5.4

CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN EUROPE DURING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Introduction

Through the lens of the Internet, it would seem that there are more conspiracy theories than ever before – and it might be true. But conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon: To a certain extent, the twentieth century could be considered their real golden age. This has been acknowledged by scholars, sometimes retracing their genealogy back to the Middle Ages (Pipes 1997). But, as conspiracy theories were not thought of as a fully-fledged historical topic until relatively recently (Münch 2008: 27–31), the research often remains fragmented and incomplete, with its most important contributions mainly investigating American history (Knight 2003; Butter 2014; Uscinski, Parent 2014).

Given their significance in totalitarian ideologies, conspiracy theories have also been studied by historians of the Soviet and Nazi regimes but, depending on the country, conspiracy theories in other contexts have remained under the radar of history. Because of this, information should be gathered as isolated evidence within the broader framework of political or cultural history. As a consequence, this chapter will not give an exhaustive panorama but will instead summarise what we can learn from existing studies, from which we will draw some conclusions.

The obsession with spies and traitors in the First World War

The early twentieth century continued with the conspiracy obsessions of the previous one. Because of the triumph of nationalism in Europe, fears of a Jewish or Masonic conspiracy, often linked to foreign powers, continued to thrive. Many documents denouncing the Jewish conspiracy circulated in Europe, but none have been as ubiquitous as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The origins and the propagation of this forgery are still discussed by specialists, but Norman Cohn’s acclaimed work states that the text was fabricated in 1903 by Russian fanatic nationalists. Several publications circulated within the tsarist empire during the following years, but its popularity was at this time confined to the monarchist and nationalist Russian milieu. It is during the First World War and its aftermath that it was used as widespread propaganda, as well as a lethal political tool (Cohn 1967; Taguieff 2004).

The war increased the echo of conspiracy theories in the public opinion of the participating countries. The French population became gripped by the so-called espionnite, i.e. an obsession
with German spies, and by alarmist rumours about their agencies. This paranoia, particularly intense at the beginning of the conflict, was understandable in the context of an invaded country. The French army mutinies of April 1917, provoked by a predictable crisis of morale among the soldiers, were interpreted by French High Command as the result of secret and subversive agencies of a nebulous pacifist organisation operating on behalf of Germany. This conviction, apparently widely accepted by the public, was strengthened by the Bolshevik Revolution, considered to be the result of a German conspiracy successfully weakening the Triple Entente. At the end of 1917, the struggle against traitors and defeatists became the watchword of the government, which led to investigations against of some politicians that were being accused of seeking a ‘white peace’ or organisations that were being suspected of fomenting a revolution (Monier 1998: 90–7).

In the U.K., hostility towards Germans and ‘spy-fever’ that were already existing before the war increased with the outbreak of the conflict. It developed into the myth of the ‘hidden hand’ of Germans (and sometime Jews) secretly operating in the U.K.; one conspiracy theory claimed German agencies caused the death of Kitchener in 1916 (Heathorn 2007). While it was first and mainly supported by radical-right organisations, this conspiracy theory gained in significance in the press and public speech throughout the war and was one reason for a strict policy of internment of German citizens. The success of this ‘hidden hand’ theory might have been the need for an explanation of the British decline as well as a means to federate the whole nation into the fight against Germany (Panayi 1988). Despite no concluding evidence of such a plot, in 1917, fighting the supposed pro-German subversion (at work behind the Bolshevik Revolution) became a priority of MI5 and the British government, with predictably disappointing results. In this particular context, the authorities’ zeal was less bound to a strong belief than to the wish not to expose themselves to accusations of weakness against subversion (Andrew 2009: 102–3, 2018: 551–5).

Conspiracy theories as an explanation for catastrophe

After the war, fears of the spread of the Russian Revolution, which was supposedly orchestrated by a Bolshevik conspiracy, increased throughout Europe. However, the significance of this new conspiracy theory varied widely depending on the respective country. In the victorious states of Western Europe, it was endorsed by conservative organisations and the press; and successive governments generally executed relatively erratic and inefficient repressive measures against communist organisations performing subversive agitation-propaganda work (Gerwarth, Horne 2012: 40–51). In 1924, a few days before the British general election, the Daily Mail published the Zinoviev Letter, the alleged directives from the head of the Comintern to the communists of the U.K. to provoke a civil war. Proven to be fake, it aimed to undermine the foreign politics of the Labour Party within the perspective of the elections, but its impact on the results was only limited (Bennett 2018: 46–77). In France, throughout the 1920s, many supporters of the right-wing warned against the danger of a communist conspiracy to launch an insurrection and establish a Bolshevik dictatorship (Monier 1995: 50–77, 245–348). This conspiracy theory was built on the occurrence of violent demonstrations, spying, anticolonial agencies and the outrageously antipatriotic propaganda of the French Communist Party. But it only led to recurrently unsuccessful trials that would sometimes enable conservatives to confederate with each other against the Red Menace (Monier 1998: 105–68, 187–230).

Stemming from a different ideological basis than in Western Europe, in Central Europe the belief in a Bolshevik conspiracy was stronger, and quickly mixed with pre-existing and deeply embedded strains of antisemitism, which resulted in a powerful programme of mobilisation and bloody repression. During the Russian Civil War, the belief in a Jewish-Bolshevik
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conspiracy became increasingly popular among White Russian Army leaders, and The Protocols and similarly fake reports were published and disseminated (Budnitskii 2012: 187–92). The Whites’ propaganda claimed that the war, the fall of the tsar and the October Revolution were the result of a Jewish conspiracy, which led to mass slaughter and atrocities against the Jews (Gerwarth 2016: 88–9). In newly independent Poland, the denunciation of Jewish Bolshevism developed from ancient stereotypes about criminal Jews into the belief in a Jewish conspiracy to undermine the foundations of the Polish nation. In the face of a strong Soviet threat, the Bolshevik-Jew conspiracy theory was promoted by the Catholic Church and ethno-nationalists and ultimately resulted in collective violence against Polish Jews (Michlic 2008: 89–93).

Conspiracy theories within Nazism

Although The Times revealed in 1921 that The Protocols were a forgery – a statement spectacularly confirmed in the Berne trial of 1935 (Hagemeister 2011) – they continued to spread throughout the rest of Europe, particularly in Germany. The endemic antisemitism, which inspired the ignominious Jewish census of 1916, was widely shared among military and völkisch nationalist movements flourishing during the Weimar Republic; some of their members combined the Jewish conspiracy theory with the myth of the ‘stab in the back’ that they disseminated.

The Nazis used the allegations of a communist conspiracy behind the Reichstag fire of 1933 as a justification for the suspension of civil liberties, which, along with violence and intimidation, was a decisive step towards the establishment of a single-party regime. But, according to Nazi ideology, this communist plot was part of a wider Jewish conspiracy. This could be related to the antisemitism embedded in Central Europe – beliefs in Jewish conspiracies were noticeable in Austria before the Anschluss (Pauley 1992: 269–70), but it was also influenced by The Protocols: Indeed, German theorists, such as Alfred Rosenberg, themselves influenced by White Russian émigrés (Kellogg 2005), had a deep impact on Hitler’s thought and contributed to his endorsement of The Protocols as proof of a genuine conspiracy. Since his early speeches and writings, he claimed to have been inspired by The Protocols for his belief in a Jewish conspiracy of world domination, at work behind military defeat, economic issues and the threat of a Bolshevik Revolution aimed at destroying the German nation (Redles 2012: 118–20). This conspiracy theory later aggregated new events, such as the boycott on German goods initiated by Jewish organisations in 1933 that the Nazis claimed to be proof of the ‘economic war’ of the Jewish conspiracy (Reincharz, Shavit 2018: 47; 122).

Nazi propaganda spread the idea of a Jewish world conspiracy through publications such as the Völkische Beobachter or the Stürmer, headed by Julius Streicher; this newspaper published negative stereotypes and lies about Jews, among which were some explicitly based on The Protocols. But, despite the importance of the international Jewry conspiracy theory in mass propaganda, The Protocols themselves were only used with caution, seemingly because Nazi leaders were dubious about the text’s authenticity (Bytwerk 2015).

The belief in a Jewish world conspiracy, so obsessively embedded in Nazi ideology, became through Nazi propaganda a means to legitimate anti-Jewish legislation and persecution, and to build an antisemitic consensus (Bytwerk 2001: 132–41, 171–81). For example, Kristallnacht in November 1938 was presented as a spectacular burst of popular violence in reaction to the Jewish plot, and shortly preceded the announcement of the war against Bolshevisation and Jewry threatening the world. However, the relentless antisemitism of Hitler and the Nazi leaders, and especially their concern about the Jewish world conspiracy, was not necessarily entirely shared by the German population (Kershaw 2008: 173–86).
Conspiracy theories under the Soviet regime

Germany was not the only regime in Europe that used conspiracy theories as a legitimation of power, repression and mass killing. Belief in conspiracy was used by some Soviet leaders as one of the many justifications for the Red Terror during the Russian Civil War. After the war, the official discourse of the new-born Soviet Union spread the obsession with an internal enemy, forging the image of a nation besieged by counter-revolutionary forces (Raleigh 2002: 71–2). This resulted in the Petrograd conspiracy theory and spectacular trials of conspirators as early as 1921. The next year, a trial was held against a faked conspiracy of socialist revolutionaries; its purpose was to be the model for the trials that Lenin wanted to organise to intensify repression against political opponents (Jansen 1982: 27–8, 150).

In the 1930s, with Stalin now the undisputed leader, conspiracy theories became a central tenet of the regime rhetoric (Werth, Moullec 1994: 470–1) disseminating a culture of conspiracy not only within the party but also throughout the whole population of the Soviet Union (Rittersporn 1993: 99–115). These conspiracy theories had several goals. One was to put the Soviet regime into a defensive position legitimating the use of harsh state repression (Getty, Naumov 1999: 17–21). In particular, they enabled Stalin to eliminate all his actual, potential or hypothetical opponents through show trials. For instance, the trial of the Ukrainian nationalists of 1931 meant that Stalin could quickly get rid of some of his last opponents and of the spokesmen of the Ukrainian nation, and thereby thwart any attempt of resistance against his policy of collectivisation (Conquest 1986: 211–20).

The assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934 and the vast investigation that followed brought to light a supposed huge anti-Soviet conspiracy; translated into several successive official conspiratorial narratives, it was then used as a pretext by Stalin to eliminate his rivals within the party – the Trotskyist Left and the right opposition – through the three dramatic and widely publicised Moscow show trials of 1936–1938 (Conquest 1989: 48–68; 77–103). The accusation of the Trotskyists plotting with hostile foreign powers also led to the brutal and secret purge of the head of the Red Army on the basis of fabricated evidence (Jansen, Petrov 2002: 69–70).

But these very famous show trials were only the tip of the iceberg of the Stalinist Great Purge, a mass repression that led to the arrests of millions of people and the deaths of hundreds of thousands. This ‘wider purge’ was brutal social engineering, a deep operation of prophylactic cleansing to eliminate actual and potential opponents to the establishment of the Soviet state and the implementation of collectivisation. This preventive operation was executed through secret operations of the N.K.V.D. and based on quotas of arrests and shootings, targeting parts of the territory alleged to host the biggest concentration of enemies. As a result, the struggle against the conspiracy expanded to many broad social categories (kulaks, priests and intellectuals) as well as ethnic minorities considered more likely to conspire with foreign powers (Werth 2003: 216–39; Khlevniuk 2004: 140–8).

The conspiracy theories and the repression that derived from them were also a means of political education and mobilisation. The purge of the party was a way to find scapegoats for its failures and abuses. In 1928, the Shakhty trial against the ‘bourgeois experts’, a group of engineers in the mining industry accused of sabotage (Shearer, Khaustov 2015: 59–67), was used to establish a new pro-worker policy in the recruitment of cadres (Fitzpatrick 1979: 379–83) and to put pressure on ineffective industry administrators. In the later context of Stakhanovism, workers as well as administrators were constantly under the threat of accusation of sabotage if they did not reach the quotas of production (Goldman 2007: 95–109, 225–36). Inside the party, it helped to promote new cadres with a better Soviet ethic; the vigilance and the capacity to detect political enemies became crucial qualities of the Bolsheviks (Getty 1985: 113).
Yet, the use of conspiracy theories to legitimate Soviet repression proved to be an uncontrolled and counterproductive political tool in the hands of Stalin. The zeal of local officials of the party during the Great Purge led to a destructive ‘overfullfilment’ of quotas of deportation and executions. Despite the incredulity of the population (Davies 1997: 118–23) and the passivity of the local communist cadres, the campaign against the Trotskyist conspiracy eventually descended in 1937 into a vortex of denunciations and arrests within the factories (Goldman 2007: 80–92, 204–47), which completely disorganised the production (Goldman 2011: 130–5). The elimination of the head of the Red Army on the basis of forged evidence was not only useless, but also dramatically weakened Soviet military capacity (Harris 2008: 34–6). This purge even dangerously affected the Comintern (McDermott, Agnew 1996: 151–6).

Historians are still debating the reasons why Stalin involved himself in a mass repression dramatically affecting Soviet economic and military capacity. If the traditional explanation were that Stalin wanted to secure his power over the party, the Army and the population, recent contributions suggest that the Great Purge might also have been the result of a genuine belief in conspiracy. The paranoia and siege mentality of the Soviet leader (Whitewood 2015: 201–86) and the deep feeling of insecurity and vulnerability founded on real anti-Soviet agencies (Harris 2016) create a misperception about how foreign enemies managed to infiltrate large fractions of the population.

The intensification of conspiracy theories during wartime

The return of war in Europe in the 1930s saw an intensification in the obsession with clandestine enemy agencies. In Western Europe, the Spanish Civil War was significant in this regard, first, because the Spanish extreme right that carried out the military uprising of 1936 used the idea of a communist conspiracy to legitimate its actions (Southworth 2002). While being a classic tool to justify ‘defensive violence’ (in the shape of a putsch) (Seidman 2011: 38; 180), the myth of a communist-Masonic conspiracy seems to have been supported by the regime until the end, resulting in the relentless repression of Freemasonry (Ruiz 2005: 192–225, 2011).

Second, it was during the Spanish Civil War that the expression ‘fifth column’ originated, first used in Republican propaganda to name a clandestine group of infiltrated enemies spying and committing acts of sabotage or destabilisation (Carr 1984: 30), and providing explanation for Republican misfortunes (Kirschenbaum 2015: 105; 108; 139). This scare induced great vigilance and repression, especially from the Soviet-led communist troops (Payne 2004: 206, 227). As the Second World War began, this expression flourished within the propaganda of countries subject to spy-fever, which had been in many ways directly in contact with the Republican forces – France, the U.K. and also the Soviet Union.

The impact of the Second World War on totalitarian regimes provoked an increase in conspiracist propaganda and state repression. In the Soviet Union, war increased vigilance against saboteurs and spies, as well as repression against national minorities, including those of newly conquered territories, which increased the number of unredeemable enemies of the Soviet destined to spend the rest of their lives in the Gulags (Barnes 2011: 143–53).

In Nazi Germany, antisemitic discourse redoubled during the war, while the head of the party organised the Holocaust of the Jews from Eastern Europe. The conspiracist rhetoric prospered in multiple Nazi publications, as well as in speeches of the most prominent Nazi leaders, such as Goebbels, presenting the persecution of the Jews as a legitimate defensive reaction against a conspiracy of international Jewry seeking to ruin Germany. In this view, the war, the alliance between Bolshevism and Anglo-Saxon plutocracy, the defeats of the German Army, as well as the massacre of Katyn, were the result of an international Jewish plot (Gellately 2001:
145–50; Herf 2006). However, criticisms of the brutal methods (Kershaw 2008: 205) and the secrecy of the extermination of the Jews from Eastern Europe suggest that belief in the Jewish conspiracy threat was merely a smokescreen rather than a conviction, used to justify the abomination of the genocide (Brayard 2012).

Germany also used international propaganda – such as public exhibitions – to attempt to convince the allied and neutral nations that the fight against Bolshevism was linked to a Jewish world conspiracy threatening Europe (Waddington 2007: 190–5). Nazis could rely on former transnational fascist networks (Bauerkämper, Rossoliński-Liebe 2017: 2–7) and on common beliefs about Jewish conspiracy, shared by allied regimes such as Ustachis in Croatia and other Balkan regimes allied to the Nazis (see also Chapter 5.6 in this volume).

A weapon in the ideological conflict of the Cold War

The Cold War is often seen as a Golden Age of conspiracy theories, especially the belief that domestic communist parties were a fifth column. This is partly due to the projection of U.S. McCarthyism onto the European context. But, while McCarthyism in the U.S.A. has long been explored, specific studies about the Red Scare in Europe are surprisingly few and sometimes politically driven, and this issue still waits to be thoroughly researched.

The two Western countries with the strongest communist parties were, by far, Italy and France. In both countries, there was a fear that the party would try to undermine the nation in order to seize power or facilitate a Soviet invasion, a view shared by right-wing and centre political movements and, to a lesser extent, social-democrat organisations. But this fear was just a part of the greater concern with the threat of the Soviet Union and came second after other political and social issues. This ‘moderate Red Scare’ appears to have been spurred by the outbreak of national violence (such as the ‘insurrectonal strikes’ or riots of 1947–1950), public defeatist claims (Santamaria 2006: 81) and the deterioration of international relations (beginning with the Korean War in the summer of 1950). But, even so, it rarely led to public and explicit denunciation of a communist fifth column. In the 1950s, with the death of Stalin and the decline of internal communist activism, this concern clearly decreased in public opinion and politics (Girard 2012: 370–461, 555–697).

In the U.K., too, the fear of the communist enemy within, whether expressed through political discourse or film, was closely linked to the international confrontation with the Korean War (Guy 1993: 36). In this context, the propaganda of the Partisans of Peace could have been interpreted as part of a wider Soviet conspiracy aimed at weakening the West (Jenks 2003: 55).

At the same time, Soviet-originated conspiracy theories spread throughout the People’s Democracies of Eastern Europe, following the establishment of repressive institutions. From 1950, and more intensively after the uprising of June 1953, the East German Ministry for State Security began to establish a broad network of surveillance and control that aimed at arresting enemies within, monitored by Western Germany (Bruce 2003). The geopolitical divorce between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia became a witch hunt, which converted the Soviet purges into the newly born Soviet regimes. In Hungary, because of internal rivalry, communist minister László Rajk was accused of Titoist activities and was, after a show trial along with other members, executed in 1949.

After early signs of antisemitic repression (Rubenstein, Naumov 2001: 32–47), the 1949 anti-cosmopolitan campaign gave birth to a grand conspiracy theory including a strong anti-Zionist strain (Pinkus 1988: 145–61; Azadovskii, Egorov 2002). Some prominent Czechoslovakian communists – among which was Rudolf Slánský, and the majority of whom were Jews – were arrested in 1951 and condemned to death in 1952 for Trotskyism, Titoism and Zionism. Because
of dissent within the Romanian Party, Ana Pauker was arrested, sentenced and jailed in 1953 for being an agent of Israel (Gellately 2013: 250–60). All these show trials revealed a clear antisemitic subtext (Wistrich 2010).

Notwithstanding the prompt stop of the arrests related to the so-called Doctors’ Plot after Stalin’s death in 1953 (with the unsolved question of the extent of the planned purge) (Brent 2004), the Zionist conspiracy theory survived de-Stalinisation and confirmed its antisemitic and repressive potential. In 1968, the head of the Polish Communist Party launched a violent anti-Zionist campaign that had strong antisemitic features, preventing any contestation and support for reforms within the party and the population (Stola 2005: 284–300). Throughout the following decades, this Zionist conspiracy became an obsession and a recurring explanation that sometimes obscured the understanding of the West by the Soviet leaders and their secret services (Andrew, Mitrokhin 1999: 19; 224–5, 473).

These Soviet-originated conspiracy theories were disseminated in the West, among the communist parties. After the Conference of Szklarska Poręba in September 1947, during which the Cominform was created, the Soviet Union turned to communist parties in the West, seeking to provoke greater conflict and a more dramatic and conspiracist view of their domestic political situation (Procacci et al. 1994). In Italy and France, the communist parties endorsed a conspiracy theory first targeting Trotskyists, corporate trusts and far-right organisations and that, after 1948, expanded to greater proportions and comprised all other political parties and the states of the Western bloc (including Yugoslavia). Thanks to their unrivalled propaganda machine, communists relentlessly promoted the idea of a ‘governmental conspiracy’, but the comparative political isolation of these parties meant that their ideas did not have significant impact (Girard 2012: 129–304).

The Soviet Union also tried to propagate some ad hoc conspiracy theories dedicated to weakening the Western bloc. The K.G.B. in particular performed ‘active measures’, i.e. disinformation campaigns aimed at spreading conspiracy theories around the world, notably about the Kennedy assassination (Andrew, Mitrokhin 1999: 225–30). Still discussed are the allegations, supported by the Soviet Union, about the use of biological weapons by the U.S.A. during the Korean War; this germ warfare suspicion continues to produce heavily contradictory works, fuelling the controversy and vivid accusations from North Korea to this day. Quite similar was the disinformation campaign launched in 1983 by the Soviets that claimed that the A.I.D.S. pandemic had been provoked by a U.S. biological weapons research programme (Romerstein 2001; Boghardt 2009; Jeppsson 2017); the impact of this campaign remains notable today (Nattrass 2012).

The rise of anti-elite conspiracy theories in Western Europe

These Soviet–originated narratives did not have a significant impact on Western societies, and, by contrast with the Soviet bloc, state-sponsored conspiracy theories arguably had less impact on the public sphere in the West. After the 1950s, fewer political movements developed long-lasting or consistent conspiratorial speech; the détente of the Cold War and the progressive integration of communist parties into domestic politics reduced the importance of conspiracy theories in communist propaganda as well as the related fear of a communist conspiracy.

New kinds of anti-establishment conspiracy theories progressively emerged from the 1970s, often drawing on some unusual event, such as the suspicious death of a high-profile personality. In 1979, the body of a French minister, Robert Boulin, was found in a pond and, despite evidence of suicide, his family, as well as some journalists, began to spread the idea of a murder linked to the misappropriation of money by his political party in the 1980s. In the U.K., the
1984 assassination of the antinuclear activist Hilda Murrell led to conspiracy theories accusing the British Security Service, publicly supported by a Labour M.P. At the very end of the century, the death of Princess Diana in Paris in 1997 also resulted in numerous conspiracy theories claiming her death was not an accident and putting the blame on the British Royal Family.

The shooting of Olof Palme, prime minister of Sweden, took place in Stockholm in 1986, but, despite a trial, the uncertainty about the murderer and his motives became the source of various conspiracy theories, blaming figures and organisations as diverse as the Yugoslav security service to a South African spy. In 1987, in West Germany, the suspicious death of Uwe Barschel, a prominent Christian Democrat politician, gave rise to several conspiracy theories including, among others, the Mossad.

In Italy, the kidnapping and assassination of the prominent Christian Democrat and former Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, by the Red Brigades in 1978 gave birth to many and sometimes very elaborate conspiracy theories, which are still continuing today. An enduring theory involves the then leader of the Christian Democracy party manipulating the Red Brigades to kill Aldo Moro, who was working to establish ties with the Communist Party. The most dramatic event was the ‘Ustica massacre’, the crash of an Italian passenger plane off the coast of Sicily in 1980, which caused 81 deaths. Whether it was due to a terrorist bomb or missile shot is still debated, but this later hypothesis became the grounds of a conspiracy theory based on a N.A.T.O. Air Force incident that was covered up by the Italian authorities. Conspiracy theories even hit the Vatican through the Estermann case, a murder involving a Swiss Guard in 1998, which ever since has been the focus of various conspiracist publications.

In the end, these post-war conspiracy theories, rather than a social category or a defined political movement, targeted governments and the political elite, suspected to be the accomplices of covert organisations such as Freemasonry, as denounced by British investigative books and television documentaries (Önnerfors 2017: 5–6, 29–30). More often, these groups were supposed to be the domestic and foreign secret services, particularly – and inevitably – the C.I.A. This suspicion towards the secret service was sometimes even shared at the highest office. In 1977, British Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson accused the security service of his own country of spying on him. Despite the support of a 1987 book by a former MI5 agent, there was in fact no real evidence of such a conspiracy.

The renewal of world conspiracy theories in the pre-9/11 era

The military interventions of the U.S.A. during the 1990s renewed conspiracy theories related to covert U.S. action and international organisations such as the Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral Commission. Developed in the U.S.A., these conspiracy theories combined with the New World Order grand-conspiracy narratives of a coming one-world government. For example, Poker Menteur, a Marxist book published in Belgium in 1998, developed a conspiracy theory that the U.S. military intervention in Yugoslavia was the result of a capitalist plot enabled by the mainstream media spreading deceitful narratives. In Serbia, the U.S. military intervention has sometimes been interpreted as a conspiracy of Bilderberg and the Jews (Byford, Billig 2001).

These anti-Western global-elite conspiracy theories mix historical and contemporary elements, until they are becoming as heterogeneous as catch-all theories. In France, the roots of far-right conspiracy beliefs in an international technocracy including the Trilateral Commission and the Bilderberg Group can be retraced to the synarchy conspiracy theory of the 1940s (Dard 1998: 156–70), while Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson supported his claims by referring to
the Zionist conspiracy, with reference to The Protocols in particular. Due to transnational networks and supports, this conspiracy theory spread all over the world and amalgamated into the melting pot of the New World Order conspiracy (Jamin 2009: 64–6; Taguieff 2013). The most extravagant conspiracy theory to date emerged in the U.K. in the 1990s, thanks to David Icke, which combined a large number of disparate elements, including old narratives such as the Illuminati and The Protocols, and a postmodern obsession with the New World Order and extraterrestrial (reptilian) entities.

But it should be noted that in the late twentieth century these conspiracy theories and the groups supporting them remained marginal, as they were unsupported by the firepower of global social networks. After 2001, many of the conspiracy theories related to the suspicious deaths of high-profile personalities saw a resurgence of interest due to publications and documentaries riding the wave of the post-9/11 era. This revival was also noticeable in Russia, where the Dyatlov Pass incident of 1959 received increasing public attention after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Indeed, the denunciation of conspiracy in post-war Western Europe in the public sphere, and especially in public political debate, remained a self-disqualifying argument rather than a claim that might be taken seriously. An analysis of British parliamentary debates during the second half of the twentieth century shows a decline in already sporadic conspiracist statements and conspiracy discourse (McKenzie-McHarg, Fredheim 2017); an observation which has parallels in other Western democracies.

This observation is not applicable to Eastern Europe and Russia (Yablokov 2018), which have seen a renewal of antisemitic conspiracy theories (Patai 1996: 48; Wistrich 2010), and, to a lesser extent, Italy. A recent scientific survey reveals that conspiracy theories are particularly widespread in Italy (Mancosu, Vassallo et al. 2017) compared to neighbouring states; Italy could be considered ‘a land of conspiracy’, which has seen the acceptance of the popular neologism ‘dietrologia’, i.e. the science of hidden facts (Fortichiarì 2007). An examination of the press reveals that, during the 1980s and 1990s, even the most prominent newspapers repeatedly used the term ‘conspiracy’ (Danesi 2001), revealing the extent to which the conspiracist perspective infused political discourse; indeed, since the 1990s, a kind of ‘secret history’ has flourished, often involving conspiracy theories, by widely read authors such as Giorgio Galli or Sergio Flamini.

The significance of conspiracy theories in Italy could be explained by the historical and political Italian ‘anomaly’ of the past. Renzo di Felice sees the legacy of the fascist regime as the ‘double State’, meaning the parallel institutions controlled by the far right to influence and undermine the newly created Republic. This ‘double State’ was suspected to be the source of the deadliest wave of far-right terrorism that struck the country during the 1960s to 1980s. This violence, added to the attempted coup d’etat of Valerio Borghese in 1970, the left-wing terrorism culminating with the assassination of Aldo Moro and the discovery of the seditious agencies of the P2 Masonic lodge in 1981, have contributed to narratives of the conspiratorial nature of the Italian Republic (Rayner 2008). The long-lasting interference of the C.I.A., the pervasive influence of the Catholic Church and the corruption of the mafia also give weight to the idea of a ‘controlled democracy’ in which decisions are made behind the scenes. In this context, the disclosure of the Gladio operation in 1990 (a modest Cold War stay-behind organisation) fuelled conspiracy theories in Italy, whereas it went by relatively unnoticed in most parts of Europe (Coco 2015).

Conclusion

The significance of conspiracy theories in Europe during the twentieth century depends a lot on the political situation, broadly fitting with geography. The democratic countries of Western
Europe were not immune to beliefs in conspiracy, but conspiracy theories were endorsed by extremist organisations from both sides of the political spectrum, although generally more often by the minorities. It was in a context of war (interstate war, civil war or even the Cold War) with existing enemies that conspiracies were most credible and accepted by the public sphere, with outbreaks of spy- fever or scapegoating.

In Central and Eastern Europe, where authoritarian states, dictatorships and totalitarian regimes ruled for a large part of the century, conspiracy theories were very often top-down official discourses, spread within society through long-lasting and consistent propaganda. The case of Nazi and Soviet totalitarian states that shared ‘theories of conspiracy, phobias of encirclement, the fear of “fifth columns”’ (Geyer, Fitzpatrick 2009: 414) underlines the fact that conspiracy theories were a twofold phenomenon. They were a political belief thriving on state-sanctioned Manichean ideology and the pre-existing diegesis of ‘imagined wars’ against peoples, social categories and foreign powers. They were also used as a political tool, enabling totalitarian regimes to create a narrative of victimhood and assuming a defensive posture legitimating the exercise of violence against real or supposed enemies. From this perspective, the real state of war did not create but rather intensified the fear of conspiracies and the violence that it justified.

Beyond this broad divide between democracies and dictatorships that paralleled to a large extent the one between Western and Eastern Europe, the fate of diverse conspiracy theories diverged. One conspiracy theory appeared to be so strongly embedded into society and culture that it contaminated all other conspiratorial narratives, especially in Eastern Europe. Quite apart from Nazi ideology, the Jewish world conspiracy theory proved to be ubiquitous: Crucial in the political discourse of many nationalists, it also reappeared under the guise of a Zionist conspiracy in the post-war Soviet bloc, and survived not only de-Stalinisation, but also the end of the Soviet Union.

In Western democratic countries, conspiracy theories followed a trajectory similar to the conclusions drawn by Michael Butter (2014) about the U.S.A. Indeed, from the 1970s, a new form of anti-authoritarian conspiracy theories emerged, denouncing government agencies of the ruling elite of apparently peaceful democracies. First limited to explaining isolated events such as suspicious murders or accidents, those conspiracy theories progressively developed into superconspiracy theories (Barkun 2013) involving apparently outdated protagonists as well as post-war free-trade organisations and allied foreign states (in the first instance, the U.S.A.). The spread of the New World Order conspiracy theory during the 1990s was the result of transnational contacts and reciprocal influences between the U.S.A. and Europe.

This evolution has certainly contributed to the current conception of conspiracy theories in the West as the grass-roots discourse of innocuous, if not laughable, marginal groups or individuals fighting mainstream narratives and trying to find meaning in a disruptive and confusing world (Byford 2011: 129–33). But history reminds us that conspiracy theories were deeply rooted political beliefs – and evidence suggests that they still are (Uscinski et al. 2016). The past century also teaches us that conspiracy theories could be mainstream, official and normative narratives, established on a set of strong ideological dogmas and certainties and used to fuel victimhood – a weapon of mass crimes in the hands of ruthless and paranoid rulers.

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