

A RUMOR ABOUT THE
J E W S

REFLECTIONS ON ANTISEMITISM
AND THE *PROTOCOLS OF THE
LEARNED ELDERS OF ZION*

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Introduction

The *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* constitutes one of the most infamous documents of antisemitism. It consists of the supposed minutes from twenty-four sessions of a congress held by representatives from the “twelve tribes of Israel” and led by a Grand Rabbi, whose purpose was to plan the conquest of the world. This congress never took place. The pamphlet is actually a crude forgery created by the *Okhrana*, or secret police, of Imperial Russia. It first appeared in 1903 and it incorporates many of the most vicious myths about the Jews handed down over the centuries. Used initially to blame Jews and their supposedly servile allies, the Freemasons, for the 1905 Revolution in Russia, the *Protocols* would become a welcome export around the world. If not simple hatred then pogroms, and if not pogroms then even worse, followed in its wake. It was applauded by royalty, it was embraced by counterrevolutionaries, and the Nazis made it required reading. It still serves as a staple for numerous fundamentalist, conservative, neofascist, and antisemitic groups in the United States and throughout the world. Indeed, what the real *Communist Manifesto* was for marxism, the fictitious *Protocols* was for antisemitism.

It enabled antisemites to see their nemesis, the Jew, as both an intrinsic element of western civilization and its *other*. This anthropological view, in fact, provides the foundation for the theory articu-

lated in the pamphlet. Beyond the myriad ways in which hatred of the Jew is expressed lies the continuity of prejudice. The *Protocols* solidifies the connection between the true believers in Christianity, those nineteenth-century reactionaries intent on combating the Enlightenment, and the fanatics of a seemingly antireligious and revolutionary Nazi movement desirous of establishing the primacy of a single race. Christian institutions and the first genuinely reactionary movements, no less than the Nazis, overwhelmingly aligned themselves against the modern ideas and values generated in the age of democratic revolution: secularism and science, rationalism and materialism, tolerance and equality, capitalism and socialism, liberalism and marxism. Antisemitism was never simply an independent impulse. It was always part of a broader project directed against the civilizing impulse of reason and the dominant forces of modernity. The way in which the *Protocols* contributed to that effort is precisely what this book seeks to explore.

My personal background surely shaped what would become my interest in the *Protocols*: my family fled Hitler's Germany and I grew up during the postwar period in a neighborhood of working-class German-Jewish immigrants who had experienced the implications of this terrible pamphlet in a way beyond my imagination. Those still alive continue to exist in the shadow of the holocaust. It remains their point of reference for any outbreak of genocide or antisemitism; my parents and their friends will still often exclaim: *genau wie beim Hitler*. Many younger people have also undoubtedly felt the sting of antisemitism in their personal lives and encountered credulous individuals who have mentioned the *Protocols*. But it is woefully misleading to draw parallels between antisemitism as it was practiced in the 1930s and its practice today. Indeed, as the century draws to a close, few know much about this once-popular pamphlet and even fewer have read it.

International sales of the pamphlet were astronomical during the 1920s and 1930s; Henri Rollin, the French scholar of antisemitism, called the *Protocols* the most widely distributed book in the world other than the Bible, and its distribution was accompanied by a mountain of secondary literature comprising well more than one thousand titles.

Since World War II, however, antisemitism has receded and, on closer examination, the mountain has dwindled in size. The tract is no longer the fundamental ideological expression of an organized mass movement capable of influencing the politics of our world. The world is different and it makes little sense to look at the present through the lenses of the past.

The *Protocols* is now almost universally recognized as a forgery. Its claims about a Jewish world conspiracy are mostly greeted with derision in the western democracies. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, of course, some still consider these calculatedly paranoid myths true and the rumors plausible. Weakened forms of antisemitic politics still exist, and certain groups and movements are still susceptible to the message contained in the pamphlet. The danger of antisemitism never fully disappears and, in any event, the political risk in making the opposite assumption is too high. The half-baked rumor might yet resurface as a full-blown myth with a new form of popular appeal. The fragility of our historical memory alone justifies a new treatment of the *Protocols*. Nevertheless, if the issue is really one of preventing the recurrence of antisemitism, then it is less a matter of offering a pedantic account of the trials and tribulations associated with the *Protocols* than providing a sense of how it was shaped by certain historical trends and how it reflects them.

Just as there are documents of liberty like the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), or the *Gettysburg Address* (1863), there are also documents in which the face of hatred and tyranny appears. The *Protocols* is one of those works: it encapsulates the historical legacy of antisemitism and reflects its transformation from a religious and social concept into a new political phenomenon. The pamphlet gives an insight into the way the antisemite thinks, not merely about the Jew but about himself or herself. It also gives an ugly insight into the utterly ruthless and unscrupulous, if sometimes self-deceiving, assumptions of right-wing extremists—whether they are “sincerely” antisemitic or not. Indeed, if this tract exhibits the uniqueness of antisemitism, it also highlights the way in which this prejudice is grounded within an antimodern and antidemocratic worldview.

Generating these insights is possible only if the *Protocols* is seen not merely as an outrageous set of lies born of prejudice but as a seminal contribution within what was an established tradition of intellectual life intent on developing an explicitly antiliberal and antisocialist political project. The forgery was perpetrated in Imperial Russia. Yet virtually the same story could easily have unfolded elsewhere. Antisemitism was an international phenomenon and the *Protocols* is not simply reducible to the Russian context in which it was conceived. Important works—even fraudulent ones—take on a life of their own and that is clearly the case with this tract. The *Protocols* helped shape the mass movements, revolutions, and wars of the twentieth century. History is not merely composed of truth: it incorporates lies as well.

Other works are arguably more seminal for the intellectual lineage of antisemitism. But they generally run hundreds of pages, and they were mostly directed toward an educated or academic audience. Nor should this appear strange given the respectability accorded antisemitism in many academic and intellectual circles prior to World War II. The *Protocols*, by contrast, fits nicely into a newspaper or a set of magazine installments. Even though one of its first appearances was in the form of an elegant gold-leaf edition meant for Czar Nicholas II, from the first, the tract was intended for a mass audience.

The *Protocols* is not a work of intellectual quality. It is short on ideas and shorter on argumentation. Its vision is gothic and a spirit of cheap melodrama permeates the tract. The writing is pathetic. Its convoluted prose, logical inconsistencies, and impoverished imagery betray the character and intellectual level of its authors. The brochure rests on traditional myths even as it gives a distinctly modern twist to the prejudices of the past: it, indeed, offers a sense of the fears raised by “the Jews.”

The *Protocols* form the basis for these reflections on antisemitism. Given the general lack of acquaintance with this work of antisemitism for popular consumption, it is perhaps useful to provide some selections. The *Protocols* appeared in many formats. But, for present purposes, the popular English translation by Victor Marsden is the

most appropriate. The selections included in the next chapter are more extensive than most, and they should provide a sense of what fascists themselves considered important about the pamphlet. They will also enable the reader to avoid dealing with a rambling and redundant work of nearly a hundred pages. The central idea of the *Protocols* involves the supposed Jewish world conspiracy designed to enslave Christian civilization under a new world order run by the leading elder of Zion. But there are other claims and various hidden assumptions. It is important to consider the imagery of the work, the stereotypes it employs, and the provincial anxieties it creates with respect to the supposed degeneration of the authentic community and its racially homogeneous inhabitants.

Antisemites were unconcerned with empirical reality, and their progressive critics must understand the assumptions informing their arguments. The *Protocols* portrays the Jews and Freemasons as outsiders and enemies of Christian civilization. It highlights their seemingly strange and outlandish rituals, their supposedly secret symbols and secret contacts. It condemns their influence, their control over media, and their manipulation of the most diverse political parties. It projects the antisemites' own authoritarianism upon them and, oddly enough, it admires the absolute obedience supposedly commanded by the Grand Rabbi or Grand Master. The Jew and the Freemason are one and the same or else the Jew is the master and the Freemason his lackey. It is the same nonsense packaged differently. "The Jew" has nothing to do with Jews.

The *Protocols* is expressive of an anthropological trend within the "Judeo-Christian" heritage, and the third chapter of this book, "The Text in Context," attempts to make sense of it. It provides a sketch of what William James might have termed the "varieties of antisemitism" and the logic driving the historical development of this particular prejudice. It also provides a sense of the cultural atmosphere in which the tract came into existence and its opposition to the civilizing forces of secularism and modernity, justice and tolerance, individualism and democracy. The pamphlet is shown to mirror the feelings of powerlessness, the paranoia, and the fear of the losers who are content to see the "hidden hand" of the Jews

pulling the strings of progress. This chapter indeed makes abundantly clear that the strengthening of prejudice is the other side of the struggle for liberty, equality, and fraternity.

The chapter begins with an examination of premodern religious bigotry in which Christians believed that Jews were working together with the devil: these believers were more concerned with abolishing the faith of the Jew than refusing to recognize him as a person. The situation changed in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and the age of democratic revolution when, fearful of Jews making use of their universal rights as individual citizens, reactionaries sought to retract the privileges Jews had gained and essentially to recreate the ghetto. This meant nothing less than implicitly recognizing the Jew as a Jew while refusing to consider him or her as a person capable of participating in the public realm. Only following the First World War would anti-semitic mass parties attempt to deny the Jew as an individual endowed with rights and as a Jew. This fateful development would indeed serve as the ideological precondition of the holocaust.

With the stage set, “The Tale of a Forgery” recounts the story behind the fabrication of the *Protocols*. It underwent numerous permutations and various versions have been ascribed to various individuals. But there is no need to rehearse once again the numerous esoteric elements of the plot or to provide a literary comparison of the numerous editions in which the pamphlet appeared. The true drama lies in the fabrication of what would become the most popular edition of the *Protocols* and the purposes it was meant to serve. All of this presupposes a more critical look at the period extending roughly from the last decade of the nineteenth century until the outbreak of World War I. The period is commonly known as “the good years” or *la belle époque*. But such terms obscure the reality: Imperial Russia was beset by a profound economic, political, and spiritual crisis and, soon enough, its implications would be felt in Europe. The *Protocols* indeed serve to illuminate the character of the crisis and the reactionary response to it.

“Spreading the News” explores the career of the forgery. It had originally inspired the pogroms organized by the infamous “Black Hundreds” in Imperial Russia. But this was only the beginning. The

Action Française, the first mass-based reactionary movement, would make use of it in its struggle against progressive forces in the 1920s and the Popular Front in the 1930s. *Opus Dei*, itself a secretive elite given to conspiratorial views and practices, employed the *Protocols* to explain the Jewish peril to Catholics. The pamphlet inspired assassinations of political figures and its fame spread to Southern Europe and the Baltic.

Antisemites of every stripe took it to heart. There were the fanatics like Ludwig Müller, otherwise known as Müller von Hausen or Gottfried zur Beek, the editor of the German edition of the *Protocols*, and Alfred Rosenberg, the future philosopher of the Third Reich, who defended it. There were great industrialists like Henry Ford, who sponsored its American publication. There were important figures like Ezra Pound and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, artistic innovators and political fools, who embraced its central thesis. And there was also, of course, Hitler himself who sought to implement its practical implications.

Countless other politicians and intellectuals were either duped by the *Protocols* or made use of the pamphlet in a calculated fashion. But there were also those who fought against its pernicious influence. The battle against this antisemitic tract was indeed an important episode in the larger ideological and political battle against fascism. That is why it is also necessary to mention the efforts of figures like Pierre Charles, Lucien Wolf, Benjamin Segel, and Rev. Elias Newman to expose the pamphlet as a fraud, and the sensational Swiss trial of the 1930s in which the Nazis were forced to substantiate their belief in its authenticity.

The trial should have settled matters. But it didn't. Or, at least, not completely. The *Protocols* became the tool of new movements: fascists looking back at the past, neofascists dreaming of the future, national movements seeking to employ antisemitism for their ideological ends. But the tract reemerged in a new context: the holocaust created a new revulsion for antisemitism, Israel was constructed as an island of safety for Jews, and new organizations in most western nations arose to combat the old myths and the old hatreds. The political salience of antisemitism has changed and the *Protocols* is no more a living document than *Mein Kampf*. It currently plays an

auxiliary role in movements far less threatening than those of the 1920s. Nevertheless, if political antisemitism is now mostly latent, it might still resurface and take dangerous forms.

Antisemitism need not always remain in cold storage: its anachronistic quality can prove attractive for supporters looking back to the “good old days.” Its appeal clearly derives from its ability to present itself as a philosophy from the gut, fueled by resentment and despair. Antisemitism highlights the irrational, the stereotypical, and the intuitive. It provides a form of self-justification and compensation for the *losers* or those who have lost faith in progress. This prejudice reinforces the connection between their ideas, their interests, and their understanding of history. “The Legacy of a Lie,” the conclusion to this volume, uses the *Protocols* to illuminate the status of contemporary antisemitism and the unique world of prejudice and paranoia inhabited by the antisemite.

Hatred of the Jew is a lived experience. Antisemitism responds not merely to economic or political needs but to existential needs as well. There is clearly a difference between the insincere utilizers of antisemitic prejudice and its sincere, if gullible, consumers. But simply disproving the various falsehoods of works like the *Protocols* is insufficient. Antisemitism is ultimately, in practical political terms, a matter of *faith*: arguments become legitimate only insofar as they support the claim made on faith. Antisemitism *presupposes* a belief in the overwhelming power of an evil Jew. The *Protocols* casts a special light on it: the fanatical antisemite turns the Jew into more than the scapegoat. The Jew is responsible because the antisemite is not. The omnipotence of the Jew, in short, reflects the impotence of the antisemite.

The Jew apparently achieved such overwhelming power because the Jew is a *chameleon* capable of taking different forms at different times: the Jew *is* not the homosexual supposedly bringing about the moral decay of society, or the capitalist supposedly consumed by private greed, or the communist supposedly intent upon overthrowing “civilization.” The *Protocols* makes clear that the Jew is all of the above and more: the chameleon can assume the form of *any* enemy required by any particular victim. The Jew

opposes the populace at every turn: the historical connection between populism and antisemitism is no accident. The *chameleon-effect* explains the ability of the Jew to manipulate international events; it shows why the Christian is always outwitted and why, in the mind of the fanatic, both the Jew and the need for antisemitism have persisted in various forms from the very beginnings of Judeo-Christian civilization.

The *Protocols* provides a mirror image of history: the powerless become all powerful and the all powerful become powerless. The pamphlet turns truth on its head. But the truth doesn't disappear. Indeed, for precisely this reason, the critic must uncover what the lie denies: the task is to show how this brochure, even as it attempts to legitimate the repression of a seemingly all-powerful enemy, actually illuminates the opprobrium borne by a powerless group of people. The forgery demonstrates the dangerous political trajectory of antimodernist or anti-Enlightenment thinking. It offers an insight into the perverse and self-serving ways in which Christians have seen Jews for most of western history. It portrays the stereotypes and the Manichean elements within Christian dogma. It shatters the comfortable illusion of a Judeo-Christian heritage.

All western and many other states have their traditions of anti-semitism. It is difficult to gauge where the ideology was "worst." The translation of the antisemitic word into the antisemitic deed depended primarily upon political factors. Little wonder then that the most favored lands for Jewish immigration should have been those with the most liberal political institutions. Liberal political institutions and a democratic public sphere may not always prove victorious against their intolerant and authoritarian enemies. But the truism holds: institutions genuinely grounded in civic republicanism and cosmopolitan attitudes are the best guarantees against antisemitism or racism of any sort. Jews have historically stood in the forefront of those demanding the creation of such institutions and the hegemony of such values. It remains perhaps the best part of the Jewish political tradition; it is also surely becoming among the most undervalued as parochial forms of nationalist extremism and religious fundamentalism greet the introduction of the twenty-first century.

Integral nationalism and messianic visions of a Christian destiny have always intoxicated antisemites. But these same values are currently embraced by an increasing number of Jews themselves. They worry over the erosion of their religion and identity. They resent the trend towards religious pluralism and the introduction of cosmopolitan values into their community. They show only contempt for liberal democracy though, ironically, its institutions remain the best guarantees against the exercise of arbitrary power and the force of prejudice. The victims of antisemitism are not immune from the thinking of their persecutors. Jews, too, can unwittingly succumb to the *Protocols*. No less than illuminating the tradition of antisemitism and evaluating its contemporary status, exposing this danger is among the most important aims of *A Rumor about the Jews*.