

'Protocols of Zion': The Life of a Fraud & Its True Believers

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If you're curious to read "The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion," the century-old anti-Semitic tract that was beloved of Hitler, Henry Ford and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, then you have already entered into its complex web. To read it you must find it, which isn't hard, but should you pay for it? You can buy a copy on Amazon.com ("used and new from \$14.90"), but that would require you to participate in the commercial circulation of an ugly book. Or you can download it for free at various Islamic and anti-Semitic Web sites and drive up their traffic while dropping your computer's identifying cookie on Web pages you'd rather not be seen visiting. Either way, you'll feel a little dirty afterward.

"The Protocols," a badly written text of about 100 pages that purports to be a secret plan for world domination hatched at a meeting of powerful Jewish leaders, has been circulating publicly since 1903, when it appeared in serial form in a Russian newspaper. It is the subject of a new exhibition that opened yesterday at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. It is also the inspiration for Marc Levin's 2005 documentary, "Protocols of Zion" (showing April 24 at 7 a.m. and May 9 at noon on Cinemax), which takes the book's popularity among bigots and conspiracy theorists as the starting point for a meditation on what it means to be Jewish in a world that still hatches notions such as Jews being responsible for 9/11. The new exhibition also features a computer screen showing Internet sites from around the world -- some celebrating, others debunking "The Protocols." The inescapable conclusion is that the book is alive and well, and its message is finding fertile new ground in susceptible readers.

The exhibition is a small one, and museum Director Sara J. Bloomfield says it is a prelude to a larger examination of propaganda scheduled for 2008. On display are multiple copies of the book and others based upon it. A map of the world shows its steady progress from Russia onward. A copy published in Germany dates from 1920; a Polish version on display, though not the first published there, dates from 1943. It also appeared in Brazil and Japan. Henry Ford, the American industrialist with a penchant for bigotry, was instrumental in spreading its lies in the United States. Featured is a 1920 copy of his "The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem," which was substantially based on "The Protocols."

Today, its availability is only a phone call or a click away.

"I asked a colleague in Moscow: How easy is it to get 'The Protocols'?" says Daniel Greene, the exhibition's curator. "He called me back in three hours and said, 'You owe me a hundred rubles.' "

And that, despite the fact that the book was exposed as a fraud in Russia during a prominent court battle in 1993. That wasn't the first time, at least outside Russia. It was also debunked, as an obvious forgery that borrowed heavily from books published in the 1860s, by a British journalist in 1920; again in the London Times in 1921; in Germany in 1924; and by a New York Herald reporter in 1928. And at periodic intervals ever since, including by a U.S. Senate committee in 1964.

Even Joseph Goebbels was convinced ("a forgery," he declared), but that didn't dim his admiration: "I believe in the intrinsic but not in the factual truth of 'The Protocols,' " he said in 1924.

That kind of doublethink has guaranteed the longevity of "The Protocols" despite numerous exposures

as a fraud. In Marc Levin's documentary, the filmmaker visits an Arab publisher in New Jersey who ran the book in his newspaper after 9/11. The publisher acknowledges that he doesn't personally believe it. But: "The problem is, I don't write it, I just publish it, to educate the people." He says he included a postscript explaining all this, but then acknowledges that he believes anti-Semitism is pretty much universal because people are jealous. Why are they jealous? "Because the Jews control everything."

Whether it's "intrinsic truth," or truthiness, or "I publish, you decide," the arguments for disseminating "The Protocols" almost always sidestep the question of its origins and authenticity. Ford offered this standard for sending the work's message into the world: "Our statements must be judged by candid readers who are intelligent enough to lay our words alongside life as they are able to observe it. If our word and their observations agree, the case is made."

According to Neil Baldwin, a visiting professor at Montclair State University and author of "Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate," a copy of the Dearborn Independent (Ford's newspaper, which began running excerpts from "The Protocols" in June 1920) was stuffed into the glove compartment of every new Ford. By the end of that year, the notoriously anti-Semitic newspaper was reaching hundreds of thousands of readers.

"Anti-Semitism for Henry Ford," says Baldwin, "was a tremendous fear of Jewish infiltration of the economic system of America."

Ford also had a tremendous fear of the instability suggested by the presence of Bolsheviks and union agitators, and "The Protocols" played neatly into these phobias, says Baldwin.

The exhibition doesn't sidestep the authenticity issue. Reproductions of newspaper articles show "The Protocols" side by side with Maurice Joly's 1864 "Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu," from which the book was substantially plagiarized (with the Jewish elders mouthing many of the ugly, dictatorial sentiments supposedly represented by Machiavelli in the original). It doesn't, however, grapple with the question of who cobbled them together and refashioned the borrowings as an anti-Semitic tract.

The standard wisdom is that it was cooked up by the czarist secret police to whip up anti-Semitism and perhaps encourage readers in a time of upheaval, to scurry back to the comfortable safety of the old regime of church and aristocracy. Some have argued that the text predates its 1903 publication and had been circulating secretly for years before then. Fanciful theories, filled with literary intrigue, have been floated. A mysterious woman stole a copy from a Jewish friend in Paris and gave it to someone else, who handed it on to its first publisher, is one commonly held belief.

Other scholars, including Cesare De Michelis, have poked serious holes in these explanations. Michelis places the origin around 1902-03, a period, he says, rife with a historical turmoil directly echoed in the text, such as occurrence of the Fifth Zionist Congress, suggesting (among anti-Semites) "an alarmed awareness that Zionism was becoming something serious."

It's understandable that the exhibition doesn't deal with this. The scholarship is often confusing and tentative, and the very notion of literary intrigue only lends a certain romance to the book. Less defensible, however, is the minimal attention paid to the content of the book. Greene, the curator, argues that the book's content isn't particularly relevant to the much larger issue of its impact.

"The way to think about it is more as a propaganda tool," he says. "The content is at most secondary."

" 'The Protocols' is almost a blank slate," he argues.

It is badly written and sometimes contradictory, but it is far from a blank slate. Its success over the years, and especially today in the Islamic world (it was the basis *for* a miniseries on Egyptian state television in 2003), can't be explained simply on the basis of its anti-Semitism. We know what "the protocols" are *against* (the Jews), but the exhibition never really asks what are they for? What would the authors' ideal society look like?

"The Protocols" describes a world of paranoid fantasies still in wide circulation today: Educated elites with a secret agenda are undermining faith and good order. Nattering nabobs of negativity sow the seeds of confusion and discord: "In order to put public opinion into our hands we must bring it into a state of bewilderment by giving expression from all sides to so many contradictory opinions and for such length of time as will suffice to make the 'goyim' lose their heads in the labyrinth and come to see that the best thing is to have no opinion of any kind."

Secretly, enemies of freedom will produce a schism in the church, corrupt youth, manipulate the economy to produce crises and force countries into debt, all the while concentrating capital and control in the hands of the few. There is a mix of right-wing and left-wing fantasy in all of this, but it generally accords well with angry ideas of populism that have circulated without any reference to anti-Semitism. The ugly genius of "The Protocols" is how well it brings together disparate but emotionally charged fears and gives them an apparent unity by blaming them all on the machinations of the Jews.

The very confusion of the text, its bizarre mix of passages that seem to argue for defending freedom against demagoguery, and others that seem to suggest a passive acquiescence to authoritarianism, is all to the same purpose. Behind the text is a familiar voice, with really only one message: Forget all that confusion you hear out there; listen to me; I know the secret truth *they* won't tell you. What that truth is, and who they are, has changed over the centuries, from Plato's "Republic" to Hitler's Thousand Year Reich. But the form of the message remains essentially the same, and it's still intoxicating.

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