



Of Jews and Bolsheviks

The 20th century saw the rise of a new blood libel, which led to the Holocaust and remains with us to this day

HERE'S THE thing about anti-Jewish canards: despite what their purveyors may think, they aren't insults. They're compliments.

These old tropes may have little grounding in reality, yet even so they redound to the credit of Jews. After all, Jewish people are believed by their detractors to be masters of the world. They own all the big banks, run all the important media outlets, and engineer the rise and fall of entire nations. Woe betide anyone who opposes them.

They also have a finger in every pie, apparently. Both Hitler and Stalin were ostensibly mere puppets in Jewish hands. Or at the very least the "Zionists" – as an antisemitic code word has it – were allied wholeheartedly with these brutal dictators, notwithstanding their wholesale murder of Jews. (Then again, the Holocaust never really happened, did it?)

Former London mayor Ken Livingstone, a Labour Party stalwart, recently gave voice to this view by asserting that Hitler "was supporting Zionism before he went mad."

Is there anything then that Jews can't or won't do?

From a Jewish perspective, though, there has been a bit of a problem. In the fever dreams of antisemites Jews may be running the world left and right, but in reality they have been largely powerless in the face of frequently murderous anti-Jewish animus. Rather than being the masterminds of tyrannical regimes such as Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, Jews were among their first victims.

Every antisemitic libel ever invented has been predicated on the same fallacy: that the Jews (who happen to be among the most factious people on earth) work in cahoots, always and everywhere, toward a shared goal, which is the subjugation and exploitation of non-Jews.

As preposterous as this assumption is, antisemitism is rarely just an excuse for scapegoating, a means by which bitter, hateful people can vent. It certainly serves that purpose. Yet antisemitism usually is a worldview, or a key component of one, which allows its holders to reduce all the ills of the world to a singular cause: the self-serving machinations of a numerically insignificant yet preternaturally devious people who punch well above their weight.

The contents of antisemitism often depend on cultural contexts, but they invariably rest on the assumption that the Jews are expert manipulators who stop at nothing to have their way. And they do so by playing a double game: Jews are ruthless billionaire profiteers even as they are also anti-capitalist agitators; they are rootless globalists except when they are hidebound blood-and-soil nationalists who lord it over a strip of stolen land they call Israel.

Nowhere were such inherent contradictions more pronounced than in Nazi propaganda, which portrayed Jews as racially inferior degenerates and yet credited them with posing an existential threat to Germany through their devilishly clever schemes. Such dichotomies

may not make much logical sense, but they can forever regenerate and metastasize because they constantly mutate.

Accordingly, the main drifts of antisemitic currents have changed with the times, reflecting contemporary fears.

In medieval Europe it was the Jew as well-poisoner and Christ-killer that exercised overactive imaginations. Then, with the rise of capitalism, came the Jew as Croesus-rich banker and financial speculator.

The 20th century saw the arrival of the Jew as Bolshevik revolutionary. His putative aim now was to topple Western nations with their capitalist economies through violent class struggle. This one was a curious specimen: a godless philistine who was also somehow animated by time-honored Jewish religious beliefs and practices.

It's the trope of "Judeo-Bolshevism" that concerns Paul A. Hanebrink, a historian at Rutgers University in New Jersey, in *A Specter Haunting Europe*, an edifying new book that serves as a valuable addition to the corpus of scholarship on the long history of antisemitism.

The notion that revolutionary communism was primarily or even solely a Jewish movement first gained traction in the cataclysmic upheaval that followed the Great War. The true victors of the war included the Bolsheviks in Russia, who managed to pull off an unlikely feat and seize power from the tottering tsarist regime in the fall of 1917. The Bolsheviks' stunning takeover sent shock waves across Europe, already reeling from seismic national and political realignments on the continent.

Many people came to believe that the Bolsheviks' victory, which would inspire similar revolts from Germany to Hungary, could not be explained simply as the outcome of historical happenstance. No, it must have been the result of a vast nefarious conspiracy. But who could conceive such an audacious plot of world domination? Only the Jews, of course.

The postwar communist uprisings were Jewish-led attempts to undo the very foundations of Christian Europe by remaking the continent with one copycat revolution after another. Or so many European leading lights, from Eugenio Parelli (later Pope Pius XII) to a young Adolf Hitler, theorized. They saw Bolshevism as a distinctly Jewish political movement cloaked in the mantle of communism, which itself was supposedly a Jewish ideology. Even non-Jewish Bolsheviks (and there were plenty of these) came to be deemed Jewish by association. When in doubt, *cherchez le juif*.

In the early 20th century, many Jews were indeed drawn towards radical left-wing movements, seeing them as harbingers of liberation and emancipation for the wretched of the earth, including impoverished Jews in flyblown Eastern European *shtetls*. Jews featured disproportionately among the leaders of communist uprisings that swept Europe after the war: Kurt Eisner and Rosa Luxemburg in

Germany; Béla Kun and József Pogány in Hungary; Leon Trotsky and Grigory Zinoviev in Russia.

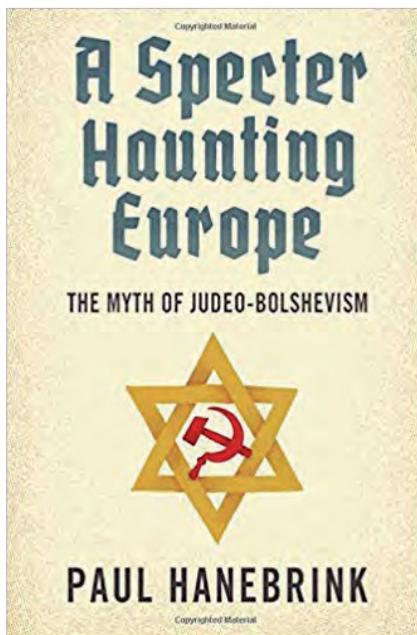
Yet their Jewishness was often incidental and hardly an animating factor behind their revolutionary zeal. For many of these die-hard communists, Jewish ancestry was an accident of birth, not a meaningful attribute of identity. A bug, in other words, not a feature. “As they turned to Communism, all [of them] broke with the Jewish milieu of their grandfathers, some with a twinge of regret, others with a feeling of liberation,” Hanebrink observes.

Nor were Jews as heavily represented in communist movements as antisemitic firebrands would have it believed. In revolutionary Russia, Jews accounted for half of the leaders of the ultimately defeated Menshevik faction of the local socialist movement, but only six out of the 26 leaders of the triumphant Bolshevik faction were of Jewish descent – and many of the Jewish Bolsheviks would soon be purged by Stalin. In Poland, meanwhile, somewhere between a fifth and two-fifths of local Communist Party members were Jewish, yet the party’s popularity among Jews in the country remained low.

And, needless to say, not even card-carrying Jewish communists were agitating for Soviet-style revolutions in the interest of “World Jewry.” Not least because that monolithic entity (which was allegedly executing the collective will of Jews everywhere) was a flight of fancy.

Facts, however, didn’t matter to people who preferred to see Bolshevism as yet another evil scheme by sinister Jews. “After 1917, a wide variety of groups and parties across the continent and even across the Atlantic shared the belief that Bolshevism was caused or led by Jews,” Hanebrink writes. “War and revolution made Judeo-Bolshevism seem an utterly new danger. But the fear and loathing it excited derived from a particular set of much older anti-Jewish prejudices,” the historian adds elsewhere. “The Judeo-Bolshevik peril was constructed from the raw materials of anti-Judaism, recycled and rearranged to meet new requirements.”

The trumped-up threat of Judeo-Bolshevism became a hallucinogenic Rorschach inkblot onto which many Europeans could project their paranoid fears of a world remodeled in a Jewish mold: un-Christian, un-European, untamed and uncivilized. Extreme rightists sought to tap into such fears by reveling in “exposing” the Jewish origins of prominent revolutionaries, who themselves had often sought to shed that ancestry by adopting new names and secular identities. In pamphlet after pamphlet, speech after speech, Trotsky was “outed” as Bronstein, Zinoviev as Apfelbaum, Kun as



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Kohn, and Pogány as Weiss.

“Repeated often enough,” Hanebrink notes, “these genealogical facts seemed to offer privileged insight about the deeper realities of Europe’s revolutions.” Namely that they were all part of a grand design to dismantle the old Christian order in favor of a newly minted Jewish one.

Oftentimes such fevered theorizing was no mere idle chatter. Between 1918 and 1921, hundreds of anti-Bolshevik pogroms took place in Ukraine, leaving tens of thousands of Jews dead and hundreds of thousands homeless. Many Jews fared no better in Poland, Hungary and Russia either. They were dispossessed, lynched or murdered by ravening thugs who saw them as treacherous fifth columnists — “Asiatic saboteurs” in the words of the influential French journalist Maurice Barrès.

But the worst was yet to come. Hitler owed his meteoric rise, at least in part, to deep-seated fears of the Judeo-Bolshevik menace. He would both feed and exploit these fears. Hanebrink goes so far as to sur-

mise that “Judeo-Bolshevism made Adolf Hitler.” That’s certainly true insofar as Hitler turned the fight against this phantom enemy into a pillar of Nazi ideology. By waging war on the Soviet Union and murdering millions of Jews at the same time, he set about eradicating Judeo-Bolshevism once and for all in what he saw as Germany’s historic duty to rid the world of it.

No sooner did German forces invade the Soviet Union in 1941 than they began slaughtering “Jewish Bolsheviks” – that is to say any Jews they could find. After a massacre of 33,771 Jews in the ravine of Babi Yar in Kiev in just two days in September that year, the German field marshal in charge, Walter von Reichenau, ordered his troops to carry on killing Jews so as to deprive the virus of Bolshevism of its alleged carriers. “The idea of Judeo-Bolshevism was crucial to the genesis of the Final Solution,” Hanebrink writes.

And it wasn’t just the Nazis. Many Romanians, Hungarians, Lithuanians and others would join the murderous hunt for “Jewish Bolsheviks” across Central-Eastern Europe. The massacres would continue sporadically in Eastern Europe even after the war.

Ideas have consequences, and the pernicious idea that Bolshevism was a Jewish movement would survive the genocide of Jews who were murdered in the name of fighting Bolshevism. It remains with us to this day, animating discussions about communism in far-right circles where it’s alleged to be a Jewish conspiracy.

And so it goes. ■

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