

Paul Hanebrink

# A Spectre Haunting Europe

## The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism

### Abstract

Today, fantasies of Jewish conspiracy cast Jews as cosmopolitan agents of globalisation and as enemies of national values. But conspiratorial antisemitism has taken many different forms. In the twentieth century, none was more potent or more destructive than the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism – the paranoid fear that Jews incited and directed Communist revolutions in order to advance their own interests. This text will discuss the history of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth, analyse its shifting functions from the Russian Revolution to the end of Communism in 1989, and explore the legacy that this myth has for today.

In the summer of 1920, two French writers, Jérôme and Jean Tharaud, went to Hungary in search of a story about Jews. Hungary at the time had just experienced a wave of revolutions, culminating in a short-lived Bolshevik regime. By the time the Tharauds arrived in Budapest, counterrevolutionaries had clawed their way back to power and were busy persecuting anyone associated with the hated revolution. The Tharauds sympathised with Hungary's vengeful conservative elite and spent several weeks talking with various people about why the revolutions had happened and who was responsible. Then they returned to France to write it all up. Their book about Hungary's Bolshevik revolution appeared the following year. It bore the title *Quand Israël est roi* (When Israel Is King).<sup>1</sup>

The argument of the book was in the title. According to the Tharauds, Bolshevism in Hungary was essentially Jewish. The brothers described Hungary's Bolshevik revolutionaries as monsters in the vilest terms. Their leader, Béla Kun, was for example described as "a small-time Jewish clerk, round like a ball, with huge bulging lips and a lizard head". His chief security officer was "a small, hunchbacked, scrofulous Jew – from what sewer had he come to light?" More importantly, the authors also made an argument about how Jews had come to dominate Hungary. They said that Jewish radicals had risen from obscurity to the heights of power as the catastrophic result of Jewish immigration. Migrant Jews from the East, they argued, had invaded the country. They took advantage of the country's liberal political system in order to secure a foothold. Soon – so the story went – they controlled the media and a large part of the country's economy. Newly empowered, Jews in Hungary then conspired to replace Hungarians and Hungary's national culture with their own perverted system of antinational and anti-Christian values. Their work culminated in revolution in which a fanatical Jewish sect nearly delivered a death blow. "A few weeks in Budapest", the Tharauds wrote, "sufficed to overthrow a society built up over centuries. A new Jerusalem arose on the banks of the Danube, sprung from the mind of Karl Marx and built by Jewish hands on ancient messianic thoughts." The Tharauds

1 Jérôme Tharaud/Jean Tharaud, *Quand Israël est roi*, Paris 1921.

meant their book to be a warning. The nations of Europe had to defend themselves, or else Hungary's fate would be theirs as well.<sup>2</sup>

Reading *When Israel is King* is a disorientating experience these days. In their book, the Tharauds constructed a nightmare scenario of Jewish communists in power that is utterly alien to us today – the product of a historical moment one hundred years ago. We cannot feel the shock of war and revolution in the same way that Europeans did in 1918. Communism has vanished from political life nearly everywhere around the world. And fears about migrants and migration on both sides of the Atlantic focus now on newcomers from Latin America, or Africa, or the Middle East – not on poor Eastern European Jews from the Pale of Settlement.

Yet so much of the Tharauds' book seems strangely familiar, stirring a flicker of recognition as we scan the headlines of today's newspapers. Consider some examples: The white power terrorists who murdered Jewish Americans in Pittsburgh and in Poway, California left a trail of racist messages on their social media accounts in which they claimed that Jews had conspired to bring Muslims and other unwanted immigrants into the United States in order to destroy white America. Jews, they insisted, played a leading role in a war to "replace" the white race – in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> This same toxic brew of anti-immigrant racism and antisemitism was on display in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, when neo-Nazi marchers chanted a phrase they had borrowed from the far right in France – "You will not replace us" – along with an antisemitic variation of their own devising: "Jews will not replace us."<sup>4</sup> In Europe, so-called identitarians from Scandinavia and the United Kingdom to Poland and Greece blame the "Jewish media" for creating a pro-migrant climate and "cosmopolitan" liberals for exploiting it in order to help migrants from the Global South replace native Europeans.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, propaganda campaigns in Hungary and elsewhere blow a loud dog whistle of encouragement by casting the philanthropist George Soros and his Open Society Foundation as a nefarious enemy whose reach extends around the world.

These racist visions reflect contemporary anxieties about migration and globalisation. In all of them, Jews are at the forefront of a plot to overturn cultures, undermine ethnic identities, and create a radical dystopian state. How different is this really from the "Jerusalem on the Danube" that the Tharauds had believed was real? This uncanny resonance across the span of a century reminds us of the enduring power of conspiratorial antisemitism. Today, one widespread version of the "Jewish plot" casts Jews as "cultural Marxists" who promote immigration and oppose the timeless cultural values of nation and family on which Western civilisation supposedly rests.<sup>6</sup> Fears of a global Jewish conspiracy have taken different forms, however. In the twentieth century, none was more potent or more destructive than the myth of Judeo-

2 The citations in this paragraph are taken from the German-language translation: Jérôme Tharaud/Jean Tharaud, *Die Herrschaft Israels*, Zurich 1927, 167, 194-195, 211-212.

3 On the white power movement, see the essential work of Kathleen Belew, *Pittsburgh Shooting Was Straight Out Of White Power Movement*, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/pittsburgh-shooting-was-straight-out-of-white-power-movement> (7 March 2021).

4 Thomas Chatterton Williams, *The French Origins of "You Will Not Replace Us"*, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-french-origins-of-you-will-not-replace-us> (7 March 2021); Emma Green, *Why the Charlottesville Marchers Were Obsessed with Jews*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/nazis-racism-charlottesville/536928/> (7 March 2021).

5 See among many works: Rafal Pankowski, *The Populist Radical Right in Poland. The Patriots*, London/New York 2010; Jean-Yves Camus/Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics in Europe*, translated by Jane Marie Todd, Cambridge, MA 2017.

6 Samuel Moyn, *The Alt-Right's Favorite Meme Is 100 Years Old*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/opinion/cultural-marxism-anti-semitism.html> (7 March 2021).

Bolshevism. This paper addresses the history of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth and suggests some of the ways it continues to cast a pernicious shadow today, thirty years after the collapse of communism.

\*\*\*

The myth of Judeo-Bolshevism held that communism was a Jewish invention. Jews, so the story went, dominated the leadership of Communist Parties in order to further their own power. For this reason, Jews were responsible for communist crimes and also for the antisemitic backlash that inevitably followed. After 1917, the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism exploded in a fury of anti-Jewish violence amid the maelstrom of war, revolution, and the collapse of empires in Central and Eastern Europe. During the Russian Civil War, a wave of pogroms caused the deaths of as many as 180,000 Jews and left another half a million homeless and destitute. The perpetrators – mainly counterrevolutionary Whites, who wanted to restore the Russian Empire, and armed groups loyal to the Ukrainian national government – accused local Jews of helping the Bolsheviks to power. In Hungary, counterrevolutionaries made the same argument after a short-lived Bolshevik regime collapsed there. Some 3,000 people were killed in the ensuing White Terror, about half of them Jews. Meanwhile, fears spread in Western Europe and across the Atlantic that Jewish migrants from Central and Eastern Europe carried revolutionary infection with them. Calls to close borders to newcomers quickly multiplied.

In the years that followed, the violent power of the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism did not fade. Most fatally, the idea was central to Nazism. According to Adolf Hitler, the Soviet Union was a Judeo-Bolshevik colossus fundamentally opposed to a “Europe of cultural nations” led by Nazi Germany.<sup>7</sup> When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, his propagandists justified the invasion by conjuring nightmares of what defeat would mean. Hordes of Asiatic barbarians, led by ruthless Jewish commissars, would ravage the continent, they said. Germany must win or all Europe would die. This idea fuelled mass shootings of whole Jewish communities in the occupied Soviet Union – the beginning of the Holocaust of European Jews. It also inspired Nazi collaborators from France to Ukraine to help in the genocide in order to curry favour with Hitler.

In every case, the perpetrators reasoned that the myth was true. After all, had not Leon Trotsky been born Lev Davidovich Bronstein? Antisemites in Hungary were quick to point out that Hungary’s Bolshevik leader had changed his name from Béla Kohn to Béla Kun in order to make it sound more Hungarian. Other prominent revolutionaries also had undeniably Jewish forebears, from Grigory Zinoviev, the long-term head of the Communist International, to the revolutionary theorist and Spartacist Rosa Luxemburg, to the great philosopher himself, Karl Marx. Moreover, pundits and analysts across interwar Europe quickly determined that Jews were overrepresented in the leadership positions of many Communist Parties. By some counts, thirty of forty-eight commissars in the 1919 Hungarian Soviet were Jewish.<sup>8</sup> After 1945, Jews, such as the Polish Jakub Berman, the Romanian Ana Pauker, and the top four leaders in Stalinist Hungary, once again appeared visible at the head of Central and Eastern Europe’s new communist regimes.

7 Der Parteitag der Arbeit vom 6. bis 13. September 1937. Offizieller Bericht über den Verlauf des Reichsparteitages mit sämtlichen Kongressreden, Munich 1938, 377-378.

8 William O. McCagg, Jews in Revolution. The Hungarian Experience, in: *Journal of Social History* 6 (Fall 1972) 1, 78-105.

Considering these facts, could it not be said that there was indeed a kernel of truth to the myth?

As ever, a shift in perspective changes the meaning of statistics. Some communists were Jews. But many Jews wanted nothing to do with communism. For example, twenty to forty per cent of the members of the Polish Communist Party in the 1920s were Jews. Yet only about seven percent of Polish Jews voted for the Communist Party in these years; the bulk of the Party's electoral support came from other ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> Put more generally, some Jews embraced communism, inspired by the promise of a new world, the opportunity to wield power, a desire to protect themselves from the antisemitism around them, or some combination of all these things. Making this choice, they broke with the religion of their grandfathers – some with enthusiasm, others with regret. However, many more Jews across Europe imagined different political futures as Zionists, or Bundists, or socialists of a very different kind. Still others gave themselves wholeheartedly to the national communities in which they lived. And some avoided politics altogether, whether because of religious devotion or because of personal inclination. The modern world afforded Jews (like non-Jews) a wide variety of paths to take. Focussing only on those who became communists mistakes a part for the whole.

Of course, rational considerations of Jewish political history have never interested conspiracy theorists, who dismiss every nuanced analysis of the relationship between Jews and communism as nothing more than fake news. One example can stand in for many. After Romania invaded the Soviet Union alongside the Wehrmacht in the summer of 1941, they reoccupied territories that the Red Army had occupied one year earlier. Eager to identify saboteurs who had betrayed Romania, Romanian officials conducted studies to determine how many Jews had served the Soviets. They found the numbers to be surprisingly low. In one county, only three of 128 local rulers had been Jews. The inspector who had commissioned the study was enraged and rejected the report as unacceptable and false. Regardless of the numbers, he knew that all Jews were communists. "The data", he declared, "contradict the facts."<sup>10</sup>

Given this dismal history, it is pointless to treat the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism as a proposition to be verified or falsified. Asking how true the myth was inevitably means meeting conspiracy theorists on turf that they have already staked out. Conspiracy theories, whether they involve Jewish Bolsheviks or more recent spectres like the 'deep state' or 'globalists', are seductive because they offer believers a world of distortions and alternative facts that invites endless study and rewards them with a powerful feeling that they alone have seen the truth behind the lies. An effective response must do more than simply prove yet again that the theory is wrong. We also need to understand what empowers a particular conspiracy theory and what it means to those who believe it. What can the history of the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism teach us about this?

\*\*\*

The myth of Judeo-Bolshevism was born amid the crisis of war, revolution, and state collapse in the waning months of the First World War and the turbulent years that immediately followed it. Across Europe, the myth grew from wartime fears

9 Jeffrey S. Kopstein/Jason Wittenberg, Who Voted Communist? Reconsidering the Social Bases of Radicalism in Interwar Poland, in: *Slavic Review* 62 (Spring 2003) 1, 87-109, here 104-105.

10 Vladimir Solonari, Patterns of Violence. The Local Population and the Mass Murder of Jews in Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, July–August 1941, *Kritika* 8 (Fall 2007) 4, 778.

about divided Jewish loyalties and Jewish treason. In Germany, the army conducted a 'Jew count' in 1916 to determine whether or not Jews were serving the country in sufficient numbers. In Russia, the army removed Jews from western border areas in order to prevent them from sabotaging the war effort. From London to Warsaw to Bucharest, security officials worried that Jewish ties to their brethren in the Russian Empire warped their priorities and set them at odds with the countries in which they lived. When revolution came, it was easy to transpose these fears onto the new political reality and to see Bolshevism as another, bigger act of Jewish sabotage.

After 1917, conspiracy theories about Jewish Bolshevik flourished. The Judeo-Bolshevik panic created a new audience for *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the forged 'proof' of a Jewish conspiracy first published in 1903 and still invoked by antisemites today. In the United States, Henry Ford reprinted the text in his newspaper; in France and Italy, conservative Catholic media incorporated the hoax into their analyses of the dangers of secular republican culture; and in Germany, the newly formed Nazi Party took the *Protocols* as proof that the 'Jewish question' needed to be solved. Of course, the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism could never be separated in practice from other versions of the Jewish plot, however illogical the connections might seem. The Jewish communist and the Jewish banker were always partnered in the antisemitic imagination. Yet the idea of Judeo-Bolshevism created a cabal comprised of new faces to set alongside more familiar antisemitic fables about wealthy Jews like the Rothschilds. More profoundly, it updated old stereotypes present in European culture since the Middle Ages that associated Jews with disorder, misrule, and evil. Anti-communists of all stripes used horror stories about Jewish terror in the Soviet Union as cautionary tales. They also made them politically productive, developing ideas about racial or ethnic purity, social order, and the nature of European civilisation against the backdrop of a Jewish Bolshevik dystopia.

Then as now, the phantasmagorical world of the far right was a transnational construction. Today, we marvel at the rapid circulation from one country to another of racist memes across platforms like Facebook, 4Chan, or Gab. It was no different in 1917. Texts like the *Protocols* were translated and reprinted across Europe. Journalists and writers travelled abroad looking for lurid stories to send home about fanatical Jewish commissars. Pundits drew connections between cataclysms far away and perceived threats at home. Émigrés fled war-torn lands and shared paranoid stories about their Jewish Bolshevik persecutors with anyone who would listen. The circulation of these ideas across Europe's borders and their constant repetition in many different countries in many different languages made the spectre of Judeo-Bolshevism seem real.

In this way, fears of a Judeo-Bolshevik plot inspired real world polices to stop it: to secure borders, check the flow of Jewish migrants, and eradicate the threat of revolutionary Jewish terrorism. In France, antisemites called for new restrictions on Jewish immigration. So did nativists in the United States, who worried that Jews in areas like New York's Lower East Side planned to bring the evils of revolution across the Atlantic. In Bavaria, officials expelled Jewish refugees from the Russian Civil War amid demands from the newly formed Nazi Party to stem the tide of *Ostjuden* (Eastern Jews) flooding into the country. Romanian officials did the same thing, also in a climate shaped by a new fascist movement led by a disturbed university student named Corneliu Codreanu. In Hungary, the government politicised religion in order to set the ideological power of a Christian nation against the Jewish Bolshevik enemy. It also set quotas on the number of Jews who could attend university, the better – they argued – to ensure that leading sectors of the economy and society

would remain out of Jewish radical hands. Everywhere, security forces trained wary eyes on Jews active in left-wing politics.

In this way, the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism captured anxieties about the fragile sovereignty of European nations at a time of political and social upheaval in especially potent ways. Nowhere was this fear of fragile national sovereignty linked more effectively to apocalyptic fantasies about the life and death of European or Western civilisation than in Nazi Germany. Communism may not have made Hitler an antisemite. Yet Judeo-Bolshevism certainly did make Hitler – fuelling the rise of the party that he led and remaining a core obsession of his until the end of the Nazi Reich in 1945. Whenever Hitler looked east and contemplated Germany’s destiny, he invariably connected the Jewish threat to the reservoir of other subhuman races that – in his mind – made up the peoples of the Soviet Union. The racial alliance between Jews and the Asiatic masses presented a mortal danger to Germany and to the rest of Europe.

Nazi Soviet experts built on this so-called insight and tried to analyse life in the Soviet Union according to what they called the “National Socialist racialist perception of reality.”<sup>11</sup> They concluded that Jews had played a leading role in every aspect of Stalinist terror, creating the gulags and causing famine through forced collectivisation. They warned that Soviet commissars were ready to lead an army of subhuman races into the heart of Europe. The far right across Europe was thrilled at this language: In France, antisemitic writers published screeds about Judaism and Marxism which suggested that supporting Nazi Germany was the best way to preserve France’s true national character. Zoltán Bosnyák, an antisemite who would get to run his own Nazi-style Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question in 1944, made similar arguments in Hungary, praising Hitler for the political genius that had finally destroyed the Judeo-Bolshevik threat in Germany.

When German soldiers poured across the Soviet border in the summer of 1941, Nazi propagandists remade this language for a Europe at war. They declared that Germany’s fight in the East was a crusade to defend Germans and all Europeans from a barbaric racial and ideological enemy. They used evidence of atrocities committed by NKVD agents to promote their racist vision of the ‘Judeo-Bolshevik’ Soviet enemy. They also turned a ruthless campaign against imaginary ‘Jewish partisans’ into a central feature of their plans to pacify the Soviet Union. When SS and Wehrmacht officers discussed the partisan threat in the summer and autumn of 1941, the substance of their discussions typically boiled down to: Jew equals Bolshevik equals partisan. On this basis, mass shootings of entire Jewish communities across the occupied Soviet Union escalated in these months – a crucial stage in the origins of the Holocaust. After the infamous Babi Yar Massacre, Wehrmacht General Walter von Reichenau declared that the purpose of the war was to destroy the “Jewish Bolshevik system” and to eradicate the “Asiatic influence in the European sphere of culture”. For this reason, it was necessary to mete out “hard but just punishment” to “Jewish sub-humans”.<sup>12</sup> Military defeats did not change this ideological line in Berlin. When Joseph Goebbels called on Germans to fight a total war against the Soviet enemy in the aftermath of the Battle of Stalingrad, he warned them that a horde of subhuman savages was coming, led by “Jewish liquidation commandos.”

11 Hermann Greife, *Sowjetforschung*, Berlin/Leipzig 1936, 31-36, 70. See also: Andre Gerrits, *The Myth of Jewish Communism*, New York 2008, 64.

12 The so-called “Reichenau Order” is reprinted in Gerd R. Ueberschär/Wolfram Wette (ed.), “Unternehmen Barbarossa”. *Der deutsche Überfall auf der Sowjetunion, 1941 – Berichte, Analysen, Dokumente*, Paderborn 1984, 339-340.



Behind them loomed “terror, the spectre of mass starvation, and complete anarchy”.<sup>13</sup> A Soviet victory, he warned, would result in a racial apocalypse and the destruction of Europe as a civilisation.

The legacy left by this toxic fusion of racism and anti-communism is complex. After 1945, overt expressions of Nazi ideology became taboo, especially in West Germany. Yet the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism lived on in the cultural memory of the war in the East. Traces could be found in many different places. Wehrmacht generals wrote memoirs to recast themselves as good anti-communists who defended Europe against a grave threat to civilisation. Mid-level Nazi ideologists (like Eberhard Taubert) had jobs as anti-communist propagandists for much longer into the 1950s than is commonly recognised. Most importantly, however, postwar neofascist theorists – the best known probably being the Italian Julius Evola – understood and wrote about the war in terms that recall the Nazi anti-Bolshevik crusade: as Europe’s struggle to defend its identity and culture against alien and destructive forces. In the works of these theorists, the locus of the contemporary postwar threat to European identity tended to circulate, sometimes fixing on migrants from former European empires, sometimes on leftist student radicals besotted with dangerous ideologies. Yet the discursive similarities with the older language of Judeo-Bolshevism was clear, as was the iconic status that the war against the Soviet Union (as a good and necessary war, rather than a racist and catastrophic war) played in the cultural memory of the post-Second World War far right. These neofascist writings have enjoyed a strange and frightening renaissance in recent years in far right, alt-right, and ethnic populist circles. Once it seemed possible to dismiss them as the marginal products of cranks and has-beens. Recent events warn us that we should not.

The myth of Judeo-Bolshevism cast a long shadow on the left as well. Amid the delirium of revolutionary upheaval after 1917, leading Communist Party ideologues generally reminded their followers that antisemitism was a remnant of feudalism that had no place in the communist utopia to come. However, local Party activists often forgot this fine distinction and easily associated their dreams of economic justice with older stereotypes about wealthy Jewish oppressors. Sometimes they also complained about the visibility of Jews in leadership positions in terms that mirrored those of their counterrevolutionary enemies. In rural Hungary in 1919, Party activists bitterly observed that the prominence of Jews like Béla Kun among the Bolshevik leadership was making it difficult to win peasants over to the revolution. Especially in Central and Eastern Europe, leftist hopes for a cadre of organic intellectuals leading the people from within became most coherent when set against critiques of ‘cosmopolitan’ (i.e. Jewish) intellectuals with no ties to native workers.

After 1945, newly formed communist regimes struggled mightily to convince their subjects that they were not agents of Jewish power. When a mob massacred 42 Jews in Kielce, Poland in 1946, eyewitnesses remembered hearing people shouting slogans that targeted Jews as agents of communist terror. In response, communist labour leaders tried to mobilise workers to condemn the violence as a ‘reactionary’ provocation. Yet they found that the workers were more eager to take part in strikes and to use anti-Jewish slogans as a way to express their own social and economic dissatisfaction. To establish their nationalist bona fides in this political environment, Party leaders across the newly establish Soviet bloc in Central and Eastern Europe

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Goebbels, Nun, Volk steh auf, und Sturm brich los! Rede im Berliner Sportpalast, <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb36.htm> (7 March 2021).

turned a blind eye to expressions of antisemitism within their own ranks and in the wider public, for example by accepting at face value calls to defend “honest labour” from the exploitation of “parasitical” and “unproductive” middlemen. They also welcomed onto the party rolls so-called “little fascists” – low-level antisemites and pro-Nazi collaborators who were willing to rewrite their personal histories in order to fit into the new order. The Jewish communist Ana Pauker commented on the amnesty that the Romanian Communist Party extended to former legionaries of the fascist Iron Guard: “There were more of them”, she admitted, “and especially workers, than I’d imagined.”<sup>14</sup>

Soon, Jewish Communist Party members fell victim to the anti-Zionist hysteria of Stalin’s last years. State prosecutors in the 1952 show trial of Rudolf Slansky and thirteen other leading figures in the Czechoslovak Communist Party consistently identified eleven of the defendants, including Slansky, as Jewish and charged them with being Zionist agents. Slansky and his thirteen co-defendants confessed to their supposed crimes. Eleven of them were executed. Careful analysis of police reports compiled during this time show that many ordinary people found the charges of Jewish treason plausible in part because they resonated with older stereotypes of Jewish communists as antinational cosmopolitans who were greedy for power.

Even after Stalin’s death, so-called national communists continued to wield the charge of Zionism as a political bludgeon against their enemies, most notoriously in Poland in 1968, when the Party demonised student dissidents (some of whom were Jewish) as Zionist agents. Wladyslaw Gomulka, head of the Polish Communist Party, was at the centre of this campaign. Already in the late 1940s, Gomulka had worried that Poles did not see the Communist Party as Polish because it had Jewish members. He had even written to Stalin to explain that the “Jewish comrades did not feel tied by any bonds” to the Polish nation or the Polish working class.<sup>15</sup> Then, at the height of the anti-Zionist campaign in 1968, Gomulka declared that the Party was ready to give “emigration passports to those who considered Israel their Fatherland”.<sup>16</sup> The wave of anti-Jewish hysteria unleashed by this tactic decimated the remnants of Poland’s Jewish community. Some 20,000 left the country. By 1970, no more than 10,000 remained.

Communist Party attitudes towards Jews and antisemitism have left a strange legacy in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. Despite the best efforts of national communists like Wladyslaw Gomulka to legitimise their rule by associating it with nationalism, Central and East Europeans across the former Soviet bloc welcomed the fall of communism as a chance to revive long-dormant national traditions. Many of them also dismissed their former communist rulers as anti-national enemies. Yet the strategy of labelling Jewish Communist Party members as less authentically national, or less rooted, or less in touch with the true feelings of the working people, left a mark nonetheless. Almost as soon as the communist regimes collapsed, new right-wing nationalists built on this history and turned it to their own ends. They declared that the nations of Central and Eastern Europe had simply exchanged the old Communist Party bosses for new international liberal masters, dominated – as before – by cosmopolitan and internationalist Jews. In Romania, some former communists even remade themselves as nationalists by claiming that it had been the Stalinist Jews who had ruined everything good about the old system

14 Robert Levy, *Ana Pauker. The Rise and Fall of a Jewish Communist*, Berkeley, CA 2001, 76.

15 Lech W. Glukowski (ed.), *Gomulka Writes to Stalin in 1948*, in: *Polin* 17 (2004), 365-384, here 379.

16 Dariusz Stola, *The Hate Campaign of March 1968. How Did It Become Anti-Jewish?*, in: *Polin* 21 (2009), 16-36.



and who were now using liberal democracy and global market capitalism to perpetuate their rule. Judeo-Bolshevism may have vanished, but right-wing nationalists insisted that Jewish liberalism had re-emerged to take its place.

\*\*\*

In conclusion: The history of the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism seems in many ways distant today. Communism has vanished from the political scene nearly everywhere. The question of Jews and Bolshevism now features most prominently in debates about how to remember the century past. Especially in Central and Eastern Europe, calls to study crimes committed by 'Jewish communists' typically function as a way to deflect attention away from the difficult business of understanding the legacy of the Holocaust in the region. This also serves as a kind of dog whistle that signals opposition to the moral project that Holocaust commemoration represents – respect for cultural pluralism, liberal political values, and human rights – as nothing more than Western political correctness. Meanwhile, the ideological coordinates that once shaped the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism have been scrambled into a new pattern. George Soros and nameless cultural Marxists have replaced Leon Trotsky as the face of the Jewish conspiracy. In France, attacks on Jews have been committed by Islamic extremists who use the language of anti-Zionism for their own ends. In the United Kingdom, debates about antisemitism within the Labour Party have also been dominated by the issue of anti-Zionism. At the same time, the far right on both sides of the Atlantic have transformed long-established staples of antisemitic politics into a potent new Islamophobia. In the 1930s, right-wing extremists dreamed of Christian nations and Christian Europe as a bulwark against the Judeo-Bolshevik menace. Now, they imagine Christian Europe as an antidote to the rising spectre of Eurabia or the Islamisation of the West. White power fanatics have made this turn as well, finding new inspiration for a race war against Muslims in old texts like the toxic 1978 *Turner Diaries* that fantasised about conspiracies between Jews, blacks, and communists to destroy white people everywhere. What is old is new again. The myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, so powerful in the twentieth century, has begun to fade. Yet the paranoid fears of Jewish conspiracy that sustained it remain with us.

This talk is a revised and expanded version of a much shorter piece that was published in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in January 2020. See: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, <https://mondediplo.com/2020/01/11antisemitism> (17 March 2021).

**Paul Hanebrink** is Professor of History and Jewish Studies at Rutgers University. His books include *In Defense of Christian Hungary. Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890–1944* (2006) and *A Specter Haunting Europe. The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (2018).

E-Mail: [hanebrin@history.rutgers.edu](mailto:hanebrin@history.rutgers.edu)

---

Quotation: Paul Hanebrink, *A Spectre Haunting Europe. The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism*,  
in: S.I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 8 (2021) 1, 104-113.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0121/SWL\\_PHAN01](https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0121/SWL_PHAN01)

**S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON.** is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the  
Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 8 (2021) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0121>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-NC-ND  
(Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives)

In appreciation to the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) for  
supporting this publication.