Lies, Stereotypes, and Antisemitism in an Age of War and Revolution

(1914–1920s)

Between 1903 and 1905, more than 3,000 antisemitic pamphlets, books, and articles were published in Russia alone. One of those works was The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which supposedly contained the minutes of a secret meeting of Jewish leaders—the so-called “Elders of Zion.” At that meeting, according to the Protocols, the “Elders” plotted to take over the world.

In 1905, few people had paid much attention to the document, but after World War I, it became a worldwide sensation. Many believed that it explained seemingly “unexplainable” events—wars, economic crises, revolutions, epidemics. The idea of a Jewish conspiracy had been around for centuries, but the Protocols gave that belief new life, and it remained rooted in popular culture long after it was exposed as a hoax in the early 1920s. For many people, World War I and the earthshaking events that followed it confirmed the authenticity of the document, no matter what evidence was offered to the contrary.

QUESTIONS OF LOYALTY IN WARTIME

World War I was sparked not by a Jewish conspiracy but by an assassination in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. On June 28, 1914, a Bosnian Serb who belonged to an extreme nationalist group killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, an empire that controlled much of central Europe. Just two months later, the world was engulfed in a war that lasted four years, was fought on three continents, and ultimately involved 30 nations. On one side were the Central Powers—Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire, and the countries that supported them. On the other side were the Allies—Serbia, Russia, France, and Britain, and the countries that supported them. More
than 19 million people were killed during the fighting; about half of them were civilians.

Winston Churchill, who later became prime minister of Britain, described the terrible nature of this “world war”:

All the horrors of all the ages were brought together, and not only armies but whole populations were thrust into the midst of them. The mighty educated States involved conceived—not without reason—that their very existence was at stake. Neither peoples nor rulers drew the line at any deed which they thought could help them win. . . . Every outrage against humanity or international law was repaid by reprisals—often of a greater scale and of longer duration. No truce or parley mitigated the strife of the armies. The wounded died between the lines: the dead moldered into the soil. Merchant ships and neutral ships and hospital ships were sunk on the seas and all on board left to their fate, or killed as they swam. Every effort was made to starve whole nations into submission without regard to age or sex.¹

**Europe at War (1914–1918)**

The areas of heavy fighting during World War I in Europe, particularly in the east, were areas where most Jews lived. Many were caught in the crossfire.
When people are engaged in such a war, their search for enemies focuses not only on the foreign armies outside their country’s borders but also on enemies—real and imagined—within those borders. During World War I, a number of rulers, generals, and ordinary citizens accused vulnerable minorities in their own countries of treason and disloyalty. In the Ottoman Empire, Christian Armenians were the primary victims. In much of eastern Europe—particularly Russia—Jews were the target. They were seen as disloyal, even though more than 300,000 Jews fought, often with distinction, in the Russian army. In fact, Jews fought in every army involved in the conflict; for example, 100,000 served in the German army.

Accusations of disloyalty have consequences, particularly in a war zone, and according to the American Jewish Committee, “one-half of the Jewish population of the world was trapped in a corner of eastern Europe that is absolutely shut off from all neutral lands and from the sea.” The American Jewish Committee had been founded in 1906 by American Jews who wanted to protect Jews in Russia from the pogroms (see Chapter 11). Now, ten years later, they feared for the safety of Jews throughout eastern and central Europe.

The war in Europe was being fought on two fronts, or lines of battle. On the western front, which stretched from Belgium to Switzerland, the two sides were mired in trench warfare, each determined to exhaust the
other. Neither was strong enough to win a decisive victory. On the eastern front, however, large stretches of land shifted back and forth from one side to the other.

Early in the war, the Russians won control of much of the Austrian province of Galicia and then bombarded the German state of East Prussia. But as the war progressed, the Germans prevailed. In a battle fought near the city of Tannenberg in August 1914, Germans nearly destroyed the Russian army. To exploit their victory, the Germans went on the offensive. Within two months, they controlled the northwestern part of Russian Poland and parts of Lithuania and the Ukraine. As the Russians retreated, they set fire to homes, farms, and businesses. Millions of people—Jews and Christians alike—were left homeless.

In the eyes of the Russian government, not all of those homeless civilians were loyal. During the war, a Jewish playwright and journalist who called himself S. Ansky traveled through the small towns, or shtetels, that dotted the Pale of Settlement and Russian-controlled Galicia to organize aid to Jewish communities there and investigate accusations that Jews were spying for the Germans. He summarized his findings:

At first, the slanderers did their work quietly and furtively. But soon they took off their masks and accused the Jews openly.

From the generals down to the lowest ensign, the officers knew how the czar, his family, the general staff, and [the commanders] felt about Jews; and so they worked to outdo one another in their antisemitism. The conscripts were less negative but hearing the venom of their superiors and reading about Jewish treason day after day they too came to suspect and hate Jews.

Every commander and every colonel who made a mistake had found a way to justify his crime, his incompetence, his carelessness. He could make everything kosher by blaming his failures on a Jewish spy. The officers, who accepted lies against Jews without question or investigation, were quick to settle accounts with the accused.

The persecution reached mammoth proportions. When the Russian army passed through many towns and villages, especially when there were Cossacks [members of the army’s elite cavalry], bloody pogroms took place. The soldiers torched and demolished whole neighborhoods, looted the Jewish homes and shops, killed
dozens of people for no reason, took revenge on the rest, inflicted the worst humiliation on them, raped women, injured children. . . . A Russian officer talked about seeing Cossacks “playing” with a Jewish two-year-old: one of them tossed the child aloft, and the others caught him on their swords. After that, it was easy to believe the German newspapers when they wrote that the Cossacks hacked off people’s arms and legs and buried victims alive. . . .

On the assumption that every Jew was a spy, [the Russian government] began by expelling Jews from the towns closest to the front: at first it was just individuals, then whole communities. In many places Jews and ethnic Germans were deported together. This process spread farther and farther with each passing day. Ultimately all the Jews—a total of over two hundred thousand—were deported from Kovno and Grodno provinces.³

At a meeting in St. Petersburg, N. B. Shcherbatov, the Russian minister of the interior, confirmed the charges made by Ansky and other Jews. He told fellow officials that even though “one does not like to say this,” military officers were attributing to Jews “imaginary actions of sabotage against the Russian forces” so that they could hold the Jews “responsible for [the army’s] own failure and defeat at the front.”⁴ Another official noted that the Jews “are being chased out of the [eastern front] with whips and accused . . . of helping the enemy”—with no attempt to distinguish the guilty from the innocent. He feared that when these refugees arrived in new areas, they would be in a “revolutionary mood.”⁵

By late summer of 1915, the Russian army had uprooted more than 600,000 Jews. A non-Jewish deputy in Russia’s parliament described their removal from the province of Radom:

The entire population was driven out within a few hours during the night. . . . Old men, invalids and paralytics had to be carried in people’s arms because there were no vehicles. The police . . . treated the Jewish refugees precisely like criminals. At one station, for instance, the Jewish Commission of Homel was not even allowed to approach the trains to render aid to the refugees or to give them food and water. In one case, a train which was conveying the victims was completely sealed and when finally opened most of the inmates were found half-dead, sixteen down with scarlet fever and one with typhus.⁶
Solrds who “catch” toddlers on their swords and police officers who force “old men, invalids, and paralytics” from their homes are not protecting their country from treason. Rather, they are seeing Jews as stereotypes, not as human beings. A stereotype is more than a label or judgment about an individual based on the real or imagined characteristics of a group. Stereotypes dehumanize people by reducing them to categories; in this case, officials treated babies and paralytics as traitors despite all evidence and logic.

Similar stereotypes shaped the irrational decisions of the tsar, his ministers, and top generals. For example, by 1916, Russian soldiers experienced shortages of food, fuel, ammunition, and other necessities, partly because the government was using freight trains and supply wagons to

Thousands of Jewish families were displaced during World War I. Some were forced out by the fighting, but many more were expelled from their homes because the Russians saw them as potential traitors.