H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephen Eric Bronner. *A Rumor about the Jews: Antisemitism, Conspiracy, and the Protocols of Zion.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 177 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-21804-1; $12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-516956-0.

Reviewed by Gordon Fisher (Department of Mathematics, James Madison University (emeritus))

Published on H-Antisemitism (June, 2000)

The Persistent Protocols

The flagrant forgery known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (and variants of this, e.g. with "Learned Elders" or "Wise Men" in place of just "Elders") surfaced sometime in the last decade of the nineteenth century, apparently in Russia. It seems to have been first published, in Russian, in 1903. However, its exact origin and its authors remain clouded in mystery, despite numerous efforts over the past 80 years or so to track them down. The document was definitively shown to be a forgery in 1921, for example by Philip Graves in a series of articles in the Times of London. Since then, there have been many works examining the sources for the forgery, and predecessors for the fantastic theory which it elaborates.

Those interested in the etiology and provenance of the forgery will find a treatment of this subject in Chapter Four of the present work. In Chapter Two, the author gives some excerpts from the Protocols, taken from an English translation published in 1922. This translation, by Victor Marsden, is (rather ominously) easily available in full on the internet today. The central theme of the Protocols is the announcement of a world wide conspiracy by a group of Jews (the "Elders of Zion") to "enslave Christian civilization under a new world order run by the leading elder of Zion" (p. 5).

In Chapter Three, the author gives a brief discussion of varieties of antisemitism in general, which provides a context for discussion of the influence of the Protocols.

In Chapter Five, the author considers the connection of the Protocols with the anticommunist political movements which followed World War I, and dissemination and support of the Protocols in a number of countries by reactionary forces, such as threatened monarchies and nobilities.

There is a consideration as well of perhaps the most notorious believers in the truth of the Protocols, namely, Adolf Hitler, various of his officials, and many other Germans. As to the influence of the Protocols on the Holocaust, the author cautiously suggests that this sui generis event transcends the antisemitism of the later nineteenth and first decade or so of the twentieth centuries. Of course, it is difficult to estimate the effect of a single document such as the Protocols on something like the course of antisemitism in Germany and elsewhere, but directly and indirectly it seems to have had as much influence as a single document can have. At the least, it can serve, as the author says, as a "basis for these reflections on antisemitism" (p. 4).

The author is interested in explaining and conjecturing about why the Protocols had such a powerful political and social effect in numerous societies and nations during the first half of the twentieth century. Bronner quotes Hannah Arendt (p. 122): " ... if a patent forgery like the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is believed by so many people that it can become the text of a whole political movement, the task of the historian is no longer to discover a forgery. Certainly it is not to invent explanations which dismiss the chief political and historical fact of the matter: that the forgery is being believed. This fact is more important than the (historically speaking, secondary) circumstance that it is a forgery." The author adds: "The point is not whether they *are* true, but rather whether the antisemite *believes* them to be true" (p. 122). In fact, those who try to prove to believers in the truth of the Protocols that they are false will customarily find themselves on the wrong track. A "true" antisemite can always find reasons to believe in the "essential" truth of the Protocols, even in the face of overpowering evidence

to the contrary.

The document is so palpably a forgery in the minds of many people that it can become for them a problem of considerable interest and depth to try to discover why it has had the influence it has had. For example, no less a person than Winston Churchill wrote in 1920 (before Graves's exposure of the forgery) "this worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization and for the reconstruction of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality has been steadily growing ... there is no need to exaggerate the part played in the creation of Bolshevism and in the actual bringing about of the Russian Revolution by these international and for the most part atheistical Jews. It is certainly a very great one; it outweighs all others" (p. 107). The formulation of this passage suggests convincingly that Churchill based his remarks on the content and "spirit" of the Protocols, if not the exact text. In Chapter Six, the author speculates on the nature of antisemitism today, especially as contrasted with the period before the end of World War II. On the whole, the author is rather optimistic. For example, he says "The world is different than it was in the interwar period: antisemitism is no longer either an ideology dealing with the destiny of mankind or a pretext. ... The overwhelming attempt to destroy the Jews turned into its opposite: the holocaust left in its wake a Jewish people more existentially, if not necessarily politically, unified than ever before. The destruction of fascism initiated what has become a strengthened commitment to the values of the liberal state ...." (p. 134). Still, as the author notes, the Protocols, and content based on them, knowingly or not, can be found in considerable quantity on the Internet. The author suggests, however, that promotion of material based on the Protocols, and analogous material, is the work of people who are "on the fringe", and that "its use by extremist groups actually helps antifascists and humanists track them and their activities" (p. 138).

Finally, the author reflects on such matters as the relationship of so-called postmodernist and anti-Enlightenment attitudes toward antisemitism, on the extent to which "Antisemitism is the stupid answer to a serious questions: how does history operate behind our backs? " (p. 140), and "if antisemitism is no longer a threat in the terms of times past, what does this imply for Jews and for Judaism? " (p. 147).

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-antisemitism

Citation: Gordon Fisher. Review of Bronner, Stephen Eric, *A Rumor about the Jews: Antisemitism, Conspiracy, and the Protocols of Zion*. H-Antisemitism, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4178

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.