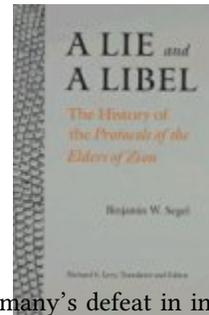


H-Net Reviews

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Binjamin W. Segel. *A Lie and a Libel: The History of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 148 pp. \$22.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4243-2.

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The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, one of the most (in)famous anti-Semitic forgeries, which allegedly revealed the existence of an international Jewish-Masonic conspiracy for world domination, was published under many different titles and in various forms. First published in Tsarist Russia at the turn of the century, the *Protocols* are essentially a patchwork composed of Maurice Joly's *Dialogue between Machiavelli and Montesquieu in Hell* (1864) and Hermann Goedsche's *Biarritz*, published in 1868 (85-86).

Binjamin W. Segel, who was born in 1866 in Galicia, spent most of his career writing for the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbuerger juedischen Glaubens* (Central Union of German Citizens of Jewish Faith), which was founded in 1893 to safeguard Jewish civil and social equality against rising anti-Semitism. He published not only *Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion, kritisch beleuchtet: Eine Erledigung* (1924), but also an earlier study of Bolshevism and the Jewish question in Romania and Eastern Europe before he died in 1931. Though a few critical treatments of the *Protocols* had appeared (by Joseph Stanjek, Philipp Graves, and Hermann Strack [65]) prior to Segel's study, Segel was prompted by the continuous effects of the *Protocols* on political life in Germany. Accordingly, he prepared an abbreviated version of his earlier studies on the *Protocols* entitled *Welt-Krieg, Welt-Revolution, Welt-Verschwoerung, Welt-Oberregierung* (1926). This shortened version, translated and edited here by Richard S. Levy, provides not only a detailed analysis of the various sources of the *Protocols*, but also of their immediate impact.

Between their concoction in Paris in 1897-1898 and the revolutionary events of 1905, the still-unpublished *Protocols* did not attract much attention. Without the

Russian Revolution of 1917 and Germany's defeat in the First World War, the *Protocols* hardly would have become so successful. Seen as a blueprint for world conquest by Jews, the *Protocols* were widely circulated during the Russian Civil War by propagandists seeking to incite the masses against the "Jewish Revolution." In Germany the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, together with the Treaty of Versailles and the legend of the "stab in the back" (*Dolchstoß*), gave the *Protocols* a particular revival. The documents initially surfaced in Germany in an edition by Ludwig Mueller under the pseudonym Gotfried zur Beek. For Segel, the *Protocols* confirmed for the lower-middle-class parties, organizations, and paramilitary groups everything they believed about the Jews. Segel explained the sponsorship of the *Protocols* by Prince Otto zu Salm-Horstmar, General Erich Ludendorff, and the Pan-German League out of their political interests in the Weimar Republic. Here Segel acutely touched upon the political function of the *Protocols*; they exonerated Germany in its defeat in the First World War and were a most effective weapon against the "Jew-Republic" (61, 64-5).

With the distribution of the *Protocols* in Europe, the Americas, and the Muslim world, Segel's study and Levy's introduction remind us of the international, cross-cultural aspect of modern anti-Semitism, which unfortunately is not limited to a specific culture, nation, or social group. It is therefore particularly difficult to detect the direct impact of the *Protocols* on anti-Jewish prejudices and politics. If Norman Cohen in his seminal study on the *Protocols* called them a "Warrant for Genocide," then it can be assumed that the *Protocols* imbued Germans not only with a particular phantasmagoric interpretation of the power of Jews but also that they had a direct bearing on the actual annihilation of European Jewry. In contrast

to this, Levy persuasively argues that the “true harm of the Protocols lay not in its questionable capacity to stimulate direct action but rather in its encouragement of inaction” (Intro, 32).

While several more recent studies on the history of the *Protocols* by Norman Cohen, Jacob Katz, and Johannes Rogalla provide us with more detailed and comprehensive histories of this work, it becomes all too easy to forget the profound insight Segel gained into the nature of the *Protocols*. By comparing various versions and uncovering original sources, Segel exposed the *Protocols* as a forgery. That this endeavor was not merely motivated by scholarly intentions but also by the threat that the *Protocols*' dissemination posed to the social and political status of European Jewry is evident in the concluding lines of Segel's study. He wrote that unless the *Proto-*

cols were revealed as a forgery, they would “...continue to befog the understanding of simple men, poison their hearts, and pervert the common sense for decades, perhaps for centuries to come” (118). Although Segel exposed the *Protocols* as fraudulent, they continued to be a powerful anti-Semitic source. As Levy points out, the *Protocols*, as a result of their lack of specificity, remained extremely malleable and infinitely adaptable (Intro, 13). Although Segel's text does not contribute much to furthering our understanding of the history of the *Protocols*, Levy's solid introduction and “Chronology of the Protocols” provide an instructive survey both of modern anti-Semitism and of the *Protocols* themselves. Together with Segel's study and an excerpt from the *Protocols*, this publication offers a compact introduction into the study of one seminal anti-Semitic text and its history.

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