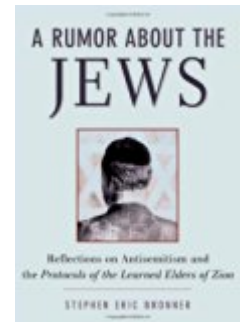


**Stephen Eric Bronner.** *A Rumor about the Jews: Antisemitism, Conspiracy, and the Protocols of Zion.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 177 pp. \$12.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-516956-0.



**Reviewed by** Linda Maizels

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In the introduction to his book, *Warrant for Genocide*, Norman Cohn describes the notorious forgery, known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, as having "helped to prepare the way for the Holocaust," by serving as an inspiration for Hitler and his followers.[1] In this way, Cohn attempts to offer an explanation of how the authors of the *Protocols* were directly responsible for helping to create an intellectual climate where genocide was seen as a viable solution to a perceived problem, namely the problem of European Jewry.

In his book *A Rumor About the Jews: Reflections on Antisemitism and the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* Stephen Eric Bronner reflects on Cohn's thesis, and cautions against taking the idea of the *Protocols* as a "warrant for genocide" too far. While he acknowledges that the antisemitic pamphlet is "part of a cumulative historical avalanche of antisemitic ideas" (p. 124), he stresses that the antisemitism of the *Protocols* was a poison derived from a pre-modern worldview, and that its fanatical creators could never have foreseen "the genocidal consequences of their blathering" that would be realized in Nazi

Germany (p. 124). What the *Protocols* do help us to understand, however, is the type of person to whom such a tract would be appealing, which Bronner refers to as "the losers left behind by modernity." He adds by way of explanation that: "their plight demands explanation and their resentment needs confirmation: this is what works like the *Protocols* provide" (p. 141).

In stressing that the *Protocols* must be seen as a protest against the perceived ills of the modern world, Bronner offers a compelling explanation for the appeal of this particular antisemitic tract. In order to buttress his theory, he devotes a substantial portion of his book to placing the *Protocols* in context, vis-a-vis the narratives of European history, Jewish history, and even the history of the phenomenon of antisemitism itself. Bronner portrays the tumultuous chronicle of continental Europe from the time of the French Revolution until the end of the second World War as a protracted battle between reactionary and liberal forces. The chaos and destruction of World War I that definitively marked the end of the ancien régime accelerated the search for a new expres-

sion of the politics of the right. However, because this new right maintained a neo-romantic nostalgia for a mythological past, Bronner maintains that the *Protocols*, which purported to explain the ills of a premodern world, provided a crucial bridge between the old and the new reactionaries.

The new right was eager to do battle against the two-headed hydra of leftist political systems, namely "bourgeois liberalism" in the West, and "proletarian dictatorship" in the East. And this battle against systems based on the values of modernity and the Enlightenment was accompanied by an ever-worsening hostility toward the Jews, who were identified as both the instigators and the beneficiaries of these new forms of government. The simple explanations provided by the *Protocols*, however outdated or ludicrous they may have been to modern sensibilities, were eagerly accepted to explain away the ills of modernity, among them the horrendous debacle of the Great War, the chaos of the Russian Revolution and the grim realities of the Great Depression. The *Protocols*, then, served as an inspiration to those who wished to eliminate European Jewry, but they did not dictate the genocidal nature of the Final Solution. Therefore, Bronner characterizes the Holocaust as "qualitatively different from the worst antisemitic visions generated in the past" and "a phenomenon sui generis" (p. 125).

Bronner's theory leads him to conclude that those who are most attracted to the *Protocols* are not necessarily genocidal maniacs, but rather those who are most interested in subverting Enlightenment values, and the political systems of western capitalist democracies. This allows him to offer a critique of latter-day skeptics of the democratic values of the western world. Maintaining the values of the liberal state, according to Bronner, is the best way to keep the hounds of antisemitism and other vile prejudices at bay, even if remaining true to those values means allowing inflammatory texts like the *Protocols* to be published freely. He cites as proof the lack of political

antisemitism in western countries and the exile of antisemitic thought and activity under liberal democracies to a fringe element of society.

Bronner's book was published in the year 2000. Since that time, the explosion of violence between the Palestinians and Israel has led to a resurgence in the popularity of the *Protocols* in the Arab and Muslim world. Additionally, there are those who point to the possibility of a new antisemitism returning to public discourse in the democracies of western Europe, and which has made its presence felt on university campuses in North America, emanating this time from the intelligentsia of the left. While the use of propaganda like the now discredited *Protocols* is certainly not in evidence, there are those who worry that the partisans of the left who portray Israeli soldiers as Nazis and refer obliquely to Jewish dominance of the media and the strength of Jewish lobbying groups are only a hyperlink away from the openly antisemitic right, Islamic fundamentalists and the Nation of Islam.

In his analysis of European fascism's use of the *Protocols*, Bronner has provided a fascinating, readable and most worthwhile addition to the literature on the subject. However, as Bronner has expanded upon Cohn's thesis, one wonders who will be the next to add an interpretation of the newest phase of the use of the notorious forgery. It is unfortunate indeed that, rather than becoming a relic of an antisemitic past, the *Protocols* will need to be analyzed yet again, to understand how the lies and hatred that it espouses might be influencing another generation of disenfranchised readers.

#### Note

[1]. Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide; The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, (London: Serif, 1996), p. xiii.

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