

A ‘Grooming Chamber’ For Antisemitism The Role of Religion in the German Fears of Judeo-Bolshevism

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If Jewish Bolsheviks could put an end to the imperial rule of the Romanovs, could they pose a threat to the vision of a Third Reich? A question the German National Socialists are likely to have asked themselves before and on the eve of plotting the rise of the Nazi regime. After all, Europe had had a long-standing relationship with blaming the Jews for the world’s miseries.¹ A relationship Germany was ready to refuel, as indicated by German Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, when he stated that ‘the most essential aim of war against the Jewish-bolshevistic system is a complete destruction of their means of power and the elimination of Asiatic influence from the European culture.’² But the German fears of Jewish interference with their great scheme for Europe’s future, must surely have been inspired by more than just the age-old conspiratorial allegation that Jews were the main forces behind world politics.

A first thing not to omit is to give thanks to prof. dr. Todd Weir for, in his review of this paper, reminding me of my—by now notoriously—excessive use of ornamental writing. As I’ve been made aware, but all too often lose sight of, I might occasionally, unintentionally, lose myself in a spree of wordsmithery when writing my essays. It may just be the over-eager marketer in me. And although, paradoxically, many a professor has often described to me the most admirable and excellent of academic works as ‘utterly unreadable’, I do get the point that overwrought writing may clutter my arguments. At any rate, I would ask the reader to take into account that there’s still much room for improvement in this regard. As is invariably the case, instances where there’s room for such improvement may have escaped me yet—and I welcome all suggestions to correct for that.

¹ François Soyer, “Chapter 3: The Dehumanization and Demonization of the Medieval Jews,” in *Medieval Antisemitism?* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 63-64.

² Brian E. Crim, “‘Our Most Serious Enemy’: The Specter of Judeo-Bolshevism in the German Military Community, 1914–1923,” in *Central European History* 44, no. 4 (2011): 624, www.jstor.org/stable/41411641.

As such, this essay will seek to inspect the apparent rise of antisemitic fears at the time, and put a case forward to show how religion played into all this. Basing the hypothesis on such sources as Paul Haberink's *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism*, it becomes apparent a case can be made for the idea that religion has had a hand in cultivating a certain anxiety and indeed enmity towards Judeo-Bolshevism. 'For centuries, the paranoid belief that Jews performed bizarre religious rituals with fanatical and inhuman zeal resurfaced periodically across Europe, reinforcing *religiously inspired* connections to the idea that Jews were evil and fueling blood libel accusations'.³ And, so Haberink says, 'echoes of this logic could be heard everywhere across Europe after 1917'—so too in Germany.

To illustrate the role of religion in the increasing German fears of Judeo-Bolshevism of the 30's and 40's, we ought to zoom in on the conception of the Third Reich and ask: what is religion an *agent* of, that the Nazis were obsessed with? The answer, according to Michael Barkun, is the accruing of *wealth and power*. American Anglo-Israelite C.A.L. Totten⁴, Barkun recalls, once speculated on the sources of the Jews' power, stating that 'they are thrifty, industrious and philanthropic,' while also 'clever in the trade of money-making' to the degree that, 'collectively, they are a serious danger.'⁵ In economic terms, Totten contrasted the Jews with the rest of the religious world, in that the Christian elite was nationalist first and Christian second, whereas Jews were 'Jews first,' and nationalistic after. As such, Totten foresaw the 'Jewish conquest of the world' as inevitable, as the 'Christian rich were incapable of uniting in common enterprise.' And this difference between how Christians and Jews prioritized their faith when they would express themselves politically, would show why in Germany Protestants and Catholics

³ Paul Haberink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 30.

⁴ Though it may seem random, Barkun would seem to have brought Totten into this only because his account on the Jews may help us understand the 'logic' behind the fearful view that the Nazis held of Jews.

⁵ Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement*, Revised ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 124-125.

constantly found themselves at odds with one another. Whereas German Jewry, political differences or not, would indeed appear more collectivist in their pursuit of *Jewish interests* in Germany, rather than *German interests* as Jews.⁶ If the Germans viewed this as a threat the same way Totten did, it might add to the explanations for the NSDAP party to launch their brand of ‘positive Christianity’⁷—in the sense that this seemingly overarching idea of Christianity may also have served as a counterweight to the suspected political monolith embodied in Judeo-Bolshevism.

However, if this was indeed in part the Nazis’ attempt to form a united religious front by establishing an idea of Christianity that could appeal to all Christians in Germany—if only to contend with the perceived threat of Jewish supremacy on a level playing field—the role of religion here still seems rather *passive*. In what capacity then, did religion play an *active* role in inciting German fears of a Judeo-Bolshevik ‘takeover-nightmare’? A first thing to point out is that, in effect, the ‘fears of Judeo-Bolshevism’ were just a repackaging of the fears of communism.⁸ Different label, same drink. To the Germans, Jews had come to symbolize all ‘evils’ that communism had brought to Eastern-Europe.⁹ As they would once have believed such things as disease being the result of Jews poisoning the wells, they had now simply tapped into a more elaborate version of the same credulity. Again, *different* specimens of the *same* species of conspiracy. And this newfound ‘*construct* of Judeo-Bolshevism’, as Brian Crim points out, had also become ‘a powerful rhetorical tool for the growing *völkisch* movement,’ and was ‘the product of an antisemitism’ that had resurfaced even prior to WWI.¹⁰ As implied by François Soyer, whenever a society senses a disunity amongst its people, the Jews have often been the

⁶ See Michael Brenner, and Norbert Frei, “German Jews or Jews in Germany?” in *A History of Jews in Germany since 1945: Politics, Culture, and Society*, eds. Michael Brenner and Kenneth Kronenberg, 207-227 (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2005xhn.11.

⁷ Richard Steigmann-Gall, “Positive Christianity,” in *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14.

⁸ Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting*, 13.

⁹ Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting*, 164.

¹⁰ Crim, “Our Most Serious,” *ibid.*

preferred scapegoat to blame its problems on. And as Doris Bergen argues, in the case of facing the rising tide of communism, antisemitism had become a way for German Protestants and Catholics to find ‘theological and tactical common ground’.¹¹ He recalls that despite their ‘confessional rivalries’, the one thing that *had* successfully bound Protestants and Catholics together, was the shared tradition of nurturing a hostility towards Jews and Judaism—that they now blamed for the communism that, in their eyes, sparked revolution left, right and center. In fact, citing a host of theologians like Richard L. Rubenstein, Franklin H. Littell and Judson Shaver, Bergen points to their conviction that it were ‘factors near *the very heart of Christian tradition* that have led Christians to an anti-Judaic posture’. Having said that, it may perhaps be more easy to isolate the role of religion in the fearmongering towards Judeo-Bolshevism, if we ask the question of whether the Nazis would have been able to successfully convince the German people of a Judeo-Bolshevik threat, if the German religious communities that governed people’s socio-ethnic attitudes had been philosemitic rather than antisemitic. In other words, did Nazi propaganda manage to groom the bulk of an entire population to be afraid enough to avert their gaze from an impending genocide, in under a decade? Or did they simply tap into fears that had already been there long before they harnessed it to combat the communist threat?

As Uriel Tal points out in his book *Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Third Reich: Selected Essays*, ‘Christian theology, Christian education, Christian politics’ and in fact the whole ‘history of Christendom’ had been a major contributor to ‘the emergence of antisemitism’.¹² An antisemitism that, as far as the Christian clergy was concerned, was interchangeable with the growing resentment against Bolsheviks. A consequence of the feeling that these godless intruders were flooding Christian lands, taking charge of

¹¹ Doris L Bergen, “Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism in Nazi Germany,” in *Central European History* 27, no. 3 (1994): 331, www.jstor.org/stable/4546438.

¹² Uriel Tal, *Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Third Reich: Selected Essays*, in series *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2004), 172.

communities everywhere—and in a rather totalitarian manner too. Hanebrink tells of Eugenio Pacelli, papal ambassador to Munich who, reporting back to an anxious Vatican, had his aide describe an ‘indescribable scene’ in 1919 Bavaria of soviet revolutionaries issuing ‘a stream of instructions and commands about every possible aspect of life’.¹³ The forces at play steered right at a ‘complete transformation of the social order’ that Catholic conservatives in Bavaria had fostered. Knowing none of the revolutionaries in question, but claiming to know ‘their type,’ of ‘dubious appearance’ and ‘Jewish like all the rest of them,’ Pacelli’s report had ‘shook the churchmen’ to their core. And as Totten had attempted to generalize the Jews on the basis of economic competence, so had Pacelli in his report generalized them on the basis of their countenance, describing the Bolsheviks of Munich as Jews, looking ‘pale, dirty, with drugged eyes, a hoarse voice, vulgar, repulsive and with a face that is both intelligent and sly’. And how likely was it, that the Christians of Germany were going to dispute the picture that their future Pope, Pius XII, had painted? Certainly when in such sources as *John 8:43*, Christ himself affirms fear of them is warranted, as he responds to the Jews by saying ‘Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do.’ The kind of anti-Jewish language not only found in holy scripture but indeed even commonly preached from the very pulpit.¹⁴ So when the Nazis defined Jews ‘as innately foreign and powerful adversaries wielding tremendous worldwide influence,’ it isn’t hard to see how the role of religion was, in the least, one of confirmation.¹⁵ When the Nazis would shout ‘fire!’, Germans are likely to have seen their pending fears confirmed in the eyes of their priests, reflecting the flames of a Bolshevik inferno. But while Nazis and Christians did equally fear the Judeo-Bolshevik threat—and took part in the war against it—they did so for different reasons.

For example the way Nazis and Christians justified their fears of Judeo-Bolshevism

¹³ Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting*, 12.

¹⁴ Bergen, “Catholics, Protestants, and Christian,” 334.

¹⁵ Robert Hutchinson, “German Intelligence and the Race War in the East, 1941–1943,” in *German Foreign Intelligence from Hitler’s War to the Cold War: Flawed Assumptions and Faulty Analysis* (University Press of Kansas, 2019), 123, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbqs5qj.9.

to themselves, was different. In the fight against it, so Lauren F. Rossi argues, the German chaplaincy used their faith and spiritual utility to Christians in the German army to ‘rationalize their complicity with a racist, murderous regime’. This, Rossi says, ‘exposed a dangerous myopia. The souls of Catholic Germans counted above all else.’¹⁶ And because the devotion to the eradication of Bolshevism was a goal through which ‘Nazism and Catholicism mutually reinforced each other’, German fears of the perceived Judeo-Bolshevik plot was on the one hand based in ‘Nazi racial ideology,’¹⁷ and on the other in the Christian struggle to protect the ‘Lebensraum in which all Catholics stand’—the dominion of churchly life.¹⁸ The German fear of Judeo-Bolshevism, in other words, was in part the fear of the loss of the Christian community and identity in Germany. And as such, despite claiming to feel equally oppressed by the Nazis’ National Socialist ideology, many a Christian in Germany found himself in league with them, if only to fight what felt like an ‘existential battle against atheistic Bolshevism’. Buying into the fearmongering about the Judeo-Bolshevik threat, Christians told themselves, was not to pledge allegiance to the Nazi regime, but rather to exercise one’s ‘religious duty’ and demonstrate one’s piety.¹⁹

Needless to say, there were also those that were as much Nazi-sympathizers as that they were Christian, and who didn’t need the threat of war and revolution to hold a grudge against and fear both Bolsheviks and Jews alike. These were the pro-Nazi Protestants who—not caring about the confusion this would bring—claimed for themselves the plain label “German Christians”. Whether they were actually ‘fearful’ of Judeo-Bolshevism or not, the very *idea* that Germans had a fear of it certainly did play into their hands, as they could use that fear to somewhat justify their very *pride* of being

¹⁶ Lauren Faulkner Rossi, *Wehrmacht Priests: Catholicism and the Nazi War of Annihilation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2015), 155, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjghv6c.

¹⁷ Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting*, 207.

¹⁸ Rossi, *Wehrmacht Priests: Catholicism*, 159.

¹⁹ Lauren N. Faulkner, “Against Bolshevism: Georg Werthmann and the Role of Ideology in the Catholic Military Chaplaincy, 1939-1945,” in *Contemporary European History* 19, no. 1 (2010): 2-3, www.jstor.org/stable/40542747.

antisemitic.²⁰ To them, the communist threat had become not necessarily an opportunity to claim a fear of Jews and Judaism, but an opportunity to express their religious championing of their hatred of it. And there were Catholics too who realized that the fruit of a perceived fear of Judeo-Bolshevism could be exploited to both shield and strengthen their religious and nationalist identity. To them, the threat of Jewish-Bolshevik infiltration into German identity and culture meant they could find support for such ideas as Christianity being ‘as thoroughly German’ as it is ‘utterly anti-Jewish’. To these particular Christians it mattered not if Judeo-Bolshevism *actually* posed a fear-worthy threat or not, as long as *most Germans’* fear of it allowed for them to spread around the idea that ‘true’ Christianity belonged only in the Third Reich if it were and remained ‘explicitly antisemitic’. In fact, in 1939 a host of members of the *German Christians* movement founded an ‘Institute for Research into and Elimination of Jewish Influence in German Church Life’. It seems that at that point, Christian antisemitism had made it so that the duty of the German military as Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau had described it, had now also become a civic duty: to eliminate in Germany all traces of the Jewish-Bolshevistic system. And a common German fear of said Jewish-Bolshevism was in a way but a lubricant to increase the chance of achieving this.

And while ‘Judeo-Bolshevism might be a myth,’ Haberink says, the problem was that the fear of it actually ‘contained a kernel of truth’. Haberink points to British editor and journalist Leopold Greenberg who, ‘while lamenting the destruction Bolshevism had brought to Europe,’ also understood why for example ‘Jewish immigrants in London’s East End might see Bolshevism as a legitimate response to the oppression and persecution that they had experienced in Russia.’²¹ And it were in fact ‘Catholic publication networks throughout Europe’ and, indeed Germany, who leaped at the chance to exploit the occasional similarity between the plight of Jews and Bolsheviks to ‘spread fears about

²⁰ Bergen, “Catholics, Protestants, and Christian,” 333.

²¹ Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting*, 19-20.

Bolshevik disorder and the Jewish conspiracy that might lie behind it'.²² And at the time of Pacelli's writing, just across the border Roman Catholic Bishop Ottokár Prohászka had already proclaimed 'Communism to be a Jewish ideology' and a 'Russian-Jewish invasion'.²³ It may be deduced that the religious communities in Germany and the region, over which an already antisemitic clergy presided, had certainly acted as grooming chambers for Germans and others to be convinced there was something to fear—and so 'Judeo-Bolshevism came to seem real'.

All in all, it would seem that the 'German fears of Judeo-Bolshevism' were a useful myth to some and a reality to others. And whether induced by Nazi ideology or religiously inspired, in both cases it seemed the goal was to rid Germany of 'Asiatic influences'—as the Nazis strived for a purity of people, so certain Christians strived for a purity of faith. As for the latter, the religious motivation behind rallying to the idea that Germans ought to be afraid of Judeo-Bolshevism has only exposed that antisemitism doesn't really wither, but only over time finds new conduits through which to express itself. As such has been the religious dynamic of antisemitism for centuries on end. And in a way, if the 30's and 40's in Germany and Eastern-Europe is to be considered a melting pot of smoldering communist sentiments that could unite a divided nation in its resistance to it, any purported Judeo-Bolshevik invasion was something to be feared as much as something to be hoping for.

²² Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting*, 32-33.

²³ Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting*, 44-45.

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