

The Masonic Conspiracy Slander

Freemasonry has been accused of complicity in widespread secret conspiracies to rule the world for more than two hundred years. These accusations still inform anti-Masonic propaganda today, and are of interest to potential applicants who wonder what we are about.

No, we do not control the levers of power in government, finance, academia, and the media; we do not manipulate public opinion; we do not influence the outcome of elections; and we are not part of a conspiracy to overthrow all governments and religions in order to impose an atheistic One World communist dictatorship.

Freemasonry has been an intellectual and moral force for freedom, equality, and religious tolerance. It is those liberal values that the Masonic conspiracy slanders seek to attack.

The French Revolution

The false allegation of Masonic conspiracy against the established order of state and religion began with the French Revolution of 1789. The revolution overthrew the feudal aristocracy and monarchy of France, and the political power of the Catholic Church in France. It was indeed a revolution against church and state.

Because Freemasonry was generally supportive of the liberal ideas of the 18th c. Enlightenment, it was viewed with suspicion by the old feudal states and by the Catholic church. Groups which promoted progressive, liberal values were seen by the old authorities as subversive.

Some traditionalists saw the French Revolution as the result of a conspiracy of liberal free-thinkers against the old order, and they included Freemasonry as a part of that revolutionary movement. No doubt, many Freemasons must have supported the push for social change in France leading up to the revolution, and some Freemasons became involved in the revolution. But there is no evidence that Freemasonry as an institution instigated or directed the French Revolution. Many Freemasons in fact tried to maintain civil order during the riots of the revolution, and many were killed by mobs or sent to the guillotine as supposed enemies of the people.

The Masonic conspiracy theory of the French Revolution was promoted by two books published some years after the revolution, which are still cited today as proof of Masonic responsibility for the revolution.

In 1797-98, the French Jesuit priest Augustus Barruel published his history of the French Revolution, in which he argued that it was the result of a conspiracy promoted by an international secret society, the Illuminati, working for the overthrow of all religious and civil

authority. He based his work on the published papers of the Illuminati, which had been seized and published by the government of Bavaria in Germany.

Working independently, in 1797 the English scholar John Robison advanced the same theory in his *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Freemasons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*. Robison also based his work on the published papers of the Bavarian Illuminati, but he was not fluent in German and had to rely on second hand sources.

Barruel and Robison alleged that the Illuminati had infiltrated French Masonic lodges and, through them, had instigated the French Revolution. The alleged link between the Illuminati and the French Masonic Lodges was a visit sometime before the revolution, by two members of the Illuminati Order to a Parisian Masonic conference in 1787.

However, the two members of the Illuminati Order did not in fact arrive in Paris until after the 1787 Congress of Masonic Lodges had closed, although a paper prepared by one of them had been read to the assembled Masons – an attack on alchemy and the occult. There is no other evidence that the Illuminati had any role in the French Revolution.

In 1806, Barruel supplemented his conspiracy theory of the revolution when he published a letter claiming that “the Jews” were involved in the Illuminati and Masonic conspiracy to foment the French Revolution.

Both books, by Barruel and by Robison, have been dissected and discredited by subsequent historians.

The Bavarian Illuminati

So who were the Illuminati? Throughout the 18th c. spread of English Freemasonry to continental Europe, the Craft was elaborated and complicated by new and so-called higher degrees, chivalric orders, and occult movements. Scottish Rite Masonry arose during those years. Some Masonic orders in 18th c. Europe claimed direction by secret Masters, unknown to the common brethren, who pledged strict obedience to these secret Masters. This arrangement would be a perfect front for a conspiracy with secret objectives.

In 1776 in Bavaria, one of the states of what would later become a united Germany, the Illuminati Order was founded by Adam Weishaupt. Weishaupt was not then a Freemason, although he was initiated the following year, 1777.

He modeled the Illuminati Order on the Catholic Jesuits, who themselves had been involved in or accused of political conspiracies since the church’s opposition to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th c. One did not have to be a Freemason to be initiated into the Illuminati.

The Order promoted Reason as the ultimate good. The goal of the order was to attain the highest degrees of morality and virtue, to promote the moral reformation of society and to oppose the progress of evil. The Order's notions of "evil" probably included the old aristocracy and the Catholic Church, which in their view promoted superstition.

The Illuminati lodges spread to France and other European states, and gained up to 2,000 members. Its anti-authoritarian values led the Duke of Bavaria to ban the Order in 1785. In 1786 and 1787, documents of the Order were seized in searches of the homes of two of its leaders. These documents were published by the Bavarian government in 1787. The published rituals of the Illuminati exalt Reason over superstition.

The Illuminati ceased to exist not long after its suppression by the Bavarian government in the late 1700s. Nonetheless, conspiracy theorists today believe that it still exists, and that international finance, globalism, communism, and the New World Order are all aspects of the Illuminati plan for world domination.

The source for the myth of the Illuminati's continued existence can be found in its own writings. One of the documents quoted by Robison speaks of fronts for the Order: ¹

The great strength of our Order lies in its concealment; let it never appear in any place in its own name, but always covered by another name, and another occupation. None is fitter than the three lower degrees of Free Masonry; the public is accustomed to it, expects little from it, and therefore takes little notice of it. Next to this, the form of a learned or literary society is best suited to our purpose, and had Free Masonry not existed, this cover would have been employed; and it may be much more than a cover, it may be a powerful engine in our hands. By establishing reading societies, and subscription libraries, and taking these under our direction, and supplying them through our labours, we may turn the public mind which way we will.

After the suppression of the Order in 1787, there is no documentary evidence for its continued existence. Conspiracy theorists, however, look to the events of the following century as proof of its continuity.

The year 1830 saw several more revolutions in Europe, in France, the Netherlands, Greece, and Russia. These revolutions in France and the Netherlands succeeded in establishing constitutional government in those states.

The political movement for progress and democracy in Germany was promoted by "reading societies" which met to discuss liberal political texts and perhaps to plan political action. Recall that the Illuminati documents had suggested "literary societies" as a useful front for their program. This intellectual milieu included Karl Marx, who as a radical German exile in England published his *Communist Manifesto* in 1848.

The year 1848 also saw a wave of revolutions across Europe, in which middle class and working class aspirations for greater power were mostly defeated by the old aristocratic order.

These revolutionary movements have been cited by later conspiracy theorists as evidence of the continuing work of the Illuminati to undermine the established order of western civilization.

The fallacy of these conspiracy theories is the notion that because the 18th c. Illuminati promoted progressive political ideas, and because progressive political movements dominated the history of the following century, the Illuminati must be behind it all.

In fact, both the Freemasonry and the Illuminati of the 18th c., and the political movements of the 19th c., are products of the intellectual Enlightenment and of social forces that had been at work in Europe since the Renaissance. No 'secret society' is needed to explain these social changes.

Modern writers of the extreme right continue this fallacy, denouncing liberal movements of the 20th c. as more recent fronts for the Illuminati. They even describe Soviet Communism of the U.S.S.R. as a front for the Illuminati, working in secret with international bankers to orchestrate world events.

The Italian Revolution

The revolutions of 1848 included the first round in the Italian wars for liberation from French and Austrian domination, and national unification. That goal was finally achieved in 1870 with the victory of Italian nationalists over the territorial and political power of the Papacy at Rome. The Italian wars of independence overthrew the old feudal and papal powers, supported by Austria and France, and established the unified state of Italy.

The military leader of the Italian revolution was Giuseppe Garibaldi, and Freemasonry was in fact aligned with his mission. As a force for rationalism, liberalism, and democracy, Italian Freemasonry was aligned with the forces of revolution against the power of the Catholic Church and its French and Austrian allies.

Garibaldi identified his cause with the progressive ideals of Freemasonry, and as a hero of Italian nationalism he was made Grand Master of the Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite in Sicily in 1862. Garibaldi acknowledged the help that Freemasons had given him in his military campaigns in southern Italy. In 19th c. Catholic Italy, Freemasonry was allied with the secular and democratic opposition to the power of the Church.

In 1864 Garibaldi was elected Grand Master of the Freemasons of Italy. Within a few months, however, he was replaced by a Grand Master who upheld the Masonic ideal of political neutrality. In 1867 Garibaldi wrote "I am of the opinion that Masonic unity will lead to the

political unity of Italy.” He was elected Honourary Grand Master of the Grand Orient Lodge of Italy the same year.²

At a conference in 1867, Garibaldi antagonised the papacy by proposing that "The papacy, being the most harmful of all secret societies, ought to be abolished." ³ He had led unsuccessful military attacks on Rome in the 1860's.

Italian nationalist forces occupied Rome in 1870, defeating the political power of the papacy, which was thereafter reduced to the limited territory of Vatican City, which is still today the independent Papal state.

While Garibaldi's Freemasonry fed the 19th c. stream of conspiracy theories, it really reflects the social forces of the times, rather than the 'secret society' theory of historical change. Freemasonry was allied with rational, liberal, and democratic movements, but the Italian revolution arose from historical and social forces, not from manipulation by secret societies.

Pope Leo XIII

The unification of Italy, including Rome, stripped the papacy of much of its territorial and secular power. Garibaldi had enlisted Italian Freemasonry in achieving that objective.

The growth of democratic, socialist and communist movements in Europe during the latter half of the 19th c. alarmed the ruling powers of all European states. Freemasonry, as an intellectual force for democracy and social equality, was suspected of alliance with those movements.

In 1884 Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878-1903) published a letter, known by its opening words in Latin, *Humanum Genus*. The Pope proclaimed the conspiratorial nature of Freemasonry, and its alliance with Satan for the overthrow of civil and religious order in Europe. ⁴

The new order to be established by the Freemasons is said to be one of religious toleration, democratic rule, and the equality of Man -- in other words, according to the Pope, "the utter overthrow of that whole religious and political order of the world which the Christian teaching has produced". ⁵ These new tenets were unacceptable to the Church of the old feudal order.

Pope Leo said that Freemasons had been able "to gain such entrance into every rank of the State as to seem to be almost its ruling power." ⁶ The Pope's letter is intended to expose "its power for evil, ... this fatal plague." ⁷

The notion that Masonry is guided by secret masters was repeated by the Pope. The papal letter refers to the secrets kept from the common brethren, and the system of degrees and orders, "such as their secret and final designs, the names of the chief leaders, and certain secret and inner meetings, as well as their decisions, and the ways and means of carrying them out. This is, no

doubt, the object of the manifold difference among the members as to right, office, and privilege, of the received distinction of orders and grades ...”⁸

The penalties are also misconstrued as literal rather than symbolic: “As a fact, if any are judged to have betrayed the doings of the sect or to have resisted commands given, punishment is inflicted on them not infrequently, and with so much audacity and dexterity that the assassin very often escapes the detection and penalty of his crime.”⁹

The letter goes on to condemn the separation of church and state; the toleration of all religions; equal rights and self-determination for all.¹⁰ Democracy is specifically rejected: “whosoever rules, he is the minister of God. Wherefore, as the end and nature of human society so requires, it is right to obey the just commands of lawful authority, as it is right to obey God who ruleth all things; and it is most untrue that the people have it in their power to cast aside their obedience whensoever they please.”¹¹

This plot to overthrow the established order is attributed to “many associations of communists and socialists; and to their undertakings the sect of Freemasons is not hostile, but greatly favours their designs, and holds in common with them their chief opinions.”¹²

The Freemasons are said to have enlisted the rulers of Europe to their cause by deception:¹³

We have to deal with a deceitful and crafty enemy, who, gratifying the ears of people and of princes, has ensnared them by smooth speeches and by adulation. Ingratiating themselves with rulers under a pretense of friendship, the Freemasons have endeavoured to make them their allies and powerful helpers for the destruction of the Christian name;

... It may seem to some that Freemasons demand nothing that is openly contrary to religion and morality; but, as the whole principle and object of the sect lies in what is vicious and criminal, to join with these men or in any way to help them cannot be lawful.

Finally, Pope Leo wrote, Freemasonry shapes the minds of the future by the secularization of public education:¹⁴

... With the greatest unanimity the sect of the Freemasons also endeavours to take to itself the education of youth. They think that they can easily mold to their opinions that soft and pliant age, and bend it whither they will; and that nothing can be more fitted than this to enable them to bring up the youth of the State after their own plan. Therefore, in the education and instruction of children they allow no share, either of teaching or of discipline, to the ministers of the Church; and in many places they have procured that the education of youth shall be exclusively in the hands of laymen, ...

In *Humanum Genus*, as in earlier accusations of conspiracy, we see the demonization of social forces for liberalism and democracy, attributed to Freemasonry rather than to the natural development of historical change.

The Jewish-Masonic Conspiracy

We now come to the mother of all 20th c. conspiracy theories: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

In the late 19th and early 20th c., the Russian monarchy and aristocracy, the Czar and feudal landowners, were under pressure from progressive liberal movements within Russia. Some intellectuals were calling for greater democracy, equality, and freedom in Russia.

In that context, Sergei Nilus, who had social connections to a Russian secret police agent in Paris, published a supposed expose of the minutes of a secret meeting of the leaders of global Zionism, *i.e.*, the supposed political leaders of the Jews. These minutes supposedly laid out the ongoing Jewish conspiracy to subvert European Christian civilization, in order to overthrow all civil and religious authority and substitute Jewish rule in its place.

The *Protocols* are well known as a complete forgery, a vicious slander on the Jews. They are also, however, a key component of the conspiracy slander against the Freemasons.

The publisher of the 1905 edition, Sergei Nilus, claimed: ¹⁵

The person who gave me this manuscript guaranteed it to be a faithful translation of the original documents that were stolen by a woman from one of the highest and most influential leaders of the Freemasons at a secret meeting somewhere in France...

In fact, the details of the alleged conspiracy have been traced back through a line of previous publications over the course of the 19th c., sharing elements and language of the same story, first aimed at the Jesuits, then at Napoleon III of France, then rewritten as a Jewish conspiracy titled “The Rabbi’s Speech” in one chapter of the 1868 German novel *Biarritz*. That version, translated into Russian, was circulated in Russia as a supposedly authentic document in the 1890’s. An expanded and modernised version of the same conspiracy story was finally published in 1905 as the *Protocols of Zion*.

That version had been developed in Paris in the 1890’s under the direction of an officer of the Okhrana, the Russian secret police. It was intended to demonize Russian radicals in exile in France, and political reformers within Russia.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917 conservative Russians fled to western Europe, and they brought the *Protocols of Zion* with them. The *Protocols* appeared in translation in Europe and the USA from 1920, and were used by Russian exiles to support western military intervention against Soviet Russia.

In 1920, Henry Ford’s newspaper the *Dearborn Independent* published a series of very racist articles publicising the *Protocols* in the USA.

The *Protocols* were picked up by an English writer, Nesta Wester, in her *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements*, published in 1921 and still in print. She cites Zionism, communism, Irish nationalism, and Arabic nationalism all as 20th c. fronts for the Illuminati.

Although the London *Times* exposed the *Protocols* as a forgery in 1921, they have been widely circulated and republished down to the present day.

A 1934 edition of the *Protocols* published in the USA includes a commentary which blames the conspiracy for all sorts of ‘social evils’: “National Insurance, Old Age Pensions, Tariff Reform, Employers’ Liability, Workmen’s Compensation, etc.”¹⁶

So what do the *Protocols* actually say, and how do they involve Freemasonry?

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion are basically an attack on liberal democracy. Every aspect of free, modern society is smeared as part of the Jewish plot to rule the world. The supposed plan is to promote liberalism and democracy in order to take power from the aristocracy and give it to the mob, to pave the way for ultimate Jewish power. The plan includes control of the press and the educational system to promote false ideas such as Marxism and Darwinism -- yes, even the theory of evolution is a Jewish plot. The goal is “gradually to absorb all the State forces of the world and to form a Super-Government.”¹⁷

“We have got our hands into the administration of the law, into the conduct of elections, into the press, into the liberty of the person, but principally into education and training...”¹⁸ and

“...our organization of secret masonry ... [its members] attracted by us into the “Show” army of Masonic Lodges, in order to throw dust in the eyes of their fellows.”¹⁹

The plan calls for the promotion of Masonic lodges as a tool of the conspiracy, to be abolished once the ultimate objective is achieved:²⁰

“... those of them which are now in existence, are known to us, serve us and have served us, we shall disband...”

“Meanwhile, however, until we come into our kingdom, ... we shall create and multiply free masonic lodges in all the countries of the world, absorb into them all who may become or who are prominent in public activity, for in these lodges we shall find our principal intelligence office and means of influence. All these lodges we shall bring under one central administration, known to us alone and to all others absolutely unknown, which will be composed of our learned elders. ... In these lodges we shall tie together the knot which binds together all revolutionary and liberal elements.”

The *Protocols* also invoke the memory of the earlier Illuminati conspiracy theory:²¹

“Remember the French Revolution, ... the secrets of its preparations are well known to us for it was wholly the work of our hands.”

The Protocols claim to be “Signed by the Representatives of Zion of the thirty-third degree”,²² alluding to the highest degree of Scottish Rite Masonry.

Historian Norman Cohn has called the *Protocols* a *Warrant for Genocide*, the title of his book about the fraud. As Sergei Nilus wrote in his Epilogue to the 1905 edition, calculated to inflame anti-semitic hatred in Europe, “... the King born of the blood of Zion – the Anti-Christ – is about to mount the throne of universal empire.”²³

Indeed, Adolf Hitler, in his book written in 1924, cited the *Protocols*. Hitler also described Freemasonry as a front for the Jewish conspiracy. Promoting religious tolerance, as Masons do, Hitler wrote, is a part of the conspiracy:

... and in Freemasonry, which has succumbed to [the Jew] completely, he has an excellent instrument with which to fight for his aims and put them across. The governing circles and the higher strata of the political and economic bourgeoisie are brought into his nets by the strings of Freemasonry, and never need suspect what is happening.²⁴

Hitler’s Japanese allies also paid lip service to the myth; a Japanese diplomat to Germany in 1938 wrote:²⁵

Judaeo-Masonry is forcing the Chinese to turn China into a spearhead for an attack on Japan, and thereby forcing Japan to defend herself against this threat. Japan is at war not with China but with Freemasonry...

To this day, the *Protocols* are cited as authentic documents by right wing conspiracy theorists, and by President Ahmadinajad of Iran. Anti-semitism is inextricably intertwined with most anti-Masonic conspiracy slanders (they lack the evidentiary basis to call them “theories”).

Robison’s *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, the *Protocols of Zion*, and similar works are still available from mainstream publishers, including Amazon online. The influence of the *Protocols*, even among those who have not read them, is perhaps the main reason that Freemasonry today is still viewed by some as a conspiratorial force in history.

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Sources

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Endnotes

¹ Robison, p. 112

² Scirocco, p. 381; Grand Orient of Italy website, “Giuseppe Garibaldi”

³ Attributed to an Italian publication of 1882, reporting on an international conference of 1867; though often quoted in the literature, I cannot cite a primary source for it.

⁴ Pope Leo XIII, *Humanum Genus* (1884); the theme is repeated throughout the letter; in particular, see para. 24. The entire text is accessible on the Vatican website.

⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 10

⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 7

⁷ *Ibid.*, para. 8

⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 9

⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 9

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, paras. 13, 16, 22

¹¹ *Ibid.*, para. 25

¹² *Ibid.*, para. 27

¹³ *Ibid.*, paras. 28, 31

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 21

¹⁵ Grand Lodge of B.C., “History of the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion”, p. 1

¹⁶ Anon., *Protocols*, p. 253

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 171

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-3

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156

²² Cohn, p. 54,

²³ Anon., *Protocols*, p. 228

²⁴ Hitler, A., *Mein Kampf*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston (1971 ed.), p. 315

²⁵ Cohn, p. 269