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Believing in “Inner Truth”: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Nazi Propaganda, 1933–1945

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Although most leading Nazis realized that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was a spurious document, they found it useful in promoting belief in the international Jewish conspiracy of which they were already convinced. Authorship and other details were irrelevant, they averred, if the book expressed “inner truth.”

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is a forgery of remarkable attraction for antisemites.¹ Its astonishing contents also draw the attention of those who find it absurd and repellent—and who sometimes take it more seriously than do antisemites. Norman Cohn’s *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Wide Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* suggests that it had great influence over Nazism: “The *Völkischer Beobachter* invoked them constantly, while Julius Streicher’s weekly *Der Stürmer* alternated between elaborations of *The Protocols* and lurid stores of German maidens raped by Jews and German children ritually murdered.”² Influential early students of Nazism such as Hermann Rauschning and Konrad Heiden, who published during the Nazi era, believed that it had had an enormous impact on Hitler, and their often unfounded statements continue to be influential today.³

There is an enormous literature on the persecution of Jews during the Third Reich, but few books focus on propaganda, and little of the literature discusses the use of *The Protocols* in that propaganda.⁴ This article examines the role of *The Protocols* from Hitler’s takeover in 1933 to the end of the war.⁵ I review its distribution, consider its employment at various levels of the propaganda system at specific times, discuss why it appeared so rarely in Nazi propaganda, and conclude with an observation on analogous uses of *The Protocols* today.

Hitler and Goebbels

What did the top Nazi leaders think? Although Hitler and Goebbels were believers in an international Jewish conspiracy, neither believed that its existence depended on *The Protocols* being what it claimed to be. On April 10, 1924, the young Joseph Goebbels wrote in his diary: “I believe that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a forgery. That is not because the worldview of Jewish aspirations expressed therein are

too utopian or fantastic—one sees today how one point after the other of *The Protocols* is being realized—but rather because I do not think the Jews are so completely stupid as not to keep such important protocols secret. I believe in the inner, but not the factual, truth of *The Protocols*.”⁶ At about the same time, Adolf Hitler was dictating *Mein Kampf*. He, too, was thinking about *The Protocols*:

To what extent the whole existence of this people is based on a continuous lie is shown incomparably by *The Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion*, so infinitely hated by the Jews. They are based on a forgery, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* moans and screams once every week: the best proof that they are authentic. What many Jews may do unconsciously is here consciously exposed. And that is what matters. It is completely indifferent from what Jewish brains these disclosures originate; the important thing is that with positively terrifying certainty they reveal the nature and activity of the Jewish people and expose their inner contexts as well as their ultimate final aims.⁷

Both leaders realized that *The Protocols* was a fake, but both thought it contained “inner truth.”

Nineteen years later the two discussed *The Protocols* just before Goebbels launched one of his periodic antisemitic campaigns. Goebbels, who had been re-reading it, commented that his propaganda colleagues maintained that it was not useful for contemporary propaganda, but he reflected: “I conclude from my reading [nonetheless] that we can put it to very good use. . . . If the *Zionist Protocols* is not genuine, it was produced by a brilliant contemporary critic.” Having talked it over with Hitler, the propaganda minister wrote in his diary: “The Führer’s standpoint is that the *Zionist Protocols* can claim absolute genuineness. No one could express Jewish plans for world domination as well as the Jews themselves. The Führer is of the opinion that the Jews do not need to follow an established program: they follow a strong racial instinct that always leads them to the actions shown throughout their entire history.” Goebbels concluded: “One cannot really speak in simple terms of a conspiracy of the Jewish race against Occidental humanity; this conspiracy is more a matter of race than of intellectual intentions.”⁸

Perhaps curiously, Hitler did not refer to *The Protocols* in public speeches after the mention in *Mein Kampf*,⁹ nor did Goebbels refer to it publicly other than once, and that soon after the 1943 conversation with Hitler.¹⁰ It was never mentioned in the prestigious weekly *Das Reich*, which Goebbels founded in 1941, and for which he wrote a lead article each week. *The Protocols* had a limited role in Nazi mass propaganda. Why?

Users of Nonsense

The first question is that of distribution, which was substantial. There were two major—and not entirely identical—versions of *The Protocols* after 1933. The “official” version was published by the Nazi Party’s Eher Verlag. The first German translation, it appeared in 1920 (although the copyright date is 1919). The Nazi Party gained the

rights to it in 1929. By 1934 it had sold 150,000 copies. Its twenty-second and final printing appeared in 1938.¹¹ An edition published by Theodor Fritsch, the dean of German antisemitism and head of Hammer Verlag, also first appeared in 1920. It reached its thirteenth printing in 1933, after which the Party's version held the dominant market position.¹² Fritsch's publishing house also kept the German translation of Henry Ford's *The International Jew*, essentially an extended commentary on *The Protocols*, in print.¹³

Publication of *The Protocols* enjoyed the support of the Party. *Der Schulungsbrief*, the Party monthly for political education, with a circulation of 1,500,000, reviewed it in 1937: "He who knows *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* understands why Jewry uses every lying method to dispute the genuineness of these protocols. Jewry's ruthless drive for world domination was stopped only by National Socialism. The work is strongly recommended."¹⁴ A 1939 list of recommended books issued by Eher Verlag urged: "It is the duty of each German to study the frightening admissions of the Elders of Zion, to compare it to the today's boundless misery and draw the necessary conclusions, but also to take action and to be sure that this work reaches the hands of every German."¹⁵ It was often included in the list of Eher publications at the end of the house's books. However, as with a variety of standard Nazi works such as Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Rosenberg's *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, far more copies were sold than were read. Most Germans of the era had heard of it, but almost certainly fewer read it.

Nazi academics rarely cited *The Protocols* (or, for that matter, other fabrications, such as the ritual murder myth). The landmark work of Nazi scholarship on the "Jewish Question" was *Die Juden in Deutschland*, a product of the Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question, also published by Eher Verlag. Eight printings appeared between 1935 and 1939, totaling 41,000 copies. The text itself made no reference to *The Protocols*, though it appeared on the list of other Eher Verlag publications.¹⁶ In 1937 Walter Frank, the head of the Institute, gave a speech reviewing Nazi "scholarship" on the Jews. His one reference to *The Protocols* was a mention of Alfred Rosenberg's 1927 pamphlet on it—an understandable nod to a powerful Nazi leader.¹⁷ Alan Steinweis's book on scholarly antisemitism has one reference to *The Protocols*, and that is in a discussion of the less-than-scholarly Julius Streicher, whom I will discuss shortly.¹⁸ Nazi "racial scholars," strong antisemites all, had no desire to appear silly before professional colleagues, even if they also had no interest in debunking cruder forms of popular antisemitism.

Below the latter on the intellectual scale came a variety of professional but non-academic antisemites, the most prominent of whom were Alfred Rosenberg (the Party's ideological chief), Theodor Fritsch, Ulrich Fleischhauer (head of the *Weltdienst* organization in Erfurt), and Julius Streicher (*Der Stürmer*'s editor). If the academics might balk at certain statements about the Jews, the propagandists were seemingly incapable of blushing. Alfred Rosenberg, who had earned a doctorate in engineering in pre-World

War I Russia, published extensively on *The Protocols* before 1933 but wrote little on the topic thereafter (although his early works remained in print). The 1933 edition of his commentary on *The Protocols* (first published in 1923) used the standard argument that since *The Protocols* was consistent with many other statements by Jews throughout history and accurately described what was happening in the world, it remained true no matter who actually penned it: “The question of authorship,” he admitted, “remains open.”¹⁹ In 1934 he wrote that the issue “was less the so-called authenticity of *The Protocols* than the inner truth of what is stated.”²⁰ Rosenberg was a notoriously obtuse writer, but his stature in the Nazi Party brought credibility to *The Protocols*.

Theodor Fritsch died in 1933, but his publishing house survived to the end of the Third Reich. The final, forty-ninth printing of his *Handbuch der Judenfrage*, appeared in 1944 and brought the total print run to 330,000. It included a great deal on *The Protocols*, specifically stating that “the question of whether it is genuine or not is not important. What is important is the ‘intelligible content’ of *The Protocols*, which is Jewish in every detail and has the characteristics of the Talmudic world and life view and the stamp of genuine Jewish thinking.”²¹

Ulrich Fleischhauer, a former military officer with no academic qualifications, ran the *Weltdienst*, an international news agency that began by issuing its newsletter in three languages in 1933 and reached twenty languages by 1944. Extreme even for a Nazi, Fleischhauer was relieved of his duties in 1939—apparently because he could embarrass the government abroad—but not before his years of notoriety during the Bern trial and appeal (in which Jewish complainants sought to have *The Protocols* banned in Switzerland under an anti-obscenity law) that I discuss later.²² He investigated the origin of *The Protocols* in considerable detail in a 400-page treatise and had no difficulty admitting that much of it was taken from Maurice Joly’s 1864 satire *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu*: “I dare to maintain that Joly’s book is not only a satire of Napoleon, but also that Joly had a second, deeper purpose; my careful study of its contents leads me to the conclusion that *this book contains the guidelines for Jewish-Freemasonic policies aimed at gaining world domination*” (emphasis Fleischhauer’s).²³ The authorship of the final document, he stated, remained uncertain.²⁴ Following the usual method of such writings, Fleischhauer collected a range of quotations from throughout history to “prove” that whatever the source, *The Protocols* was true: “If one compares the content of *The Protocols* and the plans it contains with world events of the last thirty years, one sees clearly how well it agrees with reality and how little it is merely the innocent prophesies of an evil-minded, but far-sighted forger.”²⁵

The most prolific promoter of *The Protocols* was Julius Streicher, whose apparent gullibility was as great as his cynicism. When asked about a particularly outrageous charge against the Jews from a dubious source during one of his numerous trials before 1933, Streicher’s response was: “If it were not true it could not have been

Der Stürmer claimed that the content of *The Protocols* was hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years old, but that it had been written down only in 1897: “In this year there was a major Jewish world congress in Basel (Switzerland). It was the first congress of the so-called Zionist movement. In a secret meeting, the author of *The Protocols* laid out the Jewish world goals to the Jewish leaders present and showed how these goals could be achieved.”²⁷ Unlike most Nazi sources, *Der Stürmer* frequently quoted *The Protocols* in lead articles. With its large circulation (nearly 500,000 at its maximum) and thousands of display cases throughout Germany maintained by loyal readers, it worked hard to keep *The Protocols* before the German public.

Streicher also published a variety of antisemitic books. One of the last was a dictionary of quotations that included eighty-seven index references to *The Protocols*, and numerous brief citations. The dictionary claimed that the Bern trial had failed to provide any evidence at all to prove *The Protocols* a forgery, although the volume was willing to agree that it was based largely on Joly’s work, put in final form in 1895 at the latest by high-ranking Freemasons.²⁸

Official propagandists—both in the state Ministry for Public Enlightenment and the Party’s Central Propaganda Office (Reichspropagandaleitung, RPL)—were the rung in the system closest to the mass reader. Both groups were dubious about *The Protocols*. I have already cited Goebbels’s comment from 1943 that suggests his ministry staff was not eager to use it. The prevailing opinion in these circles became clear in 1934 when the Bern trial began. At the daily Berlin press conference that gave journalists confidential instructions on what and what not to write, the *Deutsche Zeitung* was criticized for predicting that the trial would alert the world to the danger of the Jews: “The experts in the Propaganda Ministry are in no way of the same opinion. . . . The German press is asked not to turn the Bern trial . . . into a major antisemitic action.”²⁹ There were two related reasons for this advice. The “experts” knew that *The Protocols* was dubious; and they worried that the court decision could be particularly embarrassing if Germany invested its credibility in them.³⁰

The Protocols rarely featured in Propaganda Ministry material for the press. The *Zeitschriften-Dienst*, a weekly for newspaper editors, made a one-sentence reference in June 1941, stating that in the United States the Jews were treating Gentiles as *The Protocols* required.³¹ In the midst of a major antisemitic campaign in May 1943 (just after Goebbels’s discussion with Hitler), the *Deutscher Wochendienst*, a weekly publication for magazine editors, also referred to *The Protocols*. The Party’s magazine for women, following instructions, carried an article with several quotations from *The Protocols*.³² The otherwise near-complete absence of references to *The Protocols* in these significant publications is striking. The only reasonable explanation seems to be that the Propaganda Ministry experts directing the press did not think it helpful in conducting effective antisemitic propaganda (consistent with the previously cited passage from Goebbels’s diaries)—a task both periodicals otherwise assiduously pursued.

The RPL staff, less educated and less capable than their opposite numbers in the Propaganda Ministry, also hesitated to use *The Protocols*, referring to it only infrequently. The RPL issued the *Parole der Woche* between 1937 and 1944, a weekly wall newspaper posted in public places throughout Germany. Many have antisemitic themes, but only one cited *The Protocols*: a 1937 issue on the “Bolshevik threat” claimed that the general chaos in the world was part of the plan discussed in the third session of *The Protocols*: Jews were using covert methods and financial might to cause economic crises.³³

The RPL was also in charge of training and informing the Party’s large corps of speakers. Its monthly for propagandists, *Unser Wille und Weg*, mentioned *The Protocols* once between 1934 and its final issue in 1941 (not counting its occasional appearance in publishers’ advertisements): a one-paragraph 1934 review of the Eher Verlag edition stating, “Jewry always unjustly objects to this persuasive document on the Jewish world conspiracy that is here clearly laid out. It provides a clear overview of what Jewry has in mind for the world. Familiarity with it is absolutely essential for office holders in the NDSAP. It cannot be considered too often in training courses.”³⁴

Between 1933 and 1944 the RPL issued monthly information bulletins for speakers on a wide range of topics, hundreds of pages each year. *The Protocols* was seldom mentioned. A five-part 1935 series on the Jews, totaling fifty pages, did not mention *The Protocols* at all, though it did devote several pages to an obscure 1933 trial in Cairo, a proceeding in which the local Jewish community had sued Germans for distributing an antisemitic pamphlet.³⁵ A January 1939 issue included twenty-one pages on the Jews, with one mention of *The Protocols*. Rather than citing *The Protocols*, the information discussed the Bern trial as a defeat for International Jewry.³⁶ Just before the American entry into World War II, *The Protocols* was mentioned, but not quoted: “Jewry has occupied all those positions and bases of the North American Union that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* present as the prerequisite for achieving world domination and establishing a Jewish world empire.”³⁷ Later issues contained considerable antisemitic vituperation, but no references to *The Protocols*. Other speaker information issued by the RPL also omitted any mention of *The Protocols*.³⁸

The Reich Ring for National Socialist Propaganda and Public Enlightenment was an RPL department that worked to coordinate local-level propagandists throughout the country. It included representatives from every organization with even the remotest chance of influencing public opinion (Party organizations, the Red Cross, gardening societies, and the like). Members received monthly newsletters and attended regular meetings to discuss how to present Nazi propaganda themes. Although there was considerable antisemitic content in the organization’s materials, I have not found a single reference to *The Protocols*.³⁹

The Reichsjugendführung (Reich Youth Leadership) issued a wide range of propaganda for youth,⁴⁰ but the only mention of *The Protocols* I found there appears in a

1937 issue of the magazine for leaders of older girls—three brief quotations, with no discussion.⁴¹ The magazines for the children themselves had little on antisemitism, and seemingly no references to *The Protocols*.⁴²

To consider the full range of Party material would be an Augean task, but based on the publications I have considered so far, one may conclude that despite general statements of the importance of *The Protocols*, it was not central to propaganda aimed at any audiences.

The Bern Trials

The Protocols was most visible in Nazi propaganda for two brief periods during the Bern trials (or rather trial and appeal) in 1935 and 1937. As already noted, the Propaganda Ministry was unwilling to make the trials a defense of the authenticity of *The Protocols*. Instead, the Ministry treated them as attempts by “International Jewry” to attack National Socialist Germany. Newspapers and radio carried daily summaries of the trials’ progress, praising the testimony of those supporting *The Protocols*’ legitimacy and attacking those who did not. The official Party newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, for example, commented on the testimony of a prosecution witness in a less than unbiased way: “Dr. Baumgarten said little about his own subject, but rather made confused remarks about various points. He seemed less interested in speaking to the point than in having a rhetorical effect.”⁴³

The original verdict was unfavorable from the Nazi viewpoint (in short, the judge supported the complainants, but the appeal set aside his judgment because the law was applicable only to sexual material). The daily press conference directed journalists to argue that such questions had to be decided by scholarship rather than the courts; that the affair was an internal Swiss matter; and that the significance of Jewish involvement could not be denied.⁴⁴ The Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro (DNB, the official news agency, under the Propaganda Ministry) provided a reasonably accurate summary of the verdict, noting that the court had determined that *The Protocols* depended heavily on Joly’s work, that efforts to establish authorship had failed, and that in the judge’s opinion attempts to prove its validity by citing a wide range of sources were unconvincing: “One can prove anything with citations.” An article in the *Freiburger Zeitung* accordingly concluded that it was a “purely a domestic Swiss issue” and that the court had not determined that *The Protocols* was a forgery, but rather only that it violated the relevant Swiss law; it expressed a hope for the forthcoming appeal: “One may hope that the appellate court . . . will base its decision on the substantial evidence.”⁴⁵

Ulrich Fleischhauer’s organization featured the trial prominently only in material intended primarily for international readers.⁴⁶ Domestically, there was little coverage before or after the events of early May 1935 and early November 1937. Even during the trial there were few direct citations from *The Protocols*. Such citations easily could have been provided. For example, the eighth protocol stated: “We must

search out in the very finest shades of expression and the knotty points of the lexicon of law justification for those cases where we shall have to pronounce judgments that might appear abnormally audacious and unjust, for it is important that these resolutions should be set forth in expressions that shall seem to be the most exalted and moral principles cast into legal form."⁴⁷ Given the tenuous legal basis of the case (a 1916 local law against pornographic motion pictures), such a citation could have been used to argue that the trial itself was evidence for the truth of *The Protocols*. The Nazis rarely rejected dubious evidence, in accordance with Hitler's argument in *Mein Kampf* that effective propaganda depended more on plausibility than truth.⁴⁸ The fact that no such efforts were made in this instance is evidence that the propaganda leadership had little confidence in the authenticity of *The Protocols*. They welcomed the trial as proof of "international Jewry's" hostility to Germany.

In 1937 the appellate court largely overruled the earlier verdict on the grounds that, however disreputable *The Protocols*, it did not fit the legal definition of pornography. The question of its authenticity was irrelevant.⁴⁹ This was hardly an endorsement, but the Nazis presented the decision as a major defeat for the Jews. The *Völkischer Beobachter* entitled its page-five story "Jewish Defeat at the Bern Trial: World Jewry's Efforts Fail Again."⁵⁰ The DNB dispatch provided a generally factual account of the court ruling. The *Freiburger Zeitung* carried that report on page one, under the headline "A Defeat for World Jewry." It did not quote *The Protocols*, but stressed the court's ruling that "whether true or false, it is not obscene literature."⁵¹ The evening edition carried a commentary on the decision, reiterating the contention that since its defeat in Germany, Jewry had increased its efforts against Germany; one of the Jews' methods was to discredit in courts throughout the world the "scientific advances" of Germany on the "racial question." After ridiculing the "Jewish" experts brought in by the complainants in 1935, the writer asserted that a court could not determine the authenticity of *The Protocols*, particularly since "thirty years of scholarly research have been unable to determine whether it is genuine or a forgery." And yet not only had the Jews lost the case, but the trial had given *The Protocols* such prominence as to greatly increase interest in it. The commentary concluded: "The Swiss court has not only served justice in its decision, but has also quashed a new Jewish attempt to spread poison about Germany, giving the 'Elders of Zion' a well-deserved flop."⁵² Once again, there was no interest in using *The Protocols* to demonstrate the existence of a world Jewish conspiracy; instead, Jewish efforts against it were presented as evidence of that conspiracy.

Other Appearances of *The Protocols*

The Protocols was regularly mentioned in Nazi literature. Hermann Esser's *Die jüdische Weltpest*, first published in 1927 and updated in 1939, included four pages of quotations from *The Protocols*, though with little commentary. It also included an alleged quotation from Benjamin W. Segel, whose two books (*A Lie and a Libel*:

The History of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and *Welt-Krieg, Welt-Revolution, Welt-Verschwörung, Welt-Überregierung*) were early but strong refutations of *The Protocols*: “If *The Protocols* is true, there is but one appropriate penalty for Jewry: total extermination!”⁵³

The 1939 (and final) Eher Verlag edition carried a new twenty-page introduction citing eight passages from *The Protocols*, each followed by quotations from Jews purporting to show that the Jews were implementing the program laid out in *The Protocols*. It concluded: “If we review once again these comments on *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, we must conclude that the theses and facts proclaimed in *The Protocols* and evidenced by the activities of the Jews in Germany have been fully proved.”⁵⁴ This was but an extended example of the most common way of using *The Protocols*. Rather than attempting to prove its authenticity, the essay used the standard *ex post facto* strategy of arguing that a variety of sources proved that Jews had to be following the injunctions of *The Protocols*.

An obvious occasion to use *The Protocols* in mass propaganda came when World War II began—but the opportunity was largely ignored. According to the seventh protocol: “We must be in a position to respond to every act of opposition by war with the neighbors of that country which dares to oppose us: but if these neighbors should also venture to stand collectively together against us, then we must offer resistance by a universal war.” From the Nazi perspective there could be no clearer proof of an international Jewish conspiracy than the fact that Britain and France had declared war on Germany—yet the connection seems to have been made only infrequently.

Streicher’s *Der Stürmer* immediately made the point in a lead article published just after the war began: “At the end of the past century World Jewry believed that it was on the threshold of world domination. The world’s leading Jews gathered in Basel in 1897. They decided to follow a systematic and criminal program to reach their final goal. They wrote the program for a total and compete achievement of world domination. It is known under the name of the *Zionist Protocols*.”⁵⁵ After quoting the seventh protocol, it stated that Germany had dared to oppose World Jewry’s plans for world domination, with the result that the Jews were implementing their plan.

The *World-Service* cited the same passage, and concluded: “Could the war plans of Jewry be more clearly expressed? Non-Jews, read *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* and recognize the secret plans and the methods and means Jews adopt to seize for themselves unlimited power over the world.”⁵⁶ The rest of the vast German propaganda system, however, saw no point in connecting immediate and dramatic events to a document of uncertain origins. In his speech on September 1, 1939, announcing war, Hitler made no reference to it, nor did Goebbels direct his propagandists to use it.

A final significant use came late in 1943 in *Der Jude als Weltparasit*, issued by Eher Verlag, published for the Party’s internal education program (*Reichsschulungsthema*) by Rosenberg’s office, and reprinted for distribution by the Wehrmacht.⁵⁷

The volume provided ten brief quotations, and accepted the fact that most of *The Protocols* came from Joly's work. Although seemingly directed at the French government, "[*The Protocols*] was in reality most probably understandable only by the initiate among the Jews." It is impossible to know how widely this particular publication was distributed.

Although *The Protocols* was not frequently quoted except by the most rabid antisemites, it was mentioned often enough to be part of a common cultural knowledge in Germany. However, while Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was quoted at every opportunity as "the bible of the Third Reich," *The Protocols* was typically only mentioned, but not quoted.

A variety of examples from other publications illustrate such passing references. A major coffee table book promoting antisemitism and dedicated to Julius Streicher included half a page on *The Protocols*, but provided no quotations.⁵⁸ Johann von Leers, a prominent Nazi author, drew attention to U.S. Congressman Louis T. McFadden's exploitation of *The Protocols* in his 1934 attacks on Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., but did not directly quote McFadden.⁵⁹ A popular book on Hitler first published in 1924 and re-published in 1942 claimed that reading *The Protocols* would make clear much of what was happening in the world.⁶⁰ It provided no quotations. A 1943 book on the United States stated: "He who wants to understand the naked truth about recent American and world history will find *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* of greater value than everything written by so-called Americans. These protocols clearly explain how Jewish world domination is to be achieved, and not only economic domination, but in the end political hegemony."⁶¹ There are no citations, merely the reference. Other examples could be cited.

Although reluctant to use *The Protocols* in domestic propaganda, the Nazis sometimes were willing to use it on presumably gullible foreigners. Early in the war, Hitler and Goebbels discussed issuing a French translation of *The Protocols*.⁶² In December 1943, speakers were given information to use in addressing foreign workers in Germany, including almost a full page about *The Protocols* and the "Council of the Elders of Zion."⁶³

In sum, *The Protocols* was widely available and regularly mentioned during the Third Reich; but while it was cited in the writings of the most vehement antisemites, it only infrequently figured in propaganda aimed at a mass audience. How should we explain this absence?

Nazi Propaganda Strategy

We have seen that Goebbels and Hitler thought *The Protocols* an accurate description of Jewish intentions, even if its truth was "inner" rather than factual. But they seem to have been reluctant to quote it, and the propaganda system generally followed their example. Passionate antisemites were willing to believe almost anything consistent with their conviction of the absolute depravity of Jews. For them, *The Protocols* remained convincing.

Most Germans, however, were not fanatic antisemites, even if they had little sympathy for Jews. The problem in using *The Protocols* was that because even most extreme antisemites threw up their hands at determining its origins, using it required tortured explanations, unless the audience was of the most limited education. Average readers would be unwilling to read confusing justifications.

The more *The Protocols* was researched, the less plausible its authenticity became. The seventh protocol, for example, stated that Jews would organize a world war against any state that dared oppose them, but making a convincing case that Britain and France had declared war on Germany because of the machinations of the Elders of Zion was a challenging task. *The Protocols* presented Freemasonry, rather than Bolshevism, as a major tool of World Jewry, but the German military was fighting Allied armies, not Freemasons. Some elements of *The Protocols* were entirely outdated. At a time when German cities were being bombed day and night, it was hardly useful to quote protocol nine's plan to install explosives in subway tunnels of the world's great cities to destroy them if Jewry's orders were not followed. The "Elders of Zion" were a mysterious body, hard to visualize, in contrast to easily caricatured figures such as Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt. To the degree possible, Nazi propaganda sought plausibility.

There were more persuasive tools to argue for the existence of a world Jewish conspiracy. One example, almost as absurd as *The Protocols*, was to quote Theodore N. Kaufman's 1941 book *Germany Must Perish!* Kaufman was an obscure American Jew whose self-published book called for the sterilization of all Germans. The book earned derision in the United States (not yet in the war). However, when a copy found its way to Germany it became the focus of a major propaganda campaign and was quoted regularly until 1945. Germans were told that Kaufman was a member of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Brain Trust, and that the president himself had dictated some of it.⁶⁴ Kaufman's book had a clear advantage over *The Protocols*: he existed. No one disputed that, nor that had he written a book calling for the sterilization of all Germans. Five million copies of a pamphlet summarizing Kaufman's book were published. It too referred to *The Protocols* without citing it: "Just as with the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Jews could claim that *Germany Must Perish* is a clever antisemitic forgery."⁶⁵ Jews did no such thing—but suggesting that they would also suggested that Jewish arguments against *The Protocols* were equally specious.

The Nazis gathered other seemingly incriminating material from a wide range of sources—material that was often distorted or taken out of context, but which at least had actually been written or said—and that was then ceaselessly repeated. Late in 1944 a widely distributed pamphlet brought together a range of statements suggesting that if Germany lost the war its people would perish in an orgy of Jewish-Bolshevist-Allied violence. *The Protocols* was not mentioned.⁶⁶ A 1944 list of books that Rosenberg's office recommended for libraries had nothing specifically on *The Protocols* (although some of the titles included discussions of it).⁶⁷ As the Third Reich faced defeat, propagandists looked for the most plausible grist for their mill,

and actual armies made for more vivid propaganda than the supposed machinations of some Jews in Basel fifty years earlier.

Most references to *The Protocols* in mass propaganda, therefore, were “cultural truisms.”⁶⁸ References to the “Elders of Zion” conveyed meaning to many if not most Germans, but most of the latter would have had difficulty saying much about *The Protocols* other than that it had something to do with a conspiracy of “International Jewry” to rule the world. Nonetheless, this provided grounds for crediting Nazi anti-semitic propaganda—and research suggests that even a bad reason can be persuasive simply by being a reason.⁶⁹ A characteristic of conspiratorial rhetoric is to present massive amounts of data, often of the most dubious nature; the sheer volume can lead less discerning readers to assume that “at least some of it must be true.”

Some scholarly literature still assumes that the Nazi leadership, Hitler included, believed in the literal truth of *The Protocols*. I have already noted Peter Longerich’s recent Goebbels biography. Klaus Fischer’s solid history of German antisemitism claimed that Alfred Rosenberg had convinced Hitler that *The Protocols* was “absolutely genuine and true.”⁷⁰ Other examples could be given. The evidence, however, suggests that the Nazi propaganda leadership knew that *The Protocols* was not what it purported to be. But that seems not to have troubled them much. Whatever *The Protocols* was, it made for useful propaganda as long as one did not go into excessive detail.

The end of Nazism was not the end of *The Protocols*. Some still believe in its literal truth. Others find *The Protocols* convenient to use, even while granting its uncertain origins. One of many examples is Metapedia, a wiki page of neo-Nazi and racist nature. Its rather inarticulate article on *The Protocols* states that:

The document is alleged to have been secret minutes—also called protocols—from the First Zionist Congress held at Basel, Switzerland in August 1897. Much brouhaha has been made by organized Jewry and their allies claiming that the document is a “fraud”. However, the most famous public figures who have promoted knowledge of it; [*sic*] such as Henry Ford, have stated they are not interested in whether they were authored from a satirical or esoteric perspective, but rather urge a critical review of historical events that have unfolded, held up against the Protocols.⁷¹

Just as leading Nazis realized *The Protocols* was fraudulent but found that fact irrelevant in determining its utility, so today some antisemites use it not to persuade themselves of an international Jewish conspiracy, but rather because they find it useful to illustrate a conspiracy in which they already believe.

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Notes

1. Recent discussions include Michael Hagemeister and Eva Horn, eds., *Die Fiktion von der jüdischen Weltverschwörung: Zu Text und Kontext der "Protokolen der Weisen von Zion"* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012); and Richard Landes and Steven T. Katz, eds., *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred-Year Retrospective on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
2. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 201.
3. For a dissection of the dubious influence of Rauschning, Heiden, and Cohn, see Richard S. Levy, "Die 'Protokolle der Weisen von Zion' und ihre Entlarvung: Ein vergebliches Unterfangen?" in Hagemeister and Horn, *Die Fiktion*, 221–29.
4. The most comprehensive is Wolfram Meyer zu Uptrup, *Kampf gegen die "Jüdische Weltverschwörung": Propaganda und Antisemitismus der Nationalsozialisten 1919–1945* (Berlin: Metropol, 2003). Jeffrey Herf's *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), as the title suggests, covers primarily the war years.
5. For the role of *The Protocols* in Nazi propaganda before 1933, see Wolfram Meyer zu Uptrup, *Kampf gegen die "Jüdische Weltverschwörung."* 89–272.
6. *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, ed. Elke Fröhlich (Munich: K.G. Sauer, 1997–2001), part 1, vol. 1, 120.
7. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 307–308. Hitler expressed doubts similar to those of Otto Wagener: *Memoirs of a Confidant*, trans. Ruth Hein, ed. Henry Ashby Turner, Jr. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 70–71.
8. *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, part 2, vol. 8, 287. Peter Longerich reads Hitler as putting more confidence in the authenticity of *The Protocols* than I believe the passage justifies: "[Goebbels] had to realize that [Hitler] in no way shared his reserved opinion as to the authenticity of the *Protocols*." *Joseph Goebbels: Biographie* (Munich: Siedler, 2010), 574–75.
9. Hitler had made several references to *The Protocols* in speeches in 1920 when it first appeared in Germany but before it was exposed as a forgery. He made at least one reference in 1923 as well. See Robert Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 99.
10. This was in a speech in Berlin on June 5, 1943: "In the Fifteenth Protocol of the Elders of Zion it is written: 'When the king of the Jews receives the crown upon his holy head that Europe will offer him, he will become the patriarch of the entire world.' The Jews have often been near that triumph, just as they believe they are today. But always before they fell from the heights to the depths. This time, too, Lucifer will fall." The speech was carried by most newspapers and reprinted in Joseph Goebbels, *Der steile Aufstieg* (Munich: Eher, 1944), 301. The full speech is translated in the German Propaganda Archive (GPA): <http://www.research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb40.htm>, accessed April 20, 2015.
11. This was a German translation of the Russian "original." It remained available at least through the early years of the war according to *Bücher aus dem Zentralverlag der N.S.D.A.P.* (Munich: Eher, 1940).

12. *Die Zionistischen Protokolle: Das Programm der Internationalen Geheimregierung* (Leipzig: Hammer-Verlag, 1933), 9. Fritsch's edition was a German translation of the English translation.
13. Henry Ford, *Der internationale Jude*, 36th ed. (Leipzig: Hammer-Verlag, 1941). This translation brought the total run (for that edition) to 124,000. Ford, too, was a proponent of the "inner truth" argument: in 1921 he quipped, "The only statement I care to make about *The Protocols* is that they fit in with what is going on. They are sixteen years old, and they have fitted the world situation up to this time. They fit it now." Joseph Jefferson O'Neil, "Peace Object, Says Ford, in an Attempt to Justify His Anti-Semitic Attitude," *New York World*, February 17, 1921. Thanks to Matthew J. Boylan of the New York Public Library for the exact source. For Fritsche's use of Ford's work see Neil Baldwin, *Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2001), 271–72.
14. *Der Schulungsbrief* 4 (September 1937): 376.
15. *Deutsche Bücher 1939* (Munich: Eher Verlag, 1939).
16. Institut zum Studium der Judenfrage, *Die Juden in Deutschland*, 8th ed. (Munich: Eher Verlag, 1939).
17. *Deutsche Wissenschaft und Judenfrage*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1941).
18. *Studying the Jew: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 19.
19. Alfred Rosenberg, *Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion und die jüdische Weltpolitik* (Munich: Deutscher Volksverlag, 1933), 7–8. This volume remained in print throughout the existence of the Third Reich, with the sixth printing appearing in 1941.
20. Cited by Uptrup, *Kampf gegen die "Jüdische Weltverschwörung"*, 104. Rosenberg was chief editor of the newspaper until 1937.
21. Leipzig: Hammer-Verlag, 1944, 175. This volume claims that *The Protocols* derived not from the 1897 Zionist Congress, but rather from a simultaneous conference of B'nai B'rith, which based its program on the "Freemason" Maurice Joly's 1864 satirical work *The Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*.
22. In brief, Jews in Bern brought suit in 1934 against three men for distributing *The Protocols*. The main proceedings were held in May 1935 under a law banning obscenity. The judge convicted two of the three men accused, and ruled *The Protocols* a forgery. The appellate court ruled in November 1937, however, that the question of the authenticity of *The Protocols* was irrelevant and that it did not fit the definition of obscene literature, thus essentially overturning the previous verdict.
23. Ulrich Fleischhauer, *Die echten Protokolle der Weisen von Zion: Sachverständigengutachten erstattet im Auftrage der Richteramt V in Bern* (Erfurt: U. Bodung-Verlag, 1935), 20.
24. *Ibid.*, 246–47.
25. *Ibid.*, 252.
26. Randall L. Bytwerk, *Julius Streicher*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 47.
27. *Der Stürmer, Sondernummer* 5 (1936): 3.

28. Hans Jonak von Freyenwald, *Jüdische Bekenntnisse aus allen Zeiten und Ländern* (Nuremberg: Der Stürmer Buchverlag, 1941).
29. Hans Bohrmann, ed. *NS-Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit: Edition und Dokumentation*, 7 vols. (Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag, 1984–2001), 2:458.
30. The Propaganda Ministry provided financial support for the Bern defendants not because of any confidence in *The Protocols*, but rather to avoid a propaganda defeat on the world stage. See Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 218, 223.
31. Cited in Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 87.
32. “Gegen die Zerstörung der Menschenwürde,” *NS Frauen-Warte* 11 (June 1943): 2, which asserted that the best proofs of *The Protocols* were the “actual conditions in the Jewish-dominated Soviet Union and the development of the USA into a purely Jewish state.” I found no mentions in other popular magazines I checked.
33. *Parole der Woche*, April 1–7, 1937. I have seen most issues.
34. Johann von Leers, “Bücher,” *Unser Wille und Weg* 4 (August 1934): 244. Leers was a prolific antisemitic author who converted to Islam after the war and continued his antisemitic efforts under Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser.
35. *Aufklärungs- und Redner-Informationsmaterial der Reichspropagandaleitung der NSDAP*, nos. 20, 21, 23, 24 (August, September, October, November, and December 1935). The material is translated in GPA/rim3.htm, accessed April 20, 2015. The Nazi Party publishing house issued a 95-page account of the Cairo trial; that publication included a full-page advertisement for *The Protocols*. See Wolfgang Diewerge, *Als Sonderberichterstatter zum Kairoer Judenprozeß* (Munich: Eher Verlag, 1934). No such pamphlet followed the much more significant Bern trial.
36. *Aufklärungs- und Redner-Informationsmaterial*, no. 1 (January 1939): 6/31.
37. *Ibid.*, 3.
38. For example, in May 1943 a major antisemitic directive to speakers made no mention of *The Protocols*. See “Judendämmerung in aller Welt!” *Redner-Schnellinformation*, May 18, 1943. The material is translated at GPA/rsi60.htm.
39. See Randall L. Bytwerk, “Grassroots Propaganda in the Third Reich: The Reich Ring for National Socialist Propaganda and Public Enlightenment,” *German Studies Review* 33 (2010): 93–118.
40. Titles for leaders (themselves usually only a few years older than their charges) included *Die Jungenschaft*, *Die Kameradschaft*, *Die Jungmädelschaft*, and *Die Mädelschaft*. These included guidance on how to cover all aspects of Nazi ideology.
41. “Das Judentum auf dem Weg zur Weltmacht,” *Die Mädelschaft* 4, no. 1 (January 1937): 23.
42. I surveyed *Der Pimpf* (for boys 10–14) and *Das deutsche Mädel* (for girls 10–18).
43. “Der Berner Judenprozeß: Beginn der Plädoyers,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, May 11, 1935.
44. Hans Bohrmann, ed., *NS-Presseanweisungen*, vol. 3/I, 293.

45. "Das Urteil in Berner Zionistenprozeß," *Freiburger Zeitung*, May 15, 1935.
46. See issues of the *World-Service* for the first half of 1935 (I used the English-language edition).
47. Steven Leonard Jacobs and Mark Weitzman, *Dismantling the Big Lie: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Los Angeles: Simon Wiesenthal Center, 2003), 168.
48. p. 231.
49. "Swiss Court Frees 2 in 'Protocols' Case," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1937.
50. "Jüdische Niederlage im Berner Prozeß," *Völkischer Beobachter*, November 3, 1937.
51. "Eine Niederlage des Weltjudentums," *Freiburger Zeitung* (Morgenausgabe A), November 2, 1937.
52. Heinz Hugo Krische, "Zions Reinfall," *Freiburger Zeitung* (Abendausgabe A), November 2, 1937. For similar comments in other newspapers see Peter Longerich, "*Davon haben wir nichts gewusst!*": *Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung 1933–1945* (Munich: Siedler, 2006), 110.
53. I have not been able to trace the source of the quotation.
54. Hermann Esser, *Die Jüdische Weltpest* (Munich: Eher Verlag, 1939), 23. The introduction is translated at GPA/esser.htm, accessed April 20, 2015.
55. Karl Holz, "Völkermörder Alljuda," *Der Stürmer*, no. 38, 1939.
56. *World-Service*, VI/19 (October 1 issue, 1939), 2.
57. *Der Jude als Weltparasit* (Berlin: NS-Führungsstab der Wehrmacht, 1944), 41–43. A partial translation appears at GPA/weltparasit.htm, accessed April 20, 2015.
58. Theodor Pugel, *Antisemitismus der Welt in Wort und Bild: Der Weltstreit um die Judenfrage* (Dresden: Groh Verlag, 1936).
59. *Kräfte hinter Roosevelt* (Berlin: Theodor Fritsch Verlag, 1941), 149–51. Leers briefly referred to *The Protocols* in various other writings. See *Forderung der Stunde: Juden raus!* (Berlin: Propaganda-Verlag, 1933), 13; and "Überstaatliche Mächte im Zweiten Reich," *Der Schulungsbrief* 4 (1937): 372.
60. Georg Schott, *Das Volksbuch vom Hitler* (Munich: Eher Verlag, 1942), 79.
61. Edmund Fürholzer, *Menschen wie wir? Ein Amerika-Buch für Europäer* (Berlin: Wilhelm-Limpert-Verlag, 1943), 280.
62. Willi A. Boelcke, *Kriegspropaganda 1939–1941: Geheime Ministerkonferenzen im Reichspropagandaministerium* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966), 217, 225, 227. I find no evidence that any translation was published.
63. "Die soziale Revolution Europas," *Redner-Vortragsdienst für Betriebsversammlungen mit ausländischen Arbeitern* (December 1943): 7.
64. For more, see my "The Argument for Genocide in Nazi Propaganda," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91 (2005): 37–62.
65. Wolfgang Diewerge, *Das Kriegsziel der Weltplutokratie* (Berlin: Eher Verlag, 1941), 7–8. The pamphlet is translated at GPA/kriegsziel.htm, accessed April 20, 2015.

66. Heinrich Goitsch, *Niemals!* (Berlin: Eher Verlag, 1944). The pamphlet is translated at GPA/niemals.htm, accessed June 2, 2015.
67. *Siebenhundert Bücher für nationalsozialistische Büchereien* (Munich: Eher, 1944).
68. The term comes from William J. McGuire, "Resistance to Persuasion Conferred by Active and Passive Prior Refutation of the Same and Alternative Counterargument," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 63 (1961): 326–32.
69. Ellen Langer, Arthur Blank, and Benzion Chanowitz, "The Mindlessness of Ostensibly Thoughtful Action: The Role of 'Placebic' Information in Interpersonal Interaction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36 (1978): 635–42.
70. Klaus P. Fischer, *The History of an Obsession: German Judeophobia and the Holocaust* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 135. Fischer relies on Heiden's account.
71. http://en.metapedia.org/wiki/The_Protocols_of_the_Learned_Elders_of_Zion (accessed August 28, 2013).