

Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in the Early Modern Iberian World: Narratives of Fear and Hatred. By François Soyer. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019. Hardcover. ISBN 978-90-04-39550-3

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In his 2013 work, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, David Nirenberg claims that antisemitism has been a constituent factor in European history spanning back to Antiquity. In this argument, the Jewish people have existed as a spectre that has been fundamental to how the West has “constructed the reality of their world”.¹ Working within this paradigm, François Soyer examines the perceived Judaization of the Iberian Peninsula in the early modern period and how this manifested in a series of conspiracy theories. *Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in the Early Modern Iberian World* presents an insightful study on the conspiracy theories that characterised antisemitism in this period. At the centre of these conspiracy theories were the *conversos*, former Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity rather than face expulsion from the Spanish and Portuguese kingdoms during the late 15th century. Despite these conversion efforts, this minority continued to be the subject of intense discrimination that relied on a sustained campaign of anti-Jewish propaganda by early modern polemicists. Through examining this textual legacy of Jewish conspiracy theories, Soyer posits that Jews — as the ‘demonic other’ — were essential to the formation of a cohesive Iberian Catholic identity in the early modern period and further beyond.

Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in the Early Modern Iberian World analyses a number of different historical sources that have not received scholarly attention as of yet. These include printed sermons, inquisitorial records, archival documents, and (most prominently) polemical anti-Jewish literature. Soyer uses such sources to deftly illustrate a reoccurring theme of antisemitic propaganda in early modern Iberia. This propaganda disseminated a grand conspiracy theory of covert Jewish attacks on the Spanish and Portuguese kingdoms, the intention being to designate those of Jewish blood as the enemy. Through this, Soyer also historicises the origin of many 20th century antisemitic myths. One of the central themes of *Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in the Early Modern Iberian World* is that the destructive antisemitic views of the modern era have been ingrained in the Western identity for centuries. This work clearly demonstrates that such early modern Jewish myths share “a common rhetoric and themes with modern conspiracism targeting both Jews and other groups” (p.14), revealing the deep-seated historical basis of this prejudice.

Soyer's use of terminology in this text may attract the ire of some readers. 'Antisemitic' is used here because it reflects the early modern belief that Judaism and Jewish culture were transmitted through hereditary or biological lines. Antisemitic is not treated as a monolithic concept in this work but rather as one particular form of prejudice inherent to the Iberian context. The explanation provided for the use of antisemitic is persuasive and should appease all but the most critical of readers. Furthermore, Soyer's conflation of the Spanish and Portuguese contexts may also attract critique but this study establishes a strong enough case as to why the individual Iberian kingdoms can be studied as a whole. The text argues that "the similarities of both Iberian societies, of the origins of the '*converso* problem' of both Iberian monarchies and of the propaganda produced by anti-*converso* polemicists means that it would make little sense to restrict the scope of this work to either Spain or Portugal" (p. 11). Differences certainly do exist but there is enough overlap between Spain, Portugal, and their respective colonies to merit the broad analysis that this study employs. Overall, Soyer is careful with his scholarly claims (perhaps a bit much so in a few instances) and manages to navigate around the potential theoretical minefields present in antisemitic scholarship.

Chapter One: Conspiracism and Society in Early Modern Europe highlights the role of conspiracy theories in European history. The advent of the conspiracy theory, as proposed by the philosopher Karl Popper, has its origins in Enlightenment-era secularisation but Soyer convincingly argues that their proliferation lies with the advent of the Gutenberg Press. This secularisation argument rests on a "fundamental misunderstanding of mediaeval and early modern society" (p. 44) and Soyer establishes that antisemitic conspiracy theories fit into an all-encompassing worldview. Drawing on the scholarship on conspiracy theories, Soyer details that such theories were part of a 'demonic super conspiracy' that sought to group together supernatural and human activity into a cohesive paradigm. Antisemitic conspiracy theories have persisted precisely because they addressed important social, spiritual, and emotional needs. The demonic super conspiracy of the Jewish people as the eternal enemies of Christians was significant as it encouraged a collective sense of fear amongst Spanish and Portuguese populations. Furthermore, this book posits that such theories were by no means marginal and were in fact integral to the construction of Iberian Christian identity. It is precisely because of this centrality, Soyer infers, that antisemitism has persisted into the modern era.

The next chapter, *Forged Documents and the Fear of Jewish Infiltration*, performs much of the heavy lifting when it comes to source

work. Soyer details how the success of antisemitic myths relied upon a series of forged historical documents. Through the propagation of these documents, it is possible to see the beginnings of a coherent antisemitic super conspiracy. Most significant among these documents were the letters supposedly exchanged between Spanish Jews and Constantinople Jews during the late 15th century. Soyer reveals that these letters were a 16th century forgery and developed into “one of the most powerful elements in the polemical arsenal of antisemitic authors in both Spain and Portugal” (p. 56). These letters, accepted by many high-ranking churchmen, detailed a group of Jewish conspirators posing as Catholics to infiltrate state and religious institutions. This period also so the (re)emergence of many older myths, such as the 12th century concern with Jewish Blood Libel, into contemporary discourse. Such myths joined with the newer ones to establish a grand narrative of targeted and coordinated Jewish subversion against the Iberian Catholic populations.

Such documents reinforced the pre-existing belief that the Jews were seeking to infiltrate state and religious institutions with the intention of undermining Christianity. In *Chapter 3: Seeking to Build a Synagogue within the Church of God*, Soyer outlines that Judaism was wrongly perceived as a proselytizing faith. Churchman and state officials feared that crypto-Jews were attempting to become ordained priests, convert others to Judaism, desecrate churches, and thereby provoke God’s wrath on the Iberian people. This was a particular concern in the African and South American colonies where Jewish merchants held considerable influence. State institutions, under direction from the monarchy or Church, enacted policies in response to this perceived Jewish threat. For instance, university’s began purging individuals found to have Jewish heritage. Similarly, the Inquisition arrested many *converso* churchmen on the grounds of crypto-Judaism and such cases only further fuelled antisemitic polemics. Through the active engagement of secular and ecclesiastical institutions, antisemitic sentiment was perpetuated by the elites and supported zealously by members from all social ranks. As such, Jewish conspiracy theories were by no means marginal in this context, but “seemingly accepted as an incontrovertible fact” (p. 137) by the population at large.

This fear of Jewish infiltration also extended into the medical profession. *Chapter 4: Medical Murder: the Myth of the Jewish Serial-killer Doctors* examines the dramatic shift in legitimacy that Jewish doctors experienced during the late medieval and early modern periods. Jewish physicians and surgeons were held in high esteem in medieval Iberia,

employed in Royal courts and Church institutions. This was partly because there was a shortage of Christian doctors in many areas, with the available ones charging much more than their Jewish counterparts. While legislation throughout the 13th and 14th century targeted Jewish medical professionals, such laws were often flaunted by the elites. By the 15th century, this perception began to change, largely owing to the myths surrounding the death of King Enrique III of Castile in 1406. Rumours told that physician and Chief Rabbi Meir ben Solomon Alguadex poisoned the king and this story became a common feature of antisemitic polemics. Following the forced conversion decrees in the late 15th century, conspiracy theories involving coordinated campaigns of Jewish physicians murdering their Christian patients began to emerge. In early modern Iberia, conversos were linked with medical misconduct, prompting a number of purges from the Christian College of Doctors. This was further exacerbated by Gregory XIII's papal bull of 1581 which forbade Christians from seeking advice from Jewish physicians. Antisemitic policies were thus not confined to early modern Iberia, but were inherent across the West.

Antisemitic conspiracy theories also held a notable international dimension. Iberian Jews were perceived to be supporting the Dutch Protestants, acting as a fifth column that passed along vital military intelligence. This notion of *Traitors who Dwell Amongst Us* (Chapter 5) was especially prominent in Iberian colonies where Dutch naval power posed an ongoing threat. The number of *conversos* in these colonies, while entirely proportional to the overall population, led to concerns for Jewish proselytising and subversion. Moreover, the volatile indigenous populations and African slaves offered protentional recruits for this Jewish force. In the European context, Amsterdam was home to a powerful Jewish Sephardic community that was made up of former conversos, and this perpetuated the notion of a Protestant-Jewish alliance. The advent of Protestantism was even understood to be a Jewish ploy to undermine the Catholic Church and lead Christians away from God. Similarly, the Muslim population in the Iberian Peninsula was also linked to a Jewish subversion plot, drawing from myths surrounding the capture of Toledo in 711 CE. Soyer demonstrates in this chapter that any perceived external threat to the Spanish and Portuguese kingdoms could be projected onto the Jews, emphasising this Jewish super conspiracy that pervaded early modern Iberian culture. To this populace, the schemes of the Jew lay behind every potential misfortune and had been so for much of Christian history.

Finally, "*Sponges that Such Up the Wealth of Spain*", highlights the most prevalent (and persistent) antisemitic myth. *Conversos* were widely

believed to be in control of Spanish trade with merchants seeking to advance the Jewish cause through the accumulation of wealth. At this time Jews were certainly closely involved in international trade and commerce ventures, marking them easy targets for Spanish and Portuguese polemicists. From this, the image of the Jew as a parasite on society developed, designating such individuals as immoral and overly concerned with material wealth. This chapter also marks a significant departure point in this study. Spain and Portugal held substantially different policies in this instance and this provides Soyer with the opportunity to adopt a more individual approach. Spain borrowed heavily from private sources (including Jews) to fund its foreign wars while Portugal was favouring expansion into the New World. Spain's excessive spending enriched Portuguese traders (*asentistas*) who became linked with *conversos* and Sephardic communities in Holland. Notably, Jews became a scapegoat for economic failure in early modern Iberia and such a stereotype developed into "an essential feature of antisemitic thought and propaganda across Europe" (p. 263) in the modern period.

Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in the Early Modern Iberian World proves to be an engrossing and well-constructed study on the history of Iberian antisemitic thought. Through a detailed analysis of archival and polemical source material, this work reveals that antisemitic conspiracy theories have been played a much more significant role in European history than previously envisaged. As such, Soyer revises the scholarly sentiment that super conspiracy theories emerged from Enlightenment-era scepticism, arguing that they were in fact embedded in the totality of early modern Iberian Catholic identity. Antisemitic conspiracy theories have persisted into the modern period precisely because they were such a fundamental aspect of Western society dating back to the medieval era (and possibly earlier). The historical documents used in *Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in the Early Modern Iberian World* indicate that the origins of antisemitic polemics were in fact based on earlier myths and forgeries, thereby destroying all 'credibility' that their modern incarnations attempt to establish. This work serves as an important contribution to both early modern and antisemitic scholarship, posing a robust challenge to the Jewish prejudice that is becoming increasingly more prevalent in contemporary society.

¹ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism. The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 244, 468.