Suspicious Minds
WHY WE BELIEVE
CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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For Lindsay
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Introduction: Down the Rabbit Hole

All is not as it seems. There is a hidden side to reality, a secret realm buzzing with clandestine activity and covert operations. This invisible network constantly screens, sifts, and manipulates information. It conjures up comforting lies to hide the real, bewildering truth. It steers what we think and believe, even shapes the decisions we make, molding our perception to its own agenda. Our understanding of the world, in short, is an illusion.

Who is behind this incredible scheme? Some sinister secret society? Psychopathic bureaucrats in smoke-filled boardrooms? The Queen of England? The intergalactic shape-shifting lizards who she works for? All of the above?

No. This is an inside job. It’s not them—it’s us. More specifically, it’s you. More specifically, it’s your brain.

Everything Is a Conspiracy

There’s a conspiracy theory for everything. Ancient Atlanteans built the pyramids. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on the orders of his vice president, Andrew Johnson. The Apollo moon landings were filmed on a sound stage in Arizona. Area 51 is home to advanced technology of alien origin. Alex Jones, a conspiracy-minded radio host based out of Austin, Texas, is actually the alter-ego of comedian Bill Hicks (who faked his death in the early 1990s to pursue a career in conspiracism). And then there’s Big Pharma, black helicopters, the Bilderberg Group, Bohemian Grove . . .

The rabbit hole runs deep. The conspiracy allegedly extends to the air we breathe (tainted by chem-trails), the food we eat (monkeyed with by Monsanto), the medicine we take (filled with deadly toxins), and the water we drink (spiked with mind-warping fluoride). Elections are rigged, politics is a sham, and President Obama is a communist Muslim from Kenya.
These are a few of the theories, but who are the theorists? According to cliché, conspiracy theorists are a rare breed—a small but dedicated lunatic fringe of basement-dwelling, middle-aged men, intelligent outsiders with an idiosyncratic approach to research (and, often, a stockpile of Reynolds Wrap).

Most elements of the stereotype, however, don’t hold up. On the whole, women are just as conspiracy-minded as men. Education and income don’t make much difference either. The ranks of conspiracy theorists include slightly more high school dropouts than college graduates, but even professors, presidents, and Nobel Prize winners can succumb to conspiracism. And conspiracy theories appeal to all ages. Senior citizens are no more or less conspiracy-minded than Millennials, on average. At the low end of the age bracket, legions of American teens suspect that Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles of the inordinately popular boy band One Direction are secretly an item, and that the band’s corporate overlords invented a fake girlfriend for Louis as part of the cover-up.

As for the idea that conspiracy theories are a fringe affair, nothing could be farther from the truth. All told, huge numbers of people are conspiracy theorists when it comes to one issue or another. According to polls conducted over the last decade or so, around half of Americans think their government is probably hiding the truth about the 9/11 attacks. Almost four in ten suspect that climate change is a scientific fraud. Something like a third believe the government is likely hiding evidence of aliens. More than a quarter are worried about the New World Order. In a 2013 survey, 4 percent of the people polled (which, extended to the entire population of the United States, would mean twelve million people) said they think “shape-shifting reptilian people control our world by taking on human form and gaining political power to manipulate our societies.” A further 7 percent said they just weren’t sure.

These sorts of public opinion polls, it’s worth bearing in mind, only provide a rough indication of any particular theory’s popularity. Estimates vary depending on exactly who you ask, how you ask them, and when. But this much is crystal clear: There are more conspiracy theorists out there than you might expect. Chances are you know some. Chances are you are one.
It's not just Americans. People in the United Kingdom and Europe are similarly suspicious. And it's not just Westerners. Conspiracism is a global phenomenon. According to a 2011 Pew Research Center survey, between half and three quarters of people in various Middle Eastern countries doubt that Arab hijackers pulled off the 9/11 attacks. In many parts of the world, vaccines and other Western medicines are viewed with suspicion. Four out of ten Russians think that America faked the moon landings, according to a 2011 poll. In India, shortly after the country's prime minister, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated in 1984, her successor told an audience of a hundred thousand people gathered in New Delhi, “the assassination of Indira Gandhi is the doing of a vast conspiracy whose object is to weaken and divide India.” And in Brazil, a popular conspiracy theory asserts that the American military is planning to invade the Amazon rain forest and take control of its rich natural resources. As part of the propaganda campaign to prepare American citizens for the impending invasion, the theory goes, maps of South America in American junior high school textbooks show a huge swath of the Amazon under the control of the United Nations.

So, was there a gunman on the Grassy Knoll? Is Elvis alive, relaxing by the pool with Jim Morrison, Marilyn Monroe, and Princess Diana in some secret resort for aggressively reclusive stars? Who really rules the world, and what did they do with flight MH370?

If you're looking for answers to these questions, then I'm afraid you've picked up the wrong book. The truth might be out there, but it's not in here. If there really are sinister schemes taking shape behind closed doors at this very moment, if the real perpetrators of atrocities have not yet been brought to justice, if everything we think we know is a lie—it'd be nice to know. But there are plenty of other books dedicated to compiling evidence of some alleged conspiracy, and almost as many books that purport to tear the theories to shreds. That's not what this one is about. In fact, this book isn't really about conspiracy theories at all (though we'll encounter plenty of theories along the way). It's about conspiracy thinking—about what psychology can reveal about how we decide what is reasonable and what is
ridiculous, and why some people believe things that, to other people, seem completely unbelievable.

Of course, if you ask someone why they believe—or why they don’t believe—some theory or other, they’ll probably tell you it’s simple: They’ve made up their mind based on the evidence. But psychology tells a different story. It turns out that we’re not always the best judge of why we believe what we believe.

Tidy Desk, Tidy Mind (or: The Unexpected Virtue of Neatness)

In a recent experiment, psychologists at the University of Amsterdam had students think about something that they felt ambivalent about—any topic about which they had both positive and negative feelings. Imagine, for instance, eating an entire tub of ice cream. It would be a nice way to spend twenty minutes, but it’d also be pretty bad for you in the long run. You know there are pros and cons. That’s ambivalence.

Each student sat at a computer, thought about whatever it was that made him or her feel ambivalent, and typed up a few of the pros and cons. At that point, an error message appeared on the screen. Fear not—it was all part of the psychologists’ devious plan. The researcher monitoring the experiment feigned surprise, and told the participant that they would have to complete the next (ostensibly unrelated) questionnaire at a different desk. The unwitting subject was led to a cubicle across the room, where they encountered a desk in disarray, strewn with pens, books, magazines, and crumpled pieces of paper. Then, nestled comfortably amid the detritus, the participant was shown a series of pictures.
Some pictures, like the one on the left, had a faintly discernible image—in this case, a sailboat. Others, like the one on the right, consisted of nothing but random splotches. The students weren’t told which were which; they simply had to say whether they saw a pattern in the static. Pretty much everyone spotted the boat and all the other real pictures. More interestingly, a lot of the time people said they saw images where, in reality, there was only randomness. There were twelve pictures that contained nothing but random blobs. On average, the students saw imaginary images in nine of them.

At least, that’s how the experiment went for one group of students. For another group, things started out pretty much the same. They had to think about something that made them ambivalent, they saw an error message, they were led to the messy cubicle. Then there was one crucial difference. Before carrying on with the experiment, the experimenter asked each student to help tidy up the mess. Once the desk was straightened up, the students saw those same pictures. Compared to students who had worked amid the clutter, these students consistently saw fewer phantom images. They saw imaginary patterns in just five of the twelve meaningless pictures, on average—which was about the same number as people who hadn’t been made to feel ambivalent at the start of the experiment.

Feeling conflicting emotions about something is unpleasant, the researchers explained. We habitually seek order and consistency, and to be ambivalent is to experience disorder and conflict. When that happens, we might try to change our beliefs, or simply ignore the issue. Or we can use more roundabout strategies to deal with our unwanted emotions. Ambivalence threatens our sense of order, so, to compensate, we can seek order elsewhere. This is why the first group of students saw so many imaginary images. Seeing meaning in the ambiguous splotches—connecting the dots—allowed them to satisfy the craving for order that had been triggered by their sense of ambivalence. And it also explains why the second group of students saw fewer imaginary images. The simple act of tidying the desk—transforming the chaos into order—had already satisfied their craving. They were no longer on the lookout for patterns in the static. They didn’t need the dots to be connected.
What does this have to do with conspiracy theories? In another experiment, the researchers again made people feel ambivalent. This time, instead of looking at strange pictures, the students were asked to imagine they had been passed over for a promotion at work. What are the chances, the researchers asked, that a conniving co-worker had a hand in the boss’s decision? Compared to a group of people who hadn’t been made to feel ambivalent, the ambivalent students were more likely to suspect that a conspiracy was afoot. Sometimes, it would seem, buying into a conspiracy is the cognitive equivalent of seeing meaning in randomness.

A bit of clutter isn’t the only thing that can subtly influence our beliefs. In another recent study, almost two hundred students at a college in London were asked simply to rate how plausible they found a handful of popular conspiracy theories. For half of the students, the allegations were written in an easy-to-read font—regular old Arial, size twelve, like so:

A powerful and secretive group, known as the New World Order, are planning to eventually rule the world through an autonomous world government, which would replace sovereign government.

For the other half of the students, however, the allegations were written in a font that was a little harder to read, like so:

A powerful and secretive group, known as the New World Order, are planning to eventually rule the world through an autonomous world government, which would replace sovereign government.

The students who read the theories in the clear, legible font consistently rated them more likely to be true. The students who had the harder-to-read font found the claims harder to believe.

The remarkable thing is that if you were to ask the students who took part why they rated the conspiracy theories the way they did, they might have told you something like “I heard a rumor about the New World Order the other day,” or “Conspiracies happen all the time,” or “It just makes sense that people are up to no good.” None of the Dutch students would have told you that feeling ambivalent about a bowl of ice cream...
had influenced their judgment. None of the Londoners thought to themselves, “This is an attractive font, so I suppose the New World Order really is planning to take over.” They didn’t consciously choose to see the theories as more or less plausible. Their brains did most of the work behind the scenes.

Who Is Pulling the Strings?

As neuroscientist David Eagleman points out in *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain*, there is a complicated network of machinery hidden just beneath your skin. Your body is chock-full of organs, each with its own special job to do, all working together to keep you alive and healthy, and they manage it without any conscious input from you. Whether you’re paying attention or not, your heart keeps on beating, your blood vessels expand and contract, and your spleen does whatever it does. Our detailed scientific understanding of how the body works is a relatively recent development, and yet, for some reason, the idea that our organs can go about their business without us telling them to do it, or even being aware of what they’re up to, doesn’t strike us as particularly hard to believe.

Your brain seems different, though. The brain is the most complicated organ of them all. It is made up of billions of specialized cells, each one in direct communication with thousands of others, all ceaselessly firing off electrical signals in cascading flurries of activity. Somehow—it’s still largely a mystery—out of this chaos arises consciousness: our experience of being us, of being a thinking, feeling, deciding person, residing just behind our eyes, looking out on the world, making important decisions like when to cross the road and where to go for lunch. Consciousness is all we know about what’s going on inside our head, and it feels like it’s all there is to know. Masses of psychological studies, however, lead to a surprising conclusion. Consciousness is not the whole story. We are not privy to everything—or even most—of what our brain is up to. The brain, like its fellow organs, is primarily in the business of keeping us alive, and, also like its less mysterious colleagues, the brain doesn’t need much input from us to get the job done. All sorts of activity goes on behind the scenes, outside of our conscious awareness and entirely beyond our control.
But just because our brain doesn’t let us in on all of its antics doesn’t mean its subconscious processes are unimportant or inconsequential. On the contrary, our perception, thoughts, beliefs, and decisions are all shaped by our brain’s secret shenanigans. Imaginative psychologists have come up with various metaphors for our mistaken intuition that we’re aware of—and in control of—everything that happens in our brain. As David Eagleman put it, “Your consciousness is like a tiny stowaway on a transatlantic steamship, taking credit for the journey without acknowledging the massive engineering underfoot.” Social scientist Jonathan Haidt likened consciousness to a rider on the back of an elephant: The rider can coax and cajole the elephant to go one direction or another by pulling on the reins, but at the end of the day, the elephant has whims of its own, and it’s bigger than we are. Daniel Kahneman, one of the pioneers of the psychology of our brain’s hidden biases and shortcuts, described the division of labor between our conscious and unconscious mental processes in cinematic terms. “In the unlikely event” of a movie being made in which our brain’s two modes of activity were the main characters, consciousness “would be a supporting character who believes herself to be the hero,” Kahneman wrote.

I’d like to propose a similar metaphor, one more in keeping with our theme. We imagine ourselves to be puppet masters, in full control of our mental faculties. In reality, however, we’re the puppet, tethered to our silent subconscious by invisible strings, dancing to its whims and then taking credit for the choreography ourselves.

**Suspicious Minds**

Does this mean that conspiracy theories are inherently irrational, nutty, harebrained, confused, crackpot, or pathological? Some pundits enthusiastically heap this kind of scorn and ridicule on conspiracy theories, painting them as the product of faulty thinking, which disbelievers are presumably immune to. Because of this dim view, tensions between conspiracy theorists and their critics can run high. As far as some conspiracy theorists are concerned, looking for psychological reasons for believing conspiracy theories is worse than simply challenging them on their facts. It can seem like an attempt to smear believers’
credibility, or even to write conspiracy theorists off as mentally unbalanced.

That’s not my goal. This book isn’t about listing conspiracy theories like some catalog of bizarre beliefs. It’s not about singling out conspiracy theorists as a kind of alien species, or as a cautionary tale about how not to think. The scientific findings we’ve amassed over the last few years tell a much more interesting story—one that has implications for us all. Michael Billig, an early trailblazer of research into conspiracy thinking, warned that when it comes to conspiracism, “it is easy to overemphasise its eccentricities at the expense of noticing what is psychologically commonplace.” Conspiracy theories might be a result of some of our brain’s quirks and foibles, but, as we’ll see, they are by no means unique in that regard. Most of our quirks simply slide by unnoticed. Psychology can tell us a lot—not only about why people believe theories about grand conspiracies, but about how everyone’s mind works, and about why we believe anything at all.

So here’s my theory. We are each at the mercy of a hundred billion tiny conspirators, a cabal of conspiring neurons. Throughout this book, we’ll be pulling back the curtain, shining a light into the shadowy recesses of our mind, and revealing how our brain’s secret shenanigans can shape the way we think about conspiracy theories—and a whole lot else besides. Whether conspiracy theories reflect what’s really going on in the world or not, they tell us a lot about our secret selves. Conspiracy theories resonate with some of our brain’s built-in biases and shortcuts, and tap into some of our deepest desires, fears, and assumptions about the world and the people in it. We have innately suspicious minds. We are all natural-born conspiracy theorists.
CHAPTER ONE

The Age of Conspiracy

“T

his is the age of conspiracy,” a character in Don DeLillo’s
Running Dog intones, ominously—“the age of connections, links, secret relationships.” The quote has featured in
countless books and essays on contemporary conspiracism,
reflecting a belief, widely held among laypeople and scholars
alike, that conspiracy theories have never been more popular
than they are right now. As one scholar put it, “other centuries
have only dabbled in conspiracy like amateurs. It is our century
which has established conspiracy as a system of thought and a
method of action.”

There’s no shortage of guesses about what ushered in this
alleged golden age of conspiracism. The prime suspect, as far as
many twenty-first-century pundits are concerned, is the rise of
the Internet. Political scientist Jodi Dean began an article
published in the year 2000 by asserting that “as the global
networks of the information age become increasingly entan-
gled, many of us are overwhelmed and undermined by an
all-pervasive uncertainty.” Presumably things have only gotten
worse since then; a 2015 study of the spread of conspiracy theo-
ries on social media dubbed this the “Age of Misinformation.”

Other pundits point to tangible events. For journalist
Jonathan Kay, the collapse of the Twin Towers opened up
“nothing less than a countercultural rift,” a sort of intellectual
black hole that has sucked in “a wide range of political para-
noiacs.” Others trace the rise of conspiracism back farther.
Maybe it started in the 1970s, with a crisis of faith in govern-
ment that followed the unraveling of Richard Nixon’s
paranoia-tinged presidency. Or maybe the sixties, and the
collective loss of innocence that came with the death of John F.
Kennedy and the escalating debacle of Vietnam. Or maybe it
began with the creeping Cold War paranoia of the fifties.

Until recently, this kind of hand-waving guesswork was all
we had to go on. But in 2014, two political scientists, Joe Uscinski
and Joseph Parent, undertook an inventive and ambitious project to find some solid answers.

It’s not immediately obvious how to go about measuring the rise and fall of conspiracy thinking over a long stretch of time. In our digital age, getting an idea of what people are talking about is as easy as checking which hashtags are trending or how many “likes” a Facebook page gets. It’s less obvious how we might figure out how much people were talking about conspiracies a century ago. But Uscinski and Parent realized that our analog ancestors left behind a rich trove of data: letters to the editor. The letters page of the newspaper, it’s fair to say, is often overlooked, and is sometimes seen as a repository for the emotional outbursts of cranks. Yet social analysts have shown that letters to the editor are a good barometer of public opinion writ large, and therefore an invaluable research tool.

And so Uscinski and Parent set about analyzing more than a century’s worth of letters to the editor published in the New York Times. They gathered a sample of a thousand letters per year, from 1890 to 2010, amounting to more than a hundred thousand letters in total. Then a team of well-trained (and, hopefully, well-compensated) research assistants painstakingly combed through each letter, checking for conspiracy theories. It didn’t matter if a letter was promoting or debunking a conspiracy theory; either way, Uscinski and Parent reasoned, reciting the theory shows that the writer deemed it a topic worthy of discussion, and that the editor deemed it important enough to everyone else to be worth publishing.

Out of the hundred thousand or so letters, 875 mentioned conspiracies. At less than 1 percent of the entire sample, that might seem like a tiny fraction—but, as Uscinski and Parent point out, the letters page is open to any subject under the sun. It’s no surprise that singling out any particular niche, be it conspiracies or comedy or cooking, results in a relatively small slice of the pie.

In terms of the allegations that the letter writers were throwing around, the researchers discovered some real peaches. Among the accused conspirators there were all the usual suspects, such as presidents, big business, and the media, as well as a fascinating array of lesser-spotted culprits, including dairy farmers, post office workers, the Walt Disney Company. In the 1890s,
people worried that England and Canada were conspiring to reclaim territory from the United States, or that Mormons were rigging elections in favor of Republicans. For the first few decades of the twentieth century, typical theories involved financial interests attempting to subvert democracy. From the thirties until the sixties, many of the alleged plots featured communists. For the last fifty years or so, suspicion has shifted toward the American government itself, particularly its various intelligence agencies.

So what about the questions at hand? Has talk of conspiracies increased since the Second World War? Did it gain traction with the Kennedy assassination, the Watergate scandal, or the 9/11 attacks? Has it skyrocketed since the advent of the Internet? “Despite popular hoopla,” Uscinski and Parent report, the answer to all these questions was a resounding no.

There were a couple of bumper years for conspiracy theories, but they weren’t the ones you might expect. The number of conspiracy-themed letters shot up in the mid-1890s, when fears about big business flourished, and in 1950, when the Red Scare hit fever pitch. But these spikes were short-lived, and the number of letters quickly fell back to baseline. There has been no exponential increase over the years. If anything, people are talking about conspiracies a little less than they used to. The researchers counted slightly fewer conspiracy-themed letters per year, on average, in the five decades since the Kennedy assassination compared to the seven decades before it. The overall trend, however, was long-term stability. The amount of conspiracy talk was, for the most part, a stable background hum, remarkably impervious to political events, the economy, or advances in communication technology.

“The data suggest one telling fact,” Uscinski and Parent concluded. “We do not live in an age of conspiracy theories and have not for some time.” So if our current fascination with conspiracies is not new, how far back does it go? Pretty far, it turns out.

**While Rome Burned**

July 19, C.E. 64, was a scorching summer’s day in Rome, according to historian Stephen Dando-Collins. It was the eve of
the Ludi Victoriae Caesaris, the immensely popular annual Roman Games. The Circus Maximus, a giant stadium with capacity for a quarter of a million spectators, was already being prepared, and visitors were flocking into the city. That evening the fast-food joints that lined the narrow streets around the stadium stoked their ovens, busily preparing to feed the dawn crowds. It is impossible to say where exactly, but somewhere in the vicinity of the stadium, a fire broke out. Fires were not uncommon in Ancient Rome, but this one proved to be different. Fanned by strong wind, the blaze quickly spread through the narrow, winding streets, consuming the tightly packed buildings. The inferno, which would become known as the Great Fire of Rome, raged on for almost a week. Countless people died in the flames, and half the city’s population was made homeless. All told, two thirds of the city was reduced to rubble and ash.

Even before the embers had cooled, conspiracy theories began to spread. Suspicion immediately settled on the emperor, Nero. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, who had lived through the fire as a child, “nobody dared fight the flames. Attempts to do so were prevented by menacing gangs. Torches, too, were openly thrown in, by men crying that they acted under orders.” As for Nero, Tacitus reports that he had been thirty-six miles away, in his hometown of Antium, when the fire broke out. When he got back to the city, he quickly organized shelter and food for the homeless masses. Yet his relief efforts earned him little gratitude from the public. Rumors were already spreading that while the city was burning, the young, immature, self-involved emperor had been in Antium giving a singing recital.

Tacitus stayed on the fence about Nero’s involvement in the fire, reporting the rumors without explicitly endorsing them. Others were less reserved. Suetonius, who was born five years after the fire, had at one time been a respected historian with unfettered access to Rome’s official archives. After offending Emperor Hadrian, possibly by having an affair with the empress, his access to the archives was revoked. As a result, his biography of Nero, written fifty years after the fire, was based largely on gossip. “Pretending to be disgusted by the drab old buildings and narrow, winding streets of Rome,” Suetonius wrote, Nero “brazenly set fire to the city. Although a party of ex-consuls
caught his attendants, armed with [kindling] and blazing torches, trespassing on their property, they dare not interfere.” In a dramatic flourish, Suetonius adds that, after arriving back from Antium, “Nero watched the conflagration from the Tower of Maecenas, enraptured by what he called ‘the beauty of the flames,’ then put on his tragedian’s costume and sang ‘The Sack of Ilium’ from beginning to end.”

Cassius Dio, writing 165 years after the fire, went even farther, claiming that Nero had a team of well-organized lackeys torch the city out of sheer malice. Dio was clearly taken by the idea of Nero singing with demented glee while the city burned around him, too, and added embellishments of his own. His melodramatic retelling of the fire is worth quoting at length:

Nero set his heart on accomplishing what had doubtless always been his desire, namely to make an end of the whole city and realm during his lifetime . . . Accordingly he secretly sent out men who pretended to be drunk or engaged in other kinds of mischief, and caused them to first set fire to one or two or even several buildings in different parts of the city, so that the people were at their wits’ end, not being able to find any beginning of the trouble nor to put an end to it . . . While the whole population was in this state of mind and many, crazed by the disaster, were leaping into the very flames, Nero went up to the roof of the palace, from which there was the best general view of the greater part of the conflagration, and assuming the lyre-player’s garb, he sang the Capture of Troy, as he styled the song himself, though to the eyes of the spectators it was the Capture of Rome.

Whether the fire was an inside job or not, and whether Nero really serenaded it with his lyre, we do know this: He was not happy to be the subject of conspiracy theories. In an effort to scotch the rumors, he came up with a conspiracy theory of his own. According to Tacitus, “Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace.” False confessions were forced out of a few Christians, on the basis of which many more were rounded up. They were convicted, Tacitus reports, “not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.” Nero’s treatment of the scapegoats
was ruthless. “Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths,” Tacitus reports. “Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.”

The Great Fire was far from the only event in Roman history that gave rise to conspiracy theories. Rome’s infatuation with conspiracy goes back to the very beginning of the empire. Romulus, one of the city’s founders and its first king, supposedly disappeared under mysterious circumstances. It was rumored that his political advisers, the senators, had assassinated their leader in a bid to increase their own power. Cassius Dio described the deed in his signature lurid style, writing that the power-hungry senators had surrounded Romulus as he was giving a speech, and “rent him limb from limb” right there on the floor of the senate-house. Adding an ironic twist, Dio claimed that the deed had been concealed “by a violent wind storm and an eclipse of the sun—the same sort of phenomenon that had attended his birth. Such was the end of Romulus.” As historian Victoria Pagán has cataloged, the entire history of ancient Rome is suffused with stories about suspected plots. Many of the stories were based on truth; assassinations and other nefarious schemes were par for the course in ancient Roman politics. But many—such as the sensational rumors of Nero’s pyromania or Romulus’s dramatic demise—were unquestionably embellished, or fabricated entirely.

It wasn’t just Rome. The ancient world was teeming with conspiracies and conspiracy theories. Going back at least as far as the fifth century B.C.E., historian Joseph Roisman points out that the work of the famed orators and playwrights of ancient Athens was riddled with “tales of plotting that involve almost every facet of Athenian life. There are plots against people’s lives, property, careers, or reputations, as well as against the public interest, the regime, and in foreign affairs.” Just about everyone was on the receiving end of charges of conspiracy, from politicians and businessmen to immigrants and slaves, and both the establishment and the masses seem to have taken such stories seriously.

Fascination with conspiracy endured throughout the Middle Ages. As before, conspiracy theories were popular among the
unwashed masses and the aristocratic establishment alike. Famine-struck peasants often saw their plight not as “simply the result of bad weather, or poor distribution methods, but of the nefarious actions of speculators,” as historians Barry Coward and Julian Swann put it, while the ruling elite frequently blamed unwelcome change on “the plotting of courtiers, ministers, favourites, heretics or freemasons.” Though the names and dates changed, the thread of conspiracism runs unbroken through the centuries. Coward and Swann point out that “English MPs in the early seventeenth century, for example, often drew on Tacitus and Roman history to interpret the politics of their own day.”

The Great Fire of London, which ravaged the city for four days in the year 1666, offers a striking example of history repeating itself and conspiracism regurgitating itself. Even as the fire was still raging, Samuel Pepys noted in his diary that rumors had begun to flourish “that there is a plot in it.” There were those who suspected it was an inside job, started on the orders of King Charles II himself—some even drew “an odious parallel between his Majesty and Nero,” according to a contemporary report. Others suspected that the fire was a terrorist attack by Catholic conspirators or England’s European enemies. A Frenchman, Robert Hubert, was soon arrested, and confessed to having started the fire acting in league with a cabal of French popish spies. His confession didn’t quite stack up. For instance, he claimed at first to have started the fire in Westminster. When he was informed that the fire had actually started on Pudding Lane, and had never even reached Westminster, his story changed. Regardless, Londoners—and the authorities—seized the opportunity to lay blame for the fire at the feet of a willing scapegoat. With his questionable confession as the only evidence against him, Hubert was hanged on October 27, 1666, in front of a mob of delighted spectators.

As this potted history goes to show, the golden age of conspiracy theories goes back thousands of years, and shows no sign of letting up. Some of the theories of antiquity bear a remarkable resemblance to contemporary conspiracy theories. There are some noteworthy differences, however. For classical conspiracy theorists, alleged plots generally concerned local, isolated issues, and the motives behind the ostensible plots were
fairly petty and personal. It’s also worth noting that, even though many of the theories were unquestionably embellished, they weren’t *all that* farfetched. When absolute power was invested in emperors or monarchs, taking up cloak and dagger against them was often the only way to effect any meaningful change.

Over time, people’s conspiratorial concerns broadened. There was a shift from theories about local and petty conspiracies of self-interest, to altogether grander theories. The proposed plots became more mysterious, subversive, and universal. The conspirators were imagined to be working toward less tangible, and more sinister, ends.

The road from the trivial theories of old to the all-consuming theories of today was marked by two major milestones, the first of which came courtesy of a young German idealist named Adam Weishaupt.

**Illuminati Panic**

In 1772, following in the footsteps of both his father and godfather, Adam Weishaupt became a professor of law at the University of Ingolstadt in Bavaria. Law was never his real passion, though. At just twenty-four years of age, Weishaupt was restless and idealistic. Disillusioned with his strict, mechanical Jesuit education, and inspired by the blossoming Enlightenment, he had developed a headstrong ambition to improve society using the power of reason to dispel religious superstition. He was also a “cynical and unscrupulous careerist and liar,” the historian John Roberts wrote; “All the evidence of this period of his career reveals him as a familiar hazard of academic and collegiate life: the clever, cantankerous, self-absorbed and self-deceiving bore.”

According to Roberts, Weishaupt’s true passion was for intrigue. From an early age, he had been fascinated by secret societies like the Pythagorean Brotherhood. He joined a Masonic lodge in 1774, but found himself disappointed by the Freemasons’ lack of political aspirations or genuine secrecy, and by the high membership fees. He decided to start a secret society of his own. The inaugural meeting was held on May 1, 1776, with just Weishaupt and four of his students in attendance. He called it the Order of the Illuminati.
Weishaupt’s dual personality was woven into the fabric of the Illuminati. Its philosophy was idealistic to the point of naïveté. The sole goal of the order, according to the statutes Weishaupt drew up, was “to render unto man the importance of the perfection of reason and his moral character . . . to oppose the wicked designs in the world, to assist against the injustice suffered by the unfortunate and the oppressed, to encourage men of merit, and in general to facilitate the means of knowing and science.” On the other hand, being the supreme leader of his very own secret society allowed Weishaupt to indulge his taste for attention and subterfuge. He carefully curated an aura of mystery for his sect. Initiates were required to take false names, learn a secret vocabulary, go through an elaborate set of initiation rites, and were instructed to sever ties with family and friends. To recruit new initiates, Weishaupt had Illuminati members infiltrate Masonic lodges and pick off their members. Weishaupt developed an elaborate hierarchy, which was itself concealed from all but the most senior members. Advancement required complete, unquestioning obedience. The true political goals of the order—the peaceful transformation of society—were only gradually revealed as a member climbed up the many ranks.

By the early 1780s, the order had gained around three hundred members spread across Europe. But the expansion came at the cost of secrecy. Weishaupt’s pedantic, domineering personality rubbed some recruits the wrong way. A few members spilled the beans about Illuminati activity to nonmembers, often with alarming exaggerations. By 1784, rumors about the order had caught the attention of the authorities. The Bavarian government issued an edict banning unauthorized associations, and Weishaupt suspended the Illuminati’s meetings. Material continued to leak, and scurrilous rumors were increasingly published by journalists and repeated by preachers, accusing the Illuminati of “irreligion, disloyalty to the dynasty, political intrigue and moral corruption.”

In a last-ditch effort to exonerate his order, Weishaupt personally approached Charles Theodore, Elector of Bavaria, and told him most of the Illuminati’s secrets. It proved to be in vain. On March 2, 1785, Theodore issued another edict, specifically condemning the Illuminati. Weishaupt fled Bavaria. Investigations commenced, arrests were made, and masses of the
Illuminati’s secret documents, including Weishaupt’s personal letters, were published for all to see. The Illuminati was gone—but not forgotten.

The discovery of a very real secret society with very real political aspirations, combined with the many horribly embellished rumors about its sordid, subversive activity, was a recipe for confusion and alarm. Already it was rumored that Weishaupt’s secret society continued to operate, and had simply gone underground. Freed from the hassle of actually existing, the Illuminati grew to mythic proportions in the fretful imaginations of its critics—not only in Bavaria, but across Europe and as far afield as the newly independent United States. The exposure of Weishaupt’s Illuminati tarnished the reputation of the Freemasons, too. A few lodges really had been infiltrated, after all—and who was to say that all the Illuminati operatives had been ferreted out. The conspiratorial machinations of subversive secret societies increasingly looked like a viable explanation for troubling events. And then the French Revolution happened.

“It is very easy today to underrate the emotional shock of the French Revolution,” Roberts notes. “Because it opened an era of revolution in which we still live, we are used to the idea of revolution in a way in which the men of the eighteenth century were not.” Over the course of ten violent, chaotic years, between 1789 and 1799, the age-old ways of hereditary aristocratic privilege crumbled, to be replaced with a new, more egalitarian, secular society. The revolutionary ideas began to spread across Europe, and soon millions of people had been granted basic human rights that they had never before enjoyed, while the aristocracy suddenly found their power and wealth decimated. It was a profound and unprecedented transformation—the rapid emergence of an entirely new political reality. People understandably struggled to come to terms with it. “The scale and violence of the changes . . . seemed to exhaust all conventional and familiar categories of explanation,” Roberts wrote. “Some new dimension of understanding was needed.”

At the tail end of the Revolution, in 1797, two authors published, almost simultaneously, books that provided that new dimension of understanding. One was Augustin de Barruel. Barruel was a French nobleman, an ordained Jesuit priest, and a polemicist. He had already earned some literary success for his
publications criticizing the Enlightenment philosophy, based on his staunch religious views. In 1789, the year the French Revolution broke out, Barruel had published a pamphlet blaming it on the corrupting ideology of the Enlightenment and the weakness of the French clergy. But by 1797, when he published the first two volumes of his *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, Barruel had become convinced that the whole thing had actually been carefully engineered from behind the scenes. “Even the most horrid deeds perpetrated during the French Revolution, every thing was foreseen and resolved on, was premeditated and combined,” he wrote; “they were the offspring of deep-thought villainy.” The villains, he claimed, included the Enlightenment Philosophes, the Freemasons, and the Jacobins. But these groups, Barruel wrote, were only the “most obvious villains in a great plot whose authors and agents have been far longer at work and are far more widespread.” Lurking behind them all, coordinating the whole scheme, Barruel said, was an even more powerful, sinister enemy: Adam Weishaupt’s dreaded Illuminati, whose “aim is not merely the destruction of the French monarch but universal dissolution, the overthrow of society and religion itself.”

Scotsman John Robison, a professor of natural philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, had the same idea. He published his book shortly after Barruel, under the snappy title *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free-Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies, etc., Collected from good authorities*. Though Robison disagreed with Barruel over a few of the details, his premise was the same. The Illuminati was behind the French Revolution, he said, and it was only their first step toward inciting total, world-wide anarchy. According to Robison, the Illuminati leaders “disbelieved every word that they uttered, and every doctrine that they taught . . . Their real intention was to abolish all religion, overturn every government, and make the world a general plunder and a wreck.” In case his readers weren’t alarmed enough, Robison warned that the Illuminati “still exists, still works in secret . . . Its emissaries are endeavoring to propagate their detestable doctrines among us.”

Nothing Barruel or Robison had to say was particularly original, Roberts notes. Even since the earliest years of the
Revolution, rumors had circulated that the Masons or some other secret sect had a hand in it. Robison and Barruel’s genius was not for invention, but integration. They took all the existing plot theories and wove them together into a single grand theory. It not only explained the entire French Revolution, but had the potential to explain just about anything that had happened in the world, past, present, or future. The clear, comprehensive conspiracy theory Barruel and Robison articulated resonated perfectly with the fears and needs of the moment. Despite being riddled with factual errors and logical missteps, both books were quickly reprinted, translated, and exported around Europe and across the Atlantic to America.

The foundations of modern conspiracism had been laid. The petty plots of the eighteenth century and earlier could now blossom into an all-consuming political vision.

All things considered, though, the Illuminati panic was short-lived. Once thought to be the architects of revolutions, nowadays Weishaupt’s order has been demoted to managing the careers of pop stars. Musicians like Jay Z, Lady Gaga, Kanye West, and Kesha have all been branded “Illuminati puppets,” and accused of “poisoning the youth of the world with traumatic mind-control performances.” To be fair, some musicians do seem to have a penchant for arcane symbolism. Jay Z’s signature “Roc” hand gesture, for instance, echoes the Masonic pyramid and all-seeing eye. The trend may have jumped the shark in early 2015, however, when Madonna released a song called “Illuminati.” Asked about the track in interviews, Madonna revealed, “I know who the real Illuminati are, and where that word came from.” It essentially just means a group of smart people, she asserted; the message of the song is, “So, if you think I’m the Illuminati, then thank you very much, a compliment, because I would like very much to be part of that group, the real Illuminati.”

Whatever: The reason the Illuminati panic died down fairly quickly, sociologists Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab speculated, is that a successful conspiracy theory needs two elements. One is the “mysterious cabal” thought to be pulling the strings. But it also needs “some less mysterious, more visible target group associated with the cabal.” A conspiracy theory about some far-flung popish plot, for instance, will only really take off if you have a
few Catholic immigrants who can act as ambassadors, personifying the threat, making it tangible. The real-life Illuminati scandal was still on people’s minds when they were grasping for explanations for the French Revolution. Within a few years, however, the Illuminati was little more than a memory.

The second milestone in the evolution of the modern conspiracy theory came with the concoction of a new mysterious cabal. Unlike Weishaupt’s Illuminati—which was guilty, at least, of having actually existed—this new cabal was entirely imaginary. Its unfortunate ambassadors, however, were all too real.

The Wise Men of Zion

The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion makes for a meager pamphlet, filling just eighty pages or so. But its diminutive size belies the monumental revelations inside. The Protocols outlines a conspiracy of apocalyptic scale, dating back eons and coming tantalizingly, terrifyingly close to completion. And this is no mere exposé, cobbled together by some outside party. It is a confession dictated by the conspirators themselves—the minutes of a secret meeting of the supreme council of worldwide Jewry, the eponymous Elders of Zion. The lecture notes were intended for Jewish eyes only, of course, but a copy somehow turned up in print in Russia shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. Apparently the lecture had been overheard by a Russian spy—or, depending on who you listen to, a transcript was confiscated from an attendee, pilfered from some secret Zionist archive, or even pinched by the mistress of a philandering Elder.

The “protocols” themselves are twenty-four short sermons, delivered by the Chief Elder to his attentive colleagues, in which he spells out, in appalling detail, their plan for total world domination. The first protocol outlines the moral principles on which the scheme is founded. The “Goyim”—non-Jews—are unthinking barbarians, the Elder argues, lacking the keen intellect, good judgment, and self-control of the Jews. As a result, letting people govern themselves is like the blind leading the blind. The only viable form of government, he argues, is a tyrannical world dictatorship headed by Jews.
The subsequent protocols provide a helpful guidebook on how to subvert democracy and hasten its demise. All around the world, the *Protocols* instructs, Jews should sow the seeds of discord, fostering antipathy among races, classes, and nations. They must control the media, manipulate politics, and undermine religion by replacing it with ruthless materialism (the theory of evolution was invented by the Elders, apparently). And that’s on a good day. When more drastic measures are called for, they will spread plagues and famines, conjure up recessions, assassinate heads of state, and start futile wars. The populace must be instilled with helpless dread, terrorized into submission. The trick, the *Protocols* says, is to do all this while remaining hidden until it is too late for the gentiles to do anything about it. Once their grip on the reins of society is sufficiently loosened, the Jews will sweep in and take charge. Under the Elders’ rule, loyal citizens will spy on one another. The tyrants will exercise absolute control over every aspect of citizen’s lives and stamp out any dissent instantly and ruthlessly. Anyone who acts, speaks, or even thinks anything contrary to the Jewish regime will be summarily executed.

This diabolical manifesto caught people’s attention. The *Protocols* itself is conveniently vague, outlining the Elders’ general strategies for world conquest, but omitting any specific names, dates, or locations. This meant it has proved infinitely adaptable. As Richard Levy put it, the *Protocols* offered up a “veritable Rosetta stone of history, the single key that unlocks all the perplexing mysteries of the modern world.” Anything that happened in the world could be explained as the result of the Elders’ secret machinations. Observant readers needed only fill in the blanks with whatever societal ill they wish to pin on the Jews. The French and Russian revolutions? Orchestrated by the Elders. The First and Second World Wars? Ditto. The economic crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression? You guessed it. The wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and the Gulf? Elders, Elders, Elders. And they aren’t only behind such lofty endeavors as igniting wars and revolutions. According to some of the *Protocols*’ proponents, the Elders have a penchant for micromanagement. They’ve been accused of everything from popularizing jazz (of particular concern was “the abandoned sensuousness of sliding notes” and the “indecent dancing”
that it encouraged) and distributing chewing gum (in an effort to make women more promiscuous), to encouraging prostitution, alcoholism, and even, for some reason, dog exhibitions.

The shocking revelations contained in the Protocols, coupled with its ability to explain any and all ills and upheavals in the world, earned it a place in history. The Protocols has been printed and reprinted around the world, in books with titles ranging from the relatively benign Secrets of the Wise Men of Zion, to the somewhat alarmist The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem (a commentary published in the United States by Henry Ford), to the outright apocalyptic The Jewish Antichrist and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (the title of an edition published in Nazi Germany in 1938). Millions of copies have been sold or given away. One scholar estimated in 1939 that, in terms of distribution, the Protocols was second only the Bible.

There’s just one small problem, of course. There are no Elders. The Protocols is a fake. And not even a good fake. To quote the historian Norman Cohn, the Protocols is an “atro- ciously written piece of reactionary balderdash.” It is a shoddy, obvious, callous forgery, wantonly and lazily plagiarized from a handful of more obscure sources. The story of the Protocols’ creation is a tale of conspiratorial intrigue in its own right. But the Protocols didn’t single-handedly invent the myth of the Jewish world conspiracy. It was centuries in the making.

The History of a Lie

Superstition and prejudice toward Jews dates back to the earliest years of Christianity. Saint John Chrysostom, a fourth-century preacher widely admired for his eloquence, eloquently denounced Jews as baby-killing devil worshipers. In 1215, Pope Innocent III was concerned that Christians might find themselves unwittingly having relations with Jews. His solution was to make Jews wear distinguishing clothing, leading to the yellow “badge of shame” that many Jewish people around Europe were required to wear throughout the Dark Ages—and again under the Nazis. A couple of decades later, Pope Gregory IX established the Inquisition, a formalized effort to prosecute heresy against the Roman Catholic Church, which eventually
led to mass executions of Jews, among other accused heretics, and mass burnings of their holy books.

According to the pious logic of some medieval theologians, the Jewish Talmud was both blasphemous and, paradoxically, a testament to the truth of Christian teaching. Just as the Devil knows the truth of Christianity but is determined to deny it and destroy those who believe it, so too, Christian scholars argued, do the Jews. People came to see Jews as being in league with Satan, possessing arcane knowledge and black magic, and harboring an unquenchable hatred for Christianity. Allegations that Jewish people were plotting against Christians became commonplace.

One popular theory had it that Jews were in the habit of poisoning Christian drinking wells. When the Black Plague ravaged fourteenth-century Europe, outbreaks were often blamed on the international Jewish well-poisoning conspiracy. In some cases, torturers coerced confessions from a handful of Jewish suspects, on the basis of which thousands more were burned alive. The worst of the pogroms was in Strasbourg. Fear-stricken locals, desperate to prevent the plague from reaching them, decided to preemptively slaughter the town’s Jews. (Some of the town’s nobility were also in debt to Jewish money-lenders, and may have seen an opportunity to clear their tab.) City authorities attempted to intervene but couldn’t hold the mob at bay. All told, around nine hundred Jewish people were burned alive, and the rest were baptized or banished. The plague soon swept through town regardless, leaving sixteen thousand people dead in its wake.

There was also the “blood libel”—the allegation that Jewish people routinely murder Christians and drain them of their blood, which they allegedly used to make the Passover meal, to make medicine to heal their physical defects, or to perform unholy rituals. The myth was invented in the twelfth century, when a young Christian boy was found dead on the outskirts of Norwich, England, the day before Easter Sunday. Thomas of Monmouth, a Benedictine monk turned amateur detective, offered a convoluted explanation. Jewish teaching, he claimed, asserts that Jews must spill Christian blood in order to regain their homeland. Thus, a secret council of Jewish elites convenes once a year to select a sacrificial Christian child. Monmouth’s
idea caught on. For centuries thereafter, whenever a Christian child went missing or turned up dead, local Jews were often the first suspects.

These religiously motivated fears circulated for centuries. Meanwhile, Jews in many regions were denied citizenship and property rights, confined to ghettos, or banished from Christian society altogether. This began to change in the wake of the French Revolution, when many Jewish people were granted basic human rights and began to emerge from isolation. They naturally tended to favor liberal and democratic political policies that represented their best hope of increasing liberty. Still sidelined from traditional occupations, many migrated to the cities and pioneered inventive new ways of making a living. While most remained impoverished and out of sight, a few became extremely wealthy.

This all led to new social tensions. A lot of people weren’t thrilled about the radical changes taking place around them. For some, the newly integrated Jews became a defining symbol of the modern world. The age-old prejudice that had given rise to the blood libel and well-poisoning myths was reinvigorated and updated to reflect modern anxieties and resentments. Jews were no longer enemies of God, but enemies of man. In 1879, a new word, antisemitism, was coined to reflect the fact that what was once a collection of primitive medieval superstitions had become a fully-fledged political ideology.

The Protocols tapped into this new political antisemitism perfectly. It wasn’t an instant hit, though. It was first published, in abbreviated form, in the Russian newspaper Znamia (“The Banner”), in 1903. The paper’s publisher, Pavel Krushevan, was a member of the Black Hundreds, whose slogan was “kill the Jews, save Russia.” The Protocols surfaced again in 1905, as an appendix in the third edition of a book published by an eccentric religious fanatic, Sergei Nilus. Nilus reissued the book several times over the coming decade, giving the Protocols pride of place. Despite his best efforts, however, the Protocols lingered in relative obscurity. In 1913, he lamented to a friend, “I cannot get the public to treat the Protocols seriously, with the attention they deserve.”
Things changed in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the First World War. Suddenly the Protocols appeared prophetic. The Protocols swept Russia, and then the world. In the United States, Henry Ford became one of the Protocols’ biggest supporters. His self-published antisemitic literature was given away at Ford dealerships. “The only statement I care to make about the Protocols,” Ford declared, “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.” In England, the (now-defunct) Morning Post gave the Protocols its full backing in a series of articles, later published as a book titled The Cause of World Unrest. More reputable publications were taken in, too. The London Times prevaricated, “Are they a forgery? If so, whence comes the uncanny note of prophecy?”

Then, almost as quickly as it swept the world, the Protocols was debunked. As early as 1920, a German scholar, Joseph Stanjek, had pointed out the uncanny similarity between the meeting described in the Protocols and a work of fiction published fifty years earlier. The author of the earlier work, a German named Hermann Goedsche, was a “scandal-mongering writer of trashy novels,” as one scholar put it. In a chapter of his 1868 novel Biarritz titled “In the Jewish Cemetery in Prague,” Goedsche (writing under the pen name Sir John Retcliffe) revived Thomas of Monmouth’s myth of the secret Jewish council in sensational style. Once every hundred years, Goedsche’s story goes, princes of the twelve tribes of Israel meet under cover of darkness, their ceremonial robes gliding soundlessly over grass and tombstones. One by one, they report on the progress of their ancient plan for world domination. In the words of Herman Bernstein, an American journalist, it is “a clumsy piece of blood-curdling fiction of the dime-novel variety.” In 1921, Bernstein published a book detailing the similarity between the Protocols and Biarritz. It was a clear-cut case of forgery, he said. “Every substantive statement contained in the Protocols and elaborated in them is to be found in the Goedsche-Retcliffe novelette.”

More damning revelations were to come. Whoever wrote the Protocols hadn’t just ripped off someone else’s idea, they had stolen someone’s words. Philip Graves, correspondent for the London Times in Istanbul, began his exposé of the Protocols,
published over the course of three days in August 1921, with an air of intrigue. He had been approached by a Russian exile, he reports, a “landowner with English connexions,” who wished to remain anonymous. Mr X., as Graves refers to the man, came bearing a mysterious book: “a small volume in French, lacking the title page, with dimensions of 5 ½ in. by 3 ¾ in. It had been cheaply rebound. On the leather back is printed in Latin capitals the word ‘Joli.’” Mr X. had attached a note. “Read this book through,” it said, “and you will find irrefutable proof that the ‘Protocols of the Learned Elders of Sion’ is a plagiarism.”

There’s irony in the fact that the Protocols was plagiarized from a book with nothing at all to do with Jews—which was, in fact, a scathing critique of totalitarianism. The premise of the mysterious book, Graves explained, is an encounter between two historical figures, the dastardly Machiavelli and the liberal French philosopher Montesquieu, set on a desolate beach in Hell. A series of twenty-five dialogs ensues, in which Machiavelli cynically outlines the need for political leaders to employ dirty tactics to dominate their subjects. The dialogs were a thinly veiled satirical critique of the reign of Napoleon III, France’s despotic emperor during the 1850s and ’60s, with Machiavelli playing the part of Napoleon.

Graves laid out some of the incriminating passages, side by side, for comparison. Whole sections of the Protocols had been copied verbatim from this earlier work. Others parts were thinly paraphrased. The plagiarists, Graves notes, had barely made any effort to cover their tracks. It was as if someone had simply thumbed through this book, page by page, hastily paraphrasing or copying whatever took their fancy. At the time, Graves couldn’t know the author of the mysterious book. It was soon identified, however, as the work of a Frenchman named Maurice Joly. A lawyer by profession, Joly was also a keen observer of politics. Aware that he could be imprisoned (or worse) if he published an allegorical attack on the emperor in France under his own name, he attempted to smuggle it in via Belgium. He was found out. The book was seized, and Joly spent time in prison. His book was lost to obscurity—until, that is, it fell into the hands of the men who used it to fabricate the Protocols.

Mr X. could only tell Graves that he had acquired the incriminating book from a former officer of the Okhrana, the Russian
secret police. The same year, Princess Katerina Radziwill, a Russian exile living in New York, provided more pieces of the puzzle. In the 1890s, she had been close friends with Okhrana operatives in Paris. One day, an agent named Golovinskii showed her an unfinished, handwritten manuscript. She didn’t know it at the time, but he was showing her a work-in-progress Protocols. He boasted that it was a forgery he was concocting to implicate the Jews in a worldwide conspiracy. Radziwill thought little of the incident at the time. The Okhrana often used forgeries to achieve unsavory political goals, and nobody in her circle took such forgeries very seriously, she said. She only recalled it more than two decades later, when she realized that the very same forgery had taken the world by storm, and was considered by many to be authentic.

So by the autumn of 1921, the sordid origins of the Protocols had been revealed. It had been produced in Paris, hastily cobbled together from two earlier books, sometime before the turn of the century, by Russian Okhrana operatives hoping to foment hatred of Jews in their homeland. Herman Bernstein titled his exposé The History of a Lie. The London Times published Graves’s revelations under a headline declaring the Protocols a “Historic ‘fake.’” An editorial published alongside his damning articles hoped that myth of the Elders might “be allowed to pass into oblivion.” “So much for the Protocols,” Graves concluded.

Unfortunately, that was not to be the end of the Protocols.
An extract from

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