

François Soyer, *Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in the Early Modern Iberian World. Narratives of Fear and Hatred*. (Leiden: Brill, 2019) xv + 315 pp.
 ISBN 978-90-04-39550-3, e-book: ISBN 978-90-04-39560-2. EUR 198,00.

Who thinks that ‘fake news’ is something of the modern era of unreliable news sites and social media is definitely mistaken. In a detailed and fascinating book, François Soyer discusses early modern antisemitic conspiracy theories on the Iberian Peninsula, especially after the Alhambra Decree of 1492 that ordered the expulsion of practicing Jews from Spain. As is known, many Jews ‘converted’ to Christianity but were as *conversos* the object of deep distrust. Soyer shows, based on primary sources, how old tropes of antisemitic themes transformed and new ones were invented as Spain and Portugal faced new economic and international challenges. An interesting observation he makes is that he demonstrates how antisemitism was also related to medical views on how human bodies work. The behaviour, physical and mental straits of individuals were seen as the result of the semen/blood of the parents. As a consequence, many believed that also Judaism was not the result of learning, but of the blood. This led to the conviction that Jews could never become genuine Christians.

In the unstable context of the 16th century in which Spain saw itself challenged as a superpower, the content of antisemitic conspiracy theories was such that many believed that Jews were working behind the screen to destroy the Catholic faith. Pamphlets, letters, books were spread in which different varieties of antisemitic conspiracism were communicated. Soyer discusses these scenarios at length: infiltration of Jews into the Catholic Church, medical murder of Christians by Jewish doctors, secret collaboration of Jews with Muslims and – especially Dutch – Protestants, and the deliberate obliteration of the Iberian economy. Popular myths such as that in which the Jews had handed Toledo to the Muslims in the 8th century, or in which *conversos* secretly worked with Protestants to destroy the Iberian monarchies, were widespread. Soyer shows that these theories were often overinterpretations of ‘true facts’; *conversos* indeed played a role in intercontinental trade and indeed had links across religious and political boundaries. But early modern conspiracists ‘perceived only conspirational motives behind these true facts’ (262) and they held ‘the Jews’ as a collective responsible for what went or could go wrong. The result of this fundamental distrust was not only the success of gossip stories but also the use of these narratives by political elites.

As Soyer notes, conspiracy theories can constructively contribute to identity formations. However, Jews often paid the price for this, being discriminated in society and the Catholic Church, accused of sacrilege, and/or forced

to participate in an *autos de fe*. Based on primary sources, Soyer shows how fear and distrust result in the expansion of conspiracy theories and persecution. Interesting are the lines he draws up till the 20th century, in which he shows the consistency of some of these conspiracy narratives with, and the influence of the Iberian early modern context on antisemitic conspiracy theories and discourses in recent centuries. This historic line shows clearly how the ingredients of conspiracism return as – what D.A. Bysow already coined in 1928 – a ‘diving rumour’, that is: a rumour that returns time after time and in different contexts with the same features.

Soyer’s end is a bit abrupt. One wonders how the theories of conspiracism that he discusses in the *Introduction* have helped him to understand his material. Nevertheless, it is exactly this point of discussing conspiracy theories in the early modern Iberian world that makes his contribution valuable not only for historians but also, and maybe even more so, for people interested in how conspiracy theories work, what they do, and how they endanger ethnic and religious groups.

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