The 1920s were a crucial period in modern Japanese history, when new and revolutionary western ideologies, like communism and fascism, entered Japan and found adherents there. Anti-Semitism was one of those western ideologies to arrive at that time. It offered a simplistic explanation of the perplexing turmoil of the world. It appealed to conservatives alarmed about communist subversion and to those attracted by conspiracy theories. Few publications have dealt with the strange phenomenon of Japanese anti-Semitism. This thin volume is an important addition to that literature.

Ben-Ami Shillony


JAPANESE ANTI-SEMITISM lacked the religious and social roots which fed the animosity toward Jews in the west. It remained an intellectual fad that did not produce the physical attacks and other measures against Jews, which characterized western anti-Semitism. Moreover, Japanese anti-Semites sometimes expressed admiration for the rich and clever Jews, who allegedly control the world, and advocated befriending them and learning from them.

In search of scapegoats
The Russian Protocols of Zion in Japan. Yudayaka/Jewish Peril Propaganda and Debates in the 1920s focuses on the appearance and acceptance of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Japan in the decade broadly known as Taishō Democracy. As Kovalio points out, the Protocols were a forged document, concocted by the Paris branch of the tsarist secret police (Okhrana) at the beginning of the 20th century. The aim of the forgery was to deflect popular Russian discontent from the government toward the Jewish conspiracy to subvert the state. The document carried the minutes of an alleged conference of world Jewish leaders, in which they worked out their grand strategy to control the world. The purported author of the document was Sergey Nilus, a Russian occultist and a former anarchist who revolted against Russian Orthodox Christianity. The Protocols were translated into many languages and gained considerable notoriety in many countries in the years following the First World War and the Russian Revolution. They provided an easy explanation to millions of bewildered people, looking for scapegoats to exercise their fears. The egomaniacal, rich and influential Jews presented a perfect scapegoat. Even in the US, which had not been ravaged as many countries in the years following the First World War and the Russian Revolution, they provided an easy explanation to millions of bewildered people, looking for scapegoats to exercise their fears.

Forgery and fantasy
Yet, as Kovalio shows, not all Japanese intellectuals subscribed to anti-Semitic ideas, and there were those who criticized the Jewish-conspiracy theory. Professor Yoshito Sakuzō of Tokyo Imperial University, the leading liberal thinker of the 1920s, attacked the anti-Semitic writings of this time. In essays in Chō Kōron in 1921, he dismissed the Protocols as an absurd fabrication untoward of Japanese intellectuals. Himself a Christian and a Freemason, Yoshito ridiculed the identifications of the Jews with the Freemasons, showing that until the lat 19th century, Jews were not admitted to the Masonic Order. Another liberal Christian scholar from Tokyo Imperial University, Yanahara Tadao, rejected the childec accusations of the Jews, pointing out that only a few of the world’s capitalistsest Jews were only a few of the Jews were capitalists. Yanahara dismissed the accusation that Zionism was a Jewish tool to control the world, and expressed support for the Jewish return to Palestine. Other critics of anti-Semitism included Uchimura Kanōz and Hasegawa Nyoze. Kovalio translates a roundtable symposium on ‘The Jewish Question,’ which appeared in Heibon magazine in 1929. In that symposium, the participants praised the Jewish financier Jacob Schiff who had extended help to Japan during the Russo-Japanese War. The conclusion of the symposium was that the Protocols were a forgery. Zionism did not aim to subvert the world, and the Jewish conspiracy was sheer fantasy (pp. 50-57).

In the last chapter of his book, Kovalio discusses current Japanese anti-Semitic literature. He claims that in postwar Japan, the Jewish-conspiracy theory has been replaced by an Israeli-conspiracy theory. He regards Professor Ragaki Yūzō of Tokyo University as the leading exponent of this leftist-liberal form of anti-Semitism. He laments that in today’s Japan no brave intellectuals, like Yoshino Sakukō and Yanahara Tadao, have come out to challenge the Israeli-conspiracy theories.

However, Kovalio seems to overstate his case, when he claims that the demonized image of the Jews in the last 150 years was created by the ‘conspiratorial minds’ of Sergey Nilus, Pope Pius IX, Karl Marx, Henry Ford, Adolf Hitler, Shiōden Nobutaka, Ragaki Yūzō, Anis Mansour, Mahathir bin Muhammad, Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Uso Masami and others (p. 68). Lumping together all these names into one anti-Semitic block may sound as fantastic as the accusations of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Eccentricities
Kovalio uses both the terms ‘judéo-phobia’ and ‘anti-Semitism’, but often prefers the lesser known Japanese phrase ‘Yudaya-ka’ (Jewish Peril). As a result, anti-Semitic writers become ‘Yudaya-ka no naka’ (Jewish peril advocates). He also uses the self-made acronym CSA (Conspiracy and Scapegoating Anti-Semitism). Such unfamiliar terms make the reading less fluent. The transliteration of some Japanese words does not follow the standard system. Thus, the suffix ‘sha’ is spelled throughout the book as ‘sha’. One also wonders why Karl Marx is constantly referred to as Karl Heinrich Marx, which is factually correct but not the standard form. These small eccentricities do not detract from the value of the book as an important source for the study of prewar Japanese anti-Semitism.

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Note