

‘Rotten Fish’: Historians and the History of Lies¹

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While researching the history of Army conscripts in early twentieth-century Argentina, I was fooled by a set of rumors and disinformation. In Argentina, false information is called ‘rotten fish’ [pescado podrido]. As my colleague and co-author of an article elegantly put it, rumors and disinformation ‘poison’ the person who consumes it.² In this case, the person was me. As I reflect on this episode in my career, I’m reminded of an English professor character in David Lodge’s novel *Changing Places*. His troubles begin when he confesses that he’s never actually read *Hamlet*. His career and reputation go south quickly. My own story is of the inner workings of a historian, under the pressures of publishing and whose ambition led to a few mistakes of judgement. So read on. And please forgive me.

Let us start with some basics. Between 1901-1911, the Argentine state modernized and bureaucratized conscription. The purpose of these laws was as much about improving military preparedness as it was to mold young men into loyal and productive citizens. Of particular concern to state officials were immigrant men and their sons who tended to have low rates of naturalization. These officials also believed, therefore, that immigrant communities had low levels of loyalty to the republic. Not

¹ The author would like to thank Dr. Jason Freitag, Ithaca College, for his careful read of drafts of this essay.

² Jonathan D. Ablard and Ernesto Bohoslavsky, “Rumors, *Pescado Podrido*, and Disinformation in Interwar Argentina,” *Journal of Social History* 55:1 (Fall 2021): 65-84.

surprisingly, the draft met with opposition. Those with means could pay their way out of the obligation. Among the working classes, opposition coalesced around the country's powerful anarcho-syndicalist and Socialist organizations. Newspapers on the left published exposés on the many injustices that conscripts suffered at the hands of NCOs and officers alike. Anarchists and syndicalists encouraged young men to evade service, desert if possible, and to disobey orders to fire on striking workers. They also rejected the state's claim that serving in the armed forces would make 'boys into men.' The Socialist Party, by contrast, accepted the draft as a vehicle of national integration but sought to curb its abuse of conscripts and to ensure civilian oversight.³

During my early research, I detected a shift from peaceful resistance to advocacy of more violent plans. The inspiration for the shift was the Russian Revolution. A wide range of sources indicated to me that soviets were being formed in barracks throughout the republic. In the northwestern Province of Jujuy, there was a large-scale incident involving hundreds of conscripts in late 1920. The establishment newspapers characterized the event as seditious. In 1919, a newspaper called *The Red Soldier* [*El soldado rojo*] began to circulate in Buenos Aires. The paper called on soldiers, sailors, police, and fire fighters to organize soviets for the purpose of overthrowing the government. The model, it seemed, was the Russian October Revolution, when soldiers and sailors of the Imperial armed forces organized and helped to overthrow the czar. According to surviving issues of the paper, the conspirators formed a council of five men who were each then were supposed to recruit five more men.⁴ There were other scattered reports of minor incidents of insubordination by men in uniform around the country.

These two case studies were at the center of a paper I wrote on how popular responses to the draft had shifted from civil disobedience to plans for an armed revolution. I was confident about these conclusions because I believed the evidence was strong. I had accessed *El soldado rojo* through the digitized collections of leftist

³ Jonathan D. Ablard, "'The Barracks Receives Spoiled Children and Returns Men': Debating Military Service, Masculinity and Nation-building in Argentina, 1901-1930," *The Americas* (July 2017): 299-330. This article started as a submission that included the mistakes that I'm about to tell you about.

⁴ "Cómo hemos organizado nuestro soviets o consejo de soldados", *El soldado rojo* 2:11 (August 1922): 4.

periodicals held at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.⁵ The institute holds a large collection of left-wing press from all over Latin America.

Other evidence came from U.S. military attaché cables from Buenos Aires and Argentine newspapers that had commented on the seditious soldiers in Jujuy. There was a consensus that there was unrest in the barracks. There were also scattered references to the revolutionary potential of the Argentine working class in the United States press.

Professional historians had also taken some interest in the stories of barracks sedition. While these stories were not front and center in scholarship on either the military or the far right, they merited footnotes. I followed the sources listed in the footnotes and tracked down some publications by Argentine military officers from the 1920s until the 1960s who connected these alleged soviet plots to the formation of secret right-wing military cliques. The Argentine officers believed that democratically elected President Hipólito Yrigoyen was ‘the Argentine Kerensky.’ He was not himself a communist, but he was weak and might make a communist revolution possible. Furthermore, his weak leadership had supposedly encouraged labor radicalism and had exercised a corrosive influence on military discipline and respect for hierarchy. The 1930 coup d’etat that ended Argentina’s first democratic period was in part inspired by this belief among many Army and Navy officers.⁶

I suppose, in retrospect, my gullibility was fueled by the poor state of Argentine archives, and especially those that held military documents. When I first started working on the Argentine military in the early 2000s, there was little to be found in archives. The Archivo General del Ejército, located in the historic San Telmo neighborhood, had a friendly staff of non-commissioned officers but all they could show me were mundane documents like accounting records for bases, and little else. According to these archivists, the armed forces did not keep service records for conscripts since they were essentially short-term soldiers. I have never found any evidence to contradict that assessment.

I had better luck locating scattered military documents in the National Archives, especially the collections dedicated to the two military officers who ruled

⁵ For the link to the IISH’s holding of the periodical, see <https://search.iisg.amsterdam/Record/1350756>.

⁶ Jonathan Ablard, “Counter-revolution without Revolutionaries: Conspiracy in the Argentine Barracks, 1919-1930,” *A Contracorriente* Vol. 17 No. 3 (2020), p. 197.

Argentina after Yrigoyen. But really there wasn't much to work with. Since the Argentina's first coup in 1930 through the end of the last dictatorship (1976-1983), public records have often been destroyed, either by the incoming government who wish to obscure the previous regime's accomplishments, or by departing officials wishing to hide their acts. It is rare to get the precise story of why an archive does not survive. Those who destroy records rarely record their motivations.⁷

Military archives presented separate challenges. The military's frequent seizures of power, and especially the violent nature of the last military government, only added to the armed forces' preference to keep their records out of sight. Not until the mid-2010s were the military archives opened for researchers. The government made every effort to move documents that pertained to the last military dictatorship to civilian oversight. Even so, opening archives cannot resurrect destroyed documents.⁸ I will return to the state of Argentine archives later.

The global context of the 1920s perhaps also led me to see more than the evidence would support. What I thought I was seeing in Argentina had echoes elsewhere in the post-war world: the soviet experiments in Budapest, Berlin, and Munich. Closer to Argentina, the leftist military rebellion, known as the Prestes Column, operated in the Brazilian interior from 1924 to 1927.⁹ Brazil was no stranger to incidents of military rebellion and indiscipline starting well before the Russian Revolution.¹⁰ Hitherto my imaginary discoveries, the Argentine armed forces seemed outside of those currents. In a moment of vanity, I wondered if I was about to rewrite the history of the Argentine military from the bottom up.

I submitted the paper to a journal and the reviewers responded with a very lengthy and thoughtful "revise and resubmit" which was later turned into a well-deserved rejection. What stood out from the very long critique of the essay were two

⁷ During research for my dissertation on psychiatric hospitals in Argentina, I determined that the archives of two important state entities devoted to public health had been destroyed. Jonathan D. Ablard, *Madness in Buenos Aires: Patients, Psychiatrists, and the Argentine State, 1880-1983* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2008): p. 240, fnt 168; p.281, fnt 123. On the larger story of archives and politics, see Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁸ Ablard, "Counter-Revolution," 173-207.

⁹ Todd Diacon, "Searching For a Lost Army: Recovering the History of the Federal Army's Pursuit of the Prestes Column in Brazil, 1924-1927," *The Americas* 54:3 (1998): 409-36.

¹⁰ On the Brazilian naval mutiny of 1910, see Joseph LeRoy Love. *The Revolt of the Whip* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

questions: “What is ‘The Red Soldier’? Who published it?” Reviewers also wondered about the Jujuy incident.

Anyone who has ever received a bad review from external reviewers has some idea of what was going on for me. I was desperate to get the paper published. I had been working on the project intermittently starting in the early 2000s when I had met an Argentine social scientist who shared his story of doing military service during the last dictatorship. It was then that I realized that despite the military’s deep impact on civil society in Argentina, there was scant scholarship on the rank and file. I should also mention here that following the publication of my book in 2007, I had taken a step back from scholarship. Or to put it less politely, I hadn’t published much. I was getting anxious about this.

Back to correcting my mistakes. I returned to the sources and did some more digging. I soon discovered that there were no soviets in the barracks. Nor had soldiers in Jujuy embarked upon an insurrection. There were many layers to the discovery, but as I uncovered the depth of my mistake, a new and perhaps more interesting argument began to emerge about ways that the state and conservative media had worked to delegitimize the Argentine left. Moreover, the work was also an opportunity for me to think anew about how we research and write about the past in places where archives are incomplete.

Thanks to the digitized newspaper collection of the Center for Research Libraries, I was able to do the kind of directed search that was not possible in the days of microfilm. I searched “The Red Soldier” and quickly found that the Socialist paper, *La Vanguardia*, had published two thorough and convincing exposés of the paper in 1919.¹¹ In short, “The Red Soldier” was an ‘active measure,’ probably created by the police to make organized labor look more revolutionary than they really were. The exposé noted the poor quality of the graphics and the stilted prose. It bore nothing in common with the creative and worldly leftist press of the day. The fabricators of the paper adorned each issue of *The Red Soldier* with a seal of the fake soviet organization. But *La Vanguardia* observed that the seal looked exactly like the kinds of seals used to stamp official documents. In short, the hand of the police was all over it, though to this day I have not determined with certainty who produced the paper. In a follow up to the first article, *La Vanguardia* complained about the problem of *agents provocateurs*

¹¹ This meant that word of the fraudulent nature of the paper was known soon after the paper made its appearance.

who were attempting to lay at the feet of the left rumors of revolutionary plots.¹² Another clue, obvious only after I had read more about *porteño* newspapers, was that *The Red Soldier* claimed a circulation of 40,000, close to half that of a major daily of the city.¹³ One of the many mysteries about this story is that the *Vanguardia* report came out in 1919, soon after the paper made its appearance. But the paper continued circulating until at least 1922. It had not occurred to me to look up what other newspapers said about this fake paper. In fact, I simply took the existence of the paper and its legitimacy at face value.

La Vanguardia's articles led me to realize that it made no sense that revolutionaries would publish a plan about their secret plans. The paper mentioned soviets in specific units. Why would people planning the overthrow of the state and organizing to do so within the barracks publish and circulate a newspaper promising to do so? If it was true, it was the worst example of revolutionary planning imaginable. Why did it seem believable if it was, in retrospect, so ridiculous? I suppose I was overcome by the thrill of a new discovery. Desperate to get published? I also have wondered who at the time believed that the paper was real.¹⁴

The more I read about post-World War I military indiscipline and insurrection in Europe, the more I also understood that those events were the product of very specific conditions, including war trauma, the collapse of the old political order, proximity to the Soviet Union, and the creation of new lines of sociability among rank and file and junior officers that emerged from the war itself. Soldiers who took up arms against the Russian, Austrian, and German empires were battle-hardened veterans. And they engaged in a wide range of anti-state behaviors, including banditry.¹⁵ Argentine conscripts, by contrast, were hardly battle-experienced. In fact, the shorthand slang for the draft in Argentina is "Colimba" which stands for "correr, limpiar, barrer" ["Run, clean, sweep"]. Draftees are referred to a "colimbas".

¹² In 1918, the Argentine Communist Party emerged after a split within the Argentine Socialist party over the question of support for the newly founded Soviet Union. The two parties could not have been more different.

¹³ Ablard, "Counter-Revolution," p. 191.

¹⁴ Contrast the heavy-handed effort in Argentina with what is considered the most successful active measure campaign, *Operation Denver*, in which the Soviets planted stories about the role of the U.S. in creating AIDS. Thomas Rid, "AIDS Made in the USA," *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Picador, 2020): 298-311.

¹⁵ Jakub S Beneš, "The Green Cadres and the Collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918," *Past & Present*, 236: 1 (August 2017): 207-241.

I also located reports in the working-class press of trade union members and students being arrested on the charge of possessing the paper. It was not clear if the police were planting the papers on people after they had been detained or whether the police found the papers when searching suspects. I suspect the former, but either way, it was another piece of suggestive evidence of the paper's utility in the repression of leftists. I had never seen this before and found no references to this practice in the sizable historiography on the Argentine left.

The rhetoric of much of the leftist press also fed into my errors. If you have read early twentieth-century anarchist and syndicalist papers, and later the communist press, they talk a lot about revolution. If one did not know better, one might think they were calling for outright rebellion. But they usually did not mean to be taken literally. Moreover, the establishment press had trouble differentiating between anarchists, communists, and socialists. The term anarcho-Bolshevik circulated around for a while, suggesting (erroneously) that anarchists (a large sector of the working class) had joined forces with the Soviets.

With archival material in short supply for the first decades of the twentieth century, historians have relied heavily upon newspapers. Naturally, I found newspapers to be useful, especially when I had access to stories of the same events from multiple papers. I found, for example, agreement on facts when I was looking at cases of military tribunals. Left, liberal, and conservative papers concurred, mostly, that excessive punishment for what would be very minor crimes in the civilian world was out of keeping with a properly functioning society.¹⁶

Newspapers, of course, also present certain challenges. In Argentina, at least, there are few archives of the newspapers. So, we can only judge editorial policy by what appears or does not appear in the paper. It is difficult to know who the journalists were, except in the rare case of a prominent writer.¹⁷ Many newspapers on the left either had very short publication runs or only a few issues have survived to the present. The trade unions and other organizations that supported papers do not have surviving archives beyond the newspapers themselves. In historiographical terms, much of the political history of the period relies on newspapers. One lesson I learned from my egregious error of interpretation was that newspapers do not just tell

¹⁶ Jonathan D. Ablard, "'Our Archaic System': Debating and Reforming Military Justice in Argentina, 1905–35," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 52 (2020): 269–292.

¹⁷ Juan José Soiza Reilly, who wrote from the well-known weekly *Caras y Caretas* was one of the few journalists who I was able to learn about.

a version of events. They are also part of the story. It is easy to forget this when they are the overwhelmingly primary source of information.

An important example of the importance of looking into the inner life of newspapers is the problem of police informants working in leftist newspapers. This topic had received very little attention in the sizeable historiography on the Argentine left. After my "Red Soldier" debacle, I started to wonder about who was writing for and publishing in the various papers on the left. I eventually located one small file that provided evidence that the Argentine Sección Especial, a police force devoted to intelligence work, had routinely infiltrated leftist organizations, including unions and newspapers.¹⁸ Subsequent to that I found scattered allegations of individuals suspected of being police plants.¹⁹ The wider context is important. Police infiltration of leftist organizations was routine throughout the Atlantic world so it would not be surprising if the Argentine police did this kind of operation.²⁰ An infamous case was of the French anarchist paper, *La Proteste*, whose staff was full of police informants.²¹

To date, I have not been able to locate archival evidence of the precise provenance of *The Red Soldier*. However, the paper appears at the precise moment when governments were beginning to engage more systematically in *active measures*.²² Furthermore, the post-war period was a time when police and intelligence agencies across countries shared intelligence and technical expertise.²³ Again, the precise outlines of the story are often difficult to determine. And so, understanding the context is helpful.

When I was writing the initial paper, I also had not yet studied the military's own internal security apparatus or its tribunal system. After reviewing what archival material had been declassified, published reports in newspapers and government publications, I developed a new understanding of the internal life of the military. Soldiers and sailors were notoriously loose-lipped. Secrets were hard to keep in the

¹⁸ Ablard, "Counter-Revolution without Revolutionaries," 197. See Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Justo, Caja 45.

¹⁹ I spent several years trying, unsuccessfully, to track down a particular individual, Enrique García Thómas. I discuss the evidence that he was a police agent in "Counterrevolution without Revolutionaries."

²⁰ Hernán Díaz, editor. *Espionaje y revolución en el Río de la Plata: Los archivos secretos de una red diplomática de persecución al maximalismo (1918-1919)* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2019).

²¹ Richard Bach Jensen, *The Battle against Anarchist Terrorism: An International History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²² Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: MacMillan, 2020).

²³ Díaz, *Espionaje y revolución en el Río de la Plata*.

barracks and aboard ships. More so because one the principal jobs of non-commissioned officers was to keep an eye out on the rank and file. I concluded that the Argentine armed forces exercised tight, almost relentless, control over the soldiers and sailors. Not only did they maintain control inside the military, but a network of military enrollment offices throughout the republic who coordinated with local police made draft dodging especially difficult.²⁴

Finally, the fake paper and the vast conspiracy that it purported to be promoting was not mentioned at all in official military publications. The weekly gazette, *Boletín Militar*, that published all military news including legal proceedings, did not mention the paper. No soldier faced a tribunal on the charge of possessing or distributing the paper. Nor did any mentions appear in the annual report of the Ministry of War. Starting in the 1920s, the Army began to publish its own internal propaganda in the form of a monthly periodical called *El Soldado Argentino* [*The Argentine Soldier*]. The publication provided very pedantic articles on topics ranging from hygiene to communism. It makes no mention of the subversive paper.

I eventually found what I believe is a real underground newspaper. Copies of *El Lampazo* [*The Broom*], are held in the papers of General Justo. It was handwritten and then mimeographed. The few issues that I found were devoted to conditions of work and life in the military. It echoed the sentiments of the relatively new Communist Party of Argentina which was focused not on undermining the military but reforming its treatment of civilian employees and the rank and file. The title of the papers also speaks to the Argentine slang for the draft, mentioned earlier, ‘colimba’. Whoever created “The Red Soldier” did not think to add the paper to the internal records of state. Clearly, someone had investigated “El Lampazo”.

By the time of a 2018 research trip, the situation of archives had improved considerably. The Argentine government had not only declassified and made public military documents, but they published a booklet with descriptions of collections.²⁵

²⁴ Ablard, “Our Archaic System.”

²⁵ I describe the situation of military archives in “Our Archaic System” thusly: “Ministerio de Defensa de Argentina, *Guía de archivos históricos y generales de las Fuerzas Armadas Argentinas: Experiencias del programa de modernización de archivos del Ministerio de Defensa* (Buenos Aires: Ministerio de Defensa, 2015) provides a list of military archive holdings. However, a deeper dive reveals very little of substance on the daily lives of soldiers. Much of the Archivo General del Ejército collection remains classified and there are no listings of trials or disciplinary hearings. There is a substantial collection of sumarios from just before the last dictatorship until the late 1980s available at the Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN)—El Departamento Archivo Intermedio’s Archivo Histórico de Justicia Militar. The

Thanks to these efforts, I located and reviewed a set of detailed military discipline proceedings from the Navy. I did not find comparable documents for the Army except for the period of the last dictatorship (1976-1983). The naval high command went to great lengths to assure the public that insubordination was not tolerated—further evidence of the unlikely possibility of an organized subversion campaign. The case in question concerned an investigation into who among the sailors on the ship *General Sarmiento* had complained about food and other living conditions aboard ship to the newspapers. Pretty small stuff, but it provoked an extensive investigation.²⁶

As the reality of “Red Soldier” began to crumble, I realized that the Jujuy incident merited a closer look. What I learned was that there was indeed a rather dramatic incident in Jujuy, but that it was not political. Newspapers from across the spectrum had initially reported that there had been a seditious incident in the capital of the province involving the Army units stationed there.

While I was not able to travel to Jujuy, historian Adriana Kindgard provided me with a sizeable set of documents concerning the civilian trials that took place after the incident.²⁷ These included scans of the trials and newspaper clippings from the province. Initially, some of the soldiers were tried in local courts. But eventually, forty-three soldiers and non-commissioned officers were transported to the Campo de Mayo Army base in the province of Buenos Aires. There they remained, held *incommunicado* for several months.

I was never able to locate the military trial records of the Jujuy incident, but the *Boletín Militar*, a daily digest of military affairs, published summaries. Buenos Aires newspapers also reported on the cases. In the end, most of the troops were exonerated of the initial charges of subversion. One NCO was found to have been in possession of newspapers that promoted “Advanced Ideas”—shorthand for leftist ideology. The judge was not sure that the accused even really understood the material that he was distributing. The NCO penned a few tracts, but the court observed that they “cannot

Archivo General de la Armada de la República Argentina has a sizeable collection of materials, including trial records, but there is no index and researchers cannot request specific files” (Footnote 19).

²⁶ Archivo Historico DEHN, Caja 152, Legajo 764/13696 “Publicaciones en ‘La Vanguardia’ y ‘Nueva Provincia’ por abusos” (1923). Pp. 2-3. (transcript of articles on pp. 20-21 (Foja 12-13).

²⁷ Mark Healy, a professor at the University of Connecticut, put me in touch with Kindgard. As a side note, I’m increasingly impressed by the collegiality of historians. I rarely find that requests for help are turned down. Historians seem eager, generally, to share sources, contacts, and ideas.

be read without laughing.”²⁸ The incident itself? It was in fact a drunken brawl between a large mob of soldiers and the local police force. The anarchist paper *La Protesta* quoted one of the judges on the lack of discipline in the barracks. The unit in question was “not an army unit of the line but a gang of armed men [montoneros],” a reference to lawless gangs of men on horseback from the previous century.²⁹

Conservative papers, however, weren’t quite ready to let go of the subversion narrative. While they conceded that there was no revolutionary plot afoot, they argued that the indiscipline of the rank and file, and the failure of the officers to maintain control, had whiffs of 1917 Russia. There was a “moral climate of rebellion.”³⁰ In this way, they kept the false story alive.

Why did the conservative press make such exaggerated claims about the revolutionary potential of the working class? They fretted that Buenos Aires might be ‘next.’ Were they misreading the situation in Argentina because it suited their political agenda? Or did they sincerely believe that the social order was about to collapse? In part, as I discovered, it served elite interests to accuse the left of malevolent intentions. But I also think that many elite Argentines identified with the triumphs and challenges of Europe. They had followed the Great War and its aftermath with attention and concern. Stories from Europe often were prominently featured on the front pages of the establishment press.

Perhaps the most significant red flag (forgive the pun) in all the disinformation and rumors about soviet-style plots that I missed was that in 1919, rumors had also circulated of a vast Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy to form a soviet in Buenos Aires. It resulted in the only pogrom in the Western Hemisphere, the *Semana Trágica*. Gangs of civilians supported by elements of the military and police tore through a Jewish neighborhood in Buenos Aires, claiming that they were stopping a replay of the Russian Revolution on the shores of the Rio de la Plata.³¹ Neither of the false stories I wrote about contained mention of Jewish plots. That is, in and of itself, curious given the importance of the Judeo-Bolshevik-plot narrative around the world at this time. The army was notoriously antisemitic. Its in-house publication, *El Soldado Argentino* [*The Argentine Soldier*] played with antisemitic tropes.

²⁸ Ablard, “Counter-Revolution,” 183.

²⁹ Ablard, “Counter-Revolution,” 184.

³⁰ Ablard, “Counter-Revolution,” 184.

³¹ For an excellent survey of the literature of the *Semana Trágica*, see Luis Roniger and Leonardo Senkman, *Conspiracy Theories and Latin American History: Lurking in the Shadows* (New York: Routledge, 2022): 48-55.

The false flag operation and the rumors about barracks rebellions had interesting afterlives. Argentina's blossoming far right pushed the narrative of rising indiscipline and subversion in the barracks to bolster their claim that the country's largely immigrant radical labor movement posed an existential threat to the nation. They heralded the discovery of these plots to argue that the Sovietization of Argentina had been narrowly averted, and it may have helped recruit officers to a secret lodge of reactionary officers. These same false stories filtered their way into leftist publications as well. By the 1960s and 1970s, when sectors of the Argentine left were in thrall to the Cuban model of revolution, stories of earlier revolutionary actions received some mention.³²

The process of reconsidering what my sources were telling me and revising both narrative and argument led to some surprises in my professional trajectory. I published two articles on the internal workings of the armed forces. I then published an essay about the cases described above. And somewhere along the way I became something of a historian of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and rumors.

I gave a talk to students in my department about all the mistakes described above. Their response was that they found it refreshing to hear about how one of their professors had gotten it all wrong. Of course, I thought, in some sense we are constantly correcting our students. They are misunderstanding a text, or their essay arguments need improvement. At some level, they think we are a bit full of it, so a full confession was refreshing.

These experiences led me to start teaching a course that I ambitiously titled "A Global History of Lies: Conspiracy Theories, Rumors, and Hoaxes." I always start the semester by sharing my own story of being fooled by rumors and government disinformation. I remind the students that when I started looking into these two stories, disinformation and misinformation were not prominent elements of either media coverage, much less scholarship. Many of the questions that form the pedagogical anchor of the course emerged from my early and accidental foray into the world of disinformation and rumor. Inevitably, we continually circle back to our present and unsettling historical moment.³³

³² The Argentine stories are quite subdued compared to how both the Salvadoran left and right created fabricated memories of the indigenous peasant uprising and subsequent massacre in 1932. See, Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, Erik Ching, and Rafael A. Lara-Martínez. *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador: the insurrection of 1932, Roque Dalton, and the Politics of Historical Memory* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007).

³³ The syllabus is available at [*Clio and the Contemporary*](#).

We start the course with an analysis of the contemporary world of information. Thomas Rid, author of *Active Measures*, sums up the current moment nicely:

We live in an age of disinformation. Private correspondence gets stolen and leaked to the press for malicious effect; political passions are inflamed online in order to drive wedges into existing cracks in liberal democracies; perpetrators sow doubt and deny malicious activity in public, while covertly ramping it up behind the scenes.³⁴

We then dive into the history of people being fooled and the people doing the fooling, starting with the case of rumors of a vast slave conspiracy in seventeenth century Barbados. The rumors were based on both English conspiracy theories about Catholics, an understanding of Roman history of slave conspiracies, and fanciful ideas about African plans not only to end their enslavement, but to reverse the social hierarchy.³⁵

The course has led me to wonder how historians might contribute to the debates around disinformation and misinformation. What, for example, do rumors of a slave rebellion in colonial Barbados have to do with conspiracy theories about vaccines or Hillary Clinton? Can history provide any useful lessons or tools to manage the information ecosystem of 2024 and beyond? How should historians address the challenges of dis- and misinformation? What is the historian's responsibility to address the contemporary challenges of dis- and misinformation? Does the history of disinformation and misinformation, or what I like to simply call "the history of lies," offer any guidance to the present moment?

Certain patterns emerge in the history of conspiracy theories that find echoes today. The most consistent pattern is that the creator of the conspiracy theory is often worried that the target group is going to do to them that they have done to the target group. Witness the consistent anxiety of white enslavers that the enslaved will rule over them, rape the women, and force them to practice an alien religion. A slightly different version of this is the way that fascists accuse leftists and/or Jews of plotting

³⁴ Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Picador, 2020): 8. The literature on the current information crisis has ballooned to the point that it is difficult to keep up with the field beyond one's particular specialty.

³⁵ Jason T. Sharples, "Discovering Slave Conspiracies: New Fears of Rebellion and Old Paradigms of Plotting in Seventeenth-Century Barbados." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 120, no. 3, 2015, 811-43. The case is interesting, because enslaved people did in fact rebel and resist. But the American slave conspiracy tropes always included, tellingly, plans for the Africans to do to whites similar acts of violence as whites had done to them. Namely, not only to enslave them, but to rape the women.

to seize power and rule as dictators. Or white supremacists fabricating African American plots to take over the United States.

One of the cardinal rules of the historical profession is that we are supposed to be alert to the biases of our sources. What I started to realize in both my research and teaching is that historians might start thinking more about people simply lying or making things up. Federico Finchelstein's novel take on this matter, *A Brief History of Fascist Lies*, argues that lying is one of the core elements of fascism.³⁶ Analogous approaches to truth can also be found in communist countries.

This takes us to a conundrum. Conspiracy theories are lies. But it is not always clear if the conspiracist believes the lies. Richard Evans addresses this problem in the chapter "Did Hitler escape the bunker?" in his book *The Hitler Conspiracies*.³⁷ At some point, the theory that Hitler flew out of the rubble of Berlin to start a new life in Argentina converged with UFO theories. Hitler sells books. UFOs sell books. Sometimes, then, the question is not why people believe, but why the lie was created in the first place. And why people consume the lie. Many people who enjoy reading about UFOs and the government cover-up do not believe they are true. But they think it would be fun to believe that it could be true.

Conspiracy theories tend to play off each other. The Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy theory that first emerged in force after World War I is a prime example. In this framework, Jews are taking over the world both as communists and as hyper-capitalists. This conspiracy theory worked in tandem with conspiracy theories about leftists and capitalists.³⁸ We see a similar pattern today with the so-called "Great Replacement Theory" which blends conspiratorial fantasies about the people of the developing world conquering Europe and other white majority spaces with older theories about Jews as facilitators and abettors of "racial poisoning."

No matter how much you study 'rotten fish' in the present or past, we are inclined to believe information if it comes from a reliable source. It might be the butcher whose meat has never been bad, a newspaper which is generally reliable, or a website that a friend recommended. And the process of getting fooled is aggravated

³⁶ Federico Finchelstein, *A Brief History of Fascist Lies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

³⁷ Evans, Richard J. *The Hitler Conspiracies*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

³⁸ Paul Hanebrink, "[Transnational Culture War: Christianity, Nation, and the Judeo-Bolshevik Myth in Hungary, 1890-1920.](#)" *Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 1 (March 2008): 55-80. For an excellent micro-history of the violence of the myth, see Béla Bodó, "The Toszegi Affair: Rumors, 'the people's verdict,' and rural antisemitism," *Yad Vashem* 36:2 (2008).

by confirmation bias. This is true not just because of human vanity but also because we tend to believe information that fits into what we already believe or what we expect from certain groups or organizations.³⁹ In my own case, I had developed an expectation that the Argentine working class had revolutionary potential. This bias emerged from both thinking about the global context but also taking a bit too literally much of the Argentine working-class press's often overblown rhetoric about revolution. They sounded more revolutionary than they really were.

Once we have accepted false information as truth, we are slow to disabuse ourselves of the false story. The adage is true: "It is easier to fool a man than to convince him that he's been fooled." In my years of reading historical literature on 'rotten fish,' I've never seen a documented case of someone admitting that they were wrong.⁴⁰ By contrast, in the contemporary world, there is an entire field of literature devoted to the question of how to talk people away from conspiratorial world views. Many of my students find this to be an important element of the class if they have relatives who believe in conspiracy theories.⁴¹

The pace that disinformation hits us has accelerated from previous periods. The Argentine examples that I described seem almost quaint by comparison with the world of 2024. The Russian Internet Research Agency, Fox News, and an unregulated and unaccountable social media landscape immediately come to mind as culprits. The source of lies and half-truths has become limitless. It is almost beyond comprehension. While the pace with which conspiracy theories emerge is speeding up, the tropes remain remarkably stable. It is as if there are more individual conspiracy theories but when aggregated, there is the same amount. To use a cooking analogy, the conspiracy theories are thick, but the ingredients are the same.

National and regional trope patterns remain important. An image thick with meaning in one place may mean very little elsewhere. Individuals or organizations that promote disinformation do so with a certain level of historical consciousness. The stories that Black Lives Matter was a violent organization fit perfectly into the

³⁹ Naomi Klein, *Doppelgänger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2023) provides a profound treatment of our contemporary information troubles. For developing empathy for those whose beliefs we find strange, see Peter McIndoe, "Birds Aren't Real? How a Conspiracy Takes Flight," TED (September 13, 2023).

⁴⁰ Vassily Grossman, *Everything Flows* (New York: NYRB, 2009). Characters imprisoned in a gulag believe that fellow prisoners must have done something against the Stalinist state. Such a mindset suggests the difficulty of changing one's mind!

⁴¹ Jesslyn Cook, *The Quiet Damage: QAnon and the Destruction of the American Family* (New York: Crown, 2024).

foundational myth in the United States of black men's inherent violence and shallow intellect. The Hungarian right-wing attacks on George Soros as the destroyer of national sovereignty and purity squares with Hungarian antisemitism from the post-World War I period, when the Judeo-Bolshevik plot concept merged with older notions of Jews controlling the economy. And it has merged seamlessly with "The Great Replacement Theory."

These same tropes and tricks have always traveled across borders, adapting to local conditions and biases when necessary, and often forging powerful networks of likeminded people. The post-war anti-communist far right is a textbook case of this.⁴² Now they move much more quickly. And the traffic patterns are more dense and multi-directional. Who could have ever imagined that the campaign to vilify George Soros that started in his native Hungary would come to the U.S.? Who would have imagined that the American right would flock to Hungary as a model of white nationalism to be emulated?

The global phenomenon of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 is a reminder of the power of states and their leaders in generating suspicion of (medical) authority, or at least undermining it, whilst paradoxically fomenting authoritarian sentiments and policies. It is also an object lesson in what is new in our era: conspiracy theories spread with dizzying speed thanks to social media.⁴³ The groundwork for anxiety about COVID vaccines had significant historical antecedents. In the 1980s, the Soviets launched the most successful disinformation campaign to date. Their agents slowly and methodically sowed the story that AIDS was a U.S. government bioweapon. Decades later, in the war against terror, the U.S. government disguised CIA agents as polio vaccine workers.⁴⁴

In a world that is oversaturated with disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories, what hope can history offer? Perhaps there is some comfort in knowing that we, as historians and as a society, have been here before. Or perhaps more precisely, we have always been "here." Humans have always spread rumors, lied,

⁴² Kyle Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

⁴³ Luis Roniger and Leonardo Senkman, "Vulnerability and Conspiracy Theories: Latin American in the Time of COVID-19," in Knight, Peter, and Michael Butter, editors. *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*. Routledge, 2023.

⁴⁴ Rid, *Active Measures*. See chapter "AIDS Made in the USA.": "Russian media 'spreading Covid-19 disinformation'" *The Guardian* (March 18, 2020); Todd Summers and J. Stephen Morrison, "[Fake CIA Vaccine Campaign: When the Ends Do not Justify the Means.](#)" *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (May 27, 2014).

wondered who is running the world, feared the powerless, and developed stories to help us make sense of it all. In “A Global History of Lies” I remind students that this is a class as much about what happened as about what people at the time thought was happening, which was often not actually what was happening. They laugh. And a few weeks into the semester, they tell me that now the joke makes sense.