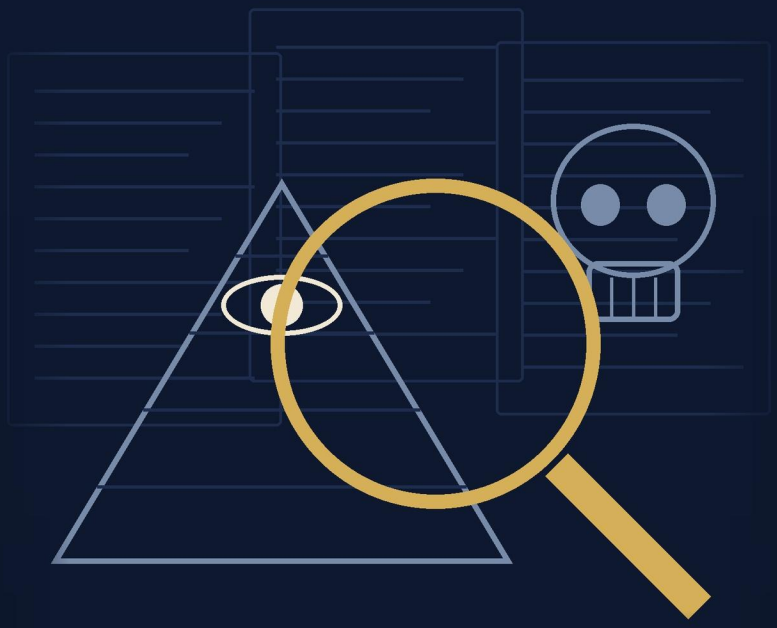
A PLAIN-ENGLISH FACT CHECK

SECRET SOCIETIES

What the Records Show



ILLUMINATI · SKULL AND BONES · 93 SOCIETIES · RUMORS

The Illuminati, Skull and Bones and the Rumors Around Them

ANDREW DOMINGUEZ

TRINFINITY Enterprises

SECRET SOCIETIES

What the Records Show About the Illuminati, Skull and Bones and the Rumors Around Them

The real history, the people we can document, and every major rumor traced to where it started

Andrew Dominguez

Fact Check Series

Trinfinity Enterprises

Secret Societies: What the Records Show About the Illuminati, Skull and Bones and the Rumors Around Them

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The information in this book stops at November 18, 2026. Every source was read on that date unless the note says otherwise. Historians are still working through the Illuminati papers in Gotha, and a major new study is due in 2027, so some details here may be refined later.

This book reports what records show about real organizations and about rumors told about them. When a claim is an allegation, it is labeled as one in the text, the tables, the captions and the timeline. Naming a person or a group in the rumor chapters does not mean the claim about them is true. Most of the claims in those chapters are not.

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Fact check notice. The ratings and conclusions in this book are my own reading of the public record as of the date the book was finished, based on the sources it lists. Statements about named people, groups, and organizations are reported from those sources and are not new accusations. If a source is later corrected or new evidence comes out, a rating may change. If you believe something here is wrong, write to andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com and I will review it.

Contents

Abstract 5

The Central Question 5

How This Book Works 6

- Where the facts come from 6
- How strong is the evidence that someone was a member? 6
- How the rumors are graded 7
- The cutoff date and what I could not reach 7
- Assumptions 8
- How the two volumes fit together 8

Part 1: The Real Bavarian Illuminati, 1776 to 1787 9

- Chapter 1: A Law Professor Starts a Club 9
- Chapter 2: Growth Through the Lodges 11
- Chapter 3: The Ban, the Seized Papers and the Last Years 14

Part 2: How a Ten-Year Club Became a World Conspiracy 16

- Chapter 4: Two Books in 1797 16
- Chapter 5: The Illuminati Scare in America, 1798 to 1800 18

Part 3: Skull and Bones at Yale 21

- Chapter 6: What the Yale Archive Shows 21
- Chapter 7: How Bones Works, and What It Owns 22
- Chapter 8: The German-Origin Story and the First Outsiders 23
- Chapter 9: Geronimo's Skull 25
- Chapter 10: Bones and the Other Societies 26

Part 4: The People We Can Document 27

- Chapter 11: Members, With the Evidence for Each 27
- People Who Shaped the Story From Outside 31

Part 5: The Wider World of Secret Societies 33

Chapter 12: A Survey of About Ninety Groups..... 33
Part 6: The Rumors, Traced and Graded..... 38
Chapter 13: Claims About the Illuminati..... 38
Chapter 14: Claims About Skull and Bones..... 43
Chapter 15: Modern World-Control Claims..... 46
Conclusion: What the Records Show..... 50
Chapter 16: The History Is Better Than the Legend..... 50
Why it matters..... 50
What I could not settle..... 50
Check It Yourself: Five Questions for Any Claim..... 52
Appendix A: Chronology..... 53
Appendix B: Claims and Evidence..... 56
Appendix C: Catalogue of Secret and Private Societies..... 58
Appendix D: Visual Credits..... 72
Appendix E: Bibliography..... 76
Primary sources..... 76
Statements by the organizations themselves..... 77
Scholarly works and research institutions..... 77
Reference works and journalism..... 78
Promoters and interested parties (cited for what they claimed)..... 79

Abstract

Few words pull a crowd like "Illuminati." Say it in a room and someone will mention the eye on the dollar bill, someone else will bring up a famous singer, and a third person will tell you Yale's Skull and Bones runs the country. This book goes back to the records to see what is actually there.

The Bavarian Illuminati were real. A young law professor named Adam Weishaupt founded the order in Ingolstadt on May 1, 1776. It grew through Masonic lodges, drew in nobles, officials and writers, and was banned by the Bavarian government in 1784 and 1785. New research from Gotha shows the order kept going quietly under Johann Joachim Christoph Bode until about 1787, mostly in Thuringia.[1] After that the record of the original order stops.

Skull and Bones is also real. It is a senior society at Yale University whose records begin in 1832. It owns property through a corporation called the Russell Trust Association, now RTA Incorporated, which files public tax returns.[2] Its members have included presidents, cabinet officers and judges, and that is documented.

What is not documented is the bridge most rumors depend on: that the Illuminati survived in secret, took over Freemasonry, caused the French Revolution, planted a symbol on the dollar, set up a branch at Yale, and run the world today through banks, think tanks and pop stars. Each of those claims has a birthday. Most of them can be traced to a handful of books written between 1797 and 1991. This book follows each one back to its earliest traceable appearance, names who started it and who spread it, and grades it against the evidence.

The short answer is that the history is more interesting than the legend, and most of the legend falls apart when you check it.

The Central Question

What do primary records actually show about the Bavarian Illuminati and Yale's Skull and Bones, who can we document as members, and where did the rumors that tie them to world control come from?

To answer that, I broke it into seven smaller questions.

1. When, where and why was the Bavarian Illuminati founded, how big did it get, and when did it end?
2. What was its real connection to Freemasonry?
3. How did a short-lived German society turn into a worldwide conspiracy story, and who told that story first?

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[1] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order of the Illuminati: New Research Puts Gotha in the Spotlight", university news release, April 29, 2026, https://www.uni-erfurt.de/en/university/current/news/news-detail/250-years-of-the-order-of-the-illuminati-new-research-puts-gotha-in-the-spotlight, accessed November 18, 2026. FactGrid (University of Halle and Gotha Research Centre), "Zwei neue Illuminatenlisten und einige grundlegende Gedanken zur Erfassung von Listen in FactGrid", FactGrid blog, May 22, 2026, https://factgrid-tools.geschichte.uni-halle.de/blog/archives/tag/mitgliederliste, accessed November 18, 2026.

[2] William Massa, Michael Lotstein and Jeanne Lowrey, comps., "Guide to the Russell Trust Association Records, RU 1135", Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, June 2015, with later accessions to 2026, https://ead-pdfs.library.yale.edu/5254.pdf, accessed November 18, 2026. ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer, "RTA Incorporated, New Haven, CT, EIN 06-0768741 (Form 990 for fiscal year ending June 2025, filed January 28, 2026)", https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/60768741, accessed November 18, 2026.

4. When and how was Skull and Bones founded, what do Yale's own archives hold, and what is the "322" on its emblem?
5. Which people can be shown, by records, to have belonged to either group, and how strong is the evidence for each?
6. How do these two groups compare with the many other secret and private societies around the world?
7. For each major rumor, what is the precise claim, where did it first appear, who promoted it, and does the evidence support it?

How This Book Works

Where the facts come from

This book is part of my Fact Check Series. Every consequential fact has a footnote placed right after it, so you can check it yourself. The notes follow Chicago style. A full list of sources is at the back.

I sorted sources into five tiers, from strongest to weakest for this subject:

- **Tier 1: Primary sources.** Documents from the time or from the people involved: Weishaupt's own letters, the Bavarian government's printing of seized Illuminati papers, George Washington's letters, Yale's archival guide, court judgments, and public tax filings.
- **Tier 2: The organization's own statements.** What a group says about itself on its own website or in its own publications. These are good evidence of what a group claims, not proof that the claim is true.
- **Tier 3: Scholarly work.** University research, museum encyclopedias, academic books and journal articles.
- **Tier 4: Reference works and journalism.** Encyclopaedia Britannica, magazines, newspapers and alumni publications.
- **Tier 5: Promoters and interested parties.** The books that spread the rumors, and writers who have a stake in the answer. I cite these to show what was claimed and when, never as proof that the claim is true.

When a story is repeated in many places, I tried to follow it back to the first place it shows up. A claim repeated in a hundred websites is still one claim if all hundred copied the same book.

How strong is the evidence that someone was a member?

Secret societies are hard to research for an obvious reason: they keep secrets. So I used five labels for membership, and every name in the People chapter carries one.

Label	What it means
Confirmed	A primary record names the person as a member: a membership list, the group's own papers, an archive catalog, or the person's own signed letter.
Documented association	Records show the person worked closely with the group, attended, recruited or wrote for it, but no

Label	What it means
	record names them as a sworn member.
Self-reported	The person said they belonged, or a group said they belonged, but I found no independent record.
Disputed	Credible sources disagree.
Unsupported	The claim exists, but no record I could find backs it up.

How the rumors are graded

The rumor chapters give each claim one of six verdicts. I used these in place of the True, Partly true, False and Inconclusive labels used in the rest of the series, because history claims often fall in between.

Verdict	What it means
Supported	The records back the claim as stated.
Partly supported	Part of the claim is backed by records, and part is not. The text says which part is which.
Disputed	Credible sources disagree and the records do not settle it.
Unsupported	No credible record backs the claim. Absence of evidence is not proof it is false, but the burden is on the person making the claim.
Contradicted	Records directly show the claim is wrong.
Unresolved	There is real evidence on more than one side, and the question is still open.

The cutoff date and what I could not reach

Everything in this book stops at November 18, 2026. I read every source on that date unless the note says otherwise.

Some sources could not be reached. Several library and encyclopedia pages blocked automated reading, and a few useful pages failed to load. Where that left a gap, I say so in the text. The biggest gaps are these:

- **Skull and Bones' own records are restricted.** Yale's archive says the Russell Trust Association records need written permission from the organization's president to use.[3] I worked from the archive's published guide, not the papers themselves.
- **The full Illuminati member lists are in German scholarly works.** I used the University of Erfurt and FactGrid summaries of that work, not the printed books.
- **Some details come from my earlier research notes and were not re-checked.** The catalogue of about 90 groups in Appendix C started as my earlier research notes. Each row says whether I re-checked it.

[3] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

Assumptions

- I assume a person was not a member of a group unless a record says otherwise. Being photographed near a building, wearing a symbol or attending a college is not membership.
- I treat a shared symbol, like a skull or an eye, as a shared symbol and nothing more unless a document ties the groups together.
- I treat silence as silence. If a group or person never answered a rumor, I say "No statement found" rather than guessing what they think.

How the two volumes fit together

This is Volume 1. It covers the Illuminati, Skull and Bones and the conspiracy stories built around them. Freemasonry comes up often because the Illuminati recruited through Masonic lodges, but the full story of Freemasonry, the medieval Knights Templar and the Templar legends in the lodges is in the companion book, *The Knights Templar and Freemasonry: What the Records Show*.

Part 1: The Real Bavarian Illuminati, 1776 to 1787

Chapter 1: A Law Professor Starts a Club

On May 1, 1776, in the university town of Ingolstadt in Bavaria, a 28-year-old professor named Adam Weishaupt founded a secret society.[4] Weishaupt was born in 1748 and died in 1830.[5] He taught canon law, the law of the Catholic Church, at the university, and Britannica describes him as a former Jesuit.[6]

That date, May 1, 1776, is about the only part of the popular story that holds up. Two months before the Declaration of Independence, a young professor in a Catholic German state started a club. What kind of club, and why, is where the legend and the record part ways.

The members first called themselves "Perfectibilists," the people who believed humans could be perfected.[7] The name that stuck was the Order of the Illuminati, the "enlightened ones." The University of Erfurt, whose research unit has spent years on the order's surviving papers, describes its start as a student reading circle.[8] Its members were scholars, civil servants, nobles and commoners. Women were not admitted.[9]

What Weishaupt wanted

The 1770s were the height of the Enlightenment, the movement that pushed reason, science and education against what its followers saw as superstition and unchecked church and royal power. Bavaria was a Catholic state, and Ingolstadt's university had long been shaped by the Jesuits. Weishaupt wanted a network of educated men who would improve themselves and, through each other, improve society.

We do not have to guess at this. Two of his letters from the first months survive, written to an early recruit named Franz Anton von Massenhausen in September and October of 1776. The German Historical Institute in Washington has published them in English from the standard edition of the order's correspondence. The editors sum up his goal as recruiting quickly "in order to quickly extend the reach of the society," with the aim to "improve mankind and thereby bring about the abolition of the rulership of men over men."[10]

Weishaupt signed himself "Spartacus," after the slave who led a revolt against Rome. In the September 19 letter he gave a piece of advice that sounds ominous out of context: "What you cannot accomplish

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[4] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…".

[5] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…".

[6] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups", Encyclopaedia Britannica, undated page, https://www.britannica.com/topic/illuminati-group-designation, accessed November 18, 2026.

[7] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[8] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…".

[9] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…".

[10] Adam Weishaupt, "Two Letters from Adam Weishaupt, Founder of the Order of the Illuminati (1776)", letters to Franz Anton von Massenhausen, September 19 and about October 1776, trans. Bill C. Ray, German History Intersections, German Historical Institute Washington; from Die Korrespondenz des Illuminatenordens, vol. 1, ed. Reinhard Markner, Monika Neugebauer-Woelk and Hermann Schuettler (Tuebingen: Niemeyer, 2005), 4-5, 8-11, https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-190, accessed November 18, 2026.

yourself, do through others."[11] In the October letter he described the kind of men he wanted: "We need skillful, hard-working, wealthy, well-behaved, powerful people."[12]

You might ask, "Isn't that proof they wanted to rule the world?" It's simple: it is proof that a young professor wanted to recruit well-connected men to spread his ideas. Every club, church and political party in history has wanted members with money and influence. What makes the Illuminati different is the secrecy and the structure, not the ambition.

Secrecy and structure

The order was secretive from the start. Members used code names taken mostly from the ancient world. Weishaupt was "Spartacus." Their letters were written in cipher, and even towns and provinces were given false names.[13] Britannica says the order was modeled on the Jesuits, with strict internal discipline, obedience to superiors and members reporting on each other.[14]

Members moved through grades. Britannica lists three classes: a beginners' class of novices, "minervals" and "lesser illuminati"; a middle class made up of Masonic degrees; and a top "mystery" class with grades named priest, regent, magus and king.[15] Those top grades sound grand, but Britannica notes that the full constitution was "never, however, actually realized."[16] In other words, the elaborate pyramid on paper was bigger than the organization ever became.

Britannica also says Weishaupt's aim was "to replace Christianity with a religion of reason."[17] That is a fair description of the radical wing of the Enlightenment. It is not evidence of devil worship or the occult. My earlier research notes put it well: grades, aliases and ciphers are documented, but there is no verified occult worship, no single official emblem, no living successor and no Yale chapter.



Adam Weishaupt (1748-1830), founder of the Bavarian Illuminati. Print by Friedrich Rossmaessler, made between 1785 and 1858. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, public domain (CC0).

[11] Adam Weishaupt, "Two Letters from Adam Weishaupt,...".

[12] Adam Weishaupt, "Two Letters from Adam Weishaupt,...".

[13] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[14] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[15] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[16] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[17] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

Chapter 2: Growth Through the Lodges

For its first few years the order was small and mostly Bavarian. Weishaupt recruited from his own students and spread out to Eichstaett, Freising and Munich, aiming for "young men of wealth, rank, and social importance."[18]

The Freemason connection

The turning point was Freemasonry. Freemasonry was already well established across Europe by the 1770s. The first Grand Lodge was founded in London in 1717.[19] Lodges were places where educated men from different classes met as equals, took oaths, went through symbolic ceremonies and talked about ideas. For someone building a secret network of educated men, the lodges were the obvious place to look.

According to Britannica, "From 1778 onward Weishaupt's illuminati began to make contact with various Masonic lodges," and in some of them "they often managed to gain a commanding position."[20] The second class of Illuminati grades was itself made up of Masonic degrees.[21]

This is the part of the conspiracy story that is real. The Illuminati did recruit inside Masonic lodges, and in some lodges they gained influence. But a few lodges in German-speaking Europe for a few years is a long way from "the Illuminati took over Freemasonry." Most Masons never had anything to do with the order. Chapter 13 grades that claim.

Knigge, the organizer

The man who turned Weishaupt's circle into something bigger was Adolph Freiherr von Knigge, a north German nobleman and writer. Eberhard Weis, in a study published by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, says Weishaupt won Knigge over during a crisis in the order in 1780.[22] Knigge, code name "Philo," brought energy, Masonic connections and a talent for organizing. Britannica credits him with the order's "extremely elaborate constitution" and its internal communication system.[23]

The partnership did not last. Weis writes that in 1784 Knigge left the order "after a long and bitter quarrel with Weishaupt" (my translation from the German).[24] Knigge is better remembered today in Germany for a book on manners than for anything he did in the Illuminati.

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[18] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[19] United Grand Lodge of England, "History of Freemasonry", undated page, https://www.ugle.org.uk/discover-freemasonry/history-freemasonry, accessed November 18, 2026.

[20] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[21] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[22] Eberhard Weis, *Der Illuminatenorden (1776-1786): Unter besonderer Berueecksichtigung der Fragen seiner sozialen Zusammensetzung, seiner politischen Ziele und seiner Fortexistenz nach 1786*, Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 1987, no. 4 (Munich, 1987), 9, 12.

[23] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[24] Eberhard Weis, *Der Illuminatenorden (1776-1786): Unter besonderer…*.



Adolph Freiherr von Knigge, the order's chief organizer from 1780 until he quit in 1784. Print made between 1818 and 1832 for a series of famous portraits. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, public domain (CC0).

How big did it get?

This is one of the most useful questions in the whole subject, because the conspiracy story depends on the Illuminati being vast. The record says otherwise.

Historians have tried for decades to list every member by name. Hermann Schuettler's 1991 book, *Die Mitglieder des Illuminatenordens*, named 1,255 members, according to the FactGrid project that now holds the data. An earlier FactGrid post counted his list at 1,351, apparently because it counted both verified and unverified names. FactGrid's own working list had grown to 1,311 members by May 2026. Weishaupt himself reportedly believed the order had 2,000 to 2,500 members at its height. FactGrid notes that no complete list probably ever existed.[25] Britannica says that at no time did the membership "appear to have exceeded 2,000."[26]

Estimate of total Illuminati membership	Number	Source
Hermann Schuettler's named list (1991), per FactGrid 2026	1,255	FactGrid
Schuettler's list, verified and unverified, per FactGrid 2021	1,351	FactGrid
FactGrid working list, May 2026	1,311	FactGrid
Britannica's ceiling	no more than about 2,000	Britannica
Weishaupt's own later belief, low end	2,000	FactGrid
Weishaupt's own later belief, high end	2,500	FactGrid

[25] FactGrid, "Zwei neue Illuminatenlisten und einige…".

[26] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

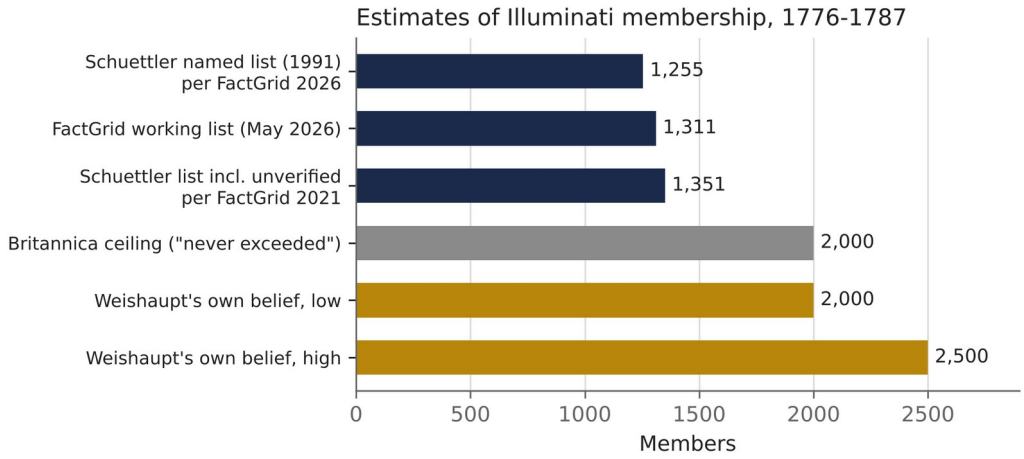


Chart 1. Estimates of total Illuminati membership, 1776 to 1787. Data from the table above. Made for this book.

So somewhere between about 1,250 and 2,500 people, spread over roughly a decade and across a big stretch of Europe, "from Italy to Denmark and from Warsaw to Paris."[27] For comparison, that is fewer people than a mid-sized American high school. These were influential people, and their papers are worth studying, but they were not an army.

Who joined

Chapter 11 covers individual members in detail, with the evidence for each. The headline names are these:

- **Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg** joined on January 29, 1783, and became the order's protector in Gotha.[28]
- **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**, Germany's most famous writer, was received into the order on February 11, 1783.[29]
- **Johann Joachim Christoph Bode**, a translator and publisher, became "chief organiser of the Order in Thuringia."[30]

Friedrich Schiller is often listed as a member. The Erfurt researchers say he was close to the order "but probably never joined."[31] Britannica adds a caution that applies to many famous names: such notables "were claimed as members although it is questionable if they were actually so."[32]

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[27] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[28] FactGrid, "Zwei neue Illuminatenlisten und einige…". University of Erfurt, Gotha Research Centre, "Illuminati Research Unit", undated page, https://www.uni-erfurt.de/en/gotha-research-centre/research/working-groups-and-networks/illuminati-research-unit, accessed November 18, 2026.

[29] FactGrid, "Zwei neue Illuminatenlisten und einige…". University of Erfurt, "Illuminati Research Unit".

[30] University of Erfurt, "Illuminati Research Unit".

[31] University of Erfurt, "Illuminati Research Unit".

[32] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

Chapter 3: The Ban, the Seized Papers and the Last Years

The ban

The Elector of Bavaria, Karl Theodor, turned against the order. Weis writes that he banned it in 1785 "after long hesitation" (my translation).[33] FactGrid dates the start of the persecution to March 2, 1785.[34] Members were jailed or driven out, and Weishaupt lost his professorship and was banished from Bavaria.[35] My earlier research notes describe Bavarian prohibitions in both 1784 and 1785. The first of those was a general ban on unauthorized societies [Not verified: the exact dates and wording of the 1784 edict were not re-checked for this book].

The papers that built the legend

On October 11 and 12, 1786, Bavarian officials searched the house of Franz Xaver von Zwack, a government councillor and one of Weishaupt's closest partners, at Landshut. The papers they found were printed "on the highest order" of the Elector under the title *Einige Originalschriften des Illuminatenordens* (Some Original Writings of the Order of the Illuminati).[36] The Bavarian State Library has digitized a copy. (I could confirm the title, but the record page did not show the year of printing, so I have not stated one.)

Think about what that meant. A government took a secret society's private letters, plans and ciphers and published them to discredit the group. Readers across Europe got a look at code names, grades and talk about reshaping society. It was exactly the kind of material that could be read as a blueprint for revolution, especially once a real revolution broke out in France three years later. The University of Erfurt makes the same point: the 1785 ban and the publication of the seized documents created legends, and the French Revolution reinforced them.[37]

Gotha: the order did not end in 1785

For more than two centuries most histories said the order died in 1785. Britannica still says that "After 1785 the historical record contains no further activities of Weishaupt's illuminati."[38] That is now out of date.

Researchers at the University of Erfurt's Gotha Research Centre, led by Markus Meumann, Martin Mulsow and Olaf Simons, have shown that the order kept working in secret under Bode until 1787, centered in Thuringia, with Gotha as its last stronghold. Duke Ernst II protected it there, in a provincial branch called "Ionia."[39]

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[33] Eberhard Weis, *Der Illuminatenorden (1776-1786): Unter besonderer…*.

[34] FactGrid, "Zwei neue Illuminatenlisten und einige…".

[35] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[36] Electorate of Bavaria (publisher by order of the Elector), *Einige Originalschriften des Illuminatenordens, welche bey dem gewesenen Regierungsrath Zwack durch vorgenommene Hausvisitation zu Landshut den 11. und 12. Oktob. etc. 1786. vorgefunden worden*, digitized by the Bavarian State Library, Munich Digitization Center; year and place of printing not checked on the record page, https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/details/bsb10381793, accessed November 18, 2026.

[37] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…".

[38] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

The key to this is a box of papers. Bode's archive of the order's documents from 1783 to 1787, called the "Swedish Chest" (Schwedenkiste), was thought lost after the Second World War. It was found again at the end of the 1980s and has only been partly studied.[40] A new book, *The Illuminati: Metamorphoses of a Secret Society 1776-1787*, is due from the Wallstein publishing house in 2027.[41]

So the most current record is this: the Bavarian Illuminati lasted from 1776 to about 1787. After that, the documented trail of the original order stops.

What happened next

Did any of it survive? Weis looked hard at that question in 1987. He found only "a certain continuity" between former Illuminati and later radical Jacobin circles in a few places: Mainz, Austria, Hungary and, in part, Italy.[42] That is individuals carrying ideas forward, not an organization carrying on.

There were later groups that used the name. In the 1890s a man named Leopold Engel started a "World League of Illuminati" in Berlin, with an Austrian branch formed in 1896, and the Gestapo shut down what was left of it in 1934.[43] Engel's group was a new organization borrowing an old name. No record I could find shows an unbroken line from Weishaupt's order to Engel's.

Markus Meumann of the Erfurt team summed it up in April 2026. The order, he said, was "a phenomenon of the Enlightenment that was clearly limited in time and space," and its real history is "fascinating enough to do without myths."[44]

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[39] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…".

[40] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…". University of Erfurt, "Illuminati Research Unit".

[41] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…".

[42] Eberhard Weis, *Der Illuminatenorden (1776-1786): Unter besonderer…*.

[43] Peter-Robert Koenig, "Illuminati and Templars", Theosophical History 5, no. 6 (April 1995), 208 and following.

[44] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…".

Part 2: How a Ten-Year Club Became a World Conspiracy

Chapter 4: Two Books in 1797

The Illuminati story you hear today was not born in Bavaria. It was born ten years after the order ended, in two books published in 1797 by men who were trying to explain the French Revolution.

The Revolution began in 1789. By the mid-1790s it had killed a king and queen, closed churches and spread war across Europe. To many people it seemed impossible that ordinary politics could have caused such a thing. There had to be a plan behind it. Two writers, working separately, said they had found it.

John Robison, Edinburgh

John Robison was no crank. The title page of his book describes him as "Professor of Natural Philosophy, and Secretary to the Royal Society of Edinburgh." His book's full title tells you the argument: *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. Collected from Good Authorities*. It was published in Edinburgh by William Creech and in London by T. Cadell Jr. and W. Davies in 1797.[45]

Notice the words "Collected from Good Authorities." Robison was not an insider. He built his case from published German material, including the papers the Bavarian government had seized and printed. The book sold well enough to go through several editions in 1798, including American editions.

Augustin Barruel, a French priest in exile

Augustin Barruel was a French Jesuit priest who had fled the Revolution to England. His *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* came out in French and was translated into English in four volumes, printed in London for the author by T. Burton, in 1797 and 1798.[46] Barruel argued that the Revolution was the result of a three-part conspiracy: philosophers against the church, Freemasons against kings, and the Illuminati against all religion and all government. Volume 4 deals with what he called the "Antisocial Conspiracy," the Illuminati part of his story.[47]

Why these books matter so much

Robison and Barruel are the root of almost every Illuminati story told since. Here is the chain in its simplest form:

1. The order really existed from 1776 to about 1787.

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[45] John Robison, *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*, Edinburgh: William Creech; London: T. Cadell Jr. and W. Davies, 1797; read in the Internet Archive scan bim_eighteenth-century_proofs-of-a-conspiracy-a_robison-john_1797, https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_proofs-of-a-conspiracy-a_robison-john_1797, accessed November 18, 2026.

[46] Augustin Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism. A Translation from the French of the Abbe Barruel*, 4 vols. London: T. Burton, 1797-1798; read in the Internet Archive scan of vol. 4, https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_memoirs-illustrating-th_barruel-abb-augustin_1797_4, accessed November 18, 2026.

[47] Augustin Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of*….

2. The Bavarian government seized its papers in 1786 and printed them to discredit it.
3. The French Revolution began in 1789.
4. In 1797 Robison and Barruel connected the two, arguing that the order had gone underground and caused the Revolution through Masonic lodges.
5. Every later version of the story, from American sermons in 1798 to best sellers in 1991, rests on that link.

The problem is step 4. Neither author had evidence that the order survived after the ban or that it directed events in France. They had the order's own goals, which were radical for the time, and they had a revolution. They connected the two by assumption. Weis's later research found only scattered personal links between former Illuminati and later radicals in a few places, and none in the central story of Paris.[48]

[48] Eberhard Weis, *Der Illuminatenorden (1776-1786): Unter besonderer…*.

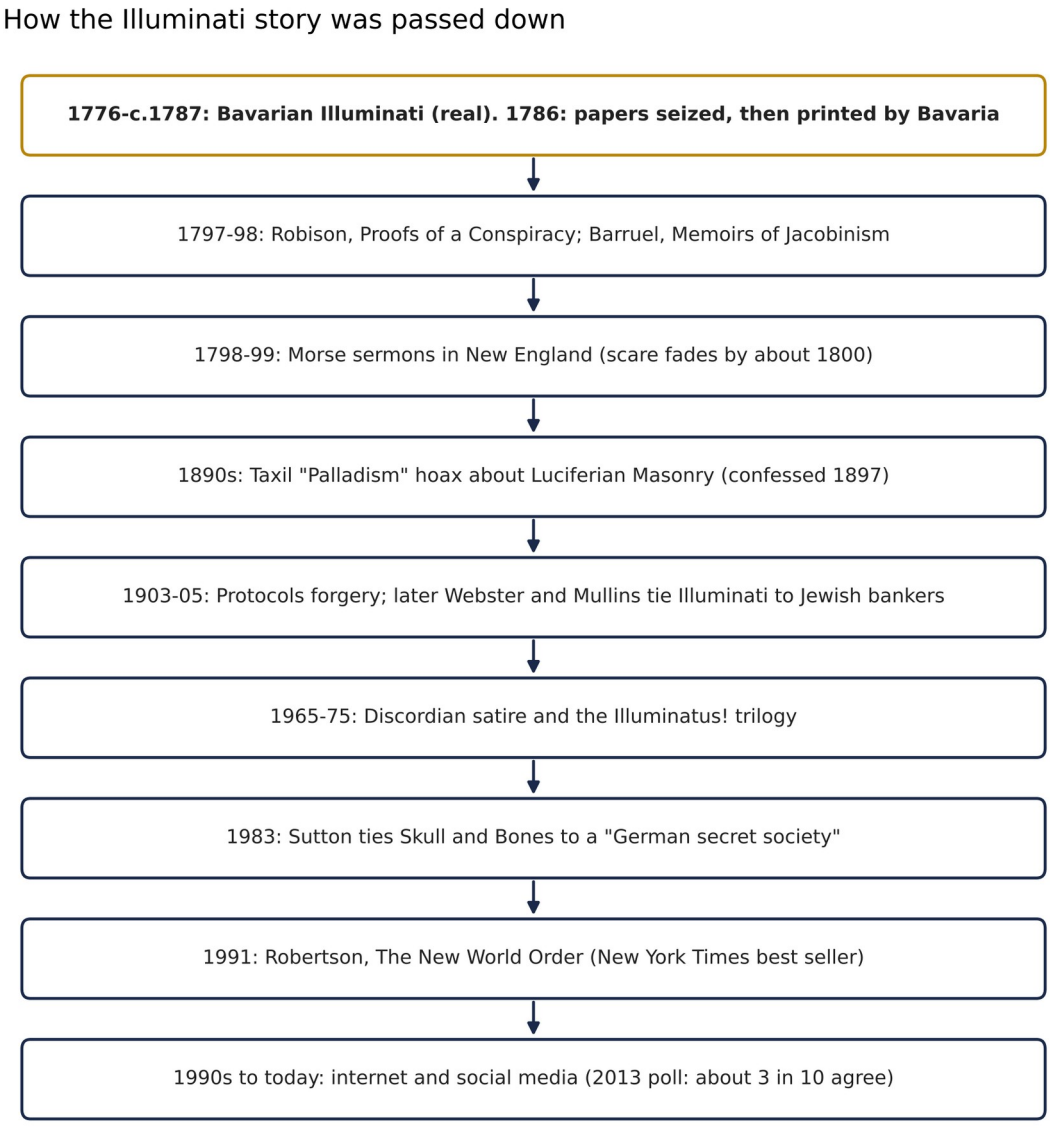


Chart 2. How the Illuminati rumor was passed down, 1786 to today. Arrows show the order in which the claims appeared; the borrowings cited in the text are named under the chart. Made for this book.

Chapter 5: The Illuminati Scare in America, 1798 to 1800

Robison's book crossed the Atlantic fast, and it landed at a nervous moment. In 1798 the United States was in an undeclared naval war with France. Americans were arguing bitterly about whether the French Revolution was a sister republic or a threat. President John Adams called for a national day of fasting and prayer.

Jedediah Morse's sermons

Jedediah Morse was a Congregational minister in Charlestown, Massachusetts, and the author of a popular geography book. On the fast day, May 9, 1798, he preached in the morning at the New North Church in Boston and in the afternoon at Charlestown. Historian Vernon Stauffer's 1918 Columbia University study of the episode identifies the sermon's printed title, which says it was delivered on "the day recommended by John Adams" for "solemn humiliation, fasting and prayer."[49] Morse used it to warn Americans about the Illuminati, drawing on Robison.

Morse returned to the subject in a thanksgiving sermon on November 29, 1798, and again on April 25, 1799, when he claimed to have evidence of Illuminati societies operating in America.[50] Stauffer also names Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale, as another leading anti-Illuminati preacher of the time.[51] (I did not read Dwight's own sermons for this book.)

George Washington's answer

In August 1798 a man in Frederick-Town, Maryland, named G. W. Snyder mailed George Washington a copy of Robison's book. Snyder asked Washington to keep the plan "from corrupting the Brethren of the English Lodge over which you preside."[52]

Washington was a Freemason. His Masonic memorial says he was initiated in 1752 in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and was named the first master of Alexandria Lodge No. 22 in 1788.[53] But by 1798 he was hardly active. He wrote back on September 25, 1798:

> "I have heard much of the nefarious, & dangerous plan, & doctrines of the Illuminati, but never saw the Book until you were pleased to send it to me."[54]

He then set Snyder straight about the lodge: "I preside over none, nor have I been in one more than once or twice, within the last thirty years." And he added, "I believe notwithstandings, that none of the Lodges in this Country are contaminated with the principles ascribed to the Society of the Illuminati."[55]

Snyder seems to have taken that as a denial that the Illuminati existed at all, and Washington wrote again on October 24, 1798, to clarify. He did not doubt the doctrines of the Illuminati had spread, he

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[49] Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1918; Internet Archive cu31924030936128, https://archive.org/details/cu31924030936128, accessed November 18, 2026.

[50] Trevor W. McKeown, "Jedediah Morse and the Illuminati", Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon, 2002, https://freemasonry.bcy.ca/anti-masonry/morse.html, accessed November 18, 2026.

[51] Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian*....

[52] G. W. Snyder to George Washington, August 22, 1798, with editorial notes quoting Washington to Snyder, September 25 and October 24, 1798, "Founders Online", National Archives; original source The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series, vol. 2 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-02-02-0435, accessed November 18, 2026.

[53] George Washington Masonic National Memorial, "George Washington, The Mason", 2026, https://gwmemorial.org/pages/george-washington-the-mason, accessed November 18, 2026.

[54] G. W. Snyder to George Washington, "Founders Online".

[55] G. W. Snyder to George Washington, "Founders Online".

said, but "I did not believe that the Lodges of Free Masons in this Country had, as Societies, endeavoured to propagate the diabolical tenets." Individuals, he allowed, "may have done it."[56]

That second letter is the one conspiracy writers usually quote, often without the first one. Read together, Washington's position is clear. He believed the Illuminati's ideas were dangerous. He did not believe American lodges were spreading them. And he had no inside knowledge; he had heard about the group and then read the book Snyder sent.

How the scare ended

The American panic burned out fast. Stauffer, who studied it in more depth than anyone before him, wrote that "before two years had passed men generally began to admit the baseless nature of the alarm."[57] Morse never produced the proof he promised. A Masonic historian writing for the Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon (an interested source, since Masons were the target) notes that, discredited, Morse wrote nothing further on the Illuminati.[58]

The scare faded, but the books did not. Robison and Barruel stayed in print, and the next time someone needed a hidden hand to explain the world, they were waiting on the shelf.

[56] G. W. Snyder to George Washington, "Founders Online".

[57] Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian…*.

[58] Trevor W. McKeown, "Jedediah Morse and the Illuminati".

Part 3: Skull and Bones at Yale

Chapter 6: What the Yale Archive Shows

If you want to know what Skull and Bones is, start with Yale University Library's archive. Its Manuscripts and Archives department holds a small collection called the Russell Trust Association Records, catalog number RU 1135. The published guide to that collection is the closest thing to an official history the society has ever put in public.

The basic facts from the guide

The guide's history note is two sentences long, and it is worth reading closely:

> "The Russell Trust Association is the trade name for the undergraduate senior society, Skull and Bones. The Russell Trust Association was incorporated in 1856 by founding president of Johns Hopkins University, Daniel Coit Gilman."[59]

It adds that the association manages the society's finances, which go toward "the upkeep of its properties, associated taxes, and other considerations."[60]

The collection itself is small: about one linear foot of material, dated 1832 to 1910.[61] It holds:

- Scanned copies of the society's **constitution, dated 1832**.
- The **contract and architectural plan for its building, 1866**. The guide lists this as the contract "to build the Tomb (1866)," the windowless hall on High Street that members call the Tomb. The folder itself is labeled "Building Contract and Constitution of the Eulogian Club," 1839 to 1866.[62]
- **Reminiscences about the club's origins** by George Ingersoll Wood, dated June 11, 1884.[63]
- A **photograph album of the Class of 1910 delegation**, given to Yale in 2025 and open for research.[64]

Two things in that list correct common stories. First, the founding year. The constitution is dated 1832, which matches the society's own customary founding date and the year my earlier research notes gave. Second, the Tomb. Some accounts say the Tomb opened in 1856. The archive dates the building contract to 1866 and notes that the dates were "provided by the creator in the content."[65] The 1856 date belongs to the incorporation of the trust, not the building.

The "Eulogian Club" name on the folder is also worth noticing. It is another name the society used for itself in its own papers. It is not a hidden link to anything else; it is simply what the documents call the club.

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[59] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[60] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[61] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[62] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[63] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[64] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[65] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

Who can see the papers

Not just anyone. The guide says: "Access to the records is restricted. Written permission of president of organization required."[66] The 1910 album is the exception; it is open for research.[67] I worked from the published guide, not the restricted papers. Anyone who wants to test what I say here should know that the core documents are still controlled by the society.

The founder named in the archive

Who founded Skull and Bones? Most popular accounts name two students, William Huntington Russell and Alphonso Taft. The Yale guide does not mention Russell at all, even though the trust carries his name. It does call Alphonso Taft (Bones 1833) a "Skull and Bones founder," in its description of the 1910 album.[68] I could not confirm Russell's role from a primary source I was able to open, so I mark it [Not verified]. It is likely, given the trust's name, but likely is not the same as documented.

Chapter 7: How Bones Works, and What It Owns

The tap

Skull and Bones is one of a group of Yale "senior societies." Each spring, a society picks a new group of juniors to join for their senior year, a custom called "tapping." According to the Yale Alumni Magazine in 2014, most of these societies "tap around 15 members" each year. There were at least 41 such societies by then, and seven of them owned buildings, or were "landed": Skull and Bones, Scroll and Key, Wolf's Head, Berzelius, Book and Snake, Elihu and Manuscript.[69]

That fifteen-a-year figure matches the Yale album. The 1910 delegation lists exactly fifteen names.[70]

Not everyone said yes. Journalist Jacques Leslie wrote in Salon in 2000 about his own senior year at Yale. When he expected a tap from Bones he decided to say "Reject!" and joined Elihu instead. Writing about George W. Bush, he summed up the two paths: "Bush joined Bones; I didn't."[71]

The money

Skull and Bones is a tax-exempt nonprofit, and that means its finances are public. ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer lists RTA Incorporated of New Haven, Connecticut, with federal tax ID 06-0768741, as a 501(c)(3) organization, a charity under the federal tax code. Its most recent return, for the fiscal year ending June 2025, was filed on January 28, 2026. It reported revenue of $808,538, expenses of $642,644 and net assets of $17,055,434.[72]

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[66] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[67] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[68] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[69] Mark Alden Branch, "Open Secrets", Yale Alumni Magazine, July/August 2014, https://yalealumnimagazine.org/articles/3909-open-secrets, accessed November 18, 2026.

[70] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[71] Jacques Leslie, "Smirk from the past", Salon, March 1, 2000, https://www.salon.com/2000/03/01/yale/, accessed November 18, 2026.

[72] ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer, "RTA Incorporated, New Haven, CT,...".

RTA Incorporated, fiscal year ending June 2025	Amount
Revenue	$808,538
Expenses	$642,644
Net assets at year end	$17,055,434

Seventeen million dollars is real money. It is also about what you would expect for an old society that owns a historic stone building and has had generations of well-off alumni. For comparison, it is a tiny fraction of what Yale itself holds. It is not the treasury of a group that runs the world.



Skull and Bones wax seals, about 1865, showing the skull and crossed bones with the number 322 below. Maker unknown. Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, via Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

The number 322

The emblem in that photograph is the society's best-known symbol: a skull over crossed bones with the number 322. The wax seals date from about 1865.[73]

What does 322 mean? The society has never said, as far as I could find. [No statement found.] The guesses run from a date in ancient Greek history to "the second chapter, founded in 1832." The best-known reading is Antony Sutton's, that the society is "Chapter 322 of a German secret society."[74] That claim is graded in Chapter 14. Without a statement from the society, any meaning given to the number is a guess.

Chapter 8: The German-Origin Story and the First Outsiders

The idea that Skull and Bones came from Germany is old. It is older than most people think, and it was doubted from the start.

Bagg, 1871

In 1871 a recent graduate, Lyman Hotchkiss Bagg, published *Four Years at Yale* anonymously as "a Graduate of '69." In his section on Skull and Bones he wrote:

> "The popular college tradition, that it was transplanted from a German university, is scouted by old neutral graduates as absurd."[75]

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[73] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[74] Antony C. Sutton, *America's Secret Establishment: An Introduction to the Order of Skull and Bones*, 1983; reissued Walterville, OR: TrineDay, 2002; read in an Internet Archive scan.

That is the earliest appearance of the German-origin story that I could trace. Two things stand out. It was already a "popular college tradition" by 1871, which means students had been telling it for some time before that. And older graduates with no stake in the matter already thought it was "absurd." "Scouted" is an old word meaning dismissed with scorn.

The Iconoclast, 1873, and Esquire, 1977

Two later publications pushed the story outward. Sutton cites an anonymous student pamphlet called *The Iconoclast*, dated October 13, 1873, as an early expose of the society.[76] I was not able to read *The Iconoclast* itself, so I can say only that Sutton cites it, not what it says.

More than a century later, in September 1977, *Esquire* magazine ran Ron Rosenbaum's "The Last Secrets of Skull and Bones," a long piece that made the society a national curiosity.[77] I did not read the Esquire article for this book; Sutton is my source for its title and date.

Sutton, 1983

The book that tied Skull and Bones to the Illuminati was Antony C. Sutton's *America's Secret Establishment: An Introduction to the Order of Skull and Bones*, first published in 1983.[78] Sutton wrote that "Others have known it for more than 150 years as Chapter 322 of a German secret society."[79] He said he had seen unpublished material originating with the society itself. In the passages I read, he did not produce a charter, a letter or a membership record linking Yale to any German society, let alone to Bavaria.

Here is what that looks like on a timeline:

Year	What appeared	What it shows
1832	Skull and Bones constitution	The society exists at Yale.
1787	Last documented activity of the Bavarian Illuminati, in Gotha	The original order is gone 45 years before Bones is founded.
1871	Bagg, *Four Years at Yale*	A "German university" origin story exists among students; older graduates call it absurd.
1873	*The Iconoclast* (cited by Sutton, not read)	Student criticism of the society.
1977	Rosenbaum in *Esquire* (cited by Sutton, not read)	National attention.
1983	Sutton	First book I found to claim a German secret society parent, which later readers took to

[75] (Lyman Hotchkiss Bagg), *Four Years at Yale, by a Graduate of '69*, New Haven: Charles C. Chatfield and Co., 1871; Internet Archive fouryearsatyale00baggrich, https://archive.org/details/fouryearsatyale00baggrich, accessed November 18, 2026.

[76] Antony C. Sutton, *America's Secret Establishment: An Introduction*....

[77] Antony C. Sutton, *America's Secret Establishment: An Introduction*....

[78] Antony C. Sutton, *America's Secret Establishment: An Introduction*....

[79] Antony C. Sutton, *America's Secret Establishment: An Introduction*....

Year	What appeared	What it shows
		mean the Illuminati.

The gap is the whole story. The Illuminati's documented trail ends in 1787. Bones begins in 1832. The German-origin tale shows up as student gossip by 1871. The Illuminati label gets attached in print in the 1980s. No document fills those gaps.

Chapter 9: Geronimo's Skull

One Skull and Bones story has more behind it than the others: the claim that members dug up the skull of the Apache leader Geronimo and keep it in the Tomb.

The 1918 letter

In 2006 the Yale Alumni Magazine reported that historian Marc Wortman had found a letter in the F. Trubee Davison Papers at Yale's Sterling Library. Dated June 7, 1918, it was written by Winter Mead, Class of 1919, to Davison, Class of 1918. It says:

> "The skull of the worthy Geronimo the Terrible, exhumed from its tomb at Fort Sill ..."[80]

I quote only the opening words, which are the part I could check against the magazine's text.

The magazine also reported that a centennial history of the society by Alexander Matthiessen, quoting a 1919 entry in the society's log, names three members of the Class of 1917 as taking part: Ellery James, Henry Neil Mallon and Prescott Bush, the father of one president and the grandfather of another.[81]

The same article was careful to say that the letter is "not proof." A letter between two members, written in the boastful style of a college club, tells us what members were saying in 1918. It does not tell us what was actually in the box. The magazine reported that in 1986 Jonathan Bush, Prescott's son, met with an Apache leader, Ned Anderson, over the matter.[82]

The lawsuit

In 2009 a group of Geronimo's descendants sued to recover the remains. On July 27, 2010, U.S. District Judge Richard Roberts in Washington, D.C., dismissed the case. The ABA Journal reported two grounds: the government had not waived its sovereign immunity, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) applies only to remains removed after the law was passed in 1990. The descendants' lawyer, former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, said they intended to keep fighting.[83]

The case was thrown out on legal grounds. The court never decided whether the skull is in the Tomb. No court has. I found no public statement from Skull and Bones on the question. [No statement found.] Chapter 14 grades this claim.

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[80] Kathrin Day Lassila and Mark Alden Branch, "Whose Skull and Bones?", Yale Alumni Magazine, May/June 2006, https://archives.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/2006_05/notebook.html, accessed November 18, 2026.

[81] Kathrin Day Lassila and Mark Alden Branch, "Whose Skull and Bones?".

[82] Kathrin Day Lassila and Mark Alden Branch, "Whose Skull and Bones?".

[83] Martha Neil, "Yale Secret Society Skull and Bones Wins Lawsuit Over Geronimo's Remains", ABA Journal, August 11, 2010, https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/yale_secrety_society_skull_bones_wins_lawsuit_over_geronimos_remains/, accessed November 18, 2026.

Chapter 10: Bones and the Other Societies

Skull and Bones is famous, but it is not unique, even at Yale. The Yale Alumni Magazine counted at least 41 senior societies by 2014.[84] Scroll and Key, Wolf's Head, Berzelius, Book and Snake, Elihu and Manuscript all have their own buildings, histories and alumni.[85] They share a campus, a calendar and a custom of tapping, which explains why people lump them together. They do not share a charter or leadership with Bones, and none of them has a documented link to the Illuminati.

Other campuses have their own versions: Harvard's Porcellian Club, Princeton's eating clubs, the Seven Society and others at the University of Virginia, and the Cambridge Apostles in England. They are listed in Appendix C with their founding dates. The point is simple. Private student societies with rituals and famous alumni are common. Bones is the best known, partly because of who joined and partly because of the stories told about it.

[84] Mark Alden Branch, "Open Secrets".

[85] Mark Alden Branch, "Open Secrets".

Part 4: The People We Can Document

Chapter 11: Members, With the Evidence for Each

This chapter lists people whose connection to the Bavarian Illuminati or Skull and Bones can be shown from records. Each one carries one of the five evidence labels explained in the Introduction: Confirmed, Documented association, Self-reported, Disputed or Unsupported.

I left out entertainers and other celebrities who are only named in modern internet rumors. They are not documented members of anything covered here, and they come up only in Chapter 15, where the rumors themselves are examined. I also left out a long tail of names that appear on the scholarly Illuminati lists but that I could not check for this book. Hermann Schuettler's list runs to more than 1,200 names, and FactGrid's working list is at 1,311.[86] Anyone who wants the full roster should start there.

A dash in the dates column means I did not verify that person's birth and death years for this book.

The Bavarian Illuminati

Person	Dates	Role	Evidence	Label
Adam Weishaupt	1748-1830	Founder, May 1, 1776; code name Spartacus	His own letters of 1776; university research	Confirmed
Franz Anton von Massenhausen	-	One of the first recruits	Named as recipient of Weishaupt's 1776 letters	Confirmed
Adolph Freiherr von Knigge	-	Chief organizer 1780 to 1784; code name Philo	Weis 1987; Britannica	Confirmed
Franz Xaver von Zwack	-	Senior member; former government councillor whose house was searched in 1786	Bavarian government's printed edition of his seized papers	Confirmed (hostile government record)
Johann Joachim Christoph Bode	-	Chief organizer in Thuringia; kept the order going to 1787	His own archive, the "Swedish Chest"; Erfurt research	Confirmed
Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg	1745-1804	Joined January 29, 1783; protector of the order in Gotha	FactGrid; Erfurt research	Confirmed
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe	-	Joined February 11, 1783	FactGrid; Erfurt research	Confirmed by newer research; older reference

[86] FactGrid, "Zwei neue Illuminatenlisten und einige...".

Person	Dates	Role	Evidence	Label
				works doubted it
Friedrich Schiller	-	Close to the order	Erfurt researchers say he "probably never joined"	Unsupported
Johann Gottfried von Herder	-	Writer drawn to the order's ideas	Britannica says notables like him were "claimed as members although it is questionable"	Disputed
Duke Charles Augustus of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach	-	Ruler drawn to the order's ideas	Same Britannica caution	Disputed
Friedrich Nicolai, Friedrich Jacobi, Friedrich Leopold zu Stolberg-Stolberg	-	Writers and thinkers	Britannica says the order "were believed to have included" them; not checked against the scholarly lists	Disputed

Skull and Bones

Person	Class	Role	Evidence	Label
Alphonso Taft	Bones 1833	Called a "Skull and Bones founder"	Yale archive guide	Confirmed
William Huntington Russell	-	Widely named as co-founder; the trust bears his name	Not named in the Yale guide; no primary record opened	Unsupported in the records I could open
Daniel Coit Gilman	-	Incorporated the Russell Trust Association in 1856; later founding president of Johns Hopkins University	Yale archive guide	Documented association
William Howard Taft	Bones 1878	Later President and Chief Justice of the United States	Yale archive guide	Confirmed
Henry L. Stimson	Bones 1888	Later Secretary of War	Yale archive guide	Confirmed

Person	Class	Role	Evidence	Label
Stanhope Bayne-Jones	1910 delegation	Bacteriologist, public health leader, brigadier general; owner of the surviving 1910 album	Yale archive guide	Confirmed
Edward Harris "Ted" Coy	1910 delegation	Yale athlete	Yale archive guide	Confirmed
Albert DeSilver	1910 delegation	Co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)	Yale archive guide	Confirmed
George Leslie Harrison	1910 delegation	President of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York; adviser to Stimson in the Second World War	Yale archive guide	Confirmed
Robert A. Taft	1910 delegation	U.S. Senator, "Mr. Republican"	Yale archive guide	Confirmed
Carl A. Lohmann	1910 delegation	Yale University Secretary for more than twenty years	Yale archive guide	Confirmed
Ellery James, Henry Neil Mallon, Prescott Bush	Class of 1917	Named in a 1919 society log entry about the Geronimo story	Matthiessen's society history quoting the log, as reported by the Yale Alumni Magazine	Confirmed (society log, as quoted)
F. Trubee Davison and Winter Mead	Classes of 1918 and 1919	Writer and recipient of the 1918 Geronimo letter	Davison Papers at Yale, as reported by the Yale Alumni Magazine	Documented association
George W. Bush	-	Later President of the United States	Journalist Jacques Leslie in Salon: "Bush joined Bones"	Documented association

The full 1910 delegation in the Yale guide has fifteen names: Stanhope Bayne-Jones, Edward Harris Coy, Albert DeSilver, Charles Pascal Franchot, Robert Dudley French, George Leslie Harrison, John Heron, Lyndon Marrs King, Augustus Knight, Walter Seth Logan, Carl Albert Lohmann, Frederick James Murphy, Stephen Holladay Philbin, Robert Alphonso Taft and Ruthven Adriance Wodell.[87]

[87] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust…".

Profiles

Adam Weishaupt (1748-1830). Professor of canon law at Ingolstadt and a former Jesuit, he founded the order on May 1, 1776, and led it under the code name Spartacus.[88] His surviving letters show a man in a hurry to recruit capable, well-connected people to spread Enlightenment ideas.[89] He lost his chair and was banished from Bavaria after the 1785 ban.[90] His impact is mostly posthumous and mostly not his doing: he became the villain of every Illuminati story told since 1797.

Adolph Freiherr von Knigge. Recruited during the order's 1780 crisis, Knigge brought Masonic contacts and an organizer's eye, and he wrote the order's elaborate constitution.[91] He quit in 1784 after a long and bitter quarrel with Weishaupt.[92] If the order ever had a period of real growth, it was his.

Franz Xaver von Zwack. A government councillor and one of Weishaupt's closest partners. The search of his house at Landshut on October 11 and 12, 1786, produced the papers that the Bavarian government printed to expose the order.[93] Without Zwack's papers there would be far less for Robison and Barruel to quote.

Johann Joachim Christoph Bode. The Erfurt researchers call him the "chief organiser of the Order in Thuringia." After the Bavarian ban he kept the order alive from Gotha until about 1787, and his own archive, the Swedish Chest, is the main source for those last years.[94]

Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745-1804). A ruling duke who joined on January 29, 1783, and protected the order's final branch, called "Ionia," in his territory.[95] His membership is a good reminder that the order was not an underground of outsiders. Some of its members were rulers.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Germany's most famous writer joined on February 11, 1783.[96] Older reference works, including Britannica, treat his membership as questionable.[97] The Erfurt research unit states plainly that he "had become a member of the Order in 1783."[98] I follow the newer archival research.

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[88] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…". Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[89] Adam Weishaupt, "Two Letters from Adam Weishaupt,…".

[90] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[91] Eberhard Weis, *Der Illuminatenorden (1776-1786): Unter besonderer…*. Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[92] Eberhard Weis, *Der Illuminatenorden (1776-1786): Unter besonderer…*.

[93] Electorate of Bavaria, *Einige Originalschriften des Illuminatenordens, welche…*.

[94] University of Erfurt, "Illuminati Research Unit". University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…".

[95] FactGrid, "Zwei neue Illuminatenlisten und einige…". University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order…".

[96] FactGrid, "Zwei neue Illuminatenlisten und einige…".

[97] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[98] University of Erfurt, "Illuminati Research Unit".

Alphonso Taft. Yale's archive guide calls him a "Skull and Bones founder" and lists him as Bones 1833.[99] He was the father of President William Howard Taft and the grandfather of Senator Robert A. Taft, both of whom also appear in the guide as members.[100]

Daniel Coit Gilman. He incorporated the Russell Trust Association in 1856 and later became the founding president of Johns Hopkins University.[101] His role shows the society organizing as a legal body more than a decade before it built the Tomb.

Henry L. Stimson and George Leslie Harrison. Stimson (Bones 1888) served as Secretary of War. Harrison, a member of the 1910 delegation, advised him during the Second World War and, according to the Yale guide, transmitted the coded message to Stimson reporting the success of the Trinity atomic test.[102] This is the kind of fact that feeds the rumors: two Bonesmen at the center of the atomic bomb project. It is also the kind of fact that has a plain explanation. Both men were part of the small, Yale-heavy elite that staffed the government at the time, and the record shows them doing their government jobs, not a society's bidding.

Prescott Bush. A member of the Class of 1917, he is named in a 1919 society log entry about the Geronimo story, as quoted in Alexander Matthiessen's centennial history and reported by the Yale Alumni Magazine.[103] He was the father of President George H. W. Bush and grandfather of President George W. Bush. [Not verified: the Bones membership of George H. W. Bush was not checked against a source for this book.]

People Who Shaped the Story From Outside

These people were not members of either group, as far as any record shows. They matter because they told the story, spread it or answered it.

Person	Dates or year active	Role in the story	Source
John Robison	1797	Edinburgh professor; wrote *Proofs of a Conspiracy*	John Robison
Augustin Barruel	1797-1798	French priest in exile; wrote *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*	Augustin Barruel
Jedediah Morse	1798-1799	Massachusetts minister; preached three Illuminati sermons	Vernon Stauffer; Trevor W. McKeown, 2002
Timothy Dwight	1798	President of Yale; anti-Illuminati preacher	Vernon Stauffer

[99] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[100] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[101] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[102] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[103] Kathrin Day Lassila and Mark Alden Branch, "Whose Skull and Bones?".

Person	Dates or year active	Role in the story	Source
George Washington	1798	Former President; wrote that American lodges were not contaminated	G. W. Snyder to George Washington
G. W. Snyder	1798	Sent Robison's book to Washington	G. W. Snyder to George Washington
Lyman Hotchkiss Bagg	1871	Yale graduate; first to record the German-origin tale, and its dismissal	[Lyman Hotchkiss Bagg]
Antony C. Sutton	1983	Author of *America's Secret Establishment*; "Chapter 322" claim	Antony C. Sutton
Pat Robertson	1991	Author of *The New World Order*, a best seller tying the Illuminati to Freemasonry and modern finance	Michael Lind, February 2, 1995
Greg Hill and Kerry Thornley	1965 onward	Authors of the satirical *Principia Discordia*	World Religions and Spirituality Project, May 20, 2013
Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson	1975	Authors of the satirical novel trilogy *Illuminatus!*	World Religions and Spirituality Project, May 20, 2013
Markus Meumann, Martin Mulsow, Olaf Simons	2018 to today	Erfurt researchers working on the Gotha papers	University of Erfurt, April 29, 2026

Part 5: The Wider World of Secret Societies

Chapter 12: A Survey of About Ninety Groups

The Illuminati and Skull and Bones get the headlines, but they are two entries in a very long list. People have formed oath-bound private groups in every age and on every continent. Some were clubs, some were churches within churches, some were revolutionary cells, and some were village institutions older than any written record.

Britannica's definition of a secret society is useful here: an oath-bound society, often devoted to fellowship, moral discipline and mutual help, that hides at least some of its rituals, customs or activities from the public. Britannica adds that secret societies "do not necessarily conceal their membership or existence."[104] By that definition Freemasonry is the largest secret society in the world, with estimated membership in the early 21st century of about two million to more than six million.[105] The Masonic story is told in full in the companion volume.

Appendix C lists 93 groups, with where and when each was founded, whether it is still active, and the source I used to check it. This chapter walks through the main types and pulls out what the list teaches.

A few rules for reading the list

My earlier research notes set out some rules that I kept:

- A worldwide census is impossible. Many traditions have no founding date, and private groups can be hard to document.
- A founding date means the earliest date the records can defend, not the date a group claims.
- "Occult" means documented esoteric teaching or practice, such as ceremonial magic or alchemy. A pledge, an initiation, a private meeting or an emblem does not by itself make a group occult.
- Shared symbols, like a skull or a cross, do not prove that two groups are connected.

Fraternal orders

These are the lodges most Americans have driven past: Freemasons, Odd Fellows, Elks, Shriners and their cousins. They use initiation ceremonies, symbols and private rituals, and most of them are known today mainly for charity. The Orange Order, a Protestant fraternity, was formed in Ireland in 1795 "to maintain the Protestant ascendancy," in Britannica's words.[106] Shriners International was founded on September 26, 1872, in New York City.[107]

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[104] Britannica Editors, "Freemasonry", Encyclopaedia Britannica, undated page, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Freemasonry, accessed November 18, 2026.

[105] Britannica Editors, "Freemasonry".

[106] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young Italy, Ku Klux Klan, Katipunan, Afrikaner Broederbond, Triad, Mau Mau, Rosicrucians, Church of Satan, Order of the Solar Temple, Opus Dei, Mithraism, Eleusinian Mysteries, Poro, Orange Order and Knights of the Golden Circle", Encyclopaedia Britannica, each at https://www.britannica.com/topic/ followed by the name, read November 18, 2026.

[107] Shriners International, "Celebrating 150 Years", undated page, https://www.shrinersinternational.org/en/celebrating-150-years, accessed November 18, 2026.

Esoteric and occult orders

This is the group that most often gets mixed up with the Illuminati, and it is the group where "occult" is an accurate word. It begins with the Rosicrucian manifestos. The *Fama Fraternitatis* appeared in 1614, the *Confessio* in 1615 and *The Chymical Wedding* in 1616. Britannica says their hero, Christian Rosenkreuz, is "generally regarded as a fictional character."[108] Later groups built on that literature, including AMORC, the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis, founded in New York in 1915.[109] The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded in London in 1888, taught ceremonial magic, Qabalah, Tarot and astrology. [Not verified: the Golden Dawn details come from my earlier research notes; the reference page I tried did not load.]

Some of these groups do practice ceremonial magic, and they say so openly. None of them has a documented link to the Bavarian Illuminati, which was an Enlightenment society suspicious of mysticism.

At the far edge are groups that ended in tragedy. The Order of the Solar Temple, started in Geneva in 1984 by Luc Jouret and Joseph Di Mambro, ended in murders and suicides: 53 dead in Canada and Switzerland on October 4 and 5, 1994, 16 more a year later and 5 in March 1997.[110] The Church of Satan was founded on April 30, 1966, by Anton LaVey. Britannica notes that it "did not promote 'evil' but rather humanistic values," which is not what most people expect from the name.[111]

Student societies

Skull and Bones belongs here, alongside the other Yale senior societies, Harvard's final clubs, the Princeton eating clubs, the University of Virginia's Seven Society and the Cambridge Apostles in England. Their common features are selection by invitation, a private meeting place and an alumni network. The Yale Alumni Magazine counted at least 41 senior societies at Yale alone.[112]

Political and revolutionary networks

This is where secrecy had a hard reason behind it: people plotting against governments get arrested. Italy's Carbonari, formed in the south in the early 1800s, "favoured constitutional and representative government."[113] Giuseppe Mazzini founded Young Italy in 1831 while in exile in Marseille.[114] The Katipunan was founded in the Philippines in 1892 to oppose Spanish rule.[115] In Kenya, the Mau Mau movement bound members with ritual oaths during the colonial emergency declared in October 1952.[116]

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[108] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young…". Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[109] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young…".

[110] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young…".

[111] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young…".

[112] Mark Alden Branch, "Open Secrets".

[113] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young…".

[114] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young…".

[115] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young…".

[116] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young…".

Some were dark. The first Ku Klux Klan was organized as a social club by Confederate veterans in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1866, and a second Klan formed in 1915.[117] My earlier research notes said 1865 or 1866; Britannica says 1866, and I use that. The Afrikaner Broederbond, formed in 1918, worked in secret to advance Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa and was renamed the Afrikanerbond in 1994, when it opened membership to all Afrikaans speakers.[118]

And one of them matters directly to the Illuminati story. The Thule Society, founded in Munich in November 1918 by Rudolf von Sebottendorf, mixed nationalist politics with occult and racial ideas and helped promote the founding of the German Workers' Party, the forerunner of the Nazi Party.[119] It is graded as a rumor in Chapter 15.

Traditional societies

In much of West Africa, Central Africa, Melanesia and elsewhere, initiation societies are part of how communities govern themselves. The Poro society of the Upper Guinea coast is one example. Britannica notes that among the Mende of Sierra Leone, membership in the Poro "is necessary for anyone in a position of authority."[120] These traditions have no founding date and no central headquarters, and calling them "secret societies" in the European sense can mislead. They are listed in Appendix C because they appear in many lists, but they belong to the living cultures that keep them.

Ancient mystery cults

The Eleusinian Mysteries, held for Demeter and Kore at Eleusis near Athens, ended in the fourth century AD. The Roman cult of Mithras flourished in the second and third centuries and declined in the fourth.[121] We know a lot about who took part and very little about what they were shown, which is the point of a mystery.

Public organizations that rumors call secret

Three groups come up constantly in Illuminati stories, so it is worth stating what they say about themselves:

- **Bilderberg Meetings** held its first meeting May 29 to 31, 1954, at the Hotel de Bilderberg in Oosterbeek, the Netherlands, and describes itself as an annual three-day forum.[122]
- **The Trilateral Commission** says it was "Founded in 1973 by David Rockefeller," with members from North America, Europe and the Asia Pacific region.[123]
- **The Council on Foreign Relations** says it was "Founded in 1921" and is based in New York.[124]

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[117] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young...".

[118] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young...".

[119] Daniel Wosnitzka, "Die Thule-Gesellschaft", LeMO, Deutsches Historisches Museum, July 29, 2022, https://www.dhm.de/lemo/kapitel/weimarer-republik/antisemitismus/thule-gesellschaft, accessed November 18, 2026.

[120] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young...".

[121] Britannica Editors, "topic pages for Carbonari, Young...".

[122] Bilderberg Meetings, "Brief History", undated page, https://www.bilderbergmeetings.org/background/brief-history, accessed November 18, 2026.

[123] Trilateral Commission, "About", undated page, https://www.trilateral.org/about/, accessed November 18, 2026.

All three publish their own histories. Bilderberg's meetings are private, and the other two have invitation-only membership. That is not the same thing as being secret, and none of them has a documented tie to the Bavarian Illuminati.

What the list teaches



Chart 3. When selected societies were founded, 1614 to 1984. Dates from Appendix C. Allegations are not shown on this timeline; only founding dates that have a source. Made for this book.

Three lessons stand out.

First, secrecy usually has an ordinary reason. Lodges keep ritual private because the ritual is the experience. Revolutionary cells hide because they will be arrested. Student societies keep secrets because secrets are fun when you are twenty-one.

Second, real connections between groups exist, and they can be documented. Cuba's Abakua is one. Scholars Ivor Miller and Mathew Ojong describe it as an institution that people from Africa's Cross River region re-created in Havana in the 1800s, carrying the Ekpe tradition across the Atlantic.[125] Italy's P2 lodge is another kind of example: a real Masonic lodge, exposed in 1981, that an Italian law of 1982 dissolved by name.[126] My earlier notes also tied the Golden Dawn's founders to the English Rosicrucian scene. [Not verified: that link was not re-checked for this book.]

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[124] Council on Foreign Relations, "About CFR", undated page, https://www.cfr.org/about, accessed November 18, 2026.

[125] Ivor Miller and Mathew Ojong, "Ekpe "leopard" society in Africa and the Americas: influence and values of an ancient tradition", Ethnic and Racial Studies (Taylor and Francis), April 2012, https://people.bu.edu/imiller/pubs/Miller-Ojong%202012-s.pdf, accessed November 18, 2026.

[126] Italian Republic, "Law of January 25, 1982, no. 17, article 5", text on Edizioni Europee, https://edizionieuropee.it/LAW/HTML/1/zn11_01_014.html, accessed November 18, 2026.

Third, the documented connection between the two groups this book is about, the Bavarian Illuminati and Skull and Bones, is not there. The Illuminati recruited through Masonic lodges and ended around 1787 in Gotha. Skull and Bones appears in Yale's records in 1832. No verified charter, membership transfer or chain of leadership links them.

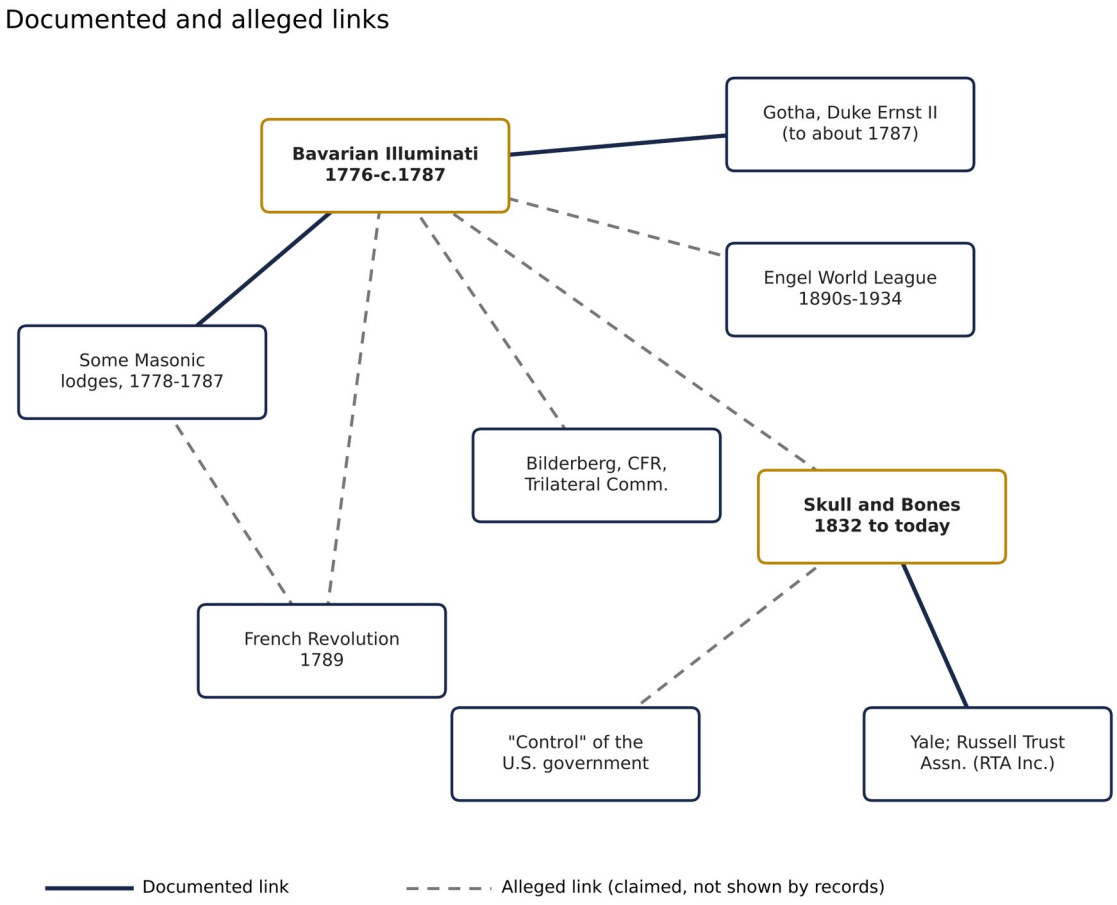


Chart 4. Documented links (solid lines) and alleged links (dashed lines) among the groups in this book. A dashed line means someone has claimed the link; it does not mean the link is real. Made for this book from the evidence in Chapters 1 to 10 and 13 to 15.

Part 6: The Rumors, Traced and Graded

Each claim in the next three chapters gets the same treatment. First a short record: the claim in its most precise form, the earliest place I could trace it, who started it and who spread it, how it traveled, whether it is still around, who it names and whether they ever answered. Then the evidence, and then a verdict from the six-step scale in the Introduction: Supported, Partly supported, Disputed, Unsupported, Contradicted or Unresolved.

A few ground rules. Every claim here is an allegation until the verdict says otherwise. Naming a person or group in a claim does not mean the claim about them is true. When I write "No statement found," it means I looked for a response from the person or group and did not find one. It does not mean they agree.

Chapter 13: Claims About the Illuminati

Claim 1: "The Illuminati was a real secret society."

Claim record	
Precise claim	A secret society called the Illuminati existed, used code names and ciphers, and recruited through Masonic lodges.
Earliest appearance	The order's own papers, 1776 onward; the Bavarian government's printing of seized papers after October 1786
Who started it	Not a rumor; the order itself
Still around?	Yes, as a fact usually mixed in with the rumors
Named	Adam Weishaupt, Adolph von Knigge and others in Chapter 11
Statements	Weishaupt's own letters of 1776

What the evidence shows. Weishaupt's letters, the seized papers, the Erfurt research and every serious reference work agree. The order was founded May 1, 1776, used code names and cipher, organized members in grades and made contact with Masonic lodges from 1778.[127]

Verdict: Supported.

Claim 2: "The Illuminati survived the ban and still exists today."

Claim record	
Precise claim	The Bavarian order went underground after 1785 and has continued without a break to the present.
Earliest appearance	Robison and Barruel, 1797, who argued the order had survived the ban and moved its work into lodges and reading societies
Who started it	John Robison; Augustin Barruel
Who spread it	American preachers in 1798 and 1799; 20th-century conspiracy writers; the internet from the 1990s
Still around?	Yes
Named	The order and, by extension, Freemasonry

[127] Adam Weishaupt, "Two Letters from Adam Weishaupt,...". Electorate of Bavaria, *Einige Originalschriften des Illuminatenordens, welche*.... University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order...". Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

Claim record	
Statements	Not applicable for the original order. The Erfurt researchers, who hold the order's last papers, describe it as "clearly limited in time and space."

What the evidence shows. The order did survive the Bavarian ban, which is the part of the claim with a grain of truth. Under Bode it kept working in Thuringia until about 1787.[128] After that, the record of the original order stops. Weis, who studied the question of survival directly, found only scattered individuals carrying ideas into later radical circles in Mainz, Austria, Hungary and Italy.[129] Groups that used the name later, like Leopold Engel's World League of Illuminati in the 1890s, were new organizations.[130] No record I could find shows a continuous organization from 1787 to today.

Verdict: Unsupported. The order outlived the ban by about two years. No evidence shows it lasted beyond that.

Claim 3: "The Illuminati caused the French Revolution."

Claim record	
Precise claim	The Illuminati, working through Masonic lodges, planned and directed the French Revolution of 1789.
Earliest appearance	Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy* and Barruel's *Memoirs*, both 1797
Who started it	John Robison; Augustin Barruel
Who spread it	Jedediah Morse and other preachers in New England, 1798 and 1799; later conspiracy authors
Still around?	Yes; Britannica notes the order was credited with everything from the French Revolution to the assassination of President Kennedy
Named	The Illuminati, Freemasonry
Statements	Not applicable for the order. Washington, a Mason, wrote in 1798 that American lodges were not spreading Illuminati ideas as societies.

What the evidence shows. The timing alone makes this hard. The order's documented life ended about 1787; the Revolution began in 1789. Neither Robison nor Barruel produced a document showing the order directed events in France. Their case was built by putting the order's radical goals beside the Revolution's radical results and assuming a cause.[131] Weis found only partial continuity between former Illuminati and later Jacobin circles, and only in a few places outside Paris.[132] The Erfurt researchers say the French Revolution reinforced legends that were already forming from the ban and the seized papers.[133]

Verdict: Unsupported.

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[128] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order...".

[129] Eberhard Weis, *Der Illuminatenorden (1776-1786): Unter besonderer...*.

[130] Peter-Robert Koenig, "Illuminati and Templars".

[131] John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy against...*. Augustin Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of...*.

[132] Eberhard Weis, *Der Illuminatenorden (1776-1786): Unter besonderer...*.

[133] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order...".

Claim 4: "The Illuminati infiltrated and took over Freemasonry."

Claim record	
Precise claim	The Illuminati secretly took control of Freemasonry and used it as their vehicle.
Earliest appearance	Robison, 1797, whose title names "Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies"
Who started it	John Robison; Augustin Barruel
Who spread it	Pat Robertson's *The New World Order*, 1991: "Weishaupt chose as his vehicle for infiltration and takeover the established Continental Order of Freemasons"
Still around?	Yes
Named	Freemasonry
Statements	Washington, 1798: no American lodge "contaminated." The United Grand Lodge of England's history makes no mention of the Illuminati. [No direct statement on this claim found from a Grand Lodge.]

What the evidence shows. There is real truth here. Britannica says that from 1778 the order contacted Masonic lodges and in some of them "often managed to gain a commanding position."[134] Its middle grades were Masonic degrees.[135] But "some lodges in German-speaking Europe for a few years" is not "Freemasonry." By the 1770s Freemasonry had grand lodges, rites and thousands of lodges across Europe and the Americas that never heard of Weishaupt. The order itself was perhaps 1,250 to 2,500 people at its height.[136] Robertson's 1991 sentence is the old Robison claim in modern dress.[137]

Verdict: Partly supported. The Illuminati did recruit inside Masonic lodges and gained influence in some. There is no evidence they took over Freemasonry as a whole.

Claim 5: "George Washington warned that the Illuminati had infiltrated American Masonic lodges."

Claim record	
Precise claim	Washington confirmed that the Illuminati had penetrated American Freemasonry.
Earliest appearance	Washington's letter of October 24, 1798, quoted out of context [the first writer to quote it this way was not traced]
Who started it	Not established
Who spread it	Conspiracy websites and books quoting the October letter alone
Still around?	Yes
Named	George Washington; American Freemasonry
Statements	Washington's own letters, September 25 and October 24, 1798

[134] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[135] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[136] FactGrid, "Zwei neue Illuminatenlisten und einige…".

[137] Michael Lind, "Rev. Robertson's Grand International Conspiracy Theory", New York Review of Books, February 2, 1995, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/02/02/rev-robertsons-grand-international-conspiracy-theo/, accessed November 18, 2026.

Claim record

What the evidence shows. Washington said the opposite. In September 1798 he wrote that he had "heard much" about the Illuminati but had "never saw the Book" until Snyder sent it, that he had been in a lodge only "once or twice, within the last thirty years," and that he believed "none of the Lodges in this Country are contaminated."[138] In October he clarified that he did not doubt the doctrines had spread, but did not believe American lodges "as Societies" had spread them, while allowing that individuals "may have done it."[139]

Verdict: Contradicted. Washington's own letters say he did not believe American lodges were spreading Illuminati ideas.

Claim 6: "The eye and pyramid on the dollar bill is an Illuminati symbol."

Claim record

Precise claim	The Illuminati placed their symbol, an eye over a pyramid, on the Great Seal and the one-dollar bill to mark their control of the United States.
Earliest appearance	Not established in this research [Not verified]
Who started it	Not established
Who spread it	Conspiracy books, websites and videos
Still around?	Yes; it is probably the most-repeated piece of Illuminati "evidence"
Named	The Continental Congress; the U.S. Treasury
Statements	The National Archives' history of the seal

What the evidence shows. The design came out of committees of the Continental Congress, not a secret society. The National Archives says the first seal committee, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, was appointed on July 4, 1776. A second committee worked in 1780, and a third in 1782. Charles Thomson's design, revised by William Barton, was adopted on June 20, 1782. The reverse side, with the pyramid, was "never used as a seal," but both sides now appear on the one-dollar bill.[140]

[138] G. W. Snyder to George Washington, "Founders Online".

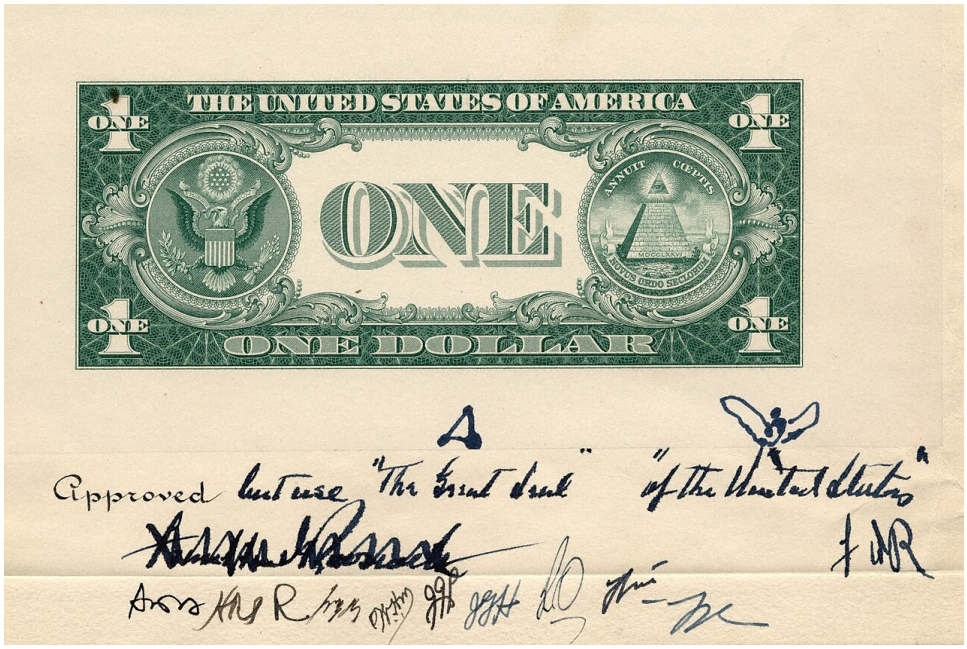
[139] G. W. Snyder to George Washington, "Founders Online".

[140] National Archives, "Original Design of the Great Seal of the United States (1782)", Milestone Documents, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/original-design-of-the-great-seal-of-the-united-states, accessed November 18, 2026.



Pierre Eugene du Simitiere's sketch for the first Great Seal committee, 1776: a shield held by two figures above the motto E Pluribus Unum. No pyramid appears. Library of Congress, via Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

The pyramid's base carries the Roman numerals MDCCLXXVI, which is 1776, the year of the Declaration of Independence. You can check that on any dollar in your wallet. The Illuminati were also founded in 1776, and that coincidence is most of the case. The reverse of the seal did not go on the dollar until the 1935 series. A preliminary design for that bill carries President Franklin Roosevelt's handwritten approval and his requests for changes.



Preliminary design for the back of the 1935 one-dollar bill, the first to include the Great Seal, with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's note of approval. Edward M. Weeks, Bureau of Engraving and Printing, 1935, via Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

[Not verified: the 1935 date and Roosevelt's role are taken from the Wikimedia Commons record for the design shown above, which credits a State Department exhibition. The National Archives page I read does not give a date for the bill.]

Verdict: Contradicted. The seal was designed by committees of Congress from 1776 to 1782 and adopted in public. The Bavarian order had no members in the Continental Congress that any record shows.

Claim 7: "The Illuminati were Satanists or occultists."

Claim record	
Precise claim	The Bavarian Illuminati practiced devil worship or occult magic.
Earliest appearance	Barruel's 1797 charge of a conspiracy against all religion was about atheism, not devil worship. The satanic layer came later; Leo Taxil's 1890s hoax about "Palladism," a supposed Luciferian high Masonry, is the best-documented source of modern Luciferian claims about secret societies.
Who started it	Barruel (anti-religion); Leo Taxil (Luciferian hoax)
Who spread it	Taxil's readers in the 1890s; later writers and websites
Still around?	Yes
Named	The Illuminati; Freemasonry
Statements	Taxil publicly confessed the hoax on April 19, 1897.

What the evidence shows. The order's goals were the opposite of occult. Britannica describes Weishaupt's aim as replacing Christianity "with a religion of reason," a goal of the radical Enlightenment.[141] My earlier research notes found no verified occult worship in the record. The Luciferian story comes from somewhere else entirely. In the 1890s the French writer Leo Taxil (Gabriel Jogand-Pages) published a long series of "exposes" of a Luciferian high Masonry he called Palladism. On April 19, 1897, before an audience in Paris, he admitted he had made it up, including his star witness "Diana Vaughan," who turned out to be his typist. "I am admitting my crime," he said. "Palladism, now, is dead, very dead."[142] The companion volume covers the Taxil hoax and Albert Pike's "Lucifer" passage in detail.

Verdict: Unsupported for the Illuminati. The best-known source of Luciferian claims about secret societies is a confessed hoax.

Chapter 14: Claims About Skull and Bones

Claim 8: "Skull and Bones members have included presidents and other powerful officials."

Claim record	
Precise claim	Members of Skull and Bones have gone on to hold the highest offices in the United States.
Earliest appearance	Not a rumor; documented in Yale's own archive guide
Named	William Howard Taft, Robert A. Taft, Henry L. Stimson, George Leslie Harrison, George W. Bush and others
Statements	Yale archive guide, 2015 to 2026

[141] Britannica Editors, "illuminati: designation for various groups".

[142] Edmond Frank, "Leo Taxil's confession (report of the April 19, 1897 lecture)", L'Illustration, no. 2827, May 1, 1897, trans. Suzanne D'Aoust, posted by the Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon, 1997, https://freemasonry.bcy.ca/texts/taxil_confession.html, accessed November 18, 2026.

What the evidence shows. The Yale guide lists William Howard Taft (Bones 1878), Henry L. Stimson (Bones 1888), Senator Robert A. Taft and New York Fed president George Leslie Harrison as members.[143] Salon reported that George W. Bush joined Bones.[144]

Verdict: Supported. What this proves is that Yale, and Bones in particular, produced a lot of powerful people. It does not prove the society directed what they did in office; that is Claim 11.

Claim 9: "Skull and Bones is Chapter 322 of a German secret society, the Illuminati."

Claim record	
Precise claim	Skull and Bones was founded as a branch of a German secret society, usually said to be the Bavarian Illuminati, and the number 322 marks it as that society's chapter.
Earliest appearance	A "popular college tradition" of a German university origin is recorded in Bagg's *Four Years at Yale*, 1871. The "Chapter 322" wording appears in Sutton, 1983.
Who started it	Unknown Yale students, before 1871 (German university origin); Antony C. Sutton (German secret society chapter)
Who spread it	Sutton; later Illuminati writers who read "German secret society" as "Illuminati"; the internet
Still around?	Yes
Named	Skull and Bones; the Illuminati
Statements	No statement found from Skull and Bones on the origin of 322.

What the evidence shows. The German-origin story was already being laughed off in 1871. Bagg wrote that "old neutral graduates" dismissed it "as absurd."[145] Sutton's 1983 claim rests on his assertion of unpublished material he did not show in the passages I read.[146] The dates do not line up: the Illuminati's last documented activity was about 1787, and the Bones constitution is dated 1832.[147] No charter, letter or membership record links Yale to Bavaria.

Verdict: Unsupported.

Claim 10: "Skull and Bones members stole Geronimo's skull, and it is in the Tomb."

Claim record	
Precise claim	In 1918 Bonesmen, including Prescott Bush, dug up the skull of the Apache leader Geronimo at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and it is kept in the society's building.
Earliest appearance	A letter of June 7, 1918, from Winter Mead to F. Trubee Davison, found in Yale's library and reported in 2006
Who started it	The society's own members, in their own papers

[143] William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[144] Jacques Leslie, "Smirk from the past".

[145] (Lyman Hotchkiss Bagg), *Four Years at Yale, by....*

[146] Antony C. Sutton, *America's Secret Establishment: An Introduction....*

[147] University of Erfurt, "250 Years of the Order...". William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

Claim record	
Who spread it	The Yale Alumni Magazine, 2006; news coverage; the 2009 lawsuit
Still around?	Yes
Named	Prescott Bush, Ellery James, Henry Neil Mallon, Skull and Bones
Statements	No statement found from Skull and Bones. Jonathan Bush met with Apache leader Ned Anderson in 1986, per the Yale Alumni Magazine.

What the evidence shows. This is the strongest rumor in the book, because the evidence comes from inside. A member's 1918 letter claims the skull was taken, and a 1919 society log entry, as quoted in a centennial history, names three members as involved.[148] But the Yale Alumni Magazine itself calls the letter "not proof."[149] Boasting among club members is not the same thing as a skull. The descendants' 2009 lawsuit was dismissed in 2010 on legal grounds, sovereign immunity and the 1990 cutoff in NAGPRA, without any finding on the facts.[150] Nobody outside the society has been able to examine what the Tomb holds.

Verdict: Unresolved. The society's own papers show members claimed to have the skull. Whether they did has never been tested.

Claim 11: "Skull and Bones secretly runs the United States government."

Claim record	
Precise claim	Skull and Bones, as an organization, directs U.S. policy through members placed in government, finance and intelligence.
Earliest appearance	Sutton, *America's Secret Establishment*, 1983, is the earliest book-length version I could trace.
Who started it	Antony C. Sutton
Who spread it	Later books, talk radio, websites
Still around?	Yes
Named	Skull and Bones; members who held office
Statements	No statement found from Skull and Bones.

What the evidence shows. The documented part is that members have held high office (Claim 8). What would be needed to show the society runs the government is evidence that it gives orders and members carry them out: minutes, letters, testimony, anything. I found none. The society's public finances show a well-off nonprofit with about $17 million in assets that spends mainly on property upkeep and taxes.[151] Fifteen new members a year, many of whom go into ordinary careers, is a network. It is not a government.[152]

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[148] Kathrin Day Lassila and Mark Alden Branch, "Whose Skull and Bones?".

[149] Kathrin Day Lassila and Mark Alden Branch, "Whose Skull and Bones?".

[150] Martha Neil, "Yale Secret Society Skull and...".

[151] ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer, "RTA Incorporated, New Haven, CT,...". William Massa, "Guide to the Russell Trust...".

[152] Mark Alden Branch, "Open Secrets".

Verdict: Unsupported.

Chapter 15: Modern World-Control Claims

Claim 12: "The Illuminati controls the world today through a New World Order of bankers and think tanks."

Claim record

Precise claim	A hidden Illuminati elite runs world affairs through groups like the Bilderberg Meetings, the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations, aiming at a single world government.
Earliest appearance	The pieces go back to Robison and Barruel, 1797. The modern "New World Order" version was made a best seller by Pat Robertson's *The New World Order*, 1991.
Who started it	Robison and Barruel (Illuminati plot); 20th-century writers including Nesta Webster and Eustace Mullins (banking and Jewish elements); Pat Robertson (popular synthesis)
Who spread it	Robertson's book, a New York Times best seller; talk radio; the internet
Still around?	Yes. A 2013 national poll of 1,247 registered voters found about 3 in 10 agreed a secretive power elite was conspiring to rule the world.
Named	Bilderberg Meetings, Trilateral Commission, Council on Foreign Relations, international bankers
Statements	Each group publishes its own history and purpose (Chapter 12). No statement found from any of them responding to the Illuminati claim.

What the evidence shows. Robertson's 1991 book argued that "Weishaupt chose as his vehicle for infiltration and takeover the established Continental Order of Freemasons" and carried the plot into modern finance and diplomacy.[153] Reviewing it in the New York Review of Books, Michael Lind traced the argument's roots. Jacob Heilbrunn followed up by showing that Robertson's argument rested on Nesta Webster's books and on Eustace Mullins's *Secrets of the Federal Reserve*, sources that tied the Illuminati to Jewish bankers and Bolsheviks.[154] The three named organizations are real and publish their founding dates.[155] Private meetings of powerful people happen, and it is fair to ask what is said at them. But a private meeting is not proof of world control, and none of these groups has a documented link to the Bavarian order, which ended about 130 to 190 years before they were founded. The persistence of the belief is documented: about 3 in 10 voters in a 2013 poll.[156]

Verdict: Unsupported.

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[153] Michael Lind, "Rev. Robertson's Grand International Conspiracy...".

[154] Jacob Heilbrunn, "His Anti-Semitic Sources", New York Review of Books, April 20, 1995, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/04/20/his-anti-semitic-sources/, accessed November 18, 2026.

[155] Bilderberg Meetings, "Brief History". Trilateral Commission, "About". Council on Foreign Relations, "About CFR".

[156] Washington Times, "Conspiracy poll: 3 in 10 believe secretive power elite is plotting world rule", April 3, 2013, https://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/apr/3/conspiracy-poll-3-10-believe-secretive-power-elite/, accessed November 18, 2026.

Claim 13: "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion reveal the real plan behind the Illuminati."

Claim record	
Precise claim	A secret Jewish leadership is plotting world rule, as shown in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and the Illuminati are its tool.
Earliest appearance	The *Protocols* were first printed in the Russian newspaper Znamia in 1903, and as an appendix to a book by Sergei Nilus in 1905.
Who started it	Anonymous forgers in the Russian Empire
Who spread it	Henry Ford's Dearborn Independent and *The International Jew*, more than 500,000 copies in 16 languages; Nazi publishers, 22 editions from 1919 to 1938
Still around?	Yes
Named	The Jewish people
Statements	The Times of London exposed the forgery on August 17, 1921; a Swiss court in Bern in 1935 called it "ridiculous nonsense."

What the evidence shows. This claim is not about the Illuminati as a historical group. It is included because modern Illuminati stories often borrow from it, and because Heilbrunn showed that Robertson's sources did exactly that.[157] The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum documents the forgery's history: first printed in 1903 and 1905, exposed by Philip Graves in The Times in 1921 as copied from Maurice Joly's *Dialogue in Hell* of 1864, and judged by a Bern court in 1935.[158] It was spread in the United States by Henry Ford and in Germany by the Nazis, and Hitler drew on it.[159]

Verdict: Contradicted. The *Protocols* are a proven forgery.

Claim 14: "The Thule Society, a secret occult order, created the Nazi Party."

Claim record	
Precise claim	An occult secret society, the Thule Society, created the Nazi Party and guided Hitler.
Earliest appearance	Not established in this research
Who started it	Not established
Who spread it	Popular books and documentaries on the "occult Reich" [not read for this book]
Still around?	Yes
Named	Thule Society; Rudolf von Sebottendorf; early Nazis
Statements	Not applicable; the society declined in the early 1920s.

What the evidence shows. The Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin documents the Thule Society. It was founded in Munich in November 1918 by Rudolf von Sebottendorf as a "study group for Germanic antiquity," mixing nationalist politics with occult-pagan racial ideas. It was anti-republican and

[157] Jacob Heilbrunn, "His Anti-Semitic Sources".

[158] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "An Antisemitic Conspiracy: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion", Holocaust Encyclopedia, last edited April 23, 2026, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/protocols-of-the-elders-of-zion, accessed November 18, 2026.

[159] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "An Antisemitic Conspiracy: The Protocols...".

antisemitic, and it promoted the building of the German Workers' Party (DAP), which became the Nazi Party in 1920. Its members and guests included Karl Harrer, Rudolf Hess, Hans Frank, Gottfried Feder and Dietrich Eckart. It had up to 1,500 members, used a swastika with a sword as its emblem, and its newspaper became the Voelkischer Beobachter, the Nazi Party paper. Its fighters also helped crush the short-lived Munich Soviet Republic in 1919.[160] The museum's article does not name Hitler as a member.

Verdict: Partly supported. The Thule Society was real, racist and occult-minded, and it helped launch the party that became the Nazi Party. The record does not show that it created the party alone or guided Hitler.

Claim 15: "Famous entertainers are Illuminati members, and their hand signs prove it."

Claim record	
Precise claim	Musicians, actors and other celebrities are members of the Illuminati and signal it with hand gestures, symbols and lyrics.
Earliest appearance	Not traced to a single origin. The modern Illuminati joke-culture traces to the Discordian movement's "Operation Mindfuck," begun in 1968, and the novel trilogy *Illuminatus!* in 1975.
Who started it	Not established. The satirical layer: Greg Hill, Kerry Thornley, Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea.
Who spread it	The early internet in the 1990s; social media; music videos and fan forums
Still around?	Yes. The Week reported that "Illuminati" was a top conspiracy hashtag in 2024.
Named	Many living entertainers. They are not named here because no record supports the claim about any of them, and repeating names spreads the rumor.
Statements	Not collected for this book, since no individual is named here.

What the evidence shows. Part of the modern Illuminati craze began as a joke. The Discordians, whose *Principia Discordia* first circulated in 1965, launched what they called Operation Mindfuck in 1968, deliberately spreading Illuminati stories to see what would happen. Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson turned that into the *Illuminatus!* trilogy, published in 1975.[161] The Week describes Illuminati theories as among the first to go viral on the early internet in the 1990s.[162] A triangle made with the hands, a single eye on an album cover or an owl in a video is a design choice. It is not a membership record, and the order whose name is being used has not existed for well over two centuries.

Verdict: Unsupported.

The tally

Verdict	Number of claims	Claims
Supported	2	1, 8

[160] Daniel Wosnitzka, "Die Thule-Gesellschaft".

[161] World Religions and Spirituality Project, "Discordianism (timeline)", May 20, 2013, https://wrldrels.org/?p=3185, accessed November 18, 2026.

[162] The Week UK, "What is the Illuminati and what does it control?", February 4, 2015, updated September 18, 2026, https://theweek.com/62399/what-is-the-illuminati-and-what-does-it-control, accessed November 18, 2026.

Verdict	Number of claims	Claims
Partly supported	2	4, 14
Disputed	0	-
Unsupported	7	2, 3, 7, 9, 11, 12, 15
Contradicted	3	5, 6, 13
Unresolved	1	10

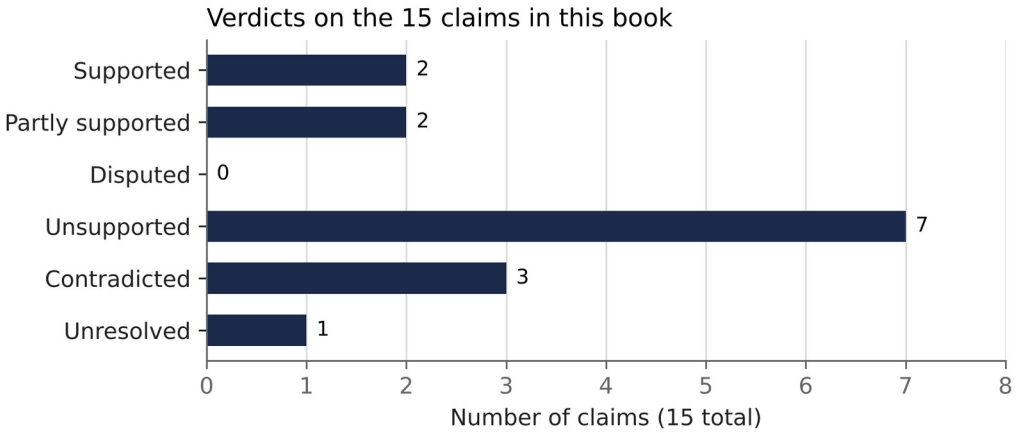


Chart 5. How the 15 claims in this book were graded. Data from the table above. Made for this book.

Conclusion: What the Records Show

Chapter 16: The History Is Better Than the Legend

Here is what the records show, in plain terms.

The Bavarian Illuminati was a real secret society. Adam Weishaupt founded it on May 1, 1776, to spread Enlightenment ideas through a disciplined network of educated men. It used code names, ciphers and grades, and it recruited inside Masonic lodges. At its height it had somewhere between about 1,250 and 2,500 members, including a ruling duke and Germany's greatest writer. The Bavarian government banned it in 1785, seized its papers in 1786 and printed them to discredit it. It carried on quietly from Gotha until about 1787. Then the record of the original order stops.

Skull and Bones is a real Yale senior society. Its constitution is dated 1832. It incorporated as the Russell Trust Association in 1856, contracted for its Tomb in 1866, and today files public tax returns as RTA Incorporated, with about $17 million in assets. It taps about fifteen seniors a year, and it has produced presidents, a chief justice, cabinet officers and senators. Its own papers record members boasting that they had Geronimo's skull, and that question has never been settled.

What the records do not show is any link between the two. The Illuminati's trail ends 45 years before Bones begins. The German-origin story was student gossip by 1871 and was already being called absurd. The "Chapter 322" claim appeared in 1983 without documents behind it.

Most of the rest of the Illuminati legend can be traced to a few books. Robison and Barruel in 1797 built a world conspiracy out of a dead club and a revolution. American preachers spread it in 1798, and it collapsed within two years. Leo Taxil invented Luciferian Masonry in the 1890s and then confessed. Forgers in the Russian Empire produced the *Protocols*. Writers like Nesta Webster and Eustace Mullins tied the Illuminati to Jewish bankers, and Pat Robertson put it all in a 1991 best seller. Satirists in the 1960s and 1970s turned it into a joke, and the internet turned the joke back into a belief.

Of the fifteen claims graded in this book, two are supported, two are partly supported, seven are unsupported, three are contradicted by the records and one is unresolved.

Why it matters

You might ask, "If it's just a story, what's the harm?" Fair question. The harm is in where the story leads. The Illuminati legend has been used again and again to point a finger at somebody: Freemasons in 1798, Catholics and Masons in the 1890s, Jewish people from 1903 on, and today anyone famous enough to be suspected. The *Protocols* were not harmless fun. They were used to justify murder.

There is a simpler harm too. A story that explains everything teaches people to stop looking. If a secret elite controls the world, then there is no point in reading the records, following the money or holding real officials to account for real decisions. The records are where the actual power is written down: tax filings, court rulings, committee minutes, letters. That is where I looked for this book, and it is where I would encourage you to look.

What I could not settle

- Whether the Geronimo skull is in the Tomb. Only Skull and Bones can answer that, and it has not.

- The full membership of the Bavarian order. The scholarly lists are still growing, and the Gotha papers are only partly studied. The Wallstein book due in 2027 may change some details in Part 1.
- Who first linked the dollar-bill eye to the Illuminati. I could not trace the earliest appearance in print.
- William Huntington Russell's role as co-founder of Skull and Bones, which is widely reported but not in the Yale records I could open.

If you have a primary source that answers any of these, I would like to see it. My address is on the copyright page.

Check It Yourself: Five Questions for Any Claim

You will hear new stories about secret societies long after this book is printed. Here are the five questions I used on every claim in this book. They work on the next one too.

1. **Where did it first appear?** Find the oldest source you can, not the newest post. A story that has been repeated a thousand times still has one first teller. The "Chapter 322" story about Skull and Bones traces to a 1983 book, and the German-origin tale behind it to a book a Yale graduate published in 1871.
2. **Who is saying it, and what do they gain?** A group speaking about itself, a scholar, a newspaper and a book seller all have different reasons to say what they say. That doesn't make any of them wrong, but it tells you how hard to check.
3. **Is there a record from the time?** Letters, court papers, minutes, laws and receipts beat memories written down years later. The Great Seal is a good example: the National Archives record shows three committees of Congress working on it from 1776 to 1782.
4. **Did the people named ever answer?** Look for what the accused person or group said. George Washington's own letters answer the claim made in his name, and Leo Taxil stood up in Paris in 1897 and admitted his Luciferian Masonry was a hoax. If you can't find a statement, say "no statement found" rather than guessing.
5. **Do the dates line up?** A lot of famous claims fall apart on the calendar alone. When a claim needs a group to be somewhere before it existed, or after it was shut down, the claim has a problem.

If a claim fails two or more of these, treat it as a rumor until someone shows you a record. For a full workbook on this kind of checking, see *How to Fact Check Anything Yourself*, also in the Fact Check Series.

Appendix A: Chronology

Events are documented unless marked **[Allegation]** or **[Rumor first appears]**. Each line points to the chapter where the source is cited.

Date	Event	Chapter
1717	First Grand Lodge of Freemasons founded in London	2
1748	Adam Weishaupt born	1
May 1, 1776	Weishaupt founds the Order of the Illuminati in Ingolstadt	1
July 4, 1776	First Great Seal committee appointed (Franklin, Jefferson, Adams)	13
Sept. and Oct. 1776	Weishaupt's recruiting letters to Massenhausen	1
1778 onward	Illuminati begin making contact with Masonic lodges	2
1780	Crisis in the order; Knigge recruited	2
June 20, 1782	Congress adopts the Great Seal	13
Jan. 29, 1783	Duke Ernst II of Gotha joins the order	2
Feb. 11, 1783	Goethe joins the order	2
1784	Knigge leaves after a quarrel with Weishaupt	2
March 2, 1785	Bavarian persecution of the order begins	3
Oct. 11-12, 1786	Zwack's house searched at Landshut; papers later printed by the government	3
About 1787	Last documented activity of the order, under Bode in Gotha	3
1789	French Revolution begins	4
1797	Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy* and Barruel's *Memoirs* published **[Rumor first appears: Illuminati caused the Revolution]**	4
May 9, 1798	Jedediah Morse's fast-day sermons in Boston and Charlestown	5
Aug. 22, 1798	Snyder sends Robison's book to	5

Date	Event	Chapter
	Washington	
Sept. 25 and Oct. 24, 1798	Washington replies that American lodges are not contaminated	5
About 1800	American Illuminati scare fades	5
1830	Weishaupt dies	1
1832	Skull and Bones constitution dated	6
1833	Alphonso Taft, called a founder, is a member of Bones	6
1856	Russell Trust Association incorporated by Daniel Coit Gilman	6
1866	Contract to build the Tomb	6
About 1865	Skull and Bones wax seals with "322"	7
1871	Bagg records the German-origin tale and its dismissal **[Rumor first appears: German origin of Bones]**	8
1884	George Ingersoll Wood's reminiscences on the club's origins	6
1888	Henry L. Stimson in Bones	11
1890s	Leo Taxil's "Palladism" hoax **[Allegation: Luciferian Masonry]**; Engel's World League of Illuminati	13
April 19, 1897	Taxil confesses the hoax in Paris	13
1903 and 1905	*Protocols of the Elders of Zion* first printed **[Forgery]**	15
1910	Skull and Bones delegation album, 15 members	11
June 7, 1918	Mead letter to Davison about Geronimo's skull **[Allegation]**	9
November 1918	Thule Society founded in Munich	15
1921	Council on Foreign Relations founded	12
Aug. 17, 1921	The Times exposes the *Protocols* as a forgery	15

Date	Event	Chapter
1934	Gestapo closes what is left of Engel's group	3
1935	Bern court rules on the *Protocols*	15
May 29-31, 1954	First Bilderberg meeting	12
1965	*Principia Discordia* first circulates	15
1968	Discordians begin "Operation Mindfuck"	15
1973	Trilateral Commission founded	12
1975	*Illuminatus!* trilogy published	15
September 1977	Rosenbaum's Esquire article on Skull and Bones	8
1983	Sutton's *America's Secret Establishment* **[Rumor first appears in print: Bones as Chapter 322 of a German society]**	8
Late 1980s	Bode's "Swedish Chest" archive rediscovered	3
1991	Pat Robertson's *The New World Order*	15
2006	Yale Alumni Magazine reports the Geronimo letter	9
July 27, 2010	Geronimo descendants' lawsuit dismissed on legal grounds	9
April 3, 2013	Poll: about 3 in 10 voters believe a secretive elite is conspiring to rule the world	15
June 2015	Yale publishes the Russell Trust Association records guide	6
January 28, 2026	RTA Incorporated files its fiscal 2025 tax return	7
April 29, 2026	Erfurt announces new Gotha research for the order's 250th anniversary	3
2027	Wallstein book on the Illuminati due	3

Appendix B: Claims and Evidence

#	Claim	Strongest evidence	Earliest traceable appearance	Verdict
1	The Illuminati was a real secret society	Weishaupt's letters; seized papers; Erfurt research	1776	Supported
2	The Illuminati survived and still exists	Gotha research ends about 1787; Weis 1987	Robison and Barruel, 1797	Unsupported
3	The Illuminati caused the French Revolution	Order ended about 1787; Weis 1987	Robison and Barruel, 1797	Unsupported
4	The Illuminati took over Freemasonry	Britannica: contact with lodges from 1778, influence in some	Robison, 1797	Partly supported
5	Washington warned of Illuminati in American lodges	Washington's letters of Sept. 25 and Oct. 24, 1798	Not traced	Contradicted
6	The dollar's eye and pyramid are an Illuminati symbol	National Archives seal history, 1776-1782	Not traced	Contradicted
7	The Illuminati were Satanists or occultists	Britannica on the order's aims; Taxil's 1897 confession	Barruel 1797 (anti-religion); Taxil 1890s (Luciferian)	Unsupported
8	Bonesmen have held top offices	Yale archive guide; Salon	Not a rumor	Supported
9	Bones is Chapter 322 of a German society	Bagg 1871; date gap 1787 to 1832	Bagg 1871 (German origin); Sutton 1983 (Chapter 322)	Unsupported
10	Bonesmen took Geronimo's skull	1918 letter; 1919 log as quoted; 2010 dismissal on legal grounds	Letter of June 7, 1918	Unresolved
11	Bones runs the U.S. government	Public tax filings; no records of direction	Sutton 1983	Unsupported
12	The Illuminati rule	Group self-	Robison and	Unsupported

#	Claim	Strongest evidence	Earliest traceable appearance	Verdict
	through a New World Order	histories; NYRB reviews of Robertson	Barruel 1797; Robertson 1991	
13	The *Protocols* reveal the real plan	US Holocaust Memorial Museum; Times 1921; Bern 1935	Znamia, 1903	Contradicted
14	The Thule Society created the Nazi Party	Deutsches Historisches Museum	Not traced	Partly supported
15	Entertainers are Illuminati members	Discordian origins; no membership records	Not traced	Unsupported

Appendix C: Catalogue of Secret and Private Societies

This catalogue started as my earlier research notes and covers 93 publicly traceable societies, regional traditions, private clubs, historical comparisons and purported groups. Every entry was re-checked for this book against at least one outside source read on November 18, 2026. The last column names the source; the full source list for the entries re-checked in the final pass is at the end of this appendix. "Partly re-checked" means part of the entry could not be confirmed, and the text says which part. Where a re-check changed an entry, the corrected version is shown.

Founding dates give the earliest date the records can defend. "Purported" means the group is claimed to exist or to have existed in the form described, but the claim is not established.

Group	Founded	Status	Checked for this book?
Bavarian Illuminati	1776 ; Ingolstadt, Bavaria	Historical. Banned in Bavaria 1785; documented activity in Gotha to about 1787.	Re-checked (Erfurt, FactGrid, Britannica)
Freemasonry	Early modern Britain ; first English Grand Lodge traditionally dated 1717, London	Active internationally through separate jurisdictions.	Re-checked (UGLE, Britannica)
Prince Hall Freemasonry	Boston ; Prince Hall and peers initiated in 1775, English charter dated 1784	Active through multiple jurisdictions.	Re-checked (Library of Congress)
Scottish Rite of Freemasonry	1801 ; first Supreme Council, Charleston, South Carolina	Active in multiple jurisdictions.	Re-checked (Scottish Rite)
Shriners International	1872; New York City (September 26, 1872)	Active.	Re-checked (Shriners International)
Independent Order of Odd Fellows	April 26, 1819 ; Baltimore, organized by Thomas Wildey, with earlier British roots	Active.	Re-checked (Independent Order of Odd Fellows)
Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in America	1843 ; New York City, Philomathean Lodge No. 646, under an English charter	Historical lodges and surviving bodies. A 2012 university source says the order still operates, based in Philadelphia.	Re-checked (VCU Libraries Social Welfare History Project)
Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks	February 16, 1868 ; New York City, from the Jolly Corks	Active.	Re-checked (Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks)

Group	Founded	Status	Checked for this book?
Orange Order	1795 ; County Armagh, Ireland	Active through national and local bodies.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Rosicrucian manifestos and the earliest claimed brotherhood	1614-1616 ; German lands; Fama published in Kassel in 1614	Historical literary movement. The manifestos' original brotherhood has no verified continuous roster.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia	1867 ; England	Active.	Re-checked (Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia)
Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn	1888 ; London	Original order split in 1900 and again in 1903.	Re-checked (AIM25 archive catalogue)
Stella Matutina	About 1903 ; England, founded by R. W. Felkin after the Golden Dawn split	Historical order.	Re-checked (Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology; AIM25 archive catalogue)
Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.)	Early 1900s ; German-speaking Europe; formation dates depend on the milestone	Active in contemporary jurisdictions.	Re-checked (U.S. Grand Lodge)
AMORC (Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis)	1915 ; United States, under H. Spencer Lewis	Active internationally.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Martinist Order of Papus	1891, when a Supreme Council was formed ; France, around the French esotericist Papus	Original organization fragmented. Several branches are active.	Re-checked (Traditional Martinist Order)
Builders of the Adytum (B.O.T.A.)	1922 by its own account ; United States, associated with Paul Foster Case	Active.	Re-checked (Builders of the Adytum)
Church of Satan	1966; San Francisco (April 30, 1966)	Active, publicly identifiable organization.	Re-checked (Britannica; city not re-checked)
Temple of Set	1975 ; San Francisco, following a split from the Church of Satan	Publicly documented modern initiatory order.	Re-checked (Gale Encyclopedia of the Unusual and Unexplained)
Order of the Solar	1984; Geneva,	Historical. 74 deaths in	Re-checked (Britannica)

Group	Founded	Status	Checked for this book?
Temple	Switzerland, by Luc Jouret and Joseph Di Mambro	1994, 1995 and 1997. Current continuation unverified.	
Reuss-Engel Illuminati revival	1890s ; Germany, notably Berlin and Dresden	Historical. Austrian branch 1896; closed by the Gestapo 1934. Unbroken continuity from Bavaria is unverified.	Partly re-checked (Koenig 1995)
Skull and Bones	1832 ; Yale, New Haven, Connecticut	Active. RTA Incorporated filed a Form 990 for fiscal year 2025 on January 28, 2026.	Re-checked (Yale archive, ProPublica)
Scroll and Key	Early 1840s ; Yale; often dated 1842, with early records also dated 1843	Established institution. Recent cohort unverified.	Existence re-checked (Yale Alumni Magazine); dates not re-checked
Wolf's Head	1883 ; Yale; began as the Third Society	Established institution. Recent cohort unverified.	Existence re-checked (Yale Alumni Magazine); dates not re-checked
Berzelius	1848 ; Yale's scientific-school community	Historically documented. Recent cohort unverified.	Existence re-checked (Yale Alumni Magazine); dates not re-checked
Book and Snake	1863 ; Yale's scientific-school community	Historically documented and reported in modern Yale coverage. Recent cohort unverified.	Existence re-checked (Yale Alumni Magazine); dates not re-checked
Elihu	1903 ; Yale	Established institution. Recent cohort unverified.	Existence re-checked (Yale Alumni Magazine); dates not re-checked
Manuscript Society	1952 ; Yale	Established institution. Recent cohort unverified.	Existence re-checked (Yale Alumni Magazine); dates not re-checked
Cambridge Apostles	1820 ; Cambridge, England, founded by George Tomlinson	Historically documented. Current operations and roster unverified.	Re-checked (King's College)
Porcellian Club	1791 by tradition ;	Longstanding private	Re-checked (The

Group	Founded	Status	Checked for this book?
	Harvard, Cambridge, Massachusetts	club. Current internal activity unverified.	Harvard Crimson)
Ivy Club	1879 ; Princeton, New Jersey	Active eating club.	Re-checked (Princeton Eating Clubs)
Seven Society	Public record begins around 1905 ; University of Virginia, Charlottesville	University documents public gifts. Private roster and founding details remain undisclosed.	Re-checked (Virginia Magazine)
Z Society	1892, as the Zeta Ribbon Society ; University of Virginia	University documents the tradition. Current roster private.	Re-checked (Virginia Magazine)
IMP Society	1913 under the IMP name ; University of Virginia; grew out of the Hot Feet, about 1902-1903	University documents the tradition. Current roster private.	Re-checked (Virginia Magazine)
Bohemian Club and Bohemian Grove	Club founded 1872 ; San Francisco; retreat in Sonoma County, California	Private club. Grove and historical gatherings publicly documented.	Re-checked (San Francisco Public Library)
Carbonari	Early 19th century ; Southern Italy, especially the Kingdom of Naples	Historical, with offshoots elsewhere.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Young Italy (Giovine Italia)	1831 ; Marseille, founded by Giuseppe Mazzini	Historical.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Filiki Etaireia (Society of Friends)	1814 ; Odesa, then Russian Empire, now Ukraine	Historical. Central to preparations for the Greek uprising of 1821.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Irish Republican Brotherhood	March 17, 1858 ; Dublin, founded by James Stephens	Historical. Disbanded in 1924.	Re-checked (University College Dublin; UCD Archives)
Fenian Brotherhood	Late 1850s, the name in use by 1859 ; United States, founded by John O'Mahony, linked to organizers in Ireland	Historical. Britannica says the movement had largely died out by the early 1870s.	Re-checked (Britannica; Dictionary of Canadian Biography)
Molly Maguires (Pennsylvania)	Active about 1862-1876 ; Pennsylvania coalfields; the name had Irish precedents	Historical.	Re-checked (Britannica)

Group	Founded	Status	Checked for this book?
Union of Salvation	February 1816 ; St. Petersburg, Russian Empire	Historical. Replaced by the Union of Welfare in 1817 or 1818 (sources differ).	Re-checked (Encyclopedia of Ukraine; Britannica)
Narodnaya Volya (People's Will)	1879 ; Russian Empire, formed after a split in Land and Liberty	Historical. Crushed by police after it assassinated Alexander II in 1881.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Black Hand (Unification or Death)	1911 ; operated from Belgrade, Kingdom of Serbia	Historical. Leadership broken after the 1917 Salonika trial.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Committee of Union and Progress (CUP)	1889 precursor ; Constantinople, Ottoman Empire	Historical. Dissolved in 1918 after becoming a ruling party.	Re-checked (Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa; Britannica)
Al-Fatat (Young Arab Society)	1911 ; founded by Arab students in Paris; offices moved to Beirut in 1913	Historical. Ended as a structured organization after 1920.	Re-checked (Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa)
Al-'Ahd (Covenant Society)	1913 ; Iraqi and Syrian officers in the Ottoman army (place not confirmed)	Historical. Little is recorded about how it was formed.	Partly re-checked (Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa)
Propaganda Due (P2)	A Masonic lodge with 19th-century roots; rebuilt under Licio Gelli in the 1970s	Historical. Exposed in 1981 and dissolved by law in 1982.	Re-checked (Italian Republic; Il Fatto Quotidiano)
Sons of Liberty	Summer 1765 ; British North America, with roots in Boston's Loyal Nine	Historical.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Knights of the Golden Circle	1859; United States, founded by George W. L. Bickley	Historical.	Re-checked (Britannica gives 1859)
Ku Klux Klan (successive organizations)	1866; Pulaski, Tennessee; second Klan 1915	Original Klan ended. The 1915 organization and later groups have separate histories.	Re-checked (Britannica gives 1866, not 1865; Georgia for 1915 not re-checked)
Lautaro Lodge (Logia Lautaro)	1812 ; Buenos Aires, founded by San Martin, Alvear and Zapiola	Historical. Lost most of its influence by 1820.	Re-checked (Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture)

Group	Founded	Status	Checked for this book?
Thule Society	November 1918; Munich, Germany, by Rudolf von Sebottendorf	Historical. Declined in the early 1920s.	Re-checked (Deutsches Historisches Museum)
Afrikaner Broederbond	1918 ; Johannesburg, South Africa; originally named Jong Zuid-Afrika	Renamed Afrikanerbond 1994 and opened to all Afrikaans speakers.	Re-checked (Britannica; Johannesburg and original name not re-checked)
Mau Mau / Kenya Land and Freedom Army networks	Late 1940s-early 1950s ; colonial Kenya; multiple networks	Historical insurgency. Emergency declared October 1952.	Re-checked (Britannica; Britannica gives about 1952 to 1963 for the movement, and the end date of the Emergency was not re-checked)
Tiandihui (Heaven and Earth Society) and Hongmen traditions	18th century ; southern China; influential archival reconstruction places an early founding in 1761 in Fujian	Historical networks and later Hongmen bodies. Local lineages vary.	Conflict: Britannica says Triad societies started operating in the early 19th century; the 1761 founding comes from scholarly reconstruction not re-checked
Ghee Hin Kongsi	1820 in Singapore, according to the National Library ; Singapore and the Straits	Historical. Suppressed when secret societies were outlawed in 1890.	Re-checked (National Library Board Singapore)
Gelaohui (Elder Brothers Society)	19th century, late Qing ; China, Yangtze region; origins disputed	Historical networks. Current continuity unverified.	Re-checked (Journal of Central China Normal University; Britannica)
White Lotus-associated movements	In existence by the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) ; China	A label for several historical sects and movements.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Katipunan	July 7, 1892 ; Manila, Philippines	Historical revolutionary organization that emerged into open revolt in 1896.	Re-checked year (Britannica: 1892); day and place not re-checked
Anushilan Samiti	Early 1900s, commonly dated 1902 in Calcutta ; Bengal, British India	Historical. Calcutta and Dhaka networks evolved separately.	Re-checked (Banglapedia)
Abhinav Bharat Society (Savarkar-era)	1904 ; Nashik, Maharashtra, British India; grew out of the	Formally disbanded in 1952.	Re-checked (Sahapedia; Encyclopedia of World

Group	Founded	Status	Checked for this book?
	earlier Mitra Mela		Biography)
Kokuryukai (Black Dragon or Amur River Society)	1901 ; Japan, organized by Uchida Ryohei and colleagues	Historical. Listed for abolition by the occupation authorities on January 4, 1946.	Re-checked (International Journal of Asian Studies; Nagoya University SCAPIN database)
Thien Dia Hoi (Heaven and Earth Society) and associated southern Vietnamese networks	Documented in French Cochinchina by the early 1880s; no single founding date established	Historical associations and labels. Present continuity unverified.	Re-checked; date corrected (Australian National University Open Research)
Poro	Traditional and decentralized ; Upper Guinea coast, including Sierra Leone and Liberia; no single founding date	Living local traditions with practices and continuity varying by community.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Sande / Bundu	Traditional and decentralized ; Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea	Living local traditions, with regional variation.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Ekpe / Ngbe (Leopard Society)	Traditional and decentralized ; Cross River region of present-day Nigeria and Cameroon	Living traditions in parts of the region. Local bodies vary.	Re-checked (Ethnic and Racial Studies)
Ogboni / Osugbo traditions	Traditional ; Yoruba-speaking southwest Nigeria	Multiple historical and contemporary formations. Modern bodies with similar names should be checked separately.	Partly re-checked (Nordic Journal of African Studies)
Abakua	1836 ; Regla, Havana, Cuba, according to historical accounts	Living Afro-Cuban initiatory tradition. Its association was officially recognized in Cuba in 2005.	Re-checked (OnCuba News; Ethnic and Racial Studies)
Anioto / Anyoto (colonial Congo)	Historically documented especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries ; northeastern Congo	Historical record. Present continuity unverified.	Re-checked (The Journal of African History)
Pyrates Confraternity / National Association of	1952 ; University College, Ibadan, Nigeria	Active as the National Association of Seadogs.	Re-checked (Premium Times)

Group	Founded	Status	Checked for this book?
Seadogs			
Duk-Duk and Tubuan	Traditional ; Tolai communities of East New Britain, Papua New Guinea; no single founding date	Practices and contemporary forms vary by community.	Re-checked (The National; Expedition magazine)
Waiat mysteries	Traditional ; western Torres Strait, including Woeydhul Island; no exact founding date	Archaeologically documented. Current private practice unverified.	Re-checked (Antiquity)
Pythagorean communities	Late sixth century BCE ; Croton and other Greek settlements in southern Italy	Historical communities. Later philosophical revivals are separate.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Eleusinian Mysteries	Greek antiquity ; Eleusis, near Athens; early development uncertain	Historical cult, ended in late antiquity.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Orphic and Bacchic initiatory traditions	Classical Greek world; an Orphic movement is attested by the 5th century BCE ; dispersed communities, with no single founder or headquarters established	Historical, regionally varied.	Partly re-checked (Britannica)
Roman Mithraic mysteries	Documented by the early Roman imperial period ; Roman Empire; precise origin debated	Historical. Ended in late antiquity.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Medieval Knights Templar	Late 1119 or early 1120; Jerusalem	Suppressed March 22, 1312. Modern Templar-name bodies have separate histories.	Re-checked (Britannica); see the companion volume
Nizari Ismaili state at Alamut, popularly called the "Assassins"	1090 ; Alamut, in present-day Iran	Historical state fell in 1256. The Nizari Ismaili community survives as a living religious tradition.	Re-checked (Britannica)
Priory of Sion	1956 ; France, registered association linked to Pierre Plantard	Documented modern association. Claimed medieval version lacks authentication.	Re-checked (CBS News; High Court judgment); see the companion volume

Group	Founded	Status	Checked for this book?
The Nine Unknown Men	Ancient Indian foundation attributed to Ashoka in legend. A traceable literary source is Talbot Mundy's The Nine Unknown, serialized in 1923.	Purported. The Ashoka link appears in later accounts, mainly from 1960 on. Historical institution and current activity unverified.	Re-checked (Project Gutenberg Australia; Jason Colavito)
Vril Society	Purported interwar German order; Vril appears earlier as a fictional force in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's The Coming Race (1871)	Purported. Scholars describe the elaborate secret Nazi "Vril Society" of later accounts as fictional, traced to a 1960 French book.	Re-checked (Wouter J. Hanegraaff)
Thuggee as a single pan-Indian cult	Purported ancient network ; India; earliest authenticated mention about 1356; British suppression campaign chiefly in the 1830s	Historical robber networks and prosecutions. The single centralized cult model is disputed.	Re-checked; sources disagree on the cult model (Britannica; London Review of Books)
Bilderberg Meetings	1954; Hotel de Bilderberg, Oosterbeek, Netherlands (May 29 to 31, 1954)	Active meeting series with official announcements.	Re-checked (Bilderberg Meetings)
Trilateral Commission	1973 ; initiative led by David Rockefeller linking North America, Western Europe and Japan	Active public organization with invitation-based membership.	Re-checked (Trilateral Commission)
Council on Foreign Relations	1921 ; New York City	Active public nonprofit and private membership organization.	Re-checked (CFR)
Opus Dei	1928 ; Madrid, Spain	Active Catholic institution.	Re-checked year (Britannica); place not re-checked
Rite of Strict Observance	Mid-18th century; first chapter about 1751 ; German lands, associated with Karl Gotthelf von Hund	Historical rite. The Wilhelmsbad convent of 1782-83 rejected Templar descent, and the rite in effect ended.	Re-checked (Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon)
Golden and Rosy Cross	18th century, no	Historical order. Later	Re-checked

Group	Founded	Status	Checked for this book?
(Gold- und Rosenkreuz)	traceable circles before about 1755 ; German-speaking Europe, with major expansion in the 1770s	Rosicrucian bodies have independent histories.	(Encyclopaedia Universalis; SUNY Press)
Philalethes	1773 or 1774 ; Paris, within Les Amis Reunis	Historical. Ended in the late 1780s.	Re-checked (Universal Co-Masonry; Bibliotheque nationale de France)
A.A. (Astrum Argentum and other renderings)	About 1906-1907 ; organized by Aleister Crowley and George Cecil Jones	Modern lineages claim continuity; organizational authority varies by lineage.	Re-checked (Britannica; College and Temple of Thelema)
Order of Nine Angles	1970s ; Britain; claimed earlier origins and leadership are disputed	Publications circulate widely online and are used by offshoots. No central authority.	Re-checked (Religion Media Centre; Mapping Militants)
Grand Sanhedrin conspiracy claim / "Protocols" allegations	Forgery circulated in the Russian Empire in the early 20th century	The alleged worldwide Jewish governing body is fabricated; the Protocols are a proven forgery.	Re-checked (US Holocaust Memorial Museum)

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Appendix D: Visual Credits

Every image was checked against its record on Wikimedia Commons on November 18, 2026. Rights are as stated on that record. Charts were made for this book from the data tables printed in the text and need no outside credit.

#	Title	Creator and date	Repository	Rights	Placement
1	Portret van Adam Weishaupt (RP-P-1914-3575)	Friedrich Rossmaessler, printmaker; made between 1785 and 1858	Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portret_van_Adam_Weishaupt,_RP-P-1914-3575.jpg	Public domain (CC0)	Chapter 1
2	Portret van Adolph Knigge (RP-P-1915-457)	Unknown printmaker; made between 1818 and 1832	Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portret_van_Adolph_Knigge,_RP-P-1915-457.jpg	Public domain (CC0)	Chapter 2
3	Skull and Bones wax seals	Unknown maker; about 1865	Yale University Manuscripts and Archives Digital Images Database, via	Public domain	Chapter 7

#	Title	Creator and date	Repository	Rights	Placement
			Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Skull_and_Bones_wax_seals_circa_1865.jpg		
4	Original design, Great Seal of the United States	Pierre Eugene du Simitiere; 1776	Library of Congress, MSS27748, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Original_design,_*Great_Seal_of_the_United_States*(1776).png	Public domain	Chapter 13, Claim 6
5	1935 Dollar Bill Back, Early Design	Edward M. Weeks, Bureau of Engraving and Printing; 1935	U.S. Department of State exhibition poster, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1935_Dollar_Bill_Back_Early_Design.jpg	Public domain (U.S. government work)	Chapter 13, Claim 6

Alt text, in the order above:

1. Engraved head-and-shoulders portrait of Adam Weishaupt in an oval frame.
2. Engraved portrait of Adolph Freiherr von Knigge.
3. Two red wax seals, each showing a skull above crossed bones with the number 322 below.
4. Faint pencil sketch of a shield held by two standing figures, with the motto E Pluribus Unum on a banner below.
5. A design drawing for the back of the one-dollar bill showing both sides of the Great Seal, with handwritten notes in the margin.

Images considered and left out: a portrait of Prince Hall whose creator and date could not be confirmed; a 1915 photograph of a Bohemian Grove ceremony whose public-domain claim rests on a modern book; and two photographs of the Skull and Bones building whose rights rested on the uploader's own statement. I left them out because their rights could not be confirmed from the item record.

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Every source cited in this book is listed here once, grouped by the five tiers explained in the Introduction. Web sources were read on November 18, 2026.

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