

Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2020), pp. xvi+540.

by *Diego Quaglioni*

The myth of a ritual murder perpetrated in hatred of the Christian faith is the subject of this vast, learned, well-informed inquiry, the work of a distinguished historian of Jewish culture and Jewish-Christian relations. Magda Teter is Professor of History and Shvidler Chair in Judaic Studies at Fordham University in New York, and the author of *Jews and Heretics in Catholic Poland: A Beleaguered Church in the Post-Reformation Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), as well as *Sinners on Trial: Jews and Sacrilege after the Reformation* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

In *Blood Libel* Professor Teter examines how the myth that the Jews murdered Christian children to use their blood in Passover rites emerged in medieval England, and spread all over Europe and especially in Eastern European countries. In particular, the book explores the role of the printed media in the widespread dissemination and surprising persistence of this unfounded belief over generations and centuries. The *Introduction* begins with the most recent episodes of anti-Semitic propaganda, in which the myth of ritual murder persistently re-emerges. The first chapter of the book, on the other hand, provides in about thirty pages an overview of the entire history of the myth, starting from the mid-twelfth century case of William of Norwich—reported only by monastic chronicles—up to the important and well-known case of Simon of Trent, in the second half of the fifteenth century (“From Medieval Tales to the Challenge in Trent,” pp. 14-42).

This introduces the main topic of the book, as the case of “little Simon” is at the center of this extensive investigation. The case ignited a persecutory frenzy between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century: the story was disseminated throughout Europe and had consequences for Jews well beyond the continent. The case occurred in Trent and dates back to the Easter-Passover of 1475. Professor Teter’s reconstruction is based on a complete re-examination of the published and partly still unpublished sources, represented primarily by the records of the trials against the Jews of Trent and the writings of

the papal legate in defense of the Jews,¹ as well as the extensive literature of the past decades.²

The State Archives and the Municipal Library of Trent host a large collection of documents, mostly from the ancient Archives of the Prince-Bishop,³ related to the trials against the Jews of Trent, which lie at the origin of the widespread anti-Jewish cult of Little Simon. Smaller collections of documents are kept in the Vatican Secret Archives and Vatican Library, the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, the Tridentine Diocesan Museum and elsewhere. Taken as a whole, this extensive documentation is of enormous importance firstly

¹ Battista de' Giudici, *Apologia Iudaeorum. Invectiva contra Platinam. Propaganda antiebraica e polemiche di curia durante il pontificato di Sisto IV (1471-1484)*, ed. Diego Quaglioni (Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 1987); Anna Esposito and Diego Quaglioni, eds., *Processi contro gli Ebrei di Trento (1475-1478)*, 1: *I processi del 1475* (Padua: Cedam, 1990), 2: *I processi alle donne (1475-1476)* (Padua: Cedam, 2008); Fabrizio Leonardelli, Diego Quaglioni and Silvano Groff, "Simonino da Trento: un nuovo esemplare degli atti del processo agli ebrei del 1475 acquistato dalla Biblioteca (ms. BCT1-6342)," *Studi trentini di scienze storiche* 90, no.1 (2011): 261-272.

² See Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder. Jews and Magic in Renaissance Germany* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1988); Diego Quaglioni, "I processi contro gli Ebrei di Trento. 1475. Il procedimento inquisitorio," in *La parola all'accusato*, eds. Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani (Palermo: Sellerio, 1991), 282-294; Willehad Paul Eckert, "Motivi superstiziosi nei processi agli ebrei di Trento," in *Il principe-vescovo Johannes Hinderbach (1465-1486) fra tardo Medioevo e Umanesimo*, eds. Iginio Rogger and Marco Bellabarba (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1992), 383-394; Anna Esposito, "Il culto del 'beato' Simonino e la sua prima diffusione in Italia," *Ibid.*, 429-443; Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, *Trent 1475. Stories from a Ritual Murder Trial* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1992); Diego Quaglioni, "Il processo di Trento del 1475," in *L'Inquisizione e gli Ebrei in Italia*, ed. Michele Luzzati (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1994), 19-34; Wolfgang Treue, *Der Trienter Judenprozess. Voraussetzungen, Abläufe, Auswirkungen (1475-1588)* (Hannover: Hahn, 1996); Susanna Buttaroni and Stanislaw Musiał, eds., *Ritualmord. Legenden in der europäischen Geschichte* (Vienna-Cologne-Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2003); Daniela Rando, *Dai margini la memoria. Johannes Hinderbach (1418-1486)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003); Tommaso Calì, *La leggenda dell'ebreo assassino. Percorsi di un racconto antiebraico dal medioevo ad oggi* (Rome: Viella, 2007); Diego Quaglioni, "'Christianis infesti.' Una mitologia giuridica dell'età intermedia: l'ebreo come 'nemico interno,'" in "I diritti dei nemici," ed. Pietro Costa, *Quaderni fiorentini per la storia del pensiero giuridico moderno* 38 (2009): 201-224; Emanuele Curzel, "Simone da Trento," in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 92 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2018), 731-733. For Little Simon iconography see Valentina Perini, *Il Simonino. Geografia di un culto*. Con saggi di Diego Quaglioni e Laura Dal Prà (Trent: Società di Studi Trentini di Scienze Storiche, 2012).

³ Until the beginning of the nineteenth century Trent was an ecclesiastical principality of the German Empire.

for the history of the legal status of Jews in Christian society, secondly for the history of the myth of the ritual infanticide *in vilipendium Christianae fidei* ascribed to the Jews, and thirdly for the transformation of this myth into a long-lasting hagiographic model, as evidenced by the widespread distribution, even beyond the Alpine arc, of Little Simon’s iconography.⁴

Compared to the literature of the past decades, *Blood Libel* adopts a partially new approach to the long and persistently re-emerging story of the myth of ritual murder. The author’s intent is not to reexamine the sources in order to construct a narrative, but rather to provide a rigorous reconstruction of the facts, building its analysis both on an understanding of the specific aspects of the legal procedure in use in 1475 and on the awareness of the blatant violation of the very legal procedure, which was distorted in order to demonstrate, at any cost, the habitual use of Christian blood in Jewish rites. The book summarizes the best previous scholarship and furthers its findings, reaching conclusions of great importance not only at a historiographical level, but also with regard to the very topical issue of contemporary anti-Semitism. As framed by the book, the case of Little Simon acquires a central role that helps us understand the survival of anti-Jewish hatred and the causes of its resurgence.

Viewed in a *longue durée* and cast expansively across time and place, this story reveals what is now understood as “confirmation bias” or “cognitive bias,” when readers embrace sources they agree with and find reliable, while rejecting information that contradicts their views, even if that information is in fact accurate (Epilogue, p. 383).⁵

⁴ For a wider survey of sources and literature see the recently published catalog of the exhibition on “The invention of the guilty” at the Diocesan Museum of Trent. This source could not be known to Professor Teter, as it appeared in print at the same time her book was published: Domenica Primernano, ed., *L’invenzione del colpevole. Il “caso” di Simonino da Trento dalla propaganda alla storia* (Trent: Temi, 2019).

⁵ Considering further the book’s relationship to previous literature, it is worth noting that the author avoids mentioning the embarrassing episode of the publication, by one of Italy’s major university presses, of Ariel Toaff’s book, *Pasque di sangue* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), in which the author, examining the case of Simon of Trent, hypothesized that the myth that some Jews killed children to use their blood for ritual purposes may have been based on an actual “ritual of blood”. This thesis was quickly taken up by far-right commentators and historians, triggering in turn a

Chapters two and three of the book (“The Death of Little Simon and the Trial of Jews in Trent,” and “Echoes of Simon of Trent in European Culture,” pp. 43-151) therefore form a substantial part of the volume. The rest of the book follows the dissemination of the anti-Jewish myth, as well as the reaction from Jewish communities up to the turn of the eighteenth century, including the role of Pope Benedict XIV and the important contemporary secret document in defense of the Jews, written by Cardinal Ganganelli (see chapters four-nine, pp. 152-344: “Blood Libels and Cultures of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe,” “Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews Respond to Blood Libels,” “‘Who Should One Believe, the Rabbis or the Doctors of the Church?’,” “‘Jews Are Deemed Innocent in the tribunals of Italy,’” “‘The ‘Enlightenment’ Pope Benedict XIV and the Blood Accusations,” and “Cardinal Ganganelli’s Secret Report”).

The trials against the Jews of Trento are in fact pivotal, in the transition to early modernity, for they fix the anti-Jewish stereotypes within a new paradigm, a very effective mixture of words and images, propagandistic texts and doctrinal writings that form a handover between modern anti-Semitism and ancient anti-Judaism. The anti-Jewish Middle Ages feed on confused superstitions, which made it the era of the great incubation of antisemitism. The myth from which the Blood Libel ultimately originates, contains a story in which legendary or “folkloric” elements give life to a hagiographic and iconographic *topos* of exceptional resilience: that of the “*puer a Iudaeis necatus*,” a composition of stereotypes and myths that together represent a form of narrative aggression. The myth was transmitted to the modern world as a tool of a “persecuting society:”⁶ the Trent trials did not have the limited purpose of proving the guilt of the Jews of Trent, but the more radical and ambitious one of proving the universal guilt of all Jews and justifying their destruction.

strong criticism of the author’s willingness to give credit to confessions extorted under torture. The book was eventually withdrawn from circulation. Diego Quaglioni, “Vero e falso nelle carte processuali: la parola ‘data’ e la parola ‘presa,’” in *Vero e falso. L’uso politico della storia*, eds. Marina Caffiero and Micaela Procaccia (Rome: Donzelli, 2008), 63-82.

⁶ Robert I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society. Authority and Deviance in Western Europe (950-1250)* (Hoboken: John Wiley, 2006).

The trials originated from the disappearance of Little Simon, on the evening of March 23, 1475, Holy Thursday (when the Jews observed the enclosure prescribed by canon law). After the report of the child's disappearance, the rumor spread that the Jews had kidnapped him. A search did not yield any results, but on March 26, Easter Sunday, the Jews themselves reported to the prince-bishop of Trent and his judges the discovery of Simon's body in the basement of the house of the main member of their community, the lender Samuel of Nuremberg. The judges ordered the arrest of Samuel, his wife Brunetta and the other male Jews present at the Passover rites in the synagogue. The other women, who could not be accused of direct participation in the alleged ritual infanticide, were imprisoned at home together with their children. A controversial medical report led to the conclusion that the wounds were caused by purposefully inflicted torments. From the collection of testimonies, which took up most of the preliminary phase, the so-called "general inquisition", confused rumors emerged about similar past episodes, and a more general accusation was made by a converted Jew, detained in prison for common crimes, whose deposition, according to the norms and the doctrine of *ius commune*, should have been considered inadmissible, as it was not confirmed by any other witness and came from a prejudiced person.

Bishop Johannes Hinderbach gave credence to the rumors that Simon had been kidnapped by the Jews out of hatred of the Christian faith and in order to consume the victim's blood in the unleavened bread of the Jewish Passover, which in that year coincided with the Christian one. On the basis of this rumor, the Jews were subjected to tortures that went systematically far beyond the ordinary and ritual stretches of rope. From the outset the investigation was aimed at demonstrating a procedural truth that was already firmly present in the minds of the judges.

Between the June 21 and the 23, death sentences were carried out against Samuel of Nuremberg, his son Israel and the other Jews. Two of them had their sentence commuted to beheading because of their conversion to Christianity. The others were burned at the stake, including the eldest of them, Moses of Würzburg, who died of torture and was burned at the stake *post mortem*. All their assets were confiscated. Samuel's wife, Brunetta, to whom the inquisitors attributed a main

role in the alleged ritual infanticide, also presumably died in prison following the torture.

It took a month for the envoy of the Holy See to arrive in Trento with the mandate to investigate the facts and to bring a copy of the proceedings of the trials to Rome. The papal legate, Battista de' Giudici, a conscientious Dominican bishop and theologian, only with great difficulty managed to acquire the procedural documentation. He believed that he was facing a plot against the Jews and that the judges had falsified the records to cover up serious procedural defects and to conceal an unjust sentence. He tried in vain to obtain the liberation of the children and women, who were manifestly innocent. Finally, he returned to Rome without having obtained anything, at the same moment in which the trials against the Jewish women resumed. In Rome, Pope Sixtus IV set up a commission of cardinals to judge the legality of the trials.

On November 3, 1475, the first two women were interrogated for the first time in the presence of the instruments of torture. Five days earlier the papal legate had sent a mandate to suspend the trials, ordering under penalty of excommunication to free the women and children. In all the interrogations of the women, the use of torture, albeit limited to the rope and without any recourse to the atrocities witnessed in the records of the main defendants, was systematically employed to obtain substantially identical depositions, which were immediately ratified for fear of new tortures. Thus the stake was ready for the Jewish women, guilty of confessing acts in contempt of the corpse of the child-martyr, acts made public and disseminated by the images that accompanied the Story of Simon, which appeared in print in September 1475 coinciding with the arrival of the apostolic legate. The bishop's book of accounts, preserved today in the Municipal Library of Trento, attests, in clear contempt for apostolic mandates, that six wagons of wood were purchased on the September 8, 1476 to burn the women at the stake ("*pro comburendis Iudeabus que postea conducte fuerunt ad castrum quia baptizate.*")⁷ The forced baptism of the women and children ended the entire trial. On January

⁷ Trent, Municipal Library, Ms. 335, c. 42r. See Diego Quaglioni, "Rituali della grazia a Trento nel 1477," in *Grazia e giustizia. Figure della clemenza fra tardo medioevo ed età contemporanea*, eds. Karl Härter and Cecilia Nubola (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), 127-145.

12 and 19, 1477, Anna, Bella and Sara, exorcised and catechized, received baptism by making full public confession of their crimes and sins and promising to remain in the new faith, under threat of death penalty for the crime of apostasy, and assuming the names of Elizabeth, Susanna and Clara respectively. Nothing is known about another woman, Bona, except that a robe was purchased for her in view of the baptism, which she would have received with the name of Justine.

The conclusion of the judicial affair was sealed in 1478 by the decision of the commission of cardinals established by Sixtus IV, which recognized the legality of the procedure applied by the judges of Trento, declaring that the trials had taken place fairly, “*rite et recte*.” The solution offered to the cardinals was provided by two legal opinions drafted by Giovanni Francesco Pavini, judge of the Roman Rota and a former colleague of the bishop of Trento, while both were studying canon law in Padua. He was also an active promoter, in those same years, of the first legal typography in Rome. The repercussions were immediate and lasting, with the proliferation of numerous trials for ritual murder, in Italy and especially in Germany, where a strong echo of the case of Trent could still be read in Luther’s book of 1543, *Von den Jüden und jren Lügen*.

In the words of the author: “The trial at Trent was a turning point. Not only did Bishop Hinderbach deploy sophisticated multimedia propaganda campaign in the aftermath of the death of the toddler Simon in March 1475, exploiting the new print technology to disseminate the story far and wide, but he also turned to earlier stories and freshly printed books to justify his persecution of Jews and the veneration of Simon as *beatus*” (“Epilogue. The Trail Continues,” pp. 377-378). It is impossible not to share Professor Teter’s bitter conclusion: the long memory trail, the ambiguous responses by Church officials, and the papal recognition of Simon of Trent and other alleged “martyrs” in the early modern period “have made it difficult to eradicate this bloody Christian tale.” And this is why former shrines such as that of Simon of Trent

despite their abolition in the second half of the twentieth century, persist unofficially, attracting anti-Semitic groups and individuals [...]. This long story of the persistence of anti-Jewish blood libels despite arguments to

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the contrary is dispiriting [...]. With so many sources repeatedly telling the same deleterious stories about Jews, it is no wonder that belief in them has persisted. These stories, scattered across printed chronicles, not only introduced the image of “murderous” and dangerous Jews and reinforced the belief in blood accusations but also [...] reflected the same impulses that incited anti-Jewish violence.

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