

Hillel Kieval, *Blood Inscriptions: Science, Modernity, and Ritual Murder in Europe's Fin de Siècle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), pp. 312.

by *Robert Weinberg*

The accusation that Jews engage in the murder of gentile children for a variety of ritual purposes stretches back a millennium and has been at times part of the antisemitic arsenal over the centuries. Originating in England in the twelfth century, the accusation, commonly referred to as the blood libel, emerged as an allegation that Jews killed Christians to mock the Passion of Christ and desecrate the Host. It also claimed that Jewish men consumed non-Jewish blood in order to replenish the blood they lost during menstruation. But it was the unfounded belief that Jews needed gentile blood in order to bake matzo that became the mainstay of the blood libel and characterized most ritual murder accusations from the fourteenth century to the twentieth century.

The blood libel spread from England to the continent, finding a home in German-speaking Europe by the fifteenth century. The blood libel could have deadly consequences for Jews: Jews suspected of ritual murder were arrested, tortured, and sometimes executed. It provided the rationale for burning at the stake fifteen Jewish men in the city of Trent for the murder of a two-year-old boy named Simon in 1475. From Protestant and Catholic Central Europe, the accusation then spread further eastward, taking root in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and, by the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire where it found a receptive audience among Orthodox Christians.

Despite its spread to Central and Eastern Europe, lands where most European Jews lived, the accusation was not a constant feature of Jewish life. The Vatican actually challenged blood libel allegations in papal bulls. Moreover, by the mid-sixteenth century authorities in Western and Central Europe¹ rejected efforts to prosecute Jews on the basis of the accusation. By the end of the eighteenth-century officials

¹ One exception was the Damascus Affair in 1840 when Christians in Damascus accused a group of Jews of murdering a monk and his Muslim servant for the purpose of using their blood for the baking of matzo. The French consul supported the interrogation and torture of the accused, who were imprisoned, tortured, and then released by the Ottoman rulers of Syria.

in Poland and Hungary stopped putting Jews on trial for ritual murder. But the blood libel enjoyed a renaissance in the quarter century before the outbreak of World War I. It was very much alive at the turn of the twentieth century: dozens of ritual murder accusations left their traces in newspapers, parliamentary proceedings, and trials in Imperial Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and tsarist Russia. Many Jews found themselves under suspicion for crimes they did not commit, became the focus of public debates and government concern, and in some cases attracted the attention of Jews and governments outside Europe and became *causes célèbres*. Violence against Jewish communities erupted in the aftermath of accusations, especially in small towns and villages. Historians are unsure whether the number of accusations actually increased toward the end of the nineteenth century or simply represented the reporting of newspapers and periodicals that proliferated during the second half of the 1800s and became the mainstay of public life. It contributed to the emergence of a politically informed and engaged citizenry throughout Europe.²

In *Blood Inscriptions: Science, Modernity, and Ritual Murder in Europe's Fin de Siècle*, Hillel Kieval focuses on four ritual murder trials that occurred in Imperial Germany (Xanten in the early 1890s and Konitz in the early 1900s and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Tiszaeszlár in the early 1880s and Polná at the end of the 1890s). The book reads like a police procedural on television by offering in-depth and nuanced accounts of how the ritual murder accusations played out in each case study and exploring the different dynamics that characterized the modern blood libel and its earlier incarnations. *Blood Inscriptions* explores the social, cultural, and political undercurrents of each trial and reveals the inner workings of judicial systems. It also uncovers the forces that rent the social fabric at the end of the nineteenth century.

Kieval uses the four case studies to illuminate how and why educated Europeans beholden to Enlightenment thought and rationality, and modern science, medicine, and jurisprudence would embrace a canard rooted in medieval religious prejudice and superstition. He writes:

² As Magda Teter writes, "Anti-Jewish libels did not cease at the end of the eighteenth century." Magda Teter, "On the Continuities and Discontinuities of Anti-Jewish Libels," *Antisemitism Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 383.

What, for example, are the means by which *disreputable* knowledge can become reputable, recapturing the imagination of social elites? How is it possible that state officials at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose ethos was built on a commitment to bureaucratic rationality and scientific method, should commit huge amounts of time, energy, and prestige to such criminal investigations and prosecutions? What would have made the accusation of Jewish ritual murder *meaningful* to self-consciously “modern” individuals? (p. 6).

He challenges the argument that the blood libel in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe was nothing more than a continuation of pre-Enlightenment religious prejudices and popular superstition. For Kieval, the blood libel was in fact a consequence of modernity and found sustenance in modern science, medicine, and forensic criminology. Antisemitism in general and the ritual murder myth are not, according to Kieval, static phenomena but are historically contingent. They may stem from a long intellectual and political lineage, but their manifestations, motivations, and justifications may change over time. *Blood Inscriptions* offers a roadmap to understanding the social, cultural, intellectual, and political underpinnings of conspiracy theories in our contemporary discourse.

One would expect that secularization and Enlightenment thought, along with the decline of superstition and rise of modern science, urbanization, and industrialization, would have led to the disappearance of blood libel canard. But the ritual murder accusation retained its hold on both educated and uneducated Christians, and did not disappear from the historical stage. Kieval notes that

the argument for the cultural backwardness—the atavism—of the modern ritual murder trials either presumes a regrettable continuity between the medieval accusation and its modern variant—underscoring the incompleteness of Enlightenment education—or suggests that it was precisely the irrational element in the blood libel that its modern protagonists found to be so appealing (p. 20).

According to Kieval, accusations lodged against Jews for murdering Christian youths in order to consume their blood are not explained by the persistence of irrationalism and superstition. Rather, historians need to uncover reasons why educated professionals, government servitors, politicians, and journalists embraced a preposterous conspiratorial theory in quintessentially modern terms. After all, many defense attorneys, criminologists, medical examiners, and government ministers subscribed to ritual murder accusations. By 1900 reliance on torture to extract confessions had been replaced by the rules of evidence demanded by modern jurisprudence.³ Rather than turn to religion on which to base their arguments, proponents and detractors relied upon late nineteenth-century science and medicine, two quintessentially modern fields of knowledge.

Kieval wrestles with the question of why the modern ritual murder trial emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and ended on the eve of World War I, a period limited to thirty-five years. Ritual murder accusations clearly had not gone away: they just hibernated until they were awoken in 1870s with the weaponization of antisemitism as a political movement. In the words of Kieval, ritual murder discourse at the end of nineteenth century “tied the imagery of the modern ritual murder accusation to the programmatic concerns of political antisemitism” (p. 107).

Kieval points to several factors that account for the emergence of the blood libel in modern Europe. One was the recent granting of Jews civil and political rights in Imperial Germany and the Habsburg Empire, the two states in which the four case studies took place. Opponents of the changes brought about by modernity turned to the political arena to promote their agenda, which aimed to limit if not undo the enfranchisement of Jews, which was seen as a by-product of democratization. Unlike England and France, German-speaking Europe was less welcoming to liberalism and therefore Jewish emancipation, and easily became a testing ground for conservative and nationalist activists who felt threatened by rapid socio-economic and political changes.

World War I marked the end of trials accusing Jews of ritual murder, and Kieval posits that perhaps the trauma of the war and the revolutions and civil wars that

³ As Kieval writes, “These were people who were convinced that they occupied a radically different historical situation than that which had existed two or three centuries earlier” (p. 226).

followed in its wake overshadowed the ritual murder accusation. As he notes, even the Nazis did not put Jews on trial for ritual murder. Or maybe the emergence of nation-states and constitutional rule that emerged in the debris of the failed Russian, Habsburg, German, and Ottoman empires militated against state-directed persecution of Jews, notwithstanding the fragile foundations of the new political order and the continued intensity of antisemitism. Kieval offers a compelling explanation when he argues that the “structure of plausibility” (p. 6) and discursive universe that fostered the willingness to countenance the blood libel collapsed under its own weight. The language and institutions that justified the accusations were “always inherently unstable and at risk of coming apart” (p. 223).

It bears keeping in mind that belief in the accusation was not monolithic and the governments’ cases fell apart: none of the defendants brought to trial in the cases studied by Kieval were found guilty of murder. At times government prosecutors undermined their cases by raising doubts about the veracity of the charges. At other times medical professionals and criminologists challenged the conclusions drawn by proponents of the blood libel. In addition, politicians and civil servants were prone to reject the premises of the ritual murder myth.

Unlike Kieval, I hesitate to dismiss religious prejudice as one underlying cause of the modern ritual murder accusation. To be sure, prosecutors, lawyers, and medical professional who supported the ritual murder allegation sought to base their cases on what they believed to be demonstrably rational, scientific evidence, thereby distancing themselves from arguments rooted in religious prejudice. They also tended to refrain from injecting Judaism into the proceedings and did not embrace the emerging racialist thinking that set Jews biologically distinct from Christians. But many educated Europeans who embraced the reality of Jewish ritual murder “pointed precisely to religion, religious, texts, and religious fanaticism as the sources of a most dangerous expression of Jewish difference” (p. 224).

Kieval is indeed correct that blood libel trials at the end of the nineteenth century were prompted, not by religious prejudice and animosity, but by the social and political dislocation caused by modernization. But anti-Judaism lurked beneath the social fabric and explained why, when a Christian youth turned up dead, all eyes turned toward Jews as the culprits. There would be no ritual murder

accusation without the existence of Judaism whose texts were twisted and misinterpreted to lend credence to the claim that Jews needed the blood of gentiles for Jewish rituals and practices.

The 1913 trial of Mendel Beilis, a Kyivan Jew accused of murdering a gentile youth, speaks to the persistence of the religious foundations of the blood libel. The prosecutor called witnesses who insisted, based on erroneous and uninformed readings of Judaic texts such as the Talmud, that Jews were religiously obliged by Judaism to use the blood of gentile youths. Even though the jury did not find Beilis guilty of murder, it did agree with the prosecution that the murder had the hallmarks of a ritual murder.⁴ It is also important to acknowledge that the transition from pre-modern to modern forms of knowledge was incomplete. As one proponent of the blood libel asserted in connection to the trial of Mendel Beilis, Beilis's legal team did not permit itself to believe that there "could be ritual murders in the century of airplanes and trams."⁵ Finally, it merits mentioning that Beilis was the last Jew to stand trial for ritual murder in Europe.

Kieval is not the first historian to write about these trials, but *Blood Inscriptions* is a superb contribution to the growing literature on the blood libel in Europe in the modern era. The book is a tour de force of historical research and reasoning that leaves no stone unturned and merits a wide audience. It will join classic accounts by Helmut Walser Smith, Magda Teter, and others as a testament to exemplary historical research and analysis on the subject.⁶ Kieval's analysis sheds light on the inner workings of the conspiratorial mindset and demonstrates how people may not believe in cabals but nonetheless find them politically expedient.

⁴ See Robert Weinberg, *Blood Libel in Late Imperial Russia: The Ritual Murder Trial of Mendel Beilis* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

⁵ Robert Weinberg, "Connecting the Dots: Jewish Mysticism, Ritual Murder, and the Trial of Mendel Beilis," in *Word and Image in Russian History. Essays in Honor of Gary Marker*, eds. Daniel Kaiser, Valerie Kivelson, and Maria di Salvo (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015), 240.

⁶ Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003); Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of An Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); Eugene Avrutin, Jonathan Dekel-Chen, and Robert Weinberg, eds., *Ritual Murder in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Beyond: New Histories of an Old Accusation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017); Eugene Avrutin, *The Velizh Affair: Blood Libel in a Russian Town* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Edward Berenson, *The Accusation: Blood Libel in an American Town* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019).

This is, of course, small consolation in today's world in which conspiratorial thinking suffuses all forms of media.

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