

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

by *Michal Frankl*

This book is full of gruesome details: knife cuts on the neck, dismembered bodies and blood, a lot—or too little—of it. But this provoking content is not for nothing: Hillel Kieval's touches upon one of the most basic and, at the same time, most difficult questions in the history of modern antisemitism. How was this possible, asked contemporaries and later commentators, journalists or scholars, that an outdated, “medieval,” religious and irrational accusation took hold in the period considered by many as modern, enlightened and scientific. The author re-read many reports of brutal murders, tragic deaths and narratives drowned in blood which disrupted cohabitation, in those places where the criminal cases occurred and beyond, and examined how there emerged the “knowledge” of a specifically Jewish crime. The book is an outcome of Kieval's decades' long interest in the accusation of ritual murder, one in which he took inspiration from his research on Czech-Jewish history in the long nineteenth century. While facing nationalism and integrating into a changing society, Czech Jews were also confronted with rumors, trials and violence that referred to alleged Jewish crimes and the removal of blood from bodies in Kolín, Polná and many other places.¹

¹ Hillel J. Kieval, “Death and the Nation: Ritual Murder as Political Discourse in the Czech Lands,” in *Allemands, Juifs Et Tcheques a Prague - Deutsche, Juden Und Tschechen in Prag, 1890-1924*, eds. Maurice Godé, Jacques Le Rider, and Françoise Mayer (Montpellier: Université Paul-Valéry, 1996), 83-99; Hillel J. Kieval, “Antisémitisme Ou Savoir Social? Sur La Genese Du Proces Moderne Pour Meurtre Rituel,” *Annales* 49, no. 5 (1994): 1091-1105; Hillel J. Kieval, “Representation and Knowledge in Medieval and Modern Accounts of Jewish Ritual Murder,” *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 1 (1994): 52-72; Hillel J. Kieval, “Middleman Minorities and Blood: Is There a Natural Economy of the Ritual Murder Accusation in Europe?” in *Essential Outsiders: Chinese and Jews in the Modern Transformation of Southeast Asia and Central Europe*, eds. Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid (Seattle-London: University of Washington Press, 1997), 208-233; Hillel J. Kieval, “The Importance of Place: Comparative Aspects of the Ritual Murder Trial in Modern Central Europe,” in *Comparing Jewish Societies*, ed. Todd M. Endelman (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 135-165; Hillel J. Kieval, “The Rules of the Game: Forensic Medicine and the Language of Science in the Structuring of Modern Ritual Murder Trials,” *Jewish History* 26, no. 3-4 (2013): 287-307.

To establish what made such modern accusations distinct, Kieval focuses on four out of the six ritual murder trials that took place between the late 1870s and the First World War (for a quick overview, see table on p. 15). All had in common the disappearance and/or murder of a Christian child, girl or young man, an investigation which confronted local knowledge and social ties with modern criminology, and eventually exposed them in court trial(s). In the case of Tiszaeszlár from 1882-83, a group of Jews from a Hungarian village was accused of killing a fourteen years old Christian girl. In the context of rising Hungarian antisemitism, this case, which the local investigator steered towards a Jewish religious crime, was eventually decided in a court trial which acquitted the defendants.² A small town in Germany, Xanten, in 1891 became a stage for a similarly polarized investigation following a murder of a five years old Christian boy. It took a year for the investigation and the jury to acquit the local Jewish butcher.³ After Anežka Hružová, 19 years old, was found dead close to the town Polná in Bohemia in 1899, and in the context of a broader antisemitic mobilization, a poor and mostly unemployed local Jew was put on trial for allegedly being an accomplice to her killing, in which the blood was drained from the body of the deceased. In 1899 and again in 1900, following an appeal and in what proved to be an exception, Leopold Hilsner was sentenced for a crime that rested on the imagination of a Jewish ritual murder.⁴ Finally, the brutal murder

² Among previously published studies on this subject, especially Andrew Handler, *Blood Libel at Tiszaeszlár* (New York: Boulder, 1980).

³ Julius H. Schöps, "Ritualmordbeschuldigung und Blutaberglaube. Die Affäre Buschhoff im niederrheinischen Xanten," in *Köln und das rheinische Judentum*, eds. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz et al. (Köln: J. P. Bachem, 1984), 286-300; Jürgen Lange, "Der Xantener Ritualmordprozeß von 1892 und die Staatsanwaltschaft," in *Rheinische Justiz. Geschichte und Gegenwart*, eds. Dieter Laum, Adolf Klein, and Dieter Strauch (Köln: Verlag Dr. Otto Schmidt, 1994), 565-623; Bernd Kölling, "Blutige Illusionen. Ritualmorddiskurse und Antisemitismus im niederrheinischen Xanten am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts," in *Agrarische Verfassung und politische Struktur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte Preußens*, eds. Wolfgang Neugebauer and Ralf Pröve (Berlin: Berlin Verlag Arno Spitz, 1998), 349-382; Willi Faehrmann, "Die Buschhoff Affäre in Xanten," in *Das Bild Des Juden in Der Volks- Und Jugendliteratur Vom 18. Jahrhundert Bis 1945*, ed. Heinrich Pleticha (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1985), 127-139.

⁴ Bohumil Černý, *Vražda v Polné* (Praha: Vydavatelství časopisů MNO, 1968); Jiří Kovtun, *Tajuplná vražda. Případ Leopolda Hilsnera* (Praha: Sefer, 1994).

and dismembering of the body of a Christian young man in Konitz in Germany in 1900 triggered multiple accusations and investigations.⁵

While these cases have attracted not only popular, but also scholarly attention before, a comparative study was still missing. In this respect, the research on modern accusations lagged behind that on the blood libels of the medieval and early modern periods⁶ and Kieval's work can be read as a strong companion to recent study of Magda Teter.⁷ Without any doubt, this book will become an authoritative study on ritual murders as discourse and trials in the late 19th and early 20th century. The approach of this author—inspired by the sociology of knowledge, in his exploration of the mutual influence and confrontation of scientific languages with local societies and economies—rewrites the history of the formation and effects of these accusations. Kieval demonstrates to be a careful and attentive reader paying attention to detail and location, terminology and tone. Exactly because he unearths the details of scenes and narratives, the book has a differentiated pace and is somewhat selective, no doubt to avoid repetitions stemming from the similarity of many details of these “bloody” cases, but also to advance Kieval's particular interpretation. For instance, Leopold Hilsner's confession after his first trial, a central moment in all other histories of the Polná case, is not discussed here at all, which shows how, for Kieval, Hilsner remained an outlier in the modern discourses on ritual murder.

Even though the motive of an alleged Jewish blood ritual might have been persistent, the series of trials examined in the book is distinct, according to Kieval. The accusations follow a gap of two or three centuries which separate them from the medieval and early modern trials, the demise of which coincided with the arrival of modern criminal justice and banning of torture as a legitimate investigative practice. Kieval focuses on the few accusations, out of the dozens or

⁵ Christoph Nonn, “Zwischenfall in Konitz. Antisemitismus und Nationalismus im preussischen Osten um 1900,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 266, no. 1 (1998): 387-418; Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale. Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York-London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).

⁶ R. Po-chia Hsia, *Trent 1475. Stories of a Ritual Murder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁷ Magda Teter, *Blood libel. On the trail of an antisemitic myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); see also discussions by Diego Quaglioni and Kenneth Stow, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 19 (June 2021), <https://doi.org/10.48248/issn.2037-741X/12547> and <https://doi.org/10.48248/issn.2037-741X/12762>.

hundreds that were circulating in the press and beyond, because they developed into court trials. The indictment and legal arguments in these cases could no longer “be articulated [...] in pre-Reformation language and symbols” (p. 136). Re-emerging in the late 19th century, the image of the ritual murder was stripped of its deep religious meanings. Now, “sacrifice has been transmuted into slaughter, the altar into the cutting block” (p. 160).

Kieval challenges the simple binary opposition between the accusations of ritual murder as a primitive, old and prejudicial phenomenon on the one hand, and the progress and modernity which also underpinned the ideas of Jewish integration in societies on the other hand. In reevaluating his own assumptions at the start of his work, he came to the conclusion “that obsessive attention to the apparent irrationality of the blood libel simply does not work well as an analytical lens” (p. 18). Kieval confronts the usual liberal responses which viewed the blood libel as a matter of the past—an expression of medieval superstition and irrationality. Such reactions, says the author, were—and sometimes continue to be—based on a serious misunderstanding of the nature of such cases.

These trials, he argues, “constituted a *new phenomenon* in the long history of the blood libel” by following modern criminal codes and rules and by the application of “modern forensic science and criminology” (p. 4, emphasis in original). In re-reading and re-contextualizing these cases of ritual murder accusation, Kieval specifically pays attention to the new epistemology of medical science and criminology in supporting or refuting the mostly inherited knowledge about Jews and their alleged deeds. Reflecting on impulses from the sociology of knowledge allows him to ask what made these accusations work by making this knowledge “meaningful” to modern, educated social actors. It was experts and practitioners of science who now “defined the boundaries—linguistic and conceptual—of plausible argument” (p. 136). Out of the large corpuses of text that these investigations, trials and the press coverage left behind, the medical reports and autopsies are the material which especially attracted Kieval’s attention, providing the language and scientific legitimacy to the old accusation. In the post-Enlightenment context, only this knowledge and authority could move the State to act, investigate and put on trial.

Kieval’s approach differs from that of Daniel Vyleta who, tracing “Jewish” crimes in contemporary criminology and press, focused on the process of discursive

making of the cunning and modern Jewish criminal and on the notion of suggestive power of a master criminal.⁸ In contrast, the analysis of Kieval revolves around the production of knowledge accumulated through the investigation and the public discussion of these crimes. This requires the readers to familiarize themselves with medical expert knowledge. For instance, in the Tiszaeszlár case, where the proceedings depended on the identification of the body of a drowned girl, Kieval guides the reader through complex medical terminology such as the production of “adipocere” (corpse wax) or “endochondral ossification” (p. 78). The volume of blood in the body and its alleged absence on the crime scene played a central role in the report of local physicians in Polná which, according to Kieval, “constitutes one of the seminal documents in the turn-of-the-century struggle to establish proper scientific procedures in forensic medicine” (p. 156). These opinions written in the language of modern science and building on observations made possible by the state-of-the-art technology both supported, but also tamed the epistemological making and sustaining of the accusations of ritual murder. Eventually, Kieval argues, sometime before the First World War their instability became apparent, and these epistemologies collapsed, no longer resulting in court trials. Even though the accusations of ritual murder continued (and still continue) to be present in antisemitic discourses, their real impact remained limited.

For Kieval, the history of modern antisemitism as ideology and practice offers little clue to explain the relative success of ritual murder accusations of the period under examination. In contrast, the book “attempts to disengage the modern ritual murder trial [...] from *antisemitism* as an explanatory construct” (p. 27). Antisemitic propaganda and violence was an important aspect of all four cases, Kieval recognizes; however, he seems reluctant to derive their emergence and impact from the national political movements which developed and spread antisemitic discourses. Leaning on the research of Robert Nemes about Hungarian provinces,⁹ he can claim that “it wasn’t antisemitism that produced the Tiszaeszlár affair but, rather, Tiszaeszlár that helped to galvanize modern antisemitism” (p. 107). Instead, Kieval locates the history of ritual murder cases in

⁸ Daniel M. Vyleta, *Crime, Jews and News. Vienna 1895-1914* (New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007).

⁹ Robert Nemes, “Hungary’s Antisemitic Provinces: Violence and Ritual Murder in the 1880s,” *Slavic Review* 66, no. 1 (2007): 20-44.

the context of what he calls “cultural geography of place” (p. 27), a close reading of the social and cultural settings in Tiszaeszlár, Xanten, Polná and Konitz. He shows multi-layered relationships between Jews and Christians and Jewish integration into local societies which cannot be easily subsumed to any history of antisemitism. As he stresses, “Jewish residents [...] were rooted in their communities, had a strong sense of place, and felt entitled to the protection of the state” (p. 59). On the other hand, with Jews and Christians living in proximity and interaction, it was the accusation of ritual murder which disrupted the daily cohabitation, triggered social exclusion and migration from these communities. Rather than antisemitism, it was this locally constructed knowledge of Jewish criminality which made up the recipe in the accusations of ritual murder. Kieval acknowledges the impact of local views and prejudice on the building up of medical knowledge. In the case of Xanten, for instance, “the closer the medical practitioners themselves were physically to the social and cultural universe of the town [...], the more susceptible their analyses were to the cultural assumptions that supported accusations of Jewish ritual murder” (p. 137). In Polná, he similarly recognizes the mutual influence of the “[s]ymbolic language, received tradition, rumor, and forensic medicine” (p. 154). Starting with Tiszaeszlár, the local was essential for the construction of knowledge about Jewish criminality and “blood libel.” For instance, Kieval shows how the “transportable images” (p. 124) of the butcher and ritual slaughterer, easily identifiable locally in the villages and small towns like the four examined in the book, played a central role in the construction of the storylines of several accusations.

Still, while persuasive and highly inspiring, the book could have been taken further to refine the argument with regard to the relationship to modern antisemitism, beyond the negative boundaries which Kieval draws. As a result, the history of antisemitism remains more a scenery to his interpretation. It appears to me that this is based on a narrow understanding of themes and methods in antisemitism research, as if it only explored continuities and ruptures of anti-Jewish ideas and practices. Arguably, the interest in the history of antisemitism in the 19th and early 20th century lessened after the 1990s, when it expanded geographically, especially with respect to Eastern Europe, and thematically. Yet, in striking similarity to the development of Holocaust Studies, it opened new approaches, be it through the lenses of gender, language, or—most significantly in this context—local history.

Kieval's new perspective on ritual murder trials fits well with this vision of the history of antisemitism as a broad category.

While antisemitism in the narrow sense of the word alone does not offer an ultimate explanation, the success of the cases that were examined in this volume would have been unthinkable without the mobilization and the legitimization it provided. In particular, one wonders how the discussions of the crime, its sites and actors, relate to the contemporaneous modernization of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories and structurally fits the widespread ideas about a coordinated action of Jews against non-Jews. Similarly to the accusations of ritual murder, the narratives of Jewish conspiracy on global or local scales constructed knowledge that seemed meaningful to its authors and recipients—it's irrationality notwithstanding. In a parallel to Kieval's interpretation, antisemitism—while not (always) scientific—offered a new language which claimed to disengage from traditional anti-Judaism with its baggage of prejudice and hatred. In the very own words of antisemites, their arguments against Jews were supposed to be rooted in the analysis of economy and society, and thus in fact and science. That's why at least some economists and sociologists experimented with antisemitic arguments. Thomas Masaryk himself, before becoming a staunch opponent of the Polná blood libel, flirted with antisemitism as a language that described the ills of the modern society scientifically. Like the epistemologies of the modern ritual trial, their entanglements with antisemitism were temporary and perhaps transitional. Hence, the logics and languages underpinning the investigations and trials examined by Kieval might be more significant to the study of modern antisemitism than the author himself acknowledges. In conclusion, rather than reading the book in separation from research on modern antisemitism, it can be studied as an enrichment and as an inspiration for future research in this field.

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