

BOOK REVIEWS

Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth

By Magda Teter. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020. Pp. 560. Hardback \$42.00. ISBN: 978-0674240933.

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The most horrific examples of antisemitism from medieval and early modern Europe are fictitious tales, which describe Jews ritually murdering Christian boys in imitation of the crucifixion, consuming Christian blood in Passover matzas, desecrating the Eucharistic host, and spreading the plague by poisoning the water supply – the last being an “honor” they shared with lepers. These myths are imbricated with particular aspects of high medieval Western Christianity: an emphasis on the suffering Christ and his humanity, religious piety via *imitatio Christi*, the theological doctrine of transubstantiation, and, most importantly, an assumption of Jewish hatred for Christ (and Christians) so vehement that it welled up in psychotic reenactments of the Passion. It hardly needs to be said that these myths only make sense within a framework of Christian belief. For Jews, the Eucharistic host was just a cracker. Why would one stab a Ritz cracker with evil glee? Jews died of the Black Death just like Christians. Would they have poisoned the wells they used themselves? From a Jewish perspective, Jesus was just a man. So why reenact the Romans’ crucifixion of a common criminal over 1000 years ago?! And most of all, would any sane person murder innocent children!

These grotesque libels against medieval, early modern, and even modern Jews only began to be studied as a form of antisemitism in the 1960s, as Holocaust Studies developed. Following the pathbreaking work of Gavin Langmuir, scholars have established the chronology of these tales, probed the cultural contexts for their spread, and plumbed the theoretical distinctions between anti-Judaism and antisemitism.

Magda Teter’s *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* is the most comprehensive study to date of the ritual murder accusation and the blood libel – both of which she includes under the latter term. As its subtitle suggests, it is an intellectual history of the extensive paper trail of letters, edicts, laws, histories, literature, and visual art which describe, report, investigate, and negate the blood libels. Teter tirelessly follows the trail as it crisscrosses Europe and takes her to eight countries. She has an incredible linguistic range, working with historical materials in ten languages including Hebrew and Yiddish. The extent of her research in European archives and printed primary sources is breathtaking. (Due to the length of the former, the bibliography of secondary texts is only produced online, with additional maps and images at www.thebloodlibeltrail.org. One hopes that the online component will remain live for many decades to come.)

Teter’s principal argument is that these antisemitic fables only became “truly rooted in the European imagination” in the early modern period following the extensive legal trial surrounding Simon of Trent (1475–1478). Moreover, she shows that these myths reached a peak in early modern Poland-Lithuania. The bulk of the book accordingly focuses there, with a secondary focus on the German lands and the Italian peninsula. The book consequently significantly alters our understanding of the chronology of the blood libels.

Although the blood libels and ritual murder accusations arose first in West Europe in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, these remained largely local, with a limited distribution in the monastic chronicles where they were recorded. In contrast, the advent of the printing press together with the extensive legal documentation of the trial of the Jews of Trent led to an early modern explosion of false news. The telling and retelling of the gruesome legends led to their entrenchment in European culture, including for the first time the papacy's backing of the beatification of two dead children as saints. The tide only began to turn in the eighteenth century with the report of Cardinal Gangellani, which reinstated the medieval papal position on the falsity of the blood libel except for these two saints. Yet Gangellani's report largely remained secret until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Jewish leaders pressed for its verification by the Vatican. The slow waning of the blood libel in the modern period has not led to its disappearance, as most readers will know. These myths are currently circulating among neo-Nazi and other alt-right groups and have spread beyond the European cultural sphere.

Blood Libel is an exhaustive empirical study and will remain a standard work for generations. But a couple of critical points might be raised for researchers as well as for readers. First and foremost, the book skates over that small but all-important question – why? Teter's emphasis on the role of the printing press in the dissemination of the blood libel is a major insight. But why do these tales metamorphize as they do? Early ritual murder cases do not include the gory false charge of consuming Christian blood. Why, then, does the fable of Christian blood used in Passover matza emerge? Even more, why do these stories begin to be told at all? This is the real question and a difficult one. Teter's meticulous, careful, and extensive research on the arguments for and against the blood libel explain well how and why it keeps going once started. But why does it start? And finally, this reader wishes that Teter had taken up the theoretical question of conceptual terminology. The term "blood libel" makes it absolutely clear that these tales are false. Well and good. But using "blood libel" for both ritual murder and consumption of blood glosses over the differences in the tales and pushes aside other fantastical libels like well poisonings and host desecrations. Even more, should medieval and early modern antisemitism be limited to these myths alone, or broadened to include a whole range of other aspects – like the myth of Jewish usury? Despite these lingering questions, Teter's book is a *tour de force* that will be a monumental work in the field for decades to come.

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Prostitution and Subjectivity in Late Medieval Germany

By Jamie Page. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 164. Cloth £65.00. ISBN: 978-0198862789.

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Prostitution is not a rare phenomenon, and neither are studies in its history. As far as institutional settings, regulations, and policing are concerned, we are fairly well informed. But when it comes to the lives and working conditions, self-images and social interactions of the prostitutes themselves, both within the milieu of prostitution and beyond, the sources tend to be reticent and relevant ego-documents are lacking. This has been deplored many