



Blood Libels and Host Desecration Accusations

by **Hillel J. Kieval**

The blood libel was an accusation of Jewish “ritual murder,” which held that Jews kidnapped and murdered innocent Christians (particularly young boys) in order to make use of the blood of their victims for purposes of Jewish religious ritual. It had important historical and thematic connections to the accusation that Jews bought or stole consecrated Eucharist wafers (Hosts) in order to pierce them with sharp objects, thereby both desecrating them and subjecting them to torture. Both forms of anti-Jewish discourse derived ultimately from medieval Christian convictions that salvation could be obtained only through the blood of Christ.

An important turning point for the theoretical elaboration of the two accusations was the elevation of the doctrine of transubstantiation to official dogma in 1215. The earliest ritual murder accusation to deploy the theme of the consumption of blood took place in Fulda (in the Holy Roman Empire) in 1235; the first major Host desecration accusation occurred in Paris in 1290. Although the underlying message in both accusations was that Jews constituted a mortal danger to Christians, these libels also worked to dispel doubts concerning the dogma of transubstantiation by demonstrating that even Jews—the “enemies of Christ”—were aware at some level of the salvific power of Christ’s blood.



Etching depicting Jews stabbing the host, from *Trzy Święte Hostye, w Poznaniu 1399. Roku Nożami od Żydów Uklote* (Three Holy Hosts, Which the Jews Stabbed with Knives in Poznań in 1399), by W. Xiądz Tomasz Treterus (Poznań, 1772). (The Dorot Jewish Division, The New York Public Library Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations)

From the perspective of Jewish experience, the two accusations represented dangerous disruptions of the social and political equilibrium. Accusations of ritual murder or Host desecration often led to criminal investigations, interrogation under torture, executions or judicial murder, popular riots, and even wholesale expulsions. Interestingly, the region of Eastern and East Central Europe was relatively free of these accusations against Jews before the sixteenth century. In Poland, for example, there appear to have been only one Host desecration case (Poznań, 1399) and two ritual murder accusations (Kraków, 1407 and 1423) before 1500. Those accusations that did occur in the late middle ages took place on the territories of the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary.

A case in point, the Breslau Host desecration charge of 1453 resulted in the burning at the stake of 41 Jews and the expulsion of the remaining Jewish population. A ritual murder accusation in the southern Bohemian city of Budweis (České Budějovice) in 1505–1506 ended with the execution of more than 20 Jews and the deaths of many others in riots that erupted against the Jewish quarter. Hungary witnessed major blood libel cases in Tyrnau (Nagyszombat) in 1494 and 1536, as well as in Pösing (Bazin) in 1529. The Pösing affair was instigated by the local count, Ferenc (Francis) Wolf, who owed sizable sums to Jewish creditors. After he proclaimed in public that Jews had killed a Christian child in order to use the blood for ritual purposes, 30 Jews were arrested, among them community leaders, including Rabbi Mosheh ben Ya'akov ha-Kohen and his children. All were burned at the stake; the remaining Jews were expelled from the city. The boy, of whose murder the Jews were accused, was eventually found alive. It was this case that served as the impetus behind the first systematic refutation of the ritual murder accusation by a Christian theologian, Andreas Osiander of Nuremberg.

Ritual murder and Host desecration accusations entered Poland–Lithuania in the sixteenth century, their number and frequency rising sharply with the Counter-Reformation in the 1560s. Historians differ as to the precise number of cases that occurred as well as to the ultimate motives that lay behind them. Some have linked them to a conversionary campaign driven by Jesuit priests and bishops, others to a desire to justify Christian theological teachings about Jews in the face of apparent Jewish success in Polish economic life. Moreover, not all accusations resulted in criminal investigations or trials.

It appears that between 1540 and 1790, between 80 and 100 ritual murder accusations serious enough to have left behind a historical record took place. Formal trials against Jews on this charge probably numbered between 20 and 25 for the seventeenth century and the same for the eighteenth century. In the sixteenth century, mainly burghers instigated the accusations. Church officials appear to have been more active in these proceedings in the eighteenth century than they had been in the past—there were at least six cases in which bishops were involved—and the number of judicial murders that ensued was also higher. More than 100 Jews and several non-Jews lost their lives during the eighteenth century as victims of this accusation.



Painting depicting blood libels in Sandomierz, still on display in town's cathedral as of 2005. Photograph by Roman Chyła. (Courtesy Magda Teter)

Sandomierz, in the Kingdom of Poland, was the site of two major blood libels at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (1698 and 1710–1713). The instigator and organizer of the criminal investigation in the latter case was Stefan Żuchowski (1666–1716)—parish priest, archdeacon, and inquisitor of the town. In 1711, Żuchowski was appointed commissioner for Jewish affairs by the synod of the Kraków diocese, a position that enabled him to oversee accusations against Jews. He had taken a personal interest in the question of Jewish “ritual murder” in the aftermath of the first Sandomierz case, published a book on the subject in 1700 (*Ogłos procesów kryminalnych na Żydach o różne ekscesy* [Publication of Criminal Trials against Jews for Various Excesses]), and followed this with another work in 1713 that incorporated his reading of the second Sandomierz case. The two books would prove to be extremely influential in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, an example of the difficulty of disentangling historical accounts from the genre of antisemitic literature: they were read widely; quoted from, not only in subsequent literature, but in future trials as

well; and they formed the basis for a list of ritual murder accusations in Poland that was assembled at the end of the eighteenth century by the Bishop of Kiev, Józef Załuski, and published in Warsaw in 1914 (*Moderstwa rytualne w Polsce do połowy XVIII wieku* [Ritual Murder in Poland to the Middle of the Eighteenth Century]). Another peculiarity of the 1710 Sandomierz case concerns the testimony of Jan Serafinowicz, a convert from Judaism. Serafinowicz served as a witness for the prosecution at the trial, offering testimony that Jews did, in fact, perform ritual murder on Christian children. He also seems to have been the author of a manuscript filled with “evidence” supporting the blood libel, which became a handbook of sorts for prosecutors. It was eventually summarized in *Złość żydowska* (Jewish Malice), published in 1758 by Gaudenty Pikulski, a Catholic priest.

The engagement of Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk, who in 1753 had orchestrated a ritual murder trial in Żytomierz, with Polish Frankists provided another, more dramatic occasion in which former or dissenting Jews would step forward to attest to the “truth” of the charge that Jews used Christian blood for ritual purposes. In the aftermath of the Kamieniec-Podolski disputation of 1757, Sołtyk sought to exploit the propagandistic potential of the Frankists, styled “Contra-Talmudists.” He instigated another public disputation, which took place in Lwów in September 1759, in which the Frankists asserted that the Talmud teaches that Jews require Christian blood and that whoever believes in the Talmud is bound to follow this teaching. Deeply concerned about the flurry of ritual murder accusations in Poland, the Council of Four Lands (Va’ad Arba’ Aratsot) sent three emissaries to the Vatican between 1754 and 1761 to appeal for the pope’s protection. In 1758, Pope Benedict XIV ordered an investigation into the matter and charged Lorenzo Ganganelli, councilor of the Holy Office of the Inquisition—and later Pope Clement XIV—to prepare a report on the commission’s work. Ganganelli’s report, presented to the congregation of the Inquisition in March 1758, reviewed the major accusations of Jewish ritual murder since the thirteenth century and concluded that the blood libel was indeed a calumny, of which Jews and Judaism were innocent.



“Commission over the corpse of A. Hružová in the Březina woods by Polná, 1 April 1899. Dr. Michálek and Dr. Prokeš make their report.”
Postcard souvenir of the Leopold Hilsner case, Polná, Austro-Hungarian Empire (now in Czech Republic). (Městské muzeum Polná)

In countries that lay to the west of Poland–Lithuania, the Protestant Reformation had the effect of casting doubt on ritual murder and Host desecration accusations, relegating them to the intellectually suspect categories of popular superstition and legend. Very few trials were prosecuted on these charges in Western and Central Europe from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. In Eastern Europe, however, a similar, delegitimizing process would not take place before the end of the eighteenth century. In the case of Poland, this disenchantment was the product of two related cultural developments: the spread of Enlightenment ideas among magistrates and officials; and the abolition of torture in criminal investigations in 1776. The result was the virtual elimination of ritual murder trials during the last quarter of the century.

Individual ritual murder cases did appear in the Russian Empire following the Polish partitions. Among the more distinctive were the Velizh affair, in Vitebsk province, which dragged on from 1823 to 1835 and resulted in the acquittal of the Jewish defendants (those who had not already died in prison) and the exile of the chief Christian accuser to Siberia; and the Zasław (Volhynia) case of 1830, which served as the indirect impetus to the composition of Yitshak Ber Levinzon's *Efes damim* (No Blood; 1837)—a classic of modern apologetics, which was translated into English in 1841 in the wake of the Damascus affair. The conviction of Jewish defendants in a ritual murder trial in Saratov in 1860 led the Russian government to appoint (not for the first time) a commission of experts to study the question of “Jewish ritual murder.” The results of this commission were mixed. One of its members was Daniil Khvol'son, a converted Jew on the faculty of the Saint Petersburg Theological Seminary, who devoted a good part of his remaining career to a scholarly refutation of the allegation; another, the Ukrainian historian Nikolai Kostomarov, believed in it to the end of his life.



Eszter Solymosi, after an original painting by Ludwig Ábrányi. From *Tisza-Eszlár in der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, by Géza von Önody

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade and a half of the twentieth—following a relative hiatus of close to 300 years—public accusations against Jews for the crime of “ritual murder” proliferated throughout Central Europe. One turn-of-the-century observer detailed no fewer than 128 public accusations of Jewish ritual murders during the years 1881 to 1900. The spate of modern accusations actually increased as the nineteenth century drew to a close. According to a Jewish defense organization based in Berlin, no fewer than 79 ritual murder accusations were leveled against Jews between 1891 and 1900—primarily in Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Bulgaria. The majority of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century claims of Jewish ritual murder may never have gone beyond rumor mongering or sensational reporting in the mass media. It is equally conceivable that dozens of accusations were followed up by criminal investigations of varying duration and intensity. What is truly remarkable is that four Central and East European states—Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Russia—chose formally to prosecute Jewish defendants at six public trials between 1879 and 1913, thereby breaking with a longstanding tradition of skeptical neutrality.

The trials in question took place in Kutaisi (Russian Georgia, 1879); Tiszaeszlár (Hungary, 1882–1883); Xanten (Germany, 1891–1892); Polná (Austrian Bohemia, 1899–1900); Konitz (Germany [West Prussia], 1900–1901); and Kiev (Russian Ukraine, 1911–1913). In the Kutaisi proceedings, nine Hasidic Jews stood accused of the murder of a young girl; all were acquitted. Salomon Schwarcz, József Scharf, and 11 other Jewish defendants stood trial in the Tiszaeszlár case for the murder of 14-year-old Eszter Solymosi. The trial lasted six weeks and eventually resulted in the acquittal of all the accused. In Xanten, a Jewish stonecutter and butcher by the name of Adolf Buschhof was accused of the ritual murder of five-year-old Johann Hegmann; Buschhof, too, was acquitted at end of a 10-day trial. The Jewish defendant in the Polná case was Leopold Hilsner, an underemployed glovemaker. Accused of the aggravated ritual murder of 19-year-old Anežka Hružová, Hilsner was convicted and sentenced to death in 1899. The case was appealed, however, and retried in Písek in 1900 by order of the Austrian High Court. At this trial, Hilsner was again convicted (this time for two murders) and again sentenced to death, a sentence that Emperor Franz Joseph commuted to life imprisonment. (Hilsner was eventually pardoned in 1916, though never officially acquitted.) The Konitz trial involved the murder and dismemberment of an 18-year-old gymnasium student, Ernst Winter—a crime that was described by many as a ritual murder. At his trial, Moritz Lewy, a Jewish butcher, was in the end convicted, not of murder but of perjury. And in the Kiev affair, Mendel Beilis was accused of ritually murdering a local boy, Andrei Iushchinskii. After nearly two years of imprisonment and trial, Beilis was acquitted; but, in issuing the verdict, the jury allowed for the possibility that a ritual murder had in fact taken place.

Table: Principal Trials against Jews for "Ritual Murder" in Central and Eastern Europe

Each of the trials received extensive coverage in the international press, but three appear to have generated the most discussion in the foreign press: Tiszaeszlár, because it was the first modern prosecution in Central Europe and, as such, elicited widespread questioning of the compatibility of ritual murder discourse and modern culture; Polná, because it coincided with the Dreyfus affair in France, was implicated in the heated national controversy between Germans and Czechs, and, finally, featured a dramatic intervention on the Jewish defendant's behalf by Tomáš Masaryk, a leader of the progressive wing of the Czech national movement who would go on to become the first president of independent Czechoslovakia; and Kiev—the Beilis affair—because it seemed to epitomize to the Western world both the backwardness of Imperial Russia and the hopeless situation of its oppressed Jewish population.



"In Memory of the Beilis Trial: Beilis Not Guilty, Jews Guilty." Yiddish postcard. Artwork by Mitchel Loeb. Printed by Progress Publishing Company, New York, ca. 1913. The card depicts the "Jewish people" with a ball chain labeled "Blood Libel" and Tsar Nicholas II saying: "Go, Mendel. You're free! Rejoice with your American friends but I won't waste any time in getting even for your acquittal with your left-behind Russian brothers." (YIVO)

It would be a mistake, however, to view the ritual murder trials of modern Europe as a return to medieval superstition. In each of the states in question, the prosecutors and ministry officials who made the decision to conduct formal criminal investigations and, eventually, to prosecute the Jewish defendants did so while trying to maintain their identity as scientifically trained, bureaucratic rationalists. Their cases also relied to a large extent on the opinions of a variety of expert witnesses—physicians, forensic scientists, criminologists, theologians, and academic scholars of Judaism—whose testimony appeared to provide the modern ritual murder accusation an aura of scientific respectability. Far from being a throwback to the middle ages, the modern ritual murder trial was, in fact, a product of post-Enlightenment politics, fears, and conventional wisdoms. It succeeded for as long as it did because it was articulated through the idioms of scientific discourse and rationality. Eventually these same cultural supports would undermine the credibility of the juridical and forensic proceedings of the modern ritual murder trial and lead to its demise after World War I.

A pogrom that broke out on 4 July 1946 in the Polish city of Kielce against its tiny community of several hundred Jews who had returned to Poland from the Soviet Union

after the war might be said to have been an even later iteration of the ritual murder accusation in Poland. The event, in which 42 Jews were killed and about 50 wounded, occurred against the backdrop of a complaint that Jews had abducted and held a Christian child and in the course of a highly publicized police search of the building on Planty Street in which many Jews resided. In the aftermath of the Kielce pogrom, surviving Jews abandoned the city, and a wave of Jewish emigration from Poland ensued.

What political and cultural meanings attached to the modern ritual murder accusation? Why was it an attractive or compelling belief to those people who held it? The modern accusation of Jewish ritual murder functioned politically as a rhetorical assault on the recently completed emancipation of the Jews of Central Europe and on the liberal state that acknowledged the legal equality of the Jewish religion. Proponents of the accusation claimed to have discovered precisely in the religious culture of the Jews the code that determined their unsociability and, hence, their disqualification from the political category of citizen and the social category of neighbor. The cultural meanings of the accusation were bleaker still, as they pointed to a new sense of danger and threat stemming from the social effects of modern life, located in the secret proclivities of the recently emancipated Jews, and inscribed on the mutilated bodies of their victims.

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