

Book Review: Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth by Magda Teter

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Teter, Magda *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. 539 pages. Hardcover, \$39.95.

I have a long-standing interest in stigma. I consider Erving Goffman's 1963 work on the subject to be one of the best pieces of sociology I have read. The concept of stigma was central when I testified in federal court as part of a civil rights case (Hirsch and Quartaroli, 2011) and have more recently applied it in an analysis of how claims of paranormal activity affect a person's reputation (Hirsch et al, 2014). Antisemitism is also an interest; my study of this subject ranges from Hannah Arendt's seminal 1951 work on the topic to more recent studies such as Andrea Dworkin's work (2000). Therefore, when I saw Magda Teter's *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* offered for review, I could not resist.

Teter's work is an exploration of how myth becomes fact and how these facts influence actions which create history and the addition of more facts. In the cycle she explores, we see how the unfounded claims of Jews killing Christian children to use their blood in rituals (blood libels) become embedded in European culture to the detriment of Jewish communities across Europe.

Teter's history of unfounded claims—blood libels—date back to 1144 when “a twelve-year-old boy named William disappeared during the Eastern season...” (p. 18) near Norwich. Years later, a monk new to the area drafts the first story claiming such a death to be a “ritual crucifixion” (p 18) whereby Jews are purported to have killed William in a manner that parallels the passion of Jesus Christ.

Marginalized groups throughout history are prey to false claims and easily scapegoated for the tragedies of life. When marginalization is accompanied by strong stigmatization, these groups are open to the worst abuses societies and its member can impose. Such is the case with the history of the Jews in the face of blood libel across Europe.

While the charges remained localized, so too were their effects. With the emergence of the printing press however, localized events became part of a literature dispersed in multiple languages across the continent. Anthologies of saints, histories of the church, and works whose sole aim was to “demonstrate ‘the hatred and malevolence the Jews have against Christians’” (p. 190) were circulated throughout Europe, introducing the myth to uninitiated populations. This initiation resulted in attributing the deaths of more Christian children to the members of more Jewish communities often resulting in their imprisonment, torture and death. Trials ending in convictions added to the history of the enmity Jews had for Christians stored both in local archives and in the next round of published histories. This reinforcing cycle continued into the 1800s in eastern Europe and Russia.

Teter explores in detail the strategies used by the Jews to defend themselves against such spurious claims. They included in their defenses support they had received from both religious and secular leaders. They worked to demystify their rituals in a manner that would debunk the claim of their need for Christian blood. They were aided by Christian scholars as well as respected members of their own community; but the weight of the evidence (fabricated stories) in published histories was often too difficult to overcome, especially in a time when books received a high level of respect.

Teter contextualizes these claims and defenses within the nature of the religious and ethnic communities involved (e.g., Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jew, Catholics and Protestants) and within the larger political contexts where the trials took place. Often secular authorities who doubted the blood libel claims found themselves too weak to intervene against local officials whipping up public sentiment. So too did the Catholic church leaders in Rome at times feel impotent in the face of regional agitation. At times, popes contributed to the antisemitism of the

Catholic community. The antisemitism of the past, has echoes today as we see in the claims of a 2019 synagogue shooter invoking the name of one child supposedly killed by Jews in the 1400s. Documents endures, including false histories of hate.

This is an extraordinary piece of scholarship. Teter translated documents from nine languages as part of her research. The work includes over one hundred pages of notes and two dozen pages of reference. It is well-written, the arguments well-constructed, and thesis relevant to the politics of today. In a world of unedited content, when truth loses its moorings to fact, we see that just as was true in the past, marginalized groups can be unjustifiably targeted by groups whipped into a fever of hate.

This work is a must read for scholars of Judaic Studies. It is relevant to all who study or teach ethnic studies or minority group relations. It has great relevance for religious studies. It certainly has a place in the library of those interested in the study of stigma. Thank you Dr. Teter for what I suspect history will prove to be a definitive work. I hope it helps us quell the fires of bigotry and hatred that are all too present in modern time.

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