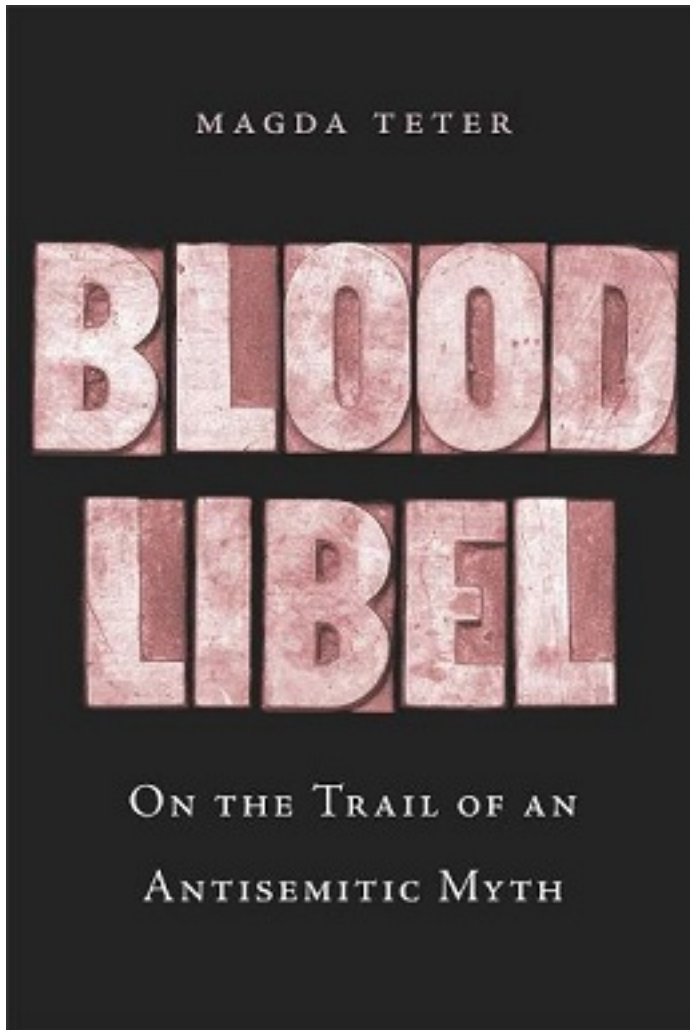


## Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth

01.02.2021 | Heather Blurton

**Magda Teter: Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. 560 pp. \$39.95 (cloth)**



*Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* explores the contexts that have continually animated the blood libel—that is, the libel that Jews murder Christians out of a ritual need for blood—across seven centuries. The introduction sets up the book’s twin themes: the first concerns the influence of the 1475 accusation of the ritual murder of Simon of Trent, and the second concerns the transformational effect of the printing press on the blood libel accusation. Teter situates the case of Simon of Trent at the center of her narrative both because his was one of only two blood libel cases pronounced on by the papacy, and also because it was the first case that was broadly publicized through the printed word. The case of Simon of Trent is thus a touchstone to which the study frequently returns, but the book is not entirely about Simon. *Blood Libel* covers a lot of ground, both temporal and geographical. Over ten chapters, this sprawling study follows the blood libel from twelfth-century England to eighteenth-century Poland, taking in many themes along the way, including the power of print, the importance of regional textual communities, shifting judicial norms, Protestantism, and the Enlightenment.

The first chapter surveys the blood libel in the Middle Ages from its beginnings in the ritual murder accusation in twelfth-century England to the thirteenth-century cases at Fulda and Valréas, which for Teter represent the real beginning of the blood libel because of their intersection with the law and their creation of a permanent archive. Chapter 2 turns to the early modern period and recounts the long and gruesome story of the arrest and trial of a group of Jews for the murder of Simon of Trent. The story predictably contains many of the elements that historians have come to expect from blood libel accusations: a local power conflict, indebted Christians, informing servants, and, a theme that Teter emphasizes, the role of torture in eliciting confessions. Teter's account focuses on the figure of Bishop Hinderbach and how, she argues, he self-consciously shaped the archive of this incident. The role of propaganda is important for Teter: throughout the book she emphasizes that some records remained hidden in archives, while others enjoyed a wide popular readership through the printing press, and that it was normally those prejudiced against Jews that had the broadest dissemination.

The importance of the Simon of Trent case for Teter is that it reversed the medieval model of papal legal protection of the Jews. Chapter 3, therefore, turns to the impact that the case of Simon of Trent had elsewhere in Europe. In this regard, she describes the importance of the new invention of the printing press for disseminating the story in both word and image, in Latin and the vernaculars, and how the publications that came out of Trent after the trial of Simon's accused murderers had a powerful role in shaping and validating future blood libels. Chapter 4 continues this theme, noting how different regions engaged with this new efflorescence of popular writing about Jews in different ways. In Germany and Italy a greater familiarity with Jewish religious and legal traditions offered evidence that Jewish rituals did not require blood. In Poland-Lithuania, on the other hand, absent this tradition, promulgation of anti-Jewish texts and images like the ones coming out of Trent tended to reinforce belief in the blood libel.

Chapter 5 turns to the Jewish response to the blood libel. Teter points out in this chapter that there were far more blood libel cases in the territories lived in by Ashkenazi Jews than Sephardic Jews. This discrepancy resulted, she argues, in different responses to them: where Sephardic narratives focus on Jews vindicating themselves through logical argument, Ashkenazi narratives focus on Jews vindicating themselves through steadfast faith and martyrdom—themes, she notes, that obliquely reflect Christian cultures of martyrdom. Chapter 6 cycles back to the influence of printed anti-Jewish literature, describing what Teter characterizes as a “feedback loop between literature and courtroom” (p. 237). This feedback loop was driven by the publication in Polish of the story of Simon of Trent in 1579 and, a decade later, *Jewish Cruelties, Murders and Superstitions* by Przeclaw Mojecki: these books, Teter argues, both created a horizon of expectation about Jewish behavior and were called as evidence of that behavior in trials.

Chapter 7 moves into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which proved something of a turning point for the blood libel accusation, at least in Italy. Here, Teter argues, a new emphasis on *buon governo* and *buon giustizia*, with its concomitant emphasis on appropriate judicial process, began to result in acquittals of Jewish defendants in blood libel trials. However, chapter 8 turns to consider the adverse effect Pope Benedict XIV had on the blood libel. Paradoxically, although Benedict XIV has a reputation as an “Enlightenment” pope for his “enlightened” attitudes toward women, slavery, and science, in regard to the blood libel accusation he became the second pope to authorize a mass in honor of a child purportedly ritually murdered by Jews. Teter describes how, before Benedict was pope, he wrote a book on canonization in which the cases of child martyrs, including Simon of Trent, became test cases. As pope, Benedict also had to contend with another child cult, that of Andreas of Rinn. Although Benedict never formally approved the canonization of these child martyrs, his persistent use of the phrase “cruelly killed by Jews in hatred of the Christian faith” was damaging.

Chapters 9 and 10 nevertheless show the tide beginning to turn against cases of blood libel. Chapter 9 begins with a 1756 accusation that resulted in the case being brought before the Holy

Office, which issued a report “condemning the frequent accusations that Jews killed Christians to obtain their blood for Passover matzah” (p. 324). It traces the fortunes of this report against the backdrop of popular belief in the blood libel in Poland-Lithuania. Chapter 10 discusses the tapering off of blood libel accusations in Poland-Lithuania, after they had tapered off elsewhere in Europe, as less the product of more enlightened attitudes toward Jews or ecclesiastical protection than of changing legal norms and political circumstances. Here, Teter especially focuses on the attempts of Jews to extract a public condemnation of the libel from church authorities, and the reluctance of the papacy to offer one.

Finally, there is an epilogue: in fact, I am tempted to recommend that the reader begin with the epilogue, which features a helpful summary of the argument of each chapter and thus offers a useful roadmap to the book. Beginning here will help the reader follow the thread of the book’s argument but also will enable readers interested chiefly in seventeenth-century Poland, for example, or eighteenth-century Italy focus on the book’s intervention in their particular area of interest. Densely researched, *Blood Libel* has over one hundred pages of footnotes, and the book is so long that it contains only a bibliography of the primary sources: a bibliography of secondary sources is housed online on the book’s website (a great feature that also has images and maps—[www.thebloodlibeltrail.org](http://www.thebloodlibeltrail.org)). Given its length and range, I hesitate to ask for more, but I would have been interested to see a discussion of the work of Gavin Langmuir (“Historiographic Crucifixion”, in Langmuir, *Toward Definition of Antisemitism*; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) and Hannah Johnson (*Blood Libel: The Ritual Murder Accusation at the Limit of Jewish History*, 2012), both of which consider the role of modern historiography in shaping such libels. *Blood Libel* begins and ends on a warning note, with an attentiveness to modern-day incidents. With its wealth of archival material, *Blood Libel* will engage readers who are interested not only in the history of antisemitism but also in the historical and cultural contexts with which it intersects.

**Heather Blurton** is associate professor in the Department of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Source: [H-Net Reviews](#); licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License.