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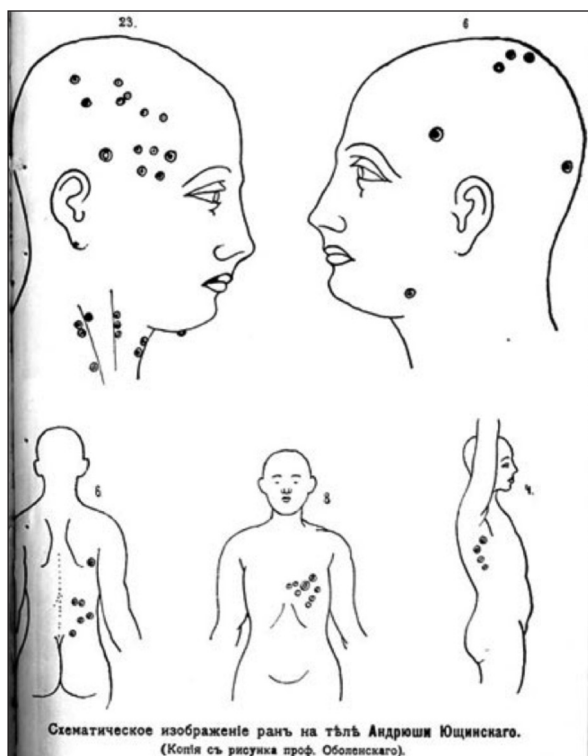


Connecting the Dots: Jewish Mysticism, Ritual Murder, and the Trial of Mendel Beilis

Robert Weinberg
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The prosecution of Mendel Beilis for the murder of thirteen-year-old Andrei Iushchinskii in Kiev a century ago is perhaps the most publicized instance of blood libel since the torture and execution of Jews accused of ritually murdering the infant Simon of Trent in 1475. By the time of the trial in the fall of 1913, the Beilis case had become an international cause célèbre. Like the trials of Alfred Dreyfus in the 1890s and the outcry that accompanied the Damascus Affair in the 1840s, the arrest, incarceration, and trial of Beilis aroused public criticism of Russia's treatment of Jews and inspired opponents of the autocracy at home and abroad to launch a campaign to condemn the trial. The persecution of the innocent Beilis mobilized forces across the political spectrum, from rabid antisemites on the extreme right and revolutionaries on the far left to persons of all persuasions in between.

The killers of Iushchinskii—probably a gang of thieves whose leader was the mother of Iushchinskii's boyhood friend—savagely stabbed the boy some four dozen times in the head and upper torso



Depiction of Wounds on Body of Andrei Iushchinskii, Based on Drawing by Professor Obolenskii (Andris Grutups, *Beilisada: Delo ob obvinenii Mendelia Beilisa v ritual'nom ubiistve* [Riga: Aetna, 2007]

with what the coroner believed was an awl. Some wounds penetrated bone, and one blow went so deep that the handle of the weapon left an impression on his skin. The corpse was significantly drained of blood, with perhaps only one third of the normal amount of blood remaining in the body. The loss of blood and the placement of wounds prompted members of the Union of Russian People and the Union of the Archangel Michael, two of the empire's most zealous antisemitic and monarchist organizations, to declaim that Iushchinskii was a victim of ritual murder and to call for an investigation that focused on Jews. The government's case was predicated on the belief that the defendant and other unnamed perpetrators had killed the boy as a result of "religious fanaticism for ritual purposes."¹

This paper seeks to shed light on the nature of antisemitism in the early twentieth century. In many respects, the trial was a struggle between two irreconcilable ways of perceiving and living in the world. As one editorial in the right-wing newspaper *Russkoe znamia* pointed out, defenders of Beilis did not permit themselves to accept that there “could be ritual murders in the century of airplanes and trams.”² The decision of the prosecution to rely on religious motives to prove its case against Beilis illustrates the extent to which the autocracy believed it was necessary to frame the trial in terms of the Jews’ purported religious fanaticism for subverting the Christian foundations of society. The tsarist government relied on the testimony of witnesses who claimed that Judaism obligated Jews to obtain the blood of non-Jews for a variety of ritual purposes, including the baking of matzo. In particular, the prosecution sought to establish a link between the murder and the Kabbalah, or Jewish mystical thought.

And yet the manner by which the prosecution put together its case against Beilis was more than a struggle between two world views. Government lawyers realized that the ritual murder accusation, easily dismissed by defenders of Beilis as a remnant of medieval religious prejudices and hatreds, needed to be supported by evidence that met contemporary scientific and intellectual standards. Even a superstition from the twelfth century had to draw legitimacy from the authority of the written word and modern science. In other words, the ritual murder accusation had to be sustained in a manner befitting late imperial Russia’s court system, which jurists in Europe and the United States held in high esteem. Hence, the prosecution turned to Ivan Sikorskii, an expert in the modern science of psychiatry, to develop its case against Beilis. Sikorskii was a prominent psychiatrist and professor emeritus at Saint Vladimir University in Kiev who taught a course about the method used by Jews to murder Christian children. In his evaluation of the autopsy, which comprised his testimony at the trial, Sikorskii asserted that the condition of Iushchinskii’s corpse revealed the nationality of the murderers. He claimed that the youth was the victim of ritual murder carried out as the “racial revenge and vendetta of the Sons of Jacob” against gentiles. Sikorskii added that the murder was

carried out with the aim of draining Iushchinskii's body of blood, to be used for religious purposes.³

Father Justin Pranaitis, a Roman Catholic priest with a checkered past and dubious credentials as an expert on Judaic texts such as the Talmud and Zohar, served as another key government witness.⁴ Drawing upon the writings of other supposed specialists who wrote about the roots of Jewish ritual murder, Pranaitis insisted that Judaism dictated the ritual murder of gentiles, though Jews were careful not to spell this out in religious texts. He claimed that the Talmud prohibited putting into words the existence of such a tradition, leaving Jews to pass on knowledge of ritual murder via the spoken word. Even though he lacked legitimate credentials as an expert on the Talmud and other Judaic texts, Pranaitis passed himself off as an authority on Judaism. In *The Christians in the Jewish Talmud, or the Secrets of the Teachings of the Rabbis about Christians*, a pamphlet written in the early 1890s, Pranaitis claimed that Judaism required Jews to kill Christians. Several years before the murder of Iushchinskii, Pranaitis took refuge in Tashkent from the police in Saint Petersburg, pursuing him for attempted extortion. But in 1911 he returned to the capital, where he began to distribute his pamphlet, thereby capturing the attention of other believers in the ritual murder accusation who then steered the police and prosecution toward a Jew as the culprit.

The indictment of Beilis drew upon the ideas of Pranaitis and offered a concise statement of the priest's views:

All the rabbinical schools . . . are united by their hatred of non-Jews who, according to the Talmud, are not considered human beings but only animals in human form. The hatred and the spite that the Jews, from the point of view of their religious law, feel toward people of a different nationality and religion are especially strong toward Christians. Because of this sentiment, the Talmud allows and even commands the killing of non-Jews. . . . The extermination of non-Jews is commanded as a religious act . . . that hastens the coming of the Messiah.⁵

When Pranaitis testified at the end of the trial, he tried to establish his scholarly credentials by grounding his testimony in a long-established

tradition of like-minded thought. He claimed that his ideas on ritual murder had been sparked by a book written in the early nineteenth century by a converted Romanian Jew by the name of Neophyte (a term that refers to recent converts to Christianity). Neophyte, a former rabbi by the name of Noah Belfer who adopted his new moniker when he became a monk, claimed that he had knowledge of the secret practices of Jews. He laid out his views in *Argument against the Jews upon Their Law and Customs*, published in 1803.⁶ Pranaitis drew liberally from Neophyte in his testimony, which went on for hours over the course of several days.

Like Neophyte before him, Pranaitis found himself in good company when it came to his belief in this calumny against Jews. Also known as blood libel, the ritual murder accusation against Beilis was one in a long line of similar charges against Jews dating back to the Middle Ages. The canard that Jews engage in the murder of Christians, particularly young boys and girls, emerged in England in the twelfth century and soon spread to the continent, where Christians accused Jews of using Christian blood for religious rites and to mock the killing of Jesus. However, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it had come to fixate on the Jews' consumption of Christian blood either in sacramental wine or baked into matzo. Not surprisingly, the ritual murder accusation tended to emerge around the time of Passover and Easter. The incidence of such accusations reached a crescendo in German-speaking Europe during the fifteenth century, frequently prompting Christians to attack their Jewish neighbors. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when ritual murder accusations began to die out in Central Europe, they gained a foothold in the Catholic regions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Nonetheless, accusations of ritual murder reemerged with a vengeance in parts of German-speaking Europe during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Dozens of well-documented incidents occurred, with the 1913 trial of Mendel Beilis as perhaps the best-known incident of blood libel since 1475.⁷

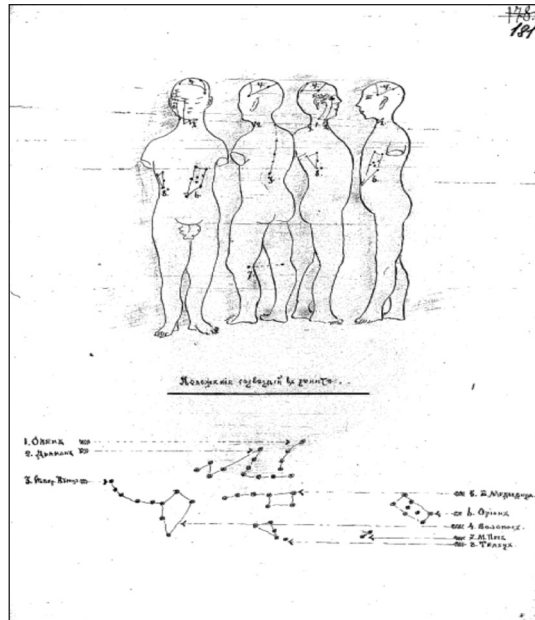
Even though the Orthodox Christian tradition did not share the Western Christian churches' fixation on ritual murder, accusations of blood libel eventually surfaced in the Russian Empire, which had

remained immune until the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late eighteenth century. It was then that large numbers of Jews, Catholics, and Uniates became imperial subjects as a result of the partitions of Poland, and by the early twentieth century the accusation had a secure footing among Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox believers. At the time of the Beilis trial accusations of ritual murder had sunk deep roots in Russian and Ukrainian culture, and strengthened antisemitism on both the popular and official levels.

The testimony offered by Pranaitis reflected the attitudes of the intelligentsia toward Jews and blood libel during Russia's Silver Age, as the literary, intellectual, and artistic revival of the early twentieth century is known. In recent years, scholars have explored the connection between general Russian intellectual and cultural trends and antisemitism on the eve of World War I. In particular, several scholars have focused on the philosopher and writer Vasiliï Rozanov's efforts to establish a link between the Jews' purported possession of secret and mystical knowledge, the role of blood in the Jews' experience of the divine, and ritual murder.⁸ Rozanov believed that Jewish religious texts were a textual artifice intended to hide the ritual need of Jews to engage in blood sacrifice and the mutilation of the body (for example, circumcision). He insisted that blood, which played a critical role in the sacrifices practiced by Jews in Jerusalem in the centuries before the destruction of the Second Temple, continued to occupy a central position in the practice of Judaism in the twentieth century. In one essay, Rozanov maintained that Hebrew words, which are written without vowels, were designed as a code to disguise the fact that Jews colluded with each other to engage in ritual murder.⁹ Jews, claimed Rozanov and others, possessed secret and mystical knowledge hidden in foundational Judaic texts such as the Hebrew Scriptures, Talmud, and Zohar. Other Silver Age writers, not all of whom were antisemites, alluded to blood rituals and the magical qualities of blood in their stories, plays, essays, and poems. For these intellectuals the Beilis case was replete with cultural symbolism and offered an opportunity to elucidate positions on both Jews and Russians.

In recent years Harriet Murav and Judith Deutsch Kornblatt have noted Rozanov's effort to establish a link between Iushchinskii's

murder and Judaism. For example, Murav has written that for Rozanov “the wounds reveal a code of letters—each letter standing for a word, and the words taken together forming a magical sentence stating that this was a sacrificial victim to God.”¹⁰ Similarly, Kornblatt concurs that Rozanov embraced the view that lines connecting the stab wounds comprised Hebrew words, which have an occult meaning suggesting ritual murder. She also makes explicit references to the role that the Kabbalah purportedly played in this line of reasoning.¹¹ However, Murav and Kornblatt, do not, in my opinion, pay sufficient attention to the matter—in particular, to the idea that the positioning of the wounds corresponded to letters and words that supposedly revealed, when decoded, the role of the Kabbalah in enjoining Jews to engage in the collective murder of innocent gentile youths. The detailed exegeses of the meaning of the messages embedded in the stab wounds served a



**Top: Wounds Connected to Each Other on Body of Andrei Iushchinskii
Bottom: Names and Drawings of Constellations Formed by the Wounds
(Derzhavnyi arkiv Kyïvs'koï oblasti, f. 183, op. 5, d. 4, l. 180; excerpted
from microfilm collection “Beilis Case Papers,” copyright East View
Information Services, 2005)**

purpose far beyond the confines of this particular trial. The scholarly language and claims of learned expertise were deployed in an effort to prove the guilt not only of Mendel Beilis, but of all Jews as participants in this heinous religious rite.

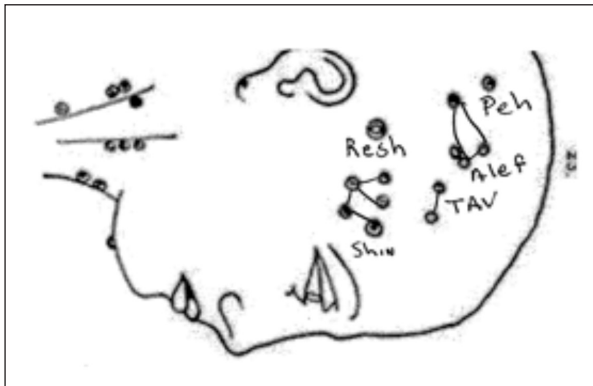
Elsewhere I have discussed how ordinary Russians and Ukrainians, along with tsarist authorities, argued that astrology, the occult, and mysticism could resolve the mystery of Iushchinskii's death.¹² Concerned citizens sent letters to police, prosecutors, and defense attorneys with advice and insight gleaned from séances and hypnosis that purported to reveal who had killed the youth. One letter writer in particular claimed that the wounds on Iushchinskii's right temple, when connected by lines, corresponded to well-known constellations. Figure 24 shows the wounds on the head, neck, and torso of Iushchinskii, while Figure 25 displays the constellations that resulted once the wounds were connected by lines. The star formations are: Aries, Draco, Ploughman, Ursa Major, Orion, Canis Minor, Taurus, and Northern Corona, and the number of wounds correspond to the number of stars in the eight constellations. The author, however, did not offer any explanation and left it up to the police and prosecution to ascertain the astrological meaning.

Another perspective on the significance of the wounds can be found in *The Olfactory and Tactile Relationship of Jews to Blood*, a collection of essays written and published during the Beilis Affair by Rozanov.¹³ He looked for confirmation of ritual murder in the writings of other observers of the Beilis trial who were obsessed with demonstrating the veracity of the ritual murder accusation. In particular, Rozanov turned to the essay "‘Echad’: The Thirteen Wounds of Iushchinskii" by S. D-skii, whose identity is unknown, for corroboration. Rozanov included D-skii's essay in *The Olfactory and Tactile Relationship of Jews to Blood*, arguing that it offered convincing evidence of the Jewish conspiracy to engage in ritual murder.¹⁴

Judith Deutsch Kornblatt concluded, "D-sky's sources . . . are less than reliable." She referred to his scholarship as "spurious," relying on "unnamed occultists and Christian cabalists" whose knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages of the Talmud and

Zohar, was dubious at best.¹⁵ For example, Father Pranaitis claimed that he was an expert on the Talmud and Zohar, but he revealed his ignorance when defense lawyers cross-examined him during Beilis's trial. Likewise, the testimony of theologians, some Jewish and some not, demonstrated that the priest's knowledge of the Talmud was laughable.¹⁶

D-skii drew upon essays, books, and translations of Jewish texts that supported his view that the positioning of wounds on the right temple of Iushchinskii corresponded to Hebrew letters. D-skii began his cryptographic analysis of Iushchinskii's wounds by asserting that the boy's killers stabbed him according to a "definite system."¹⁷ First, he rotated a drawing of Iushchinskii's head ninety degrees to the right since the boy was found sitting up with his head dangling down and chin toward the chest. D-skii then connected the various wounds with lines and found that they spelled the following Hebrew letters: *alef*, *peh*, *resh*, *tav*, and *shin* (א פ ר ת ט). The positioning of the five wounds also corresponded to the lower half of the ten *Sefirot* (singular *Sefirah*) that represent the creative forces connecting God to the material world. Each *Sefirah* corresponds to a Hebrew letter and, when taken together, symbolize the unity of the spiritual and material worlds.¹⁸ Finally, he also superimposed the lower half of the *Sefirot* on the thirteen stab wounds and concluded that "the puzzling punctures on the right temple



**Five Hebrew Letters Formed by Connecting
Wounds on Iushchinskii's Head**

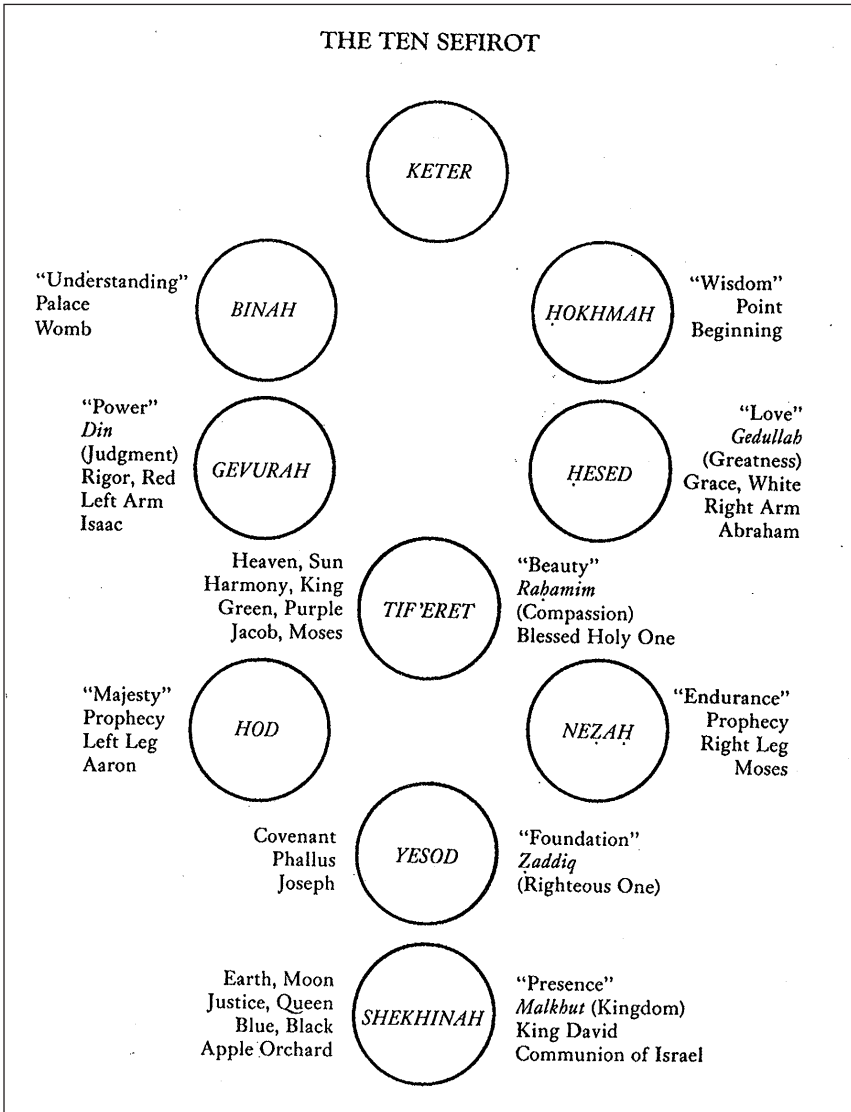
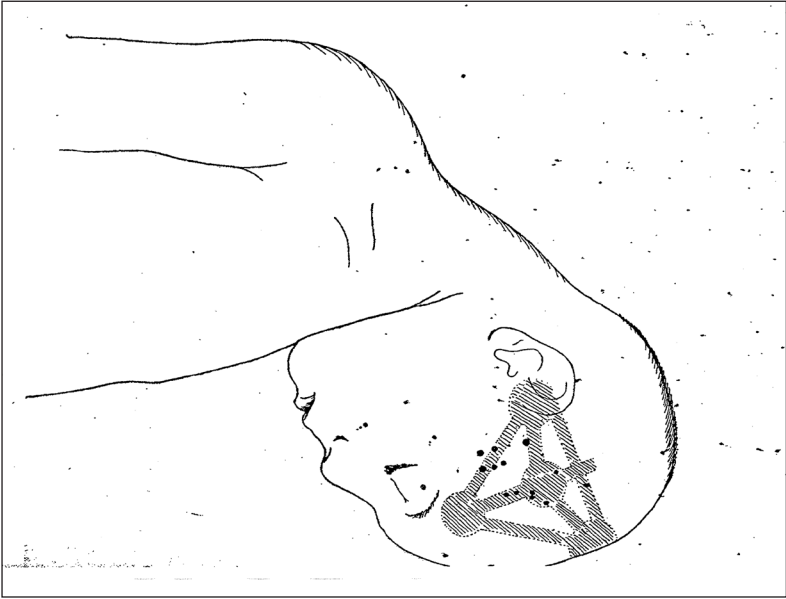


Diagram of Ten Sefirot, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*, trans. Daniel Chanan Matt (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 35. Courtesy of Paulist Press

of Iushchinskii were by no means accidental." In his words, they represented "a magical alphabetical formula."¹⁹ According to D-skii's reading of the Zohar, the five Hebrew letters signified in Kabbalistic terms: Man (א), Mouth (פ), Head (ר), Chest (ח), and Arrow (ו).



Lower Half of Ten Sefirot Superimposed on Head Wounds (D-skii, “Ekhad. Trinadstat’ ran Iushchinskogo,” in Vasilii Rozanov, *Obonitel’noe i oziasatel’noe otnoshenie evreev k krovi* [Saint Petersburg, 1914], 226

D-skii concluded that Iushchinskii, “was killed by strikes to the head and chest like the calf sacrificed to Jehovah.”²⁰ Moreover, he divined that the “secret meaning of *shin* . . . could be understood as weapons or a gun,” and associated the letter with Lucifer. In addition, the number of wounds—thirteen—corresponded to a line in the Zohar that refers to thirteen wounds on a sacrificial animal whose mouth was tied shut.²¹ Furthermore, D-skii’s analysis buttressed the view held by some believers in blood libel that Lubavitcher Hasidim were guilty of killing Iushchinskii since they comprised a “savage sect” of Judaism that engaged in “savage deeds” as outlined in the secret language of the Zohar.²² Indeed, the case against Beilis was predicated in part on the accusation that he had ties to Lubavitcher Hasidim as a *tsaddik*, a leader of a Hasidic sect, a charge that had no basis in reality.

Finally, D-skii also drew upon his purported facility with astrology when he wrote that the positioning of the wounds, when superimposed on a diagram of the signs of the zodiac, corresponds to the injunction

in Exodus that Jews should obtain the blood of non-Jews during the month of Nisan, that is, at the time of Passover.²³ In sum, the positioning of the wounds on Iushchinskii's right temple was a secret code that revealed the sacrificial nature of the killing in light of the Zohar's injunction that Jews kill Christians.

D-skii and Rozanov were not the only ones fascinated by the purported links between the murder and Jewish mystical writings. One author writing under the pseudonym Uranus claimed that the Kabbalah held the secret to Iushchinskii's murder. Like D-skii, Uranus believed that Jewish religious texts and traditions needed to be decoded in order to reveal their covert references to ritual murder. He subjected the wounds on the right temple to an analysis similar to the one performed by D-skii, and concluded that they were not "accidental." Uranus focused on six stab wounds that formed two triangles when connected by lines. When merged with each other, the triangles formed the Star of David, which, along with other letters formed from the wounds, signified blood sacrifice and devotion to the Devil.²⁴

Fortunately for Beilis, the jury found him not guilty of participating in the murder of Iushchinskii. But the jury, comprised primarily of peasants, did agree with the prosecution's argument that the killing had the hallmarks of a ritual murder. In other words, the strategy of the prosecution to claim the ritual nature of the killing succeeded. Knowing the case against Beilis as a participant in the murder was based on perjured testimony, imaginary evidence, and innuendo, some police and members of the prosecution anticipated his acquittal. Hence, the government chose to focus on the supposed ritual nature of the murder, hoping to rely on popular belief and values to win its case. The prosecution had a reasonable expectation that the jury and, for that matter, the general public, would not question the veracity of the ritual murder accusation. It pinned its hope on the general ignorance (or, even more dangerously, the little, inaccurate "knowledge") and suspicion of Judaism and Jewish culture among the population at large. Hence, the government did not appeal the acquittal of Beilis for murder, content with the verdict that confirmed the ritual murder accusation. As one member of the prosecutorial team claimed at the end of the trial, "the

main task of the trial has been proven, namely the ritual character of the murder.”²⁵ Another lawyer who assisted the prosecution told a newspaper in Kiev that the “verdict satisfies us. It was necessary for us to establish that the murder had a ritual character and we achieved this goal. . . . Had the jury said the prosecution had not proven the ritual aspect of the murder, we would not have been satisfied even if the jurors had found Beilis guilty.”²⁶

The government’s case regarding blood libel, unsurprisingly, did not fall on deaf ears as far as the jury was concerned. The jury accepted the prosecution’s assertion that the murder could have been carried out by Jews intent on draining Iushchinskii of his blood for use in religious rituals. By the turn of the twentieth century, many literate and semiliterate, not to mention illiterate, gentiles did not question the preposterous assertion that Jews were not only capable of murdering children for ritual purposes but did so because their religion required it. More than antisemitism and ignorance of Judaism were at work here. Many inhabitants of the Russian Empire, Jew and non-Jew alike, lived in a mental universe where magic potions, amulets, incantations, witchcraft, folk healing, and the occult played prominent roles in daily life. They lived in a world where logic, science, and reason clashed with ignorance, prejudice, and superstition, where the fear of the unknown challenged the science of the modern world. As we have seen, even many highly educated and cultured people subscribed to the canard of the ritual murder accusation.

Government lawyers assumed that testimony about Jewish holy men, cryptic texts, and mystical knowledge would make it more likely for the jury and public to accept their story of ritual murder. But they had to make a case that comported, at least on the surface, to the rules of evidence, drawing from scientific knowledge and textual analysis to establish the veracity of ritual murder. The modern and pre-modern forms of antisemitism coexisted in the early twentieth century. The antisemitism reflected in the Beilis case may have served secular or political objectives (and was cloaked in the vocabulary of contemporary science) and therefore qualifies as a manifestation of what historians refer to as modern antisemitism. But the foundations



of this antisemitism remained rooted in long-standing religious prejudices stemming from the late medieval period. In other words, the prosecution adorned a prejudice that stemmed from the medieval period with the trappings of the modern world. State prosecutors used modern, state-of-the-art “science” to prove the existence of a deadly fantasy. As the Beilis trial demonstrates, there was plenty of room for irrational fears to coexist with reason and rational thought.

NOTES

- 1 *Delo Beilisa: Stenograficheskii otchet*, 3 vols. (Kiev, 1913), 1:37.
- 2 *Russkoe znanie*, no. 240, October 25, 1913, 2.
- 3 University of Chicago, Regenstein Library Special Collections, Ludwig Rosenberger Collection 450 D/5, (spelling has been changed for consistency) and *Delo Beilisa* (1913), 2:252–64.
- 4 The Zohar (“radiance” or “splendor”) is a collection of commentaries on the sections of the Torah read during weekly synagogue services, and serves as the foundational work of Jewish mystical thought, Kabbalah. The prosecution was unable to find a Russian Orthodox priest or theologian willing to testify on its behalf.
- 5 *Delo Beilisa*, 1:32.
- 6 The book was a best seller: it went through ten printings between 1803 and 1936. Before the Frankist controversy in the mid-eighteenth century, converted Jews did not assert that Jews engaged in ritual murder. However, after Jacob Frank accused Jews of engaging in ritual murder, proponents of the blood libel began to seek out Jews or converted Jews who claimed to have first-hand-knowledge of or experience with ritual murder in order to substantiate their claims. I thank Hillel Kieval for pointing this out to me.
- 7 A useful overview of the ritual murder accusation can be found in Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher’s Tale: Murder and Antisemitism in a German Town* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 91-133.
- 8 Harriet Murav, “The Beilis Ritual Murder Trial and the Culture of Apocalypse,” *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 12 (2002): 243; Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, “Russian Religious Thought and the Jewish Kabbala,” in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 75-95; Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 299-333; Henrietta Mondry, *Exemplary Bodies: Constructing the Jew in Russian Culture Since the 1880s* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), chapter 3; and Leonid Katsis, *Krovavyyi navet i russkaia mysl’* (Moscow: Mosty kul’tury/Jerusalem: Gesharim, 2006), *passim*.
- 9 See “Iudeiskaia tainopis’,” in Vasilii Rozanov, *Obonitatel’noe i osiazatel’noe otnoshenie evreev k krovi* (Saint Petersburg, 1914), 1-11.
- 10 Murav, 248.

- 11 Kornblatt, 91.
- 12 Robert Weinberg, "The Trial of Mendel Beilis: The Sources of 'Blood Libel' in Late Imperial Russia," in *Russia's Century of Revolution: Parties, People, Places. Studies Presented in Honor of Alexander Rabinowitch*, eds. Michael S. Melancon and Donald J. Raleigh (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2012), 17-35.
- 13 Rozanov, *Oboniatel'noe i osiazatel'noe otnoshenie*. The Beilis Affair stretched from March, 1911, when Iushchinskii was murdered, to October, 1913, when Beilis was acquitted of murder.
- 14 S. D-skii, "'Ekhad'. Trinadstat' ran Iushchinskogo," in Rozanov, *Oboniatel'noe i osiazatel'noe otnoshenie*, 215-61. *Ekhad* or *echad* is the Hebrew word that signifies the oneness or unity of God.
- 15 Kornblatt, 91.
- 16 See *Delo Beilisa*, 2:293-440.
- 17 D-skii, 217.
- 18 D-skii, 218-235.
- 19 D-skii, 227.
- 20 D-skii, 234.
- 21 D-skii, 234-235; Evidence indicated that the killers of Iushchinskii had indeed tied something to his mouth, presumably to prevent him from screaming.
- 22 D-skii, 244.
- 23 D-skii, 235-238.
- 24 Uranus, *Ubiistvo Iushchinskago i kabbala* (Saint Petersburg, 1913).
- 25 *Kievskaiia mysl'*, no. 301, October 31, 1913, 4.
- 26 *Vecherniaia gazeta*, no. 162, October 29, 1913, 1.