



## **The Great Blood Libel Case**

Isaiah Berlin Online aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, so that it is conveniently readable and searchable online. The present PDF is part of this series.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at [berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk](mailto:berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk)

## The Great Blood Libel Case

Review of Maurice Samuel, *Blood Accusation: The Strange History of the Beiliss Case* (New York, 1966: Knopf), *Jewish Chronicle Literary Supplement*, 23 December 1966, iii–iv; reprinted as 'The Beiliss Case: Prelude to Revolution' in *Midstream* 13 no. 2 (February 1967), 66–72



*Menachem Mendel Beilis (1874–1943)*

This book has appeared at an appropriate moment. We are on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the fateful revolution which has radically altered the history of mankind. The sequence of events in Russia in 1917, and its causes – how much was inevitable, how much due to free and avoidable acts of men – will continue to be the subject of learned debate among historians, political scientists and all students of human affairs.

## THE GREAT BLOOD LIBEL CASE

There is, however, general agreement that the conflicts and tensions in Russian society, both above and below the surface, were so widespread, virulent and deep that the chances of a peaceful revolution can never have been great, even though this may have been concealed from many intelligent liberals then and later. Like France in the eighteenth century, Russia in the nineteenth was filled with talk of revolution to such a degree that this in itself was at once a symptom and a factor in the mounting years of discontent and indignation which finally burst out, first in 1905 in the wake of the Russo–Japanese War, then in the great cataclysm of 1917.

Whether Russian history might have taken a different turn if her rulers had acted with more audacity and enlightenment in the 1870s is as speculative (and perhaps as unanswerable) as the question of what would have happened in Europe if Napoleon had won the Battle of Waterloo, or Bismarck had chosen some other career. Yet what happens can be truly understood only against a spectrum of what does not, but might, happen; nor are impersonal forces everything; personality does count. Such hypothetical questions are therefore both legitimate and useful.

In fact, the rulers of Russia showed neither spirit nor intelligence. The revolutionaries who counted on the stupidity and blindness of the Tsar's government were proved right. It needed a great deal of (perhaps unfounded) optimism on the part of liberals and reformers to believe that they could prevail against the obscurantism of the right and the exasperated extremism of the left.

When a society is caught in this kind of mounting wave of mutual hatred, in which each side stimulates the other to greater excesses, and terror breeds subversion, and subversion terror; when neither side effectively believes in the possibility of a peaceful outcome, episodes sometimes occur which, even if they are not themselves of major significance, serve to break open the surface of ordinary day-to-day activity and [67] reveal the terrifying forces of destruction at work below it.

The affair of the Queen's Necklace could have conveyed to an intelligent observer that the old regime in France had not very long to live; the Stavisky case, like the Dreyfus affair on a far larger scale, was an ominous symptom of the impending collapse, if not of an entire society, or even of the state, yet of a particular political structure and method of government. The Teapot Dome scandal was certainly a prelude to the New Deal.

## THE GREAT BLOOD LIBEL CASE

In this sense the Beilis Case revealed the stupidity, corruption and incapacity of, indeed the sheer lack of redeeming qualities in, some of the fools and knaves and featureless mediocrities entrusted with the government of the lives of nearly two hundred million human beings.

Mr Samuel does not mince words in describing the individual characters of the last Tsar and his advisers. At times his tone grows emotional, which, in view of the monstrosities which he uncovers, is not inappropriate. Yet perhaps his books would have been more arresting if he had let the facts speak for themselves even more: they are black enough, and there is little need to underline the enormity of what occurred.

All but blind apologists for the tsarist regime know that among the weapons used to repress the short false dawn of liberal reform which followed the revolution of 1905 was anti-Semitism. The systematic condoning of pogroms, stimulated, or at any rate abetted, by the government (this is what distinguishes them from spontaneous outbreaks of mob violence), was among the factors which had earned Russia its unenviable name in the West in the days when such phenomena were still relatively rare. Their purpose was to bolster solidarity with the regime and rouse peasants, and other classes of the population whose status was being shaken by industrialisation, to the support of ancient ways – Church, throne, xenophobia, hatred and fear of anything remotely liberal or progressive.

Nevertheless, pogroms were a crude weapon and cost Russia a good deal in terms of its economic and political effects at home and abroad. Something was needed which at least had the semblance of a real peril, evidence of criminal activity by enemies of the people that would genuinely shock wide sections of opinion. All repressive regimes irritated by moral condemnation from without and within find it useful to justify their acts by pointing to an internal enemy – dedicated, sinister, ruthless, sufficiently unpopular to attract a high degree of public odium.

To identify the Jews with politically subversive elements, as, for example, the Minister of the Interior, Plehve, had attempted to do, was an obvious step to take, but this did not mean a great deal to the vast mass of illiterate peasantry, who in their daily contacts with the Jews in the Pale of Settlement could not conceive of them as a desperate band of political incendiaries. Appeals to deep religious

superstition would be a more effective weapon. It is not necessary to assume that the government operated in a totally cynical fashion: the prejudices to which it wished to appeal were to some degree genuinely shared by some of its own members, among them men of education and ability (and of creative genius: the superstitious anti-Semitism of Dostoevsky, Rozanov, Leskov, Blok is not in doubt).

This need not occasion surprise. Education is not a panacea, and its identification with enlightenment has suffered an appalling setback in our own time, when one of the best educated societies in the world perpetrated, or acquiesced in, the greatest recorded series of crimes in human history. Lack of education is not, therefore, alone to blame for what took place in Russia on this occasion.

The belief that Jews needed Christian blood for preparing the unleavened bread for the Passover is very ancient, but it became endemic in modern times only in Eastern Europe and the Turkish Empire. Mr Samuel draws a clear distinction between the honest maniacs who genuinely believed that Jews were in the habit of committing ritual murder, and those who were prepared to use this ancient lie to serve the needs of the state or to forward their own careers.

He is particularly illuminating on the transition in Russia from purely religious discrimination against Jews – which entailed that converts to Christianity were exceptionally well treated and favoured as an encouragement to their recalcitrant brethren – to the racial persecution by which it was succeeded, in Western Europe and later in Russia, too.

The original charge was spread by members of the Union of the Russian People, a kind of proto-Fascist organisation (commonly known as the Black Hundreds), dedicated to faith in the union of simple people, Church and tsar, and suspicious of bureaucrats, intellectuals, secularism, industry, science, rational thought and action – the kind of reactionary populism that was, and still is, not unfamiliar in the West. The Tsar encouraged these people, and the government which succeeded Stolypin's stern and reactionary, but intelligent and effective, administration leaned heavily upon them.

The story itself is one that has burnt itself indelibly upon the memory of every Jew in Russia old enough to recollect the events or to have grown up in a family which had lived through them. Mr Samuel tells the story excellently: he unwinds it slowly, strand by strand. Even at this distance of years, and despite all that followed,

## THE GREAT BLOOD LIBEL CASE

the nightmare which the Russian Jews lived through must still cause a shudder in anyone sensitive to deliberate perversion of justice and the intimidation and persecution of innocent men.

One morning in 1911, the violently mutilated body of a schoolboy was found in a cave near a brickworks on the outskirts of Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. This was the work of a local gang, frightened that the boy, who played with the children of one of the gangsters, might expose a particular series of robberies. The student, Golubev, and his fellow members of the Kiev branch of the Union of the Russian People, who were convinced that Jews killed Christians for religious purposes, may genuinely have believed that this was a case of ritual killing. Their attitude was not unlike that of bigoted white racists in Africa or the Southern States of the United States: they were obsessed, and ready to translate their fantasies into murderous acts.

The detective who originally investigated the case became convinced of the innocence of the Jews, and came near to identifying the real murderers, in particular a woman called Vera Chibiryak, who kept a house of ill repute in which the crime was conceived and probably executed. He was taken off the case by higher officials, partly under pressure from fanatical leaders of the local branch of the Union of the Russian People; partly from an intuitive conviction – later confirmed by [69] events – that cabinet ministers in Petersburg would be glad to use this case for wider political purposes.

The victim selected for execution was an ordinary, obscure, bewildered Jewish workman, employed in the brickyard in question, Mendel Beilis, a decent and kindly man, moderately popular with his Christian fellow workers. He was imprisoned, a police informer was introduced into his cell, and, after an ‘investigation’ lasting for two years, he was brought to trial.

The case brought by the government revealed a combination of malevolence, corruption and sheer stupidity unusual even among Russian officials of those days. Mr Samuel has drawn fascinating vignettes of some of the central figures in the trial, a squalid crew of knock-kneed ‘eyewitnesses’, some bribed, some intimidated by the police, others poor wandering halfwits, insufficiently rehearsed in the parts assigned to them. He describes, too, the local officials and heads of the bureaucracy, in particular the Minister of Justice, Shcheglovitov, who, largely as a means of self-advancement, did

more than most of his colleagues to ruin the integrity of the Russian judicial system.

The author takes legitimate pleasure in disposing of the legend of Tsar Nicholas II as a weak, confused but fundamentally decent and honourable man – a kind of Russian Louis XVI. He sees no good reason for condoning his fanatical prejudices or his furtive treacheries. He distinguishes, on the one hand, the pathological anti-Semites, too primitive to be consciously Machiavellian, like the student Golubev and his fellow agitators, or the Tsar and his intimates, whose blind hatred of the Jews was not susceptible to reason; as well as their ally, Shul'gin, who loathed the Jews and, like Dostoevsky and Pobedonostsev, looked on them as a menace to Russia (one of his books was called *Why We Do Not Like Them*), but was a scrupulously honourable man, outraged by the perjury, falsification of evidence and conspiracy to which the government had resorted to prove its case. (Shul'gin became an émigré after the Revolution, was captured during the Second World War in Yugoslavia, and in 1965 was still alive in the Soviet Union, where he had become a Soviet patriot.) The author discriminates between these men and the venal hacks and operators – a motley collection which included the Kiev district attorney Chaplinsky (who reported direct to the Minister of Justice); the special prosecutor Vipper; the presiding judge Boldyrev; Professors Sikorsky and Kosorotov – 'experts' who provided false medical evidence (which caused much public indignation in medical circles in Russia and abroad), one for payment, the other gratis – Father Pranaitis, a Lithuanian priest who posed as an authority on the Talmud, and turned out to be an ignoramus and a howling charlatan (and publicly discredited his patrons, and damaged their cause irretrievably); and finally the members of the underworld who had actually committed the murder. In addition to this set of persons, Mr Samuel describes the relationships of some of the gangsters implicated in the case to various minor revolutionaries, thereby opening a window on a hidden and seldom discussed cross-section of Russian life, an underworld of which one catches glimpses – but no more – in Dostoevsky's *The Devils*.

And then there are honest and just men – bureaucrats, journalists, lawyers – to whom Mr Samuel gives their belated due. The story he tells is a [70] cautionary tale, the colours are black and white with no intermediate shades – yet there is no reason to suspect

## THE GREAT BLOOD LIBEL CASE

him of any lack of realism. Public life in Russia, and perhaps elsewhere too, can at times become crudely melodramatic.

The author disposes of the view – evidently held by some contemporary writers – that the Jews were a minority surrounded by a wall of undifferentiated hatred, with no champions or defenders, in a country which totally lacked anything approaching public opinion, where the government was omnipotent and liberals and revolutionaries could do little or nothing. This is an anachronism based on later totalitarian practice. Russia was despotically governed and corroded with injustice and odious oppression, but the government could never completely ignore public opinion (not merely abroad but at home), and the texture of public life was far looser than it later became, so that individuals, both decent men and scoundrels, had a far greater opportunity for effective influence.

Mr Samuel traces the growth and progress of the Beilis affair, widely reported abroad at the time, to its dramatic culmination: the rapid collapse of the government's crudely manufactured evidence, the total exposure of its mendacious and incompetent agents, and the final acquittal (the jury was divided) of Mendel Beilis, who throughout had borne himself with simplicity and dignity, a martyr if not a hero, free from all tendency to self-dramatisation or rhetoric. The verdict was worded to avoid any direct denial that ritual **[iv]** murder was practised by Jews. Beilis himself emigrated first to Palestine, then to the United States, where he died in the 1930s. To stay in Russia was evidently impossible.

In the course of his indignant narrative, Mr Samuel justly lays stress on the fact that opinion was outraged not merely abroad but in Russia itself: that there was a widespread sense of national shame among men and women not notable for their liberal, let alone revolutionary, sentiment, that the government and the Tsar had become objects of hatred and contempt to a large section of their subjects, and not merely to radical and subversive groups. The role of Maklakov was not untypical. He was one of the leaders of the left-wing group of Russian constitutionalists, and for many years believed in the possibility of fruitful collaboration with the Tsar's government. He was a member of the team of Beilis's defenders, but his position was unique.

The Russian Jews hung on the lips of all their champions – Gruzenberg's cross-examination and speeches, his mordant and, at



times, arrogant exchanges with the presiding judge were very brilliant – Jews and liberals read his speeches with pride and hope. But Gruzenberg was a Jew himself, and his performance might automatically be discounted by the jury. Karabchevsky was a leader of the bar and a legal luminary, but of no outstanding political weight; Zarudny was sincere and high-minded, but too clearly identified with liberal and enlightened causes.

It was Maklakov who counted, politically and morally: he was a well-born Russian landowner, a conservative, a true blue patriot, respected by all, a man free from all suspicion of excessive philo-Semitic feeling. The Jews of Russia devoured his every word with pathetic anxiety and gratitude. Maklakov (whose brother was the highly reactionary Minister of the Interior) spoke from the heart, with a simple and devastating sense of outrage, born of deep humiliation at being compelled to witness the degradation of his Emperor (to whom he remained loyal) and of his government (on which he looked with bitter shame). If this was the feeling of a relatively moderate and, indeed, somewhat right-wing liberal, a man who looked on his rival, the sober and prosy leader of the bourgeois Constitutional Democrats, Milyukov (whose political views did not much differ from, say, those of Mr Asquith), as a dangerous radical, one begins to realise how deeply decent Russians of all parties abhorred naked, brutal and superstitious anti-Semitism and the sinister forces with which it was allied, and how much more effective such men could, on occasion, turn out to be, at least in the short run, than histories of the pre-Revolutionary regime sometimes allow.

The case against Beilis collapsed. The government had lost. Nevertheless the autocracy remained what it had been; those who had zealously worked to convict the innocent man were rewarded and promoted. Most Jews breathed with relief, shaming their more militant brothers. Yet no such clearing of the air had occurred as had followed the Dreyfus case in France: no real triumph over the forces of reaction. When historians ask, as they are bound to do, whether the Revolution was inevitable, at any rate in the form that it actually took, the Russia which Mr Samuel so vividly evokes must be remembered. The behaviour of the Tsar and his government was such that, with the best will in the world, even those who feared revolution, even moderately conservative Christian patriots who were, above all, concerned about the integrity and power and glory

of the Russian Empire, could not bring themselves, if they were at all honest or intelligent, to collaborate with the regime.

It must be recollected that to work for the government in Russia was, and had for some decades been, considered compromising by anyone with a claim to a liberal or enlightened outlook. If the Russian government had been even a little more intelligent – more cunning and Machiavellian – it might (as some revolutionaries feared at times that it would) have attracted to its service some of the abler members of the professions, men who were ready to remain politically neutral. The rich merchants, for example, if a finger had been extended to them – if they had not been so consistently ignored and humiliated – would certainly have tried to act as a prop of the system, brutal and corrupt as it was.

But no such finger was ever extended. The behaviour of the government was such that, despite brief moments in which concessions were made and as rapidly withdrawn, no decent man could cooperate with the regime without some degree of moral discomfort, indeed of a feeling of betraying basic principles. Technology and material forces do not always have the last word: often enough it is opinion that wins battles or loses them,<sup>1</sup> because one side is demoralised and does not believe in the system which it is called upon to defend.

No matter how fanatical and inhuman some of the Russian revolutionaries were, then and later, public opinion at home and abroad did not condemn them, because the acts of their enemies seemed too detestable. The existence of so much public sympathy for terrorists often irritated, and at times infuriated, such writers and journalists as Dostoevsky, Leskov, Shul'gin, Suvorin – the reactionary wing of Russian literature – but even they recognised it as a symptom of an appalling malaise in Russian society as a whole. The atmosphere revealed by Mr Samuel in his well-constructed narrative [72] helps to explain what it was that made rich merchants clandestinely send conscience money to revolutionaries by whom (as they half sensed) their necks would one day be wrung.

<sup>1</sup> [Cf. Joseph de Maistre's 'C'est l'opinion qui perd les batailles, et c'est l'opinion qui les gagne' ('It is opinion that loses battles, and it is opinion that wins them'), *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* (1821), seventh conversation: *Œuvres complètes de J. de Maistre* (Lyon/Paris, 1884–7), v 31, cited by IB at HF 59.]

## THE GREAT BLOOD LIBEL CASE

Upon this spectacle of a collapsing society, in which men are driven to one extreme or another, and the middle will not hold, Mr Samuel's book casts valuable and greatly needed light. The story itself is so moving, and historically so important, that to turn it into a novel and alter the facts for artistic reasons (as was recently done),<sup>2</sup> however legitimate as a literary device, is a disservice to historical truth. It is fortunate that Mr Samuel has set the record straight. As for occasional misspellings and queer accentuation in the glossary of proper names, this is not likely to disturb anyone but a few pedants like myself. The story is likely to interest anyone who wishes to understand 1917 and its aftermath.

Some of the darker trends of that time which Mr Samuel describes are, as he himself points out, by no means dead, and have indeed been tragically revitalised in our day. No historian of the Russian Revolution, its causes and its consequences (not to speak of students of modern Judaism), can afford not to read Mr Samuel's racy, accurate, informative and emotion-laden pages.

© Isaiah Berlin 1966

**Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 13 January 2023**

<sup>2</sup> [IB refers to Bernard Malamud's novel *The Fixer* (New York, 1966).]