

**The Velizh Affair: Blood Libel in a Russian Town.** By *Eugene M. Avrutin*.  
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Each ritual murder accusation unfolds in its own specific way. The identity of the alleged victim, the accusers, the prosecution, the defendants, the vigilantism that occurred at times, the formal trial, the experts heard, the sentencing, the appeal, the punishment or the release of those defendants who survived detention often involving torture. Many or all of these elements form the variables of a sequence repeated across Christian Europe throughout the medieval, early modern, and modern period, with instances reaching into contemporary history, like the cases in the Soviet Union uncovered by Elissa Bemporad or in postwar Poland (leading to the atrocious pogrom in Kielce in 1946) or Hungary. Each case deserves retelling and analyzing, independently of the question how publicized it was. Some, like the case of Yacov Beilis in 1913, were followed by a global audience. Others, like the case of the Jews of Velizh accused of this crime in 1823, have received surprisingly little attention.

What sets this case apart? According to the author of this fine study, it is first its exceptional length. Dismissed by the local prosecution in 1824, it was reopened by a direct appeal to the tsar in 1825, with a special prosecutor based in this small district capital of the Vitebsk province. He interrogates an ever-growing number of defendants in an ever-growing investigation involving two Christians, one of whom is the original libeler, a deranged and delinquent woman wreaking havoc wherever she sets foot, and a servant in

the family of the first group of defendants, who at an early stage of the investigation implicate themselves in the case. The obsessiveness of the prosecution taking the accusations of an exposed and despised liar seriously is striking, and makes for a difficult reading, as the libeler succeeded in continuously triggering new investigations into new crimes involving ever more Jewish defendants. An important element linking the Velizh case to many other instances of blood libel cases is the accusation of the most visible and also affluent members of the Jewish community (23).

The investigation spirals out of control, which in itself is a remarkable facet of the case. The prosecutor falls ill and dies before completing the final report. When the case is referred to the Governing Senate, “a caravan of twenty-six horses made the epic journey from Velizh to the provincial capital of Vitebsk, carrying dozens of sealed boxes filled with thousands of pages of documents: official reports, interrogations, depositions, forensic-medical evidence, transcripts of face-to-face confrontations, communiqués, lists, maps, translations of foreign-language books, knives, and an assortment of petitions, complaints, and letters” (143–44). The case is also exceptional because the number of Jews implicated in it grew to forty-three at its end (a list of names is provided). It is dismissed only in 1835 by the highest level of the Russian imperial administration, but several defendants had not survived the ordeal of twelve years of imprisonment on remand.

This volume embeds the story with the necessary explanations of procedural detail. The author makes sure that readers not familiar with the intricacies of Russian social and legal history can follow the events and have a good understanding of the place of Jews in Russian provincial life and of Jewish–non-Jewish relations. Avrutin integrates the Velizh case in the overall trajectory of the ritual murder accusation with special attention to eastern Europe. He rightly points out that Russian agencies inherited much of the legal and Christian theological discourse on the danger emanating from Jews from repartition Poland-Lithuania. The Velizh case offers ample illustration that widespread popular beliefs in the pernicious character of the Jews were shared on all levels of society and of the administration. It is the merit of this study to explain the impact of this background of superstition and rejection, but also of resonances and proximity. I am not so sure about the “friendships” between Jews and non-Jews the author invokes (50–51). Whoever has worked with nineteenth-century Russian administrative records will recognize the extreme demands on reporting and documentation that had a devastating effect in the case of Velizh, prolonging the suffering of the defendants. The preferred tool of investigation of the local prosecutor, the confrontation between accusers and defendants, led to exceptional quotes making for a chilling reading.

The author in his introduction explains that the abundance of preserved records pertaining to the affair had prompted first attempts already in the 1890s and later by Simon Dubnow and others to retell the story of the ordeal of the Jewish defendants in Velizh, and that it was the later twists of history that prevented historians carrying out this task. It is a story that is told more through the eyes of what state officials noted, reported, and documented, though Avrutin also integrates the attempts of the local community as well as of Jewish intercessors closer to the higher echelons of the Russian administration to intervene on behalf of the defendants.

A somewhat surprising decision by Eugene Avrutin is to introduce one of the most decisive factors in making this the longest blood libel in modern history, namely, the unusual and fateful step of accusers to involve themselves in the crime, at a very late stage. If there is a distinctive feature in the Velizh case, it is the servant not only reiterating the original accusation but implicating herself in the murder. This fateful moment is mentioned for the first time in only the third chapter (67–69), and I would have expected an earlier discussion. Also, there is an overall tendency to emphasize the proximity of

communities in Velizh including friendships (50–51), at times against the evidence provided through the investigation.

The Velizh case undoubtedly deserves this rich and detailed analysis. Avrutin integrates this Russian instance of a blood libel in the long trajectory of such accusations and defines its specific character with great expertise. The reader will gratefully acknowledge the outstanding amount of research that went into this volume. It will be of interest to an academic audience interested in Russian, legal, and administrative history and to those members of the general public with a keen interest in Jewish history in eastern Europe, and in the history of anti-Jewish prejudice.

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