

Svetlana Amosova

*Institute of Slavic Studies  
Russian Academy of Science, Moscow, Russia*

## **Blood Libel Legend in Latgale: Types of Narratives**

**Abstract.** The article is based on the materials collected among the non-Jewish population of Latgale, that is, the southeastern region of Latvia. The accusation of Jews in the ritual murder of Christians has been widespread in Europe from the Middle Ages to the present. Usually, such narratives speak about a small Christian child who is murdered and whose blood is supposedly used in a ritual context, for example, added to the unleavened bread (*matza*), which Jews eat for Passover. The topic was subject to quite abundant research work during the last two centuries. The article presents the circulation of this myth in modern Latvia and discusses the types of the story, the topics of narratives and transformation. The theme of the blood libel is well known in this territory, and almost all our interviewees have heard that Jews used blood for some ritual purposes. Often these narratives were associated with calendar festivals, frequently with Pesach and the legend of the crucifixion of the Christ, but at present stories are transformed and have lost contact with the folk calendar.

**Keywords:** Blood libel, Latgale, matsa, Passover.

The accusation of Jews in the ritual murder of Christians has been widespread in Europe since the Middle Ages. In such narratives, it is usually a young Christian child who is murdered and whose blood is used in a ritual context, for example, by being added to the unleavened bread (*matza*), which Jews eat on Passover.

In the Thompson index, this type of narrative is classified as V 361: "Christian child killed to furnish blood for Jewish rite (Hugh of Lincoln)". Due to its long history and dissemination, this legend was subject to quite abundant research work (e.g. Dundes 1991; Buttaroni and Musial 2003; Biale 2007; Belova 2006; Lvov 2008 and others). What I would like to present here is the circulation of this legend in modern Latvia, and I shall discuss the types of the stories and the topics of the narratives.

### About the fieldwork

The paper is based on materials collected among the non-Jewish population of Latgale, that is, the southeastern region of Latvia, in 2011–2014. The main subject of our fieldwork is the image of Jews from the point of view of their non-Jewish neighbors. The expeditions were carried out in those towns where Jews represented a significant part of the pre-WWII population, and where they played an important role in the cultural and economic life: Preili, Kraslava, Daugavpils, Rezekne, and others. Nowadays, small Jewish communities exist only in Daugavpils and Rezekne, the majority of the Jewish population having perished during the Second World War. A large number of interviews were conducted with the senior representatives of the local population (Russians, Latvians (Latgalians), Belorussians and Poles).

We have recorded about 140 interviews. Most of our interviewees lived in the countryside and came to towns only to visit fairs or shops with their parents or, when they grew older, to go to school. These were the moments when a meeting with the “other” space and with neighbors of different ethnic backgrounds happened. An elderly Russian Old Believer woman told us:

*“... As we went, there were some Jewish houses. Here lived Latvians and Russians. They came to my aunt. In the town, there were stalls, and in each stall, there were cakes and painted sugar chicken. Now I don’t remember; so many years have passed...”* (Preili\_11\_06).

It is important to note that reminisces of the Jews played a significant role in the historical memory of the population in Latgale. We were surprised to discover that the “local texts” describing the histories of towns always included narratives about Jews. However, the younger the interviewees are, the less their narratives are filled with specific names, and the more “general” and stereotypical their information is. The topic of the blood libel is well known in this territory, and almost all our interviewees have heard that Jews used blood for some ritual purposes.

### Theoretical framework

When dealing with the types of stories, we can use the definitions of David Hufford and several other folklorists of “belief story” and

“disbelief story” (Hufford 1982: 47—56). In our material, “belief stories” are told when the narrator is sure that Jews killed Christians and used their blood, constructing his or her narrative based on this belief. Quite often the narrator sustains his confidence by the “facts” that he saw himself, or it happened to someone else: a neighbor, a sister, relatives, husband, etc. There is an indication of an important person.

The second story type is the disbelief story when the interviewee starts or finishes his narrative with the words “*I don’t believe*,” “*it is nonsense*” and so on. In other words, he stresses that he does not believe in what he is telling. All but one such disbelief stories were recorded from Jews, who are well acquainted with the folklore of their Christian neighbors.

What is interesting in our material is the third type of story, a very frequent one, which could be named a “doubt story”. In this case, the person narrating the story accompanies it with constant commentaries “*so, people say*”, either “*I don’t know if it is true or not.*” The number of details in the narratives usually does not depend on the type of story. However, those who believe and doubt give more details than those who reject the blood libel.

### **Emotional background**

All the stories about Jews that we have recorded were emotionally colored. The stories about the Blood libel also caused the strongest emotions. The historian Irena Salenietse from Daugavpils described the emotional background of the stories about the Jews in a case study, based on one interview with Latvians. She showed that Jews are divided into “us” and “them” and the stories about “our” Jews, that is, neighbors and friends, are brightly colored emotionally (Sale-nietse 2003: 226). But in our case, the stories about the blood libel had a vivid emotional dimension—usually fear, horror, etc. Our respondents told about this theme in a whisper or looking around or said to us: “turn off the recorder.”

### **Childhood fears**

Some collected narratives are based on childhood fears when the interviewees as children were told that Jews steal and kill children, and, therefore, one should not go far from home. In their perception,

this topic is a children's frightening story, but it does not mean that they stopped believing in it as adults. For example:

*"We liked the matsa. Jews gave us a lot, and we ate it. But after this somebody said "Don't eat this matsa, the blood of baptized people was added there. Once we went to Daugavpils, there are also many Jews, and people say that they would catch, kill, take blood by syringe and add it to matsa. My grandmother and I went to Daugavpils, entered a shop. Once the grandma entered a shop, and I remained alone, don't know where she went, I stood and cried. A woman came and said, "What happened?" I answered, "Grandma disappeared." She said: "Not good, Jews will kill you and take your blood." My God! I was so scared and started to shout" (Sub\_12\_13).*

The participants of the expeditions recorded two similar stories in Subate and Preili: a child comes to a city, goes with a grandmother or nanny through Jewish shops, gets lost, and then it is there is fear that Jews would take and kill him. Our interviewees speaking about killing stress that all those crimes took place in large cities, like Riga or Daugavpils, and not in the places of near or where they lived.

### **Blood libel in Kraslava**

A story recorded in Kraslava (a town on the border of Latvia and Belarus) deserves special attention. Almost all our interviewees told us a story which allegedly took place in the interwar period: a Christian housemaid, who worked in a Jewish house, disappeared and was later found in the cellar of this house, in a barrel with nails:

*"The Jews took a girl from a poor family... as a housemaid. They fed her well. And she always came home for the weekend. And suddenly she didn't come home for the weekend. This is what my grandmother told me once. So... And no... [Relatives] think about what happened; she got sick or what. She [mother] comes to this Jewish woman, she [Jewish woman] says, "No, she went home." She [mother] says, "She didn't come." She [mother] went to police. The police did an unexpected search. And it turned out that the Jewish woman had a cellar in the house. And she [girl-housemaid] was already dead. They [Jews] put them [Catholic people] in a barrel with metal nails. They need Catholic blood for their Passover" (Kras\_12\_03).*

One of the interviewees even showed us the house where the blood libel took place. According to all the stories, the Jews were able to bribe the police, and the crime was not investigated. Meantime it is not clear if this blood libel indeed took place in the interwar period or if it is an echo of the blood libel of 1885 in the nearby town of Lutsin (Ludza). In Lutsin, a Christian housemaid who worked in a Jewish house disappeared and was later found in the river. There was a big trial in St. Petersburg, and the Jews were acquitted. Parents or grandparents of our interviewees could have read reports about this case in newspapers or simply known about it from rumors. But the Polish researcher Jolanta Źyndul points out in the map that in Kraslava, there was a blood libel in 1912–1914 (Źyndul 2011: map 166); she was not right about it, and our sources do not contain information about blood libel in Kraslava. This is a theme for additional archival research.

### Repeated elements of narratives

Now, I would like to discuss elements which repeat in all stories about the blood libel. First of all, it is the use of Christian blood. Almost all our interviewees said that Jews need blood for production of special unleavened bread for Passover—*matsa*. Thus, the story appears usually in the context of Passover and *matsa*. This purpose is quoted most often in other regions as well. The second group of narratives says that Jews need Christian blood to make their blind newborn children regain their sight. For example:

*"Jews were born blind, and when a child is born, they spread blood on eyes in order that he could see" (Preily\_11\_11).*

This narrative might be influenced by similar ones that were well known in Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries. Until the late 18th century, Latgale was a part of the Polish Kingdom, and many Polish people live in Latgale nowadays.

The next point that all collected narratives have in common is the way of getting the blood. Almost all our interviewees in Latgale describe a barrel with nails inside, where the victim is placed. The theme of a barrel with nails is a general topic, recorded in all of Europe.

Only one story in Latgale mentions a murder on the cross: a ritual murder imitates the crucifixion of Christ. The connection of ritual

murder with crucifixion is the earliest one, recorded already at the first blood libel in Europe, namely the murder of William of Norwich in 1114. In Latgale, we also encountered this connection between the crucifixion and the Jewish need for blood. Thus, Christ is described as the first victim, and the ritual of his murder is constantly reproduced.

The majority of interviews in Latgale describe the murder of a victim while less violent ways of getting blood are seldom mentioned. Just a couple of records said that Jews used bandages with the remains of blood or took the blood of animals. In the latter case, the interviewee stressed that outside of his village, Jews indeed kill people, especially in large cities. Only one interviewee said that Jewish doctors could take blood without killing — the topic recorded already in the 16th and 17th centuries and widespread in other regions of Eastern and Central Europe. And we have similar narratives from Kurzeme (western part of Latvia):

*“Well, and in the Aizpute the manager of the pharmacy was connected to the Christian blood <...> She really practiced that, that lady. <...> And next to it a mini scissor — very neat and clean. And very accidentally, by mistake, she always happened to prick a customer. And then there was a bit of cotton wool quickly put on, “Oh, oh, oh! I’m sorry!” And like that, but she kept it” (Dinne 2012: 51).*

Thus, we see that it is the importance of murder that is overstressed, not the need for Christian blood per se. “Peaceful” ways of getting blood are missing in the Latgalian narrative. The image of a Jewish doctor is quite demonic, and instead of stealing blood from his patients, he tends to murder them.

The status of the victim is not less important. Usually, it is a child or a teenage girl, described as innocent. So, the significant Christian connotations are: innocence and martyrdom. The victim usually suffers from the enemies of Christianity because of his or her faith.

Researchers working on blood libels usually stress that a typical victim is a boy (Dundes 1991a: vii). In our case, however, all but one specific victim are young, unmarried girls; only in Preili, one story about a boy was recorded.

## Conclusions

As for the causes of this legend's popularity, I agree with Alan Dundes that "in the case of majority-minority group relations, it is typically the minority group which is victimized by the majority group's stereotype or image of the minority group" (Dundes 1991b: 355). We can select three main types of stories about the blood libel in Latgale. The first and most common one says that Jews kill an innocent Christian person, a child or an unmarried girl. They usually do it with the help of a barrel spiked with nails. The second one describes Christians who voluntarily donate their blood to Jews, sometimes out of fraud. The third variant is the use of the blood given by the donors for medical purposes. The last two themes appear quite seldom in Latgale. There are only two purposes for obtaining blood: either preparation of matzas or the healing of blindness of newborn Jewish children. In general, Latgalian stories about the blood libel are similar to those in other regions of Eastern Europe, but have some particular features characteristic only for this area.

## Acknowledgements

This article was elaborated with the support of the Russian Science Foundation within the project #15-18-00143.

## References

- Kras\_12\_03—Archive of Museum "Jews in Latvia". Recorded from Stefania Voronecka, 1932. In Kraslava.
- Preili\_11\_11—Archive of Museum "Jews in Latvia". Recorded from Anna Danilova, 1927. In Preili.
- Preili\_11\_06—Archive of Museum "Jews in Latvia". Recorded from Stepanida Pugach, 1933. In Preili.
- Sub\_12\_13—Archive of Museum "Jews in Latvia". Recorded from Leonida Okmane, 1931. In Subate.
- Belova, Olga. 2006. Narodnye versii "krovavogo naveta": mifologizatsiya syuzheta v slavyanskikh folklornykh narrativakh. [The Popular Version of the "Blood Libel": Mythologizing Plot in the Slavic Folk Narratives (in Russian).] *Sny Bogoroditsy: Issledovaniya po antropologii religii*. [Dreams of the Virgin: Studies in Anthropology of Religion.] Saint-Petersburg: EUSPb. Pp. 217—225.

Biale, David (ed.). 2007. *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol Between Jews and Christians*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Buttaroni, Susanna & Musial, Stanislaw (eds.). 2003. *Ritual Murder Legend in European History*. Krakow, Nuremberg, Frankfurt: Association for Cultural Initiatives.

Dinne, Irene (ed.). 2012. *Narratives about the Jews of Aizpute: A Notebook of Traditions*. Aizpute.

Dundes, Alan (ed.). 1991. *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Dundes, Alan. 1991a. Preface. In: Dundes, Alan (ed.). *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press. Pp. vii—viii.

Dundes, Alan. 1991b. The Ritual Murder or Blood Libel Legend: A Study of Anti-Semitic Victimization Through Projective Inversion. In: Dundes, Alan (ed.). *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press. Pp. 336—376.

Hufford, David J. 1982. Traditions of Disbelief. *New York Folklore*, 8 (3—4, Winter). Pp. 47—56.

Lvov, Alexander. 2008. Mezhetnicheskie otnosheniya: ugozhenie matsoy i “krovavyy navet”. [Interethnic Relations: Treating [Goy] with Matzo and the “Blood Libel” (in Russian).] *Shtetl, XXI vek: Polevye issledovaniya*. [The Shtetl of the Twenty-First Century: Field Explorations.] Saint-Petersburg: EUSPb. Pp. 65—82.

Salenietse, Irene. 2003. Emotsionalnyy fon vospominaniy o evreyakh dovoennoy Latvii. [The Emotional Background of Memories of the Jews in Pre-war Latvia (in Russian).] *Evrei v menyayushchemsya mire: Materialy 5-y Mezhdunar. konf. Riga, 16—17 sent. 2003 g.* [Jews in the Changing World: Proceedings of the 5th Intern. Conf., Riga, September 16—17, 2003.]. Riga: s.n. Pp. 342—348.

Żyndul, Jolanta. 2011. *Kłamstwo krwi. Legenda mordy rytualnego na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku*. [The Lies of Blood: The Ritual Murder Legend in Polish in the 19th—20th Centuries (in Polish).] Warszawa: Cyklady.