Blood libel in Poland

Michał Bilewicz
Agnieszka Haska

Warszawa, 2012
Blood libel has a long tradition on Polish soil. Being heavily influenced by the preaching of Saint Giovanni da Capestrano in the 15th century, many Polish Roman Catholics at the time perceived Jews as responsible for crimes against Christians. The popular cult of da Capestrano was closely aligned with his inquisitory views on Jews as Christ-killers and with blood libel\(^1\). Today, figures of da Capestrano can still be seen in Polish churches including the one located in the former Warsaw Ghetto area\(^2\).

Several pre-War pogroms in Poland were provoked by rumours about Jews kidnapping children and using their blood for ritual purposes. Pogroms in Strzyżów (1919) and Białystok (1938) belong to the best documented ones in this context. Even the post-War wave of pogroms was almost solely inspired by rumours about Jews kidnapping Polish children – this was the case, for example, in Kielce (1946) where the disappearance of an 8-year old Polish boy named Henryk Błaszczyk set off mob riots and ultimately the killing of 36 Jewish people. Similar atrocities occurred in Cracow (1945), where Polish inhabitants had gossiped about the kidnapping of Polish children leading up to a pogrom, and in Rzeszów (1945), where riots and the plundering of Jewish homes started after the dead body of a 9-year old girl was found in a local tenement house\(^3\).

All these historical cases – some of them being as recent as the middle of last century – show how violent the consequences of blood libel could turn out in Poland. Contemporary anthropological research in Sandomierz and Podlasie areas of Eastern Poland found several cases of rumours about blood libel. In 2000, Stanisław Musiał’s article in Gazeta Wyborcza

\(^1\) Joanna Tokarska-Bakir „Legendy o krwi. Antropologia przesądu (z cyklu: Obraz osobiwy)”, WAB, Warsaw, 2008.
sparked one of the most heated and widespread debates on Christian anti-Semitism in Poland since 1989. The author argued that paintings by Charles de Prevot at the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Sandomierz, which depict blood libel, should be removed from the church and displayed in a museum with suitable commentary. Notable voices in this debate included Catholic intellectuals (e.g. Zuzanna Radzik), scholars (e.g. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir) and artists (e.g. Artur Żmijewski).

While taking the above mentioned evidence into account the Center for Research on Prejudice conducted two studies (in 2009 and 2011) on large nation-wide samples in an attempt to investigate the scale and popularity of blood libel myths in modern Poland. The 2009 study was performed on a representative random sample of 1000 participants and the 2011 study was performed on a quota-sample of 620 Polish internet users (from the GG Ariadna panel). In both studies we asked the following question: “In the past, Jews were accused of kidnapping Christian children. Do you think that such kidnappings took place in actual fact?”.

In 2009, the study found that roughly 10% of Poles agree (to a larger or lower extent) that Jews kidnapped Christian children. Blood libel was observed mostly in the Eastern parts of Poland, close to the border with Byelorussia and Ukraine. It was relatively scarce in other regions of Poland (see Figure 1.). In 2011, the study found that 9% of participants believed in Jews’ kidnapping Christian children.
Figure 1. Belief in the blood libel myth in Poland. Red coloration indicates the highest average levels of agreement with the statement about Jews kidnapping Christian children, pink areas indicate a moderate level of agreement, and green ones the lowest level of agreement (Source: Polish Prejudice Survey 2009).

In the second phase of data examination we explored some possible correlates of anti-Semitism. In the 2009 study, we found no correlation with age – both old and young Poles expressed blood libel beliefs to a similar extent. There were no significant differences in blood libel beliefs between men and women. Beliefs in blood libel were less frequent among more educated people and among those living in larger cities. Moreover, they positively correlated with right-wing, authoritarian political attitudes and other anti-Semitic beliefs (e.g. the belief in a Jewish conspiracy in politics, media and the economy). Somewhat surprisingly, beliefs in blood libel, often portrayed by researchers as ‘religious anti-Semitism’ were only weakly related to religiosity measures used in the study.
We obtained similar results in a study conducted in 2011: blood libel was unrelated to gender, age and socio-economic status (as measured by participants’ feelings of relative deprivation), but strongly related to education levels (i.e. less frequent among highly educated people) and settlement size (i.e. less frequent in urban areas). People of right-wing political orientation tend to believe more readily that Jews kidnap Christian children. Such beliefs were also strongly linked with other types of anti-Jewish prejudice (i.e. higher social distance).

Taking all results into account, we concluded that blood libel is a relatively rare phenomenon in Poland. Not more than 10% of the population believes in this myth. At the same time it became apparent that blood libel beliefs are concentrated in specific areas of the country. The eastern regions of Poland, which are less urbanised and constitute traditional strongholds of right-wing party constituencies, still seem to pose a somewhat fertile ground for the scrutinised form of anti-Jewish prejudice. It seems plausible, then, that recent anti-Semitic incidents in Eastern Poland (the desecration of Jewish cemeteries, the devastation of wartime monuments, anti-Semitic graffiti, etc.) might be attributed to persistent anti-Jewish myths that still circulate in this part of the country.