

**HI 450, B1—Topics in Popular Culture:
Ritual Murder and Other Myths of Jewish Conspiracy**

Fall 2015, Tuesdays 3:00-6:00, HIS 304

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Course Outline

This seminar explores rumors and theories about Jewish plotting, ritual murder, and other malfeasance from 12th-century England to the present day. The seminar's purpose is to explore how myths and conspiracies—however implausible—develop and gain traction in societies. In considering ritual murder and other conspiratorial accusations against Jews we will seek to shed light on the origins, manifestations, and persistence of antisemitism over the past millennium.

Course Requirements

Your final grade will be determined as follows:

Book reviews, 20%. You will write short analytical review essays for any two of the assigned books. Each essay should be a 3-4-page assessment of the book's argument, methodology, and evidence used. Ask yourself what kinds of questions the book attempts to answer, why, and how (at the end of this syllabus you will find a page on how to write an effective book review). Include at least two or three interesting questions you feel the book raises. Each review is due on the day of the book's discussion. If you are unhappy with either of your grades you can write a third essay and I will use your best two grades.

Oral presentation, 10%. Each student is responsible for leading one seminar. On your day you should prepare a short oral presentation (maximum 10 minutes) about the book we are to discuss. You should introduce the book to the class along the lines of argument, methodology, and evidence and you should provide us with enough thoughtful questions to guide us through a lively discussion. For your presentation you are also required to create a small packet of pertinent primary sources for the class to read and discuss together.

Seminar preparedness and participation, 20%. Attendance is required, but attendance alone is not enough for a good grade. Students are expected to come to each class having read the assigned book and prepared some questions and to actively participate in discussion. Prolonged absence is grounds for failure.

Research project, 50%. The research project includes two parts: an online research guide and a seminar paper. Research guide instructions and examples can be found at <http://blogs.bu.edu/guidedhistory/>. We will talk about your research every week and you will receive detailed written instructions about the research and writing process. Students should choose a research topic by October 6. Your research guide is due November 10. The seminar paper is due on the last day of class, December 8. You will be given feedback for each of these steps but a single grade for the entire project.

All assignments should be completed independently and plagiarism from any source is unacceptable. Cases of suspected academic misconduct will be referred to the Dean's Office. If they have not already, students should familiarize themselves with Boston University's Academic Conduct Code: <http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/>

Texts

I have ordered all of the texts in the course schedule to the BU Barnes and Noble bookstore. All of the books on the syllabus are currently in print and available through Amazon and other online retailers as well as through the Boston Library Consortium.

Below the course schedule you will find a supplementary bibliography with a few other valuable works I considered including when putting together the syllabus and that students might consider for further reading and/or research papers.

Course Schedule

September 8—Introduction

September 15—no class (Rosh Hashana)

September 22—David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton UP, 1998).

September 29—E. M. Rose, *The Murder of William of Norwich: The Origins of the Blood Libel in Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 2015).

October 6—R. Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (Yale UP, 1990); R. Po-chia Hsia, *Trent 1475: Stories of A Ritual Murder Trial* (Yale UP, 1996).

October 13—no class (substitute Monday)

October 20—Pierre Birnbaum, *A Tale of Ritual Murder in the Age of Louis XIV: The Trial of Raphael Levy, 1669* (Stanford UP, 2012).

October 27—William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*. Any edition.

November 3— Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: “Ritual Murder,” Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (Cambridge UP, 1997).

November 10— Robert Weinberg, *Blood Libel in Late Imperial Russia: The Ritual Murder Trial of Mendel Beilis* (Indiana UP, 2013).

November 17— Steve Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* (Vintage, 2004).

November 24—Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher’s Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (Norton, 2003).

December 1— Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* 2nd ed. (Serif, 2006). Can use the first edition if necessary.

December 8— Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *The Devil that Never Dies: The Rise and Threat of Global Antisemitism* (Little, Brown and Co., 2013).

Supplementary Bibliography (for further reading and/or research projects)

- Stephen Eric Bronner, *A Rumor About the Jews: Antisemitism, Conspiracy, and the Protocols of Zion* (Oxford UP, 2003).
- Leonard Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case* 2nd ed. (U. Georgia Press, 2008).
- Alan Dundes ed., *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore* (U. Wisconsin Press, 1991).
- Ronald Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840* (U. Wisconsin Press, 2004).
- Hannah Johnson, *Blood Libel: The Ritual Murder Accusation at the Limit of Jewish History* (U. Michigan Press, 2012).
- Daniel Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara* (Vintage, 1998).
- Edmund Levin, *A Child of Christian Blood, Murder and Conspiracy in Tsarist Russia: The Beilis Blood Libel* (Schocken, 2014).
- Bernard Malamud, *The Fixer* (first published in 1966, now many editions).
- David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (Norton, 2013).

- Sara Libby Robinson, *Blood Will Tell: Vampires as Political Metaphors Before World War I* (Academic Studies Press, 2011).
- Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism* 2nd ed. (JPS, 2002).
- Robert Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (Random House, 2009).

How to Write a Great Book Review

Your 3-4-page reviews should assess the book's argument, methodology, and evidence used. Each review should include some summary of the author's important contributions and theses, but the more analytical your approach the better. Weaving narrative and analysis together is more art than science. The best guideline is to think carefully about the questions you ask about the material. Answering "what" questions yields description. Answering "why" questions yields analysis. If, when you answer a "what" question, you follow by explaining "why" and supplement this explanation with specific examples then you are most likely doing this right!

Ask yourself what kinds of questions does the book attempt to answer, why, and how? What can we learn (or not learn) from the author's approach to the given historical question? What kinds of questions does the author ask about his or her sources, and why? What do you find particularly convincing or unconvincing about the author's arguments? Is there anything that strikes you as particularly effective/ineffective about the author's methodology? What kind of interesting questions that are relevant to the class do you feel the book raises?

I am not interested in your perspective on the author's style or whether or not you found the book dry, boring, or confusing. There is something to be learned from each of the assigned books and it is part of being a good historian to determine what is important in a text even if it is outside your area of interest or the presentation is difficult.

Students looking for an example of a good book review are better off looking in publications writing for a broad audience than in scholarly journals (which expect readers to have highly specialized knowledge). There are a lot of good examples online and at the bookstore. Pick one up and read a review about something—anything—that interests you. Here are a few:

- The Los Angeles Review of Books (free, online, and open-access)
- The Marginalia Review of Books (free, online, and open-access)
- The Times Literary Supplement
- The London Review of Books
- The New York Review of Books
- The Sunday book supplement to the New York Times
- The LA Times and Wall Street Journal book sections

You are free to read the scholarly reviews available on J-Stor, Project Muse, and elsewhere, but doing so should never substitute for reading the book itself. If you do use another source, be sure to cite it. If you rely on other reviews for your analysis I will likely be able to tell that you are doing so.

I expect all papers to have footnotes and to use the proper citation method for history – **CHICAGO**.

Finally, don't forget about my writing guide. Read it, read it again... then read it again.