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Pierre Birnbaum. *A Tale of Ritual Murder in the Age of Louis XIV: The Trial of Raphaël Lévy, 1669*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2012. 192 pp. Notes, illustrations. $60.00 U.S. (cloth). ISBN: 978-0804-7740-48.

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On September 25, 1669, a Jewish livestock merchant named Raphaël Lévy left his village of Boulay in the duchy of Lorraine on an errand to Metz to purchase supplies for the celebration of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. His business concluded, Lévy hurried to return to Boulay before the holiday began at sundown. That same day, in the village of Glatigny, which lay on the route between Boulay and Metz, a little boy named Didier Le Moyne vanished while his mother was at the town fountain doing her washing. Months later, the boy's animal-gnawed remains were discovered in the woods.

The story of how these two disparate events became connected lies at the heart of Pierre Birnbaum's *A Tale of Ritual Murder,* published in French in 2008 by Fayard and recently issued in an English translation by Arthur Goldhammer for the Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Soon after little Didier's disappearance, suspicion fell on Lévy, who was eventually charged with ritual murder. That is, he was accused of kidnapping and murdering the child and collecting his blood for ceremonial purposes. After gathering a welter of conflicting testimony, the Parlement of Metz tortured and convicted Lévy, who was strangled and burned on a Metz scaffold in January 1670.

What are we to make of this doleful tale? Pierre Birnbaum pursues two different lines of inquiry as he considers Lévy's fate. First, he presents a microhistory that investigates the vulnerability of the small population of Jews living on the war-torn eastern margins of the Louisquatorzian state. This population of hundreds was subject to "permanent and generalized suspicion" (p. 33) from non-Jewish neighbors. Shifting political control of the territory left judicial institutions in turmoil and permitted local elites to indulge local prejudices and rivalries. In this atmosphere, a resurgence of the dark myth that Jews kidnapped children and used their bodies for anti-Christian ritual could incite a furor and render impotent the protection offered to the Jewish minority by the French monarchy.

At a second level, Birnbaum's book is about historical memory. Although the Lévy case was the subject of published pamphlet debate in Paris in 1670, the case was soon forgotten, and few French histories of the era have given it any attention. There is, however, an interesting exception to this forgetting. In the 1890s, contemporaries repeatedly invoked the Lévy trial in connection with the Dreyfus affair. Anti-Jewish writers turned to the case to resurrect the blood libel in service to a conservative nationalist argument that Jews by the nature of their faith were foreign enemies and should not be viewed as full citizens of the French nation. For Birnbaum, then, the Lévy case's ultimate significance lies in its capacity to shed light on a *longue durée* tradition of anti-Semitism that has accompanied France's evolution as a nation-state. Birnbaum, a distinguished historian and sociologist, and an internationally recognized specialist on the relationship between Jews and the French state, is well qualified to explain the lasting resonance of this seventeenth-century episode. Nevertheless, doing justice to these two complex and provocative histories is a daunting task for a slim volume aimed at a non-specialist readership.

Birnbaum begins his tale in the here and now, with a remarkable story that could only happen in a place where familial roots go as deep as they do in France. In 2001, in a retirement home near Metz, a ninety-year old named Bernadette Lemoine, the ninth generation descendant of the family of the purported victim, encountered Pierre-André Meyer, a historian of Lorraine and the last, eleventh-generation descendant of Raphaël Lévy. Local media covered this extraordinary convergence of past and present. Madame Lemoine had turned, in her later years, to historical research, and examined archival documents related to the case. Based on her reading of these documents, she concluded that Raphaël Lévy was innocent, and wrote an account of the trial in hopes of repairing, after a fashion, the "enormous injustice" that her ancestor, "an illiterate peasant traumatized by the loss of his child," had "unwittingly" caused to take place (p. 2). This framing story is the jumping-off point of the book. The same trial documents used by Lemoine are the major source on which Birnbaum bases his own reading of the events of 1669-70. More significantly, Lemoine's apparent ignorance of, or unwillingness to acknowledge, the murderous role played by the myth of ritual murder in Catholic Reformation Lorraine provides the book's *raison d'être*.

A Tale of Ritual Murder traces the insidious persistence of the blood libel and establishes its relevance to the Lévy case. Drawing on the work of French and Anglophone scholars, Birnbaum's introduction discusses the rise of the myth of ritual murder, a legend that coalesced by the High Middle Ages into a three-pronged belief about a Jewish quest perpetually to reenact the crucifixion. It included, first, a claim that Jews kidnapped Christian boys to crucify them; second, that they collected the blood of Christian boys for ritual purposes, especially the making of Passover matzoh; and, third, that Jews stole or bought consecrated hosts that, via transubstantiation, had become the body of Christ, in order to abuse them and thereby mock the Eucharist. These anti-Jewish legends represent a dark shadow of the Eucharistic piety that was central to Medieval Christianity, and they became the stuff of sermon stories, paintings, plays and folklore across Western Europe. But these hallucinatory legends also engendered real murders, when, in the aftermath of the unexplained disappearance of children, Jews were fingered for these imaginary crimes, tortured until they confessed, and executed in the hundreds.

The heyday of ritual murder trials in Europe occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the vast preponderance of documented cases occurred in German-speaking Central Europe.[1] This geographical distribution is not a reflection of a more tolerant environment in Western Europe, but rather, perhaps, of its opposite: Jews had been expelled from England and France in 1290 and 1306 respectively, so the distribution of ritual murder cases merely reflects the uneven presence of Jewish communities across the map. Such trials waned in the sixteenth century when the Holy Roman Empire came to exercise greater control over local justice, requiring imperial permission to prosecute alleged cases. Given this general geographical and chronological framework for ritual murder trials—focused on central Europe in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—the Raphaël Lévy case in French Metz in 1669 stands out as an anomaly worthy of inquiry. How did the blood libel claim another victim a century after such prosecutions had all but disappeared from Western Europe? [2]

Chapter one begins to provide an answer by analyzing the context of seventeenth century Metz and Lorraine. This unstable border region had been devastated during the Thirty Years War, and remained under contested political control. Metz, for its part, was by the date of the trial more or less securely incorporated into France. It became the home of a Parlement in 1633 and the seat of an Intendant. The duchy of Lorraine, by contrast, changed hands between France and the Habsburgs several times in the decades before the Lévy affair, and by the 1661 Treaty of Vincennes had returned to the jurisdiction of its Duke, Charles IV. Birnbaum effectively conveys the uncertainty of political authority, recognizing that Lévy's fate was "determined in part by the conflicting laws of rival powers" (p. 19). Yet a novice readership unfamiliar with this complicated history would benefit from a clearer explanation of an essential point: while on his fateful errand in September 1669, Raphaël Lévy crossed from his home terrain, an area of actively contested legal jurisdiction, onto what was clearly French soil. The livestock

trader was no stranger, since he did business in the villages that lay between Boulay and Metz, but his vulnerability may have been compounded by the fact that he was not indisputably a legal subject of the French king. Indeed, the Jewish community of Metz, when it later petitioned Louis XIV to halt an investigation that was growing more threatening to its interests, referred to Lévy as "a foreign Jew" (p.129).[3]

Politically tumultuous Lorraine was home to another kind of trial, prosecutions for witchcraft. Birnbaum points to some of the intriguing structural similarities between accusations of witchcraft and ritual murder. In both kinds of cases, children figured as the victims of horrific violence, their corpses becoming the raw material for anti-Christian ritual. Observing that the Lévy trial occurred at almost precisely the moment when prosecutions for witchcraft died out in Lorraine, Birnbaum proposes that "once witches vanished from the popular imagination, traditional fears and fantasies involving Jews came once again to the fore"(p. 28). The motive force of this substitution of one enemy for another, according to Birnbaum, was "the Counterreformation" which "in defiance of all rational norms"(p. 29) came to focus its hostility "almost exclusively"(p. 28) on Jews. Returning to this theme in the conclusion, he writes: "It is as if the Counterreformation needed an Other, hostile to its idea of order, alien to its faith, and standing outside the Christian tradition" (p. 154).

Chapters two through six form the heart of Birnbaum's account, in which he relies extensively on trial documents to present the circumstances that led to Raphaël Lévy's accusation and conviction. After briefly discussing of the history of the Jewish communities of Metz and Lorraine, chapter two evokes the "separate and rival social universes and…starkly contrasting cultural milieus" (p. 40) that divided Jews from their neighbors. Despite expressed Christian resentment of this visible minority in its midst, Birnbaum notes that testimony revealed a myriad of socioeconomic ties between Jews and Christians, especially through credit relationships and trade in livestock. Chapter three draws from a contemporary Jewish diary to explore the "social and mental universe" of Jews like Lévy, and to show how Lévy's refusal to convert in the course of his trial, as he was repeatedly pressured to do, led him to be memorialized "as a saint (*kadosch)* in the eyes of his co-religionists"(p. 57).

Chapter four finally presents a narrative of the Lévy affair beginning with the fateful day in September 1669 when Didier Le Moyne disappeared. Tracing the collection of increasingly contradictory and unsubstantiated witness testimony, Birnbaum notes one of the most significant factors in the evolution of the trial: the gradual expansion of prosecutorial interest from a singular focus on the disappearance of the Le Moyne child toward a broader investigation of alleged host abuse some years earlier involving leading members of the Jewish community in Metz. In the same week that the Parlement's judges sent Lévy to the scaffold, they also decided to imprison a Jewish resident of Metz named Mayer Schwabe. By June of 1670, quite a few of the city's most prominent Jewish citizens languished in prison. This was the moment of the trial's greatest notoriety. The Jewish community of Metz sent delegations to Paris pleading with the king to intervene, and Paris intellectuals penned rival pamphlets that argued whether ritual murder was, in fact, a Jewish tradition. Royal orders to release all Jewish prisoners arrived late in June, but were resisted at first by the Parlement. Only after a second royal order in October did the Parlement finally comply.

In his telling of the story, Birnbaum once again establishes the significance of the myth of ritual murder to the Lévy affair. In its various phases, the case elicited virtually every anti-Semitic myth associated with the long and tragic history of the blood libel. Accordingly, chapters five and six delve further into the prejudices and beliefs that emerged in the course of the trial. They highlight, in particular, the sensational story of an alleged incident at Mayer Schwabe's home some years earlier, in which a Christian tailor claimed to have surprised a group of Jews reenacting the crucifixion on "a creature" (genus unknown) one Good Friday. The tailor was dead by 1669, so the prosecution collected second-hand testimony from family and friends. In pursuing this story, Birnbaum suggests, the prosecutor sought testimony to repair the anomalies of the Raphaël Lévy case, which did not adequately correspond

to the expected pattern of ritual murder. The logic of ritual murder beliefs held that Jews sought Christian blood specifically at the Easter/Passover season, and not during the autumn Jewish New Year. The Mayer Schwabe story thus made the case better fit the religious symbolism of which ritual murder charges were an expression. It also, of course, helped create the appearance a larger conspiracy in which Metz's own Jewish community would be implicated. Owing to this new development, events in Metz "reach[ed] a crescendo perfectly attuned to the most morbid imaginings of the triumphant Counterreformation" (p. 122) which would likely have resulted in still more executions had Louis XIV not interceded.

Chapters seven and eight return to the political context of the trial, and to historical memory of the Lévy affair. In the first, Birnbaum considers the actions of the French monarchy and its representatives over the course of the trial. Although the royal government did finally intercede, Birnbaum observes that "the absolutist state, for all its coercive power, could not by itself change people's habits or eliminate their prejudices" (p. 135). Given the persistent hostility of the Christian populace, he notes, early modern Jews lived in perpetual vulnerability, dependent upon the preservation of order by emergent, usually weak, nation-states. Turning in chapter eight to more recent history, Birnbaum finds dramatic demonstration of the fragility of this arrangement. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, historians documented 128 charges of ritual murder, mostly in Central Europe. While France was not the scene of this medieval sort of anti-Jewish hatred, it is no coincidence, Birnbaum argues, that the era produced the unfounded accusation of Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus for spying, as well as a wave of nationalist, anti-Jewish violence. Nor was it a coincidence that, in the course of the Dreyfus affair, French writers resurrected the events of 1669-1670 as fodder for contemporary political debate. Nationalist Catholic writers like Édouard Drumont and Henri Desportes invoked the Lévy trial to kindle anti-Semitic emotion, while the Jewish writer and politician Joseph Reinach became the trial's first modern historian, publishing *Raphaël Lévy: Une erreur judiciaire sous Louis XIV* in 1898 at the same time he became one of the most vocal champions of Dreyfus.

The connections between the Lévy and Dreyfus affairs are compelling. By juxtaposing these two troubling and fascinating episodes in French history, Birnbaum makes a contribution to our understanding of the persistence of anti-Semitism in French culture and the circumstances that shape national memory. Still, H-France readers, particularly early modernists, may be disappointed by some of Birnbaum's choices.

Despite the book's reliance on evidence produced in the course of the Lévy trial, the basic assumptions of the early modern criminal justice system do not receive the explanation needed to render them intelligible to a novice reader. Readers receive little guidance on the procedures of inquisitorial justice, the prerogatives of judges, the ostensible purpose of judicial torture, and the symbolism of the punishment assigned to Raphaël Lévy. They may wonder on what grounds Birnbaum concludes that the Parlement's judges "accepted…anonymous gossip as if it came from the most reliable sources" (p. 45) and "ignored" inconsistencies in the evidence in favor of "highly fanciful testimony" (p. 104). Specialists warn us that judicial decisions from this era rarely provide the kind of window into judges' reasoning that such phrases imply. Recent work on criminal procedure, especially for crimes related to magic, heresy and sacrilege, has done a great deal to illuminate what otherwise can seem incomprehensible.[4]

Second, while the "militant Counterreformation" (p. 12) figures as an important agent in the story, *A Tale of Ritual Murder* evinces little interest in specifying why this movement of religious reform reinvigorated the anti-Jewish myths that gave rise to charges of ritual murder. Medievalists have pointed to the intimate connections between the blood libel and historically specific changes in popular religious devotion, specifically the emphasis on the magical potency of the Eucharist.[5] It would be a major contribution to our understanding of the Catholic Reformation in France to investigate how anti-Jewish hostilities were implicated in the new forms of devotion promoted among the seventeenth-century laity, and to explore how such ideas were culturally transmitted by contemporary catechisms,

sermons, confraternities and missions. Without such attention, anti-Semitism risks depiction as an undifferentiated, transhistorical element of Christianity.

Finally, in explaining the seventeenth-century context for the trial, the author sometimes positions his story within a teleological modernization narrative that obscures more than it explains. Chapter one, in a little less than fifteen pages, very rapidly covers a host of complex issues, including the rise and limitations of absolutism, the claim that "an age of science…had begun"(p. 17), the pre-1640 era of witch-hunting and the supposed "vanish[ing] of witches from the popular imagination" in ensuing decades (p. 28), and finally the intensifying Counterreformation intolerance of Protestants and Jews. While acknowledging that "[t]he Age of Louis XIV was thus shot through with contradictions," Birnbaum ends up pronouncing it "astonishing that [the trial of Raphaël Lévy] should have occurred in the late seventeenth century, a period renowned for its cultural and scientific achievements"(p. 154). Similarly, the beliefs and actions of seventeenth-century actors are repeatedly qualified as "superstitious" and "irrational," anachronistic terms that subtly undermine the very possibility of understanding the events of 1669-70. Birnbaum cannot, of course, be blamed that a prevalent master narrative of French history defines the *Grand Siècle* as the watershed moment between a barbarous, violent past and rational, enlightened modern world. In fact, his purpose in telling the Lévy story is to probe one of the ways that this conventional narrative papers over more disturbing continuities. It is all the more reason that the residue of the modernization narrative seems incongruous here.

A Tale of Ritual Murder fits within the growing scholarship that examines the successes and failures of religious coexistence in the years before the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. As historians try to understand why such coexistence remained fragile, they will no doubt agree with Pierre Birnbaum that the fate of Raphaël Lévy deserves more attention.

NOTES

[1] R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 3-5.

[2] Although ritual murder charges were uncommon in Central and Western Europe by the seventeenth century, they became more common in the East, particularly Poland, at the same time. See Hsia, p. 3.

[3] In the aftermath of signing the 1661 treaty, Charles IV and Louis XIV bickered continually over its terms. See Guy Cabourdin, *Encyclopédie Illustrée de la Lorraine: Le temps modernes 2. De la paix de Westphalie à la fin de l'Ancien régime* (Nancy: Editions Serpenoise, 1990), pp. 23-40. The question of Lévy's juridical status is briefly discussed by Patricia Behre Miskimin in her chapter-length treatment of the Lévy trial. See *One King, One Law, Three Faiths: Religion and the Rise of Absolutism in Seventeenth-Century Metz* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 88-118.

[4] For a crucial example, see William Monter, *Judging the French Reformation: Heresy Trials by Sixteenth-Century Parlements* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[5] Along with the work of Hsia cited above, see Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999).

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