

# Blood Libel: A False, Incendiary Claim Against Jews

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The “blood libel” refers to a centuries-old false allegation that Jews murder Christians – especially Christian children – to use their blood for ritual purposes, such as an ingredient in the baking of Passover matzah (unleavened bread). It is also sometimes called the “ritual murder charge.” The blood libel dates back to the Middle Ages and has persisted despite Jewish denials and official repudiations by the Catholic Church and many secular authorities. Blood libels have frequently led to mob violence and pogroms, and have occasionally led to the decimation of entire Jewish communities.

The blood libel is particularly appalling in light of the fact that Jews follow the Hebrew Bible’s law to not consume any blood, which is found in the book of Leviticus. In order for an animal to be considered kosher, all its blood must have been drained and discarded.

## ORIGINS OF THE BLOOD LIBEL

The first ritual murder charge took place in Norwich, England, in the twelfth century. A boy named William was found dead in the woods outside of town, and a monk, Thomas of Monmouth, accused local Jews of torturing him and murdering him in mockery of the crucifixion of Jesus. Although many townspeople did not believe this claim, a cult venerating the boy eventually sprang up. At this time the myth began to circulate that each year, Jewish leaders around the world met to choose a country and a town from which a Christian would be apprehended and murdered.

The blood libel spread throughout the Christian world in the Middle Ages. When a Christian child went missing, it was not uncommon for local Jews to be blamed. Even when there was no evidence that any Jew had anything to do with the missing child, Jews were tortured until they confessed to heinous crimes. Some Christians believed that the four cups of wine that Jews drink at the Passover Seder celebrations were actually blood, or that Jews mixed blood into *hamantaschen*, sweet pastries eaten on the Jewish holiday of Purim. Others claimed that Jews used Christian blood as a medicine or even as an aphrodisiac. Scholars have documented about 100 blood libels that took place from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries. Many of them resulted in massacres of Jews.

## **THE BLOOD LIBEL IN MODERN TIMES**

The blood libel persisted into modern times. In 1840, members of the Damascus Jewish community were charged with kidnapping and killing a Christian priest who had disappeared. Several notable Jews from Damascus were tortured to extract confessions, and an angry mob destroyed a synagogue and its Torah scrolls. Jews were massacred repeatedly in the Muslim world, partly as a result of this libel, which had been imported from Christian society.

Blood libels continued even into the twentieth century as well. In 1913 a Ukrainian Jew named Menahem Mendel Beilis was charged with ritually killing a Christian child whose body was discovered near a local brick factory in Kiev. During a sensational trial, numerous respected Russian intellectuals and scholars testified that Jews attacked Christians and used their blood in obscene rituals. Ultimately Beilis was acquitted of the charges, but not before horrific anti-Semitic claims were repeated and broadcast throughout Russia.

A blood libel even occurred in Massena, New York, in 1928. When a four-year-old girl went missing from her home, a rumor spread that local Jews had kidnapped and killed her. Crowds gathered outside Massena's police station, where the town's rabbi had been summoned. A state trooper questioned the rabbi, and asked him

whether Jews offered human sacrifices or used blood in rituals. The girl was eventually found alive and unharmed.