

Magda Teter. *Sinners on Trial: Jews and Sacrilege after the Reformation*.

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The stories that Magda Teter extracts from the archives, her retelling of them, and her careful analysis of each one are worth the price of admission in this new monograph. We read about thefts from churches and synagogues, arson, jewels sliced out of priestly vestments, magical healing, drunk noblemen accidentally slicing up sacred images, and all manner of problems with consecrated hosts: theft, choking, touching, burying. Teter finds numerous cases of sacrilege, blasphemy, iconoclasm, host desecration, and ritual murder in post-Reformation Poland, and deftly reconstructs aspects of social, cultural, and religious history from trial records. The case studies are based on vast research in Polish and Vatican archives and use of pamphlets and printed broadsides, with a range of sources in Latin, Polish, Italian, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Teter is able to shed light on lesser-known cases, and to make connections between disparate events. The result enables her to go beyond a series of microhistories to develop a kind of prosopography of sacrilege in early modern Poland.

But Teter's aim is not merely to add examples from early modern Poland of well-known accusations against Jews and heretics that date from the Middle Ages across Latin Europe, or to map out the types of activities deemed sacrilegious. Rather, Teter is interested in the implications for Jews and other minorities of a new development in Poland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the

criminalization of heresy. What had been considered sinful and was adjudicated in ecclesiastical courts, gradually came to be tried in secular, state courts. This development was the unexpected result of the appeal of Protestantism among Polish nobles in the sixteenth century. In the 1540s and 1550s, the Sejm worked to distinguish the jurisdiction of secular and ecclesiastical courts and to prevent Catholic involvement in secular courts. But perhaps unexpectedly secular courts began to try cases of heresy or sacrilege and thus became, as Teter puts it, “enforcers of religious — and eventually, particularly Catholic — values” (6). Jews in Poland could be accused of the same forms of sacrilege (such as host desecration) as in other parts of Europe, but the dynamics of these cases had changed. Among the key contributions of this especially rich book is to show how much Jewish-Christian relations in the country with the largest Jewish population in early modern Europe were intertwined with Counter-Reformation polemics and politics.

Following an introduction in which she explains the shift from ecclesiastical to secular courts, the work consists of eight chapters, organized thematically. The first chapter sets the stage by comparing the construction of sacred space and sacred object in medieval Christianity, Judaism, and early modern Catholicism and Calvinism. The second and third chapters offer examples of stealing sacred objects and the other cases in which sin is prosecuted as criminal acts, with a special focus on blasphemy. In this third chapter, Teter also explores the gendered elements of the accusations and prosecutions. The next four chapters develop case studies on the role of a host desecration legend in Jewish-Catholic-Protestant relations in Poznan; on the dynamics of the first host desecration case in Poland in 1556 and the ways that the trial became connected to broader Counter-Reformation issues; a trial in Bochnia in 1600 that led to the expulsions of Jews from that small city; and a case in Przemysl in 1630 in which the issue of royal authority emerges. Chapter 8 looks at the issues from different angles: the ways in which Jews were sometimes protected from violence by complex local politics, and the ways in which more run-of-the-mill violent crime (perpetrated by both Jews and Christians) was connected and not connected to the accusation of sacrilege with which most of the book is concerned.

Teter makes a strong case for the importance of the shift in court venue and the dynamics of the sacrilege cases as part of a re-Catholicization of Poland in the wake of the Reformation, and is convincing in her challenge to any simple image of Poland as a bastion of tolerance in early modern Europe. At the same time, she also makes a strong case for historical contingency and the importance of local context throughout the book in her careful reading of each case and her willingness to point out counterexamples. The result is a work that makes important contributions across a range of fields, including Polish history, Reformation history, Jewish history, comparative religion, state-building, and gender studies.

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