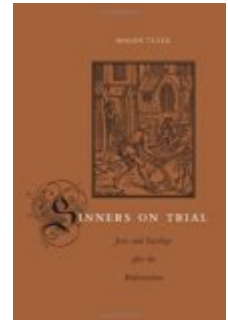




Magda Teter. *Sinners on Trial: Jews and Sacrilege after the Reformation.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. Map. 358 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05297-0.



Reviewed by David Frick

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

In her latest book, Magda Teter builds on her previous work (above all, her impressive first book *Jews and Heretics in Catholic Poland: A Be-leaguered Church in the Post-Reformation Era* [2006]) by continuing to situate Jews next to all other non-Catholics in the narrative of the re-Catholicization of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Although Janusz Tazbir appears only on the last page of the current book, Teter is implicitly arguing throughout her work against a well-ensconced view in Polish historiography, most succinctly framed in the title of Tazbir's *State without Stakes* (first published in Polish in 1967). That work became a classic formulation of a main trend in a historiographic tradition—one that reaches back much further than this summarizing work, and continues in various forms to this day—focusing on tolerance in early modern Polish-Lithuanian society; in this portrayal, although tolerance did not prevent the eradication of Protestantism from public life, it did allow for a gradual and peaceful reassertion of Roman Catholicism as

a sort of state religion, without the lighting of stakes, as took place elsewhere.

In her first book, Teter argued that the “post-Reformation” Roman Catholic Church remained far from confident, and that Jews and Protestants were implicated with each other in the Church’s continuing attempts to enforce orthodoxy. Those who work on the non-Catholics of the commonwealth know well that the term “victory of the Counter-Reformation” cannot be used without quotation marks and many qualifications: Lutheranism and Calvinism persisted in various places, if in a weakened state, long after the Antitrinitarians had been exiled, driven underground, or converted following the ban of 1658, and much of the historiography pays scant attention to the numerous Uniates and Orthodox in the East. It is the second part of her argument, however, where she makes the most innovative claims, shedding new light on the history of the Polish Catholic Church and its instrumentalization of

Jews and Protestants in the reclaiming of dominance.

The current book is based on a combination of extensive new archival research and reconsideration of older literature. The framing argument--first laid out in the introduction, "From Sin to Crime"--is one of paradox. At the height of the Protestant movement in the Commonwealth, power was wrested away from ecclesiastical courts and given to the various secular venues, from the burghers' magistracies through the Land and Castle courts, to the highest secular legal forum, the Crown and Lithuanian Tribunals. What had previously been a sin ("heresy, sacrilege, bigamy, adultery, and other marital cases, as well as conflicts over tithes" [p. 6]), for which, in many cases, penance could be made, now became a crime, subject to investigation, often employing torture, and could lead to extreme punishments, including burning at the stake. The paradox came with the waning of the Reformation. As Teter puts it: "Thus, in an unexpected and ironic twist, the secular courts became enforcers of religious--and, eventually, particularly Catholic--values. This inversion helped accomplish what religious polemics and education had failed to achieve--reinforcing the Catholic religion as the only true religion, the only one considered sacred" (p. 6). The central sin, now made a capital crime, had to do with the desecration of the host, and the secular courts now became instrumental in enforcing post-Tridentine Catholic doctrine on transubstantiation against Jewish and Protestant sacrilege.

Chapter 1, "The Meaning of the Sacred," examines Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish concepts of "sacred space" (where, again, for the Catholics, the presence of the host and the vessels that contained it, such as the ciborium, became definitive). Chapter 2, "Stealing Sacred Objects," focuses on what the courts came to view as the crime of sacrilege. The basic argument is that, over time, "the courts did not consider theft of objects from non-Catholic spaces that were used for

religious purposes to be *sacrilegium* because the spaces themselves were not deemed sacred. Violation of such spaces--Protestant churches, Eastern Orthodox churches, and synagogues--were held to be common thefts and robberies" (p. 49). Chapter 3, "Prosecuting Sins, Defending Faith," looks in greater detail at what lies at the heart of the book: the ways in which a law that had originally been intended "to shield religious dissenters from the authority of the Catholic Church's courts in the wake of the Reformation" eventually turned the secular courts into enforcers of Catholic doctrine (p. 48).

Chapters 4 through 7 offer case studies, at the heart of which lies this paradoxical legal twist. Chapter 4, "The Making of a Polish Jerusalem," tells the story of how the city of Poznań (in Great Poland) became a "Polish Jerusalem" in the course of the local Carmelites' struggles (in competition with the Dominicans) to acquire better intramural property; instrumental here was the exploitation of stories of Jewish desecration of three hosts (with nods toward Protestant--if not complicity--then indifference) and the discovery of miracles connected with those communion wafers. Chapter 5, "Protestant Heresy and Charges against Jews," takes a new look at the well-known trial of Dorota Łazęcka in Sochaczew (in Masovia in Central Poland) in 1556 for stealing the host and delivering it to Jews, for which she and the Jews were tortured and burned at the stake. Teter subtly examines the ways in which--in the words of historian Hanna Węgrzynek--it was actually "the Reformation [that] was at the crux of the 1556 trial at Sochaczew," even though it was allegedly about Jewish complicity in host thievery (p. 141). Chapter 6, "Christians on Trial, Jews Expelled," tells a story set in the city of Bochnia (in Little Poland, southeast of Cracow), whose once-famous salt mine, and income, were in decline in 1600; here, municipal authorities exploited allegations of Jewish-Christian collaboration in host desecration in order to secure a privilege from arch-Catholic King Sigismund III Vasa, expelling the Jews to a

nearby private town. In chapter 7, “The Struggle for Power and Authority,” a similar scenario, which began to take shape in 1630 in the city of Przemyśl (a mixed Roman Catholic-Orthodox/Uniate city near what is now the Ukrainian border in the southeast of modern Poland), ended with a quite different result. Here the magistracy overplayed its hand, got caught up in a struggle with the courts of the nobles and representatives of royal power, and was the object of bans by the same king (who had not become any less ardently Catholic in the meantime) against any attempts to expel Jews from the city.

I will come to the concluding chapter in a moment. The innovative, insightful, and thought-provoking pieces up to this point in the book nonetheless raise certain questions. A central concern is the lack of focus on change over time. Here, as in Teter’s first book, examples cited range from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century; and, in the current book, we are sometimes brought suddenly, and uneasily, to the eve of World War II and later. A second concern is a lack of attention to variation across regions and among cities. The map provided at the beginning of the book is a visual representation of these two points. It lacks a date (although those familiar with the history of the Commonwealth will come up with a close approximation); it lacks any demarcation between the Crown lands and those of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania; and the East seems almost totally unpopulated (this, of course, a result of the fact that only cities of some interest to this book have been put on this map).

Things looked different over time and from place to place, as the author shows so well in her tale of two cities in chapters 6 and 7. My work in the various legal fora of Wilno (Vilnius, Vilne) for the seventeenth century suggests that we should be cautious about making generalizations about Polish-Lithuanian society as a whole based on data from one place and time. I have not found a single case of secular courts passing judgment on

matters of religion, much less imposing capital punishment for such a crime. The one case of the alleged theft of a ciborium by Jews that I did encounter was heard by the Roman Catholic consistory and resulted in the accused making an oath, *more judaico*, in the main synagogue, over the Torah scroll, and being declared innocent. My argument that what Teter finds elsewhere did not happen in Wilno could be linked to gaps in my archival sources; still, the financial records for the city, complete beginning in 1663, always listed payments to the municipal *mistrz* (“master,” i.e., executioner), and they give the impression that he was not a very busy man, and that hardly any of the crimes punished had anything to do with what could be termed sacrilege.

The final chapter, “Justice and the Politics of Crime,” raises some of the most interesting questions, adds great subtlety to the picture, and goes some distance in addressing concerns about making generalizations based on the case studies. It is the culmination and perhaps the best chapter in this fascinating book. Particularly interesting is the comparison between Catholic and Orthodox (and Uniate?) views on the sacrality of the host/communion bread. Teter follows up here on a suggestion by Węgrzynek that, because of these differences, host desecration libel was more common in Western, Roman Catholic territories, while blood libel charges were more common in Eastern, Orthodox territories. Still, one wonders, if the argument is that the Church was most concerned with imposing orthodox views on transubstantiation in places where it felt most threatened, wouldn’t we expect even more charges of host desecration in the eastern lands, especially in the notoriously lax Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and particularly once the Reformation had largely been extirpated in the Crown lands? Further, if the secular courts were now enforcing Catholic doctrine through use of torture and capital punishment, why did the Polish Church feel “beleaguered”?

Teter is certainly correct in her argument that burning at the stake and other extreme physical punishments played a role in drawing a line in Poland-Lithuania between the Roman Catholic faith and all others. The book is a welcome addition to a provocative body of work. It adds much to the debate on the nature of tolerance/toleration in the early modern Commonwealth.

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