



Daniel M. Vyleta. *Crime, Jews and News: Vienna, 1895-1914.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. 266 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-181-3.



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Jewish Criminals and Criminalistic Journalists: Antisemitism and Languages of Crime

In recent decades, historical scholarship on central European antisemitism has reached mammoth proportions. Despite—or, perhaps, in spite of—this tremendous growth, scholars of antisemitism frequently share at least two common tendencies. They express interest in the complicated ways in which antisemitism provided individuals with lenses for understanding their changing worlds; and they frequently acknowledge the contradictory constellations produced within the antisemitic arena, or what the scholar Derek Penslar has called a “double helix of intersecting paradigms.”[1] These scholars frequently mimic the binaries they study. Questioning antisemitism’s modern or timeless character, they look to antisemitism in “writing” and in “the spoken word”; at its influence in ideology and in practice; and its adherents in the masses and in the elite.[2] Daniel M. Vyleta’s new book extends this important scholarship by examining the interconnections among the very modern phenomena of mass media, criminology, and antisemitism. Exploring this triad during a period of profound change in Viennese history (1895-1914), Vyleta deftly untangles three interrelated questions. He analyzes contemporary conceptions of criminality; he looks

to the sites of—and commonly accepted practices for—the articulation and production of popular narratives of crime; and finally, he examines the commonalities and interactions between antisemitism and languages of crime.

To engage with these interconnections, Vyleta introduces his reader to several case studies, most importantly the Hilsner affair, a widely reported 1899 ritual murder charge in which a Jewish vagrant was accused of killing a young seamstress in a small town near the Bohemian-Moravian border. Other scholars have written histories of specific blood libel accusations, but Vyleta is less interested in the events surrounding the ritual murder charges than he is in the relationship among the modern city, newspaper, and languages of crime.[3] Casting the Hilsner affair as a “paper-devil constructed out of black ink and café gossip” (p. 2), Vyleta takes ritual murder accusations beyond socioeconomic rearrangements, village life, or local politics. For Vyleta, the many case studies at the center of the book demonstrate the development of a late-nineteenth-century discursive category of the “Jewish criminal” and the increasing importance

of criminal trial reporting within Viennese society.

Over the course of five substantive chapters, relying heavily on criminological discourse and crime reporting, Vyleta seeks to understand how and why the category of the Jewish criminal developed. He finds its origins in three interconnected phenomena: the emerging discourse of criminalistics; the dramatic popularity of writings about crime; and the evolution of an understanding of Jewish criminality as a manipulative force rather than as a biological or racial defect.

In Vyleta's first two chapters, contemporary scholarly discussions about criminals, crime and investigation are used to describe the late-nineteenth-century discourse of criminology and its understanding of the criminality of Jews. Positioning himself within a historiography that focuses on medicalization (Cesare Lombroso) and exclusion (Michel Foucault), Vyleta calls for an analysis of criminalistics. The science of detection appeared in Austria in the late nineteenth century and gained wide currency among crime scientists in Vienna and elsewhere in Europe. It inquired into the physical procedures and psychological dynamics of the investigative and judicial processes. Its adherents focused not on the essential deviance of criminals but instead envisioned the criminal as a rational participant. They helped to create crime narratives in which the social environment of crime, rather than the individual's deviance, was at the heart of the investigation.

This science of detection influenced the ways in which scholars and journalists discussed and understood Jewish crimes. Turn-of-the-century biological and racial narratives did not dominate the debate about Jewish crime. Instead, many individuals understood Jewish criminals as rational and predatory. Jewish criminals were supposedly modern, and scholars of criminalistics looked to sociological and historical explanations for Jewish criminal activity.

The remainder of Vyleta's study draws almost exclusively on newspaper stories to demonstrate the centrality of trial reporting in the journalistic imagination, the synergies between criminalistics and journalistic interpretations of crime, and the role of the antisemitic press in implicating all Jews as manipulative, predatory criminals. By looking at hundreds of cases, Vyleta convincingly demonstrates the significance of trial reporting to popular understandings of crime and criminals. Newspaper reports discussed criminals as they were tried in court and emphasized the rational cunning of these men. Attempts to recover the truth lay at the heart of both crim-

inalistics and crime reporting, and journalists discussed the necessity of decoding hidden clues within the theaters of criminal investigation and criminal court. Moreover, journalists were interested in presenting the nuanced relationships between the defendant, judge, jury, and public. "The journalist," writes Vyleta, "proved himself an expert observer ... and-through his description-allowed the reader access" (p. 88). The antisemitic press went beyond promoting the notion of Jewish criminals as predators to creating arenas in which all Jews could be implicated in criminal activity. Because the Viennese press held the recovery of truth in high regard, journalists could accuse Jews of destroying the very mechanisms of justice. They imagined Jews to be involved in all aspects of the trial: as defendants, jury members, witnesses, journalists, or onlookers. In the Hilsner affair, for example, antisemitic journalists envisioned the Jewishness of the crime in the so-called Jewish campaign surrounding the trial. It was that campaign-and not Hilsner's deviance-that supposedly marked the crime as Jewish.

Vyleta is careful not to cast all Viennese journalists as antisemitic. Indeed, he argues that publications that did not express sympathy with antisemitic causes carefully avoided identifying all crimes as Jewish. In locating this polarized set of languages about Jews, Vyleta paints a complicated picture of Viennese antisemitism (or its absence) that falls in line with Shulamit Volkov's groundbreaking understanding of antisemitism as a "cultural code."^[4]

The book, which relies on hundreds of case studies reported on in newspapers and journals, is extremely well researched. Vyleta's argument might have been better served, however, had he limited the number of case studies invoked in the middle three chapters. When the book focuses on one case, as it does in its final chapter, the narrative is much crisper and smoother than in some of the denser chapters. In addition, while Vyleta deftly unpacks the influences of criminalistics on popular languages of crime, his book does not devote the same depth of attention to how popular discourses and understandings of crime influenced private studies of criminology.

These are slight criticisms, however. This innovative, interesting book offers new insight into the popularity and character of antisemitism and criminology in turn-of-the-century Vienna. It provides a nuanced explanation of the intersections of the popular knowledge of crime with criminology and of the ways in which crime and trial reporting were used for antisemitic purposes.

Notes

[1]. Derek Penslar, *Shylock's Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 13.

[2]. See, for example, Till van Rahden, "Words and Actions: Rethinking the Social History of German Antisemitism, Breslau, 1870-1914," *German History* 18 (2000): 413-438.

[3]. See Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).

[4]. Shulamit Volkov, "Antisemitism as a Cultural Code: Reflections on the History and Historiography of Antisemitism in Imperial Germany," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 23 (1978): 25-46.

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