

Books of The Times

Theater of the Absurd on the Stage of History

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

BLOOD ACCUSATION: The Strange History of the Beiliss Case. By Maurice Samuel. 286 pages. Knopf. \$5.95.

ON the morning of March 20, 1911, the corpse of 11-year-old Andrei Yushchinsky was discovered in a cave on the outskirts of Kiev, Russia. He had been stabbed 47 times; most of the blood had drained from his body.

There were clues—enough to lead objective investigators to a gang of criminals and a swift solution to the brutal murder, had nothing interfered. But events did interfere. Almost immediately the crime was snatched up by reactionary, anti-Semitic groups in Russia whose twisted sensibilities saw in the murder the pretext for massive persecution of the Jewish population. By calling it a ritual murder—that archaic and psychotic hallucination in which the Jew procures Christian blood for religious purposes—these groups were able to bring about, on unimaginably specious pretexts, the arrest of Mendel Beiliss, an obscure Jewish laborer who worked in a brick factory near the cave where the body was found.

The two cases, the real one and the frame-up, were to develop, interact, assume shapes by turns terrifying and ludicrous, and erupt in a canker that poisoned Russia and sickened the world.

The conspiracy to frame Beiliss began cautiously. Gradually, reactionary forces gathered and links were forged among four principal persons: Vladimir Golubev, a 19-year-old student and vociferous member of two reactionary groups, the Union of the Russian People and the Double-Headed Eagle; S. G. Zamyslovsky, a right-wing deputy member of the Russian Duma (parliament); I. G. Shcheglovitov, Minister of Justice in St. Petersburg and contact with Czar Nicholas II; and state prosecutor Chaplinsky of the Kiev Appellate Court.

Those four formed a chain to the ear of the sympathetic Czar. Once linked they were able to confound the investigation of the murder and delay trial for two and a half years while the absurd case for the prosecution was fabricated and Mendel Beiliss wasted in prison all but forgotten.

Maurice Samuel retells the whole story from murder to trial in "Blood Accusation: The Strange History of the Beiliss Case." It is a shabby drama of bureaucratic whores, legal pimps, administrative panderers, house-master Czar Nicholas groveling before his wife and her sick crew—and a few straight men. Most particularly it is a story that characterizes Imperial Russia in its terminal stages, and explains to those too young to understand why the 1917 revolution seemed to so many outside of Russia like a fresh blast of air in a sickroom.

In many respects the Beiliss case was to

Russia what the Dreyfus case was to France. Both served as magnets to align the flings of political sentiment in orderly rows from right to left. Both contained intricate, involuted subplots. Among their many differences, there is one paramount: the Dreyfus case lives on, the Beiliss case is forgotten. Maurice Samuel has written his account to recall the case—for particular reasons.

In telling the story he has forborne certain luxuries. The case is thick with drama. Samuel could have milked it, could have told the story from a single point of view, could have arranged it neatly into a series of mounting climaxes. Instead, almost perversely, he deliberately keeps the drama low-key. He assumes the omniscient point of view, even destroying dramatic illusion by inserting into the text remarks about his research. He leaps ahead of his story and brings back revelations that deflate the narrative tension. He refuses even to adorn the characters with irrelevant details that might have helped the reader to distinguish one multisyllabic Slavic name from another.

All of which is not to say that the story is dull. A trial is a trial, any coherent recital of one is almost irresistible. The Beiliss case had more than its share of obligatory scenes and Samuel has dug them all up in his painstaking research and described them with flashes of ironic wit.

But he is after bigger game than a well-told yarn. He has devoted his life and three-quarters of his 20 books to the exposition of Jewish values and the Judeo-Christian dialogue. So in retelling the Beiliss case he has sacrificed drama for intellectual history and his concluding points, which are that the elements which made the Beiliss case possible are not dead and gone, that the ritual-murder accusation is only an archaic version of more refined but equally virulent fantasies that adorn the anti-Semitic neurosis, and that such fantasies continue to thrive in contemporary Russia, and indeed the world. His argument is passionate, understandably one-sided and well made.

End Papers

REFORMATION EUROPE: 1517-1559. By G. R. Elton. 349 pages. Harper & Row. \$8.95.

In 1517 Luther tacked his 95 Theses on the church door at Wittenberg; in 1559 the peace of Cateau-Cambrésis ended the age of Charles V. Between these two key dates the Reformation shook Europe as a prelude to shaking the Western World. It was a turbulent, complicated time, peopled by men with wonderful certainty in their faith and more than the usual assortment of rogues. It is not the least of G. R. Elton's merits that his skillful character studies in this book—the latest in Professor J. H. Plumb's "History of Europe" series—bring these men to life. The Cambridge professor's other merits lie in his vigorous re-creation of the Reformation, the clarity of his explanations of theological matters and his sticking to the principal events (although he does skimp the Peasant War). His book is hard to beat as a one-volume straightforward account of the political, economic and religious upheavals that go by the name of the Reformation. ALDEN WHITMAN.



Maurice Samuel