

Eugene Avrutin, University of Illinois

Abstract

On April 22, 1823, in a small white Russian border town by the name of Velizh, a three-year-old boy finished his lunch and went to play outside. Fedor never returned home, and several days later, a neighbor found his body at the very edge of town, punctured in numerous places. Now largely forgotten, the disappearance of little Fedor resulted in the longest and one of the most comprehensive investigations of ritual murder in the modern world. All in all, the Velizh case lasted twelve years (1823-1835) and generated an astonishing number of documents, which are impeccably preserved in twenty-five bound volumes at the Russian State Historical Archive in St. Petersburg. Drawing on the newly discovered archival papers, I reconstruct small town life in the Russian Empire, exploring along the way, neighborly encounters, law and daily life, and the complex motivations resulting in the ritual murder charge. While scholars usually attribute the charge to antisemitism and economic rivalries, this study offers an alternative explanation. By recreating the day-to-day world of Velizh, I argue that tales of blood sacrifice proved remarkably contagious in the towns and villages of Eastern Europe because of their role in popular belief systems of the time and their ability to express the fears and preoccupations of a population that left no other records. Using the analytical techniques of microhistory, this study tells the story of a sensational legal case that allows us not only to zero in on the peculiarities of the investigative process itself, but also examine the relations between imperial rule and the everyday, the articulation of local knowledge and popular belief systems, and the habits, designs, and anxieties of government officials.