The Velizh Affair: Ritual Murder in a Russian Border Town

On Tuesday, November 5, Dr. Eugene M. Avrutin gave a lecture entitled “The Velizh Affair: Ritual Murder in a Russian Border Town” as part of the REEEC Noontime Scholars lecture series. The talk was part of his current project, a microhistory of the sensational and longest-running ritual murder case in world history, which took place in Velizh in the second quarter of the nineteenth century (1823-1835). The project is supported by a Charles Ryskamp fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). Dr. Avrutin is Associate Professor of modern European Jewish history, and the Tobor family scholar in the Program of Jewish Culture and Society at the University of Illinois. He is the author of Jews and the Imperial State: Identification Politics in Tsarist Russia (2010). Together with Harriet Murav (Professor of Slavic Literatures at the University of Illinois) and Petersburg Judaica (a Jewish Studies institute affiliated with the European University in St. Petersburg), he edited Photographing the Jewish Nation: Pictures from S. Ansky’s Ethnographic Expeditions (2009), which was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award in the visual arts category. Most recently, he edited a critical edition of the memoirs of the educator and feminist Anna Vygodskaia (2012) with Robert H. Greene (Professor of Russian history at the University of Montana).

Dr. Avrutin’s lecture explored the way in which the 50,000 pages of available archival documents surrounding the Velizh ritual murder case narrate this highly traumatic crime story and illuminate its historical epoch. He provided a perspective on the case that diverges from the traditional narrative.

The story began when the body of a young boy named Fedor was found in the forest surrounding Velizh. His body had punctures in several places, stimulating the idea that the Jews had killed him to drain his blood for ritual purposes. There was no proof for such an accusation, but the authorities relied on the testimony of Maria Terenteeva. She claimed that the boy was tortured and killed by Hana Tsetlin in the home of Mirka Aronson, who was the Jewish owner of the largest home in Velizh in the city center. There was no proof to indicate that her testimony was true, and, as Dr. Avrutin explained, it was likely that she had invented the tale to settle an old score. However, her testimony revealed just how influential blood libel tales were at this time.

The court eventually acquitted the Jews, declaring that there was no ritual murder that could be legally proven. Nevertheless, as Dr. Avrutin described, the citizens maintained the idea that the Jews were capable of doing such a thing, even though they could not testify to witnessing it. The case was dismissed but then picked up again when Terenteeva gave a petition to Tsar Alexander I, as he was passing through Velizh, claiming that this time her own son had been killed, and a new grand inquisitorial procedure was instituted once again. The case again concluded with the ruling that Jews did not do it and was finally settled in 1935, accordingly.

Dr. Avrutin’s question was – why did almost all the Christian respondents still insist that the Jews were capable of murder in the absence of eye-witness testimony? He claims that traditional explanations of the case do not offer vitality. In a place where rivalries and confrontations were a well-established part of everyday life, Dr. Avrutin looks beyond the traditional scholarly arguments of economic
hardship and a background of Antisemitism. He proposes that a well-established folk culture helped legitimate the case. In this folk belief setting, non-Jews used tales of blood libel against Jews to fuel the case because, in doing so, they could use it as an otherwise unavailable chance to mobilize fears and express world views.

Alana Holland is a first-year MA student in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies and a 2013-2014 FLAS Fellow. She received her BA in History from Arkansas State University in May 2012. Before joining the MA program at REEEC she spent a year abroad in Izhevsk, Russia, where she studied Russian at Udmurt State University. She is participating in an internship with the Russian Holocaust and Educational Research Center, and volunteers with The Memorial Society (Moscow).