

The Beilis Case Papers

Documents on the Beilis Case from the State Archive of the Kiev Oblast

Fonds 2,183, 864

**By Vladimir Danilenko,
Director of the State Archive
of the Kiev Oblast**

The State Archives of the Kiev Oblast (GAKO) contain documents pertaining to the so-called Beilis Case – the 1913 trial of Mendel Beilis, a Jew who worked as a clerk at a brick factory on the outskirts of Kiev. He was charged with murdering a young Ukrainian boy, Andrei Yushchinsky. Incited by Russian Black-Hundred organizations, the Beilis case aimed to provoke mass anti-Semitic pogroms¹ in the country. The timing of the trial was not accidental. On 9 February 1911, the Third State Duma began debating a draft law on abolishing the Jewish Pale of Settlement. This drew indignation and unrest from anti-Semitic monarchist parties and Black-Hundred organizations that railed against the bill. Exhausting the then standard anti-Semitic slogans, they tried to reanimate the medieval accusation of the Jews using “Christian blood” in their rites. This accusation had to be proven in a concrete court case. At the time, the local police were investigating the murder of Andrei Yushchinsky, a student at St. Sophia religious school in Kiev, whose body had been found on the outskirts of Kiev, near the factory where Beilis was employed (Fond 183, opis’ 5, delo 4, p. 4). As early as March 1911, members of the Black Hundred in Kiev claimed that the young boy had died in a ritual killing. The authorities backed this claim. Kiev psychiatrist I. Sikorsky asked by the prosecutor whether it was possible to determine the murderer’s nationality based on the examination of the body said that the boy had been murdered by Jews. The prosecution brought in as an expert witness a Catholic priest, I. Pranaitis, to act as the religious expert for the prosecution. Using randomly collected excerpts from Jewish texts he was trying to prove that Jews hated people of other religions and especially Christians.²

The only thing left was to select a culprit for the trial– a Jew.

The Beilis case was investigated for two and a half years. The trial took place in September and October 1913. Progressive Russian and Ukrainian intelligentsia rose up to defend Beilis. Writer V.G. Korolenko wrote an open letter to the newspaper *Rech* (30 October 1911) entitled “To Russian Society” against the “blood calumny.” It was signed by prominent intellectuals Andreev, Blok, Kuprin, Merezhkovsky, Aleksei Tolstoy, Vernadsky, and Tugan-Baranovsky. Some of the top lawyers pleaded Beilis's case at the trial: Gruzenberg, Zarudny, Karabchevsky, Grigorovich-Barsky, and Maklakov. There is a poster (Fond 2, opis’ 229, delo 264, p. 321) with the likenesses of Beilis and his lawyers. The poster was printed in St. Petersburg and virtually the entire print run was seized by the authorities. There was also a medal bearing the likeness of Mendel Beilis which suffered the same fate as the poster.

“Evidence” provided by I. Sikorsky and I. Pranaitis was refuted by psychiatrist V. Bekhterev, Semitologist P. Kokovtsev, Kiev Theological Academy professor, priest A. Glagolev, and Moscow Rabbi Ya. Maze.

In Kiev, students of Kiev Polytechnic Institute and Higher Women’s Courses, streetcar company servants, workers of the South Russia Engineering Plant, and the Russian Social Democratic Party came out in support of Beilis (Fond 2, opis’ 229, delo 264).

The municipal authorities were seriously alarmed over the situation surrounding the Beilis case. They turned to the headquarters of the Kiev Military District: “... In view of the enormous social importance of this case and, by the same token, its importance in the sense of racial enmity, one can expect during the days of the process street marches and disturbances

...” The authorities asked for three Cossack squadrons to assist Kiev municipal police (Fond, 2. Opus' 220, delo 264, pp. 1-4).

The president of the court asked for the maintenance of order during the trial three mounted and 30 unmounted policemen and an appropriate number of police officials. The Ministry of the Interior issued a circular letter, No. 12539 of 17 October 1913, banning the screening of a film about the Beilis case (Ibid., pp. 102-104) and recommending to apprehend agitators only as a last resort.

There were 355 witnesses in the trial (their alphabetically arranged list in Fond 864, opus' 10, delo 22). Attached to the case is a list of books borrowed for the duration of the Beilis trial from A.S. Shmakov Library (19 books in all, Ibid., p. 13).

The jury of 14 members acquitted Beilis. The court decision said: “The District Court has ruled:

By virtue of the decision by members of the jury and based on para 1 of Article 771 of the Statute of the Criminal Court, the defendant, Menakhil-Mendel Teviev Beilis, 39, resident of the city of Vasilkov, Kiev Province, is thereby ruled acquitted after trial in this case... (Fond 864, opus' 10, delo 16, pp. 425-426).

Documents in the archives contain much information adding up to the full picture of the Beilis case, including: a report on discovering Yushchinsky's body, opinions of the cause of his death by forensic medicine professor Obolonsky and dissector Tufanov, the ruling on putting Beilis in custody and the formal charge, lawyers' request, newspapers with articles (Fond 183, opus' 5, delo 4), correspondence pertaining to the trial. Here is an example of one of the letters:

We can state the fact that Beilis rose from obscurity to world fame, he has become a historic figure. His name is known to the population of the globe as well as the name of Tolstoy although Beilis has done nothing of the things that some people ...An amazing fact: to win world fame that would last forever. One shouldn't be sorry to spend several years in custody for that. I envy you! You'll be most certainly acquitted. (Fond 183, opus' 5, delo 6, pp. 93, 94).

Also included are the file of the examining magistrate of the St. Peterburg District Court for especially important cases, Mashkovsky, pertaining to the killing of Andrei Yushchinsky, materials of the questioning of suspects Korzhenevsky, Krasovsky, Voloshenko, Vera and Lyudmila Cheberyak (Fond 864, opus' 10, delo 52), the memorandum of the proceedings of the court, names of lawyers, members of the jury, experts, the court's resolution and its decision (Ibid., delo 10), the charge (Ibid., delo 22).

As a whole, the documents are a valuable source for studying this cause celebre of the early 20th century. Most of them are originals and have a powerful information potential yet to be explored.

The documents are in Russian, Yiddish, German, and Polish.

Beilis and his family left Russia for Palestine and finally emigrated to America. In 1926, he published in New York his memories recounting his ordeal. He died in the United States in 1934.

NOTES:

1. Armed pogrom gangs organized by the police and monarchist organizations for combating the revolutionary movement, inciting racial enmity and staging attacks on Jews. In a broader sense, Black Hundreders was the name for extreme reactionary and chauvinistic elements.

2. See. *Delo o ritual'nom ubiistve Andruyshi Yushchinskogo. "Taina krovi" u evreev. Ekspertiza I. Ye. Pranaitisa. Izdaniye russkogo narodnogo Soyuzha imeni Mikhaila Arkhangela* (Fond 2, opis' 229, delo 264, pp. 276-294).

The trial went ahead despite the fact that the security police, which was simultaneously conducting its own investigation, knew the actual murderers – Vera Cheberyak, member of a Kiev street gang, and her accomplices. The murderers were not brought to trial on instructions from the Ministry of Justice.

Beilis was arrested 12 June 1911 (Fond 183, opis' 5, delo 4, pp. 163-165). The Black-Hundred press launched a rabid anti-Semitic campaign and called for pogroms against Jews. The archives have the newspapers *Russkoye Znamya* issues 76, 84,85; *Groza* and *Novoye vremya* (Fond 183, opis' 5, pp. 17, 23, 24) with stories of Jewish ritual killings headlined "Christians, Protect Your Children," "A Murder Committed by Kikes in Kiev," and so on; the newspaper *Kievlyanin*, issues 102, 103, 106, 108 speaking out in defense of Beilis.