

# Reframing Libel and Cultural Tropes as Crimes Against Humanity: A Historical, Legal, and Policy Framework



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## Foreword

*In which an old villain — the lie — is put in the dock*

There are few things more dangerous than a well-told lie. Not the clumsy, obvious sort of lie that collapses under its own absurdity, but the polished, persistent kind — the lie that wears the robes of righteousness and sits smugly in the courts of public opinion, nodding solemnly while entire peoples are slandered into silence.

Humanity, bless it, has a dreadful habit of first inventing monsters and then punishing those we have decided resemble them. For centuries, the Jewish people have borne the weight of fantastical accusations: blood-drinkers, Christ-killers, conspirators extraordinaire — the cast of characters assigned to them would shame a Gothic novel. And, as is the way with such things, what begins as a whisper over ale in the market square ends in the fire of pogrom, gas chamber, or rocket attack.

But it would be frightfully remiss to suppose that this tragic tale is the Jewish people's alone. Alas, history is positively heaving with the bones of communities accused before they were attacked: Armenians branded as traitors; Tutsis called cockroaches; Roma dismissed as irredeemable thieves; Uyghurs cast as threats to social harmony; Yazidis vilified by fanatics. Words have always done the dirty work before the blades are drawn.

This paper proposes something rather radical in its simplicity: that we take such words seriously. Not in the precious, censorious sense — no one here is calling for a world of trigger warnings and speech codes — but in the moral and legal sense. When cultural libels, slanders, and tropes are orchestrated, broadcast, and institutionalised to dehumanise entire populations, they are not quaint artefacts of folklore. They are instruments — the ideological mortars before the physical ones fall.

What follows is not a diatribe, nor a lament. It is a framework: historical, legal, and policy-based. A plea, if you will, to consider that libel — sustained, strategic, and aimed at vulnerable groups — might be understood not merely as prejudice, but as incitement to crimes against humanity. Not all lies are equal. Some lead directly, and with appalling efficiency, to violence.

Let us be clear: criticism is not what is under indictment here. A nation may be criticised. A policy may be opposed. Even gods may be mocked (and ought to be, from time to time). But when myth masquerades as truth, when conspiracy dresses itself as compassion, when ancient tropes are rebranded in humanitarian garb — we are not in the realm of debate. We are back in the theatre of persecution.

So, consider this paper a kind of brief — presented on behalf of every people ever vilified into exile, every minority caricatured into oblivion, every voice drowned beneath the tidal rhetoric of hate.

The lie is in the dock. The facts are on the stand. The sentence, one hopes, will be justice.

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## Executive Summary

In an age that purports to revere truth, dignity, and human rights, the enduring power of libel and cultural tropes to incite hatred and violence remains a grim paradox. This proposal presents a bold, necessary framework for reframing libel—particularly those narratives embedded in conspiracy, prejudice, and cultural myth—as crimes against humanity within the scope of international law.

From the grotesque blood libels of medieval Europe to the conspiratorial demonisation of minorities in today's digital landscape, such tropes have long served as tools of dehumanisation, institutional scapegoating, and systemic persecution. These narratives are not merely vestiges of the past, but living instruments of incitement that continue to fuel mass violence, discrimination, and exclusion across continents and cultures.

This briefing contends that the continued dissemination of libel-based tropes—whether religious, ethnic, sexual, or racial in nature—meets the legal and moral criteria for classification as crimes against humanity, as defined by international legal instruments including the Rome Statute. It is no longer sufficient to treat these falsehoods as benign expressions of opinion or folklore. When weaponised, they become a form of psychological warfare, a precursor to physical violence, and a vehicle for state and non-state actors alike to justify discrimination and atrocity.

This proposal calls for the urgent formation of a cross-disciplinary and transnational coalition—including legal scholars, policymakers, civil society leaders, educators, and minority rights defenders—to secure the recognition of libel tropes as part of a broader apparatus of persecution. It challenges international bodies, national legislatures, and educational institutions to acknowledge these tropes not merely as rhetorical tools, but as sustained campaigns of vilification that warrant legal scrutiny and policy intervention.

To that end, it proposes a three-pronged intervention:

1. **Historical Documentation** – To trace the genealogy and transmission of libel tropes across eras and cultures, revealing their persistent function in justifying systemic violence.
2. **Legal Classification** – To develop a robust legal argument positioning libel-based incitement and dehumanisation as crimes against humanity under international law, drawing from precedents such as incitement to genocide and persecution.
3. **Legislative Advocacy** – To advance policy reforms at the national and international levels that address libel tropes as a core component of hate crimes, and to equip regulatory bodies with the tools to combat their spread in digital and educational spaces.



This initiative does not seek to isolate any one community's suffering, but rather to expose the universal architecture of persecution that libel has historically underpinned. Whether targeting Jews through blood libels, LGBTQ+ individuals through moral panics, Roma communities through baseless criminal tropes, or racial minorities through biowarfare conspiracies, libel narratives share a common DNA: they strip human beings of dignity and agency, rendering them vulnerable to violence, marginalisation, and erasure.

To dismantle these narratives is to restore truth and uphold the foundational principles of human rights. This proposal is, therefore, a call to conscience—a plea for intellectual courage, legal clarity, and collective moral will to confront one of the oldest and most pernicious instruments of hatred still thriving in our midst.

intervention: historical documentation, legal classification, and legislative advocacy.

# I. Background and Historical Context

## 1.1. Origins of Ritual Libel in Medieval Europe

The phenomenon of ritual libel – the malicious accusation that a minority group engages in heinous, secret rites – first gained traction in medieval Europe. In 1144, the quiet city of Norwich, England became the backdrop for an explosive claim: local Jews were accused of murdering a young Christian boy named William in a gruesome parody of the Crucifixion. This blood libel was unprecedented, a fantasy woven from prejudice and fear, yet it did not remain an isolated curiosity. As word of the “Boy Martyr” spread, so too did the template for a deadly myth. Over the next centuries, similar accusations erupted across Europe – from England to France and beyond – each tale as fantastical as the last, and each time seized upon by those eager to find a scapegoat for misfortune.<sup>1 2</sup>

What made these early libels especially pernicious was their veneer of piety. The accusers often framed their lies in religious imagery, claiming that Jews reenacted Christ's Passion with innocent Christian children as victims. This narrative tapped into medieval Christian anxieties and theological obsessions. It was no coincidence that such accusations often surfaced around Easter or Passover; they fed off the fevered atmosphere of religious observance and superstition. In an era when unexplained tragedy – a child's disappearance or a bad harvest – demanded a culprit, these ritual murder myths offered a darkly compelling answer. From the outset, ritual libels were

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<sup>1</sup> Gavin I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 216–222. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520088377/toward-a-definition-of-antisemitism>

<sup>2</sup> E.M. Rose, *The Murder of William of Norwich: The Origins of the Blood Libel in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3–5. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-murder-of-william-of-norwich-9780190219628>

never about evidence or truth; they were about fulfilling a social need to explain the inexplicable and to channel communal grief or anger toward a convenient target.

## 1.2. Theological and Social Functions of Cultural Libels

These grotesque fictions did not persist by accident – they served clear theological and social functions for the majority. Theologically, the blood libel and similar slanders reinforced the dominant group's worldview. To medieval Christians, the very idea that Jews required Christian blood for their Passover rituals perversely validated Christian centrality: it cast Jews as literal vampires dependent on the essence of Christian innocence. Such macabre lore buttressed the belief that Christianity was under siege by demonic forces, turning age-old anti-Jewish biases into vivid tales of good versus evil. In churches and taverns alike, the retelling of these libels became a cautionary tale that conveniently doubled as a profession of faith – “see how our enemies desecrate what we hold sacred, and see how just our cause is in opposing them.”<sup>3</sup>

Socially, cultural libels were a unifying force for the in-group. In largely homogeneous medieval towns, whisperings of ritual murder by outsiders forged an instant sense of us versus them. Rulers and commoners found rare common ground in their shared outrage. Fear and rumor spread faster than any clarifying truth, binding the Christian community together in vigilant watchfulness against the “other.” Importantly, these narratives also served as a psychological release valve: when catastrophe struck – a plague, an economic downturn, a missing child – communities burdened by anxiety could transfer blame to a minority. The libel was a convenient explanation that spared the majority from confronting randomness or their own leaders' failures. By painting the marginalized as malevolent saboteurs of the common good, society could avoid hard questions and instead indulge in righteous fury. In this way, cultural libels acted as a toxic social glue, providing simple answers and a pretext for collective action (often violent) against the chosen scapegoat.

## 1.3. Institutional Complicity: Church, Monarchy, and Judiciary

If these pernicious myths survived and thrived, it was often because powerful institutions found them useful or expedient. The Church might have been expected to dispel such wild superstition, but instead it often fanned the flames. While a few enlightened Popes issued edicts condemning the blood libel, many local clerics eagerly promoted these tales of martyred children. Some parishes quickly turned alleged victims into unofficial saints, drawing pilgrims – and donations – to their shrines. In this way, the very institution meant to champion truth and justice became complicit in spreading medieval “fake news” when it suited ecclesiastical or financial interests.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Israel Jacob Yuval, “Vengeance and Damnation, Blood and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel Accusations,” *Zion* 58 (1993): 33–90. Reprinted in English in *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source Book, 315–1791*, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Filip Mazurczak, “The Catholic Church and the Jews: The True Story,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, August 15, 2017, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2017/08/catholic-church-jews-true-story-filip-mazurczak.html>.

Secular rulers were often ambivalent. A king might one day exploit a libel incident to extort or confiscate Jewish wealth, then the next day claim to protect Jews – not from mercy, but to keep their tax revenues flowing. Such protections were fickle, and when political winds shifted or state coffers ran dry, even monarchs who once shielded minorities could find the temptation of scapegoating too strong to resist. The judiciary offered little refuge; trials for alleged ritual murder were usually shams. Judges and local officials frequently colluded in extracting confessions through torture or in admitting “spectral evidence” that had no place in any honest court. In essence, every pillar of authority – church, crown, and courts – at one time or another lent credence or cover to cultural libels. Whether out of genuine belief, opportunism, or fear of the mob, institutions that should have known better abdicated their responsibility, giving these lies an official stamp that made them far more potent and destructive.<sup>5</sup>

## <sup>6</sup>1.4. Impact on Targeted Communities: Pogroms, Expulsions, Executions

For the minorities in question – above all medieval Jewry – the consequences of these fabrications were devastatingly real. History offers grim episodes where mere rumour proved fatal. Throughout medieval Europe, countless Jews were arrested, lynched, or burned alive after hysterical accusations – a Christian child missing here, a poisoned well there – ignited pogroms fueled entirely by myth. Each incident of libel acted like a spark in a tinder-dry forest of prejudice, igniting fury that needed little encouragement to turn into murder. As the Black Death ravaged Europe in 1348, desperate populations cast about for someone to blame; wild allegations that Jews had poisoned wells led to horrific massacres of entire communities based on nothing more than toxic superstition.<sup>7</sup>

The devastation extended beyond the immediate violence. Cultural libels often paved the way for official expulsions of Jews from cities and kingdoms – as happened in England in 1290 and Spain in 1492, where years of paranoid accusations normalized the idea of banishing an entire people.<sup>8</sup> Even those who were not physically harmed lived under a shadow of terror. A simple trip outside after dark or the disappearance of a local child – events otherwise unremarkable – could, under the cloud of libel, spell doom for an entire family or ghetto. The psychological trauma was profound: to know that one’s neighbours might, at any moment, turn murderously hostile based on a lie, created a climate of fear and insecurity that lingered for generations. In short, cultural libels put targeted communities in a permanent state of siege, subject to sporadic eruptions of violence and ultimate threats to their very existence.

<sup>5</sup> Philip IV of France, “Finance and religion,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 2025, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip\\_IV\\_of\\_France](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_IV_of_France).

<sup>6</sup> Hannah R. Johnson, *Blood Libel: The Ritual Murder Accusation at the Limit of Jewish History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012); *Spectral evidence*, *Wikipedia*, accessed July 2025, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spectral\\_evidence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spectral_evidence).

<sup>7</sup> Anna Foa, *The Jews of Europe After the Black Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 34–41. Foa explores the connection between plague hysteria and anti-Jewish violence. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520218222/the-jews-of-europe-after-the-black-death>

<sup>8</sup> Britannica, “Antisemitism in medieval Europe,” July 24, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/antisemitism/Antisemitism-in-medieval-Europe>.



## 1.5. Transformation and Continuity in Modern Racial and Religious Hatred

One might hope such medieval nightmares would fade with time, yet they transformed and found new targets. The cast of characters expanded beyond the original European context, but the script remained eerily familiar. By the 19th and 20th centuries, classic blood libel tales about Jews persisted – modern newspapers and demagogues still dredged up the old lies whenever it served their purpose. At the same time, new groups began to face analogous slanders. In places of sectarian strife or colonial tension, it became common to accuse the “other” side of almost supernatural evil. In Tsarist Russia, authorities circulated the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a notorious forgery, to convince the populace that Jews ran a secret global cabal – essentially a modern update of the well-poisoning and child-murder legends, swapping out wells and blood for banks and parliaments. The continuity is plain: whether medieval or modern, the underlying trope is that a despised minority secretly conspires against society at large, requiring drastic action in response.<sup>910</sup>

Yet there were also adaptations. As scientific understanding advanced, fewer educated people believed tales of literal witchcraft or ritual magic. So the libels mutated: no longer did accusers always claim that blood was literally baked into bread. Instead, they alleged that Jews (or Freemasons, or other convenient villains) were behind global financial crashes, or that Catholics were plotting to take over governments, or that immigrants carried deadly diseases by design. Racial and religious hatred in modern times often hides behind political or pseudo-scientific jargon. In Nazi Germany, medieval-sounding claims about Jews using Christian blood resurfaced alongside talk of “race hygiene” – different packaging, same poison. Today, in internet chat rooms and extremist propaganda, one finds a chilling continuity with the past: the targeted group may vary, but the accusations – they kill our children, they defile our purity, they plot against us – remain a constant refrain. This reminds us that the work of debunking these libels is far from over. They are a shape-shifting menace, reappearing in each era with a new mask, but always the same hateful heart.

## II. Evolution of Libel in Modern Forms

### 2.1. The Blood Libel in Nazi Propaganda and Ideology

Nowhere was the old wine of blood libel poured more aggressively into new bottles than under the Third Reich. The Nazis, masters of modern propaganda, gleefully resurrected medieval anti-Jewish libels to serve a 20th-century program of extermination. Julius Streicher’s *Der Stürmer* newspaper was particularly notorious in this regard. Week after

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Ray, *After Expulsion: 1492 and the Making of Sephardic Jewry* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 17–21. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg2n9.6>.

<sup>10</sup> nna Sapir Abulafia, “The Jewish–Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages,” in *Jews in Christian Europe, 1000–1500*, edited by Robin R. Mundill (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 59–61. <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9780719087020>.

week, lurid cartoons and articles depicted Jews as child-murderers – predators lurking in the shadows for Aryan innocents. One infamous 1934 issue of *Der Stürmer* proclaimed a “Jewish Murder Plan against Gentile Humanity,” complete with grotesque images of hook-nosed figures draining the blood of German children. This was not a sideshow to Nazi ideology but a central pillar of it. By convincing ordinary Germans that their Jewish neighbors were literally out for their blood, Nazi leaders stoked a visceral fear and hatred – the kind that makes otherwise civilized people capable of accepting, even applauding, barbaric acts.<sup>11</sup>

This embrace of the blood libel by a modern state had a dual effect. Domestically, it desensitized the German public to the escalating persecution of Jews. When Jews were stripped of rights, herded into ghettos, and eventually deported to death camps, many Germans had already internalized years of propaganda painting the Jews as a deadly menace. In their minds, the regime’s violence appeared not as cruelty but as a preemptive strike against an existential threat. The grotesque Nazi innovation was to wed medieval fantasy with industrialized genocide. What had once been local outbreaks of violence became, under Nazi direction, a continent-wide, systematic attempt to annihilate a people – and the old libels provided just the sort of dehumanizing narrative needed to lubricate the machinery of mass murder.

## 2.2. Post-War Re-emergence in the Arab World and Soviet Bloc

In the aftermath of World War II, one might imagine the blood libel and its kin would be forever discredited. Tragically, the opposite happened: these libels found new life in post-war geopolitical conflicts. In the Arab world, where the founding of Israel and the dislocation of Palestinian Arabs created a powder keg of resentment, some reached for medieval calumnies to express their rage. By the mid-20th century, translations of Europe’s anti-Semitic classics – including that Tsarist fabrication, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – were circulating widely in Arabic. Even officials gave new currency to ancient lies: notably, in 1983, Syria’s Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass published *The Matzah of Zion*, a book that unabashedly revived an 1840 Damascus blood libel tale as if it were historical fact. The target was ostensibly Zionism or Israel, but the tropes were lifted straight from medieval anti-Jewish lore, portraying Jews (now cast collectively as agents of Israel) as conspiratorial child-killers.<sup>12</sup>

Even into the 21st century, one hears medieval echoes in political rhetoric and media. In some Middle Eastern discourse, for instance, Israelis or Jews have been depicted as ghoulish child-killers or deliberate starvers of innocents – essentially the old blood libel

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<sup>11</sup> Randall L. Bytwerk, *Der Stürmer in the Evolution of the German Press: Antisemitism and Nazi Propaganda, 1920–1930* (2001; rpt. 2023), figure 6, showing the May 1934 cover headline “Jewish Murder Plan against Gentile Humanity Revealed.” Available via ResearchGate, accessed August 4, 2025, [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-frontpage-of-the-special-issue-of-May-1934-accusing-the-Jewish-community-of\\_fig2\\_372504090](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-frontpage-of-the-special-issue-of-May-1934-accusing-the-Jewish-community-of_fig2_372504090).

<sup>12</sup> “The Damascus Blood Libel (1840) As Told by the Late Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass,” *MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 99*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.memri.org/reports/mustafa-tlass-blood-libel-matzah-of-zion>.

repackaged as propaganda against the Jewish state. Such portrayals serve the same purpose as ever: to dehumanise a perceived enemy and justify whatever aggression might follow.

In the Soviet bloc, too, old libels mutated into new forms. Stalin's regime, especially in its paranoid final years, toyed with conspiracy theories that would have been familiar to any witch-hunter. The notorious "Doctors' Plot" of 1952–53 accused mostly Jewish physicians of poisoning Soviet leaders – a modern blood libel wearing the garb of communist state security. While these charges were absurd and were voided after Stalin's death, they demonstrated how readily a totalitarian state could dust off the template of cultural libel to scapegoat a minority. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union often cloaked anti-Semitism in the language of "anti-Zionism," trafficking in demonizing imagery that had fueled European Jew-hatred. Propaganda posters in Soviet-aligned countries occasionally depicted capitalists or Zionists as monstrous figures preying on children or the oppressed – imagery unmistakably reminiscent of the old blood libel, even if the captions now spoke of class enemies or imperialists. These post-war resurgences underscore a sobering point: cultural libels are opportunistic infections in the body politic, lying dormant until a crisis or agenda calls them forth. Neither modern education nor the fresh horror of the Holocaust proved to be a complete vaccine against this sickness.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.3. Digital Incitement: Libellous Tropes in Online Hate Speech

As the world entered the digital age, the malignant folklore of cultural libels found fertile new ground online. What once spread by whispers in the marketplace or in scurrilous pamphlets is now transmitted globally in an instant, thanks to social media, forums, and encrypted chat groups. The internet has proven to be a turbocharger for age-old hate. On fringe websites and mainstream platforms alike, one can stumble upon threads that effectively rehash the blood libel for a modern audience – only now it might be claimed that a secret cabal is trafficking children for nefarious rituals, or that certain public figures "drink the blood" of the innocent to maintain youth. These bizarre fantasies, once confined to the lunatic fringe, have gone viral. In the cauldron of online anonymity and algorithm-driven echo chambers, libellous tropes mutate and spread like a virus.

The digital sphere has also globalised conspiracies that were once local. The infamous QAnon theory, born in the United States, co-opted ancient libel themes – painting political opponents as part of a hidden satanic child-abusing cult – and within a few years had adherents from Germany to Brazil. This modern witch-hunt narrative is essentially the blood libel with a fresh coat of paint, now targeting whoever the conspiracy theorists see as their enemy (often the old anti-Jewish motifs lurk in the background, with "globalist elites" as code). The result of this always-on disinformation environment is a normalization of hate. Younger generations encounter elaborate conspiracy theories before they've learned the real history of World War II or the civil

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<sup>13</sup> YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, s.v. "Doctors' Plot," accessed August 4, 2025, [https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article.aspx/Doctors\\_plot](https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article.aspx/Doctors_plot) — describing arrests, dismissals, torture, and the ultimate voiding of the case after Stalin's death.

rights movement. The danger is that a steady drip of digital libel – unchallenged by facts and unfiltered by traditional gatekeepers – can create an alternate reality. In that reality, some citizens come to sincerely believe that entire groups are existential threats, not because of anything those people have actually done, but because online lore insists they are guilty of heinous hidden crimes. The step from harboring such beliefs to acting on them violently is perilously short.

## 2.4. Modern-Day Scapegoating of Minorities Through Conspiracies

Alongside the digital acceleration of old libels, the modern world has seen an alarming renaissance of scapegoating conspiracies targeting a variety of minorities. Time and again, when societies face stress – be it economic turmoil, public health crises, or rapid social change – a portion of the populace reaches for the old playbook: find a minority to blame and invent a story to justify it. During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, conspiracy theories blossomed claiming that outsiders deliberately introduced the virus, or conversely that local minorities concocted the epidemic for gain. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed a tsunami of scapegoating: Asian communities worldwide faced abuse and assault due to wild claims that Chinese people had engineered the virus or that certain ethnic groups were willfully contaminating public places. In Europe and the United States, migrants and refugees have been recurrent targets of fantastical accusations. We hear that immigrant caravans are secretly funded by malevolent financiers to undermine Western civilization (a thinly veiled update of the old “Jewish world conspiracy” trope), or that Muslim refugees plan to impose their religion and laws in a grand “replacement” of the native population. These theories often start on the fringes of far-right or far-left discourse, but they have a way of leaping into mainstream conversation when demagogues find them useful during elections or crises.<sup>14</sup>

Even minorities not historically targeted by medieval-style libels now find themselves ensnared by modern conspiratorial narratives. LGBTQ+ communities, for example, have increasingly been demonised by a new libel that borrows from old prejudices: the outrageous claim that gay or trans individuals are “grooming” children or undermining public morality as part of a hidden agenda. This echoes the medieval idea of secret cabals corrupting the innocent, merely swapping out the actors and vocabulary. The persistence of such scapegoating fantasies in ostensibly enlightened societies suggests that no group is truly safe from the libel phenomenon. As long as blaming a vulnerable community provides a convenient explanation for complex problems, there will be those ready to spin the next big lie. The challenge we face today is recognizing these

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<sup>14</sup> **Heald, Suzette, et al.**, "The Ebola Crisis and the 'Outbreak Narrative' in West Africa: The Politics and Media of Epidemic Response," *Anthropology Today* 32, no. 3 (June 2016): 18–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12241>. See also: Sarah Bell, "Ebola and the Narratives of Panic and Othering," *Open Democracy*, November 10, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/ebola-and-narratives-of-panic-and-othering/>.

conspiracy theories for what they are – recycled hate in new packaging – before they once again translate into real-world persecution.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.5. Cultural Normalisation through Cartoons, Literature, and Education

Hate does not proliferate in a vacuum; it seeps into a society's bloodstream through culture, often in ways so subtle they go unchecked. In many parts of the world, pernicious stereotypes and libelous tropes are *normalised* through seemingly innocuous media like cartoons, literature, and even educational materials. A political cartoon in a daily newspaper, for instance, might depict a hook-nosed banker controlling world events or portray a minority group as monstrous vermin. To the uncritical eye, it's just satire or "humour," but to the targeted group it is terrifying dehumanisation. Such imagery harks back to the caricatures of *Der Stürmer* or even earlier – the only difference is that in modern guise they might appear in full color on social media or printed on a T-shirt rather than a 15th-century woodcut. When children grow up seeing these depictions, the stereotypes sink in deeply. A teen in Cairo or Kuala Lumpur who routinely sees Jews depicted as bloodthirsty villains in school textbooks, or a child in Europe who only encounters Roma in fairy tales as child-stealers and witches, is quietly imbibing libels with their ABCs.

In literature and pop culture, the patterns are similarly problematic. Classic stories and popular legends sometimes perpetuate notions of the sinister outsider – a theme that can easily merge into the fabric of cultural memory. In the hands of a skilled novelist or filmmaker, a whole demographic can be reduced to a villainous archetype. These portrayals might not have the crude obviousness of a blunt hate pamphlet; indeed, that subtlety can make them more dangerous in the long run. They plant seeds of suspicion in the public consciousness gently, almost artistically. Education, when co-opted by bigotry, is perhaps the cruelest tool of all. History books that gloss over or justify past atrocities against minorities, civics lessons that omit the equal humanity of all groups, or worse, curricula that actively teach mistrust ("be wary of those people, they have strange customs") all contribute to an environment where libelous ideas seem not only acceptable but true. By the time a young person reaches adulthood, they may have absorbed an entire worldview littered with falsehoods about other races, religions, or lifestyles – without anyone ever explicitly telling them a lie. The normalisation has been achieved through stories, jokes, art, and selective history. Undoing this damage is far harder than preventing it, which is why a critical eye on cultural products is necessary. To truly uproot cultural libels, societies must confront not only the obvious firebrands and extremists, but also the subtle everyday transmitters of prejudice that hide in plain sight as "culture."

## III. Legal Analysis and Classification

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<sup>15</sup> "2023 Year in Review: Anti-LGBTQ Online Hate and Disinformation," GLAAD, Jan. 4, 2024, <https://glaad.org/2023-year-in-review-anti-lgbtq-online-hate-and-disinformation/>.



### 3.1. Definition of Crimes Against Humanity (Rome Statute, Article 7)

Under Article 7 of the Rome Statute, crimes against humanity encompass acts "committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack." Among the qualifying acts are persecution, imprisonment, torture, extermination, and other inhumane acts that intentionally cause great suffering or serious injury. Central to this is the presence of intent, systematicity, and dehumanisation, where victims are no longer seen as individuals, but as subhuman entities.<sup>16</sup>

Persecution in this legal sense means the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights of a group because of who they are. Now consider the role of a sustained libel against a minority: if a regime or organisation systematically spreads false, incendiary accusations (for example, that a certain ethnic group kidnaps children or spreads plague) and uses that propaganda to justify denying that group's rights or worse, it fits squarely within the definition of persecution. When cultural libels move from whispered calumny to state-sanctioned narrative underpinning policies of discrimination or violence, they cease to be "just stories." They become instrumental components of crimes against humanity.

Recognising this does not trivialise crimes against humanity by focusing on speech; rather, it acknowledges that the worst atrocities typically begin with words. The road to ethnic cleansing and genocide is paved with hate propaganda. The architects of international justice after World War II understood this well – at Nuremberg, they prosecuted not just those who fired guns or operated gas chambers, but also those who inked poison pens and broadcast hate. When evaluating atrocity crimes today, the presence of cultural libels in the offender's toolkit should raise red flags. A government that permits or promotes fantastical accusations against a minority is flirting with the machinery of inhumanity. The legal definitions already exist to hold them to account; the challenge is mustering the will to apply those definitions in time, treating cultural libel as the serious offense it is when it underlies widespread persecution.

The legal question is not whether libelous speech exists — it manifestly does — but whether and when such speech escalates into an act of persecution grave enough to constitute a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute. Crucial here is the legal threshold of 'widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population,' which can be met not only through physical violence but also through the intentional, sustained deployment of cultural narratives that function as tools of dehumanisation, justification for violence, and obstruction to justice.

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<sup>16</sup> Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 7(1), adopted July 17, 1998, entered into force July 1, 2002, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf>.

### 3.2. The Role of Incitement, Persecution, and Dehumanisation

To move beyond generic hate speech laws, the threshold for considering libelous cultural tropes as crimes against humanity must be established along three legal axes:

- **Incitement to Harm:** Speech that not only vilifies but mobilises others to act — either through violence or systemic discrimination.
- **Persecution:** Sustained and institutionalised mistreatment of an identifiable group, including through defamatory or false allegations that shape policy and public perception.
- **Dehumanisation:** The reduction of individuals or groups to monstrous, animalistic, or disease-like caricatures, stripping them of moral standing and human rights.

While not all libel rises to this level, the persistent use of cultural tropes — especially when state-sanctioned, repeated in public media, and embedded in educational systems — serves the same purpose as more overt acts of violence: it legitimises marginalisation and prepares the ideological ground for atrocity.

While incitement to genocide necessitates a direct and public call to violence, the slower machinery of cultural libel operates through dehumanisation — a necessary precondition for atrocity. Jurisprudence from Rwanda and Yugoslavia underscores how propaganda and myth-making cultivate the social climate in which exterminatory ideologies flourish.

The journey from malignant myth to mass violence follows a chilling pattern, one that legal scholars and historians alike have documented. It starts with dehumanisation — portraying the target group not as fellow humans but as monsters, fiends, or vermin. Cultural libels are dehumanisation's sharpest tool: what better way to strip someone of their humanity than to convince others that "those people" murder babies, or corrupt children, or spread poison? Once a population accepts such a grotesque caricature of a minority, inciting them to persecute that minority becomes vastly easier. Thus incitement — the direct urging of others to hate or harm — finds fertile ground in the soil prepared by libel. Legal systems increasingly recognize incitement to genocide or violence as a punishable offense (the Genocide Convention explicitly makes incitement to commit genocide a crime). However, incitement rarely arises out of nowhere; it builds on the slow, steady conditioning of a society to accept extreme measures.

This is why the traditional focus on *persecution* in international law is so relevant. Persecution often manifests not just in physical acts like forced displacement, but in a sustained campaign of harassment and psychological terror. A group living under constant slander — its every move viewed with suspicion, its character perpetually assassinated in the public square — is a group already under attack. The law might treat a pogrom as an event and a libel as an idea, but morally and practically they are points on the same continuum. The role of incitement and dehumanisation through libels is to bridge the gap between prejudice and atrocity. By the time a demagogue explicitly calls for violence ("Drive them out! Eliminate them!"), many in the audience have been

primed for years by stories of how vile and dangerous the target group supposedly is. If we are serious about preventing crimes against humanity, we must be serious about the early stages of the process – the whispers and barroom jokes, the vitriolic pamphlets and hate-filled radio segments – because those are the moments when the avalanche can still be stopped.

### 3.3. Comparative Precedents: Hutu Radio (Rwanda), Milosevic (Yugoslavia)

Recent history provides stark precedents underscoring how libelous propaganda directly facilitates crimes against humanity, and how the law can respond. Take Rwanda in 1994: the genocide against Tutsi people was not only carried out with machetes, it was choreographed on the airwaves. Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines infamously broadcast daily dehumanising content, referring to Tutsis as “cockroaches” and spreading wild fears that they would exterminate the Hutu majority if given the chance. This wasn’t medieval Europe – it was the late 20th century, with genocidaires using a mix of modern technology and ancient hate. The international community learned, belatedly, to treat such incitement with gravity. In a landmark move, the international tribunal for Rwanda convicted radio executives and journalists for their role in inciting genocide. The precedent was clear: when speech is both heinous in content and directly tied to mass violence, it is not protected banter – it is a prosecutable act. It was a Nuremberg principle updated for a new era.<sup>17</sup>

In the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, propaganda played a similarly sinister role. Serbian ultranationalists under Slobodan Milosevic’s patronage unleashed a torrent of disinformation painting Bosnian Muslims and Croats as subversive traitors or historical villains, effectively resurrecting old libels to justify modern ethnic cleansing. Serbian state media became an arm of persecution; it relentlessly pumped out fear-mongering narratives and later downplayed the atrocities those narratives abetted. Milosevic himself was indicted for crimes against humanity and genocide, and although he died before a verdict, the trial spotlighted how deeply propaganda was interwoven with the execution of atrocities. Prosecutors assembled not only military orders and camp records, but also television broadcasts and speeches dripping with paranoid libels about the enemy. The lesson from these precedents is sobering but necessary: international courts are willing to treat cultural libels and hate propaganda not merely as moral poison, but as an actionable part of the machinery of mass crime. The challenge now is to ensure that domestic courts and international bodies apply this understanding consistently *before atrocities* erupt, not merely punish them afterward.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, *Wikipedia*, last modified July 2025, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio\\_T%C3%A9l%C3%A9vision\\_Libre\\_des\\_Mille\\_Collines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_T%C3%A9l%C3%A9vision_Libre_des_Mille_Collines).

RTLM broadcasts used insect-metaphors like “cockroaches” to dehumanise Tutsis, and have been described as “radio genocide,” actively coordinating mass violence.

<sup>18</sup> IWPR (Institute for War & Peace Reporting), *Milosevic Trial: The Propaganda War*, February 22, 2005. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/milosevic-trial-propaganda-war>.

### 3.4. Libel Tropes as Sustained Psychological and Cultural Violence

Even absent immediate massacres or overt calls for violence, libel tropes inflict a form of violence all their own. Imagine being a member of a minority community and knowing that your neighbors – perhaps not all, but enough to matter – sincerely believe you and your family engage in unspeakable evils. The psychological toll of living under such an accusation is profound. It is a slow bleeding of one's sense of security and belonging. When every public glance carries a flicker of suspicion, when children grow up internalising the idea that they are feared or reviled by society, the damage goes beyond hurt feelings. This is sustained psychological violence, a years-long assault on dignity that leaves deep scars on a community's psyche. Sociologists talk of "cultural trauma," and minority groups scarred by generations of libel – whether Jews perpetually cast as sinister schemers or Roma labeled as child thieves – know exactly what that means. The trauma is refreshed with each retelling of the lie.

<sup>19</sup>From a legal and policy standpoint, this sustained cultural violence must be recognised as a serious harm. Human rights law is starting to grapple with the idea that persecution isn't only when jackboots kick down doors at midnight; it's also when society slowly builds an atmosphere of terror around a people through slander and stigma. In many ways, libel tropes prepare the ground for physical violence by wearing down resistance. A community vilified for generations may find fewer allies rushing to its defence when violence finally knocks at the door. After all, a long campaign of character assassination means the victims have already been half-ostracized from the human family in the eyes of others. Therefore, categorising these tropes as a form of violence underscores the need for proactive measures. Just as international law bans torture for the physical agony it causes, perhaps it should more forthrightly ban systematic group defamation for the cultural agony it inflicts. We must broaden our conception of harm to include the slow, relentless grinding down of a people's spirit, which is exactly what these libels achieve if left unchecked.

### 3.5. Applicability to the UK's Genocide Determination Process and International Human Rights Instruments

The UK has often been hesitant to legally designate non-lethal forms of persecution as part of genocide or crimes against humanity. However, libel-based persecution aligns with the UN's definition of incitement to genocide, which includes actions that create conditions for future violence. A reappraisal of libelous tropes within the UK's Genocide Determination Framework is both overdue and necessary, especially given their role in creating ideologies of elimination.

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<sup>19</sup> Meyer, I. H. "Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations." *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 674–697.

<sup>20</sup>If a foreign government or movement is saturating its airwaves and schools with diatribes about a minority's alleged sinister practices, the UK should hear alarm bells. It's far easier to pressure a regime spewing hate to change course *before* it turns into another Rwanda or Srebrenica than to pick up the pieces afterward. In practical terms, this means incorporating the tracking of hate propaganda into Britain's diplomatic assessments and intelligence-gathering on countries at risk. It could become an official criterion in deciding whether the UK labels a situation as a potential genocide or mass atrocity: is there fire beneath the smoke of violence in part because the fire was lit by propaganda?

On the home front, the UK is a signatory to international human rights instruments that commit it to combat hate speech and protect minorities. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, for instance, calls for prohibiting advocacy of national or religious hatred that incites discrimination or violence. The Genocide Convention obliges states to prevent and punish not just genocide but also the *incitement* of genocide. More recently, the UN has developed strategies on hate speech, acknowledging that vile conspiracy theories can be more than just misguided opinions – they can be drivers of real-world harm. Incorporating these commitments into domestic action doesn't mean Britain should criminalise every offensive remark. It does mean, however, that our legal toolkit for addressing hate crimes and extremist speech should explicitly include scenarios where someone is willfully spreading a known dangerous libel about a protected group. Existing laws like the Public Order Act already outlaw threatening or abusive communications targeting groups; these can be enforced and interpreted to cover classic libel tropes by name. Ultimately, aligning the UK's practices with international human rights standards will strengthen our voice globally. We cannot convincingly urge others to clamp down on hate-fueled libels if we haven't put our own house in order.

## IV. Inclusion of Multiple Targeted Minorities

### 4.1. Modern Cultural Tropes Targeting LGBTQ+ Communities

While the archetypal libels of old often targeted religious or ethnic minorities, the pattern of cultural libel has proven versatile enough to adapt to other communities – including those defined by sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQ+ individuals today face their own share of grotesque tropes and slanders. Chief among these is the accusation that gay men and transgender women are “grooming” children or undermining societal morals by stealth. This modern libel borrows age-old themes: it paints a picture of innocent youth under threat from a secretive, immoral minority. The echoes of past centuries are clear. Just as medieval peasants whispered that Jews performed dark rites on Christian children, some contemporary agitators shout that drag queens reading storybooks are part of a plot to corrupt children, or that a “gay agenda” seeks to infiltrate and subvert school curricula. The substance of these claims is as fantastical and

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<sup>20</sup> International Criminal Court Act 2001,” Wikipedia (last modified...), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_Criminal\\_Court\\_Act\\_2001](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Criminal_Court_Act_2001)



unfounded as the blood libels of yore, yet they have gained alarming traction in certain media outlets and online forums.

The real-world consequences for LGBTQ+ people are not theoretical. In places where these libels gain political currency, we see a rise in hate crimes: assaults on pride marchers, harassment of transgender individuals in public restrooms, even proposals of draconian laws banning discussion of homosexuality under the guise of “protecting children.” Russia’s so-called “gay propaganda” law, for instance, effectively institutionalised a libel – the notion that merely acknowledging LGBTQ+ existence is harmful to minors. In parts of the United States and Europe, vigilantes have shown up armed to events like drag queen story hours, driven by the delusion that they are saving children from some satanic plot. All this highlights a common thread with other cultural libels: they flourish by masquerading as righteous defence of the vulnerable, when in truth they are baseless attacks on an already vulnerable group. Recognising these modern anti-LGBTQ+ narratives as direct descendants of the same old hate is crucial. It allows society to draw on lessons from combating older prejudices – including legal tools and public education strategies – to push back against this newer front of bigotry.

## 4.2. The Ritual Murder Accusations against Roma and Travellers

Europe’s Roma and Traveller communities have long been vilified as the “other within,” enduring stereotypes that would be familiar to anyone studying anti-Semitism – with a twist of their own. A persistent paranoid fantasy in parts of Europe is that Roma abduct children or engage in clandestine crimes as part of their culture. It’s a trope that functions as a kind of *blood libel* without the religious veneer: the image of the sinister Gypsy kidnapper stealing away a child at twilight. This dark fairy tale has incited real vigilante violence. Even in recent years, rumors of an attempted child abduction by Roma have led furious mobs to attack Roma settlements in countries like Italy or Ukraine, only for investigations to later reveal no evidence beyond the age-old bias that “it must have been them.” The Traveller community in Britain similarly faces wild accusations – for example, that Traveller camps are hotbeds of criminal conspiracies or that “gypsies” collectively swindle the unwary as a lifestyle. These claims go well beyond any actual crime statistics; they are libels in the true sense, imputing fantastical criminal intent to an entire group based on prejudice.

Historically, the treatment of Roma bore striking similarities to the persecution of Jews. The Nazis targeted Roma for extermination citing many of the same dehumanising stereotypes – labeling them habitual criminals, carriers of disease, threats to racial purity. Post-war Europe has been slow to shed these prejudices. Often, authorities have been slow to condemn these outrageous allegations; in some cases officials even lent credence by launching fruitless investigations whenever a town’s gossip pointed at “Gypsies” for a local incident. The social function of this libel is, as ever, to divert attention from complex causes of crime or social problems and dump it conveniently at the feet of a despised minority. Combating this particular brand of libel requires not only strong policing of hate crimes, but also proactive community outreach – officials and civil society must visibly debunk the myths and hold accountable those who propagate or act on them. Roma and Travellers are among Europe’s most marginalised ethnic

groups; allowing old slanders about them to persist unchallenged perpetuates a cycle of marginalisation and violence that has no place in a modern rights-respecting society.<sup>21</sup>

### 4.3. Libels against African and Asian Minorities (e.g., Ebola-as-bioweapon)

In an interconnected world, one might think global understanding and multicultural exposure would inoculate us against the crudest forms of libel. Sadly, new variants of old slanders continue to emerge, targeting African and Asian communities worldwide. During the West African Ebola outbreak of 2014–2016, mistrust and fear bred conspiracy theories almost as fast as the virus spread. Mistrust during the crisis bred rumors that the virus was a Western bioweapon plot, while in Western countries panic about Ebola morphed into whispers that African immigrants were carriers who "wanted to infect us." Both versions revived the ancient trope of the outsider bringing plague. We saw a similar pattern with COVID-19: East Asian people across Europe and America woke up to find themselves blamed for a virus – spat upon, shunned, their businesses boycotted – as if they personally were in league with a grand Chinese conspiracy to unleash disease. That ugly logic, "they are poisoning us," could have been lifted straight from a medieval chronicle of the Black Death.

Other libels target African and Asian communities in overtly political ways. A pernicious claim in some Middle Eastern and African media held that HIV/AIDS was a Western bioweapon aimed at Africans – a falsehood originally planted by Soviet disinformation during the Cold War. This lie not only inflamed distrust of Western aid, but also discouraged some from seeking treatment (since even medicine was painted as part of the plot). Legally and morally, the world must treat these lies not as quirky local folklore but as sparks that can ignite mass hysteria and violence. An Ebola rumor might sound almost laughable in hindsight – until one recalls that aid workers were attacked and even killed by mobs who believed it. The stakes are life and death, and we ignore that reality at our peril.

### 4.4. Comparative Study of Narrative Construction and Legal Redress

Examining these varied libels side by side, a striking commonality emerges in how the narratives are constructed. Always, there is a clear dichotomy: a virtuous "us" versus a malevolent "them." The details differ – one story features poisoned wells, another a diseased blanket or a kidnapped child – but the architecture of the lie is remarkably consistent. The targeted group is accused of a transgression that is heinous and antisocial, something that offends the deepest values of the majority (sacrificing children, spreading death, violating purity). The accusation is often tied to a kernel of

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<sup>21</sup> Persecution of Roma (Gypsies) in Prewar Germany, 1933–1939," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, June 3, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/persecution-of-roma-gypsies-in-prewar-germany-1933-1939>.

timing or coincidence (“a child disappeared around their holiday, so it must be them”; “an outbreak began in their neighborhood, surely they’re behind it”). And importantly, the narrative resists fact-checking by playing on raw emotions. When fear and anger are provoked, rational rebuttals struggle to catch up. The psychology of libel is so universal that scholars of folklore and propaganda can often predict what form a new libel will take by looking at a society’s prevailing anxieties. Worried about economic collapse? Expect a libel about a minority hoarding wealth or jobs. Worried about national weakness? Rumors will arise about traitors within who sap the nation’s strength.

In terms of legal redress, the comparative picture is mixed but instructive. Some nations have belatedly realised they must outlaw certain kinds of group defamation and incitement. Germany, for instance, criminalizes Holocaust denial and *Volksverhetzung* (incitement of the populace), recognizing that allowing some falsehoods to fester unchecked can be fatal. Rwanda’s post-genocide government has strict laws against “genocide ideology” – a direct response to the libels and hate speech that fueled 1994’s killings. On the flip side, societies with a laissez-faire approach to hate speech often find themselves repeatedly caught off guard by violent outcomes. India has endured a spate of lynchings sparked by WhatsApp rumours about child kidnappers or cow slaughter – essentially modern libel-folklore traveling via smartphone – and only now is scrambling to adjust laws and tech policies to stem the bloodshed. The lesson is that robust legal frameworks, coupled with public education and early intervention, make a difference. They won’t eliminate deep-seated prejudices overnight, but they can raise the social and legal costs for anyone attempting to mainstream a libelous narrative. And when such narratives do slip through (as they inevitably will somewhere), having legal redress means victims have a path to justice and society has a mechanism to affirm, through courts or inquiries, that the libel was exactly that – a lie – and that those who spread or acted on it will be held accountable.

## V. Strategic Recommendations

### 5.1. Launch of an International Research Commission on Libel-Based Persecution

To confront a global problem, we need a global knowledge base. The UK should spearhead the creation of an International Research Commission on Libel-Based Persecution – a high-profile panel of historians, legal experts, sociologists, and survivors from various targeted communities. The mandate of this commission would be to study the phenomenon of cultural libels across different eras and regions, and to produce actionable insights for governments and civil society. This is not meant to be another slow-moving international talk shop, but rather a nimble, well-funded task force that can draw connections and issue early warnings. For example, if the commission notices a sudden uptick in a particular libel trope being circulated in a region (say, new rumours of child sacrifice targeting a minority in Country X), it could alert local governments and international bodies to take preemptive counter-measures. By comparing notes from medieval Europe to modern Asia, the commission would highlight

patterns: what propaganda techniques consistently precede violence, what counter-narratives have worked to defuse tensions, and how technology is changing the game.

Such a commission would ideally partner with existing institutions – from Holocaust memorial centers documenting anti-Semitic propaganda to universities researching online extremism. It could issue annual reports ranking the most dangerous libels in circulation and naming the worst offenders (including state actors) propagating them. Its aim is to make it impossible for the world to say “we didn’t see it coming” the next time a genocide or mass atrocity looms. By institutionalising the study of libel-based incitement, we also institutionalise responsibility. The UK’s leadership in launching this would send a powerful signal that we consider poisonous myths not as quaint local problems, but as international security threats deserving of research and resources on par with other transnational dangers.

## 5.2. Development of a Model Legal Brief for Governments and NGOs

Law is one of the most potent tools we have to combat hate, but many countries struggle with where to draw the line on free expression or how to prosecute something as nebulous as a conspiracy theory. To cut through hesitation, a coalition of legal experts should develop a *Model Legal Brief* and even draft legislation focused on cultural libels and incitement. The UK, with its robust legal tradition, is well placed to coordinate this effort alongside international partners. The model brief would lay out, in clear terms, how existing international law (from the Genocide Convention to human rights treaties) and comparative national laws can be applied to punish and prevent the spread of egregious libelous hate. It would provide precedent-rich arguments that prosecutors can use to go after, say, the publisher of a magazine that revives the blood libel, or the leader of a radical group circulating flyers that accuse a minority of ritual murder. Likewise, it would guide legislators in drafting laws that respect freedom of speech while carving out narrowly-defined exceptions for the worst, most dangerous forms of defamatory incitement.

Crucially, this model brief should be accessible not just to governments but also to NGOs and victimised communities. If a minority group feels law enforcement in their country isn’t taking a campaign of libel seriously, they could use the arguments in the model brief to apply pressure, or even bring a private legal action where possible. In essence, we’d be equipping people with a ready-made legal toolkit to challenge hate speech in courtrooms and legislative halls worldwide. By harmonizing these legal approaches internationally, hatemongers will have fewer safe havens. Today, an extremist broadcaster banned in one country can simply move to an online platform or a less-regulated jurisdiction and continue spewing lies. But if many countries adopt similar stances – guided by a common legal template – the noose tightens around those who trade in libels. They will find themselves pariahs not just in one locale, but globally, which is exactly as it should be.

### 5.3. Inclusion in School Curricula via Citizenship and Rights-Based Education

Education is our first line of defence against the ignorance that feeds hatred. We recommend a comprehensive initiative to incorporate the study of historical and modern libels into school curricula, particularly in courses on history, citizenship, or social studies. Imagine a history lesson that doesn't just mention the Holocaust in isolation, but traces how centuries of blood libel mythology laid the groundwork for genocide. Or a civics class discussion that draws parallels between witch-hunts of the past and conspiracy theories on the internet today. By exposing students to the pattern – showing them that society has repeatedly fallen for the same poisonous tricks – we can inoculate young minds against the allure of the next big lie. This isn't about a dry lecture on medieval history; it's about engaging students with case studies and personal stories. Survivors of hate-driven violence (whether Holocaust survivors, Rwandan genocide survivors, or individuals who lived through sectarian riots) can share how words and rumors changed their world. Such testimonials make the abstract concept of “hate speech” viscerally real to teenagers who might otherwise dismiss it as someone else's problem.

On a practical level, the UK can develop teaching materials, lesson plans, and multimedia resources and offer them to schools nationwide. Partnering with NGOs already active in educational outreach – for example, organisations that bring anti-bullying or Holocaust education programs to schools – can jump-start the effort. Over time, the goal is for terms like “blood libel” or “genocide propaganda” to be as familiar to students as “Magna Carta” or “Industrial Revolution.” When young people know the hallmarks of a libelous trope, they are far less likely to be duped by it. Additionally, part of this curriculum should focus on digital literacy: teaching students how to critically evaluate online information, how to recognize when an outrageous claim about a group lacks evidence, and why such claims so often signal an agenda of hate. Education for the next generation is perhaps the most powerful long-term investment we can make to ensure that the old cycle of demonise-persecute-destroy is finally broken.

### 5.4. Campaign to Recognise Cultural Libel Tropes as Hate Speech under UK Law

Laws are only as strong as the public consensus that backs them. To build support for treating cultural libels with zero tolerance, a national campaign should be launched to explicitly label these tropes as hate speech and push for their inclusion in official hate crime guidance. This campaign could be a joint venture of government agencies and civil society organisations, branded with a memorable slogan – something like “#StopTheOldLies” or “Hate ≠ Truth.” The goal is to cement in the public consciousness that accusing any community of age-old calumnies (like ritual murder, secret global conspiracies, or plague-spreading) isn't just *ridiculous*, it's dangerous and unacceptable in Britain. Police forces and the Crown Prosecution Service should simultaneously receive updated guidance: for instance, a directive that if a crime is motivated by one of



these libelous tropes, it must be flagged as a hate crime and pursued with the utmost seriousness. Too often in the past, authorities brushed off extremist rantings as “just talk” until it was too late. This campaign should change that mindset both within institutions and among the public.

Moreover, the campaign can highlight contemporary examples that hit home. It can call out, for example, the uptick in anti-Asian conspiracy theories during the pandemic and draw the line from those lies to the rise in hate crimes against Asian Britons. It can point to how anti-vaccine misinformation crossed into hate speech when it began blaming specific religious communities for the spread of COVID. By showcasing these links through ads, social media, and community events, the campaign makes the issue concrete rather than theoretical. Importantly, this must not be a partisan crusade. It should reach across political divides, enlisting voices from all major parties, faith leaders, celebrities, and influencers. Haters thrive when society is divided or apathetic – closing those gaps with a united front is key. If successful, the campaign will make the average citizen feel a gut-level revulsion for cultural libels similar to what they feel for racial slurs. People will be more likely to report such incidents, to intervene by saying “That’s not okay” when they hear these myths repeated, and to support strong legal action against offenders.

## 5.5. Partnership with International Legal Experts and UN Special Rapporteurs on Minority Rights

Hate and libel know no borders, and neither should our response. The UK should take the lead in convening a partnership at the international level, bringing together top legal minds and the United Nations’ human rights machinery to develop global standards against libelous hate speech. A practical step would be hosting a conference jointly with the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Rights (as well as the Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Expression, since the issue straddles all three areas). This conference would aim to produce a set of recommendations – perhaps even a UN General Assembly resolution – affirming that cultural libel tropes, when systematically deployed, constitute a form of hate speech that warrants strong condemnation and action by states. Such a high-level statement could empower more countries to update their laws or pursue offenders. It also offers moral support to embattled communities worldwide: knowing that the UN and legal experts are spotlighting the propaganda they face can be a lifeline for minority activists in places where they’re under siege.

International legal experts, including judges from human rights courts and veterans of war crimes tribunals, can contribute their experience to fine-tune definitions and thresholds. For example, they could help clarify at what point exactly a vile myth propagated online crosses from protected speech to illicit incitement – clarity that many countries would welcome as they struggle to balance free expression with protecting citizens from defamation and threats. By engaging UN Special Rapporteurs, we ensure the issue doesn’t fade after one event. These independent officials can incorporate the concern into their country visit assessments and annual reports, keeping up pressure on

states to act. Perhaps the most seldom-heard argument – which this partnership can amplify – is that protecting potential victims of libel-induced violence is not a secondary or “luxury” human rights issue; it is central to preventing atrocities and fulfilling the promise of “never again.” By formalizing that principle internationally, we bolster every nation’s resolve, including our own, to treat cultural libels as the seeds of poison they are and to respond accordingly, in concert with allies.

## VI. UK Policy Briefing: National Implementation Plan

### 6.1. Legal Recognition of Cultural Libels as Components of Hate Crimes

The first order of business on the home front is ensuring our laws explicitly recognize cultural libel for what it so often becomes: a precursor and component of hate crime. This doesn’t necessarily require a brand-new statute; often it’s about clarifying and enforcing what we have. The UK already has provisions against inciting racial or religious hatred, but we propose that the guidance underpinning these laws – such as Crown Prosecution Service guidelines and judicial sentencing directions – be updated to name common libel tropes as examples of aggravating factors. For instance, if someone is convicted of disseminating literature that claims a certain minority kidnaps children for ritual purposes, that should be explicitly cited as “demonstrating hostility based on religion or race,” which under our system triggers a harsher sentence. Furthermore, Parliament could consider amending the Public Order Act to include an offence of gross group defamation – a high-threshold provision capturing only the most extreme, dangerous false allegations against a group (for example, reviving the blood libel or accusing an entire community of being terrorists with no evidence). This would fill a gap between mild hate speech and direct incitement: a legal tool to go after those who sow the kind of poisonous seeds that, while not a direct call to violence, almost inevitably bear violent fruit.

Another important legal avenue is in civil law. Currently, UK defamation law makes it hard for large groups to sue for libel – typically only individuals or companies can. We should explore mechanisms for communal redress. Perhaps an Ombudsman or a designated public advocate for targeted communities could be empowered to bring a civil case on behalf of a group when a particularly egregious libel is published. Even if the goal isn’t heavy damages, a civil judgment officially declaring a claim false and defamatory has powerful value: it puts a societal stamp on the truth and provides a form of vindication for the community. In summary, the UK’s legal framework should leave no ambiguity: if you deliberately spread pernicious falsehoods about a protected group, you will face consequences. Making that stance crystal clear will itself act as a deterrent to the casual bigot and will isolate the more determined extremists.

### 6.2. Use of Counter-Extremism Frameworks to Monitor Libel Tropes

Britain's counter-extremism strategies, including the Prevent programme and the work of intelligence agencies, need to explicitly incorporate the monitoring of libelous hate narratives as key indicators of emerging threats. We have learned that terrorism can sprout from conspiracy theories – consider how the “great replacement” myth (claiming Muslims will overrun Europe) has fueled white supremacist violence, or how QAnon's wild tales led a man to attempt an armed “rescue” of fictitious children in a U.S. pizzeria. Our security apparatus should therefore treat spurts of libelous propaganda as flashing warning signs. This means investing in better tools and personnel for digital surveillance of hate content (within the bounds of law), and linking those efforts with community policing. If, say, an online forum popular in the UK starts buzzing about an old trope – “Group X is poisoning our food” – that intel should swiftly reach local police and community leaders where Group X lives, so they can be on alert for any uptick in tension or hate incidents.

The Prevent duty, which involves schools, healthcare providers, and community authorities noticing signs of radicalisation, should be updated with training to recognize when someone is parroting telltale libel tropes. If a teenager starts ranting that a certain minority is “evil” or “unclean” in language lifted straight from extremist sites, that's a red flag they're being indoctrinated. Early intervention at that stage – through education or counseling – could pull them back from the brink before they commit a hate crime. The Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE) could also produce a dedicated report on the role of conspiracy myths in driving extremist behavior. By integrating this focus, we ensure counter-extremism isn't just about tracking who's building a bomb or plotting an attack, but also about who is building the hateful worldview that *leads* to such violence. It's a holistic approach: stop the would-be attacker not only by monitoring their actions but by intercepting the toxic ideas that set them on the path.

### 6.3. Parliamentary Inquiry into Libel Propagation in Public Institutions

Parliament should not shy away from turning the spotlight inward. A dedicated inquiry – perhaps by the Home Affairs Select Committee or a special cross-party commission – ought to examine whether cultural libels are propagating, even subtly, within our own public institutions and discourse. This isn't to suggest the UK government or mainstream bodies are actively spreading hate (far from it), but it's an exercise in due diligence and public reassurance. The inquiry could gather evidence on questions like: Have any UK-funded schools or institutions (including certain faith schools) been caught teaching or endorsing prejudiced myths about groups? Do our public broadcasters and media regulators have sufficient safeguards against airing covert libelous content (for instance, a documentary that insinuates a minority's “dangerous influence” without evidence)? Are law enforcement and social services adequately trained to distinguish legitimate concerns from those whipped up by baseless rumors? The inquiry would take testimony from minority representatives about any libel-driven discrimination they've experienced in dealing with state agencies – e.g., a pattern of social workers suspecting Roma parents without cause due to stereotypes, or doctors not taking the pain of traveller patients seriously due to bias.

By publicly airing these issues, Parliament can help cleanse any lingering traces of institutional bias and build trust with minority communities. It can also generate recommendations that outlive the inquiry itself. For example, if gaps are found – say, school inspectors not being alert to extremist literature in a private school’s library – the inquiry report can propose concrete fixes (updated training, surprise audits, etc.). A parliamentary inquiry has the added benefit of raising the profile of the issue. Hearings make headlines. Imagine senior officials being questioned on television about what they are doing to combat anti-Muslim conspiracies or anti-Semitic tropes in their departments – it sends a message that this is taken seriously at the highest levels. And it encourages every institution, from the NHS to the Army to local councils, to self-scrutinize: Are we inadvertently letting any staff or materials promote a cultural libel? If so, how do we correct it? This reflective process, catalysed by Parliament, ensures the public sector leads by example in condemning libelous hate.

## 6.4. Engagement with Ofcom, Education Standards Bodies, and Social Media Regulators

A multi-pronged engagement with key regulatory bodies is essential to clamp down on the spread of libel tropes. Ofcom, as the regulator for communications and broadcasting, should be encouraged and empowered to take swift action against any broadcaster that traffics in these age-old slanders. The UK’s airwaves and TV channels must not become a megaphone for imported hate. If a foreign satellite channel or an online streamer starts pushing content that, say, revives the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or depicts refugees as vermin, Ofcom should have the teeth to issue fines, demand retractions, or revoke licenses as needed. We know Ofcom *can* act – it has sanctioned channels for extremist content before – but a clear directive from policymakers highlighting libelous tropes as a priority will sharpen its resolve and criteria. Likewise, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and related bodies need to double down on guidance to schools about acceptable materials and curricula. In practice, this could mean periodic reviews of textbooks, including those used in supplementary religious classes or private schools, to ensure they contain no passages that malign a particular group with false generalisations. Any school found peddling prejudice (even indirectly, via unvetted guest speakers or outdated library books) should be required to remedy it post-haste or face sanction.

Then there is the digital wild west – social media. The newly enacted Online Safety regime in the UK is a chance to press tech companies to identify and squelch content that constitutes dangerous libel against groups. Government can work with the regulator (likely Ofcom for online platforms under the new law) to define “priority harmful content” to include orchestrated hate conspiracies. Social media firms, in turn, will need robust systems to detect when a viral post crosses into that territory. This isn’t a trivial demand: it marks the line between tolerating free expression of unpopular opinions and stopping the targeted vilification of a people through demonstrable lies. One practical approach is a rapid-response channel between community watchdog groups (who often spot hate trends first) and platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. If an NGO flags that “there’s a surge of posts claiming Muslims are behind a secret plot to destroy

Christianity” – a classic nonsense narrative – the platform’s moderators should treat it as seriously as they would a terrorist recruitment video or child exploitation content. In short, regulators and companies alike must be primed to treat certain words as weapons. Just as we recognize that a tweet inciting violence cannot be shrugged off as harmless, nor should a tweet inciting hatred via grotesque falsehood be ignored.

## 6.5. Funding for Civil Society Monitoring and Public Awareness Campaigns

Finally, the government should put its money where its mouth is. Combating cultural libel tropes will require sustained on-the-ground effort, and much of that work is best done by civil society organisations who are already experts in this arena. Funding streams – whether through a dedicated Hate Crime Prevention fund or existing community cohesion grants – should be directed toward initiatives that monitor, report, and educate about libelous hate speech. For instance, organisations that track antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Roma bias, or homophobia could receive support to expand their monitoring into the darker corners of the internet where these libels often incubate. They can then share real-time intelligence with authorities and the public. Transparency is key: publishing regular “hate propaganda watch” bulletins would keep the issue in the public eye and put pressure on perpetrators who prefer to lurk in the shadows.

Public awareness campaigns, too, deserve investment. Imagine a series of punchy online videos that debunk common conspiracy myths – one might dispel the notion that immigrants get lavish free benefits, another might refute a wild claim about a “satanic plot” in schools. Using facts and a dash of humor, such content can rob these libels of their power before they spread. Government backing can lend such campaigns greater reach, though they should be crafted with input from the communities concerned to ensure the tone hits the mark. Additionally, supporting grassroots inter-community dialogues can work wonders. Funding local forums where, say, Jewish and Muslim neighbors, or Roma and non-Roma residents, come together to discuss and dispel myths can humanize groups that tabloid lies have demonized. Lastly, providing resources for victims – whether a legal fund to help sue egregious purveyors of libel, or psychological support for those traumatized by being targeted – closes the circle of protection. It shows that from top-down policy to bottom-up healing, the UK is committed to draining the poison of cultural libel from our national life.

*By implementing this comprehensive suite of recommendations – from international action down to local initiatives – Britain can position itself as a world leader in confronting one of the oldest, most insidious catalysts of human rights abuses. It is an ambitious agenda, but nothing less will do if we are to relegate these hateful myths to the history books where they belong. The lies may be ancient, but our response can be cutting-edge and unyielding, ensuring that truth and justice triumph over paranoia and hatred.*



## VII. Conclusion

This proposal advances an actionable and principled approach to addressing a form of hatred that has endured for centuries. By reframing libel-based tropes and their modern iterations as crimes against humanity, this initiative seeks to close the gap between historical injustice and contemporary accountability. It offers a framework for governments, civil societies, and international institutions to confront not only antisemitism but the broader phenomenon of libel-based persecution that endangers all vulnerable communities, with particular attention to the urgent targeting of LGBTQ+ individuals and groups.

What is being called for is not merely legal precision or rhetorical clarity, but moral courage — the willingness to name as criminal what too often passes as satire, tradition, or dissent. The libels of the past were written in blood and fire; today, they are retweeted, repackaged, and rebroadcast under the guise of cultural critique. This is not progress but regression in a digital cloak.

If we are to meet this moment with the seriousness it demands, then we must elevate the discussion from isolated incidents of hate to the architecture that sustains them. These tropes are not anomalies but pillars of a narrative designed to vilify, exclude, and ultimately erase. To dismantle them is to take a meaningful step toward justice, not only for Jews, LGBTQ+ individuals, Roma, and other historically maligned groups, but for the very concept of truth in a pluralistic society.

This proposal, then, is both a reckoning and a roadmap — a call to ensure that the poisonous power of libel is not merely deplored in retrospect but defeated in our time. Let us legislate not only for the protection of minorities but for the dignity of the majority that claims to stand for decency, inclusion, and historical rectitude. Let silence no longer be complicity, and let cultural lies no longer be excused as tradition. The world has tolerated the myth; it is time to confront its consequences.