



The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town

By Helmut Walser Smith

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One of the most dramatic explorations of a German town in the grip of anti-Semitic passion ever written.

In 1900, in a small Prussian town, a young boy was found murdered, his body dismembered, the blood drained from his limbs. The Christians of the town quickly rose up in violent riots to accuse the Jews of ritual murder?the infamous blood-libel charge that has haunted Jews for centuries. In an absorbing narrative, Helmut Walser Smith reconstructs the murder and the ensuing storm of anti-Semitism that engulfed this otherwise peaceful town. Offering an instructive examination of hatred, bigotry, and mass hysteria, *The Butcher's Tale* is a modern parable that will be a classic for years to come.

Winner of the Fraenkel Award and a *Los Angeles Times* Best Book of 2002.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Two residents out for a stroll in Konitz, Germany, in March 1900, discovered a carefully tied package in a nearby lake. Its contents, the upper torso of a missing youth, set off a chain of events that brought national attention to an unremarkable village on the eastern edge of the Austro-Prussian empire. After weeks in which no suspect or motive was offered, the vacuum began to fill with rumor; the flames were fanned by the arrival on the scene of anti-Semitic journalists, and soon most of Konitz was convinced that the death was a Jewish ritual murder. A police inspector from Berlin suspected the town's Christian butcher; he and his allies in turn accused the Jewish butcher. Mobs began a series of violent acts against Konitz's Jews, and the Prussian army was called in to quell the violence. Smith, who teaches German history at Vanderbilt, does a masterful job exploring the history of the blood libel (the charge that Jews commit ritual murder of Christian children), as well as of community and how people band together to bring about great good or in the case of Konitz genuine evil. Yet, Smith argues that Konitz should be seen as a case study of "process," of how different forces came together to make "latent anti-Semitism manifest," causing peaceful townspeople to turn on their neighbors. Drawing on a remarkably detailed documentary record, Smith analyzes social, class and other factors in the violence the role of the middle vs. working classes, Protestants vs. Catholics and in an original piece of analysis, shows how the townspeople's response was itself a form of ritual murder. Although classed by the publisher as history/Judaica, this powerful volume will also appeal to true-crime readers and anyone interested in the dynamics that can turn a peaceful community into a place of hatred and violence. Map, illus. not seen by PW.

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From Library Journal

The invocation of the term ritual murder seems an echo of a distant, barbaric past, the stuff of superstition and wild fancy. Yet in eastern Germany, at a time characterized by industrialization and scientific advancement, such barbaric echoes resounded all too often. In this book, Smith (German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914) explores the murder of young Ernst Winter in the West Prussian town of Konitz on March 11, 1900. Though the authorities suspected the Christian butcher, Gustav Hoffmann, the Christian townspeople suspected a Jewish conspiracy to kill Winter and acquire his Christian blood for their Passover matzo. It is remarkable in this pre-Hitlerian Germany that the government actually protected Konitz's Jews from the angry rioters and refused to entertain the absurd idea of ritual murder. Smith has painstakingly explored the motives of all key actors in this drama. Text and bibliography are both copiously annotated. Imbued with an appropriately eerie atmosphere, this is a murder mystery with no solution, a striking re-creation of a gruesome and sad episode. Recommended for public and academic libraries. Michael F. Russo, Louisiana State Univ. Lib., Baton Rouge

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From [Booklist](#)

The supposed ritual murder of a gentile child by Jews to consecrate the Passover matzo has been a blood libel used to spark anti-Semitic outrages for centuries. Smith, associate professor of German history at Vanderbilt University, has chronicled an episode that occurred in 1900 in the relatively enlightened East Prussian town of Konitz. Here, approximately 300 Jews, most of them comfortable with their German nationality, lived in a relatively tranquil coexistence with their gentile neighbors in a town of 10,000. When the remains of a murdered, dismembered boy was discovered, the facade was dropped. Mobs screamed for revenge against the Jews, Jews were attacked, and the army was called in to restore order. The real

perpetrator of the murder was never found, although Smith provides compelling evidence that suggests the culprit. This is a disturbing and often downright frightening examination of how easily "civilized" societies can succumb to their prejudices and cross over into hysterical barbarism. *Jay Freeman*

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Users Review

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Alan Castorena:

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Edward Cottrell:

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