IX. Becoming a Bourgeois Killer: Peter Kürten, the Vampire of Düsseldorf

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Thinking biographically about a mass murderer presents its challenges, especially in the case of Peter Kürten (1883–1931). Kürten was convicted in Düsseldorf on 22 April 1931 on nine counts of murder and seven counts of attempted murder and thereafter executed by guillotine. A wholly unsympathetic character, extreme even among criminals, he killed indiscriminately, attacking young and old, male and female, using whatever weapon was to hand—a hammer, a knife, scissors. He also carried out theft and arson and may have tortured animals. It is almost certain that he committed more crimes, although some of his confessed transgressions may not have happened. He was, beyond his other failings, something of a liar. To top things off, Auguste Scharf, Kürten's spouse, had been convicted of murder before they met. In every way, this man was unusual. So why study him?

An expressly biographical look at Kürten highlights problems in the interpretive frames that scholars and amateur researchers have applied to him. Currently, the literature sees him as an archetypal 'Weimar killer', associating him with other notorious murderers from the era, such as Fritz Haarmann (1879–1925), Carl Grossmann (1863–1922), Friedrich Schumann (1893–1921) and Karl Denke (1860–1924). To frame any theme in German history within the Weimar Republic invariably connotes deviancy, decadence and doom. However, a brief consideration of the dates above indicates that neither Kürten nor the people associated with him were products of Weimar; the police just caught up with them then. In each case, we are dealing with a man of the empire that existed between 1871 and 1919, with two perpetrators born before its founding.

[47] See, for example, G. S. Williamson, 'Tales of Love and Folly: An Introduction to August von Kotzebue's *Mein Umgang mit dem schönen Geschlecht*', *Goethe Yearbook*, 27 (2020), pp. 257–69.

I reframe the problem via two killers whom contemporary writers excluded from the Weimar club, Karl Hopf (1863–1914) and Adolf Seefeldt (1870–1936). Both men were children of the Wilhelmine period, but each was punished by a different political regime, with the former executed by the German Empire and the latter by the Third Reich. And yet, despite hailing from the same historical period as the other men involved, these two are absent from the literature that deals with those criminals. Consider in this respect that Richard Evans's *Rituals of Retribution: Capital Punishment in Germany, 1600–1987*, which covers Kürten in its discussion of crime and punishment in the 1920s, never mentions either Hopf or Seefeldt in other sections, let alone associates them with the famous group.[48] Overall, one is left with the impression that the regime that executed the criminal determines the historical frame.

Thinking biographically about Kürten means rooting him in the empire that formed him rather than the republic that executed him. Two biographies of Kürten have appeared in the past fifty years. Both place more emphasis on understanding Kürten's crimes in the 1920s than on working outside the Weimar frame.[49] Hence, these two books present Kürten's youth and early adulthood as mere prequels to all the killing. In the end, the fascination with twentieth-century German politics has severed this individual killer from the contexts that shaped him.

A biographical approach to Kürten and other famous murderers of the era must also recognize that Weimar culture overdetermines our views. I offer two examples. First, Theodor Lessing's *Haarmann. Die Geschichte eines Werwolfs* (Haarmann: The History of a Werewolf), which appeared in 1925, deals with mass murderer Fritz Haarmann's sensational trial but has been incorporated into Kürten's memory by the scholarship on 'Weimar Killers'.[50] With Germany's political decline having, ultimately, yielded Lessing's murder by Nazi sympathizers in August 1933, it has been difficult for subsequent writers to avoid associating serial murder in the 1920s with the Third Reich's horrors. Second, and more broadly perhaps, there is Fritz Lang's movie 'M', which is set in Kürten's Düsseldorf, although the killer in the movie, Hans Beckert, is a composite of criminals. Given that Lang's movie appeared the same year as Kürten was executed and that Lang fled Nazi Germany, it is natural that a sense of decline permeates contemporary analyses of Kürten's life.

The issue, however, is not to avoid Weimar, since so many of the relevant crimes were committed in the 1920s, but to avoid understanding Kürten's trajectory through Weimar's lenses. From a biographical perspective, Kürten's key experiences all occurred under the kaiser, as he not only grew up in extreme poverty but also effectively spent the years between 1903 and 1921 in state custody, with brief periods of freedom always ending in another arrest and conviction. When he was finally released from prison in 1921, having missed the entire First World War because he was incarcerated, only by virtue of Germany's recent political upheaval could he become a Weimar-era criminal.

This is not to say that considering Kürten's life tells us nothing about the 1920s. In fact, it reveals how much had changed during the years that Kürten did hard time. One

[48] R. J. Evans, *Rituals of Retribution: Capital Punishment in Germany, 1600–1987* (Oxford, 1996).

[49] E. Lenk and R. Kaever, *Leben und Wirken des Peter Kürten, genannt der Vampir von Düsseldorf* (Munich, 1974); P. Hanno, *Der Würger von Düsseldorf: Leben und Taten des Serienmörders Peter Kürten* (Erfurt, 2013).

[50] T. Lessing, *Haarmann: die Geschichte eines Werwolfs* (Berlin, 1925).

outcome of Düsseldorf's role in German industrialization was demographic growth: in 1895, just before Kürten went to prison, the city had about 175,000 residents; by 1925, the year he moved to Düsseldorf with his ex-con spouse, the number was just over 430,000. Moreover, like many German cities, Düsseldorf had renovated old public spaces and produced new ones, including the Castle Garden and the promenade along the Rhine, two areas to which Kürten took his victims.

Düsseldorf's growth from 1880 to 1920 is the essential backdrop to Kürten's crimes, since by 1925 the city was so large that it afforded him complete anonymity. While Scharf was working late as a cook, her husband went in search of victims. He did not always kill women, but his female victims illustrate another overlooked theme. Reports from Kürten's surviving victims suggest that his modus operandi was that of a respectable citizen, a *Bürger*. During the early stages of any encounter, he would follow the proper forms, chatting up a woman and contriving to show her a document that identified him as ten years younger than he was and as having a good job. He would invite the woman out for a meal, a coffee or a beer, which was easily done since the city boasted numerous eating and drinking establishments. Later, the two would walk through the park or along the Rhine, just one couple out on the town. According to Kürten, he then directed these strolls to an isolated area where there was heavy petting or sexual intercourse, at which point he would try to strangle his partner. Regardless of whether his victim had died, he would escape the scene. Since he looked so ordinary, no one could describe him to the police.

To foreground Kürten's life before he committed his infamous crimes is to reframe the issue of decadence. The literature has overlooked an important change in Kürten's behaviour. Between 1921 and 1925 he learned to mimic the *Bürger*'s practices. After moving to Düsseldorf, he found employment in construction and manufacturing, while Scharf worked in hospitality. At this time, he became the picture of respectability, at least to his neighbours, dressing neatly and shaving carefully. He also cared ostentatiously for his wife, whom he would not allow to walk to or from work by herself. No one noticed that Kürten was, in effect, out on the town hunting human beings, because he had internalized all the proper social codes. The decadence that underlay Kürten's antisocial behaviour was, if anything, imperial, since his nice clothing and proper manners masked the violent impulses that pertained so fundamentally to a bygone regime.

I conclude by suggesting that thinking biographically offers a way to play with periodizations based on politics by overlaying them with social-historical developments that shaped individual lives. More work remains to be done, of course. At the very least, I hope to have shown that a biography of Kürten reveals the concept 'Weimar Killer' to be distorting and best avoided, no matter how often since the Weimar era people have said otherwise.