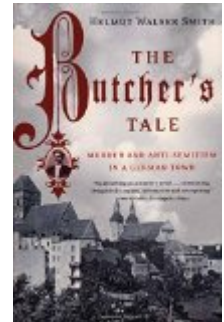


Helmut Walser Smith. *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town.* New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002. 270 pp. \$25.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-393-05098-1.



Reviewed by Richard S. Levy

Published on H-Antisemitism (December, 2002)

The sensational murder of a German high school student in March 1901 is the "tale" that allows Helmut Walser Smith to elucidate the ancient and modern historical forces that turned this grisly crime into an emblematic event. He clearly relishes telling the story, sparing us no detail of the dismemberment and redistribution of the victim's body parts all over the town of Konitz, West Prussia. But Smith is not interested in rehearsing an act of senseless violence. On the contrary, his purpose, admirably executed in this elegant study, is to make sense out of the affair.

The case immediately assumed the form of a ritual murder accusation against several Jews, foremost among them one of the town's kosher butchers. The "blood libel" that first emerged in the twelfth century maintained that Jews killed Christian children in order to use their blood for religiously prescribed purposes. Despite the rejection of the charges by secular and high Church authorities, the Christian masses responded repeatedly to the myth, often with murderous attacks on Jews. Though born in the Middle Ages, the charge of ritual murder was never long absent in one

part of the world or another; modern versions of the fantasy, often invested with a sexual subtext, were common fare for antisemitic newspaper readers. Even the more fastidious could consult learned books by theologians, earnestly discussing the evidence for and against Jews as ritual murderers. Some of the cases actually went to trial, and some led to murder convictions (although not of the "ritual" variety).

In the book's longest chapter, Smith lays out this context in extended historical perspective. But his analysis of the immediate milieu for what proved to be the most extreme episode of antisemitic violence in the imperial era is what makes this work important, convincing, and impressive. He points out that the ingredients--antisemitism, nationalism, racism, private malice--existed in many other locales without resulting in pogroms. The convergence of these forces in and around Konitz, however, produced three waves of violence, with no loss of life, but with extensive property damage and an unusual degree of lawlessness. Whether ritualized ceremonies of humiliation and exclusion, rather than murder, would

have satisfied the mob is difficult to know for certain. Smith tends to see the violence as essentially exclusionary. I think it more likely that only the presence of Prussian troops prevented the terrorization of Jews from developing into something potentially far more deadly.

How did the crime lead to this rare occurrence of mob violence in the *Kaiserreich*? Surely, the persistence of the blood libel and a cluster of other anti-Jewish stereotypes provides an explanation for why suspicion fell rather too easily upon the Jews of Konitz. Smith's meticulous research shows how feelings of mistrust continually escalated, until they achieved a broadly based certainty of Jewish guilt and then issued in violence. Local relationships proved crucial here. Many of those who gave steadily more detailed testimony against Jews worked for or in Jewish households. Personal malevolence, class conflict, and professional competition can account for some of this, but not all. A more modern sort of organized political antisemitism also played a significant role. Smith establishes a connection between antisemitic journalists, who arrived from Berlin once the case began to unfold, and the stirring up of popular passions. The press kept the pot boiling by fabricating evidence, breathlessly reporting every new revelation, validating the most dubious witnesses, and contributing all the while to the darkest fears of the population.

Smith is careful not to dismiss the sincerity of the mob. True, there were several participants in the affair who had ulterior motives of one kind or another, and whose testimonies were clearly and consciously deceitful, but a great many others utterly believed their own lies. "By this time, the consensus against the Jews--based on superstitions, rumors, false testimony, and biased reporting--had become an article of faith, and accusations an act of allegiance to a community that no longer included Jews. Denunciations were then not only safe but even dutiful..." (p. 156). Smith calls upon "distorted memory," "reality of illusory

memories," "retroactive hallucination," and "source misattribution" to explain the wide-scale belief and participation in the denunciations. The cumulative effects of this dynamic proved difficult to contain for sober German officials, who for the most part behaved responsibly. The mayor, judicial officers, regional administrator, Prussian soldiers, and police investigators from Berlin never lost their heads, and ultimately they prevailed in the restoration of order and the meting out of justice to rioters.

But there is very little to feel good about in this story. Even the victory of the forces of order may have had unforeseen negative consequences. German Jews were certainly disturbed to see a revival of "medieval madness" at the dawn of the twentieth century, but they could reassure themselves, on the strength of the events in Konitz, that the state would protect their lives, rights, and property, never dreaming that a future German state would administrate the destruction of all three. Konitz also revived the failing antisemitic political movement or at least set it on a more dangerous path of development. Their parliamentary fortunes in decline, the antisemites learned valuable lessons about the uses of violence, the ways it could be engendered, and then exploited. A new spirit of radicalism is evident in their Konitz agitation. Perhaps carried away by the passions of the mob, which they took as an exhilarating affirmation of their own Jew-hatred, they began to advocate measures far more radical than they had ever dared before. The objectivity of the judiciary, the competence of the police, the honesty of elected officials--all these were openly sneered at. If the Jews escaped punishment for this atrocious murder, perhaps, it was because they had used their riches to suborn German public servants. If the laws could not protect German children, then the "system" itself was at fault. Until this time, mainstream antisemites had contented themselves with calls for conventional legislative remedies, designed to reduce or eliminate Jewish influence on public life. After Konitz, talk

of violent self-defense, the extra-legal expropriation of "ritual murderers," and the need for a "revolution of German values" began to invade the antisemitic press and pamphlet literature. The process of delegitimizing German institutions that became the hallmark of the Weimar era was already discernible in the decade before the First World War.

Smith tells this story and examines its meaning with great sensitivity. Jews, guiltless of the murder, had their lives ruined and hopes dashed. They experienced firsthand the "fragility of individual human bonds," finding that neighbors had become strangers. But Konitz itself was also changed for the worse by the "Butcher's Tale." The breakdown in communal solidarity was never repaired. Its complete collapse awaited the Third Reich.

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Citation: Richard S. Levy. Review of Smith, Helmut Walser. *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town*. H-Antisemitism, H-Net Reviews. December, 2002.

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