

Chapter 7

**PROSTITUTES, RESPECTABLE WOMEN,
AND WOMEN FROM “OUTSIDE”**

The Carl Grossmann Sexual Murder Case in Postwar Berlin

Sace Elder



Few of Weimar Germany's notorious criminals epitomize the sexual and moral decadence often associated with the period better than the “sexual murderer” Karl (who went by Carl) Friedrich Wilhelm Grossmann. Known popularly as the Blue Beard or the Beast of the Silesian train station district of Berlin, Grossmann won infamy in August 1921, when he was discovered in his one-room apartment in one of the poorest of Berlin's proletarian districts, standing blood-soaked over the lifeless body of young Marie Nitsche. After many weeks of interrogation, Grossmann admitted to the murders of two other women. Officials, however, became convinced that he was in fact responsible for the violent deaths of many more women, some of whom had never been identified.¹ The most horrifying aspect of the murders was the brutal dismemberment of the bodies, which had been tossed into the canals and channels of eastern Berlin. Grossmann's motive, officials and medical examiners believed, had been sexual: Grossmann was, they argued, a classic sexual murderer who achieved sexual satisfaction through killing his victim during sexual intercourse. Like the period's other notorious sexual predators, Fritz Haarmann and Peter Kürten, Grossmann's story has become iconic as a symbol of the criminality and gender anxiety of the 1920s. The Grossmann case in particular provided a set of visual themes for artists such as George Grosz and Otto Dix. Scholarly literature on the subject of sexual violence in Weimar culture has demonstrated the prevalence of representations of violated female bodies in avant-garde art and literature and has suggested that the images of mutilated breasts, ripped wombs, and slashed vaginas were indicative of a

Notes from this chapter begin on page 202.

Conclusion

The public narratives constructed to explain Grossmann's crimes offered no clear villains, victims, or heroes and diverged on several key points. Grossmann was either a cunning scoundrel clever enough to evade police or an imbecile with no control over his baser instincts. His victims were either hapless innocents or depraved women. Their milieu was either a community of virtuous citizens or an assembly of apathetic and callous denizens of iniquity. In sum, the press reporting on the Grossmann case revealed a tension between two narrative themes. In one, the killer was a faceless psychopath, whose predatory activities were made possible by the anonymity of the city, which hid both his identity and those of his victims. Only with the watchfulness of attentive citizens cooperating with the authorities was such an urban monster brought to justice. In the other version of the story, the killer was a product of his milieu, which existed on the social and moral margins of the city. The criminality of the milieu thus explained the depravity of the criminal, the fate of his victims, and the inattention of his community. Neither version bore much resemblance to the social reality in which the crimes took place.

The Grossmann case touched a variety of raw nerves in postwar Berlin. The elusiveness of the victim's identities was a testament to the anonymity of city life and the inadequacy of bureaucratic attempts to police the movements of individuals in the confusion of postwar demobilization. It was especially disturbing for lower-class citizens who had lost track of loved ones in the rural-urban migration that followed the war. For left-liberal observers, the case was a reminder that the poverty and class divisions that urbanization had brought about had not disappeared but been exacerbated by the war. For conservative observers, Grossmann's crimes brought to light the immorality and criminality that lurked in Berlin's marginal neighborhoods.

Public narratives of the Grossmann case did not, then, make the city "legible," but imposed particular identities on the perpetrator and his victims: social and moral identities that served to make sense of the social and gender relations of the immediate postwar years. The experiences of the witnesses and victims as well as the public narratives that were told about them suggest that criminal stories were a powerful tool for re-stabilizing prewar gender relations in the postwar period.

Notes

This chapter, written especially for this volume, draws on material from the author's *Murder Scenes: Normality, Deviance, and Criminal Violence in Weimar Berlin* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010). Research for the article was supported by the Berlin Program for Research in the Humanities of the Freie Universität Berlin and the Social Science Research Council.

1. The exact number of Grossmann's victims is unknown. Although he was (and is) widely rumored to have killed fifty, police in 1921 hoped to pin as many as twenty-seven on Grossmann, but a more conservative number of six was mentioned in an undated police report (Landesarchiv Berlin (hereafter: LAB) A Rep. 358-01 Generalstaatsanwaltschaft bei dem Landgericht Berlin 1919–1933, Nr. 1522, Bd. 1 (Reel 741), Bl. 60–66.
2. Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, 1995); Beth Irwin Lewis, "Lustmord: Inside the Windows of the Metropolis," in Charles W. Haxthausen and Heidrun Suhr, eds., *Berlin: Culture and Metropolis* (Minneapolis and Oxford, 1990), 111–140; Martin Lindner, "Der Mythos 'Lustmord.' Serienmörder in der deutschen Literatur, dem Film und der bildenden Kunst zwischen 1892 und 1932," in Joachim Linder et al., eds., *Verbrechen-Justiz-Medien. Konstellationen in Deutschland von 1900 bis zur Gegenwart* (Tübingen, 1999), 273–305; Sabine Smith, *Sexual Violence in German Culture: Rereading and Rewriting the Tradition* (New York and Frankfurt/Main, 1998). On sexual violence and sexual crimes in Imperial Germany, see Tanja Hommen, *Sittlichkeitsverbrechen: Sexuelle Gewalt im Kaiserreich* (Frankfurt/Main and New York, 1998).
3. For recent retellings of the Grossmann case intended for a popular audience, see Kathrin Kompisch and Frank Otto, *Bestien des Boulevards: Die Deutschen und ihre Serienmörder* (Leipzig, 2003), 58–76; Jan Feustel, *Raub und Mord im Kiez. Historische Friedrichshainer Kriminalfälle. Begleitmaterial zur Ausstellung* (Berlin, 1996); Horst Bosetzky, *Die Bestie vom Schlesischen Bahnhof* (Berlin, 2005).
4. Kerstin Brückweh, *Mordlust: Serienmorde, Gewalt und Emotionen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/Main and New York, 2006), 14. Translation mine. Brückweh offers an analysis of four serial murder cases involving male perpetrators and male victims: Fritz Haarmann, Adolf Seefeld, Erwin Hagedorn, and Jürgen Bartsch.
5. *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* (BLA), n. 412, 1. September 1921.
6. Robert Heindl, *Der Berufsverbrecher. Ein Beitrag zur Strafrechtsreform* (Berlin, 1926), 141.
7. Magnus Hirschfeld, *Geschlecht und Verbrechen* (Leipzig, 1930), 209–211.
8. Curt Elwenspoek, *Mord und Totschlag: "Polizei greift ein!" So kämpft die Kriminalpolizei!* (Stuttgart, 1930), 16–18.
9. On the historicizing of narratives of sexual violence, see Judith R. Walkowitz, "Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence," *Feminist Studies* 8, 3 (1982), 541–574.
10. Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin, 1900* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1996), 59, 83–86.
11. That the First World War had disrupted prewar marital and family relations and gender roles more generally is clear. What is less clear is whether those prewar gender relations were reconstituted or altered. A provocative if inconclusive essay in this regard is Elisabeth Domansky, "Militarization and Reproduction in World War I Germany," in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930*, Geoff Eley, ed. (Ann Arbor, 1997), 427–463. For a tentative revision of the view that Weimar was characterized by gender anxiety see Birthe Kundrus, "The First World War and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Weimar Republic," in Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Oxford and New York, 2002), 159–179.
12. Hans Ostwald, *Das Berliner Dirnentum*, Hans Ostwald, ed., vol. 6, *Großstadtdokumente* (Berlin, 1905), vol. 1, 20.
13. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 4 (reel 742), Bl. 134.
14. Brückweh has observed that Fritz Haarmann, the serial murderer of Hannover apprehended in 1924, also used "bait" to secure his victims. Brückweh, *Mordlust*, 59.
15. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Bd. 1 (reel 741), Bl. 21–22. Grossmann actually implicated Helene as an accomplice, saying that she had known about the murders and had used this knowledge to blackmail him. Police took these charges seriously enough to take her into custody, but

- without corroborating evidence released her, assuming Grossmann's accusation was an act of revenge toward those who had turned him in. *Ibid.*, 31–38.
16. *Ibid.*, Bl. 19.
 17. *Ibid.*, Bd. 3, Bl. 42.
 18. *Ibid.*, Bd. 3, Bl. 92–93.
 19. *Ibid.*, Bd. 3, Bl. 61–62.
 20. Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill and London, 2000), map p. 84.
 21. Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford and New York, 1993), 154–160.
 22. *Ibid.*, 163–164.
 23. Regina Schulte, *Sperrbezirke: Tugendhaftigkeit und Prostitution in der bürgerlichen Welt* (Frankfurt/Main, 1979); Lynn Abrams, “Prostitutes in Imperial Germany, 1870–1918: Working Girls or Social Outcasts?” in *The German Underworld: Deviants and Outcasts in German History*, Richard J. Evans, ed. (London and New York, 1988), 189–209.
 24. Hans Ostwald, *Das Berliner Dirnentum*, vol. 8, Hans Ostwald, ed., vol. 6, *Großstadtdokumente* (Berlin: 1905), 3.
 25. LAB A Rep. 328-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 3, Bl. 89-91 (Reel 742).
 26. *Ibid.*, Bd. 3, Bl. 3.
 27. *Ibid.*, Bd. 1, Bl. 8, 34–37 (reel 741).
 28. LAB A Rep. 358-1, A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 3, Bl. 1–3 (reel 742).
 29. *Ibid.*, Bl. 4-6; LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 6, Bl. 26, (reel 743).
 30. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 3, Bl. 29–30.
 31. Lynn Abrams, “Prostitutes in Imperial Germany,” 193. See also Richard Evans, “Prostitution, State, and Society in Imperial Germany,” *Past and Present* 70 (1976), 106–129; Evans, *Tales from the German Underground: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 1998). For comparison, see Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge and New York, 1980); Mary Gibson, *Prostitution and the State in Italy, 1860–1910* (New Brunswick, 1986); Jill Harsin, *Policing and Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton, 1985); Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1990 [1978]).
 32. Brückweh finds this treatment of the surviving victims as witnesses rather than as victims of violent crime in the four cases of serial murder she analyzes, all of which involved male victims and homosexual murderers. She also observes that women were more likely to be perceived as victims than were men. Brückweh, *Mordlust*, 42–49.
 33. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 4, Bl. 128–130 (reel 742).
 34. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 3., Bl. 205–210 (reel 742).
 35. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 1, Bl. 31–38, (reel 741).
 36. Stephan Bleek, “Mobilität und Seßhaftigkeit in deutschen Großstädten während der Urbanisierung,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 15, 1 (1989), 5–33.
 37. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 10 (reel 744), Personalakten; LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 4, Bl. 247–249 (reel 743).
 38. Eva Brücker, “‘Und ich bin da ‘rausgekommen’: Gewalt und Sexualität in einer Berliner Arbeiternachbarschaft zwischen 1916/17 und 1958,” in *Physische Gewalt: Studien zur Geschichte der Neuzeit*, Thomas Lindenberger and Alf Lüdtke, eds. (Frankfurt/Main, 1995), 337–365. On domestic violence in imperial Germany, see Lynn Abrams, “Martyrs or Matriarchs? Working-Class Women’s Experience of Marriage in Germany before the First World War,” *Women’s History Review* 1, 3 (1992), 357–376, and Abrams, “Companionship and Conflict: the Negotiation of Marriage Relations in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Gender Relations in German History: Power, Agency and Experience from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, Lynn Abrams

- and Elizabeth Harvey, eds. (Durham, 1996). On the normalization of domestic violence in the Weimar period, see Sace Elder, *Murder Scenes: Normality, Deviance, and Criminal Violence in Weimar Berlin* (Ann Arbor, 2010), 157–189.
39. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 1, Bl. 20 (reel 741).
 40. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 3, Bl. 65 (reel 742).
 41. Equally bothersome to neighbors as the cries, and in retrospect equally as significant, was the stench that emanated from Grossmann's apartment. Several neighbors questioned Grossmann about the strong smell of rotting meat that clearly came from his room, but willingly accepted the explanation that that he had forgotten to remove a chicken that had spoiled in the summer heat.
 42. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 1, Bl. 21 (reel 741).
 43. Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992). See also Marie-Christine Leps, *Apprehending the Criminal: The Production of Deviance in Nineteenth-Century Discourse* (Durham and London, 1992), 112–134.
 44. *Vorwärts* (VW) n. 427, 10 September 1921.
 45. Heindl, *Der Berufsverbrecher*, 197;
 46. *Berliner Morgenpost* (BMP), 26 February 1920; BLA, 2 July 1921. On the Blau case, see LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 386 (reel A463).
 47. "Menschen, die verschwinden," BMP, n. 186, 7 August 1921, 1. Beilage. Jacobsohn admonished all missing persons to report to the police missing person's center.
 48. BMP, n. 188, 9 August 1921, 1. Beilage.
 49. VW, n. 374, 10 August 1921.
 50. See, for example, BLA 4 July 1921 (Morgenausgabe).
 51. Erich Wülffen, *Der Sexualverbrecher. Ein Handbuch für Juristen, Verwaltungsbeamte und Ärzte*, Encyklopädie der modernen Kriminalistik (Berlin, 1910), 454. Richard Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia sexualis. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der conträren Sexualempfindung* (Stuttgart, 1903), 47ff. See Maren Hoffmeister, "Lustmord: Widerständige Körper im Deutungssystem Justiz," in *Körper und Recht. Anthropologische Dimensionen der Rechtsphilosophie*, Ludger Schwarte and Christoph Wulf, eds. (Munich, 2003), 339–355. On German criminology, see Richard Wetzell, *Inventing the Criminal: A History of German Criminology, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill and London, 2000).
 52. Swen Thomas, *Geschichte des Mordparagrafens—eine normalgenetische Untersuchung bis in der Gegenwart* (Bochum, 1985), 255–265; Michael Schetsche, "Der Wille, der Trieb und das Deutungsmuster vom Lustmord," in *Sexuelle Sozialisation: Sechs Annäherungen*, Renate Berenike Schmidt and Michael Schetsche, eds. (Berlin, 2009). On criminal biology and the prosecution and punishment of murder, see Richard Evans, *Rituals of Retribution: Capital Punishment in Germany, 1600–1987* (Oxford, 1996), 528–533.
 53. *Berliner Morgenpost* (hereafter: BMP), no. 200, 24 August 1921, 1. Beilage.
 54. Tatar, *Lustmord*, 53–54.
 55. BMP, no. 266, 16. October 1920, 1. Beilage.
 56. BMP, no. 267, 17. October 1920.
 57. Peter Becker, "Weak Bodies? Prostitutes and the Role of Gender in the Criminological Writings of 19th-Century German Detectives and Magistrates," *Crime, Histoire and Societies* 3, 1 (1999), 45–69. See also Becker, *Verderbnis und Entartung. Eine Geschichte der Kriminologie des 19. Jahrhunderts als Diskurs und Praxis* (Göttingen, 2002), 117–175.
 58. *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* (hereafter: BLA) 23 August 1921 (Morgenausgabe).
 59. BLA, 4 September 1921 (Sonntagsausgabe).
 60. Erich Frey, *Ich beantrage Freispruch* (Hamburg, 1959), 44.
 61. BMP, no. 199, 23 August 1921, 1. Beilage.
 62. *BZ am Mittag*, no. 199, 26. August 1921.

63. Many observers, including Magnus Hirschfeld almost ten years later, expressed surprise that the wizened, unattractive, slovenly-looking man could lure so many women into his apartment. In his *Geschlecht und Verbrechen*, Hirschfeld placed a caption under a photograph of Grossmann that read, "Grossmann, the bluebeard of the Silesian train station who despite his appearance always found women." Hirschfeld, *Geschlecht und Verbrechen*, 215.
64. BMP, no. 296, 14. December 1921, 1. Beilage.
65. *BZ am Mittag*, no. 197, 24. August 1921.
66. Gertraud Zull, *Das Bild vom Dienstmädchen um die Jahrhundertwende. Eine Untersuchung der stereotypen Vorstellungen über den Charakter und soziale Lage des städtischen weiblichen Hauspersonals* Reihe Kulturwissenschaften (Munich, 1984), 175–186; Karin Walser, *Dienstmädchen. Frauenarbeit und Weiblichkeitsbilder um 1900* (Frankfurt/Main, 1985); Dorothee Wierling, *Mädchen für Alles. Arbeitsalltag und Lebensgeschichte städtischer Dienstmädchen um der Jahrhundertwende* (Berlin, 1987).
67. Ute Daniel, *The War from Within: German Working-Class Women in the First World War*, trans. Margaret Ries (Oxford and New York, 1997; orig. 1989), 138–147.
68. Julia Roos, *Weimar Through the Lens of Gender: Prostitution Reform, Women's Emancipation, and German Democracy, 1919–1933* (Ann Arbor, 2010), esp. 97–136; Julia Roos, "Backlash against Prostitutes' Right: Origins and Dynamics of Nazi Prostitution Policies," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1, 1/2 (2002), 67–94; and Elisabeth Meyer-Renschenhausen, "The Bremen Morality Scandal," in *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan, eds. (New York, 1984), 87–108. On prostitution in the Kaiserreich, see Nancy Reagin, "A True Woman Can Take Care of Herself: The Debate over Prostitution in Hanover, 1906," *Central European History* 24, 4 (1991), 347–380.
69. Arthur Kronfeld, "Bemerkungen zum Prozeß gegen Karl Großmann," *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft* 9, 5 (1922), 138–139. Arthur Kronfeld, "Bemerkungen zum Prozeß gegen Karl Großmann," *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft* 9, 5 (1922), 137–149. Robert Heindl would later echo such sentiments when he wrote, "In the area around the Silesian train station one did not like to interfere in the love affairs of his fellow men." See "Das Berufsverbrechertum der Großstadt," in *Unser Berlin: Ein Jahrbuch von Berliner Art und Arbeit* (Berlin, 1928). For Heindl, this observation served to demonstrate the essential depravity of this *Kriminalviertel*.
70. LAB A Rep. 358-01, Nr. 1522, Bd. 4, Bl. 227 (reel 743).
71. BLA 20 Sept. 1921, 1. Beiblatt (Morgenausgabe).
72. *Berliner Volkszeitung* (hereafter: BVZ), no. 437, 16 September 1921.
73. BMP 30. August 1921, 1. Beilage.
74. Karen Halttunen has described how in the early American context, Enlightenment notions of human nature and free will necessitated the alienation of the murderer from so-called normal citizens, in contrast to colonial murder narratives that emphasized the sinfulness of all humans as an invocation to repentance on the part of all members of a community. Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer in the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).