Peter Kurten Biography

Peter Kurten

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Biography

In 1929, a German city focused on the violence of the killer known as the "Vampire of Dusseldorf." Over two distinct periods, the killer plunged Dusseldorf into terror that culminated in 1929 in an epidemic of sexual violence and murder. The criminal preyed mainly upon young girls, along with the occasional adult man or woman. Mutilated corpses were discovered, and in addition to their wounds were signs of vampirism and cannibalism. Ultimately captured in 1930, the killer, 48-year old union activist, Peter Kurten, boasted of his crimes to a police psychologist, recounting in detail over 70 incidents.

Born in 1883 in Cologne-Mulheim, Kurten was one of thirteen children who suffered under a drunken, sexually abusive father who was ultimately arrested for molestation. At age five, Kurten committed his first crimes, apparently helping to drown two schoolmates during a boating accident. As a teenager, he took to bestiality and torturing animals. At age 17, he attempted to strangle a sex partner, and between 1905 and 1921, he was repeatedly imprisoned for stealing.

During one period out of prison, in 1913, Kurten committed his first pre-meditated murder, strangling and knifing the ten-year-old daughter of an inn-keeper and then returning to the bar the next day to listen to the townsfolk talk about the crime. Kurten derived sexual pleasure from violence; he soon took an axe to two strangers: the blood flow excited him.

Upon his final release from prison in 1921, a brief period of normality followed as Kurten settled down in another city. A factory worker turned labor organizer, he achieved renown within the union movement; he married and apparently lived normally. But he returned to Dusseldorf four years later, where he resumed his crimes. He committed arson beginning in February 1929 and various savage murders.

The end came in May 1930, somewhat unexpectedly. After eluding the authorities for so long, Kurten willingly released a victim who promptly identified him, and he was apprehended. After his confession to multiple murders, he spoke at length with the police psychologist Karl Berg, later to become an eminent professor. In what would later be published as the first lengthy psychological study of a serial killer, Berg analyzed Kurten's life in great detail. Following his trial, Kurten was beheaded on July 2, 1931.