

2007-2008 Hans Rosenberg Article Prize Laudatio

Kathy Stuart, "Suicide by Proxy: The Unintended Consequences of Public Executions in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Central European History* 41 (2008): 413-445.

Stuart's gripping article examines instances of suicide by proxy, whose perpetrators "committed murder with the intention of bringing about their own death by execution and thus avoiding eternal damnation that befell suicides." Only the Catholic Church declared suicide to be a mortal sin, but both Catholics and Lutherans generally believed that committing suicide [*Selbstmord*, or "self-murder"] led to eternal damnation. Murder, however, could be forgiven.

The victims were almost always children since, they, innocent of sin, were guaranteed salvation. Thus, the acts could be morally defensible, and penal codes requiring that murderers be executed provided perpetrators with the death that they desired. Or, as Agnes Catherina Schickin told local authorities after cutting the throat of a young boy, "one should now do to her what she had earned [*verdient*]." Faced with the unintended consequences resulting from a conjuncture of religious belief and legal justice, states reacted by subjecting perpetrators to painful, humiliating punishments while sparing their lives.

The article draws upon interrogation records, sermons, popular literature, legal writing, and other primary sources scattered in archives throughout Central Europe to reconstruct a phenomenon that has, until now, largely escaped the attention of historians. Stuart's surprising revelations lead to thoughtful insights. Most of the perpetrators were female, which challenges the common assumptions that women only rarely committed violent crimes in the eighteenth century. The perpetrators, and the popularizers who recounted their crimes, referred to the murdered children as martyrs who, like the murderers, found salvation, thus suggesting a particularly eighteenth-century understanding of death and redemption. Yet the acts were rational and premeditated, suggesting a particularly "modern" homicide different from the ritualistic, impulsive violence that characterized murders in the premodern era. Suicides by proxy also challenge conventional studies of modern social disciplining by providing a powerful example of common people manipulating the justice system for their own means.

Perhaps most impressively, Stuart makes a seemingly incomprehensible act understandable, and in doing so provides a new perspective on eighteenth-century Central European society and culture. Indeed, references to similar events in Scandinavia and elsewhere suggest a larger cultural moment in Europe. She unearths tales of desperate historical actors, which taken together cast light on the ideological underpinnings of entire societies at one of their most vulnerable points—a point at which a positive, Christian morality came to be associated with killing children. Throughout, Stuart has combined careful research with compelling writing to produce an exemplary work of scholarship. It is with great pleasure that the prize committee awards her with the 2010 Hans Rosenberg Article Prize.

The 2007-2008 Hans Rosenberg Article Prize Committee

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