Evil has had a morbid hold over the public since time immemorial. Whether it be fictional serial killers like Hannibal Lecter in the box-office hit »Silence of the Lambs« or reports about real perpetrators like Jeffrey Dahmer or Andrei Tschikatilo: »sex and crime« are a great way to sell tickets. During the early years of the Federal Republic, readers and cinema-goers were captivated by the demonic figure of serial killer Bruno Lüdke. Founder of »Spiegel«, Rudolf Augstein, wrote about Lüdke in a series of articles and reports. Among others, journalist and bestselling author Will Berthold laid a trail for the general public with 15 »factual reports« about Lüdke. And a young actor by the name of Mario Adorf shone as Lüdke in 1957 in the award-winning film »Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam« by Robert Siodmak.

The fascination with evil

The fascination with evil never truly waned. Until the 1990s, Berlin coachman Bruno Lüdke was known as the »worst serial killer in criminal history«. Journalists created true crime stories based on artefacts from the National Socialist CID; the feature film »Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam« brought international attention to the case. A historian, a cultural scientist and a graphic designer have now reinvestigated the topic for a case study. The result is a multi-faceted visual history about racist conceptions of man and violence. How and why did the »fake news« about the alleged serial killer arise in the Third Reich and continue in the media democracy? The interdisciplinary study on constructing the abnormal pleads for greater visuality in scientific depictions.

BY STEPHAN LAUDIEN

The fascination with evil was a great way to sell tickets. During the early years of the Federal Republic, readers and cinema-goers were captivated by the demonic figure of serial killer Bruno Lüdke. Founder of »Spiegel«, Rudolf Augstein, wrote about Lüdke in a series of articles. The real Bruno Lüdke has been relegated to the background in all the frenzy. How did Bruno Lüdke become »the devil in human form«? What interests were the police and judicial system in pursuit of him? The ruling of a Hereditary Health Court; the diagnosis stated »hereditary mental retardation«. Lüdke was arrested three years later as part of a murder investigation. During suggestive interrogations, he took the blame for 53 murders, mainly of women, which had been committed across the Reich since 1924. Bruno Lüdke was secretly murdered in the Viennese Institute of Criminological Medicine in mid-April, 1944.
the Third Reich following? And why did the horror story of the »monster« Lüdke hit a nerve with the public in the Federal Republic?

Dr. Axel Doßmann and Prof. Dr. Susanne Regener have been following up on these and related questions. »Fabrikation eines Verbrechers. Der Fall Bruno Lüdke als Mediengeschichte« (Fabrication of a criminal. The case of Bruno Lüdke as a media history) is the title of their recently published book. In the book, the historian from the University of Jena and cultural scientist from the University of Siegen discuss criminality, violence and racist conceptions of man in the 20th century and do so in a way that is as thrilling as a detective story. The findings of their research are given a further level of reflection thanks to the special book design by Markus Dreßen: the readers are directly shown several evocative sources: crime scene photos, interrogation records, a bust of Lüdke from 1944, secret documents, film posters and magazine articles from the 1950s.

»Fake news« from the post-war period: Jena historian Dr. Axel Doßmann and Siegen cultural scientist Prof. Dr. Susanne Regener have reassessed the criminal case of Bruno Lüdke and the subsequent mediatization of evil: the alleged serial killer was a victim of the Nazi criminal investigation department and the media democracy of the 1950s. Here you can see the cover of their joint publication.

The Police Museum in Berlin contained numerous artefacts relating to the case of the supposed serial killer Bruno Lüdke.

[Image: Police Museum in Berlin]

Bruno Lüdke was a victim of the Nazis, not a serial killer

Susanne Regener first came across Bruno Lüdke in the 1990s. She visited the Police Historical Collection in Berlin as part of her post-doctoral thesis and examined the social and cultural significance of »mug shots« and exhibited artefacts like a hand cast of Bruno Lüdke. The criminal case of Bruno Lüdke clearly shows the fabrication of conceptions of man and presentations of evil. Evidence suggests that high-ranking Nazis from the Reich Security Main Office (Reichssicherheitsamt) wanted to use the Lüdke case as a pretext for introducing a new social-racist law against so-called Gemeinschaftsfremde (socially undesirables). »This law would have made it legal to prosecute and murder all maladjusted Germans«, says Axel Doßmann. As a mentally ill serial killer, Bruno Lüdke would have provided the required foil for this law.

Regener and Doßmann also show their doubt concerning previous theses about the murder of Lüdke. It is highly probable that Bruno Lüdke died as a result of an experiment with poisoned munition. The aim of this »Secret Reich matter« was to test assassination attempts for high-ranking politicians. »It is beyond doubt that Bruno Lüdke was a victim of the Nazis and not a serial killer«, confirms Axel Doßmann. »But it is not just the Nazis, but also the German Federal press and judicial system that share responsibility for the myth surrounding the serial killer: sixty years ago, on 17 April 1958, Hamburg Higher Regional Court legally sanctioned the fake news of the serial killer.« In the mid-1990s, Dutch criminologist Jan A. Blaauw proved in his meticulously detailed work that it is highly unlikely that Lüdke could have committed a single one of the crimes attributed to him. The book by Doßmann and Regener now elucidates this criminal case within the historical and media context and, in doing so, allows parallels to be drawn with the present day. For it is all too easy for the mentally ill and other outsiders to find themselves caught in the wheels of criminal proceedings and the justice system.

Bibliography

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