



### 112 The “Beasts of Satan” Murders

*Felice F. Carabellese, MD\*, University of Bari, Section of Forensic Psychiatry, Policlinico, p.za G. Cesare, 11, Bari, 70124, ITALY; Jutta Birkhoff, MD, PhD, Department of Public Health, University of Insubria, Via O. Rossi, Varese, 21100, ITALY; Michele Bruno, MD, Department of Mental Health Care, P.zza Di Summa, Brindisi, 72100, ITALY; Chiara Candelli, MD, PhD, Section of Forensic Psychiatry, University of Bari, Piazza Giulio Cesare, Bari, 70124, ITALY; and Stefania Zeroli, MD, University of Insubria, Via O. Rossi, Varese, 21100, ITALY*

After attending this presentation, attendees will recognize some features of group murder and understand principles of forensic psychiatric assessment of members of satanic sects.

The presentation will impact the forensic science community by exploring the role of satanic sects in the etiology of this type of crime.

In January 2004, the body of a young woman was found in the garden of a small house in the woods in the province of Varese (a rich city in northern Italy, about 50 km from Milan). Forensic investigations showed that the woman had been shot in the face, buried alive, and finally killed by repeated beating on the head with a spade.

A few months later, not far from where the woman's body had been found, the remains of two young men were discovered. They had been killed on the January 17, 1998 (“a night of the black moon”), by repeated beating with rods, causing many bone fractures, as well as by knife wounds distributed all over their bodies.

These discoveries hit the national headlines and brought to light the actions of a sect calling themselves the “Beasts of Satan.” Although the investigations of the members of this group proceeded smoothly and those responsible for the homicides were easily identified, the news about “satanic” activities occurring in a quiet, hard-working area in the province of Varese was a great shock and provoked turmoil in local society. In the following years, any violent event affecting a young person was inevitably attributed in the public mind to the activities of this sect. In actuality, the activities were much less “occult” than was commonly imagined, as demonstrated by the investigations that easily identified the criminals as nine young factory workers with no criminal record.

The shocking violence of the murders led the judge to request a forensic psychiatric assessment of one of the members (the only one with history of mental disease), but widening the investigations to study the group dynamics and lifestyle of all the members. The assessment revealed that all the young men had a fragile, immature personality, a very low level of education, and were socially disadvantaged. They had built up a crude practice they called “satanism” that was for them an exciting escape from their humdrum reality, and a uniting element. They carried out improbable rites with a liberal use of satanic words and rites they knew nothing about. Each had a rigidly defined role in the sect, that had a hierarchical structure but no recognized leader.

The historical-cultural phenomenon of satanism, as also of spiritism and other esoteric beliefs, has nothing to do with the sub-cultural climate of violence and terror created by this group. The members of the “Beasts of Satan” were clumsily trying to mask the cultural poverty of their lives by carrying out cruel, violent actions, and identifying with a name that strikes superstitious terror (“Beasts of Satan”). The violence was aimed particularly at members who tried to renege on the group.

Although judges generally request a forensic psychiatric opinion in particularly shocking cases of murder for no apparent reason (except for mafia crimes), on the suspicion of a relationship between insanity and murder, in this case the experts did not find any trace of such a relation. The trial of the members of the “Beasts of Satan” sect was concluded with the verdict of deliberate murder by all the members, who were all given long jail sentences.

A striking point in this tale was the suicide of one of the members, before other members of the group were identified, who drove into a stone wall. The dynamics and possible responsibilities for this death remained obscure.

**Satanic Sects, Psychiatric-Forensic Assessment, Group Violence**