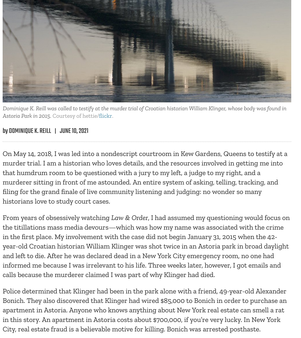
ESSAY

THE HISTORIAN AND THE MURDERER

A Croatian Historian's Death Ultimately Put Our Profession on Trial



Dominique K. Reill was called to testify at the murder trial of Croatian historian William Klinger, whose body was found in Astoria Park in 2015. Courtesy of battle1ficky.

by DOMINIQUE K. REILL | JUNE 10, 2021

On May 14, 2018, I was led into a nondescript courtroom in Kew Gardens, Queens to testify at a murder trial. I am a historian who loves details, and the revelations involved in getting me into that humdrum room to be questioned with a jury to my left, a judge to my right, and a murderer sitting in front of me astounded. An entire system of asking, telling, tracking, and filing for the grand finale of live community listening and judging: no wonder so many historians love to study court cases.

From years of obsessively watching *Law & Order*, I had assumed my questioning would focus on the titillations mass media devours—which was how my name was associated with the crime in the first place. My involvement with the case did not begin January 31, 2015 when the 42-year-old Croatian historian William Klinger was shot twice in an Astoria park in broad daylight and left to die. After he was declared dead in a New York City emergency room, no one had informed me because I was irrelevant to his life. Three weeks later, however, I got emails and calls because the murderer claimed I was part of why Klinger had died.

Police determined that Klinger had been in the park alone with a friend, 49-year-old Alexander Bonich. They also discovered that Klinger had wired $83,000 to Bonich in order to purchase an apartment in Astoria. Anyone who knows anything about New York real estate can smell a rat in this story. An apartment in Astoria costs about $700,000, if you're very lucky. In New York City, real estate fraud is a believable motive for killing. Bonich was arrested posthaste.

To counter the murder charge, Bonich insisted he shot Klinger out of self-defense. As Bonich told police and then a *New York Times* journalist, on the day of his death Klinger behaved strangely. He seemed unhinged, filled with emotional rage triggered by the fact that he had deserted his family in Europe "to meet a woman named Dominique." With Klinger coming at him, Bonich insisted he had shot Klinger to forestall Klinger doing the same to him.

There are very few people connected with Croatian academia who share my first name. Within minutes of the *New York Times* article giving Bonich's side of the story going live, a friend wrote me an email to alert me. Within an hour, my inbox was filled with queries from journalists and police. The idea that Klinger's grieving wife and children would have to suffer the killer's lies cut me to the quick and I responded by contacting anyone I could to set the record straight.

The *New York Times* immediately erased my name from the article they had published online. I gave journalists, police, and lawyers full access to all my communications with Klinger. At some point, the murderer had also asserted that Klinger and I had had a rendezvous in New York in the days prior to the shooting. To disprove this, it took just a few minutes to supply travel itineraries and credit card statements showing how I was nowhere near New York City at the time.

At Bonich's trial three years later, I assumed I was being called to the stand to disprove assertions about Klinger's relationship to me. Imagine my surprise, then, when two minutes into my deposition the prosecutor asked me, "What are the archives?"

In my professional life as a history professor at an elite research university, "what are the archives?" is a question that gets posed regularly, often by professors encouraging students to think about how history "gets made." When the prosecutor asked me this question, it was in response to my explanation of how I had first met Klinger. I had said "I met him in the archives in Rijeka [Croatia]," assuming this was straightforward. When asked to elaborate, I still assumed that the question was not about the things I usually talk about when discussing archives, but about the nature of my relationship to the deceased.

Was it possible that the prosecutor feared the jury imagined we had met at some nightclub called "The Archives"? Maybe those Queens residents were picturing us drinking cocktails at a bar pretentiously decorated with old-school card catalogs, green banker's lamps, and anachronistic maps? So, instead of answering what archives were in a professional sense, I focused on how unsexy—how all work, 8 a.m.-to-2 p.m. no fun—they are.

Here is where it became clear that all my assumptions about why I was in that courtroom were wrong. As I was explaining how archivists regularly introduce scholars to each other in the reading room, the defense attorney called out: "Judge, I'm going to object to the witness being nonresponsive." Though the judge overruled the objection, the effect of the defense attorney's intervention was significant.

From then on, my job in the almost 80 questions that followed was not to disabuse the court of ideas of adulterous encounters but instead to explain what this strange profession of "historian" was, and what role it played in bringing Klinger into that Astoria park on the day he died.

I told the jury how Klinger had attended some of the most prestigious institutions in Europe, how he had published widely in several languages, and how he was generally considered the expert in his field, even though he could not find permanent, full-time employment anywhere. A long-time motto repeated ad nauseam in academia is "Publish or perish." In essence, I was there to explain how this historian perished in our profession even though he had published, and how his professional disappointment set him up for associating with someone who would kill him for real.

When reading over the court transcripts, it is hard to remember that we were all sitting together in that room because a man had died. The questions were not about Klinger or his murderer. Instead, they focused on the intricacies of how difficult it is for a historian to make a living.

I explained how historians can't get academic jobs through individual merits in the U.S. or Europe. You need networks. I talked about "markets," the expectations of what CVs (the academic term for resumes) should look like, and how getting noticed by universities is dependent not just on productivity but also on references from people of great esteem. With every explanation I gave, another question came up. What is a postdoc? What is an editor? What is a letter of recommendation? How does anyone get paid?

The questions kept coming because the answers I was giving made no sense to how people imagined someone survived as a professional historian. Weren't historians like artists or writers? Wasn't their worth and position dependent on the quality of what they produced? Or maybe they were like journalists, paid per column or through working on producing publications? Or maybe historians were like teachers, their employment opportunities dependent on the degrees they had obtained?

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I'm sure it was confusing when I told the lawyers, judge, and jury about how the writing and publishing process works. I said: "People don't make money working for journals; you do it as a volunteer for the state of the field. There are no paying jobs." Both the defense attorney and the prosecutor had been under the impression that Klinger's arrival in the United States would solve his miserable professional status in Europe. My testimony underscored that it was far from the truth—but that Klinger didn't know it, and that's what made him vulnerable.

Though he had published much and the solidity of his research was undeniable, Klinger had not proven himself as a man who worked within structures. He had never taught in an American classroom. He had no portfolio of teaching evaluations. He had not participated in a research facility where interdisciplinary collaboration was emphasized. He had almost no links within the wider profession, meaning there were few who could vouch for him to those outside his relatively obscure specialty. This also meant he could not help future students procure positions.

Klinger did history like a starving artist might: he worked alone, he published in the easiest and quickest (rather than the most prestigious) journals, and he struggled to broaden his profile. His lack of networks was partly a result of the fact that no one in Italy or Croatia would give him a permanent position. But it was also partly because he was so passionate about the researching and writing that he didn't prioritize the other stuff.

I had explained to Klinger "at the archives" and in emails what I had said in court: procuring permanent employment in the United States is a slow, networked, highly professionalized process that proves unsuccessful for most. I had told him explicitly that there is no way to just publish, come, and get a job. But Klinger ignored me and decided instead to believe a man who told him what he wanted to hear.

Apparently, Bonich promised Klinger all: not just an apartment but also a job at Hunter College in New York City based on his qualifications, with no application, interview, or letters of recommendation required. That is as inconceivable as the $85,000 price tag for an Astoria apartment. Nonetheless, Klinger wanted to believe. The murderer also told the court Klinger had deserted his family in part because I had arranged a position for him as a journal editor in Maryland, one which would pay enough for him to build a new life for himself.

This, too, was not just a lie; it was impossible.

It didn't matter that Klinger and I barely knew each other. It didn't matter that the journal the killer named did not exist. It also didn't matter that history journals do not pay book review editors. The killer told those lies because he thought they were believable, because that's how he thought the historical profession worked. Just like Klinger, Bonich did not realize that there are almost no historians in the world who can survive on their writing, their editorships, or their qualifications. Historians in the United States are paid for how they work within institutions. And getting into the institutions is a herculean feat only the most obstinate should try to undertake.

We'll never know how many lies Bonich told Klinger before killing him. It pains me to imagine what must have been going through Klinger's mind right before he was shot. According to statements from Klinger's wife published later, he was supremely happy when he arrived in the United States and believed he had a professional future waiting for him, filled with open horizons. Did he find out before the shots were fired that this was not true?

For his sake, I hope he never found out. But I cannot say the same thing for the world surrounding me. All the imaginary ideas that the media and the public have about all the humanities professions need a reality check. People whose employment is based on their expertise in history, literature, art, languages, music, philosophy, religion, theater, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality do not live "outside" professional worlds. They are not narcissistic navel-gazers, or spoiled and leftist tweed-wearers who spout off elitist ideas and pursue whatever whims their interests take. They are also not hired based solely on their educational qualifications or their publications.

What historians and other humanists are expected to do within their places of employment are a mixture of several different specializations. They are supposed to research like forensic accountants, publish like writers, instruct like teachers, institution-build like well-connected editors, promote others like agents, and administer institutional bodies like practiced CEOs.

Even those who can do all these jobs simultaneously often can't secure employment. According to 2019 surveys, only 19 percent of recent Ph.Ds. in history programs within the United States received the kind of job Klinger believed he would get in New York City. And a large number of the 80 percent who did not gain a permanent research-geared university position had a more balanced employment portfolio than Klinger could boast.

It's been six years since Klinger died and three years since I testified about the historical profession at his murder trial. Since then, the world this 42-year-old Croatian historian tried to enter has become even tougher to crack. Now there are even fewer jobs while the breadth of the work required for this profession has only increased. Technological know-how is increasingly required for any applicant in this increasingly digital world. Sociological and psychological know-how are now musts in environments where students are exhibiting ever more the traumatic effects of our political and economic realities. Administrative skills are ever more sought after as educational institutions' budgets get tighter. I imagine soon deans will require proof of the ability to fundraise for new hires.

At the termination of the murder trial, Bonich was sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. In her closing arguments, the prosecutor emphasized how Bonich's crime was premeditated, one which weaponized an "abuse of the American dream" to catch, corner, and eliminate Klinger, his prey. The judge finished his sentencing saying "[i]t was as though you were writing a play. You set about and engaged in an elaborate scheme to convince Mr. Klinger that the yellow brick road from Croatia to America goes right through you."

Both the prosecutor and the judge were right, but Bonich was not alone in abusing a dream or writing that play. We have, too. It's time to give up the fantasies we have about what the profession of history is, so we can better appreciate what its practitioners do and better streamline how humanists might engage with society at large.

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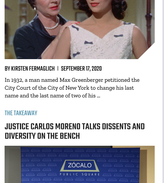

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