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The Tailor-King: The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Muenster

Anthony Arthur

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He was only a Dutch tailor's apprentice, but from 1534 to 1535, Jan van Leyden led a radical sect of persecuted Anabaptists to repeated triumphs over the combined powers of church and state. Revered by his followers as the new David, the charismatic young leader pronounced the northern German city of Muenster a new Zion and crowned himself king. He expropriated all private property, took sixteen wives (supposedly emulating the biblical patriarchs), and in a deadly reign of terror, executed all who opposed him. As the long siege of Muenster resulted in starvation, thousands fled Jan's deadly kingdom while others waited behind the double walls and moats for the apocalyptic final attack by the Prince-Bishop's hired armies, supported by all the rulers of Europe.

With the sudden rise to power of a compelling personality and the resulting violent threat to ordered society, Jan van Leyden's distant story strangely echoes the many tragedies of the twentieth century. More than just a fascinating human drama from the past, *The Tailor-King* also offers insight into our own troubled times.

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