

Days of Atonement by Michael Gregorio.
faber and faber 2007.

This is the second of Michael Gregorio's novels about the Prussian magistrate, and disciple of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, Hanno Stiffeniis.

Set in the early 1800s, with a vanquished Prussia occupied by Napoleon's victorious French army, Days of Atonement is rich in characters and drama. A woman and her children are brutally murdered, and Stiffeniis has to investigate their deaths and track down their killer, joined by a French colonel, and amateur criminologist, Serge Lavedrine. The two make a good team, and Gregorio describes the rivalry and camaraderie between the two most convincingly, not least at the times when Lavedrine exerts his considerable Gallic charm over Stiffeniis' wife, Helena.

Into the mix Gregorio throws a terrified Jewish community accused of ritual murder and a fanatical cadre of die-hard Prussian troops, led by a maniacal general.

Days of Atonement is well-written, pacy, and plausible, with a marvellous sense of atmosphere and a truly likeable central character. At the end of the first Stiffeniis novel I looked forward to its successor; having thoroughly enjoyed it I am now eagerly anticipating volume three!

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh