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The Trials and Tribulations of the European Witch Hunts

During the Renaissance, a surprising thing happened throughout the course of the supposed enlightenment. Across Europe over a period of three hundred years, tens of thousands of people were being executed on the grounds of witchcraft. Sometimes people succumb to mass hysteria and act in ways that would normally be against their better judgement (Magill). To better understand these witch hunts, it is necessary to examine their motivation, to study their scale, and to determine their impact.

Witchcraft comes from the ancient idea of sorcery which is the belief that rituals are able to modify reality (“Witchcraft”). During the Renaissance, a new idea was formed that sorcery, which was by this time called witchcraft, was the practice of harmful magic that could harm an entire community—perhaps by summoning a crop-destroying hail storm. The most important development in witchcraft theory was when theologians in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries determined that all magic was derived from the devil, so therefore witches were heretics who had to have made a pact with the devil during secret nocturnal ceremonies (Levack 312). The majority of supposed witches were females who were midwives, village healers, or babysitters (Levack 314). According to Deborah Willis, a literary scholar on the subject, witchcraft was a “social, legal and theatrical practice” and that witches were post-menopausal women who were seen as malevolent anti-mothers (qtd. in Goodare).

One motivation for the trials was a general fear of witchcraft. Witchcraft was used as an

explanation of the unexplainable for things such as illness, disaster, and death in a community. It was also used to understand strange mental states which were confused to be the curse of a witch. In Newfoundland sleep paralysis was known as being “hag ridden” as if a witch were sitting on her victim’s chest (“Witchcraft”). The poorest, weakest, and most vulnerable members of society were the natural scapegoats (Levack 315).

Another motivation for the trials was a quest for power in society. Some people capitalized on this fear for “the desire to effect social control and to blame others for factors causing social tensions” (“Witchcraft”). Not necessarily for the witch hunts alone, a system was set up in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries known as inquisitorial procedure. It gave considerable power to “officers of the court to initiate proceedings against a person on the basis of rumor or denunciation, without first obtaining an accusation from a private complaint” (Levack 313). Church leaders said in the *Canon Episcopi* that “such fantasies are thrust into the minds of faithless people not by God but by the Devil” (qtd. in “Witchcraft”). Christian leaders wanted to keep people from any kind of magical paganism (Hannam). This fear of witchcraft coupled with power interests escalated into the large witch hunts across Europe.

The witch hunters were spread throughout Europe mainly during the Renaissance, not the Middle Ages as is commonly believed (Hannam). The craze proliferated in many locations in Europe, but each had the common trait of being a Christian settlement. Although the first official trials occurred at Orléans, France in 1022, where the accused were said to kill children and call up evil spirits (“Witchcraft”), the fiercest hunts occurred in Germanic regions over the 1620s and 1630s (Hannam). The worst hunts occurred where there was the greatest breakdown in authority (Gibbons). For example, large hunts occurred during the English Civil War and also in Scotland when the court’s judges were in a period of replacement. The final trials in Europe took place over

the end of the 1600s to the middle of the 1700s with the last legally-executed witch in 1782 in Glarus, Switzerland (Hannam).

A major driving force in the continuation and strength of the witch hunts was the witch hunters. After the 1484 Papal bull by Pope Innocent VIII, which condoned the punishment of witches, professional witch hunters took the liberty to get popular support and to print a book entitled *Malleus Maleficarum*, which translates to *The Witch Hammer* (“Witchcraft”). The hunters needed such a book to gain legitimacy for their actions (Kramer and Sprenger). The book detailed the exact methods of the determination of witches, the torturing of witches, and the theory behind the evil of witchcraft (“Witchcraft”). They needed to affirm that witches were truly a threat to humanity (Gibbons). According to *Malleus Maleficarum*,

Some hold that even a witch of very ill repute, against whom the evidence justifies violent suspicion, and who, as a ringleader of the witches, is accounted very dangerous, may be assured her life, and condemned instead to perpetual imprisonment on bread and water, in case she will give sure and convincing testimony against other witches. [. . .] And doubtless such notorious witches [. . .] would be peculiarly suited to be thus preserved, in order to aid the bewitched or to accuse other witches, were it not that their accusations cannot be trusted, since the Devil is a liar [. . .]. (Kramer and Sprenger)

The book made the reader remember that witches can not be trusted because of the possibility that the devil could be helping. This logic effectively made it impossible for the accused to defend his or herself. Also, the book devised a novel system in which lengthy tortures could be justified by not having them repeat, which was against the law, but by having them “continue.” Again, this was another loophole created to get around the law so that witches could be punished (Kramer

and Sprenger).

The estimated loss of life due to the hunts varies greatly depending on the source used: popular propaganda or actual trial records. The propaganda written by the witch hunters overplayed the problem to instill fear by exaggerating the number and severity of the trials. The hunters intentionally sensationalized the apparent witch threat (Gibbons). In some estimates based upon this propaganda literature, as many as nine million women were executed during the witch hunts (Hannam). But, based on actual trial records and court documents, during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, there were about 100,000 trials concerning witches, and no more than half of the accused were executed (Levack 314). For comparison, during the French Revolution as many people were killed by the Jacobins in three years as over these three centuries of witch hunting (Hannam). The wide-spread trials have later equivalents and modern impacts.

The idea of hunting witches continued on to later episodes. During the early part of the seventeenth century, the Salem witch trials were occurring in Massachusetts due to a temporary lack of authority like their European counterparts (Hannam). In modern times, witch hunts still occur, though not aided by the judicial system. In Pakistan, there was a person who was hated by the community and was blamed to have burned the sacred Koran. There was good evidence that she had done no such thing, but the village burned her anyway due to the hysteria and her lack of popularity (Burke). Anthropologist Dr. Saunders argues that even without the direct violence, witch hunts still even occur in America when people attach marginalizing pejorative labels to others (Goodare).

The idea of witch hunts has entered popular culture in many places. A quick search of the term returns almost two million references on Google. In the 1970s, a movie was made that had a scene parodying the European witch hunts called *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. In the scene,

the villagers dress a young woman up as a witch and blame her, rather incoherently, to have done bad things to them. Then, they try to figure out how to determine if she's actually a witch and they come up with a test to see: "if she weights the same as a duck, she's made of wood [. . .] and therefore [. . .] a witch!" (*Monty Python*)

In conclusion, the witch hunts were very wide-spread throughout Europe, even though they were confined mainly to Christian settlements due to the religious view of a witch—a person who consorts with the devil. Many people were killed in the hysteria, though most were just disliked community members. The hunts impacted Europe, but probably no more than the French revolution, and they still affect western culture to this day. The hunts are better understood by examining their motivation, scale, and impact to better prevent such a thing in the future.

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