**Who Burned the Witches?**

**SANDRA MIESEL**

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**Witches Everywhere**

The 30,000 to 50,000 casualties of the European witch-hunts were not distributed uniformly through time or space, even within particular jurisdictions. Three-quarters of Europe saw not a single trial. Witch persecution spread outward from its first center in alpine Italy in the early 15th century, guttering out in Poland, where witchcraft laws were finally repealed in 1788. The center had generally stopped trying witches before the peripheries even started.

The Spanish Road stretching from Italy to the Netherlands was also a "witch-road." The Catholic-ruled Spanish Netherlands (today's Belgium) saw far worse persecutions than the Protestant-ruled United Provinces of the Netherlands, which had stopped burning convicted witches by 1600. There were early panics in the German cities of Brandenburg and Mecklenburg, as well as in Lorraine, France, and parts of Switzerland and Scotland. The Rhineland and Southwest Germany suffered severe outbreaks, with German ecclesiastical territories hit hardest. Three-quarters of all witchcraft trials took place in the Catholic-ruled territories of the Holy Roman Empire. But Catholic Portugal, Castile and Spanish-ruled Italy, and the Orthodox lands of Eastern Europe saw virtually none.

The regional tolls demonstrated the patchwork pattern of witch-hunting. The town of Baden, Germany, for example, burned 200 witches from 1627 to 1630, more than all the convicted witches who perished in Sweden. The tiny town of Ellwangen, Germany, burned 393 witches from 1611 to 1618, more than Spain and Portugal combined ever executed. The Catholic prince-bishop of Würzburg, Germany, burned 600 witches from 1628 to 1631, more witches than ever died in Protestant Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland combined. The Swiss canton of Vaud executed about 1,800 witches from 1611 to 1660, compared with Scotland's toll of between 1,300 and 1,500 and England's toll of 500. The claim of some Catholic apologists that Elizabeth I executed 800 witches a year is gross slander. In Southwest Germany alone, 3,229 people were executed for witchcraft between 1562 and 1684!ash more than were executed for any reason by the Spanish, Portugese, and Roman Inquisitions between 1500 and 1800. (All three of these Inquisitions burned fewer than a dozen witches in total.)

The most-dreaded lay witch-hunter was Nicholas Rémy, attorney general of Lorraine, who boasted of sending 900 persons to the stake in a single decade (1581-1591). But the all-time grand champion exterminator of witches was Ferdinand von Wittelsbach, Catholic prince-archbishop of Cologne, Germany, who burned 2,000 members of his flock during the 1630s.

Let no one argue that witch-hunting was a predominantly Protestant activity. Both Catholic and Protestant lands saw light and heavy hunts. Demonologists and critics alike came from both religious camps.  
 **Regional Influences**

Local factors, not religious loyalties, determined the severity of witch persecutions. Roman law on the continent was harsher than English common law. Prosecuting *maleficium* alone, as England and Scandanavia did, yielded fewer victims than prosecuting diabolism (Scotland and Germany) or white magic (Lorraine and France). Unlimited torture in Germany induced more confessions than the limited torture in the Franche-Comté region in France. English third-degree methods such as sleep-deprivation were also effective ways of raising the number of convictions.

Ignoring denunciations procured through torture preserved Denmark from Germany's dreadful chain-reaction panics in which accused witches would in turn finger other witches. "Spectral evidence" from accusers' dreams was a significant prosecution device in Salem. Finding a witch's mark insensitive to pricking "or a witch's teat," on which familiars allegedly fed, secured convictions in Scotland and England; uncertainty about the credibility of witch's marks won acquittals in Geneva. Child witnesses — often malicious liars — proved deadly in Sweden, the Basque country in Spain, Germany, and England(the hysteria resembled that surrounding the sex-abuse charges brought against U.S. day-care centers during the 1980s).

Professional witch-finders had dire impact. The best-known of these freelance accusers was England's Matthew Hopkins, who doomed up to 200 people from 1645 through 1647. But special inquisitors or investigative committees were also lethal. Local judges were usually harsher than professional jurists from outside the community. Reviews of convictions by central authorities spared accused witches in Denmark, France, Sweden, and Austria. An informal appeal from ministers outside Salem halted the panic there.

Witch-hunting was typically part of broader campaigns to repress unruly behavior and impose religious orthodoxies. The hunt played out in a world of shrinking opportunities for ordinary folk. Early modern village economies were often zero-sum games, where the death of a cow could ruin a family. Peasants were locked into face-to-face contact with their neighbor-enemies. Feuds could last for generations.

The poorest and most marginalized people in communities were the most common targets of the witch-hunts, but sometimes social subordinates and even children turned the tables by accusing their wealthy superiors of witchcraft.

Women were more prominent than men at witchcraft trials, both as accused and as accusers. Not only did Sprenger's image of women as the more lustful and malicious sex generate suspicions; the fact that women had a lower social status than men made them easier to accuse. In most regions, about 80 percent of the alleged witches killed were female. Women were then as likely to be accused witches as men were to be saints or violent criminals. That was because women typically fought with curses instead of steel. Although the stereotype did not always fit, the British witch was usually seen as irascible, aggressive, unneighborly, and often repulsive — hardly the gentle healer of neopagan fantasy. Her colorful curses could blight everything down to "the little pig that lieth in the sty." She magnified her powers to frighten others and extort favors. If she could not be loved, she meant to be feared.

Alternatively, the witches of Lorraine were said to be "fine and crafty, careful not to quarrel with people or threaten them. Effusive compliments were signs of suspected witchcraft in Lorraine, and suppressed anger could be ominous. Being innocent of the impossible crimes associated with witchcraft did not necessarily mean that witch-hunt victims were "nice." Some were prostitutes, beggars, or petty criminals. Austria's Zauberjäeckl trials (1675-1690) punished as witches people who were actually dangerous felons. The Magic Jacket Society prosecuted in those trials was a Baroque version of the Hell's Angels, recruiting waifs whom it controlled through black magic, sodomy, and conjurations with mice. The prince-archbishop of Salzburg, Austria, graciously forbade executing members of the society who were under the age of twelve. But 200 others were put to death.

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**Panic and Torture**

Witch-hunting could be endemic or epidemic. Its dynamics varied. Small panics (fewer than 20 victims) tended to occur in villages worried about *maleficium*. Their victims were often poor, obnoxious persons whose removal the rest of the community applauded.

If small panics fed on long-smoldering fears about neighbors, large ones exploded without warning, killing people of all classes and conditions and rupturing social bonds. The worst examples of this were in Germany, where unlimited use of torture (in defiance of imperial law) produced an ever-expanding wave of denunciations. To object was to court death.

Large witch-panics started with the usual obscure suspects and worked up the social scale to prosperous citizens, reputable matrons, high-ranking clerics, town officials, and even judges. The longer a panic lasted, the higher was the proportion of male and wealthy victims.

According to the Dutch Jesuit Cornelius van Loos, confiscations from suspected witches in large panics could "coin gold and silver from human blood." Youngsters were legally old enough to burn as soon as they could distinguish "gold from an apple." Children as young as nine were burned in Würzburg, including the bishop's nephew, and boys ages three and four were imprisoned as Satan's catamites.

Some of the German trials were marred by collusion, bribes, and rape. Unspeakable tortures were routine — 17 different kinds were authorized by "the Saxon lawgiver," Benedikt Carpzov, during the 17th century. Confessing "without torture" in Germany meant without torture that drew blood. Nearly all who underwent this broke, even the blameless.

Yet witches sometimes did turn themselves in and confess spontaneously, the equivalent of today's "suicide by police." The same melancholy, frustration, and despair that they claimed had driven them into the devil's arms brought them willingly to the stake. They had apparently come to believe the wish-fulfillment fantasies of pleasure and revenge enacted in the theaters of their minds. Nevertheless, they still hoped to save their souls through pain.

A few brave men spoke up for justice. In 1563, Johann Weyer, a Protestant court physician, drew attention to the cruelty of the trials and the mental incompetence of many of the accused. English country gentleman Reginald Scot mocked witchcraft as popish nonsense in 1584. In 1631, the Jesuit Friedrich von Spee, confessor to witches burned at Mainz, proclaimed them innocent victims. Van Loos, witness to the horrors of witchcraft trials at Trier, !had his manuscript confiscated in 1592 before it could be published and was himself imprisoned and banished.

Ironically, a Spanish inquisitor named Alonso Salazar y Frias mounted the most dramatic challenge to witch-hunting. In 1609, a panic among French Basques in the western Pyrenees on the Bay of Biscay spilled over into the Navarra region in Spain, where six accused witches went to the stake. But Salazar, who had been a judge in that trial, became skeptical as the panic widened to engulf 1,800 suspects, 1,500 of them children. Basque witches' confessions included such incredible details as familiars in the form of costumed toads that child-witches herded with little crooks during sabbats.

Salazar cross-checked testimony, had supposed magic substances tested, and applied logic to conclude that the alleged witches were simply an artifact of witch-hunting. "There were neither witches nor bewitched until they were talked !and written about," he reported in 1610. With stubborn patience, Salazar wrested a decision from his superiors that freed the accused in 1614. The Spanish Inquisition never executed another witch; nor did it permit secular authorities to do so after an outbreak in Catalonia that saw more than 300 witches hanged between 1616 and 1619. What could have erupted into Europe's worst witch-panic was extinguished by one man

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