

17th century
european witch craze
history essay



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The 17th century was the height of witch craze in Europe, where many were executed and persecuted for witchcraft. Approximately eighty five percent of those executed for witchcraft were women and this frenzy continued in Europe all the way to the early twentieth century. The loss of life was so severe that it has been referred to some researchers as a holocaust. Did this hysteria against witchcraft reduce their numbers? No. The more violently they were executed, the more in number they became. Most of those executed were women and this form of massive attack on women signifies a type of genocide; one that focuses on gender rather than on a religious or ethnic group. In Reformation Europe, women were overwhelmingly tried as witches. In France and Germany, more than eighty percent of those executed as witches and in England, ninety two percent of those executed for witchcraft were women and in Russia, approximately ninety five percent were also put to death (Trevor 214). The practice of witch hunts subsided by late seventeenth century and by early eighteenth century, witchcraft trials were rare. The causes for the decline of witch hunts are numerous and complex. This paper will attempt to analyze the witch craze phenomenon concentrating on several questions: why did women suffer the majority of the executions? Why did the witch craze end in the seventeenth century? Why was there a sudden increased attention to black magic, and witchcraft? The paper will also analyze the social, political, institutional, and philosophical factors which may have driven the period of witch hunts to its end.

Discussion

What was the witchcraft craze and why did it occur?

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All through history, there have always been cases of conjures, cunning folk, sorcerers and witches. Normally these individuals were women, whom other people sought out since it was believed that they had supernatural powers over both human beings and nature, leading individuals to use them in a bid to find lost items, obtain a love potion, to put a curse or spell on someone, to heal a disease and numerous other purposes. Devil or satanic association was not part of these magical powers. Around late thirteenth century, the Catholic Church started to advocate that only its priests had legal magical powers. Because these magical powers were not human, they either came from the devil or from God. Anyone, outside of the Church involved in these activities was believed to have obtained their magical powers from the devil, and thus was considered witches. As a result, a new meaning of witchcraft and witches was created. Pagel (130) affirms that with time, a progressively broader variety of crimes were assigned to witches: power to cause painful illness and crippling, to cause sudden death, to cause frigidity, sexual impotence, barrenness, loss of livestock and crop failure. Any kind of inexplicable disaster was entirely blamed on witches.

According to Levack (180), by late fifteenth century, in certain areas of German states, evidence was found that stated that witches worshipped Satan. In order to examine whether these utterances were true, the Pope assigned some Dominican friars to investigate the presence of witches. These monks found that a significant number of those involved in witchcraft were women. A significant number of scholars have attempted to find out why women were mostly recognized as witches. In Reformation Europe, women were overwhelmingly tried as witches. In Russia, about ninety five

percent of those convicted and sentenced to death were women and in England, the figure was ninety two percent (Trevor 214). By late sixteenth century, accusations and killings of witches were out of control. As the court systems secured more confessions, individuals were satisfied that the witch killings were effectively eliminating witches. Williams & Pamela (246) says that most of those accused and persecuted were only women, from the lower social economic classes.

How many women were sentenced to death? Whilst this has been termed lethal misogyny, many scholars believe that two to nine million women lost their lives (Trevor 215). Then in late seventeenth century, the persecution of witches abruptly stopped. Some of the most worthy reasons postulated about the persecutions of witches are: changing practices in medicines from male midwives to female ones, misogyny, village anxieties and tensions about the poor, witches brew, the Protestant Reformation, psychedelic rye, ergot poisoning and syphilis (Yehuda 27).

In the history of women, misogyny has been a common leitmotif. This hatred and fear of women led men at the time to post or record their negative notations on women. Williams & Pamela (257) states that even notable philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato observed women as intellectually and physically inferior beings. During the fourteenth century, most men believed that women were simply vessels for giving birth or malformed males. Starting in the sixteenth century in England and fifteenth century in France, women such as midwives came under suspicion as being witches because they used natural plants for remedies while the physicians who were men and the only ones allowed to be trained and licensed, had a

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difficult time competing with the midwives because they did not have access to the homeopathic treatments (Sidky 78). Thus, in order to avoid the competition, the physicians resulted to accusing the midwives and other female healers of practicing maleficent medicine. Furthermore, the profession of midwives was increasingly becoming a very profitable venture and the male physicians wanted to profit from this. Since there was a high prevalence of morbidity for new mothers and babies, women were natural targets for witchcraft accusations.

Additionally, there have always been village anxieties and tensions about the poor. Poorer widowed or older single women in general did not have male supporters nearby to protect them against unconfirmed witchcraft accusations. And on numerous times, these women had many cats and other pets to keep them company and these were additional sources of witchcraft suspicions. Anderson (172) states that in experiment with witches in America, older women were very defenseless and tensions between old and new settlers were also present. Also recent research indicates that while old unmarried women were killed at the start of the witch craze, they were replaced by younger and married women. The European witch craze of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries was an exceptional historical combination of accusations against individuals, particularly women, of whom the majority were possibly innocent.

Lastly, another theory that explains the witchcraft craze was the increased pervasiveness of syphilis and its attendant qualities that were related to the effects of ergot poisoning. From the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries, almost every level of society from nobles to peasants had syphilis.

In the last stages of syphilis, unusual behavior is manifested, severe mental illness occurs, compounding the events that led to accusations of witchcraft.

Decline and end of witch hunts in seventeenth century Europe

The decline and end of witch hunts in late seventeenth century Europe was a gradual process which occurred as a result of multiple causes. The elements that led to a decline and end of witch hunts included new political or social phenomena, a new way of thinking, new legislations, and so on.

Nevertheless, the elements also included, "...the absence of whatever started them in the first place..." (Yehuda 14). For this reason, the factors, which developed the widespread certainty in the supernatural into witch hunts, are closely related to the factors that led to the decline and end of the witch hunts. So, the decline and end of these hunts in contemporary Europe was a multifaceted and gradual process. The causes for the decline can be classified into four kinds of factors: social, political, intellectual/philosophical and institutional.

Social factors

It is quite clear that the witch hunts were not only about religion; social factors played a significant role. Over the years, scholars have assembled numerous records and have found connections among the accused witches (Trevor 278). As mentioned above, most of the witches were vulnerable women; those who had weak financial basis and those that lacked standing in the society. Simply put, these women had no or very little source of protection, be it money, a husband, or social status against accusations. But, as conditions improved and time passed, there were less of these vulnerable

women, and so, fewer women were persecuted for their alleged affiliation with witchcraft. The implementation of the Poor Law is a historic event that reveals this pattern. The Poor Law exclusively defined the 'poor' and classified them into 'incapable poor' who could not provide for themselves or work, the 'able-bodied poor', those who were competent of labor but who could not find any work, and the beggars (Trevor 278). Moreover, the Poor Law made provisions to provide materials and relief to these people. A substantial number of the vulnerable women mentioned above fit the groups of the 'poor' and were thus supported. In England, the decline of witch hunts in sixteenth and seventeenth century can be partially attributed to this social improvement.

Another social factor which contributed to the end and decline of witch hunts in Europe involved tolerance in the society. In Europe, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw frequent and large scale conflicts over religious identity within and between states. But, in other parts of the European society, concepts like tolerance were being spread and gained many supporters. The idea behind tolerance was not that sorcery or devil worshipping was socially acceptable, but that if individuals engaged in any sorcery or devilish acts, which did not interfere with the welfare of the society or anyone, people would not hunt them down. This change in the society considerably aided the decline of witch hunts. Also, all through the middle ages and on, disruptions, changes, revolutions and social upheavals plagued Europe. And as Europe stepped into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it experienced social developments and a general stability in

societies; this time frame matches up to the time frame in which the witch hunts declined and ended.

Philosophical / intellectual factors

In Europe, various notions and schools of thoughts developed during the period of witch hunts. Some of them were successful in persuading many people to abandon such hysterical and irrational practice. The period between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europe experienced the Enlightenment and the Reformation when the zeal for witch hunts started to cool off. The rise of secular rationalism started around this time. And, an arrangement of secularism, which is "...the affirmation that particular institutions or practices should separately exist from religious belief or religion..." (Trevor 280), and rationalism, which appeals to reason, convinced Europeans to dismiss sorcery and devilry. Individuals who upheld secular rationalism and those who believed had intellectual superiority started treating the belief in witch hunts as nonsense. This trend started with early Enlightenment's intelligentsia (Pagel 145). With such a group of individuals speaking against witch craft, the figure of witch hunts significantly declined.

However, such ideas and philosophy did not remain within the intelligentsia. People from the middle class also started accepting the theory of secular rationalism and they rejected witch hunts. They did so in order to assure themselves of their association with the intelligentsia. What's more, by attacking the poor as superstitious for believing in witchcraft, and by borrowing the ideas from the elites and backing them, the middle class could

discern themselves from the poor peasant class. Simply put, class consciousness significantly helped stop the witch hunts in Europe.

And as Europeans started becoming more familiar with medical science, it became unattainable for them to carry out executions and pursuits as they had previously done. Individuals made accusations on several grounds; one of the most ordinary ones was the physical evidence the accused persons displayed with their bodies (Anderson 179). Boils, growths, moles, and so forth, were significantly considered as evidence of affiliation with the devil or the devil's mark. Nonetheless, as people observed such qualities on the bodies of people with unimpeachable character, such qualities or marks lost reliability as evidence. For instance, in Geneva Switzerland, the devil's mark had become a recognized form of evidence, and surgeons were given the task of examining the accused persons. But, the surgeons started hesitating on their methods as they stumbled upon individuals of impeccable nature and moral reputation with the devil's mark. These surgeons concluded that differentiating the devil's mark from marks of natural origin was challenging, if not unachievable. As a result, capital prosecution of witches became almost impossible and after 1625, only one witch was executed in Geneva. Throughout Europe, similar situations occurred although not concurrently.

Additionally, there was a continuing redefinition of the concept of the devil in Europe. As time passed, Europeans started changing their views of the power of the devil. According to Levack (198), the lack of solid evidence of the devil's existence reduced the authority of the devil. As individuals began to recognize the inferior position of the devil, the issue of witch hunts became a completely religious matter, where previously it was a judiciary

matter. Punishments and response for witchcrafts became reconciliation and penance, instead of capital punishment as had been the case.

Political factors

Religious conflicts of various magnitudes infested sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. Occasions on wars, violence, instability and confusion had their origin in religion and these conflicts continued when other issues like economy and politics were added on. For instance, the Thirty Years' War and the Dutch Revolt were aggravated by and after the Protestant Reformation (Trevor 302). This kind of setting and environment was where the witch craze was the most severe and prevalent. Numerous cases of witch hunts point their basis to the political factors. According to Anderson (193) the Great Scottish Witch Hunt that occurred in 1661-1662, saw two hundred and six people accused of witchcraft. In Massachusetts in 1692-1693, over one hundred and fifty individuals were arrested and sentenced, with more individuals unofficially pursued. It is important to note that the political factor theory states that once stability restored and authority was centralized, the witch hunts significantly decreased in number.

Institutional factors

On top of the social, philosophical/intellectual and political factors, the decline of witch hunts was competed with institutional changes in Europe. The social, political and philosophical/intellectual changes mentioned above prepared European societies to implement such changes into law. In England, the Witchcraft Act of 1734 redefined witchcraft so that the conventional form of witchcraft would no longer be deemed as a legal

offence. Therefore, blameless people were not to get hunted. The English Act of Parliament in 1736 also eradicated witch hunts and Poland also did so in 1776. The amendments made in judiciary institutions contributed to bringing the hunts to a close (Sidky 148). In eras when the witch hunt craze was at its peak, there was no central or little control over the trials. Along with centralization and political stability, Europe had to experience amendments in the judiciary. In order to accomplish this, several societies allowed appeals to higher courts; they also verified that local magistrates were correctly trained for the occupation. Such measures prevented the witch craze from escalating into an uproarious drama and slowly let them subside. Also institutional touches including improvements and legislations in the judicial system concluded the second chapter of the decline of witch hunts, thus, bringing the period of witch hunts to a close. Even though when institutional factors materialized in every state varied, they were the ultimate factor of the decline and end of the witch hunts and craze.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine the witch craft craze in continental Europe as a result of the convergence of various conditions: timing of the witch craze, content and reasons why women were the primary victims of the witch hunts. The witch hunts and trials in Europe haunted many people and took many lives. The witch hunts were the prevailing societal phenomena in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and are still a topic that draws a lot of interest and attention. Particularly, in the realm of witch hunts in continental Europe, how the hunts developed from an already established belief in the existence of the devil and how they can to their end

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are topics still open for further studies. This paper also studied the causes for the decline and end of witch craze and hunts, classifying them into several factors: social, political, institutional and philosophical / intellectual. A combination of these factors reduced the number of occurrences of witch hunts and trials, and eventually concluded them. The witch craze in Europe came to an end when the conditions for its beginning were no longer in existence.