

The european witch hunts



After the Reformation in Europe, there was a time of many religious wars and exploration. Controversy within Europe over different religions along with new knowledge from foreign lands impacted the European people and influenced their attitudes toward women. From 1500 to 1650, there was a rise in European witch-hunts, because of various social and religious factors, but as Europe stabilized according to the new cultural factors, there was greater overall acceptance of change. As the people of Europe calmed down and acclimated to the changes, the number of witch hunts also went back down.

The Reformation had taken its toll on Europe, and the people suffered for it. Inflation made it very difficult for peasants to maintain their daily lifestyle, which was already being made worse by famines and religious wars. Many people were evicted from their homes, and thereby turned to beggary to survive. As the general atmosphere of Europe became unstable, people started to show more hostility toward others, especially toward women, who were viewed as inferior. There was greater hostility toward unmarried women, who could not defend themselves because they had no financial or social protection. Older women without families were the most prone to accusations of witchcraft, as seen in the depiction of the old witch feeding her little demons, known as her " familiars"(Gendercide). Villagers believed that the witches were old women who were spiteful and jealous of those who were still young and therefore capable of bearing child and doing heavy work, which led to further shunning of the elderly women on the part of the community. In general, women were believed to be evil. According to the Christian Inquisitors who wrote the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the female sex was

more concerned with material objects than men, and therefore was imperfect, while “ man belongs to a privileged sex from whose midst Christ emerged.” Witches were henchmen of the Devil, and they would try to cause havoc upon men, by tempting them, causing hatred, or rendering them sterile. To force captured women to repent and confess to being witches, they were tortured horribly, such as by receiving mastectomies or having their joints dislocated.

Many women and fewer men were killed under the accusation that they had practiced witchcraft, by the Inquisitors, of which the number grew tremendously during the Reformation. The religious wars had caused many people to become afraid of the Devil and also of social outcasts. To combat this, the rulers took action to attempt to appease the people of their countries. In 1532, Charles V of the Regensburg Reichstag passed the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina*, commonly shortened to the Carolina Code, which made witchcraft illegal in Germany. According to the Carolina Code, those who were found using witchcraft to harm others would be executed by fire, which became the precedent for the mass witch trials held from 1580 to 1680. The rulers of England also passed acts against witches; Mary Stuart, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and James I were English monarchs who passed Witchcraft Acts, which banned sorcery and enchantments (Popular Witchcraft). In the year Elizabeth passed her Witchcraft Act, the Council of Trent met for their last session also in 1563. The Council set its main goal as eliminating Protestantism from Germany, the pursuit of which the Jesuits took up. In 1589, Claudio Aquaviva, the General of the Jesuit Society, ordered the Jesuits of the Rhineland to encourage local rulers to persecute witches in

witch trials and citizens to report their neighbors for witchcraft, many of whom were innocent old women.

However, as Europe bounced back from the changing times and economic problems, the numbers of witch hunts declined. The Glorious Revolution was happening in England, while the Dutch Republic was flourishing in one of its Golden Ages. People had no need to be scared, and therefore they were starting to be less suspicious of the Devil. The old, poor women who were normally accused as witches were able to attain a better reputation as normal people, and not envious evil witches. In the picture *Maternal Care* by Pieter de Hooch, the mother and daughter are located in a regular urban house, and the plain room suggests an emphasis on cleanliness and order. This is unlike the opinions people had of women previously, which was that women served as evil workers for the Devil, who tried to corrupt men and make them evil as well. Women have gained a bit more respect, and they have also gained protection. The English Poor Law protected the poor of England, and offered them relief. Because many of the women belonged to this category, it meant that many gained at least a bit of protection under the law. This period of stability in Europe led to a smaller number of witch trials. However, this peace was broken again when Scotland suffered a small period of anarchy. The English justices were replaced, and for a small while, there was no authority to reign over the Scottish people. During this time, the number of witch-hunts peaked.

The presence of the European witch-hunts from 1500 to 1650 depended on the different aspects of each country, including the social, religious, political, and economic factors. When there was turmoil in Europe, the number of

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witch hunts went up, while when the atmosphere in Europe stabilized, there were less witch hunts throughout Europe. People had taken their fear and anger and lashed out against the women of a community as the scapegoats for their feelings, leading to the European witch hunts from 1500 to 1650.