

Witch Hunts and Panics

***Keep the following question in mind: How could the witch hunts and panics take place when the new science, which promoted rationality and reason, was challenging ancient traditions and superstition.**

- I. General Facts
 - A. Not everyone accepted the rationality espoused by the new science
 1. traditional fears and beliefs retained their hold on the majority of the population
 2. many still believed in the power of demons and black magic
 3. even the learned and those who were sympathetic to the emerging scientific ideas continued to believe in the power of magic and the occult
 - B. Between 1400 and 1700, 70,000 to 100,000 people were put to death for harmful magic and witchcraft
 - C. Witchcraft trials were prevalent in England, Scotland, Switzerland, Germany, some parts of France and the Low Countries (Austrian Netherlands, Holland, and Denmark) and even New England in America
 - D. Witches were persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants
- II. Factors Leading to the Witch Hunts
 - A. Belief in Magic
 1. Village Origins
 - a. before the Church declared war on black magic, “cunning folk” were respected members of village life
 - b. these were people who villagers turned to in times of natural calamity (crop failure, famine, etc.) for help
 - c. cunning folk gave villagers hope that such natural disasters might be averted or reversed by magical means
 2. The Church taught that magic was real and that there was a difference between “Good Magic” and “Bad Magic”
 - a. the Church maintained that only priests possessed “legitimate” magical power (the holy sacraments and the exorcism of demons)
 - b. those who practiced magic outside of the Church evidently derived their power from the Devil
 - c. in a papal bull issued by Pope Innocent VIII in 1484, the Church made official that the practice of witchcraft was heresy
 - 1) to combat “Black Magic”, Innocent sent two Dominican monks (Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer) to Germany to investigate and root out witches
 - 2) these monks wrote *Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of the Witches)*...this remained one of the standard handbooks on the practices of witchcraft and the methods that could be used to discover and try witches
 - d. the distinction between good and bad magic allowed the Church to persecute and get rid of the cunning folk...this, in turn, allowed the Church to expand its influence in the outer towns and villages

***The witchcraft craze and panic became more widespread during the 16th and 17th centuries...**

B. Religious Uncertainties

1. many witchcraft trials occurred in areas where Protestantism had been recently victorious
2. by criticizing the Church and its doctrines, Protestants had weakened traditional religious protections against demons and the Devil, while at the same time portraying them as still powerful
3. witch hunts also occurred in areas where Protestant-Catholic controversies still raged
4. as religious passions became inflamed, accusations of being in league with the devil became common on both sides

C. Political and Social Strife

1. as governments expanded and attempted to control their realms, they, like the Church, wanted to eliminate all competition for the loyalty of their subjects
2. hence, secular rulers often accused their enemies of practicing witchcraft

III. Why were women usually accused of being witches?

A. Misogyny (hatred and fear of women)

1. Biblical Roots (women seen as temptresses or corrupters)
2. *Malleus Maleficarum*
 - a argued that there was a direct link between witchcraft and women
 - b argued that women were inferior to men both mentally and morally (making them especially open to temptation)
3. women were closer to breaking away from male control

B. Social/Economic Reasons

1. older, single women were a dependant social group in need of public assistance and, therefore, natural targets
2. some women claimed supernatural powers to improve their social status
3. many women were involved in midwifery (thus, they were associated with the deaths of beloved wives and infants)

IV. Why did the witch hunts end?

A. new science

1. less emphasis on the supernatural
2. led to the belief that human beings have a significant degree of control over their lives and do not need to depend on supernatural aid

B. became a circus (the accused claimed that others, including judges and town officials, also were in league with the devil)

C. Reformation: God is the only significant spiritual force in the universe