Witch Hunts

Why were so many people in early modern Europe found guilty of using witchcraft?

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HISTORY TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION *of* VICTORIA

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Foreword

Inquiry-based learning is a major component of humanities teaching in Australia and abroad. The inquiry approach, which was first applied to the physical sciences, is based on the work of J.S. Bruner, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky and others. It has been employed in various learning contexts by practitioners such as Joe Exline, Dan Apple, Cornelia Bruner and the Education Development Center.

The inquiry method is based on the proposition that learning should be structured around a series of relevant and targeted questions, sometimes developed in partnership, rather than the traditional method of a teacher (expert) imparting an established set of facts to students (recipients). Good inquiry questions will be intriguing for students and teachers alike.

In the History classroom, the opening lesson of an inquiry unit often centres on a curious image or item which students are asked to speculate upon. The teacher might ask questions like, 'What do you think is going on here?', 'How long ago might this item have been created?' and so on. After some initial hypotheses and discussions, the teacher might explain the origin and significance of the item, before introducing the main inquiry question. This is usually a broad, over-arching question that 'frames' the unit. This framing question (for our purposes, Inquiry Question 1) will be returned to throughout the study and completed in full at the end. The teacher also sets several other inquiry questions targeting specific points – these can usually be answered in one or two lessons.

As they go through the unit, students examine a set of historical sources. These sources, comprising documents, images, statistics, news clippings and artistic works, are used as evidence with which to answer the inquiry questions. Through a range of enjoyable tasks, students respond creatively and form opinions of their own.

Inquiry units tend to encourage:

- curiosity
- imagination
- detective work
- interaction
- physical movement
- debate

They also foster skills such as:

- forming hypotheses
- research
- analysis
- synthesis
- understanding context and chronology
- forming and defending an argument

The most important part of the process, however, seems to be the sense of surprise and enthusiasm that is created when teacher and students set about solving a puzzle together.

I trust this series will give you many lively ideas for your History classroom.

Ingrid Purnell
Editor

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Overview

Why were so many people in early modern Europe found guilty of using witchcraft?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Witch hunts gripped Europe at intervals between 1450 and 1700, and their rise and decline is the subject of ongoing debate involving scholars from around the world. Recent figures suggest that up to 100 000 people were tried for the crime of witchcraft in Europe and North America, and that 40–45 000 people were executed.[1] But with many legal records lost, destroyed or incomplete, and with surviving sources scattered across the borders of long-disappeared states and dioceses, gathering an accurate picture of whom was convicted, and where, presents historians with a difficult task. Explaining *why* the witch hunts happened might seem even more challenging, viewing them as we do from our sceptical twenty-first century perspective. The aim of this inquiry is to enrich students' understanding of late medieval and early modern Europe by helping them to discover that, at that time, belief in and fear of witchcraft was not as irrational as it might appear today. In the process students will construct a historical account from raw source material.

Historians studying the witch hunts have drawn on three main groups of sources: records of legal proceedings; contemporary pamphlets or broadsheets produced for a popular audience; and guides produced by contemporary demonologists. Demonologists were experts in witchcraft: theologians, lawyers and priests who authored tracts on identifying and dealing with witches. Sprenger and Kramer, for example, produced the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) (Hammer of Witches) and King James I himself wrote *Daemonologie* (1597), which highlighted the danger posed by witches and explained how to secure a prosecution for witchcraft. Other historical sources include representations of witches and their crimes by artists, authors and musicians in the form of woodcuts, paintings and ballads.

Much historical investigation has focused on the larger-scale witch hunts such as those occurring in Essex, England (1645–6), Germany (1560s, 1580s–90s, 1620s–30s) and Salem, Massachusetts (1689). Some people were convicted on religious grounds, for making a pact with the Devil, attending a witches' Sabbath or for conjuring evil spirits. Others were accused of *maleficium*: using witchcraft to cause harm, including murder, injury or disease; interfering with pregnancy and birth; theft and damage to crops and property; or conjuring up storms. Many of the larger outbreaks occurred at the same time as poor harvests, economic hardship, wars or other kinds of upheaval occurred.

The evidence, though incomplete, reveals geographical differences in the intensity of

persecution (around 26 000 executed in Germany, four in Ireland), gender ratios of accused witches (ninety per cent were female in Hungary, while in Iceland ninety-two per cent were male)[2], the degree of interest in the Devil (Scottish and German trials were devil-centred, while English trials were often neighbourly disputes), and whether torture was used to secure confessions. The Reformation occurred during this period and different faiths are represented among the witch hunters, including Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran and Puritan.

Life in villages throughout this era, as well as in the growing towns, was subject to a range of socio-economic conditions which helped to create an environment conducive to witch hunts. Such factors included:

- widespread religious upheaval caused by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation

- military conflicts such as the Thirty Years War and the English Civil Wars

- development of the printing press

- a widening gap between rich and poor

- episodic freak weather (dubbed 'the Little Ice Age' by climate historians) which destroyed crops, caused diseases of cattle and led to episodes of famine, hunger and price inflation (in an intensely religious age where unusual events were readily interpreted as portents or signs from God).

WHAT DO BELIEFS ABOUT WITCHCRAFT TELL US ABOUT EARLY MODERN EUROPE?

Focusing on early modern beliefs about witchcraft allows us to explore people's mental and physical worlds. The sources which tell us about witchcraft also allow us to draw inferences about most aspects of life at that time, including beliefs in God and the Devil, the power of the Church, crime and punishment, legal proceedings, agriculture, food, clothing, hopes and fears, technology, medicine, politics and much more.

PRIOR AND SUBSEQUENT LEARNING

This inquiry is intended for students in Years 7–8, most of whom will have studied some aspects of the medieval period, such as peasant life, monks and nuns and the medieval church. Some may already know about the murder of Thomas Becket and the persecution of Jews in medieval Europe; those that don't may need a little background. This inquiry builds on their understanding of the importance of religion in medieval life and takes them into the early modern period.

An engaging topic has been deliberately chosen to stimulate the students' curiosity. The topic of witches, as well as being exciting, will prepare them for key social, economic and political developments within the early modern period, such as the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the English Civil Wars, the Renaissance and the settlement of North America.

Knowledge and understanding developed by the students during this unit will be useful to them in Years 9, 10 and beyond, when they encounter topics as diverse as Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia and Mao's China.

LINKS TO THE WORLD TODAY

Belief in witchcraft, and persecution of alleged witches of both sexes, continues to be a feature of many societies today, especially in sub-Saharan and southern Africa. Any discussion of this would need to be handled sensitively by the

Unit outline

INQUIRY QUESTION / NATURE OF TASKS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES STUDENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO…	TEACHING & LEARNING ACTIVITIES (FORMALLY ASSESS WHERE APPROPRIATE)	RESOURCES
1. Why were so many people in early modern Europe found guilty of using witchcraft? *Overview* *Engaging with the question*	Extract information from a primary source. Recall knowledge about early modern Europe. Frame historical questions.	Introduce the topic through close study of a single source. Students generate questions they will need to answer in order to tackle Inquiry Question 1.	Source 1
2. When and where was it most dangerous to be called a witch? *Extracting information from sources* *Initial knowledge-gathering* *Overview*	Give at least 3 examples of countries where witches were executed. Identify geographical similarities and differences in European witch hunts. Suggest methods of gathering historical data. Some students might: Generate hypotheses to explain differences in the scale of witch hunts. Identify historical problems raised by statistical sources.	Analysis of statistical sources by: 'Translating' them into another form such as graph, chart, newspaper headline, etc. Small-group discussion to decide which was the worst witch hunt. Extension: some students could generate hypotheses to suggest factors which led to the larger witch hunts. Think, pair, share with others. Develop a Fact Bank on witch hunts.	Sources 2–4 Map of Europe
3. What were witches accused of? *Extracting information from sources* *Knowledge-gathering* *Investigating early modern beliefs about witchcraft*	Describe common beliefs about witches. Extract information from a range of sources. Draw inferences about village life in early modern Europe.	In groups students use a range of sources, including court records, to research the types of harm witches were believed to cause. 'Placemat' activity is used by small groups to record their learning and present it to the class. Reflective summary on Inquiry Question 1. Students mime a common scenario of 'witchcraft' in early modern Europe. A fun, visual and kinaesthetic method for reinforcing material.	Sources 5–11

Witch Hunts

Inquiry Question 1

Why were so many people in early modern Europe found guilty of using witchcraft?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this activity, students should be able to:

- Extract information from a primary source
- Recall knowledge about early modern Europe
- Frame historical questions

ACTIVITY 1: A CURIOUS IMAGE

1. As soon as students are settled in their seats, project Source 1 on to a screen using an overhead projector or interactive whiteboard. Tell the students the picture is from the front page of a book published in the late sixteenth century. Don't tell them what topic you are studying – just let them get curious about the picture.

2. Give students one minute in pairs to describe to each other what they can see. Pairs feed back to the class. Use questioning to help students see key details in the source, such as the woman flying on a pitchfork.

3. As a group, discuss briefly what kind of book this might have been. Fiction or non-fiction? What kind of audience was it aimed at? What was its purpose? Then explain that Bishop Peter Binsfield's book, from which the image was taken, was a serious one about the problems witches were causing, and how to recognise and punish them.

4. Use questioning to enable students to draw out the meaning and implication of key details in the source. For example, bewitching crops – why were crops so important? (Binsfield blamed witches for scarcity of crops and high grain prices in the late sixteenth century, and the ensuing inflation and economic crisis); and the presence of the devil (intensely religious view of the world).

5. Explain that Binsfield's book helped to convict and execute hundreds of people in witch trials that took place in Trier, Germany.

6. Briefly contextualise witch hunts in the period 1450–1750. Compare numbers involved (approximately 100 000) to a capacity crowd in the MCG on Grand Final Day, to give a sense of scale. Of these, around 40 000 were executed – burned at the stake or hanged.

7. Introduce the inquiry question and outcome task(s) at this point: put inquiry question on board.

8. In pairs or groups, students brainstorm questions they will need to research in order to complete the task.

9. Groups feed back their questions to the class. Record questions, ensuring that these include Inquiry Questions 2-5 (or go with student suggestions if they are better). Put them on large pieces of butchers paper pinned on wall (or, if using interactive whiteboard, simply save) to be referred to as the inquiry progresses. You can even note names, to foster students' sense of ownership of the inquiry ('remember how Toby and Gemma asked about...does this source help us to answer Jordan's question about...?') Revisiting this record at key points throughout the inquiry (particularly at beginning and end of lessons) builds a sense of momentum and achievement by allowing students to see how much they have learned.

10. Very quick recap of what students already know about early modern life in Europe – especially ensure that they know about the importance of religion, agriculture, peasant life etc. From *what they already know*, can they think of any reasons why many people might have been found guilty of witchcraft? Add these to the butchers paper for future reference – as the inquiry progresses, try to find evidence for or against.

11. Students should hopefully by now be primed and curious, ready to be issued with their first set of sources and get stuck in!
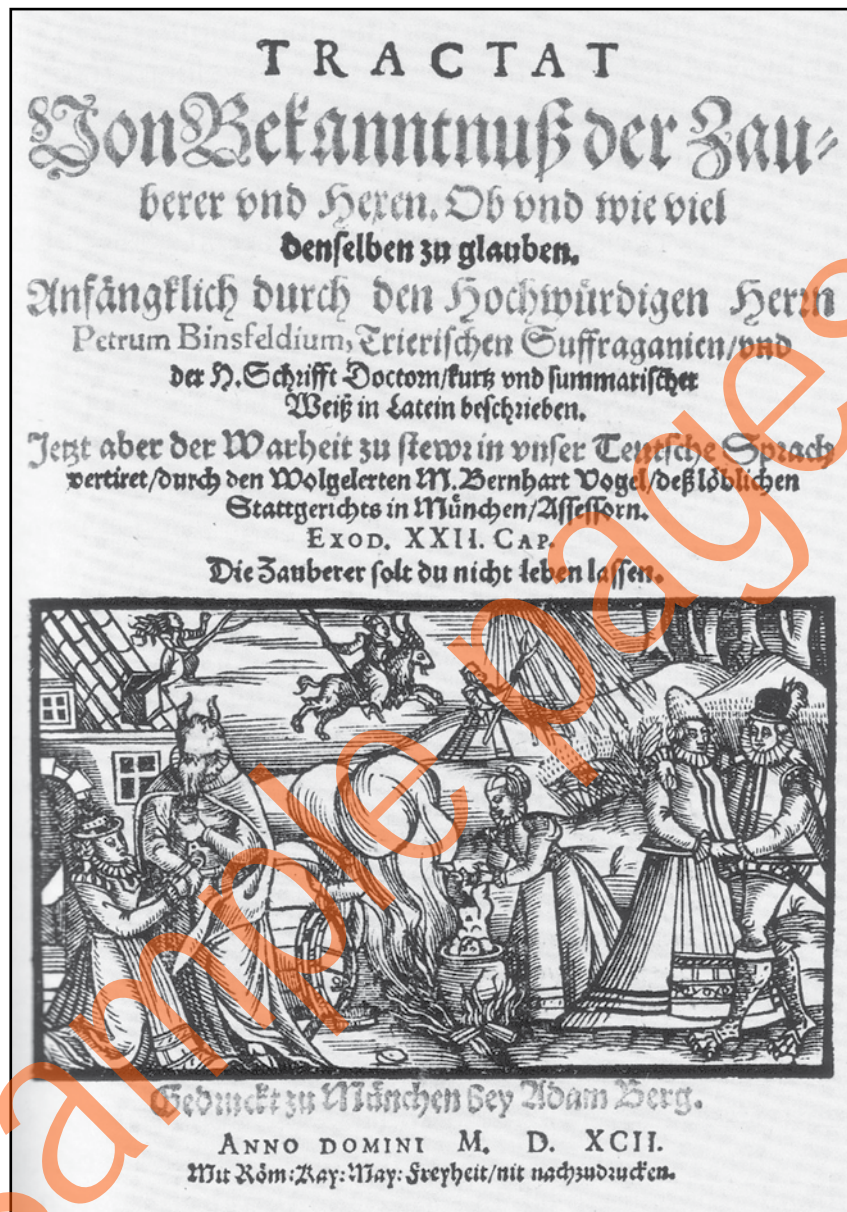
Sources

Distribute these sources to your class as required. You may photocopy from this booklet, or print directly from the CD provided.

Title page from a book published in the late sixteenth century.

Title page from Peter Binsfeld, *Tractat von Bekanntnuss der Zauberer und Hexen*, Munich 1592.

Table showing the largest witch hunts in Europe.

Victims	Place	Religion	Dates	Today in
2000	Duchy of Lorraine	Catholic	1580–1620	France
2000	Spanish Netherlands	Catholic	1580–1620	Belgium
2000	Electoral Cologne	Catholic	1626–35	Germany
2000	Mecklenburg	Lutheran	1570–1630	Germany
2000?	Duchy of Milan	pre-Reformation	1480–1520	Italy
1800	Electoral Mainz	Catholic	1590–1630	Germany
1350	Scotland	Calvinist	1560–1670	UK
1200	Bishopric Würzburg	Catholic	1616–30	Germany
1200	Vaud	Calvinist	1580–1620	Switzerland
1000	Denmark	Lutheran	1540–1680	Denmark
907	Vorderösterreich	Catholic	1560–1650	France/Germany
900	Bishopric Bamberg	Catholic	1616–30	Germany
800	Kingdom of Hungary	Catholic	1710–50	Hungary
600	Pommern-Wolgast	Lutheran	1600–60	Germany
600	Pommern-Stettin	Lutheran	1600–60	Poland
600	Schleswig-Holstein	Lutheran	1600–60	Denmark/Germany
500	Duchy of Savoy	pre-Reformation	1428–36	Italy
500	Valais	pre-Reformation	1428–36	Switzerland
500	Dauphiné	pre-Reformation	1420–50	France
450	Franche-Comté	Catholic	1600–61	France
450	Ellwangen	Catholic	1588–1627	Germany
400	Earldom of Nassau	Calvinist	1590–1660	Germany
400	Earldom of Büdingen	Calvinist	1590–166-	Germany
387	Mergentheim	Catholic	1590–1665	Germany
358	Luxembourg	Catholic	1580–1630	Luxembourg
350	Electoral Trier	Catholic	1581–95	Germany
300	Earldom of Valduz	Catholic	1648–80	Liechtenstein

From Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).