

The Salem (and other) Witch Hunts

By Mike Kubic

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Mike Kubic is a former correspondent of *Newsweek* magazine. In this article, Kubic discusses the causes and effects of the Salem witch trials and the prevalence of prejudice-fueled hunts throughout our history. Kubic connects these seemingly unrelated tragedies in a way that reveals a dark side of human nature. As you read, take notes on the causes of each historical “hunt” and the consequences that follow.

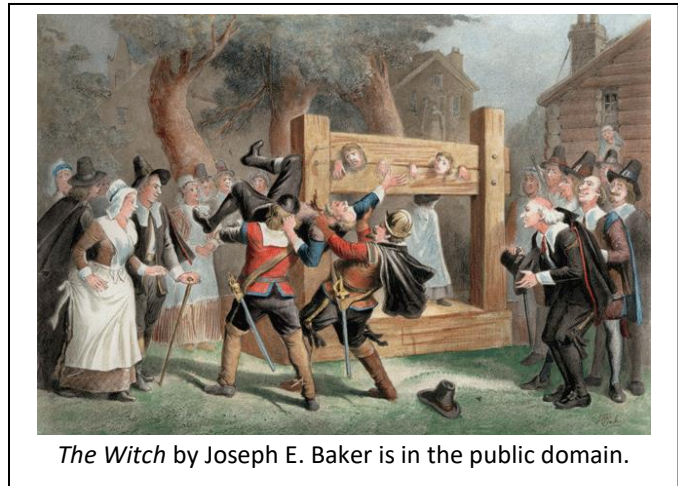
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“I saw Sarah Good with the Devil!

I saw Goody Osburn with the Devil!

I saw Bridget Bishop with the Devil!”

The speaker is Reverend Hale, a serious student of witchcraft, in the closing scene of Act I of Arthur Miller’s classic play *The Crucible*. Hale is repeating the frenzied accusations he had just heard in Salem, a village in the colony of Massachusetts, from three young girls who said they were possessed by the devil. It is not clear whether or not he yet believes what he was told.



The Witch by Joseph E. Baker is in the public domain.

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But in short order, many in the village did. The charges by the clearly unhinged youngsters spread like wild fire and in the spring of 1692 launched a terrifying wave of hysteria. The Salem witch trials that followed are the subject of Miller’s play. A harrowing example of iniquity and staggering unreason, the tragic proceedings have become a synonym for justice gone mad. In less than a year, they embroiled¹ 200 individuals, 20 of whom were executed.

The trials, based on British laws, were swift. Anyone who suspected that some untoward² event or development was the work of a witch, could bring the charge to a local magistrate.³ The magistrate would have the alleged evil-doer arrested and brought in for public interrogation, where the suspect was urged to confess. Whatever his or her response, if the charge of witchcraft was deemed to be credible⁴, the accused was turned over to a superior court and brought before a grand jury. Much of the evidence used in the “trial” was the testimony of the accuser. If more “evidence” was needed, the grand jury might consider the so-called “witch cake,” a bizarre concoction that was made from rye meal and urine of the witch’s victim and

fed to a dog. Eating the cake was supposed to hurt the witch, whose cry from pain would betray her secret identity.

History records that one suspect was subjected to *peine forte et dure*, a form of torture in which he was pressed beneath an increasingly heavy load of stones to make him enter a plea. He died without confessing. Some of those convicted of “witchcraft” were paraded through the streets of the town on their way to the execution. The sentencing of Bridget Bishop, the first victim of the witch trials, was typical of the Salem justice.

Bishop was accused of not living “a Puritan lifestyle” because she wore black clothing and costumes that were against the group’s code. Also, her coat had been found to be oddly “cut or torn in two ways,” and her behavior was regarded as “immoral.” Thus convicted of witchcraft, she was tried on June 10, 1692, and executed by hanging the same day.

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Immediately following this execution, the court adjourned for 20 days and asked for advice from New England’s most influential ministers “upon the state of things as they then stood.” Mere five days later, they produced a voluble⁵ answer penned by Cotton Mather, the prolific pamphleteer of the period, assuring the court and the grand jury that they had done well.

The prominent ministers “humbly recommend[ed]” more of the same, that is, “... the speedy and vigorous prosecution of such as have rendered themselves obnoxious, according to the direction given in the laws of God, and the wholesome statutes of the English nation...”

More people were accused, arrested and examined, but historians believe that by September 1692, the hysteria had begun to abate⁶ and public opinion turned against the trials. In 1693, some of the convicted suspects were pardoned by the governor; the Massachusetts General Court annulled⁷ the guilty verdicts, and even granted indemnities⁸ to their victims’ families.

Other Historic “Witch” Hunts

The Salem episode was a historic landmark, but by no means a rare example of inhumane and insane behavior that can afflict frightened, angry or frustrated people if they’re urged by demagogues⁹ to confront an alleged “menace.”

One hundred years after the Salem trials, courts in France launched mass executions of suspected enemies of the revolution that deposed¹⁰ the monarchy. The “Reign of Terror,” conducted without trials and made more efficient by the use of a new labor-saving machine – the guillotine – lasted from 6 September 1793 until 28 July 1794. It beheaded a total of 42,000 individuals.

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Humanity’s most heinous crime, the Holocaust, was carried out from 1933 till 1945 by 200,000 fanatics acting on orders of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi regime, but it was also abetted¹¹ by crass bigotry and a sense of superiority then affecting many Germans.

The toll included an estimated six million Jews – one-fourth of them children – and five million other people the Nazis regarded as “minderwertig” – “inferior.” They were primarily ethnic Poles, captured Soviet civilians and prisoners of war, other Slavs, Romanis, communists, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses and the mentally and physically disabled. The mass murder was carried out by gas or shooting in six large camps and many smaller extermination facilities in Germany and German-occupied territories.

The Great Purge or the Great Terror in the former USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – was carried out from 1936 to 1938 on orders of the Communist Party chairman and Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. The main victims of the Moscow show trials were Communist officials and upper echelons¹² of the country’s Red Army, some of whom confessed to crimes they had not committed. The purge terrorized the entire Soviet civil service and other leading members of the society – intellectuals, writers, academicians, artists, and scientists.

According to declassified Soviet archives, during 1937 and 1938, the state police detained 1,548,366 persons, of whom 681,692 were shot – an average of 1,000 executions a day. Students of the period believe that the actual executions were two- to three-times higher.

Public Scares in the U.S.

In the United States, groundless fears, prejudices and demagoguery produced three notable events that echo the Salem trials. All three happened under pressures created by the direst¹³ emergencies ever experienced by our nation, which were the Second World War and the Cold War in its aftermath.

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The first episode started three months after the December 7, 1941 Japanese devastating attack on Pearl Harbor, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued an order that allowed regional military commanders to designate “military areas” from which “any or all persons may be excluded.”

The order reflected the widespread fear that presumably poorly assimilated¹⁴ Japanese immigrants and their offspring would be more loyal to their ancient homeland than to their new country. To prevent the rise of such an “enemy within” during the war, state and local authorities along the West Coast removed from their homes over 110,000 Japanese Americans, almost two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens, and transferred them to hundreds of internment camps.

Far from being disloyal, hundreds of the young internees volunteered for the U.S. Army and fought with distinction in a nearly all-Japanese regiment in Europe. After the war, the camps were closed and the residents were allowed to return to their homes. Subsequent¹⁵ investigation by a special government commission found little evidence of Japanese disloyalty, and concluded the war time scare had been the product of racism.

The second and third disgraceful episodes were triggered by irrational fear of communist subversion¹⁶ before and after the onset of the Cold War, an era in which the Soviet leaders proclaimed the superiority of Marxist doctrines and threatened to “bury” the liberal democracies of the United States and other Western nations.

In the late 1930s, following two major film industry strikes, Hollywood movie producers and members of the U.S. Congress accused the Screen Writer’s Guild of including Communist party members. Although the party was legal and its membership was not a crime, in the 1940s and 1950s the charges led to widespread blacklisting of screenwriters, actors, and other entertainment professionals. The so-called “First Red Scare” seriously damaged or ruined the careers of hundreds of individuals working in the film industry.

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Its highlight came in 1947, when ten of these film writers and directors were brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee and questioned whether they were, or had been, Communist party members. When they refused to answer, they were cited¹⁷ for contempt of Congress, were fired from their jobs, and in 1950 began serving a one-year jail sentence.

The start of the “Second Red Scare” is usually traced to a speech that Joseph McCarthy, a U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, delivered on February 9, 1950, to the Republican Women’s Club of Wheeling, West Virginia. Already prominent¹⁸ as a rabid¹⁹ anti-communist, he waved a sheet of paper and announced, “I have here in my hand a list of 205” members of the Communist party who, he said, “are still working and shaping policy in the State Department.”

McCarthy never released the alleged list of names or proved any of his charges, but his reckless and vicious accusations made him both feared and famous.

During his brief political career, he made undocumented charges of communism, communist sympathies, disloyalty, or homosexuality against hundreds of politicians and other individuals inside and outside of government, including the administration of President Harry S. Truman, the Voice of America, and the United States Army.

Government employees and workers in private industry whose characters or loyalty were smeared by McCarthy’s broad brush, lost their jobs. His crusade of slander ended four years after it started, when his charges were rejected during televised McCarthy-Army hearings in 1954, and he was publicly denounced by fellow Republicans and Edward R. Morrow, a leading TV journalist.

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The Senator’s only legacy is an addition to our lexicon¹⁹: “McCarthyism” is a term that stands for demagogic, scurrilous²⁰, and reckless character assassination of opponents.

All three U.S. public scares had a significant aftermath:

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter appointed a commission to investigate whether the decision to put Japanese Americans into internment camps had been justified. The commission found that it was not. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed into law the Civil Liberties Act, which

apologized for the internment on behalf of the U.S. government and authorized a payment of \$20,000 to each individual camp survivor.

The law admitted that government actions were based on “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership,” and 82,219 Japanese Americans who had been interned and their heirs were paid more than \$1.6 billion in reparations.²¹

The Hollywood blacklisting officially ended in 1960, when Dalton Trumbo, a former Communist party member and a one of the Hollywood Ten, was publicly credited as the screenwriter of the highly successful film *Exodus* and later publicly acknowledged for writing the screenplay for the movie *Spartacus*.

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While he was blacklisted, Trumbo wrote under a pseudonym the script for two Academy Awards-winning movies, and in 2016, his story was the subject of a movie titled *Trumbo*.

McCarthy’s antics²² were rejected by the U.S. Senate, which on December 2, 1954 censured²³ him by a vote of 67 to 22. It was one of the rare cases of such extreme form of repudiation²⁴ by fellow Senators, and it strongly affected McCarthy. He died three years later at the age of 48.