

The Witchcraft Trials of 1692 and the Red Scare of 1947 - 1956

Witchcraft hysterias occurred in both Catholic and Protestant areas of Europe from about 1480 through the end of the 1600s. Scholars estimate that from 1500 to 1660, some 50,000 to 80,000 suspected witches, 80% of them women, were executed. Persecutions continued into the 1700s. In Europe, witchcraft persecutions often led to more devastating effects than the hysteria in Salem. In some cities hundreds were executed as witches. In a few Swiss villages, after the waves of anti-witch hysteria, there were scarcely any women left.

The Salem Witchcraft trials of 1692 led to the imprisonment of more than 100 people and the execution of 20. Four died in prison. Men were executed as well as women. The accusations were made by a group of young women demonstrating symptoms of hysteria. They accused various people in the village of appearing to them as specters that would pinch, suffocate or stab them. Often the only way those accused could avoid being hanged was to confess guilt and to give the names of other alleged witches.

Question 1: What is your image of how a witch would look and behave and how would such an image engender fear even in powerful men and women?

The twenty people executed in Salem were those who continued to maintain their innocence, refused to confess, and would not name others. Nineteen were hanged. One man, Giles Corey, was pressed to death, a method of torture used in England on people who would not plead in court. A plea was necessary before the court could take jurisdiction and condemn the prisoner. It was thought that the weight of rocks on the chests of the accused would push the words "guilty" or "not guilty" from their lips.

The only words that pressing got out of Giles Corey were, "more weight, more weight." Historians believe that Corey thought he would be condemned anyway and by refusing to plead he prevented the court from finding that he was a witch. Upon conviction as a witch, his property would have been confiscated and his children would have been without an inheritance. This suggests that for some, the witch trials were motivated by a desire for material gain.

In writing about the Salem witch trials, Arthur Miller sought to re-create the atmosphere in which hysteria can thrive and spread to others; he never claimed that his play was historically accurate. Most historians agree that he gets the sense of the times right: the fear, the intensity, the infectious nature of the hysteria, the retribution brought down upon those who doubted the accusers, and the use of the situation by certain individuals to expropriate and sell the land of the accused.

Arthur Miller was clearly more interested in the story of the Salem witch trials as a metaphor for the Red Scare of the period 1947-1956 than in a study of

Question 1

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American history in colonial times. In the years after World War II, competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union became intense. Spies from the Soviet Union stole secrets of making an atomic bomb. There was great fear of communists in the country, which was fanned by politicians from both parties. President Truman established Loyalty Boards to ferret out communists in the federal government. Other politicians sought headlines and political advantage by making unsupported accusations about the presence of communists in the government or other institutions. Suspicion was extended to people who had joined non-communist political organizations that were later labeled as communist front organizations because they took the same positions as the Communist Party.

The most notorious politician to foment the Red Scare was Senator Joseph McCarthy. He came to prominence with by chairing a special Senate investigating committee and by making mostly baseless claims that communists had infiltrated the State Department and other agencies of the government. When he attacked the U.S. Army in televised hearings, the irresponsibility of this conduct was made manifest and McCarthy was eventually censured by the Senate. McCarthy's name has come to be associated with political attack using guilt by association, innuendo, and unsupported charges.

Question 2: Why would an ordinary person care if another person's freedom of speech is restricted due to extreme political beliefs?

The main vehicle for what came to be known as the "McCarthyites" or the "redbaiters," because of the association of the color red with communism, was the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). This was a committee of the House of Representatives which would call witnesses to testify and demand that they disclose their past political associations. Witnesses were required to repent their connection with the Communist Party of the USA or left wing political organizations and to identify other people who had attended legal political meetings. Refusal to cooperate with the HUAC would ruin careers. If a witness refused to testify about past political associations, relying on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the witness would be cited for contempt of Congress. The government would then prosecute the witness for criminal contempt of Congress. Some people were convicted and sent to federal prison for several years. Witnesses who cooperated with the HUAC and the McCarthyites, who disavowed their prior leftist connections, and who named others with liberal political associations, were exonerated.

Question 2

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Loyalty boards, both state and federal, conducted thousands of loyalty hearings in which public employees and people who held licenses issued by the states were accused of harboring communist sympathies. Persons accused of disloyalty were required to demonstrate that they were not communists. Often these hearings were not conducted by judges and there were no rules of evidence. Unsupported suspicion was often enough to cost a person his or her job or license to practice a profession. Proceedings could be leaked to the press resulting in ruined careers and reputations. There was never any demonstration that these hearings increased the security of the United States.

Private industry also capitulated to the red baiters, firing people based on unsupported accusations and placing their names on blacklists which prevented them from getting other jobs in their profession. One of the most infamous blacklists was in the entertainment industry. It included the names of more than a hundred people and was extended to include those who had supported many of the reforms that the communists had also supported and even those who simply opposed the blacklist. Hollywood studios hired a business called "Red Channels" to investigate the background of people seeking to work in the film industry. The red baiters came to have a financial interest, in addition to their political interests, in extending the hysteria, just as some of the participants in the witch hunts centuries earlier obtained an economic benefit from the hysteria.

Question 3: What was so frightening about individual American's participating in the Communist Party that society would respond as if they were serious threats to the democratic system?

The Communist Party of the United States was organized in 1919. In the 1930s and early 1940s, in response to the inability of the American economy to provide jobs and financial security during the Great Depression, many socially conscious Americans joined liberal organizations. Some joined the Communist Party. However, voters in the U.S. have never supported the Communist Party; it has never elected a representative to Congress nor has it been popular with the "oppressed masses" it sought to champion. After the Second World War, as the authoritarian and anti-U.S. nature of the Soviet Union became apparent, membership in the Communist Party, USA dropped to virtually nothing. Because of protections specified in the First Amendment, it has never been illegal to belong to the Communist Party.

The Communist Party, USA was thoroughly penetrated by the FBI. An old joke goes that at some communist party meetings, there were more undercover FBI agents, posing as members of the party, than real communists!

Question 3

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