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## FAILURE OF WITCH-HUNTS IN 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> CENTURY EUROPE?

(On *Witches & Neighbours. The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* by Robin Briggs, London 1996)

With the application of sociological and anthropological methods to historical research, witch-hunts have become an important area of historical research<sup>1</sup>. Currently, historians do not even try answer the basic questions concerning witchcraft without accounting for its psychological, sociological and anthropological aspects. Only such an approach can properly account for the complicated vectors of forces that were the driving mechanisms of witch trials in 16 to 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

Although witch-hunts made an initially timid entry into the sphere of historical research interest, since the 1980s conferen-

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<sup>1</sup> The enduring source regarded as both a synthesis of the conventional historiography on sorcery and the starting point for research into witch-hunts has proved to be the article by H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, in his *Religion, the Reformation and Other Essays*, London 1967, pp. 90-192. Among the pioneering works in this field that deserve a mention are: J. Caro Baroja, *Las brujas y su mundo*, Madrid 1961; K. Thomas, *History and Anthropology*, "Past and Present", 1963, n° 24, pp. 3-24; C. Ginzburg, *I benandanti: Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento*, Torino 1966; R. Mandrou, *Magistrats et sorciers en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Une analyse de psychologie historique*, Paris 1968; A. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England. A Regional and Comparative Beliefs Study*, London 1970; K. Thomas, *The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft*, in: *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, ed. M. Douglas, London 1970, pp. 47-79; idem, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, New York 1971, pp. 29-56; H. C. Erik Midelford, *Witch-hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1562-1648. The Social and Intellectual Foundations*, Stanford 1972.

ces on European witchcraft<sup>2</sup> have been taking place with increasing frequency, and the present range of publications is so wide that an historian grappling with this issue must adopt a selective approach. Nevertheless, as Robin Briggs rightly points out, “the more we know, and the more ingenious and subtle local analyses emerge, the more difficult is to offer coherent answers to questions of a general nature”<sup>3</sup>. That is precisely the aim of his work: to present certain common features of witch-hunts throughout the whole Continent and to point to the factors which could influence their intensification or abatement in its diverse geographical regions.

It is rare for a phenomenon to bring to mind with such force the degree to which the historian is left to flounder in a world of fiction, and such ambiguous fiction at that. Briggs emphasises that “witchcraft was not an objective reality but a set of interpretations, something which went on in the mind”<sup>4</sup>. As a result he abandoned the idea of writing a “safe” book (of which there are now a great many but of little value). He is dispassionate in his approach to the research findings produced to date, and offers the reader a very bold treatment of the problem, in every respect, including methodological. The broad range of analyses and explanations he offers regarding European witch-hunts, may strike many as confused. Witchcraft, however, is locked in its own logic. What is worse, “on closer inspection of the persecution of witches there is no single thing to be explained”<sup>5</sup>.

*Witches & Neighbours* is one of the more interesting books on the European witch-hunt of the 16 to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that has been published in the 1990s. Briggs perceives witch trials as a socio-political phenomenon caught in a web of local cultural

<sup>2</sup> The question of development of interest in witchcraft and the need for research in Poland is discussed in detail by E. Potkowski in *Dzieje czarownicy — od historiografii problemu do antropologii historycznej* (*The History of Magic — from a Historiographical Problem to Historical Anthropology*), in: *Pochwała historii powszechnej. Księga ofiarowana A. Bartnickiemu*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 59–75. See also S. Salmonowicz, *Procesy o czary w Polsce. Próba rozważań modelowych* (*Witch-hunting in Poland. An Attempt to Build a Model*), in: *Prawo wczoraj i dziś*, ed. G. Bałtruszajtis, Warszawa 2000, pp. 303–321.

<sup>3</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 9. This problem was broached by R. Briggs earlier, in his article *Many Reasons Why: Witchcraft and the Problem of Multiple Explanation*, in: J. Barry, M. Hester, G. Roberts, eds., *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe. Studies in Culture and Belief*, Cambridge 1999 (first edition 1996), p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397.

contexts. Contrary to many researchers, who in the past were interested primarily in the persecution of witches, Briggs — who continues the approach of Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane — concentrates in equal measure on the reconstruction of the way of thinking and lifestyle of contemporaneous Europeans, and on the diverse (mainly sociological, cultural-religious and psychological) interpretations of the large persecutions of witches in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. He has excluded the intellectual context of the phenomenon almost entirely from his research.

British historiography quickly came to grips with the lack of a modern pan-European synthesis presenting the basis of the persecution of witches. A year after Briggs's publication came Stuart Clark's book<sup>6</sup>. Briggs wrote his study fully aware of his colleague's publication plans. The two complement each other.

The geographical sphere, which lies at the core of Briggs's interests, is very wide-ranging, as a result of which he has chiefly drawn on studies and published documents in western, northern and central Europe<sup>7</sup>, especially on materials concerning France, England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, parts of Germany, Luxemburg, Lorraine<sup>8</sup>, Switzerland, Savoy and northern Europe. References to the less well researched aspects of this topic in southern Europe (viz. Italy and Spain) crop up less frequently and are simply restricted to certain regions (e.g. The Basque country and Venice). Briggs analysed nearly 400 trials in Lorraine. They play a key part in his work; in most cases they are used as illustrative material.

In chapter one — *Myths of the Perfect Witch*, Briggs endeavours to square up to the stereotype of the witch. He created numerous interesting variations on the theme of certain standard perceptions, so as to demonstrate "how readily witchcraft beliefs could incorporate a disparate collection of folkloric elements and demonological theories, with the trials themselves and the books and pamphlets to which they gave rise helping to generate or

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<sup>6</sup> S. Clark, *Thinking with Demons. The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford 1999 (first edition 1997).

<sup>7</sup> There are no references, however, to the persecution of witches in Poland in Briggs's work.

<sup>8</sup> With regard to Lorraine, Briggs's remarks are a reiteration or development of his thesis contained in his earlier work: *Communities of Belief. Cultural and Social Tension in Early Modern France*, Oxford 1995 (first edition 1989); this particularly relates to two chapters: *Witchcraft and Popular Mentality in Lorraine, 1580-1630*, and *Ill-will and Magical Power in Lorraine Witchcraft*.

modify the content over time"<sup>9</sup>. Building up a European stereotype with a simultaneous attempt to distinguish local types was no easy task. Briggs rests his structure on several auxiliary issues such as: witches' testimonies, pacts with the devil, witches' sabbaths in Lorraine and in Europe in general. He presents ideal witches at the crucial moments of their lives: the moment of meeting the devil, of making a pact with him, of flying to the witches' sabbath, and their testimonies.

According to Briggs, a witch was typically an old, poor woman, dependent on the charity and benevolence of others (particularly of neighbours). However, he stresses that her reputation might be at times damaged in her middle age or earlier. He pre-empted possible allegations that his enquiries unjustifiably bypass witches from high social spheres, by saying that albeit they may have been depicted often enough in the fine arts, written sources and early likenesses of witches obstinately adhere to the time-honoured stereotype of a witch as being an old, poor and ugly hag. B. P. Levack claims that the preponderant part of those accused of witchcraft were over fifty years of age, and the proportion of widows was 10 to 25 percent on average, reaching 30 percent at certain periods<sup>10</sup>.

The degree to which this picture attaches to the Polish stereotype of the perfect witch is difficult to say unequivocally, because of the fragmented nature of the surviving sources. Seriously depletions of criminal book collections make for a good deal of chance in data collection, especially when it comes to quantitative attempts at describing the phenomenon.

Discussing the question of witch stereotypes, Briggs points out that it is time to break with the myth that witchcraft was almost exclusively the domain of women. A considerable proportion of those accused were men — about 20 to 25 percent, including priests (!)<sup>11</sup>, though to be sure, there were regions where witches were almost exclusively women, for example countries like England and Poland. (In Poland, men were usually perceived as being used by witches as musicians and means of transport for witches' sabbaths<sup>12</sup>). In other regions of Europe, e.g. in

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<sup>9</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> B. P. Levack, *Witch-hunts in Early Modern Europe*, London–New York 1987, pp. 137 and 139.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151. See also R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Information regarding Poland is based on my own archival research.

Estonia<sup>13</sup>, Finland<sup>14</sup>, in certain regions of France, men represented the majority of those accused<sup>15</sup>. The weakness of Briggs in discussing this problem is that he overlooks so different a case as that of Russia, where witch trials were used primarily to get rid of political opponents, as described in English literature<sup>16</sup>.

Briggs has not created a uniform, unailing guide to the characteristic aspects of witches. It is too heterogeneous a group. In principle one can talk about it only at a set level of generalisation: one is more frequently likely to find that those accused of witchcraft were poor rather than rich, old rather than young and women rather than men<sup>17</sup>. Among the personal character traits of the ideal witch, Briggs rightly highlights argumentativeness. A large number of cases regarding defamation indicates that potentially dangerous accusations frequently came in the course of neighbourly disputes<sup>18</sup>.

In considering the persecution of witches, Briggs stresses that it is a misunderstanding to think in terms of high and low cultural spheres as simple opposites. Judges, priests and peasants shared many of their beliefs. Witnesses would combine aspects of both folklore and official demonology which corresponded with local social and psychological determinants. "In a society where communal norms were so coercive and privacy so elusive, the related stresses must have been peculiarly intense. The fantasy of the pact brought together an inner drama experienced by individuals with the judges' requirements for clear cut offences. As the ultimate treason against God and man it could be held to justify an automatic death sentence, even the bending of normal rules of procedure. For the theorists of witchcraft the

<sup>13</sup> M. Madar, *Werewolves and Poisoners* in: B. Ankarloo, G. Henningsen, eds., *Early Modern European Witchcraft. Centres and Peripheries*, Oxford 1993, pp. 257-272; see especially table p. 267.

<sup>14</sup> A. Heikkinen, T. Kwervinen, *Finland: The Male Domination*, in: *Early Modern European Witchcraft*, pp. 319-338.

<sup>15</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.* p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> According to Levačková, *op. cit.* p. 146, women accounted for only 40 percent of all cases of witchcraft tried in Russian courts; the factors contributing to this state of affairs have been described by R. Zguttá in: *Witchcraft Trials in Seventeenth-Century Russia*, "American Historical Review", vol. LXXXII, 1977, n° 5, pp. 1187-1207.

<sup>17</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.* p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; the Polish chapter of this issue is discussed by M. Pilaszek in *Witch-hunts in Poland, 16-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, "Acta Poloniae Historica", vol. 86, 2002, pp. 103-132.

pact led into elaborate questions about the relevance and force of the mutual contract involved. This was one of the points at which they tended to tie themselves in logical knots over where responsibility ultimately lay, providing a good opportunity for sceptical critics, but these disputes between experts had little resonance at popular level<sup>19</sup>.

The myth about the witches' sabbath appears in some form or other wherever there were witch trials. Briggs considers it impossible to define the extent to which confessions regarding witches' feasts came as a result of an exceptionally rich local folklore, and to what extent the result of pressures from local clergymen and lay persecutors. In principle he sees them as something of a fusion of stereotypes of persecution formulated by clergymen and judges, with admixtures of various older peasant folklore traditions. This fusion is currently dated about 1428 or 1429, and it came about in Valais, a southern Swiss and northern Italian region. A chronicler from Lucerne, writing a few years later, gave a classic description of a witches' sabbath. Henceforth the number of witches confessing to participating in devils' banquets and the witches' sabbath increased, and assumed the shape that was to lodge in the European imagination for some centuries to come.

The idea of a witches' sabbath spread beyond the Alpine region relatively slowly. It appears rarely, even in "The Hammer on Witches". Excessive propagation of the idea of a witches' sabbath among the elites, in Briggs's opinion, had the opposite effect. Basically it put the elites off persecuting witches; they found it all too incredible and characterized by wholesale gullibility. Even in the peak years of persecution, the perceived role of the witches' sabbath seems very unclear. The example of England offers a perfect illustration that witch-hunts and the witchcraft beliefs could exist perfectly well without the idea of a pact with the devil or a witches' sabbath. Questions about the witches' sabbath were usually short and put by way of formality. Also in Poland there are numerous court record entries confirming the tendency of judges to make light of the ideological background of accusations. The chief reason for this phenomenon, Briggs rightly observes, was that judges were less libidinous than is commonly believed, and did not enquire into this type of

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<sup>19</sup>R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

detail. Only a small part of Europe believed in it truly. It should be stressed that the question of the witches' sabbath as one of reality or illusion, made problems not only to learned minds. Also illiterate country folk who testified in witch-trials had to contend with numerous doubts. This problem was also extant in Poland. A witch from Krzemieniec, Oryszka Liczmanicha (1753), desperately tried to imagine what the famous witch's flight looked like. It led to a most absurd rationalisation. She testified that when she flew to Łysa Góra (Polish counterpart of German *Brocken* or Swedish *Blåkulla*) for the first time, on a birch stake, she had not quite mastered flying techniques and though she tried to secure herself against falling with a length of rope, she fell nonetheless, "flattening her nose and injuring her head"<sup>20</sup>.

In discussing the witches' sabbath, Briggs rightly draws attention to the need to avoid pseudo-empirical explanations. It is essential to move towards psychoanalysis. Experiences of dreams probably played a significant role in justifying personal histories, and it is also likely that hallucinatory agents were used; they could bring on with the assumed witches such sensations as the sensation of flight and rising in the air<sup>21</sup>. It is difficult to believe that the potions used by witches caused visions of goats on thrones and orgies. Insofar as today people concentrate their phobias round various figures, in the early modern period they were linked with the one, which reigned supreme — that of the devil<sup>22</sup>. Folklore material was additionally filtered by peoples' imaginings and personal conflicts. For example, the people of Lorraine used the witches' sabbath as a distraction from their own drab, hard, monotonous lives. Witches frequently hid from the devils that tormented them and would change them many times over, just as the peasants with their real masters. Many of them annually made offerings (usually a chicken) in exchange for release from the arduous task of participating in witches' sabbaths and the devil would go for that.

To conclude these reflections on the sabbath it is worth alighting in Poland, a place Briggs does not visit. The witches' sabbath formula was duplicated in more or less the same fashion

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<sup>20</sup> AGAD — Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, I Department Purchases, call n° 58, pp. 125–126.

<sup>21</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> H. Trevor-Roper, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

everywhere throughout the Polish lands, but everything suggests that the Poles did not use the term "sabbath" at the time as denoting a witches night-time meeting. A thorough linguistic analysis has still to be made of witch trial transcripts, however the printed sources of that age contain no such thing! They describe witches' sabbaths solely as "feasts", "conventions", "get-togethers" and "banquets"<sup>23</sup>.

The interesting and methodologically well-thought out chapter two entitled *The Experience of Bewitchment* is devoted to peoples' awareness of coming under the power of spells. On the one hand, the author looks at the formal basis of accusations, and, on the other, the question of intensification of a state of fear<sup>24</sup> or the mechanisms of looking for those responsible for their misfortunes. Briggs believes that at the bottom of it, the standard reasons for witch-hunts were ill-will and personal animosity between two parties, which were the most characteristic elements in testimonies at trials.

The reasons for the close correlation between spells and misfortunes dealt by fate Briggs sees primarily in two large-scale systems popular in Europe at the time. These claimed that they had an explanation for everything. The first Briggs calls the religious or providential. Pride of place here goes to God who takes the part of an active force, rewarding the faithful and punishing the godless. He could articulate his will in relation to a particular area, for example, through visiting hunger or plague on errant people. The devil himself was part of this way of thinking since he was acting with God's consent. The second, parallel system, was that of natural philosophy. That was a world full of elements and humours, fictitious categories, which governed everything, from meteorology to medicine. Part of this way of viewing the world were pseudo-scientific disciplines such as astrology, or

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<sup>23</sup> This information was made available by W. Wyporska of Hertford College, Oxford, in her paper *Early Modern Exclusion — The Branding of the Witch in the Polish Demonological Literature 1511–1775*, delivered at the Budapest conference (October 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Briggs presents interesting parallels between early modern witchcraft and contemporary Voodoo deaths in Haiti. Latest medical discoveries prove that the immune system is closely tied to emotional condition. States of intensified fear to the degree that the life-supporting organs seize up are not just restricted to Haiti. E.g. in France, in 1968, there was a case of a "bewitched" women being admitted to hospital. This woman, upon applying antidote spells against her own spells, died of fear seven months later. She was terrified to such an extent that she could not eat. She died constantly repeating: "I am scared".

natural magic, claiming to offer ways to understand and control the environment<sup>25</sup>.

In discussing early modern medicine which is rooted in the system of natural philosophy, Briggs deals with the myth of the frequent accusations of midwives of witchcraft. Research in France shows that the local community would entrust the function of midwife to people worthy of trust, and ones who were perceived as such. They were selected by reference to extremely precise criteria — thus there had to be some tragic event in their practice for them to come under suspicion. Medical interests inclined Briggs to tackle the difficult yet very interesting topic of mental instability. In the early modern period, numerous mental illnesses were often interpreted as possession by demons. Of course not all behavioural disturbances were explained in this way, but the devil frequently personified the anti-social tendencies of given entities and exorcism constituted a form of therapy.

An issue repeatedly raised by Briggs is that of vicious neighbours. He stresses that an exchange of spite between neighbours or the members of a small local community and suspicions of witchcraft were more common than their criminal consequences. Considering the motives behind accusations of witchcraft Briggs sees taking the issue to court as the expression of hope that the plaintiff might succeed in forcing the accused to give redress to his misfortunes. The criminal procedures were in fact an encouragement for the witch to accept responsibility for the evil which occurred, and not to win an apology and calling off the devil. This hypothesis awaits testing in Poland though a cursory archival enquiry seems to confirm it.

Chapter three — *Supernatural Power and Magical Remedies* — is devoted to several major issues: cosmological theories, witchcraft techniques, witches' transformations into animal forms, the power to harm, which they allegedly possessed, the feeling which they evoked in their surroundings, and the image of the devil.

The religious belief prevailing in early modern Europe, spoke of the constant danger to the world order. The devil played the leading role in this: he was the first to rebel, he led Adam and Eve astray to their perdition and continued to work for the ill of humanity. Religion dovetailed with the scientific myth according

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<sup>25</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, pp. 69–70.

to which the earth and moon, together with all their elements constituted a secret, if not to say explosive, cocktail. In England at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century some Royal Society members (Henry More, Joseph Glanvill and Robert Boyle) published works on witchcraft and related phenomena, since they viewed it as a way of fighting atheism and scepticism<sup>26</sup>.

Many researchers before Briggs were incapable of liberating themselves from the bias of religious convictions that they harboured. Though in a learned discussion balanced voices of reason could be heard<sup>27</sup>, much ink flowed on proving that either Catholics or Protestants were the main witch-hunters. Briggs approaches the question of the Reformation with detachment. He draws attention to the fact that the Reformation engaged itself on a vast scale in attacking previously accepted visions of the relationship between God and the world. Protestant attacks on pictures, the cult of saints, or the power of the sacraments, struck at the very heart of religion, which had been practiced in Catholic Europe until that moment in time. The formalised ritual had the purpose of securing the most basic needs of the local community, it reassured the community about its continued existence, it bonded together the individual and family life cycles. Salvation through faith alone, displacing the importance of action, ensured that in the minds of most, God increasingly withdrew from intervening in the world, leaving it to the free reign of the devil.

Many sources relating to witch-hunting describe the clergy (both Catholic and Protestant) as leading the participants of these hunts. In the case of Protestants of all denominations it is usually stressed that they very much accentuated the role of the devil and his works in the world. In relation to the Catholic clergy the issue of their low intellectual level is frequently raised. But the fact of the matter is that it took priests little time to persuade people that misfortunes touched them by the will of God and not because of witches and witchcraft<sup>28</sup>. Thus we may note the

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<sup>26</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–100.

<sup>27</sup> E.g. H. Trevor-Roper, *op. cit.*, pp. 114, 138–139, wrote that the Church could front numerous enterprises, but witch-hunts would not be possible without the willing participation of the community, which saw it as a way of getting rid of its frustrations; he ascribed an increased interest in witch-hunts in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to Protestants and Catholics in equal measure.

<sup>28</sup> Such a posture of the clergy in Poland is described for example by A. Grabowski in his *Wspomnienia (Memoirs)*, edited by S. Estreicher, vol. II, Kraków

conspicuous absence of Catholic priests at witch trials in the guise of witnesses. But this should not surprise us. Confessors had a ban on using information obtained in the confessional box. It was rather monks, and not ordinary priests who tended to take leading roles as exorcists.

In the early modern period the borders between the sacred and the profane were difficult to distinguish, their line of division was not as distinctive as it is now. Beliefs associated both with the cosmic order, as with magic, served primarily as a collection of tales from which arguments could be drawn against specific entities and have them adjusted to specific needs. That is the basic and key cause according to Briggs as to why general theories about witchcraft very rarely led to systematic witch-hunts. This also helps explain why lay people frequently displayed an aversion to devilry and treated witch trials as ordinary (if unpleasant) matters concerning public order infringements, and on the other hand, they gladly enjoyed the services of magicians.

In chapter four entitled *The Projection of Evil*, Briggs returns yet again to the question of vicious neighbours, and again, though more analytically, presents the problem of poor relief and the institutions inspiring the charitable works in small local communities.

This seems all the more relevant, because in the testimonies (including Polish ones), the idea of revenge was constantly highlighted. Unmotivated anger was, however, rarely mentioned by witnesses. Their depositions suggest that witches were sensitive to acts of ill-disposition aimed at them, but when let be, would not attack first. Briggs wonders whether witness and plaintiff statements were falsified on a wholesale scale and whether the main motivation was rivalry. Positive answers to these questions would make one lean towards accepting that the basic factor provoking witch-hunts were cold calculation and material gain. Nonetheless, Briggs recognises as improbable that most people used accusations of witchcraft cynically, wanting to discredit their enemies. He maintains that most of the accusers and

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1909, pp. 344–346 or the controversial (probably forged) anonymous *Relacja naoczne go świadka o straceniu 14-tu mniemanych czarownic w drugiej połowie 18-go wieku* (*An Eye-witness Account of the Execution of 14 Assumed Witches in the Second Half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*). "Przyjaciel Ludu", vol. II, 1835, n° 16, 17, 18. pp. 126–127, 134–135, 138–139.

witnesses profoundly believed in the allegations proffered against witches. However, he produces no evidence in support of this thesis which, in any event, would be impossible to prove quantitatively.

The contemporary view is that the decisive factor regarding accusations of witchcraft are neighbourly conflicts. This discovery (Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane) has shed light on some of the murkier aspects involved, but, according to Briggs, a more general interpretation of witch-hunts may be built up by taking into consideration the crisis of philanthropy — the refusal of charity. Against the background of the Continent, England seems to be a peculiar case where an official system of poor relief and organized charity developed to completely eliminate it from the private domain. To what extent the problem of charity was a serious issue for its contemporaries can be seen in the views of Bodin who maintained that the charitable persons need not fear witches<sup>29</sup>.

The model witch-hunting surroundings, according to Briggs, was a hamlet or village of about a hundred inhabitants. For a contemporary European, the living conditions in such a place are difficult to imagine: no shops, no decent roads, the only public building being the church. It was a world of peddlers and local markets. The exchange of goods and services occurred daily among the neighbours. The community felt responsible for all its members, but the rules of the game were far from egalitarian. Economic and demographic changes additionally would put the already dubious social balance to the test. A purely sociological explanation for witch-hunts is, according to Briggs, inadequate in relation to the complexity of the phenomenon. An exceptionally relevant factor to understanding the problem in all its ramifications, is the human psyche: subconscious fears, complexes, feelings of hatred. Today historians are becoming aware that in the past people spent considerable amounts of time worrying and talking about witches. The degree to which the natural order of things was threatened by witchcraft, also in Poland, is to be seen in the testimony of 1545 of inspections of estates in Volhynia in which the royal inspector accuses the peasant fugitives, the men, of theft and brigandage, and the women of witchcraft<sup>30</sup>. Women's

<sup>29</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

<sup>30</sup> *Źródła dziejowe*, vol. VI. *Rewizja zamków ziemi wołyńskiej w połowie XVI wieku (Inspection of Castles in Volhynia in the Mid-16th century)*, ed. A. Jabłonowski, Warszawa 1877, p. 116.

witchcraft-related activities, especially of those who were poor, seemed to contemporaries something obvious with regard to a lack, in their case that is, of other possibilities to harm those members of the community who were better off and who, to their minds, constituted a threat to themselves. In the general public perception the ability to cast spells was a compensatory factor for the lack of physical strength which in moments of danger could be used by men. This to some degree explains the high number of accusations against women.

Since the *maleficium* was a common assumption, historians increasingly frequently delve into social psychology. That is no easy task; Briggs rightly notes that to a large extent it requires the unearthing of court materials certain constantly recurring psychological processes. This research track enables us to find out how typical inter-personal relations operated in past societies; it enables also the investigation into how a given social, family or any other context could intensify the rate of death sentences. Following the trail of contemporary psychologists, Briggs reminds us that "unit" defence mechanisms are aimed at protecting them against uncomfortable contact with reality and adds that very early we learn how to suppress socially undesirable feelings, though they never fully disappear in us. A particularly useful way of coping with them is to deny having them at all and to project them onto others. In this way a fascinating method of projection springs into action. Whole groups may develop agreed, complementary fantasies, maintaining external solidarity in sustaining the costs of having a common external enemy. Fantasies connected with witches and witchcraft could be lethal in more ways than one for the victim, the alleged witch on trial. Frequently there was an unconscious psychic link between the victim and the witch. The word "victim" had — as I found in Polish sources — a curiously double meaning: it denoted both the bewitched, and the person suspected of casting spells; both sides had a sense of loss, fear and suffering. Both sides felt themselves to be in mortal danger.

In chapter five entitled *Witch-finders and Witch Cures*, Briggs introduces small local groups and the methods of curing and hunting down witches that they applied. A closed community which believed in its own strength, would make relatively few accusations regarding their neighbours' witchcraft. Many people

actually recovered their health after consulting the local witch. Members of local communities, if not closed communities, profoundly believed in the possibility of spiteful magic being wielded by their kinsfolk. Only a handful of people — primarily puritan ministers and doctors — denied that certain people had the gift of healing. Members of elites, even if they mocked witchcraft, in the face of illness and misfortune would also seek the help of witches. It would seem that a growing awareness of this fact contains the answer to the question of why demands for anti-witch and anti-healer operations had a weak response in most of Europe. Even if those in government were to show greater determination in persecuting witches, they needed broader social support while local elites had no interest in levelling formal accusations before external courts which could threaten their own positions. The testimonies of many of those cross-examined prove that for whole years they were able to pursue their practices undisturbed by anyone. Many people of very low social status were not at all aware that some of their practices could be construed as a basis for accusations of witchcraft.

In considering the problems of witch-finders, Briggs draws attention to the fact that the careers of most of them were relatively short, while closed local groups could operate and wield influence for decades. Briggs wonders why certain people decided on becoming witch-finders. Investigating their motives, he arrives at the conclusion that they were driven by a mixture of real obsession entwined with fear of witchcraft or the thrill they might have got out of playing a starring role in the locality<sup>31</sup>. However, their activities were possible only where central government was weak. Nonetheless, this factor did not always generate the emergence of this particular group, and everything points to the fact that in 16–18<sup>th</sup> century Poland there were only few witch-finders.

Going over to the question of the participation of the state and Church in witch trials, Briggs describes various types of witch-hunts observable on the Continent. He begins with the politically fragmented Germans with a large variety of witch-persecution practices. Most German witches were condemned in local trials. Mass panic was always the most lethal in smaller localities and towns, which had their own apparatus of justice. In connection with this, the biggest witch-hunts occurred in

<sup>31</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

Trier, Bamberg and Würzburg, and a fair role was played by Cologne. Going over to other countries, due to lack of space we shall mention only two of the more interesting countries as regards witch hunts — Sweden and Denmark. King Christian IV, promulgating the reform of morality in 1617, announced new rules concerning witchcraft at the same time. In the next seven or eight years, witch-hunts reached unheard of levels in Denmark.

Witch-hunts in Sweden (its apogee came in 1668–1676) comprised a strange mixture of aspects. In most trials, groups of children were used to identify witches; they were kept together (a perfect opportunity to make their testimonies agree), and the course of events was shaped by the attitude of the royal government and nobility. Initially, both these political forces seemed to be sceptical towards this enterprise but gradually local functionaries and clergy would join the witch-hunt, with enthusiasm as a rule. The result of such a knot of events was a strange compromise: a small number of witches were condemned but the government condoned the hunts, treating them as a social safety valve<sup>32</sup>.

In chapter six, *Love and Hatred; Spouses and Kin*, Briggs encroaches upon gender studies and introduces family conditions, master-servant relations, sexual fantasies etc. as factors which possibly intensified witch-hunting propensities. Briggs discusses the significance of the family: the political, social, and emotional aspects for its members. In most countries the main type of family was the nuclear family. The modern marriage is usually described as a functional arrangement devoid of feeling and affection, based on economic calculation and patriarchal dominance. The dark tales of children being beaten and emotionally deprived in early modern history persists. There is also the conviction that right up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century sexual intercourses were usually brutal and brief. The testimonies of witches, according to Briggs, seem to give the lie to this view, because women describe their intercourse with the devil to be painful and degrading, as opposed to normal relations with their husbands. In the author's personal view, expectations with regard to partners were lower than today, and that interpersonal ties between family

<sup>32</sup>R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, pp. 199–201.

members could periodically be strained because of difficult living conditions, but not destroyed permanently. A decided minority of the married men were ill-disposed towards their wives. In principle they could count on their help. In certain countries extreme visions of the family portray it as the centre of sorcery. The idea of families flying off to witches' sabbaths was to be found particularly frequent in the Basque country where witches' testimonies contain this as a forever recurring theme<sup>33</sup>.

In chapter seven, *Men against Women: the Gendering of Witchcraft*, Briggs continues the theme of mutual relations between the sexes. Although every historian studying witchcraft knows that as a result of witch-hunts many men were killed, it does not alter the fact that *Malleus maleficarum*, an out-and-out misogynistic text, was addressed to those witch-finders in particular who hated women. Later authors, frequently, were happy to repeat uncritically anti-women's slogans as issued by Sprenger and Institor. Pierre de Lancre averred that for every ten women accused of witchcraft there was one man. Jean Bodin went even further maintaining that for every man involved in witchcraft there were fifty women. In both cases, these writers considered the main reason for women's predisposition to witchcraft to be their innate stupidity and smaller brains.

The convictions of Bodin and de Lancre about the crushing majority of accusations regarding witchcraft being levelled at women, and not men, are not borne out by the statistics. Men represent 25 percent of those executed. From among nearly 1,300 witchcraft trials, which were brought before the parliament in Paris in the form of appeals, over half the cases concerned men<sup>34</sup>, though it cannot be excluded that the reason for the high number of appeals by men could be the favourable legal verdicts they could hope for. The relatively high rate of men accused of witchcraft also appears in south-western Germany; in the 1720s, the percentage of male witches was about 25 percent<sup>35</sup>. In the

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<sup>33</sup> Contemporaneous historiography describes the testimonies of children from Sweden and the Basque country, see G. Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition*, Reno 1980, B. Ankarloo, *Sweden: The Mass Burnings (1668-1676)*, in: *Early Modern European Witchcraft*, pp. 285-317. Children's testimonies frequently proved fatal.

<sup>34</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.* p. 260.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. W. Behringer, *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern. Volksmagie, Glaubenseifer und Statsräson in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Munich 1997, p. 58; in the period 1608-1616, 203 persons were accused of witchcraft in Bavaria of which 50 were men.

Spanish Netherlands men constituted 18 percent of the accused, in the Saar and Lorraine it was about 28 percent, in Luxemburg — 31 percent. Certain extreme cases also crop up in Europe, on the peripheries, where men comprised 90 percent of the accused — as in Iceland, 60 percent — in Estonia, or nearly 50 percent — in Finland. On the other hand, there are other regions of Europe where 90 percent and more of those accused of witchcraft were women, for example, in Hungary, Denmark, England, Poland. Seeking some rational explanation for such considerable differences, Briggs comes to the conclusion that those who were brought to trial were simply a representative sample of the average expectations, views and imaginings of the local population.

Briggs devotes much attention to the gossip-mongering mechanism. He is primarily interested in the way a seemingly innocuous rumour could prove lethal. An important role in clarifying this puzzle is played, according to him, by differences between the sexes. The social division of labour and leisure divided not just the real world into male and female spheres, but also the mechanisms of gossip and rumour into male/female categories. It was as if one had separate reputations in the male and female worlds. Less formal accusations were made by women against women. Some information however seeped into the male dominated local community political structures. Observations, opinions, judgements were exchanged primarily at the level of the family; information flowed between wives and husbands. That is why Briggs took the household to be the source of accusation. In his opinion the gossip would become dangerous the moment husbands began to share the concerns of their wives<sup>36</sup>.

In chapter eight, *The Age of Iron*, Briggs presents socio-economic factors which could intensify witch-hunting predispositions. He discusses among others the crisis of poor relief, the Reformation, the Thirty Years' War, early modern criminality, and the type of economic system prevailing on the local market (he particularly stresses price discrepancies).

Chapter nine *The Web of Power* presents various sociological theories concerning witch trials. Briggs approaches them with detachment, claiming that the persecution of witches can be suspiciously easily explained in terms of functionality. He sees

<sup>36</sup>R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, pp. 273–274.

as particularly dangerous the thesis that the early modern national state became a dynamic agency for persecuting and punishing deviants, witches, heretics, and criminals, since in choosing various examples of state (or Church) activities one can prove almost every theory. The modern nation state (France, Spain, England) in which power (as it affected the daily lives of ordinary people) became something far more dynamic and dangerous than in the Middle Ages, emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Briggs sees this as an important factor<sup>37</sup>, but he emphasises the importance of a variety of options that could occur in state — local community relations. In Europe, many different political organisms existed at the time. There were large states such as the Holy Roman Empire with only an apparent rather than real possibility of controlling its component parts, strong monarchies with wide-ranging police forces (Spain), as well as urban oligarchies with jealously guarded privileges (the Netherlands).

None of the strong, centralised European states played a greater role in organising witch-hunts. Neither Spain, nor France nor England were places of especial persecution — all showed little interest in them, both in terms of absolute numbers and in terms of the dimensions of the hunt in relation to the density of the population in various countries. The attentions of the rulers were rather focused on disciplining the activities of local courts. Judicial inadequacies and errors relating to witch trials did meet with commensurate sanctions. Briggs thus comes to the conclusion that the possibility of decisive and effective state intervention in witch trials is one of the indicators of strong monarchical power. The intervention goes here in two directions — not only to put a brake on the hunt itself, but also on its organisation. As examples, he gives among others that of King Christian IV of Denmark who made great personal efforts to unleash witch-hunts in the years 1617–1625 as well as Maximilian I of Bavaria.

In Briggs's opinion, the system of justice was not merely imposed from above on a small local community. There was a complex process of negotiation, engaging all social strata. He repeats after Trevor-Roper that whatever the state system of justice might be, it would be totally powerless without the denun-

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<sup>37</sup> However, Briggs reminds us (on p. 323) that apart from new techniques in the wielding of power which emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, monarchies in early modern history generally remained based on agricultural societies with very traditional internal and ideological structures.

ciations of ordinary people<sup>38</sup>. Reiterating Trevor-Roper's view, Briggs avers that witch-hunts were the effects of social tensions<sup>39</sup>. Trevor-Roper wrote that: "No ruler could carry out an operation on such a scale without the cooperation of society"<sup>40</sup>. The key issue in the persecution of witches, of which one must be aware, is the fact that an effective state bureaucracy was still in its infancy, while the dominating factor in the lives of ordinary folk was local authority. Especially rural communities were complex structures, which preserved certain peculiar democratic characteristics. In the whole of Europe, numerous key decisions regarding local communities were undertaken at meetings of heads of households, which was the basic method of expressing the communities' opinions. Under a seemingly democratic surface lurked a profoundly oligarchic structure which was dominated by a minority of the richest members of the community. Their monopoly in key areas put them in the forefront of candidatures for positions of agents of the state, Church and lords.

Some historians draw attention to the fact that the new, more rigorous religion propagated by both the Catholic reformers and the Protestants was the ideological answer to the public order demands of the early modern state. When the richer decided to persecute their poorer neighbours as witches, or decided to be witnesses in cases brought against them, they stressed in this way their loyalty to the new values. Briggs does not deny that it is an interesting hypothesis, but he draws attention to the fact that the court records do not lend it strong support. A closer analysis of cases tried does not confirm the notion that rich peasants routinely played prominent roles in witch-hunts<sup>41</sup>. Their participation in persecutions is all too fragmentary and sporadic. The economic factor is very important in witch-hunts, but according to Briggs they were not organised primarily out of financial motives. More likely, they grew out of popular convictions and beliefs. On the other hand, though beggars were commonly associated with sorcery, there was a lack of beliefs and religious pointers for accusations and suspicions to be aimed at them in particular. Briggs draws attention to a relevant factor

<sup>38</sup> H. Trevor-Roper, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>41</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

though so obvious that one is frequently apt to forget it: survival was most important for the people, and a bad reputation additionally stimulated charity. The moral and psychological costs of such an existence were of insignificance to the poorest — they lived in constant fear for their lives<sup>42</sup>.

Chapter ten, *Internal and External Worlds, Self-Awareness and Modernity*, presents a broad range of problems connected with the way the outside world was seen at the time. Briggs discusses the question of articulating feelings and thoughts, psychoanalysis, genetics, sexual aspects of self-identification, bisexual fantasies, narcissistic dreams of unlimited power, or the theories of Emil Durkheim and Max Weber. Moving over to a more detailed analysis of the problem, he vehemently opposes the notions that judges simply forced their views onto the accused. Most of the testimonies of the accused do not represent a standard list of questions and tortures. Long and detailed testimonies only rarely seem stereotypical. The shading into one another of the real and imagined worlds to which most of the testimonies point, is most frequently regarded as cynical manipulation. There is the constant temptation to portray witches as persecuted victims and scapegoats. Such an approach gives only a partial explanation of the situation. It is of vital importance to establish the limits of cooperation of the accused with the group in preparing one's own death sentence and the strengthening of the common perception of the world which they shared with their persecutors. "Everyone would have found it easy to slip recognized witches into their inner theatres"<sup>43</sup>.

Though Briggs claims that his attempt to clarify the issue of persecution of witches is simple (he almost totally bypasses the intellectual aspects of witch-hunting), his work takes us into a world of long dead villages and towns of early modern Europe. He argues that witch-hunts were of a mass-character and a complex phenomenon, and that serious study of witchcraft must be multi-faceted. It is difficult to point to any of the theories described above as the dominant one, since Briggs claims that those writers who suggest some one single factor as the cause of witch-hunts (e.g. the Thirty Years' War, the emergence of early

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>43</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

modern states) should be treated with the utmost distrust<sup>44</sup>. Such a posture ensures that Briggs's work provides not only a better understanding of the internal logic of witch-hunts; it is also an excellent guide to the subject literature of the last twenty years — one of the chief virtues of this work.

The high-lighting of interpretations of persecution of witches that are preferred by this author do not make for bigger problems. Briggs nurtures the conviction that strong state control over witch trials is not a symptom of its power. In the face of the deficiencies of the bureaucracy at the time, and the prosecution apparatus, Briggs relegates the importance of the upper class support for witch-hunts and dismisses it as a *sine qua non* condition for the broad-ranging persecutions that took place. He transfers the centre of gravity to beliefs and common opinions held at the time, and to inter-personal relations in small local communities. He emphasizes the lack of a pan-European model for the persecution of witches. The multi-faceted local variations of witch-hunts were, in his view, the result of a complex and always unpredictable interaction between folk- and elite-based ideas. That is why he does not try to formulate a general theory of witchcraft — these rarely lead to a systematisation of witch persecution processes. In the final analysis, the reader is offered a brilliant survey of the situation in many regions of Europe. However, a pan-European vision of witch-hunting must remain highly generalised, so much so in fact, that one may wonder whether there is any point to any such exercise. Every time, witches slotted into a different ecological niche. The common denominator for the persecution of witches in Europe, as Briggs would have it, are such phenomena as the waning of traditional benevolence, bad neighbourly relations, gossip, argumentativeness, mass panic, the mechanism of projection, and other psychological factors.

Briggs overcame many methodological difficulties; he managed to stand back from many authors, including C. G i n z b u r g and R. M u c h e m b l e d. At the same time the presentation of such a wide panoply of interpretations has led to numerous repetitions. This particularly relates to the issue of bad neighbours. The author consciously decided upon this step as the

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<sup>44</sup> R. Briggs, *Many Reasons Why*, p. 51.

lesser evil. He preferred to present a given issue in as multi-faceted way as possible, than to hold fast, come what may, to a chosen structure. Another deficiency in this work is the absence of any cognisance of the persecution of witches in eastern Europe. This can only partially be justified by a lack of publications in 'international languages'.

Briggs's book raises more questions than it answers. In particular there is a need to clarify how witch-hunts came to wane. We must find out why many of the territories so easily managed to avoid them. Witch-hunting epidemics never lasted anywhere for long, they only persisted endemically; depending on one's definition, they accounted for 10 to 20 percent of the total number of court cases, especially in the 1590–1640 period<sup>45</sup>. The massacres perpetrated by French Catholics and Protestants deprived as many people of their lives as all the witch trials in Europe put together. On the main part of Europe's territory (75%), in numerical terms, witch persecutions were insignificant<sup>46</sup>. Most of the European towns and villages were not treated to the spectacle of even one trial, though their inhabitants believed in witchcraft and were convinced that some of their neighbours were witches. Demonologists who wrote treatises demanding of the authorities the vigorous persecution of witches, encountered scepticism. However drastic it may sound, according to Briggs, witch-hunting basically ended in failure<sup>47</sup>.

*(translated by Antoni Bogdanowicz)*

<sup>45</sup> R. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 339.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 400.