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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.

[1] *"I saw Sarah Good with the Devil!*

I saw Goody Osburn with the Devil!

I saw Bridget Bishop with the Devil!"

The speaker is Abigail Williams, niece of Reverend Samuel Parris, in Act I of Arthur Miller's classic play *The Crucible*. This character is based on the historical figure of the same name. Abigail, along with her cousin Betty, accused citizens of Salem¹ of being witches. The young girls claimed that they were being attacked by these men and women who had made a pact with the devil.



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

[5] The charges by these youngsters spread like wildfire, and in the spring of 1692, they 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 unreason, the tragic proceedings have become synonymous with justice gone mad. In less than a year, over 200 individuals were accused of witchcraft, 20 of whom were executed.

The trials 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 credible, 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 of pain would betray her secret identity.

1. a village in the colony of Massachusetts
 2. **Untoward (adjective):** unexpected and inappropriate or inconvenient
 3. A "magistrate" is a civil officer or judge who administers the law, especially one who conducts a court that deals with minor offenses and holds preliminary hearings for more serious ones.

One suspect was subjected to *peine forte et dure*,⁴ 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. 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.

- [10] 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.” A mere five days later, they produced a voluble⁵ answer penned by Cotton Mather, the prolific⁶ 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 abate 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 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 guillotine¹¹ — lasted from 6 September 1793 until 28 July 1794. It beheaded a total of 42,000 individuals.

- [15] 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 abetted by crass bigotry and sense superiority then affecting many Germans.

4. French for “strong and hard punishment”

5. **Voluble (adjective):** speaking or spoken fluently, without interruption

6. **Prolific (adjective):** producing many works

7. “Annul” means to declare something invalid.

8. **Indemnity (noun):** security or protection against a loss or other financial burden

9. A “demagogue” is a politician seeking support by appealing to popular desires or prejudices, rather than using logical argument.

10. **Depose (verb):** to remove from office suddenly and forcefully

11. The “guillotine” was a machine with a heavy blade sliding vertically in grooves, used for beheading people.

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 extermination facilities located in Germany and German-occupied territories.

The Great Purge 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, such as 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. Some historians 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 echoed the Salem trials. All three happened under extremely tense and stressful circumstances caused by global events: World War II and by the Cold War.

- [20] The first episode started three months after December 7, 1941, when Japanese military aircraft attacked Pearl Harbor. 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 unassimilated¹³ Japanese immigrants and their offspring would be more loyal to Japan 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 over 110,000 Japanese Americans from their homes — almost two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens — and placed them in internment camps.¹⁴

Hundreds of the young Japanese American internees volunteered for the U.S. Army and fought with distinction. After the war, the camps were closed, and the residents were allowed to return to their homes. The subsequent investigation by a special government commission found little evidence of Japanese disloyalty and concluded that the wartime scare had been the product of racism.

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

12. An “echelon” is a level or rank in an organization, a profession, or society.

13. **Assimilate (verb):** to conform to the customs, attitudes, and habits of a group or nation

14. An “internment camp” is a prison camp for the confinement of enemy aliens, prisoners of war, political prisoners, etc.

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, the charges led to widespread blacklisting¹⁵ of screenwriters, actors, and other entertainment professionals in the 1940s and 1950s. The so-called "First Red Scare" ruined the careers of hundreds of individuals working in the film industry.

- [25] It peaked in 1947 when ten of these film writers and directors were brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee¹⁶ and questioned whether they were or had been Communist party members. When the accused refused to answer, they were cited for contempt of Congress,¹⁷ fired from their jobs, and began serving a one-year jail sentence in 1950.

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 in West Virginia. Already prominent as a rabid 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 claimed, "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, and homosexuality against hundreds of politicians and non-government individuals. His attacks included 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 and loyalties 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.

- [30] The Senator's only legacy is an addition to our lexicon:¹⁸ "McCarthyism" is a term that stands for demagogic, scurrilous,¹⁹ 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.

15. "Blacklist" means to say that a person or company should be avoided or not allowed to do something.

16. The House Un-American Activities Committee, also known as the HUAC, was a committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, created to investigate disloyalty and subversive organizations.

17. To be "cited for contempt" means that one is disobedient to or disrespectful of a court of law and its officers.

18. **Lexicon (noun):** the vocabulary of a person, language, or branch of knowledge

19. **Scurrilous (adjective):** making or spreading scandalous claims about someone with the intention of damaging their reputation

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.²⁰

The Hollywood blacklisting officially ended in 1960, when Dalton Trumbo, a former Communist party member and a one of the Hollywood Ten,²¹ was publicly credited as the screenwriter of the highly successful film *Exodus* and was later publicly acknowledged for writing the screenplay for *Spartacus*.

[35] 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 antics were rejected by the U.S. Senate, which on December 2, 1954, censured²² him by a vote of 67 to 22. It was one of the rare cases of such an extreme form of repudiation²³ by fellow Senators, and it strongly affected McCarthy. He died three years later at the age of 48.

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20. **Reparation (noun):** the making of amends for a wrong one has done, by paying money or helping those who have been wronged
 21. The ten motion-picture producers, directors, and screenwriters who refused to answer questions regarding their possible communist affiliations.
 22. “Censure” is a formal and public group condemnation of an individual whose actions run counter to the group’s acceptable standard for individual behavior.
 23. **Repudiation (noun):** rejection of a proposal or idea

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Historical witch hunts occurred a long time ago and are unlikely to repeat in the modern day.
 - B. To this day, the Salem witch trials are considered the most extreme example of violent hysteria targeted at a specific group of people.
 - C. The unreasonable fear that drove the events of Salem makes it a unique and distinct example, contrasting other witch hunts in history.
 - D. While witch hunts may feel like a rare occurrence, such incidents are not uncommon in history, especially when people are fearful or frustrated.

2. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "In less than a year, over 200 individuals were accused of witchcraft, 20 of whom were executed." (Paragraph 5)
 - B. "The Salem episode was a historic landmark but by no means a rare example of behavior that can afflict frightened, angry, or frustrated people" (Paragraph 13)
 - C. "All three happened under extremely tense and stressful circumstances caused by global events: World War II and by the Cold War." (Paragraph 19)
 - D. "In 1980, President Jimmy Carter appointed a commission to investigate whether the decision to put Japanese Americans into internment camps had been justified." (Paragraph 32)

3. PART A: What is the meaning of "iniquity" as used in paragraph 5?
 - A. unfair behavior
 - B. rational behavior
 - C. curious behavior
 - D. reckless behavior

4. PART B: Which detail from paragraph 5 best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "The charges by these youngsters spread like wildfire"
 - B. "The Salem witch trials that followed are the subject of Miller's play."
 - C. "the tragic proceedings have become synonymous with justice gone mad"
 - D. "20 of whom were executed."

5. PART A: What do the three conflicts in America have in common?
 - A. They were supported by reason and evidence.
 - B. They were resolved with relatively few consequences.
 - C. They were all the result of racist agendas and policies.
 - D. They were all driven by fear during a time of crisis.

6. PART B: Which detail best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "In the United States, groundless fears, prejudices and demagoguery produced three notable events that echoed the Salem trials." (Paragraph 19)
 - B. "To prevent the rise of such an 'enemy within' during the war, state and local authorities along the West Coast removed over 110,000 Japanese Americans from their homes" (Paragraph 21)
 - C. "During his brief political career, he made undocumented charges of communism, communist sympathies, disloyalty, and homosexuality against hundreds of politicians and non-government individuals" (Paragraph 28)
 - D. "Government employees and workers in private industry, whose characters and loyalties were smeared by McCarthy's broad brush, lost their jobs." (Paragraph 29)

7. How does the structure of Mike Kubic's article support the central idea of his claim?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In your opinion, are there ongoing witch hunts today in America? If so, what are they and how can we put an end to them?
2. In the context of the text, how does fear drive action? How did fear play a role in the witch hunts depicted in the text? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. In the context of the text, what are the effects of following the crowd? Would these witch hunts have been possible without the support of others? Why do you think people supported these prejudiced hunts? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. In the context of the text, how does prejudice emerge? Why were these specific groups targeted during the witch hunts discussed? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.