



Understanding the witch trials is a vital part of understanding the rise of capitalism, the family, women's roles and our relation to our bodies. Their deep importance and impact is too often neglected in even radical histories.

This brief overview looks at the reasons for, and effects of, the massacre of women that took place during the rise of capitalism.

As phrased so well by Past Tense, the original publishers of this essay:

We re-issue this text in a new edition as a beginning step to understanding the significance of the witch trials. We undertake this not as a matter for mere study or as a historical curiosity: by tracing the threads of modern hierarchies and alienations to their relative origins we aspire to open up invigorating new terrains for discussion, action, regeneration of our own powers, and contestation in any of a variety of creative expressions. This piece serves to whet the appetite for deeper explanations of where we are, and how we came to be here. A fruitful reading may explode your notions of the possible.



BURNING WOMEN



By Lady Stardust

The European Witch Hunts, Enclosure, and the Rise of Capitalism

During the 16th and 17th century, all across Europe, in every town and village, women were killed, en masse, as witches. In some towns there were a few killed every week, in some towns hundreds killed in one go. The killings went on for two centuries and touched everyone's lives. They spread fear, destroyed networks and resistance and did not stop until the population was sufficiently subordinated and the emerging state, capitalist social relations and church had got its claws into the lives and psyches of the people. Not only is the deep significance of the witch trials glossed over in mainstream history, it is glossed over in Marxist and anarchist history too. Where it is discussed the gender implications are not brought to the fore. This text is a small step to redressing the balance. It covers how the witch trials happened, and some explanations for and effects of the trials: Independent women as a threat; Reconstructing women's sexuality; Wise women, healers, midwives and the rise of science; Older women and the rise of private property; Organised women, organised resistance.

"The superior learning of witches was recognised in the widely extended belief of their ability to work miracles. The witch was in reality the profoundest thinker, the most advanced scientist of those ages... As knowledge has ever been power, the church feared its use in women's hands, and levelled its deadliest blows at her."

- Matilda Joslyn Gage, 1893



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