

Category: Belief and Worldview

"Evil People": A Comparative Study of Witch Hunts in Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier (Studies in Early Modern German History)

By Johannes Dillinger. Translated by Laura Stokes. 2009. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. 312 pages. ISBN: 0-8139-2806-7 (hard cover).

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Johannes Dillinger's important *Böse Leute* (1999) is widely regarded as one of the most comprehensive comparative studies of European witch hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One of Dillinger's main questions concerns the significant differences long recognized in both the intensity and the objects of witch hunts in Europe and the New World. Dillinger's careful reading of administrative documents and court testimony, his deep understanding of the tensions between ecclesiastic and secular institutions, both coupled with a sophisticated understanding of the local political landscapes of his two study regions—Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier—allow him to paint a thick ethno-historiographic picture of the contours of witch hunts, of the accusers and the accused in a period of considerable political and economic change. Although his focus is decidedly on the particularities of witchcraft persecution in these two regions, Dillinger keeps his eye on the need for generalizable knowledge and draws conclusions that have significant importance for the study of witch hunts in Europe and in America. A folklorist interested in witch hunts, witchcraft trials, and understanding testimony at these trials would do well to consider Dillinger's study not only because of his folkloric insight, but also because of his noteworthy skill in exploring these decidedly folkloric phenomena in the context of institutional structures.

Dillinger's opening chapter provides a brief political history of the two regions, exploring in important and necessary detail the administrative structures that enabled and, in many ways, gave form to the witch hunts. The going in this chapter can be quite slow and it is not until later chapters that the importance of these details becomes apparent. In his second chapter, Dillinger moves on to the problematic classification of "witchcraft" and its relationship to other aspects of folk belief. Laura Stokes, who translated the work, does an excellent job with the terminological complexity associated with both witchcraft and belief. A great deal of this terminological ambiguity derives from conflicting usage in secular and ecclesiastical works concerning witchcraft. Dillinger traces the history of witchcraft persecution in both areas back to the late-fifteenth century, but focuses his main analytic efforts on the multiple waves of witchcraft prosecutions that took place starting in the late-sixteenth century. This second chapter includes an excellent overview of the different types of crimes of which witches were accused, and the author pays special attention to the accusations of weather magic that were a prime concern of the largely agrarian populace. Accretions from folk belief and legend informed the local conceptions of the witch so that these did not align with stricter theological conceptions of witches in the broader context of demonology.

Dillinger's third chapter moves beyond the generalities presented in the previous chapters and focuses on aspects of local and regional community structures and power relationships as contributing factors to the contours of witchcraft accusations and trials. This chapter and the following ones are perhaps the most engaging. In the fourth chapter, Dillinger takes up the issue of how accusations of witchcraft spread and provides details on the various trial structures that existed in the regions. The fifth chapter traces the impact of the Swabian and Electorate of Trier trials on other neighboring territories. In the sixth chapter, he shows how the witch hunts did not simply peter out, but rather were deliberately stopped.

Dillinger is an excellent storyteller and has been quite successful in teasing out interesting details from the archival resources that undergird this study. Dillinger's real strength lies in the comparative approach that informs these chapters—having laid out the institutional and political landscapes of the two regions, he is able to play the development of the witch hunts in the two areas off each other. Although the general motivating factors—such as the underlying tension between individual gain and community—might be similar across regions (and all of Europe for that matter), the local inflections of these factors set against the varied administrative infrastructure provides the necessary nuances for understanding the differences. While similarity is easy to discover and discuss, differences are far more difficult to account for, yet also far more interesting. The final chapter of Dillinger's work explores the end of the witch hunts in the mid-seventeenth century, noting that it was not the will of the people that ended the witch hunts, but rather administrative changes that put a stop to them. Dillinger's concluding chapter is short but helpful.

In both Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier, witch hunts were not based on theologically sophisticated concepts; rather, they were directed largely at women who had been accused of harmful magic, particularly weather magic. The influence of popular belief—particularly legend—changed the ecclesiastic conception of the witch as part of learned demonology into a more complex figure clearly rooted in folk belief. Legend, in turn, began to influence aspects of court testimony. Dillinger's concludes: "The range of behavior that could foster witchcraft suspicions was entirely open. Witchcraft trials usually embraced this unlimited diffusion of causes for suspicion, and thus these trials were not so much an exception within the practice of criminal justice as its structural opposite" (194). This anti-trial aspect of witch hunts led to a phenomenon noticed in other parts of Europe, a phenomenon that runs directly counter to the received notion that most witch hunts tended to focus on the poor and the marginalized. As Dillinger discovers, "any conflict at all could generate the suspicion that one's adversary was actually in league with the Devil" (195). He labels this the "evil people principle," a principle that is deeply connected with local politics and power relationships.

Dillinger's work has rightfully been considered a landmark study in the German-speaking world. The book might be a hard read for many undergraduates, but should be required reading for anyone interested in witchcraft and witchcraft trials. It could easily be incorporated in courses on witchcraft, early modern European history and culture, and graduate courses focusing on ethnographic history and the study of folklore processes from a historical perspective. Considerations of contemporary witchcraft will also benefit greatly from this historical material. Laura Stokes' translation is excellent, as are the bibliography and index. Dillinger's masterful fusion of archival research with historiography and folklore theory is inspiring.