

**Rainer Decker, Hexenjagd in Deutschland, Darmstadt (Primus Verlag) 2006, 160 p., 15 ill. (Geschichte erzählt, 2), ISBN 978-3-89678-320-2, EUR 19,90.**

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The title of Rainer Decker's slim book can be simply translated as »Witch Hunt in Germany«. True to that title, Decker examines only a single hunt, one that took place in the diocese of Paderborn from 1656 to 1658. Dr. Decker, who leads the history faculty at a school in Paderborn, has written other works and consulted with television productions about witches. He has even examined this hunt before, in »Die Hexen und ihre Henker. Ein Fallbericht« (Freiburg, 1994) and »Die Päpste und die Hexe. Aus den geheimen Akten der Inquisition« (Darmstadt, 2003). This version seeks briefly to tell a good story, as part of a series called »History Narrated«, while clarifying the rest of witch hunting in Germany. Given the limited scope offered by focusing on one hunt, Decker does provide a useful introduction to the overall problem of the witch hunts.

His story begins in the middle, with Ferdinand von Fürstenberg. Von Fürstenberg was a cathedral canon from Paderborn who also held the position of a private chamberlain for the pope in Rome in August 1657. At that time, he received materials about the ongoing hunt in Paderborn from its prince-bishop, Dietrich Adolf von der Recke. After briefly introducing us to this exchange, Decker quickly skims over the basics of magic and witch hunting in the Western tradition up through the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. With the second chapter, Decker then covers the hunt in chronological order throughout the rest of the book.

Although this hunt took place toward the end of witch-hunting, it exhibited many of the diverse facets of witch trials. Social tensions operating in early modern Germany reveal themselves in Paderborn. These include fear and violence among the lower classes, desire for order and protection of privileges by the higher classes, and quarrels of neighbors. The hunt likewise included many dimensions of witchcraft: learned opinions pro and contra, inquisition, swimming, torture, burning, possessions, the sabbat, murder, and even werewolves. Decker illustrates these events with clear prose and generous quotes from primary sources, bringing back the voices of skeptics and believers.

The hunt's progress offers numerous points of interest for witch hunting. In early 1656, two teenage half-sisters in the town of Brakel began to exhibit signs of possession. They accused the servant-girl of the mayor of causing their suffering through witchcraft. That implicated the mayor, another councilman, and the local Capuchin monks. Although sensible religious and secular authorities diagnosed the girls as simulating their symptoms, a local professor at the University of Paderborn, Bernhard Löper, took it on himself to exorcise them. Löper emerges as the villain, whose public exorcisms and utterances promoted the fear of witches that soon led to more accusations. The Prince-bishop Dietrich Adolf vacillated and hesitated about what to do. Shortly after he dismissed Löper in April 1657, the professor staged a scandalous public confrontation in the territorial parliament

that accused the bishop of being a »Hexen-Anwalt« or advocate for witches. The number of possession cases expanded into dozens. Pressure by many in Paderborn and in the countryside urged more strident actions against witches. Street violence of the »possessed« against alleged witches caused several deaths and had to be put down with military force. In reaction, the prince-bishop established his own inquisition court, which eventually led to about thirty executions. The hunt abruptly ended with the public reconciliation of the political factions in Brakel.

One unusual aspect of this hunt was its political dimensions, mirroring struggles on the town council of Brakel. Executions claimed victims from both sides, including the mother of the original two possessed. Decker also focuses on the attempted moderation by the papacy, especially through the aforementioned Ferdinand von Fürstenberg. Correspondence from Rome tried to advise the confused Prince-bishop Dietrich Adolf toward attending to spiritual needs rather than following prosecutorial methods. Even Pope Alexander VII himself read and commented on the dossier about the hunt. In this context, Decker discusses in detail the *Instructio*, printed in 1657, which outlined how inquisitors should take extraordinary care in examining cases of witchcraft. If moderation from Rome had been more clearly enunciated, argues Decker, it might have slowed hunting even more quickly. Paderborn was also, of course, briefly the home of Friedrich Spee, whose 1631 book, »Cautio Criminalis«, convinced many of the dangers of witch hunting. Spee's cautionary approach, however, had not converted Paderborn either.

Decker's framing protagonist, Ferdinand von Fürstenberg, followed Dietrich Adolf as Prince-bishop of Paderborn. The enlightened Bishop Ferdinand abolished witch hunting in the region. Decker also briefly recounts the second-to-last witch trial in central Europe, that of Maria Ursula Padrutt from 1780 in Switzerland. Toward the end of the text, Decker examines a few possible causes for the 1656–1658 hunt, such as actual possession, fraud, poison, hatred of mothers, and guilt about sexual feelings and behavior, before dismissing them. He concludes that an irresponsible intellectual authority fanned the flames of hysteria about demons. He also largely blames political rivalries, both in the town of Brakel and among the territory's nobility, made worse by the indecisive and insecure prince-bishop.

Several features help the novice to witch hunting negotiate the tangled paths of understanding this strange phenomenon. The scholarly apparatus is rather limited. Decker's bibliography is confined to listing primary sources (both original and reprinted) and just a handful of books and articles relevant to certain arguments made in the text. The few endnotes cite only his use of primary sources. More helpfully, Decker offers corrections to several »prejudices« or misconceptions about witch hunting in boxes set aside from the main text. He notes that witch hunting was not medieval (but early modern), it did not kill millions, and it was not primarily a misogynistic attack on women. In similar boxes, he defines several terms, such as the inquisition and how it works, and lists numbers involved in key hunts. Of the fifteen pictures, about half connect to this specific hunt and portraying people and places mentioned in the text (although their green tint does not aid their clarity). The others illustrate images of witches and torture from both near-contemporary and earlier sources.

Decker's main success is to show the diversity of opinion that existed about witch hunting. There was

no monolithic mentality on the dangers of witches, especially by the later 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Arguments were made based on rational thought, evidence, philosophy, and the Christian worldview both for and against a fear of witches. By then, however, the tipping point toward rejecting a fear of witches was at hand. That rejection depended on the clear and responsible actions of political, intellectual, and spiritual authorities.

Decker's description of the Paderborn hunt is clearly geared toward the general reader and beginner to witch hunts. He provides sufficient background and context for the novice to understand both issues of witch hunting and problems prince-bishops had governing their territories in early modern Germany. Those who already have some knowledge of witch hunting can also learn from this unique case. Decker ably puts it into the context of the witch-hunting mentality of that era. Like all the hunts in general, this one in Paderborn demonstrates how fear can be manipulated into the deaths of innocents.