Kurt Baschwitz

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Baschwitz's last books for a larger audience were all about mass persecution and extermination. They were of course inspired by the mass persecution of the Jews by the Nazis, which later turned out to have indeed led to extermination. But Baschwitz's first monograph on persecution was published (under a pen name) at the beginning of the occupation, in the spring of 1941. Like his friend Presser and other historians, he chose at the time to focus on a comparable but slightly different set of historical events, as it was too risky to deal with the persecution of Jews and the rise of the Nazis directly.

In his earlier works, Baschwitz had already discussed the mass psychology of witch-hunts as an example of a completely irrational mass delusion. He now further dug into that phenomenon, and gradually developed into an internationally recognized expert on the matter. This chapter covers all of his books on this subject, including those published after the war.

The historiography of witch-hunts

As the West European nation-states consolidated during the 19th century, historiographers had wrestled with themes of alternating progress and regression, rationality and irrationality. One of two recurring storylines was that of gradual enlightenment, growth, and expansion. But the other recurring storyline was that of the periodic regressions into the Dark Ages of superstition – with witchcraft and witch-hunts, for example. Isaac Newton, the key founder of modern science, had already noted: 'I can calculate the motions of erratic heavenly bodies, but not the madness of multitudes'.

The mid-19th century saw the publication of a hundred pages devoted to witchcraft and witch-hunts in the famous early mass psychology casebook in English, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* by Scottish journalist Charles Mackay. During those same decades, however,

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1 Reportedly after he lost considerable amounts of money, when the speculative ‘South Sea bubble’ burst.
major historiographies of witchcraft and witch-hunts also came out in German and French. A 1900 bibliography reportedly listed 1,700 publications in the Francophone world alone.²

But the big question of how to explain such strange collective phenomena remained. From the early 20th century onwards, the new social sciences provided new approaches, particularly the fields of social and mass psychology. From his earliest work onwards, Baschwitz had felt that witch-hunts provided a kind of convenient arch-template that could be compared with all other kinds of mass delusions.

As he explained in a later interview: ‘I needed a mass phenomenon that provided a clear example of irrational behaviour. About which there was no difference of opinion anymore, no conflict – not even within myself. Witch-hunts were really appropriate’.³

**Baschwitz’s early interest in the subject**

Early in his life, Baschwitz had learned that even his own peaceful birthplace of Offenburg, in the supposedly liberal state of Baden, had earlier been ravaged for three decades (from 1601 to 1631) by a most gruesome series of witch-hunts. As a journalist, he had also returned to the subject, for instance in the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt.* His own first three books (on press, politics, and propaganda) had all devoted at least a section or chapter to the relationship between their subject and witch-hunts; and his final three books were entirely devoted to this theme alone.⁴

It was his experience with propaganda as a foreign correspondent in neutral Dutch Rotterdam, during the latter half of the First World War, that first made him delve deeper into the subject. We have seen that these experiences helped inspire his book on mass delusions, *Der Massenwahn.* In the first editions of this text, and even more in the completely revised last edition, he used the phenomenon of witch-hunts to establish that irrational beliefs could indeed become very widespread and could have great consequences in the real world.

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² Overviews by Wilhelm Gottfried Soldan (1843) and Jules Michelet (1862). 1900 bibliography: Robert Yve-Plessis. See Monter.

³ Interview by Bas Roodnat, in the Amsterdam daily *Het Parool,* 25 April 1964, upon the publication of the Dutch translation of Baschwitz’s last and most important book on witches.

⁴ See *De strijd met de duivel,* p. 392-397; as well as *Hexen und Hexenprozesse,* Part 6, first section (p. 248-253 in the 1981 Dutch translation).
Witch-hunts seemed to illustrate a profound human tendency to blame mishaps on the evil doings of hostile individuals or groups of deviant or Other people – rather than on ill fortune or anonymous forces in nature or society. Religious and secular authorities tended to look for scapegoats just as much as the uneducated ‘masses’ did, Baschwitz said. Once the process got under way, it could easily become self-reinforcing and hard to stop.

After epidemics, a failed harvest, or other disasters, for instance, certain people would suddenly attract suspicion for their ‘strange’ behaviour or appearance. They might be tortured into confessing that they were witches or had a pact with the devil, and then to name their co-conspirators. Anyone who spoke out against such proceedings risked becoming a suspect themselves. Psychologically, this whole chain of events would lead to ‘blaming the victims’.

The thought that the ‘witches’ might have been innocent after all would soon become unbearable. How could so many well-thinking people, including authorities and scholars, possibly be so wrong? Baschwitz also applied this reasoning to the grave atrocities, and the sometimes even graver atrocity stories, of the religious wars. It could also apply to the fear and hatred of ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities, or of entire other nations. The heathens or Others are dehumanized, before being subjected to inhumane treatment.

Bascowitz emphasized that witch-hunts had not been a purely medieval phenomenon, as was often repeated, but that they had instead developed during the transition to modern times – when sciences and universities had already begun to flourish. He also added that it could happen again. ‘When I claimed that [in 1923], I was ridiculed’, he said later. ‘Nobody had yet heard of Hitler, and neither had I. [But] a few years later, he came to power’.5 Baschwitz also wrote newspaper articles about witch-hunts at the time, and gave public lectures about them, including through the modern medium of radio.6

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5 Interview with Roodnat, Het Parool, 25 April 1964. The relevant files of the Baschwitz archives contain several references to talks on the subject. File 156 has material on the November 1925 lecture series on mass delusions (together with B. Malina) in the Philharmonic in Berlin, which included one on witches and witch-hunts.

6 ‘Geheime Wissenschaften’, Hamburger Fremdenblatt, 22 June 1913 (also quoted by Ebels-Dolanóvá, p. 191, n. 1); much later article ‘Der mörderische Aberglaube’, H.F., 21 April 1931. The latter was originally meant to be a radio talk for the ‘Deutsche Welle’, but it is not clear whether it was actually broadcast in that form. A radio talk on ‘Das Rätsel des Hexenwahns’ was apparently broadcast: according to a note on the typescript, on 11 June 1931 (file 157); according to Anschlag, on 11 July (p. 154-155).
In a 1929 article in the daily *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, Baschwitz even implicitly made a connection between witch-hunts and the persecution of an entire people:

The idea that a people as such can be found guilty of a war, and must be punished – including its children and later-born generations – is a superstition of modern times, but dark [obscurantist] nonetheless. When there is a break with judicial traditions, the tyranny of prejudice easily affects those most impressionable, those without inhibitions, the lowest. And the majority of the smarter and humane contemporaries is exposed to the indignity of allowing the fury of the brutes – and later somehow to cover it up and smooth it over for oneself.7

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7 *D.N.N.*, 28 April 1929 (i.e., before the great breakthrough of the Nazis). Quoted and highlighted by Ebels-Dolanová, p.122-3.
The role of the printing press

Baschwitz again touched upon the subject of the witch scares in his second book, *De krant door alle tijden*. After the invention of printing around the mid-15th century, the first great bestseller had of course been the Bible, particularly after the Reformation. According to one later appraisal, Martin Luther’s small town of Wittenberg turned into an explosive and innovative communication hub, the ‘Silicon Valley’ of those days, with half a dozen newly founded printing houses. The area produced three million books, soon including ones illustrated by Lucas Cranach the Elder and others, over the next thirty years alone. It also created a ‘public’ and ‘a public sphere’.

But the Bible was soon followed by the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* or *The Hammer of Witches*: a manual on how to identify, question, prosecute, punish, and exterminate them – which Baschwitz labelled ‘the most horrible book’ in world literature (thus far). Both books first appeared in Latin, but were then successively translated into all of the major European languages.

Such books were still very expensive, and libraries were few and not freely accessible. So Baschwitz emphasized that the first prints that could really reach mass audiences were single-page pamphlets – increasingly in vernacular languages, with ever starker illustrations, and finally even with some colour added. These pamphlets were mostly produced in countries and cities with tolerant publication regimes such as the Low Countries, and then exported to the neighbouring regions of Germany and France. They were sold for nickels and dimes at fairs and markets there, and were shown to others and quickly passed around on a large scale – hence the term ‘flyers’. Magic and horror soon became favourite subjects: demonology, devil-worship, and therefore witchcraft as well.

The widespread circulation and translation of the Bible had gradually put quasi-theological debate about good and evil into everyone’s reach,  

8 Article series ‘500 Jahre Reformation’, *Der Spiegel*. Instalment by Ulrike Knöfel, 2016, No. 46. She also observes that – ironically – Cranach’s portraits turned Luther into an ‘idol’ – he who meant to ban all idols.

9 The first Latin bible was printed by Gutenberg in the 1450s; the first translations into modern languages began to appear from the 1520s onwards. The Dominican order had played a large role in the Inquisition. Dominican priest Heinrich Kramer (a.k.a. Institoris) wrote the *Malleus Maleficarum* on his own initiative, and his hierarchy was split about it. He therefore later added the name of his more prestigious colleague Jacob Sprenger as a co-author, and used a 1484 papal bull on the subject as a preface/introduction to lend it more ‘official’ weight. The Latin edition came out in 1487. Vernacular editions also followed decades later: it had thirty or more editions by 1669.
where it merged with older folk beliefs about miracles and magic. Including how some (particularly visibly weak) people made a ‘pact with the devil’ to acquire extraordinary powers in compensation for their weakness, and for acquiring the power to put a spell on others.

An entire iconology developed: old women flying on broomsticks through the night, on their way to a witches’ Sabbath in the faraway woods or mountains. Cooking up mischief in pots stewing over woodstoves or fires back home, and often accompanied by black animals like cats, dogs, or goats – considered to be Satan incarnate. Baschwitz further elaborated upon these themes in his later works.

Since Baschwitz’s day, the historiography of witch-hunts has developed into a separate field of study, with an ever-growing body of detailed empirical studies and grand new theories. For example, a 2011 Dutch doctoral dissertation looked at how a successful Antwerp printer of pamphlets had commissioned the arch images of witches from the painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which then spread all over Europe and were endlessly copied and paraphrased. A special 2015-16 exhibition in both Flemish Bruges and Dutch Utrecht further demonstrated this influence.

Another forthcoming Dutch doctoral dissertation even plans to apply the wholly new approach developed to understand the competitive evolution of ‘memes’ (minor textual or visual elements subject to near-automatic copying by people) to the spread of the language and imagery of witchcraft in Germany.

The connection with contemporary events

Baschwitz returned to the subject of witch-hunts in his third book *Du und die Masse*, which was devoted to mass psychology in modern society. One chapter was entirely devoted to mass crimes against ‘outlawed’ groups, such as those of a different race, ethnicity, or culture. It referred to the lynchings of blacks in the Southern United States; to the genocide of Armenians as a potential Christian ‘fifth column’ in Muslim Ottoman Turkey (during the First World War confrontation with orthodox Russia); and of course to the earlier pogroms and persecution of Jews in Eastern and Central Europe.

10 2011 Nijmegen dissertation: Renilde Vervoort, also available online.
11 Vervoort, *Bruegel’s witches*.
12 Steije Hofhuis.
According to Baschwitz, these crimes fed on the ‘differential affect’ between people who belong to dominant in-groups or repressed out-groups. Jews had often been blamed for all kinds of real and imaginary ills. Such prejudice also led to exaggerated enemy images of how such Others could pose a threat. But again, during these present-day variations of witch-hunts, Baschwitz said, it was too easy to simply blame ‘the masses’. The persecutions mostly thrived on intimidation by an active minority, condoned by a passive majority, while the authorities failed to uphold the rule of law.

Another seed for Baschwitz’s identification of witch-hunts with the Nazi persecution of Jews may have been planted in his mind by a series of incidents in The Netherlands in 1935. The country had little sharp political satire at the time. It was imported by the German exile theatre company ‘The Pepper Mill’, run by Erika Mann (the daughter of the famous writer), and enthusiastically acclaimed by the entire exile community – mostly consisting of Jews and other antifascists, and possibly including Baschwitz on one occasion or another.

In one program, the main actress spoke a song text about ‘The Witch’. In the last line, she sarcastically expressed her ‘relief’ that her role as the scapegoat had now been passed on to ... the Jews. Police demanded that the sentence be scrapped, as it was considered ‘too incendiary’ (against the new Nazi regime in the much larger and increasingly threatening neighbouring country). But reports say that the sentence was often sung anyway.

When Baschwitz finally embarked on the first of his three elaborate studies of witch-hunts, the parallel with the persecution of the Jews thus was already clearly present in his mind.13

The Oudewater ‘Witches’ weighing house’

Just before the war, major Dutch national newspapers carried an article about the restoration of one very small house in one very small town. It had been completely rundown, and had been used as a warehouse and the garage for the fire engine. But it was now to be turned into a local museum of antiquities, backed by its supposed former ‘claim to fame’ as ... a witches’ weighing house. Not one to indict people, but instead to exonerate them.

13 This incident is related in a chapter by Alexandra Pfaffen on Erika and Klaus Mann’s stay in Amsterdam, for a Dutch collection of papers about The Netherlands and Germany during the Interbellum, edited by Boterman & Vogel (2013).
Ever since the ancient Babylonian code of Hammurabi (a few thousand years before Christ), it had been said that flying witches could easily be identified by their abnormally light weight, which would make them float if one attempted to drown them in water (such as by lowering a ‘witches’ stool’ – later specially designed for the purpose – into a river or canal). The Holy Books of all three monotheistic religions contained similar references to such tell-tale signs of sorcery.

So the weighing of people suspected of witchcraft might clarify these matters – or so it was thought. Baschwitz went to visit the town of Oude-water and got in touch with the local authorities and a municipal secretary to find out more about this. His last two books had just come out, and he was thinking about a possible new project. So the plan arose to write a monograph about the ‘witches’ weighing house’: Van de heksenwaag, his fourth book aimed at a larger public.¹⁴

His preparations probably picked up after the German invasion and occupation, when Baschwitz and other Jews were fired from the university and the Institute of Social History, but there was still some freedom of movement. His family split up, and he went to live in a nearby pension alone, as a scholarly recluse. Some of his library moved with him, and others probably helped him scour public libraries and second-hand bookshops for additional material. The subject was both innocuous and pertinent. On the one hand, witch-hunts seemed to have long disappeared, and the project could not be seen as subversive in any way – at least at first glance. On the other hand, it was clear to both Baschwitz and others that it resonated with the mass persecutions of the day. So what was its starting point and focus?

Earlier, other writers had noted that witch-hunts seemed to have stopped a century earlier in The Netherlands than in its neighbouring countries and elsewhere in Western Europe. Specifically, they seemed to have ended halfway through the Eighty-Year War, in which the mostly protestant North declared itself to be an independent Republic, and seceded from the mostly Catholic South (which later became Belgium) – that remained under the control of the Spanish-Habsburg emperors for the time being.

¹⁴ The largest newspaper of the country, De Telegraaf, devoted an elaborate article to the restoration on 30 June 1938, and to the planned opening in early September – on the occasion of the 40th jubilee of the Queen. (This article repeated the myth that Charles V himself had invented the entire witches’ weighing scheme). The architect was J.C. Hogendoorn; the municipal secretary who probably encouraged and helped Baschwitz with both research and promotion was A.W. den Boer. After his retirement, the latter published a book on the history of the old town, illustrated with paintings by Johan Schouten (1965).
At this time, scholars in The Netherlands had begun to speak out. Not against belief in the devil as such – which would still have been considered heresy – but against the excessive preoccupation with witches, who were tried in phoney procedures based on unreliable confessions obtained through systematic torture. The first of these scholars had been Johann(es) Wier/us, also spelled Weir or Weyer, a medical man originating from the province of Brabant, who rose to become the personal physician of the Dukes of the nearby German Cleves. His 1562 study in Latin *On the illusions of the demons* was even prefaced and recommended by Ferdinand I, who had in the meantime succeeded his brother Charles V as Emperor.\(^{15}\)

The Habsburg emperors had bestowed certain privileges on towns in the province of South Holland, such as the right to have an official weighing house for agricultural products. Charles, fascinated by the progress of science, technology, and measurement, had even told Gouda (of cheese-making fame) to calibrate its weights and measures with those of nearby Oudewater (reputable for its rope production – which further took off when the small Republic began building the largest fleet in the entire world of those days).

In *Van de heksenwaag*, Baschwitz related how Oudewater had begun to use its weighing privilege for a slightly different, but truly revolutionary use. Its aldermen and sheriffs had agreed to weigh people (mostly women) who were accused of witchcraft, for a fee – enough to pay all of the municipal officials involved in the elaborate process. For instance, the local midwife would undress the women and loosen their hair to verify that they did not carry hidden weights so as to appear heavier than they were.

In the end, the potential victims received certificates, with seals and signatures, testifying that they had a perfectly normal weight. Many of these people had also come for help from the Catholic areas on the German side of the border. Upon their return, they could show these official papers to the local authorities, Baschwitz wrote, who would then accept them as validated proof that they *could not possibly* be witches. They were thus able to stave off prosecution and certain death.

Baschwitz summarized (p. 115): ‘So this is how the simple citizens of an insignificant Holland town provided welcome services to the most scholarly men of their time in their hard struggle against raging stupidity. By means of an in itself backward and superstitious weighing test’. He suggested that

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\(^{15}\) Baschwitz may have felt encouraged by the fact that Leonard Dooren had defended an elaborate Ph.D. thesis about the life and work of medical man Wier at the Medical Faculty of the Dutch University of Utrecht in 1940. A more recent study on Wier is the 2011 Dutch book by Vera Hoorens (today professor of social psychology at the Flemish university of Leuven).
this simple procedure had helped break the spell: first in The Netherlands itself, and then also in some neighbouring areas.

Three medical professors, and then a law professor, at the prestigious University of Leiden (close to both Gouda and Oudewater) denounced the drowning test to establish abnormally light weight, and the mass delusions about witches as well.

Baschwitz’s story was derived from several earlier versions. The first was dated to the 1620s, when the Catholic areas on the other side of the German border had experienced a wave of witch trials. A Jesuit priest who had taken confessions from the victims became convinced that many were innocent. He had then written a monograph in Latin, urging caution.

A Dutch protestant reverend then translated this book and added a preface. He lived in Oudewater and praised the good work of the witches’ weighing house there. This version was then used by another Dutch protestant reverend, whose later denunciation of witch trials was in turn translated into many other languages and helped put an end to them in large parts of Europe. After the Napoleonic occupation and the Dutch return to independence (now as a monarchy), a local historian had then published
a history of the witch trials and their early ending as ‘a contribution to the fame of the fatherland’.16

The problem was that, in the process, the Oudewater story had gradually become embellished and exaggerated through one-sided religious and patriotic pride. Baschwitz had in turn been too eager to embrace this version, and to see his new homeland in a complimentary light.

**Baschwitz’s 1941 monograph *Van de heksenwaag***

Baschwitz probably completed the monograph *Van de heksenwaag in Oudewater en andere te weinig bekende zaken* (*On the witches’ weighing house in Oudewater and other little-known facts*) toward the end of 1940; it was published in early March 1941 at the latest (that is, a full year earlier than reported in the master’s theses of Ebels and Anschlag).

While Baschwitz had written it in German, it was translated into Dutch by his Jewish friend, the poet and writer Mozes (later Maurits) Mok, whose father-in-law was even said to have offered to claim authorship if it proved necessary. But in view of the growing risks, it was published under the pseudonym ‘Casimir Visser’, with the added initial ‘K.’, for Kurt – possibly as a silent wink to insiders.

Baschwitz’s younger friend, Amsterdam’s brand-new history professor Jan Romein, recommended the book through an introduction. He said it had consoled him, about much that had recently aggrieved him (implicitly: the occupation, repression, and persecutions). He also said that ‘it had been Dutchmen, whose in-eradicable common sense and indomitable reason-ability had triumphed’ – suggestively adding, ‘at least in this case’.17

The book was widely noted. A close reading of the reviews reveals that Baschwitz’s and Romein’s hints at the disquieting present were not lost on the readers. The first review in the liberal Amsterdam *Algemeen Handelsblad* began by quoting Huizinga’s study on the late Middle Ages, with its vivid contrasts between the evil and kind-heartedness of its people. Already in the second paragraph this review asked the key question:


17 Romein was soon also dismissed as a professor and temporarily taken hostage by the Germans. Thereafter, he joined the resistance and also hid a Jew in his house.
‘Would it be different in the gruesome years that we are currently going through?’

The largest daily De Telegraaf concluded: ‘This is how the weighing house in Oudewater became a symbol for what is and should remain the greatness of our country: a haven for the oppressed and persecuted, a Seat of Justice’. But this sentence provoked the outrage of the collaborationist Het Nationale Dagblad, which said that the Dutch NSB national socialists had been oppressed and persecuted in The Netherlands before the German take-over had finally brought them to power. So the highly topical political implications of Baschwitz’s monograph were lost on few.18

Twenty-five years later, the former municipal secretary of Oudewater testified in a local paper that Baschwitz’s wartime book had done the town a great service. ‘Previously, only individuals took a peek. Now, thousands visit the [witches’] weighing house’. After the Queen had herself weighed in 1952 to get an official declaration that she was no witch, it turned into a major tourist attraction.19

Further book, on De strijd met de duivel (The struggle with the devil)

Baschwitz went into hiding soon after his narrow 1942 escape from the Westerbork transit camp and from deportation. But family and friends probably helped him collect more books on the wider subject of witch-hunts in other countries, and through the ages. He thus began to prepare a larger, less localized and wider ranging study.

He was only able to complete this work after Liberation, though. It came out in 1948. Its title was De strijd met de duivel (The struggle with the devil), and its subtitle De heksenprocessen in het licht van de massapsychologie (The witch hunts in the light of mass psychology). It was again written in German, and then translated into Dutch. He tried to get it published in Switzerland, but to no avail.20

18 Algemeen Handelsblad, 13 March; De Telegraaf, 13 April; Het Nationale Dagblad, journalism section, 19 April 1941. The ND review, five days later, objected to the fact that Romein had written the introduction, but was otherwise ‘matter of fact’. There were also reviews in half a dozen other papers.
19 Goudsche Courant, 10 June 1966.
20 According to a letter (15 November 1948) in his papers (file 6), the German version Kampf mit dem Teufel was offered to Europa Verlag in Zürich, but they answered that it did not ‘fit’ into their program.
The thick, 500-plus-page book was a clear attempt to make a complete inventory of the facts and literature about this historical phenomenon in Western Europe. But it also tried to develop more of a psycho-social approach, and to distil the wider significance for similar present-day phenomena of persecution. A much younger colleague, a professor of Dutch history, ‘re-discovered’ the book much later, and admiringly noted that Baschwitz had been searching for the eternal ‘mechanisms of evil’.

The book had seven chapters, each with three to five sections. It did of course begin with a chapter about how ‘common sense’ had first come to prevail in The Netherlands – a recapitulation of his previous monograph. But the next worthwhile five chapters centred on the evolution of different categories of actors and their roles related to witch-hunts.

The second chapter thus focused on the earlier emergence of magicians and sorcerers; the third on the notion of ghosts, Faustian pacts with the devil, and how they induced mass suggestion and ‘mass hypnosis’. The fourth chapter described the idea that there was a worldwide plot of devil-worshippers, which resulted in a ‘war’ against elder women. The fifth chapter then looked at the persecutors, how malevolent people tended to take the lead and organize terror. The sixth, by contrast, looked at the savours, and how they succeeded in breaking the spell and curing the social ill.

The final chapter returned to the conceptual framework that Baschwitz had elaborated in his very first book Der Massenwahn (without explicitly mentioning it, however). Terror often led to a ‘silent panic’, he wrote: a kind of paralysis of both bystanders and authorities. Being forced to go along made them also want to believe the accusations – by triggering feelings of guilt and the aforementioned psychological process of ‘evening out’. This process motivates one to cede to the disinformation and to reject any observations that contradict it, so as to be able to re-align one’s perceptions and thoughts and feelings – to make them correspond to one’s (in)actions.

In an added epilogue, Baschwitz stressed that we tend to refuse to learn from this history. By relegating it to the distant past of the dark Middle Ages, by linking it to mere superstition, by ascribing it to the actions of the rabble. We are fooling ourselves, he says: it can happen again, and to any one of us. The only way to prevent the emergence of such delusions, he adds, is by upholding the freedom of expression and of the press. This will allow contradiction and debunking, and make common sense prevail in the end.

Dutch reviews of the book were generally positive. One Amsterdam weekly hailed it as ‘clever, an interesting and captivating book [...] furthermore very topical’. The weekly of a liberal protestant broadcaster said it confirmed that ‘Evil really exists’. But on this score his friend Romein wondered in a monthly whether ‘the sexual-pathological aspect’ had not ‘too much been left in the dark’. This was one criticism that was to return later.\textsuperscript{22}

To Baschwitz’s great frustration, however, this bigger Dutch book about witch-hunts still only had a very limited impact. During the next ten years, he was entirely absorbed by his job at the University of Amsterdam and getting the new discipline of ‘press studies’ off the ground. So the subject was temporarily laid to rest, although he continued to collect further information.

**Final major book, Hexen und Hexenprozesse (Witches and witch trials)**

It was only after he had finally retired and gradually stopped lecturing that he again took up the subject. In early 1958 he embarked on a preface and outline for a German publisher in Munich, but feared that they might prove reticent as ‘there is too much [to be read] between the lines’ (meaning: about the much more recent Nazi persecution of Jews, which people had tried to get off their minds).\textsuperscript{23}

Thus his third and final book Hexen und Hexenprozesse (Witches and witch trials: The history of a mass delusion and the fight against it) only came out in its German original in 1963, and in Dutch translation the next year. Basically a further elaboration and reworking of the material in his previous book De strijd met de duivel, it also had almost 500 pages, but it was organized differently.

The interesting attempt to proceed from a more or less analytical framework, based on the historical emergence of the various categories and roles involved in witch-hunts, was largely given up. Instead, after a few introductory ‘parts’ (chapters) on these central elements, the majority of the ten chapters had a purely geographical and chronological focus – which resulted in making


\textsuperscript{23} Letter, 9 February 1958, in his courtship correspondence with Ilse Scholz, who became his second wife. More about this in the later section on his retirement years.
it more transparent for readers, but lost some of the earlier psycho-social focus.

*Hexen und Hexenprozesse* had chapters on The Netherlands, England, and France, two on Germany, and one covering both Switzerland and Sweden. It also had a chapter on the United States. The belated witch-hunts of the late 1680s and early 1690s in Salem near Boston had provided a kind of ultimate paradigmatic case – as this was by far the most sophisticated area of that entire young nation.

Baschwitz noted that an earlier study had emphasized that, of the 120 clergymen in Massachusetts and Connecticut at the time, no less than 107 had been educated at Harvard University – later considered the best in the world. Yet many went along with the ebb and flow of the delusion that saw hundreds of citizens accused of witchcraft on this occasion alone, 150 arrests, 50 confessions, and no less than 19 hangings.24

The driving force was a single fanatical clergymen who tolerated no doubts or opposition. At various times, secular legal and political authorities had tried to stem the tide, but were swept away. Only when the governor himself intervened decidedly after several years, was the wave finally brought to a halt. The next year, there even was an officially proclaimed day of collective *contrition* for the harm that had been done.

More than a mere historical episode, then, ‘Salem’ became a modern morality tale, which later inspired a long series of stories and novels, plays and movies about the recurring phenomenon (such as Arthur Miller’s famous 1953 play *The Crucible*, which hinted at the contemporary McCarthy ‘witch-hunts’ on supposedly hidden ‘Reds’ in the U.S.).

**Failing health**

Baschwitz was set on quickly completing what he considered his ‘magnum opus’, at all costs. He worked hard, but his health was slowly fading. His younger second wife Ilse helped him with the manuscript, but she was not an academic. Then, at age 77, he had a serious stroke. It is not entirely clear whether or how this tragedy affected the final version of the book: they may have been forced to skip final research and checks, details, or even versions.25

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24 *De strijd met de duivel*, p. 494-509; *Hexen und Hexenprozesse*, Part 9.
25 The August 1987 letter of eldest daughter Isa to biographer Anschlag mentions that he had the stroke in (early?) 1963 (p. 100, 148, n. 79). According to notes kept with his will, he was treated by neurologist Prof. Biemond.
The original German version of the book came out in the autumn of 1963. It was widely reviewed in the press and on the radio in his country of origin, mostly positively. Some were small items, but others were larger articles in such serious dailies as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Welt*. The latter reviewer wrote that the book was ‘rather readable and useful. To my knowledge there is no similar modern, elaborate and all-embracing history of the witch persecutions in German, produced with scientific thoroughness’.26 This must have given the ailing author and his wife some comfort, as they kept many such clippings in separate files.

The translated Dutch version came out a year later. It was also widely reviewed in the press and on the radio of his country of adoption, again mostly positively. Some celebrated it as ‘a work of reference’: one daily carried a full-page interview with him as a confirmed authority. But others also regretted that it was rather ‘cerebral’ (!), with ‘too many collected facts’ and ‘too little explanation’ (as this had already been provided in his earlier publications). That it was ‘somewhat schoolmasterly’, lacking in ‘an individual style’ and ‘personal commentary’. As a former journalist, such observations must have pained him.27 Although all his previous studies had been largely socio-historical, he had had no formal training as a professional historian.

One review thus concluded: ‘Unfortunately, Baschwitz’s book is of less scientific use than one would expect with such a form and size. References to sources are very rare, and unfortunately we found many inaccuracies in names and years. Furthermore, the newest and best works have often not been consulted – for instance on the Inquisition’. The reviewer, himself a Jesuit expert on the historiography of witch-hunts, surmised that the final fine-tuning might have become difficult after his stroke. But this cannot be verified.28

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28 Dr. Hugo Zwetsloot, an expert on German literature, who had done a Ph.D. dissertation on Friedrich (von) Spee – an early Jesuit opponent of the witch-hunts in Germany. The unidentified clipping (in file 152) apparently came from a paper in Nijmegen (as it has local ads on its back). This was the seat of the main Catholic university (today’s Radboud University), and of related institutions and orders.
International praise and critique

Baschwitz’s earlier studies about witch-hunts had only been published in Dutch, and had reached just a limited audience. This last book, by contrast, temporarily gained the status of an international ‘reference work’ for some. It was not only published (and repeatedly reprinted) in German and Dutch, but also translated into Serbo-Croatian (1966), Japanese (1968), and French (1973).

In France, and in the ‘Latin’ world in general, it joined a growing literature focused on the evolution of mentalities and ‘historical psychology’, partly inspired by the Annales school of historiography (named after its main journal). Yet some commentators regretted that he could have done more to elaborate the links between witch-hunts and other phenomena like anti-Semitism and misogyny.

One particularly appropriate review appeared in a German-language journal for the promotion of understanding between Christians and Jews. It hailed the ‘uncommonly lively’ book, as well as the obvious ‘parallels with the persecutions of Jews’. It also noted that ‘Psychologists and sociologists have long demanded that the persecutions of Jews through the ages not be considered in isolation, but in their relations to other phenomena of mass delusion’. A footnote therefore regretted that Baschwitz had apparently not been aware of two related American studies, published just before and during the war, about the links between Medieval superstition, Jewish magic, and subsequent accusations of devil-worship and witchcraft.

Then there was the rising preoccupation with women as victims. Of course Baschwitz had noted that the vast majority of the accused were women. At one point, he said that the hunts represented a ‘war against old women’. But many of the women had also been middle-aged or young – even adolescent virgins and/or in the fertile, young-adult age. He had noted that the witch-hunters were obvious misogynists, some with ‘perverted obsessions’. But he had not delved very deeply into the role of unconscious sexual fantasies,

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29 Caro Barojas on witches in the Spanish Las Brujas (1961, transl. 1964); Carlo Ginzburg in I Benandanti (1966); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie on related subjects in Paysans de Languedoc (1966) and Montaillou (1975); Jean Delumeau on irrational fears in La Peur en Occident (1978)’ and various studies by Robert Muchembled. The most pertinent one together with his colleague Marie-Sylvie Dupont-Bouchat and Dutch expert Willem Frijhoff, Prophètes et Sorciers dans les Pays Bas, XVe-XVIIIe siècle (1978).

30 Christlich- Jüdisches Forum (published in Basel, Switzerland), March 1964. Referring to American studies by Joshua Trachtenberg: Jewish Magic and Superstition (1939), and The Devil and the Jews (1943).
their denial and repression – although his earlier work on war propaganda had shown that he was familiar with some of Freud’s psychodynamics on this score. Had he remained a prude Victorian at heart?

An early Dutch review by a female author carried a title referring to witches as ‘Mistresses of the devil’, but also regretted Baschwitz’s lack of psychological explanations. From the late 1960s onwards, feminist-inspired views of witch-hunts became a louder voice. Some activists claimed the label of benevolent ‘white witches’ for themselves (tongue-in-cheek) as opposed to the accusations of malevolent ‘black magic’.

An article on the subject in a major Amsterdam morning paper reported that feminists had ‘almost literally devoured’ the copy of Baschwitz’s book in the public library. ‘It teems with added lines in pencil, pen and ball-pen, exclamation marks and hand-written observations. Almost all illustrations have been torn out’.

It added that ‘radical feminists carry the label “witch” as a proud nickname’. Cafés, libraries, and publishing houses for women were named The Shrew, The Hell-cat, or Witches’ Press. Women’s demonstrations paraded through the Rijksmuseum underpass with its hollow acoustics, and yelled: ‘The witches are back, with flaming hair’. There were T-shirts and bags with three witches on a broomstick.

These were for sale in Utrecht on Saturday 25 September 1982, at a thematic day of the national ‘consultation conferences’ of ‘women’s history’ studies. There was also a new master’s and a Ph.D. thesis on the subject. The latter had a few Dutch case studies, but the references to Baschwitz were mostly critical.31

As the decades had passed, Baschwitz’s studies had gradually lost ground as an authoritative reference, even in his own Germany and The Netherlands. He had begun to write about the subject immediately after the First World War. But historiography had evolved greatly since then. It was no longer enough to do a study of the literature. Immediately after his last and most comprehensive work had appeared, one professional historian had already called it ‘disappointing’; upon a re-edition almost two decades later, another said he had weighed it and found it ‘too light’.32

One was now supposed to visit archives and patiently sift through reams of original documents, deciphering them, with an eye for telling details. To make qualitative analyses of implicit ‘discourses’ and ‘the social construction of meaning’. Or even to make quantitative analyses about the specific characteristics of the accusers, the accused, the accusations: how did they vary through time and space? The founding of a Dutch academic ‘study group’ on the subject in the early 1980s had produced a great leap forward. The members produced one collection of papers after the other, concerning precise research questions.\textsuperscript{33}

One member took another close look at the case of Oudewater, for instance, and Baschwitz’s earliest monograph on the witches’ weighing house there. He concluded that the Dutch protestants and patriots had created ‘a historical myth’ about its heroic role, and that Baschwitz had bought into it and had even added further embellishments here and there himself. They had exaggerated the numbers of people seeking protection, where they came from, the benefits the weighing and certification gave them, and the date at which it had all started. Another researcher felt that the criticism on these scores was slightly exaggerated, but basically correct.\textsuperscript{34}

At the same time, however, Baschwitz’s reflections on the social and psychological processes often remain valid – even in our own day and age.

The scale and persistence of witch-hunts

Another major problem was posed by the estimates of the number of victims invoked in Baschwitz’s texts. He had quoted a total of as much as one million victims, over a few centuries, in Western Europe. But it later turned out that this figure was probably much too high, even including some of the previous Inquisition and other kinds of related violence.\textsuperscript{35} By contrast, he

\textsuperscript{33} Marijke Gijswit- Hofstra & Willem Frijhoff (eds.), \textit{Witchcraft in the Netherlands from the 14th to the 20th century} (Rotterdam: Universitaire Pers 1991), and subsequent collections (Dutch version published in 1987).

\textsuperscript{34} De Waardt; Löwensteyn.

\textsuperscript{35} The number of one million ‘burnt at the stake’ is repeated in the sensational headline for his 1964 interview with the Dutch daily \textit{Het Parool}, cited above. A table compilation of estimates in the Wikipedia article ‘Witch-hunt’ comes to approximately 80,000 trials and 35,000 executions in Western Europe, over the three centuries between 1450 and 1750. Other estimates are slightly higher. But some of the related papers may have been lost, and many killings may also have been extra-judicial.
had referred to sporadic cases in the contemporary Western World, but had seemed unaware that the problem persisted elsewhere (and continues to this very day).36

From the 1930s onwards, the term ‘witch-hunts’ had also acquired a wider figurative meaning beyond the historical phenomenon. Ebels already noted that it was widely applied to the repeated political purges in the Soviet Union, later its satellite states in Eastern Europe, the Chinese People’s Republic, and the other Asian communist states – which killed many millions. The ‘Red scares’ in the U.S. and the Western World after the First and Second World Wars, meant to ‘root out’ communists and fellow travellers in key professions, by contrast, ‘only’ cost a number of left-leaning people their jobs and reputations.

One final word. According to many observers, the present-day Western World continues to be characterized by a rapid succession of scares, and a widespread ‘culture of fear’ about relatively limited risks to health and security. Jihadi terrorism has further aggravated this. But there is also the category of ‘moral panic’ or paranoid outrage over the behaviour of deviants like GLTB’s (Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, and Bisexual people). There have also been numerous scares over abuse of children by caregivers or teachers: sometimes real, sometimes completely imagined.

So Baschwitz’s reflections on the mass psychology of witch-hunts still retain some of their relevance.37

36 Recent UN reports estimate that thousands of supposed witches are still killed every year, and many more are beaten or banned: throughout Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and within related immigrant communities. In Gambia, the previous Islamic president himself launched a witch-hunt. In the Central African Republic, the female vice-president turned out to be a believer, and 60 percent of all female prisoners were accused of witchcraft. Most of the 25,000 to 50,000 children living on the streets of the capital Kinshasa of Zaire/Congo had reportedly been suspected of some kind of demonic possession or witchcraft and then abandoned. See: Graeme Wood, ‘Sorcery at war’ and Mitch Horowitz, ‘Witch-hunting, 21st century style’, INYT, 19 May 2014. More: 5-6 July 2014; 16, 23, & 30 October 2015. Gambia: 2 December 2016.

Excerpt from *Hexen und Hexenprozesse* (Final part of the epilogue; almost identical to the conclusion of the previous *De strijd met de duivel*)

*I have replaced the word ‘witch’ with an asterisk in the following excerpt. This is meant to illustrate that the whole argument (originally developed while Baschwitz was ‘in hiding’ during the Second World War, and immediately thereafter) was also inspired by, and partially meant to apply to, the persecution of all other kinds of groups – such as Jews.*

We are too afraid of those who appeal to mass instincts and who exploit them, and put our hope too little on an appeal to common sense. That also has to do with mass instincts, but with those aimed at humanity.

At the beginning of a book about the * trials, such a thesis would have sounded excessively optimistic. But after so many chapters have demonstrated that even this persecution of people did not arise spontaneously out of the blind passions of the mass, and could not persist because of the [supposed] stupidity and maliciousness of the majority, one may dare to draw such an encouraging conclusion.

Numerous examples have shown how much effort and application of unusual means it has cost – even though the population was scared enough – to get and keep the mass murder and hunting of people going. What iron authority with the help of merciless, intimidating violence had to be mobilized. Nowhere would the persecutors have succeeded in mounting lasting and extensive massacres, if the road had not been paved by the cruelty or personal foolishness of political power holders, or by the weakness of a shaky government. The other way around: where and whenever the authorities came to their senses, and reined in the persecution mania, the ‘mass’ never revolted against it, and on the contrary its fears subsided.

The * persecutions have been the work of terror, to which people were exposed without any right or defence. The activity of fanatical persecutors was primarily made possible by the breaching of the existing rule of law, and the elimination of the already weak legal protection of the individual by the introduction of emergency laws.”

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In order to exert their terror, the * hunters depended on intimidation by physical violence and death threats. The natural feelings of fear and hate among the population – with all the blindness resulting from it – in themselves did not suffice for reaching the goal. That is why they [the hunters] never dared to rely on voluntary cooperation or passivity alone.

Yet we may not overlook that the effect of their violence and force was heightened by purely psychological means of terror. The mental state of the people of their time, with all resulting inclinations and inhibitions, suited them well. They knew how to abuse it to morally intimidate the majority of the people, and to have them willingly bow to their power.

It turned out that the most effective means against the delusion was freedom of the word. Experience has repeatedly shown that wherever this freedom existed, the * murderers could irrevocably be driven back – so, wherever differences of opinion could be fought out, and where a public opinion could develop.

Without exception, the excesses of each mass delusion are the result of intimidation and violation of laws. This allows a minority of brutes to impose their will on a reasonably sensible and reasonably upright majority.