

pressure on Israel. They are also worried about Egypt putting all its faith in one man, Henry Kissinger, who, after all, is not an institution.

Then there are still people among us who aspire to the total destruction of Israel. These people in Egypt have many allies among hard-liners in Libya, Iraq, among the Palestinians and most notably in Syria. The Syrians are convinced that the United States is out to isolate the Arabs from their only reliable ally, the Soviet Union. They think that Sadat plays along with the United States because he puts his own immediate gain above the interests of the Syrians and the Palestinians. We Arabs suffer from another handicap. Because Israel is a free society, the public is aware of the limitations of the partial victory in 1973. It feels discouraged and tired of war.

In Israel perhaps it is only at the very top that a few might welcome another war in order to be able to redeem themselves. But in the Arab world, the exact opposite is true. Unfortunately, because Egypt is not a free society, only the very top leaders know that they were in a pinch in the '73 war, and because of that, they have no appetite for a renewal of the conflict. The public, on the other hand, really believes that we *won* that war, and sometimes even screams for a renewal of warfare. There is another danger: because Egypt is a closed society, when new leaders take over from the present ones, they may not have the

information which tempered the policies of their predecessors. Even some of the present leaders, unfortunately, have a selective memory. They forget their narrow escape in 1973 and remember, only the illusion of success.

ELON: It sounds like touch and go, Sana. Both in the Arab countries and in Israel. I ask myself if we are going to find the time or the strength to sort it all out internally before it is too late.

There's an old Hasidic tale of the great Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, who one day was travelling through a wintry mountain region in a carriage pulled by two oxen. When the carriage reached a steep hill, he got off and walked alongside in the mud to ease the animals' burden. The coachman reproached him and urged him to get on again. "I don't want to reach the pearly gates," said the old man, "and find these two oxen there complaining to the Creator that this fat old Jew remained in his seat while they were slaving under the yoke." "But they won't be able to argue that," said the coachman. "They are oxen; it is their job to pull the carriage up the hill." "Yes," said the rabbi, "that is true, but who has the strength to argue with oxen?"

We'll just have to have the strength, Sana, both in Israel and in the Arab countries.

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Mushrooms

Elusive to our spells, these chambers
Tented in grass: we stoop and plod
About the church insanely, like penitents.

White and soft as conjurors' gloves,
Edging like eggs or ears out
Of the field's moist green table.

Wedded with fine hairs to a mystery
They part from when tugged like a plaster,
The thumb stump delicately clogged with soil.

Frightening, the exuded tips and domes!
But still we search and pick, our baskets
Smelling fragrantly of underground caverns.

It's as though if we left them they would bud
Into faces and not, as we know, grow skirts
Which drop to a black lace as the air melts them.

John Fuller

Norman Cohn

Was there ever a Society of Witches?

Myths & Hoaxes of European Demonology (1)



HUNDREDS OF books and articles have been written about the great European witch-hunt of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, and during the last few years the subject has received more attention from historians than ever before. But that

does not mean that nothing remains to be said. On the contrary, the more is written, the more glaring the disagreements.

Were there people who regarded themselves as witches? If so, what did they do, or believe themselves to do? Were they organised, did they hold meetings? What are we to make of covens and sabbats? Again, when and where did the great witch-hunt begin? Who launched it, who perpetuated it, and for what motives? And just how "great" was it—did the numbers of those executed run into thousands, or into tens of thousands, or into hundreds of thousands? On most of these questions there is still no consensus among historians—and even where consensus exists, it is not necessarily correct.

We may start with the stereotype of the witch as it existed at the times when, and the places where, witch-hunting was at its most intense. The profile of that stereotype at least is established beyond all dispute. We possess not only the records of innumerable witch-trials, but also memoirs and manuals by half-a-dozen witch-

hunting magistrates; and the figure of the witch that emerges could not be clearer or more detailed.

A WITCH was a human being—usually a woman but sometimes a man or even a child—who was bound to the Devil by a pact or contract, as his servant and assistant.

When the Devil first appeared to a future witch he was clad in flesh and blood. Sometimes his shape was that of an animal but usually it was that of a man, fully and even smartly dressed. Almost always he appeared at a moment of acute distress—of bereavement, or of utter loneliness, or of total destitution. A typical pattern was that an elderly widow, rejected by her neighbours and with nobody to turn to, would be approached by a man who would alternatively console her, promise her money, scare her, extract a promise of obedience from her, in the end mate with her. The money seldom materialised, the copulation was downright painful, but the promise of obedience remained binding. Formally and irrevocably the new witch had to renounce God, Christ, the Christian religion, and pledge herself instead to the service of Satan. Whereupon the Devil set his mark on her—often with the nails or claws of his left hand, and on the left side of the body.

IF BECOMING A WITCH rarely brought either wealth or erotic pleasure, it had other rewards to offer. A witch was able to perform *maleficium* (i.e. to harm her neighbours by occult means). The pact meant that the Devil would demand this from his servant, but it also meant that he would supply her with supernatural power for the purpose. With the Devil's aid, a witch could ruin the life of anyone she chose. She could bring sudden