

Violence Against Suspected Witches in France, 1790-1940

1. Introductory comments

This paper is based on a draft chapter from my current book project: *Witchcraft in France, 1790-1940*. The book starts from the conundrum of an impossible story. Historians have long known that the fear of witches in Europe did not disappear when witchcraft was decriminalized. Yet every time there was a scandalous criminal trial connected to witchcraft beliefs, journalists and legal authorities declared that it was an aberration, a 'survival' of a 'medieval' mindset. Witchcraft made no sense to writers for most of this period, because it was orphaned in time. Witchcraft was not a story that belonged in modernity, but an epilogue to the barbarism of the past.

Witchcraft in France shows how wrong these assumptions were. Not only did fears of witchcraft continue in this period, but the shape and outcome of the cultural scripts governing these conflicts changed over time. The book excavates these patterns to explore the emergence of a specifically 'modern' form of French witchcraft in the nineteenth century, which finally blended with ideas about ritual magic, occultism, and the assumptions of colonial anthropology into a new story of witchcraft fit for the twentieth century. This involves reconstructing a story that contemporaries were not aware of themselves, showing how different the patterns of conflicts over harmful magic were in modernity to the better-known case of the early modern trials.

I am working with slightly different methods to many of the other participants in the workshop. I came to this topic from a traditional cultural historical training, and the core of this project involves close-reading newspaper articles and visiting archives to consult the often very rich trial records. I've always thought it is important for cultural historians to ask themselves questions that border on the quantifiable: questions of representativeness, or frequency, scale, and demographics. But having come to those quantifiable questions from close work with sources, I am sceptical about some of the bolder claims and arguments that researchers have made about folklore and cultural traditions.¹ In this paper, I lay out some new things I have found from quantifying and trying to sketch a big picture of violence and witchcraft in this project with a particular focus on who was involved, and how the most ritualized forms of violence were changing.

2. Sources and chronology

On 21st November 1807, Anne Horeau, two of her two sons and her daughter lured a beggar named François Plet who they suspected of witchcraft to their house in rural Mayenne and killed him.² 130 years later and 180 kilometres away, Eugène Coeslier committed a similar murder against Henri Fillodeau, a fourteen-year-old boy who worked for Coeslier's neighbour in the Loire-Atlantique.³ Although the motive for both crimes was a suspicion of witchcraft, the violence of the two cases could not have been more different. Anne Horeau and her adult children attacked their victim together, while Eugène Coeslier acted alone. In the 1807 case, the family engaged in a long scene of torture, threatening their victim with a knife and a gun, before firing up their oven and repeatedly burning different part of his body. Throughout this protracted ordeal, Anne Horeau commanded him to lift the spell he had cast on one of her sons. Eugène Coeslier's actions were much more abrupt. Following a brief confrontation with his victim, he rushed into his house, seized a hunting gun, and returned

¹ Tehrani JJ (2013) The Phylogeny of Little Red Riding Hood. PLoS ONE 8(11): e78871. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0078871>.

² See AD Mayenne, U 450/5.

³ See AD Loire-Atlantique, 5 U 511.

outside in time to shoot Henri Fillodeau once at close range. His actions after committing the crime also diverged completely from Anne Horeau and her family's 130 years before. Where they had feebly tried to deny attacking their victim, Eugène Coeslier calmly continued his day, setting off to bring his cows back from pasture. When the police arrived, he frankly admitted what he had done. Between these two cases, the standardized forms of violence against suspected witches underwent a slow and uneven transformation, from the protracted, collective rituals of torture involved in witch-burnings in the early nineteenth century, to the dispassionate executions of lone gunmen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This chapter draws on 263 cases of what historians have called 'reverse witch trials' that were investigated by the police between 1790-1940.⁴ 'Reverse' because they were not trials of witches, as in the early modern period. Instead they were trials of those who assaulted 'witches', living humans they suspected of causing harm by supernatural means.⁵ The violence of these cases was shocking to contemporary journalists, criminal investigators, and medical experts, who saw every example as an aberration, a 'backwards' expression of beliefs that belonged to another age. The cases are now well-known to historians, who have highlighted that violence against witches in France outlasted similar phenomena in many other European countries, persisting into the twentieth century.⁶ These cases were identified through three sources: word-searches of 315 digitized local, national, and colonial newspapers totalling more than 1.4 million issues; visits to 35 regional and national archives, where cases have rarely been catalogued as 'witchcraft'; secondary readings.

These sources do not suggest an absolute decline of violence against witches between 1790-1940 (see *Fig. 1*). Similar patterns hold for assaults and threats, as well as the most serious cases, where the victims died of their injuries (see *Fig. 2*). This is in marked contrast to what historians have found in England, which is probably the best-studied European equivalent.⁷ But it might be more accurate to talk about the absence of a finding, rather than any clear argument about the chronological patterns of cases: the evidence for decline is absent, but it is not possible to say with certainty how the frequency of cases changed over this period. The available evidence from both the 1790s and 1910s, where cases dipped dramatically, probably under-counts cases, due to the disruption that the French Revolution and the First World War brought to both press and criminal justice. There were far fewer newspapers published between 1800 and 1830 than afterwards, which may have depressed the numbers at the start of the period. Press censorship might also have played a role in restricting the number of reported cases in the 1850s and 1860s, and even the 1870s. After 1880, the relaxation of censorship not only promoted a dramatic expansion of press titles, but also encouraged tabloid-style interest in scandalous and shocking news. Titles such as *Le Petit Journal* took a particular interest in witchcraft cases, which they vaguely linked to contemporary concerns around occultism and magic.⁸ Anti-clerical newspapers such as *La Lanterne* also proliferated in the same period and treated all stories of sorcery as yet more examples of the damaging influence of the priesthood.⁹ Judicial and press interest in witchcraft did not decline, and there were enough cases for the newspapers to maintain a steady flow of examples into the 1930s. Controlling for all of these possible distortions does not result in any clear trend of decline.

⁴ Hennigsen note.

⁵ This is my condensed version of Ronald Hutton's definition in 'Anthropological and Historical'.

⁶ See Davies, 'Witchcraft Accusations'. By comparison, the last witch-killing in Denmark was in 1800. See Hennigsen, p.122.

⁷ For England, Waters notes that cases of violence declined markedly after the first half of the nineteenth century, *Cursed Britain*, pp.68, 97.

⁸ They carried at least 61 articles on cases of witchcraft between the 1860s and 1940.

⁹ At least 87 stories.

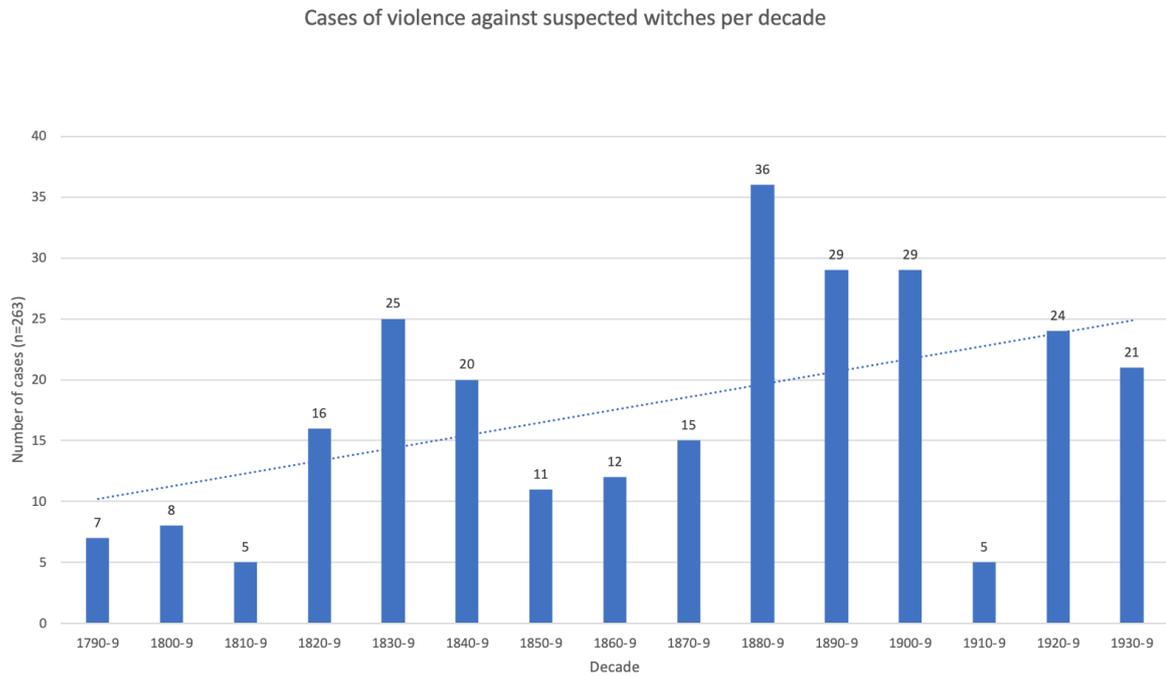


Figure 1

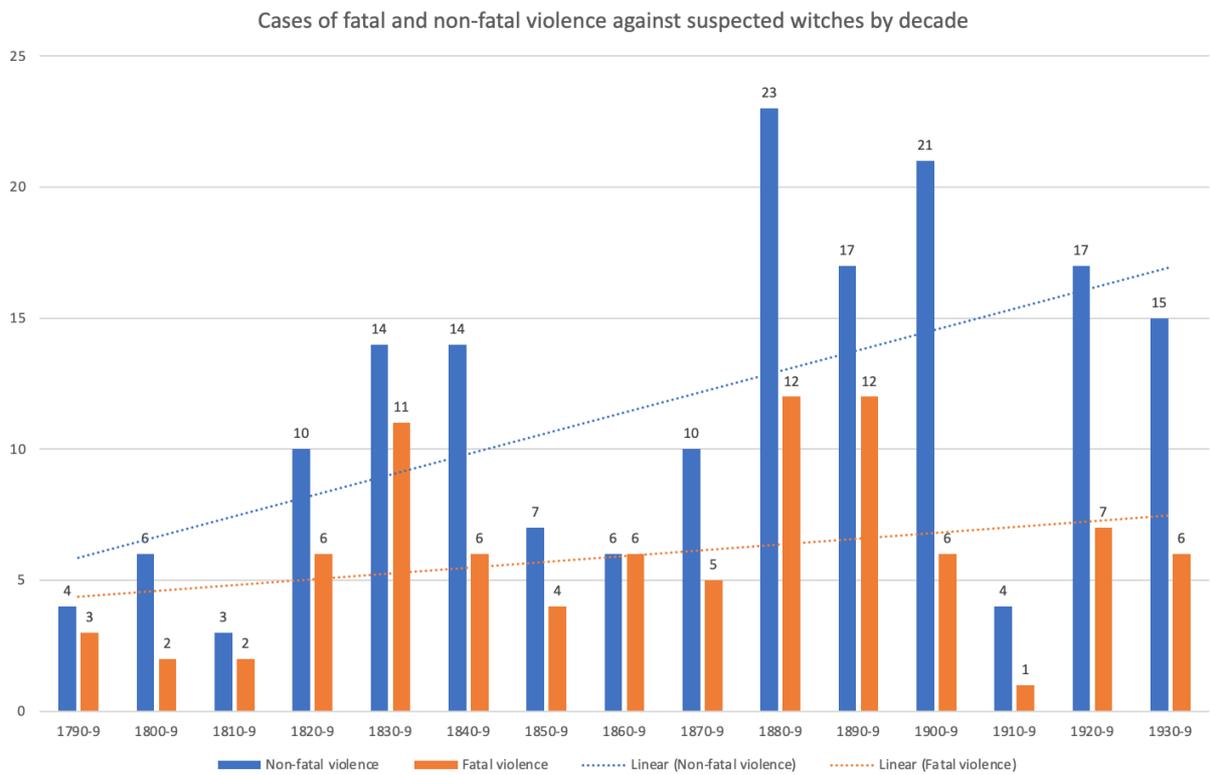


Figure 2

3. Assailants and victims

Who were the victims and perpetrators of these assaults?

Violence bespeaks unequal power relationships. Most people who were victimised for accusations of witchcraft were unable or unwilling to negotiate with their assailants, for two reasons. First, to be attacked as a witch was to be doubly denied a right of reply. Few, if any, victims of this violence could have believed themselves guilty of witchcraft, and many of them were openly sceptical about magic, in general. Their identity as victims was not of their own choosing. Unlike their assailants, they held no particular assumptions or ideas in common. Their experience of victimisation was not shared, but radically individualizing. Madame G. told a court in 1837 about her shocked realization that a family suspected her of witchcraft:

A few months ago, I borrowed a jug of milk from the P. family. On 24th February, I went to give it back to them and the mother and children gave me dark looks and wouldn't reply to my words.

When the father of the household appeared, he threw her onto a fire and commanded her to lift the spell. With the help of one of his daughters, however, Madame G. managed to escape:

I rushed away, with no idea what madness had taken hold of these good folk, with whom I had had good neighbourly relations and even friendship up until this point.¹⁰

Many suspected witches found themselves ostracised within their communities. Violent attacks were the final stage in the severing of ties of friendship, family, and neighbourhood.

The second reason why victims of violence had little control over their persecution was that they were structurally disadvantaged. Victims of violence were, on average, older than their assailants, more likely to be marginal community members, and less likely to be well-off property-owners. Almost all victims of violence were attacked individually, even if they were thought to be part of a wider group or 'cabal' of witches. They were often attacked by groups of accusers, especially in the first half of the period.

The victims of violence were broadly typical of accused 'witches' in general in this period [a topic I discuss in the previous chapter of the book], with one exception: the most socially marginal suspected witches were much more likely to be violently attacked. Where many witchcraft accusations were horizontal, with accusers and 'witches' mirroring one another's social status and position, beggars and the unemployed are overrepresented among the witches who were physically attacked, making up 15% of the known occupations.¹¹ Priests (7.9%) and shepherds (5.5%) are also overrepresented among victims of violence compared to witches in general.¹² Although clergy had more authority and wealth than shepherds, what these victims had in common with the vagrants and unemployed was their outsider status within communities. In most other ways, victims of violence against witches were relatively typical of suspected witches in general. The commonest occupation among victims of violence remained 'farmer' or agricultural worker (38%). Men only slightly predominated (52.7%) among victims of violence, compared to the clearer majority among

¹⁰ *La Gazette des Tribunaux* 27 March 1837.

¹¹ 19 of 127 known occupations.

¹² 7 and 10 examples respectively.

all suspected witches (58.3%). Victims of violence were also slightly older (56.9), on average, than all suspected witches (52.5).¹³

The contrasts with their attackers are stark.¹⁴ Assailants were not necessarily individuals who thought themselves bewitched. Often, they were family members, especially brothers, fathers, uncles, and male cousins, acting on behalf of someone else suffering under a spell. These assailants were, on average, much younger (40.7), and much more socially homogenous than their victims. Describing two witch-killers in 1846, one journalist noted they belonged to 'a class of wealthy agriculturalists who... had managed to amass a fortune that could be called considerable given their position; both are in the prime of life (34 and 36 years old)'.¹⁵ Compared to their victims, assailants were much more likely to be farmers or agricultural workers. Although newspapers and judicial records did not always use terms precisely, it is striking that 39.7% of assailants were 'farmers' presumed to own their property, with another 19.6% working as labourers, servants, or other farm workers for an employer.¹⁶ None of those who attacked suspected witches were shepherds.

The most notable difference between victims of violence and their assailants concerns gender. Where victims were only slightly more likely to be men than women, perpetrators were almost three times more likely to be men (74.5%) than women (25.5%).¹⁷ This proportion was even more dramatic in cases where the victim died of their injuries: 85.7% of those charged with fatal attacks were men.¹⁸ When women did commit violence against suspected witches, they often did so as part of mixed groups made up of male neighbours and family members.¹⁹

This overall picture of perpetrators has much in common with the demographics of the bewitched: these were people who had something to lose. They were predominantly men, predominantly well-off, and in the prime of life. Most of this violence had little in common with the carnival atmosphere or special licence sometimes given to early modern and revolutionary women and teenagers up to the nineteenth century.²⁰ Instead, most violence against suspected witches belongs to more quotidian models. Rather than the extraordinary violence of popular protest, the social picture of perpetrators and victims is closer to that found in brawling or inheritance and boundary disputes. Instead of the elaborate, explosive rituals of costuming, music, and dismemberment of the Hautefaye murder or the 'War of the Demoiselles', much of this violence was banal.²¹

¹³ Compare to the average age Waters found in Britain: 55. See *Cursed Britain*, p.103.

¹⁴ The numbers I discuss here in fact refer to *accused* assailants. Some of these were never prosecuted, and some were cleared at trial, but in neither case can this be taken as a straightforward exoneration as the next chapter demonstrates. Rather than trying to retrospectively re-judge each case, I have taken the approach of treating all accused assailants together.

¹⁵ *La Gazette des Tribunaux*, 27 March 1840.

¹⁶ 68 farmers and 3 subsistence farmers, plus a farm worker, 6 farm machinery operators, 15 day-labourers and 13 domestic servants: 106 out of 179 known occupations of the assailants. This picture of relative financial stability among assailants fits with what Owen Davies found in English witch mobbing cases in a similar period. See *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, pp.106-9.

¹⁷ 274 male and 94 female.

¹⁸ 102 men out of 119 accused killers.

¹⁹ Among the most infamous of these was Georgette Lebon, femme Thomas, executed in 1887 for murdering her mother with the help of her husband and brothers. See: *Le Radical* 25 November 1886. For rare groups of women who attacked men, see for instance the mother and daughters who attacked a priest in Mayenne in 1825, AD Mayenne, U 553, or another case in *Journal de Roanne* 30 August 1936.

²⁰ On the early modern precedent, see: Davis 'Rites of Violence', pp.86-7. On the French Revolution, see Desan 'The Role of Women in Religious Riots During the Revolution'. The most famous late example of this was the ritual torture of a noble at Hautefaye in 1871. See Corbin, *Village des cannibales*.

²¹ See Sahlins on 'The War of the Demoiselles'.

4. Quotidian violence

Most violence against suspected witches simmered over long periods, and even perpetrators struggled to articulate what their intentions were. Much of this violence defied symbolism: how much interpretation can the slaps, punches, or kicks directed against suspected witches bear? When attackers used weapons, these were most often whatever came immediately to hand: a bucket of water, a stone, whatever tools they were using for work.²² A killer in 1887, for instance, grabbed a nearby pitchfork when he found a 'witch' lurking in his stables.²³ Another killer in 1904 struck his victim with one of the pieces of wood he was transporting on his cart. The weapon was so nondescript that the police could not find it during their investigation.²⁴



Figure 3: 'The scene of the crime' from a case in Marseille, 1900.

The locations where violence happened were also quotidian. Although fields, paths, and hamlets dominate, these spaces could be urban, too. Perpetrators attacked suspected witches inside shops in Marseille in 1872, or just outside in Bordeaux in 1805.²⁵ In a case from 1937 in Rouen, a mechanic convinced the old woman living above him in his apartment block had bewitched his family went upstairs to beat her up.²⁶ The killers in a case in Marseille in 1900 left their victim's body in the street (see Fig. 3).²⁷ Even in the most

²² For the bucket of water and stone, see *Le Moniteur d'Issoire* 23 December 1925. The cases where agricultural tools were used are too numerous to mention.

²³ *Le Journal de la Ville de Saint-Quentin* 28 August 1887.

²⁴ AD Cher, 2 U 1459, 'Acte d'Accusation'.

²⁵ For 1805 in Bordeaux, see Traimond, *Le Pouvoir de la Maladie*, pp. 68-73. For Marseille in 1872, see *Le Petit Marseillais* 12 May 1872.

²⁶ See *La Dépêche du Berry* 21 August 1937.

²⁷ *Le Petit Marseillais*, 9 January 1900

symbolically complex ritual torture cases discussed below, accounts by both victims and assailants give the impression that violence was improvised. In a case in 1807 in the Mayenne, for instance, the family torturing a beggar in their home stopped to argue about whether to abandon him in a field, put him to bed in the house, or finish him off.²⁸

The clearest motive perpetrators articulated was not revenge, or punishment, but ending bewitchments. An assailant in 1891 told the *gendarmes*: 'Anaïse is a witch who has cast evil on my grand-daughter, Claire, who is 11 years old and who has been sick for eight months. I struck her because I wanted her to lift the evil from the child.'²⁹ Attackers showed little cunning in covering up their crimes. Virginie Buard, femme Clavreul told the man who tried to intervene as she strangled a suspected witch with a rope: 'Oh, she isn't dead: if I let her go, she would get back up again.'³⁰ She was, in fact, already dead.

There are reasons to think that this guilelessness was genuine. Witnesses and even victims of violence often corroborated what perpetrators said about improvised actions and unintended escalations. A protracted, late-night attack in 1900 is a good example where a whole range of eyewitnesses agreed that the assault had been confused and uncoordinated. The drunken assailants even helped their victim up at various points, before changing their minds and attacking him again.³¹ Attackers often let their victims go, knowing that they would denounce them to the authorities. In the cases of sustained ritual abuse lasting several hours discussed below, perpetrators were more concerned with forcing 'witches' to undo spells than with the legal consequences of their actions. Even those who shot suspected witches seemed surprisingly unconcerned about ramifications: they rarely checked on their victims, whether to finish them off or to help them.

Attackers normally chose one of two legal strategies: frank admission, or flat denial. 'I am innocent of that,' Victor Guillot-Patrique repeated several times under interrogation for murder in 1827.³² During the trial for the Selles-Saint-Denis case in 1886, the victim's son-in-law, Sylvain Thomas, who was accused of actively participating in the burning of the old woman, answered every question with the response 'I have no knowledge of that.'³³ It did not save him from the guillotine.

Those who admitted their actions, on the other hand, struggled to give any sense of why they had done it. Pierre Leblond was one of three men arrested in December 1900 for beating to death a local man widely suspected of being a witch. Asked why he had done it, Pierre replied: 'I don't know why I hit him, I've known him since forever and I don't bear him any ill will.'³⁴ Similarly, Joseph Auloi expressed no regrets about killing one of his neighbours in 1886, but was unwilling to dwell on what had happened, and why he had done it: 'he doesn't want to talk about it', a doctor noted. "'Let them guillotine me and be done with it!'"³⁵ Quotidian and banal, even the perpetrators of violence struggled to explain its meaning.

But these quotidian cases are the background against which some more extraordinary forms of ritual violence stand out.

5. Burnings

Unlike their neighbours across the Channel, those who feared witches in France rarely 'scratched' them to lift the spell.³⁶ Although the ritual of 'swimming' witches to establish

²⁸ AD Mayenne, U 450/5.

²⁹ *Le Guetteur de Saint-Quentin* 27 September 1891.

³⁰ *La Gazette de Chateau-Gontier* 27 June 1897.

³¹ AD Maine-et-Loire, 2 U 167. I discuss the case in more detail below.

³² AD Isère, 4 U 159, interrogation of Victor Guillot-Patrique, 27th April 1827.

³³ *Le Petit Journal* 24 November 1886.

³⁴ AD Maine-et-Loire, 2 U 167, 'Procès-verbal d'arrestation, Pierre L., 24 décembre 1900'

³⁵ AD Saône-et-Loire, 2 U 738, report by the Director of the Saint-Georges Asylum (Ain).

³⁶ See Waters, *Cursed Britain*, 20-3.

their guilt or innocence probably originated in France, it had fallen out of practice there by the late eighteenth century, unlike in England.³⁷ Between 1790-1850, what those who feared witchcraft in France did do more often than any of their European neighbours was burn witches.³⁸

Burnings followed a standard script. The victim was enticed – often under false pretences – into the household of someone who suspected them of witchcraft. Once there, the victim would be surrounded by a group of men and sometimes women, who were either family relations, or close neighbours. This group would accuse them of bewitching a family member, who was normally too unwell to participate in the attack themselves. The group would command the 'witch' to undo the spell and threaten them with violence if they did not. These threats started with blows, and escalated to knives and guns brandished, but rarely used. In the most extreme cases, the violence went even further, as perpetrators put nooses round their victim's neck, or stripped and burned them. None of these attackers actually hung their victims, and very few burned them alive. But the injuries they inflicted often proved fatal after the scene of torture had ended. This could be a matter of hours, or even days, and normally came when a 'witch' gave in and agreed to lift the spell, or when the assailants grew tired. Perpetrators took little care with what happened to their victims after these brutal attacks, abandoning them outside for passers-by to find, or to drag themselves home.

The burnings are concentrated in the period from the 1790s to 1850 (see *Figure 3*). Before 1790, there is little evidence of groups attacking and burning suspected witches like this.³⁹ Although the last known attempt to burn a witch comes from 1923, only 4 of the 24 cases took place after 1850. Like many of the later cases, the last attempted witch burning did not go as far as earlier immolations: the perpetrator could not even persuade his wife to help him.⁴⁰

One possible inspiration for this violence was judicial. The lengthy tortures that perpetrators subjected 'witches' to are reminiscent of the baroque ordeals of pre-revolutionary justice.⁴¹ In the 1807 case from Trans, for instance, the Horeau family began by insulting François Plet, accusing him of bewitching one of the Horeau brothers. They threatened to burn him, and menaced him with a gun, but he replied that he could not unwitch their brother as he was not a witch. Faced with this first refusal, they began to beat him with their fists, and the daughter of the house attacked his ribs with a steel pitcher. The mother then interrupted to insist they should not kill him straight away, but instead warm the oven. Once it had reached temperature, the Horeaus made a first attempt to shove him inside, but realized they would need to bind his hands and feet. They first tried scorching his head, pulling him out before he was too severely injured and dousing him with a bucket of water. When he maintained he could not lift the spell, they reversed his body to put him in feet first, turning him in the oven to burn him on every side. They pulled him out at least once more, repeated their threats and burned him once more again, before giving up and abandoning him outside.⁴² In other similar cases, victims also had nooses placed around their necks during these ordeals.⁴³

³⁷ Davis, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, pp.86-91.

³⁸ Other historians who have noted this pattern include Denier, p.119 and Davies 'Magic in Common Law', p.536.

³⁹ This is what Traimond claims for the southwest in *Le Pouvoir de la maladie*, p.175.

⁴⁰ *Le Journal de la Ferté-Macé* 4 November 1923.

⁴¹ Like the torture in Haute-faye, 1870. See Corbin, *Village des cannibales*, pp.92, 106-7.

⁴² AD Mayenne, U 450, report from the *juge de paix* 23 Novembe 1807, pp.2-3.

⁴³ Although they were never as common as burnings, nooses seem to have persisted sporadically for at least as long. See, for instance, *La Gazette des Tribunaux* 3 December 1826, *La Gazette des Tribunaux* 12 April 1838, *L'Écho de la République* 15 April 1848, *La Gazette de Chateau-Gontier* 27 June 1897, *La Semaine* (ed. Loire-Inférieure) 2 December 1928.

Yet this was not folk justice. There was a long tradition in France, as elsewhere in Europe, of what William Beik has called a 'culture of retribution'. When early modern legal authorities failed in their duty to punish wrongdoers, crowds felt within their rights to take punishment into their own hands.⁴⁴ This tradition survived the French Revolution. What animated the 'cannibals' who tortured and killed an unfortunate aristocrat at Hautefaye in 1870, for instance, was their belief that their victim was a Prussian spy, and that they were acting on behalf of the Emperor. Just like their early modern counterparts, the crowd at Hautefaye believed – wrongly – that justice was on their side.⁴⁵ Witch-burnings after the French Revolution differed from the 'culture of retribution' in three ways: first, perpetrators knew they did not have justice on their side; second, they performed their violence within the household rather than in public; third, most of this violence explicitly aimed not at retribution or even execution, but intimidation.

Although some of those who attacked witches claimed that what they had done was morally right, none seem to have seriously believed that their violence was condoned by the authorities. Some – as described above – clumsily tried to cover up their actions. In the Trans case from 1807 discussed above, the beggar François Plet was able to accuse Louis Horeau and his family of torturing and burning him before he died of his injuries. Confronted with this accusation, Louis Horeau told investigators that Plet was a liar who had made the story up. Asked why he would accuse the Horeau family, Louis weakly suggested 'Well, you can't please everyone.'⁴⁶

Unlike the public rituals of the early modern 'culture of retribution', witch burnings were domestic. Rather than united communities, they tended to be perpetrated by families, like the Horeaus in 1807, or by close-knit neighbours, as in La-Chapelle-Gauguin in 1799. Pierre Foussard, his wife Marie (née Souriau), their sons François and Louis were aided in their attack by two friends and neighbours, Pierre Renou and Joseph Pausseau.⁴⁷ These tightly connected groups almost always chose their own households as the scene of the torture. In doing so, they were appealing less to a sense of public justice, than to widespread understandings of witchcraft. If witches caused damage by puncturing the integrity of the emotional, psychological, and material household, witch-burners sought to repair this space by bringing witches inside it.⁴⁸ The symbolic intruder was locked within the household.⁴⁹ They were forced to confront their victims lying in their sickbeds, or better yet, burned within the hearth, the symbolic centre of the whole home. Burnings were not public performances of justice, but intimate healing for the household.

Most burnings were attempts to intimidate 'witches' into lifting their spells. Rather than early modern justice, they imitated forms of violence common to the banditry of the Revolutionary Wars of the 1790s and the early nineteenth century. Some of these bandits of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were named after their preferred method of extortion: *chauffeurs* (heaters) would force their victims to reveal where their valuables were by heating their feet on an open fire.⁵⁰ Perpetrators of violence against witches did not intend

⁴⁴ Beik, 90; see also Davis, 61-3.

⁴⁵ Corbin, *Village des cannibales*.

⁴⁶ AD Mayenne U 450, interrogation of Louis Horeau, 7th March 1808.

⁴⁷ AD Sarthe, 1 U 690/1.

⁴⁸ On these concepts of witchcraft, see Ch. 3 and Favret-Saada, *Les Mots*, as well as Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, 207-12.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, *Le Journal des débats* 3 October 1826, *Le Courrier de Saône-et-Loire* 18 March 1843, *Le Salut Public* 30 July 1856, *La Gazette de Biarritz* 23 March 1899.

⁵⁰ Gérard Boutet, *Les Chauffeurs!* Paris, Jean-Cyrille Godefroy, 1991.

to burn their victims to death, but to burn their feet until they agreed to lift their spells.⁵¹ Marie Foussard, one of the family group who burned the 'witch' Marie Bernard in 1799 in La-Chapelle-Gauguin claimed that 'her intention was to scare her, but that she never wanted to harm her'.⁵²

These scenes of torture were protracted not because they were public theatre of justice, but because they were attempts to intimidate often vulnerable community members into admitting something that few wanted to believe about themselves: that they were witches. These drawn-out scenes of group intimidation within the household slowly gave way to a newer model of dealing with 'witches': the sudden executions performed by lone gunmen in outdoor spaces.

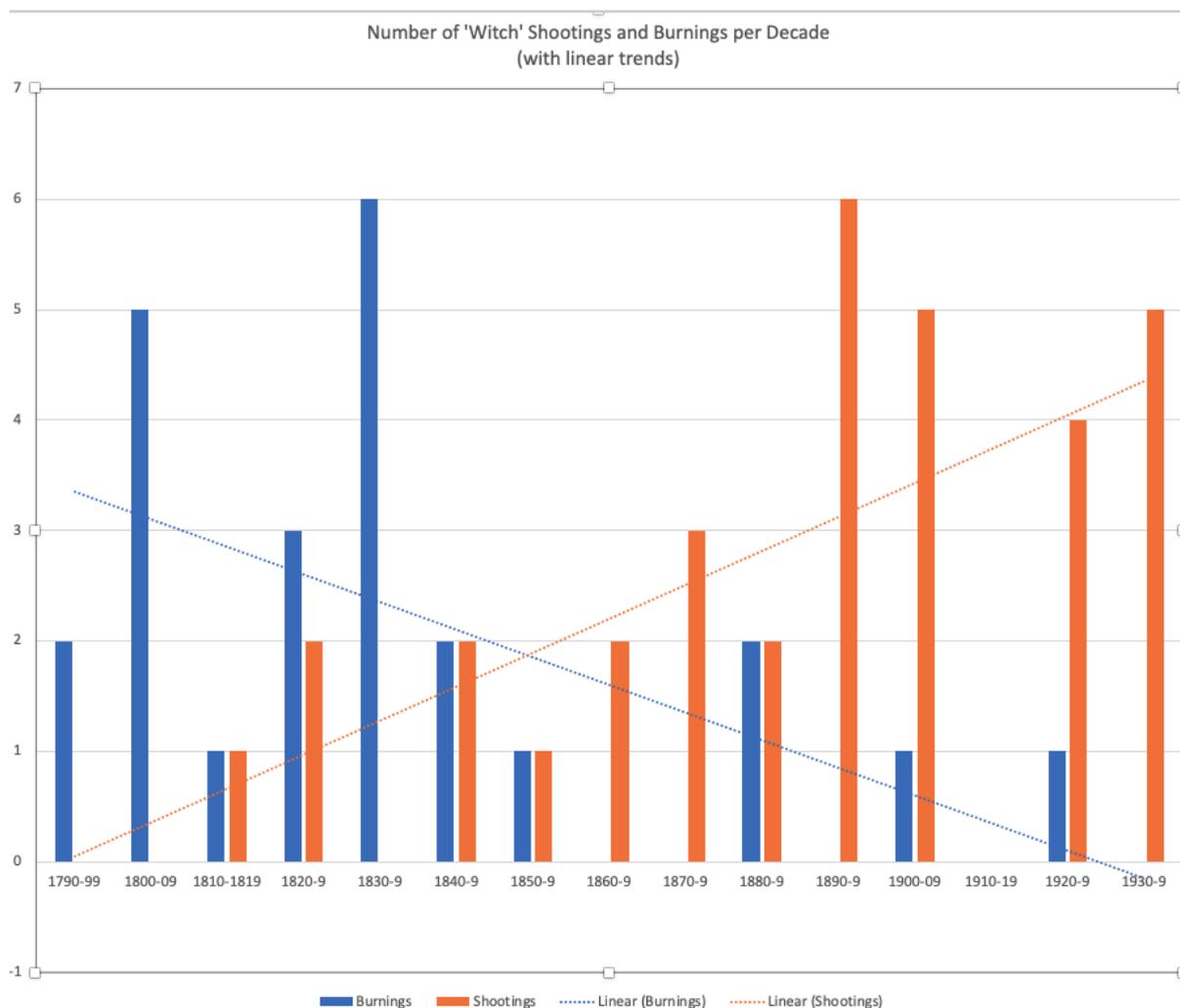


Figure 4

6. Shootings

Rather than the lengthy, drawn-out ordeals of torture, the most frequent method perpetrators used to kill witches after 1850 was sudden, even instantaneous: shootings (see *Figure 4*). When the healer and suspected witch Alfred Jably knocked at Abel Tennegain's door during

⁵¹ A case from Thilouze in 1818 is unusual from this point of view, as the assailants opted to finish the 'witch' off by drowning. The case is also an outlier in that the only record of it comes from a literary source, rather than the press or judicial sources. See Garinet *Histoire de la Magie en France*, pp. 289-90.

⁵² AD Sarthe, 1 U 690/1, interrogation of Marie Foussard, 14 Ventôse An VII, p.2.

dinner in 1935, Tennegain 'stood up, without saying anything or giving anyone time to do anything, picked up his gun and a cartridge, and walked out, loading the gun as he went.' Moments later, and without having exchanged a word with anyone, he had fatally shot Jably in the yard.⁵³ Informed by a cartomancer in 1858 that his troubles stemmed from a spell his sister-in-law had cast on him, a sharecropper in Saint-Martin-de-Seignanx walked up to her at a public fountain and shot her 'without saying a word'.⁵⁴

This suddenness was a key aspect of how witnesses described shootings, even though most cases were the result of a longer build up. In the 1935 case where Tennegain shot Jably, for instance, the killing came after months of building tensions. In the days running up to the crime, Tennegain had even said that his victim 'wasn't worth the bullet that would kill him'.⁵⁵ Other cases built over decades. In the 1938 case from Saint-Philibert, the disputes over an inheritance between the neighbouring in-laws dated back at least 18 and perhaps 30 years.⁵⁶

These sudden executions are not examples of what the sociologist Randall Collins has called 'forward panic' situations. For Collins, forward panics are one of the few pathways that most people can follow to overcome the innate aversion they have to committing violence. In a typical forward panic, tension builds up over a long time, to be released when 'the apparent threat and strength of the opponent rapidly turns into weakness'. The archetype of this situation is the military rout. When an enemy's lines break and they begin to flee, many combatants feel a sense of elation and dominance, surging forward to destroy their opponents, raining repeated blows or firing again and again indiscriminately.⁵⁷ Although the shootings do bear some similarity to this model, the sudden revelation that the 'witch' was not as powerful as they appeared did not create feelings of euphoria and power among killers.

Instead, shootings were emotionally neutral. A shooter in 1938 'returned peacefully inside his house, where he laid down his rifle. Then, without a thought for his victim, he went to fetch his cows from the pasture.' Confronted by a neighbour, he replied that his victim 'had it coming'. When the police arrived, he was similarly frank. 'Look, it's done, what more is there to say?'⁵⁸ Many shooters calmly handed themselves in.⁵⁹ In 1935, Abel Tennegain's first action on returning inside after shooting Alfred Jably was to tell his servants to ring the police.⁶⁰ It is tempting to see the shooters as an embodiment of modern justice. Like the guillotine, shootings were public, dispassionate, and fast.⁶¹ Although few shooters can have thought the law would be on their side, many, like Eugène Coeslier in 1938, nonetheless expressed – as a medical expert put it – 'a strong feeling of justice'.⁶²

The shooters also represent the apogee of another tendency in attacks on witches: dehumanization.⁶³ Even some of the elaborate rituals of burning suggest a desire to recast human 'witches' as food, or agricultural materials to be processed. When the authorities investigated the attack François Plet suffered at the hands of the Horeau family in 1807, they devoted a lot of their attention to questions about the oven where he had been burned. The Horeaus gave conflicting evidence. Some denied lighting it at all that day, as it was not of their customary days to bake bread. Others said that they had used the oven, because they

⁵³ AD Maine-et-Loire, 2 U 271, statement of facts prepared for the appeal case, p.4.

⁵⁴ *Le Journal de l'Arrondissement de Valognes* 23 April 1858.

⁵⁵ AD Maine-et-Loire, 2 U 271, interrogation 5 June 1935.

⁵⁶ AD Loire-Atlantique, 5 U 511, *gendarme* report, 27th March 1938, p.10, indictment, p.1.

⁵⁷ Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*, pp.146, 100-8, 109.

⁵⁸ AD Loire Atlantique 5 U 511, notes at the start of the file, perhaps drawn up for an appeal, p.1.

⁵⁹ *Le Journal des Débats* 11 October 1928.

⁶⁰ AD Maine-et-Loire, 2 U 271.

⁶¹ See Arasse on the guillotine, discussed in Corbin, *Village des cannibales*, p.128.

⁶² AD Loire-Atlantique, 5 U 511, p.136.

⁶³ Which was also a core part of early modern religious violence. See Davis, 'Rites of Violence', p.85.

needed to dry some hemp that they had harvested. In following this line of questioning, the authorities revealed some of the implied symbolism of putting a man into this oven: was he bread to be baking, or hemp to be dried? The victim himself emphasized that his torturers had turned him regularly in the oven, as if they were roasting a piece of meat.⁶⁴

In many more quotidian cases of violence, dehumanization remained implicit, a connotation of the actions and tools of violence. But shooting made these implications more explicit. As Owen Davies has pointed out, one reason that French witch-shootings endured long after most violence against witches in other western European countries concerns the cultural attachment rural Frenchmen have to hunting, seen as a key component of masculinity. Although urban witch-shooters often used revolvers, most rural witch-shooters used guns designed for hunting, such as shotguns.⁶⁵ Their attitude when shooting 'witches' was like someone putting down an animal. One of two men who ambushed a 'witch' in 1863 mentioned that he had not thought the plan was to kill him, but just to 'break one of his paws'.⁶⁶ In a similar way, attackers in 1846 and 1888 compared suspected witches to dogs.⁶⁷ A doctor invited to assess the mental state of a killer in 1904 claimed 'Pushed to his limits, and in fear for his life, obeying pure instinct, he wanted to get rid of this harmful being and struck, like one would strike a dog that is about to bite or has already bitten.'⁶⁸ In this way, medical experts, too participated in the slow transformation from violence designed to intimidate and coerce 'witches' to violence designed to simply eliminate them, at whatever cost.

⁶⁴ AD Mayenne U 450.

⁶⁵ Davies, 'Witchcraft Accusations', pp.119-20.

⁶⁶ *Le Journal des débats* 2 February 1863.

⁶⁷ 1846: AD Sarthe 1 U 862, *L'Indépendant Rémois* 20 March 1888.

⁶⁸ AD Cher Acte d'Accusation in AD Cher 2 U 1459.