central european history society

2025 Annelise Thimme Article Prize Laudatio

Spencer J. Weinreich, "Why Early Modern Mass Incarceration Matters: The Bamberg *Malefizhaus*, 1627-31," *Journal of Social History* 56 (2023): 719-52.

It is our great pleasure to award the Annelise Thimme prize to Spencer J. Weinreich for his multifaceted and compelling study of solitary confinement and the "carceral apparatus of extraordinary sophistication" that emerged at the height of the early seventeenth century witch-hunts in Bamberg. Focusing on the *Malefizhaus* ("witchcraft house"), also known colloquially in Bamberg as the *Trudenhaus* ("hag-house"), Weinreich opens new ways to understand prisons in the modern world, not as something new but rather as something with a much longer legacy. He also shows how methodologies of contemporary carceral studies can highlight new ways of understanding the experience and progression of early modern witch-hunts and the experience of accused witches in Germany. Finally, by exploring Heather Ann Thompson's 2010 question "why mass incarceration matters" for the early modern world, Weinreich offers an important reminder to modern and premodern scholars to pay attention to institutional developments and to scholarly methodologies that are often obscured by strict field chronological boundaries. Here he shows that crime, punishment, and prisons can be understood in new ways with an awareness of both past and present developments.

Throughout the clearly-written article, Weinreich keeps his three topics at the forefront as he approaches motivations for the construction and the subsequent use of the *Malefizhaus*. Challenging Foucault's commonly-cited assertion of "prisons as particularly modern," Weinreich reminds the reader that prisons had a much longer history, one that is also relevant to understanding "modern" incarceration. Furthermore, whereas studies of early modern witch-hunts have largely focused on the threats and torture that occurred during interrogation, Weinreich reveals that those moments were not the only suffering or perhaps even the most torturous experiences that accused witches endured.

The committee was especially struck by Weinreich's account of the Bamberg prison's construction. He shows that the *Malzeifzhaus*, designed and built in 1627, was intended not as a place to house an overabundance of suspected witches, as previously assumed, but as a form of propaganda, power, and terror; it intended to root out new witches by its very existence. The

building's exterior and interior design itself communicated the message "that no Bamberger was safe," including members of the elite. In addition, the rapid increase in cases of witchcraft after the prison's completion suggests that the building "anticipated (or created)…the need to confine accused witches." In fact, according to Weinrich's calculations, the incarceration rate in seventeenth-century Bamberg was higher than in the today's United States.

Even more striking is the article's exploration of how space and time functioned as forms of punishment and torture that drove the witch-hunts and increased the number of accusations and victims. Weinreich shows how the prison's interior design—its small, individual cells and carefully controlled access from the outside—served to isolate the prisoners from their loved ones, one another, and clergy. The regulation and uniformity of daily life in prison also stripped prisoners of previous forms of rank, experience, and social ties. In addition, the prison's organization of time, often described as "time for reflection" (*Bedenkzeit*), weakened prisoners psychologically. Indeed, as the emotional and distressed letters Johannes Junius wrote to his daughter poignantly show, prison conditions intentionally increased prisoners' suffering and made them more willing to confess quickly and share their networks. In this way, the spread and scope of the witch hunt was accelerated.

The 2025 Annelise Thimme Article Prize Committee

Marjorie Elizabeth (Beth) Plummer, Arizona State University, chair
Ke-chin Hsia, Indiana University
Lauren J. Stokes, Northwestern University