

**Kateryna Dysa, *Ukrainian Witchcraft Trials: Volhynia, Podolia, and Ruthenia, 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Budapest-New York: CEU Press, 2020), 254 pages**

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Witchcraft trials in Eastern Europe have not received the same attention as those in the West, a fact attributed in part to the limited documentary evidence, and to their less spectacular nature. In Ukraine, cases were handled in a remarkably rational manner for that era, lacking the intensity encountered in Western Europe. This approach was due, on the one hand, to the enforcement of the Magdeburg Law by the city councils, and, on the other hand, to the influence of the Orthodox Church on the studied area, determining the non-application of Western demonological principles. The accusations appeared mainly in the context of social conflicts or serious events, such as the death of a child or the loss of crops, and could be brought against anyone, without there being a fixed image of the witch or a major concern for a pact with the Devil.

Kateryna Dysa's work contributes precisely to the reconstruction of these witchcraft trials in the three palatinates (Volhynia, Podolia and Ruthenia) within the Polish-Lithuanian Union, in nowadays Ukraine. The author goes beyond the positivist approach characteristic of previous historiography, which focused on the strict quantification of executions and the unjustified application of large-scale persecution models in the West. By avoiding this approach, Dysa aims to reconstruct the "anatomy of accusations of witchcraft," focusing on the qualitative and anthropological dimension of the phenomenon, which reflects the everyday nature of social conflicts (family, neighbourhood, economic). Moreover, the author focuses on understanding the dimension of

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the cultural relationship between “popular fears and fantasies,” with the precise purpose of examining the multifaceted contexts that preceded the trial before the court in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

An extensive international academic experience underlies the expertise of the author, who is a PhD lecturer at the Department of History of the National University of “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”. She was a *visiting fellow* at prestigious institutions such as Harvard, Stanford, L'Institut d'Etudes Avancées (Paris) and Oxford University. Her main areas of interest include the history of witchcraft, sexuality, and medicine in the early modern period, especially in regions corresponding to today's territory of Ukraine and Poland. The author's research topics have continued to evolve, and, currently, Dysa studies the process of building the image of Kyiv in travel literature, from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through the rigorous analysis of a substantial sample of 198 cases of witchcraft trials, Dysa manages to dismantle traditional clichés related to the phenomenon of witchcraft in Ukrainian regions. The theoretical rigour of the paper is ensured by a quantitative and qualitative method, based on multiple sources: witchcraft trials, the trial books of the city magistrates, visual sources and the sermons of Orthodox theologians, all of which contribute to the outline of a nuanced image of the phenomenon.

The work *Ukrainian Witchcraft Trials: Volhynia, Podolia, and Ruthenia, 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, signed by Kateryna Dysa, which comprises 254 pages, constitutes a valuable scientific contribution to the study of witchcraft in Eastern Europe, coming into prominence as a fundamental analysis that distinguishes the Eastern European phenomenon from Western patterns. The paper constitutes a complex radiography of the judicial mechanisms, the social context and the specific religious and superstitious underlay that governed the accusations and beliefs in the three palatinates, between the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although the author acknowledges that the study cannot be exhaustive due to the lack of historical sources, the structure of the book puts forth a thorough analysis. It provides valuable insights about social conflict and social and professional tensions, revealing behind-the-scene stories about the daily fears and ailments of the people involved in these witchcraft-related conflicts. This is achieved by defining the legal framework and the profile of the participants (Chapter 1: *Constructing the Ukrainian Witchcraft Trial*), by exploring the views of the elite and of the Orthodox Church regarding the role of the Devil in relation to witchcraft (Chapter 2: *Ukrainian Orthodox*

*Demonology*), and by the sociological anatomy of accusations, understood as a result of neighbourhood, family and professional rivalry conflicts (Chapter 3: *Beyond the Trials*). The final chapter (*A Case of Infanticide and Witchcraft in Szczurowczyky*) is a case study of the events which occurred in 1753 in a village near Kremenets, providing the opportunity to compare official attitudes towards two “female murders” (witchcraft and infanticide) and to test the notion of fantasies about witchcraft.

The first chapter establishes the legal and sociological framework of witchcraft trials in Ukraine, especially in Volhynia, Podolia and Ruthenia, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Dysa demonstrates that although the legal framework was severe (based on the Magdeburg code of laws, and on the manual annotated with legal comments such as those of Bartłomiej Groicki, derived from *Carolina* and *Sachsenspiegel*), its enforcement was much more nuanced, as judges were often reluctant to apply capital punishment, and torture was used marginally (7 out of 198 cases), having little influence on the final result. The author also turns her attention to the role of rumours as a trigger for accusations, and analyses the typology of those accused and the accusers, showing that they often came from the same social environment and had equal status. Although 78% of the defendants were women, the accusations were often made officially by men on behalf of their wives or female relatives, who were the initiators of the conflict. This suggests that the trials were essentially “women’s business” from the domestic or neighbourhood ambit, where women exerted a direct influence.

The second chapter focuses on the religious and ideological background, comparing the view of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine with the intensely elaborated demonology of the West. The author argues that, unlike the Catholic and Protestant tradition, Orthodox demonology was minimally elaborated and played a marginal role in theological, polemical and legal discourse. As a result, in popular beliefs, the Devil and the pact with the Devil were not essential elements in defining the witch. Witchcraft was not regarded as heresy, but rather as a superstitious practice associated with sin, having social, rather than theological implications.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As previously discussed in Kateryna Dysa, “Orthodox Demonology and the Perception of Witchcraft in Early Modern Ukraine,” in *Friars, Nobles and Burghers – Sermons, Images and Prints: Studies of Culture and Society in Early-Modern Europe, in memory of István György Tóth*, eds. Jaroslav Miller and László Kontler (Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2010), 341–360.

The third chapter represents the sociological core of the book, where Kateryna Dysa investigates the causes of trials, having their roots in the deepest levels of social dynamics within the community, the same layers where accusations were generated. Thus, through this chapter, the author aims to analyse the anatomy of the conflicts leading to trials, showing that witchcraft was a manifestation of the tensions in everyday life: neighbourhood contentions related to assets, professional rivalries or dissensions within the extended family (especially between sisters-in-law and mothers-in-law)<sup>2</sup> or power relations (the master-servant relationship). Witchcraft was perceived as a practical instrument of causing harm (diseases, loss of crops) or obtaining advantages (love spells), which thus makes it a matter of managing resources and interpersonal relationships, not a matter of undermining divine order. Lastly, witchcraft served as a social discipline mechanism, targeting individuals who engaged in non-compliant behaviour and disrupted community order. Most often, the accusations did not target the people known to practice magic, but rather frequently the persons perceived as antisocial, contentious, or ungrateful.

The last chapter takes the form of a case study focused on a single criminal investigation from 1753, in the village of Szczurowczyky. It reaches significant conclusions and specifically points to the differences in perception and legal treatment between the two crimes considered inherently “female,” – witchcraft and infanticide –, in the three palatinates from the early modern period. The results of the research are revealing: although the judges were reluctant and lenient towards accusations of witchcraft, they displayed particular severity in cases of infanticide, sentencing mothers to death even when the baby was stillborn, especially if it was not buried as a Christian. This demonstrates that the courts’ priorities were focused on maintaining order in the society and applying fundamental moral norms (like in the case of infanticide, which implied a clear victim), and not on conducting witch hunts for crimes that were much more difficult to prove in the physical realm.

The major contribution of the research lies in the decisive rejection of the hypothesis of the widespread persecution of witches. Through a thorough analysis of 198 cases from the archives of the city courts, Dysa demonstrates

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<sup>2</sup> See also: Kateryna Dysa, “A Family Matter: The Case of a Witch Family in an Eighteenth-Century Volhynian Town,” *Russian History*, 40 (2013): 352-363.

a functional discrepancy between the written laws (similar to the Western European ones, which provided for punishment by burning) and the actual legal practice. In fact, accusations of witchcraft were handled with remarkable caution and visible leniency by the judges, who preferred alternative punishments or dismissal of cases. At the same time, the argument is consolidated by the statistics regarding the marginal role of torture, applied in only 7 cases of the entire sample, and the fact that there were only 13 recorded sentences to burning at the stake, clear indicators of the fact that the courts did not support large-scale persecution and did not rely on Western demonology, which was specific to Protestant and Catholic areas.

In this context, the author redefines the nature and the relationship between society, the court and the beliefs about witchcraft. She convincingly argues that the phenomenon was perceived rather as an ordinary and practical part of everyday life, whether it was a matter of causing illness, failure of a treatment or impairing the growth of the household or crops, rather than as a demonic heresy. This useful view is delimited by Orthodox demonology, which, unlike the Western one, was less spectacular and elaborate, the Devil not being a central element in popular accusations. Witches were not seen as apostles of evil, but as “enemies within”: contentious neighbours, rivals of equal social status, or in-laws. This profile of the defendants (78% women) thus shifts the focus of the analysis from religious persecution to the social dynamics of the community.

In the conclusion of the work, Kateryna Dysa invites us to take a look at the evolution of the perception of the image of the witch over time: from the conflictual and popular witch of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century trials, a contentious female neighbour, accused of practical magic, who found herself in the service of the community, to the fantastic figure augmented by the romantic intellectuals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, later transformed into a mere satirized superstition in the Soviet era, and finally into a mystical star in modern popular culture, thus perpetuating a standardized image, which has almost nothing in common with historical reality.

The only reserve related to this work is the need to present a broader context of local historical evolutions. A more detailed overview of the history of the three palatinates, correlated with a detailed analysis of the inter-community, confessional circumstances and hazards (epidemics, droughts, etc.) or exceptional natural phenomena (eclipses, comets, etc.), as well as of

private life, would render the study more complete. Such a micro-historical approach would be essential to capture the subtle dynamics of everyday life that led people to seek supernatural culprits or to release their daily frustrations through accusations of witchcraft.

Finally, Kateryna Dysa's book stands as a fundamental work thanks to its methodological rigour, which thus provides a detailed analysis and an elaborate perspective, supported by a multidisciplinary approach and comprehensive research conducted on archival sources. Thus, the study becomes an indispensable resource for anyone who studies the early modern history of Eastern Europe and the complexity of the phenomenon of witchcraft. Moreover, its continuation by extending the research to other community dimensions could elevate the study to an unprecedented level of completeness and would present an overview of the history of the phenomenon of witchcraft in the three Ukrainian regions.