Katheryn DYSA. *Ukrainian Witchcraft Trials. Volhynia, Podolia, and Ruthenia, 17th-18th Centuries*

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REFERENCES

Katheryn DYSA, *Ukrainian Witchcraft Trials. Volhynia, Podolia, and Ruthenia, 17th-18th Centuries*, Budapest – New York : Central European University Press, 2020, 254 p.

- 1 Witchcraft trials in Ukraine have not received the same attention as trials in Western Europe. This is partially due to the limited amount of documentary evidence available. But it also seems to be a reflection of the fact the Ukrainian trials were not as sensational as what happened in the West. In fact, witchcraft in Ukraine was dealt with in a remarkably rational way for the time period in question. The use of torture to extract confessions was limited and those found guilty were seldom burned at the stake. If they were sentenced to death, as often as not the choice was to dispatch the guilty party quickly and more humanely by beheading rather than through the prolonged agony of death by fire.¹ There was no category of person who was considered a witch. Rather, accusations of witchcraft happened only when something went seriously wrong, such as the death of a child or the catastrophic loss of crops. Accusations could be leveled against anyone, not just people believed to have special magical abilities or those thought to have made a pact with the Devil. Dya's book, therefore, provides readers not only with information about Ukraine, but also helps build a more complete and nuanced picture of witchcraft practices.
- 2 Dya begins by giving legal background, the laws on which the trials were based. She then describes the trials themselves. This helps the reader understand the nature of the data that the author used and its possible limitations. We seldom have the words of the accused because trial records were kept by court clerks and likely written well after

testimony in court. While torture was considered “the queen of evidence,” and was to be administered under clearly delineated circumstances and following prescribed guidelines, it was not widely used. This was partially due to the lack of specialists who could apply torture in the towns from which Dysa’s records come, but the attitude toward accusations of witchcraft also played an important role. People did not resort to trials on a regular basis because public opinion and gossip were as effective as court procedures in regulating and controlling behavior. Sometimes tensions could not be mitigated without using the courts. But, when the people who filed official complaints were found to be presenting false testimony, they, rather than the person accused of witchcraft, could be punished.

- 3 The second chapter is devoted to demonology. Since pacts with the devil were central to proof of witchcraft in Western Europe, Dysa searches for similar phenomena in Ukraine. She relies on sermons, religious illustrations that depict demons, and writings produced by ecclesiastics. In these illustrations and texts, the devil is depicted as vying with God for human allegiance, but God is shown to be more powerful, allowing the devil to torment people in order to test them or to punish them for misdeeds. Most importantly documents show that, unlike in the West, making a pact with the devil was not a prerequisite for becoming a witch. If anything, pacts with the devil were signed by desperate men who then regretted their actions. Demonic possession as an indication of the work of the devil affected men as well as women. Witches were not seen as the devil’s handmaidens and they did not belong to a special category of deviants. Rather, they were considered to be normal people who belonged to the broad general category of sinners.
- 4 The third chapter, as Dysa herself points out, is the most important part of the book. It is very long and covers a wide range of topics that can be grouped under the category of village life and how it played into witchcraft beliefs. Dysa makes a very good point about the structure of the Ukrainian village. Neighbors lived in close proximity to one another and were privy to the intimate details of each others lives. Such living patterns were advantageous when people needed to work together in times of stress: their cooperation and sharing when disaster befell a community were crucial to group survival. The disadvantage of village living patterns was that people were able to observe their neighbors’ behavior too closely and, when they detected unusual acts, especially acts that were then followed by illness or other misfortune, they were prone to suspect maleficence. Any breach of order, such as throwing rubbish out into the street or dirty wash water into a neighbor’s yard, could be seen as an attempt to cast a curse and was likely to lead to suspicions of witchcraft.
- 5 While this is the main concept of this section of the book, there are many important subsections. These include transmission or inheritance of witchcraft within the family. Witchcraft could be learned, but there was a belief that certain families had a genetic predisposition to supernatural abilities. Closely related to family transmission of magical power was the belief that jealousy within a family, especially tensions with in-laws, could lead to destructive use of magic, in other words, witchcraft. Professional rivalry among craft guilds could produce accusations of witchcraft and some of the accused actually confessed to trying to get the better of their competition through magic acts. Another situation of proximity was that between master and servant. This type of proximity, too, could lead to banding together and mutual defence with servants supporting their masters – or it could lead to tension and accusations of evil deeds.

Servants of the wealthy could be sent out on errands to contact the magic practitioners whose services their masters hoped to use. If the master or mistress was then accused of evil intent, the servants could either seek to absolve them of guilt, or present dubious evidence that would implicate their employers in witchcraft. In discussions of witchcraft in the West, low social status is often connected to suspicions of witchcraft. The socially disenfranchised, the marginalized, and the poor were the sorts of people typically accused of malefice. Their accusers were often more affluent persons who felt guilty for not helping those in need and suspected them of resentment leading to curses and spells.² Unequal social status was not an issue in the Ukrainian material except in master/servant relations and even here it was more typical for the master to be the one accused. In Ukraine, most people who took each other to court held similar or equal positions in society.

- 6 Witches were ordinary citizens: they were not a special category of people except in the case of healers and those specialists believed to be able to help their fellow villagers in matters of love. Unmarried women might turn to practitioners of love magic to attract a desired man. Married women sought the preparers of potions to ensure their husband's fidelity and trial records reveal cases where some women hoped for the opposite, namely to rid themselves of an unwanted spouse. Love magic, whether positive or negative, was particularly repugnant to the male members of society who feared both poisoning and expressions of female agency in general.
- 7 With doctors few in number and often prohibitively expensive, folk healers were sought by many and certain people did claim to know the healing arts. These arts could be real: the use of poultices, herbs, and other substances that had actual curative properties. Healers could also resort to magic. Of course, if something went wrong, accusations of witchcraft leading to court cases could result. While specialists were believed to have superior knowledge of cures, magical and other, even people who claimed no specialized knowledge could use magical means in an effort to cure themselves. As for specialists in magic, they could also help with missing objects and so-called knowledgeable people were consulted when help finding lost, and possibly stolen, items were needed.
- 8 People believed to be witches were suspected of affecting crops and farm animals. Stealing milk from cows belonging to others was a frequent accusation and, in collections of folk narratives such as the one compiled by Volodymyr Hnatiuk, accusations of magical milk theft are among the most numerous of narratives.³ Dysa also mentions acts of harm to grain crops, twists in wheat or rye that spoiled the harvest. Apparently, such twists could only be undone by a specialist and attempts by ordinary people to save a crop beset with twists could lead to illness and even death.
- 9 In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ukraine the world was filled with magic. Some people, whether for hereditary reasons or through learning, had special access to magic and could offer their services as healers, helpers in matters of the heart, and in finding lost objects. But all people knew of magical substances and acts and could resort to them as needed. It was only when something went wrong that accusations of witchcraft followed and these could be leveled at ordinary people, especially those who were quarrelsome or uncleanly, as easily as those who claimed to possess special abilities. There was no belief in a category of person who made a pact with the devil and became a witch.
- 10 The book ends with a detailed account of a case brought against a woman accused of infanticide and the people whose help she claimed to have sought. The record for this

case is especially lengthy and provides a glimpse into ideas about witchcraft held by the accused. This trial gives Dysa an emphatic way of summarizing her work in her fourth and final chapter.

- 11 This last chapter is followed by a brief afterword which takes the reader out of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century village and smalltown life into the more familiar territory of the nineteenth century. The literature of the Romantic Period and writers such as Nikolai Gogol and Hryhory Kvitka (Ostavianenko) is what has shaped most people's view of Ukrainian witches and witchcraft. With the rise of the Soviet Union, Romantic notions and belief in witches and magic came to be considered anathema.
- 12 Dysa has produced an important book that deserves to receive wider attention than it has to date. She not only expands our understanding of witchcraft and witch beliefs, she also paints a complex and nuanced picture of Ukrainian life in the seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries. And she does this mostly using archived court cases. The fact that she does use a limited data set means that there is some repetition and certain cases are cited more than once. Still, this is a tour-de-force that offers a fascinating picture of a neglected part of the world.

NOTES

1. I could not help but notice that the cover of the book is replete with scenes of torture. These are the tortures that sinners suffer in Hell rather than tortures used to extract confessions of witchcraft. Nonetheless, someone involved in the production of this book thought that torture sells.

2. See, for example, Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

3. Volodymyr Hnatiuk, *Znadohy do ukraiins'koi demonologii*, Vols. XXXIII and XXXIV of *Etnografichnyi zbirnyk naukovoho tovarystva im. Shevchenka*, L'viv, 1912,

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