Ukraine, Lithuania (and Belarus)

Since the Middle Ages, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania covered most of the territory of today’s Ukraine. In 1386, the personal union of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania with the Kingdom of Poland occurred. In 1569, the Polish-Lithuanian double state (real union) was created, which existed until the so-called division of Poland (1772–1795). Nevertheless, the whole eastern part (the so-called Leftbank) of Ukraine was already in the years 1657–1686 annexed to the Russian Empire. The southeastern part of today’s Ukraine was from the 15th until the 18th century a part of the Crimean Khanate. The southern and southwestern part of Ukraine (Black Sea region) was until the 18th century a part of the Ottoman Empire. The whole territory of today’s Lithuania and Belarus and a part of existing Latvia have belonged since the Middle Ages to the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The territory was predominantly inhabited by people of Ukrainian, Belarussian, Russian and Polish (i.e. Slavic) descent.

A relatively small number of sorcery/witchcraft trials and executions of alleged witches took place in Ukraine. The first charge of witchcraft in Ukraine was brought as late as 1578 in Volhynia against Princess Maria Kurbskaia. As the surviving documents are far from complete, however, it is very probable that were several sorcery/witchcraft trials in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 15th and in the first half of the 16th century. A conspicuous majority of the Ukrainian witchcraft trials known up to the present time were conducted only in the 18th century. The last witch trial in Ukraine took place in 1829 in the townlet of Lypovets (about 40 km to the east of the town Vinnytsia) in the western part of the Ukraine (the so-called Rightbank Ukraine). Kateryna Martynivska, a lawyer’s wife, was accused of bewitching the local priest.

The surviving documentation suggests that in Ukraine, 198 trials for sorcery/witchcraft took place between the 16th and the 19th centuries. In this number are included not only complaints in connection with witchcraft, but also slander suits (allegations of harmful sorcery or witchcraft). Their relation is 7:3. All of these cases fall into the 17th and 18th centuries (189). A total of 158 trials, more than 80% of them, took place in the palatinates (districts) of Podolia (48) and Volhynia (87) in the Rightbank Ukraine and in Ruthenian palatinate (Red Russia) (23) in the west of the existing Ukraine (later East Galicia). The majority of the remaining
cases occurred in the palatinate Bratslav in the Rightbank Ukraine, in the Kiev region, in Central Ukraine and in the territory of the Ukrainian Cossack (hettmanate, гетьманщина) in the Leftbank Ukraine. Charges were brought against 223 persons. Only 13 received the death penalty. Other severe penalties were banishment and public flogging. In most cases, a pecuniary fine was imposed, to be paid to the court or the church. Torture was used in Ukrainian trials only sporadically. As Ukrainian law demanded severe penalties for witches, the relatively low number of death penalties and other severer punishments points to a conspicuous difference between legal regulation on the one hand and milder judicial practice on the other hand.

The Ukrainian trials were (like the trials conducted in Russia) distinguished by a very low rate of women (10–15%). It seems that this was to a considerable degree due to the character of magic practices being used and persecuted. Among the accusers in Ukraine, men predominated, too. In 90% of Ukrainian witchcraft cases, the defendant and the accuser were of equal social standing. Persons of high rank very rarely brought charges against people of lower standing or even against their subjects. There were a few episodes of persons coming from marginal social groups (beggars and vagabonds) or persons belonging to ethnic minorities (Roma, Jews, Turks) being accused of witchcraft. The witchcraft trials in Ukraine were predominantly an urban phenomenon. Thus, most of the defendants were craftsmen and other people belonging to the urban middle classes. The charges often represented the final stage of neighbourhood or other personal quarrels. Priests of the Orthodox Church and their wives were among the accused, too.

As the archives of the towns of Western Ukraine are, generally speaking, in a better condition than those of the rest of the country, we have documents for a relatively high number of cases from Rightbank (West) Ukraine. A great number of death sentences in the Ukrainian sorcery/witchcraft trials were passed in the 17th and 18th centuries in the palatinate of Volhynia. The best known Ukrainian trial nevertheless took place in 1666 in the town Hadiach (Гадяч) in the Poltava region (northeast of the existing Ukraine), where six alleged witches were burned at the stake. Hadiach was at the time already a part of the Russian Empire. In the 18th century, the death sentences were more common in cases that combined magic with other felonies (fraud, infanticide, sparking of an epidemic).

The cases of sorcery/witchcraft in the Ukraine were dealt with by secular courts. Usually the town courts were responsible; in some cases the noblemen or castle courts were as well. Only at the end of the 18th century were there several cases of superstition heard by the Kiev consistorial court.

The relatively moderate, lenient and condescending attitude in the Ukraine towards the offence of magic was traditionally interpreted as influenced by the Orthodox Church, which allegedly did not create a clearly defined demonologic tradition and failed to formulate a concept of the devil’s pact. This explanation is obviously not satisfactory, firstly because in the works of some of the outstanding Ukrainian orthodox theologians active in the 17th century emerges a clear connection between the witches and sorcerers on the one hand and the devil on the other. Secondly, the majority of known trials in Ukraine took place in towns that were heterogenous in terms of ethnicity and of religion. Nevertheless, the concept of the witches as a diabolical sect did not exist in Ukraine. The witches’ sabbath
is mentioned in only one case heard in 1753 by the town court in Kremenets (Кременець) in the palatinate of Volhynia in the West Ukraine (about 80 km to the north of Ternopil). The town courts in the Ukraine, in Lithuania and in the territory of existing Belarus used since the Middle Ages (14th century) as a rule the Magdeburg Law, which included a statute about the prosecution of magic. The oldest statute against witchcraft that was in force in the entire country came into force only in the first codification of the law of the Lithuanian state, the so-called 1st Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the year 1529. The Statute conferred the jurisdiction over the offence of magic to secular courts. Although the 1st Statute explicitly subjected the cases of witchcraft to the jurisdiction of so-called land courts and castle courts, the majority of witchcraft trials were conducted before the town and patrimonial courts. The so-called 3rd Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from 1588 (de iure in force until the division and destruction of the Polish-Lithuanian Union in 1795) defined witchcraft as a crime and ordered that sorcerers and witches should be burned at the stake. The burning was in practice substituted by beheading.

On the base of the documentary evidence concerning the territory of existing Lithuania and completed by selected sources from several towns situated in the existing Belarus (Pinsk, Polotsk, Grodno, Slutsk), we may state that there were 97 cases of witchcraft between 1552 and 1771 and 16 cases of witchcraft/sorcery slander. The majority of the sources come from the territory of the so-called Principality of Samogitia (Žemaitija, i.e. from Lower Lithuania, west and northwest of today’s Lithuania). In most witch trials, between one and three persons were accused. In 28 cases, the courts passed a death sentence. The executions (as a rule by burning at the stake, seldom mitigated by prior beheading) were registered in the years 1566–1726. In other cases, the culprits were exiled or flogged. There were also ecclesiastical penances.

The sorcery/witchcraft trials in the territory of today’s Lithuania cannot be considered a mass phenomenon. According to some scholars, this was due to the late Christianization of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania which only began in the late 14th century. The first witch trial in today’s Lithuania took place in 1552 before the town court of Kaunas (in Polish Kowno, in German Kauen). The witchcraft trials in Lithuania reached their peak in the 1630s, shortly after the war waged by the Polish-Lithuanian Union against Russia and Sweden. The last trial in today’s Lithuania was conducted in 1771. In 1776, a decision of the Sejm (Parliament) ended the witch hunts in the entire Polish-Lithuanian Union.

In today’s Lithuania, most victims of the witch hunts were female. The men, however, represented (unlike in the Kingdom of Poland) more than one-third (39%) of the accused. In three cases, children had to stand trial (1695, 1731 and 1771). The relatively low rate of women among the accused might be explained by the poor state of the work force and the more important role of women within the economy, especially since the second half of the 17th century. Among the accused in the witchcraft trials in today’s Lithuania were predominantly subjects of the manorial lords and people from the lowest strata of urban society. Considerably fewer cases of complaints about witchcraft were brought against noblemen or Jews.
Russia

The nucleus of the Russian state was the Principality of Muscowy (1276), from the 1320s until 1547 the Grand Principality of Muscowy. After shaking off the overlordship of the Tartarian Golden Horde in 1480, Russia was ruled by the Tsars (царь) from 1547 to 1917. From the beginning of the 17th century until 1612, large parts of Russia, including Moscow, were under occupation from the Polish-Lithuanian Union. From the mid-16th century, the Russian reign expanded eastwards into Siberia. In the 1640s, the Tsardom (царство) reached the Pacific Ocean. Eastern parts of the Ukraine (the so-called Leftbank Ukraine) were annexed by the Tsars in the 1660s. Early modern Russia was a multiethnic empire with a Slavic (mostly Russian) majority.

The persecution of witches in Russia started only in the early modern period, i.e. later than in Western Europe. The courts in the Grand Principality of Muscowy and in the Tsardom of Russia heard from the 16th to the 19th century almost 500 known cases of magic. The number of accused reached almost 800 persons, predominantly men. Between 1601 and 1701, there were approximately 227 sorcery/witchcraft trials in Russia, in which 400 persons, mostly men, were accused.

In the period 1700–1740, there were 103 legal cases concerning the use of magic. In the years 1741–1801, in the time from the accession to the throne of Empress Elisabeth I (1741–1761/2) until the beginning of the reign of Emperor Alexander I (1801–1825), there were 127 such cases. The total number of trials taking place in Russia in the 18th century is estimated at 230–240; about 400 persons had to stand trial. Sporadic cases of the prosecution of sorcery occurred in Russia until 1840. In the years 1801–1840, the Most Holy Synod dealt with nine cases.

The charges in Russian trials concerned different forms of folk magic. The Russian orthodoxy rarely designed magic as satanic and did not develop an elaborate demonological theory. Demonology and idea of the pact with the devil played only a very limited role in the Russian trials. It is therefore more appropriate to characterize the magic (rather like in Ukraine) as sorcery, not so much as witchcraft. As in Ukraine, the overwhelming majority of persons charged with magic were men. In the 17th and 18th centuries, approximately 80% of the defendants were men.

Russian medieval chronicles mention at times that a witch or witches had been killed, but the witches only became the object of a more serious interest of the Grand Princes of Moscow at the end of the 15th century. In 1467, the first wife of the Grand Prince Ivan III (1462–1505), Maria of Tver, died, allegedly due to witchcraft or poisoning. Ivan III suspected his second wife, Sophia Paleologue, of having hired witches to kill him. At the beginning of the reign of Ivan IV, the Terrible (1547–1584), in June 1547, his grandmother, Anna Glinskaya, was said to have caused a devastating fire in Moscow, during which several thousand people perished, by spells. The enraged crowds did not lynch Anna, but her son and the Tsar’s uncle, Prince Yuri Glinski, died. Other Glinskis and the Tsar himself were also in serious danger. Politically motivated accusations of magic remained an important feature of Ivan’s entire reign. Similar suspicions occurred in the 17th century in the Romanov family in connection with the death of some wives and supposed brides. Accusation of harmful sorcery/witchcraft as a political crime occurred in Russia until the 19th
century. Political witchcraft (sorcery) trials in Russia were for a long time a specific instrument in political conflicts.57

Russian witches usually had to face secular courts. Most cases were based on denunciations or complaints. The courts resorted to a great degree to torture (pytka).58 Only about 15% of the defendants were sentenced to death and executed.59 Men were mostly beheaded (eventually hanged or burned), but women as a rule were burned alive.60 Other accused were sentenced to flogging, to banishment or to internment in a monastery (for several months, for several years or for life). Long periods of penances were customary. The relatively hardest punishments for witchcraft in Russia were imposed at the end of the 17th and in the first quarter of the 18th century.61

The Russian Orthodox Church endeavoured for a long time without achieving any success to integrate secular institutions into its campaign against sorcery/witchcraft. Since the Middle Ages, Eastern European codifications of church law contained rules concerning the prosecution of magic, some of them secular laws and rules taken over from the Byzantine. In Russia, these collections of ecclesiastical laws were known since the second half of the 15th century as Кормчие книги (Kormchyje knigi). Other norms of secular and ecclesiastical law were gradually added to them.62 Nevertheless, the emperor’s courts began to hear the occasional case of magic only at the beginning of the 17th century.63 Only in the middle of the 17th century did Emperor Aleksey I Mikhailovich (1645–1676) issue a stricter decree about the persecution of sorcery/witchcraft. In the beginning of his rule, in the year 1649, the collection of laws of the Russian state called Соборное уложение (Sobornoje ulozhenie) was established. It sanctioned sorcery/witchcraft.64 All this soon led to a conspicuous increase in the numbers of trials for magic, particularly in the towns, which culminated in the mid-seventeenth century and again in the 1670s.65

The legal treatment of witchcraft in Russia underwent fundamental changes in the first quarter of the 18th century under the rule of Emperor Peter I the Great (1689–1725). Within the framework of his reforms of the Orthodox Church, he issued in 1721 a Spiritual Regulation (духовный регламент) in the spirit of the Enlightenment: The Regulation declared that witchcraft was fraud perpetrated on trusting and on superstitious persons.66 Other laws from the reign of Peter the Great, however, took over older decrees about the prosecution of witchcraft or made them harsher. In the Military Articles (Артикул воинский), issued in April 1715 within the framework of the reform of the Russian army, Russian law accepted for the first time that there was a connection between witchcraft and the machinations of the devil.67 (The main source of Peter’s Articles was the Swedish Military Order introduced in the years 1621–1622 by King Gustav II Adolph, in the 1683 wording.)68 The Articles prescribed cruel punishments for harmful sorcery and magic perpetrated in association with the devil, including imprisonment in chains, running the gauntlet and burning at the stake. It was only possible to impose public penance for sorcery, which did not cause damage and was not diabolic in nature. The above-mentioned punishments bore not only upon the magicians themselves but also upon persons who hired them.69 The regulations of the Military Articles were in April 1720 taken over by Peter’s Naval Statute (Устав морской), in which burning at the stake was moreover characterized as a usual punishment for magicians and perpetrators of harmful magic.70
An even harsher edict, which could concern not only any village healer, but his client, too, was issued in 1731 by the Empress Anna (1730–1740). This edict ordered the execution of the sorcerers as impostors and provided penalties for them as well as for those who invited such persons and took advantage of their services. After the issue of this edict came a temporary increase in the numbers of magic trials in Russia in the 1730s.71

Under the reign of the enlightened Empress Catherine II the Great (1762–1796), a senate decree (указ) from 1770 brought a fundamental change in the prosecution of magic.72 This decree and the following legislature of Catherine the Great called sorcery a superstition and its perpetrators cheaters.73 However, these laws did not completely deny the reality of sorcery. Russian courts continued, even if sporadically, to prosecute witchcraft into the 19th century.74

The last known burning at the stake for witchcraft in Russia nevertheless took place already in 1736; at that time, one Jakov Jarov was burned in Simbirsk (today Uljanovsk) as an alleged magician.75 Given the incomplete documentation, however, it is entirely possible that there were later executions for harmful sorcery/witchcraft in Russia.

Since the 1720s, complaints about witchcraft were as a rule brought before the Most Holy Synod (Святейший Синод). The Most Holy Synod, created in 1721 as the highest Authority of the Russian Orthodox Church, functioned as a church court as well. It existed until 1917.76 Being a church court, the Most Holy Synod could not use torture. Therefore, it was not allowed to interfere in cases in which the torture was already applied. Torture was only abolished in Russia in 1801 after the accession of Alexander I to the throne. Thus, the influence of the Most Holy Synod was limited.77

In Russia, there were no mass witch hunts like those in Western Europe. We do not find any fanatical witch hunters there. Nevertheless, the number of trials was high enough: Magic and witchcraft remained permanent objects of interest and anxiety for the Russian rulers in the early modern period.78

Demonology only began to influence the concept of magic in Russia at the end of the 17th century.79 Accusations of magic perpetrated in association with the devil did not appear until the beginning of the 18th century. In that time, Russia took over within the reform framework a series of ideas and conceptions from the West, the demonological conception of witchcraft included. There were a few cases in which magic and the blasphemous abuse of Christian religious objects (crucifixes, communion wafers etc.) mingled.80 The absence in Russia of the idea of the existence of a diabolical witches’ sect with all its characteristic features conspicuously limited the number of accusations. In the greatest trials for magic in Russia, the investigations were directed against several dozens of people, but sentences were passed against at most seven or eight persons. That was the case in the trial that took place in the town of Lukh (Лух) (approximately 150 kilometres to the west of Nizhny Novgorod) in the years 1658–1659 (the so-called Lukh episode/лухский эпизод).81 But such trials were few and far between: The accusations concerned mostly single persons. In the 18th century, we meet in Russia essentially three main types of charges and denunciations: 1. the landlord’s against a servant; 2. among kindred; 3. a clergyman against another clergyman.82

In Russia, the alleged witches who did not fall into the category of healers quite often presented two sets of characteristic features. The first group was formed by
criminals who used witchcraft in combination with robbery, theft and other crimes against property and violent felonies. That is why the law of the Grand Principality of Muscovy already classified witchcraft as a crime and used for it the name ведовское воровство (vedovskoe vorovstvo, magical criminality; literally: theft of spirits). The second group consisted of so-called dishonest persons at the margin of the society and outside of the established hierarchies. The above-mentioned characteristic features were more typical of men than of women; this might have caused the specific gender structure of Russian witch trials.

Heresy – real religious dissent, not imaginary Satanism – played only a marginal role in the Russian conception of the offence of magic. Magical practices were conceived as pagan rather than satanic or heretical. They differed greatly in the different regions of Russia. The Russian language created for them and their perpetrators (and partly still uses) a series of special designations with different and partly changeable connotations.

Already in the time of the Grand Principality of Muscovy there appeared in some trials the so-called klikushestvo (кликушество, hysterics) as a certain form of bewitchment or possession by an evil spirit. Usually, it affected women. Cases of klikushestvo were more often registered only in the 18th century. Peter I began to prosecute кликуши (klikushi; hysterical, possessed women) more strictly. These cases lasted throughout the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century.

In the Russian rural environment persisted belief in witches and magic healers as a part of popular beliefs and ideas until the 19th century. This seems to be one of the reasons why, even after the end of the witch trials, alleged witches were lynched (самосуды/samosudy) in the first half of the 19th century. There is evidence for several dozen such cases between 1861 and 1917.

What was characteristic of the witch trials in Eastern Europe? The witch hunts reached the east relatively late. In Ukrainian and Russian sorcery/witchcraft trials, there was practically no place for witchcraft as defined by West European demonology. In Russia and especially in Ukraine, there were some theological treatises that discussed the relationship between magical practices and the devil, but they did not have any influence on local trials. Unlike in Western and Central Europe, in early modern Russia and Poland politically motivated accusations of magic directed against high-ranking members of the governing elites played an important role.

Notes

4 Dysa, “Ukraine, Witchcraft Trials,” 1141; Dysa, Istorija z vidjmami, 182.
6 Ibid.; Dysa, Istorija z vidjmami, 11-12.
7 Dysa, Istorija z vidjmami, 60.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 60-61.
11 Dysa, Istorija z vidjmami, 64.
12 Ibid., 64-65.
14 Dysa, Istorija z vidjmami, 63-64.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 1140.
18 Ibid., 1141.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
26 Dysa, Istorija z vidjmami, 46.
29 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 15–17.
33 Ibid., 16.
34 Ibid., 15–17.
35 Ibid., 17.
36 Ibid., 17-18.
37 Ibid., 18.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 18-19.
40 Ibid., 19–20.
43 Kivelson, “Russia,” 980.


46 Cf. ref. 46 and 47.
47 Mikhailova, *Koldovskie processy v Rossii*, passim.
48 Cf. ref. 46 and 47.
49 Ibid.
51 Cf. ref. 45 and 46.
52 Kivelson, “Russia,” 980.
53 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
59 Cf. ref. 45 and 46.
60 Kivelson, “Russia,” 982.
61 Cf. ref. 45–47.
64 Ibid., 66 and 101.
Bibliography (selection)


