

New Europe College Yearbook  
*Pontica Magna* Program  
2018-2019



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*Pontica Magna* Fellowship Program is supported by VolkswagenStiftung, Germany.

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ISSN 1584-0298

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# THE OTHER WITCH: ETHNIC MINORITIES AND WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS IN THE GRAND DUCHY OF LITHUANIA

## Abstract

The paper discusses the features of witch-hunts in the ethnically and religiously diverse society of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The sources demonstrate the involvement of some Christian (German, Russian) and non-Christian (Jewish, Tatar) minority groups in witch accusations in different roles: as accusers, defendants or suspects. The specifics of their involvement originate from their social and economic roles as well as from their cultural traits. The article attempts to explore the reasons for the accusations, the variety of beliefs about witchcraft and strategies to counter it and also the way they reflected the relations between the mentioned aliens and the surrounding majority.

**Keywords:** Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Lithuania, Belarus, Lithuanian Jews, Lithuanian Tatars, German diaspora, Russians in Lithuania, cultural borders, ethnic minorities, witch trials, witchcraft.

In the majority of societies, witch-hunts were usually a search for an internal enemy within the framework of kinship, neighborhood, and community.<sup>1</sup> Thus, no wonder that the bulk of cases involved participants of the same or similar cultural, ethnic and religious background. However, how did it work in highly heterogeneous societies that consisted of multiple major and minor ethnic and religious groups with their distinguishing social positions and cultural patterns?

The case of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania allows for an exploration of such a situation. Despite the Union of Lublin (1569), the Grand Duchy of Lithuania preserved significant autonomy within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, with distinguishable features of statehood, legislation,

court system, as well as its complex religious and cultural heterogeneity. From a religious point of view, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was overlapping Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant denominations and later a core of the Brest church union (1596) that created the Greek-Catholic church. Except for the diverse dominant population of Lithuanians and Ruthenians (and to a certain extent, Poles could also be listed there), the Grand Duchy of Lithuania possessed a variety of minorities that differed in terms of their cultural and religious features, their roles in the economy, politics and social structure. Consequently, the reaction of these groups to witchcraft was uneven. The participation of minority groups in witch-hunts is a good marker of their position in Lithuanian society, of the degree and specifics of integration, as well as an indicator of the attitude of the majority towards them.

Lithuanian witch persecutions started in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until 1776, when the Diet abolished the death penalty for witchcraft. Generally, it was not intensive: only about 130 known records from Lithuanian courts considered witchcraft, as far as the highly fragmented and unevenly researched surviving archives allow finding. More than half of them occurred in the countryside within the patrimonial jurisdiction of gentry over their subjects or before communal peasant juries (in Ruthenia), the rest came from noble county courts or burgher city courts based on the Magdeburg right. Nineteen witch cases involve representatives of minority groups in different roles. In addition, there is fragmented information in other narrative sources that allows the addition of at least two more cases. This is enough to understand that the minorities were not indifferent bystanders, with sources noting Jews, Tatars, Germans and Russians. Of course, the list of minorities living in the Grand Duchy was much longer, but there is no information about the involvement of Karaits, Scots, Dutch, Italians, and Roma.

Usually, the Early Modern witch-hunt is attributed to the features of Christian societies. The heterogeneous Lithuanian society included at least two large non-Christian ethnic groups: Jews and Tatars. Both possessed significant legal, religious and cultural autonomy but had to communicate with Christian powerful and powerless neighbors. The borders of their autonomy – despite legal and customary prescriptions – were far from totally impenetrable. Thus, was the witch-hunt a phenomenon that managed to cross these cultural barriers? Did Christians direct accusations created for internal enemies towards a neighboring Other? Did Muslims

and Jews fear Christian witches and how did they counter this common menace?

In the pre-modern world, ethnic distinctions were less sharp if the faith was similar, which is why the Christian migrants were less alienated and they were more integrated or assimilated. However, some migrants (in particular, German noblemen and merchants) stayed in touch with their native culture and land by means of business, religious or kin relations that supported their identity and distinction. What is more, Christian foreigners brought their specific worldview and beliefs towards witchcraft, especially those coming from the areas of more intensive witch-hunts. Therefore, did denominational and cultural distinctions contribute to the involvement of migrants in the Lithuanian witch persecution? Did their witchcraft beliefs have any influence?

This article applies a wider, cross-culturally applicable definition of witchcraft: malicious supernatural aggression by means of spells and rituals or innate individual power, outside the framework of legitimate religion and ritual. The work also shares the anthropological approach that witchcraft beliefs could be understood as rational within their local context. The concept of witchcraft was not only the explanation of misfortunes and part of the local process of social control. It also contributed to the resolution of interpersonal tensions by either repairing problematic social relationships, or splitting them.<sup>2</sup>

Due to its implicit social function, the idea of maleficent witchcraft was – and still is – widely spread in different societies, often accompanied with established measures to counter the threat and to fix the harm caused. Contrarily, the concept of diabolic witchcraft as a human-hostile devil-led conspiracy of witches was the late medieval and the early modern invention of certain Western intellectual circles. The spread of this invention, first of all among power elites of different levels, changed the attitude towards any supposed or actual practitioners of magic, criminalized them as public offenders and legitimized their uncovering and persecution. However, this process was uneven, especially at the peripheries and borderlands of the Western culture of the time. Trial records show that Lithuanian elites more or less knew about the Western concept and criminalized witchcraft in legislation. Nevertheless, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, with its variety of Christian and non-Christian, Western and non-Western ethnic and religious groups, demonstrates the complexity of adoption and application of this new anti-witchcraft approach.

At the same time, Protestant and Catholic Church reforms defined all magic practices outside the religious rite and the whole concept of witchcraft as superstition – not a crime but an error to be eradicated. The struggle against superstition undertaken by ecclesiastic (and, to a certain extent, lay) authorities tended to constrain witchcraft accusations on the one hand, but at the same time stoke the system of counter-magic practices and practitioners that had eased witch fears on a local level before. This process affected the Grand Duchy of Lithuania but the religious diversity of the state made its effects uneven.

## 1. Historical Context

Witch-hunts in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania emerged almost simultaneously with an active foreign migration, which had a significant impact on the economic, social and cultural life of the country. Lithuanian monarchs and feudal lords stimulated the migration of skillful craftsmen, recruited foreign warriors, and employed educated professionals, both Christian and non-Christian.

Significant Jewish immigration to the lands of the Grand Duchy started in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. Grand dukes and the nobility benefited from skillful newcomers and granted them privileges and protection, despite the discontent of the Catholic Church that was lobbying for numerous restrictions. In fact, the Jews became a separate estate with its specific rights and duties. There were many autonomous institutions of different levels, including craftsmen's guilds and self-governed communities known as *kahals*.

Thanks to their capital and international networking, Jewish merchants took a huge share of internal and international trade, including the key grain export business. Jews actively operated as leaseholders in the nobility's land holdings, the most popular were leases of inns, pubs, and breweries, but they also held farms, manors and even huge estates. Over time, this ethnic group gained a crucial role in the economy of the country.

However, the increasing Jewish migration, successful economic competition and participation in the exploitation of enserfed peasants led to the growth of social tensions and sharp contradictions. As a result, the Jewish diaspora suffered great atrocities during devastating military conflicts of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, but quite quickly recovered after all the catastrophes.



In conditions of discrimination and segregation on the one hand, but a relatively safe and propitious environment on the other, Jews of the Poland-Lithuanian Commonwealth managed to develop the most prosperous Jewish diaspora of the time and become an extremely influential minority within Christian society.<sup>3</sup>

Tatars were another significant non-Christian population group. The first Tatars sporadically settled in the Grand Duchy as war captives or refugees from the strife of the Golden Horde in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. Later other Muslim migrants from Crimea, Volga, and Siberia joined them. Tatar warriors and their families settled mostly in the Trakai, Vilnius and Navahrudak voivodeships. Their population was not large: about 7000 in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and 9000 in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

Tatars possessed relative autonomy. Their communities followed Muslim religious laws. Imams (called *molla*) were usually judges in religious and civil matters, whilst criminal cases had to be brought to state courts.<sup>5</sup> However, their society was not as isolated as the Jewish one. The Muslim religion was a core of their identity while other ethnic features were soon abandoned: since the 16<sup>th</sup> century Lithuanian Tatars have spoken Ruthenian (later also Polish) as their native language and used it in Arabic script not only for secular writings but for religious ones as well.<sup>6</sup> They created monogamous families, sometimes with Christian women. At the same time, Tatars didn't break their relations with the Muslim world, especially the Ottoman Empire, and it was common to invite educated imams from Crimea or Volga.<sup>7</sup> The social status of the Tatar military elite was quite similar to the Christian gentry, except for political rights; whilst the common folk mostly consisted of free farmers and burghers.

The relations between Tatars and Christians were much more peaceful in comparison to the position of the Jewish diaspora. However, there were hard times: during the Counter-Reformation in the late 16<sup>th</sup> - early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Catholic Church initiated various discriminatory restrictions for non-Catholics, and for Muslims in particular. Such discrimination led to the decrease of loyalty as manifested in emigration to the Ottoman Empire and even in the mass defections of the Tatar troops during the Polish-Ottoman war of 1672-1676.<sup>8</sup> However, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Tatar-Christian relations were stabilized.

Many Christians from different European countries also temporarily or permanently moved to the Grand Duchy for various reasons. First, there were Germans, Italians, Dutch, Swedes and Scots. The most numerous and influential were the Germans. In comparison to the Polish Crown with

its influential urban and rural German communities, their migration to Lithuania was much less significant. Lithuanian Germans normally were dispersed all over the country and differed in their origin, social status, and profession. The only city with a significant share of people of this nationality was Kaunas.

Economic and political relations tied the Grand Duchy to Prussia, Courland and Livonia, so the bulk of Germans came from these regions. The Prussian nobility admired the liberties in Poland-Lithuania, readily moving there for service and adopting not only loyalty, but also the Polish noble culture.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the extensive economic and political encounters with its Eastern neighbors, the Russian population in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was very low and insignificant. It mostly consisted of religious or political refugees and war captives. Taking and resettling peasants and craftsmen was a part of looting the enemy's land. Peace treaties often demanded the return of prisoners but, in practice, it was difficult to control their implementation. The most numerous group of settlers were Russian Old-Believers that rejected the reforms of Patriarch Nikon in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and escaped persecutions by migrating to remote areas of Russia or to neighboring states. Their communities usually lived in quite a strict self-isolation, with numerous restrictions concerning contacts with infidels. Contrarily, other Russian refugees and captives were usually dispersed within the local population. They often integrated well in the Ruthenian environment, but in predominantly Catholic, western lands they remained more alienated.

## 2. The Other Accuses

### *Germans: Burgher fears and gentry justice*

It would be logical to assume that migrants from German lands, the hottest spot of European witch-hunts, brought their most advanced witch beliefs and actively initiated witch trials in Lithuania. Indeed, they were in fact the most prolific accusers among the mentioned minorities, but their witch-hunt activity in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was much less enthusiastic than in their homelands and it had significant local features.

Kaunas was an important hub for trade with Prussia and the Baltic region in general. Except for foreign merchants, there lived a large group of local

German burghers.<sup>10</sup> It was also a major Reformation center, but of an unusual kind for Lithuania – Lutheranism. In 1552, 124 Lutheran families lived in the city, perhaps mostly of German origin.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the city was a hotspot for witch trials at the early stage of the Lithuanian witch-hunts. The earliest recorded witch accusations occurred in the 1540s in Kaunas, and until 1627 there were six witch trials and four other registered accusations – more than in any other single place of the Grand Duchy at any time. At least three Kaunas trials involved accusers with German names.

The first record that contains a German name dates back to 1543 (it is the second oldest witch trial known).<sup>12</sup> It reports that a Kaunas butcher named Franc accused a blacksmith named Piotr from the town Veliuona of witchcraft: the latter had come to Franc's house and began to tear some plants. The *wójt* (city mayor) sent his people to bring in Piotr, but he denied being a witch, claiming that he was a "good man". That is all one can learn from the brief record. The next case occurred eight years later.<sup>13</sup> Late in the evening of August 1, 1551, Lenart Kolaw brought his slave maid Barbara to the Kaunas *wójt* accusing her of witchcraft. He saw her walking near the fireplace and then found under the threshold some hair, feathers and sand. Barbara voluntarily confessed that according to the advice of another woman she planned to put spells into the bed of her master to make him insane and cause death. Her master insisted that she should be imprisoned. The end of the case is unknown.

Despite the possible German origin of the accusers, one can hardly see any specifics in these cases that are very common for the whole period of the Lithuanian witch-hunts. However, one case was extremely distinctive. In October 1563, the Kaunas magistrate detained Kathrynna for healing with herbs around the city.<sup>14</sup> Her confessions revealed that all the mentioned names of her customers were German: weaver Giert, Knebel, wife of Casper Libner, Derk Meirow. There are no hints to help us figure out whether Kathrynna was also a German or a local Lithuanian woman who was credible to foreigners. In any case, she demonstrated the earliest Lithuanian engagement in diabolism: when asked where she had learned herbalism she willingly said that her teacher was the devil living in a swamp; about a year before he had come to her at night and taken her to his swamp. After the interrogation the court sent Kathrynna back to prison for the next investigation – maybe, the magistrates had not anticipated that there would be such an extraordinary turn. Again, the continuation of the case is unknown. The idea that the devil attends a woman at night and drives her to a remote place and grants her with

secret knowledge was definitely related to the Western diabolic concept of witchcraft. Regardless of her ethnic origin, Kathrynna belonged to the social circle of German burghers and felt the significant influence of the set of witch beliefs from German culture that clearly shaped her imagination.

There are no more known cases with German burghers involved. Another type is patrimonial trials conducted by lords of German origin that were at the same time plaintiffs and judges over their subjects. The protagonist of the first case is Wilhelm Tyzenhauz.<sup>15</sup> He belonged to the prominent Livonian noble family von Tiesenhausen that originated from crusader knights. Wilhelm Tyzenhauz, the former Reiter cavalry officer,<sup>16</sup> held Kupiškis *starostwo* (royal estate) in the Ukmergė County as a temporary possession. On August 12, 1641, he came to Kupiškis – accompanied by county court officials and a noblemen jury – to examine the case of the witch accused of witchcraft in several villages. The accused denied her guilt but after the application of torture she did not only confess to the alleged crimes, but revealed the existence of an organized witch circle consisting of men and women that gathered four times per year as magpies in the old oak tree. Thus, it was the first time when an organized unity of witches appeared in Lithuanian records. These gatherings lacked the devil's participation and any of the typical Sabbath activities like promiscuity, feasts or production of magic paraphernalia. One should keep in mind that this extravagant confession could have been directed by the questions of judges, especially Tyzenhauz. However, in this case, Tyzenhauz stopped any further interrogation about the gatherings because he got very personal information: the witch revealed who knew about the death of his children. Tyzenhauz immediately started a new investigation. One by one, he put his subjects through trial and torture. Finally, the investigation discovered – or invented – a conspiracy of a peasant family disaffected by the taking away of two of their women as nurses to the lord's residence. The peasant men plotted to kill the master's babies to relieve the women of their duties and return the wife and daughter-in-law back home. As a result, four persons obtained capital sentences and four more were released on bail under suspicion. Thus, the case is also remarkable as the first relatively mass trial and one of the largest ones recorded in Lithuania. Moreover, the active use of torture without proper justification looks extraordinary for the Lithuanian trial procedure – in fact, Tyzenhauz and his peers examined the case as *crimen exceptum*, an exceptional crime that allows for breaking normal procedures to solve an extraordinary case. While Lithuanian Statute listed witchcraft next to regular felonies, the

idea of this crime as *crimen exceptum* was widespread among Western lawyers and demonologists since the time of the *Hammer of Witches*. The number of these significant novelties suggests the prominent role of Tyzenhauz as a carrier of distinctive legal culture and the worldview features of Baltic Germans.

The patrimonial judge Wilhelm Tyzenhauz considered another case in the same place five years later, in 1646.<sup>17</sup> Again, the village community of Sypojnie found two women, Jadziula Jusiowa and Marta Jukniowa, as scapegoats to blame for cattle and crop failures. Without private interest, he and his peers judged the case in a regular way. However, not even torture could force these women to incriminate themselves. According to the Statute, the court should have released them and should have awarded them compensation at the expense of the losing party. Instead, the judges accepted the oath of the accusers as a closing argument and both witches were burned. Tyzenhauz did not seek a diabolic or witch conspiracy. At the same time, he was confident in the necessity of eliminating maleficent witches. The influence of his German background is even less obvious than in the previous case but it can be related to his tough uncompromising position. Possibly, the witch-beliefs of the master contributed to the peasants' enthusiasm towards witch-hunting.

In the same Kupiškis domain of the Tyzenhauzes, another witch trial occurred more than a century later, in 1746.<sup>18</sup> The only material surviving is the draft of the interrogation of the supposed warlock, so it contains very little information about the trial, judges, etc. The man under interrogation confessed about his and his mother's involvement in diabolism, apostasy and numerous harmful acts towards local inhabitants, their cattle and crops. The participation of the lord Tyzenhauz is unknown, but the fact that the document survived in the Tyzenhauzes' private archives suggests that the lord knew of it and, at a minimum, failed to prevent it.

One more similar case occurred in 1726 in Trakai County.<sup>19</sup> The judge and accuser was Edward Rydiger, a temporary possessor of the Alytus estate, a royal officer (*porucznik*), perhaps from the Prussian noble house of Ridger, whose members had moved to the service of Poland-Lithuania.<sup>20</sup> In a small town of the estate, Krokialaukis (Krakopol), he considered the case of a supposed witch. However, the only witchcraft activity mentioned was stealing the host used for Holy Communion: after communion, she secretly took the host from her mouth and hid it in a kerchief. By this time, at least two cases had already happened in neighboring Samogitia,<sup>21</sup> where host-stealing was a part of witch confessions (and two more are

known later<sup>22</sup>). In Germany, witch-hunts had generally faded by this time, so Edward Rydiger acted rather like a superstitious member of the Lithuanian or Polish gentry.

### ***Jews: A dangerous business***

In the earliest cases, the Jews participated not from the dock but acted as accusers denouncing Christian neighbors for causing harm through magic. Three known cases of this kind occurred in the 1630s in Slonim<sup>23</sup> (Navahradak voivodeship) and Halšany<sup>24</sup> (Ašmiany County of Vilnius voivodeship) and, a century later, in 1731, in Druja<sup>25</sup> (Polack voivodeship).

The witch trials of 1630 and 1731 are quite similar. In both cases, several burghers formally accused widely suspected local witches. In 1630, the Jewish pubkeeper Leyba Maiorowicz – among others – made an accusation before the Slonim city court. He accused Anna Krotka, apparently a local wise woman, of the bewitchment of his household. Anna didn't confess to harming Leyba, but suggested that it could have been an intrigue of his Christian competitor, pubkeeper Onikeiowa, who had complained about her business toils in comparison to Leyba's success. This is the first but not the only evidence of recourse to magic in economic competition. In the Druja case of 1731, economic difficulties caused the pubkeeper Szmoylo Judowicz to suspect Marcin Beynarowicz and charge him before the city court. Marcin was already widely suspected and other burghers also joined in bringing forth accusations.

The third, more extensively documented episode happened in Halšany, in 1636. The Jewish leaseholder of a pub, Hoško Eskevič, filed a complaint to the Ašmiany county court about the bewitchment of his four-year-old son. According to his story, on July 20, 1636, a group of peasants were drinking vodka in his pub, including Jurka Vajciul, who was whispered to be a sorcerer. All of a sudden, Jurka handed a glass of vodka to Hoško to greet him. The scared pubkeeper considered it a bewitchment attempt and poured out the vodka with trembling hands, which angered the drunken visitor and got him to curse. At that moment, Hoško's little son entered the room. Fearing for his life, the father remembered that beating the witch could destroy spells, so he assaulted the peasant to defend his son and apprehend the sorcerer. Jurka managed to escape but the little boy fell ill on the same day. The court official examined the sick and filled the report, but there is no information about a trial. It is possible that the son recovered and that the record was preserved as an official complaint.

While it is impossible to claim that adherents of Judaism adopted the Christian diabolic concept of witchcraft, it is evident that Jews of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania could share the general fear of bewitchment. Unlike the Jewish elite who maintained insularity towards gentiles<sup>26</sup>, petty leaseholders that lived in the countryside or in towns without Jewish communities surrounded by local folk seemed to be more keen on cultural exchange at the borderland of two entities. It is therefore no wonder that pub-keepers who were in constant contact with customers could share local beliefs about magic, rumors towards suspected witches and their practices, public mood, fears that led to participation in witch-hunts – at least in this period of time.

It seems that Jews preferred to fix the damage rather than seek revenge in unfriendly Christian courts. The late 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a great rise of interest towards Kabbalah, including its practical dimension. So-called *baalshems* claimed the ability to manipulate the secret names of God for their purposes. They used occult Kabbalistic knowledge for divinations, exorcisms, amulet-making and healing.<sup>27</sup> It is possible that those Jews who couldn't afford to go to the acknowledged rabbi might instead refer to local folk witch doctors. Salomon Maimon (1753-1800), a German-Jewish philosopher born in present-day Belarus, narrated in his memoirs his own experience from his youth: *"It was therefore supposed that I had been bewitched at the time of the wedding; and under this supposition I was brought to a witch to be cured. She took in hand all sorts of operations, which of course had a good effect, although indirectly through the help of the imagination"*.<sup>28</sup>

Thus the fear of witches influenced the Jewish community, with some well-integrated Jews making trial applications against commonly known local suspects. However, demands for court prosecution of the suspected perpetrators occurred relatively seldom, usually giving way to counter-magic, which was more accessible than open trial confrontation in conditions of growing insecurity and mutual incredulity.

### ***Tatars: Magic and judicial protection***

Less numerous than Jews, Tatars are very rare in the pages of witch-trial records. Only one known document reports about a Tatar accuser that put to trial a group of alleged Christian witches. In July 1759, Mustawa Baranowski, a Tatar prince (*murza*) and army colonel, requested Alytus city court to prosecute four persons (perhaps, Alytus burghers) for witchcraft

on behalf of his subjects.<sup>29</sup> The judges interrogated witnesses who were subjects of the colonel (perhaps the ones who have initiated the accusation) and, certain of her guilt, sent at least one woman to torture (and very likely – to the stake). That is all one can learn from the brief court record preserved. Clearly, the role of the Tatar lord was just as formal mediator between his serfs who had suffered some harm from witchcraft and the city jurisdiction over the suspects. Of course, his suit filing shows that he shared the suspicions of his subjects and felt the necessity to protect them – as did the bulk of Christian nobles of the time.

As in the Jewish case, Tatars probably preferred to fix the damage of the supposed bewitchment applied by their witch doctors (*faldzej*). Early sources mentioned some traces of popular nomadic magic, but later *faldzej* practices originated from learned Oriental numerology, astrology, beliefs in the power of written incantations, prayers and sacred scriptures.<sup>30</sup> It is possible that in earlier times they also engaged more in countering maleficent witchcraft. *Faldzejs* engaged in magic by means of Islamic texts and prayers, so it appeared legitimate and acceptable even for the most pious patients. Thus, in contrast to the Catholic population, Tatars had a good opportunity to dampen the anxiety about witches through the assistance of counter-magic specialists.

### 3. The Other Accused

#### ***Jews: The sword of Damocles***

In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Christian-Jewish relations became tense. During the military calamities of the 1640s-1650s, Jewish communities from the eastern and southern territories of the Grand Duchy suffered assaults not only from Cossacks and Russians, but also from their local Ruthenian neighbors. In other places that avoided pogroms, tensions also rose even after the war. Court records of the time preserved accounts of many Christian-Jewish conflicts. However, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, these tensions did not contribute significantly to witch-hunts, with barely any witch trials appearing in the records. The state and ruling elites, aiming to avoid inter-religious clashes, played a significant role in ensuring that tensions did not manifest themselves in prosecutions.

Nevertheless, the only two cases of Jews directly accused and prosecuted for witchcraft date back to this anxious time. The information



about them is pretty scarce and neither of them looks like a typical witch trial. The first case is recorded in a court book of Ašmiany county court from October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1662.<sup>31</sup> It was a complaint about a jailbreak filed by Hryhory Hlazka, a temporary possessor of manors Milč and Čys'c'. The Jewish pub leaseholder Szymka was accused of witchcraft and poisoning with vodka and imprisoned for trial at the patrimonial court but escaped from the manor jail. At the time, poisoning was very close or even similar to witchcraft, and bewitchment by cursed beverage was widely believed. It seems to be a very convenient way to get rid of unwanted aliens that were widely engaged in pub-keeping and brewery. However, the known sources blame Jewish pub-keepers of various wrongdoings but not of such poisonings. It can support the idea that in the epoch of the witch-hunt, Lithuanian Jews were hardly regarded as maleficent witches with related attributes and activities.

The information about the second case comes from an indirect source. On July 18, 1671, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki promulgated an ordinance (*uniwersał*) that prescribed all state officials to uphold the rule of law in witch accusations against Jews.<sup>32</sup> The king strictly ordered to investigate and judge such cases in county courts, not in private ones, according to all legal procedures, not to imprison suspects before trial and not to apply arbitrary torture. As a reason for such an ordinance, the king mentioned the complaint of Jews for lawless executions of their kinfolk accused of witchcraft — as had recently happened in the Navahrudak voivodeship, where common people violently abducted and, without adherence to formalities, burned two Jewish women. From the source it is not clear whether this was a case of mob vigilantism or misconduct of some judicial body. The wording of the text leads one to suspect that other similar atrocities existed, but there is a lack of sources about them. Thus, one can assume the surge in witchcraft accusations against Jews around 1670-71 was restricted by the state's efforts.

Especially interesting is the reason for the accusations, according to the ordinance: strange inscriptions that appeared inexplicably on buildings and were attributed to Jewish sorcery. *Mahilioŭ Chronicle* also mentions the same frightening anomaly: *"In the Polish Crown and in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and in different lands and cities and in Mahilioŭ someone unknown wrote inscriptions in red curls on Catholic and Orthodox churches so high, several sążeń [Lithuanian sążeń – 1,94 m] upward, and in locked chests, that no one could these writings read"*<sup>33</sup>.

It is possible that contemporaries saw parallels with Belshazzar's feast from the Bible and felt to be Babylonians condemned to catastrophe. These and other mentioned abnormal phenomena (or rumors about them) increased moral panic and heightened the feeling of threat from Jews. Combined with social tensions, it created a fertile ground for witch accusations and executions. However, measures taken by the authorities restricted the witch-hunt, so these two women from the Navahrudak voivodeship are the only known Jews in the Grand Duchy burned as witches.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was notable for the significant growth of the Jewish role in the economy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Jews not only constituted a substantial portion of urban merchants and craftsmen, but became very active in the countryside as leaseholders of estate monopolies. It was predominantly Jews who managed the transformation in the use of grain from mainly an export commodity to the production of alcoholic beverages, especially vodka, which compensated the nobility for the decrease of grain prices in Europe and decline in the efficiency of serf labor. The importance of Jews to the economy contributed considerably to their relative security and self-confidence under the patronage of magnates and the state.<sup>34</sup>

However, the growth of their influence antagonized peasants and petty gentry and also bothered the Catholic Church, which reinforced countermeasures. Catholic clergy insisted on following the canon law provisions about the segregation of Jews and restriction of their power over Christians by numerous limitations and prohibitions.<sup>35</sup> Their Orthodox colleagues tried to enforce similar restrictions as well.<sup>36</sup> These attempts were often ignored in practice, especially by magnates in their vast possessions.

The clergy was more effective in campaigning for the minds of people. In the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church launched missionary campaigns, literary attacks and the spread of blood-libel ideas. These campaigns seemed to have an effective and lasting impact, hardening the border between Catholics (Poles and Lithuanians) and Jews and resulting in a lack of integration even in the later time of secular nation-building.<sup>37</sup> It was perhaps an essential ideological justification for fomenting social tension that, among its impacts, also led to an increase in witch suspicions in the Catholic part of the Grand Duchy.

The religious turbulences of Judaism in the late 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries could have their origin in the way Jews were perceived by their neighbors.

It was the time of the rise and fall of the Sabbatean, Frankist, Hasidic movements, and the proliferation of Kabbalah mysticism, including its practical aspect – the magic of *baalshems*. The debates between all the movements spread stories about miracles and unusual powers or horrific mischief. The echo of these anxieties reached Christian common people that could hear these rumors and observe the unusual behavior of Jewish people. Together with Catholic propaganda, it could fuel fantasies about Jewish witchcraft.

Against this background, a number of cases took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century ethnic Lithuanian lands, in which Jews began to appear in testimonies of prosecuted witches as their accomplices, but without any immediate judicial consequence. It is worth noting that, at that time, more Lithuanian cases acquired classic Western features of diabolic witchcraft: organized groups of witches, devil worshipping, Sabbaths or similar gatherings, etc. Some trials involved a relatively large number of accused and convicted people and sometimes even chain accusations took place. Investigations aimed to reveal as many local witches as possible and to use these testimonies later as evidence in case of need. From time to time, confessions included the names of Jewish neighbors in such lists of exposed accomplices.

A court of local nobility gathered in the Samogitian manor Gilvyčiai, in December 1725 to consider the case of the manor maid Krystyna caught profaning a Communion host.<sup>38</sup> Unexpectedly, her revelations led to one of the largest mass trials in Lithuanian history: seven females and one male were convicted and sentenced to burning. Krystyna confessed to having a pact and to having had intercourse with the devil, flying to Sabbaths, she confessed about an organized regiment of witches and named many of her associates. The lords of some revealed witches delivered their subjects to the court, starting a chain trial, one of the few of its kind in Lithuania. The majority of those named by Krystyna were serfs, but there were also several noblewomen and a Jewish woman, Szęderowa, who kept a pub in a neighboring village. However, she was mentioned only once, without any details, and her lord showed no intention to put her on trial.

As a rule, being blamed in such testimonies did not necessarily lead to immediate prosecution; but rather it ruined reputations, increased suspicions and became important evidence of guilt in case of future accusations. That was why in 1726, the Jewish leaseholder Aszarowicz sought to obtain a special document (*kwit*) and to register it in the record books of the Trakai county court.<sup>39</sup> The document stated that a witch named

Maryanna, burned in the town of Krokialaukis, mentioned Aszarowicz's wife among other local witches during the trial interrogation, but at the stake she withdrew her testimony. In this way, the leaseholder tried to stave off the judicial sword of Damocles over his family. The intention to get the paper could be regarded not only as a tribute to foresight and diligence, but as a reasonable precaution in light of the new attitudes of local Christians towards Jews.

Over time, the imaginary involvement of Jews in witchcraft progressed. This was reflected in one of the exceptional Western-looking mass trials that occurred in 1731, in Šerkšnėnai (Samogitia), with 11 persons accused.<sup>40</sup> A patrimonial trial was initiated by the fantastic testimonies of serf children about witchcraft and diabolism, including horrible details and named accomplices. It had a huge resonance and some of the participating noblemen delivered their subjects to trial. The same fate would befall the widow of Jakub the Jew, a leaseholder of Jan Wyszomerski. She was mentioned several times among members of a witch crew and Sabbath participants. Apart from Jakub's widow, at one of the Sabbaths on the Šatrija mount five other unknown Jewish men were also mentioned among common and noble Christian women. The leaseholder had the foresight to run away after being named, so the court became convinced of her guilt and ruled that her lord had to catch and try her for witchcraft.

The next step in the development of a Jewish witch image can be seen in the 1740 protocol of torture interrogation from Samogitia.<sup>41</sup> The accused (and almost convicted, as the court normally applied torture when it had enough evidence of guilt), peasant Jan Kolyzsko, named four accomplices, including two Jewish leaseholders from neighboring villages: an unnamed woman and a man called Gierszen. Gierszen was not just a warlock, but a leader of a witch crew – *pułkownik* (colonel). It is relevant that whilst in the Western European imagination the witches' underground organization was often described in terms borrowed from anti-Jewish discourses (Sabbath, synagogue of Satan, etc.<sup>42</sup>), Lithuanian witches belonged to units similar to those of Cossacks or soldiers, with strict discipline and corporal punishment.<sup>43</sup> Other documents of this case are lost, so the reaction of judges and the consequences for the revealed witches is unknown.

At a first glance, the Jews exposed as accomplices to witchcraft possess no distinguishing features to make them stand out from other named peasants and nobles. Trial records normally do not emphasize their ethnicity or religion as related to an accusation. As for such secondary

accusations, the interrogated in their forced confessions pointed towards: 1) personal enemies or those considered as enemies of the community 2) those widely suspected of magic and witchcraft 3) those indifferent to the one on trial, for whom they felt no solidarity 4) those immune to the consequences of accusations because of their status or other reasons.<sup>44</sup> A Jewish leaseholder could fit any of these categories: 1) his profession could make him an enemy, 2) being the exotic Other presupposed possible magic skills, 3) as an alien often isolated from common people and indifferent to them 4) immune to assaults from common folk because of patronage by lords and authorities.

### ***Tatars: Good neighbors in bad times***

Sources contain very little information about accusations of witchcraft against Tatars. Even the most hateful text, the xenophobic pamphlet *Alfurkan Tatarski* published around 1616 in Vilnius, does not accuse this minority of maleficent magic. The author tells historical anecdotes about the application of sorcery by Mongols in battles, by Turks to return escaped captives, complaints about Muslim diviners and witch doctors in Lithuania (including a detailed story of his own experience), but never blames them of any magic sabotage or explicit diabolism.<sup>45</sup>

The only mention of Tatars prosecuted for witchcraft comes from an indirect and quite equivocal source. The reputed Polish historian of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Tadeusz Czacki referred to a pamphlet named *Apologia Tatarów* (*Apology for Tatars*), published in 1630 as a response to literary attacks like *Alfurkan Tatarski*. Azulewicz, the author of *Apologia Tatarów*, indignantly reported about several Tatar women accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake somewhere in Lithuania in 1609. The evidence for their guilt consisted of suspicious coins with unreadable inscriptions. No one could read the writings, but the accusers considered them as witchcraft paraphernalia. They were, in fact, ancient Oriental coins with Kufic inscriptions in the Arabic language, highly-valued as talismans because of the name of God and verses from the Quran.<sup>46</sup> However, Czacki was the only one who cited this book as it was later lost.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the vague terms of the cited source give no indication about the exact place, type of court, or the original accusations.

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, an outburst of religious fanaticism and vigilantism swept the country. First of all, it was related to the Counter-Reformation struggle against Protestants and also to the

establishment of the Greek-Catholic Church in competition with the Orthodox one. The religious polemics were accomplished by public disorders, violence and murders, assaults and plundering of churches and cemeteries. Muslims stayed out of the conflicts, but in this time they also became targets of vigilante mobs: there is some information on the wrecking of the mosque in Trakai and the burning of another one in Salkininkai (Trakai County).<sup>48</sup> It may be assumed that the prosecution of mentioned witches took place in the same region and was related to these events.

Thus, the sources demonstrate that Christian society believed in Tatar magic but almost never accused them of witchcraft. Most likely, the primary reason was the quite modest place of Tatars in society: they occupied specific niches (military service, gardening, particular trades as wagoners, etc.), so they normally did not compete with Christians and had few possibilities to have conflicts with them. Numerical scarcity and their low-profile roles in society attracted less the attention of the Church to these infidels, so Tatars were very seldom a target for Catholic propaganda. The Tatars relieved their own witch fears by appealing to their own witch doctors and they were tolerated by clergy and secular authorities much more than their Christian colleagues. These factors contributed greatly to the minimization of the Tatar participation in witch-hunts.

### ***Germans: A suspicious kin***

The only case of a registered accusation of a German engaging in maleficent magic is the testament of Raina Jackiewiczowa, the noble landlady from Ukmergė County, registered in county books in July, 1614.<sup>49</sup> Blaming a person for causing death in a testament was a kind of valuable deathbed statement and similar to registered protestation, so it could serve as important evidence in a future trial. In her testament, Raina reports about her unhappy family life with an abusive husband who cruelly beat her even when she was badly ill. She considers that the cause of the terminal illness by which she was bedridden for two years was the witchcraft of Hanz Meldon, her husband's brother-in-law. The ethnicity or other features of the otherness of Hanz are not indicated directly in the text – he was not an outsider from a segregated social group but part of the family. However, Raina supposes that the initiative to murder her came from her husband Krzysztof, who employed not a professional sorcerer or witch, but his German relative. From the text, it is not evident whether Hanz

already had a suspicious reputation as a sorcerer, whether he had practiced something that seemed odd for locals, or whether he simply obtained a magic remedy from some witch. It is possible that being German was a way of being the Other that implied a potential for magic. It is uncertain whether Raina believed in Meldon's witchcraft or just blamed him to substantiate her decision about inheritance: she bequeathed the custody of her adolescent sons and entrusted the bulk of the property to the family of her sister, not to her cruel unworthy husband. In the latter case, in order to be plausible, her accusation had to match the widespread belief of the propensity of Hanz Meldon – or of Germans in general – to use magic.

Sources keep silent about accused witches of German or other Western origins but nevertheless, the demonization of the German Other did take place. Thus, a German-looking devil is a quite common character in trial records and especially in folk materials all over Eastern Europe.<sup>50</sup>

### ***Russians: The insulted and injured***

In the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, only two trials are known that indicate some of the participants as Muscovite. In both cases, Russians were female captives working as servants in manors of middle gentry in Samogitia.

The first record of 1590 is very scarce and unclear.<sup>51</sup> It is a statement of a Samogitian court official about the following situation. Nobleman Mikolaj Martinkevič arrested a witch named Porozka Tiškovaia, a Muscovite (*moskovka* – maybe a captive from the recent Livonian War), on the estate of another nobleman, Michal Holovin, and detained her in Holovin's manor jail but left his own people to guard her. Holovin did not like such a violation of his jurisdiction so he complained and offered either to deliver her to Martinkevič's manor, or to keep her and exercise justice according to the law. It is difficult to determine whether there was a personal conflict behind the accusation or if Porozka's suspicious reputation or foreignness made it possible to attribute some misfortune to her wicked intentions; what is certain is that Russians were quite rare and exotic in this region.

Another case is much better documented.<sup>52</sup> On July 3, 1636, Mikolaj Syrwid invited court officials and neighboring gentry to his manor Pakėvis (Pokiiowo) in Samogitia to participate in a patrimonial witch trial. He accused his maidservant Hanna Janowna the Muscovite of witchcraft against his family and household. Hanna confessed that although she grew

up in this family, she had betrayed it by assisting in various bewitchments of her masters, their children and cattle on behalf of Syrwid's sister-in-law, Cyclopedia Syrwidowa. However, she did not possess any magic power or knowledge: she obtained all her magic paraphernalia from her master's sister-in-law and her daughter Zophia. The protocol of this patrimonial trial details that the court saw her as clearly guilty and she was sentenced to burning.

However, the county court trial in October of the same year against the wicked Cyclopedia and Zophia brought new details in Hanna's case.<sup>53</sup> Cyclopedia and her family accused Mikolaj Syrwid of false declarations in the patrimonial trial and the burning of the innocent girl. According to them, Hanna was a free subject of the Russian Tsar, captured during the Smolensk War (1632–1634). The Treaty of Polyanovka that concluded the war stipulated the return of all captives. Mikolaj promised to let Hanna go with some reward for her years of service if she helped him blame his relatives of witchcraft. After the girl had confessed before the jury, she was sentenced to death and the sentence was immediately carried out. Before burning, Hanna rejected her confessions and revealed her master's plot but it was not recorded. Eventually, the court accepted Cyclopedia and Zophia's testimony, but did not react to the misconduct in Hanna's case.

It is evident that Hanna became a victim because of her vulnerable position: her master was the only one able to defend her, but the master, having realized he would inevitably have to let her go, decided to sacrifice her to family intrigue. One may assume some other conflict or misconduct towards the servant girl that he wanted to hide in the fire of the stake.

## Conclusion

Ethnic minorities were involved in Lithuanian witch-hunts in different roles. Notably, among the regarded samples, there are no witch cases involving two sides of the same ethnic group, although not all of them had judicial autonomy. Despite the rather high share of minority-related cases (19 out of 128, and also narrative reports), the number of those formally accused was low: only four persons (one Jew, one German, two Russians, also three trials against two Jews and some Tatars from narrative sources should be kept in mind), and even fewer faced trial and execution. As for the death toll, we learned from the analyzed records about the burning of a Russian servant in 1636 and the narrative sources add two Jewesses



around 1670 and some Tatar women in 1609. The number of convicted or even executed Jews would have been higher but for their proactive defense: obtaining a special royal decree (1671), securing documental evidence of cancelled incriminating testimonies (1726), escaping before investigation (1731) or even jailbreaks (1662). However, one should keep in mind that in some cases such a resolution could not be achieved.

On the other hand, three Jews accused (or participated in accusing) three persons, two of whom were burned. Four Germans prosecuted twelve Lithuanians in five trials, of which six ended up at the stake. One Tatar put to trial four persons with an unknown result, but at least one of them seems to have been convicted. Thus, an average minority representative was more likely a plaintiff than a defendant. In the rest of the cases, the positions of minority representatives were not so significant, but the information about them contributed to the understanding of their relation to witchcraft.

The cases discussed above provide some observations and conclusions. There was a significant difference between autonomous Jewish and Muslim minorities on the one hand, and dispersed Christian aliens on the other. The involvement in magic practices attributed to (and even practiced by) non-Christians was usually not confused with maleficent witchcraft. It supported the idea that the image of the witch corresponded to the internal enemy within the entire Christian society and within a given community or neighborhood in particular. The Other, the outsider, although living side by side but still segregated in its autonomous religious and cultural world, usually did not fit this image, with the exception of the most integrated border-crossers between two cultural realms. Therefore, the involvement in witch accusations in any role is already a marker of the integration of a particular group or individual into the local community. Additionally, non-Christian minorities were constantly under the pressure of the Catholic Church that tried to maintain a Catholic confessional state. In the course of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, social tensions and religious propaganda would contribute to the rise of suspicions and – in the most acute situations – even violence legitimized by witch accusations. Social contradictions were crucial in the choice of whom to hate and blame, as the difference between the involvement of Jews and Tatars eloquently demonstrates. However, the protective politics of the state and especially of feudal lords normally prevented the outbursts of trial prosecution or vigilantism.

The cultural autonomy of these minorities hindered the wholesale adoption of the Western concept of diabolic witchcraft, but did not prevent

the penetration of some of its specific elements and the influence of the general fear of bewitchment. The idea of judicial revenge against the bewitcher was unpopular not least because of the evident ineffectiveness of the judicial system and the concern of discriminatory attitudes towards aliens. Instead, the supposed victim of bewitchment preferred to apply more a natural and traditional remedy: counter-magic by religious leaders or witch doctors (the border between them could be very vague). Contrary to the disciplinary attempts by the Catholic and to some extent Orthodox churches and authorities towards the Lithuanian and Ruthenian populations, Jews and Tatars tolerated or even encouraged benevolent magic in their communities. Thus, their cultural, economic and social autonomy contributed greatly to their very minor participation in the Early Modern witch-hunt.

As for Christian aliens, the situation was quite different. They normally did not belong to autonomous communities, were under the jurisdiction of the regular legislation and lived dispersedly among the local population. As Christians, they generally shared intolerant attitudes toward various types of magic and witchcraft in particular. There was a sharp distinction between Germans, who belonged to the higher social groups like the nobility or burghers, and the mentioned Russians who were mostly rural servants. Xenophobia was rarely a motivation in accusations against those Russian witches, more significant was their vulnerable social position as isolated and defenseless lower-class strangers. The cultural features behind these trials are not always obvious but did play a part. German accusations were often of a cutting-edge character for Lithuania at that time but they contained only limited elements of the witchcraft concept typical of German culture. The share of trials initiated by Germans is very small in relation to the amount and influence of their population in Lithuania. It may be that their beliefs about witchcraft, that fitted their domestic cultural and social context, were less adjustable to the quite distinctive settings of their new home country. A large proportion of these migrants came from the periphery of the German world outside the Holy Roman Empire – from Prussia and Livonia, which were much less engaged in witch persecutions. Moreover, witch burnings in German lands diminished much earlier than in Lithuania: after the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, these regions became a source not of witch-hunt ideas, but of skepticism. Therefore, it is no wonder that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century only well-integrated representatives (often not from the first generation) could participate in witch trials on the same ground as the locals. Thus, while speaking about German cultural

influence on the Lithuanian witch-hunt, one should admit that the direct impact of Germans is existent but quite low.

Witch accusations did not become a common tool to resolve tensions between neighbors of different origin, as the Lithuanian society generally appeared immune to the wave of witch crazes that was sweeping through Europe. The Grand Duchy's cultural diversity, balanced approach to the Other and lack of violent systematic persecution for political and religious matters were among the factors that contributed to this immunity.

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