

**The Rise of Russian Peasant Witchcraft: A Response to
Social Unrest in Imperial Russia**

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Starting in the seventeenth century to nineteenth century, Russia became home to a unique form of witchcraft. Having origins in both Old Believers and the Russian Orthodox Church, witchcraft and religious practices had interrelated rituals and iconographic meanings. The influence of Russia's unique religious history, the religious structures, and the fusing of state and church created a spiritual environment different from the rest of Western Europe. Developing from those conditions, the gendered aspect of witchcraft reflected the social hierarchies rather than femicide alone. In this context, the gendered condition of witchcraft emerged differently from traditional theories of witchcraft as its purpose was to codify and stabilize those social and political hierarchies within communities. Furthermore, peasants faced a barrage of repressive action from the lack of government support in the form of political instability, economic burden, and social threats to the sustainability of their livelihoods and communities. With this context of limited social protection, witchcraft mitigated the inevitable unrest rising within these peasant communities. Combining its religious history, patterns of imperial expansion and governance, and social hierarchies, witchcraft accusations arose during especially troublesome economic and political times. Differing from eighteenth-century America Witchcraft trials, these trials were not only femicide. Targeting anyone who might subvert established social or cultural norms, these accusations often led to violent expungement, ending with a ritual of communal bonding.

Dating back to Muscovy, the mixture of religion and culture contributed to the historical development of Russian witchcraft. Developing from Orthodox Christianity and the Old Believers, the concepts and perceptions of witchcraft originated within the cultural sphere endemic to Russia.¹ And as Peter the Great blurred the lines between the two most impactful institutions and merged the state and church, this political, religious, and social change deeply impacted peasants' lives.² Through the examples of possessions and spiritual rituals, the historiography and its impact on development shows the different targets in Russian and Western European witchcraft accusations. As Steven Frank argues, "History and custom also taught Russian peasants the best way of dealing with persons whose magical powers endangered the health and welfare of the community members, crops, and livestock."³ Thus, the influence of cultural heritage and the emerging structural and individual shifts greatly impacted the emergence of Russian witchcraft and its impacts on gender and community relationships.

By analyzing the process of development within the context of religious history and development, witchcraft arose in peasant villages as a way to understand and justify the world around them. Through economic and social limitations, the religious origins of witchcraft rituals both diluted individual and community uncertainty. As an example of this simplification, witchcraft was divided into "'white' spells of 'prayers' or 'black' spells of mockery."⁴ Unquestioning, the binary between good and evil created an intellectual framework that makes the world less complex and easier to understand for the undereducated peasants.⁵ However, building off the knowledge peasants did have through religious teachings, the development of the form of witchcraft in Russian villages "relates to the 'pagan' component that has been so

¹ Aleksandr S. Lavrov. "Witchcraft and Religion in Russia, 1700-1740," *Russian Studies in History*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Spring 2007), 8.

² Stephen P. Frank. History 127D, Spring 2022, University of California, Los Angeles, Lecture.

³ Stephen P. Frank. "Popular Justice, Community and Culture among the Russian Peasantry, 1870-1900," *Russian Review*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Jul. 1987), 260.

⁴ Elena B. Smilianskaia. "Witches, Blasphemers, and Heretics Popular Religiosity and 'Spiritual Crimes' in Eighteenth-Century Russia," *Russian Studies in History*, Vol. 45, No. 4, (Dec 2014), 45.

⁵ *Ibid*, 29.

stubbornly ascribed to popular religiosity.”⁶ By having witchcraft become a stereotype or social norm, the origins in religion gives it more ability to soothe individual or communal unrest.

Bound together, the “spillage” of the magical rituals into Christianity and Christianity into witchcraft intertwines the church and witchcraft.⁷ Through this connection, both church and society solidified their influence on physical embodiments of religion and religious norms. For example, “wearing of a pectoral cross, church attendance, confession, and Communion—central tenets of church membership for an Orthodox Christian—were also of importance to the magical mindset.”⁸ Through this lens, “‘Inverted’ desecration ‘veneration’ of the same sacred artifacts, by a ‘reverse’ recitation of prayers, by rejection of the baptismal name, by sham ceremonial, and so forth” used the same historical iconography why adapting to current magical rituals.⁹ This religious dissent wreaked havoc on a village system in which management of the religious aspects of life was closely woven into secular village administration.¹⁰ By viewing the blending of magical rituals with Orthodoxy as its own unique cultural practice, the importance of both institutions cocreated and codified their existence through the similar use of icons, rituals, and meanings. Through the veil of Orthodoxy, witchcrafts’ origins hid within the history of religious norms.

Arising within a uniquely Orthodox Christianity environment, Russian witchcraft not only differed from Western society witchcraft based on religious history and ritual norms but had different impacts on gender structures. In Western Europe and the American Colonies, witchcraft almost exclusively targeted women. While in Russia, both men and women were accused of witchcraft.¹¹ Based on Orthodox Christianity’s gender expectations and social norms, the difference in religion affected all levels of society within a different context than in Western Europe. This lens not only provides reasons for the contrasting development of witchcraft but also addresses the larger impact of cultural colonization undertaken by Imperial Russia.¹² As Historian Christine Worobec argues, the “relative backwardness in comparison to Western Europe and about the peasantry, especially peasant women’s role in that backwardness, “caused social tensions between the peasantry and educated nobility who were embarrassed at their perceived lack of civilization.”¹³ However, within the peasant’s class, view of gender norms greatly impacted the burden of witchcraft on women’s role within society.

By examining the context of socio-religious development, the gendered dimension paints the broader image of different forms of hierarchy within Russian society. Based on the Orthodoxy tradition, the gender hierarchy of Western Europe did not take hold within Russia’s isolated peasant villages.¹⁴ However, as Valerie Kivelson writes, “social hierarchy within family units and broader communities created a powerful organization framework that in some ways overrode gender in Muscovites’ social imagination and practice [...] At each level, individuals

⁶ Ibid, 29.

⁷ Valerie A. Kivelson. “Male Witches and Gendered Categories in Seventeenth-Century Russia,” *Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 45, No. 3, (Jul. 2003), 641.

⁸ Elena B. Smilianskaia. “Witches, Blasphemers, and Heretics Popular Religiosity and ‘Spiritual Crimes,” 44.

⁹ Ibid, 43.

¹⁰ Heather J. Coleman. “Tales of Violence against Religious Dissidents in the Orthodox Village,” *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia*, ed. Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman, 207.

¹¹ Valerie A. Kivelson. “Male Witches,” 621.

¹² Stephen P. Frank. History 127D, Spring 2022, University of California, Los Angeles, Lecture.

¹³ Christine Worobec. “Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia,” Northern Illinois University Press, 1st edition (Feb 2001), 9.

¹⁴ Ibid, 9.

were subordinated to their superiors in rank and age, regardless of gender.”¹⁵ Within this framework, witchcraft emerged as a product of broader social practices and exploited the existing gender norms. Thus, to understand the complex social hierarchy, women’s restricted role in religion and culture created an environment of increased repressive treatment.



Figure 1. “The Husband weaves bast shoes with skill; the wife spins fibers with a will.” In this seventeenth century print, the ideal roles of men and women solidify the gender norms of the community. As economic producers, they both work within their own spheres, yet as a unit, create an industrious part of the community’s economy. It also reflects the gender hierarchy as the wife makes the primary good for the husband as he manufactures the final good.

From: V. Bakhtin and D. Moldavskii, *Russkii lubok XVII-XIX vv.* (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarst-vennoe izdatel’stvo Izobrazitel’nogo Iskusstva, 1962), fig. 11.

Women, limited to a reclusive and subordinate position within peasant society, faced increased vulnerability to witchcraft accusations and femicide. When accused and convicted of anything ranging from adultery to witchcraft, women were stripped naked and paraded around the village while villagers beat upon domestic or agricultural tools, carried signs, and mocked the victim through songs in what is known as a *Charivari*.¹⁶ Men faced a similar fate of being stripped, tarred, and feathered, but the *Charivari* ritual was usually reserved only for women.¹⁷ Furthermore, women were more likely to be accused of witchcraft within the context of the stable community. In the case of Nastas’ia Trifonova, a peasant women, she “denied the accusation brought against her, saying that she ‘had not hexed’ another soldier’s wife ‘and had

¹⁵ Valerie A. Kivelson. “Male Witches and Gendered Categories in Seventeenth-Century Russia,” 612.

¹⁶ Stephen P. Frank. “Popular Justice,” 245.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 245.

only conjured for her, for Varvara, with salt, to make her husband love her, and my conjuration was divine.”¹⁸ As argued by Kivelson, “Women, for their part, were thought to practice black magic, deriving from their peculiar anatomy and apparently magical ability to bear children.”¹⁹ Therefore, the domestic nature of female witchcraft directly attacked social hierarchies by subverting the assumed physical concealment of women within peasant society. Through this example, the entwinement of women within the context of witchcraft, social norms, and punishment emerges from the traditional gender hierarchy. Thus, the vulnerability of women within the hierarchy of Russian peasant villages created less protection against being accused of witchcraft and produced a violent community response when women exited their seclusion or standard gender norms.

In contrast to women's role within peasant society, men's greater ability to travel outside the village exposed them to a greater risk of being accused and killed of witchcraft. As men were more likely to roam the countryside as vagrants or healers, their negative impacts on taxation and shifting populations undermined the stability of local communities.^{20 21} The commune as a whole was responsible for a set tax, thus, as travelers weaved through communities, their tax burden spread amongst the community.²² This caused more economic tensions between residents and these traveling men. Men's role in witchcraft also diverged from the roles witchcraft accusations played in women's lives. “Men were associated with magical manipulation of harvests, field, weather and disease, magical specialties that grew out of their own professional skills and expertise.”²³ Thus, tying men more closely to the economic stability of the community. Undermining economic and political structures, men suffered from harsher punishment than women. Instead of charivaris, traveling men faced brutal attacks such as whipping, branding, mutilating, or execution.²⁴ Therefore, men's roles within society also emerged from the structures of the patriarchy. However, their presence as economic, political, and social heads of their communities exposed them to a greater risk of witchcraft accusations and brutal punishment if they subverted established societal norms.

¹⁸ Elena B. Smilianskaia. “Witches, Blasphemers, and Heretics Popular Religiosity and ‘Spiritual Crimes’ in Eighteenth-Century Russia,” 38.

¹⁹ Valerie A. Kivelson. “Male Witches and Gendered Categories in Seventeenth-Century Russia,” 615.

²⁰ Stephen P. Frank. *History* 127D.

²¹ Valerie A. Kivelson. “Male Witches,” 621.

²² *Ibid*, 618.

²³ Valerie A. Kivelson. “Male Witches and Gendered Categories in Seventeenth-Century Russia,” 615.

²⁴ W. F. Ryan. “The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia (Magic in History),” Penn State University Press, 1st Edition, (1999), 424.



Figure 2. “Russian Peasant Plower.” In this late-nineteenth-century picture of a male peasant plower and his son, the significance of horses and harvests was foundational to community stability. Reflecting the issue of males’ role in the economy, this picture analyzes the nature of gendered socio-political relationships in the community. Arising from this important community stability, witchcraft emerges as a gendered response to direct instability.

From: Steven Frank, “The Countryside,” Spring 2022, University of California, Los Angeles, Lecture.

On a broader scale, these gender norms and hierarchy reflect an empire-wide patriarchal governance system. Based on the Tsar and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, community participation meant ascribing to this societal structure.²⁵ Through this lens, tensions or rivalries that emerged from this class structure reflect similar patterns of hierarchical and gendered aspects of witchcraft accusations. Within the peasant village, this edified “traditional means of public criticism or punishment in which the entire community could participate and disciplinary technique by which family or community members were forced to follow collective rules.”²⁶ Therefore, the trickle-down effects of hierarchy directly influenced the emergence and practice of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations.

Within the context of the Law Codes of 1649, the increasingly stratified social classes heavily impacted the lives of peasants.²⁷ And, under Russian imperial expansion and unequal class taxation, peasants held most of the society's economic burdens with little political

²⁵ Stephen P. Frank. History 127D.

²⁶ Stephen P. Frank. “Popular Justice,” 244.

²⁷ Stephen P. Frank. History 127D.

representation or liberty.²⁸ Without government support and physical isolation from other villages, the peasant community developed close economic and cultural bonds within the community as means of survival. Therefore, as people defied the social order, witchcraft accusations allowed the community to expunge the social unrest and unite behind a shared belief system. As Heather Coleman argues through the example of religious differences within peasant communities, peasants “leaving the Church and performing non-Orthodox rites in an Orthodox milieu aroused enmity within the family, inferred with the administration of the village, and the rupture of the ritual unity of village life.”²⁹ Unity, in peasant communities, became foundational to all avenues of social life as it protected and sustained the community from the many dangerous outside threats.

These tensions and rivalries exploded during times of increased misery.³⁰ Primarily based on economic challenges or recent social unrest, the toleration of traveling men discussed earlier eroded.³¹ As an outlet for fear and anger, accusing these men (and sometimes women) of witchcraft or horse-thieving—even when there is limited evidence—allowed the community to release pent-up societal stress. In these situations, violent expungements were led by the community to rid of the social danger. In these tensional events, the *Samosud* acted as a means of justice as the Tsarist regime had little ability to punish peasant wrongdoing.³² Through the community’s decision to physically punish, parade, or economically extort, the wrong was made right.³³ However, within a community, punishments were often less extreme but always went across or down the social scale.³⁴ The rivalry that emerged between different families led to “communities and households becoming contested sites when violations or perceived transgressions of the trust placed in personal and social relationships occurred.”³⁵ Thus, accusing outsiders eased internal tensions during challenging economic times.

Within this quasi-egalitarian, mostly independent peasant society, male elders of the community governed the village.³⁶ Thus, when it came to accusations of witchcraft, the council had absolute authority over the punishment. As Frank argues, “with its wealth of symbolism and ritual, public humiliation of a wrongdoer brought both crime and criminal before the offended community for judgment, and it was the community that oversaw conformity to established customs and rules, thereby asserting the primacy of its authority.”³⁷ In performing their authority, the rituals of public shaming were used to force the community’s acknowledgment of the wrongdoing; “perhaps because of the increased significance of property relations in the post-emancipation period and an attendant weakening of the primacy of kinship.”³⁸ In this era, witchcraft developed further to migrate the suffering left during the start of modernization, and ways of survival, punishment, and unity tried to sustain the community.

From the early days of the Russian Empire through industrialization, the peasants could not escape suffering. As discussed earlier, mixed to form spiritual and ritualist practices,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Heather J. Coleman. “Tales of Violence against Religious Dissidents in the Orthodox Village,” 202.

³⁰ Stephen P. Frank. *History 127D*.

³¹ Stephen P. Frank. “Popular Justice,” 259.

³² Ibid, 262.

³³ Ibid, 264.

³⁴ Valerie A. Kivelson. “Male Witches and Gendered Categories in Seventeenth-Century Russia,” 609.

³⁵ Christine Worobec. “Possessed,” 107.

³⁶ Stephen P. Frank. *History 127D*.

³⁷ Stephen P. Frank. “Popular Justice, Community and Culture among the Russian Peasantry, 1870-1900, 249.

³⁸ Ibid, 255.

witchcraft emerged from the blending of religion. This led to communities resorting to the magical world during times of suffering. Later, as traveling men replaced earlier stereotypes of witches, outmigration and social instability drove accusations. Therefore, as modernization spread across Russia, the third purpose of witchcraft emerged. Worobec argues that the “new forces that impinged upon women’s lives were a result of industrialization and male out-migration as well as a growth in monastic institutions in the second half of the nineteenth century.”³⁹ However, the primary purpose of the witchcraft ritual and the social response to accusations stemmed from the fact that “more than four out of five Russians, peasants lived in a world obsessed with concerns of survival and regulated by a patriarchal system and notions of a moral economy or a rough-and-ready egalitarianism.”⁴⁰ Therefore, the only real solution to their economic instability and overall suffering remained incurable.

Also unchanged were the social rituals arising when accusations of witchcraft emerged. From *Samosud* to *Charivaris*, these cultural practices acted as a masked social contract. Traditional punishment acted as a social guardrail against instability within the community, authorized by the community. As one villager recorded, everyone would “even bring their children and wives and make them beat the man, so that everybody would be responsible.”⁴¹ Therefore, these structures played an important role in the governance of the community without the direct influence of the imperial government. Moreover, “Russian peasant society participated in their social healing. The ‘mimetic’ nature of possession, Edward Shieffelin points out, ‘is never merely the product of the actor alone.’”⁴² Therefore, just as witchcraft emerged as a response to economic suffering and religious origins, its expungement also formed a social product, which to itself, codified the existing social structures.

Not only did punishment act as critical societal protection to peasant villages as they “acted to soothe ill feelings and hostilities by involving an entire village in the punishment,” it helped the community unite behind a singular cause.⁴³ As Frank argues, these events “sought to bring offenders back into the community rather than drive them out altogether, and used the symbolic threat of expulsion together with the forced purchase of vodka (i.e. symbolic reconciliation) as its main instruments for re-establishing normal intra- village relationships.”⁴⁴ Therefore, the unification after violent episodes or high tensions acted as a tempering of social unrest and pacified the community. Within this context, witchcraft and the rituals surrounding it solidified social structures, morals, and community governance.

As home to its own unique practice of witchcraft, the Imperial Russian Witchcraft formed as a form of governance. Emerging during times of high social stress, the accusation of witchcraft did not solely reflect femicide intentions or religious reprisal as it did in other parts of westernized society. It reflected a community-guided governance ritual founded on religious history, gender norms, and community cohesion. In analyzing these patterns, witchcraft acts as a means of codifying social stability, cleansing economic, social, or political danger, and supporting inherited societal traditions. Exposed to harsh living conditions, these ritualized experiences united communities and preserved them from harmful external forces. Thus, the practice of witchcraft, spanning from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, deeply impacts the heritage and continued survival of Russian peasant society.

³⁹ Christine Worobec. “Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia,” 12.

⁴⁰ Christine Worobec. “Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia,” 1.

⁴¹ Stephen P. Frank. “Popular Justice, Community and Culture among the Russian Peasantry, 1870-1900,” 258.

⁴² Christine Worobec. “Possessed,” 205.

⁴³ Stephen P. Frank. “Popular Justice,” 250.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 225.

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