

This book you hold in your hands is very different from the one I originally set out to write. I was in the process of collecting sources on Polish folk beliefs for English-language readers (published as *With Stake and Spade: Vampiric Diversity in Poland*). The task ahead was simple, I told myself. It would suffice to translate materials collected by Oskar Kolberg and publish them with Benedykt Joachim Chmielewski's *New Athens* and Franciszek Bohomolec's *Devil...* maybe throw in some ethnographic curios for good measure. At the time, I still saw my subject matter – condescendingly – as a kind of poor man's mythology or folk demonology. After all, this is how historians and ethnologists had framed it for generations. It was my curiosity that set me on a path uncharted by scholars. I started perusing old newspapers, judicial decrees, theological treatises and the marginalised testimonies of Ukrainians and Kaszubians. Only then did it dawn on me that it was *anti*-mythology I was dealing with. This was a record of real events – the lives, deaths, emotions and actions of actual people, flesh and blood. Official history had spurned these people, and scholars had discounted their stories. I finally grasped that the tale I was tracing could not be reduced to “myth” but nevertheless constituted the essential or even only myth of the Slavic people. So I cast aside my academic training and taught myself to listen, patiently and reverently, to the voices of the dead. Thus, *Upiór* was born.

From that point onward, the book took shape during an unusual time. At the onset of the pandemic, I was writing of undead corpses carrying plagues. Right as I was writing a chapter on romantic revolutionaries, social movements erupted worldwide to overturn the status quo. Several days before writing even these words, voices spoke of the “end of history” – a history told in endless refrain, as if out of spite, and always resisting closure. If this book alters how we view our history, even in some small way, then I will feel rewarded for my efforts. For history does not end. The book lies open. It is only our perception and interpretations that change, and this is a process we should face willingly and without fear.

### Buried Superstition

At the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ceased to exist. It had been the great project of modern political thought: a multicultural federation spanning territories today shared between Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. Here, a diverse abundance of ethnic and cultural influences coexisted and intermixed. Poland's loss of sovereignty and figurative demise provoked reactions far from uniform, from armed struggle to expedient reforms to ambivalence or even preference for the new situation and attempts to adapt. This transformation coincided in time with a great wave of triumph and relief shared by the disappearing nation's intellectual elite: a prodi-

gious folk belief had been vanquished, and in its place emerged reason and the radiant knowledge of the Enlightenment (albeit delayed by several decades).

Members of the newly “enlightened” took heart that they had defeated belief in a being more feared than the devil, hell, or even God himself. Believers, non-believers, crypto-atheists, deists, followers of Voltaire and Descartes, bishops and ex-Jesuits – all of them grappled with this entity. Now equipped with theoretical tracts, scientific, philosophical and theological arguments, sermons, poems and plays, they derided this superstition and scorned all who clung to it as unenlightened simpletons.

This creature that united the sharpest minds and pens of the Polish Age of Reason was the *upiór*: undead spirits risen from the grave who raided humans and cattle, suffocating them or drinking their blood, spreading plagues and overturning the world order with their very existence. The *upiór* was chaos embodied, and belief in this figure was the bane of theologians and a menace to philosophers.

Excerpts translated by Eliza Rose



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Born 1981

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#### Books published

*With Stake and Spade. Vampiric Diversity in Poland, 2020*

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#### Awards

*Upiór. Historia naturalna* was named the non-fiction book of the year by “Nowa Fantastyka” (2020)