Aron Gurevich devoted the last section of his monograph, *Srednevekovyi mir: kul'tura bezmolvstviushchego bol'shinstva* [The Medieval World: The Culture of the Silent Majority], not to the medieval popular culture that constituted his primary research focus over several decades, but rather to an interpretation of witch hunts in early-modern Western Europe. In the pursuit of supposed sorcerers, he saw crystallized “the divergence between official and popular cultural traditions” that had “intensified in the late Middle Ages” and that signaled the ultimate destruction of the authentic traditional popular culture at the hands of the absolutist state. The practice of magic had long been interwoven with popular culture, Gurevich mused; why would the State and Church launch concerted attacks on it, and why would villagers collaborate? In particular, he noted the increasingly intrusive State, the destabilization of the economy, increasing levels of violence and severity of penalties for misconduct, the demands for “civilizing” the “dark masses” found in the burgeoning print culture, the disasters of war, famine, and plague, the growing importance of demonology in elite theology, and the linking of witchcraft and heresy, which redoubled the seriousness of both types of offenses. All of these disturbing developments resulted in a “collective phobia” —a generalized fear that permeated late-medieval to
early-modern communities. Witches became the “scapegoat, onto which it would be possible to place [peasants’] fears and sins...so that the village collective could recover the feeling of health and internal well-being.” Yet village sorcerers had not only elicited fears from their neighbors, but had also been the source of help as defense against the uncontrollable forces in the world, particularly the healing of diseases. Following the work of major scholars of early-modern European witchcraft, Gurevich noted the pattern they discerned: accused witches disproportionately included “marginal” persons and women, and allegations against them arose from webs of social tensions. Yet he remained dissatisfied with this explanation. “Internal conflicts,” he wrote, “took place in the village in the earlier period also, and did not lead to such catastrophic consequences.”

Although Gurevich did not base his insights into pre-modern popular culture on Russian material, he encouraged other scholars, including myself, to apply them accordingly. In this article, I will explore one aspect of the problem of early modern witchcraft as Aron Gurevich framed it: why did Russians of the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries turn on the “sorcerers” and “witches” who provided them with healing of their illnesses and accuse them of witchcraft? In Russia, as in Western Europe, ordinary people had engaged in the use of herbs, amulets, and incantations to combat disease for generations, and while Church authorities warned against such doings, they regarded them as a pastoral matter, imposing penances rather than subjecting practitioners to torture, trial, and execution. What had changed in Russian society and culture to bring about the persecution of folk healers as witches? And why did State authorities choose to act on those charges?

These large questions concerning the nature of witchcraft allegations have attracted the attention of a number of scholars who explicitly compared the situation in Russia with that in Western Europe. They note similarities: the pervasive belief in magic, the roots of allegations in local tensions, the state’s role in intensifying charges, and

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7 Aron Iakovlevich presented me with a copy of his book *Srednevekovyi mir* in September 1990, upon learning of my intention to study medieval Russian popular religion.
8 Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, 78-103; M. G. Korogodina, *Ispoved’ v Rossii v XIV-XIX vekakh* [Confession in Russia from the 14th to 19th centuries] (St. Petersburg, 2006), 203-232.