

THE OCCULT AND POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA

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The occult featured prominently in Russian popular entertainment in the last decades of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mainstream newspapers entertained their readers with reports about mysterious events, cheap pamphlets advertized the recreational qualities of magical practice, while theatres and in particular film made use of the newest technological developments to show the supernatural in action. Jeffrey Brooks has argued that authors of popular texts “felt a duty to enlighten their less well-educated readers and free them from superstitions that limited their understanding of their modern world.”¹ This article revisits the seemingly incongruous affinity between stories about supernatural forces and the quintessentially modern media of mass consumption. It argues that the relationship between the occult and the public sphere was much more complex than previously suggested and characterized by ambiguity.

Leisure-time pursuits in fin-de-siècle Russia were exemplary modern phenomena. The rise of commercial literature as well as the increasing popular success of theatre productions and of film screenings owed much to the rapid process of urbanization and to the relaxation of censorship regulation in the Russian empire of the post-reform period. While five daily newspapers were printed in St. Petersburg in 1860, this number rose to 22 in 1880.²

One of the most successful newspapers, which also frequently reported supernatural events, was *The Petersburg Flyer* (*Peterburgskii listok*). The sheet was aimed at a poorly educated audience of ordinary workers and employees. Founded at the height of the reform period in 1864, *The Petersburg Flyer* increased its numbers of weekly issues from the original four to five in 1871 and to seven in 1882. It attained a circulation of 9,000 in 1870, a number that rose

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- 1 Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917* (Princeton, 1985), 247.
- 2 The comparative numbers for Moscow are 2 (1860) and 7 (1880). Louise McReynolds, *The News under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press* (Princeton, 1991), 293.

to 24,000 in 1895 and to 30,000 in 1900.³ This expansion was quite typical for periodicals generally, which benefited from innovations such as the telegraph, improved print technology and railways. Newspapers disseminated their information to provincial towns and historians have estimated that by 1914 every second or third adult in Russia had regular contact with a newspaper.⁴

Similar developments took place in other areas too. The imperial monopoly on theatres ended in 1882 and as a consequence, popular theatres mushroomed all over the country. By the turn of the century, the theatrical landscape had dramatically diversified as had the composition of the audience: ordinary Russians including factory workers now rubbed shoulders with the urban elites at playhouses.⁵ At the turn of the century, popular entertainment was revolutionized by the invention of moving images. By 1900, cinemas had become an important aspect of Russian cultural life. Indeed, cinemas were established at such a fast rate that in 1908 the authorities felt compelled to introduce an upper limit to the number of cinemas allowed to operate in some cities.⁶ In 1912, there were 134 cinemas in St. Petersburg, 76 in Moscow and 1,412 in the empire as a whole.⁷ Films reached huge audiences and, like newspapers such as *The Petersburg Flyer*, they shocked many educated observers with the simple entertainment they provided.⁸

Leisure-time pursuits as mass activities shaped by commercial mechanisms, then, were features of modern life and intrinsically linked to urbanization, political liberalization and technological advances. But the changing concept of entertainment itself was also a novelty. As Louise McReynolds has noted, “‘free’ time, or hours not spent at work or doing domestic chores, was not intrinsically new, ‘leisure’ time however—time spent in activities intended for

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- 3 *Russkaia periodicheskaia pechat', 1703-1895: Spravochnik* (Moscow, 1957); McReynolds, *The News*, 297.
 - 4 Manfred Hagen, *Die Entfaltung politischer Öffentlichkeit in Russland, 1906-1914* (Wiesbaden, 1982), 144-149.
 - 5 I. Petrovskaja, *Teatr i zritel' provintsial'noi Rossii vtoraia polovina XIX veka* (Leningrad, 1979), 144-145.
 - 6 Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (Princeton, 1983), 28.
 - 7 Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge, 1992), 30.
 - 8 On early Russian cinema see B. S. Likhachev, *Kino v Rossii (1896-1926)* (Leningrad, 1927); Leyda, *Kino*; Paolo Cherchi Usai, Yurii Tsivian, et al., eds., *Silent Witnesses: Russian films, 1908-1919* (London, 1989); Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*; Yurii Tsivian, *Early Russian Cinema and its Cultural Reception* (London and New York, 1994); Louise McReynolds, *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era* (Ithaca and London, 2003).

‘self-actualization through the arts’—was.”⁹ These modern trends were deeply bound up with the supernatural in ways that transcended mere diversion. The new developments also pointed towards new understanding of the individual self and the creation of a shared culture that accepted diversity.

The Occult and Popular Literature

Numerous stories published by Russian newspapers or as slim and inexpensive pamphlets asserted, as Brooks claims, a rational worldview and entertained their readers by ridiculing those who believed in supernatural forces. One such case was the article entitled *The witch’s trial (Sud nad ved’moi)* published by *The Petersburg Flyer* in 1909. As the newspaper informed its readers, a rumour spread among the inhabitants of the town of Bolkhov that a witch was living in their midst who took on animal form at night. One evening, three drunken townspeople encountered a pig in the dark and concluded that the swine must be the transformed witch in question. They caught the witch/the pig, passed a “formal” judgment over her and punished her by cutting off her ears and tail. After daybreak, the tradesman Kalmykov “found his sow in a horribly disfigured state, barely alive. [He] instituted legal proceedings against the culprits for pig mutilation and attempted murder.”¹⁰ The ironic tone of *The Petersburg Flyer* suggests that the newspaper expected to entertain its readers by debunking the superstitions of provincials.

Similar accounts could be found frequently in the pages of this popular daily. A rather typical story was published 1893. It told the story of a superstitious estate owner who, of course, held a subscription to the well-known and expensive spiritualist journal *Rebus*. In a state of complete drunkenness, so the story goes, the old man saw a large number of threatening devils. The superstitious peasants who were with him also claimed to see them. Only the young and educated Vervitskii did not believe in the demons and is portrayed as the only modern and rational character in the tale. The account introduced a theme that was a frequent ingredient in diverting stories about the supernatural: the juxtaposition of the gullible and wealthy nobleman which is opposed to the young and educated rationalist. In 1895, the same newspaper published a story by D. K. Lamanchskii that praised the rational worldview of a certain engineer Kozlov. Kozlov and his family had just moved into a new apartment in St. Petersburg when inexplicable events began to take place. Objects moved

9 Ibid., 9.

10 “Sud nad ved’moi,” *Peterburgskii listok*, March 3, 1909, no. 60, 6.

around and fell from chests and wardrobes, and strange noises were heard. These events echoed reports about haunted houses that featured prominently in late imperial publishing and which interpreted such events in the context of folkloric and spiritualist notions.¹¹ The narrator of the article in *The Petersburg Flyer* did not forget to mention famous Russian spiritualists such as Nikolai Petrovich Vagner and Aleksandr Nikolaevich Aksakov; two men who were known for their investigations into haunted houses and reports about troubled dwellings in *Rebus*. Kozlov, however, who was not a spiritualist but an engineer and hence a practical man, soon discovers the cause of the troubles: after he smoked out the hollow space below the floorboards, hundreds of rats flee. Everything is quiet from that time on.¹²

The topic of the allegedly haunted, but in reality entirely ordinary, house, was long-lived, as is illustrated by “The Enigmatic House”, published again by *The Petersburg Flyer* in 1913. It told the story of a poor tenant who successfully stages supernatural phenomena in his living quarters in order to get a reduction in rent from a spiritualist landlord.¹³ These stories, then, poked fun at spiritualists’ enthusiasm for haunted houses and their inclination to interpret moving objects as items touched by invisible spirit hands.

Stories debunking the supernatural “would not have appeared in such numbers and for so long had they not found a ready readership.”¹⁴ These narratives also contained an aspect of social criticism as they contrasted their rational, urban heroes with gullible, privileged spiritualists or backward provincials. This theme was also expressed in other newspapers. An allegedly factual account published in *The Moscow Kopeck Gazette* (*Moskovskaia gazeta kopeika*), reported on a poor gypsy fortune-teller Smirnova, who predicted and influenced the future of her clients by inspecting and casting spells on their jewellery. Her magical technique, so Smirnova told her customers, requires her to wrap the precious objects in cloth bundles that ought not to be touched for three days for the spell to work. In actual fact, Smirnova robbed gullible ladies of valuable items worth hundreds of rubles.¹⁵ We can only assume that the urban lower-class readers of *The Petersburg Flyer* and *The Moscow Kopeck Gazette* enjoyed identifying with clever engineers such as Kozlov or rascals

11 Julia Mannherz, “Slukhi o ‘nepokoinom’ dome v Rossii v épokhu moderna,” In: Igor’ Narskii, ed., *Slukhi v Rossii XX veka: neformal’naia kommunikatsiia i “krutye povoroty” rossiiskoi istorii* (Cheliabinsk, 2011) 218-230.

12 D. K. Lamanchskii, “Spiritizm,” *Peterburgskii listok*, November 26, 1895, no. 325, 2-3.

13 Provintsial, “Tainstvennyi dom (rasskaz),” *Peterburgskii listok*, June 2, 1913, no. 149, 3.

14 Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 249.

15 “Proisshestviia: Gadalka,” *Gazeta kopeika* (Moskva), 1909, no. 58, 3.

such as Smirnova, and they probably relished the *schadenfreude* generated by reading stories about gullible affluent spiritualists.

The portrayal of belief in the supernatural as naive superstition by the popular press was, however, not universal. Some pamphlets dealing with apparitions of the dead tried to convince readers that the phenomena described were beyond doubt. In the story *The Dead Husband Appears to his Wife Forty Days after His Death* (*Iavlenie umershego muzha zhene na sorokovoi den' konchiny*), the religious and superstitious wife is vindicated in her belief about life after death, while the more sceptical husband has to experience the beyond before he can be convinced.¹⁶ Books like *On Life in the Beyond: Apparitions from the Other World* (*O zagrobnoi zhizni. (Iavleniia s togo sveta)*) and *The Dead Appear to the Living from the Beyond* (*Iavlenie umershikh zhivym iz mira zagrobnogo*) collected stories of this kind and presented them in a way that underscored their alleged factuality.¹⁷ Their claim to veracity was supported by Christian beliefs about life after death, on which such publications based their claims.

Not only pamphlets with a Christian mission described the supernatural as a real force to be reckoned with. The same popular newspapers that debunked spiritualist belief also published seemingly trustworthy depictions of the supernatural. Articles reporting *From the Mysterious World* (*Iz mira tainstvennogo*) were regular features in popular newspapers such as *The Petersburg Flyer*, *The Moscow Kopeck Gazette* and *The Russian Flyer* (*Russkii listok*). *The Petersburg Flyer* started its successful series *Iz mira tainstvennogo* in 1899 and articles under this title appeared—with some interruption—until 1907. These reports on the unknown covered about half of one newspaper page and were often comprised of more than one account. The prominence and the relatively long period of the series' publication suggest that it had a considerable appeal among readers.¹⁸ *Iz mira tainstvennogo* included accounts of prophetic dreams, apparitions, haunted houses, supernatural curses, mysterious marks appearing on the bodies of the living, ghost photography and inexplicable, sudden deaths. These stories entertained because they portrayed events which contradicted a rational worldview and which, because of their inexplicability, created a sense

16 Geine iz Tiflisa, *Iavlenie umershego muzha zhene na sorokovoi den' (konchiny)* (Moscow, 1910).

17 *O zagrobnoi zhizni. (Iavleniia s togo sveta)* (St. Petersburg, 1903); ed., *Iavlenie umershikh zhivym iz mira zagrobnogo* (Moscow, 1915).

18 One of many examples is "Iz mira tainstvennogo: Fotografiiia dukha," *Moskovskaia gazeta kopeika*, August 2, 1910, no. 62 (417), 4.

of insecurity and dread. Often, the scariness and the alleged reality of such stories was heightened by referring to localities known to readers. In 1903, one of these accounts told the story of Mr. Z., who lived on Pushkin Street in Petersburg. One morning, relatives found him sitting on his bed, staring with frightened eyes into empty space. Z., it turned out, was paralyzed and unable to speak. A mysterious mass and the remains of a completely demolished armchair are discovered next to him. Moreover, the icon in Z.'s room is removed from its original place and a mysterious note with illegible scribbling in Latin letters (Latin usually being associated with the devil) lies on his bedside table. The family doctor, a representative of the urban educated professional intelligentsia—commonly portrayed as deeply sceptical of everything mysterious—, suggests that some supernatural power must be implicated in the events. A few days later, Z. was found dead and his bereaved family are impatient to move into another dwelling.¹⁹ The setting of this tale in the centre of St. Petersburg near Moscow station, a sight representing technological progress and rational prowess, added to the thrill it provided for readers.

Another, similar account told a story of a traveler relishing a conversation with two students in his hotel room on Nevskii Prospekt, St. Petersburg's central avenue, when they suddenly grow transparent and eventually disappear. It is later established, so the author claimed, that they were visitors from the beyond.²⁰ Stories of that kind seem to have been highly popular, for publishers had difficulties meeting demand. Numerous stories appeared more than once or were reprinted in slightly different version, an indication that editors rushed such accounts into print. In some cases, publishers took a mysterious tale, changed the location and the names of the characters and had a new story ready.²¹

None of these allegedly factual accounts provided rational explanations for the mysterious events they reported. Instead, they meticulously refuted physical explanations and insinuated that supernatural forces lay at the source of such occurrences. These powers, however, were never clearly named and thus remained suggestive and elusive. Nonetheless, such newspaper accounts implied that supernatural powers had a bearing on the lives of Petersburgers. This form of reasoning questioned the hold of the rational mind over reality and linked the accounts of the *Iz mira tainstvennogo* series to the many gothic novels

19 -v, "Iz mira tainstvennogo," *Peterburgskii listok*, December 7, 1903, no. 336, 5.

20 Volkhv, "Iz mira tainstvennogo," *Peterburgskii listok*, December 4, 1905, no. 309, 2.

21 P. M., "Iz mira tainstvennogo," *Peterburgskii listok*, January 15, 1906, no. 14, 5; P.M., "Iz mira tainstvennogo," *Peterburgskii listok*, March 15, 1907, no. 72, 5.

which newspapers also published. *The Petersburg Flyer*, for example, serialized two of Vera Kryzhanovskaia's occult novels: *The Wizard's Daughter: An Occult Novel* (*Doch' kolduna (Okkul'tnyi roman)*) and *In the Kingdom of Darkness* (*V tsarstve t'my*).²² Popular newspapers aimed at a mass audience, then, sent mixed messages about the forces that influenced contemporaries' lives. On the first page of a newspaper, reports about political, foreign and local events commonly occupied the top two-thirds. They expressed a rational view of the world but frequently sat above serialized occult novels to which the lower third was devoted. On page two, a satirical account might ridicule supernatural belief, while a story under the heading *Iz mira tainstvennogo*, usually printed on page 5, might again suggest that scientific explanations failed to grasp important events.

Belief and disbelief were most ambiguously combined in occult instruction manuals. On the one hand, such publications operated on the assumption that contact with another, supernatural world was possible. On the other hand, numerous of these "how-to" manuals, while advertising the experiences of the beyond, simultaneously subverted belief in another world by poking fun at it. Instruction manuals enticed potential buyers by stressing the entertainment value of traditional fortune-telling practices and of spiritualist séances in their titles. The first part of the lengthy title of Moldavanin's publication is typical: *Extraordinarily Interesting and Exceptionally Intriguing Domestic Magic Booklet for Familial Spiritualist Séances in the Evenings* (*Chrezvychaino-interesnaia i neobyknovenno-zabavnaia dlia semeinykh vechernykh spiriticheskikh seansov Domashnaia Volshebnaia Knizhka*).²³ Another similar publication was *Yuletide: The Wonders of Striped Magic or the Fate of every Man and Wo-Man* (*Sviatki: Chudesa polosatoi magii ili sud'ba kazhdogo cheloveka i chelovechitsy*), which evoked the fun and humour to be discovered within its covers through

22 The last installment of *V tsarstve t'my* informed readers that the publication had to be discontinued "due to reasons beyond the editors" control, another hint at dark forces. V. Kryzhanovskaia, "V tsarstve t'my," *Peterburgskii listok*, February 20, 1913, no. 50; Muireann Maguire, "Ghostwritten: Reading Spiritualism and Feminism in the Works of Rachilde and Vera Kryzhanovskaia-Rochester," *Modern Language Review*; forthcoming 2011.

23 Anti-spirit Alkhazar-Tovii Moldavanin, *Chrezvychaino-interesnaia i neobyknovenno-zabavnaia dlia semeinykh vechernykh spiriticheskikh seansov Domashnaia volshebnaia knizhka: Knizhka volshebniša, po kotoroi možno pokazivat' teni (privedenii) zhelaemykh lits, khotia by oni vo vremia seansa byli v otsutstvii za neskol'ko tysiach verst ili uzhe umerzhie, uznat' imena i leta sovershenno neznakomykh lits. Krome togo po etoi knizhke možno uznat', skol'ko kto imeet pri sebe v karmane deneg ili u sebia v dome, nesmotria uzhe i na to, chto esli-by takoe litso bylo ot svoego doma na rasstoianii za neskol'ko sot ili tysiach verst.* (Moscow, 1883).

the un-grammatical neologism, *wo-man* (*chelovechitsy*). The pamphlet delves into Petersburg gossip, advising readers to “go to Filippov’s bakery (or to any other baker versed in the art of flying out of the chimney)” to buy a French roll and throw crumbs onto a diagram in to book which “will reveal your future.” The book’s prophetic revelations, too, expressed an air of playfulness and humour, telling diviners that “The Catholic Pope worries about you” or “the savings-bank misses you”.²⁴ Other booklets were exclusively geared towards play and games. One divinatory device allowed fortunetellers to “foresee” the grotesque face of one’s future spouse by rubbing a piece of paper with heat-sensitive colour near one’s heart.²⁵ Another included the optical illusions *A Spiritualist Apparition* (*Spiriticheskoe iavlenie*), advertized with the headline: “No medium required: Everybody can summon ghosts!” (fig.1)²⁶

СПИРИТИЧЕСКОЕ ЯВЛЕНИЕ.

EINE
SPIRITISTISCHE ERSCHEINUNG.



Каждый может призывать духовъ безъ
медиума.

Kein Medium mehr nöthig, da Jedermann
Geister citiren kann.

Fig. 1: “The Spiritualist Appearance” as an optical illusion (1883)

24 *Sviatki: Chudesna polosatoi magii ili sud'ba kazhdogo cheloveka i chelovechitsy* (St. Petersburg, 1905). Other booklets that radiated a similar air of fun, humour and playfulness include *Noveshii Peterburgskii orakul: chut' ne 1.000 interesneishikh voprosov i otvetov na Peterburgskie zloby dnia* (St. Petersburg, 1893).

25 “Vzgliad v budushchee,” 1890.

26 *Spiriticheskoe iavlenie* (St. Petersburg, 1883). The instruction reads as follows: “Fix your gaze on the starlet in the middle of the image for 30-40 seconds. Then look quickly at the wall or the ceiling, after 10-20 seconds the apparition will appear. [...] If it does not work immediately, repeat the procedure and you will certainly be successful.”