

THE OCCULTIST ALEKSANDR BARCHENKO AND THE SOVIET SECRET POLICE (1923-1938)

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In the 1990s and 2000s a number of works and monographs appeared in Russia on a seemingly impossible and exotic subject—the existence of esoteric and occult groups in the USSR and their impact on society. The most outstanding among these studies and materials are the publications prepared by Andrei Leonidovich Nikitin.¹ Just as remarkable are the publications of the Petersburg-based scholar Aleksandr Andreev,² the director of the Kozlov Museum. Other important publications include Aleksandr Nemirovskii's and Viktoriia Ukolova's *Starlight or the Last Russian Rosicrucians (Svet svezd ili poslednii russkii rozenkreitser)*, devoted to Boris Zubakin.³ Very interesting is also Sergei Valianskii and Irina Nedosekina's *Diviner of Secrets, Poet and Astrologer (Otgadchik tain, poët i zvezdochet)*, on the revolutionary and mystic Nikolai Morozov.⁴ I will pay particular attention to the fifth part of this book.

The year 1924 marked the death of Lenin. It was also the year of the boldest dream ever entertained by the leaders of the Communist International—the dream of a universal federation. At this time, one of the strategic counsels of the late Kremlin leader, published the year before in the main Soviet newspaper was still fresh in their mind:

In the last analysis, the outcome of the struggle depends on the fact that Russia, India, China et al. represent the vast majority of the population. And, in recent years, this majority has become involved with unusual

1 Andrei Leonidovich Nikitin (1935–2005) was a Soviet Russian historian, archeologist, writer, literary scholar, journalist and archivist. See Konstantin Burmistrov's chapter in this volume.

2 Aleksandr Andreev, *Okkul'tist Strany Sovetov: Taina doktora Barchenko* (Moscow: Eksmo-Jauza, 2004); idem, *Ot Baikala do sviashchennoi Lkhasy. Novye materialy o russkikh èkspeditsiakh v Tsentral'nuiu Aziyu v 1-oi polovine 20-go veka (Buriatiia, Mongoliia, Tibet)* (St. Petersburg, Samara, Prague, 1997); idem, *Vremia Shambaly. Okkultizm, nauka i politika v sovetskoï Rossii* (St. Petersburg, Moscow, 2002; 2nd edition 2004); idem, *Soviet Russia and Tibet: The Debacle of Secret Diplomacy, 1918–1930s* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003).

3 Aleksandr Nemirovskii and Viktoriia Ukolova, *Svet svezd ili poslednii russkii rozenkreitser* (Moscow, 1994).

4 Sergei Valianskii and Irina Nedosekina, *Otgadchik tain, poët i zvezdochet* (Moscow, 2004).

speed in the struggle for its own liberation. Thus in this respect there can be not the slightest doubt about the final outcome of the world struggle.⁵

All the Kremlin notables thought exactly the same and did not hide their dreams from the world. Nikolai Bukharin expressed these ideas with particular clarity:

In these conditions, when the masses are revolting against foreign imperialists and foreign oppressors who pursue their goals with an iron hand, we must bear in mind that China has 430 million inhabitants, plus our Soviet Union with more than 130 million and, if the events in India develop further, that country has more than 200 million.⁶

Of course, the revolutionaries had their secret addresses hidden passages, an intelligence network and fighters who were prepared to take to the streets in Europe. However, the arithmetic of the political geography noted by both Lenin and Bukharin pointed in the opposite direction—eastwards. And the East was a “sphinx”, a continent of ancient civilizations and possibly elements of class struggle that were completely different from the ones on which the Comintern relied in Europe. This is why the Soviet leaders were so interested in certain exotic projects that will be examined below.

The man who was destined, by fate or maybe by nature, to become the founder of a large Soviet project concerned with finding Shambhala,⁷ was not a

5 *Pravda*, 4 March 1923. From Lenin’s article “Luchshe men’she, da luchshe”.

6 “*Revolutsionnyi vostok*,” 1927, 1, 9.

7 In Mahayana-Buddhism, the term Shambhala has several meanings: it is a secret territory somewhere in Tibet or the Himalayas from where allegedly the 25th Emperor is expected to come and cleanse the world of non-believers. The Shambhala-myth can be traced back to the 10th century when it was first mentioned in the mystical Kalachakra-tantra-text. According to the prophecy, the decisive battle between the powers of good and evil, Buddhist believers and their enemies will come under the 25th tsar. After the good has unconditionally won, the future Buddha Majtreya will appear. The legends of Shambhala became so popular that guide-books began to appear in Buddhist monasteries which promised to lead to this enigmatic, promised land. According to other Buddhist teachings, Shambhala is a particular territory, a mystical realm which cannot be entered physically. Being an inner reality, it is accessible only to the most illuminated and ascetic. In a political sense, Shambhala is the source of liberation from the Chinese occupation for groups and peoples from Mongolia living on the territory of the former Empire of Chinghiz Khan. Historically, three countries have officially been declared to be Shambhala. Before the October revolution legends about a white Shambhala in the North were popular. In the myth of its arrival, the Buddhists of the Asian north took this as

member of the Bolshevik party, but a mystic seeker and a scholar: Aleksandr Vasil'evich Barchenko (1881–1938), a doctor, writer and psychic (fig.1).



Fig. 1: Aleksandr Barchenko (1881–1938)

Even before the October Revolution, he had been a visible figure among the mystics, freemasons and Rosicrucians of Petrograd. A graduate of the medical faculties of Kazan' and Dorpat (today Tartu) Universities, he was just as seriously interested in astrology, palm-reading and magic as in medicine and science. He subsumed all occult knowledge under the term “ancient science” and regarded it as a legacy left to us by extinct civilizations of the past, which perished as a result of global cataclysms, but managed to preserve their knowledge in hidden caves at the top of the highest mountain ranges, out of the reach of the worldwide flood. In his extensive written instructions to the members of the “United Workers’ Brotherhood”, an occult secret society, Barchenko summarized his views as follows:

the Russian Empire. After 1917, powerful rumors spread in Tibet and Western China about Soviet Russia as a Bolshevik Shambhala. And when finally Japan annexed parts of China creating the state of Manchukuo, Shambhala began to designate the land of the rising sun, and became a symbol of pan-Mongolism. However, at the end of the 19th century, Shambhala became important in Theosophical doctrines. The founder Elena Blavatsky maintained that in this cave-land hidden in the Himalayas lived the wise teachers, powerful telepathic leaders of mankind who direct the development of civilization and preserved ancient science in their catacombs. See Markus Osterrieder’s chapter in this volume.