OCCULT AND ESOTERIC MOVEMENTS IN RUSSIA FROM THE 1960s TO THE 1980s

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“…a whole level of culture almost unknown to anybody outside of a closed circle.”
(Grigorii Reinin)

The Stalinist project of creating a Soviet civilization based on work, empirical knowledge and “scientific atheism” suppressed occultism along with all metaphysical and cultural experimentation. The Khrushchevian Thaw brought political rehabilitations, a liberalization of culture, but also new atheist campaigns, since the revival of socialist ideals and cosmic enthusiasm refuelled the revolutionary dream of transforming society and nature by means of science. Since the Thaw, there was a marked reaction against the atheistic cult of the rational in both artistic practice and everyday life. In the late 1960s and 1970s, charismatic individuals, numerous mystical circles and sects emerged in the two capitals and in cities throughout the country, accompanied by experiments with drugs and transcendental practices intended to expand consciousness. According to Marxist-Leninist ideology the humanities were defined as part of the sciences, and their borders were much less strictly defined than in the West so that—paradoxically—phenomena excluded from the Western scientific paradigm were studied and supported within the Soviet academic system. Alongside with a highly secretive underground “occulture”,¹ works and ideas

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¹ The term “occulture” has been introduced by Christopher Partridge to expand “the narrow technical definition of the term ‘occult’ to include a vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology, and a range of beliefs emanating out of a general interest in the paranormal.” He also refers to it as “often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices”. Although Partridge has Western, mostly Anglo-American occulture in mind, his definition can also be applied to the situation in Russia described in this chapter. In Christopher
with topics and contents related to the occult and paranormal appeared in official publications. The wide range of esoteric quests and occult practices flourished along with a revival of utopian projects of the early 20th century. The almost magical appeal of cybernetics inspired fantasies of omnipotent control and, combined with Eastern yoga practices, promised total body-transcending self-control. Mathematics and mysticism merged in a bizarre variety of the Orthodox cult of imiaslavie, a secret occult circle of Moscow mathematicians originating in the early 20th century. Medicine, physics, and parapsychology mingled and opened new fields of research. All this, together with an unprecedented optimism on conquering nature and the cosmos under conditions of the Cold War, led to a highly paradoxical relationship between politics, science, religion and the occult.

The full history of this metaphysical undercurrent of Soviet civilization still remains to be written. This chapter presents some of the most influential paths, teachings, people and movements, by which occult ideas, traditions and practices were rediscovered by Russian intellectuals between the Thaw and Perestroika. It aims at expanding the picture of Late Soviet culture by looking at metaphysical aspects which have been largely unknown or remained unnoticed.

Despite the massive repression of the Stalin era, the occult tradition of the early 20th century never died. Theosophy and Anthroposophy helped shape the occult revival in the 1960s (along with specific features from the post-Stalin era to the post-Soviet present). The Russian occulture of the 1960s and 1970s

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emerged mostly from the rediscovery of Gurdjieff, Nicholas and Elena Roerich, Blavatsky’s Theosophy, Eastern religions, ancient esoteric philosophy, Christian mysticism, and Sufism. It was also informed by Western occult classics, the contemporary New Age movement in the West, and by direct contacts with folk healers and teachers from indigenous Eastern peoples and within the Soviet Empire (Siberia, Buriatia, Central Asia, Caucasus).

**Gateways to Spiritual Paths**

In Russia since the 1950s, gateways to spiritual paths were provided by texts and, for practitioners, in certain places. Anyone who sought spiritual paths to individual self-transformation, had to pursue these paths secretly and alone. Access to knowledge about the occult was mostly provided by reading. Central State libraries such as Moscow’s Lenin Library provided open access to numerous prerevolutionary publications for professional academics, which were obviously too alien for ideological scrutiny and therefore escaped the censorship’s attention. Here, some of the pioneering occultists who later became gurus for the younger generation, Iurii Mamleev, Vladimir Stepanov, Evgenii Lazarev and Evgenii Golovin, discovered the Western occult classics. The writings of Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant), Papus (Gérard Encausse), Julius Evola, René Guénon and Carl du Prel.5 Writings by Elena Blavatsky, Petr Uspensky, Rudolf Steiner and Jakob Böhme began to circulate in Samizdat in the capitals in the late 1950s, either in prerevolutionary Russian translations or in original editions from the emigré press Tamizdat, followed later by publications of the contemporary Western New Age. Libraries became places to meet other surviving occultists of the older generation by tracking down the regular readers of the same rare books.6 There were also a few libraries and archives preserved in some private collections for decades.7

Thanks to the friendly relations of the USSR with India, many basic texts on Eastern religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, including yoga philosophy and practice were accessible to the general public. Examples include Romain Rolland’s biography of Ramakrishna Paramakñhamsu (1836–1886) and Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the founders of Neo-Hinduism and popularizers of

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6 Recalled by Stepanov (Lebed’ko II, 34).

7 See Konstantin Burmistrov’s chapter in this volume, Fn. 37, 42.
Indian religion to the West. Rolland’s biography was published in 1936, in the midst of Stalinist repressions, as volume nineteen of the collected works of this French communist writer and foreign delegate at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. And in 1956, a new translation of the Bhagavad-Gita was published by Boris Smirnov by the Turkmen Academy of Sciences in Alma-Ata, as part of a grandiose one-man translation of the Mahabharata. This publication contained extensive comments, including detailed information about classical yoga practices and their philosophical context.8

Numerous articles on topics related to the occult and paranormal appeared in popular scientific journals such as Science and Life (Nauka i zhizn’), Knowledge is power (Znanie – sila), Science and Religion (Nauka i religiiia) and Technology for the Youth (Tekhnika molodezhi). Literature also served as a source of inspiration. Daniil Andreev’s novel Roza mira (Rose of the world) was one of the major influential sources circulating in the underground.9 In 1964 the well-known author of science-fiction novels Ivan Efremov introduced yoga and Indian philosophy to a wide public in his novel Lezvie britvy (Razor’s Edge).10

The discourse on anti-fascism allowed topics such as the connection between German Fascism and esoteric mysticism to be discussed in journals from the 1960s on. Among the earliest publications were excerpts from the international bestseller The Morning of the Magicians (Le Matin des magiciens [Paris, 1960]) by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier in the journal Nauka i religiiia, which described for the first time, in a sensational manner, the occult context of Hitler and Nazi politics.11

8 The neurosurgeon Boris Smirnov (1891–1967), who was politically exiled to Ashkhabad in the 1920s, translated 23,000 of the 100,000 verses of the Mahabharata. This fourth Russian translation of essential parts of the Indian epos—after several adaptations based on interlingual versions, by the theosophist Anna Kamenskaia (1916), the writer Semen Lipkin and the autodidactic translator Sergei Neapolitanskii—became particularly popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Smirnov became known to a wider public by a series of articles on Indian philosophy and yoga in Nauka i zhizn’ (1987). Viktor Boiko, Istoriia yogi v Rossii (www.realyoga.ru). Parallel to Smirnov’s there has been initiated a full Russian prose translation of the epic in Leningrad in 1939 by V. Kal’ianov (1908–2001).


10 Efremov’s novel was printed in 116,000 copies. See Leonid Heller’s chapter in this volume.

For people who had learned to read between the lines, publications of atheist polemics against all kinds of so-called “mysticism” provided classical sources as well as publications on contemporary Western New Age movements. Such publications were available in central and even regional libraries. They were based on information from library-collections closed to the public and often contained detailed information in order to ‘expose’ these phenomena as ideologically dangerous.

For Russian occulture after the 1950s prominent places to encounter knowledge of esotericism were the academic Institutes for the Study of Eastern Religions and Philosophy at the Moscow and Leningrad Universities. In Moscow the Institute of Asian and African countries and in Leningrad the departments of Indology and Egyptology had long held an internationally approved high reputation, but Oriental Studies had also branches in other cities, like Novosibirsk. Leningrad had special ties with Buddhism since the early 20th century. Buddhism, as well as Shamanism, had been acknowledged religions since the Russian Empire. In the Soviet period, even if the people following both religions were massively repressed and suffered from the consequences of atheist campaigns, they continued to be officially acknowledged by the Soviet government in Buriatia, Tuva and Kalmykia.

translated into most European languages, discussed in the press, and had an impact on many writers and intellectuals of the 1960s generation.

12 An example for this is Valentina Pazilova, a historian of religion and atheism at Moscow University. A dedicated cosmist and disciple of Nikolai Fedorov since the 1970s, married to a practicing Buddhist, she published several critical attacks against Fedorov with the explicit intention of quoting as much as possible from her revered master’s texts. In the 1990s, Pazilova became editor of the journal Science and Religion (Nauka i religiia), working with Viktor Pelevin and publishing a book on Blavatsky.

13 1909 the first Buddhist cathedral (datsan) outside of Tibet and the first in Europe was built in St. Petersburg, thanks to several influential mediators, especially the Buriat lama Agvan Dorzhiev (1859–1938), who had received his education in Tibet and represented the Tibetan government in St. Petersburg and after 1920 in Petrograd–Leningrad, and to the above mentioned Buriat orientalist and doctor Petr Badmaev. After Petr Badmaev’s death in 1920, the practice of Tibetan medicine was continued by his nephew Nikolai (1879–1939). A special private clinic for oriental medicine was founded in 1923 in Leningrad where Nikolai Badmaev treated prominent authorities, among them Maxim Gorky. Support from political leaders of the Kremlin did not protect him from denunciations and attacks, however, and in 1938 he was arrested and shot. See Markus Osterrieder’s chapter in this volume.

14 Marjorie M. Balzer, ed., Shamanic Worlds (New York: Sharpe, 1997); Valentina Kharitonova, Feniks iz pepla? Sibirskii shamanizm na rubezhe tysiaceletii (Moscow, 2006); See also Natalia Zhukovskaia’s chapter in this volume.
Other official institutions in which people with interests in the supernatural could meet in public, attain esoteric knowledge and find fellow-seekers for research and experimental practices were the Faculty of Psychology at Moscow University, institutions of health-care, alternative and complementary medicine.

A prominent source of detailed information on religious and spiritual matters and an attractive meeting place for people in search of esoteric knowledge was the Museum for the History of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad. It had a large collection of paintings and artifacts on religious topics, and a variety of cultic material in sections such as “Religions of the East”, “Origin of religions” and “Science and religion.” Andrei Terent’ev, a young indologist who later became an influential practicing Buddhist, worked in the Eastern section. Several occultists of the former underground refer to the museum as a place with access to literature which was forbidden elsewhere.15

Teachings and Teachers—Connections with the Past

For most people seeking spiritual orientation and experience beyond the dogmas of traditional religions, there was a great need for authorities and teachers, dead or alive. Together with Nicholas and Elena Roerich, Elena Blavatsky and Petr Uspenskii, Georgii Gurdjieff (1866 [?]–1949) became one of the leading authorities for the Late Soviet occult underground. Born in a Greek-Armenian family, Gurdjieff left Russia in 1920 and travelled extensively throughout Europe and America in the 1920–1940s, developed a syncretic, yet original teaching called the Fourth Way,16 a fusion of Eastern and Western esotericism, in which elements presented as being of Islamic Sufi origin, such as the theatrical-mystic art of Caucasian-Asian dervish-dance, merge with performance rituals of Caucasian table-talk, community, and elements of shock- and psychotherapy (e.g. the Enneagram). Gurdjieff, who was an artist and composer, had a particularly strong impact on artists and people in the creative professions.17

Since the late 1950s some of Gurdjieff’s disciples, Fedor Verevin (1901–1968 for example) were either released from the GULag or returned to the capitals from remote hiding places. They attracted young followers, such as Vladimir Stepanov and Boris Kerdimun, who became individual practitioners of the Fourth Way and instructed other young followers, like the writer Arkadii Rovner (b. 1940), the philologist Mikhail Meilakh (b. 1944) and the jazz-musician Boris Grebenshchikov (b. 1953), who spread Gurdjieff’s influence further. At the same time, some of the most charismatic authorities of the occult underground, the poet and translator Evgenii Golovin (b. 1938) and the writer Iurii Mamleev (b. 1931), incorporated Gurdjieff’s teachings in their ideas and behavior, in particular the elements of shock, provocation, and denigration. Sometimes the methods of breaking through the Iron Curtain for contact and information reflected Gurdjieff’s eccentric masquerades. As Rovner recalls, Mikhail Meilakh would stand on his head in the breakfast-room of the Leningrad Interhotel for foreign guests and after a while would turn to each table and ask the puzzled or amused foreign businessmen or diplomats most politely in various languages if they could bring in any information or material about Gurdjieff on subsequent trips.\(^\text{18}\) Golovin and Mamleev introduced the teachings of René Guénon (1886–1951),\(^\text{19}\) founder of traditionalism, to Russia. Their fascination with Julius Evola and other philosophers of fascism, also served as inspirations for political occultism.

In the 1970s the situation changed, as several of the protagonists emigrated. But apart from the brain-drain, emigration also helped to link the Russian occulture to Western New Age. Arkadii Rovner, who went to New York taught mysticism at various colleges, edited numerous publications, and established personal contacts with Gurdjieffians in Western countries, especially in England, including the writer-historian Robert Graves, Idries Shakh and John Bennett. Writings and information about the Gurdjievist movement was smuggled into and distributed in Russia via Samizdat. After returning to Moscow in 1994, Rovner continued to teach the Fourth Way by founding the Insti-

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tute for Cultivation of Inner States (ICIS),\textsuperscript{20} again mediating between East and West, linking generations in the Soviet past and post-Soviet present.

One of the most peculiar links between early and late 20th century occultism is the journal \textit{Okkul’tizm i ioga}. This small-size journal was probably one of the earliest and longest-lived emigré publications of the Soviet period. It was founded in 1929 by the Russian emigrant Aleksandr Aseev (1903–1993),\textsuperscript{21} who ran and edited it for more than four decades, first from Belgrade (1933–1936), then from Sofia (1937–1938) and Tallinn. From 1952 on he settled in Asuncion (Paraguay), from where the journal was published until 1977. Efforts in the early 1980s to transfer its edition to Israel, failed and publication ceased. Aseev had close ties with Elena and Nicholas Roerich,\textsuperscript{22} and, judging from the editors’ notes, the range of authors and reader-responses, served as the center of an international network for Russian occultists beyond political borders, with distributors in England, France, the US, Australia and Uruguay. The journal, sixty six volumes in all, was issued irregularly, with several issues per year. The articles covered a wide range of topics, from surveys of classical esotericism (Roscricuanism in Russia) to Theosophy, parapsychology and paganism (Druidry), as well as Russian or Slavic nationalism and “integral Christianity”. It offered texts from Russian literature, from classical to symbolist poets, and extended writings by Nicholas and Elena Roerich. Contributions came also from Roerich-disciples in Soviet Russia, such as the writer Valentin Sidorov,\textsuperscript{23} who promoted Roerich’s esoteric legacy openly in official thick journals.\textsuperscript{24} Mamleev, too, was a frequent contributor to \textit{Okkul’tizm i ioga}. He presented his own philosophical essays, discussed Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Western New Age as well as occultism in Soviet Russia.\textsuperscript{25} The journal became a link between old and new emigrant and domestic Russian occultism, even though it was read by only a small number of intellectuals. (fig. 1)

\textsuperscript{20} \url{www.sostoyanie.ru}.

\textsuperscript{21} A selection of issues can be found in the New York Public Library. To my knowledge, the complete issues are preserved in only one private collection in Moscow.


\textsuperscript{24} V. Sidorov, “Sem’ dnei v Gimalaiakh,” \textit{Moskva} 8, 1982, 3–99; Sidorov, a member of the Russian nationalist \textit{Pamiat’}-group, also became engaged in the project of re-establishing the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Okkul’tizm i ioga} 63, 1976, 29–47.
During Brezhnev’s tenure, Russian intellectuals turned inward, and discovered religion, orthodoxy and mysticism, along with Russian nationalism. A situation of closed, secretive exclusiveness emerged, which intensified both risk and romanticism, and clandestine groups flourished around masters and gurus. The urge to join a spiritual teacher was so strong that many charlatans and manipulators took advantage of the gullible, sometimes resulting in paranoia or cynicism.

But there were also remarkable personalities who went beyond social, moral and psychological norms and limits in their self-experiments and who, by their radical exploring and realization of human potential became spiritual authorities, “masters” of self-made schools. Some of these seekers had a multi-professional profile with qualifications in both the hard sciences and the liberal arts, practicing poetry, theatre, Oriental Studies, yoga, therapeutic and martial arts.26 Psychology and psychoanalysis were hotbeds of heterodox belief sys-

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26 Grigorii Reinin was a biologist and karate-teacher; Aleksandr Voronov was a chemist and psychologist; the Gurdjievist Igor’ Volodin was an engineer dealing with quantum-optics, Anatolii Ivanov held degrees in chemistry, mathematics, psychoanalysis, and physiotherapy.