

tems, and often a professional starting point. Student groups studying and challenging Freudianism in Moscow and Leningrad became laboratories of a Russian human potential movement, from where some, like Aleksandr Ètkind, moved westward into academic cultural studies, and others, like Aleksei Mar'ianenko and Vladislav Lebed'ko, became part of the post-Soviet esoteric milieu. One of the goals was to take as many of the officially possible professional qualifications offered by the system of Soviet education. "Through scientific knowledge we wanted to break through to the realm of spirituality, boundless freedom, total self-transformation," said the biologist Igor' Chebanov, who after exploring Buddhism and Sufism discovered Christianity in the Caucasus and after years of ascetic retreats moved from Moscow to a village practicing Christian mysticism mixed with "spiritual drinking".²⁷

Igor' Kalinauskas (b.1945), for example, a Russian-Lithuanian psychologist, theatre-director, musician, was introduced to Gurdjieff's teachings and Sufism by Arkadii Rovner, worked through an occultist private library, acquired eclectic knowledge of Freemasons, Theosophy, techniques of Roerich's Agni-yoga, and experimented with bioenergetics, Castaneda, and various altered states of consciousness. He became one of the leaders of the esoteric underground. Moscow student groups organized exchanges with Kiev and other cities. Inspired by Hinduism, yoga and Eastern philosophy, Kalinauskas for became a disciple of the Uzbek Sufi mystic Mirzabai Kymbatbaev (1935–2006),²⁸ and travelled to Central Asia, while working with his own experimental theater-group, training and performing improvised vocal techniques. Later he also worked as a trainer in extreme psychotechniques with Olympic sports-champions and the clean-up crew of Chernobyl' in the *Clinical Institute of Radiation Medicine* in Kiev.²⁹

27 Igor' Chebanov, Lebed'ko I.

28 Mirzabai was a charismatic Sufi-master whose reputation was, however, severely damaged, after he witnessed a brutal murder of the actor Talgat Nigmatulin by fanatic members of the group in Vil'nius without interfering. This murder-case with a ritual background stirred up similar outrage in both the official press and in the occult underground as the Kunta-yoga-group. See also Rovner, *Vospominaiia sebja*, 268–312.

29 In the 1990s he developed an international career as an esoteric multitasking artist and performer.

Occult Milieus and Circles

The Russian occult underground can be described as a “cultic milieu” (Colin Campbell), a term coined to define the “cultural underground of society” in the West, which can be equally applied to the situation in Russia.

It includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground (...). Substantively, it includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure. This heterogeneous assortment of cultural items can be regarded despite its apparent diversity, as constituting a single entity—the entity of the cultic milieu (...). The cultic milieu is manifestly united by a common ideology of seekership which both arises from and in turn reinforces the consciousness of deviant status, the receptive and syncretistic orientation and the interpretative communication structure.³⁰

From the 1960s to the 1980s, individual seekers aiming at mystical experience, gathered esoteric knowledge in solitude. Some of them went on geological or meteorological expeditions, settled in remote places far North or East in the Tundra or Taiga; others followed the example of the mystical and ascetic tradition of Russian Orthodox monks (*otshel'niki*). But much more often, esoterics remained in the capitals, gathering in various small circles of writers, artists, philosophers, scientists. Each circle had its teacher and disciples.

Since the danger of being arrested was always high, and many members of the occult underground were sentenced to prison camps or psychiatric hospitals, all circles were intensely secretive. This did not exclude, however, a high range of social and spatial mobility. The wish to escape control and stagnation, a desire for an unbound inner freedom, independent of social strata and professional obligations led many nonconformist intellectuals to give up their professional status and survive on low-profile jobs such as furnace stoker or janitor, which gave them the necessary work-registration and a lot of free time. Seekers travelled all over the country looking for qualified teachers to follow or sacred places, such as Lake Svetloiar, where the legendary town of Kitezh, the Russian Atlantis, was buried, or Belovod'e, the Russian Shambhala (Shangri-la).

³⁰ Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” In: Jeffrey Kaplan, Hélène Lööw, eds., *The Cultic Milieu* (Oxford, 2002), 12–25, here 20 (first publ. *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, 1972, no. 5, 119–136).

Tickets were cheap throughout the Soviet Union, and it was not untypical to give up a job and disappear for months or even years. Formal registration could be faked, student status kept, and in such a large territory it was possible to escape official control for a while. Although active practitioners were scattered all over the Soviet Union, mostly individuals lived under cover in their everyday life.³¹ “All San’iasins of the 1970s knew each other well,” recalled Aleksandr Voronov, one of the masters.³² The following is an attempt to classify different milieus, although they often overlapped and could not always be clearly separated.

Bohemian occulture

Moscow probably had more eccentric bohemian circles than Leningrad, where specialists in science, psychology, and ascetic adepts of Oriental Studies seemed to prevail. The area of Sokol’niki–Cherkizovo became well-known for occult circles of poets, artists and philologists. Iurii Trifonov described some of the occult Moscow underground from a non-participant’s perspective in his novella *Drugaia zhizn’* (*Another Life*, 1975). One of the most influential persons of the early Moscow underground was the above mentioned Iurii Mamleev, writer, mathematician and son of a well-known psychiatrist, who was among the first to study Eastern, especially Neo-Hindu philosophy. Mamleev introduced and translated into Russian the writings of the French occultist-traditionalist René Guénon. In the early years of the Thaw, Mamleev’s underground circle, *Iuzhinskii pereulok* (named after the address of his apartment), became a meeting-point for eccentric intellectuals, engaged in readings of literary texts and conducting bizarre happenings. Explorations into the dark sides of the human nature beyond all moral and social norms, similar to some of Aleister Crowley’s practices with the *Golden Dawn*, were part of experimenting with the boundaries of human behavior, to which the members contributed with alcohol and drugs and by calling themselves “the sect of sexual mystics” (*seksual’nye mistiki*):

Only in the depth of the total underground, behind closed curtains, a new free and independent consciousness will be born [...] in this situation with all its deviances, despair and departure from everything out-

31 For a roman à clé, in which Vladimir Stepanov is turned into the main hero, see Konstantin Serebrov, *Odin shag v zazerkal’e. Germeticheskaia shkola. Kniga pervaiia* (Moscow: Belye al’vy, 2001).

32 Aleksandr Voronov in *Lebed’ko*, II., 6 (2.10.1998).

side—an impossible literature will emerge, a literature worthy of Russia!—even if it is monstrous at first sight! (...) From the depth of the deepest abasement it shall rise!³³

This is how Mamleev described the Moscow underground in his autobiographical novel *Moskovskii gambit*, as a way down to hell and back into an enlightened state of higher consciousness. As the master of ceremonies, he offered his own philosophy of transgression and from this circle received stimulation for his writing, which later became known as “the aesthetics of monstrosity”. However, apart from self-mystifications and denunciations, few reliable sources exist to reconstruct the history of this circle.³⁴ Most of the charismatic leaders of the Moscow occult underground (Evgenii Golovin, Evgenii Lazarev, Vladimir Stepanov) were attached to it at one time or another. Their occult practices remained secret, for the initiated; how much they outgrew or internalized remains unknown. After his emigration to Paris in 1973, Mamleev became one of the mediators between the Eastern and Western occulture by contributing to and helping smuggle the journal *Okkul'tizm i ioga* into Russia. With their theatrical and often provocative mysticism, the members of this circle influenced a whole generation of intellectuals, artists and occultists, from Gajdar Dzhemal and Aleksandr Dugin to Victor Pelevin.

In the 1970s more circles emerged, which were later ironically called the “Moscow School of Pseudo-Tibetan Esoterics” (Vladimir Danchenko). Studying mysticism from books in groups with romantic names like *Gnozis*, *Artur* and *Iamskoe pole* was one thing. Practicing experimental psychology was another: masters would often order members of the circle to perform unusual tasks to break their egos and test their capacity for radical self-transformation. Thus, a person could be ordered to go to a certain town in the South and found an esoteric underground circle.³⁵ Sometimes Gurdijeff's shock-theatre was

33 Iurii Mamleev, *Moskovskii gambit* (Moscow: ZebraE, 2007), 277–278.

34 “Seksual'nye mistiki,” A. Strel'iani, G. Sapgir, V. Bakhtin, N. Ordynskii, *Samizdat veka* (Moscow/Minsk: Polifakt, 1998), 438–39. For a polemical report see Aleksei Chelnokov, “Melkie i krupnye besy iz shizoidnogo podpol'ia. Vertep v Iuzhinskom,” *Zhurnal Litsa* 8, 1997 (<http://chelnokov-ac.livejournal.com/7987.html>) (15.8.2011); Iurii Mamleev, “Okkul'tizm v sovetskoi Rossii,” *Okkul'tizm i ioga* 63, 1976, 29–46; “Unio mistica. Beseda Viktora Kulle s Iuriiem Mamleevym i Sergeem Riabovym,” *Literaturnoe obozrenie* 268, 1998, 68–74.

35 For Svetloiar and Kitez Vasilii Komarovich, *Kitezhskaia legenda. Opyt izucheniia mestnykh legend* (Moscow, Leningrad 1936 (<http://www.svetloyar.eu/publishing/doccomarovitz.htm>) and Leonid Heller, Michel Niqueux, *Geschichte der Utopie in Russland* (Bietigheim-Bissingen: Edition tertium, 2003) (first French, Paris: PUF, 1995).

simulated or parodied, when, for example, one of the members, a well-known Moscow opera singer, was summoned to stand singing on a refrigerator in front of the whole group after stripping naked.³⁶

One of the most eccentric masters of provocation in these circles was the artist Sergei (de) Rokambol' (pseudonym Grigorii Popandopulo), who established an unsavory reputation for cultivating *mat* (Russian foul language), and using it almost exclusively in his communication. He used his extraordinary intuition to break everybody's psychological self-defense with ruthless verbal attacks, even in public. Like many other occultists, Rokambol' used psychedelic mushrooms, which he found and experimented with in the woods around Leningrad. The all-prevailing drug, however, remained alcohol. "Vodka was the absolute key product to provide 'illumination'. Nothing went without vodka."³⁷ In the 1970s alcohol was raised to a cult status, turned into a philosophy of dissent,³⁸ and used for many reasons, among them to proceed to an altered state of consciousness for spiritual growth. It was consumed both to prove the maintenance of control under intoxication and to release inhibitions. Some esoterics declared themselves followers of an ancient tradition of "sacred drinking".³⁹

Health and Alternative Medicine

Unlike the Moscow bohemian circles, the milieu of spiritual healers, folk healers and practitioners of yoga following Eastern religious teachings was characterized rather by abstinence from alcohol and drugs. Larissa Honey identified three categories in the field of alternative health practice:

- external healers,
- non-traditional medicine,
- internal healers.

36 Vladimir Tret'iakov, in *Lebed'ko I*, 161. After this the singer was so embarrassed that she did not return to the circle for half a year.

37 Petr Mamkin, in *Lebed'ko I*, 3, 5.

38 "Alcoholism and drunkenness," In: *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Archie Brown (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Yvonne Pörzgen, *Berauschte Zeit, Drogen in der russischen und polnischen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008).

39 Mamkin, in *Lebed'ko I*, 3, 5. For an interpretation of alcohol as debasing oneself within a Christian religious context see Dirk Uffelman, "Exinanitio alcoholica [Selbsterniedrigung mittels Alkohol]. Venedikt Erofeevs Moskva-Petuški". *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 50 (2002), 331–372.

External healers use their own energy to cure other people. Non-traditional medicine includes Chinese medicine and ayurvedic medicine, as well as *znak-harstvo*, traditional Russian folk healing. “Inner healing” emphasizes “self-help, the importance of thoughts and the mind and the development of innate human powers of self improvement.”⁴⁰ In the 1960–1980s, healers of all three categories were active in Russia. “External healers” (*narodnye tseliteli*) were often uneducated wandering peasants, charismatic and mythologized figures ranging from “magicians” (*kolduny*) to “holy fools” (*iurodivy*). Beliefs and practices of traditional folk-healing and magic are deeply rooted in Russian culture and survived through the Soviet into the post-Soviet era.⁴¹ Folk healers used herbal medicine and knowledge passed on to them for generations in families or by old village wise men and women (*babki/dedki*). Many healers appeared to have psychic abilities and used magic spells in their treatments.⁴² Like the popular institutions for phytomedicine, “external healers” did not necessarily have esoteric beliefs, but for many the *dvoeverie* was characteristic, i.e. a mix of pagan nature religion and mystical Christian beliefs.⁴³ Oriental medicine was different, because everything was spiritually defined, and no separation between body, mind and soul was made.

In the 1970s, the book of Tibetan medicine, together with a collection of traditional recipes, which included a wide range of folk remedies and therapies from herbal medicine to magic spells and incantation, circulated in Samizdat. The main treatise of Tibetan medicine, *Chzhud-Shi*, was translated into Russian by the Buriat doctor Petr (Zhamtsaran) Badmaev (1851–1920), who brought religious, cultural and medical traditions from Tibet to European Russia and applied methods of Tibetan medicine at the court of Tsar Nikolai

40 See Larissa Honey, *Transforming Selves and Society: Women, Spiritual Health and Pluralism in Post-Soviet Moscow*, unpubl. Diss. (New York: CUNY, 2006), 125. For the tradition of womens’ folk healing in Russia see Eve Levin and Rose Glickman, *Russia’s Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements (Berkeley: University Press, 1991). For traditional and non-traditional healing and magic in Russia see Galina Lindquist, *Conjuring Hope. Healing and Magic in Contemporary Russia* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2006).

41 See Iuliia Sinelina, *Izmenenie religioznosti naseleniia Rossiian. Pravoslavnye, musul’mane. Sververnoe povedenie Rossiian* (Moscow: Nauka, 2006), 20, 33, 95–100; W.F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight. Magic in Russia* (UniversityPark, Pa., 1999).

42 This practice has been typical for rural areas until recently, as I was told by a colleague from Khabarovsk from her own experience, and by the folk healer Aleksei Gladkov in St. Petersburg.

43 See, for instance, the folk healer P. Pipko (<http://www.travolekar.ru/articles/pract/pipko.pdf>).

II. ⁴⁴ Some specialists, like the medical doctor Vadim Rozin, gave semi-public talks on Chinese folk medicine and biofield-theories, referring to a whole body of forbidden literature. ⁴⁵ Spiritual healing was the project of those who directed their attention to the development of their inner nature. By practicing meditation, yoga, vegetarianism and various psychotechniques, these people aimed at transforming their Self and thereby developing their human potential.

The reception of yoga in Russia was ambivalent. After some popularity in the early 20th century among intellectuals, which was part of the European wave of Orientalism, it disappeared in the 1930s. Only few individuals, mostly those involved with Oriental Studies, practiced it in private after the 1950s. In 1970, the Kiev studio for scientific films released a documentary film *Indian yogis – who are they? (Indiiskie yogi–kto oni?)* which introduced the “Ancient Indian health-care-practice”, by showing Indian yogis performing extraordinary physical actions, which contradicted all laws of human physiology. Fakirs lying on broken glass were driven over by a truck, others were dug out alive and healthy from inside the earth where they had been lying for months without eating and breathing, i.e. in a state of clinical death. The film was part of a State-promoted campaign for the mobilization of “hidden human resources” (skrytye chelovecheskie resursy) and caused a sensation. All over the country people began imitating these experiments.

But the official policy on yoga was contradictory, because conflicting interest-groups dominated the party-leadership at different times. Thus, right after the documentary film, yoga was severely criticized in the press, official voices warned that it would cause epilepsy, mental illness, and physical damage. Yoga was attacked as a means of ideologically undermining the Soviet mind and power, an instrument of hidden Cold War propaganda, as it was associated with the Western counterculture. In 1973, the Sports Committee of the Soviet Council of Ministers officially condemned yoga, which was declared incompatible with Marxist-Leninist ideology and called “a Trojan horse of Indian idealism.”⁴⁶

Nevertheless, yoga gained popularity and was both practiced and widely discussed as a fascinating phenomenon in popular science magazines. *Science and Life (Nauka i zhizn’)*, *Country Youth (Sel’skaia molodezh’)* and *Science and Religion (Nauka i religiia)* published extended series about yoga, which evoked

⁴⁴ On Badmaev see Markus Osterrieder’s chapter in this volume.

⁴⁵ Larissa Honey, *Transforming Selves*, 199; Vadim Rozin, *Ėzotericheskii mir. Semantika sakral’nogo teksta* (Moscow: URSS, 2002), 15.

⁴⁶ Burdo, Filatov, *Sovremennaia religioznaia zhizn’*, III, 353–355.

a great deal of reader response.⁴⁷ Defenders tried to legitimize yoga as a technique for physical exercise, body-control and health-care. It was promoted as an effective means for athletes, along with the martial arts of China and Japan which also became popular in the 1970s, and began to compete with traditional Russian boxing techniques. Just as Roerich's followers pointed to his proposed peace treaty in 1935 as a predecessor of the United Nations, to legitimize him, defenders of yoga pointed to it as a sign of the officially promoted Soviet-Indian friendship to justify its political meaning.

Behind the stage of public attacks, hidden human potential experiments with yoga were promoted by the highest orders in closed medical institutes. Scientists and the Party leadership were particularly interested in the techniques of anabiosis⁴⁸ for possible use in Soviet space travel, and thus provided extended training for cosmonauts as well as prominent athletes. The biophysicist Aleksei Katkov became obsessed with yoga breathing techniques under conditions of extreme cold. From 1966 to 1973 he worked in the secret Moscow Pirogov Institute for Cosmic and Aviation Medicine. He even published several articles about anabiosis and yoga, which were followed by self-experiments in radical esoterics. But shortly before he finished his dissertation about "Conquering pain and the resources of our organism", Katkov died in 1987, at the age of thirty seven, while fulfilling the order to hike the Caucasian Mount Elbrus without oxygen.⁴⁹

One of the early promoters of yoga as a physical and spiritual practice of self-perfection was the professor of philosophy, indologist and cosmist Vasilii Brodov (1912–1996), who participated as an expert-consultant in the film *Indiiskie yogi – kto oni?* and became the head of the *Soviet Association for Philosophical and Medical Problems of Yoga* in Russia.⁵⁰ Although he published articles about yoga in handbooks of atheism, Brodov's aim was to synthesize Russian and Indian cosmism. In the 1970s, several semi-public yoga-courses

47 Viktor Vorontsov, "Chata-Yoga: Chto my mozhem vziat' iz nego?" *Nauka i zhizn'*; *Sensatsii ne budet, Sel'skaia molodezh'* 1969–1970.

48 Anabiosis is a temporary state of extremely reduced metabolism, practiced by Indian yogis; the practice can cause near-death-experience. Experiments with anabiosis have a long tradition in Russia. For some utopian scientists in 1920s, anabiosis was connected with hopes of prolonging life and even achieving immortality. See Nikolai Setnitskii, "O smerti i pogrebenii." In: *Vselenskoe delo*, sbornik 2 (Riga, 1934), 141–146. Vladimir Maiakovskii parodied these experiments in his drama *The Bedbug* (*Klop*, 1930).

49 Burdo, Filatov, *Sovremennaia religioznaia zhizn'* III, 354.

50 Vasilii Brodov published about yoga in *Nauchno-ateisticheskii slovar'* (Moscow, 1969) and in the journal *Science and Religion* (*Nauka i religii*).

were offered in Moscow by the engineer Viktor Boiko, who was inspired by Ivan Efremov's science fiction novels, as well as by Anatolii Zubkov, an orientalist from Moscow University, who had worked in India and qualified as a yoga teacher; and by Ian Koltunov, an ardent Roerich disciple, who in 1976 founded the popular yoga-club *Kosmos*, disguised as a sports-institute, which at times attracted over a thousand practitioners. After 1980, when another atheism campaign began, yoga was categorically forbidden, *Kosmos* was closed and Koltunov was expelled from the Communist Party for his activities.

Beyond the public discourse, members of the esoteric underground studied yoga seriously with a spiritual approach to life. More profound studies and sources from the Western counterculture circulated in *Samizdat* and were available in the institutes of Oriental Studies in both capitals. But in Russia, yoga seemed to remain mostly a challenge for the physiological limits of human potential. An example in the Leningrad underground is Anatolii Ivanov (b. 1951), who became both a charismatic yoga teacher and a scandalous eccentric. With multiple degrees in psychotherapy and applied mathematics from the *Bekhterev Institute*, and qualifications in physiotherapy and oriental medicine, Ivanov trained himself in various paranormal abilities and used yoga as a means to realize optimal control of the human organism. He experimented with various psychophysical healing-techniques, including anabiotic breathing. Illumination, he considered possible only beyond the physical limits of human potential. Ivanov also got involved with Tantric sexual practices. In order to prove that the supernatural is part of human potential as boundless male libido, he had a bizarre experiment organized in a medical academic institute. For fifty-five hours he performed uninterrupted sexual intercourse with eleven female medical student volunteers under the surveillance of a group of professional doctors. For his extensive teaching of yoga while at the same time successfully practicing external and internal healing, Ivanov was arrested in 1978 and sentenced to four years in a prison-camp.⁵¹

One of the most popular Russian yogis was the peasant Porfirii Korneevich Ivanov (1898–1983). At the age of thirty five, after a mystical healing experience, he dedicated himself to a radical back-to-nature way of life, rejecting any material property, refusing to wear clothes (except for shorts) or shoes and taking only a minimum of food. Despite numerous arrests, imprisonments and compulsory treatments in psychiatric hospitals in the 1960s, Ivanov continued his ascetic life as a wandering mystic and natural healer, following both Chris-

51 See the article on Anatolii Ivanov in the *Samizdat-journal Chronicle of current events* 48, 1978 (<http://victor.sokirko.com/economy/Zes2/II.1.htm>) and Lebed'ko I., 118.

tian and pagan beliefs, seeking to overcome the limits of the physical body and achieve immortality. Even though barely educated, he wrote diaries and didactic texts for the growing number of his followers. Especially after Ivanov's death, he became a cult-figure. Some took up his practice and philosophy of ascetic health, others chose to worship him as a mystical saint of Russian nature. In the post-Soviet present Ivanov, who the official Orthodox Church rejected as a neo-pagan schizophrenic, remains a real popular hero, massively promoted in the official mass-media, an icon in the internet, and an idol for the movement of his followers (*Ivanovtsy*).⁵²

Scientific occulture

It was not only Marxist-Leninist ideology that determined what was to be considered rational and scientific in Russia. After Einstein, Heisenberg and the emergence of quantum physics, the general notion of science changed from a purely rational to a more intuitive interactive approach, and after World War II, psychology became a vital factor in warfare, prisons and psychiatry. So in both Russia and the West, the clear line between science and the Occult became blurred. In Russia these developments were embraced and repudiated at the same time. Research into paranormal, so-called "psycho-bio-physical" phenomena (such as Psi and ESP (*Extrasensory Perception*) in biophysics and astrophysics which, according to the dominant Western paradigm, had previously been considered a parascience or pseudo-science, were now promoted and supported in both East and West. In the Soviet Union it received a fair amount of institutional support, even while being publicly attacked or even prosecuted. Science itself became part of the Occult. Pioneering studies on telepathy and hypnosis in the *Leningrad Institute for Psychoneurology* in the early 1920s⁵³ which expanded into the *Institute for Brain-Research* under Vladimir Bekhterev (1857–1927), the "most prominent scientist to investigate occult aspects of mental activity," were officially banned after 1930. Nevertheless, research continued in secret laboratories and were quietly incorporated in Soviet science and even culture, because they "came to play an integral role in the creation of the theory of Socialist Realism, mainly by way of Maxim Gorky, its principal formulator."⁵⁴

52 Knorre, in Burdo, Filatov, 247–258.

53 See Konstantin Burmistrov's chapter in this volume.

54 Mikhail Agursky, "An Occult Source of Socialist Realism," In: Rosenthal, ed., *The Occult*, 247–272, here 247, 262.

In the early 1930s, Bekhterev's disciple Leonid Vasil'ev (1891–1966) founded a commission for the “Study of secret phenomena of the human psyche” by order of Leningrad party officials, who were confronted with massive appeals for information about psychic phenomena by the public and material about personal experiences, and were searching for professionals to collect and explain this material. The commission had five members: the psychiatrist Arsenii Dubrovskii from the *Bekhterev-Institute*, Ivan Stepanov, a popular lecturer, the ethnographer Nina Nikitina, and as a secretary the young assistant of the *Museum for the History of Religion* at the Academy of Sciences, Mikhail Shakhnovich. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the members of this commission, Shakhnovich in particular, collected a wide range of material based on personal interviews with astrologers, alchemists, palm-readers, psychographologists, occultists, Theosophists, spiritists, and fortune-tellers in Leningrad, but evaluations of their opinions differed considerably.⁵⁵ In the late 1950s, Vasil'ev was officially allowed to resume his research. In the 1970s, graduates of psychology and young psychoanalysts from Moscow and Leningrad University gathered in unofficial workshops on NLP (Neuro-linguistic programming) to write out and explore transcendental meditation or experimented with transpersonal psychology.

Vasil'ev's former secretary, Mikhail Shakhnovich (1911–1992), is an example of some rather tragic biographies of Russian specialists on mysticism. As a Jewish intellectual who also did research on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, he was paradoxically tied to mysticism and the occult for most of his life, publishing his research in many publications, not with the hidden agenda of a spiritual seeker,⁵⁶ but as an ardent fighter for atheism, a promoter of European rationalism and enlightenment. Shakhnovich began his career as an assistant of Leonid Vasil'ev in the *Bekhterev Institute for Brain-Research* in the 1920s, and was a sceptical opponent of Vasil'ev's “mystical” aspirations. He had also worked with Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, Lenin's emissary to the sectarians. After Vasil'ev's institute was closed Shakhnovich, who, as a disciple of Vladimir Propp, had attained a doctoral degree in world folklore, became chief of the section of “heterodox” (*vneveroispovednoi*) mysticism (1932–1941) at the *Museum for the History of Religion*, which he helped re-establish after World War II. In the 1960s he published several polemical monographs on aspects of occultism, presenting extensive quotations and in-depth information about the

55 From the evaluation of 90% fraud in these practices by I. Stepanov to only 47% by L. Vasil'ev. Mikhail Shakhnovich, *Peterburgskie mistiki*, 12.

56 Like some of the authors and editors around the journal *Nauka i religii* in the 1970s.

history of the Occult and Western New Age.⁵⁷ In a retrospective note from 1991, when his expertise was publicly requested again, Shakhnovich wrote:

It became ever more clear to me, that the “secret sciences” had not completely disappeared in our country, but that they had simply gone deeply underground, as if they wanted to prepare for their future reappearance. Sixty years passed, and I was right.⁵⁸

In 1996, material he collected for three decades was posthumously published by his daughter, a professor of religious studies at St. Petersburg University.⁵⁹ Experimental research on Psi-phenomena, ESP, and electromagnetic effects on the human bioenergy field⁶⁰ resumed in several institutes of the Academy of Sciences: the *Moscow Laboratory of Biophysics* at the *All Union Institute for Experimental Medicine (VIEM)*, which had been directed from 1934–1942 by the famous biogeophysicist and physiologist Petr Lazarev (1878–1942), an adherent of cosmism and various energy-theories;⁶¹ and at the *Moscow Laboratory of Psychophysiology*, where during the 1940s the well-known Polish psychic

57 Mikhail Shakhnovich, *Sovremennaiia mistika v svete nauki* (Moscow, 1965); *Mistika pered sudom nauki* (Moscow, 1970). – Another example is the professor of Atheist studies at Moscow State University Evgenii Balagushkin (b. 1931). In 1978, he presented one of the first detailed accounts on the Western New Age movement, based on rich material from Western media and closed collections from the Moscow Lenin Library. Balagushkin introduced Wilhelm Reich's theories of sexual revolution and its impact on Western counterculture-youth. Today he recommends himself as an expert of “non-traditional religious movements”. Evgenij Balagushkin, “Vliianie neofreidizma i teorii seksual'noi revoliutsii na nravstvennoe soznanie molodezhi Zapada,” In: *Molodezh', NTR, kapitalizm* (Moscow, 1979), 189–244; Idem, *Netraditsionnye religii v sovremennoi Rossii. Morfologicheskii analiz*, vol. 1–2 (Moscow, 2002).

58 Mikhail Shakhnovich, *Peterburgskie mistiki*, ed. Marianna Shakhnovich (St. Petersburg, 1996), 246.

59 Shakhnovich, *Peterburgskie mistiki*,

60 G.K. Gurtovoi, “Nemnogo istorii,” In: Liudmila B. Boldyreva, Nina B. Sotina, *Fiziki v parapsikhologii. Ocherki* (Moscow: Letnii sad, 2003), 6–14; *Physicists in parapsychology* (Moscow: Hatrol, 2002). In 1986 this section was renamed ‘Section for organic matter of physical fields’ (bioenergo-information).

61 See Michael Hagemester, “Russian Cosmism in the 1920s and Today,” and Mikhail Agursky, “An Occult Source of Socialist Realism,” In: Rosenthal, ed., *The Occult*, 194, 258. On the *All Union Institute for Experimental Medicine* which was established in 1932 by the Soviet authorities to conduct applied studies on the human brain, hypnosis, toxic poisons, and drugs and which also hosted a section of the occultist doctor Aleksandr Barchenko see Andrei Znamenski, *Red Shambhala. Magic, Prophecy, and Geopolitics in the Heart of Asia* (Wheaton/Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 2011), 82–88.

Wolf Messing (1899–1974)⁶² demonstrated his telepathic abilities. From 1958 to 1968 experiments on “distant acting” were conducted in the *Institute of Automacy and Electrometrics* in the Siberian Academy of Sciences in Akademgorodok led by the Doctor of Technology Boris Petrov; and the Moscow *Popov Association of Radiotechnology, Electronics and Communication* (NTORES) became a place where “almost everybody met who was involved with such interests.”⁶³ In 1975, a special section for bioelectronic research, the first institute of bioenergetics, was founded within the Popov Institute, where young physicists with esoteric and alchemical interests investigated parapsychological phenomena.

Many scientific institutions had, apart from their publicly accessible sections, a second structure of completely independent secret sections. Those working on the Soviet nuclear and space-program in *Institutes for Clinical, Radiational, Experimental and Trauma Medicine* in Leningrad, Kiev and Novosibirsk, and the *Pirogov Institute for Cosmic and Aviation Medicine* in Moscow, had laboratories and ideologically unrestricted working conditions, following different rules and taking orders mostly from the top of the party-nomenklatura or the KGB.⁶⁴ These institutes provided a field of free experiments for people with psychic abilities and a place for research and experiments on expanded consciousness for occultists in the sciences.

Ectoplasma-photography which had become a popular and scientific concern among late 19th–early 20th century spiritualists gained new attention with the work of Semen and Valentina Kirlian, two physiotherapists from Krasnodar. In 1939 or, according to other sources, 1949, by displaying visual radiation of a “human finger in a laboratory in Kiev, they discovered ‘corona/or Gas

62 Wolf Messing established a popular mythologized image of himself in Soviet Russia which has been successfully promoted into the post-Soviet present. The publication of his memoirs in 1965 was considered a sensation. At least seven monographs on him were published after 1999, six in Russian, one in English translation (Tatiana Lungin) and one in German (Topsy Küppers, 2002). Four films about him were released since 2005. However, serious research has begun only recently, by which many of the popular myths especially Messing’s supposedly close relationship with Stalin, have been deconstructed. See N.N. Kitaev, “Kriminalisticheskii ekstrasens: pravda i vymysel,” *V zashchitu nauki* 4, 2008, 102–144; Boris Sokolov, *Wolf Messing* (Moscow: Zhizn’ zamechatel’nykh liudei, 2010) and the Russian article on Wolf Messing in Wikipedia.

63 I. Voronov in Lebed’ko, I., 90.

64 Asif Siddiqi, *The Red Rockets’ Glare: Spaceflight and the Soviet Imagination, 1857–1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

discharge', also called 'electrographic'.⁶⁵ The visualization of biofeedback supposedly proved the visible existence of fine-matter, the long-held thesis of a cosmic aura-energy claimed by Theosophists, Anthroposophists and all scientists hoping to prove the existence of a fourth dimension.⁶⁶ Despite harsh criticism by many Russian scientists, their technique became famous under the name of Kirlian photography, and the couple was allowed to conduct officially approved research in their institute. Their controversial "electrographology"-methods have been contested as paramedicine in the international scientific community,⁶⁷ though in some fields of complementary medicine they are still being applied, and not only in today's Russia. Kirlian-photography has become extremely popular. In some countries it has been officially approved as a complementary medical-diagnostic technique.⁶⁸

In Leningrad the academic institutes had always been closely connected, which sometimes facilitated interdisciplinary exchanges. The *Fridman Institute of Mathematics and Cosmology* at the Academy of Sciences had offices next to the orientalist Lev Gumilev's office. Gumilev is the founder of a bizarre theory of ethnogenesis.⁶⁹ For some years, discussion groups emerged in which the quantum mathematician and specialist for cosmology Andrei Grib, Lev Gumilev and scholars of Eastern philosophy met. Sometimes foreign scientists would visit. Psychic experiences were shared and esoteric correspondences were explored.⁷⁰

65 Valentina Kirlian, Semen Kirlian, *V mire chudesnykh razriadov* (Moscow, 1964). *Kirlianovskie chteniia "Kirlian-2000"*. Sbornik dokladov i statei (Krasnodar, 1998).

66 On the fourth dimension see Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *Computers, Art and the Fourth Dimension* (Boston: Tony Robin/Fourfield, 1992).

67 See, for instance, the discussion by Tom Duerden in the British journal *Complementary Therapies in Nursing & Midwifery* in 2003/2004 with further references.

68 G. Ermolina, „Mir budushchii, mir vysshii griadet v dospekhe luchej laboratornykh... (Éffekt Kirlian uchenie zhivoi etiki),“ In: *Rerikhovskoe nasledie. Trudy konferentsii II* (St. Petersburg, Vysshii Volochek: Rerikhovskii tsentr St. Peterburgskogo gos. universiteta, 2005), 630–633. Konstantin Korotkov, *Osnovy GRV bioelektrografii* (St. Petersburg, 2001).

69 A certain "biochemical energy of living matter in the biosphere" is, according to Gumilev, decisive in the formation and vitality of an ethnos. This energy, originally of cosmic origin, evolves into genetically transmittable biological energy that induces a variable percentage of individuals from the collective to an increased social, political, intellectual, or religious activity. For this irrational energy, which he contrasts with the 'sensible' instinct of self-preservation, he created the term *passionarnost'* (passionateness). In the context of neo-Eurasian ideologies and political occultism around Aleksandr Dugin Gumilev's theories have received considerable influence among intellectuals since the 1990s.

70 Andrei Grib, in an interview with me, October 4, 2008 in St. Petersburg. "Sovremennaiia fizika i religioznoe otkrovenie," In: *Dva Grada. Dialog nauki i religii. Vostochno- i Zapadno-*

The popularity of parapsychology both in society and in the scientific community in the 1960s and 1970s is reflected not only in the fact that Leonid Brezhnev's sessions with the psychic and healer Evgeniia "Dzhuna" Davitashvili⁷¹ became public knowledge, but also in a bibliography of publications related to paranormal phenomena in specialized and popular scientific books and journals between 1969 and 1981.⁷² (fig. 2)



Fig. 2: Dzhuna Davitashvili in one of the special clinics in Moscow (early 1980s).

evropeiskaia traditsii (Moscow: RAN, 2002), 181–207; idem and A.Terent'eva, "Kosmos Drevnykh Dzainov," *Ariavarta* 1, 1996, 224–234.

71 For a reminiscence of a physicist participating in the secret research on extrasense with Dzhuna see: Aleksandr Torin (pseud. Taratorin), *Nevydumannaia istoriia êkstrasensov v Rossii* (1997)

(http://torin.vasaros.com/extrasens_nevidumannaja_istorija/nevidumannaja_istorija.pdf)

72 E.K. Naumov, L.V. Vilenskii, N.K. Shpilev, eds., *Parapsikhologiia v Rossii. Bibliograficheskie ukazatel'* (Moscow, 1993). The bibliography contains 172 titles on telepathy, 237 on biolocation and bioenergy information, 58 on poltergeist, 33 on telekinesis and 261 on physical aspects of paranormal phenomena including Kirlian photography.