edly evoked magic powers in whoever was exposed to or controlled the psychotechnique of an extended consciousness. This system, he claimed, revived an ancient Indian yoga-technique, but in fact, his programmatic slogan “Only do what you really want!”\(^{85}\) reminds one much more of Aleister Crowley’s credo “Do what thou wilt!” A major task was to challenge the borders of life and death, to overcome the fear of death, thereby creating a perception of boundless power, invisibility, and the capacity of psychic healing. Tosha’s magnetic personality offered a short-cut to ultimate liberation by accessing and controlling the occult powers of life and consciousness. Some twenty students of the faculty of chemistry, after going through some shock-therapy sessions, out-of-body experiences similar to shamanic travels, and spontaneous healing (one member was apparently cured of his tuberculosis), moved in together. When most of them were expelled from the Komsomol and lost their scholarships, and some of their apartments were searched by the KGB, they gave up their ordinary work and life and totally dedicated themselves to developing their project of self-transformation. Sometime in the early 1980s, a group of twenty-five students, including a family with a child, were ready to give up life in Leningrad to follow Tosha’s suggested path anywhere. They moved first to a remote mountain area in Armenia where they made camp in the wilderness. Later, as conflicts emerged, some members dropped out or were chased away by the local police. Back in Leningrad, they were detected by the KGB, so the most dedicated ones went underground with Tosha. To escape arrest, he moved with a smaller group to the Karelian woods in the North. The experiment ended tragically. Denounced by local inhabitants, they had to flee again; some committed suicide, others were confined in psychiatric hospitals; only a few survived and emigrated. Tosha himself disappeared into the woods where he was denounced, arrested, released and finally found in a tent months after his death. The group became legendary, but the surviving members kept silent about their traumatic experiences and the occult symbols which supposedly caused this destruction. One of them, Sergei Beliaev, who emigrated and later returned to become a teacher of esoteric healing practices, wrote a memoir, which was translated into several languages, praising Tosha as a “Russian mystic.”\(^{86}\)

\(^{85}\) “Delai tol’ko to, chto ty deistviteľ’no khochesh’!”

East-West Connections

Western New Age came to Russia in the 1960s by way of rock music, New Religious Movements, literature and personal encounters with prominent foreign leaders of the movement. The discovery of Transcendental Meditation with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in India by the Beatles and other rock musicians in 1966, especially George Harrison, promoting the newly founded Krishna movement, and the official approval of the neo-Hindu guru Sri Chinmoy by UNESCO, all had their impact in Russia, where passionate student-fans spread their music by Magnitizdat and other inventive techniques and helped to organize a cult following. Some Russian rock musicians, like Boris Gребенщиков, got involved with the New Age movement and later became mediators between East and West. The Peruvian-American anthropologist Carlos Castaneda’s book *Teachings of Don Juan*, which had an enormous impact on the psychedelic New Age, was discovered by the esoteric biologist Василий Максимов on a trip to Eastern Siberia in 1969 and immediately translated into Russian, as well as all the following volumes.

Underground Krishna groups were founded in the early 1970s after the New York-based Indian founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON; Hare-Krishna, in Russian: Vaishnavy), Bхахтиведанта Swami Prabhupada, visited Russia in 1971. Since in 1970 Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder, who had visited the first Soviet Congress of Parapsychology in 1968, stirred up considerable interest with their bestseller *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* in the West, and American professional parapsychologists such as Stanley Krippner had established personal connections with Russian colleagues during trips to the Soviet Union, the founder of the leading Western New Age-Institution, the Californian Esalen Institute, Michael Murphy opened up a high-level connection by visiting Russia four times (1971, 1972, 1979, and 1980). The first two visits were privately organized, while on the last trip he came by invitation, indirectly, of the KGB, officially hosted by the faculty of American Studies at Moscow University. In 1971, Murphy entered the Soviet Union via Central European countries where he had previously met other esoteric scientists. Together with a group of friends, he settled in the central Moscow Intourist hotel and met scientists, psychics and parapsy-

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87 See Knorre, Induizm, 410–420.
88 The first publication of Castaneda’s works in Russia was edited by Viktor Pelevin, who, as a childhood friend of Rokambol’, turned him into a literary persona (Volodin) in his novel *Chapaev i pustota* (1996). Maksimov, in Lebed’ko I.
chologists for several months, until their visit threatened to have consequences for their Russian colleagues. 89

To their surprise the enthusiastic American promoters of universal consciousness also discovered some differences, such as the strong impact of Christian mysticism and religious philosophy and a peculiar self-involvement with their own invention of an occultist vocabulary. 90 Further encounters between Russian and American members of the New Age were facilitated by the US diplomat Arthur Hartmann, who, thanks to some personal contacts, was sympathetic to Esalen. When he became Ambassador in Moscow under President Reagan, he opened his house for numerous events and meetings with Russian Rock-musicians as well as psychic healers.

The reaction of the Russian occultic milieu to the embrace of American New Age was ambivalent. Forced into the isolation behind the Iron Curtain, aware of the highly selective and coincidental reception of Western sources, Russian intellectuals did not escape the general attitude of competition, as they

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89 In the fall of 1979, Murphy attended the First Congresses on Psychoanalysis, ‘Problems of the Unconscious’, in Tbilisi. Other prominent members of Esalen joined him on visits to the Soviet Union in 1972 and 1979, met with Dzhuna Davitashvili, set up experiments with Russian psychics, later even in cross-continental telepathy, and visited scientists in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan and Novosibirsk. Murphy’s next visit in July 1980 took place in spite of frozen US–Soviet relations after the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, followed by the American boycott of the Olympic Games in Moscow. Murphy was invited as a featured speaker at the “International Conference on Sports and Modern Society,” again in Tbilisi, with a talk on “The Future Evolution of the Body: Possibilities for Human Transformation Revealed by Sport and Other Disciplines.” Murphy’s talk was part of a US-Soviet section on “Sport and Maximum Human Performance.” The Congress was attended by 1500 participants from forty-two countries. To their surprise the enthusiastic American promoters of universal consciousness also discovered, some differences, as for example the strong impact of Christian mysticism and religious philosophy and a peculiar self-involvement with its own invention of an occultist vocabulary. See Jeffrey J. Kripal, Esalen. America and the Religion of No Religion (Chicago, London 2007), 249–270.

90 Kripal, Esalen, 315–338. Peculiar terms only popular in Russia are for instance “psychotronics”, “socionics”, “egregor/ism”, “torsionic field”, “noosphere”. After Murphy’s visits to Russia, Esalen in 1980 founded the Soviet-American Exchange Program, which for sixteen years worked in favor of a Russian-American friendship, first publishing a series of English translations of Russian philosophical texts – from Vladimir Soloviev’s “Smysl liubvi” to Nikolai Berdiaev’s “Russkaia ideia.” During the last tense years of Cold War, Esalen, with secret approval from Washington, since several government-officials had close connections to Esalen, “played its own part in the collapse of Soviet Communism” by their program of ‘citizen diplomacy’. Thus, in the 1980s they sponsored the first American-Soviet satellite telebridge, and by way of citizen diplomacy several major encounters, such as the first visit of Boris Yeltsin to America in 1989. Kripal, Esalen,
were torn between curiosity about similar movements in the West and self-contained self-mythologizing. Visitors were often tested, provoked and challenged to prove their incompatibility compared to the maximum psychic powers and “hidden resources” of their Russian hosts. After the fall of communism, when many Russians travelled and the “imagined West” (Yurchak) was challenged by real encounters, disillusionment followed. And when the overwhelming wave of religious and esoteric sects from the West declined in the second half of the 1990s, and the Russian Orthodox Church reestablished its influence by creating a special section sektovedenie, most of the occult underground had ceased to exist. More than a few former leading ‘masters’ chose Orthodox Christianity as their belief, some dedicated themselves radically by becoming monks and disappearing into monastic life. Others chose emigration or established a transnational life between East and West for themselves.

Conclusion

Many of the ideas and experimental practices described here seem familiar to Western eyes and can be considered variants of the Western New Age. Michael Murphy was right in stating the similarities after his visit in 1980, in spite of his illusionary enthusiasm for an imminent universal transformation of consciousness:

There is a remarkable symmetry between Soviet and American interests in this field. The Soviet term ‘hidden reserves’, for example, is almost identical to the American ‘human potential’ as a guiding idea. Soviet concern with ‘maximum performance’ resembles American investigations of ‘peak experience’, Soviet studies of ‘bioplasma’, ‘biophysical effects’ and ‘distant bioinformation interactions’ resemble American studies of ‘energy fields’, ‘dowsing’, and ‘remote viewing’. Training in ‘psychical self-regulation techniques’ is the Soviet equivalence of ‘biofeedback’ and ‘stress management’ programs in the U.S. In both countries these ideas have stimulated new approaches to education, healthcare, and sports.

91 Rokambol’ in Lebed’ko.
92 One of the most ardent fighters against occultism in and outside of the Orthodox Church is the diakon Andrei Kuraev (b. 1963) whose numerous books can be seen as almost encyclopedic collections of occult ideas and movements in post-Soviet Russia. See for instance Andrei Kuraev, Okkul’tizm v pravoslavii (Moscow: Blagovest, 1998).
93 Michael Murphy, quoted from the unpublished report (1980), In: Kripal, Esalen, 331.
But the Soviet Union was a closed society. Although occultists were not political dissidents and therefore not prosecuted as fiercely, Russia still remained an authoritarian state. All social life was ruled by political repression, state control and ideological censorship. Esoteric attitudes in science were treated by the political leadership in paradoxical ways, since there were overlapping areas of interest which sometimes resulted in instrumental uses of the Occult by the State. It was perfectly possible to offer a course on Gurdjieff’s *Fourth Way* in an officially sponsored institution, but at the same time people were being arrested for teaching yoga in their private apartments. All this made it very difficult for groups to communicate, build networks, and almost impossible to try out alternative life-styles.

As scientists looked into occult matters, many things that were considered occult now found a basis in science. Conversely, due to the secretive Cold-War politics of science, occult sciences could sometimes be legitimized by science no matter how fanciful they were. Finally, the system of central authority and ideology affected the underground itself by increasing fascination with the irrational. For some, the secrecy of the government created the potential for beliefs that things formerly incomprehensible might have scientific explanations, known or to be discovered. Others were attracted by things “totally alien, secret and incomprehensible,” which they found in matters of the occult, esoteric or mystic. According to the level and intensity of involvement, there were various directions in the Russian occulture of the Late Soviet period:

— For many people the occulture was no more than a transitory period in which they discovered various non-orthodox religious and spiritual teachings. After the fall of communism some of them turned either to traditional Russian Orthodoxy, as has been said, several former members of the occult underground later became monks and retreated to the numerous reopened monasteries, while some went back into the atheism or agnosticism which had shaped generations of Soviet peoples’ minds.

— Others tried to find a fast and instant release from the omnipresent ideology and control by diving into esoteric knowledge and occult practices. By exercising their bodies and minds in extreme ways, including the use of drugs, they hoped for a breakthrough to ultimate individual

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95 Lebed’ko I., 21.
freedom. Some of them failed to grasp the deeper levels of spirituality.\textsuperscript{96}
Some of the most radical ones, however, failed tragically and were destroyed along the way.

— Only for a small group of people did occult or esoteric belief-systems determine their whole way of life. Some of these followed paths of traditional or Westernized Eastern religions, dedicating themselves to the Jewish Kabbalah, Sufi mysticism, Tibetan or Zen-Buddhism; others became teachers, healers or gurus in the New Age of Post-Soviet Russia.

Given the above mentioned parallels between East and West, a comparison of Russian occulture with basic elements of the Western New Age\textsuperscript{97} also reveals some significant differences, which, I argue, can be identified as specific features of Russia’s New Age:

1. In Russia, esoteric knowledge was mainly transmitted by the intellectual elite. Highly qualified specialists provided direct access by translating a body of original classical esoteric texts, while in the West New Age was predominantly transmitted by popular culture.

2. Russian intellectuals, due to the geopolitical condition of the Russian/Soviet Empire, had the possibility of more direct connections with mystical teachings and traditions of the indigenous people of the East than in Western countries, by numerous personal contacts to spiritual teachers in Buriatia, Tibet, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

3. There were many research activities dealing with occult or paranormal phenomena within the official state-supported system of Soviet science which would be considered parascience in Western countries.

4. The most striking difference, however, is that eros and sexuality, which had become central issues of the Western New Age in the 1960s and 1970s, played only a very marginal role in the almost exclusively male-dominated Russian occulture. In spite of a few practical explorations in the realm of sexuality, the occult underground in Russia has been much more cerebral and much less corporeal than in the West. There has

\textsuperscript{96} Because of their urge for narcotic self-oblivion these people were called \textit{kaifisty} (arab. kaif = idle). Mamleev, \textit{Okkul'tizm v Sovetskoi Rossi}, 30.

been a greater emphasis on esoteric knowledge than on occult practice, more emphasis on mind and spirit than on the body. The physical aspects included, for many, massive use of alcohol, which in fact worked, against any long-term psychological and spiritual transformation of consciousness. Despite often excessive self-experiments, there was a remarkable leaning towards asceticism, at least in the explicit statements of the male leaders. The ultimate goal was ridding oneself of the body, rather than unifying body, mind and soul. In this one cannot help to find common traces with the general Soviet moral puritanism which was deeply rooted in the religious traditions of Russian orthodoxy, but also has elements in common with Russian Theosophy, even though it was dominated by females, and with various teachings of Eastern mysticism.

98 Even sex was practiced as body-control (Ivanov).