After the collapse of the communist system it was not only the established denominations (the Russian Orthodox Church, various Protestant churches) that experienced a boom in Russia, as people tried to fill the spiritual and ideological vacuum left behind by the previous system. Numerous religious and spiritual movements, which current scientific classifies as occultism, esotericism or alternative religion have been offering ways of coping with life to a population that is looking for meaning.

As early as 1988 the national newspapers ran the first articles on UFOs, yoga and parapsychology that showed none of the aggressive and “unmasking” features previously characteristic of publications on these topics. Now these areas were presented as merely “insufficiently researched” and “full of open questions”. The pioneer of this process was the national newspaper Komso-mol’skaia pravda, whose target audience was mostly the generation of 20-30 year olds. Soon after the newspapers had broached the subject, books using the same neutral popular-scientific approach with regard to contentious issues began to appear.

The first newspaper exclusively specializing in this subject area appeared in 1990 under the title Anomaliia. Publisher and editorial board, who had set themselves the goal of providing unbiased reports on enigmatic phenomena, chose the following epigraph for their newspaper: “The miracle is not incompatible with nature but with what we know about nature”. In the first two years the paper’s print run reached 250,000 copies per issue. However, shortly afterwards the number of copies sold fell quickly, probably because of the emergence of a large number of rival publications on the same subject.

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1 The author gratefully acknowledges the financial support provided by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) to the research project that led to the findings presented here. Some of them also appeared in Demyan Belyaev, “Heterodox Religiosity in Russia after the Fall of Communism: Does it Challenge ‘Traditional’ Religion?” Religion, State & Society 2010, no. 38 (2), 135–151.

2 Aleksandr Vengerov, Predskazaniia i prorochestva: za i protiv (Moscow, 1991).
This newspaper still exists, if in significantly modified form. However, the highest number of copies (up to 550,000 copies per monthly issue) has been reached by other specialized esoteric newspapers and journals, including Oracle, UFO, Secret Power, The Age of Aquarius, and Paranormal News (Orakul, NLO, Tainaia vlast’, Era Vodoleia, Anomal’nye novosti). The largest of these, Oracle, belongs to the German media corporation Bauer and, unlike the above-mentioned pioneering publications, has a strong commercial focus and relies heavily on advertising. The newspaper is sold in Russia, Ukraine and other countries. However, it is marketed not as a yellow-press paper but a worldview-specific publication with an orientation towards popular science.

Political liberalization was followed by a rapid growth in publications on all kinds of topics related to occult knowledge. The books of Blavatsky, Roerich, Gurdjieff, Andreev and other Russian and Western esotericists of the past came out in huge print runs. The number of publically acting healers, magicians and astrologers grew exponentially. Healing with the help of magic techniques was especially popular. Moreover, other movements that the author of this article considers to be at the margins of the esoteric subculture, such as Slavic neo-paganism and the concomitant Russian nationalism or traditional shamanism in Siberia and certain other Russian regions, have also seen an upturn.

TV played a special role in the process of spreading esoteric knowledge and skills in the years of Perestroika. The uniqueness of this historic moment probably consists in the fact that the mass media were still highly centralized when the Soviet Union collapsed, while state control over the information presented in these media suddenly disappeared. This is why those who managed to gain prominence on TV as esotericists during this time quickly acquired country-wide fame.

The first popular subject was healing. On 31 March 1988 the Ukrainian doctor Anatolii Kashpirovskii (b. 1939) performed a live operation on the show Vzgliad, using a kind of hypnosis as an anaesthetic. On 9 October 1989 the public channel Ostankino, which can be received all over Russia, began broadcasting Kashpirovskii’s healing séances. In 1989 the Muscovite Allan Chumak

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3 Interview of the author with Ol’ga Monachova, Moscow, 23/08/2007.
(b. 1935), a trained sports coach and journalist, appeared with similar séances for the first time. While live on TV he charged water, food and other items with healing energy, solely by gesticulating, unlike Kashpirovskii, who pronounced some formulae.\(^7\)

The next vogue was astrology. In January 1989 the astrologist Pavel Globa (b. 1953), a trained historian and archivist, and his wife Tamara made their first appearance on the Leningrad channel *The Fifth Wheel* (*Piatoe koleso*). Pavel Globa had been teaching astrology underground since the late 1970s, for which he was charged for anti-Soviet agitation and imprisoned. The Globas have made a significant contribution to the popularity of astrology among the broad masses of the Russian population, mostly by propagating astrology as a form of ancient esoteric knowledge with links to Zoroastrianism. Their prognoses for the future, including politics, which they regularly presented on TV, also became popular with ordinary Russians.

The third very popular area of applied occultism was magic. In the late 1980s–early 1990s, also on TV, the Ukrainian Iurii “Longo” Golovko (1956–2006) gained notoriety as a practitioner of white, practical magic. The phenomena demonstrated included levitation and even the resurrection of the dead. Later on, he switched to individual consultations. In the last years of his life Longo spoke frequently about his plans to found a “practical religion” that would help people to do the right thing in various situations.\(^8\)

Although these individuals were national celebrities in the late 1980s, they no longer have the same influence on the population as they used to, but they remain active to the present day, mostly in the esoteric milieu. Kashpirovskii, for example, has been on several short tours throughout Russia since 2005, even though his performances no longer draw large audiences and there have been a number of protests against his “charlatanism” in several towns (Nogorod, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii). Allan Chumak toured Germany for a month in 2005, giving séances in various towns. Just like Kashpirovskii, he seems most popular among Russian émigrés who left in the late 1980s–early 1990s and maintain links to aspects of Russian culture that were prominent during that historical period (e.g. pop singers who have long since fallen into oblivion in Russia itself). Pavel Globa still reads the horoscope every morning on one of the commercial TV channels and publishes articles in newspapers and journals. He also advises politicians and businessmen.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) See, e.g., http://www.peoples.ru/medicine/psychology/anatoliy_kashpirovskiy/index.html

\(^8\) Jurii Longo, *Entsiklopediia samoistseleniia i tainykh znani* (Moscow: Êksmo, 2004).

\(^9\) See e.g. www.globa.ru
During the market reforms of the 1990s the range of esoterically oriented materials and activities grew so large that now there is a large number of active magicians, astrologers and healers. However, what they all have in common is that their practice is usually limited to a single service to a single customer (“client”). This service can entail information or advice (in the case of astrologers and tarot readers) or healing and/or health promotion (the two kinds of healers most common in Russia are called *celiteli* and *ekstrasensy*). These representatives of the esoteric sub-culture in contemporary Russia are not organized in institutions (associations etc), which makes establishing their true number next to impossible. Representatives of the esoteric subculture often advertise in free magazines, complete with photos.

Due to the overall lack of both institutional organization and written sources, providing a structural overview of this part of the Russian esoteric milieu is possible only to a very limited degree. In addition to the first differentiation according to specialization – astrologers, tarot readers, magicians etc – first attempts have been made in the literature to divide, for example, those esotericists who engage in various kinds of healing practice into subgroups according to the main method of healing they use. Perhaps the same approach could be used in order to structure the milieu of magicians, wizards and fortune-tellers.

However, the scene in contemporary Russia is not limited to those representatives of the esoteric subculture we have subsumed under the term “suppliers of exclusively applied esotericism”. Next to them we find those who specialize mostly in the dissemination and/or teaching of different schools, training systems and practices. These systems and practices offer different focal points to their followers, e.g. influence on the human body (like Malakhov’s *Cleansing of the Organism*, (Ochishchenie organizma), Levshinov’s *How to get a Perfect Figure* (Kak sdelat’ figuru velikolepnoi) or Norbekov’s *Path towards Youth and Health* (Tropinka k bodrosti i zdorov’iu), the development of certain abilities that the majority of people do not possess (Zolotov, Klein, the “late” Norbekov and Bronnikov) or how to bring about fundamental changes in the relationship between man and his surroundings (Lazarev, Sinel’nikov und Sviash).

This theoretically founded section of the esoteric subculture includes bioenergetics (often also called psychics), the development of psychic abilities, as well as several approaches from the field of practical psychology as long as they

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10 This is not the same as “psychics” known in the West as the alleged principle of their work is different.

11 Evgenii Panov, *Naidi svoego tseliteia* (Moscow, 2000).
appeal to the existence of supernatural forces or laws. Some the most important forms of knowledge transfer for the representatives of this second section of the esoteric subculture are the so-called “seminars for personality development”. One of the first such seminars was held in 1988 in Southern Siberia by Boris Zolotov and his closest disciples, Nikolai Denisov and Aleksandr Klein. Zolotov (b. 1947) is a native of the city of Odessa and from the family of a military rocket engineer and member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. He calls himself a “specialist in complex systems”. According to the participants in his seminars, Zolotov allegedly possesses healing - and other unusual abilities. During the 1990s Zolotov regularly held seminars in different cities in the Ukraine (Kiev, Kherson, Krivoi Rog), Bulgaria, Hungary and Russia. A large Zolotov-seminar took place from 10 July–10 September in Evpatoriia (Crimea). Zolotov’s methods for working with his disciples resemble the ones used by the Sufis: knowledge is transferred not directly (verbally) but must reveal itself to the disciple, without further action from the teacher, during the process of living through certain situations in which his teacher has placed him. Zolotov himself says he is teaching “expert-operative interaction”.

Another important way of communicating esoteric knowledge in contemporary Russia, both theoretical and practical, is through books. The pioneer in this field was Gennadii Malakhov (b. 1954), who published his first book on this topic, *Cleansing of the Organism and Diet* (*Ochishchenie organizma i pitanie*), in 1991 in the small southern town of Staryi Oskol. This book was followed by several others and, according to *Book Market Survey* (*Knizhnoe obozrenie*), by 1995 Malakhov (b. 1954) had sold more than four million copies of his highly esteemed four volumes. He still lives in his native town of Kamensk-Shakhtinskii in the Rostov area in southern Russia. He regularly travels the country, meets his followers, publishes a newspaper, has his own TV show and owns the publishing house *Genesha*.

Mirzakarim Norbekov (b. 1957) came to Moscow in 1993 and began to hold health promotion séances on various stages, just like Andrei Levshinov (b. 1957) in St. Petersburg. Later they both turned to writing books, trying to gain a bigger audience for their ideas and healing methods, in the same way as Malakhov. First they both collaborated with experienced female authors – Levshinov with Valentina Travinka in 1995 and Norbekov with Larisa Fotina in 1996. Later they each wrote bestsellers that made them famous throughout

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13 Larisa Fotina, Mirzakarim Norbekov, *Doroga v molodost’ i zdorov’e. Prakticheskoe rukovodstvo dlia mushchin i zhenshchin* (Moscow, 2002).
Russia. Norbekov organized a network of courses for the restitution of sight. Subsequently he began offering courses for the development of intuition, which he presents as a necessary prerequisite for founding one’s own company and improving one’s financial situation. Levshinov taught yoga and Qi Gong and held outdoor training sessions abroad, which he called “grand master classes”.

At the end of the 1990s, Aleksandr Sviash (Sviash), Valerii Sinel’nikov and Viacheslav Bronnikov appeared on the Russian scene. Chronologically they belong to the “third wave” of esotericism. Sviash’s first book, How to design events in your life with the power of thought (Kak formirovat’ sobytiia svoei zhizni s pomoshch’iu sily mysli) came out in 1997 and became the cornerstone of his doctrine and his training center called The Sensible Way (Razumnnyi put’). Sviash told me that he began to study esotericism seriously in 1990 and that he attended Boris Zolotov’s seminars among others. Although he painstakingly avoids esoteric terminology in his latest works, he explains the laws of the world that surrounds us using concepts such as “astral bodies of man” (ton’kie tela), “egregore” etc, which clearly identifies him as a propagator of esoteric knowledge rather than, for example, conventional psychotherapy. The same applies to Sinel’nikov, who became popular only when his book Love your Illness (Vozliubi bolez’ svoiu) came out in 2000. Over the course of a kind of ideological drift, Sinel’nikov gradually moved away from orthodox medical training to homeopathy, modern Western psychotherapy and hypnosis and finally towards an esoteric worldview.

Bronnikov claims to have discovered a phenomenon of “direct vision” via the brain or rather, with closed eyes. He calls the alleged capacity of the brain to function in such mode the “biocomputer”, a skill which, according to him, can be trained in many people. But whether the “biocomputer” is the brain or the phenomenon of direct vision, or the brain’s capacity to function in this mode is not clear.

Some of Bronnikov’s disciples have been examined at the Institute for Brain Research in St. Petersburg, which is part of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Allegedly the scientific Director of the Institute, Natalia Bekhtereva, confirmed

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14 Andrei Levshinov, Taina upravleniia sud’boi (Moscow, 2002); Mirzakarim Norbekov, Opyt duraka, ili kluch’ k prozreniu. Kak izbavit’sia ot ochkov (Moscow, 2003).
15 Aleksandr Sviash, Razumniy mir (Moscow, 2006).
16 Valerii Sinel’nikov, Tainy podsoznaniia (Moscow, 2006).
17 This is not the same as “remote viewing” known by some Western psychics. “Direct vision” is the literal translation of Bronnikov’s term, which is preferred here given that the technique he teaches is peculiar in itself.
the existence of the phenomenon of “direct vision”. In 2003 Bronnikov began to sell video recordings of his training sessions, and in 2005 he founded the first regional training centers for teaching the “Bronnikov Method.” Just like Norbekov, Bronnikov is one of those esotericists who seek recognition from traditional science, which is why he gave his doctrine the scientific-sounding term “Cosmo-psycho-biology”. Still relatively unknown esotericists also frequently give their doctrines scientific-sounding names; examples include Tonkov’s “biosensoric psychology” or the “spiritual psychocybernetics” by Gennadii Mir (Miroshnichenko) from Tula.

In addition to the abovementioned esotericists, this subculture also has a large number of activists who are not seeking a large audience but prefer to concentrate on teaching relatively small groups. Examples include Zolotov’s disciple Nikolai Denisov (school The Golden Ray (Zolotoi luch)), Sergei Romasenko and Aleksandr Klein, the main proponent of Russian Zen. In 2005 Klein organized twelve different seminars in a holiday center near Moscow on Second Logic (Vtoraia logika), as he calls his system. Others include Sergei Rozov and Artur Razumov in St. Petersburg, Vasilii Goch in Tallinn and Vladimir Lermontov in Bolshoi Utrish. Less influential esotericists often have no institutionalized schools of their own but sometimes use “Centers for Spiritual Development” such as The Other World (Drugoi mir) in St. Petersburg or Help Yourself (Pomogi sebe sam) in Moscow as their platforms, or open air festivals such as Inlakesh in the summer. Esoteric bookshops such as White Clouds (Belye oblaka) in Moscow are other venues that attract these figures.

There are some clear cases of fraud where people pretending to represent the esoteric subculture are looking only for financial gain. Notorious is the case of Grigorii Grabovoi from Kazakhstan in 2006, who offered to resurrect, for a fee, the school children killed during the attack by Chechen separatists in Beslan. He was subsequently given a prison sentence. However, such cases are for the most part exceptions. On the whole it is noteworthy that those who are now recognized as bearers and disseminators of esoteric knowledge began to engage with this subject matter well before the fall of the Soviet Union. Thus it is very hard to accuse them of having chosen esotericism simply as a convenient way of making money in the financially difficult transitional period of the 1990s.

Andrei Levshinov told me that he has been interested in yoga, karate and psychology since 1978. Gennadii Malakhov was the director of the Alertness (bodrost’) club for natural healing as early as 1984. Sergei Lazarev began his

research in the field of bioenergetics around 1980. Sinel’nikov met his karate teacher Vladimir Zhikarentsev when he was 14, a meeting that was, according to him, decisive for his later wish to become an unusual doctor. Most of these esotericists were born in the 1950s and are therefore presently at the height of their creative careers. All these observations suggest that what intensified significantly after the collapse of the Soviet Union was not the interest in esoteric knowledge as such, but merely the scope of this interest and the intense communication of this knowledge to broad groups of the general population.

Different scientific approaches have been used to examine the recent developments in the religious panorama in Russia (among which esotericism and occultism are usually counted); they have led to a variety of conclusions.

On the one hand, doubt is cast on the profundity of the beliefs of those Russians who today refer to themselves as believers. In view of the widespread belief in astrology and miracles, some people say, it is an exaggeration to speak of a religious renaissance in Russia, since such a mixture of beliefs ought to be interpreted as a sign of rejection of all definite religious convictions. However, some scholars say that religiosity in Russia was never very high and the Orthodox Church, it is suggested, never had a monopoly on religious belief even in the 18th and 19th centuries. Others insist that in Russia even communism was turned into a religion. According to these people the view that the country underwent a process of secularization in the Soviet era is erroneous, as is the view that a de-secularization took place during the 1990s. On the contrary, the dogmatic and quasi-religious atheistic system had nothing to do with secularization, and only today are we witnessing secularization, in its post-rational, adogmatic-eclectic form. Russia’s spiritual evolution is like a pendulum moving between different kinds of religiosity, that is, from Orthodox Christianity to communism and atheism towards post-rational eclecticism.

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Some scholars even apply this theory to all of Eastern Europe and argue that the atheization of Eastern Europe in the 20th century was a myth.23

In the early 1990s it was not only Marxist ideology that was in a very weak position. Orthodox Christianity had been compromised by decades of collaboration with the Soviet authorities (“spiritual bankruptcy”24) and as a result the main rivals of Orthodox Christianity, traditionally the dominant religion in Russia, were those religious doctrines whose adherents “believed not in God but in supernatural forces.” The adherents in question can identify with Orthodox Christianity as well as with Christianity in general and even with atheism; typical for this group is an interest in Eastern religions, spiritism, para-scientific and para-religious mythology. The latter is seen as a movement “towards an amorphous, eclectic consciousness that is not denominational and not even Christian or anti-Christian.”25 Religion in Russia has turned into a folkloric belief system based on science, para-science and Theosophy. Magic, occultism and elements of Eastern religions are combined with traditional Christian dogmas. This, they say, points to the existence of a wholly private religiosity, the main criterion of which is the ability to construct a worldview of one’s own.26

Therefore, it is claimed, the “real” religion of Russia is “not Orthodoxy, and not paganism, shamanism or atheism either”, but rather “a popular religion combining many elements of different origin.” Only on the surface is there a thin layer of Orthodox Christian practices, or a Muslim one in post-Soviet Central Asia, which is home to a “popular religion based on shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Islam and other sources.27 The public consciousness of Russia is seen as dominated by “spiritual entropy”, while within the paradigm of “occultism-after-atheism” Orthodox Christianity no longer serves as a source of beliefs and values, but rather as the “public religion”, that is, a source of the national ideology and identity that is sought by society.28 Two conflicting ten-

25 Dmitrii Furman, Religion and Politics.
26 Irene Borowik, Between Orthodoxy and Eclecticism.
Dencies are said to exist in Russian post-communist society: “a syndrome of missed modernity” and simultaneously “a postmodern framework” which together result in a “hybrid picture”. The reasons for this hybrid mixture are identified as a “weak civil society” and “lack of experience in independent public treatment of religious questions in a pluralistic context.”

The third line of argument derives from cultural studies, rather than the sociology of religion. Scholars point out that occultism normally flourishes “during hard times”. Its present flourishing is interpreted as a reaction to the “pseudo-scientific worldview previously propagated as part of the general atheistic teaching” and a result of “Russia’s own historical and spiritual heritage” —a comforting alternative to the rational worldview prescribed by scientific materialism. It is even claimed that there is a connection between the occult ideas that circulated in Russian society at the beginning of the 20th century and the later Stalinist regime. New Age worldviews in post-communist states are seen as deeply rooted in utopia and socialism and as means of transporting the central ideas of socialism into the post-socialist age.

Among the reasons Russian scholars give for the present growth of esotericism, mysticism and occultism in Russia and the world are the disintegration of the motivational principles of the former cultural mainstream of Western civilization, the collapse of faith in science, the complexity of human life which science is not always and not everywhere capable of ordering, the real

nature of the human psyche, the need for self-affirmation, the striving towards the creation of a perfect society and the desire of intellectuals who consider the traditional religious worldviews slightly primitive to find patterns for interpreting the world that have a stronger rational or science-like appearance.

Is it thus true that the present esoteric subculture in Russian could turn into a rival of traditional (Christian) religiosity and even aspire to a dominant position in the religious consciousness of the population? This question motivated me to carry out my own opinion poll among the Russian population in 2006. For this poll I presented 1,600 persons from all over Russia with a questionnaire on belief in occult ideas and their experience with occult practices. This poll has so far been the only scientifically founded quantitative investigation in Russia specifically designed to analyze the proliferation of occult worldviews in the Russian population.

According to the results of the poll the majority of respondents agreed with thirteen of the examined esoteric worldviews, and even those ideas that were rejected by or viewed in a sceptical light by the majority were approved by a relatively large minority.

38 O. Baksanskii, “Psikhologicheskie osnovaniia ézotericheskikh uchenii (v svete analiticheskoi psikhologii K. Iunga),” Ibid., 131–146, here 143.
Tab. 1 Attitude towards the examined elements of esoteric worldviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreed with the following statements: (%)</th>
<th>Yes or likely yes</th>
<th>Hard to say</th>
<th>No or likely no</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a higher power such as God, providence or others</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a higher instance of justice that rewards or punishes people’s acts</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is possible to predict the future</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanity today is facing a global crisis</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Christ really was the son of God</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is possible to influence other people’s life by magic</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some healers can cure diseases that traditional medicine cannot cure</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human beings have a soul that can exist independent of the body</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a correlation between a person’s zodiac sign and character</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angels, demons and ghosts do exist</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luck and misfortune are influenced by supernatural powers or laws</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is possible to read other people’s mind (telepathy)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talismans can be effective</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governments keep knowledge about the supernatural secret (“conspiracy”)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aliens have visited planet Earth already</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is not my first life</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is possible to move objects by the power of thought</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with ghosts is possible</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own calculations, representative poll of Russian population in September 2006.

In addition, the respondents were asked about their practical experience with esotericism or its representatives. We distinguished between several different kinds of experience. According to our results, over 22% of Russians have had some contact with a spiritual healer, with a subjective success rate of almost
56%; almost 35% of Russians over 18 have read some kind of esoteric literature and around 50% believe they have profited from the advice given in this literature.

The worldviews we analyzed (see Table 1) can be divided into two groups. Ideas such as the belief in a soul, God, higher justice, angels and Jesus\(^{41}\) can be summarized under the label “traditional-religious”. The second, esoteric, group comprises ideas such as predicting the future, telepathy, moving of objects, healing, talismans, magic, astrology, and contact with ghosts.\(^{42}\) There is a strong correlation between these eight ideas, which is not as obvious for the remaining ideas (also listed in Table 1 but not allocated to either group).

According to our calculations the proportion of convinced non-believers (i.e. those who do not believe in any of the ideas from the two groups) is relatively low at just under 10%. Around 15% of the population adheres to traditional religious beliefs (i.e. most of the elements of the first group but not of the second). In comparison, around 20% of the population have a predominantly esoteric worldview (believing most of the elements of the second group but not of the first). Another 27% are both traditionally religious as well as believers in esoteric ideas (they believe in most ideas from both groups) and around 30% ostensibly have no consistent convictions in the field of religious or esoteric belief.

This quantitatively founded result allows us to draw the following conclusions: in contemporary Russia esoteric worldviews are more common than traditional forms of religiosity. They apply consistently to at least 45% of the population, compared to 40% who hold traditional Christian ideas and 10% who adhere to scientific materialism.

It is hardly possible to reduce the complexity of societal relations that have led to this situation to a few social causes. But we can point to a few specific conditions that may have encouraged the flourishing of esoteric beliefs. Above all there is the fact that esoteric and occult doctrines have a long-standing tradition in Russia, in particular among the intellectual elite, both before the Bolshevik Revolution and after. Secondly, the fast rejection of Marxist doctrines in public consciousness in the early 1990s furthered the reception of everything new, including all kinds of occult and esoteric doctrines. Thirdly, one can say that perhaps the Russian consciousness (“mentality”) remains less influenced by the West European Enlightenment. However, this proposition ought to be proven or refuted with the help of specialized research into mentality.

\(^{41}\) For complete wording see Table 1.

\(^{42}\) For complete wording see Table 1.
As someone who grew up in Russia and has engaged in extensive research into Russia during different historical periods, I would like to point out that I regard any talk about a “break” with the “rational” Soviet past as erroneous. The Russian people have always been merely human, with all the traits inherent to human nature, including irrationality. Soviet “civilization” was only superficially “rational” or “different“. Therefore I see no causal relation between the present rise in esoteric ideas and Soviet civilization, with the potential exception of the freedom of the press, which did not exist in the Soviet Union.

It would likewise be a gross exaggeration to talk about a “cult of humanism” in the Soviet Union as opposed to a “cult of nihilism” in present-day Russia. The Soviet cult of humanism was nothing more than a phenomenon of the belief in science and progress, which was also apparent in the West during this time. Likewise, the “cult of nihilism” has been known since the days of Nietzsche and today constitutes a phenomenon of international mass culture, imported to Russia from the West and consumed there. The fact that certain Russian writers and other producers of cultural goods are active in this field does not tell us anything about the genuine worldview of the Russian people, but merely about their openness to manipulation by the “gatekeepers” of mass literature, which characterizes the populations of Western countries in much the same way.

For these reasons it might be more appropriate to regard contemporary Russian esotericism as part of the development of global society rather than a reaction to the Soviet past.