COMPETING LEGACIES, COMPETING VISIONS OF RUSSIA: THE ROERICH MOVEMENT(S) IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

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In *Ten Days That Shook the World*, his classic account of the Russian Revolution, journalist John Reed noted dryly that, in Petrograd, the year of 1917 was “a particularly active season for Theosophists.” Reed’s implication—that alternative belief systems flourish in times of social and political instability—holds just as true for Russia’s post-Soviet aftermath as it did for the period of tribulation that preceded the USSR’s birth. During the long transition that began with the glasnost’ campaign of the late 1980s and continues to the present day, a combination of excitement, curiosity, uncertainty, and frustration has sparked a widespread spiritual revival among contemporary Russians, causing many to embrace not just conventional religion in the form of Orthodox Christianity, but a tangled variety of mystical, esoteric, and occult practices.

Of these, among the most successful, and yet most controversial, has been the movement—more precisely, the cluster of movements—dedicated to the teachings of Nikolai Roerich [Rerikh] (1874–1947), the prominent Silver Age painter who, in emigration, gained fame for his peace activism and his artistic-archaeological expeditions to Asia, and, with his wife Helena [Elena], created the Theosophically-derived doctrine of Agni Yoga, known also as the “system of living ethics.” Roerichism draws advantage from its association with a versatile, internationally-known celebrity, as well as its exceptional doctrinal elasticity, which allows the views and enthusiasms of a wide variety of adherents to be accommodated. In particular, Roerich’s vision of a morally pure Russia, connected organically to Asia and the Christian world by virtue of its geographic position, holds enormous appeal for those who seek a belief system that sustains them spiritually and reinforces their sense of self-worth as Russians, but who, for whatever reason, derive little satisfaction from Russian Orthodoxy. Also, the Roerich family’s ambiguous relationship with Soviet power has made

2 I use the term “Roerichism” as an umbrella term to include all spiritual outlooks that involve a meaningful degree of admiration for Roerich. I interpret “Agni Yogist” to mean someone pursuing a narrower and more dedicated commitment to the “living ethics” (zhivaia ėtika) outlined in the Roerichs’ 14-volume “Agni Yoga” series.
it unusually, if not uniquely, viable for Roerich to be adopted as an object of admiration by Russians who reject the country’s Marxist-Leninist past and by those who mourn communism’s demise.

On the other hand, that same ambiguity contributes to the many controversies that have surrounded Roerich movements since the collapse of the Soviet regime. Astoundingly for someone so famous, some of the most basic facts of Roerich’s life story remain the subject of intense debate, none more so than the question of his poorly-understood collaboration with the Soviet regime, and whether this involved espionage or, as seems far likelier, a more tentative and less successful interchange. Not only have these debates affected Roerich’s reputation among the Russian public, they have caused rifts among those actively dedicated to Agni Yoga. Other issues bedeviling the Roerich movements include disputes over institutional and doctrinal authority, competition over custodianship of Roerich’s art and the family’s personal effects, public condemnation of the Roerichs by the Russian Orthodox Church, and, most profoundly, a failure to arrive at a unified understanding of Roerich’s vision for Russia, its future, and its place in the world. This essay will trace the explosion of public interest in Roerich that began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, along with the rise of Roerichite groups and circles, including the International Center of the Roerichs (MTsR) in Moscow. It will also address the controversies outlined above, especially the unceasing struggle to resolve competing articulations of Roerichism.

The Roerich Revival and Russia’s Transition from Communism

As described in Markus Osterrieder’s chapter, Roerichite currents flowed through the Soviet Union following the artist’s rehabilitation—and the return of his older son, the orientalist George, or Iurii—in the late 1950s. Roerich was restored to the canon of great Russian artists; during the Cold War, he served as a useful symbol in depictions of the USSR as committed to world peace and to fraternal relations with Asia, thanks to his lifelong advocacy of the Banner of Peace Pact (also known as the Roerich Pact), whose purpose was to protect art

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3 At the invitation of Nikita Khrushchev, Iurii Roerich returned to the USSR and took up a position as a Tibetologist with the Russian Academy of Sciences. In 1958, a major exhibition of Roerich père’s paintings was held in Moscow, and cautiously sympathetic reviews such as N. Dmitrievna, “Vystavka proizvedenii N. K. Rerikha,” Iskusstvo 8 (1958); and N. Sokolova, “Re-rikh,” Oktiabr’ 10 (1958), signalled his artistic rehabilitation. Also see Birgit Menzel’s chapter in this volume.
in times of war, and to the many years he and his family resided in India. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, key centers of Roerich-related activity cropped up in Riga, Tallinn, Izhevsk, and Novosibirsk, and the 1974 centennial of Roerich’s birth unleashed a flood of commemorations and publications dedicated to him, including a library of standard biographies and collections of his writings.

Still, if Roerich’s influence flowed readily, it did not do so with complete freedom. His expeditions were portrayed as strictly artistic and scholarly endeavors, and allusions to the political motivations underlying them were risky—as was open discussion of Roerich’s mysticism, which had to be kept as rarefied and abstract as possible, with emphasis on “universal profundity” and “keen insight” into the philosophies of the east. There was no room for talk of the Roerichs’ past as Theosophists and mediums, nor was it safe to study Agni Yoga as an esoteric doctrine, as demonstrated by the 1979 crackdown visited upon Academy of Sciences scholars in the Novosibirsk suburb of Akademgorodok, where a subgroup of the city’s large Roerich circle tried to promote Nicholas’s and Helena’s thesis from the 1920s about the reconcilability of Agni Yogist mysticism and Marxist-Leninist communism. “Your Blavatskian tendencies have placed our institute in a difficult situation,” the authorities thundered as they forced recantations all around. “If you wish to continue being considered communists, you had better rethink your position.” The state responded similarly in Izhevsk, where, in 1983, a member of the local Roerich group claimed to be receiving psychic sendings from Shambhala. At roughly the same time, poet Valentin Sidorov stirred up a public storm by publishing his Roerich-inspired travelogue Seven Days in the Himalayas (Sem’ dnei v Himalaei) in the journal Moskva.

All this changed in 1987, when sponsorship from the highest levels of

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5 See, for example, N. K. Rerikh, Iz literaturnogo naslediia (Moscow: Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo, 1974); idem, Izbrannoe (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossia, 1978); A. D. Alekhin, Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh (Moscow: Znanie, 1974); and Katalog khudozhestvennykh proizvedenii N. K. Rerikha s 1885 po 1947 gg. (Novosibirsk, 1974).


Soviet leadership raised Roerich’s prestige to unprecedented levels. That year, after a May 14 meeting with Roerich’s younger son, the artist Sviatoslav, Mikhail Gorbachev began speaking with approval about the “Roerich idea,” praising the Roerich family as “cultural pillars” and “outstanding representatives of our country.” Gorbachev and his wife Raisa enjoyed a warm relationship with Sviatoslav, and Raisa, who grew up in the Altai region (where Roerich’s memory is particularly well preserved) and greatly admired Indian thought, is rumored to have sympathized with Agni Yoga, speaking in her own autobiography of Roerich’s “wisdom.” More than that, Gorbachev wished to use the “Roerich idea” to revitalize a Soviet ideology whose symbolic force had been exhausted by overuse and public cynicism dating from the stagnation (zastoi) of the Brezhnev era. Gorbachev appears to have calculated that Roerichite thinking, properly packaged, would infuse the Soviet worldview with a potent combination of aesthetically-appealing and exotic imagery; a pride in Russia that was neither chauvinistic nor at odds with the multiethnic nature of the Soviet state; an associative link between the USSR and respect for the ideals of peace, culture, and beauty; and the possibility of spiritual enrichment without the need for conventional religious faith. In October 1989, Gorbachev, supported by Sviatoslav and the academician Dmitrii Likhachev, the government’s chief adviser on cultural affairs, allocated funds for the creation of a Soviet Roerich Foundation to locate and gather Roerich’s art, manuscripts, and belongings, and a Center-Museum to stimulate Roerich studies.

The driving force behind both bodies’ work was the Center-Museum’s head, Liudmila Shaposhnikova, an indologist and journalist with powerful connections among the Soviet elite and a personal acquaintance with Sviatoslav Roerich dating back to 1968. In 1990 and 1991, Shaposhnikova established cooperative ties—for the moment—with Roerich societies throughout the USSR and in Bulgaria, Australia, Mexico, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland, as well as with India’s International Roerich Memorial Trust (which held responsibility for maintaining the family’s former residence in the Kulu valley village of Naggar) and the Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York. In May

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10 On the weakening appeal of Soviet symbology under Brezhnev, see Christel Lane, The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society—The Soviet Case (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), passim.
1990, with the aid of Iurii Vorontsov, the USSR’s deputy minister of foreign affairs, and with Sviatoslav’s apparent blessing, Shaposhnikova scored a major coup by recovering from the Roerichs’ home in Bangalore, India, a treasure trove that included 432 paintings, several tons of books and letters, numerous *objets d’art*, and at least a portion of Nicholas’s and Helena’s funerary ashes. These materials were formally presented to the Soviet people on October 9, 1990, the 116th anniversary of Roerich’s birth.

But by this time, the Roerich revival, as with so many *glasnost’* initiatives, was going farther, and in different directions, than Gorbachev had intended. In keeping with the general interest in New Age practices that blossomed during the last years of the Soviet period, many of Roerich’s admirers became more boldly and openly occultist—as witnessed, for example, by the strong Roerichite orientation of the Russian Theosophical Society, reconstituted in 1990–1991 after a seven-decade hiatus. Also, conceptualizations of Roerich diversified, making it difficult to settle on the single “Roerich idea” that Gorbachev had originally envisioned. Certain leaders had connections with the Roerichs that rivalled Shaposhnikova’s and could therefore claim equal right to interpret the family’s teachings and desires. The founders of the Siberian Roerich Society, Natalia Spirina and Boris Abramov, had studied with Roerich himself in Harbin, Manchuria, during the 1930s, and Pavel Belikov, the longtime head of the Estonian Roerich Society, had corresponded with him during the 1940s. Prominent members of the Moscow Roerich Society, founded in 1990–1991, had similar ties: the artist Boris Smirnov-Rusetskii had been a member of the Amaravella school inspired by Roerich in the 1920s and 1930s, and had met Roerich in 1926, while the indologist Natalia Sazonova had known Sviatoslav Roerich almost as long as Shaposhnikova had. Finally, in ways that presaged the quarrels of the post-Soviet 1990s and 2000s, institutional imperatives threatened to clash: leaving aside the works held by collectors and galleries in America, India, and Europe, many of Roerich’s paintings, designs, and belongings were held by various museums in Russia, including the Tretiakov Gallery, the *State Russian Museum*, the Bakhruhin Theatrical Museum, numerous regional museums (especially the *Novosibirsk Picture Gallery*),

the Izvara Estate-Museum outside St. Petersburg (the country retreat owned by Roerich’s family during his childhood), and, most important, the State Museum of Oriental Art (MOOA, today the Museum of the East). Each had its own stake in how the Roerich revival worked out.

All the same, it appeared in 1990 and 1991 that some degree of coherence and cooperation would prevail, with the Soviet Roerich Foundation and its Center-Museum providing leadership and coordination. In March 1991, the first All-Union Meeting of Roerich Societies—attended also by foreign representatives, including from the Nicholas Roerich Museum (NRM) in New York—agreed to transform the Center-Museum into the International Center of the Roerichs, which would manage a new Roerich Museum and a charitable fund to be named after Helena Roerich. The MTsR’s first president was Iurii Vorontsov, who used his UN connections to have the Center named an associate organizational member of UNESCO. Shaposhnikova took the posts of MTsR director and Roerich Museum head, and also the presidency of the Helena Roerich Fund. Over the course of the year, the MTsR acquired as its home base the sumptuous Lopukhin Estate on Malyi Znamenskii Lane, only a short distance from the Kremlin Embankment and the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. All this transpired against the backdrop of the USSR’s final disintegration, and it was only in December 1991, on the very eve of the Soviet Union’s final disbandment, that the MTsR formally registered itself as a legal entity.

**Uncertainty and Diffraction:**

**Roerich Movements during the Yeltsin Years**

One of the most vivid manifestations of early post-Soviet Roerichism involves the famous Altai pilgrimages that began in 1991 and peaked in 1992, sparked by expectations that a great flood was soon to engulf Eurasia, leaving only the Altai Mountains unscathed. To ensure humanity’s survival into the next cosmic era, a number of Roerichite communes established themselves in the Altai, although few lasted for long. Not only did the awaited deluge fail to occur, but the pilgrims were constantly divided by arguments about the nature of their mission—particularly about whether the “radiant city” of Zvenigorod that Roerich had wished to build in the Altai would miraculously appear if their faith were strong, or whether they would have to erect it themselves before the flood poured down.12

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12 NRM director Daniel Entin, interviews with the author (October 1999). Also see Lunkin, “Rerikhovskoe dvizhenie,” 24.
This episode illustrates not just how dedicated to Roerichite ideas many Russians were during the 1990s, but also how difficult they found it to arrive at a consensus about those ideas. In many ways, this was a function of the problem that arises whenever one tries to gauge the nature and intensity of a spiritual belief: as William James outlined multiple varieties of the religious experience in his classic 1902 book of that title, we can recognize many varieties of the occult experience, ranging from casual dabbling to dogmatic adherence to a single discipline. Four to five hundred Roerichite groups and circles (many of them small and loosely organized) formed in Russia during the 1990s; unspecified thousands practiced on an individual basis, and scholarly estimates of those “captivated” in some way by Roerich’s “unique philosophy” have run to “the millions.” Especially in the last case, it is hard to determine how much Roerich’s popularity rested on non-spiritual factors, such as interest in his uniquely-styled art, patriotic admiration for him as a historically significant Russian, or popular perception of him as a Gandhi-like symbol of transcendent humanitarianism. But even looking strictly at those to whom Roerich appealed on spiritual grounds, we see a huge diversity, both in their level of commitment to Roerichism and in what form their Roerichism took. As in the West, there emerged in post-Soviet Russia an “increasingly complicated cacophony of spirituality,” to borrow from a New York Times discussion of contemporary American religion—and, for many Russians, Roerichite spirituality was merely one item for purchase in the growing marketplace of esoteric practices, often blended syncretically with Zen, yoga, Theosophy, astrology, and Vedanta, not to mention indigenous or conventional faiths like shamanism or Christianity (despite the Orthodox Church’s constant denunciation of New Age trends). Simply to revere Roerich did not necessarily make one an actual Roerichite.

Even when it did, there was never anything clear about what it meant to practice Roerichism. Like the Theosophy from which it sprang—frequently described by scholars as “intellectually undisciplined” and “promiscuous[ly] hospita[ble] to symbols”—Agni Yoga is a sprawlingly eclectic and protean system of belief, complicated all the more by the way the Roerichs themselves

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constantly changed their political and philosophical views. It is often observed that Agni Yoga can adapt to “any school of thought,” be it “ecology, astrology, vegetarianism... Buddhism,” and so on—but so can many alternative belief systems, and the question goes beyond that. Roerichism is so riddled with inconsistencies and so susceptible to selective, decontextualized readings that, out of it, numerous lines of thought can be spun, few having much to do with each other, and many in direct opposition. This certainly took place during the perpetually shifting and often disheartening sociopolitical circumstances of the Yeltsin years, when Russians turned in any and all directions for psychological and spiritual comfort. Depending on how it was tailored, Agni Yoga could appeal to the right or the left, to Russophile chauvinists or peace-loving internationalists. It spoke to savior-seeking messianists, pantheists wishing to perceive divinity in the natural world, intellectuals who agreed with Roerich’s emphasis on the societal importance of culture and the arts, and atheists looking for a more philosophically austere metaphysics. It resonated with those who expected the future to unfold apocalyptically and with those who expected it to do so noospherically.

A broad church indeed was needed to bring together so many different outlooks, and yet the only body with a chance of succeeding—the International Center of the Roerichs—failed in that task, thanks largely to doctrinal and institutional high-handedness. With unyielding zeal, MTsR director Liudmila Shaposhnikova insisted on the Center’s exclusive right to codify and publish the Roerichs’ writings; by compiling fresh editions of Nicholas’s and Helena’s essays, letters, and diaries—the “Great” and “Small” Roerich Libraries (Bol’shaja Rerikhovskaia biblioteka and Malaia Rerikhovskaia biblioteka)—the MTsR sought to control the production of a new canon that would have the authority of scripture. Most of all, Shaposhnikova claimed that the line of Agni Yogist authority descended directly to her from the departed Roerichs and their masters, Morya and Koot Hoomi. Those who refused to accept this “truth,” she maintained, were not legitimate Roerichites. Not surprisingly, such fiat sat poorly with many others in the Roerich community, including some otherwise inclined to agree with Shaposhnikova on questions of interpretation.

17 These views are set out and periodically updated on the MTsR’s website (www.icr.su), particularly in the “Zashchita imeni i naslediia Rerikhov” section, as well as the MTsR journals Mir ognennyi and Kultura i vremia. See also Daria Kucherova, “Art and Spirituality in the Making of the Roerich Myth,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Central European University, 2006); and Lunkin, “Rerikhovskoe dvizhenie,” 36–37.
A canny and well-connected operator, Shaposhnikova worked on several levels to define the “Roerich idea” to her liking and to the MTsR’s advantage. Among committed Roerichites, she asserted as dogma the status of Nicholas and Helena as ascended masters, saint-like entities in a pantheon of prophets and teachers similar to that found in Blavatskian Theosophy and the Baha’i faith. Building on the artist’s own claim that his paintings had healing powers, she proclaimed that Roerich’s art was imbued with a positive, life-giving force. Helena received greater attention than during the Soviet period as the primary author of the Agni Yoga books, and Shaposhnikova, emphasizing the physical suffering Helena endured during her lifetime, in the form of migraine headaches, back pain, and cardiac palpitations, depicted her as a martyr who allowed rays of energy to pass through her—virtually as though she had been crucified—“in order that the normal balance of energy on our planet might be restored.”

Shaposhnikova purported to be in psychic communion with the Roerichs’ spirits, making her the earthly executor of the couple’s will: a high priestess in all but name. She promoted the same eschatological scheme that Helena had preached after Roerich’s death and right before her own, according to which the battle of Armageddon had been fought during World War II and had ended with the withdrawal of Lucifer from the solar system in October 1949. Maitreya, Buddha of the Future, was enthroned in Shambhala; at some point in the coming century, he would reveal himself, ending the epoch of Kali Yuga, the age of discord, and inaugurating the bright era of Satya Yuga.

No discussion of political scandal, or of any topic that might call into question the MTsR’s carefully-cultivated image of the Roerichs as invariably virtuous, was permitted.

In the public sphere, Shaposhnikova concentrated less on esoterica and more on Roerich’s stature as a great Russian. The MTsR made no secret of his mysticism—several rooms in its museum are quite shrine-like, including the entryway, with a plastic “crystal” lit from within by an electric “fire,” and the Hall of Living Ethics—but defined it in vague and beatific terms, not cultish ones, and pointed out how he fit into Russia’s long tradition of cosmist and supernatralist thought, with reference to Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*, and to Silver Age thinkers like Vladimir Soloviev and Nikolai Berdiaev. Stress was placed on Roerich’s intellectual versatility (with frequent comparisons to

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18 Quotation from *Zashchitit' kul'turu* (Moscow, 1996), 83, as translated by and cited in Lunkin, Filatov, “Rerikh Movement,” 144.
Leonardo da Vinci\(^{19}\)); his profound insight into nature’s inherent sacrality (he was touted as an early environmentalist, and Anatolii Boukreev, the finest Russian mountaineer of his generation, spoke with feeling about his ability to “sing of Himalayan beauty”\(^{20}\)); the scholarly value of his 1925–1928 and 1934–1935 expeditions, which were portrayed as “bedrock” contributions to archaeological and ethnolinguistic understandings of Asia (even though academically useful results were meager and in fact belonged to Iurii, not Roerich senior)\(^{21}\); his pronouncements about the role of culture in bringing humankind closer to its cosmic destiny (presented as desperately-needed wisdom in a world overrun by materialism); and, most of all, his abiding love for Russia, along with his conviction that it was the messiah among nations (although Shaposhnikova continued the time-honored strategy of keeping silent about Roerich’s ever-changing feelings for Soviet Russia).

In many respects, this approach paid off. Public regard for Roerich grew. One particular bonus was the deep and longstanding respect for him that Iurii Roerich had managed to foster among the USSR’s scholarly elite upon returning to work for the Soviet Academy of Sciences in the 1950s and 1960s. This, combined with the generally greater open-mindedness of Russian academics and public intellectuals to paranormal speculation and noospheric theorization, as described by Birgit Menzel in her chapter of this volume, ensured Roerich a higher degree of credibility among Russia’s scientists and literati than he has tended to have in the West. Another asset was Shaposhnikova’s network of connections among the press and in the government. A Communist Party stalwart dating back to her student days at Moscow State University, Shaposhnikova had been a member of the Union of Soviet Writers and the Union of Soviet Journalists, and her orientalist studies acquainted her with many who went on to become highly-placed diplomats and ambassadors in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Owing to the incomplete turnover of political elites following the collapse of the USSR, this left her with extensive contacts within the Yeltsin regime, most notably Evgenii Primakov, who served the new government as head of foreign intelligence, foreign minister, and prime minister.

\(^{19}\) For example, Evgenii Matochkin, *Kosmos Leonardo da Vinchi i Nikolaia Rerikha: khudozhestvennye paralleli* (Samara: Agni, 2002).

\(^{20}\) Anatoli Boukreev, *Above the Clouds* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2001), 111, which is adorned throughout with Roerich’s Pax Cultura symbol and epigraphs from his book *Shambhala*.

Shaposhnikova could count on positive media coverage from many outlets as well. Raising Roerich’s profile became all the easier with such useful friendships at one’s disposal.

Not for long, however, did the MTsR stand unopposed. While Roerichite groups in the majority of Russian cities remained loyal, as did foreign partners in Bulgaria, Latvia, Ukraine, and Belarus, resentment of Shaposhnikova flared up in key centers, for three main reasons. First, the MTsR’s campaign to enlarge its collection of Roerich’s art brought it into conflict with other museums, particularly the *Museum of Oriental Art*, which, thanks to a 1974 gift from the *Nicholas Roerich Museum* in New York (and other bequests in the 1980s) owned nearly 300 paintings by Roerich and his son Sviatoslav, including Roerich’s prized “Architectural Studies” from 1903–1904. Argument about these works began in 1991 and continued throughout the decade, causing MOOA director Vladimir Nabatchikov to oppose the MTsR institutionally, and a number of Roerichites associated with the MOOA, among them Ol’ga Rumiantseva, Ekaterina Sheveleva of the “Roerich House” cultural center, poet Valentin Sidorov, and Natalia Sazonova of the Moscow Roerich Center, to ally with him. The MTsR lobbied the Yeltsin government intensely and received vocal support from Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov, but the Russian Ministry of Culture upheld—and continues to uphold—the MOOA’s position (this caused the MTsR’s museum to erect a “wall of shame,” castigating all of Yeltsin’s ministers of culture, especially the long-serving Evgenii Sidorov; only in the following decade was this odd display taken down). In the process, the MTsR antagonized the *Nicholas Roerich Museum* in New York, as well as the deputy

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22 The MTsR has based its argument principally on a claim that Sviatoslav Roerich, who died in January 1993, had bequeathed his family’s “legacy” (*nasledie*) to the Soviet Roerich Foundation, whose work the MTsR was continuing. However, Sviatoslav’s widow, the Indian film star Devika Rani Roerich (d. 1994), stated in 1993 that her husband had wished the inheritance to go to a *state-run* museum in Russia or be returned to India—and the museum of the MTsR had never been recognized as an official state institution. Not only was the MOOA a state museum, the MTsR was relying on a highly dubious claim of “moral right” in insisting that Sviatoslav’s wishes had any bearing on art bequeathed to the MOOA in the 1970s and 1980s. Complicating the question further were questions about whether the Soviet Roerich Foundation had violated Indian law by airlifting so many of the Roerichs’ possessions to Moscow in 1990 (the 1972 “Antiquities and Art Treasures Act” forbade the export of any artifacts owned by the family that were more than one hundred years old, and, because Roerich had been declared a “National Treasures Artist” by the Indian government in 1979, export of his art was likewise against the law), as well as the appearance of Devika Rani’s relatives from an earlier marriage as possible heirs. See interviews with NRM in 2002; and Lunkin, “Rerikhovskoe dvizhenie,” 22–23.
director of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute for Oriental Studies, Rostislav Rybakov.

A second source of friction was the MTsR’s reaction to the appearance during the 1990s of previously unknown or unpublished manuscripts that promised to shed new light on the Roerichs’ lives and careers, including the journals of several people who followed or traveled with the family, including Sina Fosdick (Zinaida Lichtmann), Dr. Konstantin Riabinin, Pavel Portniagin, and Colonel Nikolai Kordashevskii. The emergence of these texts caused the MTsR a great deal of anxiety, revealing as they did a number of personal and practical details that contradicted the Center’s image of Nicholas and Helena as politically-innocent saints. That anxiety helps to explain the fury with which the MTsR waged its next struggle, which had to do with the right to publish the diaries of Helena Roerich. Written down in nearly fifty notebooks, Helena’s diaries ended up in America, with the original held by the Amherst College Center for Russian Culture, but with photocopied and electronic versions widely available. By the mid-1990s, plans were in place for the Sfera publishing house, led by Dmitrii Popov, formerly of the reestablished Russian Theosophical Society, to annotate and publish the diaries with assistance from the NRM in New York. Shaposhnikova took legal action, blocking publication for more than ten years (it is proceeding now under the editorship of the Museum of the East’s Vladimir Rosov) and embroiling Sfera and the NRM in a barrage of lawsuits that were accompanied in the early 2000s by political pressure and, according to rumor, behind-the-scenes threats. The Sfera affair reinforced the growing impression that the MTsR was prepared to interfere at will with academic work on Roerich, and it wedged the Center even farther apart from the MOOA, the RAN’s Institute for Oriental Studies, and the NRM; by 2002, it caused a rupture between Shaposhnikova and Nataliia Spirina of the Siberian Roerich Society, who had tended earlier to be more or less in line with Shaposhnikova on matters of belief.

Thirdly, opposition to Shaposhnikova arose not just among Roerichites who found her too fundamentalist, but also among those who considered her


24 For Spirina’s complaints, see Nataliia Spirina, “Skazhem pravdu!” Na voskhode (November 24, 2002).
not fundamentalist enough. Many of these complaints came from groups who based their theology on the pro-Soviet writings of the 1920s, when Nicholas and Helena penned paens of praise to Marx and Lenin and foretold the synthesis of Buddhism and Soviet communism. Roerich societies in Tomsk, Volgograd, Lenin’s birthplace of Simbirsk, and Vladivostok (where, much to the MTsR’s consternation, Roerichite leader Mikhail Lunev claimed to be in psychic contact with the Roerichs) took Shaposhnikova to task for downplaying this aspect of Roerich ideology, and all of them became active in the 1996 presidential elections, supporting Gennadii Ziuganov and the Communist Party. Other organizations felt that they should be more forthright about the supernaturalist side of Agni Yoga. This was the case with the Karelian circle led by the cosmist Iurii Linnik and the Crown of the Heart movement in Barnaul, although the most outspoken of the independent movements has been the Bazhov Center headquartered in Cheliabinsk and led by Vladimir Sobolev, who considers himself the reincarnation of Confucius and has several times predicted not just the return of Zoroaster (who will be enthroned in the ancient temple site of Arkaim), but the outbreak of a third world war that will destroy Europe and America, leaving Russia to rule the earth.

As if all this were not enough, the MTsR had to contend with outside pressures that made it increasingly difficult to manage Roerich’s public image. Shaposhnikova might prefer to remain silent about the political side of Roerich’s career, but a host of revelations from formerly-inaccessible Soviet archives, in combination with the new sources described above, confirmed what had already been suspected or partly-known for years: namely, that Roerich’s 1925–1928 expedition involved an attempt to convince the USSR to support the artist’s “great plan” of creating a pan-Buddhist confederation encompassing Tibet, Mongolia, and parts of Siberia (in exchange, he offered to gather intelligence and propagandize the virtues of communism among the Buddhist peoples of Asia), and that his 1934–1935 expedition—and much of the acclaimed work he did on behalf of the 1935 Banner of Peace Pact—had to do with trying to sway either Japan or the U.S. to help him do the same thing, but now with an anti-Soviet slant. Western scholars had mooted these possibilities for decades, but Russian authors shied away from them until the early-to-mid-1990s, when an array of works touching on these themes began to burst onto

25 Lunkin, “Rerikhovskoe dvizhenie,” 38–40, 50–52; Lunkin, Filatov, “Roerich Movement,” 144–146. For an MTsR complaint about Lunev’s insistence that he was in communication with the Roerichs, see “Ostorozhno, Lunev!” Mir ognennyi 19 (1998).
the Russian scene. The most dramatic was the series of articles published by Oleg Shishkin in the newspaper *Segodnia* in the autumn of 1994 and later expanded into book form, arguing that Roerich had become an agent for the USSR as early as 1919–1920 and that the rest of his career was tied up with service as a Soviet spy in the full sense of the word. Shishkin’s maximalist interpretation was based on incautious readings of sources that call out for careful interpretation (such as confessions extracted from prisoners interrogated by Stalin’s secret police), and many particular points have been called into question or disproven. Still, the process of inquiry he helped open up has been carried on by formidable researchers like Aleksandr Andreev and Vladimir Rosov, and has brought much valuable information to light.

It also had a potentially electrifying effect on public perception of Roerich, especially in conjunction with another bombshell of the mid-1990s: the Orthodox Church’s war on Agni Yoga. This was part of a larger effort on the part of the Church, which had anathematized all forms of occultism in 1932 and again in 1944, and which found itself appalled at the upsurge of New Age and occultist trends in Russia during the 1990s.


29 As the Osterrieder chapter in this volume notes, the Roerichs themselves were hard-pressed to cope with the Church’s hostility to occultism. Aside from the fact that they cherished Russian Orthodoxy as an essential aspect of “Russianness” and as a legitimate reflection of the higher
included Agni Yoga in its attacks on “pseudo-Christian, neo-pagan, and occultist sects,” undermining the Roerich movement’s attempt to portray Nicholas’s and Helena’s teachings as culturally and spiritually compatible with Russian Orthodoxy. Wielding the heaviest cudgel was deacon Andrei Kuraev, whose many anti-Roerich publications include the 1,000-page Satanism for the Intelligentsia: On the Roerichs and Orthodoxy, from 1997, which charged Roerich with espionage, quasi-Nazism, and the production of bad art. In January 1999, a Church conference on “Totalitarian Sects in Siberia,” held in the Altai town of Belokurikha, declared that “the dissemination of the Roerichs’ Agni Yoga that has taken place with the support of state leaders evokes our horror... we declare that Roerich’s teachings are not only incompatible with Christianity but directly inimical to it.”

With clockwork predictability, the MTsR responded by becoming more combative than ever. Adopting as its motto the catchphrase “we shall defend the Roerichs’ legacy,” the Center lashed out at all who spoke of the Roerichs in less than ideal terms, denouncing any criticism, be it scholarly or ecclesiastical, as defamation and libel. The term “legacy” took on a twofold meaning, referring not just to the art and heirlooms that the MTsR was so determined to acquire and control, but to the Roerichs’ good name, which the Center was prepared to safeguard with Cerberus-like vigilance. In her most strikingly successful exploitation of government connections, Shaposhnikova persuaded Evgenii Primakov to transfer Roerich’s secret police file from the archives of the former KGB to the MTsR. And to Shishkin, Rosov, Andreev, and other authors writing about the Roerichs without the Center’s imprimatur, she threw down the gauntlet, declaring it an “abomination” to speak of Nicholas and Helena without reverence, as if they were “mere historical figures.”

truths revealed in the “true religion” they believed themselves to be espousing, they sought White Russian backing for their “Great Plan” between 1928 and 1935—one of their anti-Communist phases—and did not wish to alienate any potential supporters. Accordingly, during these years in particular, Roerich placed special emphasis on St. Sergius as a motif in his art and essays, and was anxious to portray himself as devoutly Orthodox.

30 Proceedings of the Bishops’ Council of November-December 1994, as recorded in Arkhiereiskii sobor RPTs (Moscow, 1995).
31 Andrei Kuraev, Satanizm dlia intelligentsii: o Rerikhakh i Pravoslavii (Moscow: Ochii dom, 1997). Also see idem, Vse li ravno kak verit’? (Moscow, 1994); idem, Ob otluchenii Rerikhov ot Tserkvi (Mstitslav’: Prosvetitel’, 1995); and idem, Khristianstvo i okkul’tizm (Moscow, 1997). Also see Rachel Polonsky, “Letter from Peryn,” Times Literary Supplement (June 7, 2002): 5.
32 “News about Religion in Russia,” www2.stetson.edu/~psteees/ relnews/ 9903a.html
33 See the “Zashchita imeni i nasledia Rerikhov” section of the MTsR website; as well as Kucherova, “Art and Spirituality,” 309–311.
Imperfect Consolidation: Roerichism in the Twenty-First Century

Whether or not the dictum holds true that bad publicity is better than no publicity at all, the abovementioned scandals did not prevent Roerich’s fame and popularity from soaring even higher in the 2000s than they had during the 1990s. The number of active Roerichites is estimated to have grown, with the quantity of circles and groups rising to several thousand, and that of individual followers to at least the tens of thousands. More than that, though, the level of generalized and informal admiration for Roerich skyrocketed in the new century.

Much of this had to do with the booming international market for fin-de-siècle Russian art over much of the decade. As part of this overall trend, Roerich’s paintings fetched unprecedentedly high prices at Sotheby’s, Christie’s, and elsewhere, a fact that redounded to his credit at home. Many Roerich works were repatriated, as in 2007, when the famed Rostropovich-Vishnevskaya collection—which included Roerich’s Treasure of the Angels (1905)—was purchased by tycoon Alisher Usmanov and installed in St. Petersburg’s Constantine Palace. Beyond that, in what might be termed an M. C. Escher or Maxfield Parrish effect, Roerich’s unique, eye-catching style continued to earn him a much higher degree of popular recognition among the wider public than any number of artists from his time who are treated with greater seriousness by art historians.

Much more crucial was the way Roerich became linked in the public mind with the confidence of an economically healthier and more assertively nationalistic Russia—due somewhat to general circumstances, but also to assiduous image maintenance on the part of Roerichite institutions throughout the country, especially the MTsR. Roerich centers in Moscow and St. Petersburg became steadily more entrepreneurial in making themselves part of Russia’s expanding tourist infrastructure; starting in 2001, a state museum-institute dedicated to the Roerich family was established in St. Petersburg, with the assistance of St. Petersburg University and Liudmila Mitusova, daughter of Helena Roerich’s favorite cousin, the composer Stepan Mitusov.
ism helped to ensure that Roerich’s name appeared as far and as wide as possible: on the hull of a naval vessel in Russia’s Pacific Fleet, as the designation of planetoid #4426, and as the name of a peak in the Altai. Roerich’s Banner of Peace flag, with its symbol of three crimson orbs, was carried to the top of Mount Everest, flown into space by the shuttle Columbia, and displayed aboard the Mir International Space Station. The Center also continued its cozy relationship with Russia’s state authorities. Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov remained an ally, and President Vladimir Putin has spoken frequently and effusively about Roerich’s importance as an artist and philosopher. Also, during the first half of the decade, the federal procuracy took up the MTsR’s case against Sfera, and the Administration for the Prevention of Economic Crimes (UBEP) charged Dmitrii Popov and Daniel Entin with conspiring to cause economic harm.  

The prominent Master Bank, which uses Roerich-inspired logos, bankrolls much of the MTsR’s publishing activities. Not that the MTsR was completely triumphant. More and more, regional groups found it in their best interest to conform to the MTsR’s line, but not always. Tensions persisted between the MTsR and the Siberian Roerich Society, and outright war continued between the Center and the Museum of the East (as the MOOA renamed itself); the MTsR’s animosity toward the NRM still burned as well. Externally, the Church’s campaign against Roerichism took its toll, despite the ironic fact that the two worldviews increasingly converged during the decade in their Russophilia and, as cultural critic Rachel Polonsky puts it, in their insistence that “the West has defiled Russia’s sacred space and led her away from salvation.” The irony is physical as well: the reconstructed Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the most visible symbol of Orthodoxy’s post-Soviet resurgence, stands a two-minute walk from the MTsR—close enough for the two institutions quite literally to hurl imprecations at each other. (Church criticism remains a sore point with Roerich admirers, even less pugnacious ones; the response is generally to argue that Nicholas and Helena remained Christian, but, like Tolstoy in his later years, had a purer understanding of the faith than did the Church, or to maintain—as does the St. Petersburg Museum-Institute of the Roerich Family—that the family never abandoned

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38 Author’s interviews in October 2002 with staff of the Nicholas Roerich Museum. Lunkin, “Rerikhovskoe dvizhenie,” 23, mentions how the MTsR also turned to Putin, with less success, for help in its dispute with Moscow’s Museum of the East.


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former home of Mikhail Botkin, Roerich’s worst enemy during his years as an employee of the Imperial Society for the Encouragement of the Arts. The museum’s website is www.roerich.spb.ru.
Orthodoxy at all.) The MTsR created an additional firestorm between 2005 and 2007, when Vladimir Rosov, whose penetrating examinations of Roerich’s political ambitions had caused the Center great embarrassment since the 1990s, completed the dissertation “Nicholas Roerich’s Russian-American Expeditions to Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s,” in fulfillment of his higher doctoral degree. Even though Rosov had the backing of thirty academicians and doctors of historical science, the MTsR, joined by a host of other Roerichite organizations, launched fierce attacks on him in the press, seeking to discredit the October 2005 defense of his dissertation with accusations of “deficient scholarship” and deliberate “slander.” For more than a year, the furor over Rosov’s dissertation became a cause célèbre of nationwide proportions; in the end, Rosov’s foes failed to block him from a successful second-stage defense in the spring of 2007.

To some extent, the MTsR’s shrillness of tone and the continuous rehashing of the oddities and mysteries surrounding Roerich’s career have damaged the artist’s credibility; there are plenty who roll their eyes or shake their heads at the mention of his name, and the slang term rerikhnut’sia, coined during the 1990s and punning on the verb rekhnut’sia (“to go crazy”) shows every sign of surviving into the new century. All the same, the prevailing view of Roerich is in many ways as the MTsR and its allies would have it. Followers ignore anything unflattering about Roerich, and non-followers, even when they are aware of such things, tend not to dwell on them. The MTsR’s signal accomplishment during the Putin years has been to formulate in the public mind an equation of Roerich with “Russian-ness” (russkost’) without sacrificing his usefulness as a symbol of universal peace and multicultural tolerance. Roerich’s paintings are held up as testaments to the unique virtue of the Russian land, and even his mysticism, properly framed, plays well to the longstanding Slavophile stereotype that many Russians have of themselves as spiritually richer and more intellectually flexible than close-minded, narrowly empirical materialists in the

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40 The latter point is made in the display notes—and was pressed upon me vehemently by a tour guide—at the St. Petersburg Museum-Institute (interview of May 2008, name withheld).

41 Note that Rosov already possessed a kandidatskaia degree, the equivalent of a Ph.D. in the West; the Russian doktorskaia degree carries greater weight. A sampling of attacks on Rosov, or discussion of those attacks, can be found on the MTsR website; “Kul’tura, ne politika… K voprosu o neudachnoi dissertatsii o Nikolae Rerikhe,” Literaturnaia gazeta (September 26, 2006); “Ètika lzhenauki” and “Staroe pod maski novogo,” both in Novaia gazeta (November 23, 2006); and “Zaiavlenie Sibirskogo Rerikhovskogo obshchestva po povodu doktorskoi dissertatsii V.A. Rosova,” Voskhod 156, no. 4 (2007): 15–18.
West. In this context, any questioning of Roerich’s worth as an artist or a thinker, or of his wider motivations (especially by foreigners, or based on research done in foreign archives), could be construed as an insult to Russian pride—a discursive approach that served Roerichites well in a Russia governed by a more openly nationalistic regime than before, and eager to reject the perceived humiliations heaped upon it by the West during the years of shock-therapy transition to capitalism. Some Roerichites have taken this line of reasoning to egregious, if not disturbing, extremes: the Roerich society in Sochi blames “anti-Russiaism” in the West on the influence of Jews and Masons, and Roerichite cultural critic Ksenia Mialo has named J. R. R. Tolkien, the Catholic Church, the “judaic media,” “global capital, NATO, and the Internet” as “implacable enemies of the pure ‘Russian soul’.” On a related note, neo-Eurasianists such as Aleksandr Dugin have encouraged a free-floating association between Roerichite thought and their own quasi-millenarian vision of a Russia rising to glory over the “Atlantic” West, although this is not an association sought by the MTsR or Agni Yogists in general.

And yet Roerichism can also be used to buttress Russia’s self-presentation as a nation with natural ties to cultures in the east, most particularly the Buddhist peoples of Central Asia and the Russian Federation itself, not to mention India. Whatever scholars may say about the authenticity or inauthenticity of Roerich’s Buddhist pretensions, or of his affinity for other Asiatic belief systems, it is true that certain non-Russians have gone some way toward embracing Roerich, either as an exemplar of friendly relations between faiths, or even recognizing him as one of their own. Roerich is a figure of respect among the Buddhists who worship at the famed Kalachakra Temple in St. Petersburg’s northern suburbs (Roerich himself was one of the artists who helped design the temple’s interior during its 1909–1915 construction). Farther afield, Roerichism is popular among the indigenous peoples of the Altai, where it is often associated with or incorporated into shamanistic or Ak Jang (Burkhanist) practices, and a similar dynamic has been observed among Kamchatka’s native

Itelmen. The Roerich group in Kazan is engaged in an interesting hybridization of Agni Yoga and Sufism, and, outside the country, Roerich’s 1926–1927 residence in overwhelmingly Buddhist Ulan Bator has recently been commemorated by the transformation of his quarters into a house-museum, with support from the Mongolian government.

This sort of receptivity is most prominent and heartfelt in India, where the Roerichs’ connections with the Nehru-Gandhi and Tagore clans are still remembered fondly, and where Roerich, in 1979, became one of only nine individuals—and the only non-Indian—to be named a “National Treasures Artist.” As noted before, the USSR had stressed these ties during the Cold War, and the Putin regime lost no time in exploiting them as part of its larger strategy of asserting a more muscular presence on the world stage than the Yeltsin government had managed to do. Russia’s ambassador to India, Alexander Kada-kin, long an admirer and promoter of Roerich, has served as the deputy director of India’s International Roerich Memorial Trust, and, with the assistance of no less than President Putin’s wife Liudmila, he played a mammoth role in organizing a December 2002 exhibition of Roerich’s work in New Delhi, at the National Museum of India.

Putin himself has referred to Roerich as an example of “the spirit of closeness that binds all people”: an excellent illustration of how those who praise him as a paragon of russkost’ are often just as ready to use him as a symbol of “boundless internationalism” when it suits their purposes.45 This is not always cynicism—the Roerichs’ own writings, after all, provide ample backing for both views—although the contrast with nationalist strains of Roerichite ideology is sometimes jarring. Whatever the case, Roerich’s name has appeared with surprising frequency in civic and academic discussion of international relations and new directions in foreign policy. Mainly, he has been cited by political scientists and strategic thinkers in Russia looking for models of “multipolarity” and “global pluralism” to counter U.S. hegemony and seemingly triumphalist or confrontational political theories from the West, such as Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis or Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations”; here, Roerich appears in the same company as other “internationalist” thinkers, such as Pitirim Sorokin, Sun Yat-sen, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.46

45  Putin quote from India Today cited in Markus Osterrieder’s chapter in this volume; “boundless internationalism” comes from Lunkin, Filatov, “Roerich Movement,” 142.
(As noted above, Roerich has, paradoxically, been claimed as a kindred spirit by neo-Eurasianists whose aspirations are decidedly less ecumenical).

These internationalist views have generally been voiced outside the confines of the Roerich movement. Still, anything that earns the artist more approbation works to his followers’ benefit, and most Roerichite organizations have echoed this rhetoric whenever possible. On numerous occasions, the MTsR has taken advantage of its UNESCO status to boost Roerich’s visibility at the United Nations, trying to have him acknowledged as a humanitarian and peacemaker on par with Dag Hammarskjöld or Albert Schweitzer. This exercise has yielded meager results, as Roerich continues to be poorly known or perceived as an oddity by those outside his natural constituency. With evident pride, the MTsR displays a large photograph of UN General Secretary Kofi Annan being presented with a flag stamped with Roerich’s Banner of Peace emblem. How justified that pride is, though, remains open to question: although it may be a trick of the camera, the non-Roerichite viewer cannot help but be struck by the nonplussed look on Annan’s face—a small amusement illustrating a more significant dilemma.

Concluding Remarks

All signs indicate that, for the foreseeable future, the Roerichs’ fame will continue to flourish in Russia. The celebration of Nicholas and (to a lesser extent) Sviatoslav as artists of note is unlikely to abate, nor is there much chance that George’s scholarly reputation as an orientalist will dim. A casual survey of Russian bookstores, whether in Moscow and Petersburg or in Novosibirsk and Irkutsk, shows right away the wide acceptance Helena has gained as an author of ezoterika and, increasingly with the passing years, as a philosopher in her own right.47 Even Roerich’s poetry, particularly his Flowers of Morya collection (1907–1921), is working its way slowly into the Russian literary canon.48

By no means, however, does renown in a generalized sense translate automatically into religious appeal, and the future of the Roerich movement is more difficult to predict. Over the course of almost two decades, the MTsR has

47 For instance, Mikhail Maslin, ed., Russkaia filosofiiia (Moscow: Algoritm, 2007), 468–469, is one of several encyclopedias or general histories that give Helena Roerich serious consideration as a member in the canon of Russian thinkers.

48 Verses from Roerich’s Flowers of Morya (Tsvety Morii) poems can be found in Russkaia poeziia. XX vek: Antologiia (Moscow: OLMA, 1999), 61–62, while N. K. Rerikh, Pis’mena (Moscow: Profizdat, 2006), was released as part of a major “Poetry of the Twentieth Century” series.
turned itself into Russia’s, if not the world’s, single most powerful Roerichite institution—and yet its goal of monopolizing control over Roerichite doctrine and practice remains far out of reach: various and sometimes radically different strains of Agni Yoga exist throughout Russia and the regions neighboring it, some outright hostile to the MTsR and many feeling no need to pay allegiance to it. Especially now, in an era so enormously shaped by information and social-networking technology, diversity and individualized syncretism appear to be the wave of the future for Roerichism, as for most New Age systems of belief. Nor is it particularly clear which conception of Agni Yoga will prove dominant in the end. Will Russophilia win out over universalism, or vice versa? Or will the coexistence of both continue?

At certain points throughout his career, Roerich appears to have anticipated such unpredictability, posing the following question in his 1935 essay *The Builder (Stroitel‘)*:

> Can the sower know for certain how the seeds he has sown will grow? The sower may suppose, but it is not given for him to know. The builders of wondrous temples and fortresses never knew whether they would be destined to complete their work.49

One would dearly love to have the opinion of Roerich himself on the MTsR, and on all the many disputes that have been fought in (and over) his name for so long. About such things we can only speculate, but the sole certainty is that, when Roerich dreamed of the temple he hoped someday to leave behind, he dreamed of one, not many. Unfortunately for him, the probability that a true and single church of Agni Yoga will ever materialize in Russia remains just as remote now as it did in his and Helena’s lifetimes.50

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50 Such a development may be more likely in the Baltic states, where, according to researcher Anita Stasulane, public discourse regarding the Roerichs and their spiritual views has become increasingly orthodox and dogmatic, with significant support from the state and its educational institutions. July 2009 conversation between Birgit Menzel and Anita Stasulane, relayed to the author in September 2010.