



The NEW AGE *of* RUSSIA

OCCULT AND ESOTERIC DIMENSIONS



EDITED BY ■ BIRGIT MENZEL ■ MICHAEL HAGEMEISTER
■ BERNICE GLATZER ROSENTHAL

The New Age of Russia
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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Transliteration follows the Library of Congress system except that the familiar English spelling is used for well-known persons and terms such as:

Andrei Bely
Elena Blavatsky
Fedor Dostoevsky
Nikolai Gogol
Maxim Gorky
Gurdjieff, Gurdjieffian, Gurdjievist movement
Nicholas and Elena Roerich
Vladimir Soloviev
Peter Tchaikovsky
Lev Tolstoy
Leonid Vasiliev
Boris Yeltsin

Kabbalah
Shambhala

The Library of Congress transliteration is used in the footnotes.

ILLUSTRATIONS

On the cover

1. Ex libris from Grigorii O. Möbes (1910-1920s) (private collection K. Burmistrov);
2. Bidia Dandaron (private archive Vladimir Montlevich);
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(private archive Russell Targ)
p. 178 “Tosha” from the book Sergei Beliaev, *Ostrye kunty. Put’ russkogo mistika. Tosha–russkii Budda* (St. Petersburg, 2002) (www.ark.ru)

INTRODUCTION

BIRGIT MENZEL

This book is not about what the Orthodox Church and traditional religions regard as sects. It is not about magicians, superstition and folk beliefs, although pagan double-belief¹ (*dvoeverie*) and some traditional folk beliefs in Russia lived well into the 20th century. It is not about traditional Asian religions, including Buddhism and Shamanism, although much is borrowed from them, and Russian mixtures sometimes come closer to their original spheres than in Western countries. And it is not about popular entertainment or the spiritual marketplace, although many formerly exclusive concepts and experiences have entered main-stream commercialized culture since the 1990s in both East and West. This book is about non-conformist spiritual seekers, about individual quests beyond the dogmas of both the political and the religious powers that ruled Russia throughout its history, especially in the 20th century. It is about Russians, mostly intellectuals, who, with a problematic experience of modernity in an atheist and post-atheist society, turned to non-conventional metaphysical quests and practices. These generally unknown phenomena in Russian society are relevant to an understanding of the post-Soviet present.

In early 20th century Russia, ambivalence about the new world and the uncomfortable recognition of the ultimate uncertainty of all human knowledge, which neither scientific nor legal experts nor the churches could resolve, intensified the desire for wholeness, harmony and synthesis and led many people unhappy with modernity to embrace the new occult doctrines.² Soviet rule, especially in Stalin's time, attempted to eliminate all metaphysical thought.

1 Double-belief is a term for a long-living mixture of Christian-orthodox and pagan belief systems in Russia. See Iurii Lotman, Boris Uspenskii, "The Role of Dual Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (Up to the End of the Eighteenth Century)," In: Iu. Lotman, B. Uspenskii, *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. Ann Shukman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1984), 3–35 (Russ. in B. Uspenskii, *Izbrannye stat'i v 2 tomakh*, t. 1 (Moscow, 1994), 219–253.

2 See Isabel Wünsche, *Harmonie und Synthese. Die russische Moderne zwischen universellem Anspruch und nationalkultureller Identität* (Munich: Fink, 2008). See also, Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul. Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 246, 248.

People engaged in occult or esoteric thinking and practices had to go underground or were sent to the GULag. Yet, we must not forget that there were uses of the occult by the Soviet state. These ranged from trading the life of the theosophical Buddhist mystic Nicholas Roerich in exchange for U.S. dollars and Soviet propaganda abroad in the 1920s and 30s to experiments with mind control and psychic warfare for political and military reasons, which was also practiced in the U.S.³ The end of the Soviet Union and the breakdown of a bipolar world-order have affected concepts of history, as well as the sciences and humanities. It has brought a reconsideration of boundaries and paradigms of rationality. Coming to terms with the global experiment of communism has revealed shadows of modernity and enlightenment. Post-colonial approaches have re-evaluated perspectives beyond traditional hierarchies and the asymmetries of power and have helped develop holistic concepts that integrate Eastern and Western philosophies, religions, artistic practices and life-styles. Quantum physics and mechanics have expanded basic notions in the sciences and opened up new dialogues with religion and the humanities. Seen from today's post-modernist perspective some phenomena from early 20th century recur. For example, Theosophical and Anthroposophical associations were refounded in the 1990s and reestablished their international networks.⁴ Other phenomena are altogether new, but all have become part of a new context that challenges conventional paradigms.

Since the fall of communism, and even before, there has been a marked return of religion in both the East and in the West. It can be seen in the sense of a reverence for the great established religions, but also in a wide range of quests for new spiritual orientations. This yearning has been manifested on all levels of society, in high culture as well as in popular culture and everyday life.

One of the fastest growing areas involved is an immersion in the ideals and practices of the occult and esoteric. Many Western scholars of contemporary Russia have encountered this prevalence of occult and esoteric ideas and topics

3 For Roerich see Robert C. Williams, "Mysticism and Money: Nicholas Roerich," In: *Russian Art and American Money. 1900–1940* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980), 111–147. For Russia see Henry Gris, William Dick, *The New Soviet Psychic Discoveries* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1978), chapter 3. For the U.S. there are numerous studies. One of the first was José M.R. Delgado, *Physical Control of the Mind. Toward a Psychocivilized Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Alex Constantine, *Virtual Government, CIA, Mind Control Operations in America* (Venice, CA.: Feral House, 1997); John Marks, *The Search for the 'Manchurian Candidate'. The CIA and Mind Control* (New York: Norton, 1991).

4 For the revival of theosophy see Bernice Rosenthal, "The Occult in Modern Russian and Soviet Culture. An Historical Perspective," In: *Theosophical History* 4 (1992–93), 252–259.

in post-Soviet culture either through the vast literature or simply by visiting bookstores and street vendors in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as other cities, such as Kazan', Novosibirsk and Khabarovsk. It is almost impossible to understand contemporary Russian literature without being equipped with an encyclopedia of the occult.⁵ In the 1990s no less than 36 percent of all non-fiction publications in the humanities dealt with occult-esoteric topics.⁶ Some former Soviet thick journals, such as *Literaturnoe obozrenie* and *Nauka i religii*, have adopted a whole new profile with publications on aspects of the occult.

This revival has been described by some Western scholars, for instance, Eliot Borenstein, Valentina Brougher and Holly deNio Stephens, as a phenomenon of popular culture, and one might be quick to assume that it represents a primarily one-way import of New Age ideas and publications flooding into commercialized Russia from the West.⁷ We will argue, that the occult revival in Russia is by no means simply a question of popular culture. The fascination with esoteric, supernatural and non-orthodox spirituality, with popular utopian and pagan folk traditions in post-Soviet Russia can be found on all levels of intellectual and artistic life, including the sciences and politics. One can discern a considerable impact of esoteric ideas and ideologies not only in the humanities, but also on the sciences: newly established organizations based on "Russian cosmism," a hybrid ideological concept of human self-

5 See Birgit Menzel, "The Occult Revival in Russia Today and Its Impact on Literature," In: *The Harriman Review*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 2007).

6 For an empirical study on esoteric orientations of the population in Russia today see Demian Belyaev's chapter in this volume. In 1993–2001, 63% of the 76 % who declared themselves as Orthodox, believe in supernatural powers present in life, 35% of them believe in magic and 30% in fortunetelling, although only 8% had once been active and only 3% are still actively involved in magic. See Iurii Sinel'nikov, *Izmenenie religioznosti naseleniia Rossii. Pravoslavnye, musul'mane, suevernye povedenie Rossiian* (Moscow: Nauka, 2006). Also see the rich body of material on non-traditional religions and belief systems in M. Burdo [Bourdeaux], Sergei Filatov, *Sovremennaia religioznaia zhizn' v Rossii. Opyt sistematicheskogo opisaniia*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Logos, 2005).

7 Valentina G. Brougher, "The Occult in Russian Literature of the 1990s," *Russian Review* 56, (1997), 1, 111–124; Holly deNio Stephens, "The Occult in Russia Today," In: *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca/London: Cornell UP, 1997), 357–76; Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, "Russia's Occult Revival," In: *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, August 1, 1999; Eliot Borenstein, "Suspending Disbelief: 'Cults' and Postmodernism in Post-Soviet Russia," In: *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society Since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 437–62; idem, "Survival of the Catchiest. Memes and Post-Modern Russia," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 48 (2004), 3, 462–83.

perfection and salvation, such as the *Association for a Complex Survey of the Russian Nation* (*Assotsiatsiia po kompleksnomu izucheniiu russkoi natsii, AKIRN*), which has ties with several Pan-Slavist circles, closely collaborates with the *Slavic International Union of Aviation and Aeronautics* (*Slaviakosmos*), the Mir Station, and the *Museum of the History of Aviation and Aeronautics*.⁸ The sheer number of conferences and research projects, university course offerings and college textbooks on supernatural powers, from bioenergy theories, the so-called “torsionic” fields, to UFO’s and cosmic consciousness, produced by scientists at the highest academic ranks has been so disturbing that in 2002 a commission within the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN) was founded to warn and propagate against the spread of “obscure pseudoscience.”⁹ The occult is also connected to the healing sciences. Shamanism as an alternative medicine has entered scientific discourses in Russia and in the West.¹⁰ In July 2005 and July 2010, the International Congress of Transpersonal Psychology was held in Moscow for the first time. Transpersonal psychology, a branch of professional psychology, was founded in the 1960s by the Czech-American psychiatrist Stanislav Grof and the American psychologist Ken Wilber and is based on an esoteric approach and worldview, accepting paranormal experience as a reality.¹¹ We will show that today’s occult revival should be seen, first of all, as the result of seven decades of the forceful suppression of metaphysical thought in Russia. The spiritual vacuum caused by

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- 8 See, for instance, the 8th Pan-Slavist Convention in April 2001, held on the initiative of the Pan-Slavist Council of N. I. Kikechev. The AKIRN was founded by Evgenii Troitskii. See Marlène Laruelle, “Futuristic Religion and Air Space Conquest: The Conception of the Universe (*Kosmos*) in the Russian Cosmism Ideology,” paper delivered at the ICCEES, July 28, 2005, Berlin.
- 9 See “Obskurantizm v postsovetskuiu èpokhu,” In: *Rossii: Tret’e tysiacheletie. Vestnik aktual’nykh prognozov*, no. 8, vol. 2 (Spetsvypusk ‘Nauka v Rossii’: Stsenarii razvitiia 46–161), ed. Eduard Krugliakov (Ekspertnyi Sovet RAN pri administratsii Prezidenta po bor’be s lzhe-naukoi) (Moscow, 2004).
- 10 See Dagmar Eigner, *Ritual, Drama, Imagination. Schamanistische Therapie in Zentralnepal*, Habilitationsschrift Medizin (Vienna: Universitätsverlag, 2001); *Boľ’shaia èntsiklopediia narodnoi meditsiny* (Minsk, 1999).
- 11 See the Russian Transpersonal Psychology and Psychotherapy Association (www.atpp.ru), which was founded in 2002. For a report on the conference “Human Consciousness, Human Values in an Interconnected World; A Transpersonal Approach,” see www.transpersonalcentre.co.uk/moscoweurotas.htm. See also Boris Falikov’s chapter in this volume. For a basic study on this see *Irreducible Mind. Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*, ed. Edward Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly et al (Boulder/New York: Rowman&Littlefield, 2007, 2010).

the downfall of Communism together with a traditionally strong desire to believe helps to explain the impact of belief systems outside the established religions. As Mikhail Epstein writes, “many more people now exit atheism than enter the churches. They exit atheism without arriving, they stay somewhere at the crossroads.”¹² The Russian people have a desire for wisdom, unity and a holistic being, which reaches out beyond the dogmas and traditions of the established religions:

Imagine a young man from a typical Soviet family who for three or four generations has been completely cut off from any religious traditions. And now that he hears a calling, the voice of God from above, this young man is unable to determine into which church, under which roof he should take cover. All historical religions are equally alien to him. He seeks belief and finds only religious confessions [*veroispovedaniia*]. [...] And it is precisely in this gap between [the yearning for] belief and [traditional] confessions that the poor religion emerges, one without dogma, books, or rituals. [...] This crossroads is in fact the crucial point, where all paths merge. A point of common belief, equally accepting all belief systems as leading to one unified belief. [...] Simply belief, belief in the Good, [...]. Poor religion is a religion without further definition.¹³

For Epstein, this particular search for spiritual reorientation which he calls “poor religion” or “religious modernism”, is a uniquely post-atheist phenomenon, and thus inseparably linked with the Soviet past. While all believers had formerly been equal in relation to the monolithic atheist state, the negative sign has now been turned into a positive one in the same totalizing undistinguished way. This uniqueness, however, is open to question, if the religious renaissance is seen in a broader international context. Wouter Hanegraaff, professor of the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam, argues that “the emergence of modernity itself is intertwined with the history of esotericism.” However, “surviving examples [...] of western esoteric currents are not recognized as an integral part of our collective cultural heritage and are insufficiently documented, studied and preserved.”¹⁴

¹² Mikhail Epshtein, *Na granitsakh kul'tur. Rossiiskoe–Amerikanskoe–Sovetskoe* (New York: Slovo-Word, 1995), 315.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Wouter Hanegraaff, *Masonic & Esoteric Heritage. A New Perspective for Art and Conservation Policies*, <http://www.amsterdamhermetica.com>; and quoted from Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World. Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13.

It is commonly maintained that during the Soviet period occult traditions were cut off. This book offers material to revise such opinions. Soviet civilization defined itself as a purely rational ideocratic society, based on work, on science, and empirical knowledge, yet its cult of the rational was taken to such an extreme that one could speak in terms of a “rationalistic religion.” In the 1920s and again in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when science merged with utopian thinking, when during the proclaimed “cosmic era” borders shifted between science and science fiction, certain disciplines, for example, telepathy, hypnosis and parapsychology—three topics traditionally connected with spiritual and occult thought—all experienced a boom. Commissions at the Academy of Science explored the phenomena of alien intelligence, intergalactic UFOs, the Tungus meteorite in Siberia and anthropoids (the Abominable Snowman/Yeti) in the Tibetan Himalayas.¹⁵ Nuclear submarines were commissioned to find the mythical “blue continent” Atlantis on the bottom of the sea, Khrushchev declared 1960 in New York, that human reason can nowadays create miracles to be possible, and Iurii Gagarin was paralleled with Christ’s ascension to and return from heaven.¹⁶ All these projects evoked strong popular interest and were accompanied by extended discussions in popular scientific journals.¹⁷ Paradoxically, with its strictly defined borders of science—the humanities seen as part of science—its borders were at the same time much less strictly defined, so that phenomena excluded from the Western scientific paradigm were studied or declared scientific within the Soviet academic system.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a marked reaction against this ‘cult of the rational’ and countervailing concepts became popular in both artistic practice and everyday life. Expressions of reaction against “Soviet-speak” include the playful undermining of the official rituals or political self-representation by mystical circles and sects in the two capitals and in other

15 On parapsychology and the Abominable Snowman see *Informatsionnye materialy Komissii po izucheniiu voprosa o ‘snezhnom cheloveke’*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1958–59). On the hypotheses about the Tungus meteorite, see N. Vasil’ev, *Tungusskii meteorit. Kosmicheskii fenomen leta 1908g.* (Moscow, 2004), 256–266. See Matthias Schwartz’ chapter in this volume.

16 On Atlantis see for instance Ekaterina Khagemeister, “Udivitel’noe skhostvo dat geologicheskoi istorii Atlantidy s noveishimi dannymi o lednikovom periode,” *Tekhnika-molodezhi*, No. 12 (1956), 17–18; Khrushchev quoted in Vladimir L’vov, “Na zare kosmicheskoi éry (Malaia kosmicheskaiia éntsiklopediia),” *Vokrug sveta* no. 10 (1961), 4; V. Mezentsev, “V gostiakh u bogov,” *Znanie-sila*, no. 9 (1962), 2.

17 See Matthias Schwartz, *Die Erfindung des Kosmos. Zur sowjetischen Science Fiction und populärwissenschaftlichen Publizistik vom Sputnikflug bis zum Ende der Tauwetterzeit* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2003), 83–104.

cities; a rediscovery of eastern religious concepts and philosophy; and experiments with drugs and transcendental practices that expand consciousness. The occult opened up paths of metaphysical exploration, spiritual growth, and individual self-empowerment.

All this raises questions, such as: What are the effects of the idiosyncratic Russian expressions of reactions against Soviet order and reality (i.e. to be found in such cults as an obsession with trash¹⁸)? Where can one pinpoint connections or divergences between the old (Soviet) cults and various new ones? How have the borders between established religions, such as orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism/Hinduism, Judaism and unconventional religious practices to be found in Shamanism and other esoteric beliefs, shifted in this recent turn to religion? How did occult ideas influence, shape or merge with Soviet science, politics, culture and society which explicitly declared themselves as atheist and anti-metaphysical? How did popular occult uses change after the Revolution? And how did they change after Perestroika? How and by whom were modern, 20th century scientific and technological tools applied in the Soviet period? How were they used to deconstruct other belief systems?

While the return of traditional religions has been studied extensively,¹⁹ superstition, sects and magic have been analyzed,²⁰ and recent studies on 20th century Russia have reconsidered paradigms of rationality focusing on emo-

18 See Mikhail Epshtein, *Cries in the Wilderness* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2002), russ. *Novoe sektantstvo. Tipy religiozno-filosofskogo umonastroeniia v Rossii (1970–1980)*, ed. Roman Levin (Holyoke: New England, 1993; and Moscow, 2005).

19 See for instance Kimmo Kääriäinen, Dmitri Furman, “Religiosity in Russia in the 1990s,” In: *Religious Transition in Russia*, ed. Matti Kotiranta (Helsinki: Kikumora, 2000), 28–75; Kathrin Behrens, *Die russische orthodoxe Kirche: Segen für die ‚neuen Zaren‘? Religion und Politik im postsowjetischen Russland (1991–2000)* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002); John and Carol Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent. Faith and Power in the New Russia* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

20 See Sergei Filatov, *Sovremennaia Rossiia i sekty, Inostrannaia literatura*, no. 8, 1996 (<http://magazines.russ.ru/inostran/1996/8/filatov.html>). Faith Wigzell, *Reading Russian Fortunes* (Cambridge, 1998); Aleksandr Panchenko, *Khristovshchina i skopchestvo. Fol'klor i traditsionnaia kul'tura russkikh misticheskikh sekt* (Moscow: OGI, 2002); Laura Engelstein, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom. A Russian Folktale* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Aleksandr Etkind, *Khlyst (Sekty, literatura i revoliutsiia)* (Moscow: NLO, 1998); William F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight. Magic in Russia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). See also the excellent study of Leonid Heller/Michel Niqueux, *Geschichte der Utopie in Russland* (Bietigheim–Bissingen: ed. tertium, 2003); much shorter *Histoire de l'Utopie en Russie* (Paris: PUF, 1995).

tions and the irrational, in conditioning individuals by State dogma as well as shaping a specific type of Soviet civilization,²¹ it is quite remarkable how little scholarly attention has been given to spiritual and occult practices and thought in Soviet and post-Soviet society. Reasons for this reluctance can be found both in the specific historical conditions and in problems met by scholars.

In Russia, the borders between science and religion and the Occult have differed from those in the West for several reasons: Russian Orthodox Christianity, rooted in the Byzantine, i.e. Eastern tradition, has always been open to mystic experience and esoteric knowledge. Mystical, utopian and pagan roots in religious and intellectual belief systems and more generally in Russian folk culture were stronger than in modern Western societies and had a pervasive influence throughout the twentieth century. Asian philosophy and religions, including indigenous Shamanism and Sufism, have been part of the Empire, transferred by Siberian, Buriat, Caucasian and Central Asian traditions, and survived into the 20th century, offering alternatives to European Russians.

Research on this topic also faces methodological problems. There is a great variety of material which at the same time is extremely scattered, with sources hardly accessible, often unreliable, and the scholar is faced with mystifications and mythologizing. Last, but not least, research faces terminological challenges, especially when Russian and Western scholars try to cooperate. So explanation of the terminology in this book is necessary.

Terms

All terms to describe the phenomena presented in this book have been controversial. Most of them are not terms the practitioners would use to describe themselves. Likewise, the academic field established in the West has offered definitions which did not always find the approval of the authors of this volume and the Russian scholars involved in its production. The terms Occult and New Age have been rejected by most Russian members of, what I will call here the occult underground. Russian adherents of cosmism for instance strongly reject any connection with the occult or the esoteric,²² although by Western

21 See Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia. A Study of Practices* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Caryl Emerson, "Soviet civilization. Its Discontent, Disasters, Residual Fascinations", *The Hudson Review*, 44 (Winter 1992), 4, 574–84; Corliss Lamont, *Soviet Civilization* (Kessinger, 2007); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley/CA., 1995).

22 Information from Anastasiia Gacheva (Fedorov-museum in Moscow) by e-mail (12.1.2009).

academic definition they certainly would be included. There are also newly coined terms such as *Russian Sannyasin*, a Hindu term for wandering monks who dedicate their entire life to spiritual pursuits. Since the 1990s the term *esotericism* (*ézoterizm*) has been emphasized by academic scholars to distinguish it from mass cultural popular uses which are called *ézoterika*. The *History of Esotericism* (*istoriia ézoterizma*) has even become an academic program for universities as part of the new subject of Religious Studies.²³

The disagreement on terms defined in the West, can in part be seen as a consequence of historical conditions and confusion in the just emerging field of academic research in Russia. For several reasons, terms defined in Western scholarship need modification or further explanation when applied to Russian material. Many terms, which were originally quite specific, have become catch-alls dictated by the state, still argued about, and inaccurate. Thus, the term commonly used in Russia for a wide range of phenomena related to the spiritual realm is *mysticism* (*mistitsizm*). Although mysticism and occultism have little in common, especially since the occult particularly in Russia has always claimed to be rational, scientific and part of evolutionism, irreligious or even antireligious, Soviet officials, however, confused this term by polemically denouncing most diverse phenomena as mysticism: metaphysical religious philosophers (such as Sergei Bulgakov, Vladimir Soloviev and Lev Losev), as well as what they saw as occultism in the sciences, popular traditions of both Christian Orthodox religion, folk beliefs and Siberian Shamanism.

It is not the aim of this book to offer new theoretical approaches or advance a single coherent theory of the occult, esoteric or New Age. What it offers is a collection of material, information and exchange of ideas between scholars of different countries and disciplines, in the aim of providing a documentary foundation and, by bringing different discourses together, advancing this field of knowledge. It is more descriptive than conceptualizing; for the latter much more research is needed.²⁴ In assembling this volume, the editors, mindful of the problems of terminology, and for pragmatic reasons, asked all contributors

23 Curricula were developed already since 1994. As an independent course on the 'History of Esotericism', it was taught since 2000 and became mandatory only since 2007. A basic curriculum was developed at the Russian Humanitarian University in Moscow (RGGU). See *Diskursy ezoteriki. Filosofskii analiz*, ed. Larissa Fesenkova (Moscow, 2001).

24 For a fascinating discussion of an array of paranormal phenomena, including mysticism, the occult, and parapsychology, see Jeffrey Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible. The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2010). For the first time, it brings the Sacred and the Occult into a serious dialogue which inspires an application to Russia.

to follow the same basic assumptions in order to establish some common understanding of terms. These assumptions are:

The term *New Age (OF Russia)* is used first of all as a metaphor pointing to the challenge of naming; but it also suggests application of George Chryssides's term (in Kemp and Lewis' *Handbook of New Age*) to Russia: as a "theoretical construct", a "segmented polycentric integrated network" (Ferguson), lacking a unified worldview, ideology and organization, which comprises various areas as education, religion, ecology, health care and medicine. For the contributors, despite many differences, there are several common features based on:

- the goal of self-improvement, or self-empowerment, by way of self-education to get in touch with the divine essence in oneself and ultimately achieve self-deliverance;
- the unity of physical, spiritual and mental, the emphasis being on first-hand spiritual experience;
- the ecological worry of preserving nature threatened by destruction and of the future fate of the earth and cosmos, which are perceived as a unity;
- the conviction of the effect of energetic and psychic powers and the belief in a transformation of the earth and the cosmos into a new age (Aquarius), which can be achieved by the collective effort of a fundamentally changed way of life; the hypostasis of the feminine. The future age is seen as a female one.²⁵

The term *esotericism*, which, from the Greek word *esoterikós* (inward), i.e. secret teaching, can be traced back to Greek philosophy of the 3rd century A.D., and can be applied to all cultures. Today, in a semantic context shaped since the late 19th century, *esoteric* is used in two different senses: (1) as a general term for occult practices, teachings and communities, and (2) as an "inner path" to certain spiritual experiences that go beyond following dogmas in an external or formal manner, and which is connected with tradition, secrecy and initiation.

Nothing is naturally esoteric. Esotericism is a designation of the historical role of certain ideas and methods within a culture rather than a description of their intrinsic characteristics. As an adjective, *esoterical* describes a culture's attitude towards ideas rather than the ideas themselves.²⁶

25 George Chryssides, "Defining the New Age," In: *The Handbook of New Age*, ed. Daren Kemp/James R. Lewis (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), 5–24.

26 Joseph Dan, *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion. Selected Papers presented at the 17th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religion* (Mexico City, 1995); *Gnostica 2*, ed. Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 128.

The term *esotericism* is used here according to Antoine Faivre's definition, as a "mode of thought" that can be recognized by four intrinsic and two non-intrinsic characteristics:

1. a belief in invisible and non-causal 'correspondences' between all visible and invisible dimensions of the cosmos;
2. a perception of nature as permeated and animated by a divine presence or life-force;
3. a concentration on the religious imagination as a power that provides access to worlds and levels of reality intermediary between the material world and God;
4. the belief in a process of spiritual transmutation by which the inner man is re-generated and re-connected with the divine; the non-intrinsic, frequent but not always present characteristics are:
5. the belief in a fundamental concordance between several or all spiritual traditions and
6. the idea of a more or less secret transmission of spiritual knowledge.²⁷

The *Occult* has been the most controversial term. As "concealed wisdom" (Latin: hidden, secret), it is here seen as linked to, though not identical with *mysticism* as "secret experience,"²⁸ but also to the term *esoteric*.²⁹ The occult is generally considered "higher knowledge" in the East in the sense of Buddhism, Shintoism, Hinduism etc., but "lower knowledge" in the West. As "hidden teachings" it should be seen together with the inner circle of many religions and religious belief systems. This means, it is usually connected to a holistic (in terms of connecting body, mind and soul) world view, a spiritually oriented belief system, and practices of harnessing and making use of basic forces in many fields. The occult is about power.

Based on Maria Carlson's definition, the occult "embraces the whole range of psychological, physiological, cosmological and spiritual phenomena and applies the study of all arcane sciences (astrology, alchemy, the mystic traditions of the main religions, Kabbalah, Sufi, Vedanta, Zen, etc.) to these phenomena. Secondly: the occult always comprises both a certain theoretical or philosophical concept and a number of practices which are supposed to lead

²⁷ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 10–15; *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006), 336–340.

²⁸ See "mysticism," Robert Galbreath, "A Glossary of Spiritual and Related Terms," In: *The Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting, 1890–1985*, ed. Edward Weisberger (Los Angeles/New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 376–377.

²⁹ All three terms, *occult*, *mystic* and *esoteric*, are often used synonymously, although referring to different historical and ideological contexts.

the person involved to an experience of higher, ultimately divine knowledge and consciousness.”³⁰ This is considered a path to deliverance and divination within the human life.

However, sometimes the occult is not used to achieve higher consciousness or divine knowledge, but to deliberately make practical use of self-serving or “dark”, evil forces. A special affinity between the occult, mysticism and literature has always stemmed from a similar belief in the magical power of the Word. Language as a literary device may then be chosen for its magical effect or its symbolism, rather than as an aesthetic value or for explaining ideas. In this sense, the occult can be seen as a relative term applied to the uses of the Soviet state and also as a term to denote an underground with exclusive access to secret knowledge and power.

Just as the term *esoteric*, the *occult* can be seen as a certain perspective; a culture’s attitude rather than certain phenomena and ideas themselves. Some examples may illustrate the problem and considerations of the editors to include certain topics or perspectives and exclude other ones: The Tungus meteorite discussed in Matthias Schwartz’s chapter is certainly a topic of popular mythmaking and legend and it can be a topic of cryptogeography, but it is not necessarily a topic of the occult in the concept suggested above. The same applies to superstition, *fin-de-siècle* spiritualism or telepathy, which can also be analyzed within conventional sciences such as psychology and sociology (fashions of popular culture). But they can be related to the occult, if viewed and discussed in the context of “magical thinking”, or harnessing power and control, which applies not only to popular culture, but to philosophy and orthodox religion, or linguistics, as in phenomena such as “imiaslavie” (the belief in the magic and mystic qualities of the name of God). Another example of applying magical thinking and energy theories to language is the assumption of a destructive effect on speakers using “mat”-language (curse words).

Neither the religious aspects of Russian philosophy nor the relations between canonical Western and Russian philosophy will be part of this discussion on the occult. However, Soviet science can be related to the occult, in that in certain research beyond the mainstream scientific paradigm, particular scientists and scientific communities perceived a world-view as a form of metaphysics, reaching out for a hidden meaning, an ancient source of holistic knowledge or teaching, perhaps a spiritual redemption or a new form of gnosis.

30 Maria Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth. A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875–1922* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 10, 15.

Shamanism is foremost a topic of ethnography and anthropology. It has also become, if only in the past few decades, a topic of both conventional and non-conventional medical science and pharmacology. Shamanism can, however, be related to the occult, if it is seen and discussed, as in Natalia Zhukovskaia's chapter, with regard to the need for a holistic (in the eyes of the shaman), spiritually based belief of people in arcane powers in the modern world,³¹ which is connected with either healing forces and practices or, less frequently, with evil forces, "mysticism of violence" and demonizing practices.

Mind control is first of all a topic of political science. But it becomes a topic of the occult, if viewed in the context of manipulating those with a belief in the occult, hidden uses of technology and science, policing, and using hidden forces and knowledge for exerting or combatting political power.

Literature, philosophy, bio-political utopias, research about cosmic influences and reference to cosmic powers—the line could be continued—can be related to the occult, if they are connected with a belief in an integrated and lively magic power to transform and redeem the world, and if this can be identified as the driving force of one or several Russian writers, scientists, philosophers, artists or political leaders.

Contributions

This book is in part based on a conference on *The Occult in 20th Century Russia* held in Berlin in March 2007 and brings together scholars from Germany, Russia, France, England, America, and Canada, most of whom have explored relational metaphysical aspects of Soviet and post-Soviet society from different disciplines—anthropology, history, literary scholarship, psychology—for many years.

Proceeding from the research that has been done, above all extending Bernice Rosenthal's book *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, the main issue discussed in this book is whether today's rejection of the rational and reference to irrational and anti-rational sources represents a radical break with past Soviet society or to what extent it represents a continuation of the anti-rational reaction to it, and thus an intensification of elements in what has been called Soviet civilization. Most contributors argue that the contemporary scene is a continuation, however weak and distorted the connections may be. Cosmism and Roerich were the main channels of influence connecting the early, late and

31 Both Eastern and Western or mostly Western – a question to be asked if discussing the Russian/Soviet/post-Soviet context.

post-Soviet periods. However, some contributors, such as Burmistrov and Aptekman, describe this new era as a break, while others, such as Falikov, describe altogether new developments. New occurrences are, above all, organized forms of the occult including international networks. Lines of conflict occurred wherever traditions were maintained, such as Shamanism or secret societies. A mixture of rational and mystical elements, which Julia Mannherz finds in the publications of popular occult print media before the Revolution, has in fact been a feature which many contributors have identified in their chapters. While Stalin tried to suppress metaphysical and religious movements, the political occult has nevertheless been an important driving force from the 1920s to the end of the Soviet period. Examples appear in Burmistrov's, Shishkin's, Osterrieder's, Hagemeister's, McCannon's and Sedgwick's chapters. An indirect consequence of the political dimension is the sacralization of forbidden knowledge, which is addressed by Leonid Heller but can be traced throughout the occult Soviet underground. Since different aspects reoccur in different times or contexts, some overlappings are inevitable. They have been marked by cross-references. Wherever possible, comparative perspectives help to avoid specifying certain phenomena as typically Russian or Soviet and thus projecting exclusiveness where there is none, or ignoring specifics by overstressing similarities.³²

There are three parts, loosely structured chronologically: 1. Prerevolutionary roots and early Soviet manifestations; 2. Material related to spiritual practices from the 1930s to late Soviet society, and 3. Material on the Occult Revival in Late and post-Soviet Russia (1985 to the Present). However, some chapters give a general overview or treat specific aspects or earlier manifestations of the occult and esoteric and their subsequent reception. Some chapters focus more on the political aspects, others on the cultural and literary aspects in different time periods.

Julia Mannherz analyzes the prominent role of the occult in popular entertainment of the late tsarist empire. Whereas previous scholars have asserted that modern media such as newspapers and forms of entertainment such as fun fairs, the theatre and the cinema propagated rational views that debunked "superstitions", she argues that the messages of these institutions were mixed. Reports about gullible spiritualists were usually printed in the same issue as articles that stressed the power of mysterious forces to influence the lives of ordinary Russians. Similarly, some allegedly occult journals taught secret tech-

32 This refers, for instance, to certain marginalized parts of both Western and Soviet sciences, main-stream historiography, astro- and space physics.

niques, while simultaneously satirizing them. Mannherz concludes that a widely shared uncertainty about the forces that governed individual fates existed among contemporaries, an uncertainty that was by no means resolved in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

Konstantin Burmistrov discusses occultism in the drastically changed conditions of the 1920s. He focuses on the members of four underground esoteric societies—The Order *Emesh Redivivus*, the Order of the Moscow Rosicrucians and Manichaeists (*Orion-Khermorion*), who called themselves neo-Rosicrucians, the Order *Lux Astralis*, and the Moscow Templar Order. Especially interested in Hermeticism, Magic, and Kabbalah, they believed that their occult studies would be accepted by the society and would benefit all humanity. Most of them perished in the Gulag.

Oleg Shishkin shows some early Soviet uses of the political occult. Based on archival materials, it reveals the attempts of Aleksandr Barchenko (1881–1937), a doctor and a mystic, to study “brain rays” or what today would be called mental telepathy. He was a writer and a member of a Rosicrucian Order, then broke with it in order to organize a secret society of the Kremlin and the OGPU-NKVD elite. This was done by his disciples, Ivan Moskvina and Gleb Bokii (formerly Lenin’s personal secretary). Barchenko himself continued his research at the *Neuro-Energetic Laboratory*, until 1937, when he was accused of belonging to a Masonic society, arrested and executed. Although he was not a member, the society did exist and was connected with the mystical quests of some high-ranking Bolsheviks.

Markus Osterrieder introduces Nikolai Roerich (1874–1947) and his wife Elena who developed an esoteric system called Agni Yoga. Their ultimate objective was to establish a vast “new country” in Central Asia, as the earthly expression of the invisible kingdom of Shambhala (the “holy place” where the earthly world is linked to the highest states of consciousness), thereby preparing humanity for a New Age of peace and beauty. He led two missions in search of Shambhala, but after Stalin declined to support his project, Roerich turned his attention to prominent Americans.

Michael Hagemester’s chapter illustrates the fusion of Soviet science and the occult by presenting a new perspective on Konstantin Tsiolkovskii (1857–1935), who is considered the “father of Soviet space travel.” His thought was rooted in a “cosmic philosophy,” a unique syncretism of vitalism, panpsychism, and monadology, with aspects of Gnosticism, Theosophy and Spiritualism. Tsiolkovskii’s goal was to open the cosmic way to the transfiguration and perfection of humanity, and finally to immortality and eternal salvation. Space travel was only a means to achieve this goal.

Birgit Menzel traces the seeds of the post-Soviet occult revival back to the 1960s. She explores occult ideas in official publications on literature, culture, and science; esoteric groups and teachings in the artistic milieu of Moscow and Leningrad; occultism in scholarly study of Eastern religious mysticism and mythology; and uses of the occult in secret political and scientific institutions. Unlike Theosophy in the early 20th century and unlike the contemporary Western New Age movement, the Russian occult underground of the 1960s and 1980s did not imagine the future as a hypostasis of the feminine and did not emphasize sexual liberation.

Leonid Heller describes a parallel universe, mostly underground, of esoteric literature. This was a complex entity composed of three elements: esoteric literature per se, science fiction (which he calls “cosmic opera”), and “mythological prose” (stories about the flowering and decline of ancient and exotic civilizations). Throughout, he finds echoes of the occult and esoteric literature of the Silver Age and the 1920s, and of the Fedorovian theme of immortality.

Matthias Schwartz focuses on “alien encounters” in Soviet science fiction the most popular literary genre and the key literary channel for occult topics. Works about alien encounters appealed to readers on all levels of Soviet society, including the so-called scientific intelligentsia, because it encrypted taboo spiritual and religious practices. By reflecting alien encounters, science fiction explored the unknown, concealed, and mysterious aspects of human existence. In a society emerging from feudalism and geared to the future, this was a main-spring of the ideology.

Marlène Laruelle discusses cosmism, a doctrine constructed in the 1920s and reinforced by the recent conquest of space. She limns cosmism’s roots in Western and Russian thought and argues that cosmism reflects a unique experience of modernity, because of its emphasis on technology, not so much for its own sake, but as a means to totally transform humanity.

Demian Belyaev focuses on the resurgence of traditional religions since the 1990s which up to now is accompanied by interest in occult and esoteric doctrines and alternative religions. Works by Blavatsky, Roerich, Gurdjieff, and Daniil Andreev were published legally and more and more people consulted healers, sorcerers, and astrologers. Based on a wide-spread representational survey, this chapter presents esoteric theories and teachings, originating in a post-Soviet Russian subculture, which are based on experience and result in practices that had a major impact on a number of individuals.

In the 1980s, Aleksandr Dugin (b. 1962) belonged to an occultist dissident group that studied the teachings of Georgii Gurdjieff. Mark Sedgwick shows how he became primarily a Traditionalist (a school that originated in early

20th century France that totally rejects the modern world). Dugin's version of Traditionalism was especially appealing to persons who had experienced and reacted against Soviet reality, the cults of science and progress. At the end of the Soviet period, Dugin modified his views and incorporated aspects of Eurasianism.

Marlène Laruelle connects a new religion, *Rodnoverie* (a form of neopaganism) to the post-Soviet search for identity. She describes *Rodnoverie* as an alternate spirituality, rooted in Asian religions, esotericism, occultism, astrology, and UFO research. Here, too, a marked difference to Western paganism and the New Age movement is the absence of a female element and a marked emphasis on national uniqueness.

Marina Aptekman reveals the occult element in post-Soviet counterhistory by examining three novels: Ilia Masodov's *The Devils*, Vladimir Sorokin's *Be Like Children*, and Polina Dashkova's *The Source of Happiness*. All three novels treat the Russian Revolution not as a political but an occult process, an alchemical Great Work aimed at reworking mortal material into an immortal synthesis of the soul, matter, and consciousness. Although these authors have different perspectives, they all use the motif of eternal life and its significance in the occult tradition and in Soviet mythology to link Russia's past and present and to recreate and mythologize 20th century Russian history.

Natalia Zhukovskaia treats Russian *intelligenty's* perceptions of Shamanism. They regard it as a world view and as a practice that offers physical and spiritual healing, reveals the future, explains the present by way of the past, makes it possible to connect with dead ancestors, reach other worlds, stave off misfortune, and even remove the threat of death. It is this practical aspect that links Shamanism and the Occult, that particularly interests the urban intelligentsia.

John McCannon shows that the "amazing elasticity" of Agni Yoga has enabled it to influence contemporary Russian cultural and political life in various ways. The Moscow based International Center of the Roerichs espouses a hagiographic and messianic view. Other centers have a more academic and slightly more universalist stance. His chapter also touches on the ways that the ideals of Agni Yoga have been co-opted by political thinkers, environmentalists, other modern esotericists, artists, and the general public.

Boris Falikov recounts attempts by Russians interested in Transpersonal Psychology (which originated in the United States at the end of the 1960s and reached Russia in the early 1970s) to "russify" the discipline by connecting it to the early 20th century occult and religious revival. Their attempt failed, partly because the Orthodox Church criticized Transpersonal Psychology's supposed

occult underpinnings. As a reaction to these recent campaigns adherents of Transpersonal Psychology chose the ambivalent strategy to promote their teachings through popular culture as the least ideologically controlled sphere of post-Soviet society.

Two concluding chapters comment on comparative aspects.

Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal points out that occultism surges during periods of spiritual crisis, i.e. periods when the dominant ideal of a society loses its luster, leading people to search for "something else." Examples of such periods include prerevolutionary and early Soviet Russia; Russia after Khrushchev's de-Stalinization; late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia; and the United States since the 1960s. The dominant ideals were very different, and they faded for different reasons, but the response—a turn to the occult—was the same. The occultism of each period, addressed contemporary concerns and reflected the cultural legacy.

Jeffrey J. Kripal, an expert in American esotericism, views the Russian materials in the mirror of the American materials and vice versa. He emphasizes the boundary erasing aspect of mysticism and the global networks of mystics that developed, while also noting nationalistic and messianic aspects in Russian mysticism. He then turns to and suggests to address the "gap" that existed, in both countries, between persons who have had a mystical experience and those who have not, to the "silences" on these personal experiences, which result in "secrets" that have existed in both countries, on different levels, for different reasons.

There are several topics missing in this volume: Rasputin's role in the impact of esoteric and mysticism in connection with sexuality in Russia; Anthroposophy and its influence on literature, the healing sciences, and theater, the work of Leonid Vasiliev on extra-sensory perception (ESP), the interrelations of Russia with occult and esoteric dimensions in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This research would have to be based on material in archives hitherto inaccessible, that Russian scholars have collected, and on research presented on countries, such as Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Ukraine.

THE OCCULT AND POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA

JULIA MANNHERZ

The occult featured prominently in Russian popular entertainment in the last decades of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mainstream newspapers entertained their readers with reports about mysterious events, cheap pamphlets advertized the recreational qualities of magical practice, while theatres and in particular film made use of the newest technological developments to show the supernatural in action. Jeffrey Brooks has argued that authors of popular texts “felt a duty to enlighten their less well-educated readers and free them from superstitions that limited their understanding of their modern world.”¹ This article revisits the seemingly incongruous affinity between stories about supernatural forces and the quintessentially modern media of mass consumption. It argues that the relationship between the occult and the public sphere was much more complex than previously suggested and characterized by ambiguity.

Leisure-time pursuits in fin-de-siècle Russia were exemplary modern phenomena. The rise of commercial literature as well as the increasing popular success of theatre productions and of film screenings owed much to the rapid process of urbanization and to the relaxation of censorship regulation in the Russian empire of the post-reform period. While five daily newspapers were printed in St. Petersburg in 1860, this number rose to 22 in 1880.²

One of the most successful newspapers, which also frequently reported supernatural events, was *The Petersburg Flyer* (*Peterburgskii listok*). The sheet was aimed at a poorly educated audience of ordinary workers and employees. Founded at the height of the reform period in 1864, *The Petersburg Flyer* increased its numbers of weekly issues from the original four to five in 1871 and to seven in 1882. It attained a circulation of 9,000 in 1870, a number that rose

I wish to thank Ian Forrest for commenting on this article.

- 1 Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917* (Princeton, 1985), 247.
- 2 The comparative numbers for Moscow are 2 (1860) and 7 (1880). Louise McReynolds, *The News under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press* (Princeton, 1991), 293.