

## BOOK REVIEW

**Birgit Menzel; Michael Hagemeister & Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (eds.), *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*, München & Berlin: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012, 448 pp. ISSN 1868-2936, ISBN 978-3-86688-197-6.**

This volume assembles different authors who look at the backgrounds of esotericism in Soviet and post-Soviet culture. The publication is a result of the research conference “The Occult in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russia: Metaphysical Roots of Soviet Civilization” organised by Birgit Menzel from 11 to 13 March 2007 in Berlin. The book covers different aspects of esotericism in Russian culture examined by seventeen contributors from Germany, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.

Addressing the subject of Russian esotericism is not a novel phenomenon. Over the past decade, Russian researchers have published a significant number of works on esotericism in Russia. However, this body of literature is confined mainly to the period before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. This gives the impression that esotericism went underground or was exterminated in Soviet concentration camps during the Soviet era. In fact, esotericism strongly affected all levels of society even under the communist rule. This book aims to fill this gap by focusing mainly on the occult in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. In the preface to the book, editor Birgit Menzel states that “this book is about non-conformist spiritual seekers” stressing that it is about “intellectuals, who, with a problematic experience of modernity in an atheist and post-atheist society, turned to non-conventional metaphysical quests and practices” (p. 11).

The editors have produced a well-structured volume presented in a chronological framework in four consecutive parts and eighteen chapters. Part One, “Prerevolutionary Roots and Early Soviet Manifestations” of esotericism in Russia provides the necessary historical and cultural background for exploring the metaphysical aspects of Russian society. It starts with a chapter by Julia Mannherz who deals with the occult in popular culture before the Bolshevik Revolution by analysing newspapers, journals, and forms of entertainment such as fun fairs, theatre, and cinema. These examples convincingly show that Spiritualism had a significant impact on entertainment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The contribution of Konstantin Burmistrov is linked with the

previous one. He discusses the history of esotericism during the first two decades after the Revolution of 1917 marked by activities of several esoteric societies: *Emesh Redivivus*, *Order of Orion-Khermorion*, *Lux Astralis*, and *the Moscow Templar Order*. This period represents a particular phase which differs from the epoch of evolution of esotericism in tsarist Russia and its revival in the next Soviet stage. Oleg Shishkin goes even further in showing trends for strengthening the defence capability of the Soviet regime through paranormal power and an esoteric quest of some high-ranking Bolsheviks. The author focuses on Aleksandr Barchenko who worked in OGPU-NKVD secret research centres. Markus Osterrieder carefully traces a network of personal connections, demonstrating how Nicholas and Helena Roerich tried to make use of the Soviet leadership to establish a vast “new country” in Central Asia. The example of fusion of science and esotericism reviewed by Michael Hagemester provides an insight into the thinking of “father of Soviet space travel” Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, who claimed that he had received messages from super-evolved beings remarkably similar to the Mahatmas of Helena Blavatsky.

Part Two, “Manifestations in the Soviet Period (1930–1985)” provides, firstly, new and particularly fresh insights into esoteric movements in Russia from the 1960s to 1980s. Birgit Menzel makes a comparative analysis of the Russian occult underground movement and the one of the Western, New Age. In turn, Leonid Heller, who has carefully examined texts, demonstrates how esotericism provided inspiration for Russian writers in the genres of science fiction and “mythological prose” between the 1960s and 1980s. Matthias Schwartz, who shares the same interest in literature, performs an exceptional analysis of Soviet science fiction and draws our attention to its emergence among “scientific intellectuals” during the peak of the so-called Great Terror and the Cold War. The contribution of Marlène Laruelle highlights Cosmism as fusion of Romantic thinking and Organicism, the latter of which assumes the existence of laws of harmony between humankind, nature, and the cosmos with strong allusions to Christianity.

Part Three, “The Occult Revival in Late and Post-Soviet Russia (1985 to the Present)” begins with Demyan Belyaev’s overview of occult and esoteric doctrines after the collapse of the communist regime. The author points out that the Orthodox Church serves only as a “public religion”, while consciousness of Russia is dominated by esoteric subcultures. It is demonstrated by the analysis of the attitude towards elements of esoteric worldviews based on survey data obtained from 1,200 respondents. Mark Sedgwick, through an insightful

examination of the case of a Soviet dissident Aleksandr Dugin, demonstrates the way Traditionalism of the Soviet era as a form of esotericism developed towards the post-Guénonian Eurasianism as an increasingly fashionable political doctrine. The study carried out by Marlène Laruelle shows the connection between the search for pre-Christian ancestry and the occult in the multifaceted *Rodnoverie* movement, in which esotericism plays the key role necessary for reconstruction of mythological knowledge and enrichment of a neo-pagan religious practice. The subsequent contribution of Marina Apteckman demonstrates the intertwining between her emphatic interest in contemporary Russian literature and esoteric themes. Accordingly, her chapter is firmly rooted in the literary analysis of three post-Soviet novels (Ilya Masodov's *The Devils*, Vladimir Sharov's *Be Like Children*, and Polina Dashkova's *The Source of Happiness*) selected for discussion on interpretation of the Bolshevik Revolution not as a political but as an esoteric process reflecting dissatisfaction with interpretation of the real history. The paper on shamanism among the Russian intelligentsia by Natalia Zhukovskaia deserves special scholarly interest. It provides a detailed picture of correlation between shamanism and esotericism in the Soviet and post-Soviet era, based on her field work as a participant-observer among shamans in Central Asia and among followers of "experiential shamanism" in Russia. John McCannon traces the Roerich movement from the explosion of public interest in Nicholas Roerich in the late 1980s to the consolidation of the movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A careful examination of the history of the International Centre of the Roerichs (ICR) helps a reader to better understand the origins of a rupture between the Roerichite groups and the messianic Moscow-based ICR. The chapter by Boris Falikov on Transpersonal Psychology (TP) in Russia seeks to find the reasons why Russian TP turned into popular culture. It also analyses the process of its commercialisation by selling the way of access to alternative states of consciousness.

The final part of the book "Comparative Aspects, Continuity and Change" offers rather different but complementary contributions to the collection. In the opening chapter, Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal addresses occultism as a response to a spiritual crisis and takes readers through different historical periods. Although the author does not necessarily offer new insights into the social and political contexts, their connection with the spiritual crisis has been clearly revealed, as well as helpful summaries on the key figures have been offered. She presents factors of the spiritual crisis not only in Russia, but also in the United States, and discusses their interplay. The entire book benefits greatly from the concluding essay by Jeffrey J. Kripal who challenges the established assumptions by

recognising that much still remains unknown. He points to the global character of esoteric movements. Indeed, after having looked at the close link between the intellectual currents shown by the contributors of this volume, it is possible to conclude that esotericism is a global tradition that travels across the world. It has both transcultural and local dimensions taking root in many distinct cultures.

Lastly, the bibliography selected by Michael Hagemester is an essential part of the book. Unfortunately, there is no index, a tool which would be very useful given the wealth of information packed in the collection. Nevertheless, the book is also available in a downloadable version making it possible to run simple word searches across the text.

While some contributions are less interpretive and more documentary by nature, they are no less satisfying both in terms of content and presentation, which are the strengths of the book. Finally, it needs to be said that the authors certainly deserve respect for the analyses provided, and for the fact that this book is a valuable addition to scholars' collections, since it helps fill the gap in the research topic that has been little studied. The book is a significant achievement in the field of Slavic studies, as well as in the area of historiography of esotericism.

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