

special section

Introduction.

New Age spiritualities of (post-)socialism

The religious dimension of atheistic envisaged socialist societies has been a major issue in the Western history of religion and sociological studies during the 20th century. What was implied by religion was earlier established confessions and institutions and scholars studied internal changes and the survival strategies for such beliefs in the face of ideological suspicion towards religious matters and through the endorsed active destruction of religion by socialist states. Research on religion in the socialist countries themselves has not been particularly straightforward. It resulted in the elimination of research interest in religion as a whole and the total abolition of religion. It also took place in other constellations. So, for example, the socialist countries of Eastern Europe promoted the history of atheism with a Marxist-Leninist critique on religion which, in its paradigmatic stance, constructed and controlled religious discourse. Many in-depth studies on religious topics were also placed in the margins of humanities. Both Western and Eastern European research on religion in socialist societies was differently imposed on Cold War politics; even the organiza-

tion and development of studies on religion within the particular disciplines of each country varied significantly.¹

Academic interest in contemporary religion around the globe increased in the second half of the 20th century.² Remarkably, Western Euro-American, and Eastern European studies did not address the non-institutionalized forms of

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religion in the Eastern bloc – which had been well observed in Western countries and increasingly discussed in the scholarly literature by the start of the 1970s by Western European and American sociologists. Most studies on socialist

countries aimed at so-called monotheistic (mainly Christian or Christianity-inspired “sects”) religions, their history, as well as their “gradual decline” within Socialism, as well as oriental religions such as Buddhism and Islam, have been studied from historical and ethnographical perspectives. Socialist scholarship (some literature can be found, particularly in the USSR) had been quite aware of the newest wave of religious movements or so-called *mass mysticism/occultism* in the “Western countries”, as well as in the East (for example, in South Asia) that emerged after WWII. Scholars of religion regularly produced special digests about these contemporary religions or cults based on the foreign periodicals of the “capitalist West.” Nevertheless, the underground groups and practices amidst that the “developed socialism” were hardly considered – it was as if they had never existed. This research distortion led to many misunderstandings and re-inventions in the public sphere after the failure of Eastern European regimes. The mass media of the crisis in the 1990s started to appropriate the discourse of a “religious boom” after a “spiritual vacuum” during the socialist era. In addition, several regional scholars

used these metaphors while noting that Eastern European and Soviet trends had a secondary character compared to their Western counterparts and were therefore just late in arriving.

Primarily it has established a connection to new religious tendencies, namely, the rapidly spreading, gradually institutionalizing, and commercializing of *neoesoteric* and *parascientific* practices on a global scale, which became known under the (in many ways, still problematic) designation of *New Age* spirituality. This (mainly note used as self-description) term goes back to an expectation of a qualitatively different epoch in human history and is related to those holistic teachings and self-realization practices that became increasingly popular in Western European and North American religious or spiritual *seeking* milieus that have emerged since the late 1960s. In their understanding of *New Age*, they were referring to both the esoteric and the scholarist (also millenarist) visions of the 20th century, for example, Alice Bailey's theosophical *Age of Aquarius*, including *New Age* (1951), or Thomas Kuhn's *paradigm shift* (1962) (both specifically articulated decades later in one of the acknowledged "bibles" of the *New Age* movement, Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980)). According to scholar of religion Olav Hammer, *New Age* "no longer refers to a specific movement that expects the coming of a new age," it describes at the highest level a "wide array of ideas and practices, largely united by historical links, a shared discourse and an *air de famille*."³ Moreover, today's *New Age* spiritualities can be understood as a firm constituent of global mass culture that diffuses through all spheres of public and private life.

FROM A HISTORICAL point of view, Eastern Europe can be seen as one of the most central regions of global *New Age* (think, for example, of such prominent transnational movements inspired by the teach-



ILLUSTRATION: KARIN Z SUNNVISSON

“SOME RECENT STUDIES HAVE ARGUED THAT THE SOCIALIST ERA IS CHARACTERIZED BY A NEW AGE UNDERGROUND.”

ings of the Bulgarian Petar Danov or by the Russian Roerich family which, for a long time, went beyond the frontiers of their own cultures, or even psychotronics/parapsychology or UFO groups). However, the dramatic political ups and downs of Eastern European history in the 20th century is why the other traces of *New Age* remain poorly documented, scarce, and incomplete. Thus, we cannot easily identify the continuities or clearly imagine even Eastern European intercultural exchanges. Yet, there has been sufficient material to deny the previous hypotheses of total dependency on the Western *New Age* in late Socialism – the entire picture is more complex than previously imagined. In fact, some recent studies have argued that the socialist era is characterized by a *New Age* underground, and that there are individual dynamics, including through international contacts, initially via print media. In current studies of the late social-

ist era, scholars of the *New Age* and alternative movements in Eastern Europe participate in processes that decolonize the established scientific modes of interpretation.⁴ The future responses of scholars to the following questions will undoubtedly impact theories of *New Age* spirituality and regional interdisciplinary studies, commuting between two analytical perspectives – global influences and local adaptive practices and innovations. As much as we would like to accelerate research processes, scientific understanding of the *New Age* spiritualities and their effects on the public sphere during the late socialist era, with its

miscellany of cultural, political, and economic characteristics, is still insufficient because this period is only just beginning to be scrutinized. Without doubt, the late 1980s and the early 1990s in Eastern Europe represent a particular “breaking line” between the underground, “invisible” *New Age* spiritualities and their later public manifestations within the publishing “tornado” of esoteric literature, which contributed to the emergence of new discourses on esotericism, as well as new groups, courses, centers and organizations. Some practices of *New Age* spirituality that were formed in the socialist era have been extended following the change of regimes.

BALTIC WORLDS HAS in this special section “*New Age* and alternative beliefs in socialist Eastern Europe” invited scholars from different disciplines to address topics relating to the diversity of new religious beliefs in Eastern Europe during the socialist era and beyond. The authors, five scholars studying the multiple expressions of *New Age* spirituality on their own material, propose to view *New Age* from various angles.

The sociologists Andreas Anton and Ina Schmied-Knittel open the collection of articles with their contribution on the beliefs and paranormal practices in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The

dominant “scientific worldview” did not presuppose the existence of mystic experiences. Consequently, the fight against everything “irrational” in the GDR was more successful compared to many other socialist countries, even in the Soviet Union, which had an immense impact on the Eastern German population. Investigating what GDR citizens thought about occult topics, namely, “telepathy, psychic dreams, premonitions, hauntings and spirits, parapsychology, astrology, alternative medicine, or UFOs,” the authors note that “towards the end of the GDR, only a few people were still secretly dealing with relevant topics. Overall, the findings show a largely successful marginalization of deviant practices and belief systems in a society with a stringent order of social reality.” Moreover, paranormal beliefs became more resistant than the teachings and practices of the mainstream Christian denominations, which gradually declined through the state’s secularization politics.

The anthropologist Anna Ozhiganova addresses how the unofficial late-Soviet alternatives of homebirth were linked to the utopic thinking in Russian culture. Nourished by the modernist utopia of creating a “new man”, and Soviet futurist space exploration projects, the Soviet waterbirth movement underwent many transformations to become part of the Soviet, and after the dissolution of the USSR, post-Soviet. *New Age* mythology brought a range of new identities into play. One of them, referred to as a “dolphinist sub-culture” by scholar of religion Mikael Rothstein, started to flourish as early as the 1960s. Ozhiganova describes the attempts by Igor Charkovskii, a guru and pioneer of the *Aquaculture* method in the Soviet waterbirth movement, to adapt humans through mediations of aquatic mammals, particularly dolphins, to water. Similarly, the vision to expand human power to the oceans was a continuation of the ideas of the Russian cosmists who strived to conquer the universe. Being less of an intellectual but more of an influential guru, Charkovskii, helped by his followers and powerful benefactors in medicine, conducted experiments on pregnant women, babies and dolphins,

at the boundaries of societal norms. He was inspired by prominent Western figures from the Western *New Age*, such as American John Lilly, Frenchman Jacques Mayol and New Zealander Estelle Myers. These figures were also interested in the dolphin experiments in the USSR. Ozhiganova concludes that apart from the underdevelopment of scientific research in human-dolphin connections at the global level in the 1970s–1980s, “it is obvious that they should be viewed as a part of *New Age*, with its ability to combine mystery and advanced science, spiritual search and social experiment.” Born in the late decades of the Soviet Union, Charkovskii’s movement was transformed over a long period from a local grassroots utopic project to being part of a global *New Age* scene, particularly in the Russian-speaking diaspora.

APPROACHING the religious-historical perspective that refers to the concept of esotericism, which goes back to its earlier forms in the early 20th century, scholar of religion Victoria Vitanova-Kerber presents a panorama of *New Age* spiritualities in socialist Bulgaria. According to Vitanova-Kerber, esotericism in a broader sense means elitist esoteric practices and other forms of “occult and *New Age* spirituality, including non-institutionalized practices like clairvoyance, telepathy, and fortune-telling, [...] referred to as *popular esotericism*.” Claiming the contextual closeness between esotericism and *New Age* spirituality, she defines the *New Age* spirituality in the socialist era as not a new phenomenon but belonging to a traditional Bulgaria milieu, from a *longue durée* perspective. In Vitanova-Kerber’s view, what is essential in the late and post-socialist eras are the processes of “*becoming visible* for all these esoteric groups and practices that emerged at the turn of the 20th century and survived in the religious underground of the socialist era to become part of the 1970s’ *New Age* spirituality in Bulgaria.” She discusses the many types of esotericism that emerged since the start of the 20th century, beginning with masonic lodges, theosophical, anthroposophical and White Brotherhood communities, to the female seers, the

best known in the world being Vangelia Gushterova (*Baba Vanga*). A noteworthy fact is that in Petar Danov’s teaching that developed before WWII, an idea of *New Age* was already acknowledged. In addition, there were established state-promoted research institutes such as Georgi Lozanov’s Institute of Suggestology or Alexander Fol’s Institute of Thracology. Special attention is paid to the figure of Lyudmila Zhivkova (1942–1981), daughter of the Communist leader Todor Zhivkov and later president of the Committee for Art and Culture. Zhivkova was a patron of the Bulgarian esoteric circles of the 1970s and, as we know, a spiritual seeker in her own right. Zhivkova’s prominent position in the Communist nomenclature allowed her to sponsor many esoteric projects, such as Rerikh’s family programs in the framework of Bulgarian culture politics.

THE HISTORIAN Adrien Nonjon addresses the notion of geopoetics by the contemporary Scottish *nomade intellectual*, poet and writer Kenneth White in relation to the history of the Ukrainian *Ridna Vira* (literary “native faith”), several Neopagan groups that emerged out of the Ukrainian diaspora in the US and Canada after WWII and which became active in Ukraine from the 1990s. The *Ridnoviry* constructed a specific mythological ecological teaching, a type of religion of nature. They were re-imagining the distant past in terms of the linguistic theories of the Indo-Aryan area. According to them, they had seen in the Ukrainian folk descendants of the Aryans, Vedic ancestors. Nonjon clarifies that Neopaganism is close to *New Age* spirituality and shares many ideas with it (for example, the notion of a sacred environment and the “energies” of the Earth). However, both movements differ. One of the significant differences is that “*New Age* claims to be universal in seeking ‘self-realization’ through a set of invented mythologies involving different religions and spiritualities such as Buddhism or witchcraft, which are often mixed with scientific or pseudo-scientific works tinged with esotericism and occult elucubrations.” In addition, *Ridna Vira* has elaborated “national valorization through the aesthetics

of the territory” and contributed to an imaginary reconstruction of the own “homeland” in exile and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The interview with scholar of Serbian literature Nemanja Radulović investigates the literal and artistic trajectories of esoteric and occult figures in Yugoslavia that he has studied. In Radulović’s view, the research on *New Age* spirituality as a global phenomenon can be applied to Yugoslavian settings with its “local modifications.” His previous and ongoing studies cover (apart from his intense attraction to a certain esoteric intellectualism) diverse fields such as magic specialists, for example, Živorad Slavinski or other healers, and Neo-pagan groups, giving us an idea about the different degrees of involvement in *New Age*. Radulović aptly points out that the *New Age* spirituality in Eastern Europe “mystified the past of one’s nation, which becomes a source of all civilizations of past ages. Such para-history can appear in a fully non-esoteric, pseudo-rational form, but is often combined with *New Age*.” He also formulates a paradox that can be confirmed by Soviet sources: Despite the bitter fight against alternative thinking and conventional religious communities, the interest in mysticism was not classified as dangerous for the authorities. Radulović summarizes: “In a strange way, Communism led new generations of those born into Communism toward esotericism: It separated them from Christianity and traditional forms of religion, and since the ideology was dull, expressed in ‘wooden’ language, they found an outlet in an “alternative.”

THE ABOVE-MENTIONED contributions would in no way exhaust the topic of alternative, “unseen” *New Age* communities in socialist countries. This field offers many ways of studying late -socialist spirituality: From research on the undiscovered charismatics of the esoteric underground to well-established personalities within mainstream sciences interested in parascientific experiments; Eastern European *New Age* networks and transfers; the creation and distribution of popular esoteric and parascientific *samizdat* literature; manifestations of *New Age* in

political and social life; Eastern European *New Age* historiography; sacred geography, also invented by the mass media and in fiction; *New Age* spiritual market and consumption in Socialism, and so on.

We are all hopeful that new data from religious-historical research with free access to documents in the archives of the socialist era will identify more of the people involved, bring clarity to the processes of that age, and new hypotheses. The editors and authors of this thematic section gratefully thank the eight peer reviewers who provided us with valuable suggestions and did a great job sharing their exceptional knowledge of this complex field of research. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Editor-in-chief Ninna Mörner for her encouragement and the enjoyable collaboration during this year. ✕

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references

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- 2 Compare, for example, James R. Lewis, and John Gordon Melton eds., *Perspectives on the New Age* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).
- 3 See Olav Hammer, “New Age Movement,” 855–861 in Wouter Hanegraaff ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*. In collaboration with Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 855. Hammer relates to the studies by another prominent historian of religion Wouter Hanegraaff *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (1996, 97) and his view on New Age religion as having two stages of development as a *sensu stricto* (an original millenarist movement in the 1960s) and *sensu lato* (the New Age in a wider sense since the 1980s).
- 4 See Patrick Lally Michelson, “Foreword,” 8–14 in Alexandra Coțofană, and James M. Nyce, *Religion and Magic in Socialist and Post-Socialist Contexts I. Historic and Ethnographic Case Studies of Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and Alternative Spirituality* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2017), 11.

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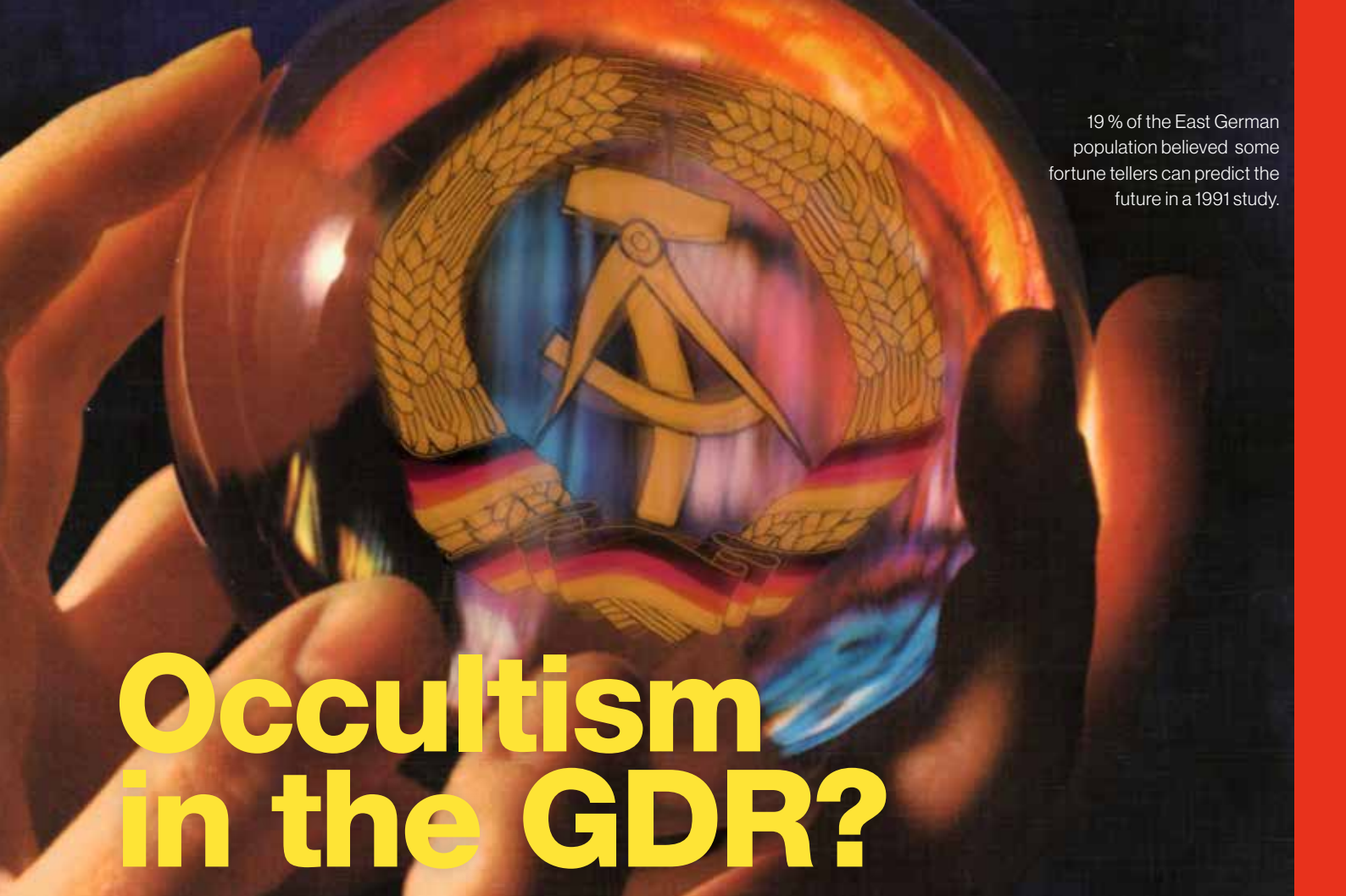
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- 50 “I was fascinated by the extent of occulture in a communist country like Yugoslavia of the 1970s”.** A conversation with Nemanja Radulović, *Anna Tessmann*



Esotericism in late socialist Bulgaria

“ This attempt to elevate Bulgaria’s cultural and spiritual role as a direct successor of the Thracian civilization fitted well in Lyudmila Zhivkova’s cultural agenda of the 1970s. **Page 56**

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a crystal ball. Inside the crystal ball, a golden hammer and sickle symbol is visible, set against a background of a woven basket. The lighting is dramatic, with warm orange and red tones around the edges of the crystal ball.

19 % of the East German population believed some fortune tellers can predict the future in a 1991 study.

Occultism in the GDR?

PHOTO: MICHAEL SCHETSCHKE / INSTITUT FÜR GRENZGEBIETE DER PSYCHOLOGIE UND PSYCHOHYGIENE (IGPP)

THE PARANORMAL AS HETERODOXY OF SCIENTIFIC WORLDVIEW

abstract

The article summarizes the main findings of a socio-historical study devoted to the question of the political and social handling of “paranormal,” “parapsychological” or “occult” knowledge, experiences, and practices in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The “scientific worldview” derived from Marxism-Leninism and propagated in the GDR was essentially a scientific conception of reality. Against this background, all occult or paranormal topics were rigorously rejected in the public discourse of the GDR. The clear direction of the public discourse was accompanied by an institutionally supported struggle against everything that was considered “irrational.” These discursive and institutional measures had a considerable impact on the population of the GDR. In the final years of the GDR, only a few people were still secretly dealing with paranormal topics. Overall, the findings show a largely successful marginalization of deviant practices and belief systems in a society characterized by a stringent order of social reality. However, compared to traditional Christian beliefs, which were severely repressed by the state’s secularization program, paranormal beliefs proved to be somewhat more resistant.

KEYWORDS: German Democratic Republic (GDR), socialism, scientism, superstition, occultism, parapsychology

by **Andreas Anton & Ina Schmied-Knittel**

Marxism-Leninism was the theoretical and practical fundament of political ideology in the GDR (and other socialist countries). It was based on the combination and integration of ideological, economic, and political principles with a universal approach to explanation, which determined both unambiguously and fundamentally what was to be considered true and false. In building up socialism, a fundamental goal of the GDR leadership was to establish a society with a scientific worldview in which all forms of “superstition,” “irrationalism” and “mysticism” – as it was talked about in the official language – was to be eroded. This primarily referred to church membership, religious practice, and religious belief, although the process of secularization (envisaged and planned by the state and party leadership) ultimately incorporated all (in the broadest sense) esoteric, psychic, alternative, paranormal, magical, and occult ideas and practices. In the public discourse of the GDR, topics such as astrology, parapsychology, and occultism were generally regarded as backward superstition. Moreover, this was to be categorically forsworn in the socialist society of the GDR.

But how successful was this agenda? Except for the public dis-

PHOTO: THE GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVE



World clock on Alexanderplatz in winter 1969.

PHOTO: THE GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVE



Series production of microelectronic started in 1974/75 at Erfurt, VEB Mikroelektronik.

crediting of these topics, virtually nothing is known about their relevance in the everyday world of the GDR society. While several studies have been conducted on the role of churches in the GDR, the role and significance of the paranormal is yet to be systematically investigated. So, what did GDR citizens think about telepathy, psychic dreams, premonitions, hauntings and spirits, parapsychology, astrology, alternative medicine, or UFOs? Was the population's engagement in paranormal phenomena and magical practices – notwithstanding official proclamations – wholly eliminated, or did they continue to exist at least in a rudimentary or clandestine level? Furthermore, what were the consequences for those individuals who engaged in topics that deviated from the dominant *Weltanschauung* or even had experiences themselves that were contrary to the worldview? Moreover, what was the government's position? Were the state leadership and security agencies (*das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS)*) interested in these topics? Was it dangerous for people to engage in them? In other words, was there an “occult underground” in the shadow of the scientific worldview?

THESE QUESTIONS FORMED the background of a research project entitled “In the Shadow of Scientism. On Dealing with Heterodox Knowledge, Experiences, and Practices in the GDR”.¹ The aim of the research was to investigate the relevance of the paranormal in the GDR in terms of social history, sociology of knowledge and discourse analysis. A large variety of different forms of beliefs, experiences and practices are generally considered to belong to this field of research. However, what they have in common is that the ontological state of the phenomena associated with this field is generally controversial from a scientific point of view. They are not easily distinguishable from other alternative religious complexes. Demarcations are possible only in detail; emic names such as esotericism, New Age, occultism, parapsychology, and magic are in circulation. Regardless of

“SURVEYS SHOW THAT QUITE A FEW PEOPLE HAVE EXPERIENCED EXTRASENSORY PHENOMENA.”

its historical and social dimensions, “occultism” is often used as an umbrella term for the paranormal and superstitious ideas and practices we are interested in here. For centuries it was used to designate mysterious powers and supernatural properties (healing powers, magnetism, the effects of the stars).²

We want to follow a proposal by Hans Bender³ and define the occult or the paranormal as a collective term for different areas of alleged or natural phenomena and related parapsychological and parapsychical activities that are located outside generally accepted scientific experiences such as telepathy, clairvoyance, ghost phenomena, psychokinesis and haunting, as well as astrology, UFOs and miracle healing. Bender also characterized the concept of the “uniformity of the occult.”⁴ We agree with this and refer to the fact that these phenomena are reported in all historical ages and across different cultures. That the occult does play a role in history, as the spiritualist and esoteric traditions in Great Britain,

France, Germany and the USA in the 19th and 20th centuries show, have long been the research subject of historical and cultural studies.⁵ The occult had a wider mass appeal in the past, but still today the “paranormal” is an integral part of everyday and popular culture – not only in fictional formats such as feature movies, series or novels.⁶ Surveys show that quite a few people have experienced extrasensory phenomena, and

age, level of education, social status and ethnicity do not seem to play a significant role.⁷ Indeed, there are also indications that such experiences took place in the population of the GDR, as demonstrated, for example, by near-death experiences.⁸ This is significant for our research question, and it belongs to the core assumptions that – based on the anthropological constant of the paranormal – such experiences (or at least the interest in these topics) also played a role in socialist East Germany.

For the systematic reconstruction of the (presumed) paranormal field⁹ in the GDR, three research dimensions were specified: (1) the framing of the issues in public discourse, (2) the question



Stamp "275 Years of the Academy of Sciences, Berlin" from 1975. The scientific worldview was praised in the GDR.

of concrete, institutionally determined forms of the way that the state addressed the paranormal (e.g., in the form of laws and sanctions), and (3) the prevalence and relevance of paranormal experiences, beliefs and practices in the lifeworld of the GDR population. The research questions were followed up by a variety of empirical data and methods (qualitative interviews, textbooks, encyclopedias, publishers' programs and movies), as well as historical material.¹⁰ Around 1000 pages of archival documents and more than 300 published sources, including around 90 scholarly articles, 30 books, 140 news articles and four TV broadcasts were collected – plus around 32 hours of audio material from 23 interviews.¹¹

The scientific determination of reality in the GDR

The question of how to deal with the paranormal seems to be of particular interest in a society which, according to its self-understanding, was fully oriented towards progress, rationality, this world¹² and science. One of the supporting ideological principles in the GDR was the so-called scientific worldview (*wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung*) as part of Marxism-Leninism. This particular understanding of science was seen as a (better, the only) method of explaining all phenomena in the world. As can be read in a programmatic paper, the scientific worldview enables humans to understand the "objective general rules according to which all things and phenomena operate" and thereby providing an overview of the "apparently confusing, inconsistent phenomena of life."¹³ In the GDR, this scientific worldview alone was regarded as the "only appropriate instrument for explaining the world, but also as an individual guideline and a source of meaning."¹⁴ Thus, not only was there an ambition to understand politics and economics as "scientifically founded"; it was also regarded as being generally possible to "scientifically determine the position of human beings in this world, and the meaning of their lives."¹⁵

Because of this (over-)emphasis on science, the scientific worldview propagated in the GDR can be characterized as sci-



The Academy Library, the Grimm dictionary section in 1952. Literature on paranormal topics was often kept in special restricted areas.

entism. As Thomas Schmidt-Lux convincingly demonstrates, scientism became "an integral leading idea of a government body and party organs, as well as in the educational system" with the founding of the GDR.¹⁶ It was an essential element of the socialist concept of education and, to that extent, was therefore also an institutional concept. It was disseminated through schools and universities, so-called workers' and farmers' faculties (*Arbeiter- und Bauernfakultäten*¹⁷), and other educational institutions. In addition, the *Urania*, a scientific association (founded in Berlin in the 19th century), which aimed to bring scientific knowledge from natural science, technology, medicine, and social science, closer to the public, was of great importance. Presentations and papers should show "that nature is based on principles and dialectics and that miracles do not happen, but that the world is knowable and we can influence it, so we are not dependent on 'higher beings.'"¹⁸ After all, the task should be "to fight superstition, unscientific beliefs and mysticism."¹⁹ On this occasion, the "non-value and the harmfulness of unscientific conceptions of an unscientific worldview – in whatever form (superstition, mysticism, astrology, Kurpfuscherei, fatalism, idealism)" have to be emphasized with the aim of "making the population more and more immune to the existing phenomena."²⁰

IT WOULD BE BEYOND the limits of this article to go into the details of the institutional embedding of this particular program of scientism. However, at this point, it is essential to underline that the ideological essence of scientism colored all spheres of public discourse from the beginning to the end of the GDR. All forms of knowledge, experiences and practices related to the paranormal or occult topics (in the official discourse of the GDR often summarized as "superstition") were rigorously rejected, and their circulation systematically suppressed. The ultimate aim was a society free from superstition and irrationalism. In other words, scientism was based on the assumption that (according to the well-known saying) "between heaven and earth," there should be precisely nothing.

The paranormal in the public discourse of the GDR

Which concrete arguments were used to justify the resistance against the paranormal or against superstition in the public discourse of the GDR? We will show the impetus of the public discourse with some examples in a moment. However, before that, we want to make a few notes about the GDR media system's specific political and ideological framework. The political discourse of the GDR was determined by a far-reaching system of control and censorship. Almost the entire media system was directly connected to the government, making it possible to control the media on all levels. The established system of governmental control over public opinion created an "ordered public sphere."²¹ Within this ordered public sphere, contradictions, criticism, dissenting, or alternative opinions were barely tolerated, if at all, so the public discourse was in line with the ideological imperatives, with no exception.

This context also characterises the discourse on paranormal phenomena, occultism, parapsychology, and related topics. Thus, initially, it is not surprising that there were almost no sources of information about the paranormal in the GDR. Non-fiction and other books, TV and radio broadcasts, or public lectures were very rare. In terms of content, the few existing documents are characterized by a very high degree of uniformity, in line with the structural logic outlined above. We initially illustrate this with some examples from newspaper articles, in which the content of the articles is already often straightforward from the headlines: "Modern superstition in the guise of science. Parapsychology – the latest fashion in irrationalism," "Bourgeois ideology in the sign of crisis – What is and what does irrationalism want today?," "FRG: Witches are booming." The list could go on forever. The articles are also dismissive. The arguments vary only slightly in content and over time so that, in conclusion, it is possible to perceive a uniform pattern of interpretation regarding the paranormal for the entire existence of the GDR. According to this pattern of interpretation, *everything* that belongs to the paranormal, the supernatural or the occult in the broadest sense, can be indiscriminately counted as superstition. It is false, irrational, unscientific or pseudoscientific and is therefore contrary to the scientific worldview of Marxism-Leninism. Also, superstitious beliefs represent elements of a bourgeois, revanchist, and dangerous ideology, have an emotional and personal connection to fascism, and are regarded as a phenomenon of crisis and the collapse of capitalism in Western societies.

A concise example can be found in *Einheit. Journal for Theory and Practice of Scientific Socialism* of the SED. In a 1975 article entitled "PSI in bourgeois ideology," the pattern of interpretation outlined above can be found in the typical form.²² The author claims that there is a structural relationship between capitalism

and the "circulation and propagating of parapsychological ideas by the mass media of capitalist countries," when he states: "In fact, there is a close correlation between the increasing crisis phenomena of capitalism and the growth of irrational mysticism in a variety of forms."²³ In the end, according to a brief paraphrase, parapsychology, spiritualism and occultism, along with pornography and Hollywood, are instruments of imperialist manipulation that obscure the actual conditions and serve the interests of the powerful. A pseudo-science (in the West) is presented as degenerated and in contrast with the comprehensive Marxist-Leninist view of science, "based on a profound scientific worldview." Not only is this the only valid worldview; it also protects against symptoms of decline as observed in capitalism: "With the development of a socialist society, the basis for occult ideas has been eliminated in the socialist states; there is no longer any place for superstition in natural and spiritual science."²⁴

An article from *Neues Deutschland* in 1981 entitled "The Crisis

and the Darkening of Minds" presents almost identical arguments. The cause of the spread of superstition in Western societies, it is argued, is attributable to a general crisis in the capitalist system, which is on the edge of collapse. Due to the imminent collapse of capitalist social systems, social orders are breaking down, living conditions are becoming complex, and future perspectives are dark. This instability engenders anxiety, and from this anxiety stems "a hope for miracles and at the same time the will to believe, which is necessary in

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WORLDVIEW OF
MARXISM-LENINISM."**

order to accept all kinds of absurdities as forms of support and protection."²⁵ Further, it is said: "From the point of view of the dominating system of exploitation and its ideological defense, a growing superstition is seen as positive. Those who lose themselves in the jungle of magical ideas are lost for revolutionary thoughts and actions. From this thicket, there is no longer a view through to the laws of social development. It acts as a barrier to progress. It causes distancing from reality, political abstinence, isolation, stupefaction. Thus, irrationalism is promoted in the present capitalist world on various levels of intellectual aspiration."²⁶

OTHER FORMS OF DISCUSSION of superstition in the media discourse of the GDR, such as books, journals, and TV or radio broadcasts, tend to follow this structure of interpretation and argumentation almost universally. However, an inevitable shift can be observed regarding the chronological development of the discourse, and two phases can be identified: The "enlightenment phase" includes the period from the foundation of the GDR until around the mid-1960s. In this phase, the discourse on superstition tended to be inward looking, focusing on combating the "survival" of superstition in the own population. In other words, it was a question of eliminating the historical remnants of superstitious ideas and magical practices which, in the under-

standing of the party and state leadership, would interfere with the establishment of socialism in the young GDR. In this context, alternative medical practices, in particular, played a role.

As far as the second phase is concerned, the discourse on superstition from around the mid-1960s onwards was characterized by an increasing political functionalization of paranormal topics (along the lines of the articles cited above.) The focus was no longer on superstitious ideas among the own population – these were considered to have been mostly overcome. From now on, superstition, mysticism and irrationalism were regarded above all as characteristics of Western capitalist societies and were the source of an externally directed political-ideological critique – primarily of the immediate “class enemy,” West Germany. The enlightened, progressive society of the GDR (and other socialist countries) was contrasted with the supposed irrationalism of Western capitalist societies. In other words, it was a matter of establishing the GDR as a “better,” “more rational” and “more enlightened” country. The enlightened program against superstition in its population became an ideological weapon in the political struggle of the systems. In line with its resolutely ideological direction, this second phase can be described as the “propaganda phase.”

Observation and punishment

The apparent impetus of the public discourse was connected with an institutionally supported defense strategy against the propagated dangers of superstition. This process was realized with considerable effort, particularly during the enlightenment phase. A law adopted mainly from the NS era prohibited fortune telling and astrology and imposed heavy fines and imprisonment for non-compliance. It provided the legal basis for surveillance and sanctioning measures by police authorities and State Security for several spiritualist and astrological groups and individuals.

An exceptional case about a female fortune teller from Thuringia demonstrates the harshness with which this was often done.²⁷ In the 1950s, this fortune teller had been reading cards for people. Since, according to the police and the *Ministry for State Security* (MfS), she had advised several people to leave the GDR, she was sentenced to twelve years in prison for “boycott agitation.”²⁸ The relevant document from the trial in August 1956 states: “The 53-year-old accused had been earning her living since 1945 by reading cards for money. She had a large circle of visitors and often saw several people a day. A brother of the accused living in West Berlin, who was opposed to the conditions in the GDR and wanted the unity of Germany in the Western sense, persuaded her to advise her visitors to leave the GDR by reading their cards. The accused complied with this request. [...] Based on a certain opposition to the conditions for workers and farmers, she took advantage of the wavering attitude of her clients, who were caught up in superstition, and induced them to dissertate from the republic.”²⁹

Such methods resulted in a high level of persecution, which helped occult or superstitious practices to disappear successively among the GDR population (quite a few fled to West Germany). The, in some cases, drastic actions against fortune tellers, spiritualists, astrologers, or psychics must also be seen in the context of the radical political reorganization programs of the state lead-

ership at the beginning of the GDR. In this early enlightenment phase in particular, there was a huge intervention in economics, society and culture in order to develop socialism, and any deviating behavior was heavily criminalized and sanctioned.

SUCH SOCIAL AND POLITICAL conditions also provided virtually no opportunities for the association or institutionalization of paranormal belief systems and forms of practice – neither in the official nor in the unofficial culture of the GDR. Thus, clubs, societies, or interest groups in the area of the paranormal, such as those that had emerged in West Germany and still exist today, were unthinkable in the GDR.³⁰

The state’s anti-superstition approach ultimately also manifested itself in the form of various instruments for controlling, monitoring, and censoring information. These included the so-called “printing authorization procedures” which, in the GDR, regulated the publication of books and other printed materials in accordance with strict directives. What can also be mentioned in this context was the safekeeping of relevant Western literature on paranormal topics in special restricted areas of public libraries (the so-called “poison cabinet”) and the strict regulations and controls imposed by the customs authority on the import of literature. All this systematically and successfully blocked the circulation of topics and information that did not conform to the official interpretive scheme.

Occult underground?

The described interventions had a clear impact on the lives of the people. Over time, occult topics and practices became well hidden, and the body of knowledge disappeared more and more from the consciousness of society. By the end of the 1960s at the latest, it was hardly possible to speak of a substantial “occult underground” or an organized “scene” in the GDR, although individual interests and marginal forms of practice did take hold clandestinely despite (or perhaps precisely because of) the strongly negative position of the dominant ideology.

Thus, the empirical findings of our study show that – if we look deeply enough – certain occult practices and individual practitioners can be found throughout the entire GDR period: Dowsers in allotment gardens and agricultural cooperatives, fortune telling and palmistry in almost every small and large city, Ouija boards and seances among young people, UFO observations, private yoga classes, and much more. Of course, in the GDR, all these niches and subcultures existed in isolated cases, and there was also a specific interest in the paranormal. Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that the number of these beliefs and practices was anything but high and always represented only single cases. Moreover, concerning other forms of dissident activities that existed in the GDR (such as the punk scene or the peace and eco movement), the topic of the “paranormal” represents a highly marginal heterodoxy that had no real cultural resonance.

Overall, it becomes clear that the party and the state leadership did indeed do everything in their power to prevent superstition and the paranormal and, in doing so, had a substantial impact on the everyday lifeworld of the people of the GDR. How-

ever, it can be concluded that the state leadership could replace the paranormal as a social field and transform it into a controllable heterodox and marginal phenomenon, similar to what happened to the church and religion in the GDR. At the same time, there are signs of resistance and persistence.

The persistence of the occult?

For example, the results of a representative survey conducted immediately after the reunification of Germany are interesting (Terwey 1992). The primary data of the study refer to 1991. The subject of the survey was the situation of faith and church in a unified Germany. In addition to items on classical Christian beliefs, the study's questionnaire also included questions on paranormal beliefs. A central finding was that while there are significant differences in traditional beliefs and church memberships between the East and West German populations, when it comes to paranormal phenomena the differences are much less. Even on the fundamental question of belief in God, East and West Germans differ significantly. While 57.9 percent in West Germany agree with the statement "I believe in God and have always believed in Him," the figure for East Germany is only 19.4 percent. The differences are even more pronounced regarding membership of a religious community or church: only 10.6 percent of the respondents in Western Germany said they did not belong to any religious community, while the figure was 64.7 percent in Eastern Germany. Initially, this corresponds to expectations about the effect of the secularization imposed by the state in the GDR.³¹

The following table shows the approval ratings for traditional content of the Christian faith in the West German and East German populations. The percentages indicate the summed values for the response options "Yes, definitely" and "Yes, probably." As expected, the approval ratings in Eastern Germany are significantly lower than in Western Germany.³²

	West	East
Do you believe in life after death?	44.4%	12.2%
Do you believe in the devil?	20.1%	5.7%
Do you believe in heaven?	35.0%	17.4%
Do you believe in hell?	20.3%	5.7%
Do you believe in miracles?	51.2%	34.9%

However, the comparatively high approval ratings for the possibility of miracles among East Germans are remarkable. Terwey notes: "51.2% in the West tend to believe in miracles, compared to 34.9% in the East. Further calculations show that 26.4 percent of atheists from the new federal states accept miracles as at least probable (old federal states: 32.8 percent). Could it also be that in the former GDR, there is a comparatively high proportion of the population which, detached from central Christian ideas, believes in supernatural phenomena?"³³

When studying the survey results related to paranormal phe-

nomena in the following table, only minor differences can be seen in the belief in paranormal phenomena between West and East Germans. For some items, such as faith healers have supernatural powers, an even higher consensus was found in the East German population than in the West German population. The values given are the combined figures for the response options "Definitely true" and "Probably true."

	West	East
Lucky charms sometimes do bring luck	27.0%	29.6%
Some fortune tellers can predict the future	27.9%	19.0%
Some faith healers really have supernatural powers	32.5%	33.7%
A person's zodiac sign will influence their life	27.8%	20.5%

It is astonishing that despite the very different ways of dealing with the subject area of the paranormal in the FRG and the GDR, there are hardly any differences in the imaginability of related phenomena between West and East Germans. This seems all the more surprising since the differences in classical religious beliefs are, as expected, high. Both paranormal and religious beliefs were considered outdated superstition in terms of the scientific worldview promoted in the GDR and were to be overcome in the course of a secularization systematically promoted by the state. However, the presented findings raise the question of why the secularization program led to clear effects in religious beliefs, although not to paranormal beliefs and ideas.

The secularization promoted by the state in the GDR continues to affect the religiosity of the East German population to this day. Thus, the statistical values related to religious beliefs and church membership have remained virtually unchanged. In West Germany, 11% of the population in 1991 and 18% of the population in 2012 did not belong to any religious community. In East Germany, 65% (1991) and 68% (2012), respectively. East Germans in the GDR were "de-churched" and have not returned to the churches in the reunified Germany.³⁴ Although the West German population is converging with the East German population, it can be expected that the East-West differences in religious affiliation will continue in the coming decades and will converge only slowly, if at all. Thus, the anti-religious or anti-church education of the GDR has been shown to have a lasting effect on religious belief in the East German population.

Interestingly, the findings from 1991, according to which the differences in belief in paranormal phenomena between East and West German populations were relatively small, were also confirmed in later surveys. Thus, for example, a representative survey from 2000 on the imaginability of paranormal

phenomena such as ghostly apparitions, telepathy, divination dreams or even UFO sightings, shows that there were relatively minor differences between the East and West (in contrast to the significant differences about religiosity). For example, in West Germany, 16 percent of the respondents believed that psychokinesis exists; in East Germany, 15 percent. The following table lists the results.³⁵

Belief in paranormal phenomena in West and East German populations (year 2000)		
	West	East
Psychokinesis	16%	15%
UFO	25%	25%
Telepathy	51%	40%
Precognition	57%	47%
Extrasensory perceptions in connection with death and crises	74%	68%

There were also very few differences between East and West Germans in direct paranormal experiences. For example, 76 percent of the West German respondents stated they had had one (or more) paranormal experiences; in the East, the proportion was 73 percent. For individual types of experience, the results were as follows.

Own paranormal experiences in West and East German populations (year 2000)		
	West	East
Déjà vu	52%	46.5%
Meaningful Coincidence	41.6%	35.2%
Prophetic Dream	38.5%	39.2%
Precognition	20.6%	22.2%
Mysterious Appearance	18.4%	15.3%
Haunting/Poltergeist	13.7%	13.9%
UFO	2.9%	3.1%

Overall, the East-West origin had *no significant influence* on the occurrence of exceptional experiences.³⁶ It should be emphasized that a large part of the reported experiences had occurred already in GDR times. This means that even though paranormal phenomena were treated in a highly disrespectful manner in public and scientific discourses in the GDR, this had no noticeable influence on the occurrence of such individual borderline experiences. This also applies to the phenomenon of near-death experiences, i.e. reports of extraordinary states of consciousness from people who found themselves in life-threatening situations. In an all-German population survey in the mid-1990s, just as many East Germans as West Germans stated that they had already had near-death experiences. Again, in the vast majority of cases, the experiences of East Germans had taken place before the reunification of Germany.³⁷

Conclusion: Heterodoxy without infrastructure

Altogether, the example of the paranormal documents a widely successful marginalization of deviant practices and belief systems in the GDR. Institutional and discursive settings contributed to the fact that paranormal forms of knowledge, experience and practice had little social resonance and relevance and became more or less meaningless with time. Of course, this does not mean that the paranormal did not exist at all (anymore) in the GDR. However, it existed only in *individual* belief systems, some singular magical practices, and in a very few paranormal experiences that were incompatible with the dominating definition of reality. This kind of dissent was, in a sense, a heterodoxy without infrastructure. This is referring to the almost total lack of opportunities for the institutionalization, socialization, communication, publication or commercialization of paranormal topics, both within and outside of this heterodox field, thereby leaving it with minimal potential to make a social impact. To borrow a metaphor: In the end, practically no occult plant was able to grow in the considerable shadow of scientism.

The process of cultural repression of the paranormal in the GDR, coupled with structural conditions that ensured that the few existing ways of dealing with relevant topics could leave almost no historical trace, can therefore hardly be reconstructed retrospectively and is in danger of disappearing entirely historically. The methodological consequences of this are sobering: societies with a strict definition of reality are not only able to exclude undesirable bodies of knowledge from their present; they can also make them invisible for the future through processes of systematic marginalization.

Nevertheless: That the marginalization of the paranormal on a collective level does not automatically lead to its total disappearance on an individual level is remarkable and might be read as an indication of the anthropological constant of the paranormal – even in the GDR. Although they were no longer socially relevant, at least some people had such extraordinary experiences. (You do not necessarily have to believe in it, yet you can have such an experience.) Whether and what socially accepted patterns of interpretation society has in place for them is another question.

Also, it is quite possible that, after all, the “level” of heterodoxy was considered too insignificant for a “real threat to socialism“. In other words, the paranormal (particularly during the final phase of the GDR) had very little domestic political relevance and was also uninteresting from an economic perspective (for example, as an exchange value for Western currency). This could also explain why at least something from the paranormal field could survive before the state controlled and sanctioned every activity. The paranormal and its actors definitely did not play a role in the political opposition that finally led to the fall of the SED government. ❌

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GIVING BIRTH TO A BABY DOLPHIN

PHOTO: CHANNEL FOUR

ESOTERIC REPRESENTATIONS OF HUMAN-DOLPHIN CONNECTIONS IN THE LATE SOVIET WATERBIRTH MOVEMENT

by Anna Ozhiganova

abstract

This article describes the New Age version of the *dolphinist* myth and the practices of human-dolphin communication that developed in the late Soviet Union in the grassroots movement for “home waterbirth and active raising of infants.” The *Aquaculture method*, authored by the psychic healer and charismatic teacher Igor Charkovsky (1936–2021), included intensive training of pregnant women, giving birth in water, infant swimming, and diving from the first day of life, as well as metaphysical connections with dolphins. Charkovsky drew inspiration from such prominent representatives of the Western New Age dolphinist community as John Lilly (1915–2001), Jacques Mayol (1927–2001) and others with whom he was personally acquainted. However, the *Aquaculture* project was also closely related to the tradition of an early Soviet utopia with its notion of man’s omnipotence and power over nature.

KEY WORDS: New Age, human-dolphin connections, dolphin consciousness, water babies, paranormal abilities, late Soviet waterbirth movement, *Aquaculture method*.

The dolphin has become an essential icon of the New Age movement, acting as a benefactor of humans, embodiment of primordial wisdom and “channel of communication” with nature. The abundance of images and myths associated with cetaceans, but mostly with dolphins, allowed some researchers to talk about the “New Age dolphinist sub-culture.”¹ In fact, it would be correct to define New Age not as a subculture or counterculture but as a complementary culture that consistently generates hybrids, or as a “diffused religion which is in constant transgression.”² Some authors have noted that no structure or boundary can be drawn between New Age and such phenomena as the ecological movement, science fiction and academic science,³ and this confusion is seen also in the studies of human-dolphin connections.

Although many myths and legends about human-dolphin communication and miraculous rescues of people by friendly dolphins have been known from the pre-modern era, particu-

larly from ancient Greece, the modern dolphin myth originated in the 1960s. It was closely related to the desire to rethink and rebuild the human-nature relationship in the era of the rapid development of science, technology, and space exploration. As Arne Kalland noted in Bron R. Taylor's *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, two main concepts are brought together to form the New Age dolphin myth: "One is inspired by pre-modern myths and legends about dolphin-human relations. The other is inspired by high tech, modern science, and space travels."⁴

On the one side, dolphins become a symbol of a peaceful and harmonious relationship between human beings and nature and patrons of such practices as natural healing, childbirth, parenting, meditative states of consciousness, nature sustainability, etc. On the other side, dolphins are attributed with a huge brain, highly developed language and intelligence, the ability to transmit images directly to the human brain and stimulate them to the scientific research of human potential and the creation of high-tech communication technologies. As Kalland wrote, the image of a pre-tech dolphin in the New Age cult merged with an image of a high-tech dolphin that is believed to communicate with humans, have contacts with galactic forces and scan each other's diagnostics and treatment using sonar.⁵

A KEY FIGURE in both scientific and mystical approaches to dolphins was American neurophysiologist John Lilly, author of the popular scientific volumes *Man and Dolphin: Adventures of a New Scientific Frontier* (1961) and *The Mind of the Dolphin: A Nonhuman Intelligence* (1967). Lilly was a member of a counterculture circle of scientists that also included Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) and Timothy Leary. Lilly embarked on formal dolphin research in 1959 and later combined this work with efforts to establish communication with dolphins. His studies on the dolphin brain convinced him that dolphins were highly intelligent and advanced spiritual beings with their own language, knowledge, and ethics. John Lilly's works inspired many scientists as well as all kinds of esotericists to pursue dolphin studies that were focused on their physiology, social life, intelligence, and communication. As American scholar of religion, J. Gordon Melton summarized: "New Agers have taken to heart Lilly's contention that dolphins are superior beings with a metaphysical message."⁶

Another iconic figure in the studies of human-dolphin connections was Jacques Mayol – a famous French free diver and hero of *The Big Blue* film by Luc Besson (1988). He authored the book *Homo Delphinus: The Dolphin Within Man* (1979) based on his experience of telepathic communication with dolphins and the practice of apnea, to which he attributed not only physiological but also mystical meanings. In his experiments, Mayol explored the aquatic ape hypothesis of human origins⁷ and concluded that humans could return to a particular primordial state and become

a *homo delphinus* through special training and some anatomy and physiology transformations – a kind of genetic make-up.

Estelle Myers was a founder of the Rainbow Dolphin Centre in New Zealand – "a research center to study the magic of the human dolphin connection" (1981).⁸ In her PhD dissertation written in the unusual genre of "reflective topical autobiography", Myers wrote that there was a small international group of people involved in cetacean research including Lilly, Mayol, Dr. Horace Dobbs (founder of International Dolphin Watch, a non-profit organization for the observation, conservation, study and protection of wild dolphins), researcher and musician Jim Nollman, who studied communication with dolphins using sounds and music, and some others: "They all shared a common thread; their lives had been changed, as indeed mine had, by their encounters with dolphins."⁹ Myers

invented the concept of *dolphinicity*, meaning the "warm feeling of happiness and love for all overcomes humans" and a "magical serendipity connection to cetacea." She noted that there was common usage amongst the circle members to sign letters with the words "With dolphinicity."¹⁰

The Danish historian of religion, Mikael Rothstein, noted that the rise of human-dolphin identities

in New Age speculations is a fairly recent construct.¹¹ Indeed, Melton and his co-writers¹² make no mention of humans who believe themselves to be dolphins in their summary of the symbolic meanings of cetaceans in New Age thoughts. However, the notion of being a dolphin seems a logical continuation of the idea of the magical connection between humans and dolphins within the New Age dolphinist myth. Dolphins acquired the "character of the messiah" and they served as an "instrument or a medium for a divine or cosmic mind to have been sent on a mission to save the Earth."¹³ So, the merging of humans and dolphins is directly related to millenarian New Age views: "New Age people become dolphins due to their engagement in what they believe to be a cosmic transformation – the advent of the Age of Aquarius or the dawn of a new era."¹⁴ Thus, becoming a human dolphin is one of the options for human enhancement, a way to "become different." Still, the whole process is ignited by a structural need for transformation on a societal or cosmic level.

Igor Charkovsky and his Aquaculture Method

In the 1970s and early 1980s, a broad grassroots movement for a healthy lifestyle was formed in the Soviet Union. In part, it was a response to the ideological appeal to people to take responsibility for their health: "With all the considerable successes of our medicine, it would be naive to believe that it alone could solve the problems of public health. No, each of us can and should provide himself a sufficiently high level of health, if possible, without waiting for doctors and using medications. Himself,

“DOLPHINS COULD PROVIDE THE NECESSARY ASSISTANCE IN HUMAN ADAPTION TO WATER AND THUS CONTRIBUTE TO THE EVOLUTION OF HUMANS AS AQUATIC MAMMALS.”



Igor Charkovsky was a research fellow at the All Union Research Institute of Physical Culture in Moscow, an institution focused on the research of physical exercise. Here he's pictured left with child-physiologist Professor Ilya Arshavsky (1979).

PHOTO: RIANOVOSTI

because a person has no right to charge society and relatives with taking care of himself.”¹⁵ At the same time, ordinary people tended to regard the state with utter distrust. They shared a sensibility that “healing required concerted efforts to cultivate personal strengths, morals, and interpersonal relations.”¹⁶ Hundreds of people in large cities formed clubs for a healthy lifestyle. They studied naturopathy¹⁷ and participated in wellness activities such as jogging, yoga, breathing exercises and so-called cold strengthening via swimming in ice holes. The most enthusiastic members began to practice alternative approaches to pregnancy, childbirth and infant raising. Thus, people “took responsibility” for themselves, but in completely different ways than expected by physicians and health officials. They promoted a holistic approach to health, psychic healing, and other esoteric practices, focusing on women’s and infants’ health, which was unusual for the late Soviet culture. The most famous among these parent groups was a Moscow club called *Zdorovaia sem’ia* [Health Family], where meetings were held in the 1980s with important figures of the international New Age movement such as Linda Tellington-Jones,¹⁸ Estelle Myers, John Lilly, and others.

In this milieu, a special training system for babies called *Aquaculture*, authored by the psychic healer and charismatic teacher, Igor Charkovsky, was widely implemented. The *Aquaculture* method included intensive training of pregnant women (swimming, diving, gymnastics, and cold strengthening); giving

birth in water (ideally in the sea); *baby yoga* (a kind of manual neonatal therapy); infant swimming and diving from the first day of life; *dynamic gymnastics* with infants (a set of exercises that consisted of twisting, rotating and throwing) and metaphysical connections with dolphins.

ACCORDING TO CHARKOVSKY, dolphins could provide the necessary assistance in human adaptation to water and thus contribute to the evolution of humans as aquatic mammals. He claimed that his theory “is that the dolphin environment offers the best imaginable conditions for infant raising and thereby for the development of the whole human race.”¹⁹ Children trained in the *Aquaculture* method were called *water babies*, *Charkovsky’s children* or *babies-dolphins*. They have been attributed with various paranormal abilities such as clairvoyance, telepathy and psychic healing. (“You need to understand that this is not just done for the sake of physical education but also to reveal the inner vision, the ‘third eye,’ those abilities that are now called ‘paranormal’.”)²⁰

Many of those who were involved in aquatic training did not share a belief in the metaphysical connection of their children with dolphins and perceived the expression “babies-dolphins” as a metaphor. Charkovsky’s follower and former aqua coach Margarita Razenkova explains her critical position: “I have never set the goal of developing superpowers. God forbids! But some went to Charkovsky just for this. And they held the children



PHOTO: SOVIET VISUALS

Members of the Healty Family Club in Gorkyj Park, Moscow, 1985. Club members took part in activities such as jogging, yoga, breathing exercises, and cold strengthening via swimming in ice-holes.

underwater so that they turned blue! [...] I even wrote about this: With such activities, not all children will live to the Age of Aquarius, you'll just drown them, that's all [...] I can't say anything about their meditative states, I can't tell whether the baby was meditating or just fell asleep. Someone says: "Oh, look, he is meditating! Dolphins! Stars!" Well, why not? But not me."²¹

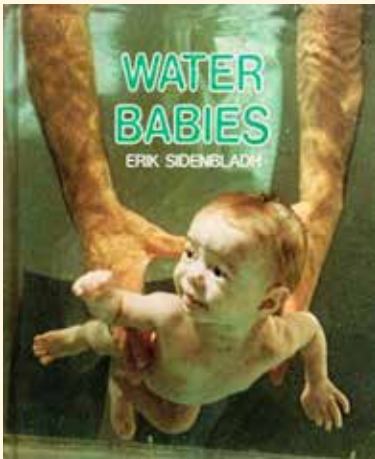
Margarita Razenkova trained her son Vasia very intensively, according to the *Aquaculture method*. At the age of one year and nine months, he became a star in the public demonstration of the abilities of water babies, organized by Charkovsky's supporters in 1992. He swam (in reality, floated with his hands tied) 33 kilometers in a school swimming pool for 15 hours non-stop, following Charkovsky, who walked in the water in front of his small disciple. Charkovsky argued that Vasia "could swim across the ocean,"²² although some of his followers had another opinion regarding this event. Vladimir Bagriansky, father of the first child born in the sea in 1986,²³ describes Vasia's marathon swim as one of many of Charkovsky's hoaxes. Another Charkovsky's follower, psychic Evgeniia Igoshina, admits that she perceived Vasia as a dolphin baby at the time: "He was a real dolphin, not a human. I had a feeling that he was not breathing at all because he raised his

head for only a second. He even made sounds like a dolphin."²⁴

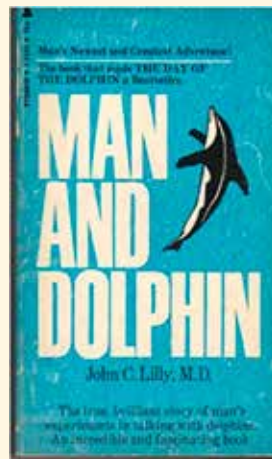
The *Aquaculture* advocates formed the basis of the Russian homebirth movement. Although homebirth was illegal in the Soviet Union and remains so in Russia of today,²⁵ homebirth midwives significantly impacted the reform and humanization of Russian obstetric care. Thus, home waterbirth developed significantly. At the same time, other components of the *Aquaculture* method – water training, dynamic gymnastics, and cold strengthening – became quickly marginalized and are currently practiced only among a narrow circle of radical supporters of the *Aquaculture* way of infant raising. Accordingly, *Aquaculture* researchers focused mainly on homebirth practice, while other aspects, particularly the human-dolphin connection, remained largely unstudied. In her dissertation on the "Russian waterbirth method," anthropologist Ekaterina Belousova mentions the main elements of Charkovsky's dolphin myth: Dolphins could help humans get rid of their fear of water; pregnant and birthing women should meditate to help their children establish contact with dolphins. She summarizes that the dolphins gained a unique, authoritative status among "natural childbirth" activists as they became "significant others" or "companion species" in the terms by Donna Haraway.²⁶

IN THIS ARTICLE, I consider Igor Charkovsky's ideas about the metaphysical connections between babies and dolphins to be embodied in various aquatic and spiritual practices in the context of the interest in "dolphin consciousness," which appeared in the 1960s in the West, and later – in the 1970s and 1980s – in the Soviet Union. What were the sources of inspiration for Charkovsky that contributed to the emergence of these ideas and practices? What did alternatively-minded parents feel about the practice of raising "babies-dolphins"? What was the specificity of the late Soviet "dolphinist myth" and how did it differ from human-dolphin communication research in the West? Was the late Soviet movement for home waterbirth and active raising of infants part of the international New Age, or was it closely related to the tradition of an early Soviet utopia?

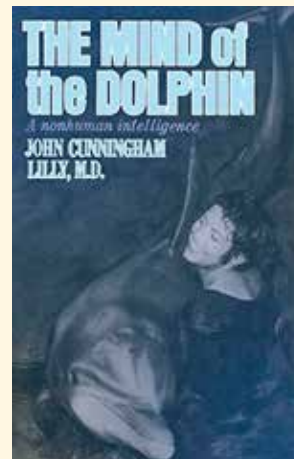
The study of this phenomenon is complicated by the fact that Charkovsky conveyed his ideas only in personal conversations and in practice: There is no detailed presentation of his method. Moreover, there is a high degree of mystification and deception in his experiments that his followers only partially reveal. Thus, this article is written based on a wide range of sources: publications in the Soviet press, television programs, photos and videos dedicated to infant swimming, diving and cold strengthening, as well as *Samizdat* materials, in particular, the *AQUA* journal, published by Charkovsky's followers, Tatiana and Alexey Sargunas. In addition, Western publications that discuss Charkovsky's ideas and experiments are also an important source: A book called *Water Babies* by Swedish journalist Erik Sidenblad (1982), based on his conversations with Charkovsky in the early 1980s, and a reflective topical autobiography by Estelle Myers, *Midwife to Gaia, birthing global consciousness* (2008), in which one chapter is devoted to her trip to the Soviet Union in 1985 and her meeting with Charkovsky. The stories of my interlocutors –



Erik Sidenbladh's book *Water babies* was first published in Swedish in 1982, and soon translated to English.



The American neurophysiologist John Lilly's books *Man and Dolphin* and *The Mind of the Dolphin* served as a source of inspiration for Igor Charkovsky.



Vladimir Bagriansky with his daughter Eya, who was born in the Black Sea in Crimea in 1986.

participants of the late Soviet movement for home waterbirth: Vladimir Bagriansky, Evgeniia Igoshina, Tamara Solovieva, Tatiana Sargunas, Marina Dadasheva, Natalia Kotlar and others – are also an extremely important source for this study.

Creating a Baby Dolphin myth in the late Soviet Union

Nobody knows when and how Charkovsky came up with the idea of a special relationship between humans and dolphins. In a conversation with Estelle Myers, Charkovsky said that he had his first contact with dolphins back in 1958.²⁷ His followers believe that Charkovsky possessed strong psychic abilities: He was engaged in extrasensory healing, could “see the biofield” and had a particular “channel” for communication with dolphins. Some people believed that he had been a dolphin in a previous incarnation. Others claimed that he was half-dolphin due to his ability “to be out of this world.”²⁸ Those closely acquainted with Charkovsky noted that it was difficult for him to express his thoughts in writing, and his speech was “very peculiar and tangled.”²⁹

There was a legend about the miraculous rescue of Charkovsky by dolphins in the Black Sea when he served at the Sevastopol Naval Academy in his youth. A version of this story was told by French journalist Patrice Van Eersel, who took part in Charkovsky's 1987 “aquatic expedition” to the Crimea: “He swam for so long that he no longer remembered how and when he lost consciousness; it took two days or more. Then, finally, he came to his senses and was amazed to see that he was lying on the same beach from where he had started swimming. Then he remembered the dream he had just had, that he was being quickly carried by two dolphins. But was it a dream?”³⁰

Erik Sidenbladh wrote that Charkovsky had been dreaming about an experiment with babies and dolphins since the 1960s. However, his dreams about people who follow dolphins to live in the ocean were first publicly announced in 1979. An article in the journal *Technology for Youth* states that Charkovsky conducted a successful experiment on children-dolphin contact: Babies swam, dived and even slept in the water near the dolphins. As a result of this experiment, he concluded that in the very near future a newborn child would be able to live in the ocean with a pod of dolphins and feed on dolphin milk. First, however, the question arose of how a small child would hold on to a dolphin's back: “Maybe instinct will make our newborn hold on tightly to the dolphin, and the oncoming water-air flow will turn on thousands of “micro reflectors” on the baby's sensitive body,

so that it will automatically take the most optimal pose with the lowest possible resistance to the aquatic environment.”³¹ These ideas sound like quotes from a science fiction novel, but archive photos have documented these experiments.

Sydenbladh also cites Charkovsky's report on these experiments: “During the summer of 1979, we (that is, I, several researchers from the Institute, female athletes, mothers, women in advanced stages of pregnancy and an

assorted group of children between the ages of eight days and eight years) made an expedition to a dolphin research station on the Black Sea. We conducted various experiments with the dolphins, some of which we were forced to do at night while the station's regular research staff were sleeping. They did not approve of having our newborns together with dolphins because they were afraid that the dolphins might harm the children”³². The members of the expedition experimented with different ways

“HE CONCLUDED THAT IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE A NEWBORN CHILD WOULD BE ABLE TO LIVE IN THE OCEAN WITH A POD OF DOLPHINS AND FEED ON DOLPHIN MILK.”

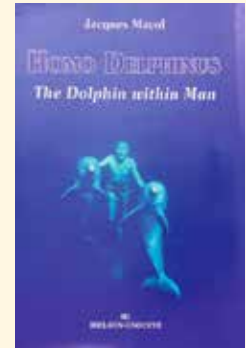
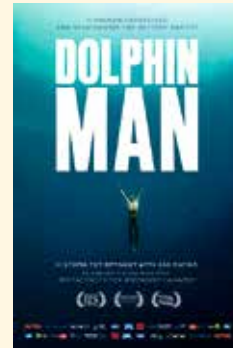


PHOTO: ANEMON PRODUCTIONS

Famous French free diver Jacques Mayol was an iconic figure in the studies of human-dolphin connections. His book *Homo Delphinus: the Dolphin Within Man* (1979) was based on the experience of telepathic communication with dolphins and practice of apnea.

of attaching the babies to the dolphins' backs: "We attached different types of saddles and handles to their bodies and they willingly allowed the children to ride on them."³³

At the time, all dolphinariums in the Soviet Union were non-public military and scientific facilities subordinate to the Naval Forces. It was only in 1994 that the Utrish Dolphinarium was opened for public and did performances³⁴. The history of the military use and study of dolphins in the Soviet Union, which remains virtually unstudied today, became the source of numerous myths that formed the basis of media publications, popular books and documentaries about dolphins and their unique abilities. Academic dolphin scientists, to some extent, contributed to the creation of the dolphinist myth. For example, a leading specialist in the biology of marine mammals, Professor Sergei Kleinenberg, author of popular brochures about dolphins and the preface to the Russian edition of John Lilly's *Man and Dolphin* (1965), wrote that during his years working with dolphins, he was convinced of their amiable attitude towards humans, and once even had an own experienced of their caring. Furthermore, he confirmed that the evidence of children taming wild dolphins, described by the ancient scholars – Aristotle, Pliny, and others – can currently be witnessed at the dolphinariums: "These were considered ancient legends, and only recently have these legends come to life and turned into real facts."³⁵

In the late Soviet popular science literature and cinema, dolphins were presented as possessors of extra-human intelligence, primordial wisdom and an intimate connection with

the universe. A Soviet science fiction TV series called *People and Dolphins* (1983-1984, 4 episodes) probably raises the most relevant issues of human-dolphin contact: dolphins at war, miraculous rescues of humans by dolphins at sea, their high level of intelligence and paranormal abilities. For example, a group of dolphins trapped in a natural pool destroyed a rock blocking their exit to the open sea by using ultrasonic waves. Dolphins also possess the ability to transmit information telepathically: The heroes in the TV series spontaneously began to draw bizarre pictures, the ideas of which were inspired by dolphins. The series also depicts an experiment involving the prolonged isolation of a woman with a dolphin in a semi-aquatic house, and refers to similar research by John Lilly. Many movies and documentaries present the empathic (and equal) relationship between children and dolphins. For example, the cartoon *The Girl and the Dolphin* (1979) describes how a dolphin taught a girl to swim in the sea. After the dolphin was caught and taken to the dolphinarium, the girl released him, singing a song: "They say dolphins can speak. They speak; they do. See how their backs glisten in the sun! Dolphins are swimming towards us. Now they are going to talk." The cartoon reproduced the belief that dolphins could save humanity from all possible problems, so it was critically important to decipher their language and establish reliable communication.

Thus, Charkovsky created the *Aquaculture method* in an environment in which the idea of a "dolphin consciousness" was circulated very actively and thus became a constant source of inspiration for him. However, the radical way of transforming

humans into aquatic mammals, proposed by Charkovsky, was unique: First, a pregnant woman leads an aquatic lifestyle (she had to swim and dive) “accustoming the embryo to water,” then the baby is born into the water, which develops its “natural swimming reflex.” As a result, it is transformed into a *homo delphinus* – a kind of semi-aquatic creature.

Igor Charkovsky and the international dolphinist community

Erik Sidenbladh’s *Water Babies*, published in Swedish in 1982 and quickly translated into several European languages (but not into Russian), introduced Charkovsky’s waterbirth method and the training of water babies to the Western world. Inspired by his ideas, a number of women from the USA, Germany, Australia and other countries decided to give birth to their children in the water³⁶. Some of them, such as Americans Ana F. Costa (and her husband Gerald Krumland), succeeded in visiting the Soviet Union, where they met Charkovsky, despite the continued isolation of the Soviet Union from the Western world in the 1970s and early 1980s.³⁷

Charkovsky also made acquaintances with some members of the informal international dolphinist community, such as John Lilly, Jacques Mayol and Estelle Myers, during their visits to Moscow in the 1980s. For example, Michel Odent, a French obstetrician-gynecologist, and well-known natural childbirth enthusiast, says he first heard about “the amazing Russian doctor who takes deliveries in water” from Jacques Mayol in the late 1970s. A few years later, Odent received a postcard from Moscow signed by Mayol and Charkovsky, “who turned out not to be a doctor, but a swimming instructor.”³⁸

Mayol visited the Soviet Union twice – in 1971 and 1982 – and on both occasions he took part in the Travelers Club TV show, which was very popular among the Soviet audience. The presenter introduced him as a “human dolphin” who could hold his breath underwater for five minutes. During the program, Mayol, without naming Charkovsky, talked about the water babies he had seen in Moscow: “We saw kids here who were 3–4 years old and who moved like fishes in the water. They had happy eyes and they laughed merrily. We saw that swimming was a pleasure for them. We saw here the implementation of an approach to upbringing people capable of penetrating the depths of the ocean without harm.”³⁹

THE AQUACULTURE IDEAS were close to Mayol’s reflections on the benefits of early water training for making the transition of people to life in the ocean. In his book, Mayol also talks about water childbirth. Starting with the controversial aquatic ape theory, he hypothesizes that the human genetic memory, and particularly the memory of the embryo developing in an aquatic environment in utero, retains memories of the marine lifestyle: A baby in the water “feels like it is in its native element, as if it had never left mother’s ocean.”⁴⁰ Mayol suggests the time a baby spent underwater should be constantly increased, thus reminding them of their instinctive reflex of apneist during freediving. “In two to three generations, *homo delphinus* will be able to double the current diving depth by up to 200 meters and quadruple the

apnea time by up to 16 minutes. There will be enough time to dream underwater and play with whales” – concludes Mayol.⁴¹

The *Dolphin Man* was not published in Russian until 1987, but Charkovsky had the first edition from 1979 in Italian, which his followers translated for him in the early 1980s. At the time, Charkovsky was actively involved in the aquatic training of babies-dolphins. In the spring of 1980, together with professional midwife, Irina Martynova, he did the first home waterbirth.⁴² It is not known for certain, but it was likely the Mayol’s book inspired Charkovsky to create new spiritual practices (meditations) in search of an “inner dolphin” and some applied methods, for example, a so-called “artificial placenta.” He constantly invented various devices to train babies in water such as a frame on which the child was attached in a specific position, and a twisted spine or a fixture for nipples to feed a child underwater, as well as several other devices. These devices included something that resembled an “artificial placenta” – a bottle with water attached to a hose – so that the child could dive into the water using this device. Marina Dadasheva, who was present at one of these experiments, explains that this imitation of the placenta was actually “a superstructure for the child’s body to recreate its imaginary integrity.”⁴³ However, this experiment is likely a quote from Mayol’s book, where he talks about a technical solution to breathing underwater. Mayol admitted that thanks to the *artificial placenta* – a real mini-laboratory with a tube that could be connected to the vein of an amphibian man – voluntary apnea would occur when diving and the lungs would be “turned off.” Thus, a dolphin man would have access to a new type of respiration that is characteristic of the embryo.⁴⁴

SOVIET READERS were inspired by dolphin imagery and research on human-dolphin communication in numerous science fiction and popular science publications⁴⁵. Of course, the dream of a man-dolphin evoked an allusion to a famous science fiction novel, человек-амфибия [The Amphibian Man], by Alexander Beliaev (1928). The book was turned into a popular film in 1962 and has inspired some amateur and scientific projects for living underwater.⁴⁶ The hero of the book, Ikhtlander, could live in the sea thanks to shark gill transplant surgery. However, the book’s main themes are the loneliness of the hero, who was doomed to live away from the world of people, and the moral integrity of scientific experiments. These issues did not arouse Charkovsky’s enthusiasm, and he does not mention this novel anywhere.

“Psychics from New Zealand said that the dolphins had given their permission for an ocean childbirth.” With these words, Igor Charkovsky began one of his public presentations in 1982.⁴⁷ He referred to Estelle Myers, founder of the Rainbow Dolphin Centre in New Zealand and Wade Doak, guru of human dolphin research in New Zealand, who published an underwater diving magazine *Project Interlock*, collecting life stories of what he called people’s “dolphin initiated human interactions.” Myers learned about Charkovsky and his experiments with waterbirth from Jacques Mayol: “I was totally fired up, as a figment of my imagination had turned into reality.” Back in 1981, while meditating, she had the idea that water babies “would be the peacemak-

ers of the future”: They did not suffer from birth trauma, and their mothers having not experiencing the weight of gravity during the process of labor could quickly go into an altered state of consciousness.⁴⁸ So she started to take deliveries in water in Australia and New Zealand from 1981 to 1982 and invited Charkovsky to participate in one of the international waterbirth conferences that she organized. He was unable to attend but then she visited Moscow in 1985 to meet him in person and study water birthing. In Moscow, she took part in TV programs with Charkovsky, plunged into an ice hole in the Gorky Park together with members of the Healthy Family club, watched the aquatic training of babies, and even attended a home waterbirth. In her memoirs, Myers describes how she smuggled a video of this waterbirth out of the country in a package marked “ballet video.”⁴⁹

John Lilly’s book *Man and Dolphin*, published in Russian in 1965, likely also served as a source of inspiration for Charkovsky. It seems that in his experiments, he decided to put into practice Lilly’s prediction from a later book: “Over the next 10-20 years, humanity will establish communication with representatives of other species, with some other creatures, perhaps not terrestrial, most likely marine, but most likely possessing a high level of mental development or even intelligence.”⁵⁰

Lilly visited the Soviet Union in 1988 and met Charkovsky, whom he called an “interspecies communication enthusiast,” at the “Healthy Family” club in Moscow. Lilly was impressed by the abilities that the water babies demonstrated: “I was convinced that the children Charkovsky worked with had established exceptional contact with dolphins, they don’t even need music – they understand each other through intuition. Charkovsky’s disciples already know how to sleep in the water and find food in the sea. They are able to live in the ocean if dolphins take them into their pod. And apparently, there have already been such cases.”⁵¹ Lilly also linked Charkovsky’s method with his ideas about a new human-dolphin civilization: “I like the idea that someday people will abandon the technical achievements that threaten them with death and return to the cradle of humanity – the World Ocean. The Homo Dolphinus will appear – a creature that combines the best qualities of two species.”⁵²

IN 1989, CHARKOVSKY went abroad at the invitation of the New Age commune, the Findhorn Foundation⁵³ and gave lectures all over Britain, thereby entering the international New Age community. In the following years, he took part in various New Age events talking about his experiments with water babies. However, his demonstrations often caused an adverse response and were perceived as violence against children, and therefore unacceptable. Also, in the 1990s, the dolphin theme became less “esoteric” and increasingly popular in the mass media. Myers wrote: “It felt to me that the ‘dolphin’ craze had gone too far. There were masses of people around the world now, all wanting to play with and swim with the dolphins.”⁵⁴

Dolphin mythology among Charkovsky’s followers

Charkovsky’s ideas about babies-dolphins and their paranormal abilities were quite popular in the 1980s and early 1990s and are still promoted by a number of enthusiasts of the *Aquaculture method*. Vladimir Bagriansky recalls that there have been many cases of women giving birth at sea when dolphins were nearby. Still, dolphins attended underwater births, that Charkovsky and his followers dreamed of, never happened. Bagriansky is convinced that such childbirth is only possible through close spiritual contact between a pregnant woman, a child, and dolphins. However, some of Charkovsky’s followers claim that dolphins accompanied their sea deliveries. A homebirth midwife, Natalia Kotlar, traveled to Goa with her husband Alexey Sargunas in 2007 to give birth to her fifth child in the Indian Ocean. She perceived

this childbirth as an event of incredible spiritual unity with nature, which dolphins personified: “The dolphin swam quite close and hung, looking at my belly, without stopping. At the same time, I felt my baby moving inside me toward the exit. Our daughter floated into the water, opened her eyes and, oh, what a miracle! Smiled in response to our happy laugh. Alpha (the name

that Natalia and her husband gave to one of the dolphins) swam very close, and using her nose, very carefully pushed the child to the surface of the water. Her large blue eyes, as if from time immemorial, radiated a powerful stream of wisdom.”⁵⁵

SEVERAL OF CHARKOVSKY’S partners and followers have contributed to the development of the dolphinist myth. For example, Evgeniia Igoshina was inspired by the telepathic communication of pregnant women and babies with dolphins in the summer camp “Golden Dolphin,” which was held by the “Healthy Family” club on the Black Sea coast in 1985. Igoshina recalls that “various miracles took place there”: Women and children meditated on dolphins and made metaphysical contact with them.

Based on this experience, she developed a form of meditation on dolphins and began teaching it to women on childbirth preparation courses. According to Igoshina, if a woman meditates during labor, whether at home or at a maternity hospital, she will always get help from dolphins: Pain relief or increased contractions in the event of weak labor. Such meditation is a kind of dolphin visualization: “Put on some nice music, light a candle. Relax and imagine you are swimming in the sea, dolphins are around you [...] They like you, their biofield makes the water native, the water supports you, caresses you [...] You see your child swimming nearby and playing with the dolphin baby [...] Talk to the dolphins, ask them to help you [...] When you feel really good, say goodbye and get out of meditation.”⁵⁶

Unlike other followers of Charkovsky, Igoshina was not a midwife or a swimming instructor but had a special mission: She “possessed a communication channel” with dolphins. Igoshina

“WOMEN AND CHILDREN MEDITATED ON DOLPHINS AND MADE METAPHYSICAL CONTACT WITH THEM.”



Igor Charkovsky and his followers at the Maly Utrish Dolphinarium. "Golden Dolphin" summer camp, 1985.

PHOTO: VLADIMIR MEKLER

explains that new babies, whom she calls *sensitives* or *indigo children*, only wanted to be born in the water, so "they opened this channel to come to our world." Once, in meditation, she had a revelation that "people and dolphins were usually incarnating into each other" and that she had already met Charkovsky in a previous incarnation when they were both dolphins.

Vladimir Bagriansky has been practicing dolphin meditation since 1986 when Charkovsky "opened this path for him." He reveals that he can contact both the individual consciousness of dolphins and whales and the collective consciousness of cetaceans. Still, the most powerful for him are meditations on sperm whales thanks to their psycho-transforming effects. In his worldview, cetaceans are associated with the corresponding archetype in transpersonal psychology. They are a symbol of transition from the world of the dead to the world of the living, and vice versa, connected with the processes of conception, birth, death, and spiritual rebirth. In the teachings of Stanislav Grof, the dolphin archetype refers to the first perinatal matrix – tranquil embryonic existence associated with a feeling of endless bliss. Grof also appeals to the etymological similarity of the words "dolphin" and "uterus" in ancient Greek.⁵⁷

Unlike Charkovsky and most of his followers, Bagriansky pays great attention to the ethical and environmental aspects of human-dolphin interaction. He is convinced that it is necessary to establish "interspecific cooperation": "To survive, people need the knowledge of cetaceans, and they need our protection. <...>

It is necessary to learn cosmic consciousness from cetaceans. Don't be afraid of death. To enjoy life. To love each other."⁵⁸

The Aquaculture project: Russian New Age or the late Soviet utopia?

Considering the late and post-Soviet movement for home water-birth and active infant raising in general, we can find many features connecting it with the New Age in the broadest sense of this phenomenon: yoga and psychic healing, parapsychology and transpersonal psychology channeling, paranormal abilities such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and others. It seems that Charkovsky's dolphinist myth also fits into the New Age paradigm: It was characterized by millenarian expectations and faith in the birth of miraculous children – babies-dolphins – who would herald the arrival of the New World. During Perestroika and especially in the 1990s, many New Religious and New Age people, ideas and literature emerged, gradually liberated from the *Iron Curtain*. Members of the waterbirth movement – Charkovsky's followers and his opponents – absorbed a variety of discourses and practices and endowed *Aquaculture* with different new meanings depending on their spiritual and intellectual preferences. However, the core of teaching remained esoteric: The oral transmission of knowledge, belief in a sacred sense, and hidden forces.


Charkovsky had been fascinated by the idea of aquatic training with infants since the early 1960s when he had his first experience of such training with his newborn daughter. The first follow-

ers came to him in the 1970s, but the movement only began to expand in the 1980s. Can we assume that during these years – in the so-called “era of stagnation” – some version of the New Age movement with features similar to those that appeared simultaneously in the West developed in the Soviet Union? Birgit Menzel, in her overview of occult and esoteric dimensions of the Russian New Age, describes a specific phenomenon of Soviet culture “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.”⁵⁹

It should be taken into account that Soviet science adhered to the materialistic concept of paranormal phenomena. Professor Alexander Spirkin, vice-president of the USSR Philosophical Society and corresponding member of the USSR Academy of Sciences, argued that Soviet scientists were ahead of their Western colleagues in understanding the nature of paranormal phenomena because they understood its material essence and saw their task of registering it by special devices.⁶⁰ A whole network of bioenergy information laboratories was engaged in fixing paranormal phenomena and searching for their material substrate. Many people with “psychic abilities,” including Charkovsky, who would have been classified as occult figures in other circumstances, were perceived as researchers working at the cutting edge of science. However, what is most important is the fact that Charkovsky’s teaching, in principle, does not imply spiritual growth and personal transformation, like the “search of inner dolphin” by Jacques Mayol. Only children trained in the *Aquaculture method* could become superhuman beings with high intelligence and paranormal abilities.

THE OTHER CONSIDERATION relates to Charkovsky’s methods, which were criticized, even by many of his followers. For example, he reprimanded “stupid mothers” who did not follow his instructions: “Women do not understand anything and do not want to understand, they behave like females, and work on ancient instincts that came from animals, they themselves do not know why they cannot understand simple things.”⁶¹ Charkovsky’s demonstrations of aquatic training and dynamic gymnastics shocked New Agers in the West who invited him as natural childbirth and infant raising guru. Alexander Zemlinsky, who was Charkovsky’s translator during his first overseas tour from 1989 to 1990, perceived him as a kind of a chthonic deity: “He was like Demeter from a Greek myth when she was invited to work as a nanny to the family. And when no one was looking, she put the child on hot coals and tempered him in the oven. <...> Charkovsky is such wild black magic which, perhaps, really gives something, but is completely out of date.”⁶² The methods that Charkovsky used in his workouts with water babies – feeding underwater, tying to different frames, a series of prolonged dives – demonstrated that he was guided by the principle of “violence for good.” So, we can consider the essence of the *Aquaculture* project as a kind of titanism – a utopian idea about the extreme plasticity of human nature and the possibility of its

radical transformation to achieve the ideal human. These ideas bring Charkovsky’s project closer to the early Soviet utopia with its notion of the omnipotence of man⁶³ and his power over nature then to New Age thought with its ethical and environmental agenda and values of “love” and “peace.”

Charkovsky’s critics and followers introduced issues about protecting nature and freeing whales and dolphins from captivity, promoting a peaceful life, spiritual search, and self-improvement, into the Russian movement for home birth, under the influence of the Western New Age thought. Thus, the *Aquaculture* project has undergone significant transformations. The movement has come a long way in its development from the 1970s to the 2000s: From the Soviet modernist utopia of creating a “new man” to the Russian variant of New Age. 

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“I was fascinated by the extent of occulture in a communist country like Yugoslavia of the 1970s”

A conversation with **Nemanja Radulović** on esotericism and New Age in communist Yugoslavia, and alternative and occult expressions and thinking.

by **Anna Tessmann**

ANNA TESSMANN: Nemanja, the first time we met was in 2013 at a huge academic conference at Margarita Rudomino Library for Foreign Literature that was dedicated to themes that in the academic study of religion and culture are usually designated as mysticism, occultism and, in its more or less modern expression, New Age spirituality. Why did you want to participate in it, taking a flight from Belgrade to Moscow?

NEMANJA RADULOVIĆ: The reason I came to Moscow was that, although I was familiar with current research in the West, I was less familiar with what was going on in Russia – individual papers on specific topics were known to me, depending on the topic I was occupied with at any one time, but I lacked a broader image of current affairs or the dominant paradigm. An annual conference of the Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism (ASEM) seemed like an excellent opportunity to learn in a condensed way what Russian colleagues were working on and how. Needless to say, historical contacts between Russian and Serbian cultures also were an important reason to become familiar with the latest research (to give just one example, my research on esoteric motifs in Serbian romanticism was essentially helped by studies about Russian poetry of Martinist inspiration).



PHOTO: NEMANJA RADULOVIĆ PRIVATE ARCHIVE

Nemanja Radulović is Professor of Serbian Literature and South Slavic Literatures at the University of Belgrade. For many years, a sustained focus of his research has been the history of esotericism and biographies of personalities involved in secret societies in Yugoslavia. Nemanja Radulović is the author of many articles on these topics. In addition, he was the host of the second CEENASWE Conference on Esotericism, Literature, and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe in Belgrade in 2016. Radulović was also co-editor with Polish researcher Dr Karolina Maria Hess of the collected volume *Studies on Western Esotericism in Central and Eastern Europe* (2019).

AT: How does your own biography correlate with the topic you study? Why did you choose this field? Who sparked your interest in it? Moreover: How do you explain or define for yourself what New Age or New Age spirituality is in Central and Eastern Europe, especially in your country?

NR: My interest started during my study of literature in the late 1990s. Although I had previously read esoteric authors, I was aware that it wasn't an area included in "serious" academic discussion but something to be kept apart, as a private reading interest. Browsing through literary histories, I noted that on the margins of "real" study, there were mentions of esoteric influences on some writers, like Gérard de Nerval, so I was intrigued by this – our professors never talked about it – and I wanted to learn more. And upon finding studies and learning more about some of the essential European writers, I thought it would be interesting to do such research in Serbian literature. Is there any trace of esotericism at all? I had only a couple of (excellent but old) articles to rely on, such as two 1950s articles on Kabbalistic and Gnostic motifs in the poetry of Romantic poet Petar Petrović Njegoš. So, I embarked on finding out if there were any traces, and found more than I expected, and here I am today, still digging up new material.

To the last question, a short answer is that the conclusions reached about New Age as a global phenomenon apply here too, but with local modifications.

AT: Which New Age groups and personalities have you studied? For how long? Where did you find information about them?

NR: I initially focused on the older period, the 19th and early 20th centuries, and topics like Freemasonry, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Spiritism, the Roerich movement, and some interwar groups. As for New Age, I studied manifestations of New Age thinking in culture, both high (literature in the first place), and popular. I especially paid attention to channeled texts from the 1980s and 1990s. Then there is Živorad Mihajlović Slavinski (b. 1937), probably the most



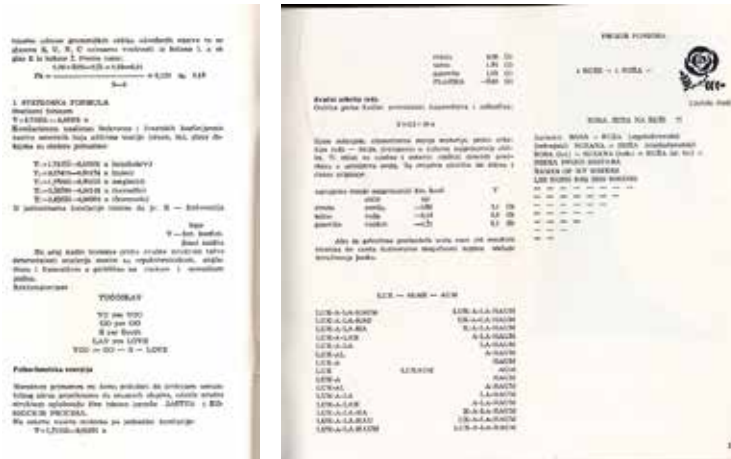
influential magus in ex-Yugoslavia, who moved from magic and the Gnostic church (areas he was involved with the 1970s–1990s) toward New Age workshops today. I interviewed him, but his books written in the last 50 years were perhaps even more crucial. Then there are contemporary healers who are a curious mixture of New Age concepts, folk medicine, and outright fraud; they rejected interviews, so I had to rely on media presentations. Finally, some other contemporary groups I studied (Slavic Neo-pagans) don't fit into the New Age definition, albeit New Age elements permeate their concepts too.

AT: What is the most specific aspect of them compared to their Western (American and European) counterparts? Were the New Age practices and teachings autochthonous or just derivations, Western European-North American imports?

NR: Undoubtedly, New Age practices and teachings come from the West. But they acquire some new traits and often serve as articulation for some more profound questions. Speaking of New Age ideas in the 1980s and the post-communist era, one aspect is the question of national identity – for example, Nikola Tesla is a perfect New Age icon with the entire mythology developed around him, but in the Serbian New Age, he is also the icon of national culture. Because of the issue of identity, New Age thought here (and I believe elsewhere in Eastern Europe too) often merges with pseudohistory. It's not only about ancient aliens or Atlantis, but about the mystified past of one's nation, which becomes a source of all civilizations of the past ages. Such para-history can appear in a fully non-esoteric, pseudo-rational form, but it is often combined with New Age thinking. However, your question is essential not only for New Age thought, but for esotericism in Central Eastern Europe generally. I focus here on the Orthodox cultural area of Eastern Europe, for which names as *Slavia orthodoxa* or 'Byzantine commonwealth' or 'Byzantium after Byzantium' were used. As is known, this cultural area experienced a radical change in the 18th century when it abandoned the Byzantine cultural model to adopt a Western one, with the Enlightenment, Romanticism, the Baroque, and so on. Now, the esotericism we have from the 18th century in this cultural area is transferred from the West. But instead of describing it as imported, we may reach another conclusion: It means that esotericism is not some residue of a pre-modern archaic mentality, superstitions, etc., as it was often seen in Western modernity. Quite the contrary, here it appears to be the trait of modernity itself. Just like Enlightenment or Romanticism, esotericism came via the same channel. A similar conclusion has been drawn regarding other milieus, but we have different historical and cultural circumstances here. This leads to another question I am not yet prepared to answer, and that is the very character of pre-modern esotericism in the Orthodox world and how modern definitions of Western esotericism apply to it; and consequently, whether there is any kind of continuity between pre-modern and modern esotericism in this area of Europe (the same question is raised for other forms of culture, like arts and literature).

AT: What were the features of the New Age landscape in socialist Yugoslavia? What currents were the most important ones?

NR: I'd say legitimization through science was one crucial trait. That is a feature of the New Age generally speaking and of Western occultism since the 19th century, of course, so it's not something outstanding per se. But within the communist system, it had to carry an additional weight – the use of "scientific" or psychological vocabulary aimed



1. *The Seed of the Cosmic Knowledge. Christ's Messages* (channeled text from 1993, by Karma center).

2. *The Key to the Psychical Magic*, by Živorad Mihajlović Slavinski (1971), first book that brought ritual magic to popular culture and general knowledge (mostly based on English works about Golden Dawn), including practical information about rituals.

3, 4, and 5. Examples of "Light Formula" by S. Vlajić, published in the catalogue of the Signalist exhibition, 1981.

to wash this suspicious phenomenon clean of "regressive tendencies." Another aspect is its surprising link with arts and literature. Now, questions are raised such as whether the New Age movement is like Romanticism, or whether it lacks actual esthetic values and so on, but it seems that, regardless of whether the New Age is a field of its own, in 1945-1990, many artists in Yugoslavia found in New Age thinking a way to articulate their poetics or to include New Age elements in their creative worldviews, from those in the counterculture to those in more established positions. So New Age thought was not only a source of themes but a way for new artistic *forms* of expression, as opposed to dominant regime-backed esthetics. And that is an example of how the New Age entered Serbian/Yugoslavian culture, becoming one layer in the multilayered history of esotericism and culture and interacting with others. On another level, New Age concepts "trickle down" to folk magic practices, forming a kind of folk New Age (a term comparable to folk religion in my opinion and a justified one), merging New Age ideas with more traditional views of magic.

AT: Do you know any New Age transfers between the countries of the Eastern Bloc? Could you illustrate some of them?

NR: One would expect that, but the answer is not that straightforward. It should be remembered that Yugoslavia was excluded from the communist bloc in 1948 and that its popular culture was formed under Western influences. However, there are some examples: In the late 1980s, Russian healers like Džuna or Alan Čumak were famous in Yugoslavia. (In 1992 – although that is after the period we're talking about – there was a huge, public, media-covered "experiment" of telepathic communication between Belgrade and Novosibirsk). The term "psychotronics" was adopted from Czech parapsychology but acquired new meanings, merging with ritual magic and neo-Gnosticism in the early 1970s. One parapsychology researcher in the 1970s, Momčilo Todorović, collaborated with Georgi Lozanov (1926–2012) in Bulgaria. Yugoslavia's odd position between the blocks is reflected in this area too. Some similarities, however, are more typological or come from deeper sources common to different national cultures of the region (like late modernization or influence of Herderian ideas).

AT: When strictly, in your opinion, can we observe the appearance, the period of flourishing, and then the stagnation of New Age spiritualities in Yugoslavia? Is it possible to speak about a specific chronology of the New Age in Yugoslavia? Which models would you suggest?

NR: In the 1960s, there was quite a strong reception of the French occulture-fantastical realism of Powells and Berger, their *Le Matin des magiciens. Introduction au réalisme fantastique* (1960) and themes from the editions of *J'ai lu*. It is not strictly speaking New Age thinking, but it does pave the way to it. Not only do the two share some topics, but in Yugoslavia, the same persons were involved in spreading both. Serbian culture was strongly French-orientated since the early 20th century, so it is not surprising that even on the plane of esotericism, French influence dominates (although the translations appeared only after 1990, the New Age actors were familiar with the original). (By the way, the international reception of fantastical realism calls for research. Just one example – Miguel Serrano, Chilean ambassador to Yugoslavia in the 1960s, wrote a letter to the Yugoslav minister of foreign affairs mentioning

“In the late 1980s, Russian healers like Džuna or Alan Čumak were famous in Yugoslavia.”

The Morning of Magicians). Then from the 1970s, there was the emergence of the New Age proper, becoming visible in popular culture and media. Important in that regard was a group of Serbian and Slovenian neo-avant-garde artists influenced by American counterculture, experimenting with communes at some time after 1971, and visiting Findhorn. That is the time of interest in parapsychology, of individual experiments in it, and discussions in official associations of psychologists. The Society of Psychotronics was formed, but its internal kernel was the neo-Gnostic church, occupied with channeling practice. The vogue of UFO contacts didn't skip Yugoslavia either. In the 1980s, New Age ideas became more widespread, often emerging in alternative medicine, bioenergetics, and radiesthesia. Different forms of Neo-Hinduism in the 1970s and 1980, such as TM (Transcendental Meditation), Osho or Sai Baba, merged with New Age spirituality. In the 1980s, there was a rise of private, small publishers who published a lot on occultism (astrology especially enjoyed popularity); new editions of Rudolph Steiner appeared, and Crowley was published for the first time. There were public discussions about occultism. O.T.O. [Order of the Temple of the East or Order of Oriental Templars] started in 1982, and another Thelemite group in 1985. In 1985, there was the first Yugoslavian congress about liminal phenomena of science. And in the second half of the 1980s, different civil associations for alternative research were registered. In the 1990s, with more liberty and more commercial opportunities, an expanded media scene, and private practice, New Age became fully present. The feature of that period (the civil war period in Yugoslavia and the country's dissolution; economic sanctions against Serbia) is propagandistic, political engagement of some New Age representatives, and use of New Age subjects in regime media for political purposes. The spread and commercialization of the New Age explain why in the last twenty years, some figures from occult milieus have moved increasingly toward the New Age – for example, Esotheria (sic), an esoteric publishing house from 1990, recognizable initially for its Thelemite profile, turned into typical New Age publisher.

AT: After 1945, with the establishment of the communist government and during Tito's regime until 1980, the Yugoslavian federation was a place where any kind of religiosity was suspicious and suppressed because of its "hostility" against communist ideology's visions of the future as well as its character that was depicted as "retrograde". Could we agree that official ideology in Yugoslavia had a clear negative position towards alternative (including spiritual) lifestyles, or were there exceptions? What was the attitude of the Yugoslavian nomenklatura towards New Age ideas and practices?

NR: Many publications positioned themselves as alternative science or something similar. Individuals could self-publish their books (so it wasn't samizdat; it was legal). The Theosophical Society was banned in 1947 but allowed to work again in 1966, even organizing summer camps. Anthroposophists gathered privately and traveled to Dornach. So, some first impressions suggest that the attitude was rather lax – and indeed today, some tend to describe the regime as liberal. Comparing it to some other communist countries, it may appear so, but it would be better to say that it was less repressive in some respects. Censorship was vigilant. Books and movies were banned up to the end

“In a strange way, Communism led new generations of those born in Communism toward esotericism.”

of the regime and telling a joke about Tito could land one in jail for up to two years. However, toying with esotericism could pass, just as abstract art, jazz, or the theater of absurd were able to emerge after the 1950s, not because of the regime's open-mindedness but because esotericism was perceived as harmless. Ideas perceived as a direct threat to the regime (like Tito's leading role or the legitimacy of the communist government) were objects of persecution. But esotericism wasn't seen as such – and that is simply the variant idea of esotericism as rejected knowledge, in a somewhat twisted way! It also says something about the regime's ideological (in)consistency: Holding power was of primary importance. I didn't find any trace of officially supported experiments, as was the case with parapsychology in the USSR or Bulgaria – the first state-supported project about parapsychology comes only in 1988 (in Bosnia). Of course, it is possible that there is material in currently inaccessible archives of the intelligence services and political police. There were some people among the nomenklatura, however, who were interested in “alternative” ideas (in a sense somewhat broader than New Age), like writer Jara Ribnikar (1912–2007), who belonged to the top social level and who became an ardent supporter and propagator of the Maharishi and TM in the 1980s; she kept her nomenklatura role in the 1990s when she was in the leadership of the Yugoslav left, a party led by Slobodan Milošević's wife, lobbying for TM among regime functionaries. The children of the nomenklatura in the 1970s

and 1980s, the ‘golden youth’ (or red bourgeoisie), were those who developed a strong interest in Western pop culture and counterculture, occultism included, from Thelemite currents and Gurdjieff to New Age thinking. Marina Abramović and her brother Velimir, who has been one of the key figures in the national New Age for decades, stem from that milieu. In a strange way, Communism led new generations of those born in Communism toward esotericism: It separated them from Christianity and traditional forms of religion, and since the ideology was dull,

expressed in ‘wooden’ language, they found an outlet in “alternative” ideas. As one of my informers said: “In our spiritual seeking, we were left to ourselves.” That explains the strange case of the popularity of O.T.O. in the 1980s in Yugoslavia.

AT: In your research, you deal with art and widespread manifestations of New Age, mystic or occult thinking in different settings. What was your most fascinating discovery about New Age spirituality in the socialist period?

NR: I was fascinated by the extent of occulture in a communist country like Yugoslavia of the 1970s – not that I didn’t know something, but there was more than I expected, for example, in youth magazines. The importance of the New Age and occulture for elite culture and the individual poetics of writers and artists was even more fascinating. I would just mention that from the 1970s to 1990s, many artists created their own Tarot decks. Actually, in some cases, the border between popular and high culture was obfuscated since the same people participated in both precisely through occulture. Some of them were in opposition toward the communist regime, or at least tacitly disliked it. Others were active party members – Vasko Popa, one of the most important Serbian poets of the 20th century, was a loyal party member and activist. At the same time, he was deeply interested in alchemy, from old texts up to Fulcanelli and Canseliet, as his poetry shows. The neo-avant-garde movement Signalism from 1970s was also inspired by New Age thinking. Spasoje Vlajić (1946–2020), author of many books about the New Age and parahistory, most famous for his ‘light formula’, first created it as part of a Signalist poetical experiment. Although he is nowadays recognizable as a figure of the New Age scene, his main concept appeared in this context. Poet Ljubiša Jocić (1910–1978) who started as a surrealist in the interwar period and joined Signalism in the 1970s, wrote in the 1970s about spirituality of electrons, a new era of consciousness, of the unused 90 percent of the brain, and holism, but in texts published as programmatic texts of this neo-avant-garde movement.

AT: Did the forms of New Age spirituality change after the breakup in Yugoslavia in the 1990s?

NR: More interest in national identities and more interest in para-history emerged. The New Age movement followed the general pattern of happenings.

AT: What do you think about the future of the study of New Age spiritualities in Central and Eastern Europe? Are there academic resources in Serbia and neighboring countries for that? What would you call the most crucial challenge for the scholars of the late socialist period studying the “invisible” New Age?

NR: I’d say the issues are the same as with any other research in humanities – the lack of funds, access to literature, etc. Areas that call for an investigation are archives, old journals, and (if possible) private diaries and letters – that is to say, fundamental work on sources. Since research on esotericism is still a new field, often met with raised eyebrows or, perhaps even worse, with interest unaccompanied with serious work, it is essential to avoid all pro and contra attitudes, whatever their source might be – situating esotericism in the broader framework of cultural history, instead of leaping to conclusions and passing value judgments. A practical tip: English is nowadays the lingua franca of academia, but it’ll be necessary to read in languages other than English. You asked about transfers among countries of Eastern Europe – having a network for exchanging information, comparing research, and so on is very important for a complete answer to the question. ❌

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PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Vangelia Gushterova (1911–1996), known to her followers as *Vanga*, or *Baba Vanga* (grandma Vanga), was a Bulgarian seer.

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FROM SOFIA'S SALONS TO THE MOUNTAIN RANGES OF KOZHUH

Social and functional dimensions of esotericism in late socialist Bulgaria

by **Victoria Vitanova-Kerber**

abstract

The article observes esoteric spirituality in Bulgaria in a longue dureé frame and argues the existence of a consistent tradition since the late 19th century. Based on biographical research, contemporary sources and archive materials, the article delivers insights into the social and functional dimensions of esotericism in socialist Bulgaria and answers the question of how esoteric and New Age subculture could spread in a supposedly antireligious socialist society. It argues that esotericism was neither merely a manifestation of popular “superstitions” nor purely the intelligentsia’s domain but was also a key feature of socialist nomenklatura (e.g., Lyudmila Zhivkova) and at times even part of public policy. A broad spectrum of functions of esoteric phenomena in a socialist society is discovered: from coping with transcendence through political protest and mental escapism to the instrumentalization of esoteric ideas for the construction of a nationalistic Bulgarian history.

KEYWORDS: Esotericism; religion and politics; socialism; Eastern Europe; nationalism.

After the collapse of socialism, many religious groups emerged on the surface of public life in Eastern Europe and sought legal recognition. This rapid pluralization led to the diagnosis of a “religious boom” in the 1990s that was supposed to fill the spiritual void of the previous four decades. Yet in Bulgaria, just like in other former socialist countries, there was neither a void nor a boom, but a process of *becoming visible* for all these esoteric groups and practices that emerged at the turn of the 20th century and survived in the religious underground of the socialist era to become part of the 1970s’ New Age spirituality in Bulgaria.

In the following, a history of religion approach will address the barely researched issue of esotericism and New Age spirituality in late socialist Bulgaria in its social and functional dimensions. The primary sources are 1) biographies and memoirs of prominent political, intellectual and cultural figures such as Lyudmila and Todor Zhivkov, Vera Bojadzhieva and Alexander Fol, Georgi Lozanov, Peter Deunov; 2) sources from the Central State Archives in Sofia, particularly holding 405 (Ministry of Culture), holding 904 (State Research Institute for Suggestology) and holding 288B (personal fund of Lyudmila Zhivkova); 3) a selection of Zhivkova’s political speeches in the edited volumes

According to the laws of Beauty (1981), *Her Many Worlds* (1983) and *Think of Me as Fire* (1985), as well as 4) contemporary sources such as webpages and newspaper articles.

Theoretical pre-considerations

The concepts of esotericism and New Age – both terms standing for diverse ideas and practices – are crucial for the present study. In academia, the term *esotericism* was long reserved for specific forms of religiosity which, referring to the philosophical system of Hermeticism, arose in a late 19th century Western European white, educated, elitist, predominantly male context. The concept of “Pésotérisme occidental”¹ became crucial for a whole generation of scholars who developed the research paradigm of *Western Esotericism*.² The focus on the “West” was strongly criticized for its normativity and ignorance towards many esoteric actors and phenomena that were of crucial importance to the global history of religion. The historical inaccuracy of *Western Esotericism* led to the adoption of a more inclusive and comparative perspective, which concentrates on the interrelations between esoteric currents worldwide by embedding them in global religious history.³ This allows research on esotericism to consider the developments in Eastern Europe and the Balkans – two regions that were thought to be secularized by the atheist propaganda of socialism. Nevertheless, a closer look shows the opposite to be the case.

ANOTHER LESS DISCUSSED problem regarding the academic study of esotericism (unlike folkloristics or anthropology), is its blindness to the non-elitist esoteric practices outside of the Hermetic tradition, often referred to as “low magic”⁴ or “superstition”⁵. By failing to incorporate this part of the esoteric strata, in which, among others, the female agency comes to display, we receive a distorted picture of the esoteric field as an ivory tower of highly educated male elites. Thus, in this article, the term *esotericism* will be used not only covering brotherhoods, secret societies, and lodges, further referred to as *elitist esotericism*, but in a broader sense for all forms of occult and New Age spirituality, including non-institutionalized practices such as clairvoyance, telepathy and fortune-telling, further referred to as *popular esotericism*.⁶

The term *New Age* has also been broadly disputed among scholars of religion over the last 30 years⁷ with some of them seeing some common characteristics of this otherwise eclectic collection of ideas and phenomena⁸, and others questioning its analytical value.⁹ This article follows a historical approach that traces the emergence of some New Age ideas back to early 20th-century esotericism¹⁰, but also recognizes the constant process of reinterpretation and inflow of new content into it during the last three decades of the century.¹¹ Nevertheless, a strict division between esotericism and New Age spirituality is not always possible as both phenomena often merge into one another, creating an entangled religious history.

The qualitatively different international and national historical settings of the 1960s and 1970s played a key role for the emerging of New Age spirituality on both sides of the Iron

Curtain. The new world order of the Cold War hindered the transfer of material and intellectual goods between the “East” and the “West” but was far from completely stopping it. Social movements such as pacifism, student activism and the hippie movement, which were crucial for the formation of New Age spirituality in the USA and Western Europe, also reached socialist Bulgaria and created a stir among the younger generation, intellectuals, and creative circles. Moreover, the impact of the local political and religious situation should also be considered since New Age can also be defined as a counterculture¹² to a specific religious or political mainstream. In socialist Bulgaria, the religious practices were strongly reduced; the indoctrination of State Security agents among the clergy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) shook people’s trust in institutionalized religion. For decades, the socialist regime exploited art and humanities for the construction of legitimizing narratives of its materialist doctrine.¹³ People’s individual “spiritual wellbeing” was pushed to the background of socialist life to make room for the fulfillment of collective material values and aims such as technical progress, plan economy and the “building of Communism.” These circumstances might have also supported the emerging of New Age spirituality in the 1970s – as a reaction and counterculture to the atheistic socialist culture.

Emerging of the esoteric field in Bulgaria

Although the socialist period is a blind spot in the history of esotericism, the establishment of an alternative religious milieu at the turn of the 20th century and its culmination in the interwar period have already been discussed by anthropologists,¹⁴ folklorists,¹⁵ historians¹⁶ and scholars of the study of religion. The national historical context was an essential factor in this process. By the time of the separation from the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of a Bulgarian national state in 1878, a petty bourgeoisie had developed in the bigger cities. The children of merchants, writers and recently appointed politicians could travel and receive education in renowned European and even American universities.¹⁷ When they returned, they brought the *zeitgeist* of the late 19th century Western Europe and the esoteric worldviews belonging to it.¹⁸ The domestic forms of esoteric spirituality thrived on the uncertainty of the time. During a period of 40 years, Bulgarians experienced historical events such as: the liberation (1878), the reunification (1885) and the independence (1908), but also the two Balkan Wars (1912; 1913) and the devastating World War I. The wars led to loss of significant territories, and are described in the public memory of the Bulgarians as “national disasters”.¹⁹ Seers and visionaries offered answers to the transcendent questions that emerged from that period of uncertainty and helped rebuild the damaged national self-esteem.²⁰

THE EXTENT TO WHICH the global esoteric field was interconnected by 1900 can be shown through the rapid spread of translations of esoteric literature in Bulgaria. In 1892, Allan Kardec’s book *Spiritism in its Simplest Expression* became the first book on spiritism to be published in Bulgaria. Other books followed

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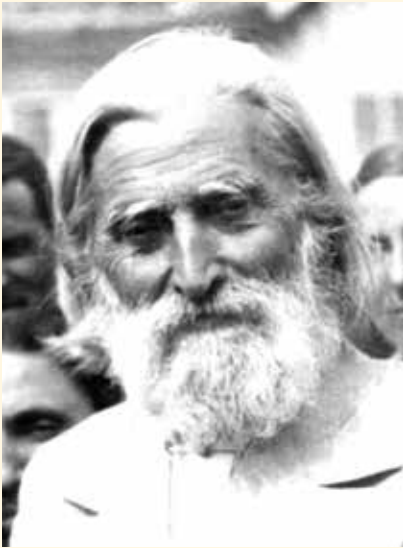


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Beinsa Douno (Peter Deunov, Petür Dünov in Bulgarian: Петър Дънов) founded the spiritual teaching the (Universal) White Brotherhood at the beginning of the 20th century. The movement is still active, and has followers around the world.

in 1897 and 1899 in the cities of Varna and Sliven, while spiritist séances were held in bookstores and in the homes of politicians²¹ in the capital, Sofia. It has been recorded that, by this time, most Bulgarian male elites participated in masonic lodges such as “Balkanska zvezda” [Balkan Star], “Bratstvo” [Brotherhood], “Zaria” [Dawn] and “Velika lozha na Bŭlgaria” [the Great Lodge of Bulgaria].²² Among them were many politicians such as member of the Macedonian revolutionary movement, Aleksandar Protogerov (1867–1928), the two-time prime minister, Konstantin Stoilov (1853–1901)²³, scientists like the first rector of Sofia University – the linguist Professor, Aleksandar Teodorov-Balan (1859–1959)²⁴ and writers such as Nikolai Rainov (1889–1954), Ivan Grozev (1872–1957), Dimo Kiorchev (1884–1928) and Emanuil Popdimitrov (1885–1943).²⁵ The first translations of Annie Besant’s works by the intellectuals Sofronii Nikov and Aleksander Krŭstnikov were published in 1902 and were followed by the establishment of a Bulgarian Theosophical Society in 1904 and a theosophical lodge in 1907.²⁶ The periodicals *Bŭlgarski teosofski pregled* (1904–1907), *Teosofia* (1911?–1932), *Teosofski vesti* (1933), *Anhira* and *Orpheus* popularized both theosophical and masonic ideas. The theosophist and editor of *Anhira* (1921–1923) and *Orpheus* (1924–1926), Nikolai Rainov, was influenced by Nicholas and Helena Roerich’s teaching “Agni Yoga”, to which he dedicated a series of publications. The artists Boris Georgiev and Vassil Stoilov were also adherents of the Russian painter and spiritual teacher and exchanged letters with him.²⁷ A Bulgarian Roerich Society was established in 1930. Anthroposophical ideas reached Bulgaria even faster – the first translation of Rudolf Steiner was

published in 1916,²⁸ only four years after the official establishment of the Anthroposophical Society in Dornach.

DOMESTIC SPIRITUAL movements were also part of the alternative religious scene at the beginning of the 20th century. The son of an Orthodox priest, Peter Deunov (1864–1944), also known as *Beinsa Douno*, became familiar with spiritism and theosophy during his studies in the US²⁹ and, back in Bulgaria (around 1900), founded his spiritual teaching called the *(Universal) White Brotherhood*, combining theosophical, anthroposophical, and pre-Christian ideas and practices. A group of adherents gathered

around him and established a settlement called *Izgrevev* [Sunrise] near Sofia. On March 9, 1914, Deunov announced the coming of the *Age of Aquarius*³⁰, which is a common theme, and started to regularly give lectures on spiritual topics. Relevant to the further exposition are the nationalistic aspects of Deunov’s teaching. In the “new age,” he expected a “new race” – carriers of a “new culture.” This role he “assigned to Slavdom, in general, and to Bulgaria, in particular” and formulated as a central task of the White Brotherhood “to enhance the world role of Bulgaria and Slavdom through the

popularization of this new ‘culture of the sixth race.’”³¹ In the interwar period, the White Brotherhood gained popularity and spread throughout the entire country and abroad.³²

Another example was the secret esoteric society, created in 1912 by the revolutionary and writer, Stoyan Zaimov (1853–1932) in the town of Pleven. Being familiar with the Rosicrucian and freemason societies in France and Russia before 1900³³, Zaimov developed his esoteric worldview based on cosmic references,

“SEERS AND VISIONARIES OFFERED ANSWERS TO THE TRANSCENDENT QUESTIONS THAT EMERGED FROM THAT PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY.”

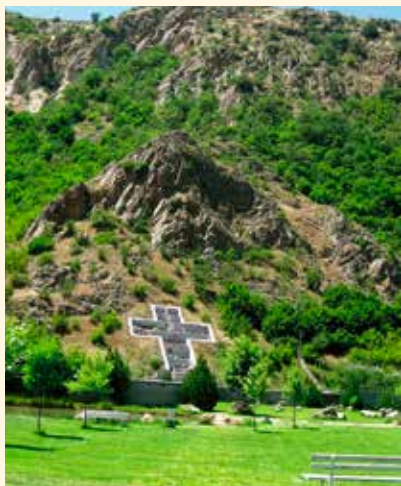


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In the 1970's, the seer Vanga moved into a state-funded house in the village of Rupite. The house is now a museum, and there are also monuments, a church, and even a zoo near her house.

Bulgarian folk legends, Thracian, and Greek mythology.³⁴ The network first consisted of Zaimov's friends, colleagues and associates but promptly gained members among the intellectuals in all the major cities. However, after Zaimov died in 1932, the group dissolved.

Analyses³⁵ of the alternative Orthodox association *The Good Samaritan*, founded in 1907 by former military officers who promoted the idea of "Bulgaria as a new Israel,"³⁶ emphasize the role of seers as both religious and political actors and shed light on the issue of "unconscious historicization." The term was introduced by anthropologist Galia Valtchinova regarding the practice of interwar seers to interpret divine messages and visions in a nationalistic way, consulting history textbooks and newspapers to defeat the general mood of failure after the "national catastrophes"³⁷ and to construct a positive national identity.³⁸ This was the case of the seer Bona Velinova (1885–1960) from the village of Grigorovo near Sofia, who was involved with the association *The Good Samaritan*. Velinova is also known for identifying over 40 old and destroyed churches. The exact location of the holy places was supposedly revealed to her through visions.

Female religious agency is manifested in a remarkable way in the case of the Bulgarian seer Vangelia Gushterova (1911–1996), known as Vanga³⁹, from the southwestern town of Petrich. Her religious biography follows the classical pattern⁴⁰ of being chosen, having a difficult family situation and a near-death experience resulting in physical limitations, which "unlocks" visions or the gift of "seeing" the future, the past, the dead, etc. At an early age, Vanga is said to have had an accident, that made her completely blind.⁴¹ However, her gift as a seer was claimed to have been revealed to her in a vision when she was 31 years of age, in the middle of World War II.⁴² After this, people started visiting her house in Petrich, but her real popularity came in the 1960s and 1970s, when she moved into a newly built, state-funded house in the village of Rupite at the foot of the Kozhuh mountains. Every year, the seer was consulted by tens of thousands of

people from Bulgaria and abroad and had *de facto* established herself as an expert in solving everyday problems, transcendent questions and medical issues. After the collapse of socialism, Vanga's popularity increased even more together with her re-framing as a lay woman and an Orthodox saint. In 1994, she commissioned an Orthodox church to be built next to her house. Her place developed into a complex comprising also monuments, a museum, a small zoo, a park and souvenir shops, and it attracts thousands of pilgrims every year. Vanga's life is repeatedly being reproduced in Bulgarian and Russian movies, TV-series and documentaries.

Esoteric and New Age spirituality in socialist Bulgaria

After a repressive first phase lasting from the socialist takeover in 1944 until the mid-1950s, although political cleansing and violent religious persecution took place, the Bulgarian public sphere cautiously yet continuously⁴³ became liberalized in the 1960s–1970s and early 1980s.⁴⁴ Despite the ongoing anti-religious propaganda, many actors from the pre-socialist esoteric scene could operate underground and kept translating and popularizing esoteric literature. According to the religious biography of one of the first Bulgarian anthroposophists, Dimo Daskalov (1908–1989), 80 out of the 360 volumes of Rudolf Steiner's works were translated during the socialist period.⁴⁵ Despite the emic self-victimizing narrative adopted by the White Brotherhood in the post-socialist era, recent research shows that from the mid-1960s onwards, it received unofficial yet solid support from high levels of the BCP when there were conflicts about land ownership and legal recognition.⁴⁶ The reason for these protections was the personal connection between Deunov and two of the most prominent Bulgarian socialists, Georgi Dimitrov and Todor Zhivkov⁴⁷, who hid in the Izgrev settlement back in the early 1940s.⁴⁸

Esotericism thrived not only in the underground but also in the official scientific institutions of socialist Bulgaria. In 1966 the

State Research Institute of Suggestology at the *Ministry of National Education* was founded in Sofia by the trained psychiatrist and neurologist, Georgi Lozanov (1926–2012). It is said that Lozanov had an interest in practices such as telepathy and hypnosis, which he tried out on his schoolmates.⁴⁹ Primary sources report that during his study of medicine, he started practicing yoga, visited the Izgrev settlement and met some of the first adherents of the White Brotherhood, Boyan Boev and Ivan Antonov, who influenced his worldview.⁵⁰ With the assistance of high-ranking party members, including the daughter of the General Secretary of the BCP, Lyudmila Zhivkova (1942–1981), he received spatial, material and personal resources to conduct empirical research on psychic phenomena related to telepathy, clairvoyance, hypnosis and the psychology of suggestion.⁵¹ Based on *Suggestology*, Lozanov's neologism for "the science of suggestion," a new methodology for accelerated learning, called *Suggestopedia*, was developed. Based on the premise that people use only 10% of their brain capacity, Lozanov wanted to activate "the unused capacities" of the human brain by implementing the yoga relaxation practice of *Shavasana* in learning courses.⁵² His methodology was very similar to the ideas of the second-generation theosophist, Annie Besant (1847–1933), about the hidden capacities of the human mind. Parallels can also be drawn with the premises of the *Human Potential Movement*, which developed at the same time as part of Western New Age culture, and with the *Progressive Education Movement*. In the late 1970s, *Suggestopedia* was experimentally implemented in many schools. It was the principal methodology⁵³ in the brand-new school for talented children, the "National Study Complex for Culture,"⁵⁴ founded in 1976 by Lyudmila Zhivkova, who at that time had become an active and influential politician, head of the enormous cultural institution *Komplex Kultura*, accommodating the spheres of culture, science, education, sports, mass media, architecture, and cultural relations with foreign countries.⁵⁵

THE AMERICAN AUTHORS Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder, who traveled in the Soviet Union, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia for six months in the late 1960s and visited many parapsychological institutions, delivered relevant insights into the activities taking place in Lozanov's institute.⁵⁶ The research on psychic phenomena there included "skin-seeing" (blind people's supposed ability to see colors via touching), the performance of medical surgeries with "hypno-anesthesia" (hypnotizing patients into a condition in which they should not feel pain), and experiments with the seer Vanga, who was "on the payroll" of the institute.⁵⁷ We learn that Bulgarian parapsychologists willingly and proudly showed their Western guests the latest developments in the research on psychic phenomena. From a historical perspective, the spirit of competition between the "West" and the "East" during the Cold War, combined with a genuine curiosity towards the

new, made parapsychology a logical extension of the armament and space-research programs between the two blocs. Thus, the scientific openness to esotericism led to the normalization and legitimation of some esoteric currents, which were impossible for other religious denominations in socialist Bulgaria.

Another valuable contemporary source of information on the matter is the documentary *Fenomen*⁵⁸ from 1976, produced by Bulgarian National Television. It shows recordings of Vanga making prophecies in the presence of scientists, led by psychiatrist, Nikola Shipkovenski (1906–1976). The scientists were trying to understand how (not whether) she was "seeing." The recording sheds light on Vanga's methodology of asking guiding questions, using common Bulgarian names, and guessing their connection with the case. It is also a good demonstration of the scale of the socialist seer's popularity – it shows hundreds of people queuing and even sleeping in front of her house, some of them for weeks, just waiting to see her. The state appropriation of the seer went further: there were regular opening hours at her

private house and a state employee sold tickets and kept things in order. A system of pre-registration with appointments "from September [this year] for the next year"⁵⁹ was also available. All collections went to the local municipality's treasury, whereas Vanga lived from material donations and gifts from her visitors. The seer was consulted by people of all ages, genders occupations and social backgrounds. Most of them were ordinary working-class people, but Sofia's creative intelligentsia and even high-ranking

politicians such as Lyudmila Zhivkova and Svetlin Rusev (1933–2018)⁶⁰ also paid her visits. What all visitors had in common were transcendent questions about the future or about sick, missing or dead relatives and friends.

A KEY ASPECT OF VANGA as both an esoteric actor and an object of parapsychological research is her medical/scientific framing.⁶¹ As an esoteric actor, she diagnosed and sent people to hospitals, advising them to take prescribed medicines or undertake surgery, thus claiming medical competencies herself. At the same time, by scientifically researching her alleged psychic abilities, their presence and effects were being *de facto* recognized. This *scientification* of Vanga's esoteric practices is part of the transition of esotericism from a religious into a scientific context, which took part in the socialist *State Research Institute of Suggestology*. This is one way of normalizing esotericism in a socialist country and can also be observed in the research on *psychotronics* in Czechoslovakia. However, of course, all of this did not happen without resistance from more conservative political and academic factions.

Following the authentic recordings of Vanga's predictions in *Fenomen*, part of a discussion⁶² between leading psychiatrists and uninvited participants, moderated by Shipkovenski, is shown. The prevailing opinion towards Vanga and parapsychol-

"ESOTERICISM THRIVED NOT ONLY IN THE UNDERGROUND BUT ALSO IN THE OFFICIAL SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTIONS OF SOCIALIST BULGARIA."

ogy is critical, with most of the experts emphasizing the political disadvantages of showing the film to an audience without adding a Marxist atheist preface to it.⁶³ Some of the commentators wanted to have an official statement on the political correctness of the film before giving their opinion, which suggests that they realized the ideological tension between Marxist doctrine and the research on esoteric phenomena. Because of the critical reactions and the unclear ideological frame, the movie did not air on television until the 1990s.

The fragile status of parapsychology as a scientific discipline and of its research objects comes to display in the interview between film director Nevena Tosheva and Georgi Lozanov from 1975, which appears at the very end of the film. The founder of the *State Research Institute of Suggestology* expresses his bitterness of the “public opinion” not letting him continue his research on Vanga⁶⁴, part of whose predictions were allegedly still scientifically unexplainable and needed further research.⁶⁵ He refers to the most central aspect of the issue:

The question is provided Vanga really sees [...], is it because of telepathy? Moreover, if it is because of telepathy – is this contradicting our basic scientific Marxist views? If it does, we should rethink our premises, but what would be the norm for this? Who could tell us if it contradicts it or not?⁶⁶

Citing the ideologue of Bulgarian Marxist philosopher, Todor Pavlov, Lozanov argues for the legitimacy of parapsychological research and asks rhetorically: “Will we be afraid of innovations in science? What kind of scientists will we be then?”⁶⁷ According to him, trying to explain phenomena like Vanga was more appropriate than claiming them as forms of ideological adversity. For the first time, the universality of the socialist norm is questioned by science. In previous decades, it was science that was in the service of ideology and had the duty of legitimizing Marxism. Once again, the socialist quest for progress and innovation comes in handy for the justification of parapsychology.

TO RECONSTRUCT the esoteric field in socialist Bulgaria, we need to look at another new formation – the Institute of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, founded in 1972 by historian, Alexander Fol (1933–2006). As a son of the journalist, feminist and intellectual Vera Bojadjeva-Fol (1893–1989), who was well known in Sofia’s early 20th century salons and had connections with progressive educationalists and members of the masonic lodges⁶⁸, Alexander Fol grew up in a somewhat “bourgeois” setting involving classical music lessons and intellectual talks instead of Marxist ideology.⁶⁹ He was working on his doctoral thesis in the History Department of Sofia University at the time

that Lyudmila Zhivkova was studying there (1960–1966). With Zhivkova’s support,⁷⁰ his approach to and theories on *Thracology* became the core of the research at the institute and laid the ground for a new reading of early Bulgarian history.

Since the term “Thracology” was understood as the “science about Ancient Thrace,” the main objective of the institution was “research on Ancient Thrace and the Thracians in the context of Paleo-Balkan (sic!) studies which, in turn, researches the pre-Greek and non-Greek components of the ancient Balkan and Western Asian-Minor cultural-historical space”.⁷¹ Fol argued

“THIS ATTEMPT TO ELEVATE BULGARIA’S CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL ROLE AS A DIRECT SUCCESSOR OF THE THRACIAN CIVILIZATION FITTED WELL IN LYUDMILA ZHIVKOVA’S CULTURAL AGENDA OF THE 1970S.”

that Thracian civilization up to this time had only been observed by Greek and Roman authors, who saw it through the lens of their own culture (*interpretatio graeca*) and postulated a new approach (*interpretatio thracica*), which had to take Thracian culture and spirituality from the shadow of the Greek perspective.⁷² This attempt to elevate Bulgaria’s cultural and spiritual role as a direct successor of the Thracian civilization fitted well in Lyudmila Zhivkova’s cultural agenda of the 1970s. The latter was based on the image of an existing continuity between Bulgaria’s past, present, and future – a constant evolution in which socialism was the culmination. Fol’s

Thracology was thus fruitful for constructing the “new socialist man” as a successor of the culture of “a great people and a great civilization,” which “has come down to us over the threshold of the centuries.”⁷³

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THIS continuity would not be possible without the concept of *Thracian Orphism* – the supposed religion of the ancient Thracians, which Fol had been working on since 1976.⁷⁴ He developed a cosmology in which Orpheus is the highest solar deity, despite the limited explanatory power⁷⁵ of archaeological material. According to the historian, there was also a figure of a “king” who “enters into a symbolic marriage with the Goddess Mother”⁷⁶, who is then “self-fertilized, gives birth to her son, waits until he becomes a man and couples with him to give the beginning of a new cycle.”⁷⁷ The son is then “capable of setting the second phase of the [...] cycle in motion through his self-perfection.”⁷⁸ Thus, Fol sees “the spiral-shaped evolution of the entire macro- and micro-world” parallel to this cyclic development. Furthermore, he points out that “[t]he mystery of Thracian Orphic religion [...] consists in the mysterious faith in immortality” and in the idea “that the body is the grave of the soul, which can enter and leave it freely.” Under the presumption of a constant self-perfection enabled by the immortality of the soul, Fol believed that the Thracians could transfer all their ancient knowledge to the next generations. A direct connection between the contemporary Bulgarians and the 2nd millennium B.C. Thracians was thus manufactured to offer a source of national identity and pride. By embedding the socialist ideology as



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PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Lyudmila Zhivkova was an influential politician with an interest in esotericism. The *Monument to 1300 years of Bulgaria* was built on plateau above the city of Shumen in 1981 as part of a large-scale state project to commemorate the 1300th anniversary of the first Bulgarian empire.

a culmination of this continuity, Zhivkova was actively promoting this logic in her public appearances:

It is just in this way that our socialist generation (sic!) look on the historical-cultural heritage. Making use of the rich historical cultural traditions, the experience and the beauty inherited from the past to form the new socialist consciousness and attitude to life, they look ahead and dream of the communist society when the harmonious and all-round well-developed man will live according to the laws of beauty.⁷⁹

It can be concluded that Alexander Fol's concept of *Thracian Orphism*, which combined classical esoteric symbols such as the "spiral" and the "mother goddess,"⁸⁰ with Greek mythology, Bulgarian "mystical" geographical sites (the Kazanlak Tomb; Strandja mountains) and pre-Christian folk traditions ("nestinari"; "kukeri" etc.), were implemented not only scientifically but also politically for the local construction of a Bulgarian national identity far off the Soviet internationalism. Hand in hand with promoting this supposed unique Thracian descent of the Bulgarians is the relativization of another theory, which had been creating a common ground with the Soviets – that of the Slavic origin of the Bulgarians. It was in the early 1980s that the first volume of the ambitious project "Istoriia na Bŭlgariia" [The History of Bulgaria], dealing with ancient Bulgarian history and written by Alexander Fol et al. was published. A new approach to the question of the origins of the first Bulgarians was offered: they were neither only Slavs, nor only Thracians, but an amalgamation of Slavs, Thracians, and Proto-Bulgarians. This narrative, which is predominant in Bulgarian historiography until the present day, contradicted Todor Zhivkov's earlier aspirations for Bulgaria to abandon its national sovereignty by joining the Soviet

Union as a 16th republic. This can either be read as a sign that this idea was off the table in the early 1980s or as an indication of a nationalistic shift in Bulgarian identity policy under Lyudmila Zhivkova, despite the ambitions of her father.

The obsession with Thrace and its instrumentalization is evident in the large-scale state project for the commemoration of the 1300th anniversary in 1981 of the founding of the Bulgarian state. The preparations, coordinated by a committee headed by Lyudmila Zhivkova, started in the mid-1970s, and adopted the idea of the "unity of past, present and future"⁸¹ with six "thematic directions," each comprising different initiatives that had been formulated in 1978. The first initiative was called "Bulgaria: A Country of Ancient Culture, a Crossroads of Civilisations" with "The Descendants of Orpheus" as a significant initiative that had "to reveal the Bulgarian lands as one of the sources of the emergence and development of human civilization [...]"⁸² A general focus was put on the achievements of the past – ancient (the Thracian descent), medieval (the "Golden Age" under Tsar Simeon I (893–927)), and modern (the revolutionary national liberation movement in the 19th century). This appreciation of and pride in own history contradicted state policy during the first decades of socialism, when even "neutral" research on medieval Bulgarian history was regarded as nationalist or bourgeois.⁸³

Promotional material about the event was distributed in all countries with which Bulgaria had diplomatic connections. In some of them, separate events were organized. The book *Bulgaria is 1300 Years Old*,⁸⁴ published in the Netherlands in 1982, demonstrates the *historical/nationalist turn* in Bulgarian cultural policy. It refers to the glorious Bulgarian past, using images of archaeological excavations, historical figures, and events such as the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet by Cyril and Methodius,⁸⁵ the Christianization of Bulgaria under Tsar Boris in 864,⁸⁶ the territorial expansion under Tsar Simeon I, iconographies and

frescos,⁸⁷ Thracian gold treasures,⁸⁸ the national movements for an independent church and liberation from Ottoman rule,⁸⁹ etc. Religious events and references seem not to have caused dissonance in the allegedly atheistic socialist state, in the same way that nationalistic praise of one's own glorious pre-socialist history seems not to have interfered with the Soviet quest for internationalism. In a speech about the 1300-year celebration, Lyudmila Zhivkova calls the gnostic group of the Bogomils a "democratic revolutionary tradition", next to the partisans and the fighters for social justice.⁹⁰ She postulates a direct connection and continuity between the monk Paisii of Hilendar, author of the first written history of Bulgaria and a pivot of Bulgarian national self-consciousness, the heroes of the Bulgarian national pantheon – the revolutionaries Hristo Botev and Vassil Levski⁹¹, and the chief ideologue of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Georgi Dimitrov.⁹²

This leads us to one central piece of the Bulgarian esoteric puzzle, which is Lyudmila Zhivkova. Connected to the entire creative intelligentsia of the 1960s and 1970s, as a young woman, she organized salon meetings in her home, where topics like clairvoyance and spiritism were no rarity. Among her closest friends were scientists Alexander Fol and Georgi Lozanov, artist Svetlin Roussev and writer Bogomil Rainov (son of one of the first Bulgarian theosophists, Nikolai Rainov) – all of them having a pronounced interest in esoteric matters. Having almost unlimited material and political sources at her command, Zhivkova managed to put them in critical positions in the socialist cultural, scientific, and political landscape. An adherent of Agni Yoga, theosophy and the White Brotherhood, and a regular visitor to the seer Vanga, the high-ranking politician had a leading role in all esoteric developments in socialist Bulgaria and functioned as a binding element between the different actors and phenomena.

Not only in the celebration of 1300 years of Bulgaria but also in her other ambitious and expensive projects, we find esoteric references and symbols. For example, the International Children's Assembly Banner of Peace, which took place in 1979 and gathered participants from 79 countries in Sofia, was named after Nicholas Roerich's Pact⁹³ and used a logo created by him. It showed three red dots in a red circle and possibly symbolized the unity of past, present and future.⁹⁴ Central to Agni Yoga, symbols of the sun, fire, spirals and a figure of the "Mother Goddess" were implemented in the building of the National Palace of Culture, where they can be found to this day.

IN 1979, ZHIVKOVA STARTED a state program to popularize "all-round talented and harmoniously developed personalities," the first one-year cycle of which was dedicated to Nicholas Roerich.⁹⁵ His art and spiritual ideas about "the laws of beauty"⁹⁶ were thus popularized through exhibitions, readings, and conferences. On public occasions, Zhivkova talked about "the gigantic struggle between the old and the new consciousness,"⁹⁷ the latter of which belonged to Roerich, who "strove to enter the laws of eternal continuity, the spiral development and expansion of evolutionary waves, to catch the rhythm of the epoch in which he lived and worked."⁹⁸ This is an example of Zhivkova referring

solely to esoteric topoi such as the "old and the new consciousness," the "eternal continuity," and code words like "waves," "rhythm," and "spiral", instead of using common topics and phrases of the formalized socialist language such as "the battle against capitalism", "the victory of socialism", "heroes of labor", "fulfillment of the five-year plan," etc. This kind of semantics, highly loaded with esoteric imagery and symbols, can be found in the majority of her public speeches and became the reason why she was often misunderstood by other Politburo members and by the broader public. It also affected Lyudmila Zhivkova's legacy as a politician.

Conclusion: Matching the pieces

Against the dominant public image of atheism and religious decline, alternative religiosity in socialist Bulgaria did not disappear but became more and more visible and increasingly challenged the spheres of historiography, medicine, and culture. The popularity of the seer Vanga crossed geographical and political borders and became viral in the Soviet Union and beyond. Experiments with telepathy, suggestion and clairvoyance were *en vogue*, and the whole nationalist historiography was reinvented based on a supposed Thracian Orphic religion, remarkably similar to the theosophical teachings that were popular at the time. State programs praised some esoteric thinkers and implemented their ideas in school curricula and the socialist material culture.

Many different actors were involved in these esoteric developments, following their aims and interests. Drawing a clear line between the forms and agents of *popular* and *elitist esotericism* in socialist Bulgaria is a complicated task since they often intersect and interact with one another. Moreover, providers and consumers, subjects and objects change places according to the viewpoint and the concrete historical moment. Nevertheless, some systematical conclusions can be made along the social and functional dimensions of the phenomenon. Thus, we should answer the "Who?" and "Why?" questions about esotericism in the People's Republic of Bulgaria.

Forms of *popular esotericism* like clairvoyance, healing and fortunetelling offered an opportunity for developing female religious agency and alternative life solutions.⁹⁹ They were thus often practiced by physically or socially disadvantaged persons from remote mountain areas, who served as mediators between the immanent and the transcendent world. Since the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was first strictly observed and later controlled from the inside by the state,¹⁰⁰ alternative ways towards enabling one of the essential functions of religion – providing answers to the great¹⁰¹ transcendent questions of death, birth, lethal diseases and the afterlife – were needed. Seers like Vanga were privately consulted by people because they offered answers not only to the great but also to the intermediate transcendencies such as career path, relationships, etc. The "spiritual product" of the seers also included a universal moral compass, instructions for solving everyday problems, and, not least, an impressive performative experience.

Academically, the seers were of interest to psychiatrists and physicians, but also the *Dürzhavna sigurnost* [State Security], not only for the sake of science but also because of their potential

usage in intelligence in the context of the Cold War. Thus, within an ongoing competition between the “East” and the “West” and among the countries of the former socialist bloc, all resources were mobilized, even if they contradicted the official materialist state doctrine. Consequently, by trying to appropriate the possible political potential of *popular esotericism*, the latter was transferred from the domain of “religion” to the domain of “science,” thus being *de facto* legitimized. Still, neither the political appropriation nor the *scientification* of esotericism are exceptionally Bulgarian ideas. Similar examples originating from the Soviet Union were the scientific interest in *psychotronics* in Czechoslovakia and the Georgian “folk healer,” Dzhuna Davitashvili, who gained international popularity.

IN CONTRAST, the social bearers of what I call *elitist esotericism* were rather representatives of the socialist intelligentsia: writers, artists, politicians, and academicians in the larger cities who knew foreign languages. They often came from families with an established esoteric tradition, had access to esoteric and samizdat literature through personal contacts established at university, or had heard of esotericism in one of the bohemian cafés or at an exclusive salon meeting in Sofia.¹⁰² In the first half of the century, esotericism had laid a foundation that was too solid to be broken by atheist propaganda. It had become a trend and a label for artistry among the creative intelligentsia. Amidst the reasons for an engagement with the esoteric current were political protest, quests for scientific freedom and curiosity towards the new and the unknown. Mental escapism from the highly materialistic socialist reality can also be supposed in some cases.

Representatives of the nomenclatura and specifically of the second socialist generation had a crucial role in the thriving of esotericism in the 1960s and 1970s in Bulgaria. The high-ranking cultural politician, Lyudmila Zhivkova, who had central public spheres such as science, education, and mass media under her command, lobbied for the foundation of *the State Research Institute of Suggestology* in 1966, *the Institute of Thracology* in 1972, and personally conceptualized the implementation of their research results in large-scale political projects. While we could hardly assess the personal motives of Zhivkova, the political function of parapsychology, *suggestopedia* and *Thracian orphism* can be evaluated as nothing less than a base for the construction of a narrative on the “great Bulgarian history,” seen as a continuity from Thracian to socialist times. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, different esoteric elements come to service in this endeavor. The scientific attempts to understand and explain Vanga’s talent of “seeing” only “proved” Peter Deunov’s vision of the Bulgarians as a “new race” with new (psychic) abilities to be true. In turn, the postulated ability of the Thracians to transfer knowledge and experiences through their “immortal soul” corresponded (even semantically) with Roerich’s idea of the “spiral evolution” of “self-perfecting human beings.”

This is the prism through which we should see the cultural politics of late socialist Bulgaria. Although it was the esoteric and not the socialist logic leading, no direct dissonance was caused since it served the nationalistic political agenda and supplied in-

ternational prestige. After Lyudmila Zhivkova died in 1981, most of her legacy was abandoned. Long-term programs were canceled, funds were cut and personnel changes made. Her utopian project for the creation of “all-round harmoniously developed people” failed but the nationalistic narrative of the descent of the Bulgarians survived and has become a fixed component of the contemporary nationalist discourse. One example of this is the nationalist party, VMRO, which reproduces an image of the Bulgarians as ancestors of “Slavs, Thracians and Proto-Bulgarians,” of the great medieval tsars, under which Bulgaria was “on three seas”¹⁰³, and of national heroes like Vassil Levski, “the Apostle of freedom”.¹⁰⁴ However, the question of how esoteric and New Age spirituality seeped into present day nationalism requires further research. ✕

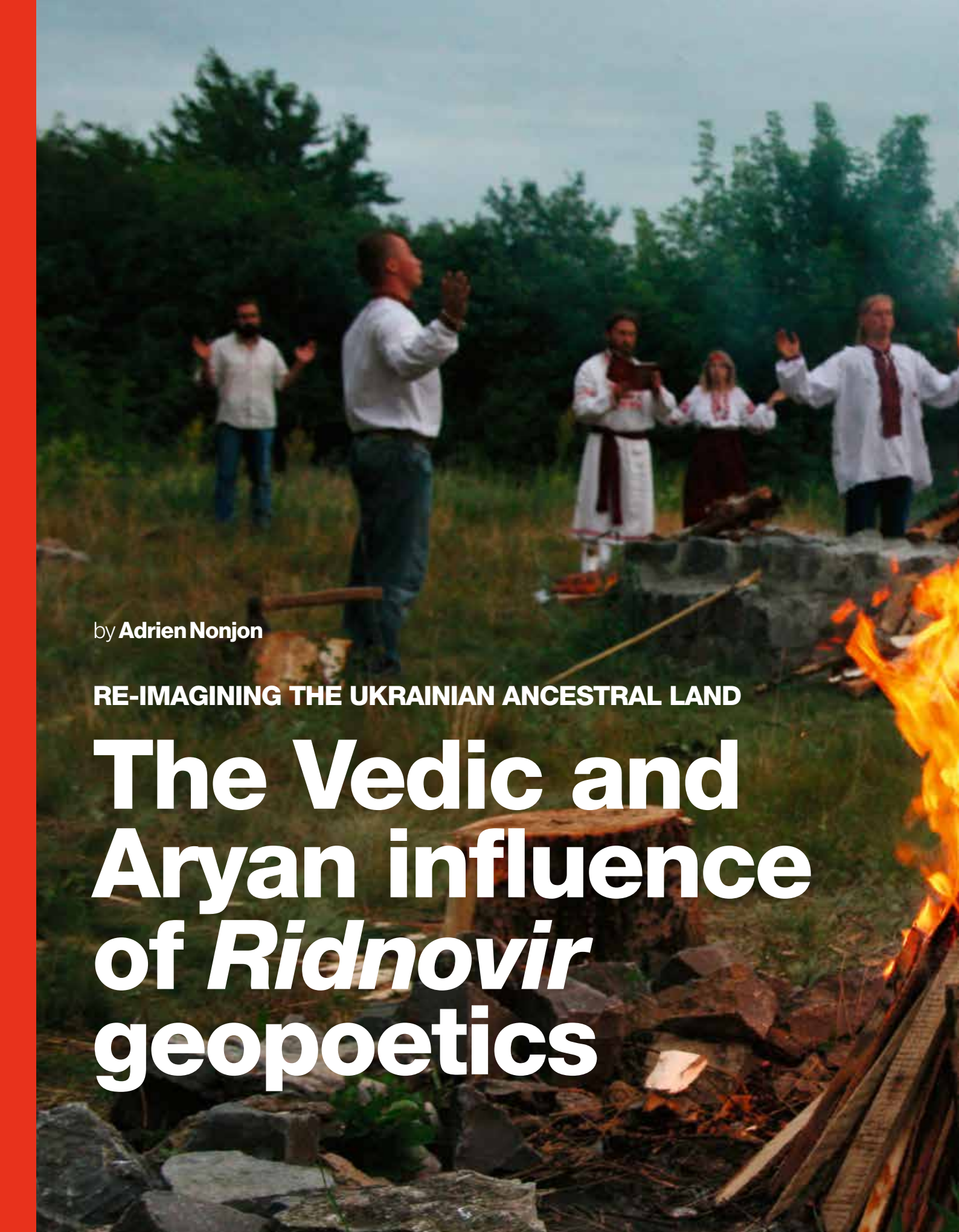
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- 6 The dichotomy between elitist/popular is solely based on the regimes of accessibility of the phenomena and does not imply any form of positive or negative assessment of the author towards them.
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- 40 Cf. Valtchinova, *Balkanski iasnovidki i prorochitsi [Bulgarian Female Clairvoyants and Prophets]*, 328.
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- 47 Cf. Todor Zhivkov, *Memoari [Memoirs]* (Sofia: IK "Trud i pravo"), 480.
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- 58 Nevena Tosheva, *Fenomen [Phenomenon]* (1976), 108 min., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOTInoRiIM&t=1015s&ab_channel=doker, last accessed 10.03.2021.
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- 99 This means pursuing alternative professions, family concepts or ways of framing physical disabilities in the socialist society.
- 100 See Metodiev, "Turning Point or Continuity," 19–22; Galia Valtchinova, "From Socialist Religious Revival to a Socialist Seer and Vice Versa: The Remaking of Religion in Postsocialist Bulgaria." In *Working Paper 98*, ed. by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle/Saale, 2007). Metodiev points out that in the 1980s, the majority of high-ranking clerics in the BOC were agents of *Dürzhavna sigurnost* (State Security).
- 101 I use the differentiation between great, intermediate and little transcendencies of Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann, *Strukturen der Lebenswelt*, 2nd ed. (Konstanz, München: UTB, 2017).
- 102 On the culture of literary/art cafés in Sofia from 1900 onwards, see Mariana Pürvanova, *Bohemskite kafeneta na sotsa [The Bohemian Cafes of Socialism]* (Sofia: IK Gutenberg, 2017).
- 103 See "Praznichno shestvie za 123 godini VMRO oglasi sofiiskite ulitsi [A Festive Procession for 123 Years of IMRO Filled the Streets of Sofia]," IMRO-BNM, <https://vmro.bg/news>, last accessed 15.03.2021.
- 104 See e.g., "Poklon! 148 godini ot gibelta na apostola na bülgarskata svoboda! [Tribute! 148 Years Since the Death of the Apostle of Bulgarian Freedom!]: Neka si pripomnim dumite mu i neka pomnim zaveta mu za chista i sviata republika [Let Us Remember His Words and His Covenant for a Pure and Sacred Republic]," *Bülgaria*, no. 51 (2021), https://vmro.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/vBG51_feb2021.pdf, last accessed 15.03.2021 and "Poklon pred pametta i deloto na Vassil Levski [A Tribute to the Memory and Work of Vassil Levski]: 142 godini ot obesvaneto na apostola na svobodata Vasil Ivanov Kunchev [142 Years Since the Hanging of the Apostle of Freedom, Vassil Ivanov Kunchev]," *Bülgaria*, no. 25 (2015), https://vmro.bg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/vmro25_web.pdf, last accessed 15.03.2021.

A group of people, including men and women, are gathered around a large bonfire made of logs and branches. They are wearing traditional white and red clothing, possibly representing a folk or religious ceremony. The scene is set in a grassy field with trees in the background. The overall atmosphere is solemn and ritualistic.

by **Adrien Nonjon**

RE-IMAGINING THE UKRAINIAN ANCESTRAL LAND

The Vedic and Aryan influence of *Ridnovir* geopoetics



Ridhavra followers gathered around ritual bonfires on the longest day of the year (summer solstice) in Kamianets-Podilsky, Ukraine.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

abstract

Ukrainian Neo-pagan groups, known as Ridnoviry, since the 1950s, sought to develop an archaic cosmic piety around nature and primordial traditions, to providing an alternative to the disillusion of Soviet materialist atheism and give meaning to an uprooted nation. Mainly influenced by an environmentalist and Hinduist imaginary, the landscape constitutes the main element of inertia structuring this belief. Indeed, the emotions embedded in the Brahmin knowledge and the aesthetic permanence of territory are the foundations of what could be called a pagan "geopoetics". This concept, based on environmentalism and poetry, was part of the deployment of a new understanding of nature, and the claim of a Ukrainian ascendance linked with the Vedic and Aryan origins myth. Focusing on the main Neo-pagan groups Ridna Ukrayins'ka Natsional'na Vira (RUN-Vira) and Ob'iednannia Ridnoviriv Ukraïny (ORU), I propose in this article to return to the genealogy of this belief and show the role of geopoetics in the construction of Ukrainian Neo-paganism.

KEY WORDS: Ukraine, ecology, geopolitics, Paganism, Vedism, New Age.

Considered a mystical axiom, nature and its veneration constitute the primary characteristic of contemporary alternative religions and spiritualities. This metaphysics appeared at the very end of the 19th century and covers various cultural and political sensibilities, ranging from deep ecology to progressive environmentalism. Nevertheless, it is the result of a single ontological interpretation of monotheisms. Considered to be anthropocentric, the latter would have made human beings depositaries of the environment offered by God for the purposes of exploitation. Cut off from his deep roots, which were once anchored in the soil and in the living, man would fall prey to a form of alienation that prevented him from taking into account the fragility of his environment.¹ In view of the damage inflicted on the biosphere by modern societies, some individuals have tried to find philosophical substrates outside the field of monotheistic traditions that would allow the reconciliation of Man and nature around a "biophilia", in other words, a love of the living.² Spiritual ecology suggests that spiritualities linked to nature can offer higher standards than the secular approaches of ecologism. Beyond this holistic transcendence, which is intended to replace the temptations of contemporary materialism in order to safeguard the environment, Neo-paganism has been able to follow much more complex paths, combining the search for this primary harmony with the quest for origins.

An historical outline of Ukrainian Neo-paganism and Vedic tradition

The environmental question is a corollary of Neo-paganism, as well as *New Age*. However, it cannot serve as a sufficient criterion to establish a strict distinction between the two. Indeed, if these belief systems advocate a return to nature and its cosmic essence in order to provide existential answers in an increasingly materialistic and individualistic world,³ their traditions and inspirations

largely differ from each other, particularly when it comes to identity. While *New Age* claims to be universal in seeking "self-realization" through a set of invented mythologies that involve different religions and spiritualities, such as Buddhism or Witchcraft which, are often mixed with scientific or pseudo-scientific works tinged with esotericism and occult elucubrations,⁴ Neo-paganism is foremost a resurgence of pre-Christian native polytheistic cults.⁵ Closely linked to the Romantics' legacy, which idealized antic and traditional societies, unlike *New Age*, Neo-paganism underpins the idea of indigenous tradition passed on from generation to generation throughout history. Thus, Neo-paganism is not the result of some revelations, and is even less based on beliefs that disregard origins. Although part of a millenarian approach, the environment in Neo-pagan faith is mostly considered to be the *topos* of a rehabilitation of sacred natural places, but also as the cradle of national identity. In doing so, self-realization through nature worship is more ethnic than ethical.⁶ By proposing to re-enchant the world through the "return of ancestral gods" and local mythologies, it is not surprising to see that Neo-paganism has found an outlet in contemporary societies in need of reference points. This observation is even more relevant when it comes to the case of Ukraine: A residual construction of former Soviet colonialism in which the national community has painfully tried to rebuild itself and maintain its traditions⁷.

ABOVE ALL, THE HISTORY OF Neo-paganism in Ukraine has been implicit and hidden. Officially disappearing at the very end of the 10th century, a period of the evangelization of Slavic peoples marked by the conversion of Rurikid Prince Volodymyr in 988 to the Byzantine rite and the establishment in 991 of a Metropolitan bishop in Kyiv, former Pagan practices and beliefs persisted through the folklore of rural communities, most often far away from religious centers of power. Although Christianity became the official religion of Kyivian Rus', it was actually only an additional rite to the existing Pagan customs.⁸ Far from having disappeared, Ukrainian Paganism like other Slavonic cults would therefore have been subject to syncretic assimilation rather than a replacement imposed without consensus. This unofficial co-existence would then have resulted in a "dualist belief system".⁹ It was not until the 20th century that the ancient Slavonic faith reappeared. If this renewed interest is mainly due to the will of the Soviet regime to rekindle the flame of patriotism in a context of ideological confrontation with the West, through the rediscovery and valorization of ancient Slavic beliefs,¹⁰ it is also used in Ukrainian dissident movements as an obvious cultural-political alternative to reconnect with an oppressed national identity.¹¹ Born in the post-1945 Ukrainian diaspora, which mainly established itself in the United States and Canada, the resurgence of Ukrainian native beliefs was mainly due to two individuals: Volodymyr Shaian (1908–1974), a philosopher and Sanskritist, and the writer Lev Sylenko (1921–2008), a disciple of the latter, according to some sources. Volodymyr Shaian was the first person to set about restoring a "Ukrainian native faith". Having initially founded the *Order of the Knights of the Sun God*, a Neo-pagan paramilitary organization integrated into the Or-

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Volodymyr Shaian founded the Neo-pagan Order of the Knights of the Sun God.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Author Lev Sylenko emigrated to the US and founded RUN-Vira in Chicago in 1966.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Halyna Lozko founded Pravoslavia in 1993, and Obiednannia Ridnoviriv Ukrayiny in 1998.



The symbol of RUNVira, representing Prav, Yav and Nav, encircled by the Sun. Prav, Yav and Nav are the three dimensions of the cosmos as described in the *Book of Light* and in the *Book of Veles of Slavic Native Faith*.

ganization of Ukrainian Nationalists that fought the Germans and Soviets during the Second World War;¹² Volodymyr Shaian was forced to flee to Germany in 1944, then to London, where he completed his academic training and participated in the creation of several Neo-pagan journals such as *Orden or Svitannia*¹³ with the help of Lev Sylenko. Although they were driven by the same cause, the collaboration between the two men quickly ended at the beginning of the 1950s, giving rise to the first schism in the Ukrainian Neo-pagan faith. Emigrating in 1954 to the New World, Lev Sylenko founded the first branch of a reformed Ukrainian native faith (RUN-Vira) 12 years later in Chicago on December 3, 1966.¹⁴ Initially located in the United States, between 1970 and 1980, RUN-Vira extended its ramifications to the various Ukrainian diasporas that had been established in Canada, the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom and even in Oceania. Volodymyr Shaian also founded his own communities in Toronto and Hamilton in Canada. He did

continuing his work in London, where he died at the age of 74. The liberalization of the Soviet Union during Gorbachev's reforms in the mid 80s and finally the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 allowed the gradual return of these cults to Ukraine. While RUN-Vira established itself permanently in Ukraine from 1992,¹⁵ Shaian's movement owes its popularization in Ukraine to the philologist and ethnographer Halyna Lozko (b. 1952). A disciple of Shaian's precepts, she founded her own movement in Lviv in 1993, called *Pravoslavia* [The True Faith] and later became General Director of Shaian's movement, which she led under the name *Volkh-vynia Zoreslava* [High Priestess Zoreslava].

Through her activism and numerous scientific publications for the academic world, Halyna Lozko gradually succeeded in gathering most of the groups belonging to Shaian's movement. In 1998, she founded *Obiednannia Ridnoviriv Ukrayiny* [Association of Ukrainians of the Native Faith], a federation of Pagan families established in almost entire Ukrainian territory. Although Ukrainian Neo-paganism now numbers around 10,000 people,¹⁶ each

belonging to organizations, as diverse as they are in terms of dogma and ritual, owes much of its worldview to the Shaian and Sylenko movements.

AS PART OF A GROWING subculture, Neo-pagans in Ukraine have indeed sought to develop an archaic cosmic piety based on former Slavic beliefs. Presented as a "traditional" religion, i.e., "of societies that have never broken the link, never having been converted to monotheism, it is based on respect for traditions and on the conformist reproduction of the religious practices of ancestors"¹⁷. This singular desire to reconnect with "indigenous Ukrainian belief that must be considered – to quote Volodymyr Shaian – "not only as poetry, but as a living and creative religion",¹⁸ is mainly reflected in the terminology used by its followers to designate themselves. Although Ukrainian Neo-paganism might be considered by historians as mythologizing (re)

"AS PART OF A GROWING SUBCULTURE, NEO-PAGANS IN UKRAINE HAVE INDEED SOUGHT TO DEVELOP AN ARCHAIC COSMIC PIETY BASED ON FORMER SLAVIC BELIEFS."

construction fabricated *a posteriori* on the basis of a rediscovered local rural folklore,¹⁹ rather than the faithful practice of an ancestral religion due to a lack of original sources, the term "Pagan" or *pohanstvo* is perceived by followers as pejorative insofar as it would encompass unrelated beliefs (e.g., *New Age*) or would refer to attacks by the Orthodox Church. Because of their pronounced ethnicism and the so-called primordial nature of their religion, Ukrainian Neo-pagans prefer to use the term *Ridnavira*, or "native faith/truth" to designate their religion. However, it is also widely decried; the term "Neo-pagan" is still accepted as they consider themselves worthy inheritors of an ancestral faith.²⁰

Like other Neo-pagan beliefs, *Ridnavira* is present in Central and Eastern Europe, polytheistic and holistic taking benefits from post-Soviet cultural recomposition. Built around the cosmogonical concept of the "World Tree" on which the existing world exists as its essential foundations, *Ridnavira* has the sacralization and personification of nature and elements in a pantheon of 17 deities, of which *Rod* god of fertility, *Perun* god of thunder and rain and



A modern Rodnover altar with depiction of the God Dazhboh (left). An Ukrainian stamp depicting Kupala night, a traditional Slavic holiday that was originally celebrated on the shortest night of the year. It is celebrated on the night between July 6 and 7.



Dazhboh father of gods were the main ones. The rich and complex formulations of this cosmology are complemented by a series of ritual practices that organize human life around the rhythm of nature. Thus, perceived as the exclusive receptacle of the divine, nature and its veneration among *Ridnoviry* implies the idea of a holism, a cosmic “Whole”, formulated around tripartism: *Nav* the Spiritual, Invisible or “Other World”; *Yav* the “Manifested World”; and *Prav* the “World of the Higher Law”. As an intrinsic part of the second world *Yav*, nature, enchanted by Paganism, commanded respect, reverence, and reciprocity in the human mind. In this sense, *Ridnavira* proceeds from a form of hedonistic and vitalistic fulfilment that is opposed to any form of modern materialism that is conducive to individualism and egoism. However, despite these elements, the *Ridnavira* is divided. Inspired as much by *New Age* as by evangelicalism, *RUN-Vira* is distinguished by the veneration of one and the same god named *Dazhboh*, the God who gives or the Sun God, whose sacred words are transcribed in the book *Maha Vira*, written in 1979.²¹ In contrast to Sylenko, who was considered a “false prophet”, Volodymyr Shaian emphasizes the polytheistic dimension of the Ukrainian Faith. Thus, the latter takes up the great canons of Slavic Paganism of Kyivian Ru’s, compiled in the book *Vira predkhiv nashyx* [Our Ancestors’ Faith], written by Shaian in 1987, but also those canons recognized in folk studies [*narodozniavstvo*], which Halyna Lozko observed in the journal *Svaroh* and her own publications.

While the *Ridnavira* is largely based on Slavic rural folklore and traditions, its mythological essence also features Vedic heritage. Initially born in Russia in the 20th century, Vedism can be considered as the Eastern quest of the Slavic tradition.²² This philosophical current was developed with the help of the ancient works of white emigration scientific cenacles and proposes a Russian rereading of the history of the Slavic peoples and their

spiritualities. Wishing to place themselves in an immemorial religious lineage, the proponents of Vedism link Pagan Slavic religions to ancient traditions that came from the Indian peninsula and the Persian world. Originally part of the *Rig Veda*, the main manuscript allegedly containing a collection of Vedic hymns and mystical teachings, this Eastern tradition would then have gradually spread to the West during the various waves of migration that have occurred throughout Antiquity. Having disappeared due to changes in population, Vedism would nevertheless have survived had it been assimilated into the Slavic Pagan beliefs originating from the Volga and the Pontic region. Original as it is in many ways, this interpretation of history makes sense to many Neo-pagans according to their reading of the *Book of Veles*, a so-

“NEO-PAGANISM IS FIRST AND FOREMOST A SYSTEM OF MORAL VALUES CLOSELY RELATED TO ENHANCEMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT.”

called proto-Slavic work discovered during the Civil War of 1917 which, since 1960, has constituted their main source, an irrefutable proof of this legacy.²³ Having been subject to various interpretations, ranging from esotericism to Gnosticism²⁴ the Vedic question is deeply political. It unites the many narratives of Slavic Neo-paganism that justify racial superiority²⁵ insofar as it refers first of all to a celebration of spiritual heritage symbolized by the

figure of the Indo-European and his mythical avatar: the Aryan. As the presumed repositories of Vedism, Russians would be direct descendants of the Aryans and the main garants of “White World”. Nevertheless, this version of history is contested in Ukraine by *Ridnoviry*. Both influenced by oriental religions and in particular Hinduism, Volodymyr Shaian and Lev Sylenko were convinced that the Vedic knowledge present in the north of India would have been transmitted by Aryan people, making Ukraine the true cradle of this civilization, although their interpretations differ. Lev Sylenko’s mythology is part of a theosophist perspective, an occult current born at the beginning of the 20th century under the pen of Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891). It largely takes up

the idea of "root peoples" who, in turn, have been vectors of civilizations throughout ancient history, each of which developed characteristics according to their environment. Identified in the *Maha Vira* through the word "Oriana", wrongly derived from the word "Aryan".²⁶ For Lev Sylenko, Ukraine is the last resort for this people that have been at the origin of the Brahmin knowledge contained in the *Rig Vedas*. Making the Ukrainian nation the first white one among the other. In contrast to Sylenko, in the ideology of Volodymyr Shaian and Halyna Lozko, the Aryan myth espouses an ethno-differentialist and anti-Christian vision. Thus, the identitarian component is very present in the ORU. Just like its Russian side,²⁷ antisemitism and anti-Zionism can collide with the desire to create a religion specific to white populations that are assimilated to Indo-European peoples (understood as Aryan). Although Volodymyr Shaian was able to introduce this approach in his 1937 conference entitled "Renaissance of pan-Aryan thought"²⁸, it owes also to various rightist and fascist intellectuals, such as the Italian neo-fascist philosopher Julius Evola, who used the Indo-European Pagan "Primordial Tradition" to distinguish the "noble-minded" races that were the guardians of "wisdom" and "gnosis" over the millennia²⁹. Like other authors who praised traditional societies and Indo-European Europe, such as Alain de Benoist and Pierre Krebs³⁰, Julius Evola and his work have thus been disseminated and conceptually assimilated within Ukrainian Neo-paganism under Halyna Lozko's patronage³¹.

A Pagan "geopoetics"? Toward a new reading of *Ridnavira* environmentalism

In his article "Nature and Ethnicity in East European Paganism: An Environmental Ethic of the Religious Right?" Adrian Ivakhiv argues that the ecological representations built around the *Ridnavira* faith are above all to a worldview that should embrace the Ukrainian specificity in terms of religious tradition and relationship to nature.³² This idea of a "continuum"³³ between the human being and nature originates from an idealization of traditional religions considered as cosmic.³⁴ It is about recognizing the absolute character of nature by conferring on it a sacred as well as a living dimension. This idealization would force people to enter into harmony with the world and return to the primary stage of their existence in contact with nature.³⁵ In this non-anthropocentric perspective, nature is seen more as a partner than as a place to live. If this representation of nature is mostly based on romantic ecological arguments, Adrian Ivakhiv's article points out that nature can also be understood in *Ridnavira* as radical ideas expressing the idea that ethnic communities are above all biological communities rooted in a specific natural territory.³⁶ This radical approach has not been without effects, albeit appendicular, in the theoretical corpus of Ukrainian Neo-paganism.³⁷ Indeed, if the environmental conservation of most Neo-pagans corresponds to a "cultural ecology"³⁸ seeking to rebalance interactions between human activities and the living, it is also used as a means to oppose globalism³⁹ and monotheisms. Presented as an external aggression, for most movements the environmental crisis in Ukraine is attributable to Christianity. This anti-Christian dimension is a major point of convergence between radical

deep ecology and ethno-nationalism.⁴⁰ By conquering and appropriating new virgin territories throughout history, Christianity would have made possible the trivialization of the cosmos and the questioning of indigenous beliefs. The process of technical arrest resulting from modern Western civilization would be the indirect result of the replacement of the Pagan pantheistic myth by that of Christian anthropocentrism.⁴¹ Also, ecology among *Ridnoviry* goes hand in hand, as Adrian Ivakhiv points out, with the preservation of people's identity. For some believers, the environment defence it is first and foremost that of the people. To be an ecologist and to venerate nature would consist in wanting to preserve the natural environment of living species, of which Man is a part. Thinking that each people is associated with a specific biome, the Pagan supporters of this identity-based ecology are thus opposed to any form of mixing. Introduced with the Vedic and Aryan hypothetical cradle, *Ridnoviry* therefore considers Ukrainian nature to be the last bastion in the world to protect from such so-called threats.

IDENTITY IS INDEED essential from the point of view of Ukrainian Neo-paganism. Through ecology, Neo-paganism intends to establish a new ethic of the future based on a natural order inspired by the pristine purity of ancient peoples who struggled for their survival, as well as that of their environment. It is therefore appropriate to approach this theme with as much distance as necessary, and even more so when it comes to the Vedic and Aryan issue. However, in her book on Aryan myth in Russia, Marlène Laruelle reminds us that this imaginary represents, under its mythical and ideological aspect, a research itinerary that, at the very least, is heuristic.⁴² While most scholars such as Adrian Ivakhiv have focused on the identitarian and political dimensions underlying *Ridnavira* spiritual ecology, it is important to remember that before being an ideology, Neo-paganism is first and foremost a system of moral values closely related to enhancement of the environment. Indeed, through their mythical dimension, Neo-pagan religions participate in the transformation of the view of immediate universe. It is no longer a question of considering the environment as simple physical inertia, but as a "mirror of the soul",⁴³ a new metaphysical horizon on which man projects himself in a transcendental way in order to find there the language of the inanimate through which he can express his feelings, passions and lyrical impulses through the Vedic tradition. Indeed, the sense of the sacred in the *Rig-Veda* is distinguished by the ability to see the world in its complexity in the light of the divine.⁴⁴ The *Homo Vedicus*, which can be described by Halyna Lozko as "a person whose goal in life is spiritual perfection"⁴⁵ lives in symbiosis with his environment. He would be connected to nature through his soul by a holistic feeling that would allow him to acquire a global wisdom capable of perceiving all the powers gravitating around him. Because they were governed by these holistic principles emphasizing the functional, spiritual and moral unity that links human beings with nature and the supernatural, indigenous Ukrainian societies would have maintained a dynamic balance within and between ecological and social systems through their beliefs and traditions.⁴⁶ This exaltation of human solidarity with

life and nature⁴⁷ is visible in the worship of ‘Mother Earth’, similar to Aryan practices, which *Ridnovir* claims to be⁴⁸. Because of their Aryan roots originated from the Vedic tradition, *Ridnovir* could be able to decode the world in order to better perceive the multiple manifestations of the divine.

Based on this principle, for this study I propose to look at *Ridnavira* by using the notion of “geopoetics” developed by the Scottish poet Kenneth White. This multidisciplinary field of study aims to bring together science, philosophy and literature for a better understanding of “global space” as it is perceived.⁴⁹ By a careful study of the literary and geographical material presented in the poems and by travelers, geopoetics aims to faithfully retrace the author’s actual emotional perception.⁵⁰ It is no longer a matter of simply understanding the environment described, but of grasping the aesthetic permanence that structure it and link it to the human being. This approach is all the more interesting as it is partly based on the notion of ecology. Kenneth White’s geopoetics, with its vocation to show and tell the world in a new way, actually has a total admiration for nature and the writing of the emotions felt in contact with it.⁵¹ The etymology of the word “geopoetics” reflects this transcendental process: geo (the Earth) and “poetics” a conversion of this experience into Art. Thus, not only does geopoetics recall ecology (as a “discourse on the earth”) to this concern for beauty, it doubly exceeds it through the aesthetics of the narrative and the elements.⁵² Geopoetics is by no means foreign to Neo-paganism. In his time, the Russian Neo-pagan priest Alexey ‘Dobroslav’ Dobrovolsky (1938–2014) had formulated this aesthetic and emotional dimension:

The mere possibility of contemplation, perception, contemplation of the ‘Beauty’ of ‘Nature’ fills the soul with quiet reverence and purges all secondary and useless thoughts. You are joyful because you feel Nature, the Universe, and not just able to think about them [...] Nature gives us a great gift: that of childlike joy, without artifice, which puts you on the path to health, to mental enlightenment. It also brings mystical experiences, which are usually identified as religious ecstasy.⁵³

With its own myths and ritual practices intimately linked to nature and the territory of which it is a part, Neo-paganism indeed gives rise to a reconfiguration of space. Through the intensity of the process experienced, the believer projects himself beyond space but transmutes it into emotion. Thus, the indigenous rite constitutes a *pietas* through which eternal gratitude to the living is expressed. By relying on the very specific knowledge (historical, anthropological, geographical etc.) that makes it up, I intend to show that *Ridnavira* faith is a form of geopoetics designed to enhance the Vedic and Aryan heritage in Ukraine. However, it should be noted that the geopoetical approach that I favor is intimately linked to geopolitics, understood here as the study of power rivalries in a territory. Indeed, in geography and in *Ridnavira*, nature intrinsically refers to territories that are claimed and delimited by borders. Considered as a physical geographical space used for strategic and defense purposes,

as geographer Michel Foucher notes, could participate in the formation of a territory: this would not be based on “human limits”, but on “natural” limits and this, “in a period of upheaval of the foundations”.⁵⁴ Such a formulation echoes that of Jacques Lévy and Michel Lussaut who, in their *Dictionnaire de l’espace et des sociétés*,⁵⁵ define territory, according to its etymology, as a space with a local specificity that is characterized by the identity of the individuals and societies that occupy it; a “lived space”, to quote Armand Fremont. The idea of a “lived space” in geopoetics is in fact not so far from the notion of ethnoscape first formulated by Arjun Appadurai and then Katarina S.Z. Schwartz to describe the forms of space that can be found in the world. Schwartz to describe the forms of existence that allow uprooted people, rejected people, fractions in struggle to repeat, to live in their daily life, certain cultural habits in an ‘other space’⁵⁶ which, in the Ukrainian case, could be that of nature. The ‘ethnoscape’, as a form of meta-national existence, allows for a progressive approach to the ‘Other’ and preserves the uprooted and travelers from too much stressful contact with it. This idea is all the more relevant when confronted with the problem of post-Soviet Ukraine: a state whose borders were born out of the collapse of the USSR (the Other), and where the newly-born national community is still struggling to build itself on the basis of the fundamental criteria of the so-called ‘Western’ nation-state: language, culture, history, and which is also challenged by foreign powers like Russia. Thus, while the geopoetics promoted by the Vedic tradition of Ukrainian Neo-paganism is downstream of the ecological crisis, it is also used as part of an identity politics that has turned against Ukraine’s enemies. Thus, Ukrainian Neo-pagan geopoetics needs to be qualified here as it is more what I can call a “national valorization through the aesthetics of the territory” than an emotional and poetic approach to the environment.

Ukraine’s representation in *Ridnovir* geopoetics

As briefly outlined above, the development of Ukrainian Neo-paganism is said to have clear links with the spiritual re-enchantment of the natural world proposed by deep ecology. Emerging in the 1970s from theories developed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (1912–2009),⁵⁷ the concepts of interactivity, referentiality and valorization of the living in this discourse very early on involved the problem of territory. Indeed, the preservation of the biosphere or, more generally, of nature would imply the establishment of closed regions, so that humanity cannot disrupt biodiversity through its interference. Put inside a shelter like a precious artefact, nature in this radical discourse takes the form of a boundary delimiting a primary domain purged of all human markers from a secondary human domain, most often considered “unnatural”, for it is by considering nature as outside of identity that human beings have often dominated and exploited it.⁵⁸ This will to preserve the environment, which we can consider to be marginal, is not simply a matter of taking a radical militant stand.⁵⁹ Indeed, an examination of the indigenous Ukrainian faith shows that, more than a fantasized attachment to nature, there is a desire among *Ridnavira* followers to establish,



Rod — the God of fertility, Perun — the God of thunder and rain, and Dazhboh — the father of Gods.

through the Vedic rite, a new territory aesthetic that would be specific to them and, above all, would allow them to reconnect with their Aryan roots. It is a question of putting this idea into practice, by giving it consistency through geopoetics.

Determining precisely what might hypothetically fall under *Ridnovir* geopoetics is a delicate task, as there are so many unknowns regarding the processes by which such an environmental imaginary is created. The complexity of this approach stems from the different perceptions and ways of inhabiting space, each of which is individually determined socially, culturally and geographically. This observation is further reinforced by the fact that Ukraine has a very wide diversity of landscapes and constructions of identity at the local level.

However, belonging to a Pagan religion that constitutes foremost an organic and communitarian environment⁶⁰ offers the possibility of sharing and standardizing geographical knowledge and relationship to space according to distant Vedic and Aryan origins. This element seems essential to understanding the mental structuring of *Ridnovir* geopoetics: the ethnic, collective and quasi-holistic perception of space. In Ukraine, the predominantly peasant identity reflects a key assumption of a close relationship with nature and provides the basis for this idea. According to most *Ridnoviry*, this unique sensibility toward nature is due to the legacy of the Trypillian culture. Heir to the Neolithic migrations from south-western Europe, this culture, according to historians, developed a culture that was particularly ahead of its time, notably by establishing the first human settlements from 4500 BC.⁶¹ Rather egalitarian, Trypillian society would have built a religion centered around the cults of fertility and nature.⁶² Based on this singular episode in human history, the first Ukrainian Neo-pagans, such as Lev Sylenko, simply projected their fantasies onto this civilization, seeing them as the people who introduced the Vedic tradition in Ukraine. In an article

“THE INDIGENOUS RITE CONSTITUTES A PIETAS THROUGH WHICH ETERNAL GRATITUDE TO THE LIVING IS EXPRESSED.”

dated 2004,⁶³ Halyna Lozko does not hesitate to list the similarities between the Trypillian culture and the Ukrainian peasant customs highlighted in the Neo-paganism of the ORU. Far from appearing as simple theories specific to Ukrainian Neo-pagan movements, the idea of a geopoetics inherited from ancient peoples has already been formulated by some Ukrainian or Russian geopoliticians that have been rebounded by *Ridnavira* leaders such as Shaian or Lozko. In addition to Eurasian geographer Lev Gumiliev and his ‘ethnistic ecology’, in which the landscape “necessarily influences ethnic processes”⁶⁴, the same is true for Yuriy Lypa (1900–1944), a doctor by training but recognized as the founding father of Ukrainian geopolitics during the interwar

period. Indeed, there are very specific references to this notion of the “geopoetic” feeling of Ukrainian people, such as his book *Pryznachennia Ukraïny* (The destination of Ukraine), published in 1938.⁶⁵ For Yuriy Lypa, Ukrainian identity is based on three *substrata*: Trypillian, Hellenic and Gothic, of which the first two are central. If the Hellenic substratum, resulting from the colonization of the Crimea in the 6th century BC, implies that Ukrainians have always been commercially oriented and creative, the Trypillian substratum would explain why they are gifted at singing songs, decorating their properties, cultivating orchards and, in general, demonstrating their love of nature, from which they draw inspiration to express their national grandeur and their quasi-poetic admiration of nature.⁶⁶ This idea is further substantiated by the fact that the author quotes Western travelers who have been subjected by Ukrainian “geopoetics” – according to Kenneth White’s terminology⁶⁷ – by being impressed by the cleanliness and beauty of Ukrainian landscapes and way of life. Thus, *Ridnovir* geopoetics in Ukraine seems to initially equate the phenomenological dimension with the social and cultural dimension of nationalism and its ethnic side. If the notion of geopoetics is first expressed by the Aryan or



Ridnavira followers worshipping a kapy (pole) of Perun, in Ternopil Oblast, Ukraine (left). The worship ceremony of the organisation Ancestral Fire of the Slavic Native Faith in Ukraine (top center). *Ridnavira* followers worshipping a Goddess at Vodokres holiday (bottom center). Statue of the Slavic God Perun, erected by *Ridnavira* followers in 2009, city of Kyiv (right).

Vedic essence (and its heirs) of the Ukrainian ethnos, it owes its difference to the introduction of a requirement to want to define itself by specific territories.

Indeed, when using geopoetics as an angle of approach to the *Ridnavira* faith, it is difficult to ignore the notion of landscape. Being interested in the relationship between man and the space he occupies, the *Ridnavira* faith pays considerable attention to the poly-sensoriality of landscapes in the Vedic narratives and hymns for which it is the repository, since they translate a presence in the world, an awareness of the instantaneousness of perceptions and of the intimate factors conditioning the experience of the group. Thus, the reconfiguration of territory through geopoetics is based on privileged spatial figures. The choice of territories revered in the Pagan faith is not a matter of chance or invention. While Max Weber prophesied the “disenchantment of the world” through the increased rationalism of existence⁶⁸ – the inevitable outcome of which would be the morbidity of everything – geopoetics, developed in the writings of Shaian and Sylenko, proposes to provide more than for veneration. If the ethnologist Mariya Lesiv rightly reminds us, Neo-pagans work from historical sources, most often from ill-informed ancient historians such as the Greek Herodotus or the critical commentaries of the Orthodox Church Fathers. They all try to seek in ‘aryanity’ of the Ukrainian national territory and its sacredness “what the human soul strives for, embodied in the bodily human body”.⁶⁹ Ukraine has a large number of sacred places for this purpose, ranging from the Dniepro river, the main Aryans and *Rigveda* codex cradle, to the sacred stones of *Mirobog* in Vinnitsychyna,⁷⁰ which are said to be endowed with mystical energies that appease and strengthen the soul, or the Black Sea, which would indeed be the original cradle of the

Aryan race, called *Hyperborea*. Associated with an “ancestral homeland” in which the soul and emotions of the Ukraino-Aryan identity lie, these natural territories lead the individual to reflect on their own presence in the world and their heritage. Through these ceremonies, most often punctuated by songs and solemn moments calling for meditation and reflection, the adept seems to lose himself in his own thoughts, which are guided by the narrative and the prayers. Apart from these elements that make *Ridnovir* geopoetics a search for collective filiation thanks to natural spaces that are invested with a mythical dimension, it should be understood that, above all, the geopoetic approach to Pagan narratives through the Veda myth is motivated by seeking inner exaltation and harmony which, in contact with the landscapes, turns into aesthetic and existential enjoyment in which the call of the cosmos grows bigger and bigger, going so far as to vibrate the links that unite the believer in the world. The stories from Lev Sylenko’s own experience show this change of perception in relation to the environment.⁷¹ During his many walks in American forests, where he had his revelation, Sylenko was not only confronted with landscapes; he was put in the presence of an intimate language, that of the solar god *Dazhbog* and of the *Orians* who shaped all civilizations throughout history.⁷² Building on this revealed mythology, his intimate geography unfolded along a new itinerary shaped in a quasi-mystical way by the rediscovery of the Vedic traditions and language from this physical environment. The Vedic linguistic dimension is therefore equally important to grasp this poetics of landscape. Although incomplete,⁷³ and being somewhat compensated by new archaeological and linguistic discoveries linking the Indo-Iranian and Ukrainian languages, has opened up new explanatory schemes for the “Aryanity” of the Ukrainian national territory nurturing,

to use Kenneth White's expression, a "topoetics"⁷⁴ which unites aesthetics with space. Thus, the toponym takes on a poetic utility through language, stimulating the imagination and giving access to the believer to a certain representation of space and myth. We find this same dimension in Shaian and Lozko. Their translations of the *Book of Veles* or *The Dream of Prince Igor*, a Slavic epic text,⁷⁵ can be read as a series of paintings in which the central object is, of course, Ukrainian space. These texts oscillate between scenes experienced among various emblematic Slavo-Aryan figures and representations of the Eastern space through which they travelled. In other words, "the writing alternates between various sensory foci in order to unfold itself".⁷⁶ Thus, the *Ridnovir* geopoetic reading strives to give as much importance to landscapes as to epic scenes, as these suggest a space not only contemplated, but also practiced and experienced. On the scale of *Ridnovir* geopoetics, Ukraine or "Aryan world" can be seen as a marginal space, one of wilderness, magical spaces and ancestral legacies in which a poetic and sensory experience of reality is lived. By re-imagining the ancestral land around a natural "primitive territory", Ukrainian Neo-pagans reorganize, to quote Katarina Schwartz, "collective perceptions, encoded in myths and symbols, of the ethnic meanings of certain parts of the territory, in order to provide 'maps' of the community, its history, its destiny, and its place among nations".⁷⁷ This is all the more necessary as *ridnoviry* are convinced that natural landscapes are the physical embodiment of the deep roots of Ukrainian identity.⁷⁸ In this representation, the central geographical position of Ukraine and the dominant characteristics of its landscapes are given priority. While world disenchantment seems to be on the march through the increased rationalism of existence – the ineluctable outcome of which would be the morbidity of everything – nature, through the ancestral myths of Ukrainian Neo-paganism, finds a certain poetry. More than an attachment to wild landscapes that have long been domesticated, it is a real re-enchantment of the territory.⁷⁹

IF GEOPOETICS IN Ukrainian Neo-paganism refers above all to the creation of a mental space, one could also speak of a kind of promotion of a new stage within global Neo-pagan thought. Geopoetics corresponds to an even more intimate representation of 'primitive' territory and ecology. It is not a question of forcing a line, but of recognizing that, paradoxical as it may seem, Neo-pagan thought moves all the more easily because it chooses the local level to express itself in its globality.

If this re-enchantment of the world by means of the poetic approaches contained in the Vedic tradition was initially thought to promote a return to the country, this aesthetic vision of the territory would also be the vector of a new "geographical imaginary", thus reshuffling the cards of the current Ukraine and its geopolitics. Beyond appearances, it is important to remind that

the "Aryan myth"⁸⁰ of Ukraine origins present in Neo-pagan "geopoetics" is the bearer of a *Weltanschauung* and therefore of the ultimate goals to be achieved. To quote the religion sociologist Peter L. Berger, it is the collective ideology par excellence which can only find its origin in a powerful need to belong to a group.⁸¹ Purely a product of identity and social needs, allowing answers to be provided in a precarious post-communist national context, this ecologist ethic of territory does not escape geopolitical considerations. As the 2014 and ongoing war in Donbass increase the religious rivalry between the Patriarchates of Kyiv and Moscow and globalization increases environmental degradation, this new geographical perception, based on the Aryan myth and the Vedic tradition, is presented by Ukrainian Neo-pagans as an authentic identity and spiritual refuge. This is all the more necessary as the Vedic legacy, as I have said, can be subjected to some rivalries between Ukrainian and Russian Neo-pagans. But nature as inertia of the territory is not synonymous with neutrality in *Ridnovir* geopoetics. The geopolitologist Olivier Zajec speaks

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of a "magic land"⁸² in which identity and cultural constructions are at the heart of representations of the territory that give a large part to feelings, impressions and imagination. They can therefore be the baptismal font of the nature-nationalism couple. Thus, nature can be seen in *Ridnavira* geopoetic as a real border elaborated with both Slavophilia and primary anti-Communism.

In their desire to reappropriate the habitable territory from an ecological and community perspective, *Ridnoviry* hope to use geopoetics to create a national "ethnoscape" to face the geopolitical and ecological challenges of the present day.⁸³ This is no longer a mere perception, but an affirmation. In a country in which ecological political forces are on the verge of exhaustion, in which the Ukrainian nation-state is being challenged at the local level by autonomy and ethno-linguistic separatism, such a shift in the scale of representations can only give more meaning to the claims of Ukrainian Neo-pagans who favor an ethnicist vision of the nation. Unlike some Neo-pagan movements in which the Aryan question is fundamentally incompatible with the glorification of the single and indivisible nation-state, Vedic geopoetics in the Ukrainian case would allow some movements, such as the ORU, to promote national reconciliation on the basis of a new perception of the country as fundamentally hostile to the outside world. For *Ridnoviry*, Ukraine would be a border between Russia and the 'West' due to its vast natural domain⁸⁴. This is all the more logical for the followers, since the same territory coincides with the Eurasian steppe in the east and the impenetrable forest massifs in the north and west in present-day Polesia, Galicia and Trans-Carpathia. As a territory straddling two biomes with few impassable natural barriers, very early in its history, Ukraine was subjected to all sorts of invasions and conquests from the East, notably by the Kurgan populations that were considered

barbaric, non-Aryan and not very close to nature.⁸⁵ This natural civilizational barrier between Eurasia and Ukraine is a challenge but is rich in meaning for grasping the political dimension of contemporary geopoetics. This contrast in values concerning the perception of nature would lead to two opposing sets of values. On the one hand, Ukraine is idealized as a perfect region; a natural space that would be the place of expression for a rooted and authentic peasant culture, of which the Aryan and Trypillian peoples would be the main legacies.⁸⁶ In contrast, the Russia and Ukrainian regions such as the Donbass would be excluded from this sacred geography induced by geopoetics. Because of their Turko-Mongol and then their communist past, these regions and their inhabitants would simply be closed to any notion of the environment and nature protection.⁸⁷ Once the land of the mythical Zaporogian Cossacks and the Varangians, Donbas would have seen its Aryan-Ukrainian identity disappear through its progressive systemic and economic integration into Russia and then the USSR, along with its primary harmony with nature, if only through the introduction of the Russian language and the exaltation of the worker and his productive qualities.

Conclusion

Initially marginal and developed in a historical context in which it could only be limited to a quest for emancipation from foreign tutelage in terms of spirituality, the Ukrainian Neo-paganism I have been discussing is a conceptual “tinkering”⁸⁸ which is, to say the least, particular. Through their belief systems and philosophies, *Ridnoviry* generally claim a direct lineage, or even heritage, to the Aryan tradition established over fifteen centuries before our era. In opposition to rigid monotheism, it is through this spirituality that they wish to re-establish an archaic ethic based on natural harmony inspired by the transcendence of the landscape and the emotional purity of the ancient Vedic people. It was obvious to take an interest in this area, particularly in view of the diversity of the ideological fabric of Paganism in its modern sense. Thus, my approach to Ukrainian Neo-paganism through geopoetics aimed to give another interpretation of the links that can unite this religion with nature. By primarily focusing on the inner space subjected to the emotions induced by the Vedic vision of nature and landscapes, rather than on their strict ethnic dimension, I sought to make palpable the consciousness and exotic ontology of this religion. By proposing a new way of looking at the world and nature, the *Ridnavira* religion offers a space of analysis that is conducive to a geopoetic approach. As in the *Rig Vedas*, this approach could be interested in the multiple ways in which this sense of being in the world can be captured and described. If Vedic and Aryan geopoetics seem to offer a new world vision in which mankind is substituted from the modern world for nature contemplation, this philosophy is not limited to deep ecology. In classical geography, nature has always corresponded to a physical inertia intimately linked to space in order to characterize it. However, if these inertias induce directly or indirectly in Ukrainian Neo-pagan doctrine well-established moral power factors, they foremost include also ethnic ones, suggested by the notion of an “Aryan primitive territory”.

While it may seem sufficiently credible in the light of the many scientific research to which it has been subjected to be legitimized, the Vedic and Aryan myths in Ukrainian Paganism are above all an Orientalist fantasy more commonly known as ‘Indomania’. Indeed, both Shaian and Sylenko are first and foremost religious specialists of India, each having made a career in the twentieth century, a period of particularly intense emulation for this field of study. In addition to this, let’s add the no less problematic constitution of the Ukrainian nation at the same time. Deeply marked by their respective exiles in the West, the latter tried through Neo-paganism to federate the Ukrainian nation around a moral attachment to ancestral traditions other than those of the former imperial Russia and the USSR. Contrary to Russian Vedism and Aryan myth, the objection was not to create a new nation-state,⁸⁹ but to reconstruct the original country. Thus, the mobilization of “geopoetics” can be seen as what Benedict Anderson calls a “nation-state building project developed in exile”.⁹⁰ It is a question of reappearing in the collective imagination and nostalgia a territory of reference to which to relate: the ‘homeland’. Finally, because it represents one of the last great civilizations founded on a quasi-temporal polytheism around which a perfectly hierarchical society was built, ordered according to a set of ethics such as honor, transmission and the preservation of identity.⁹¹ These are all references to be followed by Ukrainian Neo-pagans in order to halt the process of national fragmentation.⁹² ✖

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