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**UNION**

‘Magic is real, it is extremely efficient, but only in its proper dimension. In order for it to affect a person, there must be adequate «mental soil». For it to come to existence, a set of expectations must be met that would allow redirecting mental energy in a specific manner; redirecting, indeed, because magical influences are not based on powerful external pressures but on the control of the victim’s internal processes, by activating the existing psychic mechanisms conditioned by culture, existing exclusively within its framework.’<sup>1</sup>

In the ideology of the USSR, there was no room for esotericism in any of its variations; astrology, alchemy, and magic on par with religion were stigmatised by the term *мракобесие* (obscurantism).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, traditions, magical proclivities and the occult mentality, survived and soldiered on, hidden from the state, despite the attempts to eradicate or rationalise them. The forbidden phenomena left their mark on the phraseology, legends, and histories related to that period but they have been in circulation to this day. After the collapse of the USSR, they returned with a vengeance.

At the turn of the twentieth century, esotericism exerted a major influence on the upper classes and intelligentsia of the Russian Empire, who, as though sensing the coming period of historical turmoil, threw themselves into the arcane sciences. Any magical thought would catch on and spread like fire. Not only were people attracted to the thrill of initiation into the ‘forbidden teachings’ but it also served as a powerful psychological defence mechanism, as a form offering one a sense of psychic safety founded on the feeling of belonging to a rigid structure. After all, the esoteric hierarchy rested on two pillars: the master and the apprentice, while its universe was made of rather clearly defined interrelations: ‘As above, so below; as below, so above.’<sup>3</sup> And this system left no room for chance. The candidate, having been initiated into the secret knowledge, received an opportunity to be saved.<sup>4</sup> At the turn of the centuries, Europe was in a state of social and cultural instability and magical sciences promised an escape from the political reality.

1 В. Пелевин, *Зомбификация*, Москва: Эссе, 1990, 12.

2 Л. Лебедева, ‘*Антирелигиозный плакат СССР*’ (2017), <https://arhive.com/plakaty/publications/4025> [accessed 22 May 2021].

3 *The Kybalion. A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece*, by Three Initiates, Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, 1912, <https://gutenberg.org/cache/epub/14209/pg14209.html> [accessed 28 Nov. 2022].

4 С. Пахомов, ‘*К вопросу о демаркации понятия «эзотеризм»*’ in *Мистико-эзотерические движения в теории и практике. История. Психология. Философия: Сб. материалов, Санкт-Петербург: Издательство РХГА, 2008, 8–10.*

Occultism, or esoteric thought, as it was referred to, was a new progressive idea that ‘broke the shackles of religion and science’, a synthesis of long lost knowledge with modern scientific theories. One such synthesis was the teaching of Helena Blavatsky, who combined Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution with ‘the ancient knowledge of the East’. Several decades later, Peter D. Ouspensky put forth the idea of ‘the fourth dimension’ and – visiting the Stray Dog, an artistic basement in St Petersburg – gathered around him crowds of listeners who rubbed shoulders with the representatives of the silver age.<sup>5</sup> George Gurdjieff, who saw the revolution as the cumulation of ‘the knowledge of the entire world’ that could be used for one’s own purposes, set up several dozen schools around the world where he taught his secret theory which he called ‘the fourth way’.

The American Society for Psychical Research<sup>6</sup> popularised the belief in paranormal phenomena, such as: telepathy, spiritism, teleportation, and telekinesis.<sup>7</sup> Every bourgeois salon held its own *séances*, while many a publication owed its creation to the technique of *écriture automatique*.

After the overthrow of tsardom, representatives of the esoteric movements strove to establish cooperation with the Bolshevik government, perceiving the revolution as a historical necessity and a chance to fulfil the prophecy and develop the spiritist soul of humanity. The secret police (the Cheka, and subsequently the OGPU) considered using magical phenomena; publicly, however, any manifestation thereof was denounced as obscurantism and persecuted.

These developments led to the emergence of many Soviet myths, the true meaning of which gradually came to be forgotten, but which continue to influence the inhabitants of the entire territory of the former USSR.

## THE ROERICHS

‘From the south and from the north, from the east and from the west, they are thinking of the same things. And the same evolutionary process is being impressed upon the best images. A center between the four oceans exists. Consciousness of the new world exists. Will the subterranean

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5 Ю. Кружнов, ‘«Бродячая собака», кабаре, энциклопедический словарь/искусство/музыка, театр/эстрада, кабаре, варьете’, in *Энциклопедия Санкт-Петербурга* (2015), <http://encspb.ru/object/2804016970> [accessed 29 May 2021].

6 The American Society for Psychical Research, [aspr.com/who.htm](http://aspr.com/who.htm) [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

7 П. Носачев, ‘Оккультизм и романтизм как две формы «секуляризованного эзотеризма» XIX – начала XX в.», *Государство, религия, церковь в России и за рубежом*, 4/33 (2015): 215.

Tchud not return? Do not the Agharti, the subterranean people, saddle their horses? Does not the bell of Belovodye ring out?’<sup>8</sup>

Nicholas Roerich was born on 9 October 1874 in St Petersburg into a family of a notary. At the age of eight, he was sent to a private school in Petersburg. When he was ten, the famous archeologist Lev Ivanovsky came to Izvara (the estate of Roerich’s father). The scholar took to the ingenious pupil and brought the boy with him to excavation sites. Nicholas developed a huge interest in archeology: he would read books about history, perform excavations in the vicinity of the family estate, sketch the ancient kurgans, collect folk legends, epics, and traditions. Having graduated from gymnasium in 1893, he enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts in Petersburg, and at the same time – on his father’s advice – in the Faculty of Law at the Imperial University of Petersburg.<sup>9</sup>

At this time, he had already been a member of the Archeological Society. During one of his excursions, he met an extraordinary girl, Helena Shaposhnikova. The artist regarded their encounter as significant and informed Helena that she would be his wife. From their correspondence it can be gathered that Roerich (like the majority of the Petersburg intelligentsia) participated in, as it was then called, saucer divination (known today as the Ouija boards) *séances*. The participants would sit at a table having a board with letters of the alphabet and the words ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in front of them. Everyone held the saucer which was to be moved by spirits. It pointed to letters which formed answers to the questions asked. ‘The table answers: «He sleeps». I ask: «When will I go to Petersburg». It responds: «In May». «Will I exhibit my painting in the Salon?» It responds: «Yes». «Will it be successful?» «Yes». «Will it be sold?» «No».’<sup>10</sup>

The wedding took place on 28 October 1901. Roerich had in Helena a faithful companion. She actively participated in many of his works and social undertakings. Nicholas wrote: ‘We worked together and it was quite rightly said that the works should have two names – a feminine and a masculine one.’<sup>11</sup>

In 1913, he published the essay ‘The Indian Way’, in which he wrote of the need to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the culture of India. Roerich

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8 N. Roerich, *Altai-Himalaya: A Travel Diary*, New York: Nicholas Roerich Museum, 2017, 352.

9 ‘Николай Константинович Рерих. Краткая биография и интересные факты из жизни художника’, 2017, <https://rerih.org/er/biography> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

10 А. Андреев, ‘Оккультизм и мистика в жизни и творчестве Н.К. и Е.И. Рерих’ in А. Андреев, Д. Савелли (eds.), *Рерихи. Мифы и факты. Сборник статей, Санкт-Петербург: Нестор-История*, 2011, 60, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00964027/document> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

11 ‘Николай Константинович Рерих...’, op. cit.

*In the ideology of the ussr, there was no room for esotericism in any of its variations; astrology, alchemy, and magic on par with religion were stigmatised by the term *мракобесие* (obscurantism). Nevertheless, traditions, magical proclivities and the occult mentality, survived and soldiered on, hidden from the state, despite the attempts to eradicate or rationalise them. The forbidden phenomena left their mark on the phraseology, legends, and histories related to that period but they have been in circulation to this day. After the collapse of the ussr, they returned with a vengeance.*

was able to notice the common roots of India and ancient Rus'. He recognised it in the details of headwear, attire, everyday objects, kurgans, and the basics of the language.<sup>12</sup> He started to seriously consider the possibility of the journey to India and even outlined its route.

In 1916, Roerich was receiving medical treatment in Finland. For a long time, he and his family were unable to return to their homeland because of the Bolshevik Revolution. His initial attitude towards the revolutionary movement was negative; his collections and paintings had been seized in the first days after the Bolsheviks's seizure of power. On the other hand, however, he treated the revolution as a sign of historical determinism, an imminent global catastrophe. Consequently, he was willing to cooperate with the revolutionaries.

In 1919, the Roerich family settled in London and, reverting to old habits, started to frequent the homes of the Russian intelligentsia. It is there that the Roerichs would often participate in *séances*. Their close friend, Zinaida Fosdick, described one: 'A rain of matches, coins, tissues falling onto the heads of the seated, metal objects flying around the room without touching or harming anybody; carpets breaking loose and flying over people's heads, the table – untouched by anyone – moving of its own accord ... . Everyone was sitting in silence on the sofa, listening to a dog walk around the room, his tail hitting the floor, a horse galloped through, an elephant walked with his trunk touching a cupboard, a cow went by, birds flew in and scratched things with their beaks; all these sounds were astonishingly clear.'<sup>13</sup>

At this point, an event of utmost importance happened in the life of Helena Roerich: she met her mahatma. She did say that her childhood had been rife with mystical experiences; she often had prophetic dreams (for instance, about the death of her parents), or of her future incarnations. During her adolescence, she had often received instructions as to the decisions she should take. 'Here is one of her ... visions – «the vision with the boy», which occurred in April 1914, on the third day of Easter. That day Helena had been to church and seen «the face of Christ blessing the children». In the evening, when she was going to bed, she experienced an extraordinary bliss of serenity. When she woke up that night, she saw before her the image of a wonderful boy with large eyes. His sight filled her with great joy. She wondered: Was it her brother? – No, not a brother. Her husband? – No, not the husband. Well, who, then? She finally learned

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12 А. Первушин, *Оккультные тайны НКВД и СС, Санкт-Петербург* – Москва: Олма-Пресс, 1999, 87.

13 З. Фосдик, *Воспоминания о Рерихах*, Москва: Эксмо, 2014, <https://cutt.ly/OSA0CFZ> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

that the person who appeared to her at night disguised as «the wonderful boy» – was her future Teacher, Mahatma Morya.<sup>14</sup>

She came across Mahatma Morya in Hyde Park in London. Having noticed in the crowd two Hindu gentlemen in military uniforms smiling benignly at her, Helena Roerich instantly knew that they were mahatmas who had arrived especially for her. When she returned home and told what had happened, she was ridiculed – and for a good reason. Indeed, Helena Roerich repeated almost word for word the story told by Helena Blavatsky about her encounter with the mahatmas in Hyde Park several years earlier.

Nevertheless, as Fosdick narrates, from that moment on, strange things started to happen in the Roerichs' house: 'the profound gaze of large eyes' started to appear on the walls and, much like at Mrs. Blavatsky's, the presence of astral bodies was making itself known – slight tapping echoed through the house. 'The power accumulated to such an astonishing extent that sometimes they were told to sit quietly in the dark without turning the lights on, while in front of them a table – touched by nobody – moved, walked around and thudding could be heard. They asked questions at night, when they were already in bed, and someone's knocking answered. They were able to conduct long conversations this way.'<sup>15</sup>

Eventually, Helena's meeting with the mahatmas came to be treated seriously and interpreted as the encouragement to organise the expedition to India they had been dreaming about. The advice that Helena received from her Teacher was associated with strenuous and painful attacks which she referred to as 'sacred pain' – an analogue to the 'sacred disease' as ancient Greeks would call epilepsy. She explained it as the concentration of energy in her body, as the experiments that she believed her 'cosmic friends' to be conducting on her.

During bouts of such 'sacred sufferings', the Teacher revealed to the Roerichs the Grand Plan entailing the establishment of a new country and 'the victory of Shambhala protected by Maitreya', identifying three significant yearly dates: 1928, 1931, and 1936. There were suggestions that the event to occur in 1928 would have something to do with the collapse of the USSR. The year 1931 was to be the time of Shambhala's Great Battle against evil. It was assumed that meant an insurrection against the British occupation of Tibet and the overthrow of the 13th Dalai Lama (who was pro-British). In 1936, Shambhala was to triumph. The new country was to be established in Belovodye, which – just like Shambhala – is a leg-

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14 А. Андреев, *'Оккультизм и мистика в жизни и творчестве...'*, op. cit., 65–6.

15 Ibid. 71.

endary country where the dreams of fraternity, equality, happiness, and justice are realised. 'Belovodye is the white mountain, the mountain that knows where the white water comes from. The white mountain and forty summits beyond. Take your cedar staff, put on your white attire, ascend the white mountain, that is where the secret is revealed, that is where the stone is ablaze, that is where the City stands.'<sup>16</sup>

In 1923, Roerich went to India and from there to Central Asia. '«The time has come for the peoples of the East to wake up from their slumber and break the shackles of slavery», he declared. Himalayan notables present him with soil for the grave of Mahatma Lenin and a message to the Soviet nation.'<sup>17</sup>

The utopian dreams of the Roerichs were not far removed from the ideology of the USSR, therefore, it is there that they decided to seek patronage after the three years spent in India. In 1926, they returned to Moscow. 'During our long journey, we have not seen Russian eyes for a long time, and these eyes did not disappoint, for wings have grown and everything is possible and everything is at hand, whereas the major scourges of life – fear and prejudice – are gone.'<sup>18</sup>

Roerich handed to the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgy Chicherin the plan of a 'Buddhist revolution': 'First of all, the teaching of Buddha constitutes a revolutionary movement. Second, Maitreya is the symbol of communism. Third, the movement of the world's communities may instantly attract hundreds of millions of Buddhists. Fourth, the simple foundational teaching of Gautama should be easy to get across to people. Fifth, European opinion will be shocked at the union of Buddhism and Leninism. Sixth, the Mongols, the Kalmyks, and the Tibetans are willing to adjust the dates of their prophecies to the current revolution. Seventh, the activity of the Tashi Lama will provide an unprecedented reason to intervene (against England). Eighth, the arguments against the existence of God are seen by Buddhism as quite reasonable. Ninth, immediate action is required along with complete familiarity with local circumstances and prophecies.'<sup>19</sup>

Chicherin and the foreign branch of the OGPU decided to support the Roerichs. For the Bolsheviks, the important thing was to eliminate

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16 P. Сергиенко, *Николай Перих*, 1976, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-8Lztoa3ReM> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 А. Андреев, *Гималайское братство теософский мир и его творцы. (Документальное расследование)*, Санкт-Петербург: Издательство СПбГУ, 2008, <https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/sekty/gimalajskoe-bratstvo-teosofskij-mif-i-ego-tvortsy-dokumental-noe-rassledovanie> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].



the indomitable 13th Dalai Lama, while Roerich did not hide his sympathy for the Tashi Lama: ‘«The spiritual leader of Tibet is not the Dalai Lama but the Tashi Lama of whom we have learned only good things. Tibetans condemn the current situation even stronger than we do. After the Tashi Lama’s return, when he has become the head of united Tibet, the Precious Knowledge will flourish with him. Again...». From the Darjeeling monastery throughout Tibet the prophecy is spread that the current 13th Dalai Lama shall be the last.’<sup>20</sup>

Chicherin delivered to the Soviet authorities the *Maitreya* cycle of paintings about the liberator of the oppressed. Having received support, he prepared an expedition to Tibet. ‘Nevertheless, the journey was undertaken under the American flag and its participants had agreed that through Buddhist states they would be travelling as Buddhists, in Tibet – in the name of Shambhala, while in other countries as Americans; and it was forbidden to show the Soviet passport.’<sup>21</sup>

During the journey, Roerich conducted archeological and ethnographic research, studied rare manuscripts, collected linguistic materials and folk works, and took down accounts of local customs. Over these years, he created around five hundred paintings. To archive all the discovered data, the Roerichs established the Urusvati (the Light of the Morning Star) Institute in the Himalayas.

‘Already during the long journey to Central Asia (1925–1928), Roerich earnestly declares himself to be a spiritual leader endowed with the gift of prophecy and mystical vision. His route is extraordinary; Roerich follows «Buddha’s path», ... Kashir – Ladakh – Hotan (in Xinjiang) – Altai – Mongolia – Tibet. Having completed this «magical» circle, he returns to the place where it had begun, to Darjeeling.’<sup>22</sup> His transformation was influenced by the mystical experiences of his wife. However, the historian Alexander Andreev observes that Helena was a seriously ill woman who would explain away her illness as a test. ‘We are in possession of the opinion of Roerich’s family doctor, Dr A.F. Yalovenko: «As for Mrs. Roerich, I must say that she is ill. She suffers from a nervous disease known as an epileptic aura. Patients with this disease often hear voices and see some objects. Knowing the profound feeling he [Nicholas Konstantinovich Roerich] has ... for his wife ... [I believe that] he often yielded to her influence, sometimes even believing in her supernatural abilities. I often told him of Helena Ivanovna’s disease, but his reaction was frigid, particularly as regards my professional knowledge in the field».’<sup>23</sup>

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20 А. Первушин, *Оккультные тайны НКВД...*, op. cit., 91–2.

21 Ibid. 92.

22 А. Андреев, *‘Оккультизм и мистика в жизни и творчестве...’*, op. cit., 93.

23 А. Первушин, *Оккультные тайны НКВД...*, op. cit., 92.

Roerich frequently claimed that he had seen Shambhala, even though there is no evidence to corroborate this, apart from the entries in his journal: 'Not war, not hatred, but the best constructive concepts shall bring to all the world the messengers of Rigden-jyepo, the ruler of Shambhala. The iron birds predestined by Buddha are already in flight, peacefully demolishing the conventional boundaries. In beautiful, scientific rays of Agni Yoga, evolution is knocking at the door. The messengers of Rigden-jyepo are speeding and blessed discoveries are bringing light and benediction to all mankind.'<sup>24</sup>

There was one more person who participated in Roerich's expedition, who may have been the witness of Shambhala: a mysterious lama who joined Roerich in 1925.

### YAKOV BLUMKIN

'The Mongolian lama has arrived and with him a new wave of news. ... He is an excellent lama and has already traveled from Urga to Ceylon. ... There is not the slightest bigotry in the lama and for the defence of the foundations of faith he is even ready to take arms. He will whisper: «Do not speak to this man – he will babble everything». ... «And now I had better leave you». And there is nothing personal felt behind his motives. And how ready he is to move farther!'<sup>25</sup> This is Nicholas Roerich's description of the lama who joined his expedition in 1925. According to some scholars, this was in fact the famous Soviet terrorist, Yakov Blumkin.

Yakov Blumkin was born in 1898 in Odessa to a family of poor Ukrainian Jews. He completed the four-year Hebrew school and worked as a courier for shops and institutions.<sup>26</sup> The revolution found him in his home town, where he was actively involved in the agitation campaign. After moving to Kharkiv, he joined the Socialist Revolutionary Party, whose members were known as the SRS.

He was made famous by his successful terrorist attack on the German Ambassador, Wilhelm Graf von Mirbach-Harff. Intended as 'a mark of solidarity with the German proletariat', this act was meant to 'help annul the Bresk-Litovsk Treaty, and force the government's support in the struggle for international revolution', as well as 'reignite the war

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24 N. Roerich, 'Shambhala, The Resplendent (1928)', in idem *Shambhala*, New York: Nicholas Roerich Museum, 2017, Russian translation: <http://www.bibliotekar.ru/index.files/uuRerih.htm> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

25 И. Ганина, 'Путь к мировой революции лежал через Шамбалу' (2005), [https://www.ng.ru/ng\\_religii/2004-09-15/8\\_shambala.html](https://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2004-09-15/8_shambala.html) [accessed 28 Nov. 2021]. [Translator's Note: The English passage in: N. Roerich, *Altai-Himalaya...*, op. cit., 100].

26 'Блумкин Яков', in *Электронная еврейская энциклопедия* (2018), <https://eleven.co.il/jews-of-russia/public-life/10666> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

against the Bolshevik Russia, which the SRS accused of 'having betrayed the revolution'. Blumkin assassinated Mirbach in the building of the German Embassy in Moscow on 6 July 1918.<sup>27</sup>

In line with the SRS' ethics, the perpetrators of a terrorist attack were to remain on site and be arrested. Yet, Blumkin fled. He went into hiding until he decided to surrender himself to the authorities in April 1919. Even though the assassination of Graf von Mirbach had led to the deterioration of relations between the Soviet Russia and Germany and triggered the coup d'état of the left-wing SRS, Blumkin's punishment was surprisingly lenient. On 16 May 1919, by the decision of the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, taking into consideration Blumkin's voluntary surrender and his detailed explanation of the circumstances surrounding the Ambassador's assassination, he was pardoned.<sup>28</sup>

In September 1920, Blumkin was admitted to the Eastern District of the General Staff Academy of the Red Army. The Academy prepared students to serve in the Eastern territory of the USSR, and to do military and diplomatic work. They were taught the basis of military strategy, the regulations of service in the General Staff, military geography, the structure of the Red Army, military psychology, and six socio-economic disciplines: the philosophical and sociological foundations of Marxism; the basis of foreign policy; social psychology; the constitution of the RSFSR; the theory of socialism; and the railway industry. Additionally, the Faculty of Oriental Studies provided language courses in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese, and others. 'The learning conditions were dire. Classes would start at 9 AM and last until 10 PM, with hour long breaks for lunch and supper. Food was very poor. Classrooms were extremely cold. Typhoid fever raged. In spite of such difficult conditions at the academy, Blumkin was able to receive a good military education and do a thorough study of socio-political literature.'<sup>29</sup>

Having graduated from the Academy, Blumkin was appointed to the position of Private Secretary to Leon Trotsky and became a full-fledged member of the Cheka. He travelled to China and the Pamir region, to Tibet and Mongolia, to Ceylon and Afghanistan, and when he returned to Moscow, he would write poems to then read them publicly in literary cafés and participate in joyful feasts with other writers. Nikolay Gumilyov wrote about him, 'The man who shot the Kaiser's ambassador in a throng of people came to shake my hand and thank me for my poems',<sup>30</sup> while Vladimir

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27 Ibid.

28 А. Первушин, *Оккультные тайны НКВД...*, op. cit., 78.

29 Ibid. 79.

30 П. Романов, '*Яков Блюмкин – любовник революции*' (2018), <https://ria.ru/20180215/1514099255.html> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

Mayakovsky presented Blumkin with a book he affectionately dedicated: 'To my dear Comrade Blumochka. Vl. Mayakovsky'<sup>31</sup>.

It is during this time that his contradiction-filled character was shaped. He was completely devoted to the ideas of socialism and willing to sacrifice his life for its ideals. 'Lover of the revolution', Trotsky would say. He was, however, rather vain and intoxicated with power, so much of which he gained so soon. This manifested itself during an incident which occurred when he was with his friends, the poets Sergei Yesenin and Osip Mandelstam. He suggested that they should all go for a walk to the headquarters of the Cheka and watch counterrevolutionaries be shot in the basement of the Lubyanka: «Someone does not want to testify», said Blumkin cynically, «I'll stand him against the wall. People's life is in my hands now. I sign a piece of paper, two hours later a person is no more. Look, here comes a poet. He is of great cultural value. Now, if I want, I'll have him arrested at once and I'll sign his death sentence. If you need him, though», Blumkin turned to face Mandelstam, «I'll save his life». Obviously, Blumkin alone had no such power as the decisions of capital punishment were made by the Cheka Committee. But Mandelstam could not know this and was outraged at Blumkin's behaviour: «Stay away from my affairs!» But Blumkin interrupted him dryly, «You dare cross me? Then you'll eat a bullet».<sup>32</sup> Yesenin did not share Mandelstam's attitude to Blumkin – he often mentioned the *chekist's* name in conversations with café goers and boasted of being able to 'demonstrate [them] the basement of the Lubyanka, and demonstrate [them] men being shot'. Perhaps he felt enticed by the image of a poet-terrorist. One of the six versions of the manifesto of imagism was signed not only by Sergey Yesenin, and Anatoly Marienhof, but also by Blumkin.

In 1923, Felix Dzerzhinsky, also known as Iron Felix, offered Blumkin a transfer to the Foreign Department of the OGPU. Already in 1920 in Moscow, the parapsychologist Alexander Barchenko became very interested in Shambhala and towards the end of 1925 was able to organise an expedition to Afghanistan and Xinjiang in search thereof. Barchenko was to be the head of the expedition himself, while Blumkin was to be its commissar. Blumkin looked the part of the expedition commissar: he was a polyglot and an expert in hand-to-hand combat; he had already developed a network of contacts in the East. Barchenko applied to Chicherin for the permission to undertake the Tibet exhibition, writing: 'I am quite convinced that there was no rich culture in the prehistoric times, but I assume that an

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31 'Блюмкин Яков Григорьевич', 2013, <https://sosnr.gov.ua/nash-kray/mist-sev-radii/item/541-blumkn-yakov-hryhorevych> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

32 Первушин А., *Окультные тайны НКВД...*, op. cit., 76.

additional trip to Lhasa may strengthen a little the relations we are in the process of establishing with Tibet.<sup>33</sup>

However, when the time of the expedition drew nearer, it turned out that Barchenko had not earned the trust of the NKVD after all and because of his associations with secret societies was denied the expedition by Chicherin. Meanwhile in 1925, Blumkin became the head instructor at the National Security Council of Mongolia (an equivalent of the Cheka) and was sent as a resident to Tibet.

Blumkin started to consider Nicholas Roerich as a person of interest. 'At night, the mysterious lama would disappear and did not show himself for as long as several days.'<sup>34</sup> In the meantime, Blumkin reached places of difficult access, plotted maps of road blocks and border barriers, the altitude, the state of transportation and the length of stretches of the road.

He also diligently gathered intelligence on British military garrisons, roads, and the location of bridges. It is likely that the Brits were aware of the 'young lama' and the whole Roerich expedition must have been a terrible nuisance for them. Blumkin would disappear somewhere for a day or two, and then suddenly reappear out of nowhere on a snowy mountain pass to once again join Roerich and his companions.<sup>35</sup> At the end of the journey, the lama spoke Russian, while Roerich noted in his journal: 'our lama even knows many of our friends.'<sup>36</sup> In his journals, Roerich always wrote with the utmost respect of the lama that he encountered and he gave no hint of being aware of the man's true identity. Nor do we know whether or not they were successful in their search for Shambhala.

The return journey to Moscow, where Blumkin was to submit his report upon completion of the mission, led through Turkey. In Constantinople, they happened – probably entirely by chance – to meet Trotsky's son, and then Leon Trotsky himself, who asked them to deliver a book to his relatives in Moscow, to which Blumkin agreed. After his return to Moscow at the end of 1929, Blumkin met an employee of the foreign branch of the Cheka, Lisa Rosenzweig, with whom he had a romantic relationship. He informed her of his encounter with Trotsky and his apprehension about delivering the book to Trotsky's siblings. Lisa instantly reported it to her superiors. Blumkin decided to flee to Asia and hide in one of the Buddhist monasteries in the mountains. He was arrested by the *chekists* as he was about to board his train at the Kazansky Railway Station in Moscow. For his contact with Trotsky he was shot on 12 December 1929.<sup>37</sup>

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33 Ibid. 82.

34 И. Ганина, *'Путь к мировой революции...'*, op. cit.

35 В. Алабай, *Яков Блюмкин: портрет и рама*, 2006, <https://lechaim.ru/arhiv/166/alabay.htm> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

36 И. Ганина, *'Путь к мировой революции...'*, op. cit.

37 В. Алабай, *Яков Блюмкин: портрет и рама...*, op. cit.

He is alleged to have sung the hymn of the proletariat in the last moment of his life: 'Arise, wretched of the Earth / Arise, convicts of hunger'.<sup>38</sup> According to another version, he exclaimed: 'Long live comrade Trotsky', or 'Revolution's over, shoot!'

### PROGRESSIVE VAMPIRISM

'In an old book on Faust it is circumstantially described to us how Faust makes a slight incision in his left hand with a small penknife, and how then, as he takes the pen to sign his name to the agreement, the blood flowing from the cut forms the words «O man, escape!»'<sup>39</sup> Let me start, however, with the protagonist of this section, Alexander Bogdanov, a Russian scientist, revolutionary, physician, utopian thinker, a writer-fantast, and a major figure among socialist ideologists. Bogdanov was the first to delineate a series of semantic connections: Mars – the red star – revolution – bright communist future. The initial meaning of this structure would later be lost, but it will remain active deep in the social subconscious.

Bogdanov believed that by virtue of man's development, man can reach truly divine heights and gain the power to alter objective laws of the universe. A collective individual (at once, the subject and object of the new culture of the proletariat) that shall emerge during the communist era will be able to organise his life experience in such a way that matter shall strive to achieve a perfect harmony. By focusing on fraternity as the foundation of the future society, Bogdanov dreamt of the perfect unification of humanity into a single family by way of blood transfusion.<sup>40</sup> In 1908, he published his utopian novel *Red Star*, in which – benefiting from the legacy of the earlier authors of utopias – he took the reader to Mars, where communism had already been brought about as the political system of the future. Total equality of the sexes, sexual freedom, abolition of private property and social classes. It is there, on Mars, that the 'exchange of blood' has long been practiced as a means to rejuvenate the old and 'enhance' the young:

'We go even further and perform mutual blood transfusions between human beings, whereby each individual receives from the other a number of elements which can raise his life expectancy. Such an exchange involves merely pumping the blood of one person into another and back

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38 А. Первушин, *Оккультные тайны НКВД...*, op. cit., 98.

39 A passage from R. Steiner's lecture of 25 October 1906. 'Blut ist ein ganz besonderer Saft: Eine esoterische Betrachtung' (Blood Is a Very Special Fluid: Esoteric Considerations), [https://www.scribd.com/document/237219856/Blut-Ist-Ein-Ganz-Besonderer-Sa\\_](https://www.scribd.com/document/237219856/Blut-Ist-Ein-Ganz-Besonderer-Sa_) [accessed 30 Nov. 2021].

40 А. Первушин, *Оккультный Сталин*, Москва: Яуза, 2006, 24.

Veronika Hapchenko, *Jakow Blumkin*, 2021  
acrylic and ink on canvas, 100 × 80 cm



Veronika Hapchenko, *Progressive vampirism*, 2021  
acrylic and ink on canvas, 100 × 80 cm





Veronika Hapchenko, *Vessels*, 2021  
acrylic and ink on canvas, 55 × 70 cm



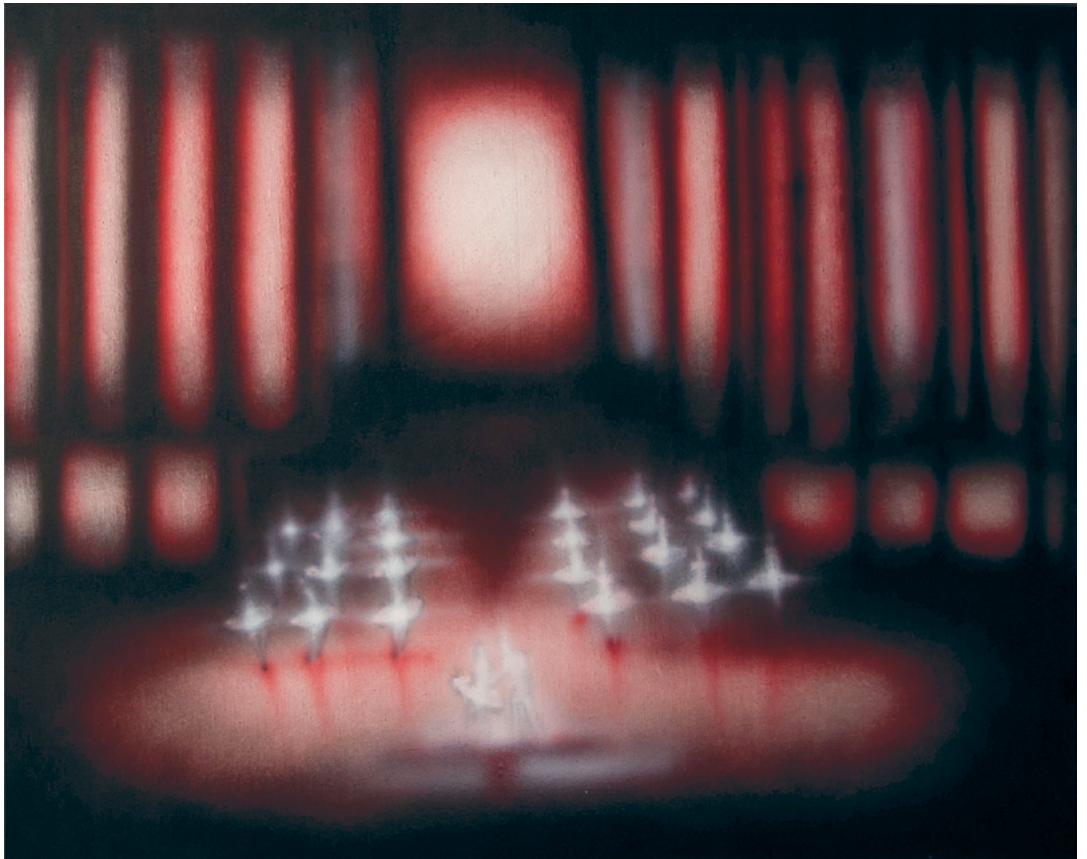
Veronika Hapchenko, *Vessel*, 2021  
acrylic and ink on canvas, 40 × 30 cm



Veronika Hapchenko, *Belovodye*, 2021  
acrylic and ink on canvas, 80 × 70 cm



Veronika Hapchenko, *The Lake of Swans*, 2021  
acrylic and ink on canvas, 100 × 80 cm



again by means of devices which connect their respective circulatory systems. If all precautions are taken, it is a perfectly safe procedure. The blood of one person continues to live in the organism of the other, where it mixes with his own blood and thoroughly regenerates all his tissues ...'

'Are you able to rejuvenate old people by introducing young blood into their veins?'

'... there is more than just blood in the organism, and the body in its turn also has an effect upon the blood. That is why, for example, a young person will not age from the blood of an old one. The age and weakness in the blood are quickly overcome by the organism, which at the same time absorbs from it many elements which it lacks. The energy and flexibility of its vital functions also increase.'

'But if this is all so simple, how is it that our medicine on Earth does not yet employ the method? ...'

'I don't know. Perhaps there are organic factors which render the method ineffective on Earthlings. Or perhaps it is merely due to your predominantly individualistic psychology, which isolates people from each other so completely that the thought of fusing them is almost incomprehensible to your scientists. ... Quite in keeping with the nature of our entire system, our regular comradely exchanges of life extend beyond the ideological dimension into the physiological one.'<sup>41</sup>

It is during this period (1900–1924) that the Austrian philosopher and mystic, Rudolf Steiner, tours the entire Europe with his lectures. Among the members of his audiences and his students were representatives of Russian intelligentsia: Maria von Sivers, the artist Margarita Voloshina and her husband, the poet Maximilian Voloshin, the poet Marina Tsvetaeva and her husband Sergey Efron, the painter and sculptress Asya Turgeneva and her husband, the poet and writer Andrey Bely, the actor Mikhail Chekhov, and, as mentioned already, Alexander Bogdanov.

In one of Steiner's lectures, 'Blut ist ein ganz besonderer Saft', cited in the opening of this section, we can discover similarities to the presented passage from the *Red Star*: '[T]he representative of the powers of evil believes – nay, is convinced – that he will have Faust more especially in his power if he can only gain possession of at least one drop of his blood. Faust is to inscribe his name in his own good, not because devil is inimical to it, but rather because he desires to gain power over it.'<sup>42</sup>

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41 A. Bogdanov, *The Red Star*, transl. by Ch. Rougle, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984, 86–7.

42 R. Steiner, *Occult Significance of Blood*, transl. by M. Gysi, Boston: Occult & Modern Thought, 1912, 5–6, <https://ia800204.us.archive.org/34/items/occultsignifican00stei/occultsignifican00stei.pdf> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

Blood absorbs the images of the outside world that brain created within itself, transforms them into living and constructive powers and using these builds the human body. Hence, blood is the material of which the body is composed. There is a process that occurs in blood: out of its cosmic environment, blood gives out the most important substance it can get, that is, the oxygen which regenerates it and provides it with new life. Blood is stimulated to open itself to the outside world.

Steiner wrote: 'The important thing to bear in mind here is that in olden times there was a hazy clairvoyance, from which the myths and legends originated. This clairvoyance could exist in the nearly-related blood, just as our present-day consciousness comes about owing to the mingling of blood. The birth of logical thought, the birth of the intellect, was simultaneous with the advent of exogamy. ... Whoever, therefore, would master a man, must first master that man's blood. This must be borne in mind if any advance is to be made in practical life. For example, the individuality of a people may be destroyed if, when colonising, you demand from its blood more than it can bear, for in the blood the ego is expressed. Beauty and Truth possess a man only when they possess his blood. Mephistopheles obtains possession of Faust's blood because he desires to rule his ego.'<sup>43</sup>

After the revolution, the first Institute of Blood Transfusion in the world will be created in Moscow. The position of its Director will be given to Alexander Bogdanov. Several years later, in May 1928, he will die, having had a blood transfusion from a man suffering from malaria.

### SWAN LAKE

A ballet by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky in four acts. Tchaikovsky is believed to have been inspired by his visit to Bavaria, where he saw the famous Neuschwanstein – 'the swan castle' of King Ludwig II. Stage designs of the classic productions of *Swan Lake* tend to feature a Gothic castle in the mountains. In 1871, the composer wrote a one-act children's ballet titled *The Lake of Swans* for his relatives. Then, five years later (in 1876), he created the timeless score of the *Swan Lake* ballet, commissioned by the Directorate of the Moscow Imperial Theatres. The polemic on the ideological message of Tchaikovsky's music continued until the mid-1930s. Before then, the party denunciations of its decadence and mysticism never completely went away; on the other hand, however, censoring it would result in an open confrontation with the actual tastes of the audience. The reception of his oeuvre had to be reframed. The

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43 Ibid. 41, 46.

interpretation of Tchaikovsky's music as the symbol of 'national heroism' would become universal and commonly accepted one.<sup>44</sup>

Maya Plisetskaya, a Russian ballet dancer and choreographer, Hero of Socialist Labour (1985), one of the leading figures in twentieth century ballet, wrote in her memoirs:

Foreign guests – heads of foreign governments – ... [t]hey were all brought to the Bolshoi. To the ballet. And almost always to *Swan Lake*. The flags would be hung out. Anthems would be played. The house lights would be turned on. Everyone would rise to their feet. The chiefs would graciously wave their puffy, generous hands to the Muscovites from the central Tsar's Box: peace and friendship, good people. The gilded chandeliers would dim . . . and Pyotr Ilyich's swan music would flow.

Khrushchev would always be in the box with high-ranking guests. Nikita Sergeevich got to see *Swan Lake ad nauseam*. He once complained to me, toward the end of his reign, at one of the receptions:

'If I think about having to see *Swan Lake* in the evening, I start to get sick to my stomach. The ballet is marvellous, but how much can a person take? Then at night I dream of white tutus and tanks all mixed up together . . .'<sup>45</sup>

Every year on 10 November, the USSR would solemnly celebrate the Day of Soviet Militia, in the era of television accompanied by a concert of Soviet pop stars. But in 1982 the concert was cancelled. Instead, the television broadcast *Swan Lake* – this was to honour the death of the late Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev. The funerals of his successors – Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko – were also to the music from the *Swan*.<sup>46</sup>

Since then, *Swan Lake* has been seen as a signal of sorts, a sign of mourning, a signal of major political developments in the USSR and the anxiety of the unknown. These connotations of the *Swan* reached their peak during the days of the Soviet coup d'état in August 1991, when the ballet was broadcast on every TV channel over the three days the affair lasted. Thus, the ballet that the citizens of the USSR had been so fond of, became one of the final chords of the Soviet era – its swan song.

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44 'История «Лебединого озера»' (2012) [https://www.culture.ru/s/lebedinoe\\_ozero](https://www.culture.ru/s/lebedinoe_ozero) [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

45 M. Plisetskaya, *I, Maya Plisetskaya*, transl. by A.W. Bouis, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001, 139–40.

46 А. Азаров, 'Почему Лебединое озеро стало символом конца Советского Союза' (2012), <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/balet-lebedinoe-ozero-saraphanov--brezhev/24588709.html> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

The interest in the occult and the mystical was in a sense dictated by the historical circumstances and perhaps this is why it erupted with such force within the Russian Empire – before its collapse, during the revolution, and when the new state was being established. The unstable social situation fostered the popularity of esoteric thought.

If some occult communities did survive Stalin's repressions of the 1930s at all, it is because they either operated abroad or deep underground. Paradoxically, the authorities' universal hostility to independent thought made esotericism and mysticism even more attractive. The teachings that were persecuted for such a long time returned with a vengeance instantly after the collapse of the USSR. Numerous astrological schools were established. One of their representatives was Pavel Globa, who frequently appeared on radio and TV after the evening news to present his astrological predictions for the year. In 1991, he was believed to be directly linked to the authorities as a consultant of sorts. This was later confirmed by the Russian journalist and writer Mikhail Zygar.

While presenting his most recent book, Zygar stated: 'If you juxtapose the table of Mercury retrogrades with the period soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many events that seemed illogical before start to make sense according to the time when they occurred'.<sup>47</sup> He wrote that the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) established entire departments of astrologers, psychics, and occultists.<sup>48</sup> Supervised by Georgy Rogozin and Alexander Korzhakov, a monthly horoscope for Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation after the collapse of the USSR, would be prepared. These events have been described by Zygar in his book *Everybody is Free: The Story of How Elections Ended in Russia in 1996*.<sup>49</sup>

The phenomenon of the popularity of esoteric movements may be explained by the need for experiences of this kind in times of historical turmoil. Sociopolitical instability engenders apprehension which creates fertile ground for manipulation on the part of propaganda organs. Then, people start to believe in even the most absurd pieces of information.

Let us take as an example the story of Bogdanov, blood transfusion, and its magical properties. In the 1990s, it was widely rumoured that the

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47 'Михаил Зыгарь: история не повторяется', *Kuji Podcast*, 85 (2021), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LV1ZgCv9n5w&ab\\_channel=kujipodcast](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LV1ZgCv9n5w&ab_channel=kujipodcast) [accessed 29 May 2021].

48 М. Зыгарь, *Все свободны. История о том, как в 1996 году в России закончились выборы*, Москва: Альпина Паблишер, 2021.

49 Ю. Варшавская, 'Это Россия за секунду до Путина: Михаил Зыгарь – о своей новой книге «Все свободны» о выборах 1996 года' (2020), <https://www.forbes.ru/forbeslife/414439-eto-rossiya-za-sekundu-do-putina-mihail-zygar-o-svoey-novoy-knige-vse-svobodny-o> [accessed 27 May 2021].



mummy in Lenin's Mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow is once a month pumped with the blood of young boys. However, the boys whose blood was transferred did not die. In a 2020 interview, the former Kremlin strategist Gleb Pavlovsky admitted that this confabulation was used in the campaign of the Democratic Party; he also mentioned the hosts of astrologers cooperating with the government. To illustrate the issue more fully, it is worth looking at another incident in the recent years: the history of a shaman who set off to Moscow to expel Vladimir Putin from the Kremlin. Indeed, in March 2019,<sup>50</sup> the shaman Alexander Gabyshev started his foot journey from Yakutsk to Moscow. He justified his pilgrimage with having to perform the supreme mission – he intended to liberate the Kremlin from a demon. As he understood it, only a shaman could perform the feat. In September 2019, however, he was recognised as an extremist and listed as wanted.

'At dawn on 19 September, on the border of Buryatia and Irkutsk Oblast, Gabyshev's campaign was put on hold for a long time or even for good: his colleagues reported that early in the morning he had been abducted and taken away in an unknown direction'.<sup>51</sup> He was forcefully admitted to a psycho-neurological infirmary. After his release, he decided to suspend his activity. According to Amnesty International, he is a prisoner of conscience.<sup>52</sup> Aware of his power, the shaman from Yakutsk announced that he would undertake another pilgrimage in 2021, this time on a white horse. However, the pilgrimage did not come to pass as the shaman had been arrested and admitted against his will to a mental hospital in October 2021.

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50 О. Болдырев, *'Насилия нельзя, даже над демоном, Как шаман из Якутии шел изгонять Путина и не дошел'*, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/feature-res-49762600> [accessed 30 May 2021].

51 Ibid.

52 Amnesty International, *'Russia: Siberian Shaman on a March Against Putin Must Be Released'* (2019), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/russia-siberian-on-a-march-against-putin-must-be-released> [accessed 28 Nov. 2021].

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**Abstract:**

The paper focuses on the phenomena of occultism in the territory of the USSR before the country's formation, during its formation, and in the period of its collapse in 1991. I selected four instances demonstrating how the esoteric thought of the times influenced various milieux. At the turn of the twentieth century, when the influence of occultism was at its peak, the borderlines between science and arcane knowledge were blurred. Seemingly as alien to materialism as can be, occultism functioned on par with scientific research.

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**Keywords:**

**occultism, the USSR, Nicholas Roerich, Yakov Blumkin, Alexander Bogdanov, *Swan Lake***

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