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Russian Esotericism in the Research Conducted by The Laboratory of Non-Dogmatic Spirituality

ABSTRACT

Traditions of Western esotericism determine the scope of research conducted by The Laboratory of Non-Dogmatic Spirituality. In the 1990s, academics from The Institute of Eastern-Slavic Philology founded a research laboratory at the Faculty of Languages at the University of Gdańsk. Soon, academics from other centres joined in. Nowadays, the group comprises scholars from Polish universities, as well as from Russia, Ukraine, the USA, Sweden and Germany. Among the most interesting projects carried out by the Laboratory, one can find the research connected with a unique archive that was presented to the Department of manuscripts at the Gorky World Literature Institute (Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow). The collection, which was handed over in 2014, had been compiled by the late Ludvig Aleksandrovich Novikov (1933–2005), a physicist, scientist, academic by profession, but an archivist and a culture researcher by avocation. The collection includes valuable documents concerned with the history of anthroposophy, one of the initiation schools mentioned above, which was extremely popular in Russia, especially with representatives of the art world.

KEYWORDS

esotericism in pre-Revolution Russia, Russian anthroposophy, Silver Age, Ludvig A. Novikov, Laboratory of Non-Dogmatic Spirituality

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The traditions of Western esotericism determine the scope of research conducted by The Laboratory of Non-Dogmatic Spirituality.¹ In the 1990s, academics from The Institute of Eastern-Slavic Philology founded a research laboratory at the Faculty of Languages at the University of Gdańsk. Soon academics from other centres joined in. Nowadays, the group comprises scholars from Polish universities, as well as from Russia, Ukraine, the USA, Sweden and Germany. The nature of the group is official, which does not mean that the research conducted by the Laboratory ensures only enthusiastic reviews from the academic world. The cultural phenomenon of esotericism is rarely investigated in Poland, as it still stirs up controversy. However, it should be stated that the initial mistrust with which the Laboratory was regarded has gradually turned into acceptance and now the group does not face any major obstacles. On the contrary, twenty years of scientific endeavours have resulted in the group receiving research funds and gaining awards for publications.

It should be stressed that the esotericism which interests the researchers from the Gdańsk research centre is mainly of Russian origin. The research concentrates on the unique close of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, when the Russians and the inhabitants of the Russian empire contributed to the development of initiation organisations and schools in the West. Suffice it is to say that among the most prominent esotericists one could find Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society, Peter D. Ouspensky and G. I. Gurdjieff, the creators of the so-called Fourth Way, and Nicholas and Helena Roerich, the makers of Agni Yoga – the system of Living Ethics. Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the Anthroposophical Society, was also closely connected with Russian culture.

The research conducted by the Laboratory is diversified. It concentrates mainly on fact-finding about Russian initiation schools in pre-Revolution Russia and in Bolshevik Russia. The research concerns also esotericism in the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia, including intense activity of Russian occultist-emigrants both in large and minor European centres, such as Prague, Berlin, Paris, Dornach and Munich, as well as in the Far East, in Harbin, Shanghai and others.

The research undertaken by the Laboratory stems from the philological interests of the members of the group, though its purely literary character quickly gave way to that of history, fact-finding, palaeography, history of art, history of ideas, philological exegesis, cultural anthropology and religious studies.

¹ For details, see: Laboratory of Non-Dogmatic Spirituality, [online] <http://labspirit.fil.ug.edu.pl/?lang=en> [access: 25.05.2015].

There are several reasons for this. First of all, esotericism in pre- and post-Revolution Russia and in the diaspora is a unique phenomenon, even if compared to esoteric Europe at the turn of the centuries. Its vastness and complexity have been researched only to a small extent so far. Nowadays, it needs no reminding how important esotericism was for Russian artists at the beginning of the 20th century. Moreover, the Silver Age (the name applied to Russia at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries – Russian modernism) is attracting considerable attention. One cannot fully appreciate this period without a thorough knowledge of the influence esotericism had on Russia.

Soviet scholars, for obvious reasons, avoided studying not only esotericism, but the whole period as well, precisely because of its obvious esoteric context. Until the 1990s, the subject had not existed in Soviet Russia for ideological reasons (exceptions such as works by Nikolay Bogomolov, Konstantine Azadovski, Georgy V. Nefedjev, Gennady Obatnin and Andrey Nikitin only prove the rule).² Literary and critical works written during modernism were rarely reissued. Even if they were reissued, they had to undergo censorship that never failed to get rid of their occult context. Therefore, both works motivated by esotericism as well as authors that belonged to initiation organisations in Russia at the turn of the centuries were no longer of research interest.

The first research into esotericism in pre-Revolution Russia was undertaken mainly by Western scholars, especially American, often emigrants of Russian origin (Vadim Kreyd,³ Bernice Glazer Rosenthal and her followers). Western

² See, for example: Н. Богомолов, *Русская литература начала XX века и оккультизм*, Москва 2000; idem, *К истории эзотеризма советской эпохи*, “Литературное обозрение” 1998, № 2; К. Азадовский, В. Купченко, *У истоков русского штейнерианства*, “Звезда” 1998, № 6; Г. Нефедьев, *Русский символизм: от спиритизма к антропософии. Два документа к биографии Элвиса. Приложение: Элвис. Спиритизм и символизм. Письмо к Р. Штейнеру*, “Новое Литературное Обозрение” 1999, № 39; idem, *Русский символизм и розенкрейцерство (статья первая)*, “Новое Литературное Обозрение” 2001, № 51; idem, *Русский символизм и розенкрейцерство (статья вторая)*, “Новое Литературное Обозрение” 2002, № 56; Г. Обатнин, *Иванов-мистик. Оккультные мотивы в поэзии и прозе Вячеслава Иванова*, Москва 2000.

³ See, for example: В. Крейд, *О Скалдине и его романе*, [in:] А. Скалдин, *Странствия и приключения Никодима Старшего. Роман*, New York 1989; idem, *Борис Поплавский и его проза*, “Юность” 1991, № 1; А. Л. Никитин, *Мистики, розенкрейцеры и тамплиеры в советской России*, Москва 2000; idem, „Тайная история советской России”: *Мистические общества и ордена в Советской России*, вып. 1, *Орден российских тамплиеров*, т. 1: *Документы 1922–1930*, т. 2: *Документы 1930–1944*, т. 3: *Легенды тамплиеров. Литература ордена*, Москва 2003; *Мистические общества и ордена в Советской России*, вып. 2, *Розенкрейцеры в Советской России. Документы 1922–1937*, Москва 2004; *Мистические общества и ордена в Советской России*, вып. 3, *Эзотерическое масонство в Советской России. Документы 1923–1941*, Москва 2005.

archives, as a result of the influx of emigrants after the Revolution, acquired numerous occult editions from before 1917, which proved to be of scientific interest to researchers in the West. In Soviet Russia such archive records, which belonged to members of various initiation groups (Freemasons, Templars, Rosicrusians, Martinists, Theosophers, Anthroposophers, etc.) were unavailable to scholars. They were usually given the status of ‘closed collections.’ Frequently, they were used as evidence in investigations conducted by communist security services. It should be remembered that occultists had been persecuted in Soviet Russia since the 1920s. Since 1929, the repressive measures were especially intensive – there were deportations to Soviet forced-labour camps and even cases of capital punishment sentenced under the famous article 58 (counter-revolutionary activity). Until the late 1980s, the documents that contained accusations of ‘suspects’ being a member of esoteric groups or simply having esoteric interests formed an invaluable part of the KGB archives, carefully guarded and used against ‘the suspects.’

Western researchers worked mainly on materials available abroad. Since the 1970s, there have appeared very interesting works initiating the subject of esotericism in Russian culture. Among those of fundamental importance, one can find Maria Carlson’s book *NO RELIGION HIGHER THAN TRUTH. A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875–1922*, New Jersey 1993, and a collective volume edited by Bernice Glazer Rosenthal entitled *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, Ithaca 1997.⁴

⁴ See inside this book: B. G. Rosenthal, *Introduction*; W. Ryan, *Magic and Divination: Old Russian Sources*; L. Ivanits, *Two Three Instances of the Peasant Occult in Russian Literature: Intelligentsia Encounters Narod*; J. Deutsch Kornblatt, *Russian Religious Thought and the Jewish Kabbala*; K. Groberg, „*The Shade of Lucifer’s Dark Wing*”: *Satanism in Silver Age Russia*; M. Carlson, *Fashionable Occultism: Spiritualism, Theosophy, Freemasonry and Hermeticism in Fin-de-Siècle Russia*; R. von Maydell, *Anthroposophy in Russia*, G. M. Young Jr., *Fedorov’s Transformations of the Occult*; M. Hagemeister, *Russian Cosmism in the 1920s and Today*; A. Vanchu, *Technology as Esoteric Cosmology in Early Soviet Literature*; I. Gutkin, *The Magic of Words: Symbolism, Futurism, Socialist Realism*; M. Agursky, *An Occult Source of Socialist Realism: Gorky and Theories of Thought Transference*; H. Lövgren, *Sergei Eisenstein’s Gnostic Circle*; V. Brougher, *The Occult in the Prose of Vsevolod Ivanov*; M. Epstein, *Daniil Andreev and the Mysticism of Femininity*; D. Stephens, *The Occult in Russia Today* Holly; B. Glatzer Rosenthal, *Political Implications of the Early Twentieth-Century Occult Revival*; E. Kasinec, R. Davis Jr., *Russian Occult Journalism of the Early Twentieth Century and Emigration*; M. Carlson, R. Davis Jr., *Russian Occult Journals and Newspapers*; E. Kasinec, R. Davis, *Literature on Russian Occult Journals*; E. Kasinec, R. Davis Jr., *Russian Occult Monographs: Titles Listed in Antoshevsky’s Bibliografita okkul’izma Located in the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) Database*.

Polish scholars researching Russian literature and culture also played an important role in the research into Russian esotericism. This all began in the 1980s, when the notion of investigating Russian modernism first appeared. However, it was an ‘unwelcome’ subject in Poland in those days for political reasons, which is why Gdańsk University organised conferences under the rather neutral title ‘Russian literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.’ In reality, during the conferences one could hear speeches on non-dogmatic subjects – issues of intrinsic importance to modernism.

The research produced very interesting works. In Gdańsk, Elżbieta Biernat published a number of articles and a monograph on the Symbolist novel;⁵ also in Gdańsk, Irena Fijałkowska-Janiak published articles connected with Masonic symbolism in Russian culture.⁶ In Wrocław, Tadeusz Klimowicz brought out a monograph on the ‘occult syndrome in Russia.’⁷ Thanks to such activities, Russian occultism and esotericism were given attention and preliminary examination, although the source materials were still scarce. Fact-finding often had to be based on secondary sources.

In 1995, Professor Elżbieta Biernat initiated a postgraduate seminar on esotericism. Although the very words – ‘esotericism’ and ‘occult’ – did not

⁵ E. Biernat, *Proza powieściowa F. Sologuba*, „Przegląd Humanistyczny” 1978, nr 10; eadem, *Poetyka tytułów rosyjskiej powieści symbolicznej*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Wydziału Humanistycznego Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego. Filologia rosyjska” 1984, nr 12, eadem, *Poetyka rosyjskiej powieści symbolistycznej*, Gdańsk 1988; eadem, *Inspiracje ezoteryczne w kulturze rosyjskiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku*, [in:] *Wschód – Zachód. Pogranicze kultur*, red. O. Prokopczuk, Słupsk 2001; eadem, *Nurt ezoteryczny w późnej prozie Michaiła Kuzmina*, [in:] *W kręgu literatury rosyjskiej*, t. 3, red. E. Biernat, Gdańsk 2003; eadem, *„Doktor i Dornach”. Wspomnienia o Rudolfie Steinerze*, [in:] *Literatura rosyjska przełomu XIX i XX wieku*, red. J. Sałajczyk, L. Kalita, Gdańsk 2005; eadem, *Antropozofia w Rosji początku XX wieku*, [in:] *Wschód – Zachód. Dialog języków i kultur*, red. Z. Nowożenowa, Słupsk 2006; *Droga do światła. Jelizawieta Wasiljewa i antropozofia*, [in:] *Literatury Wschodniosłowiańskie w kręgu Europejskich idei estetyczno-filozoficznych*, red. A. Wieczorek, Opole 2007.

⁶ I. Fijałkowska-Janiak, *Оккультные романы Всеволода Соловьева*, [in:] *Literatura rosyjska przełomu XIX i XX wieku*, red. F. Apanowicz, Gdańsk 2002; eadem, *Масонское откровение. (Еще раз о стихотворении «Подмастерье» Максимилиана Волошина)*, [in:] *W kręgu literatury rosyjskiej*, t. 3, red. E. Biernat, Gdańsk 2003; eadem, *Знаки русской культуры модернизма. Масоны и женщины*, [in:] *Literatura rosyjska przełomu XIX i XX wieku*, red. J. Sałajczyk, L. Kalita, Gdańsk 2005; eadem, *Жид – Вечный МASON*, [in:] *Wokół wizji i fascynacji Srebrnego Wieku*, red. F. Apanowicz, M. Rzeczycka, Gdańsk 2008; eadem, *„Сатанисты XX века” Елизаветы Шабельской. Книга о жидомасонском заговоре*, [in:] *Literatura rosyjska przełomu XIX i XX wieku*, red. L. Kapała, L. Kalita, Gdańsk 2008.

⁷ T. Klimowicz, *Poszukujący, nawiedzeni, opętani. Z dziejów spirytyzmu i okultyzmu w literaturze rosyjskiej*, Wrocław 1992.

appear in PhD papers, the studies conducted by PhD students of the time (including the author of this article) were devoted to these very problems.⁸

It was a time of important political changes in Russia, brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union. In time, 'special collections' were made available – a process that has been observed on and off until today. Thanks to the means acquired for preliminary research in Russian archives, members of the Laboratory managed to get hold of and work on real treasures, unknown archive material connected with the turbulent history of esotericism in Russia. Moreover, the Silver Age has been in vogue in Russia since the collapse of the USSR, which creates favourable conditions for the research group. Publishing houses have appeared specialising in esoteric texts dating from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as 'Enigma' from Moscow, a publishing partner of the Laboratory. It prepares extremely meticulous editions, often reprints of books published before the Revolution.

The Laboratory of Non-Dogmatic Spirituality is proud of its unique series of publications devoted to esotericism under the title *Light and Darkness*. Until now, there have appeared five collective volumes, which include papers written in Polish, English and Russian, both by the members of the group as well as guest writers. Each collective volume is devoted to the research into a specific academic subject.⁹ The series also includes original monographs. So far, three books devoted to distinct issues concerning esotericism in Russia and the diaspora, have been published in Polish and Russian.¹⁰

The research conducted by the Laboratory concentrates on several areas: the fact-finding and palaeography of such initiation schools as The Theosophical Society, The Anthroposophical Society, Russian Rosicrucianism, The Fourth Way, Agni Yoga, Russian Masonry *sensu largo*; interpreting literary

⁸ See, for example: M. Rzczycka, *Fenomen Sofii Wiecznej Kobiecości w prozie powieściowej rosyjskich symbolistów: Andrieja Bielego, Fiodora Sologuba i Walerija Briusowa*, Gdańsk 2002.

⁹ *Światło i ciemność. Motywy ezoteryczne w literaturze rosyjskiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku*, t. 1, red. E. Biernat, Gdańsk 2001; *Światło i ciemność. Motywy ezoteryczne w kulturze rosyjskiej początku XX wieku*, t. 2, red. E. Biernat, M. Rzczycka, Gdańsk 2006; *Światło i ciemność. Motywy ezoteryczne w kulturze rosyjskiej początku XX wieku*, t. 3, red. D. Oboleńska, M. Rzczycka, Gdańsk 2009; *Światło i ciemność. Ezoteryzm w kulturze XX i XXI wieku*, t. 4, red. K. Rutecka, M. Rzczycka, Gdańsk 2012; *Światło i ciemność. Podróż inicjacyjna. Podróż metafizyczna. Podróż ezoteryczna*, t. 5, red. D. Oboleńska, M. Rzczycka, Gdańsk 2014.

¹⁰ See: D. Oboleńska, *Путь к посвящению. Антропософские мотивы в романах Андрея Белого*, Gdańsk 2009; eadem, *De Imaginatione. О эзотерической имажинации в русской культуре начала XX века*, Gdańsk 2014; M. Rzczycka, *Wtajemniczenie. Ezoteryczna proza rosyjska końca XIX – początku XX wieku*, Gdańsk 2010.

works with esoteric motifs; esoteric *genology* – research into the genre of the initiation novel and other literary forms of similar character; the relation between esotericism and fine arts in theory and practice; connections between artists (Russian, Polish and western) and initiation schools, as well as their mutual relations beyond borders, with reference to their activity in initiation organisations; methodology, especially that of the language of describing phenomena connected with experiences of a spiritual nature.

The experience we gain while conducting any research creates favourable conditions for international cooperation. Among the most interesting projects carried out by the Laboratory, one can find the research connected with a unique archive that was presented to the Department of manuscripts at the Gorky World Literature Institute (Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow). The collection, which was handed over in 2014, had been compiled by late Ludvig Aleksandrovich Novikov (1933–2005), a physicist, scientist, academic by profession, but an archivist and a culture researcher by avocation. The collection includes valuable documents concerned with the history of anthroposophy, one of the initiation schools mentioned above, which was very popular in Russia, especially with representatives of the art world. The archivist's widow decided to hand over the collection to RAS, subject to one stipulation – the esoteric competence of the research team. Therefore, the Department of manuscripts at RAS turned to the Laboratory of Non-Dogmatic Spirituality to prepare an expert opinion and evaluation of Novikov's archive. The collection proved to be unique indeed. It seems to be the biggest collection of this kind in Russia, which has been assembled in one place. It includes hundreds of documents dating from different periods, the majority of which are extremely valuable manuscripts and photographs from the beginning of the 20th century.

The archive is made of a few separate collections that Novikov assembled over many years. The most valuable one is an extensive collection of documents that belonged to the first generation of Russian anthroposophers, who helped to establish an initiation organisation founded by Rudolf Steiner in 1912, and who personally took part in building Goetheanum – anthroposophical centre in Switzerland. Among the documents, we can find some shorthand notes of Steiner's lectures written down by Russian anthroposophers, notes from talks, records of eurythmy exercises, translations of Steiner's works and theatrical pieces, memoirs, journals, letters, drawings, sketches, as well as poetry and prose inspired by anthroposophy. The most valuable part of this collection is the archive of an anthroposophic group run in Russia by the famous Symbolist Andrey Bely and his wife Klaudia (Klodi) Bugayeva. The documents contain letters and excerpts of Bely's works and

the works of other eminent representatives of the Silver Age who were also advocates of anthroposophy: Maximilian Voloshin, Margarita Sabashnikova, Elisaveta Dmitrieva (Cherubina de Gabriack), Mikhail Chekhov, Boris Leman, Olga Annienkova and others.

The collection is also connected with the history of the second generation of Russian anthroposophers, followers of the first group. Although they never met Steiner in person, they studied and put into practice his teachings in Bolshevik Russia and later in the USSR. This part of the archive uncovers many anthroposophical mysteries: it speaks about a secret, completely unknown history of anthroposophy in Soviet times, never studied before, its popularity among the actors of the famous Kamerny Theatre in Moscow, the methods implemented by anthroposophers, the repressions they suffered, etc. Novikov obtained these documents thanks to a long-standing friendship with female representatives of the second generation, who decided to pass the archive to their trusted friend in 1980s, times which were difficult and still dangerous for anthroposophers.

Ludvig Novikov acquired also a substantial collection of anthroposophical documents connected with the recent history of the Anthroposophical Society in Russia. These unique documents refer to the revival of the movement in the 1990s, the establishment of an official organisation (Anthroposophical Society in Russia), operating legally in a new political situation. One can find interesting accounts of the visits (the first following perestroika) made by Russian anthroposophers to Switzerland and by Western anthroposophers to Russia.

Novikov's collection boasts his own works – a careful analysis of the history of the anthroposophical movement in Russia, detailed studies of Steiner's most famous Russian followers, philosophical dissertations placing anthroposophy in the context of Russian culture, very interesting works on classical Russian literature, their analysis and interpretation according to Steiner's anthroposophy.

Novikov's archive is an extremely promising territory for researchers. The archivist not only compiled an extremely valuable collection of documents which had been unavailable for researchers before, but also created a unique methodology that puts – it seems – a completely new perspective on researching modern initiation currents. The preliminary examination of this field gives the promise of discoveries and surprises connected with the unknown pages of the history of anthroposophy – one of the leading European esoteric movements in the 20th century.

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