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The Occultist Background of Bolshevism

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Abstract

The revolution in Russia was not conceived among workers and peasants, as it has been accepted in popular historiography. It was a project with intelligentsia roots and an esoteric background. The aim of the article is to show the long occultist path that led to Bolshevism and communism, whose origins date back to the times of Peter I and his reforms, carried out in the spirit of Western Gnosticism with the help of secret societies. In the 19th century Russia was captured by an occult frenzy, which combined various currents of thought and made the society treat the revolution as a mystical action leading to the construction of a new world. The issue we deal with in the article covers a wide range of interrelated social, political and cultural phenomena over the three hundred years of Russian history, for which the international context is extremely important. For obvious reasons, we do not aspire to exhaust the subject. The text is intended to draw attention to the actual profound causes for the origination of Bolshevism and communism, creating a scientific basis for a study that will be soon brought out in the book form.

Keywords

occultism, freemasonry, sects, mysticism, Gnosticism, anthroposophy, theosophy, quasi-religion, bolshevism, communism

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Westernization of Russia in the spirit of Gnosticism

Russia, which had been built on Turanism, remained strongly influenced by that tradition until Peter the Great began the process of transplanting Western culture onto the eastern grounds, while giving himself a mandate to make progress through the application of violence.¹ Peter's reforms not only represented a breakthrough in Russian history and culture, but actually meant a disruption of historical continuity.

The abolition of patriarchate and its replacement with the state office under the name of the Holy Synod,² with the emperor becoming formal head of the Orthodox Church, even further enhanced the authoritarianism of the imperial office and, at the same time, the omnipotence of the state, effectively depriving the Church of its power. Peter the Great thus brought the weakened Orthodox Church to complete submissiveness. "During his times, Russia's capital was relocated from Moscow to St. Petersburg, and although it was also thought of as the Third Rome, it was pagan Rome. The emperor partied with his company around the new capital, often insulting the Orthodox religion."³ When in 1721 the Tsar introduced the Clerical Rules, which abolished the patriarchate and replaced it with the Holy Synod, headed by a secular official with the title of a public Procurator, responding to the ruler, "the two-century synodal period began, during which the Orthodox Church was but merely one of the state bodies. This situation forced out conformism, thoughtless participation in the rites imposed by tradition and law. A large number of the inhabitants of the Romanov Empire refused to accept such conformism, if only because they were particularly interested in the matters of faith. Such people clung to the elderly, monks endowed with great wisdom, and sometimes also with miraculous powers. (...) Others, on the other hand, were attracted by freemasonry, which had a somewhat mystical character in Russia."⁴ Freemasons were usually people from higher social echelons, who knew the West, "while and average *bogoiskatiel*, having abandoned the Orthodox Church, used to become associated with one of many sects, including local Protestant groups. Before the October revolution, the sects probably affiliated about 40 million people, or about every fifth subject of the Tsar."⁵ Most sects in Tsarist Russia were occultist-gnostic.

The reforms of Peter the Great came to Russia along with Western cultural influences, especially from Germany, to a lesser extent from France. The imitation of Europe was French in form (language), and German in thought.⁶ Western modernists, Rosicrucians, saw Russia as "nobody's land", which could be freely developed. "Muscovy Rus was perceived by Western diplomats and travellers

1. A. Walicki, *Zarys myśli rosyjskiej od oświecenia do renesansu religijno-filozoficznego*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego 2005, p. 31.

2. Of the eleven members of the Holy Synod, five, not counting Theophan Prokopovich, were students of the Kiev academy, already in the reformed spirit. See: B. Cywiński, *Szańce kultur. Szkice z dziejów narodów Europy Wschodniej*, Centrum Europejskie Natolin, Wydawnictwo Trio 2013, p. 35.

3. G. Pełczyński, *Kilka uwag na temat specyfiki religijnej Rosji*, "Studia Historica Gedanensia", 2016, Vol. 7, pp. 209–210.

4. Ibidem, p. 210.

5. Ibidem. See also: O. Figes, *Taniec Nataszy*, 5th edition, Wydawnictwo Magnum 2014, p. 259; S. Pastuszewski, *Liczebność staroprawosławia*, "Świat Inflant", 2012, <https://akant.org/dodatki/swiat-inflant/153-swiat-inflant-2012/2876-stefan-pastusze-wski-liczebno-staroprawoslawia>, (access 07.12.2023); A. Andrusiewicz, *Mit Rosji: studia z dziejów i filozofii rosyjskich elit*, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej 1994, pp. 249–250.

6. B. Cywiński, *Szańce kultur...*, op. cit., p. 36. See also: M. Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 42–50.

as an exotic country, foreign to Europe no less than Muslim Turkey. However, the grandiosity of Peter's reforms, observed first-hand by his Western advisers, caused that Russia began to be seen as an area for materializing the ideal Kingdom of Reason, and in its Emperor – as «a new Solon». Leibniz, who met Peter twice and developed for him (in 1711) a plan for the Russian Academy of Sciences (established in 1721), formulated the view that a new Russia, having completely destroyed its former barbaric institutions, became a «blank page» – a virgin country, where an enlightened monarch could create an ideal society, according to the principles of *la republique des lettres*. He even complemented this with the hope that a renewed Russia would fulfil its ecumenical mission, uniting Christian denominations into one Church.⁷ It was supposed to be a Christianity similar to universal human civilization, which would yet be created by Russia. This resembled the Saintsimonist idea of universal civilization and such Christianity.⁸

“The European knowledge and culture became fashionable and politically correct in Russia at the same time – one was supposed to know what was being thought and talked about in Europe. Polish culture had already ceased to be the model of Europeanism. The French language prevailed among the elites, although the transmitted content came primarily from Germany. Characteristic was the discovery of European philosophy, though perceived not so much within its centuries-long tradition as in the contemporary perspective. In the latter half of the 18th century from England and Germany this wave brought the influences of Freemasonry to St. Petersburg, Moscow, but also to Ukraine.”⁹

“In Russia, the first Masonic lodges appeared in the middle of the 18th century, during the reign of Elizabeth Petrovna. According to the memoirs of an outstanding Masonic activist, J. P. Yelagin, they had the character of a kind of social clubs and offered little food for the mind and heart. The real flourishing of Freemasonry in Russia occurred during the reign of Catherine II, who was hostile to Freemasons. Freemasonry gathered then the cream of the Russian aristocracy; its membership included leaders of the noble opposition – Panin brothers, prince Shcherbatov, as well as prominent writers such as Sumarokov, Cheraskov, Karamzin; even Radishchev was a member of the «Ukraine» lodge. There was a popular legend that the first Russian freemason was Peter I himself.”¹⁰

Such people as Nikolai Novikov, the main “propagator of the humanitarian ideas of the Enlightenment” in Russia, placed himself “halfway between religion and Voltairianism.” They were torn between national feelings, which at that time and under those circumstances were associated with

7. A. Walicki, *Zarys myśli...*, op. cit., p. 33.

8 See: K. Pawłowicz, *Saint-Simon i saintsimoniści - od rewolucji do kolonizacji: historia pewnej religii (1803-1870)*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2018.

9. B. Cywiński, *Szańce kultur...*, op. cit., p. 36.

10. A. Walicki, *Zarys myśli...*, op. cit., p. 55.

Russian Freemasonry takes on the role of the Church

traditionalism, and progressive, cosmopolitan ideas of the Enlightenment, in the name of which they criticized the Russian reality. "(Novikov) found the way out of this crisis in Freemasonry, which he joined in 1775. Actually, he did not join but was rather admitted to the group of Freemasons, who, in order not to discourage him, even gave up official ceremonies."¹¹ Novikov is only a noteworthy example, one of many. The Masonic movement in Russia of the 18th century, just like in all of Europe at that time, was the "most powerful and most influential clandestine organization or (depending on the circumstances) semi-conspiratorial one of an international nature. The ideology of Freemasons has never been clearly and unambiguously formulated; it would, moreover, be contrary to the conspiratorial nature of the movement and esotericism of its doctrine. Individual systems and even individual brothers could represent a variety of socio-political ideologies, from radical liberalism to extreme reactionism. All Freemasons in one way or another formulated thoughts about universal brotherhood of men, moral self-improvement, and the coming of the golden age. However, this did not give rise in any specific political agenda. As a matter of fact, – writes Andrzej Walicki – "Freemasonry was a kind of a secularized form of religious life. (...) For people who, like Novikov, stood halfway between religious tradition and rationalism, the Masonic ideology became a surrogate for religion, and Masonic organizations, with their hierarchy and rites, were a kind of a surrogate for the Church."¹²

Masonic influences "were obviously also noticeable in the Orthodox Church. (...) The eighteenth-century Freemasonry was not a homogeneous spiritual current; it was rather a multitude of intellectual circles, linked by the idea of searching for a new philosophy of man and the world. One of the main aspects of this search concerned the religious issues – and here the ways of thinking took various courses. (...) The protestant spiritual background of British Freemasonry rather stimulated its averseness to a specific religious rationalism (...). Therefore, British Freemasonry was inclined to search for a more mysterious faith, brushing with the traditions of ancient Gnosticism, but sometimes close to modern – also Protestant – Pietists."¹³ Masonic ideas flowed to Russia primarily from London, Amsterdam and Berlin. "And they met in St. Petersburg with the milieu of Orthodox elites which were thirsty for western culture and sensitive to mysticism."¹⁴ Thus, in Russia, the main role was played by mystical Freemasonry, drawing on the mystical concepts of Jacob Boehme and Saint-Martin. "Their works were translated into Russian; Saint-Martin was particularly popular, especially with the Martinists in Moscow, with whom Novikov cooperated."¹⁵

11. Ibidem, p. 54.

12. Ibidem, pp. 54–55.

13. B. Cywiński, *Szańce kultur...*, op. cit., p. 36.

14. Ibidem. See also: G. Florovskij, *Puti russkogo bogoslovija*, YMCA-Press 1983, pp. 114–119; N. Bierdajew, *Rosyjska idea*, 2nd edition, Stowarzyszenie Kulturalne Fronda 1999, p. 24.

15. A. Walicki, *Zarys myśli...*, op. cit., pp. 54–55.

The occultist frenzy

In Russia, as in Austria and Germany, occultism infiltrated into the artistic, scientific and philosophical areas. “A specific spiritual ferment, caused by the crisis of the positivist thought, caused the emergence of new fascinations for artists, who ever more often sought inspiration in gnosis, theosophy, Cabala, magic, Spiritism or parapsychology. Various spheres of cognition were also often combined, thus bringing all fields of art closer together. Due to the Russian specificity, where the religious element played an important role, the close relationship between philosophy, art, literature and everyday life attained the dimension of the confession of faith and universally binding artistic convention.”¹⁶ The crisis of rational positivism turned into irrational modernism, which was charged with Spiritism of all kinds and the conviction that *volò ergo sum*. This favoured the emergence of “new interpersonal relationships, confirmed the belief that the time of our civilization is coming to an end, and so everything is allowed, while on the other hand, it allowed to believe in the unlimited power of the people of the new times the Slavs hoped to become after the apocalypse.”¹⁷

At the end of the nineteenth century the upper classes in Russia “were captured by the real madness of the occult.” As Marina Aptekman writes, the “Silver Age” (the end of 19th and the beginning of the 20th century) “witnessed a sudden and intense revival of interest in mystical and magical issues. Occultism was an integral part of pre-revolutionary Russian culture. Occult doctrines captivated artists, writers and political activists. Modernist poets and painters were intrigued by the idea of the fourth dimension. Philosophers and secular theologians used the occult in their quest for the new forms of religion.”¹⁸ The occultist magazine *Rebus* reported in 1906 that all of St. Petersburg was involved in the mystical movement, which resulted in the abundance of various pseudo-religions, cults and sects. This mystical movement also embraced Moscow and the entire province, where secret societies, hypnotic séances and gypsy diviners proliferated. There was almost no educated man in Russia who was not familiar with theosophy, spiritualism, Rosicrucianism, Martinism or tarot. The mystical movement was popular in both upper and lower classes. At the same time, theosophical-Buddhist trends were developing in upper circles, while in the other ones we can see the apogee of interest in both Freemasonry and the rebirth of long-silenced religious movements from previous centuries.¹⁹

The Petrograd group of anthroposophists gathered around Andrei Bely, a Russian poet, novelist and art theoretician, poet Boris Leman and poetess Elizabeth Vasilyeva. It can be said that the literary group was at the same time a mystical-occultist group. Andrei Bely (Bugaev, 1880-1934),

16. Z. Krasnopolska-Wesner, *Rosyjscy artyści w Goetheanum (Margarita Sabasznikowa)*, “Sztuka Europy Wschodniej Искусство Восточной Европы Art of Eastern Europe”, 2015, Vol. 3, p. 301.

17. Ibidem.

18 M. Aptekman, *Jacob's Ladder: Kabbalistic Allegory in Russian Literature*, Academic Studies Press 2011, p. 153. See also: B. Glatzer-Rosenthal, *Introduction*, in: *The Occult in Russia and Soviet Culture*, ed. B. Glatzer-Rosenthal, Cornell University Press 1997, p. 5.

19. M. Carlson, *No Religion Higher than Truth: A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922*, Princeton University Press 1993, p. 5. See also: M. Carlson, *Fashionable Occultism: Spirituality, Theosophy, Freemasonry, and Hermeticism in Fin-de-siècle Russia*, in: *The Occult in Russia and Soviet Culture*, ed. B. Glatzer-Rosenthal, Cornell University Press 1997, pp. 135-152.

using the ideas of Solovyov, in his essay *On theurgy* (1903), outlined the concept of theurgical art, which is a kind of a mystical revelation, and at the same time a tool for changing the world. Among the Russian anthroposophists, both in Moscow and Petrograd, no political activity was practiced. However, there were trips to the West of Europe, especially to Germany and Switzerland, to contact both Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the movement, and the centre of the movement located in Dornach, Switzerland.

These processes had a quasi-religious foundation of a mystical nature, in which an artist is the holder of secret knowledge and has to fulfil the “mission of searching for ever more perfect ways of mysteries.” This “artist-demiurge creates new worlds, introduces imaginary cosmologies into art, at the same time making art a tool for their cognition. The creative act in this case develops into the role of a mission. In the circle of Russian symbolists (especially younger ones), the conviction is confirmed that artists should become priests and prophets.”²⁰ The path of initiation for artists was the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, which reached Russia thanks to the members of the Theosophical Society, *inter alia* Cleopatra Christoforova, Anna Minclova, Olga Annenkova.²¹ But above all, thanks to its founder, who was also an important figure of occultism spreading in the nineteenth-century Russia, one of its luminaries Madame Helen Blavatsky.

Blavatsky was a subject of the Russian empire, on the side of her mother – a Russian from the princely family of Dolgorus, on the side of her father – a Russified German, since 1878 an American citizen. She organized spiritual sessions in her home, which were popular with the intellectual elite in Russia. In practice, her prophecies turned out to be a programme she knew from her secret contacts. She herself claimed that her prophecies came from spiritual guides, whom she called “mahatmas.” She maintained, in a way typical of occultists, that these spiritual guides were “invisible sages ruling the world”, whose purpose was to enlighten the humanity.²²

The theosophical anthroposophy rejected God as the Creator and Lawgiver, and recognized a man of paranormal qualities “as the supreme personage.”²³ It found a fertile soil, since in the societies in which, as a result of materialism and the development of an atheistic worldview, there is a spiritual emptiness leading to “a certain kind of the «voice» God, which, despite unfavourable conditions, is sought for by human spirit. And, having lost confidence in religious authorities, it is groping for answers to the emerging questions about the source and meaning of its life (...).”²⁴

20. Z. Krasnopolska-Wesner, *Rosyjscy artyści...*, op. cit., pp. 301–302.

21. Ibidem, p. 302.

22. N. Goodrick-Clarke, *Okultystyczne źródła nazizmu : tajemne kultury aryjskie oraz ich wpływ na ideologię nazistowską*, transl. J. Prokopiuk, Wydawnictwo Aletheia 2010, p. 36; *Bławatska Helena *w budowie**, 2019, <http://www.tradycjaezoteryczna.ug.edu.pl/node/157>, (access 21.08.2022); *Helena Bławatska, Przepowiednie, Życie, Biografia*, <https://numerologia-partnerska.blogspot.com/2019/07/helena-bawatska-przepowiednie-zycie.html>, (access 21.08.2022).

23. *Siostra Michaela Pawlik OP, Antropozofia*, <https://gdynia.fsspx.pl/2011/04/29/siostra-michaela-pawlik-op-antropozofia/>, (access 15.07.2022).

24. W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia filozofii*, Vol. II, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1958, pp. 63–66, 180, 220–224; *Siostra Michaela Pawlik...*, op. cit.

Pierre Virion described the situation in the elites of the pre-revolutionary Tsarist Russia as follows: “The remnants of German Rosicrucians, Swedenborgism, and especially Martinism, which find a response and nourishment in the Slavic soul, infect educated milieus, the nobility, high officials up to the rank of minister and even the Tsar’s court, where in 1880 «magus» Henri de Langsdorff was brought to, to be followed suit by Jean Hits, called John of Kronstadt. In 1900, he was replaced by the famous «magus» Philip, introduced to the court by the great duchesses and the great duke Vladimir having listened to a Papus conference. Papus (Dr. Encausse) himself was called there in 1905 by several of his high-ranking followers, who demanded enlightenment from him, as we read in the diaries of Maurice Paleoloue, the French ambassador to St. Petersburg. A lodge of Martinists was set up at the court, the meetings of which were zealously attended by the Tsar and Tsarina, the future victims of this rampant mysticism. In 1906, after Philip’s departure, malevolent Rasputin made his home at the court. Upon his arrival, the imperial couple began to be affected not only by the most contradictory psychological influences, but also by the mind-blowing Tibetan Lamaism combined with German political influences.”²⁵

At the beginning of 1917, after Rasputin’s death, “his spirit is still being called in the Spiritist circles and in the Martinist lodges, where Protopopov, Minister of the Interior, Dobrovsky, Minister of Justice, and Prince Kuriakin indulged in these practices every night. All this is a cover for the work taking place in the Masonic lodges, where the originators of the revolution: Miliukov and Kerensky operated.”²⁶ The documentation from the International Conference of the Supreme Councils of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (Paris 1929) reads as follows: “In the period just before the First World War, in the years 1909-1913, an organization which called itself the «Great East of the Peoples of Russia» was established in Russia by the Freemasons initiated in Western Europe. (...) Its purpose was purely political: to overthrow the autocratic system. At the beginning of the first revolution (March 1917), there were about forty lodges in Russia with 400 members.”²⁷

The occultist revolutionaries, such as Alexander Blok or Grigory Mebes (GOM), already at the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries observed astrological signs announcing the “new cosmopolitan era.” Mebes was the main figure on the Russian esoteric scene until almost the end of 1920, when he was arrested. His lectures from the series “Encyclopaedia of occultism”, in which he developed the Kabbalistic visions of Papus as occult doctrines, “the basic law of modern cosmogony and original tradition”, attracted especially “esoterically oriented members of the so-called “Guild of Poets”, mostly

25. P. Virion, *Rząd światowy. Globalizm. Antykościół i Superkościół*, 2nd edition, transl. H. Czepułkowski, Wydawnictwo Antyk 2006, pp. 122–123.

26. Ibidem, pp. 121–122.

27. Ibidem, pp. 122–123.

The mystical activity of the communists

from the group of Acmeists, which was initiated by Nikolai Gumilev, and whose members were, among others. Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Sergei Gorodetsky, Mikhail Kuzmin. Nikolai Gumilev, although a zealous listener, was not an active Mebesian activist, unlike the lesser-class authors, such as Alexei Skaldin and Nina Rudnikova, who joined the occultist activity with enthusiasm. Occultist influences penetrated into the twentieth-century Russian society through the involved artists, writers, poets, men of science. Particularly distinguished here was the Order of Martinists, whose membership included: the outstanding Russian painter Nikolai Roerich with his wife Helena, academician Professor Oldenburg, sculptor Sergei Mierkulov, editor of the magazine “Russkoje bogatstwo” Pavel Makijewski, and Alexander Barchenko.

Very few people know – writes Elżbieta Bielińska – “that in the country where thousands of Orthodox churches were demolished and where atheism was to reign forever, employees of Cheka (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution, Profiteering and Corruption), OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate, the political police, also involved in intelligence and counterintelligence), and NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) fought for the victory of communism using... occultist methods. It turns out – and the documents leave no doubt about it - that the special services of the new Bolshevik state, which was born on the ruins of Tsarist Russia, were interested in mystic sciences!”²⁸ Zenon Chocimski writes that many occultists perceived communism as active participation in the struggle for the soul of the world, those “invisible immortals”, who perceived the Bolshevik revolution as a mystical activity. In the Barchenko Order popular was the concept of building socialism understood as a restauration of the “Golden Age” in the history of mankind, which was to follow the “Silver Age.”²⁹

Conclusions

In this text, we tried to show that there had been a long path, lasting several centuries, that led to the Bolshevik revolution and communism, as well as the profound transformation of Russian cultural identity. Those processes assumed the form of a gnostic-mystical quasi-religion, for which the centres of spiritual power were numerous and diverse Masonic lodges. In the same spirit, the Bolsheviks and communists undertook the apocalyptic effort of building a new world.

28. E. Bielińska, *Okultystyczny oddział CzeKa*, “Nieznany Świat”, 2011, No. 11, p. 12.

29. Z. Chocimski, *O diabelskich źródłach komunizmu. Stalin był satanistą?*, 2018, <http://www.fronda.pl/a/o-diabelskich-zrodlach-komunizmu-stalin-byl-satani-sta,119143.html>, (access 16.06.2022).

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