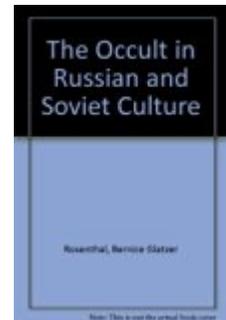




Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed.. *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997. vii + 468 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-3258-3.



Reviewed by Shoshana Keller

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I have often felt frustrated by fleeting references in books to Freemasonry, Theosophy, mysterious Tibetan doctors, and other whispers of magical practices in Russian culture. Generally historians have not (until recently) bothered themselves with such things, which pale in importance alongside the larger political and economic upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But as the authors in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal's admirable anthology demonstrate, not only are magical and occult beliefs of interest to anyone who wants a deeper understanding of Russian culture, they had a greater impact on recent Russian history than western rationalists may feel comfortable acknowledging.

The book, which is the product of a research conference held at Fordham University in 1991, is almost entirely concerned with the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The exception to this is the first essay, by W.F. Ryan, on the many types of divination, amulets, manuals of dream interpretation, etc., attested to in medieval Russian sources. His discussion of these sources is the most valuable aspect of the essay, which other-

wise simply lists methods of divination in a repetitious manner. The major reason the anthology focuses on the modern period of Russian history is that "the occult" (defined in Rosenthal's introduction as "a cosmology," i.e., the study of hidden or esoteric knowledge that reveals the true structure of the universe and humanity's place in it) is a product of Renaissance western Europe, the influence of which did not begin to reach Russia until the early eighteenth century. Freemasonry, addressed here by Maria Carlson, may have established its first lodge in Russia in 1731. Carlson has to be cagy about exactly when Russian Freemasonry began, because the masonic lodges have been among the most secretive of all the occult movements. This jealously guarded secrecy, and the centuries of wild rumors this secrecy has spawned, creates a great deal of frustration for scholar and reader alike. As Carlson writes, "Much of what we 'know' is based on hearsay and anecdotal evidence ... It is best to approach any text purporting to deal with Russian Masonry skeptically, as many such texts are contradictory and of uncertain accuracy," (p. 143). It would be wonderful, given stories of Alexander Pushkin's

involvement with a masonic lodge, masonic signs on Russian gravestones, and other hints, to get a clear explication of the Russian Masons, but sadly this does not appear to be possible. Carlson's essay also deals with Theosophy and Spiritualism in the late nineteenth century, and provides an overview of these movements that is well-suited for use in undergraduate courses.

One of the ways in which this anthology is unusual is that it crosses the line between historical and literary studies, bringing both into one volume. This is a useful approach for studying an unacknowledged orphan of intellectual history, since the occult ideas explored by such literary movements as the Symbolists had at least an indirect impact on political ideas proper. Linda Ivanits discusses the traces of peasant occult beliefs in shorter writings by Ivan Turgenev ("Bezhin lug," from *Zapiski okhotnika*), Andrei Bely ("Serebrianyi golub"), and Alexander Solzhenitsyn ("Matrenin dvor,") as examples not just of folklore but of the intelligentsia encountering and trying to understand this foreign world-view. Kristi Groberg surveys satanism among Silver Age writers, which usually took the form not of devil worship per se but of using satanic images to explore politically and sexually dangerous ideas. Her essay is both interesting and frustrating; if you want information about the prevalence of actual satanism in Russia you will be disappointed, because true Satan worshipers were inclined to keep their activities highly secret. Since Russian literary satanism in this period was directly imported from the west (especially France), one wonders how truly "Russian" the works Groberg surveys were. On the other hand, stories and art with satanic themes had a powerful impact on their audience, however derivative the ideas may have been. Groberg's piece is liberally sprinkled with illustrations of satanic art from semi-pornographic *lubki* to paintings by Mikhail Vrubel', and even in black-and-white reproduction they are striking. A 1907 mag-

azine cover by Mstislav Dobuzhinsky of the devil as a great black spider is truly haunting (p. 113).

Theosophy, Spiritualism, and kabbalistic studies (Judith Deutsch Kornblatt has a fine essay on Vladimir Soloviev's interest in the Jewish Kabbala and its impact on religious thinkers as diverse as Nikolai Berdiaev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Vasily Rozanov) all posit a superior, hidden knowledge that masters may reveal only to the elect, if the elect can prove their worthiness. Possession of this knowledge allows the adept access to a new universe, and through it power over nature and the unenlightened masses. This basic mindset, whether its particulars involved changing consciousness through language or changing Soviet society through technology, infused a wide current of Russian thought in the twentieth century. Occult concerns with manipulating words and symbols to effect change in the physical world were particularly appealing to the Symbolist and Futurist writers. Irina Gutkin discusses how Alexander Blok, Konstantin Bal'mont, Andrei Bely, Viacheslav Ivanov and others borrowed variously from Theosophy, Vladimir Soloviev, knowledge of ancient Egypt, etc., to create a "magic of words" by which they could destroy the old world and create a new reality. Ivanov and Georgy Chulkov were interested in the idea of using theater as a cultic center where new "socially unifying myths would be articulated," as Rosenthal writes in her concluding essay (p. 383). The Futurists, while mocking Symbolist mysticism, were equally interested in creating a new language that would both reflect and create a reborn world. Hakan Lovgren discusses how the great film director Sergei Eisenstein studied Gnosticism, a dualistic system of hidden knowledge dating back to antiquity, to aid the development of his cinematic philosophy.

The most thought-provoking pieces in this anthology are those that connect Soviet, especially Stalinist, technophilism and millennialism with occult thinking. The germinal thinker was Nikolai Fedorov (1828-1903), who is the subject or partial

subject of several essays here. Fedorov was an ascetic eccentric who taught that people have a "common task," to correct nature's mistakes and use technology to resurrect all of the dead back to Adam and Eve, whom Fedorov placed somewhere in the Pamir mountains. This common task would lead to the compulsory salvation of mankind through liberation from death. It was compulsory because in Fedorov's vision no one would be allowed to labor for any cause other than the common task: "Only if all join in will all be resurrected, and only if all are resurrected will all be known to all," as George M. Young Jr. writes (p. 180). Young's essay is the weakest in the collection, however. Fedorov taught orally, leaving it to his disciples to publish his ideas in a very small print run after his death. None of these published writings discuss the occult directly. This makes a clear account of Fedorov's ideas difficult, but Young compounds this difficulty by focusing on possible "shared concerns" between Fedorov and occult texts and how he transformed occult ideas into his own idiom. Since the surviving texts are few and enigmatic, Young winds up quoting rather extensively from secondary sources that are close to Fedorov's ideas or that Fedorov might have read, needlessly confusing the reader.

Much more successful is the following piece by Michael Hagemester on "Russian Cosmism in the 1920s and Today," which traces the later impact of Fedorov's thought. Cosmism, especially the "biocosmism" variant championed by Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935), expands Fedorov's ideas to create an anthropocentric universe, in which mankind (women figure very little here) is evolving toward self-perfection through science and technology. The main occult connection, that both Young and Hagemester discuss, is the alchemical idea of transformation through esoteric knowledge. Hagemester also points out that both Cosmism and Russian Theosophy developed extensive and somewhat overlapping followings in the city of Kaluga, where Tsiolkovsky spent most of his life. This constellation of ideas--universal res-

urrection, future perfection brought about by human science, collective participation in the common task, and Tsiolkovsky's vision of exterminating all "defective" humans, animals, and plants--bears a striking resemblance to the mythos of Soviet Communism. Lenin's corpse, after all, was originally preserved so that science could restore him to life in the future. Hagemester further suggests that the Soviet space program, of which Tsiolkovsky was a founder, may owe almost as much to his biocosmism as to strategic imperatives. This segment of the book is rounded out very nicely by Anthony Vanchu's essay on magical technology in early Soviet literature, with a fascinating analysis of Marietta Shaginian's "red detective" novel *Mess-Mend*.

That this anthology has several well thought out, central concepts is a testimony to Rosenthal's fine job of editing. The book's scholarly apparatus is excellent, including useful footnotes, a complete index, and a large appendix of sources on the Russian occult, compiled by Edward Kasinec, Robert H. Davis Jr. and Maria Carlson. While I think that Rosenthal pushes the connections between the occult and Stalin's rule a bit beyond the evidence in her concluding essay, the book is a valuable contribution toward a deeper understanding of the intellectual atmosphere in which Communism developed.

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