

SVETLANA TAMBOVTSEVA

## “VseiaSvetnaia Gramota”: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Utopian Comparative Studies

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**Svetlana Tambovtseva** — Institute of Russian Literature, Russian Academy of Sciences; European University at Saint Petersburg (Russia). [stambovtseva@eu.spb.ru](mailto:stambovtseva@eu.spb.ru)

*The post-Soviet cultural landscape is characterized by the popularity of nationalistic ideas and narratives, which apply conspiratorial explanatory models and suggest various versions of “alternative history.” They are framed, in particular, with amateur concepts of language shaping what can be called cryptolinguistics. This type of cryptolinguistic discourse is illustrated in this article with the case of the so-called VseiaSvetnaia Gramota (the “WorldWide Script”), which teaches that an esoteric Slavic alphabet “encodes” the entire universe. The doctrine’s discursive design and its interpretive patterns give an opportunity to track the connections between Western esotericism, the history of philology, and nationalism.*

**Keywords:** “VseiaSvetnaia Gramota,” *Book of Vles*, amateur linguistics, Aryan myth, conspiracy theories, Kabbalah.

### Introduction: The Etymological Version of the Dulles’ Plan

ON MARCH 21, 2018, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Literary newspaper) published an article titled “Time Bomb Laid by Max Vasmer, or the Language We Speak.” According to the author of this text, journalist Vladislav Pisanov from Chelyabinsk, Vasmer’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language* is “an ideological diversion, a humanitarian bomb, the fragments of which have survived to the present day and are rooted in the core of Russian linguistics,” because it intended to prove that “Russian speech came from a huge number of borrowings,” and “the Russian language didn’t exist, until words from other languages were borrowed.” Vas-

mer, according to the article, was working toward the “linguistic-political fragmentation of the Russian Empire” (assuming, in particular, “the creation of an artificial Ukrainian vocabulary”) proposed by a member of the “mystical society of the Ahnenerbe” and linguist Georg Schmidt-Rohr. For this purpose, Max Vasmer allegedly used concentration camp prisoners as respondents to collect dictionary material. When reading the article it becomes clear that the author mixes diachrony with synchrony, Indo-European correspondences with direct borrowings, and reads the etymological dictionary as a foreign vocabulary, each time drawing ethnolinguistically inspired conclusions:

Take, for example, our birch, praised by mothers and poets. If we consult Max Vasmer’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language*, which is fundamental for Russian science, it turns out that the Russians did not know how to call this tree until they were “prompted” by Dr.-Ind. Bhūrjas, as well as by the Alb. Bardh “white,” Goth. Bāírhts is “light, shiny.” There are no birches in India? Well, so what? They’re white after all! (Pisanov 2018)

The article ends with an attack against institutional linguistics, especially “academics who have received their degrees in comparative linguistics” inherited from Stalin-era conspiracy culture. As a plot it resembles a linguistic version of the Dulles’ plan (more precisely, a variation of the plot of the occult war), because foreign invasion into the Russian language is perceived as causing irreparable damage to the unity of Russia, its political well-being and national identity.

How and why has language become so important for post-Soviet conspiracy theories? What are the trajectories of linguistic conspiracy in Russia and how are they related to trends of philological knowledge and studies of New Age religion? What are their modes of perception and existence, their cognitive and social functions? These are the issues that will be touched upon in this article.

### **“VseiaSvetnaia Gramota”: Alphabet, Teaching, Movement**

Post-Soviet nationalist ideas and narratives often use conspiratorial explanatory models and foster different versions of the fringe science, namely alternative history, in which concepts of language occupy a special place; folk linguistics, overlapping with conspiracy theories,

can be referred to as “cryptolinguistic.” The term “cryptolinguistics,” proposed by Vladimir Bazilev, describes non-professional language judgments based on the idea of its inherent hidden value and power (Bazilev 2012).

“VseiaSvetnaia Gramota” (further referred to as VG) serves as a vivid example of such cryptolinguistic doctrine. It is believed to be an authentic Slavic alphabet (associated with the primordial language of all mankind), which was later distorted and reduced by the enemies of the Slavs. According to the teaching, the VG alphabet has 147 letters (*bukovy*) and is several millennia old.

There have been two English equivalents of its name introduced by scholars so far — “Pan-International Charter” (Laruelle 2008) and “Planetary Writing (Alphabet)” (Bennett 2011). I would suggest translating it as “WorldWide Script” since a slightly Russified version of the Ukrainian word *usesvitniï* (worldwide) is used while the word “script” can deliver the polysemy of the original; supporters of the doctrine can be called *vseiasvetniks*. The leader and founder of the movement was Ananii Abramov (1938–2019, he used the double surname Shubin-Abramov), who set out his doctrine in *Bukovnik* (The letter book) and over one hundred VG bulletins, and also created the public organization of the same name.

We know little about how and when the movement was formed, and about who inspired it. According to the conventional narrative, it began to spread back in 1979, but there is no independent evidence of this. As for Ananii Shubin-Abramov himself, according to the information provided on the website, he was a member of numerous non-existent academic institutions and secret state committees, and he was also considered divine. He represents himself as a descendant of the boyar clan of the Shubins, who allegedly decided to disclose the family secret and started to preach VG due to the global crisis of humanity.

The VG letters are stylized as Cyrillic uncial and semi-uncial lettering, with the pre-reform-looking names ascribed to them or designed for them; there are also letters modified in shape as well as ligatures. The way in which the rotation of the letters from different angles also changes their meaning can be seen as a reference to the idea of “Russian runes,” especially since the guidelines for fortune-telling with runes, widely used in the early 1990s, are found, for example, in the magazine *Science and Religion*, which became a platform for neo-Pagan journalism.

Each of the 147 VG letters has its own esoteric meaning, which allows you to read any word as an acronym and learn its “true” etymology. The VG also employs a phonosemantic model of interpretation, but the process of intensive semiotization involves both material objects and the human body.

The knowledge embedded in the VG is considered to be overwhelming: participants usually describe it with the formula “all about everything,” referring to the name of the famous popular science book series for children. According to the VG teaching, all letters are multidimensional and their flat representations, as well as the reduction of their number, has inevitably led to the loss of esoteric knowledge and power. Human history unfolds as the history of a gradual reduction in the number of letters, or rather malevolent attempts on the linguistic integrity of the VG. In this case, the narrative about the Jewish conspiracy is linguistically colored — the “theft” of letters is imputed to an influential ethnically marked group.

One of the key aspects of the applied “linguistic magic” in VG is the bodily one: almost all the letters of VG correspond to bodily “poetics,” which implies a set of positions corresponding with the outline of each letter; this way it is supposed to provide contact with the universe. In fact, the “Mental and Corporeal Gymnastics” as a part of VG include elements of collective prayer within the framework of morning workout. The genealogies of such “Russian yoga” can be traced back to the 19th century. Pavel Uspensky, a disciple of George Gurdjieff, dedicated several works to the idea of the “fourth dimension” (first of all, the book of the same name, published in 1909 [Uspenskii 1910], which echoes the concept of the isomorphism of the letters to the multidimensional physical world, not given in the profane sensual experience, but comprehended by the developed sensoriums in the course of bodily practices similar to yoga). Correlation with anthroposophical practices of eurythmy is also possible.

VG has gained ground in the post-Soviet period; as a recognizable discourse and a number of practices formed. Congresses were held, lectures and classes were organized to study the *Bukovnik*, and several books were published interpreting historical events and offering etymologies inspired by VG (Beliakova 1994). Despite the fact that the majority of representatives of Rodnover (i.e., native faith) movements eventually rejected the VG (Aitamurto 2016, 98), its representation in the corresponding segment of

the Internet shows that the doctrine remained somewhat popular in the 2000s and the 2010s. During this period, some active VG enthusiasts regional communities (and, for example, provide regular meetings in the museum of the artist Konstantin Vasiliev in Moscow, which became a landmark for the Rodnover movement).

The popularity of VG has decreased compared to the 1990s and the early 2000s. There are 7,000 to 11,000 participants in its public groups in the social network Vkontakte (in 2019); at the same time, the VG congresses in the Kostroma region are usually attended only by about 30 to 40 people. I use materials collected at two of them (in 2017 and 2019). The regional, educational, and gender background of the participants was mixed: along with Moscow and St. Petersburg, big Ural and Siberian cities and small towns were represented, as well as post-socialist countries such as Lithuania, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. The leading roles at the congresses are played by elderly women, mainly provincial school-teachers, who give lectures and workshops on VG during the congresses; in recent years this seems to have been the only way for many of the participants to communicate face to face with other VG believers; communication takes place at other times mostly online.

The study of cryptolinguistic ideas and narratives generally focuses on texts, and the communities that share them are rarely the subject of research, but a shift in focus toward the community and its practices can prove interesting. Some of the earliest evidence on the activity of VG “ideologists” dates back to the end of the 1980s and the very beginning of the 1990s. In the book by Mark Deutch, *The Browns* (meaning “the Brownshirts”) the essay “Brown Verbiage” is devoted to the meeting of the leading members of the “Russian Academy” with the public.

There are a number of things in the description of the meeting characteristic of the VG movement to this day: the anti-Semitic and homophobic position of the speakers, naïve etymologization, as well as the bodily “poetics.” Apparently the events have brought together various neo-Pagan “academicians” (it was announced that “before the beginning representatives of the pagan gods and then representatives of Orthodoxy will speak” [Deutch 2003, 30]).

The first VG bulletin was dedicated to the summing up of the results of this meeting, which opened with the “Resolution of the World Forum ‘For Unity with the Purpose of Reviving the Right to

Life by the Mind Carriers.”<sup>1</sup> According to the announcement of the chairman, the head of the “Russian Academy,” “the other day it was the 7500th anniversary of the introduction of flat writing in Russia” (Deutch 2003, 30). Despite the contradictory information in different sources, the year 7500 according to the VG chronology is the year 1991: bulletin number 1 indicates the dates of the forum from August 26 to September 4, 1991; the meeting described by Deutch was dedicated to the same anniversary and was held in early September, when, in the opinion of the VG adherents, the New Year should be celebrated (these details are also recorded in Deutch’s essay [Deutch 2003, 31]).

There are few direct references to any affiliations of the participants: “The only thing that was known about the Russian Academy was that it was founded by Ilya Glazunov together with some of our ‘writers’” (Deutch 2003, 20). In addition, Deutch jokingly says that the choice of the Central House of the Soviet Army (Rus. TsDSA) in Moscow for the event was not random and cites one of the speakers about the solar particle “ra” and the idea that it is “not without reason [that] there is so much sunshine in the words ‘army,’ ‘generalissimo,’ ‘general,’ [and] ‘marshal.’” Shubin-Abramov, called a “Russian academician” in the essay, will later present himself as a “people’s academician,” and militaristic images will also be reflected in his titles: “Orthodox and Military Academician, Doctor of Philosophy in Space Security.” Ilya Glazunov, as a landmark figure for Russian nationalism, has often contributed to the implementation of various initiatives such as the meeting described above, including their sponsorship.

The celebration of the thousandth anniversary of the Baptism of Rus’, regarded as a milestone that marks the beginning of the use of Cyrillic script, as a significant event in the late Soviet period can be considered a closer context of the VG. VG bulletins contrast this date with a more impressive one — 7500 years since the “introduction of flat writing,” i.e., the simplified transfer of multidimensional letters on the plane<sup>2</sup> — thus, the chronology since the creation of the world gets a new (and also linguistic) interpretation.

1. Bulletin of the VseiaSvetnaia Gramota no. 1, 7500, 1.
2. See Bulletin of the VseiaSvetnaia Gramota no. 30, 7504, p. 4, accessed March 2019, <http://xn--80aaafahlboegpvgrh3sg.xn--p1ai/gramota/bulleteni/>.

## Amulet, Trademark, Totem

The outlines of most of the VG letters iconically represent their meanings (figs. 1, 2). An iconic interpretation of the alphabet borrows the illustrative tradition of the medieval figurative alphabets (for example, the alphabet books by Karion Istomin) and, presumably, is aesthetically oriented towards them (fig. 3). The letter “zelo” (“the sign of the sunset with no dawn following” [Bukovnik 31]) is the only negative one out of a hundred and forty-seven letters, is supported symbolically. Not coincidentally vseiasvetniks use only one Latin letter, “s,” to denote it, iconically representing the snake, the image that actualizes connotations (including biblical) associated with danger and abomination. The letter is used, for example, to write the words *slo* (evil), *sombi* (zombie), *parasity* (blood-suckers), *lesbiistvo* (lesbianism), *sidy* (Jews), and *vrasi* (enemies) (fig. 4). In medieval art the snake represents sin, and scenes that depict fighting with it are called psychomachia as the fight takes place in the soul of man. Among vseiasvetniks this symbolism is reinterpreted so that the language in its written form turns out to be the main battlefield between good and evil.



Fig. 1. See description in the text.





Fig. 4. See description in the text.



Fig. 5. Author's photo, see description in the text.

As Brian Bennett notes, it is symbolism that connects esoterism and conspiracism, which are combined in post-Soviet alphabetic mysticism (Bennett 2011, 13). The VG essentially assumes a kind of irregular semiotic system in which the sign can belong simultaneously to three different types of the Peircean triad (iconic, indexal, and symbolic). The search for a universal language is carried out by destroying the conventionality of the signs. More precisely, symbols reveal themselves as “natural,” they are metaphorically or metonymically connected with the natural world, which is covered by the symbolic system of

“antediluvian language.” Thus, the primordial nature of the VG alphabet is proved by its “naturalness” — this can be called natural philosphic linguistics.

Everything around, and nicks and notches<sup>3</sup> on birch trees, and the forms of scales, flowers, and feet of insects and other living creatures, as well as the rainbow, halo, and other Light-woven formations reflect the letters, Syllables, and even the Words of the WorldWide Alphabet. (Bulletin of VG 1 30 of 7504, 4)

It can be noted that VG signs have very limited application — they are mainly used decoratively and apotropaically. Letters are used for the organization of space (for example, window frames in the form of the letter “tau” — a kind of Slavic Feng Shui), they are sewn on clothes (from the stylized national flax shirt to the hoodie) and glued on the backlite of used Zhiguli, dying out on the worn-down roads, which, according to the memories of villagers, were last repaired “under the Communists.” The participants of the congress put VG inscriptions on dishes and kitchen utensils — at the common table you can see coffee cups and mugs inscribed in this way (fig.5).

Thus, in a sense, the letters of the VG denote themselves; they mark a kind of “corporate” belonging of people and things. This visual culture is partly reminiscent of the pseudo-Russian logos of the 1990s, which were made in pre-reform spelling or Slavic ligatured script.

### **VG and the Discursive Role of Secrecy in Esotericism**

Given the lack of reliable data on the environment where VG originated, what we know is gleaned mainly from various discursive “evidence.” According to the Dutch researcher of Western esoterism, Kocku von Stuckrad, a discursive approach can help in understanding the unfolding of the cryptolinguistic culture characteristic of the VG. Stuckrad complements the Foucauldian concepts of discourse and epistemes with the poststructuralist ideas of Bourdieu’s sociology, in particular the concept of the field (Stuckrad 2010). Considering the discursive approach not as a concrete method, but as a research style or perspective, he defines its subject as “the relationship among com-

3. Nicks and notches (Rus. “cherty i rezy”) were used by illiterate Slavs to count and to read fortunes, according to the short treatise “On the Letters” of the 9th–10th century. Neo-Pagans often use this quote as evidence of the existence of a Slavic pre-Christian writing system. See Bennett 2011, 147.

municipational practices and the (re)production of systems of meaning, or orders of knowledge; the social agents that are involved; the rules, resources, and material conditions that underlie these processes; and their impact on social collectives” (Stuckrad 2013).

A case in point is Stuckrad’s view of the discursive function of secrecy and its social capital, which is characteristic of many esoteric communities: “From this point of view, the chief effects of secrecy are on the recipients of the secret, not on those from whom it is putatively withheld” (Stuckrad 2010). Shifting the focus to the group and its formation around the idea of secrecy is an interesting prospect. In the case of the VG, connotations relevant to Soviet culture are important, as the idea of state secrets, which permeated all levels of society’s existence, contributed to the development of conspiracy theories. The most prestigious areas of professional activity — military, scientific, and technical — were related to secrecy. The “core” of VG community tend to represent themselves as related to some state project of enormous importance, secret and thereby mysterious (see Shubin-Abramov’s titles above). One of the participants of the congress, who presented several conspiracy stories in the first conversation, concluded by saying that we have already “learned too much,” and it would take at least two years for beginners to understand the secrets he had mentioned (he was propagating the so-called “Concept of Public Security”<sup>4</sup>).

It seems to me that the role of “discursive secrecy” of this kind cannot be overemphasized when it comes to the process of transmitting ideas, narratives, and practices in post-Soviet New Age religion. Here we deal with the cognitive attractiveness of the understatement that triggers interpretative creativity in which values, representations, and implications symptomatic for this or that group find a way out. In this sense, the story of the *Book of Vles*, which largely anticipated the introduction of VG and served as one of its direct sources, should be considered revealing.

### **The *Book of Vles* as Precursor to the “VseiaSvetnaia Gramota”**

The *Book of Vles* is one of the most prominent forgeries in the history of Russian paleography, as well as an extremely important text for

4. “The Concept of Public Security (Russia)” (CSR) is a conspiratorial and totalitarian political program of the movement “Course of Truth and Unity.” For more information, see Ob”edinenie Storonnikov Kontseptsii Obshchestvennoi Besopasnosti, accessed March 2019, <http://kob.su/>.

many Russian nationalists, especially the neo-Pagans. Despite the unambiguous expert opinion exposing the forgery (Zhukovskaia 1960, 142–44), in the 1970s there was an upsurge of public interest in it (Mitrokhin 2003, 415–16). This interest remained largely unsatisfied — access to the text itself, which was distributed illegally and not in full, was difficult, and the text was associated with foreign (i.e., oppositional and of higher quality) content. The official press only mentioned the *Book of Vles* as a “mysterious” manuscript that provoked disputes among scientists.<sup>5</sup> Although the reaction from experts was clear and there was no scientific controversy over the authenticity of the *Book of Vles*, their negative findings were easily presented as part of an imaginary scientific discussion. Comparisons of the narrative about the *Book of Vles* with the story of “The Tale of Igor’s Campaign,” “sacriligious” according to many members of the academic community, in fact explain a lot of the success of the *Book of Vles* (Tvorogov 1990, 43:170–234; Shnirelman 2015, 1:150).

The full text of the *Book of Vles* became widely available to Russian readers in various forms only in the 1990s: it was published in a detailed academic review as a falsification by Oleg Tvorogov and at the same time was “translated” into Russian by Alexander Asov and published in many thousands of copies (Tvorogov 1990). The reasons that gave rise to such a strong cultural impact of the *Book of Vles*, and perhaps partly clarifying its popularity, are rooted in the growing strength of the Russian nationalist movement in the 1970s, which was both officially based and supported by underground intellectuals (Mitrokhin 2003).

Cryptolinguistic hermeneutics, implying the etymologization of any foreign words as if it was derived from Russian, goes back to the pre-scientific stage of Russian linguistics, as it inherited and spread particular ideas (for example, that the word “Etruscans” is derived from the word “Russians” (Bogdanov 2013, 100–114). Examples of its use in Soviet scientific discourse can be found in the works of Boris Rybakov, who has undertaken a dubious reconstruction of the pagan belief system of the ancient Slavs (Rybakov 1981).

The content of the *Book of Vles*, as a chronicle that recorded the heroic victories of the Ruthenians during the seven thousand years preceding the adoption of Christianity and the Cyrillic script, as well as some ritual instructions, lies in the field of folk-history; in the case

5. Skurlatova 1979, 55–59. The article is also included in the collection “Tainy Vekov,” 26–33. The reference is provided in Tvorogov 2004, 47–85.

of the “VseiaSvetnaia Gramota” the alternative history of the Russian Empire is implied. It is worth mentioning that, according to those who support the authenticity of the *Book of Vles*, it was the Nazi organization the Ahnenerbe that hunted for the secret knowledge embedded in the “book” and stole it during the Second World War.

The system of writing of the “original” *Book of Vles* is called *velesovitsa* (Bennett 2011, 140–50). Representing a distorted but recognizable version of the Cyrillic alphabet, *velesovitsa* is the result of reverse deciphering of the allegedly ancient manuscript. Linguistically, this effect of antiquity is achieved by the obscure semantics and syntax, as well as by the mixing of features characteristic of different Slavic languages. Of course, the linguistic creativity of the VG creators extends much further, but the careful elaboration of a hundred and forty-seven letters, the rules of accentuation, and a kind of “literary norm” express the idea that the older the language, the more opaque and incomprehensible it must sound and look on the page. This works according to a cognitive principle that provides ritual viability to sacred texts that have undergone desemantization to a certain degree (Boyer 1990, 79–93). In this sense, the linguistic work that we see in the VG texts can be called radical without exaggeration.

Finally, there are numerous borrowings from the *Book of Vles* in VG, which are quite common in the “cultic milieu” of the post-Soviet New Age, so that direct acquaintance with the original was optional.

So, we can say that VG is a kind of a grassroots version of the *Book of Vles*. The inaccessibility of the full text of the *Book of Vles* in later Soviet times led to the fact that it became partly “imaginary” and was replaced by a story about itself. What matters here is that the VG exists outside of any text that claims to be authentic. Like the *Book of Vles*, it is intended to demonstrate the existence of pre-Cyrillic script in Russia, but VG is given by itself, not in the text, but in the alphabet. Moreover, there is little attention to writing practices in the VG story – rather writing becomes an attractive existential metaphor, and its comprehensive and pervasive nature manifests itself in natural phenomena, human physiology, and universal processes. In a way, it is the ideal foundation of the universe and the dynamics of creation. Such a model of hermeneutics and encoding, which are constantly evolving into each other, can be called Kabbalistic – it is certainly not a question of direct orientation to the Kabbalistic tradition, but rather of the history of some ideas and world-view systems entwined in the history of European esotericism and the New Age.

## Philology as an Esoteric Discipline

In discussing the discursive genealogies of VG, it is necessary to take into account the historically significant place of esoteric hermeneutics in the formation of the philological tradition and the mutual influence of these forms of knowledge. When considering esoteric knowledge as stigmatized, it is important to understand that this status is historically dynamic. In the Renaissance period, neo-Platonism and Christian Hebraism played a crucial role in the formation of humanist doctrine (Stuckrad 2010). The origin of philological criticism, including pre-Reformation criticism (e.g., by Johannes Reuchlin) was connected with the study of biblical translation. Therefore, the pursuit of the *vseiasvetniks* can be seen as a philological one in many respects: it is a peculiar version of the reconstruction of the primordial language, building a new type of semiotics and critique of translation, revising “corrupt” language. Thus, the sphere of applied philology expands to the cosmic scale as the world order is regulated linguistically, and an alternative version of history is attached to the “linguistic” agenda.

Kabbalistic tradition is associated with the ontologization of letters, which were endowed with mystical properties and were thought to be the basis of the universe. Interpretation became an act of creation, implied a special cosmic combinatorial approach, and claimed to decipher the immanent course of nature. Its assimilation by the later philological tradition led to the existence of a special kind of subtext that underlies hermeneutic practices, the transformations of which through the end of the 20th century could be a separate subject of research.

Vladimir Solovyov and some of his followers, whose thinking was more of an exceptional than a typical phenomenon in Russian religious philosophy, introduced Kabbalistic spirituality to Russian culture. Solovyov pointed to the deep resemblance of the Christian Kabbalistic tradition to Orthodoxy, and connected both with hope for the future of Russian theocracy.<sup>6</sup> Marlene Laruelle, one of the few re-

6. Solovyov's precedent of intellectual appropriation of the Kabbalistic tradition was not followed up directly. As Judith Kornblatt writes, “despite frequent references to the Kabbalah, Solovyov's heirs did not possess sufficient knowledge of Kabbalah's teachings to separate Kabbalah from the dualism of Gnosticism and save it from dissolution among other esoteric systems” (Kornblatt 1997, 87), and “the return to the occult in Russia today often has a clearly anti-Solovyov and anti-Semitic connotation” (*ibid.*, 76). See also: Burmistrov 2016, 47–65.

searchers who has paid special attention to the VG, notes its “unacknowledged” “Kabbalistic,” one of the sources of which could be the practice of onomatodoxy (*imiaslavie*), widespread on Athos in the early 20th century and condemned by the Synod in 1913 (Laruelle 2008, 306). The similarity with Kabbalah (in the way the name of God is endowed with divine nature and “reified”) should be considered typological, since it originates from the practice of hesychasm, in particular, the repetition of the Jesus Prayer.

The attractiveness of this practice in grassroots religious life is undeniable — the proof is the sectarian movements of Russia in the modern period that adapted them (in particular, Khlysts). Comparing them to the VG and, more broadly, the post-Soviet new religious movements (NRM) can make sense in the context of antimodernization attitudes and eschatological aspirations. Anti-“technocratic” ideas are associated with post-Soviet resentment, which is one of the unifying factors of the movement in terms of its social origins (Seriot 2012, 186–99). Post-Soviet religious movements gave rise to a kind of hermeneutics, often referred to as “cargo cult science” (Panchenko 2012, 122–39).

Brian Bennett regards the conspiratorial image of Kabbalah as a part of a broader phenomenon in post-Soviet religion, which he labels as alphabetical mysticism, including such alternative scripts as runitsa, vlesovitsa, and VG. So given the absence of a Kabbalistic tradition itself, Kabbalah appears as a widespread powerful image created by the conspiratorial imagination (Bennett 2011).

Alexander Panchenko, following literary critic Frank Kermode, considers eschatology as “a cognitive mechanism of meaning, placing individual life and the history of human communities in the field of final causes and consequences” (Panchenko 2018, 300–317). It can be assumed that the etymological “obsession” revealed by the followers of VG, along with the adherents of other diverse cryptolinguistic teachings, provides the same ordering effect opposing the entropy of historical processes. The return to the proto-language in this logic is thought to be a means of “salvation from history” and highlights the utopian nature of the linguistic project of VG.<sup>7</sup>

7. Brian Bennett suggests a somewhat similar explanatory model for alphabetic mysticism: “I will then suggest that the connecting link between esotericism and conspiracism is the notion (borrowed from William James) of ‘unseen order,’ and that alphabets are a way of making this order visible” (Bennett 2011, 134).

Interestingly, the cited article by Panchenko is devoted to the “paleocontact hypothesis” in the New Age culture of the late Soviet Union on the example of the writings by Slavic philologist Vyacheslav Zaitsev. A kind of “cybernetic” hermeneutics influenced both Zaitsev’s ideas and “methods of reconstruction of ‘modeling semiotic systems’” proposed in the first half of the 1960s by Vyacheslav V. Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov (ibid.). Kocku von Stuckrad, whose approach to the study of the history of esoterism was mentioned above, begins the chapter of his book on Kabbalistic tradition with an insight into the history of scientific language. The researcher traces back the dead metaphor of “coding,” central to the language of genetics, as well as in cybernetics, to the very sphere of esoteric-philological knowledge. DNA is understood textually as a divine code consisting of combinations of four letters. But for von Stuckrad this metaphor is significant in an epistemological context, as it makes it possible to witness the “deification of the human being through combinations of letters” and the textual ideology of European culture, which inspired the urge to make space “readable” (Stuckrad 2010, 89–93). Interestingly, DNA becomes a powerful metaphor for vseiivetniks, who teach that letters are bioenergetic entities, encoding universal processes.

However, when discussing the origins of cybernetic hermeneutics, one should not forget about the institutional history of late Soviet (oc)culture: Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder in their famous book on Soviet parapsychology point out the fact that many research groups were attached to cybernetic and bionic laboratories (Ostrander and Schroeder 1970, 143).

### **The (Post-)Soviet Psychic Project and the Problem of Mediation**

As mentioned above, the leader and founder of the VG, Shubin-Abramov, repeatedly pointed to his connection with secret military projects, mentioning, in particular, military unit 10003 and General Alexey Savin, who headed it. The work of the psychic program under the Ministry of Defense covers the period from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, coinciding with the peak of VG popularity. Without going into detail, it is important to note a number of significant differences from similar US projects. In particular, as far as can be seen, it did not involve experimentation with psychotropic substances, but was also less focused on remote viewing. According to the published

memoirs of former Stargate project participants, Soviet psychic intelligence often relied on measurements and indicators generated by various devices, which Americans tended to explain as related to the materialistic essence of Marxist ideology (Savin et al. 2016). Indeed in studying the scientific imagery of the late and post-Soviet culture of the New Age, we should keep in mind the context of the Soviet secular project.

The extrasensory program in many respects inherited the early Soviet experiments and, moreover, was based on the philosophical tradition of “Russian cosmism,” understood via Carl Jung, which was “invented” in the late Soviet era (General Savin in collaboration with V.I. Antonenko in the early 2000s wrote an essay titled “The Fundamentals of Noocosmology” [Savin and Antonenko 2013]). In many ways, it is from this discursive field that the specific sociolectus of the VG must have been drawn, in which the “Collective Spirit-Mind” (*Kollektivnyi Dukh-Razum*) is a hybrid of the Jungian “collective unconscious” and Vernadsky’s noosphere. Interestingly, Savin mentions Vladimir Solovyov, whose Sophiology he also reads in line with the Russian religious philosophy included in Russian cosmism, and in connection with the image of the Kabbalah:

The analysis of V.S. Solovyov’s religious and philosophical works gives grounds to believe that he is entirely based on Christianity. At the same time, the idea of the creative beginning of the world is developed by him in the wide spiritual context of Platonism, Buddhism, biblical traditions, the philosophical teachings of Jakob Böhme, Benedictus de Spinoza, and Friedrich Schelling, Berndt Andreas Baader’s mystical teachings, and Kabbalah, taking into account personal mystical experience. (Savin and Antonenko 2013, 410–11)

The narratives on psychic experiments still constitute a significant resource for the argumentation of VG experts. In them, the materiality of thought is clearly expressed and can be measured. Speaking of VG genealogies, it is appropriate to recall the practice of spiritualism in which communication with spirit was often meditated graphically — with the help of a sequence of letters folded into a message, and bodily — by the medium.

The issue of mediation in this context is particularly challenging and important. The very concept of the material is problematic and interpreted extensively — esoteric neo-Platonism is complicated by the separation of densely material objects and thin-material phenomena

and processes, which introduces metaphysics into the field of physics (Savin and Antonenko 2013, 503). It can be assumed that here, in full accordance with Marshall McLuhan's aphorism, the means of communication determine its nature. In my opinion, it is crucial to understand how VG works as media, as a secret code for decrypting the world.

### **Graphic Artifacts and Bureaucratic Kabbalah**

Webb Keane's approach marks a turn to materiality in semiotic research: "representations exist as things and acts in the world... A medium of representation is not only something that stands 'between' those things it mediates, it is also a 'thing' in its own right" (Keane 1997, 8).

As anthropologist Matthew Hull notes, "one of the most fruitful insights to emerge from the general rehabilitation of materiality in the social sciences and humanities is that representations are material. Anthropologists have long recognized that things are signs, but until recently they have often ignored that signs are things" (Hull 2012, 13). This aphoristic formulation rather accurately captures the conceptual inversion conceived by Keane. Hull seems to be seeking to develop the idea of semiotic ideologies, which have a more convincing empirical application. *The Government of Paper*, a book on the bureaucracy of urban Pakistan, explores office infrastructure given in its materiality (Hull 2012).

Following Webb Keane's proposal to expand "linguistic ideologies" to the semiotic level, Hull offers his own, "graphic" ideologies, which shape "semiotic functions and non-discursive uses of graphic artifacts" (Hull 2012, 14). In addition to the mediation of the semiotic, graphic artifacts are objects involved in non-semiotic events and incidents (ibid., 22).

Hull draws attention to the processes of recontextualization, both material and semiotic (ibid.). Graphic ideologies, as he notes, may also include more general representations of the ontology and authority of graphic artifacts and their ability to represent or produce truth, meaning, and so on.

Hull's attention to the regimes of materiality of documents allows us to take the next step and fix the moment when the form is separated from the material carrier and asserts its own materiality. As he notes, "The powers of graphic artifacts depend on their place within a regime of authority and authentication. However, the focus on the

normative commitment to following rules or on the aesthetics of form can lead to the view that the specificities of individual documents are secondary, even unimportant, beside their formulaic and pro forma aspects” (ibid., 27).

Form does not exist without matter, materiality presupposes form. Form (even if free) dominates all bureaucratic genres, and formality largely determines the deployment of their content. Therefore it is possible to see an unexpected resemblance between bureaucracy and folklore.

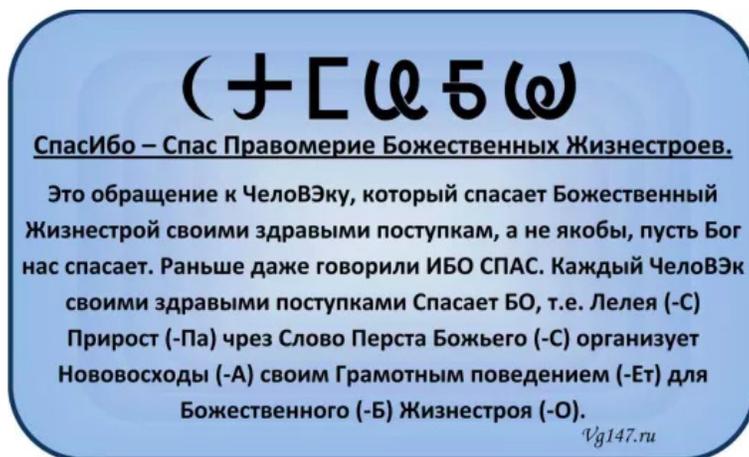
The semiotic ideologies of the VG are characterized by such tension between written and oral, in which the authority and authoritarian nature of written culture leaves a deep imprint on people’s linguistic imagination. Indeed, the typical popular etymology of *folk linguistics*, based on consonances in VG, is complemented by deciphering words as acronyms. The words of everyday language are endowed with a second secret sacred meaning, the key to which is the VG alphabet.

The VG bulletins also contain references to bureaucratic genres (in the example below it is directly related to secrecy as social capital):

With this small official statement from STGI<sup>8</sup> we will slightly restore in your Motherland the Historical Truth about the Childhood of Mary — the Future Mother of God. It is a pity that so far we have had to conceal the exact place of Mashenka’s birth, so that the enemies [враги] couldn’t defile it by “building” in this place any kind of industrial monster, drinking house, or toilet, as it has already happened in desecrated Judaism (more often than not by the grandparents of the present-day shitheads) of Svyato-Rusya [Holy Russia]. (Bulletin No. 17 of 7502, p. 1)

Characteristically, in some cases comprehensive abbreviations tend to take an acrostic form that combines the metaphysical understanding of each of the letters into long attributive constructs, often containing an indication of the subject, object, purpose, and mode of action (fig. 6).

8. STGI of VG stands for the School of the Teachers of the Great Initiation (Shkola Uchitelei Velikogo Prosveshcheniia).



**Fig. 6. See description in the text.**

The letter on the plane projects the process of materialization, i.e., the creation of matter. We say, remember, the word is material [ . . . ], so we do magic.<sup>9</sup>

The form of the letters of the VG appears as a constitutive force of universal scope. The mode of communication with the cosmos, the praying language, the ideal language, the language of paradise turns out to be inspired by the Soviet bureaucracy.

### **VG and Utopian Geometry**

Matthew Hull, addressing the study of document flow and urban planning documentation of Islamabad, recalls the metaphor proposed by James Scott in his book *Seeing Like a State*: the bureaucracy makes society “readable” to the state (Scott 1998). (Hull adds that this process involves more than one channel of mediation [Hull 2012, 155–56].) Scott puts together, among other things, the artificial forests, the utopian urban planning of high modernism, and the radially organized transport system connecting the outskirts and the center. This visual aesthetics and clear geometry meet the requirements for a rationally organized, ordered space, “readable” for the state. The same goal was

9. Workshop “Mnogomernoe pis'mo” [Multidimensional writing], [https://vk.com/vgakademiya?z=video-151469882\\_456239064%2F2eb60e25ac1f114422%2Fpl\\_wall\\_-151469882](https://vk.com/vgakademiya?z=video-151469882_456239064%2F2eb60e25ac1f114422%2Fpl_wall_-151469882), published on August 20, 2019, available as of August 26, 2019.

achieved by language standardization, which ensured the overcoming of linguistic impenetrability of the territories inhabited by speakers of different dialects (see Scott 1998, 9–85).

As mentioned above, the VG offers its own standard of literary language, the observance of which is strictly controlled in everyday speech. The “proper” speech in the VG version is not only free from lexemes that are recognized as the foreign ones (post-Soviet borrowings, mainly English), but also, in some cases, implies the rejection of conventional word usage in favor of some peculiar made-up variants. Thus, special attention is drawn to the use of intransitive reflexive verbs as well as negative particles. The colloquial emphatic use of the word “(to like) awfully” is regarded as an oxymoron. All of these cases seem to be united by a striving for literalization and the destruction of the metaphorical and idiomatic nature of language.

Such linguistic moderation — benevolent, but insistent — seems to be one of the most common practices not only among the vseiasvetniks, but also in New Age culture as a whole. It is partly rooted in popular psychology, which connects thoughts and words with their bodily “materializations.” However, among its prerequisites, it is worth recalling the high social prestige of literate speech in the Soviet era. The vseiasvetniks carry out an alternative codification and offer an alternative literary standard, demonstrating in this sense truly imperial ambitions. One of the sessions at the congress in Orlovo was devoted to multidimensional writing; in the course of it the participants put down the names of the small peoples of Russia written on the blackboard (the list included, among others, such pseudo-ethnonyms as “Pelasgians”).<sup>10</sup> These actions were regarded as acts of practical magic to help the representatives of these peoples. The workshop ended with reading a poem glorifying Vladimir Putin (the president’s surname was the source of the image of the man who composed the “heavenly ways” and was looking for the “ways of saving the Earth”<sup>11</sup>).

Urge to systemize, which is easy to see in the bulk of writings by vseiasvetniks, is definitely inseparable from the visual culture of VG. It is no coincidence that the adherents of the teaching com-

10. Some identify this ancient Slavic civilization with the Aryans or the Pelasgians or the Etruscans (or all three). See Bennett 2011, 146.

11. The association is based on the meaning of the Russian word *put'* (“the way”).

pare it with the periodic table, introduced by Dmitri Mendeleev — while its elements are marked by letters and their combinations, VG letters turn out to be the primary elements. In this context, Mendeleev’s table is both a symbol of scientific knowledge (and intuitive at the same time, since it is believed to have been revealed in a dream) and its “icon.” The world and man are brought into conformity with linguistic geometry (in many respects the same way as in the Renaissance Kabbalistic tradition) by the utopian model of high modernist authoritarian social engineering — standardization and classification. And in this sense, behind the seemingly complicated universe of VG, there is a simplification. To be more precise, VG’s success is in balancing between secret and common knowledge, anchoring esoteric symbols in popular scientific facts; delivered in the children’s encyclopedia, as if promising that this shared popular knowledge stands for deeper and essential meanings and thus post-Soviet people appear to be well-equipped when facing global catastrophes.

Relatively recent history knows many examples of the Cyrillicization of the writing of non-Slavic and non-Christian peoples as an instrument of Soviet colonial policy. Invented alphabets are known as a tool not only for nationalistic fringe science, but also for authoritarian national politics.

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting on the stigmatized knowledge in contemporary American culture, Michael Barkun notes the blurring boundaries between it and the mainstream, caused mainly by the spread of the Internet (Barkun 2016, 1–7). The media context is a crucial factor in this case. In the late and post-Soviet period, the opposition between stigmatized knowledge and mass culture often seems counterintuitive. Since the weakening of institutional control over print content and informal dissemination practices, this opposition has, at least for some time, become irrelevant, and the high demand for all the bulk of published texts has been generated, rather, by the existing trust in their credibility and uncritical appropriation. While such magazines as *Nauka i Religiiia* (Science and religion), or publishing houses such as Molo-daia Gvardiia (The young guard), can be said to have been controlled by specific communities or subcultures, their large audience was mostly united not by belonging to certain groups, but by the conventional ways of consuming information. Stigmatized knowledge was thus

becoming widespread at least a decade before the Internet became widely accessible, and has since then been characterized by the reverse process of marginalization. At least, this seems to be the case with neo-Paganism and a wider range of phenomena within the post-Soviet New Age.

Thus, *VseiaSvetnaia Gramota* — a seemingly rather marginal doctrine, obsessed with fear of the Western world — can be inscribed in one of the most ambitious and significant cultural trends in the whole European culture — namely, what Umberto Eco called “the search for the perfect language” (Echo 2007). Comparative linguistics, engaged in the search for a primordial language, can be considered in the same paradigm. While the *Book of Vles* was still largely “elitist” knowledge, the “*VseiaSvetnaia Gramota*” profanes, esotericizes, and radicalizes it at the same time. Anatoly Doronin, the founder of the Konstantin Vasilyev Museum of Slavic Culture, as well as a former associate of his, scornfully characterizes VG as “profanation,” and even Valery Chudinov, an honorary academician of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences<sup>12</sup> and one of the most famous Russian “linguistic freaks,” speaks about it at best condescendingly, exposing the ignorance of its creators.<sup>13</sup>

Both the author of the scandalous article in *Literaturnaya gazeta* and the academicians of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who drew up an indignant letter about this article, may be equally committed to linguistic nationalism (see the article by A.V. Pavlova and M.V. Bezrodnyi about the subtexts of Russian neo-Humboldtianism [Pavlova and Bezrodnyi 2011, 11–20]). However, the manifestations of this linguistic nationalism can be very different, since extralinguistic in nature.

The popular culture of the late and post-Soviet New Age is unlikely to deal with Kabbalah directly. Rather, there is a kind of Russian version of “grassroots philology” that has absorbed pan-European linguistic nationalism. Considering the configuration of nationalism and comparative linguistics, which have historically developed along with the idea of the providential role of the Ar-

12. The Russian Academy of Natural Sciences, RANS (Rossiiskaia Akademiia Estestvennykh Nauk) is a non-governmental organization; its members' activity is often associated with pseudoscience.

13. See “*Iakoby zakrytye istochniki Vseiasvetnoi gramoty*,” Institut drevneslavianskoi pis'mennosti i drevneevraziiskoi tsivilizatsii, <http://www.runitsa.ru/publications/466#37837>.

yan race in the history of mankind, Maurice Olender traces the philosophical and scientific tradition of contrasting the Christian-European world to the Semitic world, based on the Orientalist opposition of progress and statics (Olender 1992). East European nationalism, adapting these ideas, turns them upside down: the Russian (Slavic) tradition is regarded as sacred and static while the distorting effect of modernization comes from Western (Jewish) culture. Such inversions in the discourse of the modern New Age are constantly observed, and numerous examples of de- and re-contextualization argue for the viability of smaller units of transmission than narratives.

A significant part of the studies mentioned above were preoccupied specifically by the origin of the alphabet, the reconstruction of the supposed initial cryptograms, and the restoration of its geographical and cultural trajectory. The alphabet was thought of as a cultural storage medium in an extremely compressed form (almost a genome of culture), therefore the historical precedence was so fiercely contested. The case of the “WorldWide Script” as an example of grassroots New Age subculture shows how esoteric discourse transforms when meeting with vernacular practices and what role mediation plays in this process.

As can be seen, VG signs are hypersemiotic on the one hand, and non-semiotic on the other. They are intrinsically, but imperceptibly material: on the one hand, their postulated multidimensionality makes them fully accessible only to extrasensory perception, on the other hand, they become visual mediators while semiotic relations are replaced by mimetic ones.

Word formation models of Soviet newspeak are known to have long been productive material for language games. But they also gave birth to a peculiar hermeneutics of the state, which highlights the ritual nature of the Soviet bureaucratic sociolect, the opacity of which contributes to its “sacralization” (Bogdanov 2008, 300–337). This esoteric potential of officealese is in demand by post-Soviet cryptolinguistics. It becomes a domain of creativity — linguistic and ritual — and provides the patterns for communication with the cosmos. The whole world becomes involved in the Slavic cosmic bureaucracy, or rather, its virtual expansion of universal scale. When related to the state, secret becomes sacred (Taussig 1993), and the national language turns out to play crucial role in the never-ending circle of its deciphering and encoding as if the printed culture would stand for the state itself.

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