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The Revolution of Spirits for the Spiritual Brotherhood: The Social Ideals of Russian Spiritualism

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This article offers a reconstruction of the social ideals of the Russian spiritualists. The main sources include texts revealing spiritualists' ideas about the structure of the spiritual world, the structure and characteristics of spiritual circles, and literary works by spiritualists that reflected their social ideals. Although the social and political views of Russian spiritualists were mostly conservative, their ontological views contained elements of social radicalism. The author divides Russian spiritualists into two types — the rationalists and the traditionalists — depending on their attitude towards the Orthodox Church, Christian theology and their specific views of the spiritual world. All spiritualists viewed society critically, as gripped with a disease. Rationalist spiritualism was critical towards Christian dogma and practice, and although its supporters advocated the preservation of the social and political status quo, they hoped for both gradual social and political transformation and the acquisition of social ideals in the spiritual world. The traditionalists, despite their commitment to monarchy and the institution of the Church, expected a millenarian upheaval and thus challenged the social and political order. Overall, the spiritualists' social ideals are close to communitarian social projects based upon the idea of Christian brotherhood.

Keywords: spiritualism, history of religion, Russian Orthodoxy, millenarianism, brotherhood.

SPIRITUALISM, which asserted the existence of a spiritual authority that was simultaneously anthropological in nature, became one of the most significant currents for social change in the mid-nineteenth century United States. The voice of the “spirits” became the voice of a “nation,” which expressed its demands through mediums, demands that often coincided with those of the era’s reform movements (Braude 2001). At the same time, it must be acknowledged that B. Caroll, who demonstrated the ambivalence of spiritualism as a means of social legitimization, was right to conclude that the “spiritual world” could serve as a justification for conservative social views as well as reformist ones: “if they were ‘radical spirits’ articulating a ‘middle-class radicalism’ that challenged the conventions of the status quo in the name of liberty and envisioned an alternative social structure, they also displayed a profoundly conservative middle-class concern for order” (Caroll 1997, 5). The focus of this article is precisely that conservative trend in Russian spiritualism.

The social views of Russian spiritualists were conservative, if one determines a movement’s level of conservatism by measuring their attitude towards social revolution and governmental change. Rejecting social revolution, the spiritualists proposed changing society through small deeds; in this sense, their views were close to those of Nikolai Nepliuev and Alexander Engelhardt (Gordeeva 2020, 89, 101). In the words of spiritualist Maria Petrovna Saburova:

these days, hotheads see everyone as equal, and have lately (March 1st of this very year) made an attempt on the life of the Tsar, supposing that the death of a ‘tyrant,’ which is how they view every monarch, could instantly change everything for the common good; they do not understand that there is only one single correct way of being at peace — for everyone to honorably contribute his share of labor to the common structure (IRLI RO, f. 2, op. 1, d. 262, l. 289).

As this article will demonstrate, the social ideal of the spiritualists was one of a spiritual brotherhood, since a participant, under the guidance of the spirits, would, in the words of Nikolai Wagner, “engage more fervently in socially useful activities, since this serves to strengthen his will and his attachment to all members of society, which is where the ‘humane’ truly manifests itself” (“Rebus iz rebusov” 1881, 60).

The Russian spiritualists seem even more conservative if one considers their political beliefs. In all likelihood, there were proponents of myriad political views among their numbers, but, judging by the avail-

able evidence, it seems that all of them at least refrained from criticizing the monarchy. Some (S.V. Semyonov, F.B. Vinberg) (NIOR RGB, f. 368, k. 8, ed. 13, ll. 9 ob, 12) participated in the Black Hundreds movement, and the work of famous spiritualist Vera Ivanovna Kryzhanovskaya expressed concerns about internal and external threats to Orthodoxy and autocracy that were characteristic of the group: “while in the past one ruled over all, now all rule over everyone — nay, not even all, but only those who have managed by whatever means to grab power for themselves and, in their own interest, support this delusion in the consciousness of the people” (Kryzhanovskaya 1906, 20). Right-wing representatives of spiritualism, such as Elena Ivanovna Molokhovets, spoke of the need for conservative reforms in the government and the church in accordance with their spiritualist ideals, but all of their proposed innovations, such as removing references to living people from the liturgy or removing texts that people could not understand from the Orthodox catechism (while retaining Church Slavonic as the language of church services), were ultimately designed to strengthen the institution of the monarchy through administrative restructuring. As Molokhovets asserted “in our Orthodox world, monarchism, nationalism, and Orthodoxy constitute a single indivisible whole” (Molokhovets 1910, 1). Even spiritualists who publicly defended the principle of freedom of religion and largely supported the missionary work of Father Joann Wostorgow criticized his activities in the Union of the Russian People for mixing national and religious questions (Smeleye mysli 1910, 465) and always publicly maintained their loyalty to the institution of the monarchy. They displayed commendations from Nicholas II in the pages of their journals and criticized the social upheavals of 1905-1907, “When a current of western culture, with its materialistic worldviews that reject and reproach everything, were directed into Russian patriarchal society by an artificial hand” (V. P. B. 1907, 138).

While the sociopolitical conservatism of the well-known Russian spiritualists is indubitable, Ilya Vinitsky’s famous claim that “the Russian spirits were restrained, even conservative” (Vinitskii 2005), requires more nuanced discussion. My goal here is to offer a more sharply focused analysis of the religious positions held by the Russian spiritualists, some of which went against their declared sociopolitical loyalty, while others supported it. In my view, this social tension was created by two ideas, divine intervention and spiritual evolution (Aksakov 1887, 87-8; “Dukhovnyi darvinizm,” 1890, 302), both of which held that the current social order was transitory. Social consolidation

was supported by the idea of a spiritual hierarchy, which, in my view, played a decisive role in the formation of the social ideals of the Russian spiritualists.

Spiritualism between tradition and rationalism

It is possible to discern two threads in spiritualist theology: the rationalist and the traditionalist (Razdyakonov 2019, 11). The primary difference between them lies in the question of reforming religious institutions; the rationalists were inclined to reject the Church as a social institution, while the traditionalists held that it would have to undergo a transformation, either a liberal one that permitted a diversity of views among the faithful or a fundamentalist one that asserted the principle of strict compliance with religious norms. The theological debate between those two threads reflected both the then-ongoing public discussion of reforming the Orthodox Church and its attitude toward the modernist movements of the period.

The “rationalists” took a critical stance towards Orthodox dogmas and religious practices and favored a universalist understanding of Christianity. One example of this attitude towards Christianity can be found in the spiritualist journal of Maria Petrovna Saburova, in which she cited the opinion of, among others, representatives of Biblical criticism and cast doubt on the dogma regarding the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. In her words: “I venture to suggest that there would be fewer nonbelievers if the Church had not established dogmas that run counter to science... I am convinced that many of Christ’s words have been distorted... if we are meant to perfect ourselves, that means there can be no such thing as eternal damnation” (IRLI RO, f. 2, op. 1, d. 262, no. 1, ll. 427-8). A. N. Aksakov expressed equally critical views of Christian theology in his comments on the Russian spiritualists:

Believing themselves faithful followers of Spiritualism... do not follow its teachings, which conflict with the dogmas of contemporary theology, that is, they do not take logical conclusions from accepted truths to their legitimate end; they stand on neutral ground between the orthodox teaching of their national church and the rationalism of Spiritualism (Aksakoff 1869, 457).

The persistence of this critical position is demonstrated by the fact that M. P. Saburova held to such views despite her communication (through the medium Sophia Bestuzheva) with spirits who told her

that Orthodox observances were indispensable: “despite the fact that you do not particularly hold with Orthodox observances, and despite the fact that much in your world has been perverted, the majority of people are still in need of form and cannot do without those rituals... we do not have them in our world, but when we praise the Creator, it is utterly incomparable” (IRLI RO, f. 2, op. 1, d. 262, no. 1, l. 62)! M. P. Saburova’s letters to A. N. Aksakov were written in the same critical spirit: “do you approve of my decision to publish these tidings as well? I vacillated for a not inconsiderable time before coming to a decision on the matter. How unfortunate that we shall scarcely be able to publish what they have said regarding religion, that ‘we do not have different denominations’” (IRLI RO, f. 2, op. 1, l. 2 ob.).

As the diary of M. P. Saburova indicates, other spiritualists, whom I referred to as “traditionalists” above, such as Barbara Ivanovna Pribytkova, defended Orthodox dogma and practices. The regular arguments between M. P. Saburova and B. I. Pribytkova make clear that such disagreements did not interfere with the close relationships between the rationalists and the traditionalists. The latter group held that Orthodox tradition should be preserved, since its observances were the means through which an occult connection between the human world and the world of spirits was established:

... No one would ever dare to deride the Mystery of the Eucharist if he knew that every person who undertakes to take in the body and blood of Christ with sincere, deep belief facilitates the centralization, the condensation of the atomic rudiments of the astral body of the Son of God, and is actually tasting, in a crumb of what appears to be bread, of His actual body, and in the drops of transubstantiated wine, is taking in his divine blood (Kniaz' Inok 1906, 572).

Sacred texts retained their significance thanks to a form of spiritualist hermeneutics designed to substantiate spiritualist metaphysics, while spiritualist seances, were, at least in some cases, perceived by the traditionalists as analogous to Orthodox liturgy (NIOR RGB, f. 368, k. 9, ed. 1, l. 154 ob.). Some spiritualist scholars, such as N. P. Wagner, argued, in accordance with their Orthodox convictions, for the religious significance of prayer and faith, making a distinction between the “miraculous” and the “mediumistic” and not reducing the former to unknown natural forces. In his words, “the power of prayer produces a miracle. The power of mediumism produces only mediumistic phenomena. These phenomena may be strengthened by prayer and the

harmony of the circle, but a miracle will never be counted among the mediumistic phenomena, although some bear features of a miracle” (PNP Wagner, ll. 4 ob.-5). The traditionalists viewed Christianity as the highest religious form (Razdyakonov 2020), and conceptualized themselves as reformers, destined to “renew” it:

“My children! Today the time has come again for repairing the Old and outmoded forms, the time for the further development of the Word! And here we are, the workers of this mission, calling upon you to join us in undertaking this work, which is great, lofty, and joyful! We have not come to break the Law, but to add to it, and, by God’s Will, to correct it” (NIOR RGB, f. 368, k. 8, ed. 26, l. 48)!

Different traditionalists had diametrically opposed visions for that religious reform. For example, Vladimir Pavlovich Bykov, who had a high opinion of the missionary efforts of the Baptists and evangelicals, could not “agree with the claims of the dominant church that it is sinful for laymen to say prayers on their own, to read and interpret the Gospels and preach the word of God without a special blessing to do so” (Bykov 1910, 272).¹ Others, such as E. I. Molokhovets, took the opposite stance, calling for a struggle against “cosmopolitanism,” which they viewed as the greatest threat to the “spiritual-religious-moral” state of Russian society: “freedom of conscience (*Gewissensfreiheit*) is a contrivance of the West, the best means of distinguishing and defining the West and the East, those two countries of the world, obliged at all times to be representative of spiritual darkness and light” (Molokhovets 1880, 63). While E. I. Molokhovets framed a fundamentalist plan for a Russian Orthodox state, V. P. Bykov, judging by the writings of his closest colleague E. F. Speranskaia, was inclined towards Christian ecumenicism during the period when he embraced spiritualism; the circle of “dogmatist spiritualists” he founded boasted 800 members in 1910, “just in Moscow alone,” “where Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Calvinists, Baptists, Gregorian-Armenians, and representatives of the Anglican creed all live closely together” (“Doklad, chitannyi E. F. Speranskoiu 18 maia po novomu stilu na vsemirnom s’ezde spiritualistov v g. Briussele” 1910, 549).

1. After his break with Spiritualism, V. P. Bykov took a diametrically opposed position: “for the achievement of his great designs, the Lord chooses ONLY OUR MOTHERLAND, our holy Orthodox Church , and His great chosen and anointed one, our God-loving Tsar for carrying out those designs in this life” (see Bykov, 1914, 25).

The difference between the rationalists and the traditionalists was not limited by the question of how to view theology, observances, and the institution of the Church. The rationalists and traditionists had different definitions of the significance of national and religious factors in the structure of the spiritual world. Analyzing these factors makes it possible to draw conclusions regarding the social goals of the spiritualists, including their level of sociopolitical conservatism.

The spiritual world as a social project

Despite the spiritualists' adherence to the principle of spiritual progress, their spiritual world, as a whole, was static, existing as a hierarchy of spheres on the soul's path to perfection. As P. Chistiakov averred, "Jacob's Great Ladder, with angels constantly going up and down, is no longer a myth for us, but a reality — more than that — the Highest Reality of the Universe" (Chistiakov 1907, 89). At the head of the cosmological and social hierarchy, standing as an unreachable template for the pursuit of perfection, was God. More perfected souls ruled over less perfected ones: "after Andrei's transition to a better sphere, OD became able to use him as an intermediary" (IRLI RO, f. 2, op. 1, d. 262, no. 1, l. 157). The relationships of dominance and subservience, however, were not based on coercion as in the real world, but rather on mutual love and free choice (Karyshev 1897, 8). The principal business of the spirits consisted of perfecting themselves and mentoring those at lower levels of development. In addition to spirits participating in a hierarchy, the spiritualists spoke of spirits who were unwilling or unable to do so. Those souls either eked out a lonely existence or joined together in small groups (Geintse 1899, 623; O'Rurk 1886, 4), or else joined the anti-hierarchy headed by the Devil (Karyshev 1897, 218). They could not develop and required help from the spiritualists, though they would often hinder spiritualists' own path towards perfection.

There was a difference in how rationalists and traditionalists understood the structure of the spiritual world. The rationalists emphasized the unending development of the soul as it climbed the ladder of progress (Boltin 1907, 9). They viewed the present as a transitional period, regarding it as the dawn of a new era that had to be reached through human effort. Though the traditionalists agreed with spiritual evolution in general, they ascribed greater significance to eschatological concepts, according to which the world would soon undergo a radical transformation as a result of divine intervention.

Rationalists, such as M. P. Saburova, used the allegorical method to interpret certain utterances from mediums, as is exemplified by the story of a spirit's "tail" "falling off," which apparently provoked indignation among Russian spiritualists (IRLI RO, f. 2, op. 1, d. 262, no. 3, l. 205). The rationalists, who confined themselves to general speculation about the structure of the spiritual world, were, in principle, critical of detailed descriptions. As Saburova remarked "my acquaintance Barbara Ivanovna Pribytkova is a follower of Swedenborg. Unquestioningly believing everything he says about the world of spirits, she has tried for some time to convince me of his teachings, but metaphysics and his ideas about life there, which are, in my view, very crude, cannot make their way into my soul, into my mind" (IRLI RO, f. 2, op. 1, d. 262, no. 1, l. 46). They were no less skeptical of the possibility of communicating with the souls of "great people," considering it unlikely given their level of development. Furthermore, the rationalists took a critical view of the idea of distinctions between souls based on any feature other than their level of perfection. Their spiritual world could be characterized as a rationalist utopia in which religious content was ultimately designated as secondary in relation to the general structural makeup of the spiritual world.

Certain traditionalists, however, presented abundantly detailed descriptions of the structure of the spiritual world. For example, the social utopia located on Mars was, according to the mediums of I. A. Karyshev, nothing more or less than a system of gardens (Karyshev 1897, 221-2), which spirits who had reached a level of perfection beyond earthly society tended and inhabited. Furthermore, a significant element of the traditionalist concept of the spiritual world was its characteristic cosmological dualism, which presupposed the existence of a constantly active evil as a necessary component of development and a precondition for spiritual progress. On the one hand, it was brought to life by close contacts between spiritualists and folk mediums, as, for example, in the well-known cases of M. P. Saburova, E. F. Tyminskaya, and I. A. Karyshev, and, on the other hand, it was influenced by, for example, in the case of V. I. Kryzhanovskaia, French occultism based on the works of Eliphas Levi (Luijk 2016, 136). Cosmological dualism meshed well with the militaristic rhetoric that was characteristic of traditionalists like E. I. Molokhovets and V. I. Kryzhanovskaia, which emphasized the general elitism of spiritualism and held that competition and struggle between opposing forces existed in the spirit world as well:

“The Morning Star is dressed in a black shirt and wrapped in a mantle, with head uncovered and bare feet. All of the fallen heavenly forces and angels are also dressed in black shirts, but they are not wearing robes. The Lord God took all of their wings away; only the servants of the Divine may bear them, not the adepts of the black king” (Karyshev 1897, 133).

The spirit-guide of the Blagoveshchensk Society of Spiritualists discussed the spirits in a similarly “dualistic” manner: “Satan is a god, but a god of evil, for borders for the development of his endeavors...evil spirits are the victims of Satan” (Blagovest 1916, 105).

Some traditionalists stated that nations played a role in the spiritual world. For example, P. A. Chistiakov cited a document which held that spirits were able to join together in the spiritual world along national lines, forming “national” conglomerates of spirits that acted as the collective patrons of earthly peoples: “all such disembodied intellects constitute a kind of Olympus, a complex hierarchy of folk gods, the protectors of nations, saints and prophets that differ from one another in knowledge, abilities, and power” (Chistiakov 1907, 97). The study of the souls of races and peoples that the popular Gustave Le Bon developed in his works included a vision of the Indo-European peoples as the race that appeared most recently, an idea that found itself reflected in the popular occult raciology of the period, harkening back to the works of Antoine Fabre d’Olivet. It is not surprising that P. A. Chistiakov defined the future Apocalypse as a conflict between Christianity and Buddhism, the “white” and “yellow” races (Chistiakov 1905, 3-5).

The spiritual world of the Russian traditionalists was a place home to both Orthodox saints and warriors who, according to the artistic writings of V. I. Kryzhanovskaia, appeared to aid the Russian people in their struggle with European occupation (Kryzhanovskaia 1906, 5, 13) and intervened as an avenging force headed by Christ during the Last Judgement (Kryzhanovskaia 1911, 284-5). Russian national spiritualism was a fully distinct movement that contraposed itself against both the individualistic and materialistic “West” and an “East” associated with Buddhism and the destruction of the self. Its national character manifested itself not only in criticism of foreign spiritualists, Kardec first and foremost, but even in the policing of language: “the Russian name has been agreed upon here since the beginning of this endeavor; in various ways the word ‘medium’ of spirits, patron, and leader, has given way to the word *provodnik* [conductor], the saucer is called an *orudie* [tool], the pencil a *stil'* [stylus], and a séance a *beseda* [dis-

cussion]" (*Vestnik obshchestva spiritualistov v g. Blagoveshchenske* 1910, 32). The traditionalists thought of themselves as surrounded by threats and enemies (Maklakova 2019), and thus sacralized national memory, indicating that recollection was a means of developing the souls of nations (Chistiakov 1907, 96), which, in their turn, thereby gained the ability to act as patrons of spiritualist organizations.² This system of mutual spiritual aid made Orthodox practices (primarily prayer and pilgrimage) necessary methods of national spiritual consolidation from the traditionalist point of view. Ultimately, it was precisely the perfect spiritual world that defined events in the earthly world: "a change to a given governing principle in the state, or a change to a given piece of legislation" demands decisions from the "higher heavenly forces of the leaders, the patron spirits; they all debate 'yea' and 'nay,' the entire quantity of good and evil that will be introduced into the world by every involved party, and they decide whether or not to permit it" (Karyshev 1897, 116).

The spiritualists' vision of a hierarchically structured spiritual world stood in contrast to the real world, which they characterized as a space of competition between individuals and groups. They often compared the earthly world to a school, or even a prison (Chistiakov 1907, 333-4), in which souls experienced pedagogic preparation. In this world, society was ill, and the spiritualists envisioned themselves as its doctors and saviors. There was also a spiritual empire to which they were fated to return, and they saw themselves as its colony in the earthly world, a colony in need of "ambassadors" and "prophets" from the spiritual world. These "ambassadors" manifested themselves in the spiritualist circle, which, thanks to transcendental approbation, became a source of social change. By turning to an analysis of the social relationships between its participants, it is possible to discuss the question of how closely the religious ideas of the Russian spiritualists about how society should be ordered corresponded to the actual state of affairs.

The spiritualist circle as a religious proto-commune

Traditionalists viewed spiritualist circles as a means of religious renewal for the Orthodox Church. E. F. Tyminskaya and E. I. Molok-

2. The patron of the "Moscow Circle of Dogmatic Spiritualists" was Saint Seraphim of Sarov and the patron of the Blagoveshchensk Society of Spiritualists was apparently Saint Nicholas of Myra.

hovets, for example, received messages from the apostles in their capacity as “higher spirits”; participants in circles of this type, which, according to V. P. Bykov, were the most widespread in Russia, were active in the Church (Bykov 1911, 1-16). The dawn of circles as the organizational model of spiritualism can be compared to the eucharistic revival of the early twentieth century (Zernov 1991, 69), first and foremost by viewing it in the context of the activities of the “Christian brotherhoods” (Balakshina, et. al. 2017). For example, the spiritualists of Blagoveshchensk made the first and only attempt to create a spiritualist labor brotherhood (*Vestnik obshchestva spiritualistov v g. Blagoveshchenske* 1911, 17-8; *Blagovest* 1916, 192-8).

A religious spiritualist circle was a group of people who met regularly to receive instructions and guidance from spirits. This narrow description excludes amateur circles that assembled simply to entertain participants from consideration, and those in which participants dedicated themselves to studying the physical and psychical sides of mediumship. Spiritualist circles of this kind were a means of affirming “transcendental” authority which sanctioned and directed the circle’s activities. The fact that the idea of “brotherhood” held these groups together signals both their closed nature and the elitist nature of spiritualism:

“A spiritualist circle is a school of interrelationships with the aim of achieving a unification of Spirits, which is able to exert a beneficial influence in the future on the thinking beings of such a relational community, and likewise of the process of self-improvement. Spiritualist circles have deep meaning and a great mission! The more of them are founded, the more brotherly love will develop between people” (PNP Wagner, l. 17).

The spirit-guide of the Blagoveshchensk Society of Spiritualists made a distinction between the “brotherhood,” which was under his leadership, and the formal “society,” which was necessary for recruiting new members: “to begin with, bring them into an ordinary society of people broadly interested in this particular branch of knowledge, and then it is only from a *member of the society* that a *member of the brotherhood* can be molded” (*Blagovest* 1916a, 188).

In contrast to the professed ideology of “brotherhood,” relationships within the spiritualist circle were structured along authoritarian lines. This circumstance is shown most distinctly by the example of the Moscow spiritualist circle, in which the spirit-guides had the

deciding vote in discussions of contentious questions, and the primary circle, which controlled the “branch” circles, had the right to expel any who were disobedient for violating the strictures of their charter (Proekt “ezotericheskogo” ustava Russkogo spiritualisticheskogo obshchestva 2018, 125-6). The denial of access to communication with spirits became a punishment, since spiritualists considered this communication a means for improving a person’s spiritual/moral and physical condition. This situation facilitated the formation of socio-psychological attachment to the group among its members, as the example of the A. I. Chertov’s split with A. I. Bobrova’s circle demonstrates:

I shall not hide from you that the incident which occurred left me so shaken that my sorrow was expressed as tangibly as it often is among nervous women... I will tell you one thing that you and A. I. [Bobrova] know very well, that, for almost three years, I had not missed a single séance, even last summer, when my daughter was at death’s door, but this circumstance still did not stop me and my inner sense... You knew very well what I expected when I became involved in spiritualism...and all of that was destroyed by the dictatorial power of A. I. I am finished with her (NIOR RGB, f. 368, k. 7, ed. 65, ll. 3-3 ob.)!

One excellent example for demonstrating the significance of the medium in a spiritualist group is the Blagoveshchensk Society of Spiritualists. They held regular meetings for members of the “brotherhood,” at which “the guide offered their thoughts via hypnotized speech through *their first intermediary*, after which their *co-teachers* in the development of that thought, which was the foundational one for the meeting, gave their thoughts through two other mediums who belonged to the society” (Blagovest 1916a, IV).

Although mediums, as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds, also played the role of social arbiters in religious circles, in some instances, especially among rationalistically inclined spiritualists, their social status not only failed to rise, but actually fell. The medium was reduced to a “thing” that others had to take care of to make sure he or she was working dependably:

My parlor-maid answered me in such an abashed voice (she is still ashamed that she permits herself to be Ivan) when she was passing me the glasses: “Varya! Now I am alone again! Good lord, how horrible!” “There is nothing horrible about it! You are just a little machine through

which a dead person can speak — that's it!" I said, comforting my speaking-medium who stood before me, head lowered (IRLI RO, f. 2, op. 1, d. 262, l. 254).

In my view, these two ways in which spiritualists assessed the significance of a medium — either as a cult figure or as an automaton — corresponded to two opposing concepts of social leadership: a monarchical one that insisted that the leader should play a political role and a religious role simultaneously, and a republican one that transformed the leader into an instrument for fulfilling the "will of the people." The social ideals of the spiritualists expressed their aspiration to synthesize those two concepts; for example, the traditionalists sacralized the figure of the tsar, while, for the rationalists, the tsar was not only a "conduit for divine will," but also a conduit for the will of the spirits, and thus, in accordance with spiritualist logic, the will of the people.

As my analysis of the social structure of spiritualist circles demonstrates, they should be viewed as typologically related to communitarian projects (Gordeeva 2017, 10). Obviously not all religious spiritualist circles were this sort of "spiritual commune," but, judging by the available materials on the Moscow Spiritualist Circle, the Blagoveshchensk Society of Spiritualists, and N. P. Wagner's circle, they were inclined towards precisely that form:

"When it comes to us, the four members of the circle, we are, in truth, also still weak students and often get answers wrong at our lessons, but that should not trouble us; we must work doggedly, study, and continue the great task we have undertaken, with warm, tacit prayer, not restricting ourselves to any form. We, my dear Nikolai, will struggle with all our negative traits and together we will, at the same time, learn to love each other and everything around us more and more, and that love will give us blessings in proportion to its strength" (PNP Wagner, ll. 17 ob.-18).

Russian spiritualists referred to the first Christian communities as their historical antecedents (V. P. B. 1907, 460), while, for those who were more inclined towards occultism, such as V. I. Kryzhanovskia, the Pythagorean communities might have been an analogous historical reference point (Nazarov 1911, 5).

The example of the labor brotherhood of the Blagoveshchensk Society of Spiritualists, which founded a settlement near the village of Astrakhanovka, shows that the aspiration of returning to the "land" was familiar among spiritualists, just as it was for representatives of the

other reform movements of the period. For example, the theosophist D. V. Strandén, who valued the spirit of the common people highly, noted that “the representatives of the common people are not reacting to new ideas in the same way. Their psyches have not been distorted by abnormal city life, and their will has not been weakened, but rather tempered by the constant struggle with the natural environment” (Nazarov 1911, III). Social isolationism was not, however, characteristic of the spiritualist movement as a whole; although the spiritualists usually viewed cities negatively, they considered such a “hostile environment” an essential prerequisite for self-perfection.

The way in which spiritualist circles were structured as small, closed religious groups, whose teachings varied depending on the personalities of the mediums (in every instance I am familiar with), made it difficult for the Russian spiritualists to create a large and open informal organization. Two well-known Russian spiritualist organizations in the early twentieth century, the Moscow Circle of Dogmatist Spiritualists and the Russian Spiritualist Society, openly opposed each other (“O prostitutsii mediumicheskogo dara ‘Spiritualista’” 1907, 5-6). The spiritualists’ dreams of social unity ran into internal obstacles. To determine how spiritualists imagined their ideal organization it is useful to analyze the spiritualist fantasy literature they produced.

The brotherhood of Christian Magi

To the spiritualists, a secret brotherhood seemed to be the most suitable social form for realizing their ideal. Their social ideal was aristocratic in so far as “nature is itself aristocratic, and it follows that any democratic culture is, to a certain extent, artificial, in that it contradicts nature itself” (Diu Prel’. 1893-1894, 33). The “aristocracy of the spirit” demanded political and social dominance over the wild masses: “it is strange to think that there will come a time when knowledge will penetrate down to the lowest strata of the people, but despite all that it will not match their moral development. This mismatch inevitably must give rise to the existence of social evil...” (Diu Prel’. 1893-1894, 295). The task of the aristocracy was to mold and develop the “lowest strata of the power” with the goal of overcoming their ignorance, as “it is precisely there that the cause of our social evils lies, in that gaping abyss that lies between the enlightened minority and the ignorant masses” (Diu Prel’. 1893-1894, 54).

This concept of a “secret brotherhood” was represented in the Russian literary tradition of spiritualism by the occult novels of V.

I. Kryzhanovskaia (Kryzhanovskaia 1910, 5). She used a Himalayan theosophic myth to create an artistic image of a secret brotherhood (Andreev 2008), as well as ideas about the mystical brotherhood of the Grail: “if I call our brotherhood the ‘Brotherhood of the Grail,’ it is only to use a name that is already known to you, one which comes from a word that was pronounced Sainreal, which means ‘royal blood.’ That allegorical name is relatively accurate, since the essence of life truly is the royal blood of nature” (Kryzhanovskaia 1901, 64). The ideas behind this brotherhood that possesses the secret of immortality change over the course of V. I. Kryzhanovskaia’s “Magi” pentalogy, but the primary goal of the brotherhood remains unchanged — that of caring for humanity and, first and foremost, Christians, the most morally advanced subset of humanity.

V. I. Kryzhanovskaia contrasted the moral ideals of the brotherhood with the materialism and egotism of humanity, and she described the birth of a magus as the process of transforming an “old” person: “you were a *person* in the fullest sense of the word, never dreaming of being a *magus*” (Kryzhanovskaia 1917, 308). V. I. Kryzhanovskaia’s work expressed the social skepticism typical of Russian spiritualism, asserting that society was not capable of being transformed. Despite the brotherhood’s efforts to correct society, it ultimately had to experience the wrath of God, and only a small portion of people could escape on spaceships. It was precisely this negative interpretation of society that made the idea of a secret brotherhood legitimate; spiritualists often saw the public world as a space like a theater, in which illusions and deceptions reigned, describing it as an “aggressive environment” in which egotism and competition flourished.

In V. I. Kryzhanovskaia’s text, the secret brotherhood fulfills a function traditionally assigned to angels. Diminishing the significance of angels, which was characteristic of spiritualism as a whole, was accompanied by a reaffirmation of the significance of Russian Orthodox saints, who were subject to increased attention in the early twentieth century due to a campaign to discover new relics and canonize new saints, most notably Seraphim of Sarov, who was popular among Russian spiritualists (Nol’de 1909, 139-41; Anatolii 1908, 513-7). The euhemerism characteristic of V. I. Kryzhanovskaia which led to most “miracles” being interpreted as the results of the actions of great people, imagined the secret brotherhood as the key historical agent resisting the degradation of society. The primary mission was to become the lawgivers of a new society following a global eschatological event. Once they had arrived on another planet, they had to “establish order

there, create laws, teach people how to meet their needs, both material and spiritual, in a reasonable way, and to endow them with the beginnings of the process of understanding the divine" (Kryzhanovskaya 1917, 18).

The brotherhood was organized hierarchically; a magus climbed the hierarchy by passing through a system of initiations. Directing the brotherhood was a tribunal of magi who selected a leader to mentor student magi. V. I. Kryzhanovskaya held that anyone pursuing perfection must have a teacher who would always propose decisions that facilitated development but never negated freedom of choice. Members of the brotherhood even obeyed their leaders when it came to their personal lives. In spiritualism, the search for a spiritual teacher paralleled the search for an anthropological and simultaneously spiritual authority figure. For many Russian spiritualists, those figures were not so much mahatmas and yogis, but rather Orthodox zealots and elders.

V. I. Kryzhanovskaya's views of the structure of the secret brotherhood reflected the way many spiritualists who were inclined towards occultism viewed knowledge, as a means of social segregation. The "Brotherhood," itself a type of social relationship opposed to "society," became an alternate source of knowledge and power, but one that did not compete with the state, which gradually fell under the influence of the forces of evil. P. A. Chistyakov's criticism of political Freemasonry was not just a gift to censorship, but also an expression of the spiritualist certainty that changing the social status quo was only possible through a personal or cosmological eschatological event that would separate the invited from the elect. In his words: "no forms of social relations which are themselves elevated can dignify and make holy a person who has not been born again and who does not carry within him the light of brotherly love and a living sense of love for God and the Truth" (Ch-v" 1909, 9).

Social reform and religious reformation

The religious views of Russian spiritualists are indicative of the conservative nature of their social ideals. In general, the Russian spiritualists unlike many American ones, hoped not so much for social change as for a spiritual transformation of man and the cosmos; they were no longer talking about "external" social reform, but rather about an "internal" religious reformation. This reformation required spiritualists to reimagine their place in the world and think of themselves as a

part of a single unified spiritual hierarchy that encompassed both the earthly sphere of being and the “other” world.

The spiritualists’ belief in the existence of a divine plan preordained the totalizing character of their spiritual project; asserting that the individual soul was preserved forever and insisting on the necessity of it constantly changing its position and significance in the spiritual world, the spiritualists placed it in a spiritual hierarchy, fully defining its development on the path to becoming perfect and god-like. In contrast to the idea of social unity as the equality of all people associated with socialist thinking, the spiritualists proposed a complex unity based on the principle of social hierarchy. From their point of view, the efforts of individual people could lead to positive social change, but an individual could not change the social order as a whole. The colony-brotherhoods scattered across the materialist continent served as gateways to the empire of souls to which the spiritualists dreamed of returning.

The political and social conservatism of the Russian spiritualists was based on their theological interpretation of the evolutionary process. The renewal of Christianity, which can be considered one of the key questions on the spiritualists’ social agenda, was regarded as a natural process that was simultaneously controlled by God. The spiritualists viewed the future “crisis” as an external one, not one of the essential nucleus of the Christian teaching. The two groups within Russian spiritualism — the rationalists and the traditionalists — understood that “essence” in different ways, but they shared an equal belief that the “new form” would be the realization of a divine plan for humanity. It was this handover of power from humanity to divine Providence that contained the essence of the religious (and, therefore, social and political) conservatism of Russian spiritualism.

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