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The Rerikh Movement: A Homegrown Russian ‘New Religious Movement’

ROMAN LUNKIN & SERGEI FILATOV

When the Soviet Union died in 1991 the Soviet ideology died with it. This was not surprising. After the communist ideology established a monopoly of power in 1917, the decades that followed transformed it into a collection of meaningless formulae and primitive prejudices. This ideology was no longer seeking new answers to contemporary challenges, it was not developing, but just ‘collapsed’ and perished together with the political regime that was its protector. For the vast majority of the country’s population, their past – including the ideals which they once shared to some extent, the values for the sake of which they had worked and which had made them proud of their country – had become something alien and was now being universally mocked.

The attempts by present-day communists to proclaim some form of essentially non-ideological ‘Russian patriotism’ are intrinsically weak and unconvincing, for until their very last years in power the Soviet authorities denied having anything in common with the prerevolutionary past. The ‘incompatibility’ of Soviet and pre-Soviet values is even clearer with regard to religious ideology. The militant atheism of Soviet rule, its total dogmatic suppression of religious life, the bloody persecutions in the first decades of Soviet power, are in themselves too strong an argument against the emergence of any ideas combining communism and Orthodox church thought. The attempts made by certain communists and certain Orthodox clergymen to create a working relationship between the two hostile ideologies before 1991 are mostly regarded by public opinion as a joke. The Moscow Patriarchate is now distancing itself from atheist power and, as a rule, tries to present its own role in public life before 1991 as more that of an opposition than it was in reality. If the Moscow Patriarchate admitted its servile position in the atheist state, it would mean acknowledging an unpleasant chapter in its past, which lowered its prestige: even if some members of the clergy were still proud of it, these days they would not say so too loudly.

Because of the vicissitudes of national history, people who formerly described themselves as ‘Soviet’ have been placed in a very awkward position, psychologically and ideologically, as it has become hard to love your own past; even if you lived a decent life and worked hard for the good of your country, it is now almost impossible to feel proud of it and difficult to reconcile it with the trends of the new age. The human soul is seeking ways of restoring this broken time link between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras (and with the pre-Soviet era as well, if possible); but this is not at all easy.

However, in Russia there is now a widespread religious movement – or rather, parareligious (as it does not regard itself as religious) – which has been able to restore this time link in an organic and natural way. It consists of the admirers of the Rerikh family and the followers of the teachings of Yelena Rerikh, the Rerikh societies and groups throughout the Russian Federation, which could be called the Rerikh movement. The distinctive and in some ways even unique ability of the followers of the Rerikhs to link the Soviet period with prerevolutionary and post-soviet quests for meaning has been essentially determined by the way this ideology arose, and the life stories of its founders.

Even before the 1917 Revolution Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh (1874–1947) had become a prominent cultural figure, an artist and peace activist, engaged in spiritual searching. He was brought up in an artistic and liberal milieu and displayed all the impetuous tendencies of the epoch known as the ‘Silver Age’. In this milieu the idea arose that culture – secular, ecclesiastical and especially artistic – had a sacral role.

The turn of the century was, above all, the age of mystics, who were ready to turn towards any spiritual path as yet unexplored. The philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev was the mystic of total unity, the poet Maksimilian Voloshin took an interest in occultism, the composer Skryabin dealt with ‘black mass’ themes, while the poet Andrei Bely became a follower of Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy. The free and easy circle of these creative and educated people was influenced by occult ideas, reinforced by an interest in eastern spirituality. Many of them read their way through the classics of the East – the *Mahabharata*, the *Rig Veda* and the *Upanishads*. At the same time, the books of Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Yogi Ramacharak began to be published (these are now in demand again among Russian readers and have been published again as reprints in the 1990s). The intelligentsia at the turn of the century usually held a view of spirituality which was not that of the Church. Without breaking formally with Orthodoxy, the liberal intelligentsia of the pre-revolutionary period was searching for the sources of Russian culture and the true spiritual nature of the Russian people. On the one hand, they had a persistent desire to appeal to something national, as expressed, for example, in Aleksei Remizov’s essay *Zherlitsa družinnaya* (1916), dedicated to the pictures of Nikolai Rerikh.¹ On the other hand, they were seeking the source of truth itself, some primordial moral law, unfamiliar to themselves. We need only recall Merezhkovsky’s novel *Iisus neizvestny*, or Lev Tolstoy, who was regarded as a spiritual teacher at the turn of the century and whom Lenin called ‘the mirror of the Russian Revolution’.

This spiritual quest was carried on against a background of faith in social progress and in the bright future of humanity. Members of the intelligentsia fell into raptures at the heroism of revolutionaries and were in sympathy with revolutions, involuntarily seeing them, as Karl Marx did, as ‘the midwives of history’, assisting at the birth of a new and beautiful world. They were awaiting this birth and sometimes greeted it with mystical ecstasy, like Aleksandr Blok in his poem *Dvenadtsat’*: ‘rose-crowned, ahead of them, marches Jesus Christ’.

In this setting, with all its mystical turmoil and its syncretism, one married couple succeeded in creating from this collection of unconnected ideas, aspirations, expectations and artistic images a unique philosophy of life, which in our own days has already captivated the minds of millions. At the beginning of the century these were the ideas of only a few people in the artistic salons of Petersburg, while after 1917 it was the Rerikhs and a narrow circle of their followers abroad who became the only exponents of this particular ideology.

One of its central ideas – the sacralisation of culture – captivated Nikolai Rerikh from the very beginning, both as an artist and as a public figure. Nikolai Rerikh always had an especially reverent attitude towards creative works of art. It was in order to emphasise the importance of culture and of preserving cultural treasures that he worked for the promotion of peace. In 1915 he appealed to the Emperor Nicholas II to conclude peace and to take care of cultural monuments during military operations. One of Rerikh's achievements that became known worldwide was the signing of a Peace Pact at the White House in 1935 by President Roosevelt and representatives of the Pan-American Union. Simple respect for creativity as the essential basis of civilisation gradually became transformed, for Rerikh, into a soteriological realisation that culture was part of the spiritual sphere. Rerikh was now treating the concept of culture as divine: 'Culture is reverence for the Light. Culture is love of mankind. ... Culture is salvation. ... Culture is immortal.'² Mystical themes like these became more frequent after the Revolution, and more intense towards the end of Rerikh's life: 'He who has experienced the sacred foundations of Culture will be conscious of the one great Light.'³ The religious element is obvious.

The Rerikh movement today recognises a special mystical force – 'vital energy' (*energetika*) – in works of art. Among the primary works regarded as wielding this power are Orthodox icons and pictures by Rerikh, which are devoted to particular spiritual concepts and therefore are most strongly 'charged' with positive energy. A similar sacred artistic frisson is produced by the dozens of artists who paint pictures on the subject of 'Agni Yoga' (one of the names for the Rerikhs' doctrine) and who represent the 'spiritual tendency' in art. Amateur art, above all in amateur 'art workshops', is naturally a widespread activity among the Rerikh societies.

At the time of the 1935 Peace Pact a symbol was adopted to indicate works of art that were to be protected during military conflicts. Rerikh invented a Sign of Peace for this purpose: three red dots within a red circle, symbolising the past, present and future achievements of mankind, surrounded by the circle of eternity. Rerikh offered another interpretation as well: religion, art and science as manifestations of culture. In this context, the Rerikhs had their own understanding of science – it was the sphere of knowledge which was to reveal the unexplored abilities of humanity and ultimately to go beyond the limits of our Euclidean world.

This parareligious ideology took shape only gradually in the thinking of Nikolai Rerikh and Yelena Ivanovna Rerikh (1879–1955, née Shaposhnikova), whom he married in 1901. Initially the Rerikhs studied the theosophy of Blavatskaya, the esoteric doctrines of Annie Besant, occultism and popular books on eastern spirituality. However, they did not commit themselves to the path of theosophy as it seemed too narrow; but they took it that the 'mahatmas' and 'masters of peace' with whom Yelena Blavatskaya (1831–91) had been in contact while writing her great work *The Secret Doctrine* were the same as those with whom the Rerikhs themselves were later to 'establish contact'. Those whom the theosophists and the Rerikhs called 'teachers' were not the Hindu mahatmas, but certain very enlightened individuals, who according to Hindu tradition live in the Himalayas and control the world. The tradition states that they live in Shambhala, which is visible only to those who are permitted to see it by the 'teachers'. The Rerikhs wanted to make esoteric thought accessible, while association with the 'teachers' was to be the source of the revealed teachings of Living Ethics (*Zhivaya Etika*), which the whole world would be able to comprehend.

We do not know whether Rerikh himself practised spiritualism, but some material based on KGB archives has appeared in the Russian press about the fact that he was a

Freemason, including reports that he received his occult initiation from the chief delegate of the 'Grand Lodge of France', who in 1911 held spiritualist seances⁴ in Rerikh's home. Later, however, the Rerikhs gradually adopted a more critical approach to occultism. In the context of the revelation provided by 'Agni Yoga' occultism came to be seen as the childish toy of past generations. Occult links with the other world are replaced, in *Living Ethics*, by direct communication with the vital energy of the Universe. Thus for the Rerikhs theosophy and occultism became mere stages on the way to the revelation of what they called esoteric, secret knowledge – a revelation for the whole world, not just for the small circle of theosophists absorbed in their seances. In the 1920s Yelena Rerikh wrote that

There are many occult books, but most of them are of no use any more. The main reason is that they always require at least a few specially chosen persons to begin with – but our Teaching is for absolutely everyone! Only this summons to everyone can replace an abstract form of ethics with the Teaching of Life.⁵

Yelena Rerikh made use of the ideas of Blavatskaya, presenting her own Teaching as a revelation by the 'mahatmas' of knowledge disclosed in *The Secret Doctrine*. So in 1936, when all the 'Agni Yoga' books were published, some participants in a congress of the Theosophical Society accused Nikolai Rerikh of borrowing theosophical ideas. In reply Yelena Rerikh wrote that the only theosophist Rerikh had read was Blavatskaya and that 'the teachers' were their only source. The main aim of the Rerikhs' teachings was to make all this intelligible; to preserve the concept of esoteric knowledge, but at the same time to make it accessible to everyone. What had been secret in the past had now been revealed in the books of 'Agni Yoga' or through *Living Ethics* and could be applied in practice, declared Yelena Rerikh.

Interest in theosophy developed at the same time as a longstanding fascination with the East. Nikolai Rerikh was attracted by eastern religious images and the eastern style of painting. In 1911–12 he embodied this passion of his in the Church of the Holy Spirit in Talashkino (Smolensk *guberniya*), where he painted an iconostas and a mural of the 'Queen of Heaven'. However, because of the artist's uncanonical style the iconostas was not consecrated and religious services in this church were forbidden.⁶ Rerikh's 'Mother of God' was distinctly Indian in appearance (the future mystical image of the 'Mother of the World') and the prophets, stretching out their arms to the Holy Spirit, resembled mahatmas. This mural has not survived, but even in photographs it looks distinctly alien in the church.⁷ Meanwhile, Rerikh was a member of a committee for the construction of a Buddhist temple (*vikhara*) in Petrograd. The Rerikhs gradually became convinced that the source of spiritual knowledge for all mankind was to be found in Tibet, the Himalayas and India. In the 1920s they visited these places and from the mid-1930s Nikolai and Yelena Rerikh took up permanent residence in the valley of Kulu in the Himalayas. There they wrote letters and essays on spiritual life, while studying Hinduism and Buddhism.

They accepted the basic principles of these eastern religions: reincarnation; karma as the law of destiny; cycles of birth and death of the universe, individual worlds, our own planet and historical epochs (*manavantar*); the spiritual relationship between the teacher (the mahatma) and the disciple. One of the basic ideas was that of a spiritual hierarchy as the foundation of religious life, in which every individual must take the place he deserves, moving higher by means of reincarnation. However, the Rerikhs did not simply become Hindus or Buddhists. The real reason why the Rerikhs' teachings have been easily accepted by Russians is that Nikolai Konstan-

tinovich and Yelena Ivanovna were able to unite eastern religious values intrinsically with Russian culture and even with certain substantial borrowings from Orthodox Christianity. Nikolai Rerikh's passion for the East was combined with a sincere interest in ancient Russian culture. He travelled a great deal around Russia, visiting ancient Russian towns, which inspired him to create such famous pictures as *Gorod stroyat* (Building the Town), *Po puti iz varyag v greki* (On the Way from the Varangians to the Greeks) and *Zamorskiye gosti* (Guests from Across the Sea) (bought by Emperor Nicholas II). The teachings of the Rerikhs also include certain basic ideas and values taken over from Christianity. The result is that Russians are attracted to something which seems native and familiar and are encouraged to postpone any consideration of the profound eastern influence on these teachings.

One of the subjects the Rerikhs returned to in their writings was that of the great spiritual role of the Christian saints. The Rerikhs' followers have a special respect for St Sergi of Radonezh; in the 1930s the idea arose among them that Nikolai Rerikh was the modern reincarnation of St Sergi. Articles on the life and achievements of St Sergi, or of St Nikolai the Miracle-Worker,⁸ are constantly appearing nowadays in the publications of the Rerikh movement. There are Orthodox icons in the homes of almost all members of the Rerikh movement, as many of them consider themselves to be Orthodox, despite the fact that in 1944 the Russian Orthodox Church anathematised all those who professed theosophy, occultism or the teachings of the Rerikhs (the Russian Orthodox Church in Exile had already done so in 1932). One of those who considers herself Orthodox, for example, is Inessa Shumskaya, a well-known, longstanding active member of the Rerikh movement, who in the 1970s had already founded one of the first study groups on the Rerikh heritage at the Udmurt University in Izhevsk. Shumskaya still has her own confessor and often attends church services. Members of her Rerikh society in Izhevsk regularly record the Saturday pastoral talks on the radio by Metropolitan Kirill (Gundyayev) and discuss them, emphasising the significance of prayer and icons which according to them produce positive energy. Most followers of Rerikh believe that church works of art and works of art in general give off a powerful form of spiritual energy. During a conversation with one of the authors of this article, Inessa Shumskaya greatly regretted that Metropolitan Kirill no longer spoke about the power of energy because of the Church's suspicious attitude to the teachings of the Rerikhs. The meditative practices of yoga and the reciting of mantras are often compared with the Orthodox 'Jesus Prayer' tradition. Members of Rerikh societies and groups who do not usually practice meditation often replace it with readings of Orthodox prayers and attendance at church, where from time to time they take part in church sacraments.

Like all religious teachings, those of the Rerikhs include views on salvation and eschatology. Through good works and the maintaining and creating of cultural values an individual can reach the highest level in the spiritual hierarchy; and this is in fact the fulfilment of one's predestined karma, so that one can pass on to a higher level in the next life. People are helped in this enterprise by the 'world teachers' from Shambhala, who know the laws of the Cosmos. Among these teachers are such 'great enlightened ones' as Buddha, Confucius, Plato, Krishna, Christ, St Sergi and many others, who have reached the level of the 'fiery world' (*'mir ognenny'*). The latest to be consecrated as 'mahatmas' in this way were Nikolai Konstantinovich and Yelena Ivanovna Rerikh. Nikolai Rerikh was the greater, because of his 'spiritual' creativity and his cultural and peacemaking activities. Meanwhile it was through Yelena Rerikh that the teachings of 'Agni Yoga' were transmitted in 14 volumes. She maintained contact with the mahatmas throughout her life, but this contact was manifested

visibly only in 1920 in London, when one of these teachers appeared to her in the form of an English officer from an Indian corps, who told her that the Rerikhs would be going on an expedition to Central Asia and the Himalayas. It was during this expedition (1924–26), according to ‘Agni Yoga’, that Yelena Rerikh was chosen by the mahatmas to pass on their directives to humanity. Followers of the Rerikhs believe that Yelena Rerikh became a ‘magnetic transformer’, able to receive cosmic energy through her heart. During the expedition the mahatmas gave them the task of setting up ‘magnets’ (energy accumulators) at certain points in the world, in order to open up the universe’s centres of vital energy. The followers of the Rerikhs consider that two of these ‘magnets’ were the Rerikhs themselves, with their resources of inner energy. A third ‘magnet’ was a stone fragment, preserved in Shambhala, which accumulates energy from the Cosmic Magnet in the constellation of Orion. The magnet in Shambhala regulates the rate at which energy enters and leaves the Earth, thus preserving the balance of vital energy on our planet. ‘This stone is not something supernatural, it is a fragment of a meteorite, which retains the rhythm of vital energy from the Cosmic Magnet.’ Thus even the spiritual inspiration of Nikolai and Yelena Rerikh is endowed with a certain ‘scientific’ and down-to-earth quality.

The eschatology of ‘Agni Yoga’ is based on expectation of the return of the Messiah to Earth. This Messiah is the greatest among the teachers of Shambhala. Sometimes he is called Maytreya, sometimes Buddha. The ‘bright epoch’ of Satya Yoga is destined to start in the twenty-first century, preceded by Armageddon, the battle in which Maytreya combats the forces of evil. Maytreya will become the ruler of Shambhala; Yelena Rerikh identifies him with the Messiah of the Bible and Nikolai Rerikh calls him the ‘Lord of the Bright Future’. The exact time of the beginning of Satya Yoga and the coming of the Messiah is unknown and most of the Rerikhs’ followers are not specific about it. However, Yelena Rerikh wrote that ‘the battle of good and evil’ had taken place at the time of the Second World War and that Maytreya had become ruler of Shambhala. Thus Armageddon ended on 17 October 1949 and ‘the enemy’ was expelled from the solar system.⁹

What Agni Yoga has to say about salvation and eschatology is mostly based on Biblical and Christian teachings about the Second Coming of Christ and the battle against Antichrist rather than on eastern concepts. The Rerikhs considered themselves Orthodox. Their understanding of Orthodoxy was not that of the Church, however. Yelena Rerikh even wrote that the Church and the Truth were irreconcilable, citing as an example the negative attitude of some sections of the Church towards those the Rerikhs revered: St Sergi of Radonezh, Fr Ioann of Kronstadt and the ‘spiritual cell’ at Optina Pustyn.¹⁰ They put themselves forward as representatives of the ‘spiritual’ tendency (as they saw it) within the Church. The Rerikh movement differs radically different from Christianity, however: it rejects the idea of a personal God and of the divine nature (in the Church’s sense of the word) of Jesus Christ, recognising him only as one of the ‘teachers of the world’; it interprets the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as purely symbolic, as some kind of threefold original cosmic principle reflected in the ‘sign of peace’; and Agni Yoga unexpectedly locates Lucifer (Satan) in one of the higher ranks of the spiritual hierarchy, his name having been ‘usurped by ignorant priests’.¹¹ Yelena Blavatskaya too identifies Lucifer with the Logos, that is, with Christ,¹² while her teachers, the mahatmas, regard Christian missionaries as their enemies and seek to root out Christianity in their pupils.¹³ All this does not of course mean that the Rerikhs’ followers are Satanists. The Rerikh world-view can accommodate not only those who consider themselves Orthodox believers, but also those who recognise the authority of Lucifer and even atheist materialists.

Any convinced Marxist or atheist would find much that was familiar in Rerikh eschatology and teachings on salvation since they both have a materialist foundation. Agni Yoga invokes the Light and the Absolute, but its understanding of the Highest Being comes down to worship of a 'highest essence', which means energy that can be detected and, the Rerikhs hope, measured by scientific means. The leader of the Rerikh Society in Siberia is Nataliya Spirina, an old associate of Nikolai Rerikh. She totally rejects the idea that 'Living Ethics' constitutes a new religion. On the contrary, she says, these are 'materialistic teachings', a 'synthesis of western scientific thinking and eastern thought ...'. Spirina thus expresses the general aspiration of the Rerikh movement to define the new concepts 'spirit' and 'soul' in material terms: 'The very concepts of matter and material essence have been broadened to an unusual extent in Living Ethics. What religion calls the spirit is also matter, only a subtler form of matter. So far it has not been studied scientifically ...'.¹⁴

The Rerikhs' peculiar form of materialism is not the only trait that lends their ideology an affinity with Soviet ideology. They felt a zeal for the revolutionary transformation of the world and the construction of an authoritarian hierarchical state. The first volume of the teachings of Agni Yoga, written in 1924–25, is called *Obshchina* (*The Community*) and is wholly concerned with the conditions for the construction of a new society with a rigid hierarchical structure. In this book Marx and Lenin are referred to as 'teachers'. In the ideal state, as described by Yelena Rerikh, everyone has to work incessantly, in obedience to the directives of the 'teachers'. There will be no entertainment and books will be carefully selected. Children will be educated outside the family according to a special syllabus. *Obshchina* also calls on everyone to take up vegetarianism, and to be as steadfast and determined as the disciples of Lenin.

In the 1930s, not far from New York, a close friend of Nikolai Rerikh, Georgi Grebenshchikov, organised an agricultural and spiritual commune, *Churayevka*, based on Nikolai Rerikh's cultural ideas. It included a chapel dedicated to St Sergi of Radonezh and a printing works, which published the works of the Rerikhs. This experiment was unexpectedly revived in the early 1990s. In 1990–92 there was a rumour among some Rerikhites that Eurasia was going to be flooded, leaving only the Altai mountains. Enthusiasts from Moscow, Irkutsk and other cities went on pilgrimages to the Altai region with the aim of founding Rerikhite communes there. One of them claimed to be a reincarnation of the Apostle Paul. These communes did not last long and the movement largely came to nothing. The Rerikhs' call for a 'community' was too theoretical and oriented towards the future: Yelena Rerikh saw the community as above all an ideal state for perfect people (a cross between heaven and the chiliastic reign of the saints on Earth).

After the October Revolution the Rerikhs saw in Lenin and the Soviet government the potential for a new world order. The measures taken by the Bolsheviks, in their opinion, reflected the great significance of Russia for the whole world. During their Central Asian expedition in 1925 the Rerikhs visited Moscow, meeting Chicherin, Krupskaya and Lunacharsky, and gave their famous 'message from the mahatmas' to the Soviet government. It expressed full support for the Bolsheviks and their actions; the mahatmas, according to the Rerikhs, blessed them for founding a unified state with a unified culture.

In the Himalayas we know what you have accomplished. You have abolished the Church, which has become a hotbed of lies and superstition. You have liquidated the petty bourgeois mentality, which has helped to spread prejudice. You have destroyed the prison of education. You have got rid

of the hypocritical family. ... You have acknowledged that religion is the study of universal matter. ... We have recognised the timeliness of your movement. ...

The mahatmas had sent with the Rerikhs a chest full of sacred Himalayan soil, on which was written 'for the grave of our brother, Mahatma Lenin'. The Shambhala teachers thus spoke through the Rerikhs in approval of the Red Terror and acclaimed the Bolshevik leader as enlightened and perfect. After his death Lenin was to go to Shambhala as one of the 'teachers of the world'. The Rerikhs were able to justify even the Stalinist repressions as part of the unavoidable karma or destiny of Russia. In 1937 Yelena Rerikh wrote: 'Let us not imagine that Russia is in a state of terror. Death hovers above those who have brought death to others. That is how the Higher Righteousness works.'

During *perestroika* many people voiced justifiable suspicions that the Rerikhs had cooperated with the Soviet government. In 1925 they had voluntarily left Moscow for Mongolia. It is difficult to prove that the Rerikh couple acted as Bolshevik agents during their Central Asian expedition, but one thing we do know is that one of those who took part in the expedition was V. A. Shibayev, a representative of the Comintern in London, who in the 1930s became Nikolai Rerikh's personal secretary.¹⁵ Later the Rerikhs were to write that the Soviet government had not heeded the voice of the mahatmas and had followed a different path; but they always remained well-disposed towards Soviet power.

Before the Revolution Nikolai Rerikh had a somewhat vague conception of Russia's role on the world stage, writing about it in articles on architecture and painting. The Revolution focused the Rerikhs' ideas. Their understanding of Russia and Russian nationalism evolved in response to the changes Russian nationalism was undergoing as part of Soviet ideology. The Rerikhs started off with declarations of boundless internationalism, but ended with assertions like that of Yelena that 'the downfall of Russia is the downfall of the whole world'.

Nikolai Rerikh believed that Russia, located between Europe and Asia, had a great spiritual and messianic role to play. It had always manifested the kind of cultural synthesis towards which the Rerikhs aspired. For their part, they contributed a synthesis of religions, each of which would lead, in their opinion, to the future unity of the world: 'Truly the dark age is ending with the proclamation of the Community! Sergi [of Radonezh] hewed it with his axe, Boehme set about it with his hammer. The Buddha, the teacher, put it together with his own hands, while Christ prepared a bridge for it.'¹⁶ Rerikh wrote of St Sergi, of Kiev and of Novgorod as symbols of the spirit of Russia; he referred in his articles to Tolstoy and Maksim Gor'ky as pillars of Russian culture. The Rerikhs wrote of their love for Russia and their reverence for its cultural and spiritual traditions, although they spent half their lives in the Himalayas, eagerly adopting Indian customs.

During the most fraught and bloody periods of Soviet history, from the 1920s to the 1950s, there were no adherents of Agni Yoga in Russia. In these years the Rerikhs themselves were carrying on their creative activities in India, while their supporters, of whom there were not many, were living beyond the borders of the land of triumphant socialism – in Latvia, in the USA, among the Russian emigres in Harbin. The beginning of the Rerikh movement in Russia can be dated to 1957, when Nikolai Rerikh's eldest son Yuri, an Oriental scholar, returned to Russia. He was respectfully received and became head of the School of Tibetan Studies at the Oriental Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In 1959 Boris Abramov and

Nataliya Spirina, favourite pupils of the Rerikhs, were repatriated from Harbin. They settled in the 'academic city' of Novosibirsk and became the founders of the Siberian Rerikh Society, which later became the largest in the country. In 1970 the Rerikhs' younger son, Svyatoslav, also chose to return to his homeland.

The Rerikhs' world-view developed within the framework of a small group of their friends and followers. Until the 1960s organised groups studying Agni Yoga existed only in Riga. In Russia they first appeared after Yuri Rerikh started giving lectures and after the first exhibition on Nikolai Rerikh was held in Novosibirsk in 1960. The official press began to publish articles by Nikolai Rerikh on culture, the Himalayas and Siberia. The Agni Yoga books were published illegally in Riga, and wherever people were able to read the literature and see Rerikh's pictures groups of his admirers began to appear. They discussed Nikolai Rerikh's pictures and essays, Yelena Rerikh's letters and the teachings of Living Ethics. These groups totalled only a small number of people, usually associated with cultural work, teachers or lecturers, people who were socially active and had extensive contacts among intellectual circles.

At this time a number of hostile and prejudiced articles appeared in the press, and there were cases of harassment and discrimination at work, but there was no real victimisation or persecution of the Rerikhs' followers. The basic teachings of the Rerikh movement, as well as its history, made it easy to achieve a symbiosis between 'Sovietism' and 'Rerikhism'.

As soon as it emerged into the free expanses of *perestroika* the Rerikh movement began to develop further as a parareligious world-view. The cultural contacts of the Rerikhites proved useful at this time when the state permitted and supported any form of spiritual activity. The Rerikhs' literary works began to be published and distributed in large quantities: works on the occult were generally extremely popular. The concepts underlying the teachings of Living Ethics became common currency. Spiritual self-improvement, the astral world, the vital energy of the individual and the whole world around him (the so-called 'astral plane' ('*tonki plan*')), positive and negative energy, the 'aura' around each person and 'karma' as the one law determining the fate of all: all these ideas became part of the personal philosophy of millions of people. It was the Rerikh movement that disseminated and championed such concepts in other 'spiritual' and 'cultural' circles. The works of Nikolai and Yelena Rerikh were often the most accessible and regarded as the most authoritative because the Rerikhs were seen as prominent champions of Russian culture rather than as proponents of some religious way of life. The Rerikhs were not generally condemned by those who stood for the Soviet past, as they had spent their entire lives in India.

The Rerikh movement also gained publicity with the arrival of Svyatoslav Rerikh in the USSR in 1989 and the creation of the Soviet Rerikh Foundation (*Sovetsky fond Rerikhov*), attracting people by its broad-minded approach to culture and the role of culture as a force for salvation. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s the intelligentsia were constantly bewailing their lack of culture. The attitude to science enshrined in Agni Yoga began to attract a strong following. Living Ethics had claimed that it could outdo rational science, that it was seeking the 'astral plane' and trying to extend the borders of consciousness by scientific means. The organisations founded at this time by Rerikhites – the Rerikh Foundation, the N. K. Rerikh Museum and the International Rerikh Centre (*Mezhdunarodny tsentr Rerikhov*) (IRC) – were supported, and continue to be supported, by well-known figures in the world of science and art such as Academician D. S. Likhachev and film director Nikita

Mikhalkov. In fact, this official support and the authority of prominent cultural figures has encouraged wide-ranging interest in the teachings of the *Rerikhs* among the population at large.

As *Living Ethics* has grown in popularity, its doctrines, created at her desk and single-handedly by Yelena *Rerikh*, have been evolving into a coherent religious system. Yelena *Rerikh* has taken on the features of a 'saviour' of mankind, through whom 'a ray of energy has passed, in order that the normal balance of energy on our planet may be restored'. Yelena *Rerikh* is understood to have been practically crucified by the cosmic ray that pierced her.¹⁷ The *Rerikhs* are revered as mahatmas and are treated as semi-divine. The *Rerikhites* are preparing for the philosophy of *Living Ethics* to take over the whole world in the twenty-first century. Then the epoch of *Satya Yoga* will begin, the epoch of community described by Yelena *Rerikh*, when all religions will become one and there will be one race, the sixth, consisting of people who have attained perfection and are living according to the 'Laws of the Cosmos' and of *Shambhala*.

The *Rerikh* societies are trying to retain a more or less unanimous interpretation of the books of *Agni Yoga*. *Rerikhites* usually fear they may be accused of occultism or of belonging to a religion. They regard themselves as above any religions, although formally they may call themselves Orthodox Christians or even Muslims. Nevertheless, the *Rerikh* movement takes quite diverse forms in different parts of Russia and the IRC tries to disown these in various ways. The IRC is the main centre of the *Rerikh* movement and is headed by a single-minded, strong-willed woman, *Lyudmila Vasil'yevna Shaposhnikova*. It is she who officially represents the *Rerikh* movement, trying primarily to maintain its cultural orientation in a way that will avoid scaring off the Moscow intelligentsia. The IRC is the largest and most influential of the *Rerikh* organisations, and assumes the role of coordinator of all the *Rerikh* centres scattered throughout Russia. However, the *Rerikh* movement has no formal, centralised all-Russian organisation. Each regional centre has its own particular features, more or less clearly expressed.

Shaposhnikova's milieu is the Moscow cultural elite, and her views have gradually evolved in an opportunistic way. She and her colleagues at the IRC have gradually become more critical of the Soviet past, the sacred role of India has taken second place to Russian patriotism, and religious and eschatological themes are ever more muted. It is not surprising to discover that there has been an orthodox and 'fundamentalist' reaction to the *Shaposhnikova* line. As guardian of the 'Holy Grail' of *Rerikh* doctrine at the end of the 1990s has emerged *Mikhail Lunev*, leader of the *Urusvati* *Rerikh* society in *Vladivostok*; he has received a lot of support from *Rerikhites* in the provinces. *Shaposhnikova*, he maintains, is wrong to ignore India, for it is in India that human salvation is to be found. She is wrong to speak ill of the Soviet past and of *Lenin*, since the *Rerikhs* themselves were among *Lenin's* supporters. *Lunev* is more concerned than the Moscow centre is about the approaching *Apocalypse*, the final battle between good and evil. He believes it will happen in the near future.¹⁸

Rerikh societies differ widely in their ideology. In *Sochi*, for example, the *Rerikh* society has acquired some extremely nationalist features. Here the *Rerikhites* regard themselves as Orthodox believers and discuss the Jewish-Masonic conspiracy and the role of Russia with reference to the works of *Nikolai Rerikh*. In *Simbirsk*, the *Rerikhites* hold *Lenin* in particular reverence, taking their cue from *Rerikh's* paintings. In the *Barnaul* *Rerikh* society *Crown of the Heart* (*Korona serdtsa*) *Mikhail Shishov*, doctor of philosophy, considers the *Altai* mountain range to be one of the

most powerful spiritual centres. Shishov unites the Orthodox practice of 'wise prayer' (*'umnaya molitva'*) with meditation, and favours 'true Orthodoxy'. He believes that Orthodoxy was distorted by the Church Fathers and has been preserved only in books by writers of the Silver Age – Fr Sergi Bulgakov and Fr Pavel Florensky.

New organisations or movements often split off from the 'primary', more or less 'orthodox' centres, and can develop the Rerikh ideology as far as they wish. Sometimes it becomes impossible to say whether any given splinter group is still part of the Rerikh movement or whether it has drifted too far away from it to be so. Let us look at a few of the most striking examples.

The N.K. Rerikh Spiritual-Ethical Centre of the Urals (*Ural'sky dukhovno-etchesky tsentr im. N.K. Rerikha*), or the Bazhov Academy, is a movement led by Vladimir Sobolev. He is a 'prophet', who foretells the Last Days of mankind and the Third World War in the near future, on the basis of the Bible and the Agni Yoga. The Bazhov group regard Arkaim, the remains of an ancient Tengrian temple not far from Magnitogorsk in Chelyabinsk *oblast'*, as the vital energy centre of the Urals. They believe that this is the place where an exchange of energy with the cosmos takes place, as it does in Shambhala, or in Belovod'ye, a land in Tibet which is similar to Shambhala. The Bazhov group has incorporated local colour into the basic structure of the Rerikhs' teachings, in the form of folklore taken from the stories of Bazhov, a writer and storyteller from the Urals; the Bazhovites revere the Mistress of the Copper Hill (*Khozyaika mednoi gory*) and the Great Snake (*Veliki poloz*). In many ways these ideas are neopagan, but they show that, like the Rerikhs, the Bazhovites have recognised the whole culture of a particular land and people. Sobolev considers that, like Nikolai Rerikh, he is a conduit for the Fiery Bible (the Agni Yoga) and a reincarnation of Confucius. Sobolev also prophesies the resurrection of St Serafim of Sarov, on the basis of a legend which is also found among Orthodox believers. He also prophesies that the Apostle Andrew is going to appear in Chelyabinsk. The Bazhov group fully support the Rerikhs' attitude to the Soviet past and follow Sobolev in regarding Lenin as a saint.

In the mid-1990s the Vsevolod Unity Communist Party (*Partiya kommunistov 'Yedineniya Vsevolod'*) (VUCP) was founded in Volgograd on the basis of Rerikh doctrines. The leader of this movement, Vera Grishchenkova, says that the 'Higher Reason' (*'Vysshi Razum'*) communicated to her telepathically to tell her that she must found the VUCP as a party to unite all faiths, peoples and nationalities. The chairman and ideologist of the party is Mikhail Botnar', a former member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, now a worker in a building cooperative and a part-time masseur. His small house serves as the party office. The secretary of the party is Zoya Lemka, formerly secretary of the Communist Party in a Volgograd factory. The Complete Works of Lenin and of Marx and Engels are included among the sacred texts of the VUCP. The party's constitution, registered with the local department of justice, says that the VUCP, 'carrying out the commandments given by Moses and fulfilled by Jesus Christ and Buddha, and developing the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin, is a conduit for the ideas of the Higher Reason as the eternal source of knowledge'. Its ultimate aim is 'to construct by peaceful evolutionary means a structure resembling the hierarchy of World Communism'. Members of the VUCP work as directed by the 'Higher Reason of the Universe' and are 'conduits for sublime ideas and love'. The VUCP slogan is 'The Higher Reason and the Party are One'. One of its priority tasks is 'to teach people to defend themselves against the Absurd'.

Lenin has a special place in VUCP ideology. Its members are awaiting his return

as Messiah. The name of Lenin, like the word 'communism', is a source of positive energy, and helps to purify human nature. In 1996 a woman brought her chronically ill son to the VUCP, hoping for extrasensory healing. Party members went into a trance and received information from the Cosmos that the ailing boy was the current incarnation of Lenin. His illness was the result of colossal energy disabling a body which was not yet capable of receiving it. Mikhail Botnar' confirms this: somewhere in Ilovinsky raion in Volgograd *oblast'* the little Lenin is now slowly growing, awaiting his call. At the moment he is about ten years old.

The 'class enemy' of the VUCP is negative energy, which must be resisted by the cultivation of a healthy lifestyle. Spirituality is directly linked with health, and these are to be attained by the use of prayer, cold water, lighted candles and mantras. 'Prayers' are composed by party members in automatic writing. In the 1996 presidential election VUCP members voted for Zyuganov, but did not support the communist Nikolai Maksyuta in the gubernatorial elections in the same year.

Rerikh doctrines provide some justification for a development along these lines. The Living Ethics books contain references not only to Lenin as a mahatma, but also to Marx, whom the 'teachers of the world' visited while he was living in London. Yelena Rerikh reports that both thinkers made the right response to the mahatmas: 'May Shambhala come soon'.¹⁹ Members of the Vsevolod Unity Party adhere to a cosmic interpretation of communist teachings, and the founders of those teachings have now acquired a mystic halo. Thus in Volgograd affection for the Soviet past is combined with a passion for the 'astral plane'.

Rerikh doctrines acquire a distinctive intellectual content when they take hold among national and religious minorities. They start to adapt the local religious concepts. Among the predominantly pagan peoples of Siberia, for example – the Altai of southern Siberia and the Itel'men of Kamchatka – a hybrid of Rerikhism and shamanism is to be found. Perhaps the most interesting hybrid is that between Rerikhism and Islam, produced by the Rerikh society of Kazan'. Members of this society link the Rerikhs' teachings with the Sufi tendency in Islam and the ideas of the Muslim teachers Rumi and Hafiz. The Sufis, in their opinion, claim no monopoly on the truth; they are tolerant towards all religions and have a system of master-disciple relationships. Moreover, the way in which Rumi and the poet Omar Khayyam interpret the concept of the Absolute is similar to the Rerikhs' understanding of the Universal Principle. The Tatarstan Rerikh society take pride in the fact that Yelena Rerikh's great-grandmother was a Tatar. Rerikhites who are Tatar by national origin believe that each individual can be a Sufi in his soul and everyone should aspire to this condition. Nor is it necessary for this to be within the framework of Islam, as great Christian saints were also Sufis in essence, while the Sufi concept of chivalry is exemplified by Cervantes' Don Quixote. The Rerikhites believe that like the Rerikhs' teachings Sufism promotes the idea that before one can advance spiritually one needs to gain a grasp of all earthly spiritual practices in order to broaden one's consciousness.

In the village of Arakchino, in the suburbs of Kazan', the artist and sculptor Il'dar Khanov is building a Universal Temple, which is to unite all religions. This concept, and the draft plan of the temple, were approved by Svyatoslav Rerikh, who sensed that Khanov's views were close to those of the Rerikh family. The resources for the temple's construction have been provided by some of the most unexpected people: businessmen from South Korea sent a sculpture of the Buddha, while a German general sent a powerful telescope. The temple building is to include a centre for aesthetic education, where children of five to sixteen will learn yoga, u-shu, breathing systems, drawing, music and, without doubt, the teachings which can effortlessly

unite all these – those of Living Ethics.²⁰

Various individuals influenced by the Rerikhs' teachings and 'aspiring towards Unity' in their own way have come to prominence. Yelena Anopova runs a regional fellowship – The Third Ray of Light: Road to a New Faith (*Treti luch – put' k novoi vere*) and the members regard her as their spiritual teacher. The movement's regional centres usually have esoteric names – the one in Vologda, for example, is the *Ales* Centre, the Earth's name of power. Yelena Anopova accepts the truth of the Rerikhs' books and Living Ethics, but interprets the teachings in her own practical way, on the basis of the Agni Yoga, so her followers prefer to read her books. She speaks of the necessity of meditation, in order to purify oneself and prepare for the approaching Age of Aquarius. There are regular meditation meetings at which members try to overcome mistakes made in their past and present lives. Anopova's followers have a stronger belief than most Rerikhites in the literal reality of the Earth's supervision by the teachers or mahatmas from the 'astral plane'.

The *Radasteya* Society, led by Yevdokiya Marchenko, is one of the most widespread in Russia. Her followers consider that she has attained absolute enlightenment and is conversant with all the world's sciences; they revere her as 'semidivine'. Marchenko teaches that each person is a ray of light sent to Earth by the Rulers of Shambhala and must fulfill his or her task on earth with the help of *Radasteya*. For this purpose, regular 'radasty' – assemblies of *Radasteya* members – are held, at which they all meditate or read prayers in verse written by Marchenko herself. Depending on how well these human rays of light are trying to live out their allotted destiny, they are divided into two groups: 'heavenly manna' (*'manna nebesnaya'*), people who have broken free from the bonds of existence with the aid of Marchenko's methods; and 'manna porridge' (*'mannaya kasha'*) – people who have not yet realised their purpose in this life. *Radasteya* not only has a hierarchy of individuals, but also a hierarchy of professions, of which revolutionaries are among the most highly rated. 'Revolutionary rays of light' (*'luchi-revolutsionery'*) transcend the bonds of existence more than anyone. This explains why followers of *Radasteya* respect the Soviet past and extol communists.

In atheist Soviet society the absence of religious experience gave rise to a longing for something that would be simultaneously highly intellectual, scientific and mystical. It was a thirst for a sense of union with higher forces – and not just the usual 'bearded god sitting on a cloud'. Some researchers explain this by the social circumstances of the period after *perestroika*: 'The poverty of the life led by Russians made them seek something that would absorb their attention and increase their self-respect.'²¹ It did not require much in the way of historical or scientific education for people to be able to adopt the Rerikhs' teachings intellectually and feel themselves in touch with world culture and the 'higher forces and laws of the universe'.

The religious concepts of Rerikhism contain no mythology of a primitive kind that might make an educated person cringe, and everything in Agni Yoga is indeed more complex than the Orthodox catechism. It is significant that intellectual circles have not felt any great sympathy for the national Church, that of the Moscow Patriarchate. On the contrary: the Rerikhites are wont to regard the Church and popular Orthodox traditions in Russia as a manifestation of the lowest level of spiritual development. At the same time, there are many instances of Rerikhites who are happy to consider themselves Christians in the sense that they recognise Christ and St Sergi of Radonezh as 'teachers of the world'; they thus arrive at their own version of Christianity. Rerikhites are quite capable of believing in all faiths while at the same time giving their own interpretation to the truths they contain. Any concept or school

of thought can be shaped to the Rerikh paradigm: ecology, astrology, vegetarianism, occultism, magic, Zen Buddhism, nationalism, communism and Messianic expectations. We have seen some of the diverse ways in which the teachings of Living Ethics can be interpreted. Yelena Rerikh's ideas, torn out of context, are utilised by the founders and members of all kinds of sects, while psychics explain their methods of treatment to their patients in the language of Agni Yoga. Museum attendants, librarians and research workers, in whom the state no longer takes any interest, find consolation in the works of the Rerikhs. Many an academician or professor feels that he or she is preserving cultural traditions and broadening his or her horizons through the study of Living Ethics, with its claim to unite science and spirituality.

Totalitarian sects pass away like illnesses, but the Rerikh movement is alive and well all over Russia, even after accusations in the press that the Rerikhs collaborated with the NKVD, and even after the Russian Orthodox Church has anathematised it. In any large Russian city there is a Rerikh society or a group of educated people taking an active interest in Rerikh culture. An enthusiasm for all kinds of new religious movements, for Buddhism, Krishnaism and the East in general, for the 'New Age' and theosophy, is not of course confined to Russia alone. In Europe and America religious eclecticism and syncretism are sweeping triumphantly through the lands of Christian civilisation. There is one movement, however, which has an ideology shaped uniquely in and for Russia: the Rerikh movement.

Notes and References

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- ¹⁶ Agni Ioga, *Listy sada Morii* (Ozareniye, Moscow, 1994).
- ¹⁷ 'Zashchitim kul'turu', p. 83.
- ¹⁸ *Urusvati* (journal of the Eastern Rerikh Society), no. 1, 1998, pp. 35–101. On the polemic with Lunev, see *Mir ognenny* (journal of the International Rerikh Centre in Moscow), no. 4, 1998, pp. 112–126.
- ¹⁹ *Mozaika Agni logi* (Tbilisi, 1990), p. 124.
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(Translated from the Russian by Marite Sapiets)