

Conference “Fachtagung Slavistik”, organized by the Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Osteuropakunde (DGO)/ working group ‘Russian and East European Culture’ (Prof. Birgit Menzel, University of Mainz/Germersheim), in cooperation with the Harriman Institute/Columbia University (Prof. Catharine Theimer-Nepomnyashchy)  
11-13 March, 2007, in Berlin (European Academy)  
(languages: English and Russian)

## **The Occult in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russia / ОКУЛЬТИЗМ В РОССИИ** **Metaphysical Roots of Soviet Civilization**

- Since the fall of communism, there has been a marked return of religion in post-Soviet Russia. This trend coincides with the revival of religious factors in international relations, especially after 9-11, when what Huntington has called “the clash of civilizations” has become a vital issue. The return of interest in religion can be seen in the sense of a reverence for the great established religions, but also in a wide range of quests for spiritual new orientations. This yearning has been manifested on all levels of society (in high culture as well as a yearning for the spiritual in popular culture and everyday life, expressed often in an interest in unconventional religious practices, in the humanities as well as in the natural and social sciences and politics). The search for some form of spirituality has become a vital issue for individuals as well as larger groups, both in private and public spheres. It reaches far beyond the institutionalized churches and established religions. One of the most fast-growing areas involved on all social levels, is an immersion in the ideas and practices of the occult and esoteric.
- Soviet civilization, its claims to “scientific atheism” notwithstanding, was from the very beginning influenced by religion. It defined itself as a purely rational ideocratic society, a society based on work, on science, and an empirical knowledge, yet its cult of the rational was taken to such an extreme that one could talk in terms of a “rationalistic religion”.
- Since the 1960 and 1970s, there has been a marked reaction against this “cult of the Rational” and countervailing concepts became popular both in artistic practice and in everyday life. Expressions of reaction against Soviet speak (such as the playful undermining of the official rituals of political self-representation by the Moscow conceptualists; neopagan underground circles; mystical sects and communes in the two capitals and in the ‘provinces’; a revival of eastern religious concepts and philosophy; experiments with drugs and transcendental practices that expand consciousness).
- The main issue to be discussed at the conference is, if or how far today’s rejection of the rational and reference to irrational and antirational sources represents a radical break with the rational past of Soviet society or to what extent it represents a continuation of the anti-rational reaction to it, and thus a continuation or an intensification of elements in Soviet civilization. Questions will include: In which areas and along which lines of conflict does a break occur? What are the effects of the specific Russian idiosyncratic expressions of reactions against the Soviet order and reality (to be found in such cults as an obsession with trash)? Should we view the current “cult of nihilism” that is becoming widespread as purely a negative reaction against the Soviet “cult of humanism”? Where can one pinpoint connections, and where breaks, between the “old (Soviet) cults and the various new ones”? How have the borders between established religions, such as orthodox Christianity, Buddhism/ Hinduism, Judaism and unconventional religious practices to be found in Shamanism and other esoteric beliefs, shifted in this recent turn to the religions?

- The conference will bring together scholars from different countries (Germany, Russia, France, America) and different disciplines (anthropology, history, literary scholarship, medicine) to explore relational metaphysical aspects of Soviet and post-Soviet society, while also attempting to put its findings in a comparative context, by comparing trends in the West. The aim is to produce a book based on the conference material which will address this complex topic.
- It is quite remarkable the extent to which little concretely is known about spiritual and occult practices and thought in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Hence at the conference itself a crucial aspect will be the sheer collection of information and exchange of ideas between scholars of different countries and disciplines in the aim of advancing this area of knowledge. There are four main topics which the conference will address:
  - Material related to spiritual practices in late Soviet society (1960 - late 1980s);
  - Influences of neopagan and esoteric concepts in literature and art and their function both within the works, themselves, and in society;
  - The role and function of mystical, spiritual and occult ideas in the development of political ideologies;
  - The impact of this thought on various sciences (astrophysics, cosmotechnology, eastern and oriental studies, medicine, (para-)psychology etc.).