UNDERGROUND HINDU AND BUDDHIST-INSPIRED RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN SOVIET RUSSIA

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INTRODUCTION

This article aims to describe the historical background of the presence in Russia of religions of Indian origin, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and a number of spiritual / religious teachings, movements and groups that were in one way or another related to or inspired by them. This historical survey will be placed in the context of the tsarist and Soviet governments' policies towards the peoples practicing these religions and teachings (focusing mostly on the Soviet period). It should be noted that the situation with the Eastern, and particularly Indian religious movements and groups in Russia has always been ambiguous. On the one hand, they have always aroused great interest on the part of certain circles of society, including intellectual elites. At other times they often faced the resistance of the authorities and/or the mainstream religions, in particular the Orthodox Church. This resistance sometimes took the form of outright persecution.

In accordance with the governmental policies on nationalities and religions and the political interests of the state throughout Russian history, there were periods when attitudes towards religions of Indian origin were somewhat tolerant (for example the pre-revolutionary period, the first years of Soviet rule, the period of the Great Patriotic war and for some years after that, and finally Gorbachev's perestroika), and there were periods in which persecution escalated, such as Joseph Stalin's repressions of the 1930s, Nikita Khrushchev's antireligious campaign of the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the aggravation of censorship and "toughening campaigns" which took place in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s (under Yuri Andropov).

THE TSARIST PERIOD

The interaction between Indian religions and Russian society has a long history. Russia's geographical position was conducive to the establishment of contacts between Indian and Russian traders even in medieval times. Thus Afanasy Nikitin, a merchant from Tver, reached India in 1446 and spent three years there. The account of his travels was recorded in an unrevised manuscript: "*Khozhenie Za Tri Moria*" (A Journey Across Three Seas). It is a well known fact that there were Indian communities in the South of Russia from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The largest settlement (*podvor'e)*, was concentrated around the Hindu temple in the city of Astrakhan and reached its peak under Peter the Great, who extended his patronage to the community. This policy of religious tolerance was continued in the eighteenth century by Catherine I, who ordered that the sacred book of Vaishnavism Bhagavad Gita be translated from English into Russian. In the course of the nineteenth century the publication of books and translations of ancient Sanskrit texts in Russia continued unabated. These included translations from the Vedas and great Hindu epic poems Ramayana and Mahabharata. At the beginning of the twentieth century the teaching and practice of yoga also came into fashion in Russia and Europe.

Buddhism

Of all religions of Indian origin that have come to Russia, Buddhism has grown the deepest roots. The incorporation into Russia of peoples that practiced Buddhism and the territories they inhabited played an important role in the formation of Russia's Empire in Asia. Within Russia's borders, Buddhism spread through Buryatia, Kalmykia, Tuva and the Chita and Irkutsk regions and was represented mostly by the Gelugpa school, which originated in Tibet in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Kalmyks, a western Mongolian people, were incorporated into Russia in 1655. The Buryats, a northern Mongolian people, were incorporated into the Russian Empire at the end of the seventeenth century. Much later, in 1914, a Russian protectorate was established over Tuva.

The policies of the tsarist government were quite tolerant. Thus in 1741 Elisabeth I issued a decree acknowledging the existence of the "Lamaistic faith" in Buryatia. This was the official date of the recognition of Buddhism in Russia. By the end of the nineteenth century the knowledge of Buddhist doctrine had already spread widely among educated circles in the main European capitals: London, Paris, Rome, Berlin and Vienna. This revival of interest in the Orient was particularly strong in Russia. The rising popularity of Buddhism in European Russia was also accompanied by the development of Oriental Studies (including Buddhist and Indian) as an academic discipline. From the 1850s, St. Petersburg became one of the most important centres of Oriental scientific research in Europe. The history of Russian Buddhist and Indian studies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is connected with the names of Ivan Minaev (1840–1890), Aleksei Pozdneev (1851–1920), Sergey Oldenburg (1863–1934), Theodor Stcherbatsky (1866–1942), Otto Rosenberg (1888–1919) and many others.

At the end of the nineteenth century a Buddhist community began to develop in St. Petersburg. This consisted mostly of "traditional adherents" (Buryats and Kalmyks), foreign businessmen, diplomats and representatives of the foreign legations and, finally, Russian converts. The attitude towards Buddhism among certain groups in Russian society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was generally quite sympathetic. In contrast, the attitude of the hierarchs of the Orthodox Church to Buddhism was openly hostile. Being the state religion, it regarded Buddhism as a dangerous competitor, especially when it drew in people who did not belong to communities that traditionally practiced Buddhism. The revolutionary situation in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century forced the government to modify its religious policy. The tsar's edict of 12 December 1904 prohibited any manifestations of religious oppression or discrimination.

In discussing the history of Buddhism in Russia, one should not neglect the construction of the Buddhist temple in St. Petersburg, which is closely connected with the life and activities of Agvan Dorzhiev (1853–1938), an outstanding political leader, scholar and propagator of Buddhism. Dorzhiev was born in Buryatia and studied in the Aginsk *datsan*. He was educated at the famous Buddhist centres in Urga in Outer

Mongolia and in Tibet, and finally became first a tutor and then the inseparable attendant and closest political advisor of the thirteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet (1876–1933).

At that time Tibet was facing the possibility of British colonial expansion and dependence on China. The Dalai Lama, seeking Russia's support, sent Dorzhiev to St. Petersburg as his official representative in 1898 and again in 1900, with the secret mission of convincing the Russian government to establish a protectorate over Tibet.[1] He became quite close to Russian ruling circles, and after negotiations with Tsar Nicholas II, was officially appointed the Tibetan diplomatic representative in Russia in 1901. From that time on, he persistently sought to promote the construction of a Buddhist temple in the Russian capital. The construction of the temple was temporarily blocked for various reasons, including resistance from the Russian Orthodox Church, which proclaimed it to be a den of heathens and pagans. However, work on the temple began in 1908 and was completed in 1913, with the first public worship coinciding with the three-hundredth anniversary of the House of the Romanovs.[2]

THE SOVIET PERIOD

Buddhism

After the February Revolution of 1917, Dorzhiev devoted himself to political, religious and reformatory activities, including propagating Buddhist knowledge in Buryatia and Kalmykia. These activities were permitted for two reasons. Firstly, the Bolshevik nationalities policy at the time actively promoted distinct national identities and the national self-consciousness of the non-Russian populations. This resulted in a commitment to support national territories, national languages, national elites and national cultures.[3] Thus non-Russians had a better chance to preserve their reli-

[1] John **Snelling**, *Buddhism in Russia. The Story of Agvan Dorzhiev, Lhasa's Emissary to the Tsar* (Shaftsbury, Dorset: Element Books Limited, 1993); **Александр Андреев**, *Тибет в Политике Царской, Советской и Постсоветской России* (Санкт-Петербург: Издательский Дом Санкт-Петербургского Университета, 2006).

[2] Aleksandr **Andreev**, *The Buddhist Shrine of Petrograd* (Ulan-Ude: Eco-Art, 1992).

[3] Terry **Martin**, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet*

gions as part of their national culture than did ethnic Russians, whose culture was stigmatized as a culture of oppression.[4] Secondly, Dorzhiev's activities coincided with the foreign policy objectives of the Bolsheviks and their interest in the Buddhist East, above all in Tibet.

In the early 1920s, Dorzhiev, together with Buddhist leaders in Buryatia, made an attempt to prove the fundamental similarity between the tenets of Buddhism and communism, urging people to return to the ancient ideals of purity, morality and unselfishness. They called themselves Modernisers (*Obnovlentsy*), and interpreted Buddhism as an atheistic doctrine related to Marxism-Leninism. The first Congress of Soviet Buddhists, which took place in January 1927, consolidated the victory of *Obnovlenchestvo* and its reforms over conservatives.[5] In his efforts to protect Buddhist teachings against the background of the state's policy of atheism, Dorzhiev used various methods, even claiming that Lenin, Zinoviev and other Bolsheviks were all Buddhists, and that the Buddhist faith would in due course be adopted throughout the Soviet Union.

It should be noted that from the 1920s a general policy of restrictions against religious organizations was pursued. In the early 1930s the attitude of the authorities towards Buddhism changed radically, a fact that could be attributed both to the anti-religious campaign launched by Stalin and a general alteration of the nationalities policies, which became far more restrictive.[6] Campaigns against religion in general and Buddhism in particular were also connected with Stalin's collectivization drive; the attack on Buddhism was linked to the suppression of the rebellion against collectivization in Buryatia and Kalmykia. Under these new circumstances, the *Obnovlenchestvo* made no sense.

Apart from the condemnation of Buddhism from the ideological perspective, the communists focused on the political and counterrevolutionary activities of Buddhists. To justify the brutal destruction and ruin of the trans-Baikal and Kalmyk monasteries, they stigmatized them as hotbeds

Union, 1923 –1939 (Cornell University Press, 2001), 13.

4 *Ibid.*, 31–74.

5 „Протоколы Заседаний Первого Всесоюзного Собора Буддистов СССР от 20–29 января 1927", Архив Востоковедов ИВАН СССР (The archive of oriental scholars, the Institute of Oriental Studies, USSR), fund 2, inventory 1, file 373.

6 Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 311–393.

of imperialism, support for the White Army and scheming against the Soviet people. Active struggle against the Soviet power was also attributed to them. Thus the Soviet press declared that in the 1920s, during the *Tsagalgan* and *Dugzhuba* festivals, when the enemies of faith had to be symbolically pierced with an arrow, the lamas of the Gusinoozerskii datsan allegedly launched arrows towards the district committee of the Communist party. At the same time in this very monastery the traditional *Sansariin Hurde* (wheel of life) picture, which demonstrated the causes of human suffering, was enriched with new subjects, namely a plane, a plant and a school with a red flag. In 1934, during an epidemic of typhus in Buryatia, the lamas supposedly assured the people that only mass withdrawal from collective farms could stop the spread of the disease. Most of all, however, the Soviet authorities were irritated by prophesies about the advent of the Buddha *Maitreya*, the Buddha to be, under whom joyful life was to be established.[7]

At the beginning of 1935, a large group of lamas was arrested, and all of them were charged with counterrevolutionary activities in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Leningrad, and with espionage on behalf of Japan. Within the course of 18 months this second wave of repressions completed the devastation of the Buddhist community in Leningrad. Lamas, doctors and scholars who lived in the temple were arrested and executed. Dorzhiev himself was arrested. At his first interrogation he supposedly confessed to membership in a "counterrevolutionary, pan-Mongolist, terrorist, insurgent, spy organization that intended to overthrow the Soviet government." The next day Dorzhiev was transferred to a prison hospital, where he died in January 1938. His death inevitably led to the closure of the temple in Leningrad. By 1938 all *datsans*, monasteries and schools had been closed, and almost all of them had also been demolished or burnt to ashes; sacred books and other items were destroyed. The majority of the priesthood was subjected to severe repressions.[8]

Clearly few Buddhist groups could survive under such circumstances. Nevertheless, there is some evidence of the existence of a number of

[7] Keston Archive, N. Teodorovich, Буддийская Церковь, как Орудие Коммунистической Политики, 1963.

[8] Александр **Андреев**, *Храм Будды в Северное Столице* (St. Petersburg: Nartang, 2004), 158–162.

itinerant lamas who continued to lecture illegally and perform religious rites, attracting masses of believers.[9] By the end of 1941, after a series of defeats suffered by Soviet troops in the war with Germany, the state modified its nationalities policy and somewhat alleviated the pressure on religion. Under war conditions, any tool promoting mobilization was exploited, including the appeal to religion and nationalism amongst Russians and non-Russians alike. The Buddhist communities that had survived the repressions of the 1930s contributed to the defence of the Soviet Union, raising large sums of money from their supporters for that purpose. These patriotic endeavours were appreciated, and Buddhism was once again tolerated, though only in the trans-Baikal region. In 1945 Buryat Buddhists were permitted to restore their Dharma (faith, truth and eternal law) and two *datsans*: the Ivolginsk near the Buryat capital of Ulan Ude and the Aginsk in Chita. In 1946 the Central Buddhist Board of the USSR was established in Ulan Ude.[10]

Now that Buddhism was once again legal, it was actively used to meet the needs of Soviet foreign policy and to demonstrate the "freedom of conscience in the USSR" to the countries of Asia. In addition to legal Buddhist centres, a small number of lamas in various Buddhist regions who had by then been released from prison performed Buddhist ceremonies and preached unofficially. Some of them attracted disciples from non-Buddhist areas. The most famous group formed spontaneously around Buddhist teacher and scholar Bidiya Dandaron. Dandaron was born in Buryatia in 1914 into the family of a lama, and was recognized as an incarnation. In 1933 he moved to Leningrad, where he studied the Tibetan language at Leningrad State University. Dandaron was arrested twice, in 1937 and 1947, on charges of counterrevolutionary conspiratorial activities. Paradoxically, the years of imprisonment, which he spent in the company of renowned scholars, historians and philosophers, equipped Dandaron with valuable knowledge and skills. There were also lamas amongst the prisoners, and under their guidance Dandaron continued his Buddhist education, improved his knowledge of Oriental

[9] Галина **Чимиторджин**, *История Иволгинского Дацана*. http://www.datsan.buryatia.ru/iid.html December 7, 2009.

[10] Владимир **Пореш**, "Тибетский Буддизм в России" - *Современная Религиозная Жизнь России.* Под редакцией Сергея Филатова и Майкла Бордо, Том 3 (Москва: Логос, 2006), 236.

languages and studied Buddhist philosophy and yoga.

After Stalin's death in 1953 and the eventual appointment of Nikita Khrushchev to the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party, the process of "de-Stalinization" gradually began. Many prisoners were rehabilitated and released from labour camps. Dandaron was released and rehabilitated in 1956. Paradoxically, one aspect of Khrushchev's "de-Stalinization" was his rejection of Stalin's more quiescent policy towards religion that had been implemented during the war, and his return to active persecution. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, over half of Orthodox parishes were disbanded, and around ten thousand churches and monasteries were destroyed or closed. Nor did other religions (including Islam and Buddhism) escape this change in policy, which also affected Buddhist scholarship.

After Khrushchev was deposed in 1964 and replaced as General Secretary by Leonid Brezhnev, a partial re-Stalinization and a crackdown on cultural freedom began. Some members of the intelligentsia responded to these repressive policies by urging the Party to observe the human rights stipulated by the Soviet constitution, such as freedom of speech, information and conscience, the latter being another term for freedom of religion. A dissident movement emerged, its activists engaged in underground publishing (*samizdat*) defending human rights, protesting against political persecution and informing the foreign mass media about specific cases of human rights abuses in the USSR. These dissidents consisted of people with a range of different political views and religious beliefs. Hence it can be said that from the mid-1960s an embryonic civil society began to develop in the Soviet Union.[11]

This period can generally be characterized by the "explosion of interest in various cultural and intellectual pursuits based on the experience of a faraway 'elsewhere'", such as Oriental philosophies and religions, including Buddhism, which took place in the 1960s.[12] Popular books about Eastern spirituality began to appear in bookshops; at the same time, various *samizdat* publications on Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Shamanism and

[11] Joshua **Rubenstein**, *Soviet Dissidents: Their Struggle for Human Rights* (London: Wildwood House, 1980); Mark **Hopkins**, *Russia's Underground Press: the Chronicle of Current Events* (New York: Praeger, 1983).

[12] Alexei **Yurchak**, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 150–160.

esoteric Christian teachings were read, copied and passed around among friends. These included translations of material by foreign authors, such as Japanese Buddhist scholar Daisetsu Tietaru Suzuki's writings on Zen. The works of the Russian mystic George Gurdjieff, Jorge Luis Borges and, several years later, Carlos Castaneda, also appeared in *samizdat.* In due course a relatively small but active circle of people interested in mystic and philosophical matters was formed in Leningrad. These included both scholars and students from the Oriental Faculty of Leningrad State University. Similar groups were created in Moscow and other cities in the USSR.

In 1965 two young people, Aleksandr Zhelezno and Iurii Alekseev, went to the Pamirs with the intention of reaching India illegally and practicing yoga there. The attempt failed, and Zhelezno went to Buddhist monasteries in Ulan Ude instead, where he met Dandaron and became his first disciple. This was the beginning of a Buddhist religious movement amongst citizens of the USSR who lived outside traditional Buddhist regions. Young people reached out to Dandaron as a teacher who could answer what they considered to be vitally important questions. They came to Buryatia from Leningrad, Moscow, Ukraine, Estonia and other parts of the country to see him. Among his visitors were talented Muscovite Buddhist scholars Oktiabrina Volkova and Alexander Piatigorsky and Estonian scholar Linnart Mäll.[13]

By the early 1970s, Dandaron's had some thirty to forty disciples. Dandaron taught them traditional methods of *tantra* and the theory and practice of Buddhist meditation. His teaching was characterized by syncretism, as it combined various schools of Buddhism, including Gelug, Nyingma and Sakya. Dandaron's independent character, his popularity, and the fact that he had never made his religious convictions secret caused increasing concern on the part of the Buryat authorities, who were determined to silence him. The resulting ruthless crusade against the group was most likely caused by the local Buryat authorities' desire to show their efforts and vigilance and even to compete with the central authorities in the suppression of religion.

[13] **Владимир Пореш**, "Русский Буддизм, как это возможно?" – *Религия и Общество.* Под редакцией Сергея Филатова (Москва, Санкт-Петербург: Летний Сад, 2002), 386.

At approximately the same time, in 1972, the Teacher's Newspaper published a lengthy anti-Buddhist article, in which the author expressed her concern about the persistence of the Buddhist faith in Buryatia, and that many people, especially school children, are attracted by Buddhism and its rituals, and attend *datsans*. It also claimed that Buddhism was not as innocent as it may seem, but on the contrary very dangerous, as it distracted people from their main goal – the construction of communism. The article ended with the conclusion that anti-religious propaganda was somewhat weak in Buryatia, and something had to be done in that regard.[14] In the same year, Dandaron was arrested for the third time. The Buryat Public Prosecutor's Office planned a show trial involving not only Dandaron but also eight of his followers; they were charged with being members of a savagely cruel sect that performed bloody rites, carried out obscene orgies, and made human sacrifices. The case of Dandaron and his disciples concurred with the new policy of repressions against dissidents and religious believers pursued by the Soviet authorities; since freedom of conscience and of association were guaranteed by the constitution, they could not openly be charged with engaging in religious practices, and thus were instead accused of the trumped-up charges referred to above. A slanderous campaign against Dandaron was also launched in the press, in which he was described as a confirmed drunkard, profligate, blackmailer, thief and fraudster. Although many of the charges against him were dropped during the course of the trial, Dandaron was still convicted and died in prison two years later. Some of his disciples were declared insane and forcibly confined in mental hospitals, while others lost their jobs.[15]

Yoga, ISKCON and other forms of India-inspired religious activities

As mentioned above, after Stalin's death, modest political liberalization led to the revival of old groups and the appearance of new, mostly underground, ones. The main feature of the religious thinking of that period

[14] **В. Галкина**, "Вокруг Дацана" – *Учительская Газета*, 12/12, (1972).

[15] *Delo Dandarona* (Firenze: Edizioni Aurora, 1974); Keston Archive, Transcript of the Trial of the Buddhist Scholar B. D. Dandaron, 1972; Stephen **Batchelor**, "The Trials of Dandaron: Buddhist Perseverance in Russia" - *Tricycle*, 1/ 3 (Spring 1992), 12–21.

was syncretism, which is a mixture of different forms of Eastern and Western spiritual traditions and practices. Members of these groups, practicing different disciplines of Hindu and Buddhist yoga, combined traditional ideas with the teachings of Helena Blavatsky, Nicholas and Helena Roerichs and Gurdjieff, flavouring them with different types of magic, shamanic and Christian techniques, partly borrowed from *samizdat* or books brought from abroad or received through instructions from various amateur gurus. Among Christian esoteric practices, *umnaia* or *iisusova molitva* should be mentioned. Some features detected in this ancient inner prayer, which must be repeated together with inhalation and requires concentration and slow breathing, parallel the practices of meditation and yogic breathing techniques.[16]

It can be concluded that the socio-historical situation that developed in the USSR between the 1960s and the 1980s, gave rise to a unique generation of spiritual seekers. The lack of information was accompanied by an extraordinary amount of creative activity that resulted in the development of new "ingenious methods", practices and styles. In search of teachings, people went to Buddhist *datsans* and remote villages of the trans-Baikal region and Altai and the republics of Central Asia. The few living bearers of the tradition could not, however, satisfy all of the seekers, who, while acting on their own, at times found themselves in dangerous and tragic deadlocks. Experiments with various practices and techniques, which aimed at obtaining maximum results in a very short time, were often based on untested, dubious sources and could be dangerous for both body and mind. In his book *Khroniki Rossiiskoi Saniasy* (The Chronicles of Russian Saniasa), Vladislav Lebed'ko mentions cases of death, health damage and mental disorders caused by the excessive enthusiasm of spiritual seekers and the unskilled guidance of amateur gurus.[17]

Among the prominent groups in the 1970s was one connected with *Kunta* yoga. After the long period of underground spiritual quest (the study of Christianity, Roerich's books as well as various *samizdat* sources on Hatha-yoga), a group of Leningrad university students developed

[16] **Архимандрит Михаил Козлов**, "Рассказ Странника, Искателя Молитвы" – *Символ*, 7 (1992), 7–75.

[17] **Владислав Лебедько**, *Хроники Российской Саньясы* (Санкт-Петербург: Тема, 1999).

their own *Kunta* ("spear" in Sanskrit) yoga of magic symbols and *mantras* (phrases). This system was allegedly developed in India in the second century A.D. by the sage Maharama Kunta and his disciples, although there is no scholarly proof of this statement. In fact, *Kunta* yoga represents a combination of various yogic and meditation techniques and practices, experiments on the "restructuring" and "broadening of the consciousness" (sometimes with the use of psychedelic drugs), healing practices etc. The focus on magic symbols supposedly enabled the adepts to contact divine energy called *Shakti* in Sanskrit (many of the terms used in *Kunta* yoga are derived from Sanskrit), enter other worlds (through shamanic-like practices), heal people and in general fulfil any possible task. Meditation around a certain group of symbols was allegedly able to set the mind free from all limitations. It is hardly a surprise that the activities of the group were constantly monitored by KGB agents. Thus the leaders were repeatedly called in for interrogation, temporarily imprisoned or placed in special mental hospitals. It should be mentioned that the majority of the followers of *Kunta* yoga died at a young age under questionable and tragic circumstances that could partly be explained by the permanent psychological pressure to which they were subjected.[18]

Over time, some sources of information began to appear legally. Due to the expansion of cultural relations between the Soviet Union and India, a number of Soviet specialists worked in India from the mid-1960s. Some of them studied yoga and other practices there, and brought home complexes of yogic exercises. By that time, an interest in yoga among Russian society had already been hastened by the publication of Ivan Efremov's adventure novel *Ostrie britvy* (The Edge of a Razor) in 1964, and by the appearance of a popular science film *Indiiskie Iogi, Kto Oni?* (Indian Yogis, Who Are They?) in 1970. In his novel, Efremov discussed some principles of yoga and psycho-training and defined yoga as a "constant connection between the conscious and the unconscious in the human mind, an iron rod supporting the strength of spirit and body and giving energy for lofty deeds, fulfilment and struggle". On the whole, *Ostrie britvy* reflected a great interest in "the East" and various para-psychological phenomena in Soviet society. The documentary film "Indian Yogis, Who are They?"

[18] Elias **Beliaev**, *Tausha: The Life and Teachings of a Russian Mystic* (New York: Station Hill/Barry Town, 2001).

for the first time provided the Soviet audience with a relatively objective description of Hatha yoga and demonstrated the celebrated "miracles" of yogis, such as eating glass or being buried alive, and this was a revelation for many people, who responded to it by scrutinizing *samizdat* instructions on yoga and including the "lotus pose" in their everyday morning exercises.

One of the most prominent propagandists of yoga in the USSR in the early 1970s was Anatolii Zubkov, a philologist, who had worked in India for several years. He began to popularize yoga, giving public lectures and publishing articles in popular magazines, such as *Sel'skaia Molodezh* and *Nauka i Tekhnika*. Adhering to the principle of moderation, Zubkov helped many people to move away from extremes and self-damage in yoga. Emphasizing the therapeutic effect of yoga rather than its spiritual role, he successfully avoided conflicts with the authorities, whereas some other groups and their leaders continued to be prosecuted.[19] In the early 1980s, the method of shallow breathing, similar to the yogic *pranayama* (breathing practice), developed by physician Konstantin Buteiko back in 1950, also became widespread in Russia. Despite the fact that the method was intended as a medical treatment for asthma, some seekers used it as a means of reaching "enlightenment" and special psychological and physiological effects.

The mixture of some ancient yogic ideas with contemporary physics and psychology gave rise to the psychics and alternative healers who tried to fill in the gaps in human knowledge using various unusual activities and techniques. It should be mentioned that there were some officially approved organizations that were engaged in parapsychology and extrasensory perception, such as the Department of Bioinformation, attached to the Popov Research Society of Radio-Engineering, Electronics and Communications, which was established in 1965. The authorities' positive attitude to this body can be explained by the fact that the KGB was interested in the methods of psychological influence over people and manipulations with human consciousness, and thus tried to keep all such activities under control.[20]

[19] **Виктор Бойко**, *Зубков Анатолий Николаевич*. http://www.realyoga.ru/classic/history/341/ March 7, 2011.

[20] Лебедько, *Хроники*, 197.

The History of the Hare Krishna movement in the USSR can be traced back to 1973, when Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON, made an official visit to Moscow. Shrila Prabhupada was eager to lecture to interested academics about his worldview, but was immediately informed that that would be impossible in the Soviet Union. He did, however, manage to convey the main ideas of the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness to a young man called Anatolii Piniaev, whom he accidentally met, and who became the first propagator of the new faith in the USSR. During the next ten years Anatolii was visited by a few members of the Hare Krishna movement. He also travelled extensively to different parts of the country, where he preached and taught what he had learnt from his spiritual masters. The underground groups functioned not only in the main Russian cities, such as Moscow and Leningrad, but in different parts of the country, including Siberia, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia and the Baltic republics.

In 1980, two Hare Krishna leaders, Shri Vishnupada and Kirtiraga Dasa, came to Russia and attempted to organize a *kirtan* (ritual Hare Krishna chanting) and a lecture in Riga. The believers were dispersed by the police and KGB agents, and the foreign guests were advised to leave the country. The first publicity Hare Krishna followers received was an article in the journal *Communist*, in which a KGB agent stated that "the three greatest threats to the Soviet Union were Western Culture, pop music and Hare Krishna". Later this was followed by a number of negative articles about the movement in the Soviet press, including the newspapers *Sotsialisticheskaia Industriia*, *Izvestiia*, *Nedelia* and *Nauka i Religiia*. In 1981 the Hare Krishna congregation in Moscow, led by Vladimir Kritskii and Sergei Kurkin, made an attempt to register as an official religious group. Their application was, however, denied by the Council of Religious Affairs on the grounds that the Hare Krishna movement was an "ideological deviant" and that "there was only one ideology permitted in the Soviet Union, and that was Marxism-Leninism." Both Kritskii and Kurkin were soon arrested and charged under article 227 of the criminal code of the RSFSR (Infringement of the person and rights of citizens under the appearance of performing religious ceremonies).[21]

[21] Keston Archive, David Jacupko, The History of the Hare Krishna Movement in the USSR, 1988.

In the early and mid-1980s, several dozen Hare Krishna followers were imprisoned and confined to mental hospitals (the exact number varies in different documents and in different periods, but it is clear that it was not less than 50, or maybe even more).[22] The followers themselves attribute these repressions to the rule of Yuri Andropov, the new General Secretary of the Communist Party, who toughened religious persecution. Among the offences ascribed to Hare Krishna followers was the propagation of vegetarianism, which allegedly had a detrimental effect on the health of the converts, luring the people away from socialist realities and the Soviet way of life to an illusory world of mysticism, anti-Soviet activities, parasitism etc. Sometimes much more absurd accusations took place. Thus during one of the trials against Hare Krishna followers, the prosecution was seriously considering the claim of a mentally retarded woman that the believers (who practiced vegetarianism and the principle of *ahimsa* – causing no harm to any living being) wanted to sacrifice her underage child.[23] It should be mentioned that Hare Krishna followers suffered immensely in prison because of their religious beliefs and special diet.

The Keston Archive at Baylor University in Texas contains numerous records of beatings, torture, force-feeding (with raw eggs and other forbidden products) through a tube, psychiatric abuse, back-breaking labour and other violations of human rights. A few "mental patients" died from huge doses of administered psychotropic drugs and insulin. One must consider that the overwhelming majority of Soviet Krishna followers were relatively young people, and belonged to intellectual circles; many of them had university educations. This was probably one of the reasons for the strength of the state's animosity towards them. Soviet ideology put forward the idea that religion was a kind of anachronism and correspondingly the prerogative of elderly, ignorant people. Many of the imprisoned followers had children, who were used to exert a psychological pressure on their parents. One of the victims, Olga Kiseleva, a 37-year-old mother of two, a poet and Moscow university graduate, was put on trial and sentenced when she was nine months pregnant. She gave birth in prison, and

[22] Keston Archive, Psychiatric Abuse of Hare Krishna Devotees in the USSR, an Information Bulletin from CVSHK, 1987.

[23] Keston Archive, Protocol of the Interrogation of Hare Krishnas' trial, 6–9.

the baby died soon afterwards in an orphanage.[24] This outrageous case caused resentment among human rights advocates in the USSR and raised public concern abroad, as evident from the numerous publications in the press (in the Daily Mail and Sunday Morning Herald, for instance), Radio Liberty reports etc.

It is also worth mentioning that despite severe prosecution Hare Krishna followers felt that they were empowered as the descendants of the ancient tradition Gaudiya Vaishnava as well as the members of the global neo-Hinduist Hare Krishna movement. The prisoners of consciousness and their families and comrades were willing and able to fight back, alerting the public and writing numerous letters of complaint to various authorities in the USSR and abroad, including President Gorbachev, President Reagan and his wife, Indian President Rajiv Gandhi, the Pope, the Roman conference for the investigation of psychiatric abuse in the Soviet Union, etc.

From the late 1980s through the early 1990s, when the liberalization of religion began, the situation gradually and slowly began to change. One by one the prisoners were released and rehabilitated. In 1988 the first Hare Krishna group was officially registered in Moscow. Finally, in 1989, a large group of former detainees even went on a pilgrimage to India, something that would earlier have been quite unthinkable.

CONCLUSION

The article demonstrates that Indian religions have been present on Russian territory since the seventeenth century, and the first contacts can be traced to even earlier times. They have always aroused both great interest among the population and fierce opposition from the official state ideology and from church circles. During the Soviet era, the period between the early 1960s and the late 1980s could be characterized by a surge of interest towards Eastern, particularly Indian, religions and philosophy in the USSR. On the one hand this can be explained by the desire to escape from the realities of the Soviet way of life with its egalitarianism and oppressive control over spiritual and religious spheres to some bright exotic "faraway

[24] Keston Archive, The List of the Arrested Hare Krishna Followers, Open Letter, 1985.

elsewhere." On the other hand, this interest could be part of a worldwide trend, as the infatuation for non-mainstream, unusual, sometimes even seemingly bizarre religious ideas, swept across Europe and the US in that period. It is important to mention that the specific underground character of the Soviet religious groups and movements caused by the state's overall policy of atheism and the lack of sources, materials and spiritual guidance gave them a unique indigenous flavour, and paradoxically enhanced the creativity of the spiritual seekers who developed new, mostly syncretic teachings, methods and practices.

It should be mentioned that the tendency to attack non-mainstream religions (including Eastern religions) continues in Russia even today. The period of religious freedom in Russia after *perestroika* and especially after the passing of the liberal law "On Freedom of Consciousness" in 1990 was rather short-lived and soon gave way to concerns about destructive "sects" and "cults" that allegedly posed a threat to the society and state. Among the main objectors to non-mainstream religions in Russia are the Russian Orthodox Church and the representatives of the so-called anti-cult movement, represented by both Orthodox priests and laypersons (public figures, intellectuals and politicians).