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ESOTERIC POETRY IN THE LATE USSR: THE CASE OF JAN KOLTUNOV

The name of Jan Koltunov (1927–2016) is not on the list of the most famous Russian esoteric leaders. At least, nobody has ever dedicated a study specifically to him as an esoteric author, although Birgit Menzel has mentioned him briefly in her chapter in *New Age of Russia*, where Koltunov is described as “an ardent Roerich disciple, who in 1976 founded the popular yoga-club *Kosmos*, disguised as a sport-institute, which at times attracted over a thousand practitioners.”¹ Despite of an impressive number of students back in the 1970s, Koltunov’s books were not translated into English, and it seems that information about his ideas did not spread outside the USSR. Moreover, even in Russia it is very unlikely to find these books by chance in a bookshop or in a library.

Although Koltunov is not a popular esoteric author nowadays, the study of his ideas is still important for scholars of Soviet esotericism. The most obvious reason of it is the fact that Koltunov is a very typical example of the late-Soviet esotericist, and a study of his biography can help us to understand better specifics of Russian esotericism of that period. At the same time, he influenced a number of contemporary esoteric groups in Russia. His ideas in some regards shaped contemporary Russian esotericism, and examination of Koltunov’s connections with contemporary esoteric groups revealed that Koltunov was an influential figure in the late-Soviet esoteric circles.

Koltunov wrote a series of books in which he explains his ideas about religion, philosophy, society, self-development and related topics. In the last period of his life, between 2000 and 2016, he was very active on the Internet. He struggled to promote his ideas and published many of his

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¹ Birgit Menzel, “Occult and Esoteric Movements in Russia from the 1960s to the 1980s,” in *The New Age of Russia*, edited by Birgit Menzel et al. (München, Berlin: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012), 168.

works online, which makes them now easily accessible for scholars. Besides that, primary sources related to the study of Koltunov's doctrine include memoirs, interviews and biographical works prepared by his followers, the most extensive of which is a book of Valentin Bratenko *A Road to the Temple*, published in 1999.

We should begin the talk about Koltunov's esoteric poetry with a brief overview of his biography that will help us deepen our understanding of his ideas by placing those ideas in historical context. Koltunov was born in 1927 in Moscow. After the Second World War, he began to study and graduated from the Moscow Aviation Institute to work as a rocket engineer. In some regards, it resembles a story of the American occultist Jack Parsons (1914–1952), who was thirteen years older than Koltunov and also was a rocket engineer involved in the occult movement about the same time on the other side of the Iron Curtain. However, the roots of their esoteric ideas were different: whereas Parsons was inspired by the ideas of Aleister Crowley, Koltunov was a reader of the works of Russian "grandfather of space travel" Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, who was also a proponent of the so-called "cosmic philosophy," which was, in turn, influenced by the early 20th century Theosophical groups.² Followers of Koltunov's ideas also pointed to some parallels between Koltunov and the American astronaut Edgar Mitchell, who landed the Moon during the Apollo 14 mission in 1971.³ Mitchell said that during the flight he had a mystical experience that soon led him to the creation of esoteric teaching of "noetics." This idea of mystical interpretation of cosmic exploration was important to Koltunov as well.

When Koltunov had a chance, he participated in the evening courses of philosophy at Moscow universities, which was one of the most obvious legitimate ways that time in the USSR to get some information about topics related to esotericism, like ancient Indian, Chinese and Greek philosophy, medieval and modern religious philosophy, etc. Koltunov and his followers also extensively used ideas of Soviet mainstream authors, for instance, Dmitrii Likhachev and even Vladimir Lenin, whose quotes adjoined quotes from Nikolaj Berdyaev, Augustine of Hippo and Rerih's.

In the late 1970s, Koltunov elaborated his doctrine of Cosmic Self-Programming (Kosmičeskoe Samoprogrammirovanie) or KSP⁴ that he started to popularize in the 1980s. The abbreviation KSP was interpreted by followers of the movement in several manners, not only as Cosmic

² Michael Hagemester, "Konstantin Tsiolkovskii and the occult roots of space travel," in *The New Age of Russia*, edited by Birgit Menzel et al. (München, Berlin: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012), 143.

³ Valentin Bratenko, *Doroga k hramu* [A Road to the Temple] (Moscow, 1999), accessed October 13, 2016, <http://www.koltunov.ru/Literature/DorogaKHramu.pdf>, 3

⁴ This abbreviation is pronounced in Russian as ka-es-pe.

Self-Programming, but also Complex Self-Programming (Kompleksnoe Samoprogrammirovanie), primarily for external audience,⁵ or Koltunov's Self-Programming (Koltunovskoe Samoprogrammirovanie) by some of his students,⁶ or even How to Advance Thyself (Kak Sebja Prodvinut').⁷ The main tenet of the teaching was an idea that the Cosmos is a living creature, of whom we all are parts and with whom we can and should communicate to make our life better. Koltunov even coined the word "cosmoterica" (Russian: *kosmoterika*; derived from *kosmos* and *esoterika*) to name the doctrine that should be a "unity and complementation of exo- and esotericism".⁸

As many other figures of Soviet occult underground, Koltunov was an engineer who looked for spiritual answers and found them by means of creation of an original esoteric doctrine. This doctrine incorporated ideas of cosmism, yoga and Chinese martial arts. Koltunov was one of the first active yoga teachers in the USSR, and, thanks to little competition, his lessons that were free for students attracted dozens of followers. The movement in general was completely non-profit – to volunteer, to work for no money for the sake of self-development and to help others was an important part of its teaching. It was, in a sense, an implementation of Soviet socialist, anti-capitalist ideals in spiritual practice. Lessons usually took place in open air in a small town near Moscow. The lesson usually included different types of gymnastics, yoga postures and so-called "meditative run" together with conversations about spiritual development, harmony with nature, cosmic ethical laws and practice of meditation. There also were summer camps that took place in different parts of the USSR.

One of important features of Koltunov's teaching was its representation in the form of poetry. Some of his books were poetic compendiums with brief esoteric commentaries, while other books were prosaic, but still usually included a section with poetry. It is obvious that poetic representation has prominent meaning for the movement; however, Koltunov was not a gifted or professional poet, but rather an obvious amateur who created the most part of his poems in trains or during sessions of his "meditative run." A representative example of his poetry is the following verse from a three-page long poem entitled "Five Years of the Wide Movement of KSP":

⁵ Ian Koltunov, *Vstan' Rossija, s kolen preklonennyh!* [Stand up, Russia, from your knees!] Vol. 1. (Kaluga: Izdatel'stvo Kaluzhskoi oblgorganizatsii Souiza zhurnalistov Rossii, 1999), 87.

⁶ Bratenko, *Doroga k hramu*, 7.

⁷ Bratenko, *Doroga k hramu*, 3.

⁸ Ian Koltunov, *Oblast' projavlennogo Čuda v žizni Probužděnnogo* [An Area of the Manifested Miracle in a Life of the Awakened], accessed October 13, 2016, <http://koltunov.ru/Literature/Miracle1.htm>

Their slander and closure of the first clubs of KSP,
 Persecutions of me, activists and all the KSP movement,
 Were like fires of inquisition, Auto-da-fé,
 That took place right before the early Renaissance.⁹

The poem, written in 1985, is all like this verse, a detailed story of the first years of the movement. It may seem boring; yet at the same time it helps to feel the atmosphere of the time when any type of unconventional spirituality was oppressed by the government, and yet people struggled to find answers for their spiritual questions and looked for spiritual guidance.

Other poems, which are more fruitful for our study, aimed to inform readers about the teaching of the movement. The first thing that became obvious for a reader is the fact that although Koltunov was not a neopagan author, he explicitly developed the idea about a special historical role of Russian pre-Christian culture as opposite to Orthodox Christianity officially supported by the government before the 1917 revolution. In one of his poems, created in 1990, Koltunov wrote:

...Solemnly they proclaimed to their adepts
 That their religion and dogmas,
 Customs and servants of the Church and the government
 Are higher than others and only they
 Should be accepted by the people with no questions,
 While everything that was before in Rus'
 Traditions of that clear and pious life,
 And, what is more, deep meanings of calendars,
 And Russian letters, sounds of Russian speech
 Their Cosmic Essence and important meanings
 And Knowledge, and the Arts of Revelation,
 Historical experience and culture
 Should be forgotten and destroyed
 Because it's nothing more, they said, than mere pagan darkness...¹⁰

Koltunov's interest in Slavic paganism reflects tendencies of the early 1980s that included growing interest in ancient Slavic mythology in the USSR, supported by publication of popular books of academic historian Boris Rybakov. Rybakov wrote about "pagan theology" of volkhvs, Slavic pagan priests,¹¹ and his influence on the development of Slavic paganism was in some regards similar to the influence of Margaret Murray on Gerald Gardner. At the same time, although Koltunov's criticized the Russian

⁹ Koltunov, *Vstan' Rossija, s kolen preklonennyh!*, 53.

¹⁰ Koltunov, *Vstan' Rossija, s kolen preklonennyh!*, 12.

¹¹ Boris Rybakov, *Jazyčestvo drevnih slavjan* [Paganism of Ancient Slavs] (Moscow: Nauka, 1980).

Orthodox Church, his criticism did not target Christianity itself, and the name of Jesus appears in his poems from time to time as an example of the spiritual being equivalent to pagan solar gods Daždbog and Jarila, that could be described as a single entity “Dažd’ – Jarila – Jesus”.¹²

Koltunov criticized as a repressive social institute not only the Russian Orthodox Church, but the government as well. According to Koltunov, they cooperated to suppress spiritual freedom and traditional national culture that implied a life in a harmony with the nature. In his criticism of the government, Koltunov was equally skeptical about Russian monarchy, Soviet regime and post-Soviet Russian government. He definitely adopted some of the most important tenets of the sixtiers (Russian: *šestidesjatniki*), a movement that emerged during the period of the Khrushchev Thaw. This period, that took place from 1953 to 1964, was characterized by a liberalization of the Soviet regime that started to allow existence of moderate civil opposition. This opposition was not explicitly political, because political opposition was still strictly prohibited; instead, it was represented for the most part in the field of arts like literature and music. As Michael Kort put it, “the Communist Party of the Soviet Union still determined the limits on artistic expression. But those limits became far less restrictive, and artists who exceeded them did so at the risk of their careers, not, as was the case under Stalin, their freedom or lives.”¹³ This liberalization of atmosphere in the arts can help us understand, why poetry, songs and literature in general became one of the most obvious ways to express esoteric ideas in the late USSR.

A doctrine of the Thaw also implied a limited possibility of criticism of the Communist Party’s bureaucracy as far as the criticism did not aimed the party in general, its leaders and communist ideology. The anti-governmental orientation, which was widespread among Soviet esotericists even in Stalin’s age, only developed during the Hruščev Thaw times and never disappeared in later Soviet times. One of the obvious reasons in this case was the fact that governmental officials regularly suppressed esoteric communities in the USSR. Spiritual seekers were also often critical about the materialistic and atheistic aspects of ideology supported by the government. Prominent figures of Soviet esotericism as different from each other as Evgenii Golovin, Daniil Andreev, Vasilii Nalimov and Ian Koltunov shared this common feature.

Although Western esoteric doctrines were definitely a matter of a serious suspicion in the USSR during the Cold War period, “Eastern philosophy,” on the other hand, was considered as a cultural heritage of

¹² Koltunov, *Vstan’ Rossija, s kolen preklonennyh!*, 18.

¹³ Michael Kort, *A Brief History of Russia* (New York: Facts on File, 2008), 205–206.

friendly nations. Birgit Menzel accurately describes the situation: “Thanks to the friendly relations of the USSR with India, many basic texts on Eastern religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, including yoga philosophy and practice were accessible to the general public.”¹⁴ In 1956, for example, a new Russian edition of *Bhagavad-Gita* was published in the USSR, while an interest in yoga rose thanks to the 1970 Soviet film *Indian Yogis – Who Are They?* No wonder that Eastern religions played a prominent role in Koltunov’s doctrine as well, especially when it comes to the practical aspects of KSP. In one of his poems, Koltunov mentions “several pathways to the skies”, including KSP, qigong, wushu and yoga,¹⁵ while Bratenko adds to the list of Eastern sources of Koltunov’s ideas ayurveda, zen and some other doctrines.¹⁶ However, yoga seems to be the most important practice for Koltunov. The Soviet scientist Ural Zakirov, who worked with Koltunov for some time, mentioned in his memoirs: “Ian Ivanovič Koltunov [was] an interesting person, I can say that he had very unusual ideas. (...) I often visited Koltunov at his apartment; usually he met me in a ‘yoga’ posture, he was extremely enthusiastic about it.”¹⁷

In the terminology of KSP there were a lot of words that were taken from Indian religious philosophy. For example, the image of the Earth or even the entire cosmos as a “Universal Ashram” appears several times in Koltunov’s poems.¹⁸ In some of them we can find even more specific terms like “Ishtva Devata” (the term Koltunov used instead of Ishta Devata). Derived from Indian religion, it was interpreted by Koltunov as a guardian angel who provides us with a divine control, transmits divine influence and provides a response to our deeds as a part of the “Cosmic System of Self-Organization”.¹⁹

Koltunov tried not only to create a holistic approach to different religions, but also looked for a holistic knowledge of reality in general, which should combine science and religion. He always used a title of a member of the Tsiolkovsky Academy of Cosmonautics, a Russian academic organization that unites scientists and engineers working in a field of space exploration. Obviously, for Koltunov, there was no difference between his esoteric ideas and his work as an engineer. Koltunov wrote in 1985:

¹⁴ Menzel, “Occult and Esoteric Movements in Russia from the 1960s to the 1980s,” 153.

¹⁵ Koltunov, *Vstan’ Rossija, s kolen preklonennyh!*, 63.

¹⁶ Bratenko, *Doroga k hramu*, 10.

¹⁷ Ural Zakirov, *Est’ v kosmose i naši sledy...* [There are our Footprints in the Space too...] (Kazan: Tatarskoe knižnoe izdatel’stvo, 2000), 28.

¹⁸ Koltunov, *Vstan’ Rossija, s kolen preklonennyh!*, 39, 45.

¹⁹ Koltunov, *Vstan’ Rossija, s kolen preklonennyh!*, 40.

The world is united, and the Universal Science tells about it,
 Not a thousand isolated sciences,
 If only you could break through fears of the circle enchanted,
 The brain would comprehend and understand the World around you.²⁰

Of course, this struggle for a holistic worldview can be regarded as a common feature of the 20th century Western esotericism. It was represented in Theosophy, Thelema, contemporary Masonry and in many other forms of esotericism.

However, a fascinating thing here is that despite many differences, on both sides of the Iron Curtain similar processes related to development of esotericism took place, like a growth of the interest in pre-Christian cultures or merging of esoteric ideas with a theme of space exploration. At the first glance, it seems that there should be many differences between Soviet esotericism and anything we can find in Europe and in the USA of that time. However, despite of difficulties of intercultural communication in the period of the Cold War, there still were a lot of similarities between Soviet, European and American esotericism not only because of the same roots in the late 19th and early 20th century but also because of underground cultural exchange and similar cultural contexts, like extensive space exploration. And if it is correct, why should we not regard the very concept of deep and comprehensive cultural differences between the USSR and the West, at least in the case of esotericism, as a mere piece of the Cold War ideology?

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²⁰ Koltunov, *Vstan' Rossija, s kolen preklonennyh!*, 60.

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