

Translating Esotericism: Russian

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Names of magic and magical specialists

The Russian language has a spectrum of words related to magic and esoteric knowledge. While these words can often be used interchangeably and there is no consensus with regards to possible nuances of their meaning, each has subtle connotations and appears in some settings more often than in others.

One word, *волшебство* (volshebstvo), comes from the Old Slavic *вльшьба*, which means magic.¹ From the same origin comes an obsolete form *волшба* (volshba) and names of magical specialists — *волхв* (volkhv) and *волшебник* (volshebnik). In contemporary Russian, *волхв* is used primarily to refer to wise men of the ancient past, both pre-Christian Slavic pagan priests and magicians from remote regions, such as the three Magi in the Gospel of Matthew. It is also used as a self-identifier in contemporary Slavic Paganism. The word *волшебник*, on the other hand, appears primarily in fictional settings. It is often used to translate the English word “wizard,” and its noticeable appearances include Russian translations of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Harry Potter*.

Another word of Old Slavic origin that refers to a practice of magic is *чародейство* (charodejstvo), coming from the Old Slavic *чарь* (magic, charms, and divinations).² A close English equivalent to this word is “to enchant,” as in “to influence by charms.” In fact, the word *чары* is used in Russia, just like “charms” in English, both to refer to an actual magical practice and to indicate someone’s charisma and attractiveness.

1. Krylov, *Etimologičeskij Slovar'*, 76.

2. Fasmer, *Etimologičeskij Slovar'*, vol. 4, 317.

There also exists a word *колдовство* (koldovstvo). There is no universally accepted etymology for it, but it is related to Lithuanian *kalbà* (language, speech) and originally referred to a practice of chants and spells.³ It is usually translated in English as “sorcery.” It refers especially to folk magic and has connotations of black magic and demonic influence. It is used in academic anthropology to refer to folk beliefs about magic and also as a self-identifier among people practicing various types of magic.

Next, there is a set of words associated with the possession of special, secret knowledge. To this group belong words such as *знахарь* (znakhar’) and *ведун* (vedun). Both come from words that mean “knowledge.” *Знахарь*, just as *колдун* (koldun, a person who practices *колдовство*), refers primarily to practitioners of folk magic. Fasmer suggests that *знахарь*, literally a “man of knowledge,” was originally a tabooistic euphemism for the word *колдун*.⁴ It has a plethora of dialectic variants that only exist in certain regions of Russia — *знатник*, *знаток*, and so on.⁵ *Ведун* originated from the Old East Slavic *вьдѣ*, meaning both knowledge and magic.⁶ It is considered obsolete and is rarely used today. A more popular word of the same Old East Slavic origin is *ведьма* (ved’ma) meaning a witch.⁷ This word has a widespread use in fairy tales and was recently adopted by Russian followers of Wicca and witchcraft.

To summarize, words of Old Slavic origin related to magic are used in contemporary Russian primarily in three ways — in fictional settings, as a reference to folk beliefs about magic, and in contemporary Pagan groups.

Esotericism and occult sciences

Aside from the autochthonous vocabulary, the Russian language incorporates a gamut of words with Latin and Greek origins that were imported during the nineteenth century, primarily through German and French, and later through English.

3. Krylov, *Etimologičeskij Slovar’*, 187; Fasmer, *Etimologičeskij Slovar’*, vol. 2, 287.

4. Fasmer, *Etimologičeskij Slovar’*, vol. 2, 101.

5. Fasmer, *Etimologičeskij Slovar’*, vol. 2, 101.

6. Fasmer, *Etimologičeskij Slovar’*, vol. 1, 284.

7. Fasmer, *Etimologičeskij Slovar’*, vol. 1, 285.

The words “esoterism” and “esotericism” were borrowed in Russian both in their original forms — эзотеризм (ezoterizm) and эзотерицизм (ezoteritsizm) respectively — and with the suffix -ik-, эзотерика (ezoterika). The forms эзотерика and эзотеризм are typically used interchangeably while the word эзотерицизм appears in translations or in the discussion of Anglophone sources when the distinction of esoterism and esotericism is explicit in the original work. To quantify the relative popularity of these words, according to Google Scholar, as of August 2022 the query эзотерика yielded 4670 results, эзотеризм appeared half as often (2440 results), while only eight texts mentioned эзотерицизм. The prevalence of the form эзотерика over эзотеризм is a relatively new development. By contrast, in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century эзотеризм was the preferred term. In the catalog of the Russian State Library, its earliest appearance can be traced back to the late 1860s. Particularly, in an 1868 translation of the book *Les mystères de la main* by Adolphe Desbarrolles, it is used to translate the French word *ésotérisme* defined as “that which one should conceal.”⁸

Around the same time, the noun эзотерик (*ezoterik*, a person affiliated with something esoteric) was introduced in Russian. In an 1877 translation of Karl Schmidt’s *History of Pedagogy* it referred to people who had reached an advanced stage in the educational systems of the Brahmins in India, the ancient Egyptians, and the Pythagoreans.⁹ The word became widespread with the growing interest for esotericism in Russia around the 1890s, as reflected in the 1892 *Critico-biographical dictionary of Russian writers and scientists* by Semen Vengerov, who applied it to followers of Helena Blavatsky.¹⁰

The words оккультизм (*okkul’tizm* — occultism, noun), оккультный (*okkul’tnyj* — occult, adjective), and an obsolete adjective оккультический (*okkul’ticheskiĭ*) were introduced in Russia around the same time, again partly because of Blavatsky’s influence. They were used to translate various words related to secret

8. Desbarrolles, *Tajny ruki*, 76.

9. Schmidt, *Istorija pedagogiki*, vol. 1, 105, 131, 205.

10. Vengerov, *Kritiko-biograficheskij slovar’*, vol. 3, 309.

knowledge and occult sciences, such as the German *Geheimwissenschaft* in a 1904 translation of Karl du Prel's book *Studien aus dem Gebiete der Geheimwissenschaften*.

The words *эзотерика* and *окультизм* are closely associated with Western esotericism and primarily refer to literate urban forms of magic and mysticism. They are often used as synonyms, although some authors might have their own preferences about the use of these words. The conversation about the meaning of these words, however, is in no sense unique to Russian and is defined by the same authors as in the Anglophone context.

More specific terms referring to practices such as astrology and alchemy also exist in Russian as cognates. They came to Russia through different sources. *Астрология* (*astrologija* – astrology), in particular, was known since at least the eleventh century and the word was probably borrowed directly from Greek.¹¹ Alchemy, on the other hand, appeared in Russia relatively late, in the sixteenth century, and the word came through New High German.¹²

Магия (*magija* – magic) is another example of a word that was borrowed into Russian through German at a relatively late moment. One prominent difference with English is that the word *магия* in Russian, unlike the English “magic,” typically does not refer to stage magicians and usually applies only to people who see it as real. Consequently, a debate concerning the difference between “magic” and “magick” had little impact in Russia despite the popularity of Aleister Crowley. While the neologism *магика* (*magika*) is used occasionally to translate the word magick, especially according to Crowley's understanding of it, this word is hardly universally accepted.

In translations from European languages, these cognates, due to their close connection with Western esotericism, are preferred when the goal is to present a text as esoteric. If, however, the goal is to avoid associations with Western esotericism, then the cognates are usually avoided. For the same reason, certain Russian spiritual communities, such as followers of Daniil Andreev or the Roerich movement, avoid the words “esoteric” and “occult” when speaking about themselves.

11. Fasmer, *Etimologičeskij Slovar'*, vol. 1, 94.

12. Fasmer, *Etimologičeskij Slovar'*, vol. 1, 73.

Religion, mysticism, and spirituality

Relationships between esotericism and religion were always complicated in Russia. The majority of authors affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church traditionally put great effort in separating themselves from esotericism and magic. The same authors used words related to mysticism — *мистика* (*mistika*) and *мистицизм* (*mistitsizm*) — to refer to practices that exist in various religious traditions including Christianity. In the Russian Orthodox context they have positive connotations, although mysticism outside the Church is typically condemned.

At the same time, other authors use words *мистика* and *мистицизм* as synonyms of the paranormal. The words were already used in this sense in the nineteenth century and this was later solidified in the Soviet literature, where they referred to “a view that affirms the existence of fantastic, supernatural forces and the possibility of human interaction with them.”¹³ In this sense the words can have negative connotations, as they are associated with pseudoscience and irrationality, but can also be used in a neutral or positive sense among people interested in these topics.

Another contested term is spirituality — *духовность* (*dukhovnost'*) — and a related adjective *духовный* (*dukhovnyj*). Although widely used, these words are notorious for being extremely vague. Kolkunova and Malevich identified several intersecting meanings of these words in contemporary Russia, including the following:

1. commonly accepted, “universal” moral virtues — humanity, justice, and so on;
2. a state of mind achieved through religious life, a contact with the divine;
3. selflessness, dedication to others, often with cosmopolitical religious overtones;
4. personal development, education, self-cultivation not necessarily related to anything religious;
5. (especially in the official discourse) patriotism, the ability to internalize values defined by the state as a part of a normative Russian identity.¹⁴

13. *Bol'shaja Sovetskaja Entsiklopedija*, vol. 27, 596.

14. Kolkunova and Malevich, “Ponjatije ‘dukhovnost’ v sovremennoj rossijskoj literature.”

The lack of widely accepted definitions makes it hard to understand what a particular author means when he or she uses the word. In recent years, however, Russian academic literature has gradually adapted to Anglophone usage of the word spirituality in a sense of unaffiliated spirituality or “spiritual but not religious,” which is now becoming more and more prominent.

The West and the East

Russia historically experienced a substantial influence of Eastern spirituality. This was facilitated by the fact that Buddhism was present for centuries in large parts of Russia. In the Western regions of Russia, the interest in Eastern spirituality was prominent since at least the nineteenth century, embodied in figures such as Helena Blavatsky and Leo Tolstoy. Conversations about esotericism in today’s Russia almost inevitably include words of Eastern origin – karma, chakras, kundalini, meditation, yoga, qi, and so on – that are mostly used within the framework of contemporary eclectic spirituality.

Questioning the place of Russia vis à vis East and West constitutes an important aspect of the Russian quest for identity. There is no universally accepted view concerning this issue in Russian society. Positions differ from recognizing Russia as a part of Western civilization to the notion of a “special path” that is neither Western nor Eastern. Part of this conversation is a claim that Russia is the cradle of civilization, and esotericism plays an important role in supporting this claim. An example is the concept of “Slavic-Arian Vedas,” according to which the roots of Hindu civilization can be found in Russia, and ancient Russian culture has its own sacred texts similar to the Vedas. In the strict sense, the name “Slavic-Arian Vedas” refers to a specific text that is central to a controversial Slavic Pagan movement called “Inglism.”¹⁵ The text was published in the 1990s and was eventually prohibited in Russia due to its claims of ethnic superiority. The understanding of Russian culture as “Vedic,” however, exists in a wider context that does not necessarily imply nationalist views.

15. For a brief overview of the history of Inglism, see Aitamurto, “Rodnoverie.”

Closely associated with this are claims (with no support in academic linguistics) concerning “Russian runes,” although they position Russia closer to Northern Europe. Both claims coexist with an idea of Russia as the legendary Hyperborea, as well as exercises in folk linguistics and alternative history aimed at proving that various languages and alphabets are derived from Old Russian.

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