EURASIA AS A SPIRITUAL REALM? INQUIRIES INTO AN IMAGINED CONTINENT

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses Eurasia as a meta-geographical spiritual entity, an imagined continent, which is still much of a provincialized area under western eyes. By applying a cultural-studies approach, various perspectives on spiritual Eurasia are presented, as they have helped to incorporate this territory into a mythologically, ideologically, and symbolically charged space. This implies historical ethnographic descriptions and stories of various esoteric seekers of a re-enchanted spiritual landscape, from Blavatsky to Gurdjieff and Roerich, but also academic experts of oriental studies as translators and transmitters of spiritual ideas from East to West as well as hybrid forms of religious revival among indigenous people in the post-Soviet present time. Two examples illustrate how new myths are created in post-Soviet Russia: Arkaim as a Russian Stonehenge in the Urals and Eurasian spirituality as an instrument of political ideology, particularly Lev Gumilev and Nursultan Nasarbaev in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: Eurasia, spirituality, esotericism, Shambhala, Arkaim, Belovod'e, meta-geography Siberia, religious revival

INTRODUCTION

This article is about the spiritual dimension of Eurasia, a meta-geographical entity (Turoma 2018, 89)[1], the name of which – before the twentieth century – was associated both in Russia and in the West with Europe's Asian territories. After the end of colonialism and with the emergence of post-colonial self-reflection in a globalized world, Eurasia, the largest continental space on earth, is still much of a provincialized area under Western eyes (Turoma and Waldstein 2013). This article is also about cultural differences, which have become incorporated into a mythologically, ideologically, and symbolically charged space. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Eurasia became an imagined continent with a significant impact on geopolitical and economic realities (Suslov 2018). Russia and its Asian parts have also been considered a landscape of mysticism in western Europe ever since the eighteenth century.

The history of relations between East and West[2] on this continent has been one of the mutual reflections, projections, and reactions between western Europe and the Russian Empire. Religions and belief systems which are considered eastern, such as Byzantine Orthodoxy, Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhism, and indigenous pagan traditions, such as Siberian shamanism, also responded to a longing in Western people for Eastern wisdom since the beginning of secularist modernity. This situation is comparable to other cross-cultural histories of esotericism and calls for further analysis[3] for which,

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[1] The term "meta-geographical" is used to describe cultural, ideological, or other entities which are constructed on the basis of geographical spaces and charged with symbolic meaning. I thank Anna Tessmann, Michael Hagemeister, Konstantin Burmistrov, Birgitte Beck Pristed, Irina Pohlan, and Paul Hillery for critical comments.

[2] The terms East and West are not used as analytical concepts here, but as historically contingent terms of self-description. They have been challenged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in post-colonial discourses, and in recent debates on global dimensions of esotericism (Asprem and Strube 2020). In Russia, notions for metageographical self-descriptions until the mid-nineteenth century were North and South (Schenk 2002).

[3] It would be worth exploring how far a comparative approach of this contemporary space of Eurasia can be reconfigured as connected histories. For a discussion of this concept applied to early modern Eurasia see Subrahmanyam 1997.

however, some of the methodological concepts in the study of Western Esotericism need to be modified (see Suarsana 2020).[4]

Some remarks should be made about terminology. All terms used in this context are problematic in one way or another. Although this article attempts to introduce various esoteric dimensions of Eurasia, the term esotericism, which has never been used for self-description, will not be applied in this context. The object of study is not "esoteric Eurasia". Definitions of esotericism have been developed in Western academic discourse (Hanegraaff 2013) and recently challenged for lack of a globally applicable conceptual framework (Asprem and Strube 2020). Rather than developing a new theoretical approach, a more modest aim is pursued here by giving a survey of material which may inspire future comparative analyses. Therefore, I prefer to use "spiritual Eurasia", "Eurasian spirituality", and "spirituality in/and Eurasia" as synonymous descriptive, in part self-descriptive terms. "Spirituality" is an English term much discussed by scholars of religion since the 1960s. The relation between religion and spirituality – whether it is rather complementary, overlapping, or one of opposition and replacement – has been debated in Western academic publications of the past decade (Huss 2014a, 2014b).

In this article, the term "spirituality" is defined as an "explicit relationship to a reality beyond the goals and reality of the individual", an "experienced approach to a transcendental dimension" (Walach 2011, 23), "something (or maybe Someone) that exists beyond the empirical realm – whether it is God, Brahman, buddhas, and bodhisattvas, or some kinds of spiritual beings such as Ascended masters or devas. Spirituality typically expresses itself in ritual […], is about finding meaning in one's life, receiving guidance for life, obtaining answers to questions about why we are here, what the purpose of life is, and what may happen after we die" (Chryssides 2007, 14).

Recently, a Russian publication has presented the first comparative survey on "spirituality" in the Russian, English, and German language academic research (Orekhanov and Kolkunova 2017). The translation of the terms which comes into consideration here has rarely been studied. It is, however, important and adds to the

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[4] For excellent examples of this modified methodological approach, see the two monographs by Mark Sedgwick, "Against the Modern World. Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century" (2004) and "Western Sufism. From the Abbasids to the New Age" (2017), 1–12.

complexity of the topic, as I will briefly exemplify. The Russian word for spirituality is "dukhovnost'", but this is an inadequate translation. As a general term, it has become very popular only since the 1990s, but the word, especially in its adjective form, carries a long multilayered history and a variety of blurred meanings fraud with tensions and even contradictions. The word has been a key term since the early nineteenth century, first defined as "matters of faith and morality and subject to the authority of the clergy" (Rousselet 2018, 40). Later it became a synonym for Russian culture. Secularized in the early twentieth century, it attained a new religious-philosophical dimension which also included esotericism. In the Soviet period, "dukhovnost'" was propagated as a basic value of non-materialism, morality, and collectivism. "Soviet atheism reoriented itself from the battle against religion towards the battle for a Soviet spiritual life" (Smolkin-Rothrock 2014, 175). It became a unifying ideological principle of what was considered Soviet civilization. But since political opposition and New Age religious nonconformism emerged in the 1970s as well, "dukhovnost'" has also adopted some meanings of the Western term "spirituality" (Kolkunova and Malevich 2014)[5]. In the past decade, "dukhovnost'" has become a politically instrumentalized key element in Russian patriotism (Rousselet 2018). The word is vastly used in a wide range of political and cultural public contexts, always applied in opposition to Western individualism and materialism. The fact that philosophical concepts of the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire, moral principles of Soviet scientific atheism and post-Soviet ideology merge in a multi-faceted mixture point to a historical continuity throughout the changes with only one common feature: the link between religious and national identity.

One of the contradictions in recent neo-imperialist ideology is that "dukhovnost'/spirituality" is not only seen as a unique national feature of Russianness but also as a unifying feature of a supranational, in fact, multiethnic and multireligious Eurasian identity. Eurasia has been connected with a certain spirituality, with a special integrative power, and as such, it has been claimed by some intellectuals

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[5] Recently, the term "dukhovnost'" has also been critically discussed by Russian-speaking scholars as a possible self-descriptive term of Russian esotericism. Anthropological mini-conference as part of the VDNH-XII conference at the European University of St. Petersburg (November 16th –17th, 2018) "Spirituality as a New Religion?" See more: https://eusp.org/news/dukhovnost-kak-novaya-religiya

and politicians in Russia to be a geoculturally unique territory (Ramazanov 2015; Kofner 2011). The West, which this recently growing movement refers to, is America as the antagonistic Atlantic continent more than western Europe.[6] The question, which will be explored in this article, is whether and, if so, in which way Eurasia has been mapped as a spiritual space in its own right, beyond the ideological instrumentalization? What would make it specific and distinct from other geo-cultural spaces, especially in relation to esotericism? And how can esotericism and the "East" be understood in this context? Through a stereoscopic exploration into this "East" as a space, which has been considered by different groups of people as a spiritual unity, I would like to test this hypothesis from the perspective of cultural studies. As a scholar of cultural studies, I expand the focus of description from ideas and religious concepts to subjects, actors, and processes of constructing, projecting, and building identities. By this, I hope to contribute to an emerging comparative view in the studies of esotericism, as suggested by Egil Asprem (Asprem, forthcoming). Before discussing this question, both the notion of Eurasia as a continent and the methodological approach need to be explained: since when and by which criteria has the term Eurasia been used and defined as a meta-geographical continent?

EURASIA AS AN IMAGINED CONTINENT

After the fall of communism, the "grand chessboard", as Zbigniew Brzezinski called Eurasia (Brzezinski 2016), has returned to the center stage of geopolitics, where it had been in the early twentieth century, when Russia and England, two colonial powers, competed for dominance in the so-called "great game". With the emergence of post-colonial discourses and the so-called "spatial turn" in historiography since the 1990s, Eurasia has also gained scholarly attention as a "mental map", a space in which various Eastern and Western empires, civilizations, and religions have co-existed and in part merged for centuries.

But we need to consider that the idea of Eurasia as a continent is a cultural construct (Suslov 2018, 22–28). Both the term and the notion as a continent have repeatedly changed over decades and

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[6] This can be especially seen in the influential rightwing neo-Eurasian ideology of Aleksandr Dugin who bases his writings and public actions on a – more concealed – set of occult-esoteric ideas.

centuries (Turoma 2018, 101). While in pre-World War I Western, especially British knowledge, Eurasia was associated with Europe's Asian colonies and its racial significations, in the cold war period after 1945, it became the most influential key notion for a continental division between East and West. In Russia, Eurasia was first mapped as a continent in the early twentieth-century ideology of Eurasianism, an attempt of Russian émigré nobles after the revolution of 1917 to create a scientific theory of Russian identity. By this, they wanted to preserve the empire into Soviet times and integrate its European and Asian parts against western Europe. What is almost unknown, is that some of these classical Eurasianists were deeply involved in esotericism. Lev Karsavin, historian of religious thought, for instance, was one of the most important Russian esotericists, the creator of neo-gnostic theory, and at the same time a practitioner.[7] In the 1930s, a "leftist" political Eurasianism emerged, breaking with the "classical" Eurasianism of the 1920s. Only in the 1970s began the notion of Eurasia to play a central role in Soviet Russia's geopolitical imagination. Referring mainly to the new political myth of the 1930s, Eurasianism was now directed against a twofold West, western Europe and America.[8] The close relationship of classical Eurasianism and esotericism still awaits further research.

By speaking of Eurasia here, I mean the territory of the former Russian and Soviet empire that includes Siberia, the Caucasus, Kazakhstan, and large parts of Central Asia. Russia has a key position in this area, though a controversial one, claiming either domination or the role of a mediator between East and West, Orient and Occident. In order to understand today's aspirations to spiritual Eurasia, the Soviet history of militant atheism is of crucial significance and will have to be taken into account.

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[7] Information by Konstantin Burmistrov.

[8] In the 1970s, Eurasia was propagated as the "greatest continent that combined two parts of the world", the "sixth continent [...] which shaped the worldview of generations of Soviet and post-Soviet citizens." The ideology of one Soviet people was promoted by the Brezhnev regime which was paradoxically defined by both ethnic national and imperial supranational criteria. Geography became a massively popularized subject providing a supposedly natural basis of the Soviet ideology and national pride of Soviet citizens (Turoma 2018).

PERSPECTIVES ON SPIRITUAL EURASIA

Before turning to the notion of spiritual Eurasia or Eurasian spirituality, some methodological remarks need to be made. The term esotericism appears only indirectly here in the sense that a great variety of religious ideas, movements, and phenomena related to esotericism are being included in the notion of "spiritual Eurasia". Since the use and controversial definition of terms and the problems of their translations are part of the academic discourse on esotericism, as explained above, this article follows the cultural-studies approach suggested by Michael Bergunder (Bergunder 2010). Much of what Bergunder explains about the term esotericism can be applied also to the notion and discourse of spiritual Eurasia, which is associated with other terms like Eastern mysticism, Eastern wisdom, shamanism, etc. Esotericism should be understood neither as fiction nor as an essence, but rather as "a form of identity marker". "Identity itself is not an essence, but a *positioning*, thus relational and always within a social discourse" (Hall 1994, 395, quoted in Bergunder 2010).[9] The topic should therefore be studied under the name that people (esotericists as well as researchers of esotericism) give to a certain discourse related to religion or scholarship. Bergunder traces the contemporary notion of esotericism back to global negotiation processes beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, dealing with concepts, such as religious history, world religions, and Eastern wisdom. Esotericism in this sense can be seen as a historical product of early globalization and colonialism. Early globalization includes also pre-modern migrations of spiritual concepts and mystical ideas, be this along the Silk Road from China to Transcaucasia or Iro-Celtic migrations on the Eurasian continent towards the Black Sea. Since it is not only a form of identification and a set of ideas and traditions but also a social practice, all actors and networks of this discursive field,[10] esotericists and opponents alike, travellers, literary authors, journalists, academics, tour-ists, etc. should be included in the picture.

The elements of a discursive analysis according to a cultural-studies approach applied to "spiritual Eurasia" are all present in this

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[9] Another methodological premise of the cultural-studies approach mentioned by Bergunder is that the perspective of the academic observer is always interrelated with its subject.

[10] Here, Bergunder refers to Bourdieu's sociological concept. He later argues with the concept of "empty signifiers" developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe following Jacques Lacan.

field: the long history of fascination, exoticism, and demonization from a Western perspective on Siberia, Mongolia, the Caucasus, and the Altai mountains for instance, but also on Russia itself; the role of "Eurasian spirituality" as an identity marker by both Russians and various non-Russian indigenous people of the Asian parts, especially in the post-Soviet decades; the naming of "spiritual Eurasia" from within Russia and even the impact of academic researchers on the esoteric milieu, which Bergunder mentions as another premise of the cultural-studies approach, can be observed in the study of shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism. The Caucasus, if it is included in the notion of Eurasia[11], then becomes Russia's Orient (Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2010).

In the following, some examples of Western perspectives[12] on "spiritual Eurasia" will be sketched, then some inside perspectives from the "continent" Eurasia itself. Here, a distinction needs to be made between Russia, i.e. the more western part of the Empire that has always been closer to Europe, and self-perspectives from peoples of the Eastern, the more Asian part of the Russian Empire beyond the Urals.[13]

Firstly, Siberia has always been a landscape of spiritual longing in western Europe, especially in Germany with its specific and complex relations with the Russian empire (Stolberg 2005). The first ethnographic descriptions about unknown phenomena like altered states of consciousness in shamanism for instance by Western scholars in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – many of them Germans – were impregnated with distanced colonial attitudes of alienation, which Edward Said has described as Orientalism.[14] They were shaped either by a Christian worldview, full of contempt for

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[11] In contemporary discourse on Eurasia, depending on countries and geopolitical contexts, the Caucasus is sometimes included and sometimes not.

[12] The history of how the reception of Siberian shamanism, Tibetan Buddhism, and other religions practiced in the Russian/Soviet Empire became part of the history of esotericism is beyond the scope of this article but is yet to be written.

[13] This set of perspectives is an attempt to illustrate the complexity of the subject. Naturally it contains generalizations and calls for further specifications and more detailed analyses.

[14] The lure of the East is even much older. As Rafał Prinke has illustrated on the example of alchemy (see his forthcoming article "The Bitch of Armenia and the Dog of Khorasan: Transcaucasian Motifs and Influences in Latin Alchemy"), exchanges, traveling texts, concepts, and spiritual teachings go back to the Middle Ages.

any lack of civilization and pre-Christian paganism, or by a more neutral world-view of scientific dissection, the rationalism of enlightenment.[15] A second type of appropriation followed in the age of Romanticism of the nineteenth century. Inspired by Johann Gottfried Herder's idea that every people has its own culture, ethnographers and anthropologists set off to discover the peoples and folk traditions of the Russian and Siberian East as objects of romantic exoticism.

In the early twentieth century, the age of modernity and secularization led to what Max Weber (Weber 1946, 155) called the "disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberung*)". One reaction to this was the occult revival and the rise of Theosophy, in which many people, especially intellectuals, saw a possibility to reconcile natural science with religion or spirituality, as well as religions of the East and West. Inspired by this re-enchantment of the world different people with different aspirations set off to explore the Eurasian East: adventurers, such as the Polish nobleman Ferdynand Ossendowski (1876–1945) and the Baltic-German Baron Robert Nikolaus Maximilian von Ungern-Sternberg (1886–1921)[16], travelled in search for revolutionary change, often driven by ideas of political occultism. Some were seeking Shambhala, the Tibetan Buddhist paradise, or Eastern wisdom, trying to establish mythical and esoteric connections between East and West. Since the 1970s, Siberia has become a steady "mind-place" (*Sehnsuchtsort*) in Western New Age, and after the fall of communism, especially since the 2000s, also a brand name on the international spiritual marketplace, striving for attention and commercial success via esoteric tourism.[17]

Secondly, while in earlier centuries either travel accounts from both East and West had created separate complementary exclusive

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[15] The majority of the ethnographers exploring Siberia by the order of the Tsarist Academy of Science founded by Peter the Great were Germans, such as Daniel G. Messerschmidt, Johann G. Gmelin, Gerhard F. Müller, just like early scientists of Oriental cultures and languages (Bucher 2007).

[16] For the connection of shamanism and the Bolshevik Revolution, see Znamenski (2011); for Ungern-Sternberg, see Sunderland (2014); for Ferdynand Ossendowski, see Palmer (2008).

[17] To give just a few examples from Germany: specialized travel agencies offer spiritual Baikal-tours (<https://baikaltours.de/reisen/schamanen-tour-baikaltours/>) including encounters with real shamans (<https://www.newsage.de/2016/01/ur-religion-oder-ur-kult>). Spiritual guidance is offered by therapists experienced in working with Siberian shamanism (<https://www.newsage.de/2016/01/ur-religion-oder-ur-kult>).

images of each other[18], or Western scientists had directed their attention towards the eastern continent, in the early twentieth-century transfers from the East to the West began to have an impact on Western esotericism. Major spiritual teachers of the twentieth century, such as Georgy Gurdjieff (1866–1949), Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), and Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947), were born and raised in the Russian Empire where they lived and practised for a considerable part of their lives. Only later they became influential and famous in the Western world. While little is known about the works and impact of Gurdjieff and Blavatsky during their time in Russia – much is still in archives and has neither been published nor translated yet –, the Russian symbolist painter Nicholas Roerich, a key figure of Russian esotericism, has become an object of academic studies outside of the international cult and myth created around him and his wife Helena Roerich (1879–1955) by his followers. The Roerichs and their reception can be seen as a paradigmatic example for the construction of Eurasia as an esoteric space.[19] In his life and art, which were surrounded by deliberate myth-making and his religious mission, which was transmitted in his writings, Roerich strived for Eurasia as a unique esoteric realm: Russia, with its symbolist art and orthodox Christianity, was seen as the primeval place of culture, the Siberian Altai mountains with their folk religion of shamanism, part of the Russian Empire, were seen as the cradle of mankind carrying magical properties; Buddhist Mongolia and Tibet were ultimate lands of a perennial religion (Agni Yoga) (Stasulane 2005; Andreev and Savelli 2011; Andreev 2008). Although Roerich travelled between conflicting countries and continents – Russia, Europe, America –, financed by both Eastern and Western money and serving different national security services (Ringboom 1966), and although he conceived himself as a founder of a new religion, who ultimately settled in Northern India with his family, he nevertheless remained a representative of the Russian art-religion of the *fin de siècle*. Roerich wanted to establish an esoteric connection between Western, Russian modernism, and Eastern, i.e. Siberian, Indian, Mongolian-Tibetan mysticism. By connecting esotericism, art, and politics in the International Roerich pact (1935) he created an organization, which, together with his

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[18] For an excellent analysis of the mutually complementary negative stereotypes created by travelers from western Europe to Russia and vice versa since the sixteenth century, see Scheidegger (1993).

[19] Roerich did not use the term Eurasia but spoke of the "new land" (*novaia zemlia*) in his Agni Yoga writings.

esoteric writings, teachings, and paintings, has survived the Soviet Union, and which after 1991, has even experienced a revival in Russia and some post-Soviet states. Reconnected with post-Soviet nationalist ideologies, today it has grown into an international network, an esoteric Roerich movement, with representatives in many Eastern and Western countries.[20]

Thirdly, a more contemporary example of the popular[21] esoteric myth of the Altai mountains as Shambhala or the Land of the White Waters (Belovodye), which was promoted by Nicholas Roerich, can be found in a book by the Russian clinical psychiatrist Olga Kharitidi (born 1960). In the 1980s, she was practising in Novosibirsk, where, on a trip to her native area in the high mountains of Altai, she had a life-changing healing experience with a shaman-woman. After this, Kharitidi quit her job, went on to explore indigenous psychic healing in Central Asia and emigrated to the United States, where she is now practising nontraditional trauma therapy. Her book *Entering the Circle* was published in San Francisco in 1995 and became an international bestseller, translated into many languages (Kharitidi 1995).[22] In her book, Kharitidi presents the Altai as the prehistoric cradle of a unified human core civilization, which had a special spiritual connection to the cosmos and from where all other humans developed. Therefore, it is an area with special spiritual energy where excavated graves reveal mummies with messages from transcendent realms. Kharitidi's book can be seen as a typical example of the popular syncretistic mixture of various traditional and new religious myths in post-Soviet new religious movements, in which Siberia and Eurasia play a crucial role.

A somewhat different perspective can be found when we look at the religion and spirituality among the various indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Far East. The notion of indigenous religion in connection with indigenous peoples has been critically discussed in recent years as an attempt to overcome unjustified generic projections (Tafjord 2017). It needs to be considered that, contrary to the ideology promoted in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, there were

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[20] For the contemporary reception of Roerich, see McCannon (2012), 348–69.

[21] For this myth as part of global New Age culture, see, for instance, Ashe (2018) and Jeffrey (2019).

[22] In German: *Das weiße Land der Seele*. Berlin: Ullstein, 2017; in Russian: *Vkhozhdenie v krug*. Moscow, 2000. Available at <https://refdb.ru/look/2337502-pall.html>.

no ethnically "pure" people in Eurasia. Most of the indigenous population east of the Urals has been of mixed ethnic origin since the thirteenth century.[23] Secondly, under the atheist Soviet regime, ethnically defined nationality and religion were tied together, i.e. would be registered in passports. Next to the Russian Orthodox Christian religion, there were three other religions with an officially acknowledged status: Judaism, (Tibetan) Buddhism (in Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva[24]), and Islam (mainly in the Caucasus – Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkariya, and North Ossetia – and in Central Asia –Tadzhikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, but also in the European part of Russia – Tatarstan, Bashkiria, and in the regions of Nizhny Novgorod and Orenburg). After the end of the Soviet Union, when some of these former republics became independent states, others remained republics within the Russian Federation, the religious revival became stronger and more complex. Sufism, for instance, has become popular as both an ethnic and a spiritual identity marker in the Volga-Ural region (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan) since the late 1980s. Religious practices are being revived from regional long term, even suppressed Sufi traditions. New orders are present on traditionally Islamic territories, such as the Naqshbandi Haqqani brotherhood in the Volga-Ural region, which has existed for a long time outside Russia. But as Sufism has spread also in the metropoles and has become part of global New Age culture, people who are interested in the regional Sufi practices at the same time may become familiar with Sufi readings by Gurdjieff, Osho, Idris Shah, or Inayat Khan so that the revival of Sufism has become a multilayered, often paradox phenomenon.[25]

Outside of the traditional religions, there is also a wide range of spiritual, pagan traditions and traditional folk belief systems in this area, which have mixed since the first encounters with Christian settlers and missionaries, with Islam since the thirteenth century, and the entering of Buddhism in the sixteenth century. Animistic

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[23] The indigenous population of this vast territory was mixed ever since the Tartar-Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century. The territory was settled by religious groups and communities which fled from persecution in the West, also by prisoners and exiles from the European part of Russia various ethnic groups deported to the East, and by survivors of the GULag.

[24] The number of registered inhabitants of these republics (ca. 1,5 mio.) does not reflect the actual practice of Buddhist religion (compared to 269 mio. population of the Soviet Union). See Bräker (1981).

[25] For the revival of Sufism in the Urals, see di Puppo and Schmoller (2019). For the New Age in post-Soviet Tatarstan, see Kefeli (2022).

rituals, the worship of pagan deities, living nature, and ancestors in everyday life, a fluent border between life and death had long been co-existing with Orthodox Christian or Buddhist symbols, rituals, and practices.

The religious revival began in the late Soviet period in the 1970s, unofficially, still under conditions of rigid atheist propaganda and sanctions: after all, religious practices had been abolished and severely repressed in the Stalin era. This religious revival was eclectic and hybrid in many ways, which is a characteristic feature of the New Age in the Soviet Union and elsewhere continuing today: mainstream religions (Christianity, Islam, Tibetan Buddhism), their mystical undercurrents (Hesychasm, Imiaslavie (the sacred cult of names) in Christian Orthodoxy, Sufism, Kabbalism), traditional folk belief systems (Shamanism, Tengrism, Burkhanism[26]) and New Age ideas and practices (including Blavatsky's Theosophy, Gurdjieff's teachings, and psychedelics) re-travelling from the West, have all been revived at the same time: some are related to traditions on more local or regional levels, others follow readings by individual or collective choice, as individuals and in groups, all in search for new spiritual orientation beyond the atheist Soviet "quasi-religion of rationalism".

The revival of esoteric belief systems and shamanism in post-Soviet Siberia is a complex phenomenon in which many diverse motives and elements are mixed together. The opening of borders in the early 1990s for the first time facilitated numerous international encounters and conferences; not only Western practising scholars like Michael Harner, Fritjof Capra, and transpersonal psychologists, such as Stanislav Grof, cooperated with Russian anthropologists in experimenting with shamans on site (Kharitonova 2006), but shamans themselves began to appear at international conferences in order to speak for themselves and correct what they perceived as distorted historiography (Zhukovskaia 2011). This situation is somewhat similar to what Suarsana describes for the "hippie revival" in Bali (Suarsana 2020): the serious effort to revive cultural and religious

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[26] Tengrism is a collective term for the primordial folk belief system of all Turk peoples in Central Asia, by some scientists considered the earliest form of shamanism on the Eurasian continent. Early written sources about Tengrism come from China and Mongolia (see Laruelle 2006). Burkhanism was a new religious movement between 1904 and the 1930s, millenarian and originally anti-shamanist, by which Altai people sought to distinguish themselves from other Eastern peoples in the Czarist Empire (see Sherstova 2010). All of these movements were somewhat religious forms of ethnic identity in the Russian Empire, later forbidden and repressed in the Stalin era.

traditions by local indigenous people and academic scholars is mixed with commercial considerations reacting to the demands of a new market, of national and international esoteric New Age tourism[27], elements of nation building and reactions to the challenges of globalization. What may be specific in Siberia compared to Bali: after six decades of harsh atheism, the striving for attention and acknowledgement is driven by disastrous economic consequences for the provincial parts of the dissolved empire. The goals are much less hip than similar areas in other parts of Asia. The case of Arkaim will be presented below as an example of Eurasian New Age.

As mentioned above, there were also orientalist scholars, both from Russia and from the Far East of the Empire, who had an impact on the esoteric culture. One example in the 1970s is Boris L. Smirnov (1897–1967), an exiled Russian neurosurgeon and sanskritologist in Turkmenistan (Menzel 2011, 154), a practising esotericist, who translated ancient Sanskrit texts, studied them in-depth, and published them in academic editions with rich comments. He also wrote for popular science magazines and thereby transferred knowledge from original Indian and Tibetan source texts into the space of the Russian language. These writings informed and inspired people who began to practise yoga and establish conspiratorial esoteric groups. Bidia Dandaron (1914–1974)[28], was a Buddhist lama-shaman from Buryatia, who worked as an academic lecturer of Indology and Tibetology at Leningrad University. Before that, he was arrested and sent to the GULag twice. During the Thaw, when the GULags were liquidated, he was rehabilitated, but then fell under repression again, together with his students, during the Brezhnev era. After being imprisoned and in exile from 1937 to 1956, he was arrested for the third time in 1972 and sent to a prison camp where he died from brutal beatings. Dandaron lived a double life in and outside Soviet academia. Several of his disciples, who later became internationally

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[27] An example for this is the Ivolginsky datsan outside of Ulan-Ude in Buryatia. It has become a site of spiritual pilgrimage for people from all over the continent, of different religions, nationalities, classes, and ages. It is the place where the Buddhist lama Dashe-Dorzho Itigelov (1852–1927), – by his own words went into an anabiotic deep state of meditation to protest against the Bolshevik repression – was excavated in 2002 and found undecayed, with supposedly clear signs of being alive, he is being exhibited to the public once a year. By traditional Buddhists in Russia Itigelov is considered the head of the Russian sangha (community) in our time. (see Zhukovskaia 2011b, 36–39; Al Jazeera English 2008).

[28] In Buryatia Dandaron received his monastic education and was acknowledged as a religious leader in 1921.

acclaimed Buddhologists[29], were initiated by him, others were arrested, too, and followed him to the GULag and later continued to edit his writings into the post-Soviet present (Dandaron 2006; Montlevich 2008).

A third example of how academic scholars themselves had an impact on esotericist culture is Nicholas Roerich's oldest son, the internationally renowned scholar of orientalism Yuri (George) Roerich (1902–1960). After he had studied in Finland, London, Harvard, and Paris in the 1920s, and learnt numerous languages of the Far East, Roerich accompanied his father on his expeditions to Mongolia, Manchuria, and Tibet in the 1930s, and settled in India where he continued his studies in Tibet, taught in Bengal, and founded the Himalayan Research Institute in Darjeeling. When he returned from India to Moscow in 1957, he became a senior researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences. From 1958 until his death he was the head of the philosophy and history of religion sector of this institute. Roerich is considered one of the founders of academic studies of Tibetan Buddhism. His legacy in post-Soviet academia in Russia is mixed with elements of the cult of Nicholas Roerich (*Rerikhovskoe Nasledie*… 2005).

POST-SOVIET NEW AGE: ARKAIM – RUSSIAN STONEHENGE IN THE URALS

In this section, two antagonistic perspectives on Spiritual Eurasia will be introduced in more detail: Arkaim as a case of Russian New Age in Eurasia, and the new, officially supported ideology of (Neo-) Eurasianism with its esoteric leaning both on Russian nationalism and on the nation-building process in Kazakhstan.

In 1987, a new archeological site caused a sensation in the Soviet-Russian world. In an uninhabited valley in the great steppes of the Southern Urals and Northern Kazakhstan, where since the 1960s several prehistoric fortified villages from the sixteenth – eighteenth century BCE (Middle Bronze Age) were excavated, among them an amazingly well-preserved necropolis of Sintashta with one of the oldest wooden wheels (2026 BCE) of the world[30], a new myth –

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[29] Examples are the Soviet dissident, later exiled philosopher and orientalist Aleksandr Piatigorsky (1929–2009) and the Estonian orientalist Linnart Mäll (1938–2010).

[30] According to archeological analysis, the most settlements existed no longer than 150 years.

Arkaim – was created. With the few sparse texts and sites of prehistoric history on the grounds of the Russian and Soviet empires, Arkaim was soon instrumentalized for the new Russian patriotic myth of origin.[31]

A well-known Russian astrologist, Pavel Globa (born 1953), and his former wife, Tamara Globa (born 1957), are key figures in the new post-Soviet Russian New Age. Tamara Globa visited Arkaim in 1991 and she declared it immediately as Russia's Stonehenge. From then on, a flow of several thousand New Age pilgrims have visited Arkaim each year. They attend summer solstice folklore festivals and ceremonies and worship this as a sacred place and origin of a Eurasian civilization, also the traditional Slavic holiday of Ivan Kupala. The tourists of esotericism represent a very wide range in terms of religious orientation: from orthodox Christians to Buddhists, from Tyva people[32] to Islamic Mullahs, from psychics to all kinds of different healers. Symbolic sacrifices are offered on the surrounding mountain tops, collective rituals and public readings of the ancient sacred texts are performed several times a year. The highest peak above the Arkaim valley Cherkasinskaya sopka, the so-called "mountain of reason", has become a sacred site where people mount on by spiraling movement against the movement of the sun in solemn processions to get in touch with cosmic powers, practice energy and other healing rituals. Each summer, hundreds gather to meet the sunrise on another peak Voronya sopka ("mountain of love"). Summer camps on the mountain slopes and stone labyrinths have been newly built by patterns taken from the historical ritual labyrinths of the indigenous people of the Northern Tundra.

There are also special tours such as "On the Paths of Zarathustra" organized by Russian Neo-Zoroastrians, one of the new religious movements in contemporary Russia.[33] As it has been shown in Anna Tessmann's study (Tessmann 2012, 81ff.), Arkaim has been interpreted as an important pilgrimage destination of Russian Zoroastrians, namely connected with the Zoroastrian ancestor Yima or the legendary protector of the Zoroastrian prophet Zarathushtra King

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[31] In 2005, President Putin visited the site and confirmed it as a place of historical Russian identity.

[32] I.e. autochthon inhabitants of the Siberian Republic of Tyva.

[33] According to Neo-Zoroastrians in Russia, this ten day-tour consists of eleven sacred Zoroastrian places (natural: caves, lakes, mountaintops), including later Orthodox-Christian chapels and churches, which possess a "khvarna" – Zoroastrian charisma. Such organized travels are popular among people coming from Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and also from abroad.

Vishtaspa, the figures of ancient Iranian mythology.[34] According to Globa's interpretation who views himself as a Zoroastrian priest and astrologer the Zarathushtra's teaching "will come back to [the place] where it originated" (Globa 2008, 31) what in his eyes certainly refers to Arkaim and the Eurasian steppe landscape (Aryan width) around it. Many of Globa's adherents now claim Arkaim to be a somewhat Avestan twin brother of the esoteric cult at Stonehenge. A mystical connection is seen not only in the same longitude but in the cosmic observatory and gigantic horoscope. Arkaim has become the most-visited tourist place in the Urals in the 1990s–2000s. Whereas in Soviet times mountain-climbing, nature, and traditional crafts attracted tourists, it has now become a space of sacred geography, a place of power, earth magnetism, a mix of psychic, neo-Slavic, and neo-Aryan origin.

Apart from this attraction as an esoterically charged site, Arkaim is also a place where new myths are created. People gather there to communicate across national, religious, cultural, and ethnic borders, searching for a meaningful spiritual community, sometimes with fragmented, eclectic worldviews. Tessmann calls Arkaim a contemporary "discursive crossroads" where scientific, religious, political, and economic interests meet. Additionally, it is an interpretative construct in search of a resurrection of an imagined Eurasian unity.[35]

EURASIAN SPIRITUALITY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Since the beginning of the 1990s, in Russia, as well as other post-Soviet countries, new religious movements have become fashionable as part of constructing a new national identity. Along with resurging movements with a long-standing history, such as Spiritualism, Theo-

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[34] The popular etymology of Arkaim since the "arc of Yima", a legendary king and ancestor of Iranian people, also mentioned in the Indian Vedas (see Tessmann 2015).

[35] Other New Age communities on Russian territory are the "spiritual eco-community" of Vissarion (Sergej A. Torop, b. 1961, the New Jesus) in Tiberkul, Siberia, which is said to be the largest contemporary utopian community (about 5,000 international residents (see <http://www.vissarion. info/>); Kellner 2022, 122–161; Panchenko 2020; Senina 2020), and the Anastasiia movement, which is based on the book series by Vladimir Megre "The Ringing Cedars of Russia" and has become an international East-West movement with about 500 villages and ca. 6000 people (see Andreeva 2021).

sophy, Anthroposophy, and Cosmism, the more recent (Neo-)Eurasianism, Neo-paganism, and Astrology have become quite popular, even though they are strongly attacked by the semi-state institution of the Russian Orthodox Church, but relevant as part of global modernity with their "invented traditions" (Laruelle 2008 and 2012).

Today all moments of national history have been opened to alternatives. Alternate histories include the paranormal, the study of parallel worlds, and the mysteries of ancient civilizations, and numerous para-academic texts claim to represent alternate scholarship. Conspiracy theories, especially anti-Semitic ones, play a crucial role in these so-called "memory wars", based on a kind of post-modern, paranoid cultural imagery.[36] The matrix of the new Eastern spirituality includes a rejection of the Judeo-Christian tradition and and reiterates instead a reinterpretation of the Mongols (Genghis Khan included) as well as the Turkish nomad tribes of the steppes as part of the mystic origins of the Slavs (Shnirelman 2001; Laruelle 2008, 287ff.). One of the major theorists and founders of the neo-Eurasian ideology is another scientist, the historian and orientalist Lev Gumilev (1912–1992).[37] He developed a highly speculative, non-orthodox theory of ethnogenesis including a positive reinterpretation of the role of Genghis Khan and the Mongols for the Russian civilization. Unaccepted in the international academic community, Gumilev's writings have now become standard teaching material in many universities of the post-Soviet territory.[38]

Although Germanic ideas of the prestigious Aryan origin of European peoples were discussed as roots of the Russian civilization already in the nineteenth century by Slavophile intellectuals, Orthodoxy had still remained the primary religious influence before. Neo-pagan Aryanism, i.e. the rejection of the Russian orthodox faith, was introduced only in the 1960s and 1970s by underground right-wing Russian nationalists. A new Russian Aryan myth including

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[36] The historian Marlene Laruelle offers a socio-psychological explanation for this: "The feeling that the limits imposed through social conventions and institutions in writing history were open to challenge worked to reinforce the need to find explanations for the traumatic events linked to the collapse of the Soviet Union" (Laruelle 2012, 566).

[37] One of the state universities of Kazakhstan in the former capital of Almaty was founded and named in 1996 as L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. On Gumilev, see Bassin (2016).

[38] The university of the Kazakh capital Astana upon its foundation in 1996 was named L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University.

national pre-Christian Slavic faith transplanted Germanic Ariosophy and national-socialist ideas to the Russian-Eurasian realm. A forged manuscript, the so-called "Book of Veles" [Velesova kniga], became a core-piece of this new myth: a supposedly ancient text found on wooden birch tree boards, dating from the first centuries BCE, and considered to be an authentic manuscript by Russian nationalists as well as Russian and Ukrainian emigrants (Laruelle 2008, 285). The new term of "Vedism" was invented to describe the Slavic Neo-paganism and thus appropriating the Indian filiation of the Vedas.

In Kazakhstan, one of the most prominent post-Soviet independent states, Eurasian spirituality has even become the official ideology, a major argument for political unification and nation building, promoted by its president Nursultan Nasarbaev (in power since 1990) who called Kazakhstan a "traditional secular society supported by the foundation of Sufi-spirituality, traditional Islam."[39] In 1997, Astana, a city in the northern desert of Kazakhstan, was declared the new capital of the largest post-Soviet state, in the geographical and geopolitical "heart of Eurasia". The Palace of Peace and Reconciliation[40] was opened in 2006 by President Nursultan Nasarbaev, a quadratic pyramid modelled after the Egyptian pyramids, hosting the biannual Congress of leading representatives of the World-and traditional Religions. Alexander Dugin, the spokesman of Russian (Neo-)Eurasianism, has promoted this Kazakh renaissance as a project of his anti-western political occultism with close ties to the New Right all over Europe.

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[39] Sufism is traditionally very popular in Kazakhstan, even among the younger Slavic population who seeks a way out of the orthodox dogmatic religious revival.

[40] The pyramid was specially constructed to host the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. It contains accommodations for different religions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism and Shintoism. It also houses a 1,500-seat opera house, a national museum of culture, a new "university of civilization", a library and a research center for Kazakhstan's ethnic and geographical groups. This diversity is unified within the pure form of a pyramid, 62m (203ft) high with a 62x62m (203x 203ft) base. The building is conceived as a global center for religious understanding, the renunciation of violence and the promotion of faith and human equality.

CONCLUSION

The forced secularization during the atheist Soviet twentieth century deeply affected all belief systems but could not erase them. Driven underground, but reactivated in the 1970s mostly within the intelligentsia, all religions and religious movements moved closer together so that hybrid forms of esotericism emerged under conspiratorial conditions. One result of the long-term political repressions was a longer and stronger coexistence of Christian mysticism, Eastern religions, and traditional folk-beliefs, which in this mixture – even if it is far from being a mass movement – cannot be found in the New Age movement in Western countries. Since the post-communist decade of the 1990s, with a new religious revival, together with the search for national identity or – outside Russia – nation building, the imagined meta-geographical continent Eurasia has now been reconstructed as a geosacral space with a network of old and new sacralized territories, pilgrimage sites for members of religions as well as new religious movements.

This article argues that Eurasian spirituality, indeed, exists as a phenomenon with real impact. In a wider sense, as a historical constellation, connecting religions and space, early forms of globalization, it can be found in

– the constructions and projections of western travellers, ethnographers, and other intellectuals for several centuries discovering and thereby orientalizing the East;
– the migration of Iro-Celtic mysteries to the Slavic territories and the Black Sea (Osterrieder 1995), as well as spiritual teachings migrating along the historical Silk Road;
– the search for earthly paradises in sacred spaces east of the Urals by people migrating from Russia, the western, European part of the Empire; visions of paradises were for instance Shambhala in the magical Altai mountains and "the Land of the White Waters" (*Belovodye*), a peasant myth of a promised land since the seventeenth century which was revived in the twentieth century (McCannon 2002);
– in all co-existing hybrid forms of traditional religions of non-Russian indigenous people, including shamanism, and orthodox mysticism (Hesychasm) or Eastern religions, such as Tibetan Buddhism[41] (in Buryatia, Kalmykia, Mongolia) and Sufism.

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[41] Tibetan Buddhism has been traditionally practiced in Buryatia, in Kalmykia and in Tuva (see Zhukovskaia 2011).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Eastern ideas, spiritual concepts, and teachers began to travel West (Blavatsky, Gurdjieff, Tibetan medicine), while Western, including Russian, esotericists (Roerich) also began to transform the spiritual East of Eurasia. Scientists and orientalists, contributed to this transfer by the translation and popularization of Eastern folk-beliefs, wisdom-teachings, and practices. Here we can observe travelling belief systems and spiritual teachings from East to West and back.

In a narrower sense, Eurasian spirituality is a contemporary phenomenon and therefore closely linked to the post-Soviet atheist condition. Three manifestations can be distinguished: the first is neo-Eurasianism, an explicitly constructed ideology in search for national identity, with political implications and links to political occultism. In Russia, this movement is driven by the construction of national identity, with a strong leaning to neo-pagan Russian or Slavic nationalism, while in other post-Soviet states, such as Kazakhstan, it has become an instrument for a new nation-building process which at the same time offers a global, transcultural, trans-religious esoteric identification. This spiritual Eurasia is mostly shaped and manipulated by actors outside the Asian part of the empire, i.e. from Russia or Western countries.

The second manifestation is a more implicit, bottom-up movement, connected with globalized new religious movements respectively the New Age in Russia. Both create their own mythological past as a history alternate to Soviet historiography. Eurasian spirituality here is a result of the search for a non-Western spiritual identity beyond mainstream religious borders and dogmas, with roots in the late Soviet underground both in Russia and among non-Russian indigenous people. This is an expression of new religious movements inventing traditions in post-atheist space, around sacralized places. Typical for this is a hybrid cross-religious diversity with connections to both ancient Eastern religions (Zoroastrianism) and Western New Age (Arkaim, Altai-myth). In this space, both Eastern and Western religious and esoteric concepts cross-fertilize each other. The historiography of New Age in Russia and the post-Soviet Eurasian imagined continent, however, has only begun to be established in recent years.

A third manifestation can be found in the complex religious revival and diverse perspectives from within the indigenous peoples of the Eurasian East (Siberia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus). What used to be inherent traditional folk-beliefs and practices, rooted in everyday life, after repression and confusion during the atheist Soviet past, now has become a special attraction for globalized actors from

the outside, or an instrument for building local, regional, national identity, economic survival, sometimes leading to distortion or commercialization on the spiritual marketplace.

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