

# RUSSIA'S MYSTICAL ANARCHISM: THE CASE OF ALEKSEJ SOLONOVICH (1887–1937)

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## ABSTRACT

The name of Aleksej Solonovich is hardly ever heard of in Russian studies, nor is his philosophy of “Mystical Anarchism”, although they both stirred up the esoteric and dissident underground of early Soviet Russia. This paper sheds light on the biography and personality of this controversial mathematician, anarchist, and esotericist whose ideas contributed to the final collapse of the Russian anarchist movement. At the same time, it dwells upon the encounter of “mysticism” and “anarchism” in post-revolutionary Russia, which engendered not only a philosophy but also a movement of social protest and a secret society of Knights Templars. Approaching Solonovich’s “mystical anarchism” from a cultural and translation studies perspective, the author takes into account the semantic baggage and scope of cultural concepts, narratives of tradition, and the political mythology of leftist thought. Focusing on the beginning of the twentieth century, the paper offers a long-durée perspective on the development of the Russian New Age culture and a nuanced understanding of its syncretisms.

**Keywords:** Russian anarchism, mysticism, Knights Templar, translation studies, cultural analysis, travelling concepts, Silver Age

## INTRODUCTION

At first sight, the compound “mystical anarchism” strikes as odd. It is neither transparent nor self-explanatory, given that two seemingly unrelated if not opposing terms form a linguistic unity.

Indeed, when looking at the terms’ histories, one finds great divergence in both the context of origin and semantic baggage: “Mysticism” arose from the mystery cults of Greco-Roman antiquity (Bouyer 1949, 5) and came to signify the individual experience and direct knowledge of the transcendent in the history of religions (Wilke 2006, 1279). Since the Enlightenment, however, it has been frequently used in popular parlance as a “weapon to stigmatize” (Lamm 2013, 2) something as pre-scientific and irrational. While the English word implies both aspects, other languages, such as Russian, German, or French, distinguish between *mistika* and *mistitsizm*, *Mystik* and *Mystizismus*, *mystique* and *mysticisme*. In the early twentieth-century Russia, while mysticism was glorified by the Symbolists, its pejorative usage as *mistitsizm* prevailed over its original meaning. In 1901, the Russian philosopher Aleksandr Vvedenskij (1856–1925) noted that the word *mistitsizm* is “often used, especially in order to politely phrase the most severe disapproval” (Vvedenskij 1901, 43f.). In Soviet times, mysticism turned into a convenient “ideological target”, being academically presented as a misleading, pseudoscientific, and therefore “false ideology” (Malevich 2015, 183).

Turning to anarchism, the tinge of pseudoscientificity appears to vanish, for anarchism is usually considered a relatively recent product of the Age of Science. By both etymology and idea, anarchism is actually rooted in Greek political philosophy (Marshall 2018, 66 ff.), though it was not before the nineteenth century that it developed into an “organized movement of social protest” (Avrich 2005, 3) in Central Europe. Anarchists’ suspicion towards and substantial criticism of religion as the belief in a supernatural authority led to the association of anarchism with atheism, a connection that was enforced in public imagination by the political dismissal of anarchism as terrorism, violence, chaos, and moral degradation (Marshall 2008, 74; Christoyannopoulos and Apps 2019; Bantman 2019). Up until today, Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), one of the fathers of anarchism, is read, interpreted, presented, and even celebrated by some as the prime example of a “convinced and fervent atheist” (Carr 1975, 304), whose “passion for destruction” aimed at

abolishing God himself. In Russia, the anarchist movement gained steam only at the beginning of the twentieth century, and its emergence, development, and fate were tied to the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 (Avrich 2005, 3f.). The theory of anarchism appealed especially to Russian intellectuals and presented a “lively intellectual force” (D’Agostino 2019, 409) that offered an elaborate, radical, and economic (and thus “scientific” and down-to-earth) criticism of the state, bureaucratic tyranny, and capitalism.

And yet, despite this apparent semantic dichotomy, history records the encounter and alliance of mysticism and anarchism amidst postrevolutionary turmoil in Russia’s capital. They met for the first time in 1906 in the form of an aloof and short-lived “manifesto” formulated by the Symbolist writer Georgij Chulkov, only to be united again more than a decade later into a syncretistic philosophical teaching and a secret society that adhered to this teaching. That secret society presented itself as the successor of the medieval Order of Knights Templar, thus below the surface, the discussion is complemented by the idea of templarism.

The founder and first “commander” (Nikitin 2003a, 26) of the anarcho-mystical Moscow Templar Order is said to have been the anarchist theorist Apollon Andreevich Karelin (1863–1926), a little-studied political figure shrouded in mystery and legend. Karelin, a lawyer by profession and populist revolutionary by conviction, had repeatedly been arrested and disbarred due to antigovernment activities when he escaped Siberian confinement by fleeing to Paris in 1905 (Sapon 2015, 40). There, he spent twelve years in intellectual and anarchist circles of Russian exiles, before he returned to Russia in the summer between the two revolutions (Ibid., 75). Legend has it that Karelin had been initiated into a Parisian Templar Order, had received the task to establish an Eastern branch of the Order in Russia, and had brought with him an ancient teaching and the memory of more than one hundred esoteric legends of equally ancient origin (Nikitin 2003a, 13). What can be said for sure is that Karelin had maintained relationships with renowned Russian Freemasons (Sapon 2015, 40ff.) during his time in Paris, though it cannot be proven, whether he himself belonged to a masonic or any other esoteric organization. Be that as it might, around the year 1919, an underground Templar Order was formed in Moscow, the members of which were not all anarchists but “represented the cream of the contemporary intelligentsia working in the humanities” (Burmistrov 2011, 75). Among its ranks it counted the theater actor and director Iurij Zavadskij (1894–1977), the prose writer Georgij Shtorm (1898–1978), the art historian Aleksej Sidorov (1891–1978), the Orientalist

Iulian Shchutskij (1897–1938), and the composer Sergej Kondrat'ev (1898–1957). In the years to follow, the Order developed a hierarchical, secretive structure and expanded by four additional branches in Leningrad, Nizhnij Novgorod, Sochi, and Batumi. Its Moscow center was located in the Kropotkin Museum, an important meeting point of anarchist groups in the 1920s. There, the members of the Order organized public soirees, talks, and lectures that aimed at presenting anarchism as a perennial wisdom and the “religion of truth” (Solonovich in Kanev 1974, 397) that constituted the unrecognized essence of Jesus Christ’s teaching.

It comes as no surprise that their interpretation of anarchism met with severe resistance on the part of those who saw themselves as preserving the legacy of “the materialist and positivist Kropotkin” (*Delo Truda...* 1928, 21), not only because of “mystical anarchism’s” religious dimension but apparently also because of its popularity: by 1925, the Kropotkin Museum had become the “bastille of the mystical anarchists” (*Ibid.*; *Delo Truda...* 1929, 25) and thus scene of a bitter fight for supremacy that would permanently divide Moscow’s anarchist community. The dispute was carried out publicly in the years 1928 and 1929 in the monthly anarcho-communist newspaper “*Delo Truda*”, testifying to the open vilification of the “mystics” (*mistiki*) and the “non-mystics” (*nemistiki*) efforts to “purge the museum of the mystics’ dominance” (*Ibid.*, 24). It is important to consider the possibility that “mystical anarchism” did not constitute a mere self-designation but received its name as a derogatory label by its opponents. Their main target, however, was not Karelin, who had died in 1926, but his closest associate and successor as head of the Order, Aleksej Aleksandrovich Solonovich. Solonovich, a philosopher and mathematician, was identified and assaulted as the “mastermind” behind the teaching and the “undisputed leader” (*Ibid.*, 27) of the anarcho-mystical movement. He was accused of propagating a “pernicious and dangerous” reactionary ideology “in the guise of a liberating philosophy” (*Ibid.*). Despite all efforts, the “mystics” appear to have won the fight over the Kropotkin Museum, since even the great anarchist’s widow Sof’ia Kropotkina (1856–1941) sided with them (*Ibid.*). Nevertheless, within the emergent Stalinist system the flourishing of “mystical anarchism” was short-lived. Already in 1930, Solonovich was arrested and sent to Siberia. While in exile, he tried to uphold ties to his Moscow organization with the help of his wife and relentless co-worker Agniia Solonovich (1888–1937), however, in the course of the 1930s, almost all of the members likewise fell victim to state repressions. The Order of

Templars was destroyed, its teaching faded into oblivion, and its leader never returned from exile.

For several decades, Russia's "mystical anarchism" had remained forgotten, the proof of its existence safely hidden in the classified KGB archives. Only in the 1990s, after the Soviet Empire had collapsed and when state archives were gradually opened to the public, the existence, philosophy, and suppression of the anarcho-mystical Templar Order was first documented and inscribed in history.

This paper endeavors to present both the ideational foundation and the actual originator of Russia's "mystical anarchism" for the first time to the Western public. Also, it will offer an unconventional interdisciplinary methodological approach to analyze this complex historical phenomenon that drew upon political philosophy, esoteric Christianity, legendary historiography, and mythopoetic imagery. In order to point out the importance of adjusting the methodological perspective, I will first go into previous research on "mystical anarchism" and point to the dead ends to which it has led. Following the theoretical digression, I will turn to Aleksej Solonovich, the person everything begins and ends with. His biography and belief system will be set out to provide an insight into a worldview profoundly at odds with the world by which it was engendered, and guided by a Faustian revelation saying that anarchism is what "binds the universe together".

Outlining "mystical anarchism" will illustrate that the later Soviet and post-Soviet New Age culture can no longer be seen and studied as an "imported" post-war phenomenon but must be understood as a conceptual progression from its early-twentieth-century esoteric precursors. "Mystical anarchism's" typological features allow for a *longue-durée* perspective on Russian New Age that cannot but admit to certain native Russian traits of New Age.

## HOW TO ANALYZE MYSTICAL ANARCHISM?

All that is known today about the Order, its members, and its teaching of "mystical anarchism" stems, on the one hand, from the memoirs of the Russian philosopher and mathematician Vasilij Nalimov (1910–1997) (Nalimov 1994), a former initiate of the Order who had survived imprisonment and twenty years of exile. In the last years of his life, Nalimov reflected upon and extended the ideas he had come into touch with in his youth (Nalimov 2013; Idem 2015). On the other hand, the contemporary knowledge is due to the life work of the Russian historian Andrej Nikitin (1935–2005), who

unearthed the evidence of the Order's existence in the depths of the Moscow FSB archives and who was the first to review, publish, and interpret this evidence. Nikitin's collection of material (Nikitin 1998; Idem 2002; Idem 2003a-c) comprises poetry written by the Order's artistic members, theatrical plays attributed to Karelin, philosophical lectures held by Solonovich, numerous interrogation protocols from 1931 onward, and finally 137 esoteric legends of unknown but allegedly ancient origin. According to Nalimov, these legends had never been written down before they were published, for they had to be transmitted orally and exclusively to initiates in order to have a lasting revelatory effect on the audience (Nalimov 1994, 313f.). Being an intrinsic part of the Order's rituals, they were told during gatherings and initiation ceremonies and were supposed to support the adepts' inner work towards self-perfection.

The source material presents the researcher with the image of hoary tradition: Apparently, the medieval Order of Templar Knights had continued to exist, operating clandestinely in European and Russian underground, and in possession of texts, rituals, and a teaching that had been passed on through the ages. Previous research on Russian "mystical anarchism" has been hooked on this idea of sacred tradition. Although Nikitin's academic contribution is beyond question, one cannot fail to notice his efforts to find a possible link between the historical Knights Templar and their twentieth-century Russian "successors", as a result of which he was misled by a nineteenth-century German forgery.<sup>1</sup> His approach to his object of study can only be understood in the context of his own biography: Nikitin's parents had both been initiates of the Order, and he had lost his father, the artist Leonid Nikitin (1896–1942), to the political regime at a young age.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore as comprehensible as it is undeniable that Nikitin shared the adherents' emic position in spite of his academic background as a historian. His focus on historical continuity made him single out Karelin, whose rather blurred biography and

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<sup>1</sup> In "Mistiki, rozenkrejtsery i tamplieri v Sovetskoj Rossii" Nikitin hinted at a historical foundation by including an article from 1878 reporting the discovery of a secret Templar Rule that had apparently been found by the German masonic scholar Theodor Merzdorf (Nikitin 1998, 277–300). The Rule implied the existence of an esoteric belief system, which led Nikitin to believe in its continuity. However, as Peter Partner emphasizes in "The Murdered Magicians", Merzdorf's "Geheimstatuten" were "one of the last major Templar forgeries" (Partner 1982, 161).

<sup>2</sup> The family history was written down by Nikitin's mother Vera Nikitina in "Dom oknami na zakat" (1996).

Western contacts provided the missing link in the narrative of tradition, and identify the legends as “translations” from French (Nikitin 2003c, 4). However, going further down that road, one reaches an impasse – any affiliation with French secret societies as well as a possible French origin remain unproven.

Instead, analysis can only be fruitful when claimed historiography is acknowledged as a means to confer legitimacy to recent innovations. As James Lewis and Olav Hammer have pointed out in “The Invention of Sacred Tradition”, “claim and documented historical reality need not overlap” (Lewis and Hammer 2007, 1), when it comes to narratives of tradition, which are a common feature of New Age lore. Shifting the focus from documented to claimed history allows to re-read and re-evaluate the material at hand. My own research in France and Russia, my scrutiny of all the documents available, including unpublished material that to some extent had been neglected by Nikitin<sup>3</sup>, finds that the teaching of “mystical anarchism” was not “imported” but developed on Russian soil. While nothing points exclusively to Karelin, numerous intertextual references, similarities in terminology and content, implicit allusions, and at first glance hidden patterns point to the man in the former’s shadow, Aleksej Solonovich.

Still, important questions remain: What could anarchism possibly have to do with mysticism? How do the Knights Templar, belonging to an age-old chapter of history, fit into this twentieth-century conglomerate? How can one approach this phenomenon ranging on the borderline between disciplines?

Proceeding from my own background in cultural and translation studies, I perceive “mystical anarchism” and its remake of chivalry not so much as “inventions” than as zeitgeist-specific adaptations or re-translations of cultural concepts, most notably of mysticism, anarchism, and templarism. I hereby draw upon the Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal’s notion of “traveling concepts” (Bal 2012). As the title of her work already suggests, Bal’s cultural analysis of cross-disciplinary terminological encounters and semantic controversies focuses on the humanities. In this article, however, her interdiscip-

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<sup>3</sup> The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI) in Moscow preserves a document titled “Hristos i Hristianstvo” [Christ and Christianity] that is kept in Karelin’s file (122/2/215) but must be attributed in form and content to Solonovich. The document contains insightful information regarding the belief system behind “mystical anarchism”, provides in part an explanation of the legends, and points to their Russian origin. Nikitin is listed as having inspected the document, though he did not even mention it.

linary methodological approach is taken out of its original scholarly setting and is being applied in a philosophical and intercultural context. What is of interest to the present study is Bal's view on concepts, which are seen as elastic instead of static, contextual instead of autonomous (Ibid., 22ff.). To visualize the dynamics and mutability of concepts, Bal uses the metaphor of travel, by which she demonstrates that concepts always leave their context of genesis behind and change over time and space, within spheres and networks. Approaching mysticism, anarchism, and templarism as concepts instead of as mere linguistic terms involves taking a step back from the images these terms usually convey in Western culture, and disengaging from a fixed perception of what they are "supposed" to mean. Concepts are not tantamount to words with clear-cut and common meanings; they transcend ordinary language, in that they entail the whole manifold of possibly related aspects, every one of which correlates with and appears within different social contexts and cultural settings.

What Bal refers to by "traveling" is a never-ending "process of becoming" (Ibid., 51), a process of crossing over, transmutation, and realignment. In other words, concepts are constantly being retranslated. Translation in its broadest possible and philosophical sense is not bound to words but to the conveyance of meaning.

Bal's approach operates on a broad understanding of translation that conventional translation studies still struggle with. It has however been repeatedly voiced by the Russian philosopher and translator Natalya Avtonomova<sup>4</sup> who has reflected on the idea and meanings of translation. She defines translation as "the dynamic of transition, the transfers between different layers of human experience" (Avtonomova 2013, 103), including in it every form of "articulation of non-verbal experience" (Avtonomova 2008, 11). Avtonomova's reflections, like Bal's, are based on her professional experience – in this case, the translation of linguistic texts – and like Bal, she offers the methodological tools for a cultural study. Drawing upon Bal's notion of "traveling concepts" just as upon Avtonomova's philosophical definition of translation, I argue that "mystical anarchism" as teaching and organization had come into being due to a perpetual retranslation of concepts.

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<sup>4</sup> Natalia Avtonomova deserves credit for her Russian translations of French philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean Laplanche, and her innovative linguistic work that transferred French philosophical thought into the Russian language. I am indebted to Irina Pohlan, PhD, my teacher and colleague, for introducing me to Avtonomova's works.

In the context of Russian culture, mysticism and anarchism did neither have to be interpreted anew nor forcefully adapted to one another. What surfaced in Solonovich's teaching had already been contained in the concepts' semantic fields: regardless of mysticism's "bad press", Russian cultural and intellectual history had long/always been closely entwined with mystical thought, and yielded various facets of mysticism, such as Orthodox monastic mysticism, sectarian mysticism, or religio-philosophical mysticism. A closer look at these three aspects of mysticism reveals a faint and discontinuous, though discernible trace of anti-authoritarianism. It is found in the group of the hesychast "Nonpossessors" (Bolshakoff 1950, 31f.) and the dissident imiaslavie movement (Graham and Kantor 2009, 7ff.); it manifests most clearly in the anarcho-communist traits of the Khlysts, Skoptsy, and Dukhobors (Jetkind 2013), and can be discerned in the musings of Russia's religious philosophers, to whom the mystical experience of absolute freedom legitimized the philosophy of anarchism (Vvedenskij 2016; Berdjaev 1994).

Russian anarchism in turn has always dovetailed with the semantics of mysticism: Lev Tolstoj, Peter Kropotkin, and even Mikhail Bakunin, whose ideas constitute the pillars of not only Russian anarchism, all referred to a transcendent dimension and the ideal of natural union – despite their undeniable ideological divergences: Tolstoj was convinced that "the divine nature [ ] exists in every man's soul" (Tolstoy 1894, 99) and that it was the "rational" life task of every man to "merge his life with the life of the Father" (Ibid., 95). Kropotkin identified the "desire of unity" (Kropotkin 2002, 22) and "mutual-aid inclinations" (Idem 2017, 229) as an "ever-living tendency" (Ibid., 282) of human nature. Bakunin believed that human beings were "endowed" with an "instinct of natural interconnectness" (Bakunin 1987, 270) and based his theory of anarchism on the faith in a benevolent, harmonious, eternal, and self-regulated universe (Bakounine 2010).

The aspects enclosed in mysticism and anarchism were eventually "liberated" in resonance with the cultural context of early-twentieth-century Russia. The concepts thus underwent re-translation. The same is true for the concept of templarism, though its development must be regarded in the light of not only Russian but Western culture.

Templarism was born in the Middle East during the time of the Crusades in reference to a military organization of monastic knights that had existed until 1314, and was lastingly informed by both the image of holy warriors ready to fight, suffer, and die for Christ, created by the medieval abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, and the allegation of

heresy and malice put forth by the French King Philip IV at the notorious Templar Trial (Partner 1982). Ever since the dissolution of the Order, public discourse has not ceased to revolve around the question of Templar guilt or innocence. Numerous figures of history took a position on the nature of events<sup>5</sup> (Ibid.; Barber 2012; Josserand 2020; Wildermann 1971), and the concept of templarism has assumed many shapes. A close study of these shapes reveals that what lies at the core of templarism is the struggle of good versus evil, and whatever the concept's appearance, it always responds to this antagonism. The numerous re-translations of templarism have been traced by Peter Partner in his "The Murdered Magicians" (1982). Partner's analysis finds the Templars to function as equally convenient players for conservative, radical, and esoteric accounts of history. As a consequence, different narratives have developed, featuring the Templars as either righteous protagonists or evil antagonists. The narrative of importance with regard to "mystical anarchism" presents them as one link in an ancient tradition of alternative belief.

While speculations concerning a possible connection between the Templars and what were then seen as "heretic" groups had already been expressed during the trial, a coherent narrative started to unfold only in the sixteenth century, when the French political theorist Jean Bodin (1530–1596) aligned the Templar case with the fate of other victimized minorities, such as the early Christians in the Roman Empire, Gnostic groups vilified by institutionalized Christianity, and the Jews in France and Spain to sustain a line of argument against governmental injustice (Wildermann 1971, 122f.; Partner 1982, 93f.) In 1766 then, the French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778) similarly compared the Knights Templar with the Manichaeans in the Byzantine Empire, the Jews and Albigensians during the Crusades, and the Huguenots in France in having fallen prey to the conspiracies by tyrants against peoples (Voltaire 1877–1885). Some decades later, Voltaire's conspiracy myth was reversed by the Jesuit Abbott Augustin

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<sup>5</sup> Among them were Dante Alighieri who in his famous "Divina Commedia" (1321) charged the French king with cupidity, the Catalan philosopher Ramon Llull who was convinced of the king's rightness to destroy the Order; the French historian Étienne Baluze who justified the actions of the French government; the French dramatist Francois Raynouard who displayed the innocence of the Templars in his successful verse play "Les Templiers" (1805), the French painter Fleury Richard whose painting "Jacques de Molay" (1806) created an archetype of the Templar's grand master, and even Napoleon who denied the possibility of crime committed by politicians (while his wife bought Richard's paintings).

Barruel (1741–1820), who proclaimed that the Knights Templar had followed a subversive teaching that had originated with Manes, the founder of Manichaeism, had been shared by the Bogomiles, the Beguines, and the Cathars, had then passed on from the Templars to the Jacobine Freemasons and the Bavarian Illuminati, resulting in the overthrow of the French monarchy in 1789 (Barruel 1789a-b; Barber 2012; Strube 2016). Barruel represents a key figure in this context, as does the French pharmacist Charles-Louis Cadet de Gassicourt (1769–1821) who also set up his own theory of an ancient tradition of conspirators, for both of them claimed that the subversive teaching was anarchist in essence (Gassicourt 1796; Partner 1982, 130). This semantic charge also became manifest in the writings of the Austrian orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856), who also maintained that the Templars had shared the beliefs of the Gnostic Ophites and Manichaeans, the Albigensians, and the Freemasons, and even resembled the Eastern Assassins “in their spirit of political interference and secret doctrine” (Hammer-Purgstall 1835, 76). In order to prove both the tradition and the transmission of secret knowledge, the German Masonic scholar Theodor Merzdorf even forged a Templar Rule (the one Nikitin fell for), and it is barely surprising that the potential of this esoteric aspect was indeed exhausted within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Freemasonry and was revived in numerous rites and orders<sup>6</sup> (Le Forestier 1970; Mazet 2006; Mollier 2006). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Austrian esotericist and founder of Anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) discussed the Templars along with the Rosicrucians, the Albigensians, and the Cathars as the joint enemies of the Catholic church and interpreted this enmity as the manifestation of a fight between “spiritual tenets” (Steiner 1991, 78). According to him, this clash had already appeared in the opposition between Augustine and Mani and was resurfacing in the conflict between the Jesuits and the Freemasons who, as the Templars, had shared the spirit of Mani.

This short digression into political mythology pursues three objectives. First, it aims at reconstructing the historical baggage of templarism and setting out the historical context, within which it

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<sup>6</sup> The narrative gave rise to Karl Gotthelf von Hund’s “Rite of Strict Observance” and Johann August Starck’s “Templar Clerics” was retold with Jean-Baptiste Willermoz’ order of the “Chevaliers Bienfaisants de la Cité Sainte”, and reinterpreted in the nineteenth century by Bernard-Raymond Fabré-Palapat who unearthed a charter of continuous succession and a fifth gospel called the “Levitikon”.

was revived. By the time templarism “arrived” in Russian anarchist circles, it was enjoying great popularity within esoteric and (pseudo-) masonic milieus in Europe. Second, it is meant to illustrate the flexibility and translatability of concepts. Since its “departure” from the Middle East, templarism has repeatedly traveled between agitators and recipients, has wandered political discourse, and even dovetailed with anarchism and dissidence, has encountered the idea of perennialism, and acquired a Gnostic coloring with the dust of antiquity. Third, it demonstrates the power of narrative, for the connection between templarism and leftist political thought rests in narrative alone.

This finding is substantiated by a recent study presented by the historian of religion Julian Strube. Strube’s evaluation of the nineteenth-century French socialist historiographies (Strube 2017) revealed not only that socialism historically builds upon a forgotten religious foundation, which had barely been taken into account by the twentieth-century historiography, but also that the historical closeness between religious and leftist political thought is also tightly anchored within the narrative of dissident tradition. When the first socialist schools of thought emerged in the early nineteenth century, the contemporary establishment perceived the socialist reformers as belonging to an ancient heretic tradition that had its roots in the Gnostic groups of late antiquity and was believed to aim at subverting the existing social order. The socialist reformers, for their part, employed the same narrative, though reversed the perspective: From their point of view, they were not heretics but the legitimate heirs of true, pre-institutionalized Christianity, and social reform was, by necessity, to go hand in hand with religious reformation (Ibid., 51).

In addition to a conceptual, translational, and narratological perspective, a glance into the political theology of leftist thought offers another key to approach “mystical anarchism”. According to the anthropologist Erica Lagalisse, leftist political theories, including socialism, communism, and anarchism, develop along “a particular theological thread” (Lagalisse 2019, 17). She points to the German political theorist Carl Schmitt, who in the early 1920s had already assumed such a thread to exist. Schmitt had stated that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts” (Schmitt 1985, 36) for “every political idea in one way or another takes a position on the ‘nature’ of man and presupposes that he is either ‘by nature good’ or ‘by nature evil’” (Ibid., 56). When applying Schmitt’s somewhat generalizing claim to Western political theory, it follows that the assumption of a flawed and vicious human

nature demands for guidance and control by a government. This conservative or right-wing position is opposed by leftist endeavors, most notably by anarchism as its radical other, which, in Schmitt's opinion, operates on the premise that "man is decisively good" (Ibid.).

Thus, Western political theory is traversed by an apparently insurmountable anthropological dilemma. To the cultural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins this conflict is the cosmological consequence of Western mythology and can be traced back to the biblical tradition. The Book of Genesis reports that man had sinned as soon as he was created and had thus given proof of an "inherently wicked humanity" (Sahlins 1996, 396). From this moment on, the gates to Paradise had closed, and God had departed, leaving man in lack and need of guidance and control. In God's absence, Sahlins deduces, humanity's wickedness must be dealt with by his conceptual representatives, e. g., by state institutions. Complementary to the theological preoccupations of authoritarianism, deriving from the idea of divine transcendence, Lagalisse now suggests approaching "modern 'anti-authoritarianism' with the same lens", proposing that antiauthoritarianism "behold[s] the immanence of the divine" (Lagalisse 2019, 17f.) instead.

In principle, this is the lens I am going to apply here, though my approach requires some more nuanced clarifications. First, what Lagalisse doesn't take into consideration is that equating the authoritarianism-vs.-antiauthoritarianism controversy with a transcendence-vs.-immanence opposition leads to an essentialist perspective. It is however important to clarify that philosophical anarchist discourse criticizes essentialist premises. As the British political scientist Benjamin Franks points out in "Anarchism and Moral Philosophy" (2010), essentialist accounts are rejected by practical anarchism and not consistent with the idea of anarchism itself, since they imply the existence of "forces beyond human control" and thus "deny (or severely restrict) human agency and freedom" (Franks 2010, 154). Franks' remark safeguards the very core of anarchism; still, I am inclined to relativize it. For obvious reasons, essentialism cannot be a typological feature of anarchism; however, my research of Russian anarchism shows that the latter cannot do without it either. This leads me to my second clarification. This is not a general backlash against established research on anarchism but a targeted re-view of Russian anarchism with respect to its development in the early twentieth century. Now, a close reading of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Tolstoj reveals such essentialist traits, a superficial overview of which has been shown above. True, none of them had insisted on a purely

benign human essence – on the contrary: Tolstoj saw that people could become corrupted by life (Tolstoj 1894, 267); Kropotkin acknowledged the existence of “two currents of human life” (Kropotkin 1989, 117) running side by side and equally powerful, both the feeling of solidarity and the “self-assertion of the individual” (Ibid., 295). Bakunin admitted that “man often is evil and stupid” (Bakunin 1987, 258), since “every human individual is the involuntary product of the natural and social environment within which he is born” (Idem 1972, 149f.). Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that they all based their visions of social reform on the belief that human beings are invested – whether by divine assistance, evolution, or primordial instinct – with a sense for harmony, on the belief that harmony is immanent in creation (a transcendent reference that can hardly be overlooked, either).

Without disagreeing with Lagalisse’s anthropological point of view but proceeding from my own background in cultural and translation studies, I like to think of this theological dialectic underlying Western political theory as two different perspectives on or “translations” of divinity. Drawing again upon Bal, I propose, albeit roughly, that the concept of divinity has “traveled” out of Christian theology into the political sphere, and somewhere along its journey, has found resonance with anarchist thought due to a change in focalization (a term I import from narratology). Russian anarchism did not ban the concept of divinity, as is widely assumed; it rejected the disempowering implications of its authoritarian use, and thus transformed it into an empowering potential. No longer resorting to the image of an anthropomorphized deity detached from its creation, Russian anarchism deified creation itself, while keeping the conceptual implication of an ideal that transcends human knowledge and existence but functions as regulative principle that ensures social order and ethical conduct. The most representative illustration of this shift in focalization is found in one of Bakunin’s latter and most celebrated writings, “God and the State”, in which he begins his argument by reversing the biblical Fall, turning the tale of the Original Sin (“this crime of treason against humanity” (Bakunin 1970, 11)) into the tale of Original Rebellion, thus bestowing upon man an unknown omnipotence.

These remarks were made to set the focus for what “mystical anarchism” might disclose to the study of culture, anarchism, and New Age, when looked at from a different angle.

## ALEKSEJ SOLONOVICH'S ANARCHIST KNIGHTHOOD

As has been indicated above, “mystical anarchism” appears to be the creative product of one man, whose name is hardly ever heard of, if anything in detailed studies on Russian anarchism. Aleksej Solonovich was born into a family that belonged to the Russian nobility (Memorial) but was resident, at the time of his birth, in Kazimierz-Dolny, Poland (Nikitin 2003b, 140). His father and uncle both were high-ranking officers in the Imperial army (Orlovskij gubernskij statisticheskij komitet 1897, 194f), and Solonovich, too, was sent to military school, after the family had moved to Karachev in Russia. From 1907 to 1914, Solonovich attended Moscow State University, studying at the Mathematics Faculty, which at that time employed today’s renowned mathematicians, such as Pavel Nekrasov (1853–1924) and Dmitri Egorov (1869–1931). After he had obtained his university degree, the faculty offered him a teaching position; later, he also taught mathematics and mechanics at Bauman Technical University (Nikitin 2003b, 141).

In the aftermath of the February Revolution, Solonovich appeared on the public scene: Having avowed himself an anarchist, he started publishing political articles (Solonovich 1917a-b), joined anarchist associations (Nikitin 2003b, 141), and gave philosophical lectures on anarchism as a worldview – first to private audiences only, then, from 1921 onwards, he lectured publicly in the Kropotkin Museum. His acquaintance with Karelin and affiliation with the Moscow Templar organization must have taken place around the year 1919, when Solonovich became a member in Karelin’s All-Russian Federation of Anarchist-Communists (Ibid., 140). Apart from his political activity, another crucial biographical aspect is his involvement with the Moscow Anthroposophical Society, of which he had been a member sometime before he went into politics (Gorinevskij 1993, 219). Even though he eventually (not later than the 1920s) “drastically broke with Anthroposophy and became its uncompromising opponent” (Zhemchuzhnikova 1988, 43), his ideas remained heavily influenced by Rudolf Steiner. Probably due to his affiliation with Anthroposophy, he was well-known in Symbolist circles; however, his teaching of “mystical anarchism” had nothing to do with the doctrine of the same name that had been postulated by the Symbolist writer Georgij Chulkov<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It needs to be highlighted that early twentieth-century Russia saw the postulation of two theories of “mystical anarchism” that, however, had not

in 1906, “for which Solonovich had nothing but contempt” (ibid., 42).

Despite his family’s ties to the Tsarist Establishment, Solonovich early on found himself in confrontation with state authority. He first got in trouble at the age of seventeen for engaging in anti-government activities. In 1911, he participated in student riots, as a consequence of which he was temporarily excluded from Moscow university. Three years later, he had to stand trial for his first book “The Wanderings of the Spirit”. In 1925, then, he was first arrested on charge of conspiratorial anarchist activities but soon released, only to be arrested again five years later as head of an anarcho-mystical organization and to never return from exile (Nikitin 2003b, 140ff.). One of the main charges against him was his authorship of a six-volume treatise titled “Bakunin and the Cult of Yaldabaoth”, which presented anarchism’s prime atheist as a deeply religious man who would have fought for the liberation of mankind from communist and Soviet power (*Delo Truda...* 1926, 5). Unfortunately, his scandalous work is nowhere to be found,<sup>8</sup> though its title alone bears witness to the unconventionality of Solonovich’s anarchist thought. Despite the absence of Solonovich’s magnum opus, the surviving and largely unpublished material allows for a reconstruction of the teaching he developed. Its complexity makes it impossible to present it here in its entirety, which is why this article focuses on the conceptual basis “mystical anarchism” was built upon.

Now, what actually is “mystical anarchism”?

“Mystical Anarchism” is neither a religious doctrine nor a political ideology. It can rather be described as a social and cultural theory that was meant to offer an alternative to an increasingly Westernized world. Its main target was not so much the state as such as it was a state-approved positivist scientism engendering a rationalist, mechanistic, and deterministic worldview deprived of any spiritual dimension whatsoever. Its “dissatisfaction with the approaches to reality” (Hanegraaff 2013, 42), forwarded by official culture, and search for alternatives brings it close to the post-war New Age counterculture.

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been connected. Although Chulkov’s vision was short-lived and never brought to life, it is his name that in academic circles is generally associated with “mystical anarchism”, which is probably due to the supportive foreword to Chulkov’s anarchist manifesto written by the famous Symbolist poet Viacheslav Ivanov.

<sup>8</sup> It is probably preserved in the FSB archive of Tomsk region, Solonovich’s last station in exile.

Solonovich's chosen archenemy was Marx, more precisely, his theory of historical materialism. His critique of Marxist philosophy serves to open up a conceptual analysis of "mystical anarchism". Since Marx regarded German philosophy as gridlocked in the Hegelian tradition and stuck "upside-down" in Hegel's Spirit, he set about placing it back on its feet by arguing that material conditions alone – not abstract ideas – were the true engine of social change, evolution, and progress. Keeping Hegel's dialectical approach, Marx believed historical progress to be contingent on overcoming the contradictions, i.e. the injustices inherent within every economic system, which at some point would eventually lead to a more advanced economy, beneficial material conditions, and social justice. The ultimate level of social development would be reached with communism. By predicting the evolutionary stages of man and society, Marx formulated a law of history, which Solonovich perceived to be nothing but presumptuous. If Marx claimed to have found a scientific constant of evolution, and a materialist one on top of that, then Solonovich would hold science against him. In one of his lectures, dedicated to the "Criticism of Materialism" (and Marxism per se), Solonovich explains to his students:

Let us think about how matter was pictured at that time and is still pictured today. Matter was pictured in atomistic form, but if we take this point of view, if we agree that everything consists of atoms and their combinations, then things differ from each other only insofar as there are different atomic combinations. [...] And since matter is not characterized by consciousness but by expansion, a dialectical process is not possible here, for one atomic combination cannot contradict another – that is nonsense. (Solonovich in Nikitin 2003c, 447) [translation by the author]

Having pointed to the error in Marx's materialist reasoning, Solonovich concluded that any theory of evolutionism based upon materialist premises must necessarily be false, for he defined evolution as the coming into being of what has not been before. He countered Marx's historical materialism with a 'creation from nothing' – 'nothing' being the source of all existence and the transcendent impetus for evolution that Marxist philosophy was lacking. Solonovich's idea of a *creatio ex nihilo* is illustrated most vividly in the opening scene of his first publication "The Wanderings of the Spirit" (1912), devoted to the creative force of the transcendent. Using the language of mystical experience, he described it as the realm of "Nothingness" (*Nichto*), "Nonbeing" (*Nebytie*), and the Unmanifested (*Neprojavlennogo*)

that is “ineffable” (*nevyrazimoe*), “unfathomable” (*neob’iatnaia*), and “unknowable” (*neizvestnaia*) (Solonovich 1914, 9ff.). Every single particle existing in material reality has transitioned out of this realm, though it is emphasized that this transition is spontaneous, arbitrary, and unpredictable – in short anarchic.

The realm of the transcendent equals a fundamental omnipotence, harboring all “potentiality (the possibilities) of reality” (Solonovich in Nikitin 2003c, 445). The parallel to thermodynamics and its category of potential energy stored and conserved in an isolated system surely was not coincidental, since Solonovich referred to thermodynamics to demonstrate that life on earth, and thus human consciousness, is unpredictable, for every gas atom is “absolutely free” (*absolutno svoboden*), its movements “absolutely random” (*absolutno proizvol’no*) (Solonovich, lecture no. 10.1).<sup>9</sup> Yet, he argued, just like the entirety of freely moving particles results in heat energy, every human being is an integral part of the whole and contributes to “a kind of consistency” (*Ibid.*, 8) in history. Therefore, although the course of history cannot be predetermined as Marx postulated, it is informed by natural consistencies, which remain transcendent to mankind but can be theoretically described by mathematical probability. Again pointing to thermodynamics, Solonovich reminded that, according to probability theory, the entropy, i.e. the number of possible particle combinations or simply the “state of disorder” in a given system, will increase over time – in Solonovich’s understanding, chaos would reign supreme; cultures and societies would eventually complete their cycle of life and perish, as it demands the ancient Hindu law of *kalpa*. Unless there was a supernatural counterforce that could change the course of history. Here, Solonovich referred to James Maxwell’s nineteenth-century thought experiment, according to which an increase in entropy could theoretically be obstructed, if an imaginary demon were to appear who was able to understand, guard, and redirect the motion of molecules. Maxwell’s reasoning is key to understanding Solonovich’s social vision:

So, these considerations tell us that in the case of humanity, concerning its sociological and historical reality, we need a kind of demon, a superhuman, who can understand the course of history, the laws of social reality, and is capable of giving impulses and directions. Such a genius can only be born out of pneumatism. (*Ibid.*, 9.)

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<sup>9</sup> The following lectures represent unpublished material, which I have received from Nalimov’s widow Zhanna Drogalina.

The vision that invigorated “mystical anarchism” saw the possibility to influence both the history and destiny of humanity by lending new “meaning” (*smysla*) to the course of events. However, these “impulses” (*impul'sy*) could only be initiated by those who had become enlightened by the spirit, whom Solonovich called “pneumatics” (*pnevmatiki*). Here, he employs the anthropological classification system of Gnostic theology, trisecting humanity into the lowest class of “hylics” (*giliki* – people of the flesh), the class of “psychics” (*psikhiki* – people of the soul), and the highest class of “pneumatics” (people of the spirit). Gnosticism proves to be a main aspect of “mystical anarchism”: the legends’ cosmological setting is clearly modelled on Gnostic myth, and Gnostic dualism is reflected in the all-pervasive idea of a cosmic struggle between good and evil. The use of Gnostic anthropology discloses the abyss gaping between Solonovich’s egalitarian vision of social justice and his intellectual elitism.

In Solonovich’s mental universe, pneumatics must abide by certain pneumatic principles, the implementation of which will set the “demonic” impulses needed for the benefit of the society. One principle is anarchism as the only “truly” socialist way of life (Ibid., 5) and necessary counterforce in the cosmos of violence and domination, created and reigned by the evil creator-god Yaldabaoth (Idem, lecture no. 10.2, 30). Solonovich’s reading of the New Testament perceived anarchism to lie at the core of Jesus Christ’s teaching, which, however, had been either deliberately ignored or simply not recognized by the apostle Paul, who, unwilling to part with the Jewish tradition, had been too ignorant and ambitious for power. In an 80-page inflammatory pamphlet titled “Christ and Christianity”, Solonovich constructs his own exegesis aimed at proving that Jesus had taught anarchist values, that the apostle Paul had distorted primitive Christianity, and that the apostle Peter had established a “satanic Church” (Idem., *Khristos i khristianstvo*: 16). The pamphlet discloses a religiously founded anti-Judaism that might explain why the legends principally exclude Jews from the possibility of pneumatic enlightenment (Nikitin 2003c, 50ff.; legend no. 22). Jesus is presented as an initiate of a powerful but secret organization that had somehow been “close to the Essenes” (RGALI, 35) and had prepared Jesus for his mission. Quite paradoxically, this nebulous background story is entangled with an often-literal exegesis, but serves to imply a spiritual tradition and perennial teaching that had been transmitted to Jesus and by Jesus to a group of secret disciples who then, in turn, had originated the Gnostic schools of thought. Similar to the socialist revolutionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Solonovich attempts to sacralize anarchism and weave it into a history

of tradition by projecting it into a legendary past and presenting it as the continuation of the Early Church. In striking accordance with Tolstoj's religious views (Aleksandrova 2017), Solonovich holds that the essence of anarchism could not only be found in primitive Christianity but also in the ideas of Buddha and Krishna, who had taught "equality" (*ravenstvo*), "fraternity" (*bratstvo*), and "philanthropy" (*chelovechestvo*) (Solonovich, lecture no. 5, 13). Their ideas of non-violence (*nenasilie*) had repeatedly resurfaced in history, in the teachings of Joachim of Fiore, Thomas Müntzer, John of Leiden (*Ibid.*, 14), had invigorated the deeds of the crusader knights and the Freemasons (*Idem* in Nikitin 2003c, 482), and had then reappeared in the visions of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Tolstoj, whom Solonovich named "the three magi from the East" (RGALI, 3) and the greatest "precursors of the Paraclete" (Solonovich, lecture no. 5, 15).<sup>10</sup> To him, the establishment of an anarchist society would erect the "Kingdom of Heaven on earth, coinciding with the state of anarchy" (*Ibid.*, 14). Solonovich's "Kingdom of Heaven" presupposes an anarcho-communist society without domination or inequality in possession, though entitled to an individualism that, as he emphasized, had nothing to do with Max Stirner's "egoistic" individualist theory but finds expression in the "right to creativity" (*pravo na tvorchestvo*) (*Idem* 1917b, 35; *Idem*, lecture no. 2, 21).

Solonovich saw the legitimacy of anarchism in its "true realism" (*Idem.*, lecture no. 10.1, 5), for the teaching of anarchism attended to the factual social conditions of the world of today – in marked contrast to Marxist philosophy, which merely promised "future well-being, a future socialist paradise," for which "one has to sacrifice the present" (*Ibid.*). It is the direct confrontation with reality that links anarchism with mysticism, another pneumatic principle.

Attention must be drawn here to Solonovich's mastery of language, by which he subtly shifts the semantic focalization of concepts. While presenting both anarchism and mysticism as capable of revealing the "true reality of human existence" (*Idem*, lecture no. 10.2, 18), he dumps Marxism into the dubious jungle of *mistsizm* labelling it as an "absurdity" (*nelepost'*) (*Idem* in Nikitin 2003c, 448), "nonsense" (*bessmyslitsa*), "rubbish" (*chepukha*) (*Ibid.*, 454), and simply as a "lie" (*lozh'*) (*Ibid.*, 485).

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<sup>10</sup> In Christian theology, "Paraclete", meaning "comforter", "consoler" or "Spirit of Truth", refers to "the figure that Jesus himself promised would come to fulfil his teaching" (Baker-Brian 2011, 53). In Gnostic theology, the term is commonly associated with the prophet Mani, whose visions gave rise to the Gnostic current of Manichaeism, and who identified himself as the Paraclete announced by the Messiah (see *Ibid.*).

The semantic dislocation is complemented by a typological classification, identifying four different types of mysticism: According to Solonovich, its most simple form was to be found in the “mysticism of the elements” (*mistika stikhijnykh sil*) as it was practiced by sorcerers and shamans, and by “hylics” in general. On a higher level he placed “human mysticism” (*mistika chelovecheskaia*) defined by the religion of the ancestors and the perception of reality shared by several “psychics” (*psikhiki*) in the guise of political figures, social reformers, and scientists, such as Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, and Rudolf Steiner. In the transitional stage from psychism to pneumatism, the most dangerous form of mysticism was likely to appear – the “mysticism of darkness” (*mistika t'my*) or the “mysticism of evil” (*mistika Zla*), which would become manifest in the “fight for power and pleasure”. Therefore, mysticism in its highest form could only arise from pneumatism, and would not arouse the thirst for power but lead to “sacrificial love”. This is what Solonovich called “the mysticism of light” (*mistika sveta*) (Idem, lecture no. 10.1, 2f).

Contemplative experience was meant to bring full awareness of reality, which would be followed by conscious deeds. To Solonovich, everyone who acted consciously was a mystic. However, conscious deeds could only result from the ability to distinguish between good and evil. Those who had acquired this ability and acted correspondingly were eligible for knightly status. Spiritual insight finding expression in ethical conduct constituted the core of Solonovich’s concept of templarism, a third pneumatic principle. It remains faithful to the antagonism of good versus evil that is at its core. The legends feature the Templar knights as protagonists who fight in the “army of light” (Nikitin 2003c, 72) against the forces of darkness. Ethics and spirit combined would then necessarily converge into “an anarchist knighthood and chivalric anarchism” (RGALI, 38), and these spiritual knights, assuming the role of vanguard warriors, would lead the way into the “Kingdom of Freedom” (Ibid.). Solonovich’s “translation” of templarism served the Order’s self-identification and legitimization. Furthermore, it represented a call to action (*delanie*). Since, according to him, “the last knights of freedom” (Solonovich in Nikitin 2003c, 482) had died with the Anabaptists in the German peasants’ war, new warriors needed to rise and “retake” the cross. Thus, templarism as a form of *imitatio Christi* implied the resurrection of pre-institutionalized, anarchist Christianity.

The conceptual triad of anarchism, mysticism, and templarism constitutes the ideational foundation of the teaching that went down in Russian history as “mystical anarchism”.

It proves challenging to give a general outline of and at the same time do justice to Solonovich's teaching. It is all-embracing and, after all, elliptic. It is open-minded and yet imperious, allowing of no deviation from its principles. It is both egalitarian and elitist, humanistic and sharp as a whiplash. It is strikingly elaborate, though contradictory in its very essence. Its contrariness oddly reflects its reception in Russia's political underground: Solonovich's fighting spirit, provoking eloquence, and uncompromising views breaking harshly with Soviet reality antagonized fierce adversaries but also attracted a whole regiment of ardent followers.

One of them, Vasilij Nalimov, Solonovich's close disciple and early representative of the Russian New Age, revived and elaborated on his teacher's ideas. Solonovich's views are scattered throughout Nalimov's philosophical works and form the basis of his probabilistic theory of culture. They were further carried on by the renowned Russian writer Vasilij Golovanov (1960–2021), who had been Nalimov's disciple for many years. In a radically different way, Solonovich's legacy still lives on: The Templar legends, most of which doubtlessly penned by Solonovich himself, have found their way into the neopagan "Rodnoverie" movement. At the end of the 1990s, Aleksandr Khinevich, the leader of the Church of Ynglings, published a collection of allegedly ancient "Slavo-Aryan Vedas", which contain some of the legends Nikitin claimed to have discovered shortly before (Slaviano-Arijskie Vedy 1999).<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Some parts of the history of Russia's "mystical anarchism" still remain in the dark – what were the concrete influences giving birth to "mystical anarchism"? What was the scope of the movement? How did the Moscow Templar Order actually come into being? Nevertheless, the given outline has laid down the teaching's conceptual basis and offered a new methodological approach that regards culture, both mainstream and subcultures, as mosaics of concepts, each configuration presenting one potential translation thereof. Above all, it presented the hitherto unacknowledged mastermind behind "mystical anarchism", whose personality, thoughts, and social vision invigorated an intellectual movement of social protest and significantly contributed to the downfall of Russian anarchism.

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<sup>11</sup> On Khinevich see Aitamurto (2016, 50ff.).

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