

Soviet notebook

Crackdown on parapsychology

Moscow parapsychologist Eduard K. Naumov, sentenced to two years hard labour last March, was reportedly beaten in prison in December. Two weeks ago, it was reported that parapsychologist Larissa Vilenskaya, who had previously been permitted to visit Naumov in jail, had herself been arrested.

Naumov's trial and the dismissal from their posts of others who had been active in parapsychology in Russia in the 1960s marks the end of a phase during which free and indeed spirited discussion of parapsychological topics was permitted throughout the Soviet Union, and during which a fair amount of informal and unofficial East-West contact was at least tolerated.

Naumov was apparently convicted of taking fees for his lectures without the permission of the appropriate authorities. According to reports from Russia, the fees seem to have been collected in the normal way by the club's director and his assistant. However, both were subsequently declared psychologically unfit to testify, certified schizophrenic, and referred for some unspecified form of involuntary treatment at the Serbsky Institute of Forensic Psychological Expertise. This institute's director, Dr Andrej Snezhnevsky, is widely known for his psychiatric zeal on behalf of ideological orthodoxy and for his opposition to parapsychology.

At the trial Snezhnevsky himself gave evidence to the effect that parapsychology was a pseudo-science based on idealism and mysticism. Although 40 witnesses said they had bought their tickets from the club's director or his representative, Naumov was found guilty and sentenced to two years in a camp.

According to Lev Regelson, a Moscow physicist, Naumov's offence was twofold: first, despite reiterated warnings from the KGB he had "maintained free, personal, human contacts with foreign scholars..." and made use of the material he received for disseminating information on parapsychology in the USSR. Naumov's second fault is ideological. Up to most recent times parapsychology has been looked on in the Soviet Union as "mysticism" and "pseudo-science," sharing the fate of the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, cybernetics, genetics etc.

The official Soviet attitude towards psychical research has fluctuated extensively. In 1924, A. V. Lunakharsky, Commissar for Education, took the initiative in forming a Soviet Committee for Psychical Research. Extensive work was financed at the University of Leningrad at the Institute for Brain Research, as a result of Academician V. M. Bekhterev's enthusiasm for the subject. L. L. Vasiliev, a former student of Bekhterev's demonstrated to his own satisfaction that telepathic influence at a distance may indeed occur.

The research was then discontinued,

and the official Soviet attitude hardened against parapsychology. Telepathy was treated as a mystical and anti-social superstition and nothing further was heard of parapsychology in Russia until the late 1950s. Then, as a result of French newspaper articles, rumours began to circulate that American researchers had disproved the "brain-radio" theory as a result of ship-to-shore telepathy experiments involving the US atomic submarine Nautilus.

The Nautilus "experiments" probably were mythical. But the claims had one tangible consequence: the Soviet authorities permitted Vasiliev, then professor of physiology and holder of the Order of Lenin, to publish his own earlier work which decades previously had ostensibly demonstrated that whatever mediates telepathic influencing, radio-type brain waves apparently do not. Vasiliev was also allowed to open a unit for the study of parapsychology at the Institute for Brain Research.

Vasiliev's work first reached the West with an English translation of his monograph Experiments in Mental Suggestion in 1963. The result was instant international interest. Numerous Western researchers travelled to Russia and found a fair amount of activity and interest in the paranormal, although the focus was frequently different from that in the West. Russian workers tended to be far more preoccupied with physical and biological effects than with the so-called "mental" phenomena of telepathy and clairvoyance, on which Western researchers have concentrated in recent times. Russians, for example, pioneered Kirlian photography (see New Scientist, vol 62, p 160).



Dr J. G. Pratt was among the first parapsychologists to visit the Soviet Union after the publication of Vasiliev's work. He described the differences in atmosphere pervading two conferences in 1963 and 1968, both organised and chaired by Naumov. During the first, free and cordial exchange of views was possible; the second was overshadowed by an article in Pravda attacking parapsychology which, in Pratt's words, "largely wrecked the formal plans for the programme". Most of the Russians declined to speak, Western visitors were pressed to deliver impromptu lectures, and the House of Friendship withdrew its invitation to hold further meetings or allow films to be shown there.

From this time onwards, with certain fluctuations, official hostility towards parapsychology increased in the Soviet Union. Russian authorities took the strongest possible exception to Schroeder and Ostrander's best seller Psychic Discoveries behind the Iron Curtain, based on the author's visit to the USSR in 1968. Naumov is cited throughout as the two

journalists' guide and mentor. Unfortunately, the Voice of America beamed a radio programme into Russia discussing the Schroeder and Ostrander book, a broadcast that was construed as a politically motivated attack using parapsychology as a weapon.

Apart from this episode, it is not entirely clear why Soviet officialdom should have taken such fierce exception to a frankly popular, sensational, and rather chaotic book, which is not likely to be taken seriously by Western scientists. The most plausible interpretation seems that the Russians are worried that they might be believed by the world's scientific community to be self-proclaimed champions and leaders of parapsychology, as expounded by Schroeder and Ostrander. In fact, Soviet scientists are just as divided among themselves concerning parapsychology as scientists elsewhere.

In October 1973 a long and detailed paper entitled Parapsychology: fiction or reality? was published in Questions of Philosophy, an official publication of the Soviet Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, by four eminent members of the Moscow Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. They explicitly set out "to express the viewpoint of the USSR Society of Psychologists towards parapsychology." "Obviously" they write, "some so-called parapsychological phenomena do happen; however, the main obstacle to the acceptance of their existence is ignorance of the basis of their operation."

It is not clear from this paper just which parapsychological phenomena "obviously do happen"; the only ones which the authors unambiguously support as authentic, such as Kirlian photography and Rosa Kuleshova's "dermal-optical vision"—the alleged ability to "see" colours by touching them—are explicitly stated not to be parapsychological.

A large portion of the paper is in fact devoted to a denunciation of "militant parapsychologists," popular credulity, fraudulent practices, physicists who quite unnecessarily change their jobs to investigate paranormal phenomena, sensationalistic journalists, and institutions such as the Institute for Technical Parapsychology (which is cited by name).

It seems plain that the authors are anxious to discredit as a myth any idea of a "parapsychological movement" in Russia, and to ensure that no such profession as that of parapsychologist should emerge: "there is no need for parapsychology to exist as a separate discipline."

Anita Gregory

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