

Moscow academics prepare for what looks like an official monopoly of research

# Is Russia adopting a party line on parapsychology?

It will come as a surprise to many that there has been widespread interest in the phenomena of psychical research in Russia, not only in the popular press but at the highest academic levels.

In October 1973 there appeared in *Questions of Philosophy*, an official publication of the Soviet Academy of Sciences a long, careful and very interesting paper by four of Russia's most eminent psychologists, members of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, V. P. Zinchenko, A. N. Leontiev, E. F. Lemos and A. R. Luria called *Parapsychology: Fiction or Reality*, in which the authors commit themselves to the statement, "Obviously, some so-called parapsychological phenomena do happen".

Yet when, on March 26, 1974, the Moscow parapsychologist, Eduard Naumov, was sentenced to two years in a labour camp because he was alleged to have misappropriated funds of a club where he had been lecturing on parapsychology Dr Andrei Svezhnevsky, a psychiatrist, was called as an expert witness who testified that parapsychology is a pseudo-science based on mysticism and idealism. It is, of course, difficult to find out exactly what happened: according to friends of Naumov's, the club's director allowed him to take some entrance fees for showing a film on the so-called Philippine spirit healer, Tony Appana, however, the director was not permitted to speak on Naumov's behalf in court, having been declared psychologically unfit to testify by the authorities.

There has been activity in the parapsychological field in the Soviet Union since the early 1920s, when Academician V. M. Bekhterev took an interest in the subject. Indeed, in 1924, Mr A. V. Lunakharsky, Commissioner for Education, took the initiative in forming a Soviet Committee for Psychical Research, to the International Committee for Psychical Research.

In 1922 Bekhterev founded a special commission for the study of mental suggestion attached to the Institute for Brain Research at the University of Leningrad. The activities of the commission included a

collection of spontaneous phenomena, case histories of people reporting, for example, alleged telepathic experiences; the psychological and physiological effects of magnetic fields; and the effects of distant or mental suggestion on subjects under hypnosis.

The scientist in charge of the hypnotic programme was a former student of Bekhterev's, L. L. Vasiliev, subsequently Professor of Physiology at the University of Leningrad, who throughout the 1920s and '30s conducted a systematic research project on distant influencing. Vasiliev had originally witnessed an experimental demonstration of apparent telepathic hypnosis by K. I. Platannov, an eminent Soviet psychiatrist. Professor at the University of Kharkov, later author of an important work on medical hypnotherapy, *The word as a physical and therapeutic factor*.

Vasiliev and his team of engineers, doctors, hypnotists and physiologists set out to test the theory put forward by Cazzanini that telepathic influencing was mediated by radio-type waves. When the experimenters found that screening by means of a Faraday cage failed to inhibit the telepathic rapport and that consequently, so far, no channel for the ostensible non-sensory communication could be detected, the research ceased. It is not entirely clear just why the research was discontinued in the mid-thirties. Certainly, as Vasiliev wrote, when he was eventually able to publish some of his results in the early 1960s, the war intervened (one of his most promising research students, V. S. Stoblin-Kaminsky was killed during the siege of Leningrad). On the other hand, there is also reason to believe that it was precisely his failure to prove the existence of a physical channel that led to the abandonment of the research.

In 1959 some articles appeared in the French popular press alleging that successful telepathy experiments had been carried out between the American atomic submarine and the shore, thus proving that screening which entirely cut out radio waves did not inhibit telepathy.

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pointed out to his authorities that he and thus his country certainly had priority of discovery in this respect, and he was allowed to publish some of his work. He was also, in 1960, allowed to set up a research unit attached to the Institute for Brain Research at the University of Leningrad, and letters poured in from all parts of Russia, giving examples of what Vasiliev's correspondents believed to be psychic experiences.

To the best of my knowledge Vasiliev published three works: a long essay *Mysterious Phenomena of the Human Psyche*, a popular book which has been translated into French under the title *La suggestion a distance* and a scientific monograph translated into English in 1963 under the title *Experiments in Mental Suggestion*. This latter book was widely

national activity. For example, Dr Stanley Krippner of the Maimonides Dream Laboratory in Brooklyn delivered a lecture on parapsychology at the Institute of Psychology, a section of the Soviet Academy of Pedagogical Sciences in 1971. Krippner arranged, jointly with Naumov, to organize an "International Meeting on the Problem of Bio-Energy and Related Areas" in Moscow, which took place in July 1972. The conference, as Krippner wrote, "was not officially sponsored by the Soviet government, being regarded rather as a function of Naumov's Institute for Technical Parapsychology".

In the Soviet Union interest is apt to be focused on possible biological and physical parameters of so-called paranormal phenomena. Zinchenko et al write, for example, that "the search for the measurement of electromagnetic fields continues. These fields are called by different names ('bioplasma', 'electregre-u', 'bio-potential')... fine progress has been made with instruments... to appraise the functional state of individuals. For instance, the 'Nirvan effect' (photography of live tissue exposed to high frequency current) was used by parapsychologists before it was used by physiologists and psychologists"; again: "In 1967 an All-Union section for Technical Parapsychology... was organized within the Central Administration of the Scientific-Technical Society of the Instrument Building Industry. In 1968 and 1971 two scientific-technical seminars on the 'bio-physical effect' (eg. dowsing) were held under 'its auspices'."

Now, it would seem that Schroeder and Ostrander's book gave extreme offence in Russia. Zinchenko et al strike it out for disapproval, partly because of what they feel to be its overtly anti-Soviet attitude, partly because of its inaccuracy, partly because of its sensationalism. At the International Congress of Psychotronics (another Eastern word for psychical research) in Prague in June 1973, organized by Dr Z. Rejzjak under the auspices of the Czech Scientific and Technical speakers

made a special point of dissociating themselves from Schroeder and Ostrander. Neither Naumov nor any of his co-workers, such as Barbara Ivanova or Larissa Vilenkova, attended.

Russian workers tend to stress that the main obstacle to progress in parapsychology is the lack of a suitable physical basis to explain the phenomena and to come up with the search for such explanations, whereas in the West the emphasis has on the whole been an endeavour to demonstrate their very existence, leaving theoretical explanations to take care of themselves in the future. It may well be that at the present structure the Russian emphasis is very much overdue. Krippner states that Soviet researchers are mainly concerned with the formulation of a unified theory to describe the basic energy transformations involved, whereas Zinchenko et al describe as "in principle simplistic and incorrect" the search for a single basic force or principle to account for the phenomena.

That Soviet scientists should wish to bring some scientific and theoretical order and restraint into the field of psychical research is, of course, to be welcomed. Nor are Russian scientists the only ones who deplore a state of affairs where people with ostensible paranormal gifts are promoted and publicized prior to proper systematic investigation, and publication in the technical literature.

The takeover of any field of study by professionals from amateurs always raises difficult and painful problems. It would be ironic if what amounts to an official pronouncement by the Soviet Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, to the effect that the investigation of psychical phenomena is a subject fit for academic and scientific study, were to herald wholesale legal persecution of all private enthusiasts and amateurs in Russia. Indeed such a move might well be self-defeating; who, in such a political climate, is likely to own up, or draw attention to, so-called psychic experiences to be studied by the official experts?

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