

# ESOTERICISM, LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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## THE INFLUENCES OF WESTERN ESOTERICISM ON RUSSIAN ROCK POETRY OF THE TURN OF THE CENTURY\*\*

Many researchers believe that Russian rock music has become a phenomenon, largely formed by religious interests of its creators. For example, Russian rock classic Boris Grebenshchikov's interest in Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism is well known.<sup>1</sup> However, researchers rarely give consideration not to religious but esoteric influence in the works of Russian rockers. I would like to address this side of their work in my paper. It is necessary to raise a few key questions:

- 1) Which Western esotericism features inspired Russian musicians' creativity and which esoteric theories did they address?
- 2) How conscious was their address to esotericism: whether it was a tribute to fashion, artistic device or expression of personal beliefs?

It is clear that Russian rock period of formation and development (the late 1970s–1990s) becomes a period of a new era in the religious life of the citizens of the USSR, and later Russia. It was a situation when religion and a wide range of schools made spiritual perfection an aim, available to anyone. The increase in the number of esoteric literature samizdat publications is associated with the 1980s,<sup>2</sup> the groups practicing various forms of Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Huttunen T. “Russian Rock: Boris Grebenščikov, Intertextualist,” accessed October 03, 2016, [http://www.helsinki.fi/venaja/e-materiaali/mosaiikki/en1/th1\\_en.pdf](http://www.helsinki.fi/venaja/e-materiaali/mosaiikki/en1/th1_en.pdf); Peršin D. “15 voprosov o vere Borisu Grebenščikovu” [15 questions about faith to Boris Grebenščikov], accessed October 03, 2016, <http://www.ppravmir.ru/15-voprosov-borisu-grebenshnikov/>

<sup>2</sup> At this time appear the first translations of Castaneda and Manly P. Hall.

mysticism has emerged, the NRM branches were created.<sup>3</sup> In such a case spiritual freedom of the 1980s and later 1990s was not filling a blank slate. There have been underground esoteric groups in the Soviet Union since the late 1950s, where the ideas of the fourth way, integral traditionalism, anthroposophy and the different variations of the eastern systems are the most popular.<sup>4</sup> All heroes of my paper were people, more or less affected by this esoteric underground, either directly or indirectly, through lectures, literary and publishing activities.

One of the central figures of the Soviet underground was Evgenij Golovin. He was a philologist by education, an expert in Swedish and French literature, he was a follower of Western esotericism by conviction, he studied alchemy, Renaissance occult theories, especially natural magic, Golovin was the one who opened Guénon, Evola and other traditionalist works in the USSR and widely disseminated their ideas. Golovin was a poet and sang songs as well. It is interesting to analyze Golovin's impact on the Russian musicians.

When throwing a stone into the water, the water circles will diverge in different directions and the farther they are from the center of the fall, the weaker the vibrations are. Something similar may be observed with outstanding esoteric teachers, a group of followers grouping near one or another teacher, which involve others and so the ideas are spread, but the less people are familiar with the teacher himself, the weaker this influence is. Golovin was born in 1938, one of his oldest students-musicians was born in 1958, so that Golovin was at least a generation older than his students, which ensured his special influence on them. It is better to start the review from those musicians who have experienced the direct influence of the Soviet esoteric underground and Yevgenj Golovin in particular, and then refer to the musicians, whose works have esoteric motives, but not directly related to Golovin.

The leader of the band called "Va-Bank" Alexander Skljjar became acquainted with Golovin accidentally when he was a thirteen-year-old teenager. This is how Skljjar describes this meeting: "I'm at home, reading "The Cathedral ..." written by Hugo, listening to "Morrison Hotel" by the Doors. Doorbell. I open. Two drunken men are at the door. We exchange greetings. One of them said that they couldn't remember which floor their

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Unification Church and Krishna Consciousness.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this topic, see Menzel B., Hagemester M., Rosenthal B.G., eds. *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions* (Berlin: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012).

fellow lived on, they heard familiar music outside the door – so here lived a normal person. We became acquainted.”<sup>5</sup>

They actively communicated with Golovin since then, even trying to make a collective musical project, but for some reason it did not take place. Skljjar considers himself Golovin's student and is in close contacts with Alexander Dugin, the main follower of Golovin and the most active Russian traditionalist. Skljjar and the band “Va-Bank” created by him become widely known in the USSR and give concerts abroad since 1987. Since 1991 a cooperation between Golovin and Sklyar begins, actually Golovin is the author of about a quarter of the songs by “Va-Bank” recorded in the period from 1990 to 2005. Songs based on Golovin's poems have several levels of meaning. Such “Va-Bank” hit songs as “Learn to Swim” and “Eldorado,” although they may resemble the usual entertaining songs in the outward expression, but in fact reflect Golovin's alchemical ideas. This trace is even more noticeable in other songs, so the song called “Amanda”<sup>6</sup> actually tells the story of love to the fire elemental – Salamander, the access to which is possible only through the imagination, which directly reflects the views of Golovin on the nature of alchemy as an inner spiritual practice. In the song called “John Donne 2000”<sup>7</sup> esoteric images of Donne's work are used: in particular the compass and a circle symbolism and the search for true self. In general, the theme of femininity (true and false), the four elements and elemental spirits symbolism, the North Pole as a spiritual center theme are clearly expressed in the majority of the songs written by him for “Va-Bank.”

If Alexander Skljjar sings esoteric songs written by Golovin, Vasiliј Šumov, Skljjar's friend, met Golovin in the 1980s and writes songs under his influence. Golovin wrote a few songs for one of the first albums of Šumov's band that also became hits, such as “Summer Lines Stewardess”<sup>8</sup>, which in particular have a comparison of rock 'n' roll with white birds from the final lines of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Golovin's favorite book by the American writer. But the cooperation between Šumov and Golovin came to an end in the late 1980s, when Šumov had emigrated to the United States but Golovin's impact on his work are noticeable and thereafter. So

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Skljjar A. “Korabli ne tonut, ili skazka dlinnoju v žizn'” [The ships did not sink or tale as long as life] in *Gde net paralelej i net poljusov: pamjati Evgenija Golovina* [Where there is no latitudes and no poles: In memory of Yevgeny Golovin] (Moscow, Jazyki slavjanskoj kul'tury, 2015), 189.

<sup>6</sup> “Amanda,” accessed October 03, 2016, [https://the-fasol.com/page\\_chords.php?id=46929](https://the-fasol.com/page_chords.php?id=46929)

<sup>7</sup> “John Donne 2000,” accessed October 03, 2016, <http://teksty-pesenok.ru/rus-vabank/tekst-pesni-dzhon-donn/1759356/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Summer Lines Stewardess,” accessed October 03, 2016, <http://tekstovnet.ru/22/Tsentr/tekst-pesni-Styuardessa-Letnih-Linij>.

the song, written by Šumov, called “The Accident in the Subway”<sup>9</sup> illustrates Guenon’s relation to the modern world, which Golovin also shares. The story in the song is told by the young man, who was in a crowded subway car in the afternoon, where “blind went wild”, starting breaking windows. This experience is shocking for the lyrical hero and forces him to quit college. In the mid-1990s Golovin wrote the book called *Sentimental Rock ‘n’ Roll Madness*, entirely devoted to Šumov, in which he interpreted a number of Šumov’s songs in the esoteric way. Golovin gives such interpretation to the song called “The Accident in the Subway:” “The Underground. One of the new era determinants, which sharply separates it from the others, it is a good illustration of words ‘you are dust, and to dust you shall return’. Going down with the help of escalator, car, sleepiness in the mother’s womb in the roaring darkness, birth, entering the illuminated station – manifestation. Quite an initiatory experience wiped out by powerful dailiness. And apart from this subway arouse a lot of associations: it often appears in the sleepy nightmares and staying in the car, in spite of the ‘reading in public transport’ raise gloom, forced-idle thoughts ... The blind breaking black glass in a black tunnel while wobbling sound – a rhythmic composition, ‘concrete music.’ This song is about happening, shock therapy for the half-dead (because of the daily inertia) passengers. The art, having lost its religious, philosophical, educational functions, as for its impact become like a kitten with a ball, a car accident, a naked man with only a tie just hurrying to the businesslike crowd, so, to everything that attracts the bleeding eye. Vasily Šumov in his artistic image is this blind himself, and his song only softens and slows down the steel punch glass kick...”<sup>10</sup>.

A musician, Sergej Kalugin and his group called “Orgy of the righteous”, emerged in 1999, is perhaps the brightest example of the modern Russian rock esoteric influences, so I will analyze his work in details. Kalugin was also familiar with Golovin and for some time was in circles of Russian traditionalists close to him. A young man was seriously interested in the various forms of esotericism, later he became Orthodox, but up until now his work is a complex fusion of many influences.

Kalugin noticed several times in interviews that all of his work can be divided into two periods: nigredo and albedo. In 1994 he recorded his first album on CD, the album title speaks for itself – *Nigredo*. The motifs associated with darkness are made to play in the album cover design, all

<sup>9</sup> “The Accident in the Subway,” accessed October 03, 2016, [http://www.joov.net/text/147242425/tsentr\\_vasiliy\\_shumov-sluchay\\_v\\_metro.htmls](http://www.joov.net/text/147242425/tsentr_vasiliy_shumov-sluchay_v_metro.htmls).

<sup>10</sup> Evgenij Golovin, *Sentimental'noe bešenstvo rok-n-rolla* [Sentimental rock ‘n’ roll madness], accessed October 03, 2016, [http://www.e-reading.mobi/chapter.php/86776/12/Golovin\\_-\\_Sentimental%27noe\\_beshenstvo\\_rok-n-rolla.html](http://www.e-reading.mobi/chapter.php/86776/12/Golovin_-_Sentimental%27noe_beshenstvo_rok-n-rolla.html).

the illustrations are made in dark colors and is mostly articulated on the two images – the circle and the sun. Thus, the idea of the album design may be reduced to the variations on the black sun theme (*sol Niger*) – which is well known as the image of the first stage of the Great Work in the alchemy. It is worth mentioning that the image of the black sun began to play an important role in the far-right spectrum of esoteric movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was close to Kalugin at that time.<sup>11</sup> Poetically and musically, almost the entire album is also designed in accordance with the ideas of death, destruction and degradation. Compositionally, it is constructed from the sonnets, interlaced with songs, there are four sonnets and five songs arranged in a checkerboard pattern in the album. In the first song called “The King-Muskrats story”<sup>12</sup> the story of fratricide is the plot, in which one – because of the “Fish, whose food are eyes” one brother kills the other and goes crazy. In the second song, called “Casanova’s Dance,”<sup>13</sup> the story is told on behalf of the great tempter, who exposes a complex range of feelings and thoughts while seducing a new girl and the central idea in the Casanova “reflection” is: “I am captured by the voluptuousness of flight on an exploded life fragment!” A very similar picture appears also in the “The Black Moon Rising”<sup>14</sup> where even the name itself refers directly to the alchemy. The lyrical hero of the song is captured by a dark femininity, which opened to him an unbearably hard experience of existence, this experience rocked his world, forcing to refuse walking on the “path of light.” The finale of the song is the hero’s sacrificing himself to this dark femininity. The final song of the album “My Joy” is dedicated to the similar theme. All the lyrics describe the human feelings of standing on the edge of unavoidable death, and the perception of death itself cannot be called gloomy, to him death is the best thing that can happen to a person, that’s what is said in the text as for this: “Cry, do you hear? – The Heaven is calling us, so cry, vaults of time are breaking down with the rumble, cry because of wild freedom, limitless and terrible freedom... Cry! There is nothing like death!”<sup>15</sup> A similar figurativeness is introduced in the sonnets too, so the moon and wandering in the dark themes are revealed in the third and fourth sonnets, the second sonnet ends with the words “The words are dead, my soul is dead.” It is important to note that the stage of work in black is perceived as a necessary condition for further metal changes in

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<sup>11</sup> For more on this topic, see Goodrick-Clarke Nicholas, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York: New York University Press 2002).

<sup>12</sup> “The King-Muskrats Story,” accessed October 03, 2016, <http://orgia.ru/release.php?id=11>.

<sup>13</sup> “Casanova’s Dance,” accessed October 03, 2016, <http://orgia.ru/release.php?id=11>.

<sup>14</sup> “The Black Moon Rising,” accessed October 03, 2016, <http://orgia.ru/release.php?id=11>.

<sup>15</sup> “My Joy,” accessed October 03, 2016, <http://orgia.ru/release.php?id=11>.

the alchemy, leading to a transmutation as a result, it is also obvious in Kalugin's *Nigredo* that the album end is death, its main theme, but death as a necessary step to the otherness, escape from this world, that's is why there is nothing and couldn't be better than death. Death is not only the end of this life, but also the beginning of a new one.

At least two songs have the images of interest to us in the album called *For Those Who Are Dreaming*, released in 2010. From the very title of the sixth song of the album called "The Raven Road"<sup>16</sup> we can see a direct allusion on the first stage of the alchemical work. In the whole lyrics of the song there is an interpretation of alchemical practice as an inner spiritual path that requires serious ascetic efforts. We also find an interesting image in the other song from the same album "The Way in the Ice," which has a direct relation to the alchemical symbolism. Human life is illustrated by the following verse: "We go through the night, without hope to reach the dawn in these ices beyond range. There is no other dawn than we have. A fire, illuminating the part of the worlds is in our heart."<sup>17</sup> So, we have the image of the night – nigredo again, which there is a need to pass through, to reach the dawn, and the course is kept to the north, which is associated with the male principle in alchemy. There is also an important image of inner fire, known in later alchemy and in Castaneda's teachings.

The single "Shitrok" released in 2012 perhaps illustrates Kalugin's interest in alchemy in the most direct way. His latest composition called "Royal Wedding" is a musical-poetic fantasy on J. V. Andrea's "Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz". Some extracts from the "Chemical Wedding ..." are read in the composition at certain moments, alchemy is seen as the antithesis of everyday life here, the practice of searching for God inside oneself.

The esoteric motifs are well observed and in the most recent album called *For Those Who Are Dreaming Vol. 2*, in the song "Windows"<sup>18</sup> for example, the motif of human life from birth to death through the windows of the apartment in which he lived is made to play, a system of ten (or more precisely 11 with Daath) sefirot gives the structural unity to the song and notably the song begins with the last Malchut and is ended with Keter. Thus, the "Windows" is a song about a life leading to God through the Sefirot tree.

Esotericism manifested itself in Russian rock differently. So during a company of deputies election to the State Duma (the country's main legislative body) the concert in support of one of the candidates (Alexander

<sup>16</sup> "The Raven Road," accessed October 03, 2016, <http://orgia.ru/release.php?id=17>.

<sup>17</sup> "The Way in the Ice," accessed October 03, 2016, <http://orgia.ru/release.php?id=17>.

<sup>18</sup> "Windows," accessed October 03, 2016, <http://orgia.ru/release.php?id=25>.

Dugin) in St. Petersburg in 1995 under the title “Pop Mechanics 418: Kurehin for Dugin’s”<sup>19</sup> was conducted. It was the last creative project of the famous Russian musician Sergej Kurehin, who was the creator of performances since 1984, each of which was called “Pop-Mechanics”. Performance of 1995 has the special character. The figure 418 to the title adding is not incidentally. We can read such thing in the Crowley’s *Book of Law*: “They shall worship thy name, foursquare, mystic, wonderful, the number of the man; and the name of thy house 418,”<sup>20</sup> the Kurehin performance was actually dedicated to the memory of Crowley and reflected the ideas of his work in the scenic action. Kurehin left a moment of silence on the memory of Crowley honoring, and Dugin read extracts from one of his books.

As I mentioned, the impact of esotericism on Russian rock varied. The band called “Rada and the Blackthorn” was established in 1991 and does not use direct references to esoteric ideas and concepts, the inspiration by esotericism is more possible to guess in their work. The circle of reading is clearly visible from interviews with the band creator – Rada Ančevskaja, this circle includes all the classics of Western esotericism available in the 1980s-1990s in Russian (Castaneda, Swedenborg, and others), it is known that she was familiar with Golovin and his circle. “Rada and the Blackthorn” music creates the impression of a complex magical or shamanic action, in which listener’s particular feeling of the music process and its performance on the stage is important. Over the last years Rada has actively worked with ethnic elements, in particular appears with practicing Khakass and Siberian shamans and includes in her work shamanic instruments (tambourine), as well as the shamanic performance style. The group organized a theatrical performance “Running with Wolves. Women’s Archetypes in the Myths and Legends” based on the Clarissa Pinkola Estes book in October 2013. Rada herself describes her work in such a way: “When I say that we play shaman rock, it does not mean that we are engaged in specific shamanic practices, but that we feel the earth’s energy. In fact, if you’re playing music, tied to the tradition – there is no other way ... And the music is ritual of course. And there is no way without it, too. When you go out on stage and sing, you perform the ritual, and all the musicians in the band must perform their ritual during the concert... Or it’s not Rock otherwise.”<sup>21</sup> It is worth mentioning that we can find Yevgenj Golovin’s worldview reflection in her

<sup>19</sup> Video of this concert is available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoBLYHL3vSA>, accessed October 03, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law*, accessed October 03, 2016, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/oto/engccxx.htm>

<sup>21</sup> “Rada i ternovnik”: “Horoshij muzykant – vseгда shaman...” [“Rada and the Blackthorn”: a Good musician is always a shaman...], accessed October 03, 2016, <http://darkeromagazine.ru/page/rada-i-ternovnik-horoshij-muzykant-vseгда-shaman>.

work. For example, in the song called “Salamander”<sup>22</sup> the cosmic fire dance covers the entire universe: angels, mountains, ice floes, sun, whirlwinds are dancing. And the dance impulse comes from the salamander dancing in the fire. The entire universe is dancing tango in the song. Speaking about the styles of dance, Evgenij Golovin characterized tango as follows: “Tango is the personalized fire element, the alchemist-musician cannot do without the tango for working with the elements.”<sup>23</sup>

The main aspects of esoteric influence in Russian rock cannot only be described by Golovin’s influence. The poet and musician Psoj Korolenko builds all his creativity on the game with lots of meanings, texts and techniques typical for different religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity) and esoteric practices (shamanism, folk magic charms). Korolenko’s songs are a compound of doctrines, traditions, myths, legends, but this compound is in the game manner<sup>24</sup>. This game is inherent in many of his works, as in the song called “Ala Ulyu”, which is based on the repetition principle, there are lines “And we fly afar, / We fly away together, together into the distance, / Where will be the Mind, where will be the Thunder, / We’ll fly and we’ll sing ...,”<sup>25</sup> the words “Mind” and “Thunder” in the printed text are capitalized. Here we see a direct reference to the famous gnostic text “Thunder Perfect Mind”. Or in the song called “The Great Chthonic Principle” where the idea of prayer to the goddess: “Diana, Selene, Hecate” and “inconspicuous bodiless Mole” is comically played up in repetition system, containing the following lines:

Let us pray to the World Underground Mole ... about initiation fleeting / the magic range full completion / the magical elements rapid transformation / life-giving tincture preparation / well ascension of the Chosen Generation / inconceivable Utopia fulfillment / the eternal return of reuniting / a birth of tragedy from the spirit of music<sup>26</sup>.

It is obvious that the author is familiar with the Western esoteric “alphabet”, but the esoteric themes are carried to the point of absurdity in the game carnival manner here.

<sup>22</sup> “Salamander,” accessed October 03, 2016, <http://teksty-pesenok.ru/rus-rada-i-ternovnik/tekst-pesni-salamandra/1899989/>.

<sup>23</sup> Sklyâr, “Korabli ne tonut, ili skazka dlinnoiu v žiznĭ”, 202.

<sup>24</sup> For detailed analysis of Korolenko’s lyrics, see S. V. Sviridov “Pesni Psoj Korolenko” [Songs of Psoj Korolenko] in *Russkaja rok-poeziia: tekst i kontekst* [Russian rock-poetry: text and context]. (Tver: Tverskoj gosudarstvennyj universitet, 2005), 5–31.

<sup>25</sup> “Ala Ulyu,” accessed October 03, 2016, [http://gkitfm.ru/playing/psoj-korolenko\\_alja-ulu](http://gkitfm.ru/playing/psoj-korolenko_alja-ulu).

<sup>26</sup> “The Great Chthonic Principle” Accessed October 03, 2016, <http://teksty-pesenok.ru/rus-psoj-korolenko/tekst-pesni-htonicheskij/1898153/>.

In the end of my paper, I want to get back to the beginning and to answer briefly on the questions raised.

- 1) Which of the Western esotericism features inspired Russian musicians creativity, and which theories did they address?

The review shows that the Soviet esoteric underground and Evgenij Golovin's figure in particular, had a significant impact on the Russian rock-music originality, but it's not the only influence. Russian musicians actively turn to alchemic, gnostic, magic, shamanic, Crowleyan images and ideas, combining them into complex combinations and creating on their basis unique works.

- 2) How conscious was their appeal to esotericism?

We can conclude from the review that in these examples an appeal to esotericism was fully conscious and cannot be attributed to fashion, but likely the appeal to esotericism was an expression of personal beliefs, and sometimes followed the musicians' aesthetic needs or was an expression of their ideology as well.

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