Psychic Studies: The Soviet Dilemma

The tug of war about parapsychology continues in the USSR, as elsewhere. Soviet psi research is subject to a variety of influences and should be neither slighted nor overdramatized.

Martin Ebon

SOVIET STUDIES in parapsychology during the past quarter of a century reflect much of the dilemma that faces scientists in the USSR in other fields, notably in psychology and sociology. It is never useful to see Soviet efforts as those of a totally monolithic society; many ideological and administrative forces tend to influence the selection of subject matter, experimental approaches, and, in the end, who does what, who takes the credit, and, who takes the blame.

Soviet interest in modern parapsychology was initially aroused when a French popular science magazine, *Science et Vie,* published an article in its February 1960 issue with the title "The Secret of the Nautilus." The author of the article, Gérald Messadié, asserted in considerable detail that the U.S. nuclear submarine *Nautilus* had been in telepathic contact with the naval base at Friendship, Maryland, and that mental shore-to-ship signals had been 70 percent successful.

Some two decades later I visited Messadié in his magazine's Paris office, and he freely admitted that as a young and overenthusiastic writer he had fallen for a hoax when he wrote the Nautilus article. The material for this story was given him by the late Jacques Bergier, a somewhat mysterious man born in Odessa, who claimed several early intelligence connections. Just why he fed Messadié this doubtful, but cleverly selected,

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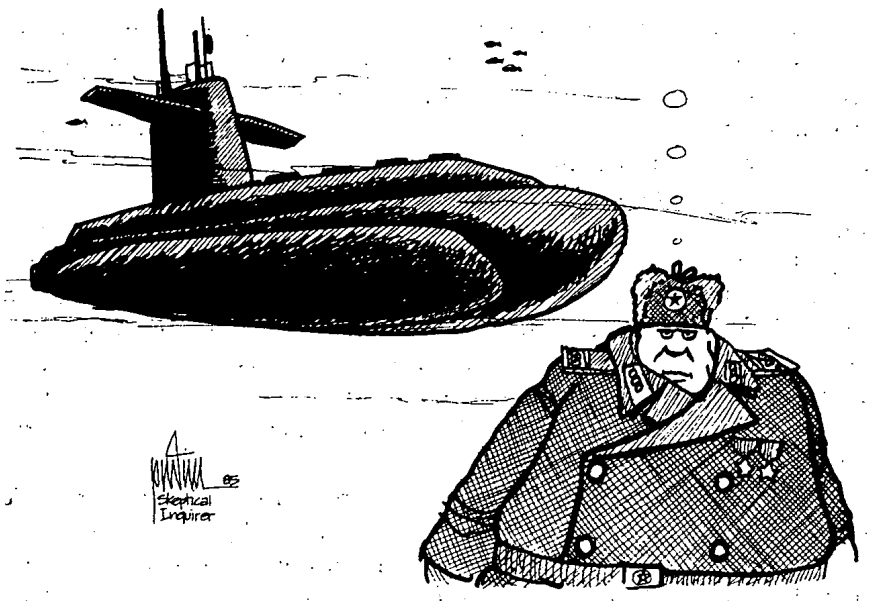

information remains a mystery. In any event, Soviet parapsychologists seized on the Nautilus report and said, in effect, "Look what these Americans are doing!"

A quarter-century passed, and the problem of communicating with submerged submarines remains. Neither the U.S. Navy nor the Russians have found telepathy sufficiently reliable to do away with projects for contacting submarines by such means as ELF (extreme low frequency) transmissions. Telepathy, if it could be harnessed and directed properly, would obviously be a great deal cheaper than alternative projects like stringing vast underground antennae in northern Michigan in the face of vigorous local opposition.

The question of applying extrasensory perception to specific military or nonmilitary uses focuses on means of controlling a seemingly spontaneous and elusive faculty. Laboratory experiments today seek to create settings and emotions that may permit ESP to emerge and function. In studying Soviet psychic research we encounter a good deal more than the usual Soviet secrecy. Researchers in the field are not only subject to rivalries, zig-zags in policies, and other insecurities common to academic and government work—they also suffer the additional handicap of tackling subject matters that arouse enthusiasm, antagonism, and mixed emotions that have nothing to do with purely empirical considerations.

In the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* for April 1984, Charles Tart of the University of California at Davis deals with the topic "Acknowledging and Dealing with the Fear of Psi." He states that such unacknowledged fear is "widespread" among parapsycholo-

gists, and we need not doubt that it also exists among opponents of parapsychological studies. In the Soviet Union, researchers need not only fear psychic faculties and happenings as such, but must also run the risk that ideological hard-liners can threaten their careers, as well as their academic and social standing.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Prof. Leonid Vasiliev, head of the Physiology Department of Leningrad University, tried to remove ideological barriers to the study of ESP. Traditionally, Marxism had lumped psychic studies with mysticism and religion as "idealistic," in contrast to the "materialistic" concepts that it favored. Vasiliev, a closet parapsychologist during the Stalin years, published two books—*Suggestions at a Distance* and *Experiments in Mental Suggestions,* both in 1962—that dealt with psychic research before the Stalin period and throughout the world during the first decades of the century.

Vasiliev suggested that it would be a blow to "idealism" if psychic phenomena could be examined in purely physical and physiological terms; if they were found to have a material basis, this finding would, as it were, pull the rug out from religio-spiritual musings about telepathy, clairvoyance, premonitions, and mind-over-matter. One member of the Leningrad group, Prof. V. P. Tugarinov, urged in the university's bulletin in 1964 that scientists studying telepathy should "distinguish reality from preconceived ideas" and try to "explain the energetic and physiological basis" of telepathy. Tugarinov, then head of the Philosophy Department of Leningrad University, also wrote:

> The success of investigations depends upon the unprejudiced cooperation of physicists, physiologists and engineers. Whenever this topic is put up for discussion one hears again and again, "I don't believe in it" or "I do believe in it." But is this thing, which we are trying to put on a solid foundation, a matter of belief? Above all, the question is to examine by experimental scientific methods whether these phenomena exist or not. Should we find even fragments of them confirmed, then we ought to devote all our efforts to clarifying the rational basis of these phenomena.

Vasiliev, who died in 1966, provided the ideological groundwork for psychic studies in the Soviet Union. We must remember that it was the Khrushchev Decade, from 1954 to 1964, that permitted parapsychology to come to the fore and made it possible for American and other Western researchers to visit their parapsychological colleagues in such centers as Moscow, Leningrad, and Alma Ata. Soviet scientists also traveled abroad. But a parapsychological journal that Vasiliev had hoped to issue never came into being. Instead, popular newspapers and magazines, and periodicals in a variety of disciplines, such as education and ophthalmology, carried papers of parapsychological significance.

Soviet researchers have the dual need of being both scientifically and

ideologically respectable. In order to put some distance between themselves and their Western colleagues, they developed a vocabulary of their own. Thus, "telepathy" became "bio-communication," and "dowsing" was labeled "the bio-physical effect." Parapsychologists in Czechoslovakia coined the word "psychotronics," which specifically refers to what Western researchers call "psychokinesis" and what the public knows as "mind over matter." Psychotronics has become something of a catch-all. International congresses on psychotronic research have taken place in many parts of the world, and Soviet researchers either participate or have their papers read in absentia.

Such Soviet papers are not revelatory of sustained coordinated psychic research. Given the nature of Soviet society and the isolation of scientific disciplines in the USSR, this is not surprising. More troubling is the fact that experiments reported by some Soviet researchers are at times, presented in such a way that they cannot be replicated. Often essential segments are missing in published versions; among explanations given was that paper shortages prevented publication of complete accounts of experiments.

When reports of psychic tests appear in popular papers or magazines, it is often difficult to distinguish between experimental details and journalistic dramatizations. Among the more imaginative tests are telepathy—or bio-communication—experiments over long distances. Among the most colorful and controversial were those between two telepathists, Yuri Kamensky, a biophysicist, and Karl Nikolayev, an actor. As in the case of a transmission between shore and submarine, where a short code-word might be sufficient to alert the vessel to surface and receive more detailed instruction, one or several of the tests used Karl as a "transmitter" and Yuri as a "receiver." Keeping in mind that strong emotions are claimed to be instrumental in creating telepathic impulses, Karl was instructed to use hostile thoughts toward Yuri, even going through the motions of beating him up, in order to transmit dot-and-dash code signals.

But this experiment, which was said to have been successful, was reported in the newspaper *Moskovskaya Pravda,* not in a scientific journal. And while we are told that the "receiver's" brain and heart were monitored during these experiments, no details of these procedures are available. Amplifying telepathy by such emotions as hate and fear and by the use of drugs and electronic stimulants appears to be part of the Soviet scientific arsenal in this field.

We have, however, had a good deal of information from former Soviet residents who have come to Western countries in recent years; some of them were active in parapsychology, and some worked in the former Laboratory of Bio-Communication of the Popov Institute in Moscow, which organized the long-distance telepathy experiments. This laboratory, which had been the central point of parapsychological experiments in the Soviet Union for several years, was quietly dissolved in 1975. Apparently

some staff members were considered too "idealistic" in their approach to research. In 1978, the unit was revived under the name Laboratory of Bio-Electronics, with parallel centers in other cities, apparently under tighter military and secret-service control.

So much is being written about the role of secret services these days, including the Soviet KGB, that one is almost reluctant to use such initials for fear of sensationalism. But the KGB *has* played a role in the development of parapsychology studies in the Soviet Union, just as changes in the Soviet leadership, after the removal of Nikita Khrushchev in 1964, have influenced official attitudes toward such research. On the most personal level, the so-called bio-energetic treatments given by the Georgian healer Dzhuna Davitashvili to the then ailing Leonid Brezhnev (*SI*, Winter 1980-81, p. 6) appear to have helped the standing of various healing techniques in the USSR. The emergence of Yuri Andropov, later the Soviet chief of state, as head of the KGB in 1967, was followed by a clamp-down on relatively free-wheeling parapsychologists, coupled by greater KGB involvement in experiments at a variety of institutes.

None of the available information is clear-cut. None of it gives us anything like a full picture of Soviet involvement in psychic studies, whether on a purely exploratory level or in the area of applied studies, whether for civilian or military purposes. There has been much speculation about the extent of Soviet expenditure in psychic studies. In my opinion, such speculation is futile; very likely there is no one in the Soviet Union itself who has a full picture of the funds devoted to work at the institutes, which are scattered from Novosibirsk to Leningrad, from Alma Ata to Kiev.

Nor is it at all clear which segment of the Soviet establishment has achieved priority in conducting psychic experiments. In September 1973, the prestigious Moscow journal *Questions of Philosophy* published the paper, "Papapsychology: Fiction or Reality?" signed by four prominent Soviet psychologists. It surveyed international studies in the field and concluded that, in the USSR, such research should be taken out of the hands of self-styled parapsychologists. The authors clearly saw such people as mere amateurs compared with professional psychologists. They said that "the attention of serious scientific organizations" should be directed toward "unanswered questions of the human psyche."

One nonacademic parapsychologist, the very active Edward Naumov, was sent to a labor camp in 1974 and released after a year of imprisonment. He has, however, been able to continue lecturing in his chosen field, mainly reporting on developments on the international parapsychological scene. On occasion he has been arrested but quickly freed; in such instances, officers of the Ministry of Interior and of the KGB seem to disagree about whether or not Naumov's lectures are officially acceptable.

Yet another area of difficulty has been the motivation of Soviet officials in permitting foreign visitors access to certain experiments and experi-

Will the Real Jack Anderson Please Sit Down

Readers of Jack Anderson's syndicated column have been subjected to a series of contradictory stilmuli that would have delighted the late Prof. Ivan Petrovich Pavlov. Anderson, whose home-ground is the comic pages of the *Washington Post* (he was exiled from the Op-Ed page years ago) has alternately boosted and ridiculed governmental research in parapsychology, in both the United States and the Soviet Union.

The valiant few who keep track of this sort of thing, and I am one of them, note that Anderson devoted his column to this topic on February 5, March 30, and June 8, 1981, and on July 17, July 31, and August 12, 1985. The columnist's approach ranged from sly giggles over U.S. "voodoo warfare" to solemn declarations that "the Soviets are outspending us by at least 70-to-1 in occult research." Last August, Anderson wrote that a "top" psychic had "described the Semipalatinsk nuclear facility in Soviet Central Asia in detail that was only confirmed afterward by satellite spy photos." Still he suggested "all this ESP-ionage" might simply be just another boondoggle.

One gets the image of the columnist, hyper-competitive among his kind, rushing frantically from one exposé extreme to another. Will the real Jack Anderson please sit down!

—*Martin Ebon*

menters but not to others. For several years visiting parapsychologists would arrive in Moscow, see local researchers, and then, as likely as not, go to Leningrad to see the psychic Nina Kulagina engage in what appeared to be remarkable demonstrations of psychokinesis or psychotronics. She moved small items, apparently by mind power, even when they were encased in plastic. However, no Western parapsychologist ever succeeded in setting up and carrying out a fully controlled and satisfactorily monitored experiment.

As the experiments in remote viewing undertaken by Harold Puthoff at SRI International in Menlo Park, California, have emerged as the only documented U.S. government-supported research, it long seemed likely that Soviet scientists would at least try to duplicate this work, and possibly seek to better the results. However, no published material emerged from the Soviet Union to confirm this. Similarly, Soviet studies have in the past dealt with influencing the human mind at a distance by hypnosis, or

possibly through the use of some electronic device capable of having an impact on brain action or mood. More recently, when former SRI associate Russell Targ visited the Soviet Union, he was told that remote viewing was being studied in Soviet Armenia. Consistent Soviet interest in mind-changes and mind-control makes it likely that distance experiments have indeed taken place and are continuing.

This puts us in the awkward position of doubting the value of information we do receive and attributing importance to work that remains unreported. In other words, one is tempted to operate under the maxim "Doubt what you are told; believe what remains unsaid!" Such applied cynicism is often justified, but it, too, has its limits. Now that studies of remote viewing have been acknowledged in the USSR, are we to assume that reports about it are to be treated as "disinformation"? Not really. More likely, Soviet researchers have come to an impasse in their studies and would like to explore new avenues.

With so much uncertainty in recording and analyzing Soviet work in parapsychology over a period of more than two decades, it is exceedingly difficult to come to definitive answers about how well the Soviets are doing. That they have continued their work for such a long time, and under adverse and changing conditions, suggests at the very least that they remain encouraged.

Why do the Russians persist in this work? Why did they get into it in the first place? The parallel questions are, of course, why is there such a persistent interest in psychic studies in the West generally, and in the United States in particular? And why, after years of direct suppression during the Mao era in China, have some Chinese scholars, notably in biology and medicine, now ventured deeply into this previously forbidden territory?

One Russian-born specialist, Prof. Nikolai Khokhlov, now at the Department of Psychology at San Bernardino State College, told a meeting of the Foundation for Research in the Nature of Man that "the very nature of the Russian national character" involves "traits which make a Russian specifically sensitive to matters relative to the mystical side of the human psyche and lead him to a restless search for the philosophical meaning of human existence." Marxism has failed to meet the religio-mystical yearnings of the Soviet masses, be they Russian or non-Russian in ethnic tradition. And Khokhlov noted that there continues "a search for the mysterious, the far-removed world beyond the senses" that lies "beyond materialism."

Marxism has, in the past, been able to gain supporters precisely because it seemed to meet such needs for a mystical-utopian experience. Lenin's embalmed body in Moscow's Red Square is a symbol directly in line with the public's response to religious relics. A visit to Lenin's tomb is in the tradition of religious pilgrimages to a shrine. Lenin's constant presence throughout the Soviet Union in larger-than-life statues, in busts,

medals, and paintings, follows the Russian tradition of icons that may look stern or benign, but always inspirational. Lenin's writings are, of course, as ever-present as any scripture, and they are cited as such in speeches, articles, books, and pamphlets.

But this is clearly not enough. The statues have become part of the landscape; the writings are largely unread. Small wonder that, during the Mao years, a leading Peking journal accused the Soviet Union—and the United States—of introducing parapsychology in order to detract what Mao's China saw as the distraught masses within the "two superpowers." Russia and America were attacked for using parapsychology as "religion without the Cross"—in other words, in the best Marxist vernacular, as a new opium for the masses.

The reverse is probably true, at least in the Soviet Union. The government, or some people in it, regard public and scholarly fascination with psychic phenomena as a threat to "materialism," and to this day it is risky to ignore such doctrinaire matters in the USSR. But the general public in the USSR seeks diversion in such things as yoga, at least when it is labeled simply as some form of exercise—just as meditation is practiced as long as it bears the label of "autogenic training."

There is also the attraction of the unknown, which has been with us through recorded history, as far back as cuneiform tablets will take us. In the United States, the decade from 1965 to 1975 brought wide interest in psychic phenomena, but it has been on the downgrade ever since.

The underlying fascination has, however, only shifted. Public interest has moved toward novels and motion pictures that depict the unknown within the tradition of the ghost story, the horror story, the science-fiction version of supernatural powers of destruction. Movies like *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist,* which contributed to the Occult Decade, have been overtaken by wild tales of terror.

No doubt infantile fascination with horror in fairy tales and adolescent addiction to horror movies can provide grist for a dozen mills of psychological analysis. In this country, certainly, the general public has lost interest in the more sedate approaches to the paranormal, and now we have whole sections of "occult fiction" in some bookstores.

It is the accepted thing, of course, to draw a firm line between the public's tastes and the trends in academic government research. But when we examine the various levels of interest in the mass media and among the opinion-making élite, we do discover common denominators. The unconscious drives, fears, and fascinations of decision-makers are likely to make themselves felt.

This is just as true for individuals in the Soviet Union as it is for people elsewhere. The veneer of Marxist materialism should not distract us from the fact that religio-ethnic traditions within Russia and the other Soviet republics persist in many levels of society. If the rumors that reach us from the Soviet Union are correct, experiments have been designed and

undertaken that are based on the traditions of Eastern Shamanism; healing of the type undertaken by Miss Davitashvili shows close kinship with the laying-on-of-hands that is practiced within religious settings elsewhere.

I have long been interested in the experiences, often early in life, of people who are attracted or repelled by psychic phenomena. Rarely can one obtain detailed and totally candid accounts. Such encounters are often highly subjective—and therefore utterly non-"scientific"—and people tend to avoid talking about them and try to make light of them. Surveys show that those who accept the concept that psychic phenomena do occur have, for the most part, experienced them themselves.

For all I know, some or all of these personal experiences are based on malobservation or hallucination; but that does not make them any less real to those who experience them. It may be frightening or thrilling to encounter an apparition, to experience a precognitive dream, or to run through a series of striking coincidences. People are confused and scared by such experiences, and they don't accept them all that easily within our cultural framework. Often enough, they wonder whether they are going crazy. Pathology, of course, is very often an exaggeration of the normal. A phobia can be seen as normal fear or caution—crossing the street, let's day—multiplied to a degree that makes day-to-day functioning impossible.

People who feel that they are being spied upon by telepathy, or directed by hypnosis at a distance, may be suffering from a form of paranoia. This does not mean that telepathy is, at all times, a product of the imagination; it certainly does not eliminate the reality of hypnosis.

An aura of the magical continues to envelop psychic phenomena and parapsychological research, no matter whether we apply quantitative or qualitative methods, or whether we—or the Russians—tinker with the vocabulary to make it more technical-sounding. But then medicine and chemistry are fruits on the tree of alchemy. Magic potions are being advertised on television day in and day out. The tug of war about parapsychology continues in the Soviet Union, just as it does here and in other countries. We ought to continue to observe these research trends, to take note of them, and neither to slight nor to dramatize them unduly. •