

# The First Skeptics' Congress Convenes in Russia

*The Russian Academy of Sciences cosponsored a special conference with CSICOP on "Science, Anti-Science, and the Paranormal" last October in Moscow. Russian scientists complained about the growth of uncritical public acceptance of pseudoscience in Russia and participants passed a resolution warning of the increasing anti-science, charlatanism, and irrationalism.*

PAUL KURTZ

**B**elief in pseudoscience and antiscience has been rising in Russia, as it has in other countries of the world. This is especially true in the mass media and popular press, but pseudoscience has also entered into Russian science, largely because skeptical points of view have not been heard. This has been of special concern to many Russian scientists, who believe that the scientific community needs to provide critical examinations of paranormal claims—which mainstream scientists heretofore have largely deplored but ignored.

With this vexing problem in mind, the Russian Academy of Sciences, cosponsored a special conference with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) on "Science, Anti-Science, and the



Three co-chairmen, October 2001, CSICOP / Academy of Sciences Conferences, Moscow, Russia. Paul Kurtz, Valerii Kuvakin, and Edward Kruglyakov.

Paranormal.” This was held on October 3–5, 2001, at the headquarters of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. Founded in the eighteenth century, the Academy survived Stalinist repression during the Soviet period. The Russian Academy is considered Russia’s elite scientific body. It includes in its highly select roster the most prestigious scientists in the country.

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The conference was co-chaired by Edward Kruglyakov, a member of the Academy, who is a research physicist and deputy director at the Russian scientific city of Novosibirsk; Valerii Kuvakin, president of the Russian Humanist Society and former chairman of the department of philosophy at

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*Paul Kurtz is the chairman of CSICOP and was a co-chairman of the Moscow conference.*

Moscow State University; and myself as chairman of CSICOP.

Well over 200 scientists and researchers came from all over Russia and neighboring republics—from Ukraine to Kazakhstan—to participate. Valerii Kuvakin heads the Center for Inquiry at Moscow State University, which opened four years ago. He is also editor of their journal *Zdravyy Smysl* (*Common Sense* or *Critical Thinking*) and editor of a series of books published in Russian. The Center, a joint project of CSICOP and the Council for Secular Humanism, is committed to reason, science, and free inquiry in all areas of human interest.

This conference marked my fifth trip to Russia in the last twelve years. I have participated in several conferences in Russia over the years, but this is the first one devoted exclusively to science and the paranormal. The Russian intelligentsia is largely unfamiliar with our emphasis on skeptical inquiry, but a number of them are now sympathetic to the agenda defended by CSICOP. During the long period of the Soviet Union, the official dogma of the Communist Party ruled the country, and alternative viewpoints were suppressed, though the rulers defended what they called “scientific Marxism.” With the collapse of the Soviet

Union, all sorts of paranormal and religious claims proliferated, but there were few defenders of critical thinking.

Both Kruglyakov and Kuvakin have visited the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, New York, Kuvakin several times as a Research Fellow. The Center for Inquiry in Moscow State University is also a strong proponent of human rights and democracy, which it considers essential for the flourishing of science.

Kruglyakov was appointed chairman of the Russian Academy's new "Commission Against Pseudoscience and the Falsifications of Scientific Studies." His task is to work with CSICOP and other skeptical groups in providing information about uncorroborated claims. In his paper, "Why Is Pseudoscience Dangerous?" [see page 33], he was particularly concerned with unsubstantiated pseudoscientific theories that are being introduced into mainline physics and accepted without dissent. Kruglyakov was recently asked by President Putin for recommendations in treating this problem. Kruglyakov urged increased funding for scientific research and education. Incidentally, news of the conference prior to our arrival was apparently discussed in the Duma and engendered heated controversy.

Russian scientists at the conference complained about the growth of astrology, psychic phenomena, UFOlogy, and alternative medicine, but until now they said they did not have the proper tools or the information with which to criticize these topics. The need for scientific education in Russia was emphasized by astronomer D.G. Sordin, who said that the funding for scientific research and education is in crisis, for it has declined precipitously. He cited the fact that Russia's most influential science magazines have lost readership. For example, *Science and Life* has dropped from 3.4 million during the Soviet period to 40,000 circulation today. Russia's leading physics magazine, *Quantum*, has fallen from 315,000 to 5,000 readers. Garry Abelev, also a member of the Academy, said that pseudoscience is growing in biology and medicine. Well-known TV personality Sergei Kapitsa, vice president of the Academy of Sciences, attributed the growth of pseudoscience to sociological causes and said that it is a symptom of the "worldwide disintegration of society." Yuri Efremov, another noted astronomer, in his paper [see page 29] criticized the increasing influence of pseudoscientific philosophies, such as postmodernism and religious fundamentalism, which have subtly undermined the naturalistic outlook and the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and some exponents of spirituality and the paranormal attended the public sessions of the meetings. Much has been written about an alleged religious revival in Russia. Lev Mitrokhin, a member of the Academy and social philosopher, said popular inter-

est, somewhat intense several years ago, has already begun to abate. Most people do not attend church, but they do not call themselves atheists or skeptics. Many Russians were concerned about the possible growth of cults in Russia, but popular interest here has likewise begun to decline.

A number of members of CSICOP participated in this conference. They included Willem Betz from Brussels, who dis-

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cussed homeopathy and alternative medicine. Amardeo Sarma, head of the European Council of Skeptical Organizations and of CSICOP's Center for Inquiry in Rossdorf, Germany, dealt with the Shroud of Turin and the problems of creating a skeptics movement in a country. James Alcock, psychologist at York University, analyzed the question "why people believe." Richard Wiseman from England criticized parapsychology. In attendance from the United States were Lee Nisbet, who talked about media misinformation; Joe Nickell, who discussed miracles; and Jan Eisler, who dealt with the limitations of "therapeutic touch."

In the last session of the conference the participants passed a resolution against antiscience, charlatanism, and irrationalism in Russia and supported the work of the new Russian committee [see page 28]. The Russian Humanist Society also passed a resolution protesting the violation of the separation of church and state, and, in particular, the efforts by the Russian Orthodox Church to reintroduce religion into the public schools, which they thought would undermine science. Having suffered decades of religious repression at the hands of Stalinism during the Soviet period, participants, however, were cautious in their criticism of religion.

The conference received extensive coverage in the media, front page in *Izvestia* and other newspapers, as well as considerable comment in scientific journals, TV, and radio.

Last but not least, the proceedings were held in a friendly atmosphere and concluded with many toasts of vodka at the Academy and at the Faculty of Philosophy of Moscow State University, chaired by the dean. The most important conclusion to emerge from the conference is that Russian scientists wish to participate in the world skeptics movement. They wish to take part in future conferences and to dialogue with their colleagues throughout the world. □