PARAPSYCHOLOGY IN EASTERN EUROPE

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I am afraid my paper will destroy a myth which I involuntarily helped to create: that parapsychology in Eastern Europe is far ahead of similar research elsewhere in the world.

Allow me to start by recalling my role in building up this myth. Until 1967, I lived in Czechoslovakia. During my visits to the USSR and other East European countries, I was fortunate enough to meet nearly all the important parapsychologists in these countries.

In the 1960s interest in parapsychology in Eastern Europe grew rapidly, and the situation of East European parapsychologists had several promising features, such as government interest, emphasis on practical application, and innovative research ventures.

In reports published in the West ¹⁻⁹ I tried to convey an idea of these highly promising features, which really existed and to some degree still exist. But many readers apparently understood them as testimony that some spectacular breakthrough was achieved in Eastern Europe, which definitely did not happen. This wrong impression was strengthened by the widely read book *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain*, ¹⁰ which has dramatized and exaggerated the results of East European parapsychological investigations. It has become a kind of popular fashion to glorify these East European researches on the basis of incomplete reports available, and overlook the fact that the majority of these glorified researches were inadequate with respect to scientific method.

After my defection from Czechoslovakia, my East European friends severed all contacts with me, and I could learn about their work only indirectly, through the incomplete testimony of Western visitors who went to meet these East European parapsychologists, but whose communication with them was usually greatly impeded by the language barrier. What I learned through this testimony seemed to indicate that, after the climax in 1967, parapsychology in Eastern Europe began to decline.

I could understand the difficulties these visitors had, since I ex-

perienced them years ago myself, in spite of the fact that I had the best possible opportunity to learn what my colleagues in the USSR were doing. I could interview them in their own language, without the inconvenience of interpreters. Or, to put it better, I did not interview them at all; rather, we usually chatted with each other as close friends. Moreover, I had been living for decades in a communist country, and I could understand their problems.

Yet I found it often difficult to reach an authoritative judgment about their work. Now and again, I held the opinion that I was meeting people who belonged to two extreme groups: Some of them were very open, eager to discuss their past experiments and most fantastic future projects, while others were unusually reserved, hesitant to tell anything about their work, and seemed determined to obtain as much information as possible from their visitor while telling as little as possible about themselves.

The talkativeness of the first group made one suspicious. These people must have made tremendous progress—or are they only boasting, hiding the fact that their progress has actually not been that great? This dilemma was confirmed by the impression gained from the members of the other group: Either they are working on secret, classified projects sponsored by their governments—perhaps military—or is their reticence concealing the embarrassing fact that they have nothing of significance to report?

The situation was what Winston Churchill once characterized as a "riddle wrapped in an enigma." To make things worse, East European parapsychologists (perhaps even more than their Western counterparts, and probably for similar reasons) are split into several competing factions, and there are some individuals who prefer to work alone and not to have much in common with the rest. A recent visitor to the USSR ¹¹ characterized it poignantly: "Dr. X doesn't speak to Dr. Y, Dr. Y doesn't speak to Dr. Z, Dr. Z won't speak to anybody. Much work is 'secret,' so secret we are not even sure it exists."

Comparatively recently my East European colleagues began to correspond with me again, and this made it possible for me to look somewhat more closely into their problems anew. Because of my defection, however, I cannot visit them now. Therefore, I am giving this review deprived of the benefit of close insight into their work, for which free conversation and on-the-spot observation are invaluable.

Carefully judging my recollection of personal visits, combined with new impressions from published reports and personal correspondence, I have the feeling that the truth about their work is somewhere in between the two extremes-though I still find it hard to say where precisely.

To my knowledege, there is no full-time parapsychologist in Eastern Europe who would be paid by some governmental institution for his work in parapsychology, except, perhaps, for one single person whose present status is obscure. However, there are several people who are pursuing research on problems relevant to parapsychology at universities or other respectable scientific institutions. These persons are either working full-time on problems only remotely related to parapsychology (though possibly of considerable potential significance), or are working on problems more closely associated with parapsychology, using the equipment of their institutions, but as a hobby, after their full-time engagement in some more orthodox field.

Though there presently seems to be no apparent direct government support of parapsychology in Eastern Europe, this situation amounts, in East European conditions, to some limited governmental support. The researchers are allowed to work, on their own initiative, on problems relevant to parapsychology, using scientific instrumentation that belongs to the State.

Generally, East European parapsychologists have continued their investigations at great personal sacrifice, and with means that are far below the support available for similar research in the West. They have achieved some impressive experimental results, but there is definitely no breakthrough that would outclass the work of their Western colleagues. The importance of their work seems to lie more in suggested novel methods of research than in real accomplishments. Unfortunately, there seems to be also much dilettante amateurism and ostentatious exaggeration of results—but I would not claim that Western parapsychology is absolutely free of these defects either.

Historically, the development of East European parapsychology was influenced by the ideological and political situation. The prevalent materialistic ideology suppressed mysticism, supernaturalism, and speculations on religious implications. Instead, it led the investigators to emphasize a down-to-earth, pragmatic approach. There was no occult background of palmists, professional psychics, fortunetellers and astrologers to influence the general public, which began to view psi phenomena without mysterious undertones, soberly, merely as new, not-yet-explained natural phenomena which natural science will explain in due time.

Aside from these positive factors, however, the general climate was hardly favorable for the development of parapsychology. In the Stalin era and in early post-Stalin years, parapsychological research had to

proceed underground, since all activities not expressly sponsored by the communist government were dangerously suspicious.

I can show the climate of political oppression which obstructed research with one anecdote from my own experience. In 1953, I managed, with some difficulty, to send out a brief historical survey of parapsychology in Czechoslovakia which was published in the Swiss magazine Neue Wissenschaft. After some time, I wondered why I had not received a copy of the magazine containing my article. The Swiss editor explained that the first copy of the magazine he had sent me got lost. He sent me another copy by registered mail. This second copy, which could not get simply lost, was returned to him with the note "Not permitted in Czechoslovakia." I could not even get a copy of my own paper at that time!

After a few years, however, the situation changed. I began negotiations with Czech scientific institutions trying to establish a parapsychological research laboratory in Prague, and informatory articles in Czech newspapers and magazines followed in increasing numbers, especially in conjunction with the parallel publications of L. L. Vasiliev in the USSR. The sudden advance of East European parapsychology in the 1960s was a surprise not only for Western observers, but also for those of us who lived through it and helped to implement it.

Vasiliev's well known work was also done underground at first, but the last ten or twelve years have seen the gradual acceptance of parapsychology in communist countries. The progress of Vasiliev's work is so characteristic and illuminates so well the conditions under which parapsychology developed there, that it deserves to be dealt with in more detail.

In his effort to stimulate the Russian public's interest in parapsychology, Vasiliev proceeded gradually, with noteworthy prudence. After having probed the general opinion with a number of articles in popular magazines, he published a book, *Mysterious Phenomena of the Human Psyche* (1959), ¹³ in which he fought against superstitions and gave a natural explanation for many seemingly mysterious phenomena, such as sleep, dreams, hypnosis, and possession. In this book he devoted one chapter to a description of some telepathic experiments. Significantly, he confined himself mostly to the description of experiments by Russian authors. Under the heading "Does the Brain Radio Exist?" he said, carefully, in effect, this: There are observations which seem to indicate that telepathy occurs; many investigators are of the opinion that—if it occurs—it may be explained in terms of some kind of electromagnetic radiation; of course, this cannot be in contradiction to dialectical materialism.

When this book was favorably accepted, he brought out another popular one, Long-Distance Suggestion (1962).¹⁴ In it he quoted numerous evidential experiments testifying to the existence of telepathy. Without saying so explicitly, he left the reader convinced that telepathy does indeed occur. Moreover, he quoted with emphasis numerous arguments, including the description of his own experiments, to testify that telepathy cannot be explained in terms of the electromagnetic field.

These bolder claims were again accepted without excessive opposition. Consequently, the second, enlarged edition of his *Mysterious Phenomena of the Human Psyche* was published in 1963. He expanded the chapter on brain radio by including the description of numerous Western experiments, and he added two more chapters on the topic of parapsychology: "What do We Know about ESP?" where he favorably discussed the possibility of clairvoyance (deliberately neglected in his earlier publications), and "The Possibility of Transmitting Muscular Force at a Distance" (note the careful wording!) with a description of numerous PK experiments, including E. Osty's sittings with the medium Rudi Schneider.

Vasiliev's early work in parapsychology was little known outside of the USSR. I learned about him as late as 1959 through a German physician, M. Jun, who corresponded with Vasiliev and whom I met when he visited Prague for a medical conference, which had nothing to do with parapsychology. But once Vasiliev's first book was published (followed in 1962 by his countryman B.B. Kazhinsky's *Biological Radiocommunication*), ¹⁵ it became widely known that isolated researchers have been working on problems of parapsychology in the USSR, right through the communist era.

After 1960, when Vasiliev officially began his researches on telepathy at Leningrad University (some say he was committed to work on some classified government project) further development was rapid. Numerous research groups—big and small, of varying qualties and endurance—were mushrooming in different cities of the USSR, thanks in great part to the organizational initiative of E. K. Naumov.

An important episode in Russian ESP research was the exploration of finger-reading (skin-optic sensitivity) following the discovery of Rosa Kuleshova in 1962. She was able to distinguish colors or even printed text by what appeared to be the visual sensitivity of her fingertips. The investigation of her ability in scientific laboratories in Moscow ¹⁶ proved that she really had this talent—at least at one period of her life (later she lost it). Some scientists maintained that finger-reading might be a kind of anomalous visual sensitivity of the skin, which

would be a physiological, not a parapsychological phenomenon. However, there are reasons (such as its occasional presence also in darkness) to believe that at least some cases of finger-reading are instances of ESP.

Later, interest of Russian parapsychologists was directed especially to experiments in telepathy (such as those of I. M. Kogan ^{17, 18} who is a specialist in radiocommunication), mainly with the object of determining its practical application in telecommunication.

In their exploration of telepathy, Russian parapsychologists have paid little attention to the activity of the percipient (who "reads" mental states, or thoughts, of other persons). Rather, they have emphasized the activity of the sender. This can be recognized in their terminology: they prefer to speak about "mental suggestion" rather than telepathy.

Vasiliev's early experiments ¹⁹ dealt primarily with a sender's mental influence on the behavior of another person. He studied the transmission of telepathic signals, such as to "fall backwards," with emphasis on telepathic hypnosis. Some of his subjects were successful in receiving a hypnotist's telepathic orders to fall into a hypnotic trance. Later investigators continued this line of research into the possibilities of telepathically influencing the behavior of other people. For example, Bulgarian psychiatrist G. Lozanov telepathically transmitted signals for the subject to press down one of two telegraphic keys.

The year 1967 saw a climax of governmental interest in parapsychology in Eastern Europe. For me, personally, the consequences of this interest were paradoxical. For many years I had fought for official recognition and government support of parapsychology in Czechoslovakia. In 1967, this support was really forthcoming, and parallel support was apparent in some other Communist countries. This support, however, was associated with conditions that were unacceptable to me, and which compelled me rather to leave my native country.

In 1968, a marked decline in Russian parapsychology became apparent. It was due mainly to two factors: One of them was an unsuccessful long-distance telepathic experiment between Moscow and Kerch (about 1,800 miles) organized by one of the leading Soviet newspapers, the *Literary Gazette*. The experiment was carefully organized and broadly publicized. Well known Russian sensitives, such as K. Nikolaev and Y. Kamensky participated in it, but it failed. The committee, when evaluating the results, nevertheless recommended that research continue, but it was evident that some of the former claims of Russian parapsychologists were exaggerated.

Another fiasco was that of the International Parapsychological Con-

ference in Moscow in June, 1968. After long efforts, and after having overcome great difficulties, Russian parapsychologists organized a big conference to which delegates from numerous foreign countries were invited. After several postponements, the conference, which was originally supposed to last one full week, was suddenly condensed to one single day of presenting papers and addresses, which was followed by a showing of films on Russian experiments. The disfavor of Soviet officialdom at that time was manifested by a strongly critical article in the leading newspaper Pravda right on the day of the conference. The article attacked the well-known, but controversial Russian subject, N. Kulagina-Mikhailova, who years ago exhibited finger-reading. and who later was well known for her alleged ability to move various small objects telekinetically. The article blatantly accused Mikhailova, who was to be the central figure of the conference, of cheating. Probably as a result of this criticism the host of the conference (House of Friendship with Foreign Nations) reversed its former hospitality, and the film showing was transferred, thanks to the assistance of some Czech parapsychologists, to the Embassy of (the then liberal) Czechoslovakia.

These two unfortunate events definitely diminished the publicity parapsychological activities had enjoyed in Eastern Europe until that time.

Some recent reports about East European parapsychology (especially Ostrander and Schroeder's popular book) ²¹ have presented a number of alleged discoveries by East European parapsychologists such as biological radiations, Kirlian photography and various physical effects. I deliberately have not included them in this review, because I have serious doubts about the validity of some of these claims, and, of the others, I do not think that they belong in the area of parapsychology at all.

If I were to describe briefly the present situation of parapsychology in Eastern Europe, after the setback in 1968-1970, I would characterize it as "a cautious Renaissance."

My impression is that parapsychologists in the East and in the West—in spite of the different political and ideological systems they are living under—have markedly similar problems. This should not be surprising, since science does not recognize political boundaries. Both have their special characteristics, but neither is significantly ahead of the other. And neither has so far succeeded in fully convincing scientific colleagues in other fields of the value of parapsychology. Eastern parapsychologists may be in a more difficult situation (less financial

means, political restrictions), but they may have more endurance and more dedicated enthusiasm.

I personally strongly endorse some research tactics which were primarily emphasized on the East European parapsychological scene and which seem to prevail there:

(1) Effort to bring parapsychological abilities under regular laboratory control, preferably by training new subjects.

(2) Emphasis on the practical application of research findings.

(3) Interdisciplinary approach to problems of parapsychology, involving cooperation of scientists from many different fields.

(4) Application of new research techniques involving the use of more sophisticated instrumentation.

These goals which seemed to signify a more imaginative approach by East European parapsychologists, were soon adopted also by Western parapsychology, and former differences were soon wiped out. On the contrary, Western parapsychologists have probably found it easier to equip their laboratories with modern instrumentation than did their East European counterparts.

In my opinion, one important asset of East European parapsychology is the attitude of the general public. Compared with the Western public, the Communist public accepts parapsychology more rationally and seriously, as a new science, perhaps underdeveloped, but nevertheless a field which is bound to grow and bring forth more knowledge and practical values in the future. Not only college students, not only intellectuals, but also the lay public are reading books and articles on parapsychology—not so much for the thrill of the unknown, not from the eagerness to hear anecdotes about some supernatural mysteries, but in a serious effort to learn more about the not-yet-discovered forces in nature.

This public interest is really impressive. There is for example the book *Telepathy and Clairvoyance* ²² which was recently published in Czechoslovakia. This volume is a collection of short articles written by leading parapsychologists from all over the world, such as J. B. Rhine, L. L. Vasiliev, G. Murphy, H. Bender, and W. H. C. Tenhaeff. It is not always easy reading. The style is difficult to understand, and several chapters involve complex mathematics, tables, and graphs. Yet this book was published in nearly 30,000 copies—in a small country like Czechoslovakia. Translated into American conditions, it is as if the publisher, in the first printing, counted on a rapid sale of much more than half-a-million [!] hardcover copies.

After the recent setback, however, the government attitude to parapsychology in the USSR seems far from favorable. This can perhaps

best be seen by the fact that a recent authoritative publication on parapsychology in the USSR was not a book by some Russian advocate of parapsychology, but a translation of C. E. M. Hansel's critical book.23 In the postscript to this book, the influential Russian critic of parapsychology, A. I. Kitaygorodsky, says among other things: "Why was it necessary to translate the book by Hansel? It would seem that [in parapsychology] we have to do only with nonsense which does not deserve any attention, that we dispute with an insignificant group of misled individuals who do not influence society. Unfortunately, this is not the fact. Hansel's book has exposed in detail all the fabrications and frauds which have been presented in some of our books and offered as sensational discoveries of a progressive science. . . . In my opinion, [Hansel's] book has only one defect-it is too objective. In my opinion, the topic deserved more temper, it needs anger and wrath, embitterment and surprise, alarm and concern, wit and sarcasm. This is not what Hansel's book is like."

Individuals who are involved in East European parapsychology (again, not unlike those in the West) are of different kinds. Some of them are interested mostly in publicity. They are merely journalists and propagandists who do no significant research of their own. Others are engaged in serious experimental research, but we do not learn about their work, since they are not interested in premature publicity. My personal impression is that in recent reports on East European parapsychology the publicity achieved by an investigator is in inverse proportion to the quality and solidity of his work.

The propagandists are responsible for some of the discredit that East European parapsychology suffered in 1968–1970. They took advantage of a somewhat more liberal attitude toward publishing in Eastern Europe, and made known observations that were not solid pieces of scientific research. Not only did they discredit the field in their own countries, but in their contacts with Western parapsychologists and journalists gave a wrong impression of their work and situation.

Allow me to conclude my review by listing a few centers that, in my opinion, offer the greatest promise for East European parapsychology. The list may be incomplete, but these are the centers that seem to be involved in the best type of research, that which is meticulous, solid and promising. The high scholarly standard of these centers—though they are working more or less on the margin of parapsychology—promises more respect for the study of psi phenomena, regardless of whether they avow direct adherence to parapsychology or not.

Brief descriptions of the activity of these centers will explain why I characterized their parapsychological relevance as "a cautious Renais-

sance." We shall see that, so far as solid pieces of research are concerned, there is no more the former broad scope of pioneering ventures, no more a Vasiliev's purposeful pushing through of the whole thematic range of parapsychology. The more spectacular ventures, which are most publicized, are more science fiction than solid pieces of scholarly study. The relevant scientific work proceeds in a few restricted areas only, and all effort is made to remain safely within the limits of scientific orthodoxy. Research in parapsychology is on the defensive in Eastern Europe now, but the best scientists keep the door open for future progress.

1. Laboratory of Physiological Cybernetics, University of Leningrad (Director: Professor P. I. Gulyaev). Gulyaev and a group of his colleagues ²⁴⁻²⁸ discovered that all living bodies are surrounded by a faint electrostatic field (called an "electrical aura"). They were able to detect this field with a specially sensitive piece of apparatus constructed by V. I. Zabotin. This field undergoes changes in the course of time. For instance, muscular contractions, even as small as the ideomotor movements accompanying a mere imagination of a movement, give rise to changes in it which can be detected.

These changes in the "electrical aura" represent signals which carry certain information. They could be, first, the basis of some process of information transfer among animals, probably atavistic in nature—such as communication between some fish, or some insects, and second, they could have also a technical significance. There is, for instance, a theoretical possibility that the changes in the aura, initiated by man's mental activity, for example those accompanying the thought of some movement, could be used to exert a distant control over some apparatus.

This electrostatic field also changes with alterations in the location and electrical properties of objects in the surrounding space. Since the body may also be sensitive to changes in this surrounding field, there appears to be a possibility of perceiving surrounding objects through this new type of "electric sensitivity," which really exists in some fish species. There is also the possibility that a record of the "electrical aura" of the body or of some individual organs could be used for diagnostic purposes.

Gulyaev's researches also provide some foundation for the revived Russian interest in dowsing, stimulated especially by the activity of the geologist N. N. Sochevanov. The possible explanation is that the aura interacts with geophysical fields.

2. Bioinformation Unit in the A. S. Popov Scientific-Technical Society for Radiotechnics, Electronics, and Communication in Moscow

(Chairman: Professor I. M. Kogan). Kogan approaches the problem of telepathy from the point of view of his specialty in radiocommunication. In his theoretical contributions ²⁹⁻³⁰ he was trying to show that telepathy can be based on electromagnetic signals. Experimentally, he has been studying the velocity of information transmission in telepathy, as measured in bits per unit of time. He claims that with increasing distance the velocity of information transmission decreases.

A recent report of Kogan's co-workers 31 indicates that they have probably achieved a considerable degree of control over ESP in their subjects. Also, their work gives a corroborative testimony that ESP can be developed. They used a modification of Ryzl's method of training subjects in ESP. 32 They trained their subjects in visual imagery to prepare them for an experiment in which they attempted to transmit one-digit numbers telepathically (with a chance hit probability of p=.1). During the experiment the sender visualized a white screen on which the transmitted number was projected. The receiver visualized a blank screen and waited until a clear image of some number appeared on that screen. Though he was allowed to name all numbers which appeared on his imagined screen, only those of his images were counted which were clear and distinct. In 135 trials they recorded a surprisingly high number of 105 hits and only 30 errors.

3. Pedagogical Institute in Sverdlovsk (Professor A. S. Novomeysky with a group of co-workers in Sverdlovsk and adjacent Nizhny Tagil). For nearly a decade these scientists have been meticulously investigating finger-reading. They have worked without any significant publicity so far, publishing their results in local scientific media with limited circulation. Their work, however, deserves serious attention. S3-37 Essentially, they claim that man has the ability to distinguish colors through opaque screens by the sensitivity of the skin of his hands. The explanation offered is that the skin is sensitive to characteristic electrostatic fields around colored objects.

In former experiments with the skin-optic sense, the subjects were asked to name the colors. In the newer development of the technique (which gives more objective results) the experimenter asks the subject to move his hand toward the colored surface until he feels a "barrier," a subjective feeling of some influence of the target on the outstretched hand. Each color is characterized by a specific distance to its "barrier."

In addition to the above three centers I am tempted to add one more area of investigation in Eastern Europe where we may expect some development that may be of value for parapsychology. This is the Institute of Suggestology, Sofia, Bulgaria (Director: Dr. G. Lozanov). This center is only of potential importance for parapsychology. G. Lozanov

was engaged in some investigation of ESP in the past (for example, he studied the famous Bulgarian clairvoyant Vanga Dimitrova). Now he seems to be fully occupied with researches of a non-parapsychological character. He is investigating suggestion, especially from the point of view of its possible role in stimulating the learning process. However, because of his lasting interest in hypnosis and in ESP, it is possible that he will choose to investigate ESP at some future time again, provided favorable conditions prevail.

Finally, I wish to comment on the widely publicized psychokinetic claims of Mrs. Kulagina-Mikhailova, a young woman who allegedly is able to move light objects in daylight by the mere power of her concentration. A few American visitors have seen her successfully demonstrate her feat—though under informal conditions only.³⁸ I regret I had no oportunity to witness her performance myself, and cannot base my opinion on direct personal experience.

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