

## Alternative Religiosities in the Soviet Union and the Communist East-Central Europe: Formations, Resistances and Manifestations

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# Astral Karate as a Phenomenon of Late-Soviet Esoteric Underground

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**Abstract:** The article concentrates on the history of Astral Karate, its doctrine and sources. Astral Karate was a late-Soviet eclectic spiritual movement based on esoteric interpretations of martial arts and yoga. The term “Astral Karate” had spread in the 1980s thanks to spiritual leader and underground esoteric author Valery Averianov who called himself Guru Var Avera. On one hand, the movement reflected global tendencies, such as growing interest in Eastern cultures and spirituality, that characterized esoteric groups in the USSR as well as in the USA and Europe during this period. On the other hand, esoteric groups in the Soviet Union developed in isolation from European and American esoteric currents and under unique ideological and legal pressures. The combination of these factors contributed to the originality of late-Soviet esoteric currents and therefore makes Astral Karate an important object of academic inquiry, which helps us to understand the specifics of Soviet spirituality and its further developments in post-Soviet states

**Keywords:** Western esotericism; Soviet esotericism; martial arts; karate; yoga

Soviet society, although atheistic on the surface, in fact had a rich and vibrant esoteric underground that scholars has been extensively researching since the 1990s. Interest in research in the field rose thanks to publication in 1997 of an anthology *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, edited by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal and based on the conference on that topic that took place in 1991. This conference was probably one of the first attempts to create a holistic picture of Soviet and Russian esotericism as a subject of academic inquiry. In the Introduction to the anthology, Rosenthal stated that “the occult was a remarkably integral part of pre-revolutionary Russian and Soviet culture.”<sup>1</sup> Instead of the traditional description of the Soviet culture as thoroughly materialistic and atheistic, Rosenthal highlighted that the turn from religion to science proclaimed by the Soviet ideology coexisted with an adaptation of esoteric symbols and ideas, widespread in pre-revolutionary culture, to the new social reality.

*The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* emerged twenty years ago, however, despite all developments in the field in the last decades, we are still far from creation of the holistic image of Soviet esotericism. Even the basic terminology is sometimes confusing when it comes to the study of Soviet esoteric groups, mixing terms, i.e. occultism, esotericism, and mysticism, especially when it comes to translation of Russian scholarly research or primary sources into English.<sup>2</sup> Keeping in mind this terminological uncertainty, it is worth noting that the term “esotericism” in this article is used in accordance with definition elaborated by an American scholar Arthur Versluis. Versluis defined esotericism as a set of traditions based on claims of knowledge of hidden aspects of reality achieved through direct spiritual insights, and accompanied by

<sup>1</sup> Rosenthal, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>2</sup> Menzel, “Introduction,” 18-19.

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secrecy that may be a result of explicit restrictions on sharing this knowledge, or the complexity of said knowledge, which makes it useless for the profane.<sup>3</sup> Soviet esotericism is, in turn, a form of esotericism that developed in the Soviet state between the 1917 Russian revolution and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although there exist different approaches to periodization of the Soviet history, the term “late-Soviet” in this article refers to the period of Soviet history after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, which is an approach often used in studies of the Soviet culture.<sup>4</sup>

Among Soviet esoteric currents some, such as the Roerich movement and Russian Cosmism, have provoked a prominent interest in the academia, while others continue to remain in the shadows and thus need further scholarly attention. One of these neglected movements is Astral Karate that spread in the Soviet Union throughout the 1980s. The term “Astral Karate” had emerged thanks to a Soviet spiritual leader and author Valery Averianov (born 1940) who called himself Guru Var Avera. In late 1970s, he created a small circle of students who sought understanding of spiritual aspects of martial arts. In absence of relevant information about Asian esoteric doctrines, lacunas in historical knowledge were filled with information from all available sources, including elements of yoga, literature about Buddhism, and Theosophical ideas.

Through Averianov’s lessons, his students learned basic doctrines of Western esotericism, such as subtle bodies and egregors, combined with pieces of information about karate, yoga and Chinese martial arts. They believed that this information would help them to master secret techniques of martial arts that presumably included abilities of spiritual healing, clairvoyance and neutralizing enemies by means of spiritual powers of a fighter. It had become a basis for an original syncretic doctrine, which reflected both global tendencies of the period, such as growing interest in Eastern spirituality, and specific local esoteric groups in the Soviet Union, which developed in relative isolation from European and American esoteric currents, ideological and legal pressure. These facts makes it an important object of academic inquiry helping to increase an understanding of how Soviet culture reflected global tendencies and how these tendencies were at the same time shaped by the Soviet reality.

## 1 Astral Karate as a subject of academic inquiry

Although study of the Astral Karate movement would have deepened our understanding of specifics of the late-Soviet esoteric underground and adaptation of Eastern spiritual practices in the Soviet Union, there has been – with one exception – almost no scholarly effort dedicated to the movement. A brief mention in a 1996 paper of Igor Kungurtsev and Olga Luchakova, describes the movement in an ironical manner as a mere curiosity. “Some groups in this category”, stated the authors, “are really funny. For example, the school of Averianov (known under the pseudonym ‘Var Avera’) in Moscow is concerned with the purity of the astral plane and practices ‘astral karate’ to keep away evil sorcerers and entities. These activities, of course, were not taken seriously in mystical circles. The group was nicknamed ‘the Astral Police,’ while the guru himself received the title of ‘Astral Colonel.’”<sup>5</sup>

Such a scornful evaluation, however, is not entirely correct. In fact, the movement managed to become a prominent phenomenon of the late Soviet esoteric underground and influenced post-Soviet esoteric communities. Averianov’s circle of followers continues to exist today, and among spiritual movements influenced by Averianov between the 1990s and 2010s, there is the “Issiidiology” of Sergei Tsvelev, who referenced Averianov in his early works, and “SAMPO” created by Artem Iva, who extensively uses practices and terminology derived directly from Astral Karate. An influence of Astral Karate has even reached the USA. In Los Angeles, there exists a Golden Altai Academy, a spiritual school tracing its roots to late 1980s and created by a Russian emigre who calls himself Altai Chi and promotes techniques of “Siberian Yoga” and “Astrokarate,” which were obviously inspired by ideas of Valery Averianov.

<sup>3</sup> Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Kozlov, “The Historical Turn.”

<sup>5</sup> Kungurtsev and Luchakova, “Pagan Sorcery,” 27.

Given that Astral Karate was previously almost completely outside of the scope of the critical academic inquiry, the primary aim of this paper is to summarize the basic information about its history and doctrine, providing the ground for further research in this direction. The results of the study may improve our understanding of the life of late-Soviet esoteric communities and their leaders, as well as highlight some nodes of late-Soviet esoteric networks.

In order to achieve this goal, the study is concentrated on analysis of the texts, lectures and interviews of the creator of the movement, Valery Averianov, and particularly on his pivotal book *Astral'noye Karate* (Astral Karate). The importance of such a research is related to the fact that some of the primary sources, particularly, the 1992 edition of *Astral'noye Karate*, are rare and cannot be found within the public domain which would facilitate comparison with other editions and increase our understanding of the transformation of the movement in 1990s and 2000s. Based on these sources, the paper highlights the main tenets of the movement as described in Averianov's writings and lectures, as well as the probable sources of his ideas.

However, to understand these sources properly, it is important to place them in the wider context, and while the study of the movement itself may shed light on the history of the Soviet culture, the history of the USSR may, in its turn, shed light upon the genesis of Averianov's ideas.

## 2 Historical background

Karate, a Japanese martial art, appeared in the West after the Second World War. Karate study groups began to spread in the late 1940s in the United States and in the 1950s in Europe.<sup>6</sup> An important year for the history of martial arts was 1964, when judo was, for the first time, included in summer Olympics. In addition, those same Olympics took place in Tokyo, in which martial artists of various Japanese styles demonstrated their skills during exhibitions, which stimulated interest in martial arts worldwide.<sup>7</sup>

In Soviet history, the mid-1960s were the last years of the Khrushchev Thaw (Khrushchev retired as Premier in October 1964), a period of liberalization in many areas of life that had started after the death of Stalin in 1953. The Thaw was characterized with ambiguous developments in the sphere of spirituality. On the one hand, the government officially supported development of atheistic propaganda in a form of "scientific atheism." In his public speeches Khrushchev regularly attacked religion and even promised to obliterate it in the nearest future. At the same time, as a scholar of the Soviet esotericism Birgit Menzel put it, "since the Thaw, there was a marked reaction against the atheistic practice and everyday life. In the late 1960s and 1970s charismatic individuals, numerous mystical circles and sects emerged in the two capitals and in cities throughout the country."<sup>8</sup>

The 1960s and 1970s were also a period of a fascination of Soviet culture with history and an active search for a cultural identity. In his article "The Historical Turn in Late Soviet Culture: Retrospectivism, Factography, Doubt, 1953–91" Denis Kozlov describes this phenomenon in the following manner, "As the post-Stalin debate of the 'Thaw' undermined the persuasiveness of earlier interpretations of history, many groups in Soviet society sought to legitimize their existence by constructing new historical continuities."<sup>9</sup> For spiritual communities this historical turn often meant the formation of historisophical teachings that could explain both the history of Russia in the context of their doctrines and their role in this history. For many Soviet people, especially from educated circles, such a developments were indissolubly related to interest in esoteric literature. As Russian esoteric writer educated as a scholar in Oriental studies Igor Demin described it in his autobiographical 1992 book, "Many Russians implicitly understood during the 1970s ... that our experience after the revolution was defective and that it had moved us out of the main routes of the history of humanity. ... Alternative future of Russian people was imagined then ... on basis of the ideas of a completely different circle of Russian thinkers, primarily, Cosmist geopoliticians. Specifics of

<sup>6</sup> Dolin and Popov, *Kempo*, 399, 403.

<sup>7</sup> Mallon and Heijmans, *Historical Dictionary*, 69.

<sup>8</sup> Menzel, "Occult and Esoteric Movements," 151.

<sup>9</sup> Kozlov, "The Historical Turn," 578.

their teachings were related to their attempt to hide from coldness of local political reality in appeals to the world's Reason and international historical experience of humanity.”<sup>10</sup>

In the sphere of international relations, the Soviet government under Khrushchev's rule sought to expand its ties with Asian countries, including Japan. In 1956, the USSR and Japan signed Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration that proclaimed the end of the state of war between the two countries and a restoration of diplomatic relations. That opened new possibilities for cultural exchange through which Soviet people learned, among other things, about karate.

Karate spread rapidly in the Soviet Union, and finally the Soviet Karate Federation was established in 1978. The following several years were definitely the golden age of Soviet karate. However, the government did not welcome the rapid growth of popularity of martial arts, but rather was concerned about it. In early 1980s, it elaborated a series of measures aimed to take martial arts under total control. In November 1981, the government issued two decrees that introduced liability for “illegal teaching of karate.” As far as the laws included no description of legal ways to teach karate, they effectively prohibited karate classes in general.

Reasons for this decision were manifold. First of all, a general rise of conservatism throughout the Brezhnev era (1964-1982) included growth of governmental desire to control anything that could be used as a weapon, be it firearms or martial arts. It is indicative in this regard that the prohibition against teaching karate was included in the *Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic* as a subsection of article 219, “careless keeping of firearms.” Another reason was a decrease of diplomatic relations with Japan and the West, especially after the beginning of Soviet-Afghan War in 1979, which triggered a new wave of confrontation with social phenomena inside the USSR that were considered alien to Soviet culture. In addition, popularity of karate stimulated a growth of the number of instructors who provided private classes that government considered as an illegal business.

Karate remained illegal in the USSR until the 1989 when the laws against it were revoked. Nevertheless, many karate groups existed illegally between 1981 and 1989 in the Soviet Union despite possible consequences for their members. Students of martial arts in these informal communities were often interested not only in martial arts per se, but also – even more – in a sort of spiritual guidance associated with them. Memories of Russian fighting instructor Dmitry Skogorev (born 1967), who started to learn karate at that period, provides a good illustration for the atmosphere of the epoch. Back then, in 1981, according to Skogorev, his first karate instructor E. V. Titkov performed classes in a basement room, where he taught students “to understand martial arts as art, not a sport” and “concentrated on internal (subtle) energies connecting human beings with the world.”<sup>11</sup> “Many people at that time,” recalls Skogorev about 1980s, “studied Tai Chi for invigoration and heard about fighting implications of inner energy called Chi.”<sup>12</sup> That was a milieu in which Astral Karate emerged and developed.

### 3 The doctrine and practices of Astral Karate

The term “Astral Karate” became popular in 1980s thanks to a *samizdat* (the Soviet term for unofficial illegal publications printed and copied manually) book *Astral'noye Karate* written by Valery Averianov. The precise date of creation of the book is unknown, but it was most likely published between 1980 and 1983. The earliest official date of such a publication represented in the Russian State Library is dated 1995, although there also exists an edition published in 1992, but without the name of the author.

Various editions of the book have both common and unique content. In this paper, two editions are referenced, 1992 and 2003. The 1992 edition is probably the earliest officially printed version of the book. It is also the shortest one and describes only the most basic aspects of the doctrine. It is 39 pages long, compared with 94 pages in the 2003 edition, and it is probably the most consistent with the *samizdat*

<sup>10</sup> Demin, *Khudozhestvennaia Zhizn'*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Skogorev, *Vzaimodejstvie*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

original. The 1992 edition concentrates on the description of the practices with little discussion of the doctrine. The 2003 edition, on the other hand, includes the content of 1992 edition, but it also includes a series of additional essays on various topics that help to create more holistic image of Averianov's ideas.

*Astral'noye Karate* was not Averianov's first attempt to address spiritual topics. His experiments in this field had begun more than a decade before the completion of the book. On his website (<http://www.pralaya.ru>), Averianov mentions a series of works on yoga and other spiritual topics that he presumably wrote in the 1960s and 1970s, which are now available online on the same website. Although we cannot verify the identity of current online versions with their *samizdat* originals, it seems quite feasible that in the 1960s Averianov might be interested in yoga, because it was popular in the Soviet Union at that time. In his early works, Averianov does not mention Astral Karate, but writes, for the most part, about control of "sansa," a sort of spiritual energy that, according to Averianov, allows the practitioner to employ personal energy to influence other people. To master the control of sansa, taught Averianov, students ought to complete special training such as meditations and *pranayama*.

When popularity of karate began to rise during 1970s, Averianov's interests shifted, and his ideas finally formed into the eclectic Astral Karate doctrine. In his supposedly mid-1970s book *Azbuka Russkoi logi* (Alphabet of Russian Yoga), he writes, "Unfortunately, the Russian sport system does not include any principles of meditation and has no clear egregor. Effects of Hatha Yoga are not available to it. In Japan, schools of martial arts (judo, karate) are schools of meditation. We may try to create something like this here".<sup>13</sup> If the online version is consistent with its mid-1970s original, this statement may be the first reflection of Averianov's idea to create his own school of "karate" in the USSR.

It is important to stress that Averianov described his doctrine specifically as a Russian variant of karate in opposition to Asian martial arts. It may sound confusing, however, for Averianov always emphasized that traditional Eastern approaches to spiritual practice are not fully acceptable in modern day society. One reason for that was that they required specific conditions, like clean mountain air or isolation from the society, that urban people cannot afford in big cities. In the same manner, he believed that spiritual practices created for Eastern people would not be beneficial in the West, including Russia, without revision and adaptation. Thus, he developed his ideas in explicit opposition to more conventional schools of karate. "When today I watch karate, taekwondo, kickboxing competitions, even at international level," writes Averianov, "I smile skeptically; all this reminds me my study of boxing thirty-five years ago <...> in none of them do I feel the Warrior Personality, who follows the path of the Truth of the Death."<sup>14</sup>

Such a critical approach allowed Averianov to justify the fact that his teachings were often different from traditional sources and practices. On the other hand, it incorporates naturally into the whole system. Averianov described an appearance of his school as a result of the evolution of humanity with arguments very much similar to conception of races in Theosophical literature. In the 2003 edition of *Astral'noye Karate* Averianov claims that all schools of traditional yoga and Eastern martial arts are parts of a conspiracy designed to collect energy of the students from different countries and transmit it to Indian, Chinese and Japanese egregors. "Russia, Europe, and Baltic states," claims Averianov, "need their own, clearly national Schools of Karate to annihilate Chinese aggression and to stop sucking of energy from white race to yellow. And we should spread our methods worldwide so that the world feeds not China and Japan, but us, Indo-Europeans, which is objectively better for the world, because an expansion of European culture is preferable for humanity than worldwide Chinese 'Cultural Revolution.'"<sup>15</sup>

The practice of Astral Karate is concentrated around a series of exercises called *kata*. In traditional karate schools, *katas* are series of movements that usually include attacks, blocks, and intermediate moves. In Astral Karate, however, *kata* are a series of actions – within a wide range, from meditations to a sexual intercourse between two practitioners – performed with spiritual goals. There are two types of *katas* in Astral Karate. Small *katas*, as their name suggests, consists of small number of exercises or even one move that is performed several times. Large *katas*, on the other hand, are a series of twelve actions

<sup>13</sup> Var Avera, *Azbuka*.

<sup>14</sup> Var Avera, *Astral'noye Karate* (2003), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

united into logical sequences. For example, so-called “Carpet *Kata*” is a series of twelve Hatha Yoga postures accompanied by visualization of energies floating through the body,<sup>16</sup> while “*Tantric Kata*” is a set of twelve sexual positions involving a male and a female practitioner that performed together with short mantras and visualizations of energy.<sup>17</sup>

The last one was especially provocative in a context of restrictive Soviet sexual morality. Despite overall liberalization of Soviet culture in the second half of 1980s, attitudes towards to sexuality were still surrounded with many suppressions and restrictions. “The death of Brezhnev led to three rapid changes in leadership, and then the onset of *glasnost*’ and *perestroika*. The Soviet Union now seems set on the path of transformation in virtually all spheres of life. Yet this has had little impact on the 1970s model of sex-role socialization. If anything, it has reinforced it.”<sup>18</sup> As a well-known statement based on a phrase of a Soviet woman during a US-Soviet Space Bridge in 1986 said, “There is no sex in the USSR.” In these circumstances, discussions about sexuality were marginalized during Soviet times and Averianov’s publication was a slap in the face of Soviet morality.

From a contemporary point of view, Averianov’s instructions about sexual practices were, in fact, quite innocent by all standards compared, for example, with sexual experiments of Aleister Crowley. Averianov’s recommendations did not address traditionally problematic topics such as homosexuality and were limited to a vaginal sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. Nevertheless, critics cited Averianov’s instructions on “*Tantric Kata*” as a demonstration of an amoral nature of his ideas. Averianov mentions one example of this kind in a critical article about him that was published in 1988 in *Iunyi Kommunist* (Young Communist) journal.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, the appearance of such a practice in a book on esoteric spirituality was not a matter of chance, but a reflection of general social developments. Despite of general conservatism of Soviet society, *glasnost*’ (openness), an official policy of elimination of censure in the USSR introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, allowed free discussions on the first Soviet works in sexology, like the works of Igor Kon (1928-2011). Kon’s publications presented some aspects of modern Western theories of sexuality to the Soviet audience and provoked a series of discussions about sexuality.<sup>20</sup>

The topic of sexuality was even more important in esoteric circles of the time. As a scholar of esotericism Marco Pasi has pointed out, modern esoteric groups often played a role of safe spaces where people could discuss ideas that are rejected by the society in general.<sup>21</sup> This thesis is true when it comes to the topic of sexuality in the late USSR. Although to some extent Soviet esoteric milieu inherited a wary approach to sexuality typical for the Soviet society, some groups and individuals actively explored it. People shared hand-to-hand *samizdat* tomes, dedicated to sacred sexuality, at least since late 1970s. For example, in 1980s a *samizdat* spread a translation of a book of *The Tao of Love and Sex* by Jolan Chang that addressed the Chinese sexual practices. It is symptomatic that the Russian *samizdat* version was entitled *Dao liubvi* (Dao of Love), which demonstrated how the very word “sex” was rejected by the Soviet culture as inappropriate. At the same time, it demonstrated ambiguity in late-Soviet views on sexuality. On the one hand, the topic was considered indecent, on the other, there was an obvious interest and a public inquiry on information about it.

Therefore, Averianov’s ideas reflected many actual tendencies of the Soviet society of the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, they inherited some elements from the previous history of Soviet esotericism and were based on ideas that were discussed in esoteric circles of the 1960s, a period formative of his personality.

<sup>16</sup> Astral’noye Karate (1992), 15-19.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 22-31.

<sup>18</sup> Attwood, *The New Soviet Man*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Var Avera, *Astral’noye Karate* (2003), 85.

<sup>20</sup> Attwood, *The New Soviet Man*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> Pasi, “The Modernity,” 63.

## 4 Sources of the doctrine of Astral Karate

Examination of Averianov's interviews and lectures reveals more information about the sources of his ideas. In a 2013 interview in *Gazeta RB* Averianov said that in 1962 he faced accusations in anti-Soviet propaganda and was expelled from the Communist Party and Leningrad University where he studied journalism. He had to leave Leningrad and, as a result, he ended up in Buryatia, an Asian region of the USSR located in Siberia. "The Secret fighting technique," states Averianov in the interview, "was known here by some elders, who in pre-revolutionary times talked to Buddhist Shaolin monks and from Tibet in general. Although there are now many studies of different Eastern techniques, Buryatia remains the only lively and Russian-speaking center of Buddhism and yoga that is directly available for Europeans."<sup>22</sup> Although claims of a continuous Shaolin legacy in Buryatia are certainly no more than exploitation of a popular name, it is true that Tibetan Buddhism is a traditional religion of this region that existed there even in Soviet times. An experience of life in Buryatia has probably played its role in the spiritual development of Averianov who was, by then, in his early twenties.

Further clues from the same interview point in a more precise direction when he mentions an influence of Soviet spiritual leader Bidia Dandaron (1914-1974). Dandaron was a Buryatian Buddhist teacher and author who worked in academic Tibetology during Soviet period, and between 1956 and 1972 he was a lecturer of Indology and Tibetology at Leningrad University.<sup>23</sup> It seems very likely that Averianov, who was a student of the same university at that time, became interested in Eastern spirituality thanks to a circle of Dandaron's followers who then recommended that he move to Buryatia in 1962.

However, Averianov stayed in Buryatia for only a few years, and in the mid-1960s moved to Moscow where he plunged into local esoteric circles. In one of his lectures, published on YouTube in 2009, Averianov calls himself "a Russian Freemason." He mentions a Freemason who taught him about Masonic doctrines, "Alexander Prokophievich Markov, who was a Don Cossack, who graduated with distinction from a seminary and therefore was accepted without exams in Saint Petersburg University."<sup>24</sup> According to Averianov, they contacted in the mid-1960s, but then went their separate ways.

Alexander Markov (1885/1886-1973), whose spiritual student Averianov claims to be, was a real person, a Russian economist who began his education in Don Theological Seminary. After that, he studied at university, however, not in Saint Petersburg, as Averianov claims, but first in Kharkiv<sup>25</sup> and then in Moscow.<sup>26</sup> In 1922, during the first years of Soviet regime, he moved to Germany where he worked until 1925. From 1925 to 1947, he lived in France then worked several years in Bulgaria until, in 1951, he returned to the Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup> There he was almost immediately arrested and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison, but was granted amnesty in 1955. His career was rehabilitated and he received a position as a university lecturer. He worked in Soviet academic institutions in Moscow until his retirement.

Aside of Averianov's own words, there is no solid evidence that Markov was his spiritual teacher, but we do know for certain that he actually was a Freemason and worked in Moscow in the mid-1960s. There Averianov could meet him wandering through various underground esoteric groups, although to what measure they actually had teacher-student relationships remains an open question. For example, no tangible sign of Masonic ideas appears in Averianov's works. Nevertheless, what is actually important is that a story about a Russian emigré who returned to the Soviet Union with spiritual secrets prohibited in the USSR was archetypical for the Soviet esoteric underground that relied, in many ways, on support from fellow esotericists outside of the USSR. It is also possible that Markov's influence amplified Averianov's worldview with ideas of esoteric Christianity and, more generally, provided some feeling of connection with pre-revolutionary Russian culture.

<sup>22</sup> Igumnova and Chihachev, "Var Avera."

<sup>23</sup> Menzel, "Occult and Esoteric Movements," 175.

<sup>24</sup> Var Avera, *Astral'noye Karate. Shkola Russkikh Masonov*.

<sup>25</sup> *Russkoe Masonstvo*, 522.

<sup>26</sup> *Rossiiskoe Zarubezh'e*, 144.

<sup>27</sup> *Russkoe Masonstvo*, 522-523.

The case of Averianov provides an example of the evolution of spiritual doctrine from interest in Eastern religiosity during university years to a transformation under the influence of Western esoteric ideas into its mature syncretic form. Averianov's spiritual doctrine incorporates various forms of Western and Eastern esotericism and, at the same time, elaborates a complex and ambiguous approach towards non-Western cultures. Averianov obviously identified Russian culture as a European one, regarding it at the same time as the Europe's Eastern frontier and a point of cultural exchange between the West and non-Western cultures, from which "Indo-Europeans" might learn ancient spiritual technics that they should then adapt to contemporary circumstances and improve through a sort of Westernization. As Averianov himself put it, "Of course, we may and should learn from Chinese, but, gentlemen, not too straight, not too literally, we are Europeans after all."<sup>28</sup>

Although we can learn about some roots of Averianov's doctrine from interviews and lectures, specific literary sources of his ideas are much more obscure. Averianov usually provided no references in his books, partly because most of them were actually just records of his lectures, letters and short instructions for students, making it hard to trace the sources of his ideas and to distinguish his original concepts from those inherited from other groups. However, texts of other authors who developed ideas of Astral Karate independently from Averianov, yet reflecting his obvious influence, may help us to make some inferences about a set of literature that was usual reading for people involved in these circles.

Particularly, in the third volume of his 1992 book *Put' Karate* Ukrainian martial arts instructor and spiritual teacher Sergei Tsvelev (born 1954) describes an "energetic aspect of martial arts" referencing, among others, the ideas of Var Avera as a source of insights about esoteric aspects of karate. Unlike Var Avera, Tsvelev provides a reference list revealing several cornerstone pieces of esoteric literature of the early 1990s. The list included works of Roerichs and their followers, particularly a book of Aleksandr Klizovskii (1874-1942) *Osnovy Miroponimaniia Novoi Epokhi* (Foundations of the Worldview of the New Epoch).<sup>29</sup> These books, together with Theosophical literature, dominated Soviet occult circles and transmitted a number of Theosophical concepts such as an elaborated doctrine of subtle bodies. Other sources were, for the most parts, pre-revolutionary works on occult topics, i.e. *Okkul'tizm i Magiia* (Occultism and Magic) by French occultist Gérard Encausse, also known as Papus (1865-1916), published in Russian in 1908, and a 1907 book of Russian occultist Sergei Tukholka (1874-1954), *Magiia I Okkul'tizm* (Magic and Occultism).<sup>30</sup> These sources enriched Astral Karate and related currents with terminology and concepts from Western esotericism.

It is easy to mention that even in the early 1990s after several years without censure post-Soviet esoteric authors relied for the most part on Russian esoteric literature from the first half the twentieth century, knowing little to nothing about contemporary European or American esoteric currents. That was even more so in the 1970s and 1980s making the list of sources of any esoteric leader quite limited. This accounted for the originality of Soviet esoteric doctrines.

## 5 Conclusion

Astral Karate was a late-Soviet esoteric current that, just as other esoteric movements of the same time, developed in a situation of legal and ideological pressure. In an absence of free access to esoteric literature or academic literature on esotericism, it accumulated different elements that were available to its creator.

Some may state that that this eclectic mix of ideas was typical not only for late-Soviet esoteric groups but also for the New Age movement in the USA and Europe as well as other esoteric currents, which, to some extent, are an intrinsic characteristic of Western esotericism in general. Nevertheless, it is important to stress the difference between Soviet esoteric groups and similar groups in the US and Europe of the same time – the differences being a result of differing social contexts. While the New Age movement emerged in a situation of a free access to an overwhelming amount of literature on different spiritual topics – with the

<sup>28</sup> Var Avera, *Astral'noye Karate* (2003), 86.

<sup>29</sup> Tsvelev, *Put' Karate*, 215.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

final mixture being a result of free choices from among this bounty of information – Soviet esoteric groups emerged in a situation of an absence of discussion and information on such topics.

The biography of the creator of the movement, Valery Averianov, illustrated the situation from which Soviet esotericism exited, and the complex path of Averianov himself that lead him to the formation of Astral Karate. After involvement in esoteric circles in early 1960s Leningrad, he faced accusations in anti-Soviet propaganda and moved to Buryatia, a region where ideological pressure was less than in the capitals, and then lived in Moscow where he participated in underground esoteric communities, gathering pieces of information about esotericism that he then incorporated into the doctrine of Astral Karate.

The main sources of this doctrine included information from Leningrad and Moscow esoteric circles in which Averianov was involved. Among Soviet esoteric figures who might have influenced him there was a Buryatian born scholar and spiritual teacher Bidia Dandaron and Moscow esotericist and university professor Alexander Markov, whom Averianov names as his spiritual teacher. We also know that he was familiar with some pieces of *samizdat* esoteric literature. However, Averianov did not belong to any particular school or group but instead tried to coalesce different elements that he managed to find into an original mixture.

The importance of studying Astral Karate is to some extent related to the fact that it has reflected some important tendencies of the Soviet culture of 1970s. Among these tendencies was an interest in Eastern spirituality and martial arts, struggles of the Soviet people in acquiring spiritual guidance in an atheistic society, the rise of national self-awareness, the search for a Russian national identity between East and West, and rising interest in sexuality.

It is worth noting that this paper contains only a prolegomena for future research in the field. It is an invitation to further discussion that may lead to better understanding of the complex history of Soviet esotericism.

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