

GURDJIEFF IN THE SOVIET NEW AGE

Esoteric Resistance and Spiritual Rebellion

Author: Nik Schulz

Abstract The Soviet Union's totalitarian ideology suppressed religious and spiritual practices. Due to the state's repression towards the Orthodox Church, people found reassurance in underground esoteric movements which offered alternative paths to spirituality. Gurdjieff's emphasis on inner transformation provided a non-institutional spiritual framework that resonated with Soviet dissidents. This paper examines the influence of Gurdjieff's teachings on the Soviet spiritual underground and how Gurdjieff's teachings on self-fulfilment intensified resistance towards state atheism. Furthermore, by contextualising the New Age Movement in the Soviet Union, this study provides new insights into how it operated beyond the Western world and adapted to a repressive ideological environment.

Keywords: Gurdjieff, New Age Movement, Soviet Union, Esotericism

I. Introduction

Giorgi Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866-1949) synthesised his esoteric teachings under the title: 'The Work.' He was born into a Greek-Armenian family in Gyumri, Armenia. However, during his life, the city was under the Russian Empire and named Alexandropol. During his life, he claimed that he had discovered secret knowledge during his travels to 'the East.' In his book, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (2015 [1963]), he introduces his travels to Western and Central Asia, Eastern Africa, Tibet, and Siberia. However, the book has been deemed a rather unreliable autobiography. He presented his studies and teachings mostly towards 'the Western world'. Gurdjieff targeted mainly European and American people who were receptive to his 'exotic Eastern' spirituality. Furthermore, he was also actively spreading his teachings within imperial Russia until the Revolution of 1917 (Sutcliffe & Willmetts, 2020).

With the Bolshevik Revolution, Gurdjieff went into exile to Paris, where he was able to continue his teachings. Even though he could not live through the spiritual revival of the 1960s and 1970s of the New Age Movement, his teachings of 'The Work' were used on the other side of the Iron Curtain. His esoteric teachings helped secret societies practice alternative spirituality during these times, even with state atheism being a fundamental doctrine of Soviet ideology. In the 1960s and 1970s, a thaw in the Soviet Union helped Gurdjieff's ideas spread. People of the U.S.S.R. were able to rediscover Gurdjieff's teachings of 'The Work' (Puttick, 2000; Menzel, 2013).

This essay will analyse Gurdjieff's teachings and the spiritual revival in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s. For this, a research question was formulated: 'How did Gurdjieff's teachings contribute to the revival of spirituality in the Soviet Union?' To address the research question, the paper will first introduce Gurdjieff's esoteric teachings. Then, the atheistic environment of the Soviet Union will be presented to showcase how Gurdjieff's ideas and the Soviet Union co-existed within the spiritual revival of the New Age Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, a conclusion of the findings will be given.

2. G. I. Gurdjieff

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff's 'The Work' or 'The Fourth Way' is a spirituality that explains that a person's soul, after being born, is stuck in the Modern world's fixation on 'personality,' leaving one not really conscious. The core of his teaching, 'The Work,' is that Gurdjieff is a holder of a deeper knowledge, a state which he

also called 'being,' that others can also accomplish. He intended to unite spiritualism and science by capitalising on the West's obsession with Orientalism (Gordon, 1978; Petsche, 2011). Gurdjieff built up a system of "neutral scientific observation of one's self" (Anderson, 1991, p.55). He built the 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man' on the idea that most humans live in a state of 'autonomous existence,' living in a constant state of sleep. The ego, according to 'The Work,' controls all actions of a person, but the problem with an ego-based existence is that it can only react to external forces. As such, people need to wake up from the state of sleep to reach their full potential (Gurdjieff, 1933; Petsche, 2011; Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020).

A modern man lives in sleep, in sleep he is born and in sleep he dies. About sleep, its significance and its role in life, we will speak later. But at present just think of one thing, what *knowledge* can a sleeping man have? And if you think about it and at the same time remember that *sleep* is the chief feature of our being, it will at once become clear to you that if a man really wants knowledge, he must first of all think about how to wake, that is, about how to change his *being*. (Ouspensky, 1950, p.73)

A person, according to Gurdjieff, is born with a state of enlightenment but gets trapped and encapsulated by personality, which creates a 'false-I' in which people believe that they are conscious. However, a person can escape from this by 'working on' themselves, and they can develop their 'real I,' their 'essence'. To break away from the ego, according to 'The Work,' is to create a 'soul'. However, this practice or work can only be achieved by active effort and struggle. The person needs to recognise that spiritual growth requires persistent effort and overcoming internal obstacles. Gurdjieff claims that struggle is a necessary component of transformation (Ouspensky, 1977; Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020).

I decided to do this without fail so that this initial chapter of mine, predetermined as I have already said to awaken your consciousness, should fully justify its purpose, and reaching not only your, in my opinion, as yet only fictitious "consciousness," but also your real consciousness, that is to say, what you call your subconscious, might, for the first time, compel you to reflect actively.

(Gurdjieff, 1950, p.25-26)

The awakening, according to 'The Work,' is done by integrating the three traditional ways of spiritual development: the way of the fakir (physical discipline), the way of the monk (emotional devotion), and the way of the yogi (mental con-

centration). Thus, Gurdjieff aimed to create a 'Fourth Way,' which is the way his student Ouspensky (1977) referred to the teachings of 'The Work.' By integrating these approaches, Gurdjieff aimed to create a more balanced and comprehensive path to spiritual growth. This also shows that Gurdjieff's spirituality tapped into perennial philosophy by showcasing that there is a common core shared by other spiritualities (Ouspensky, 1977; Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020).

To 'awaken' according to Gurdjieff, one needs to practise a state of consciousness. This practice was mainly done in groups where people could help each other achieve 'awakening'. These groups engaged in physical work, ritualised eating and drinking, movements known as 'sacred dances,' and many 'inner exercises' (Cusack, 2016; Ouspensky, 1950; Petsche, 2011). This method claims to connect the body and the mind. He claimed that through self-observation, self-knowledge is gained. This knowledge can then be used in the practice of self-remembrance, which leads to the state of consciousness, or enlightenment, according to Gurdjieff. However, it was emphasised that self-knowledge is key since if one tries to seek change before understanding oneself, one will fail to achieve anything. This sense of 'working on oneself' is where the name 'The Work' comes from (Gurdjieff, 1950; Ouspensky, 1977; Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020; Wellbeloved, 2013).

The aim of 'The Work' is to show people how they can meet their own needs. It is an individual process since all individuals will have a different encounter with consciousness, but it is not individualistic. 'The Work' is "self-oriented" and must be practised by the 'individual,' it is not 'individualistic'" (Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020, p.10) since the practitioners must also interact in a group "to come to know themselves and their particular foibles (their 'chief feature'), and through this encounter to support each other to 'wake up' through negotiating their interpersonal frictions" (Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020, p.10). According to 'The Work', this type of group work can help break free from the prison constructed by the so-called 'false-I' with the help of the guru, Gurdjieff, who was seen as the 'escapee.' This escape is assisted under the authority of an 'escapee'. This could solely be Gurdjieff, even though he claimed that others could also reach consciousness (Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020; Ouspensky, 1950; Wellbeloved, 2013).

'The Work' also believes that Gurdjieff is the only enlightened or conscious being. This hierarchy then created schisms within 'The Work'. Nonetheless, Gurdjieff's work kept on affecting the world and even though he was exiled from Russia during the Revolution of 1917, his work kept the spiritual scene of the country alive even under the atheist Soviet Union. Even though Gurdjieff developed his teachings in pre-revolutionary Russia, he continued to have an impact on the area during the Soviet era because of the New Age Movement (Menzel, 2013; Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020).

3. Soviet Atheism

The introduction of official atheism into the state's ideology under Stalinist Soviet Communism severely damaged the nation's spiritual life (Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1996). Stalinism became a totalitarian ideology, aimed to "defend the interests of the state and to extend its influence into all spheres of personal and social life" (Van Den Bercken, 1985, p.269). Hence, people living under the Soviet Union could not hold any ideological debates in public. Otherwise, they could find themselves ostracised by the state, since it enforced its ideological devotion with political force. The Stalinist rule over the Soviet Union hindered the spiritual life of many (Van Den Bercken, 1985).

When talking about Soviet atheism, it is important to note that it is not the same as Western atheism. The former bans religions altogether, whereas the latter claims that there is no God. The role of state atheism was to eliminate any competing ideas. A totalitarian ideology like Soviet Communism is unable to acknowledge opposing ideologies since intellectual plurality would have destroyed the government's legitimacy. The totalitarian control would cease to exist, and the Soviet Communists would lose their authority over the country. Religion was seen as a competitive ideology since spiritual seekers were seen by the Communist Party leaders and the KGB as individuals who would rather not give up their beliefs at the altar of the Soviet ideology due to their sacrosanct devotion. Thus, many religious or spiritual figures became 'enemies of Soviet power' and were persecuted (Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1996; Van Den Bercken, 1985).

Stalinist Russia faced aggressive atheism and persecution of believers. The 1920s witnessed the targeting of occultist leaders and members, and by the 1930s, the nation had lost all of its former secret societies (Krasztev, 2019). Khrushchev, who followed Stalin after his death in 1953, continued to maintain an aggressive anti-religious sentiment. However, he was met with 'disappointments and failures' since, parallel to this harsh policy, he also started a strong de-Stalinisation. This reform put a halt to the blind dedication towards Stalinism and let spirituality back into people's lives. By the time Khrushchev wanted to change that, he could not do much about it (Gordeeva, 2017; Judt, 2011; Shlikhta, 2023).

When Brezhnev took over in 1964, his policies throughout the 1960s-1980s included reorientation to manage the Church's power and visibility, rather than attempting to eradicate them due to the comprehensive effects of de-Stalinisation that caused disenchantment with Stalin's Communism. Furthermore, Brezhnev also realised that he could not hold onto the Soviet Union in the same way as Stalin's time. As such, his doctrine issued peaceful coexistence with the satellite state and the only time the mother country would intervene was if the political

authority of Communism would be questioned. The conditions of Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation and Brezhnev's moderate relative tolerance towards religious groups assisted alternative spiritualities to rise during the 1960s and 1970s (Menzel, 2013; Michnik, 1986; Shlikhta, 2023).

The 1960s and 1970s also saw the religious revival through the New Age Movement; "a social phenomenon, which has emerged during the 1970s and which has adopted and further developed a secularized esoteric belief system" (Hanegraaff, 1999, p.146). Within the New Age Movement, the underground cultic milieu became aware of itself. Groups of people independently worked towards the same goal of individual spirituality and self-improvement (Chryssides, 2007; Hanegraaff, 1999; Partridge, 2004; Possamai, 2007). The countercultural revolution and its break from the traditional way of life reached beyond the Iron Curtain. This movement helped non-conformist ideologies spread and independent religious communities started to erupt, led by Soviet intellectuals. Occultist dissident groups started to form and silently fight against the regime within the framework of the New Age Movement (Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1996; Partridge, 2004; Tchepournaya, 2003).

Even though there was a massive repression of religion under the Stalinist era, the occult traditions never died. This continued practice could aid occultists' claim that spiritual yearning is a part of human nature that cannot be silenced by external forces, like the Soviet state atheism (Clark, 2001; Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1996; Menzel, 2013). One figure that played an important role in Soviet spiritual revival was Gurdjieff. Although by the spiritual revival of the 1960s and 1970s, Gurdjieff was already dead and was mostly famous outside the Soviet Union, his teachings sparked interest within the region due to the historical factors that were listed before (Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020). Gurdjieff's teachings returned to the underground spiritual mainstream during the 1950s, when some of his students were released from the GULAG. This led to the formation of underground spiritual movements based on Gurdjieff's teachings on self-fulfilment (Gordeeva, 2017; Menzel & Hagemester, 2012).

4. Gurdjieff and the New Age Movement in the Soviet Union

The rediscovery of alternative spirituality within the U.S.S.R. was aided through the New Age Movement. The New Age Movement in the Soviet Union resulted in an underground circulation of knowledge of alternative spiritualities, to which Gurdjieff's teachings had a great influence on. His works and teachings were redistributed in the form of samizdat (Menzel & Hagemester, 2012). These illegal

pieces of literature were smuggled into the country and reproduced uncensored on private typewriters. Books and manuals were printed and redistributed illegally within the Soviet spiritual underground. As such, they became highly useful in assisting the innate religious yearning that many spiritual leaders claimed to satisfy (Gordeeva, 2017; Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1996; Martin, 2023).

The members of these communities of dissidents had to remain in secrecy since even after the thaw of de-Stalinisation that brought relative freedoms towards spiritual yearning, structural opportunities for religious organisations remained limited due to the ingrained Soviet atheism. As such, to avoid getting caught, only a select few could join the underground network. Prospective members were brought in by members of the underground. Due to the repression, one had to earn the members' trust (Tchepournaya, 2003). These communities could mostly be found in urban areas, around the big cities, where samizdat knowledge could come together and be spread (Krasztev, 2019). There, they could read and discuss the texts and practice 'The Work' through engaging in the 'sacred dances' and 'inner exercises' of self-observation to result in 'waking up' (Cusack, 2016; Menzel, 2013). Furthermore, it is also important to mention that no centralised movement of 'The Work' existed, but rather these underground communities were fragmented and local circles (Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020).

Members of the spiritual underground mostly included intellectuals and artists who had greater access to the knowledge circulation that the samizdat brought in. Those who could join the underground were able to spread the teachings of Gurdjieff towards the general public (Menzel & Hagemester, 2012). Gurdjieff's teachings were appealing to Soviet intellectuals and artists because of their intent of waking up and struggling to remain conscious, which corresponded to the political environment of the thaw during the 1960s and 1970s. Artists integrated specific elements of 'The Work' into their art, namely of shock and provocation. These subtly spread 'The Work' even to those who did not have access to the underground (Menzel, 2013). Gurdjieff's teachings gave people access to peek over the Iron Curtain. However, this struggle did not directly confront Soviet ideology since 'The Work' emphasised spiritual growth while remaining active in daily life (Menzel & Hagemester, 2012; Michnik, 1986).

The nature of 'The Work' also helped with the redistribution of its teachings. It was relatively compatible with the Soviet doctrine, which made it easier to spread even within Soviet atheism. Gurdjieff advocated for the combination of science and spirituality that resonated with the Soviet state ideology. That ideology is heavily based on reason, science and progress, which Gurdjieff also supported. Many followers of 'The Work' could find peace with their spirituality since it also advocated rigidly for the importance of science and reason. Thus, fear of state

scrutiny could be avoided relatively more by practising 'The Work' due to its relative compatibility with Soviet Communism. The scientific nature of Gurdjieff's teachings helped circulate 'The Work' in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the flourishing of the New Age Movement during the 1960s and 1970s also greatly influenced the spreading of 'The Work' (Gordon, 1978; Menzel & Hagemester, 2012).

The spiritual revival and rediscovery of Gurdjieff were also influenced by the New Age Movement. In the Soviet Union, it manifested differently than in the West (Menzel, 2013; Menzel & Hagemester, 2012). In both cases, the movement involved an awareness of sharedness and the countercultural revolution. However, in the West, this awareness presented itself in realising the common goal of individual spirituality and self-improvement. Furthermore, the countercultural revolution entailed breaking from mainstream religious traditions (Chryssides, 2007; Hanegraaff, 1999; Partridge, 2004). Moreover, it preached spiritual privilege, and the middle class got involved with alternative spirituality, breaking from the exclusivist traditions. However, the New Age Movement had a different meaning within the Soviet Union (Goldman, 2012).

The New Age Movement in the Soviet Union manifested itself differently. The shared goal was to work towards dismantling state atheism. People within the U.S.S.R. used individual spirituality and self-improvement since they were not allowed to be part of the Orthodox Church (Martin, 2023; Shlikhta, 2023; Van Den Bercken, 1985). The countercultural revolution inspired youth to reject the traditional way of living, which in this case was Soviet atheism and struggle against it. This dissatisfaction with institutional control over the spiritual life found solace in embracing alternative spirituality. The struggle to remain awakened in a dictatorship was also distinctive to the Soviet Union since the West was living under democratic governance (Gordeeva, 2017; Menzel, 2013; Ouspensky, 1950). Furthermore, in the U.S.S.R., the spiritual privilege of the middle class and breaking from the exclusivist aspect of alternative spirituality was also not the case. Soviet intellectuals were leading the movement since they had the privilege to interact with the samizdat and be part of intellectual circles.

The underground spiritual movement created a 'second cultural reality.' Within this movement, people could shake off state atheism. Gurdjieff's teachings of 'awakening' and becoming 'conscious' through 'self-observation' and 'self-remembering' also resonated with the New Age Movement and took a unique shape in the Soviet Union. There, these ideals were also in sync with the de-Stalinisation and disenchantment from the Soviet ideology. As such, Gurdjieff's ideals acted as the nest for spiritual reckoning and with that a soft resistance towards the government (Gurdjieff, 1950; Menzel & Hagemester, 2012; Sutcliffe & Willmetts,

2020). Nevertheless, Gurdjieff's 'The Work' provided individual development that was safe enough to practice since they were somewhat compatible with the Soviet state ideology. However, Gurdjieff also advocated for its teachings to be individual but not individualistic. Hence, his followers gathered in secret circles to practice 'The Work' inherently worked towards the spiritual revival of the Soviet Union (Gordon, 1978; Gurdjieff, 1950; Menzel & Hagemester, 2012; Ouspensky, 1977).

5. Conclusion

G.I. Gurdjieff's 'The Work' influenced the spiritual revival of the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s within the New Age Movement due to the de-Stalinisation and disenchantment with Soviet Communism that occurred in the previous decade. His teachings of awakening and struggling towards maintaining consciousness resonated with the New Age Movement and the Soviet people who wanted to awaken from the dictatorship (Sutcliffe & Willmet, 2020). Furthermore, seeking alternative spirituality due to the dissatisfaction with institutional control over the spiritual life became more common. However, the New Age Movement manifested differently in the Soviet Union due to its geopolitical condition. Behind the Iron Curtain, the common goal in seeking alternative spirituality was to struggle against state atheism, whereas in the West it was the seeking of individual understanding of spirituality (Gordeeva, 2017; Menzel, 2013; Ouspensky, 1950).

Nevertheless, there is one great problem in the research of the Soviet spiritual life of the 1960s and 1970s: the secrecy that surrounded these underground movements prevents us from studying it in depth (Krasztev, 2019; Tchepournaya, 2003). Furthermore, the Soviet archives are currently under a seal placed by the government. These archives are also written in Russian, so specialists in this area would need to either be native or speak the Russian of the time. Both are tricky since free academic knowledge is not supported by the government, and attaining that level of Russian as a native speaker takes a lot of time. Nevertheless, from previous research, one can say that Gurdjieff's figure was of importance in the Soviet spiritual revival (Afinogenov, 2020; Grimsted, 1991; Kramer, 2012).

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