Pluralizing Practices in Soviet Moscow:  
Russian Alternative Practitioners Reclaim Individualism  
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With the fall of the Soviet Union, the rapid growth of alternative health organizations that celebrated individualism and self-exploration seemed at first glance to reflect new processes of neo-liberal democratization in Russia. Exploring this avenue of social change through ethnographic fieldwork and life-story interviews revealed a far more complex reality. While conducting fieldwork in Moscow amongst practitioners of alternative spiritual health, I learned that many began practicing in the 1970s through officially sanctioned Soviet health classes, often starting with yoga classes in Houses of Culture. Far from a spiritual wasteland, their stories reveal a space permeated with esoteric and other practices that promoted individualism and responsibility and indicate that Soviet science was engaged in innovative approaches to health and self development. Life histories of alternative practitioners point to an emerging pluralism of activities and beliefs that pre-date the political and economic changes instituted under perestroika.

Building on Alexei Yurchak’s (2006) work, I argue that the alternative health sphere is an example of a deterritorializing milieu, where Soviet citizens enjoyed outlets for creative pursuits and were encouraged to work towards self-cultivation and independent thinking. It is in this dialectical interaction between the state and creative people that the alternative movement was nourished, and where practitioners came to develop their particular understandings of individualism and collectivism. Finding support in collective spaces while working towards self-improvement, practitioners did not fully reject or accept Soviet ideals but formed unique interpretations which are visible today and often mistakenly taken as signs of neo-liberal westernization.
Focusing my research on contemporary women practitioners, I found their lives to embody democratic pluralism in action. For some, active searching for individual fulfillment and responsibility began during Soviet times, in the period leading up to perestroika. This is in direct contradiction to western-centric portrayals of Russia as anti-modern, a “moral vacuum”, held back by “vestiges” or “legacies” of socialism, and lacking the active citizenry necessary for the development of democratic capitalism (See Connor 1992; Taubman 1995; Pipes 1996; Millar and Wolchik 1997). Their lives offer critical lessons about the cultural biases at the core of these portrayals and serve as a case study in the powerful and distorting influences of hegemonic discourses.

Due to the continued influence of Russian and Soviet legacies, so the western hegemonic argument goes, the Russian people do not have the required attitudes and the Russian state does not have the required institutions to build a prosperous and pluralistic democracy. Political scientist Richard Rose develops this idea more fully in relation to Russian health. Rose characterizes the Soviet health care system as having a collectivist orientation and explains that due to this, patients maintained a passive relationship with the system and did not invest individual responsibility in health. He maintains that the health crisis in Russia has been particularly severe because Soviet society did not promote social cohesion. Ordinary Russians, according to Rose, isolated themselves from the state and relied on face to face contacts. The resulting social formation was an “hour-glass society” where citizens cut links with the state in order to protect themselves from the repressive totalitarian regime, and while citizens depended

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1 This literature is under-girded by Robert Putnam’s elaborations on civil society and social capital, which are set forth as the essential ingredient in democracy building and consistently described as missing or weak in post-Soviet society. A large body of anthropological literature has developed in critique of such view. See for example Hann and Dunn 1996. A special issue of Critique of Anthropology offers a particularly compelling look at the biases and underlying assumptions within the civil society discourse in the West (see Doane 2001; Hearn 2001; Junghans 2001; Medeiros 2001; Schneider and Schneider 2001).
on the state for social support, the lack of reciprocal contact meant that supply and demand were often left unmatched. He argues that such “‘anti-modern’ organizational pathologies created a stressful society with negative effects on human capital” (Rose 2000:1424). The underlying assumption here is that “collectivist” attitudes necessarily lead to passive citizens who are unable to take responsibility for their own lives (See also Cockerham 2000 and McKeehan 2000).

The life stories of contemporary alternative health practitioners stand in direct opposition to this view. Their practices and beliefs complexly blend traditions of Russian mysticism, Soviet social values and pragmatic attitudes, creating a unique strain of individualism tempered by a concern for collective well-being. Rejecting certain intolerant and absolutist inclinations, these women selectively incorporate Orthodox, Russian and Soviet traditions and values into their lives. Many feel an alienation from dogmas of any kind. They question the Orthodox tradition of redemption through suffering as well as the Soviet virtue of deprivation and self-sacrifice, instead creating systems of belief and practice that acknowledge the lessons to be learned from suffering and crisis but focus on the joy that can be found in life on earth today. The body and physical health are the building blocks for attaining these goals. Similarly critical of autocratic and oppressive practices of the State – both Soviet and post-Soviet – they at once embrace freedoms of expression and liberty as well as the social rights promoted by the Soviet Union, all the while maintaining deep concerns about the fragility of both.

Weaving through individual stories and published accounts from the late Soviet period, this paper explores the early practices of the women involved with alternative spiritual health. In these accounts we see that even before structural changes were set in place, people were involved with spiritual activities and activities that promoted notions of individualism more generally associated with western forms of neo-liberal society. We find notions such as self-
improvement, personal responsibility and free will being promoted by individual searchers as well as by scientists and doctors in the official sphere. In fact, it has been argued that such notions were an integral part of the Soviet system and the cultivation of communist consciousness. Many of the activities that flourish in the current alternative movement were already taking place during Soviet times, including occult study groups, large health clubs that taught vegetarianism, ice-water therapy and clairvoyant healing, and a wide-spread interest in yoga and alternative teaching and psychological methods. Not all of these activities were underground. Some were studied and promoted within official Soviet spheres, perhaps encouraged by early communist doctrine that called for new educational methods that could break down habitualized modes of thinking.\(^2\) An exploration of the alternative spiritual practices of the time reveals that the focus on the power and responsibility of the individual was tempered by a firm belief in certain socialist principles, creating a very different configuration of beliefs than in the West.

Rather than finding such social values and collectivist sentiments to be alienating or signs of a passive populous, my work supports Melissa Caldwell’s (2004) argument that the behaviors and strategies found within a system of social welfare can foster social cohesion and a flexible and resilient populous. Where she found social cohesion and active individualist agency in the tactics and social lives in Moscow soup kitchens, I found a strong sense of community, a reverence for ‘the collective’ within Russian alternative circles, where individual achievement

\(^2\)In a diary entry published in Pravda on January 4, 1923, V.I Lenin discusses the progress of such methods and new ways of thinking: “Quite a lot is being done to get the old teachers out of their rut, to attract them to the new problems, to rouse their interest in new methods of education, and in such problems as religion.” Of course, the problems of religion he speaks of here are not the same issues being discussed in occult circles during the late-Soviet period.
was equally admired. Members of the alternative sphere continue to create this sense of a collective community through their participation in spiritual “trainings” and their membership in spiritual health groups.

**Dialectical Constructions of Individualism and Collectivism**

Within the Soviet period unique processes and interactions developed contextually specific understandings of and approaches to such notions as “individualism”, “collectivism” and the “cultured citizen” that do not translate directly into the same culturally constructed understandings of such notions in the West. It is those Soviet constructions that are now in dialogue with the West. I suggest that the practices and beliefs of the Russian alternative sphere reflect a unique Russian interpretation of individualism that incorporates notions of the collective. Rather than standing alone, the support and social bonds created within the collective provide the individual with the confidence to pursue self development and creativity.

This argument is fundamentally different from that put forth by Kharkhordin (1999), who also sees the development within Soviet society of a particular understanding of individualism and collectivism. In his work he explains how “work on the self” was an integral part of the Soviet educational system and ideology, creating a particular focus on the individual that encouraged the development of the Soviet “New Man.” He argues that the focus on the individual here was ultimately aimed at the collapse of individual desires into those of state collective ideals. Soviet citizens, he argues, were called on to develop their wills in order to learn how to control their own desires. Kharkhordin focuses his work on the processes of self-critique and the public shaming that took place during critiques of individuals within the collective. Here the individual and collective take on the ominous roles of enforcers of Soviet morality. Any actual expressions of individuality were unintended consequences and resulted in
duplicitous behavior by people forced to hide their individualism from the collective and the state.

I contend that the individualism expressed so fervently within contemporary alternative spiritual health circles in Moscow is in large part indeed a Soviet cultural construction, reflecting an on-going dialogue with culturally constructed understandings that continues into the present. But unlike Kharkhordin’s duplicitous rebels, who publicly abided by the state’s practices but privately disagreed with or disregarded them, or the self-criticizers whose sense of the collective was formed by its practices of conforming critique, the women I worked with found comfort and support in their collective spaces and, working earnestly towards self-improvement, they developed strong notions of individual worth, importance and responsibility. Their strivings toward creative individuality included a strong sense of responsibility to the social sphere. They did not fully reject or accept Soviet ideals, but through their actual practices they helped form particular understandings and interpretations of them that they in turn integrated in their lives.

Ever working to elevate and cultivate themselves and the world about them, members of the Russian alternative sphere, in fact, might even reflect the revolutionary spirit of the avant-garde, those members of the revolution whose creativity, intellect and ethics would lead the way. Drawing on Yurchak (2006), I propose that they are in a sense the spiritual avant-garde of the new era. In the Soviet context, according to Yurchak, emphasis was placed on the need for revolutionary education. The ‘liberation of culture and consciousness in communism’ could only come about through the education and cultivation of the population (Yurchak: 12). We find several of the principle characteristics of the alternative sphere encompassed in the seemingly paradoxical ideology that developed during the Soviet period. As the avant-garde became institutionalized, Yurchak explains, “The Soviet citizen was called upon to submit
completely to party leadership, to cultivate a collectivist ethic, and repress individualism, while at the same time becoming an enlightened and independent-minded individual who pursues knowledge and is inquisitive and creative” (ibid: 11). While the goals appear paradoxical and mutually exclusive, Yurchak argues that the late Soviet state allowed for and actually participated in the development of new spaces for expression, what he calls a deterritorializing milieu. Within this milieu citizens could enjoy multiple outlets for creative pursuits – often promoted and supported by the state. In other words, the state to a certain extent was involved in a dialectical process which encouraged enlightenment and independent-mindedness, which, according to Yurchak, contributed ultimately to the demise of the state. Having been granted spaces for development and encouraged to seek optimal development, people with creative and strong personalities were brought together in spaces where their creativity and strivings took them ultimately to unforeseen realms. It is here, in this dialectical interaction between the state and creative people that we see the engines of perestroika starting to emerge. I would argue that it is here, in these ambiguous spaces Yurchak calls deterritorializing milieus, that the nascent alternative movement in Russia was nourished and began to flourish, and where they developed their own particular understandings of such concepts as individualism and collectivism, one that closely intertwines notions of individual rights and social rights. With the collapse of the Soviet state, members of the alternative spiritual health community continue their avant-garde role as spiritual and ethical teachers. I would submit that the continued focus on education and the development of the spiritually elevated individual reflects a certain Soviet individualism that is now interacting with a more globalized Russian space. In other words, not all signs of individualism and personal responsibility are symbolic of neo-liberal westernization.

Soviet Alternative Spiritual Health Practices
Ethnographic research reveals that people found ways to carve out Soviet space into an environment for spiritual and personal experimentation and created for themselves an active and nurturing alternative spiritual health movement that even in Soviet times resembled aspects of the alternative sphere in the West. Several key factors worked in conjunction to create this space where alternative spiritual health practices could be explored and even encouraged during the Soviet period.

One of the most important points in this regard is the simple fact that the Soviet period was not an information vacuum. While the thousands of books currently available on the whole spectrum of alternative ideas and practices were not available, books, newspaper articles, and journals were published on such themes. While many official articles on alternative themes were often critical, they did offer information about alternative viewpoints. Those interested could gleam practical tips and ideas even from the most critical of articles that I found. At the same time, many topics that would be considered alternative – and thus marginalized or rejected within the scientific community in the West – were openly researched and discussed in Soviet Russia. A review of this literature points to three further important factors in the development of an alternative health movement, all of which are interrelated: the importance of health in Soviet ideology; Soviet research into “hidden human reserves”; and the relationship with India.

Health was an important part of Soviet ideology (see Rivkin-Fish 1999; Bernstein 1998; Barr 1996; Waters 1991). A healthy population made for a healthy and productive workforce, and much socialist realist propaganda artwork is devoted to posters promoting good hygiene and healthy living (Bernstein 1998; Waters 1991). The years of war leading up to the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 left the country in a state of economic turmoil and in a serious health crisis. In 1918 the People’s Commissariat of Public Health (Narkomzdrav) was
established to combat this (Bernstein 1998: 191). Lenin viewed this health crisis as a political emergency, and early on he emphasized the importance of health in the development of socialist society, declaring in 1919 at the Seventh Congress of Soviets: “Either the louse defeats socialism or socialism defeats the louse” (Barr 1996: 307). The Narkomzdrav began a campaign of “sanitary enlightenment” to educate the population about health and hygiene, as it was believed that politically “conscious” socialists must also be health “conscious”; all responsible citizens must take care of their health (Bernstein 1998: 192). Many women involved with alternative health began their paths within the health sphere. While questions of spirituality were discouraged and certain activities could lead to negative repercussions in the workplace or even persecution at certain points in Soviet history, the state’s focus on health allowed many spiritual ideas to develop under the cover of the healthy living moniker.

In conjunction with the focus on health, the Soviet Union was a source of innovative methodologies in the realm of health, art and pedagogy. Many methods that today would be considered alternative were incorporated into the official health sphere. Many of the same ideas ascribed to alternative health groups today can be found in books and articles in the mainstream Soviet press. These articles and books reveal that Soviet scientists were researching hidden potentials, or “human reserves” and healthy lifestyles and were encouraging the exploration of supernatural phenomena, traits common to the activities and beliefs of contemporary alternative practitioners world-wide.

Related to the importance of health and “human reserves”, is the role of India. Indian spiritual beliefs play a significant role in the alternative sphere in Russia and throughout the world. While access to Indian spiritual literature may have significantly declined during the early Soviet period, interest was renewed and literature again became more readily available with
the strengthening of ties between the two governments in later years. Increased interest in all things Indian allowed for greater access to Indian practices, particularly under the guise of health promotion. Given the interest within the Soviet scientific community in “hidden potentials,” it is not surprising that such practices as yoga and meditation were readily incorporated into Soviet health practices. Those interested in issues beyond the physical sphere could further their understanding with “cultural” articles in the press or *samizdat* articles passed between friends.

**Hatha Yoga: Entrance to Alternative Soviet Space**

The intersection of health promotion, “human reserves” research and India often began with Hatha Yoga. We see this illustrated in the life story of Sveta Prival’skaya, the general director of Ascension, a contemporary alternative health organization I worked with in Moscow. She is a model of the Soviet alternative spiritual health searcher, and her story provides a quintessential account of an alternative health journey that started in the time of Brezhnev. She was a leading member of Healthy Family, a branch of Cosmos, one of the largest spiritual-health movements in Russia in the 1980s, and she continues to play a leading role in the contemporary alternative scene, with activities that take her throughout Russia and beyond. The starting point of Sveta’s journey, however, begins earlier, with health problems and a failing marriage. But even at this early juncture we see the convergence of spirituality and physical health as well as the first indications of the important role India and Indian thought would come to play:

In 1976-77 I studied Hatha yoga for the first time. That was before Healthy Family, it was during my first marriage. That was a very difficult marriage. And I had continuous headaches. That was in addition to gynecological problems... At that time the first groups of Hatha yoga appeared in the Soviet Union and I ended up in one of them. I studied for two years and the headaches completely disappeared. And I couldn’t feel any of the gynecological problems, and so I stopped doing it. Because everything was good, so why keep working on it? But everything returned – in 1984 before my divorce – it all happened around the same time. But when I was studying Hatha yoga of course I also read literature...
about it because I was interested in various aspects of it. At that time I read the Bhagavad Gita for the first time.

Although this initial introduction to alternative methods and Indian spirituality did not lead immediately to active involvement with a movement for Sveta, we see that already in the 1970s, practices traditionally associated with the alternative sphere were developing in Russia. The India connection was a key aspect of this development. In 1971 India and the Soviet Union signed a 20-year treaty of friendship, which aimed at economic, scientific and technological cooperation. One result of this cooperative relationship was the discussion of Indian philosophies in the mainstream Soviet press. One example is a 1980 article in Izvestia titled “Conversations on health: help yourself with happiness,” (Dembo 1980). Written by a Ukrainian doctor, the article discusses yoga, the importance of positive thinking, and the patient’s own responsibility towards his or her health, all of which are key elements of the contemporary alternative sphere. In fact, Sveta’s own post-Soviet book is called How to Live in Happiness, and positive thinking and personal responsibility are central themes. But here in the Izvestia article we find a Soviet doctor who, looking to India for inspiration, discusses several new methods for alleviating stress and regaining health and places a strong emphasis on the importance of individual attitude and will:

When a patient comes in and complains about pain in the heart, shortness of breath, or nightmare-filled sleepless nights, first of all you need to attend to the difficult situation. A doctor’s arsenal will have many methods for healing neuroses. There is medication, well-known and very new, hypnosis, auto-training, the gymnastics of yogis, and self-hypnosis. But no form of healing can replace the will of the patient and his belief that he will be healed (Dembo 1980: 3).

While technically Dembo does not use the term yoga, he clearly intends this and also offers a positive assessment of it and other methods which today would be considered “alternative”. Furthermore, he highlights the important role of the self, the individual will in the
healing process. His promotion of individual development contradicts western accounts of
Soviet medicine as passive and focusing more on illness than healthy living.

Yoga is again discussed in connection with the will and self-control in an article from
1984 about the latest research endeavors of the Pavlov Institute of Physiology. This article also
points to several key characteristics of the Russian alternative movement: positive thoughts, the
power of the self, and holism, all of which were encouraged by Pavlov over a century ago and
continued to be investigated by Soviet scientists.3 The Indian yogis’ abilities to master mind and
body are offered as support for Soviet science and ideology. According to the article, Pavlov had
stated that “It is the duty of the physiologist not only to teach people how to correctly, that is,
usefully and pleasantly, work, rest and eat, etc. But also how to correctly think, feel and desire...”
(Manucharova and Nevel’skii 1984: 3) And the accomplishment of such feats requires the
development of self-control, not just of the will and thoughts, but also control over the actual
physical organism – the heartbeat, blood pressure, and even the electrical activity of the brain.
According to the article, the possibility of such control is evidenced by the practice of Indian
yogis (ibid.).

For many of the women I worked with in the alternative sphere, Hatha yoga was the first
step into the spiritual world. Although the focus in state sanctioned groups was purely on the
physical health aspects of the exercises, many became interested in the philosophy behind them
and began exploring it more deeply. Several later made pilgrimages to India once restrictions
were lifted after 1991. Valentina, a professor in her fifties, was led to yoga by her husband. I
met her at a course on NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming). At these meetings she often
exchanged Orthodox prayers with the other participants. In the mid 1980s, however, Valentina

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3 Alexei Yurchak (personal correspondence) suggests that perhaps it was Pavlov’s focus on the physiological origins
and aspects of such phenomenon that led to their scientific investigation during the Soviet period.
was not baptized and had only started to become involved with alternative spiritual health activities. Here she discusses a period shortly before graduate school:

My husband studied in courses for clairvoyants. It was around 1984 or 1985. They were private secret courses. Simply it was an acquaintance of an acquaintance – she discovered it in herself and she started to teach it. And before that I studied yoga with my husband. He studied yoga before we got married, and then when I moved here and we got married, he showed me some of the yoga exercises and we started regularly doing yoga. He had gone to a class in some sort of house of culture. There was a circle or society. It was out in the open. That is, yoga began to spread under the guise of physical education. That is, there are special exercises, gymnastics, and gymnastics of yoga. It was purely physical yoga, just Hatha yoga, but still there were already books that were typed out and not just Hatha yoga, but also Raja and already some sort of interest in such things already existed in my husband’s family. And then he went to the clairvoyance classes.

We see here an example of the dialectical relationship between alternative practitioners and the state. Houses of culture were state run spaces offering opportunities for individuals to develop themselves and meet others. It was through her husband’s interaction with such a place that Valentina became familiar with the practice of yoga. It was at this time that we can see the beginning of her interest in healing and the hidden powers of the body. This was to develop much more strongly with her later involvement in a variety of alternative teaching methods, particularly suggestopedia, a method founded by Bulgarian psychologist Georgii Lozanov.

If Hatha yoga was often the entrée into alternative health practices, such practices in turn led to a more spiritual exploration of Indian philosophy. Here Sveta continues her discussion of the early years of her involvement with occult circles and the Healthy Family group. She explains the appeal of Indian philosophy and some of the important lessons she struggles with to this day:

In 1977 I read the Bhagavad Gita for the first time and Hatha yoga and somehow for many years it stayed with me because I felt that here there was a lot of food for the soul and the intellect, which I don’t find in the Bible. For the soul there is something, but there’s practically nothing for the intellect. But that is something
unitary – [edinnyi] – for me – emotions, feelings, principles and intellect. This sense is very strong in the Bhagavad Gita and in Indian thought more generally just like they have much more for the mind, and no less love for the soul, and much deeper. So India already got into my soul. And in 1984 with the Healthy Family, the first spiritual book I read was Agni Yoga, by the Rerikhs. And I read it like a song, like something that long has been inside of me. As if everything is obvious, of course it’s like that, of course it’s mine, no question. And then almost immediately after that I read, already now at a much higher level, the books of Krishnamurti. That is a remarkable teacher of course who said that all those teachers and gurus are all like mold, that is, this is absolutely the son of Shiva, and I consider myself a daughter of Shiva. That is a teacher that destroys all authorities, that destroys all fossilized principles, which is very important now because we’re on the threshold of a completely different life, new thinking. Well, that was all mine, no question, although even today there are a few of Krishnamurti’s ideas that, well I understand them with my mind, but I haven’t matured enough for them.

I know that it’s necessary to become unattached – this is very strong in Hinduism, especially strong with Krishnamurti, although his work is not completely Hindu, but this is what all of our illnesses teach us – don’t become attached – first of all to your stereotypes – stereotypes of what we should be like. I want to become thin. But I’m not able to. I eternally weigh more than I want to weigh. Sometimes I’m able to quickly lose weight but then I gain it all back. It doesn’t work. So why am I attached to such a stereotype? I mean, if it doesn’t bother me a lot? Also, don’t become attached to people close to you. This is really difficult. It’s the most difficult task that God has given us because of course all people are attached to their loved ones, their children, etc, even to our pets. But as for attachments to things, to material I don’t have a problem.

In this discussion we see the back and forth between the spiritual and the physical as Sveta weaves between discussions of the philosophy and depth of Indian spiritual thought and the practical application of such thoughts to her physical shape and interactions with those she loves. We see here the intellectual appeal that Indian philosophy offered her as well as the anti-authoritarian and anti-materialist views that drew her closer to such thought. The Bhagavad Gita, Shiva, and yoga are all direct Hindu influences, but Sveta also was strongly influenced by the Rerikhs and their work Agni Yoga as well as Krishnamurti, who was groomed from childhood as a Theosophical prophet. These particular influences are no coincidence. In fact, a 1984 Izvestia article about a cultural exchange between India and Russia calls Nikolai Rerikh “a
spiritual bridge between our country and India” and notes that Rerikh referred to India as the “natural sister of Rus’” (Kuznetsov 1984: 5).

As with her first experiences with Hatha yoga, Sveta’s second voyage into the world of alternative spiritual health was also triggered by physical illness. This time she moved from official state classes in Hatha yoga to an underground health movement where she began exploring psychology and the powers of the mind, deepened her studies of Indian spirituality, and delved into Orthodox Christianity. Her whole family was under duress and in need of healing. The official channels were offering little help, and she began a search for alternative ways to heal her family.

Towards the end of 1983 my whole family except me was completely sick. My son had severe psychiatric problems and it was understood that they were incurable. These problems were ensured by the relatives of my husband, along the male line. We aren’t taught – in schools or college – what are called the signs of psychiatric illness. And when I got married at a young age I of course didn’t notice anything. We were in love, but it was all very difficult. It became clear later and doctors told me that along the male line, that is, his father and my son had signs. So towards the end of 1983 my son had psychiatric problems, my second husband was depressed because his first wife wasn’t allowing him to see his daughter... And my daughter was diagnosed with a chronic illness. She had gastritis. She was then eight years old. And the worst was she had an inflamed kidney. It was a serious illness, and she spent time in the hospital several times and that would help a little bit, but it’s an illness that doesn’t go away, and doctors, that is, official medicine confirmed that this diagnosis is never lifted. A person has it forever.

By nature optimistic, Sveta was not deterred by the negative prognosis of official medicine. She began searching for help, and during this search she came upon the club Healthy Family, a movement that to this day continues to play an instrumental role in her life and world view. While the movement no longer exists as such, many of the leaders are still active in the alternative health sphere in Moscow, and many of those who no longer work together on a
regular basis, still gather together for the yearly summer spiritual health retreat they started during the early 1980s.

But I was always an active person, and today I’m the same and have never believed in the complete victory of any type of evil. I know that there’s always something you can do. We just know very little and official medicine knows very little in order to truly help. But we had already tried lots of hospitals and medication with my daughter and also with my son, and I saw that they didn’t help or if they did help it was very temporary. Then I began to search for nontraditional methods. And my friend at the time also was looking for nontraditional methods of treatment, and together we came across this remarkable club called Healthy Family that was in Moscow. These people united in order to lead healthier life styles than was accepted as the norm in our society. It was nontraditional in that every Sunday hundreds of people gathered with their children, starting with newborns, and pregnant women participated in the movement. First we met on the outskirts of Moscow, by the ponds, but then we moved to Gorky Park in the center of Moscow, which strangely enough is right nearby where our group gathers today. We jogged and did various exercises and swam all year round. That is, we swam in water in the middle of ice. They even threw newborns into the ice water. And that movement I think was extremely important in general for Russia. It was primarily in Moscow and several 1000 people participated. Later they broke up into smaller groups, and our group had around 100-200 people at various different times.

Many of the activities of the Healthy Family club focused on physical health, on jogging, eating nutritious food, staying active. But even early on there was a spiritual aspect to their practices. Meditation and the connection between a healthy body and healthy spirit were actively pursued. Water birthing in particular is highly revered in the Russian alternative community as a more spiritual and loving way of giving birth, and the children who are born this way are widely considered to be more spiritually developed.

And children who were so to speak christened in ice water right after they were born, grew up very healthy. Along with this we had a movement called conscious parenting, where birthing took place in water. Igor Borisovich Charkovsky, who is known in America, was the founder of that movement, and now people participate in it throughout the world. Children are born completely different. And they grow up completely differently. They are open, happy, they’re friendly towards nature and they’re much healthier. So this all started at the end of 1983 and the beginning of 1984. We did Hatha yoga. Actually I studied Hatha yoga for the first time in 1977. In the club Healthy Family we had a children’s group.
We ran not for speed but for health. We ran very slowly, but during that we did dynamic meditation. We did for example a program of cleansing with energy meditations, where we cleansed our organs and vessels...And in addition to that there was a course on proper nutrition. First we tried the separate food system and then my husband became a complete vegetarian. At least we started to pay attention to that. We started collecting herbs. We would drive out of town to gather various healthy herbs. And the most important of course was the cold water, which created a micro-stress for your organism, which then called up all the protective strengths of the organism in the fight against illness. This is the method of Porfiry Ivanov. He was the main teacher, but unfortunately by that time he had already left the earthly plane, but in his name our teachers taught us to be friends with cold water and of course the most important thing – even more important than cold water – was that one has a completely different mood. There was a mood of unity. That word remains key for me to this day in terms of how I judge myself and of everything that happens around me. If something is working for unity then it’s positive. If it’s for disunity then it goes without saying that it’s negative to me. And the club Healthy Family taught us to find unity with nature. Children were taught that nature and we are one.

This mood of unity Sveta found in this club reflects a deeply held conviction. She hopes to see one day a unity of spiritual beliefs, a unity between science and religion, and a unity between people of all nations. It is at its core her pluralistic vision of the coming New Age, a unity of individually developed strong personalities, and it is rooted in her early activities during Soviet times. The individual gained significance not only as the transformer of his or her own life, but because of the nature of the universe, each individual thought contained the potential to influence the outside world. The power of inner potentials required control over their manifestations and a deep sense of responsibility towards others.

We see here the influence of her intellectual background and an affinity with the healing philosophies forwarded by Pavlov and the Soviet doctor, A. Dembo. The focus is on the thinking individual who works to live in a conscious manner, with control over mind and body. Furthermore, individual development is not only for personal self-improvement or gain. A person’s thoughts and actions can affect people the world over. We are individuals joined as one in unity, which is why self-control is so very important. One path to such control involves the
deep exploration of the un-conscious self, a search for the “deep causes” of illness. It is here that
the “incorrect” thoughts and behaviors noted by Pavlov could be discovered and transformed.

At that time there was very little literature available on the theme of clairvoyance. I don’t remember. If there was, there was very little. We learned to feel sick organs with our hands and to heal each other and for several years we worked doing that, we healed people. It was all within the framework of the club Healthy Family and it was always free…This work was free because we made our money as an engineer and mathematician. I was a programmer. And in addition several times a week we helped people. But then we realized that it wasn’t correct. Because if the clairvoyant or healer simply takes the illness out, on the energy level they harmonize the field of a person and the illness gradually leaves, nevertheless the cause remains. And we understood that the cause of a person’s illnesses lies within his thoughts, in his incorrect emotions, incorrect worldviews. And these reasons remain and they continue to act and either the old illness returns or he gets new ones. And we’re not talking only about physical illnesses. But certain incorrectnesses of interrelations are manifested. Or a certain hole/blunder [prokol] in one’s fate manifests itself. And we understood this and started studying psychology.

While she began studying psychology at a state medical institute, Sveta continued her
alternative activities in the underground Healthy Family movement:

The club was absolutely not official and absolutely not a state club. Simply people. There’s an interesting story. Sometime in 1983 several adults who were tired of the fact that official medicine couldn’t do anything to help with health, started jogging in Novodereevko. This is a sacred area of Moscow. There are remarkable ponds there and relatively clean air for Moscow. This group was headed by Anatolii Soloviev. They had come from the club “Cosmos”, which attracted around 2000 people to the outskirts of Moscow. Every Saturday they jogged and did dynamic meditation and swam in ice water, using Porfiry Ivanov’s method. These were students of Ivanov. But then the group split up into smaller groups and Anatolii Soloviev began jogging in the Novodereevko region. And there they found a rather elderly woman who was giving lessons to children – some sort of dynamic meditation and they were throwing them into the ice water and these two groups united and formed Healthy Family. That is, the whole family would go to the ponds and then we moved to Gorky Park in the Center of Moscow. So we had ice water, Porfiry Ivanov, Hatha yoga, lectures and workshops on nutrition. And then a small group of clairvoyants was formed. Soloviev started this group, called Self-Perfection. And here we worked on our negative traits. There were a lot of interesting methods there. And then we learned how to see with our hands that which isn’t visible to the eyes. At that time books about non-traditional healing were very rare. It was all, you could say, forbidden. The government didn’t sanction or encourage such things. In
fact, the club Cosmos was investigated. Even Ivan Ivanich Koltunov - the leader of Cosmos, who started that movement, he was also a student of Ivanov - he was excluded from the Party. He was a communist, but then it wasn’t possible not to join the Party if you wanted to have a career. In those years it was that way. Before perestroika. I think that’s why he joined the party, although maybe he truly believed, I don’t know. I know only that he led the group Cosmos for several years, completely unofficially. But people gathered in the forest and ran and swam in ice water. And of course the group called attention to itself and he was called up by some Party organs and he gave up his membership card. He said that what he was doing was right and that if he couldn’t do it as a Party member then he would do it outside of the Party.

We see here the complexity and contradictions of the period. Hundreds of people were gathering in the center of Moscow outside in a public park and learning about healthy living and alternative healing methods. And yet the practices were not openly sanctioned by the State and therefore practitioners were at the whim of Party apparatchiki. And while the leader of Cosmos was willing to sacrifice his official career for his principles and the sake of the group, soon after he did so, the larger group fell apart. Again, however, this was not a complete failure because it led to the formation of Healthy Family, the very group where Sveta got her start in the field of alternative healing.

And so back to Healthy Family - in 1984, in January, starting in the beginning of January we all started meeting on Sundays and on Thursdays we also studied aerobics and other exercises, and we also separately studied clairvoyance. We changed our eating habits and my husband became a total vegetarian. And in the middle of January my daughter, despite everything, said she also wanted to go into the ice holes. But her kidney disease requires continuous warmth. But we decided to try it anyway because we understand that micro-stress can truly do miracles. And there was a miracle. We brought along her medication in case something happened. Of course, we didn’t need the medication. And my child’s face, which previously had been completely sallow-colored, suddenly became rosy. She literally changed right before our eyes. About 10 months later we went to the doctor and she had tests done and the doctor said you know in general it’s possible to retract the diagnosis. But we still need to observe her. And then again a year later we came back, and she had had several tests done during the year, and they declared her cured, which simply never happens with that disease. And she didn’t have any more attacks, right up to the end of school when she stopped practicing all of this and she quit running – she used to run a lot – but then in order to get her school leaving certificate she needed to pass exams, which she did
very well, but she started smoking and three months later she was married and her health went downhill again. But that’s another story. It’s her own choice.

We see here that Sveta had given up on the medical system because it could not provide a cure for her daughter. Her positive attitude and belief in the infinite possibilities of the human organism led her to keep seeking. And yet, she did not completely reject the medical system. She returned for tests and used her alternative methods in conjunction with the medical analyses to chart the progress of her daughter’s health. Sveta describes the changes as miraculous and truly believes people are capable of miracles. But it is up to them. Her daughter made the choice then to jump in the ice hole, but later she also chose to neglect her health. While Sveta is not happy with her daughter’s choice, she understands it is her daughter’s responsibility.

**Soviet innovations: Encouraging Individuality**

Blurring the lines between official and unofficial practices, Soviet innovations in health and medicine incorporated elements of mind-body development. Principles learned in underground groups were reinforced in official state spheres. An Izvestia article from 1982 discusses a new scientific field called yuvenology which promoted healthy life styles and underscored the limitless hidden potentials of the human body. According to this article, the Social Institute of Yuvenology opened in Moscow in 1977 and brought together specialists from many fields: Geneticists studied the liquidation of illnesses, psychologists and cyberneticists studied the improvement of the intellect. The goal of this science is to “teach a person to use his physical, moral and intellectual gifts – hidden reserves – in order to preserve the parameters of youth for the whole extent of his long and fruitful life” (Nat and Shabel’skii 1982). Key to this science is emotional stability, rational eating habits, motor activity and toughening. Through lectures, the institute promoted such activities as, “Self-regulation – the path to health and long life,” “New Aerobics,” and “Effective trivialities that improve health and longevity.” They also
organized healthy walks and runs in the woods. According to the article, the head Yuvenologist, L.M. Sukharebskii, was 83 years old at the time but did not even look 55. Sukharebskii explains in his own words how he maintains his youthful vibrancy:

"Until I was 55 I was a normal person with many bad habits that regularly ruined my life. And then I thought about how to change my style of life. I stopped smoking, started to diet, taking into consideration the particularities of my own organism. I built a home stadium in my apartment – very simple one. I go to bed at the same time and I get up at 5 am. Morning exercises, contrasting shower, for breakfast I have a glass of warm water with strawberries. My diet consists of bread, vegetables, juice, and I eat meat once a week. I should say that rational eating plays an important role in the formula of health. It’s been established, for example, that the rational limitation of the amount of food consumed lengthens life by 30 to 40 percent. And also it’s important not to forget about such effective means against stressful situations that await the contemporary person every day, such as mini-auto-training (Sucharebskii in Nat and Shabel’skii 1982: 6). 06-17-1982; IZV-No.168).

We see here the basic elements of Healthy Family and the contemporary alternative health scene – exercise, toughening, and a healthy, primarily vegetarian, diet, self-regulation and control. The science is action oriented, encouraging individual responsibility for health. While spiritual questions do not arise in the article, the experiments into hidden reserves and potentials segue smoothly into the alternative sphere’s strivings toward higher selves and self-perfection.

This notion of self-control, perfection, and the unity of body and mind is highlighted in a 1983 Izvestia article about hypnosis therapy. According to the article, Vladimir Raikov was a doctor-psycho-therapist and professional artist who had been researching hypnosis for twenty years. The Izvestia article enthusiastically describes how Raikov was able to use hypnosis to bring out artistic abilities in people who had previously never even touched a paintbrush. Like Sveta and Healthy Family, he was tapping into the subconscious. According to the article, Raikov worked at a regional medical clinic in Moscow and used hypnosis to cure such mundane problems as hyper tension, ulcers, heart disease and alcoholism. His claim to fame, however, was his artistic work. Raikov believed that the creation of art gives people a feeling of freedom,
liberation and confidence, all of which help them tap into their inner potentials and improve their quality of life. According to Raikov, hypnosis helps people mobilize their strengths and overcome fear and can help them realize their full potential in any activity. According to the article, the goal of hypnosis is ultimately to “help a person find himself” and “to give a person the possibility of attaining his own individuality, and to mobilize his intellect and undiscovered strengths for solving important problems” (Aleksandrova and Tutorskaia 1983: 5).

The Izvestia articles provide positive assessment of Raikov’s methods, yuvenology, yoga and the search for “human reserves” and inner potential. Seen in conjunction with practitioners’ life stories, a complex picture of the late Soviet period begins to emerge. A dialectic between state and underground practices served to encourage innovative approaches to health, personal responsibility and the development of individual will and creativity. While many practices were still underground, the early eighties was a period of flourishing ideas and experimentation in the Soviet Union.

Alternative Soviet Collective Space

As underground and official health practices worked to underscore individualism and innovation, they also provided a space for collectivism, unity, and a sense of responsibility to society as a whole. Often this responsibility was directed towards development of the younger generations. While family illnesses brought Sveta to the Healthy Family club, Zoya, a music teacher, was primarily attracted to its social aspects.

The club existed half-legally. A girl friend of mine brought me there. It was mostly by word of mouth. And it was all done under secret of night. When my mother in law found out she had a fit. She began calling, searching. She made things very unpleasant for me. She was scared. What I did was pour cold water on her [my daughter]. My daughter was still small, she was not yet three years old. And my mother in law was afraid that the banya would seriously harm her. The teachings of Ivanov weren’t secret, but they were not wide spread. And this was his students who gathered after his death. I never saw him and never knew
him. In and of themselves the people were very pleasant and truly helped people. There was such a pleasant and joyful atmosphere that I haven’t seen anything like it since then. Maybe only at Sveta’s club now. And that club, what attracted people to it. Indeed there was an atmosphere of health within the club. We gathered in Park Kultury Gorkogo. Not right in the front of the center entrance. When you go in it was off to the right. On the right side artists work, and we were downstairs in a half-basement type space. At first we were there. We talked about cleansing the organism, about urine therapy, about the fact that you can fast and not die, and that you can live without antibiotics. That you don’t have to use antibiotics when you have the flu, that you can change your diet or, even better, abstain from food. We learned that you need to toughen the body, that you can’t pour cold water on yourself immediately, but you need to work up to it gradually. I liked it, and I continue to do it to this day. I do it when I take a shower. I used to pour water out of a bucket, but now I just let the cold water pour down on me from the shower and all is calm. It’s just at first there’s that “ahh” and it’s true I stoop my shoulders and when the water hits me my back immediately straightens out.

Zoya sees many parallels between Healthy Family and Ascension. She was drawn to the warmth and sociality of both clubs. And while she notes that the activities at Healthy Family were forbidden, they were somehow available and actively pursued. And the club even had its own membership card and logo.

But at the club we studied everything, everything that was forbidden to study – astrology – but that we studied in people’s apartments. Someone would offer up their apartment. And at that time the dues were five rubles a month so that the club would stay together somehow. Just like Sveta now collects twenty. And we didn’t pay anything else. I was struck and surprised by these people. They risked their own safety. From what I heard they even attracted fatally ill people. I didn’t need that kind of help. But I believed them and am endlessly thankful to them for everything. I also studied yoga then and then like Sveta’s Wednesday evenings now… Then it was a different day… We had a very interesting membership card. There were two dolphins and inside they formed an image that looked like a mother and inside of her was a child. That was our emblem. And you could choose any activity. There was yoga, simply discussions about health, and then even after the club fell apart I continued to follow these things.

Zoya continues to participate in activities with Ascension – she goes to the weekly meetings and takes trainings and attends the summer retreats, but there is a sense of nostalgia in
her recollections of the Healthy Family period. The community feeling inspired by gathering together outside under dark of night is no longer there, and she clearly misses it.

But mostly we worked on toughening and being healthy. Toughening is done when you want to be healthy without medicine. For example, you rub something on yourself. But they didn’t give us anything. They gave us a basket and we walked barefoot in the snow. You know, you start out at home in the bath and then more and more. My daughter loved it. When there was snow we never missed a night. Every evening, when it was dark, because lots of people gathered and screamed out swears. My spouse would have killed me. So our group ran around and then you needed to rub your feet so the snow didn’t melt. It’s painful. It even feels like hot drops of water after the snow. It’s a very revitalizing procedure. But you really don’t get sick if you regularly strengthen your system. We did that every day in the winter. But I no longer do it. It was a group activity. They said that it’s better to create a collective field … If you go alone then the people around you who see you and don’t understand could harm you somehow. So it’s better to do it as a collective.

Zoya is not alone in feeling a sense of a lost collective. It is a sentiment heard often when speaking about the Soviet period, that back then people spent time together and really cared about each other. Friendships were strong and even though some of the collective activities were required – such as pioneer work, student field work, or even work meetings – the friendships and camaraderie that developed there were real, and many now regret their passing. But the depth of relationships that developed in the circles of people who met in secret under dark of night or in friends’ apartments seem to be particularly missed by some. Even Sveta with her focus on the individual still longs to recapture the sense of commonality she felt in those days. And in a sense she is striving to do this with Ascension and its group meditations. It is this joining of the spiritually developing individual within the common group that is key to the contemporary alternative health scene in Russia.

*Izvestia* articles reveal that these alternative group health activities were taking place throughout the Soviet Union, and not just in Moscow. This positive sense of collective and social atmosphere of the Soviet alternative health scene where individual self development was
nurtured and encouraged was recounted in a 1984 article by Eduard Kondratov, who traveled the country and conducted anthropological-like research on alternative practices. One story is about a group in the southern Russian Samarovskii region that is strikingly similar to Healthy Family. While Kondratov writes with a skeptical and at times condescending attitude, he describes in detail how he traveled extensively around the Soviet Union and “met people who did such things as share recipes for receiving living or dead water, who were experts of Tibetan medicine, those who ate raw food, clairvoyants, and even one alien” (Kondratov 1984: 3). He participated for an undisclosed amount of time with the Samorovskii group which he found practicing in a large ravine: “They ran barefoot along the wet forest paths, intensely creating a bio-field around themselves, standing on their heads. They would say ‘om’ and focus attention on one organ of the body and then another” (ibid.). During his research he interviewed an engineer he called Nina: “Is it interesting? Of course. Otherwise I wouldn’t go. I don’t have any aches, but I want to be stronger – physically and psychologically, especially in regards to my will. The abilities of our organism, it turns out, are limitless. If, of course, your spirit has a body’” (ibid.). Discussing whether she likes the people in the group, she continues: “Very much. There are people to talk to. And not about jeans or strawberries at the dacha. Here there are very nice intelligent people. They’re interested in eastern philosophy and live spiritual lives” (ibid.).

Conclusion

Out of the stories and published documents of the late Soviet period, a picture begins to emerge that stands in stark contrast to conventional western ideologies. In Soviet Houses of Culture, out in open city parks, in doctors’ offices, research centers and private apartments, we find an atmosphere of creative discovery where people are taking active control over their health and are working to develop their individuality. A dialectic between the state and individuals is
playing out in these spaces where independent thought, self-development and individual initiative are encouraged and experienced. Unlike Rose’s passive health consumers or Kharkhordin’s collectives that encourage self-critique only to create more submissive citizens, we find here a collective space that offers support for people to develop their individual talents and personalities. Within these dynamics unique understandings and conceptualizations of individual and collective developed. Soviet alternative health practitioners came to value personal experience and appreciate the inner potentials within the individual. At the same time they maintained a strong sense of social responsibility towards their collective group and the world around them. Significantly, these practitioners were ordinary Soviet citizens and not dissidents. They were engineers, doctors, teachers, and while they were critical of authoritarian rule, and none I spoke with wish for a return of the Soviet system, they remain avid supporters of certain social values of the period, such as the focus on education and the value of human relationships over wealth and consumerism.

The contemporary alternative health scene in Russia reflects the individualist and collectivist values that practitioners developed within Soviet space. Interpretations that see the latter as simply holdovers from the past and the former as evidence of neo-liberal westernization erase the agency of Soviet practitioners and fail to appreciate the dynamic processes taking place both within the deterritorializing milieu of Soviet space and continuing within the contemporary globalizing scene. The demise of the Soviet system did not leave citizens in an ideological void or encrusted in old ways of thinking. Instead we find contemporary post-Soviet practitioners actively continuing the dynamic process of interpreting, expressing and developing their own unique conceptualization of individualism.
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