



U N I V E R S I T Y O F O X F O R D
History Working Paper
Number VIII, October 2013

*Hypnosis in Russian Popular Culture during the Era
of War and Revolution*

Julia Mannherz

Hypnosis in Russian Popular Culture during the Era of War and Revolution

Julia Mannherz

Oxford University

julia.mannherz@history.ox.ac.uk

Hypnosis was a hot topic in Russian mainstream publishing throughout the era of war and revolution, but it was never a simple phenomenon which allowed contemporaries to agree in their assessments of it. Precisely because of its contentious character, the technique lends itself for an analysis of continuity and change across the political caesuras of 1914, 1917 and 1921. Throughout the period, hypnosis was advertised as a practice that offered entertainment; it was also recommended as a means of personal self-advancement; and furthermore it was part of scientific enquiry and medical practice. Doctors championed hypnosis as an infallible treatment, i.e. as a method that worked reliably and which was able to heal bodily ailments and social ills which had befallen the tsarist empire or which had not (yet) vanished in the young socialist state. Hypnosis also appealed to contemporaries because it offered an explanation for the social and political upheavals they were witnessing: the technique, it seemed, accounted for the stellar rise of some political leaders.

The phenomenon of hypnosis itself was not new in 1914.¹ Since the late eighteenth

¹ On the history of hypnosis, see Alan Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). A general, although slightly unreliable, overview over the history of hypnosis in Russia is provided by Ludmila Zielinski, "Hypnotism in Russia, 1800-1900," in: Eric J. Dingwall, ed., *Abnormal Hypnotic Phenomena: A Survey of Nineteenth-Century Cases* (London: Churchill, 1967): 1-105. [Could this please be reverted to 1968? It's a series of various books – but without

century, men and women had observed with amazement that slow movements of the hands or steady oscillations of shining objects transported subjects into a state of mind that resembled neither waking nor sleeping. In this condition, participants frequently behaved out of character, seemingly becoming the willing fulfillers of the hypnotist's authoritative commands. Hypnosis had also been used as a medical cure. Indeed, the technique first became notorious in the late eighteenth century when Franz Anton Mesmer, a Viennese doctor, received significant public attention for employing it in Parisian high society. Mesmer believed hypnosis to be an occult force, a fluid that flowed from the hypnotist to his object. This "magnetic fluid" acted on the nerves of his patients and called forth the astonishing phenomenon he termed "animal magnetism." Mesmer used his technique to cure patients whose illnesses, he argued, were caused by "obstacles" in the fluid's movement through the body. A panel of scientists, however, concluded in 1784 that Mesmerism was a fraud. Mesmer had to flee Paris and the fame of animal magnetism declined. In 1831, however, a new scientific commission in Paris published a favorable report and the technique became fashionable again among doctors and lay-people; by the next decade it was widely appreciated across Europe for its anesthetic, curative and entertaining features. In 1842, the British surgeon James Braid termed the phenomenon of mesmerism "hypnosis" after the Greek god of sleep. Braid's move was partly motivated by an attempt to rid the technique of the supernatural aura that had always surrounded mesmerism, and in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, hypnosis began to engage the attention of numerous esteemed scientists all over Europe.

In order to conquer hypnosis for scholarly professions, academics had to propose scientific explanations about its workings. Mesmer's ideas of "nervous fluids" and later

volume number and the one that contains Zielinski's text was published in 1968]

theories about electro-magnetic forces ceased to convince the scientifically educated from about 1850, when experimental results showed that the nervous system was not powered by some quasi-electrical energy.² During the last decades of the nineteenth century, when neurologists, anatomists and histologists developed a strong interest in hypnosis, they commonly explained the phenomenon in physiological terms. In the 1880s, the most authoritative figure on the subject was the Parisian neurologist Jean-Marie Charcot, who viewed hypnosis as a distinct nervous state. According to Charcot, hypnosis resembled hysteria to which it was etiologically linked, and both were brought about by a biological predisposition. Charcot's view was prominently challenged in the late 1880s by Hippolyte Bernheim in Nancy, who argued that hypnotic trances were instances of extraordinary psychological, not physiological, states that were neither abnormal nor a sign of illness such as hysteria. Although contemporary researchers were increasingly drawn to Bernheim's psychological suggestion, physiological and psychological explanations continued to coexist. The Russian neurologist Vladimir Mikhailovich Bekhterev described suggestion in a lecture series delivered at the Military-Medical Academy in St Petersburg in 1897 as a form of irrational reasoning. In Bekhterev's view, hypnosis was a psychological state, but one which could affect groups of people in ways akin to the spread of contagious microbes.³

The increasing scientific interest in hypnosis notwithstanding, the technique remained closely associated with magic by society at large, and physiologists and medical doctors frequently bemoaned that it was practiced by "charlatans."⁴ When the famous spiritualist

² Gauld, *History*, 265-66.

³ V. M. Bekhterev, "Priroda gipnoza," *Vestnik znaniia*, 1 (1926): 35-40; V. M. Bekhterev, *Suggestion and its Role in Social Life* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998).

⁴ See for example P. Rozenbakh, "Gipnotizm," *Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar'* (St Petersburg, 1893) 8A:

medium Stefan Fomich Sambor realized in 1900 that he too could heal hypnotically, his feats were reported in the mainstream press and confirmed a long-established connection: the medium, who earned his living through the rather dubious profession of communicating with the spirits of the departed, was described by *Peterburgskaia gazeta* as a plausible candidate for a successful hypnotist.⁵

Because of its mysterious qualities, hypnosis was a highly popular topic in early twentieth-century mass publishing. In this sphere, the terms mesmerism, (animal) magnetism, suggestion, hypnotism and hypnosis were used synonymously, a linguistic practice which underlines the ambiguous position of hypnosis within and outside established science. Particularly successful with customers were instructions manuals, which taught readers how to hypnotize and to impose their will upon others, and they frequently went into numerous editions.⁶ Journals too serialized courses on suggestion, while newspapers advertised pamphlets and reported the feats of powerful hypnotists.⁷ Fascination with the topic

726-734.

⁵ “Mediumy progressiruiut (Iz besedy s g. Stano),” *Peterburgskaia gazeta*, 22 November 1900: 3.

⁶ For example, Kh. M. Shiller-Shkol’nik, *Novyi kurs gipnotizma: Nasha sila vnutri nas* (Warsaw: Miss Hasse, 1910), reprinted in 1911 in St Petersburg, Saratov and Warsaw; and again in 1914.

⁷ [First name? His “first name” is “Professor Mister”. No others are given] Bell, “Gipnotizm: Kurs prakticheskikh metodov ukrepleniia v sebe sily voli i dukha dlia razlichnogo roda vnusheniia,” *Spiritualist* 8 (1906): 365–74; 9 (1906): 424–29; 10 (1906): 469–76; 11 (1906): 523–26; 12 (1906): 584–87; A. A. Likhanov, “Skrizhali maga: Rukovodstvo k razvitiu psikhicheskikh sposobnostei cheloveka,” *Izida*, no. 1 (1913): 3-5; no. 4 (1914): 3-7, no. 5 (1914): 4-12; no. 7 (1914): 3-7; no. 8 (1914): 4-9; no. 9-10 (1914): 5-9; no. 11 (1914): 6-14; no. 12 (1914): 3-7; no. 6 (1915): 1-6; “Lichnoe vliianie,” *Gazeta kopeika (Moskva)*, 20 April 1909: 6; A. Dn-ov, “L. L. Onore i ego lechenie

continued from the later years of imperial Russia right into the first decade of the young Soviet republic. In 1925, for example, zoologist and professor at the university of St Petersburg, Petr Iul'evich Shmidt recommended the hypnotization of animals in the popular science journal *Vestnik znaniia*. "Hypnotizing a frog is easiest," Shmidt explained. This kind of experiment was highly entertaining, as the scientist knew from personal experience, having recently used two grass frogs in "a rather amusing experiment." Shmidt made one hypnotized frog "sit cross-legged and put one of its hands to its heart, the other I stretched out to the front. I made another frog sit opposite the first one in exactly the same position and thus obtained a scene in which two frogs confessed their love. This scene lasted for a few minutes and greatly entertained my children and acquaintances."⁸

Hypnosis in Peacetime: Self-Advancement and the Occult

One striking characteristic of pre-revolutionary hypnosis was the promise that it could be used by everyone for personal self-advancement, as authors enthusiastically recommended hypnosis to their readers as a way of improving their individual lives. The ultimate aim of this program was to become a self-assured and assertive person with a strong will that was free from dithering. Once a student of hypnosis had acquired this personal confidence, he could quickly learn how to read the minds of others, but more importantly, he could acquire the skill to exert influence upon others through his psychic power.

How to achieve the authoritative character required for suggestion was the subject of numerous tracts. According to A. A. Likhanov, trainee hypnotists first had to subjugate the physical functions of their own bodies to the power of their minds. This was to be achieved

vnusheniiami na iavu," *Peterburgskii listok*, 28 February 1910: 3.

⁸ P. Iu. Shmidt, "Kak gipnotizirovat' zhivotnykh," *Vestnik znaniia*, 3 (1925): 243-46.

through strict dietary regimes and exercises inspired by yoga. Only once the adept was able to control his body with his will could he turn to the “production and accumulation” of “fluid.” Gaining control of this fluid enabled him to develop a commanding gaze and confident gestures. Hypnosis was a highly gendered practice according to this and other instruction manuals. Men, Likhanov noted, were most likely to turn the “fluid” into an active “temperament” that would enable them to “capture the thoughts of others” and to influence those around them. Women, in contrast, developed “passive, mediumistic abilities,” i.e. the ability to receive communications from supernatural beings.⁹

The personal gains of masculine hypnotic ability were great indeed: manuals promised supreme knowledge, success in business and triumph in love. Descriptions of the successful hypnotist portrayed him as a vigorous and aggressive man, while the rare women who practiced the technique grew into meek communicators of edifying wisdom. Catriona Kelly has suggested that late imperial advice literature about how to cultivate aggressive manliness was addressed at white-collar workers who had to make an impression upon subordinates, superiors and colleagues in large organizations and whose status was not determined by the rigid table of ranks that dominated state service.¹⁰ In following her

⁹ Likhanov, “Skrizhali maga,” no. 1 (1913): 4-5.

¹⁰ Catriona Kelly, “The Education of the Will: Advice Literature, Zakal, and Manliness in Early Twentieth-Century Russia,” in: Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey, eds., *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002), 136. On page 134 of that article, Kelly suggests that before the revolution programs to develop an aggressive masculinity were directed towards bodily strength only, whereas after 1917 muscle building was combined with education of the will. The sources cited here suggest that the education of the will was already prominent in late tsarist Russia.

interpretation, hypnosis courses can be seen as reflecting both the experience of social change and the personal aspiration with which some contemporaries drove this transformation.

Likhanov's instructions also illustrate how popular instruction literature explained hypnosis. His claims combined Mesmer's fluids, Eastern practices such as yoga, contemporary concerns about self-advancement, and spiritualist communications with the beyond. Other authors added science to the mix. A. [patronymic? None given, I fear.] Khrapovitskii, for example, claimed that mental power resided in the celiac plexus, and his exercises consequently taught readers how to enable communication between the brain and this abdominal network of nerves.¹¹ A different "scientific" explanation was advanced by A.V. Segno, whose course on strengthening the will went into its 47th edition in 1912 and was addressed to "all who seek truth and power." Segno asserted that all thoughts left physical traces in the forms of etherial waves. It was these vestiges which his technique enabled users to read and utilize. Like many similar practices, Segno's method was acquired through ritual repetition of firm resolutions, which included "I will control my behavior and actions; I will never worry nor dither," and "I will be successful."¹²

The incorporation of scientific metaphors notwithstanding, early twentieth-century ideas concerning hypnosis remained inextricably linked to the occult. Likhanov in his instructions, for instance, claimed that his own innovative method was a "rational combination of yoga"—then universally seen as an exotic, esoteric practice—"with the

¹¹ A. Khrapovitskii, *Magneticheskoe pis'mo* (Moscow: Tip. Mamontova, 1907).

¹² A. V. Segno, *Zakon mentalizma: Prakticheskoe nauchnoe ob'iasnenie mysli i dushevnoi sily, zakon upravliaiushchii vsemi myslennymi i fizicheskimi deistviiami i iavleniiami, sushchnost' zhizni i smerti* (Moscow: A. A. Levenson, 1912), 66, 125.

methods of Western practical occultism.”¹³ Indeed, many guides to hypnosis were printed in what could be described as the occult press.¹⁴ *Zerkalo tainykh nauk*, a popular and much advertised compendium of all things magical, for example, discussed hypnosis alongside demons, black magic, dreams, hallucinations, doppelgänger, fortune-telling, spiritualism, haunted houses, chiromancy, astrology, and stage magic.¹⁵

This close association between hypnosis and the supernatural, however, was contested by doctors who strove to explain hypnosis scientifically and who laid claim to hypnosis as a technique that only the medical profession should be allowed to practice.¹⁶ They were particularly opposed to travelling practitioners of hypnosis, who lacked medical training, such as the medium Sambor or Osip Il’ich Fel’dman, Russia’s undisputed star hypnotist and hero of the popular broadsheet *Peterburgskii listok*. Doctors convinced Russian lawmakers that hypnosis was a dangerous tool in the hands of laymen. From 1890, the law was changed repeatedly and either required medical doctors to be present whenever hypnosis was conducted, or stipulated that only doctors were allowed to practice it.¹⁷ The frequent legal

¹³ Likhanov, “Skrizhali maga,” no. 1 (1913): 5.

¹⁴ “Kurs lektsii o gipnotizme,” *Lektsii okkul’nykh znanii* (1911): 1-48.

¹⁵ *Zerkalo tainykh nauk ili otrazhenie sud’by cheloveka: Polnyi kurs gipnotizma* (Moscow: Aviator, 1914).

¹⁶ On similar developments in Germany, see Heather Wolfram, “‘An Object of Vulgar Curiosity’: Legitimizing Medical Hypnosis in Imperial Germany,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 67, 1 (2012): 149-76.

¹⁷ P. Rozenbakh, “Gipnotizm” and “Gipnoz,” *Bol’shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, S. I. Vavilov and B. A. Vvedenskii, eds, 2nd ed., 51 vols (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe nauchnoe izdatel’stvo, 1952): 11, 403-405.

changes and the repeated passing of the same stipulation, however, indicate that official regulations were largely ignored. Indeed, the press published numerous accounts about lay hypnotists valiantly defying state regulation and ridiculed official “hypnocrats.”¹⁸

In attempts to claim hypnosis either for lay practitioners or for science, authors elaborated upon the benefits the technique could bring to society as a whole. Laymen stressed the healing potential of hypnosis and referred to hopeless medical cases, in which their “passes” -- i.e. hand movements -- finally relieved patients from long suffering.¹⁹ Lay healers claimed to be treating not only individual afflictions, but also the social ills that had befallen society, such as alcoholism, wayward behavior in teenage girls, the breakdown of marriages, irresponsibility and rebelliousness more generally.²⁰ Scientists also promised social progress through the advance of rational knowledge that hypnotic experiments would provide. Bekhterev moreover hoped that suggestion could be harnessed to influence groups that were not easily convinced by reformers’ rational arguments. In 1897 he argued that

¹⁸ “Mediumy progressiruiut (Iz besedy s g. Stano)”;
“Intsident s L. L. Onore,” *Peterburgskii listok*, 8 August 1911: 4.

¹⁹ “Eshche izlechenie gipnotizmom,” *Rebus*, 5, 16 (1886): 170-71; “Gipnoz i vnusheniia,” *Peterburgskii listok*, 30 July 1895: 3; L. L. Onore, *Gipnoticheskaia sanatoriia* (Tomsk, 1907); A.-ov, “Na seansakh u L.L. Onore,” *Petrogradskii listok*, 12 January 1914: 8.

²⁰ Nadezhda Nikolaevna (vdova podpolkovnika) Anton’eva, “Izlechenie dushevno-bol’noi,” *Rebus*, 7, 35 (1888): 315; “U O. I. Fel’dman,” *Russkii listok*, 1893, 3; L.L. Onore, *Gipnoticheskaia sanatoriia*; “Na seansakh u L. L. Onore,” *Petrogradskii listok*, 30 October 1914: 14. For the larger significance of such seemingly private disputes see Barbara Alpern Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound: The Politics of Marital Strife in Late Imperial Russia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011).

“there are far more numerous and various ways of transferring psychic states with the help of suggestion than there are ways for transferring thoughts through argument.” Reason, he claimed, “can mainly affect persons with a soundly logical mind, whereas suggestion affects not only these persons, but, to a greater extent, persons possessing insufficient reasoning capacity as, for example, children and the popular mass.”²¹ In Bekhterev’s eyes, hypnosis could serve as a tool in an enlightened professional mission to reform Russia, which would overcome the stubbornness of its backward-looking elements.²²

While hypnosis was enthusiastically embraced by readers of instruction manuals who strove for personal betterment and by physiologists who enlisted it in their research, the technique also gave rise to anxieties. If it was plausible that everybody could achieve absolute power over another person through mental suggestion, then the practice that offered such opportunities to some was simultaneously a possible threat to others. In the 1890s, the press frequently reported hypnotic abuse and hypnotic experiments gone awry. The latter included cases of subjects who, once hypnotized, could not be woken afterwards, or patients who repeatedly fell asleep at the time a dilettante hypnotic experiment had first been conducted.²³ Other victims of hypnosis were said to have committed crimes that had been suggested to them by a hypnotist.²⁴ With the help of hypnosis, numerous women and young

²¹ Bekhterev, *Suggestion*, 18-19.

²² Daniel Beer has shown that such authoritarian approaches in the name of social progress were common among those who described themselves as progressives acting in the interests of the people. Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880-1930* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

²³ “Kratkie zametki,” *Rebus* 9 (1890): 20.

²⁴ Rozenbakh, “Gipnotizm”.

girls were allegedly made to marry men they did not love, while other women were reportedly raped while in a hypnotic trance. A third group of women, consisting mainly of mature wives, was made to commit suicide.²⁵ So great was the apprehension of being under someone's malevolent hypnotic influence that Bekhterev named a new illness after this fear: *paranoia suggestio-delira*.²⁶

Doctors exploited these anxieties in their attempts to restrict the practice of hypnosis to qualified medics. Pavel Iakovlevich Rozenbakh, distinguished psychiatrist and author of the entry on hypnotism in the eminent *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, echoed concerns raised in the mass media by warning that suggestion administered by unworthy hypnotists could lead subjects to commit crimes against their will or could turn the hypnotized into victims of fraudsters and rapists.²⁷ V. Sukhova-Osipova claimed in 1904 in *Vestnik psikhologii, kriminal'noi antropologii i gipnotizma*, the organ of the Psychoneurological Institute in St Petersburg -- edited by, among others, Bekhterev -- that Fel'dman had harmed the internal organs of some of his patients.²⁸ The image of hypnosis in pre-revolutionary Russia thus presents a contradictory picture of a practice drawn between magical connotations and medical analysis, as a technique that could possibly heal the ills of society, or aggravate these

²⁵ "Gipnoticheskoe prestuplenie," *Rebus*, 16, 26 (1897): 219; "Zhertva gipnoza," *Russkii listok*, February 24, 1901, 3; V. M. Bekhterev, *Bred* [sic? Or Vred? Бред means ravings or delirium. It's the word in the title and should stay without alteration or "sic"] *gipnoticheskogo ocharovaniia ili Paranoia suggestio-delira* (St Petersburg, 1913).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* (St Petersburg, 1891).

²⁸ V. Sukhova-Osipova, "Gipnotizm," *Vestnik psikhologii, kriminal'noi antropologii i gipnotizma* (1904): 614-16.

if practiced by dilettantes or with evil intent.

Hypnosis in War and Revolution

Anxieties about the possible abuse of hypnosis were intensified by internal conflict and civil war. The previously anonymous hypnotist, who could have been any reader of one of the numerous cheap instruction manuals, was now associated with political leaders. During the tumultuous years following Russia's entry into the Great War, hypnosis was frequently described in the mass media as a technique mastered and employed by powerful schemers in order to manage either psychologically weaker, impressionable men who held positions of power; or to steer whole masses into action. Thus, during the war some suggested that the German enemy was employing hypnosis as a weapon. At the same time, numerous publications directed at a mass readership depicted in great detail the weak willpower of Nicholas II and surmised that he had become a puppet in the hands of dangerous machinators.²⁹ Grigorii Rasputin was the prime suspect for such a manipulative role, and hypnosis was frequently mentioned when commentators tried to explain the exceptional position of the Siberian peasant at the centre of imperial power. In 1917 S. P. Beletskii, erstwhile director of the police department, argued in front of the extraordinary inquiry of the Provisional Government that he had received intelligence reports in 1913 which suggested that Rasputin was taking lessons in hypnosis. Beletskii had been so concerned by this that he inquired more closely into the activities of Rasputin's teacher and blackmailed him into

²⁹ O. S. Porshneva, *Mentalitet i sotsial'noe povedenie rabochikh, krest'ian i soldat Rossii v period pervoi mirovoi voiny (1914-mart 1918g)* (Ekaterinburg: UrO RAN, 2000), 229-30; Boris Kolonitskii, *"Tragicheskaiia erotika": Obrazy imperatorskoi sem'i v gody pervoi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010), 197-223.

leaving the capital.³⁰ Numerous memoirists and commentators have later claimed that Rasputin hypnotized a significant number of powerful people, including the tsar and his wife Empress Aleksandra, and bishop Feofan (Bystrov). He was allegedly less successful with some prominent men such as prime minister P. A. Stolypin.³¹ These failures notwithstanding, Rasputin's hypnotic influence, these authors suggested, explained not only his success at court, but also the political blunders of the hapless tsar.

German generals and Rasputin were not the only political figures who were suspected of having obtained power through hypnosis in revolutionary Russia. During the civil war, the political enemy was frequently charged with having resorted to the use of suggestion. At times, this was a metaphorical allegation, expressed for example when Bolsheviks accused the propertied classes of employing the hypnotic power of money in the suppression of the proletariat, or when communists claimed that the bourgeoisie used nationalism as a form of "political hypnosis" to estrange non-Russian workers from the Soviet cause.³² The metaphorical use of hypnosis became an important and ubiquitous ingredient in the political language of the early Soviet Union. Ten years after the October revolution, *Pravda* celebrated

³⁰ P. E. Shchegolev, ed., *Padenie tsarskogo rezhima: Stenograficheskie otchety doprosov i pokazanii, dannyykh v 1917 g. v Chrezvychainoi Sledstvennoi Kommissii Vremennogo Pravitel'stva* (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1925), vol. 4, 501.

³¹ René Fülöp-Miller, *Der Heilige Teufel: Rasputin und die Frauen* (Leipzig: Grethlein & Co., 1927), 4-5, 64; Bernard Pares, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy: A Study of the Evidence* (London: J. Cape, 1939), 138-142; M. V. Rodzianko, "Krushenie imperii," in: V. Kriukov and I. Saiko, eds, *Grigorii Rasputin: Sbornik istoricheskikh materialov* (Moscow: Terra, 1997), 153-156, 263.

³² "Iz slovaria burzhuazii," *Pravda*, 6 June 1918, 1; "Gipnoz deneg," *Izvestiia*, 31 December 1921: 2.

Lenin's unique revolutionary achievement by noting that he had "freed the masses from [their] historical state of hypnosis."³³ The metaphor would not have evoked such a powerful image had the technique itself not been known as a powerful tool with quasi-magic qualities.

And indeed, the allegation that hypnosis was a tool in politics was not always merely employed in a figurative manner in revolutionary Russia. The charismatic socialist Aleksandr Kerenskii was rumored to possess, quite literally, mesmeric powers capable of inducing states of hysteria in his listeners.³⁴ When *Pravda* claimed in an article about political enemies that "all these Kerenskiis, Chernovs, Vinnichenkos, Petliuras, Martovs, [and] Gegechkoris [...] suppress the proletariat and the peasantry through the hypnosis of pretty socialist slogans" (*pri pomoshchi gipnoza krasivykh sotsialisticheskikh fraz*) the borders between metaphorical and literal speech became blurred.³⁵ In the context of rumours about Kerenskii, it seemed possible that either he, the Menshevik Martov, leaders of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, Ukrainian or Georgian revolutionaries were indeed employing those hypnotic techniques which instruction manuals had long advertised as powerful tools of persuasion. A similar ambiguity existed in relation to the Bolshevik leader. Some contemporaries explicitly attributed Lenin's success to his extraordinary willpower, the prerequisite of imposing one's will upon others through hypnotic means, and to his "hypnotic power."³⁶ In 1920, *Izvestiia* published an article entitled "Why does Lenin influence the masses?"³⁷ In the first

³³ "Fevral' - etap k oktiabriu," *Izvestiia*, 3 November 1927: 1.

³⁴ Orlando Figes and Boris Ivanovich Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 81-83.

³⁵ L. Sosnovskii, "Ili Getman - ili Sovety," *Pravda*, 9 May 1918: 1.

³⁶ Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting*, 102.

³⁷ N. Podvoiskii, "Pochemu Lenin vliiaet na massy?" *Izvestiia*, 23 April 1920: 2.

paragraph, its author rejected the proposition that Lenin's charisma was due to "hypnosis or an authoritative personality, his intense political will, [or his] steadfastness." Yet this statement implied that such suggestions were voiced by some and needed to be rebutted by the government newspaper. In the second section of his piece, however, the author himself could not refrain from suggesting that Lenin possessed some form of hypnotic power. "The special quality of [Lenin's] slogans [*formuly*]," he wrote, "brings about hypnosis." This was "the hypnosis of precise, clear and basic slogans which Vladimir Il'ich throws out incessantly." Lenin's formulas were based on a superhuman understanding of the present, which gave the Bolshevik leader "foresight" (*predvidenie*). Both the importance of short authoritative commands and Lenin's ability to foresee the future echo occult ideas about hypnosis, such as the similarity of hypnotic commands to magic spells and its link to clairvoyance.

Most frequently, the claim that someone exerted hypnosis on unsuspecting followers was voiced by political opponents, thus portraying hypnosis as an illicit tool of persuasion. Sometimes, however, even political allies were described as possessing some form of hypnotic ability. The success of pre-revolutionary instruction manuals had clearly prepared the ground for the image of hypnosis at times of political upheaval.³⁸ If absolute power over others could be obtained through its practice, then hypnosis became a plausible explanation of the sudden rise and fall of political figures.

³⁸ Russians were by no means alone in their suggestion that a mass following was somehow created through hypnosis. In an essay written in 1920, Sigmund Freud suggested that the relationship between charismatic leaders and their followers was brought about by a bond of hypnotic identification. Sigmund Freud, "Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse," *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse; Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2007): 31-105.

The Russian attitude towards hypnosis during the Great War and its aftermath compares tellingly to German opinions during the same period. As Paul Lerner has shown, hypnosis was celebrated during the war by German doctors, who promoted it as an almost magical technique that could cure the most disconcerting ailment of the time: shell shock. During the social and political upheavals that followed the country's defeat of 1918, however, the restorative qualities of hypnosis that had been hailed before by medics, patients and social commentators alike, turned into an imminent threat. As contemporaries witnessed the revolutionary elements and political instability of the Weimar Republic, they began to see hypnosis as implicated in the unsettling of traditional authority. Instead of the trustworthy doctor who healed suffering defenders of the fatherland during the Great War, hypnosis after 1918 was described as being practiced by scheming charlatans and unreliable elements.³⁹ Hypnosis in Germany and Russia, it seems, mirrored contemporary attitudes towards figures in power and social authority. As long as there was social stability and agreement about where legitimate power and authority lay, hypnosis was a generally-acclaimed cure. When social and moral authorities were disintegrating, however, the technique acquired a threatening quality. As we shall see below, the development from cure to threat that Lerner describes in the case of Germany was, to some degree, reversed in Russia.

While war and revolutionary upheaval turned hypnosis into a powerful topic of political discourse in Russia, the technique also retained its visible pre-revolutionary role in entertainment and science. Yet this role experienced a number of adjustments. In Soviet popular culture, hypnosis was no longer the "democratic" discipline that could potentially be

³⁹ Paul Lerner, "Hysterical Cures: Hypnosis, Gender and Performance in World War I and Weimar Germany," *History Workshop Journal*, 45 (1998): 79-101.

learned and employed by anyone. Instead, hypnotists were portrayed in the 1920s as an exclusive group, consisting of political leaders, a few exceptional entertainers and most significantly medical doctors. As far as the previously contested question of who could explain and legitimately practice hypnosis was concerned, the press was now securely on the side of doctors in general and on that of academician Bekhterev in particular. When hypnosis appeared in the listings of Soviet newspapers, it was almost exclusively employed to advertise the therapeutic services of doctors' surgeries.⁴⁰ Training courses open to the public or teach-yourself-manuals which had previously been prominent were no longer promoted.

The monopoly doctors enjoyed when it came to the legitimate practice of hypnosis was underlined by a number of articles in the Soviet press that highlighted the scientific nature of the technique. *Izvestiia*, for example, noted the prominence of hypnosis at the Second International Congress of Psychical Research held in Warsaw in 1923.⁴¹ A year later, the same newspaper reported how at the All-Russian Congress of Psycho-neurologists, "enormous interest was sparked by the presentations in the section about hypnosis, which described the recent medical successes of hypnosis."⁴² These medical achievements were closely followed by newspapers which published celebratory reports about the use of hypnosis during operations and difficult births. This reporting also included news items about

⁴⁰ See, for example, "Dr Ia. I. Shalyt," *Izvestiia*, 2 December 1922: 5. Over the course of one month, the advertisement was repeated on 6, 9, 16 and 23 December; it was also printed in the following years. Dr Shalyt was joined by numerous colleagues who also referred to their hypnotic qualifications when advertising their surgeries. One of them was Dr Markovnikov. See "Dr Markovnikov," *Pravda*, 14 December 1922: 6.

⁴¹ "Kongress psikhicheskikh issledovaniï," *Izvestiia*, 17 August 1923: 4.

⁴² "Vserossiiskii s'ezd psikho-nevrologov," *Izvestiia*, 1 July 1924: 4.

the role of hypnosis in the research projects of famous scientists, most prominently in the work of Bekhterev.⁴³

Sensationalist titles such as “Operations under Hypnosis” not only stressed the medical monopoly of the technique, but simultaneously preserved its old scandalous flair. The press also advertised talks about “Hypnosis and the Will” and “Books on Hypnosis,” which further underlined the thrilling appeal of hypnosis, even though these presentations were now given by qualified medics.⁴⁴ In some instances, such announcements were printed under the heading “Lectures, Talks and Concerts,” suggesting that the link between hypnosis and entertainment had not been severed altogether.⁴⁵ Occasionally, hypnosis was indeed still used to advertise theatre productions, circus stunts, and documentary or foreign films, although officially sanctioned reviews were frequently highly dismissive of the superficial and obscurantist character of such productions.⁴⁶

As the upheavals of the First World War and the Civil War subsided, hypnosis turned into a purely medical technique. In stark contrast to pre-revolutionary lay-magnetizers such as Fel’dman, the Soviet hero-hypnotist was an established academic, and most prominently this role was fulfilled by the acclaimed neurologist Bekhterev. But Bekhterev too altered his

⁴³ “Operatsii pod gipnozom,” *Izvestiia*, 2 July 1923: 5; “Operatsii pod gipnozom,” *Izvestiia*, 1 February 1924: 3; “Operatsii i rody pod gipnozom,” *Pravda*, 1 July 1924: 7; A. A. Sukhov, “Iubilei akademika V. M. Bekhtereva,” *Izvestiia*, 19 September 1925: 3; “Novaia kniga Pavlova,” *Izvestiia*, 15 March 1927: 5.

⁴⁴ “Gipnoz i volia,” *Pravda*, 20 February 1920: 8; “Knigi po gipnozu,” *Pravda*, 13 April 1928: 8.

⁴⁵ “Gipnoz i volia”.

⁴⁶ “Indiiskaia grobnitsa,” *Izvestiia*, 3 March 1923: 5; “Kino: ‘Gipnoz i vnushenie’,” *Pravda*, 18 August 1924: 8; “Tsirk miuzik kholl,” *Izvestiia*, 22 October 1926: 7.

view on hypnosis. Whereas he had described suggestion as a psychological process in his 1897 lecture, in the 1920s he emphatically advanced the view that hypnosis was a physiological state in which the workings of the reflexes in the brain were suppressed. This explanation was the undisputed exegesis in early Soviet publications, not least because opponents of materialist explanations were deprived of the opportunity to express their views in print.⁴⁷ Bekhterev's disciples now proclaimed confidently that "the further science progresses, the more and more secure the triumph of the materialist approach becomes."⁴⁸

Doctors also approached hypnosis with more optimism than before the revolution. Reports about hypnotic treatments gone awry or articles about victimized women vanished from post-war Soviet newspapers. Instead, doctors now recommended hypnosis for use in child-rearing and education. The use of hypnosis as an investigative tool in criminology was also acceptable to Soviet doctors, whereas pre-revolutionary practitioners of hypnosis had strongly rejected such proposals.⁴⁹ Doctors moreover advanced hypnosis as a potent tool against social ills. First and foremost, this was still related to alcoholism, but it also concerned smoking, kleptomania, bedwetting and aberrations from what Bekhterev saw as normal sexual behaviour.⁵⁰ To rid workers of a shameful bourgeois heritage, Bekhterev

⁴⁷ Bekhterev, "Priroda gipnoza."

⁴⁸ A. V. Dubrovskii, "Novoe v izuchenii chelovecheskoi lichnosti," *Vestnik znaniia*, 6 (1926): 392.

⁴⁹ "Narodnoe obrazovanie," *Izvestiia*, 1 November 1922: 4. On the rejection of hypnosis in child-rearing by pre-revolutionary doctors see, for example, Rozenbakh, "Gipnotizm."

⁵⁰ "Dr Markovnikov"; V. M. Bekhterev, "Samovnushenie i kueizm, kak istseliaiushchii faktor," *Vestnik znaniia*, 17-18 (1925): 1121-30; V. M. Bekhterev, "O lechenii gipnozom," *Vestnik znaniia*, 2 (1926): 85-96; V. M. Akad. Bekhterev, "Perspektivy refleksologii cheloveka," *Vestnik znaniia*, 6 (1927): 323-26. According to Bekhterev, hypnosis could be used against pain during menstruation,

administered mass hypnosis and taught his patients how to use autosuggestion so as to prevent future relapses.⁵¹ While hypnosis was still used to transform subjects and to turn them into more perfect members of the human race, this transformation was now done with a collective goal in mind, not individual self-advancement. Bekhterev, it seems, grasped the opportunity to carry through his pre-revolutionary agenda of transforming the dark masses that threatened to hold back Russia. By doing so, he embraced and furthered the goals of the Soviet state in ways that were not uncommon among Soviet psychologists, as Martin Miller shows in his chapter in this volume. [Check if book I or II.]

Linked to this optimism regarding hypnosis was the conviction, or at least the claim, that it was now fully understood by scientists. Neurologists usually mentioned in the introductions to their texts that hypnosis had in the past been associated with magic or spiritualism, but that these connections were now no longer accepted by intelligent people. Instead, hypnosis could be explained physiologically as a braking process that affected cerebral reflexes. Some of the explanations advanced in the Soviet press revived older nineteenth-century notions about the workings of hypnosis. Passes were now painstakingly rationalised as a way of dispersing electro-magnetic waves from one organism onto another.⁵²

Portraying hypnosis as a scientific technique was furthermore achieved by the

masturbation, onanism and unspecified “sexual perversion”. See also Patricia Herlihy, *The Alcoholic Empire: Vodka and Politics in Late Imperial Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.

⁵¹ Bekhterev, “Samovnushenie i kueizm”; V. M. Akad. Bekhterev, “Sotsial’noe nasledie starogo byta,” *Vestnik znaniia*, 9 (1927): 351-538.

⁵² V. M. Bekhterev, “Gipnoz,” *Vestnik znaniia*, 16 (1925): 1057-64; L. L. Prof. Vasil’ev, “Novoe o gipnoticheskikh passakh,” *Vestnik znaniia*, 1 (1927): 27-38.

increased reference to animals on which hypnotic experiments were conducted. Reports about such tests were published, and detailed instructions taught readers not only how to hypnotize frogs, mice, rabbits, lizards, snakes, birds, dogs or fresh-water crabs, but also how to dissect these organisms and how to conduct other neurological experiments.⁵³ Hypnosis was thus portrayed as a method akin to other, long established forms of laboratory practice.

Instructions on how to hypnotize animals moreover firmly established hypnosis as a technique for which medical expertise was vital. Whereas in pre-revolutionary Russia manuals on how to hypnotize other men and women abounded, no such instructions for lay people were printed in the 1920s. If scientifically interested Soviet citizens wanted to try the technique at their leisure, they had to use reptiles or small mammals for their experiments, that is, the common objects of amateur biological studies. Trials with other humans were restricted to the medical profession. The same development took place in popular entertainment. When the circus magician To-Ramo advertised his feats in the 1920s, he promised to hypnotize “lions, crocodiles, constrictor snakes, and eagles” but no people.⁵⁴

⁵³ R. Gabrieliants, “K voprosu o gipnoze zhivotnykh,” *Vestnik znaniia*, 21-22 (1925): 1293-98; Shmidt, “Kak gipnotizirovat’ zhivotnykh”; G. N. Sorokhtin, “Prakticheskaia fiziologiiia liubitelia,” *Vestnik znaniia*, 5 (1925): 387-94; L. L. Prof. Vasil’ev, “O peredache mysli na rastoianie,” *Vestnik znaniia*, 7 (1926): 457-68. Hypnotic experiments with animals were not unknown before the revolution. However, they were reported far less frequently and usually were not set in the broader context of neurology. Cf. “Kratkie zametki,” *Rebus* 7 (1888): 423.

⁵⁴ “Tsirk miuzik kholl”. This seems to have changed in the 1930s, when the magician Ornal’do entertained circus audiences by hypnotizing the front row. Muzei Tsirkogo Iskusstva, R_vyr/154. [is this an archive? Where located? Is “Ornal’do” a fond?

It’s a very small archive in SPb. R_vyr/154 is the shelfmark of the file, there were no fond or opis’

Doctors' emphatic claims that they fully understood the workings of hypnosis expressed social progress in the Marxist sense in a further respect, that of religion. Religious miracles, so the argument went, represented nothing else than hypnotic cures. By exposing religious events as scientifically explicable phenomena, doctors strove to undermine the authority of belief. In 1925, Bekhterev, for example, wrote that "in Biblical times, the possessed were healed everywhere." These are cases "which science now recognizes as hysterical psychoses" and which it would cure with hypnosis.⁵⁵ Hypnosis not only explained stories in the gospels, it also provided the clue to medieval and modern visions of Mary or the Holy Cross and to the ecstatic behaviour of Old Believers and other sectarians.⁵⁶ Hypnosis was thus not only a technique which could rid Soviet citizens of paralysis, sadness and bourgeois leftovers like alcoholism; it also provided a rational explanation for religious emotions and alleged miracles.

That early-Soviet descriptions of hypnosis made use of materialist explanations will not come to anyone as a surprise. That occult notions also found their way into Bekhterev's laboratories and those of his colleagues might be a little less expected, however. In an article about the many uses of hypnosis and autosuggestion, Bekhterev echoed pre-revolutionary occult practices for the strengthening of one's will-power. Bekhterev recommended repeating resolutions regularly, such as "from now on, I have freed myself from my [harmful] habits." This should be done in bed, just before going to sleep and immediately after waking in the

names. So we'll have make do with this].

⁵⁵ V. M. Bekhterev, "Vnushenie i chudesnye istseleniia," *Vestnik znaniia*, 5 (1925): 322-31.

⁵⁶ V. M. Bekhterev, "Vzaimnovnushenie v soobshchestve liudei i kollektivnye galliutsinatsii," *Vestnik znaniia*, 6 (1926): 361-66.

mornings.⁵⁷ These techniques mirror religious practices like prayers, and quote pre-revolutionary courses on how to hypnotize almost literally.⁵⁸ Bekhterev himself was aware of this. He noted that “autosuggestion has so far not received much attention from doctors. In the past it has either served moral aims (the attainment of Nirvana in the East) or, in the hands of healers, the strengthening of the will along the formula ‘the power is within ourselves’.”⁵⁹

Early-Soviet scientific approaches to hypnosis also echoed earlier occult ideas when it came to the application of the technique. By proposing to heal Soviet citizens both from physical and psychological ailments, hypnosis became a tool in the creation of the New Soviet Man. As professor Birchevskii wrote in *Vestnik znaniia*, neurology and hypnosis were part of “contemporary eugenics – i.e. the science of the improvement of man’s nature.” According to him, this science would “strive towards the inner perfection [of man] and his emotional functions.”⁶⁰ Birchevskii had prominent support for this view. In *Literature and Revolution*, a work written in 1922-23 and published in 1924, the Bolshevik leader Lev Trotsky described the “psycho-physical self-education” required in the process of creating the new Soviet man in a manner that is strongly reminiscent of pre-revolutionary occult

⁵⁷ Bekhterev, “Samovnušenie i kueizm, kak istseliaiushchii faktor,” 1123.

⁵⁸ Compare, for example, Segno, *Zakon mentalizma*.

⁵⁹ Bekhterev, “Samovnušenie i kueizm,” 1126. The formula was a direct quotation from the many occult publications on hypnosis that appeared in *fin-de-siècle* Russia, for example Shiller-Shkol’nik’s *Novyi kurs gipnotizma: Nasha sila vnutri nas* [publication information? Fully quoted in footnote 6].

⁶⁰ I. Prof. Birchevskii, “Nauchnoe dal’novidenie i, tak naz., ‘iasnovidenie’,” *Vestnik znaniia*, 23 (1927): 1409-14. According to Bekhterev, hypnosis could improve the rational abilities of man. V. M. Akad. Bekhterev, “Perspektivy refleksologii cheloveka,” *Vestnik znaniia*, 6 (1927): 323-26.

instructions of self-perfection through meditative practice and hypnosis. The new man, Trotsky wrote, “will try to master first the semi-conscious and then the subconscious processes in his own organism, such as breathing, the circulation of the blood, digestion, reproduction, and within necessary limits, he will try to subordinate them to the control of reason and will.” Eventually, these exercises would allow him to conquer the “nature of man himself [...] hidden in the deepest and darkest corner of the unconscious, of the elemental, of the sub-soil.”⁶¹ Trotsky’s work, in which he lambasted the mysticism of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, simultaneously smoothly translated pre-revolutionary occult programs into a Soviet plan of action.⁶²

Throughout the revolutionary period, hypnosis remained a practice that raised difficult questions about its scientific workings and about why some men held power over others. Before the war, hypnosis held out the promise that the opportunities for social change could be enjoyed by ordinary people. When seminal political events followed in quick succession, hypnosis gained traction because it seemed to explain what was going on at court, at the frontline, and why society was becoming so polarized along ideological lines. In short, hypnosis seemed to provide the answer to the disconcerting question of why traditional authorities were being toppled by new ones, whose source of power remained (in the eyes of some) in need of explanation.

In the sphere of science, hypnosis challenged neurologists throughout the period to come up with models of the brain that could explain the functioning of suggesting. In many ways, this was more difficult before the revolution than afterwards, since from 1900 until

⁶¹ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), 255.

⁶² On Trotsky’s criticism of intelligentsia mysticism see *ibid.*, 21-23.

1917, esoteric free-thinkers enthusiastically published accounts in which they claimed hypnosis for themselves and creatively adapted explanations advanced by academics. They thereby challenged doctors' understanding of science and academics' view about who was allowed to make use of its insights. These voices, which tried to advance a worldview that had not received the academic seal of approval and was not securely based on materialistic assumptions were silenced after 1917. In the mid-1920s, when doctors had firmly established their authority with regard to hypnosis, scientists like Bekhterev could repeat -- mantra-like and without fear of remonstrance -- the assertion that neurologists had found a way of dealing with hypnosis scientifically, even when the explanations they offered remained sketchy. At the same time, and with their rivals silenced, Bekhterev and his colleagues were now freer to take up occult notions themselves and incorporate them into their experiments and theories. This fact bestows Soviet neurologist with a considerable open-mindedness in their scientific research, an open-mindedness which is easily overlooked in light of the Marxist language doctors employed and which included vehement rejections of religion, unwavering support of scientific materialism, and references to Lenin, the Great October Revolution and the class struggle.⁶³ Yet as Trotsky's vision of the Soviet superman illustrated, even Bolshevik politicians could not entirely escape the allure of "bourgeois mysticism" and one of its favorite obsessions: hypnosis.

⁶³ See, for example, Bekhterev, "Perspektivy refleksologii cheloveka"; A. A. Prof. Sukhov, "Akademik Bekhterev, kak svetoch znaniia i geroi poluvekovogo nauchnogo truda," *Vestnik znaniia*, 6 (1926): 441-42; S. Prof. Gruzenberg, "V. M. Bekhterev na obshchestvennom postu," *Vestnik znaniia*, 6 (1926): 443-46.