

Mysterious knocks, flying potatoes and rebellious servants: Spiritualism and social conflict in late Imperial Russia

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Strange things occurred in the night of 13 December, 1884, in the city of Kazan on the river Volga. As *Volzhskii vestnik* (*The Volga Herald*) reported, unidentifiable raps were heard in the flat rented by the retired officer Florentsov on Srednaia Iamskaia Street. Before the newspaper described what had actually been observed, it made it clear that ‘all descriptions here are true facts, as has been ascertained by a member of our newspaper’s editorial board’. This assertion was deemed necessary because the phenomena were of a kind ‘regarded as “inexplicable”’. On the evening of 13 December:

Mr. Florentsov was just about to go to bed, when a loud rap on his apartment’s ceiling was heard, which caused worry even to the neighbours. At about the same time, potatoes and bricks began to fly out of the oven pipe and smashed the kitchen window. On the 14th the ‘phenomena’ continued all day long and were accompanied by many comical episodes. About 10 well-known officers came to Mr. Florentsov’s apartment. They put a heavy pole against the oven-door, but the shaft was not strong enough and it soon flew to one side. [After this] potatoes rolled out beneath the furniture, fell from the walls, rained down from the ceiling; sometimes a brick appeared at the scene of action. One officer was hit by a potato on his head, another one on his nose, some were hit by the bullets of this invisible foe at their backs, shoulders and so on. The aide of the district police officer showed up at the battlefield; the flat was thoroughly searched but no explanation could be found. [...] The potato bombardment continued and one of the rank and file received such a severe blow, that he was beaten off his feet by fear. However, the soldiers endured the potato fire and calmly collected the shells eating some of them on the battlefield, thus making the most of the fact that many of them were cooked. [...] On the 15th many Kazaners visited Florentsov’s apartment, quite a few of them spiritualist amateurs or simply fascinated by some kind of devilry or other.²

Volzhskii Vestnik and other newspapers and journals subsequently published follow-up stories of this case, and it emerged that Florentsov’s landlords tried to put an end to the mysterious potato-throwing by holding a public prayer (*moleben*). They came with an icon, holy water, spices and frankincense. But as they were fumigating the apartment, fourteen potatoes fell down from the ceiling. Indeed, the prayer seems to have aggravated the unknown cause even more: the maid Sasha had to evade a knife that was thrown with such force that half of the blade made its way into the kitchen wall. After this incident, Florentsov’s son-in-law

¹ I am grateful to the Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes and the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), whose financial support has made this research possible. I would also like to thank the two anonymous referees for their valuable comments.

² ‘Kartofel’naia kolonada,’ *Volzhskii vestnik*, 16 December 1884: 3.

told the girl to lie down on the [kitchen-] bench and to think as well as to wish for something to fall down and break to pieces. Suddenly and in front of the captain's and the batman's eyes, a tray came down from the wall. Immediately afterwards the girl, too, fell from the bench and regained consciousness only after she hit her head against the table.³

Florentsov and his family soon came to terms with their new situation and made the most of it: they held a séance, inviting their acquaintances, among them the chief of the city police and a police officer. The message from the other world was 'very unclear', but promised the continuation of the baffling manifestations.⁴ Judging from the newspaper *Volzhskii vestnik* and from the spiritualist journal *Rebus*, the spirits kept their promise. Although no further news emerged about Florentsov and his potatoes, before a week had passed, the mysterious events had spread to other apartments in Kazan and to an estate in the Kazan *guberniia*.⁵

Newspaper accounts such as these were very common during the last decades of the Russian empire, a time marked by economic change, social upheaval and cultural transformation. They were in no way restricted to a few geographic areas, but remained a common feature in the pages of elite and low-brow newspapers, illustrated journals and cheap publications until the revolution of 1917. These reports were part of a broader fascination with the supernatural that gripped fin-de-siècle society in Russia as it did in the rest of Europe. In Russia, notions of the occult were considerably influenced by spiritualism, a spiritual practice which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. The fascination with the occult in general and spiritualism in particular is not only mirrored by newspaper accounts about haunted houses, but also by literary or philosophical works of the Silver Age, some of which very overtly incorporated occult notions and on a much broader scale by popular entertainment such as early Russian cinema, popular theatre and circus acts.⁶

Despite its ubiquity, urban occultism and the reception of spiritualism in fin-de-siècle Russia has only recently attracted the attention of historians. Soviet publications on the matter have frequently maintained that the mysterious only fascinated the cultural elites of the tsarist empire, thereby illustrating the intelligentsia's decadence, its otherworldly concerns and its ultimate inability to govern the country. That ordinary Russians or even workers were also intrigued by the occult, did not fit into the ideological framework. This view has crept into many non-Soviet publications as well.⁷ In the last decade, however, several studies have dealt with diverse popular

³ M. B., 'Mediumicheskie iavleniia v Kazani (Korrespondentsiia "Rebusa"),' *Rebus*, 1885 4: 30. In this account, the name of the affected is given as Florenskii instead of Florentsov.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ 'Chto za chertovshchina?' *Volzhskii vestnik*, 21 December 1884: 2; Nik. Ivanov, 'Mediumicheskie iavleniia (pis'mo iz Kazani),' *Rebus*, 1885 4: 16; 'Novye mediumicheskie iavleniia v Kazani,' *Rebus*, 1885, 4, p. 48; 'Novoe proiavlenie mediumicheskoi siloi v Kazani,' *Rebus*, 1885 4: 203; M. Sukhanov, 'Mediumicheskie iavleniia,' *Rebus*, 1885 4: 59; 'Vnimanie "Rebusa" i vsekh spiritov,' *Volzhskii vestnik*, 2 March 1885, p. 2; 'Kratkie zametki,' *Rebus* 1885 4: 115.

⁶ For the occult in Silver Age literature see for example V. E. Aleksandrov, 'Unicorn impaling a knight: the transcendent and man in Bely's Petersburg,' *Canadian-American Slavonic Studies*, 16, 1982: 1-44; David M. Bethea, 'Aspects of the apocalyptic plot in the age of Symbolism: Blok, Bely and the poetics of revelation,' in *Christianity and the Eastern Slavs: Russian Literature in Modern Times*, ed. Boris Gasparov, Berkeley 1995; Bogomolov, Nikolai Alekseevich. *Russkaia literatura nachala XX veka i okkul'tizm: Issledovaniia i materialy*, Moscow 1999; Magnus Ljunggren, *The Russian Mephisto: A Study of the Life and Works of Emilii Medtner*, Stockholm 1994

⁷ See for example Beer, Daniel. 'The Medicalization of Religious Deviance in the Russian Orthodox Church (1880-1905),' *Kritika*. 5, 3, 2004: 451-82 (p. 479).

aspects of supernatural practice in imperial Russia's urban centres, while others have focused on the folkloric traditions of the rural population. Maria Carlson's study on the theosophical movement, for example, examines the history and cultural significance of Helena Blavatskaia's teachings, while Faith Wigzell's book on fortune-telling traces traditional influences on divinatory and printing practices. Christine D. Worobec's work on demon possession focuses on the peasantry.⁸ Other publications have been concerned with stock-taking of the many occult practices. The volume edited by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal on the occult in Russian and Soviet culture thus presents essays that address the issue from a broad range of perspectives and provide a general overview. Last but not least, W.F. Ryan's seminal and encyclopaedic study on magic in Russian history is a treasure trove for those eager to learn about the myriad facets of magical practices and beliefs.⁹

The popular fascination with the occult can reveal a lot about pre-revolutionary urban Russia. Historians of Russia have long analysed the late imperial period in the light of social antagonism and economic development. We know about the political conclusions that contemporaries drew from the cultural changes and social upheavals that they experienced. But the other cultural and spiritual implications that these transformations had for Russians at the turn of the century have been neglected for a long time. In the past decade, cultural history has addressed some of these issues. More recently, enquiries into consumerism have analysed attitudes towards the self, national identity, society and culture from new perspectives.¹⁰ Finally, a few publications have drawn our attention to questions of belief and religion.¹¹ My work is indebted to these studies for initiating new thinking about the old empire. In the picture that emerges from an inquiry into the fascination with the occult, social antagonism, although still present, shifts from the public to the private, from open demands for emancipation to covert defiance with supernatural support, while at the same time common ground appears on which members of different social backgrounds could assemble. Late imperial society emerges highly complicated and ambivalent, extremely contradictory and less clear-cut.

Among the groups that addressed supernatural and mystical matters in late imperial Russia, spiritualists were culturally the most influential. The movement was originally born in 1848 in the United States, in a climate of spiritual and political crisis and religious quest.¹² It soon spread to Western Europe, especially to Britain from where it

⁸ Maria Carlson, *'No Religion Higher than Truth': A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia 1875-1922*, Princeton 1993; Christine D. Worobec, *Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia*, DeKalb, IL 2001; Faith Wigzell, *Reading Russian Fortunes: Print Culture, Gender and Divination in Russia from 1765*, Cambridge 1998.

⁹ Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (ed.), *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, Ithaca, NY, and London, 1997; W.F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia*, Stroud 1999.

¹⁰ See for example Joan Neuberger, *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900-1914*, Berkeley and London 1993; Stephen P. Frank and Mark D. Steinberg (eds.), *Cultures in flux: lower-class values, practices, and resistance in late imperial Russia*, Princeton 1994; Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia*, 2 ed. Ithaca 1996; Louise McReynolds, *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era*, Ithaca and London 2003.

¹¹ See for example Laura Engelstein, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale*, Ithaca and London 1999; Heather J. Coleman, 'Becoming a Russian Baptist: Conversion Narratives and Social Experience,' *The Russian Review* 61 2002: 94-112.

¹² Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, Bloomington 1997. On spiritualism see Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*, Cambridge 1985; Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850-1910*,

reached Russia. After a slow start but a few high-flown scandals in tsarist society, it gained notoriety and a considerable following in the mid-1870s and 1880s. The basic assumption of spiritualism is the belief in man's continuative existence after death as a spirit and the notion that communication between the living and the deceased is possible. This can be achieved through a medium, a person sensitive enough to encourage spirit activity and thus to convey messages. Initial spirit activity is assumed to consist of blows and raps to the walls, ceilings or furniture. Once such phenomena are observed, a code can be agreed between the living and the ghostly visitor and messages can be exchanged. Usually, this involved the holding of a séance. For this purpose, sitters gathered around a table in a darkened room. They held hands, thumbs and little fingers touching, to form a chain of energy believed to assist spirit activity. Often, prayers or psalms were recited or the group engaged in joint singing. Although this did not guarantee supernatural occurrences – in some cases nothing might happen – at other instances, knocks would be heard, messages conveyed or, if one were particularly lucky, a spirit could materialise as a radiant white figure.

This, apart from the materialisation, is what happened in Florentsov's apartment in 1884. Florentsov's case conforms to the general pattern of events in haunted houses: it began with mysterious knocks, which gradually grew louder as the spirits became more assertive. The raps were then supplemented by flying objects, broken glass and smashed dishes. An unsuccessful *moleben* further aggravated the situation and a member of the household was slightly injured, before a séance confirmed the involvement of spirits.

Rumours and gossip, which unfortunately did not survive to be used by historians, newspapers and popular publications were the main means which spread the news of such mysterious events and popularised spiritualist beliefs. In tsarist Russia, elite and low-brow periodicals took up the subject of spiritualism and ensured that it became a prominent part of fin-de-siècle culture. The first publications about ghostly communications appeared in the thick journals that were so influential in turn-of-the-century Russian culture: in particular, articles in *Vestnik Evropy* (*The Herald of Europe*) and *Russkii vestnik* (*The Russian Herald*) initiated debate about mediumistic phenomena.¹³ The subject immediately made it into upper-class newspapers such as *Novosti i birzhevaia gazeta* (*The News and Stock-Exchange Gazette*), *Sanktpeterburgskie vedomosti* (*The Saint Petersburg News*) and *Novoe vremia* (*The New Times*). It was also taken up by provincial publications such as *Volzhskii vestnik* and by newspapers that catered for the needs of low clerks and literate workers, such as *Peterburgskaia gazeta* (*The Petersburg Gazette*), *Peterburgskii listok* (*The Petersburg Flyer*), and *Gazeta kopeika* (*The Kopeck Gazette*).¹⁴ Since 1881, with the

London 1986; Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England*, London 1989; R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*, New York 1977. There is no monograph about spiritualism in Russia, but it is addressed in Maria Carlson, 'Fashionable Occultism: Spiritualism, Theosophy, Freemasonry, and Hermeticism in Fin-de-Siècle Russia,' in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal ed. *The Occult in Soviet and Russian Culture*, Ithaca 1997; Michael D. Gordin, 'Loose and Baggy Spirits: Reading Dostoevskii and Mendeleev,' *Slavic Review* 60 2001:756-780; Michael D. Gordin, *A Well-Ordered Thing: Dmitrii Mendeleev and the Shadow of the Periodic Table*, New York 2004.

¹³ The article that let loose the public debate on spiritualism in Russia was N. P. Vagner, 'Pis'mo k redaktoru: po povodu spiritizma,' *Vestnik Evropy*, 1875, pp. 855-75. It was followed by A.M. Butlerov, 'Mediumicheskie iavleniia,' *Russkii vestnik* 120 1875: 300-48.

¹⁴ On the other organs see for example 'O privedeniakh,' *Novosti i birzhevaia gazeta*, 25 June and 16 July 1902, p. 2, p. 2; G. N., 'Voskresnye negativy: Privedenie v *** departamente,' *Sanktpeterburgskie vedomosti*, 8 (20) May 1888: 2-3; M. Bern, 'Na seanse u spiritov,' *Novoe vremia*, 1 (13) August 1883: 2; V. S. P., 'Pochemu teper' zagovorili o prizrakakh,' *Novoe vremia*, No. 5704, 1892: 2-3; 'Nevedomoe

first appearance of *Rebus*, Russians could subscribe to a journal devoted entirely to spiritualism. Moreover, readers were overwhelmed by a flood of cheap how-to instruction manuals devoted to occult matters: how to become a medium, how to summon a ghost, how to have prophetic dreams, or how to anticipate and predict the future.¹⁵ Although spiritualist notions and other occult traditions were regularly confused in these publications, the general popularity and appeal of such beliefs is beyond doubt.

Despite the large number of accounts about haunted houses, what really happened that December night in Florentsov's apartment cannot be ascertained. However, many reports suggest that these events were taken seriously and seemed plausible to contemporaries. Other accounts are highly ironical and this seems to imply that some journalists and/or readers were amused by alleged hauntings. The frequent appearance of reports about haunted houses, however, indicates that these texts brought up urgent questions.

The séance and social experimentation

Why was spiritualism so appealing to diverse groups that included subscribers of thick journals and readers of kopeck newspapers, ranging from aristocrats, members of the intelligentsia, professionals, and workers to some peasants? There is no single answer to this question; the reasons for the popularity of spiritualism are various and multi-layered. The charm of spiritualism was partly due to the fact that its practices were entertaining and thrilling, but they also offered individualised religious practice outside or alongside the seemingly rigid and authoritarian Orthodox Church. Spiritualism sought rational explanations for transcendental phenomena and thus pledged to straddle the divide between traditional society and modernity. It also provided space for alternative visions of empire. The *dramatis personae* of spiritualism, the spirits, could provide justice where the authorities of this world acted unfairly or arbitrarily. At the same time, spiritualism was highly diverse: no one agreed on what caused the phenomena in darkened rooms and as a consequence these occurrences were open to different interpretations. Spiritualism and especially hauntings also provided space for the expression of social conflict. The reasons for the popularity of séances and associated beliefs were thus both spiritual and religious but also social and political. In this paper, I shall concentrate on the space spiritualism provided for the enacting of social tensions.

Séances not only provided space for individual experience of the transcendent, they also held out the hope of a new society. In spiritualist writings, belief in spirits was equated with civilisation and modernity, while Orthodox anathema, scepticism or the unwillingness to acknowledge spirit activities were linked to conservatism.¹⁶ The hostile treatment of spiritualism by representatives of the state church bestowed the

i neob-iasnimoe v chelovecheskoi zhizni,' *Peterburgskaia gazeta*, 24 December 1900: 3. *Peterburgskii listok* ran a weekly series from 1899 until 1907 entitled "Iz mira tainstvennogo". See also 'Iz mira tainstvennogo: Fotografiia dukha,' *Moskovskaia gazeta kopeika*, 2 August 1910: 4; 'Poslednyi debut artistki M. Ia. Puare,' *Gazeta kopeika*, 22 September 1916: 3.

¹⁵ See for example A. I. Litvinov, *Prakticheskoe rukovodstvo k uznavaniiu chelovecheskoi sud'by s ukazaniem pravil cheniia chuzhikh myslei, byt' schastlivym i liubimim vsemi*, Khar'kov, 1887; *Zerkalo tainnykh nauk ili otrazhenie sud'by cheloveka: Polnyi kurs gipnotizma*, Moscow 1914.

¹⁶ 'Aleksandr Nikolaevich Aksakov,' *Rebus* 22, 1903, pp. 25-7, 45-6; Vagner, 'Pis'mo k redaktoru: po povodu spiritizma. '; V. Pribytkov, 'Vopros o spiritizme v Rossii,' *Rebus*, 19 1900: 126-9, 135-6, 143-4, 151-3, 174-5, 191-2, 200-1, 206-8, 223-5, 230, 237-8, 248-9, 259, 387-8, 393-5, 405-6, 455-6.

movement with a liberal and an almost rebellious character vis-à-vis officialdom. And indeed, séances realised some liberal ideals. For example, they frequently turned tsarist society upside-down. Although mediumistic powers were thought to be bestowed upon members of all social strata, most professional mediums and especially those whose names appeared on the pages of newspapers and journals, were from the disadvantaged groups of society: they were women, members of ethnic minorities or representatives of the working classes. Spiritualist investigators, i.e. those who could afford to employ the services of a professional medium, were most frequently members of the aristocracy or of the privileged educated elite. Ordinary Russians, of course, also engaged in spiritualist activities. But in these cases too, mediums were often socially inferior to other séance participants. In the countryside, for example, where patriarchal structures dominated society, mediums were frequently women, young girls or female wards. Séances thus offered a carnivalesque mirror image of the late empire and its social make-up. Socially disadvantaged mediums were in charge of the event. They demanded the room be lit according to their wishes and commanded the sitters to sing, pray or be silent. 'What the séance promised', Alex Owen has observed for the English context, 'was the ritualised violation of cultural norms.'¹⁷ This, too, was the case in Russia. Spirits dishevelled the hair-dos of well-to-do Petersburgers and also frequently hit them. The medium Jan Guzik, a former tanner from the empire's Polish region, offered séances that were both highly popular and especially feared among Petersburgers: sometimes chairs were dragged from beneath affluent sitters, punches were severe and in 1913 one of the attendants was seriously injured. Such physical attacks on representatives of the privileged strata would not have been sanctioned outside the séance room, but within the spiritualist context they were accepted even by those who got a bloody nose from spirit communications.

Despite spiritualism's ability to assemble men and women of different backgrounds around a séance-table, the rituals associated with the movement provided ample room for rebellious acts. This was most conspicuous in the cases of haunted houses, where women servants seemed to be rising against their superiors.

Haunted houses and social conflict

Houses troubled with banging spirits, rapping ghosts and haunting apparitions have a long history in Russia. Russian folklore most frequently attributed strange noises, groans and knockings in the peasant hut to the *domovoi*, the spirit of the house. In the late nineteenth century, however, belief in traditional and folkloric spirits was in decline and this is mirrored in newspaper reports about haunted houses.¹⁸ In urban centres, spiritualism became the fashionable and appropriate framework within which haunted houses were interpreted, while reference to the *domovoi* became regarded as a sign for rural backwardness.¹⁹

¹⁷ Owen, *Darkened Room*, p. 203. See also I. L. Smolenskii, 'Interessnyi iuridicheskii vopros,' *Rebus*, 32, 1913: 5-6; 'O chlenovreditel'nykh seansakh: k zametke g-na Smolenskogo,' *Rebus*, 32, 1913: 5.

¹⁸ On the decline, see Vladimir Dal', *O poveriiax, sueveriiakh i predrassudkakh russkogo narod.*, St. Petersburg, 1996; Linda Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, New York 1992; N. Kh., 'K voprosu o religioznykh vozzreniakh krest'ian Kaluzhskoi gubernii,' *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, 4, 1892: 210-5.

¹⁹ This development also relegated the devil, the explanation favoured by the Orthodox Church, into the background.

What was believed to have caused events in haunted houses and how did newspaper accounts make sense of such phenomena as those reported of Florentsov's apartment?

While neither the *domovoi* nor the devil were regarded as plausible explanations for a haunted house by urban observers, the presence of a female servant provided a first suspect for future investigations. As we have seen, Florentsov's son-in-law suspected the servant Sasha of having some special relation to the cause of their troubles (he had her lie on the bench to see whether she could provoke some of the inexplicable phenomena). The reporter of the Kazan case was also able to establish that 'she was a very nervous and sensitive person, liable to suffer from hallucinations.'²⁰

Other accounts were much more explicit in placing sole responsibility for the sudden blows and raps on the newly hired *niania* (nursemaid). In a case from St. Petersburg region, the peasant Feodos'ia Spiridonova was eager to inform a journalist that they had taken on 'the 11- or 12-year-old Mariia Semenova, a peasant girl from the village of Berezniaki to serve as *niania*. About a week later the events started: blows to the windows, which originated apparently from inside the frames.'²¹ The Spiridonovs followed their neighbours' advice and placed an icon against the windows, but the holy picture was soon thrown to the floor. Events took on a more threatening turn when knives began to move by themselves; one of the knives even drove itself into the wooden floor. Wherever Mariia was, some supernatural event was bound to take place:

When, for example, she approached the oven [...] all the utensils [near it] began to move and fall over. Logs that lay on the oven fell to the ground without any obvious reason and in one instance a loose brick was thrown from the top of the oven at the girl. [...] When the girl sat on a bed, the bed began to move beneath her, and when she sat on a bench, an unknown force tried to lift the bench. The bench shook and knocks were heard inside it.²²

The Spiridonovs asked the local priest to hold a prayer and an exorcism but when these failed to end the disturbances, they saw no other option than to dismiss Mariia. All supernatural events ceased after she left.²³

These reports and many more shared the assumption that if inexplicable or supernatural events occurred in someone's living quarters, a female domestic servant was a plausible suspect. This is not to say that female servants were openly suspected of fraud or of witchcraft. Instead loosely defined and rarely voiced mediumistic abilities of the housemaid in question were considered a potential cause of supernatural events. In short, maids were frequently suspected of being mediums and thus of facilitating spirit activity. How the maids themselves might have explained these events was irrelevant to the newspaper reporters. In their accounts, the female servants were clearly seen as the prerequisite, without whose presence none of the mysterious phenomena would have occurred. After inexplicable phenomena were recorded, a maidservant was brought into direct relation with them. Journalists usually mentioned that she suffered from a nervous illness. It was upon the departure of the maidservant that the inexplicable phenomena suddenly ceased.

²⁰ B., 'Mediumicheskie iavleniia v Kazani (Korrespondentsiia 'Rebusa'),' : 30.

²¹ Bar. A. Pritvits, 'Samoproizvol'nye mediumicheskie iavleniia v derevne Iugantovo Luzhskoi volosti, Iamburskogo uezda, S.-Peterburgskoi gubernii,' *Rebus*, 15 1896: 88-9.

²² Ibid. 88-9.

²³ Ibid.

The prominent role of servants is one peculiarity of Russian hauntings. Although there were reports of haunted houses in late nineteenth-century Britain as well, these were of a very different quality. British ghosts were far less violent than their Russian counterparts. They usually appeared to the landlord and his family as shady figures, but neither did they break dishes nor did they physically harm members of the household. Moreover, in Victorian Britain, servants were not seen as having any special relation to the unusual phenomena. Instead, suicides or 'terrible crimes' were thought to be their source.²⁴

The Russian cases raise several questions. What role was attributed to gender in these hauntings and in the tsarist empire more broadly? After all, servants with suspected mediumistic abilities were inevitably female. What was the status of maidservants in the late tsarist household? How can these events be interpreted as a social phenomenon? What is the importance of servants' hysterical disposition?

The women question (*zhenskii vopros*) had concerned Russian intellectuals since the era of the Great Reforms in the 1860s and 1870s.²⁵ After the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, patriarchy and the subjugation of women were regarded as a leftover of serfdom, and wives and daughters, especially of the lower classes, became symbols of this oppressive system.²⁶

Servants epitomised the downtrodden lower-class woman for many observers in fin-de-siècle Russia. The exemplary domestic servant was characterised by her unobtrusiveness, submissiveness and her devotion. In the post-reform years, domestic service became predominantly female: preference was given to women, because they were the more easily governable and physically controllable.²⁷ Observers agreed that the conditions of domestic service were extremely harsh. Maids led the most degrading life of all working women. They were totally subjugated to their employers and often experienced sexual abuse by their masters. Female servants 'were permitted neither visitors, including legal husbands, nor holidays.'²⁸

Despite or because of the strenuous life of their maids, employers increasingly saw the lower stratum in general and domestic servants in particular, as a latent but constant threat. Historical research has shown how discourses on thieving servants, uncontrollable hooligans and sexually immoral paupers both mirrored and fed these fears.²⁹ The spectre of the maid who governed the country haunted well-to-do Petersburgers and found its way into satirical drawings.

²⁴ W. F. Barrett et al., 'First Report of the Committee on Haunted Houses,' *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, I, 1883, pp. 101-5; R. C. Morton, 'Record of a Haunted House,' *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* VIII, 1892: 311-32.

²⁵ On the women question, see Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*, Princeton 1978; Linda Harriet Edmondson, *Feminism in Russia, 1900-1917*, London 1984; Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Christine D. Worobec (eds.), *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, Berkeley and Oxford 1991.

²⁶ Christine D. Worobec, *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period*, Princeton 1991.

²⁷ Angela Rustemeyer, *Dienstboten in Petersburg und Moskau 1861-1917: Hintergrund, Alltag, Soziale Rolle*, Stuttgart 1996: 94.

²⁸ L. N. Lenskaia, *O prisluge*, Moscow 1908:11. Cited in Rose L. Glickman, *Russian Factory Women: Workplace and Society, 1880-1914*, 2 ed., Berkeley and London 1986: 62.

²⁹ Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness*; Neuberger, *Hooliganism*; Rustemeyer, *Dienstboten*.

Figure 1³⁰



The image of the wayward and sexually permissive lower-class woman, moreover, echoed older traditions of Russian culture. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rural communities, women believed to be in contact with demons or to be witches were usually widows, wives of soldiers or, in the nineteenth century, wives of migrant workers, i.e. women whose spouses were absent. Similarly, in fin-de-siècle Russia, *klikushество* (demon possession) was explained with sexual frustration.³¹ Maidservants in cities suspected of causing supernatural phenomena had much in common with rural witches or *klikushi*. They were outsiders and they lacked male companionship. This did not prevent young women from becoming a potentially disruptive element within the household. In the 1880s, sexual relations between employers and servants were a common topic in Russian literature.³² Female servants were thus associated with issues of sexuality.³³ The uneasiness with regard to migrant

³⁰ The drawing is entitled 'What the job agency will soon turn into'. The central sign in the picture reads 'City bureau for the selection of "mistresses"'. On the table lies *the Directory of Mistresses in St. Petersburg*. The employers hand reference letters (*attestaty*) to the servants. 'Na zlobu dnia: Vo chto skoro prevratitsia "biuro dlia naima prislugi"; *Peterburgskaia gazeta: Illiustrirovannoe prilozhenie*, 14 December 1900: 409.

³¹ Worobec, *Possessed*: 94, 170-1.

³² Rustemeyer, *Dienstboten*: 144.

³³ On upper class anxieties regarding lower-class girls and their sexuality in fin-de-siècle Russia, see Laurie Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters: Prostitutes and their Regulation in Imperial Russia*, Berkeley and London 1995; Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness*.

women of allegedly loose morals was mirrored in reports about haunted houses. In these reports, the girls that allegedly caused supernatural phenomena were always young, from a lower-class background and caused havoc in the houses of their respectable employers.³⁴

Well-to-do Russians, however, also feared that domestics would become thieves, and stories of servants who – in some cases successfully – plotted to assassinate their employers also tormented the country's elites.³⁵ The prominent role of knives in these accounts needs to be viewed in the context of such fears.

Employers' fears about dangerous servants are illustrated by stories of haunted houses which sometimes echoed criminal cases. Mysterious raps were thus associated with crime and rebellion. In a prominent court case from 1870, the civil servant Gorodetskii and his wife sued their former cook Marfa Zakharova. The Gorodetskii's had been out on Christmas Eve. When they returned home, they found their youngest child maltreated and severely injured.³⁶ In 1892, a newspaper report in *Novoe vremia* resembled Gorodetskii's case to an astonishing degree. On New Year's Eve, Professor L. and his wife returned home from a party to find their servants upset, the furniture in the living room smashed to pieces and their little daughter slightly injured. According to one servant's account, she was feeding the little girl when suddenly a supernatural power broke the lamp, shattered the furniture and suspended the daughter in the air.³⁷

Suspecting servants of causing blows to walls and raps on window frames can thus be seen as an expression of the anxiety about lower-class rebelliousness. This was such a common fear that it was not only employers who suspected their servants of causing mischief with the help of supernatural powers. Similar suspicions were also often voiced by outsiders such as policemen, reporters and curious visitors.

However, a Russian maid who allegedly caused supernatural events in her master's apartment was far from practising open mutiny. Her rebellion took place within the cultural context that was restricted both by the prevalent notions of spiritualist belief and by fin-de-siècle notions about female illness and nervous disorder. The hysterical illness from which these servants allegedly suffered played an important part in haunted houses.

Fin-de-siècle culture throughout Europe and beyond was obsessed with uncovering the secrets of the mind and bringing hidden wishes and desires to light. It was the 'golden age of hysteria'.³⁸ Numerous investigations into the power of the mind were conducted and fostered an increased interest in hysteria, hypnosis and, of course, such psychic phenomena as spirit communication and telepathy. Hysteria and mediumistic abilities were closely linked in that hysteria was regarded as an essential predisposition for developing abilities that would enable communication with the spirits of the departed. Like mediums, hysterics were thought to possess heightened sensory abilities, hyperaesthesia, which facilitated thought-reading, telepathy, spirit communication and prophecy. Hauntings often coincided with altered states of mind among servants of the afflicted house. Sasha in Kazan for example lost consciousness when the mysterious events unfolded around her. Similarly, Pelageia Arbutova, a maid in St. Petersburg, suffered from fits and fell into a trance-like state when the spirit of her deceased master allegedly smashed dishes and 'the heavy dining table

³⁴ As Alex Owen has observed, trance mediumship oozed sexuality. The same was true for spiritualist practices in Russia. Owen, *Darkened Room*: 218; Bogomolov, *Russkaia literature*: 284.

³⁵ Rustemeyer, *Dienstboten*.: 50-2.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 142.

³⁷ Peterburzhets, 'S nekotorykh por,' *Novoe vremia*, 15 January 1892: 3.

³⁸ Mark S. Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and its Interpretations*, Princeton, 1995: 15.

turned around and around with ease.’³⁹ So common was the assumption that women, who suffered from nervous illnesses were the cause of supernatural events that the author of one article commented with bewilderment that the maidservant in question did not seem to suffer from any nervous conditions and was apparently healthy.⁴⁰

Hysteria has been interpreted as an expression of cultural crisis, as an instance in which the desires, aspirations and ailments of a whole society are brought into the foreground.⁴¹ This claim, if accepted, can illuminate the cases of haunted houses, which so fascinated readers in late tsarist Russia. These newspaper reports imply that when a maid entered the trance like state of mind, her innermost characteristics were brought into the open: rebellious acts were carried out and the downtrodden servant suddenly stood at centre stage. These cases are reflections of wide-spread fears and changing social values.

At the same time, however, servants with mediumistic powers did not bear responsibility for the threatening phenomena they allegedly incited. They were part of a cultural performance, which granted servants a restricted space for acts of rebelliousness but without threatening accountability.⁴²

Maidservants, permitted to protest solely under the influence of supernatural guidance, were thus – unlike male strike-protestors – deprived of autonomous agency. They acted only through and within a cultural pattern of hysteria and mediumistic phenomena, which removed accountability. This corresponded to the prevalent notion that lower-class women were, unlike their socially and politically conscious and skilled brothers or husbands, not outspoken but ‘backward’.⁴³ Like *klikushi*, peasant women believed to be possessed by demons, maidservants in haunted houses symbolised the ‘out-of-control women.’ Their condition was the ‘female form of hooliganism’.⁴⁴ In contrast, to regard a man as the possible cause of supernatural events seemed totally implausible. Preternatural events in apartments and houses usually originated in what was generally regarded as female space: the kitchen. Kitchens and ovens figured most prominently in haunted houses. As another affected landlady put it, the supernatural events took place ‘only in the kitchen, under the roof and in the bathhouse. We have never noticed anything of this kind in the master’s cabinet.’⁴⁵

The relationship of maids with the supernatural powers remained as unclear as that of *klikushi* with demons: both groups were neither clearly active nor obviously passive, neither good nor evil, neither innocent nor evidently guilty.

The Russian fascination with the supernatural at the turn of the century thus incorporated aspects of traditional rural culture, but adapted these to current fashions and to the urban setting in which they expressed contemporary anxieties.

³⁹ Vas. B., ‘Nepokoinye doma v Peterburge i Moskve,’ *Rebus*, 27, 1908: 7-8.

⁴⁰ V. Khlopitskii, ‘Samoproizvol’nye mediumicheskie iavleniia v Varshave,’ *Rebus*, 16, 1897: 335. P. Ch., ‘O Vladikavkazskom mediume,’ *Rebus*, 23, 1904,: 1-2.

⁴¹ Elisabeth Bronfen, ‘Die Vorführung der Hysterie,’ in Aleida Assmann and Heidrun Friese (eds.), *Identitäten: Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität 3*, Frankfurt/Main, 1999: 243.

⁴² On spirit possession, see Worobec, *Possessed*. On the cultural significance of narrative patterns see Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in 16th-Century France*, Stanford 1987; Mannherz, Julia. ‘Geistererscheinungen und ihre Zeugen: Geschichtenerzählen zwischen Positivismus und Spiritismus im ausgehenden Zarenreich.’ *WerkstattGeschichte*, 1, 2007: 79-93.

⁴³ Glickman, *Factory Women*.

⁴⁴ Worobec, *Possessed*, pp. xii, 186.

⁴⁵ ‘Nepokoinyi Dom: Pis’ma iz Lanshevskogo uezda,’ *Rebus* 18, 1899: 279-80, 289-90, 296-7, 303-4, 297.

However, it is important to remember that most of the news on haunted houses was published in the popular press and therefore met the demands of a wide readership. The alleged supernatural involvement in these 'real' reports reached a readership that wished to be thrilled and entertained. Masters and mistresses of servants might have found their fears about unruly maids expressed in these reports, a literary technique that until today is a potent reason for a topic's appeal. These reports, however, were not only an expression of the anxieties caused by female servants. We can assume that stories about landlords who had become powerless in their own homes were a popular read among those who could not afford to live in a spacious apartment, let alone hire a servant. Apart from providing entertaining stories about knockings, raps and misbehaving kitchen utensils, spirits in these newspaper articles also mocked the authorities of church and state. As we have seen, *molebny* were interrupted by flying objects and carnivalesque acts ridiculed sacred objects such as icons. The soldiers in Kazan were ridiculed by being drawn into a battle with potatoes, while the retired officer Florentsov and his friends from the police corps were unable to assert their authority. Spiritualists might have been interested in these reports because they depicted manifestations of their beliefs. However, it is likely that readers with or without spiritualist convictions simply relished stories in which priests and other representatives of officialdom struggled to assert their authority. This appeal of an unruly element is especially noteworthy in Florentsov's case from Kazan, in which a representative of the military, closely associated with the disliked police, his officer friends, his landlords and the clergyman are depicted as unable to control potatoes.

Rational explanations

Like so many cultural expressions in fin-de-siècle Russia, reports of haunted houses, were subject to change.⁴⁶ From about 1908, science was more frequently invoked when it came to explaining haunted houses. Electricity, which had newly been introduced into the daily lives of city dwellers, served particularly well as an explanation of formerly inexplicable phenomena. The role played by science in newspapers and tabloids was very similar to the role of science in popular literature. Jeffrey Brooks has observed that

science is often invoked when the reader is asked to accept something marvellous and mysterious without the aid of superstitious belief. In this sense, the popular literature might be considered antiscientific, since the use of science is more akin to magic than to logic.⁴⁷

This was especially so in the case of electricity. Electricity and electrification were potent symbols of modernity in fin-de-siècle Russia, but electricity was simultaneously associated with the supernatural.⁴⁸ It is not surprising then, that electricity, which could so successfully combine the scientific with the mysterious, was used to explain haunted houses, often with a rational intention. A fine example of the use of science in newspaper reports published in 1911 can be found in *Volyn*.

⁴⁶ Frank and Steinberg (eds.), *Cultures in flux*.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917*, Princeton, NJ, 1985: 259-60.

⁴⁸ Lionel Declé, *The New Russia*, London, 1906: 161-2. A. Toporkov, 'The devil's candle: how artificial light perturbed turn-of-the-century urban Russia,' *History Today*, 46, 1996: 34-6.

When unusual phenomena occurred in Mr Lysenko's Zhitomir home, the latter suggested the following explanation:

My house is located near the crossing of streetcar [lines]. During the days in question there was, obviously, an extraordinary accumulation of electricity, which ultimately found itself an outlet and because my house is the highest in the neighbourhood, the electricity swooped down on its roof from where its influence spread throughout the house.⁴⁹

However, Mr Lysenko had to acknowledge that neither Mr Beker, the director of the electric power plant, nor the physicist Dr Dumanenskii found his explanation convincing.⁵⁰ Compared to Florentsov's reaction to supernatural phenomena in Kazan some thirty years earlier, Lysenko's approach is indicative of a considerable change in attitude. Florentsov's landlords, it will be recalled, chose the traditional approach of a public prayer, while Florentsov's son-in-law suspected the maid Sasha of possessing mediumistic abilities and Florentsov himself resorted to holding a séance. In contrast, Lysenko preferred what he considered to be a rational and scientific explanation.

What was the reason for the increasing attractiveness of rational explanations for haunted houses at the turn of the century? Jeffrey Brooks has argued that although popular superstitions still flourished in late imperial Russia, the belief in the power of supernatural forces was in decline. Brooks follows Keith Thomas in identifying the crucial factor for the decline of magic and the widespread dissemination of a more scientific approach in the growth of a notion of self-help.⁵¹ Although this is certainly the case, I wish to add another interpretation. Brooks suggests that the appeal of supernatural explanations probably resumed again around 1910, but this is not so in the case of spiritualism.⁵² The attraction of spiritualist explanations markedly decreased after 1905. This claim is corroborated by statements from the editors of the spiritualist journal *Rebus*. Viktor Pribytkov, editor until 1903, perceived a favourable attitude towards the movement among the general readership in the 1890s. Pavel Chistiakov, his successor, however, felt compelled to write a deeply disillusioned editorial in 1910. In this piece, Chistiakov enumerated the many factors that conspired to generate pessimism among the remaining spiritualists. The media had turned against them, financial support was running out and the editorial board was left with heaps of unsold copies of the journal. Followers of the movement bemoaned the fact that by 1912 spiritualist ideas had lost their appeal among the younger generation.⁵³

The reasons for this decline are complex. One of them might be that the fashion of spiritualism had run its course, but there seem to be other, more complex explanations as well. Firstly, the popularity of spiritualism was undermined by the foreign odour of this Western import, not helped by the fact that spiritualism was propagated in Russia

⁴⁹ Quoted in *Rebus* as 'Nepokoinye iavleniia v Zhitomire,' *Rebus*, 30, 1911, pp. 5-6 (p. 6). For similar scientific explanations see V.M. Danilevskii, 'Telepaticheskoe iavlenie,' *Rebus*, 23, 1904: 3-5; B., 'Nepokoinye doma v Peterburge i Moskve.:'; M. F., 'Tainstvennaia sila istseliaushchaia bol'nykh,' *Peterburgskii listok*, 1 July 1911: 3; 'Koloshenskaia chertovshchina,' *Peterburgskii listok*, 14 January 1916: 3.

⁵⁰ 'Nepokoinye iavleniia v Zhitomire,': 6.

⁵¹ Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*: 268. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, ed., Harmondsworth, 1991: 58-89.

⁵² Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*: 267.

⁵³ V. Pribytkov, 'Vopros o spiritizme v Rossii,' *Rebus* 20, 1901: 4-6, 19-21, 30-2, 39-41, 45-7, 53-4, 61-2. 32; 'V. I. Pribytkov,' *Rebus* 29, 1910: 2-3; 'Po puti,' *Rebus* 31, 1912: 2-3.

by men with non-Russian names.⁵⁴ With the war against Japan in 1904/05, the star of spiritualism began to decline and the treatment of haunted houses changed dramatically. Secondly, developments on the labour market had an impact on the interpretation of haunted houses. 'The great strikes of 1905 generated a sense of power and optimism among workers.'⁵⁵ This self-assertiveness lingered on after 1905 and despite the conservative rollback, workers and servants continued to articulate their grievances. Two months after Bloody Sunday in 1905, a union of female domestic servants was founded in Moscow and domestic servants went on strike in the same year.⁵⁶ Although these professional associations were restricted to the larger cities, servants now expressed their dissatisfaction openly. Instead, unconventional and politically ambiguous movements like spiritualism became associated with the privileged and idle elites. In turning aggressively against the upper classes of society, the masses turned against spiritualist notions too. Social unity broke apart, and spiritualism could no longer provide a robust enough common ground for different layers of society to converge upon.⁵⁷ The same media outlets that had previously popularised spiritualism and played a major role in its dissemination, now used reports of occult phenomena to make fun of the gullibility of the rich and expose their 'bourgeois' pastimes as frauds. They did so frequently by referring to electricity as the 'true' cause of seemingly inexplicable events. In the post-1905 climate, haunted houses lost their anti-authoritarian connotations and spiritualism became associated with idle salon entertainment. One account, 'The Enigmatic House', published by *Peterburgskii listok* in 1913 is quite typical of this new treatment of supernatural phenomena. It tells the story of a poor tenant who successfully stages supernatural phenomena in his living quarters in order to get a reduction in rent from a spiritualist landlord.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The shift in attitude towards spiritualism in the post-1905 years provided fertile soil for later misrepresentation of the movement as an essentially elite leisure-time pursuit. The fascination with spirit hauntings, however, was culturally important and had expressed diverse interests in the decades before the great social upheavals at the beginning of the twentieth century. Spiritualism and its attractiveness illustrate the intricacy of fin-de-siècle Russia: it simultaneously displayed the potential to unify and bring together people from the most different backgrounds, and it carved out a space in which social conflicts could be enacted.

⁵⁴ Russia's most famous spiritualists were Aksakov, Butlerov and Vagner. Their names were quite clearly of Tatar, English and German origin.

⁵⁵ Glickman, *Factory Women*, p. 192f.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 243. Rustemeyer, *Dienstbote*: 176-7.

⁵⁷ These findings support Leopold Haimson's observations about the disintegration of social unity in the post-1905 years. Leopold Haimson, 'The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905-1917,' *Slavic Review*, 1964-1965: 1-22, 619-42. This illustrates that the process of alienation from and hostility towards the bourgeoisie, which for the revolutionary year of 1917 has been termed 'Anti-Burzhui Consciousness' dates back at least a decade further. Boris Ivanovich Kolonitskii, 'Antibourgeois Propaganda and Anti-"Burzhui" Consciousness in 1917,' *The Russian Review*, 53, 1994: 183-196.

⁵⁸ Provintsial, 'Tainstvennyi dom (rasskaz),' *Peterburgskii listok*, 2 June 1913: 3. This is not to argue that superstitious belief vanished because of electricity. Beliefs in supernatural influence still existed at this time, spiritualism, however, lost much of its appeal.

From the mid-1870s onwards, spiritualist beliefs and practices appealed to diverse groups and provided a roof under which different people could assemble. Spiritualism offered new visions of society by challenging traditional authorities and by offering social experimentation during the séance. Accounts of 'enigmatic houses' relished descriptions of figures of authority unable to assert their influence at home. At the same time, haunted houses provided space for ritualised drama, for careful disobedience and rebelliousness within the set pattern of hysteria and spirit communication. As ordinary Russians became more and more self-assertive in the years after the revolution of 1905, social unity broke apart and neither the social experimentation of the séance nor the sanctioned carnivalesque challenge of authorities in haunted houses satisfied social discontent. Mysterious phenomena were now explained in ways perceived to be rational and spiritualist notions were ridiculed in the popular press. In the preceding decades, however, spiritualism had aptly illustrated the complexities of Russian society, where weak unifying practices co-existed alongside expressions of social conflict.