

By the shores of white waters: the Altai and its place in the spiritual geopolitics of Nicholas Roerich*

John McCannon

Abstract

The artist Nicholas Roerich, famous for his expeditions (1925–1928 and 1934–1936) to Central Asia and the Himalayas, was deeply fascinated by the Altai Mountains, which he visited in 1926 (even though he had emigrated from Soviet Russia in 1918). His interest in the region had partly to do with his scholarly theories about the origin of Eurasian cultures. Even more important were Roerich's occult beliefs. Ostensibly artistic and academic in nature, Roerich's expeditions were part of a larger effort to create a pan-Buddhist state that was to include southern Siberia, Mongolia, and Tibet. In the Altai, Roerich aimed to locate the legendary land of White Waters (Belovod'e) and build his capital there. Support for this 'Great Plan' came from American followers of Roerich's mystical teachings. In addition, by representing himself to Soviet authorities as someone who might foster anti-British resentment and pro-Russian feelings among the populations of Central Asia and Tibet, Roerich briefly piqued their interest. The Great Plan was never realised, but Roerich continued to believe in the Altai's magical properties.

Keywords: art, espionage, ethnography, Eurasianism, occult mystery, spiritual geopolitics, travel.

During the late summer of 1926, the Russian artist, explorer, and mystic Nicholas Roerich – with his wife Helena and older son Iurii – spent more than a month in the Altai Mountains, as part of his famous 'Roerich Central Asian Art Expedition.'

Department of History, University of Saskatchewan

This journey, which lasted from 1925 to 1928, was a mammoth undertaking which spanned more than 16,000 miles, gained the Roerich family worldwide fame, and embroiled them in enough adventure, occult mystery, and geopolitical scheming to last a lifetime.¹ At first glance, the Altai's place in the Roerich expedition appears quite minor. The Roerichs' itinerary took them in a great circle from northern India through Ladakh, the Karakorum Pass, Chinese Turkestan, southern Siberia (with a side trip to Moscow), Buriatia, Mongolia, the Gobi Desert, and Tibet, then back to India. The Altai, therefore, was only one of dozens of places the family visited. Yet Roerich considered the Altai to be of crucial importance. Indeed, the peaks of the Altai, along with the Himalayas, were at the heart not only of Roerich's artistic vision and his view of Eurasian history and ethnography, but also of his mystical conceptions about the future and his practical plans for that future.

To write about Roerich's travels presents a number of difficulties. To begin with, although the Roerich expedition was, in its own time, well-publicized – it was covered by flagship periodicals in the United States and Europe, it resulted in two moderately famous books (*Heart of Asia* and *Altai-Himalaya*), and it may have been the inspiration for James Hilton's blockbuster novel *Lost Horizon* – many of the narrative details remain clouded. Even more obscure is the full range of Roerich's goals and intentions. Composer Igor Stravinskii, who worked with Roerich on the 1913 masterwork *The Rite of Spring*, famously remarked that the painter looked 'as though he ought to have been a mystic or a spy.'² Roerich was openly and unabashedly the former. Though there is no concrete proof he was the latter, he managed during his travels of the 1920s and 1930s to convince the intelligence services of at least half a dozen countries that he was an agent or political operative of some sort (the very fact that Roerich, an *émigré* who had harshly criticized the Bolshevik regime during the early 1920s, was allowed into the USSR and Soviet-dominated Mongolia in 1926–1927 was, by itself, cause enough for suspicion in the minds of most).

It has been known for quite some time by scholars and journalists that Roerich's travels were motivated by more than the goals he publicly discussed. Roerich claimed that the chief purposes of his expedition were to paint the desert and mountain landscapes of Siberia, Central Asia, and the Himalayas, and to conduct what he referred to as scientific investigations into the legends, religions, and ethnic histories of these same regions. However, it was no secret at the time, and has been common knowledge since, that what Roerich called 'ethnographic' and 'anthropological' research was actually animated by his deep interest in occult theories (most notably those derived from the Theosophical tradition), Eastern mysticism, and a highly eclectic esoteric school of thought that he himself, with his wife, had originated. One of Roerich's principal goals in traveling to the Siberian-Central Asian-Himalayan hinterland was to 'prove' the validity of his most cherished occult beliefs.

That there was a political dimension to Roerich's expedition has likewise never been in doubt, except among the most stalwart of his believers and devotees, many of whom continue to insist that Roerich's journeys were motivated strictly by the purest of artistic, scholarly, and spiritual intentions. However, the exact nature and

full extent of Roerich's ambitions for Siberia, Central Asia, and the Himalayas have never been clear. Until recently, historians and other researchers have most commonly speculated that Roerich was some sort of spy (most likely for the USSR),³ or that he was working in some vague way to oust the British from India, or that he was attempting to intervene in Tibetan religious politics, or that he wished to conquer some part of Siberia or the Himalayas for himself, or some combination of the above. In almost all these cases, the implicit assumption has been that Roerich's artistic work, his interest in Eurasian cultures, even his passion for the occult were secondary to his political goals, masking whatever those might be.

As it happens, Roerich's political intentions were far more complex and grandiose than any of his supporters have, until recently, been willing to admit, and more so than most of the neutral and scholarly observers writing about Roerich have ever realized. Even though hints of Roerich's politically-oriented plans were, over time, discerned or suspected by various writers, only with the opening of Soviet-era archives and the recent publication of various diaries and personal papers left behind by the Roerichs and their closest associates has a clearer picture come into sharper focus. Briefly put, Roerich's ultimate aim – which he and his followers referred to as the 'Great Plan' – was to establish a pan-Buddhist state stretching from Tibet to southern Siberia, including territory that was governed by China, Mongolia, Tibet, and the Soviet Union. This Himalayan theocracy was to be no less than the revived kingdom of Shambhala, and Roerich's intention was none other than to await the coming of a new age of peace and beauty, which would be ushered in by the earthly manifestation of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future.

Aside from its breathtaking scope and fantastic nature, the most striking thing about the Great Plan is the way in which it wed political aspiration with esoteric belief. Roerich believed with absolute sincerity that a great turn of the cosmic wheel was imminent, but he was further convinced that only by his efforts and those of his family could this new age be brought into being. In short, any attempt to understand Roerich's political actions without taking into account his occult convictions (whatever one may think of them) is fruitless or inadequate. In this sense, one can speak, as this article does, of Roerich's 'spiritual geopolitics.' Indeed, this is perhaps the only way one can speak of Roerich's actions.

The Altai – and, more widely, Siberia – was at the core of the Great Plan, an indispensable component of it. The purpose of this essay is to discuss in detail how Roerich painted and perceived the Altai, as well as how he fit the Altai into his grand, sweeping, idiosyncratic vision of humanity's future. The essay will begin with Roerich's theories regarding Siberia and Central Asia as the possible origin of all human cultures. It will move on to the various legends and occult beliefs Roerich associated with the Altai, most notably his interest in the myth of Belovod'e, the 'Land of White Waters.' It will then outline the central role the Altai was to play in Roerich's 'Great Plan'. Finally, this essay will conclude with an epilogue describing the failed outcome of the Roerich expedition, as well as its long aftermath.

The untouched treasure: Roerich and Siberian ethnogenesis

Having secured permission in April 1926 to enter the Soviet Union (a controversial matter discussed at greater length below), the Roerichs traveled from Urumchi (Ürümqi), in Chinese Turkestan, to Moscow, reaching the capital in June. After reunions with former colleagues and consultations with various authorities, including the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the OGPU, or secret police (also discussed below), the party resumed its eastward journey. On June 22, the Roerichs left Moscow for the Altai, via Omsk and Novonikolaevsk (Novosibirsk), then along the Ob' River to Barnaul, gateway to the Altai region, which they reached on July 28. During their time in the area, the Roerichs visited Biisk, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Ulala (Gorno-Altai), and Verkhni Uimon, where, for reasons discussed below, the expedition spent two weeks conducting geological surveys. The Roerichs also paid their respects to the range's principal peak, the great mount of Belukha, regarded as sacred by the native population.

Of the many theories Roerich held about Siberia in general and the Altai in particular, the longest-standing was his vision of Siberia as the possible origin of human culture. Between his days as a student in the 1890s and the time Roerich reached the Altai in 1926, his thinking on this matter had evolved considerably. In particular, his theories became blended with a variety of speculations and occult admixtures that were less than scholarly in nature. However, early on, Roerich's ideas regarding the birth of Stone Age cultures and the migration of Eurasian peoples had grown out of anthropological and ethnological research that was respected in its own day – even if many of the conclusions based on that research have, by now, been modified or discarded.

It was during the 1890s, while a student at the Imperial Academy of Arts (and, at the same time, St Petersburg University), that Roerich first began to concentrate his thought on the question of ethnogenesis. One of his early mentors was the critic and scholar Vladimir Stasov, most famous for championing the works of composers such as Mussorgsky and the 'Mighty Handful' and painters such as the 'Wanderers', but also known for his theories about the influence of Indian and Iranic poetry and art on ancient Russian culture. Moreover, Stasov introduced the young student to the eminent philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev, whose ideas about the diffusion of language, religion, and culture throughout Eurasia were similar to Stasov's. Under Stasov's and, to a lesser degree, Solov'ev's, influence, Roerich read as much about India as he could and delved deeply into the works of ethnographers and explorers conducting research in Central Asia and southern Siberia – including Grigorii Potanin, the famed explorer Nikolai Przhevalskii, and Nikolai Korkunov (Roerich's uncle, and one of his history professors at St Petersburg University). Added to this during the 1900s and 1910s was Roerich's own work in the field of archaeology – a discipline he pursued in an almost professional capacity and in which he gained a fair degree of renown.⁴

On one hand, then, Roerich's interest in the Altai dovetailed with scholarly theories about the origins of humanity that were perfectly consistent with the state of anthropological and ethnographic understanding in his own time. Roerich accepted the prevailing view that Indo-Iranic languages, customs, art, and religious beliefs had spread westward from South and Central Asia in a gradual process of diffusion. He was also intrigued by the role that non-Indo-European cultures had played during centuries, even millennia, of cultural interaction and interchange throughout Eurasia – especially his native Russia. What of the various Turkic tribes and Mongol peoples whose impact on Russian development was evident in so many ways? What of the Scythians, whose territorial sway had extended from Siberia to the Black Sea? What of the Finns, Zyrians (Komi), Estonians, and Magyars, whose long histories had transplanted them from their ancestral homes in Asia to the eastern borderlands of Europe? Most famously, what of the conquering Mongols, or Tatars, of Genghis Khan? Linguistic and ethnographic research dating from the nineteenth century and earlier had proven that the original homelands of these peoples were located throughout the steppes and mountains of Central Asia and Mongolia. In particular, the Altai was pinpointed as the fount and origin of, among others, the Finno-Ugric ethnic-linguistic group, which gave birth to the modern Finns, Estonians, and Hungarians. Roerich himself wrote that “The Altai played a most important part in the migration of nations. . . . From the prehistoric and historic point of view, the Altai is an untouched treasure.”⁵

As time passed, and as Roerich became increasingly engrossed in his artistic and scholarly studies of the Stone Age – and, just as important, in occult mysticism and Eastern esoterica – his thinking about Central Asia's and Siberia's role in early human history became more expansive and, ultimately, fanciful. To a certain extent, Roerich's ideas remained within the scholarly mainstream. It was undeniable that Central Asia and southern Siberia – the Altai included – had given birth to a variety of ethnicities and that, furthermore, it had acted for hundreds of years as a great cauldron of cultural interaction, literally seething with various forms of mutual religious, linguistic, folkloric, and artistic influence. With regard to even deeper roots, many of the finest minds in the field of paleontology, among them Roy Chapman Andrews and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, remained open to the possibility, based on the fossil record, that Central Asia or Mongolia might have been the birthplace of the human species itself.

However, Roerich's understanding of ethnic development and cultural diffusion was, by the 1910s and 1920s, becoming steadily intertwined with his occultist outlook. Once renowned as a scrupulously accurate painter of Slavic primevalism and northern prehistory, Roerich was, already before 1910, beginning to subordinate his previous outlook – which, if not wholly academic *per se*, was at least anchored partly in the academic – to his mystical agenda. Major works such as *Battle in the Heavens* (two versions, 1909 and 1912), *Human Forefathers* (1911), his designs for *The Rite of Spring* (1910–12, premiered 1913), even his wildly popular sets and costumes for *Prince Igor* (1909), are all

associated, to one degree or another, with a key transition in Roerich's career: his shift from an artistic outlook grounded in geographic and historical specificity to one oriented more toward metaphorical generality and the quest to uncover in his painting a metaphysical otherworld of truth and beauty.⁶ Roerich now began to conceive of the Stone Age as a time when a single, universal proto-culture – nothing less than an *ur*-culture for all of humanity – spanned the globe, existing in harmony with its natural environment, attuned to the forces of spiritual purity around it.

In a figurative sense, this was an artistically useful, even appealing, notion, not unlike conceptions of ancient civilizations and the divine that many of Russia's Symbolist poets and writers, such as Konstantin Bal'mont, Valerii Briusov, Andrei Belyi, Sergei Gorodetskii, and Viacheslav Ivanov, pondered during the same years. Not only did Roerich give shape to these ideas in his painted work, he gave voice to them in his poetry (especially the Theosophically-inspired cycle entitled *Flowers of Morya*) and prose. Perhaps his most eloquent written statement on the topic is his essay 'Joy in Art' (1909), published in the influential journal *Vestnik Evropy* (*Herald of Europe*).⁷ The entire piece is a rhapsody dedicated to the idyllic, magical, spiritually-charged existence of neolithic tribes, who lived in a time when, to use the words of the poet Ivanov, 'every form of life was sacred and . . . everything was full of gods.'⁸

In 'Joy in Art,' however, as in countless other writings, Roerich tried to force this conceptualization on to the actual historical record. His analysis of linguistic diffusion, artistic interchange, and the pattern of ancient migrations was not only highly selective, it brushed aside the specific and the particular in favor of the broad and sweeping. Since a single *ur*-culture pervaded the entire Stone Age world, wide-ranging conclusions about artifacts, myths, and cultural practices could, in Roerich's view, apply equally well to the ancient Mayans as they could to prehistoric Balts or paleolithic Chinese. In his attempt to emphasize the common and the universal, Roerich, once an archaeologist and folklorist of painstaking exactitude, now flattened differences, erased distinctions, and made more out of surface similarities between widely-divergent or long-separated cultures than was warranted. In a way that was quite common in the *popular* anthropological-ethnographic thinking of the day (and remains so even in the present), Roerich pointed out the 'striking' likenesses between, or 'virtually identical' natures of, for example, the Himalayan peoples (especially Tibetans) he encountered on his expeditions and the 'Red Indians' he had met during his travels in the American Southwest.⁹ The fact that one of the recorded names for ancient Tibet was 'Gota' led Roerich to speculate that the Himalayas were the original homeland of the Goths (a theory that also attracted German scholars and amateurs, including occult-minded Nazis like Heinrich Himmler).¹⁰ The widespread use of the swastika as a sun-sign intrigued Roerich, and he drew similarly broad conclusions about fire symbols, leading him to conflate Tibetan Bon-Po, Celtic Druidism, and Zoroastrian ritual.¹¹

Certainly Roerich was not alone – even among more orthodox researchers – in interpreting the fact that Eurasian cultures indeed influenced each other in a

myriad of ways over the long course of centuries in such a manner as to regard as established truth certain connections, links, likenesses, and cause-and-effect relationships that, upon closer examination, do not hold up, or, at the least, are not as strong or meaningful as they might first appear. However, Roerich also added to his somewhat fast-and-loose anthropological-ethnographic speculations a large measure of occult detritus (he was hardly alone in this, but it moved him farther outside the scholarly mainstream). As discussed in greater detail below, Roerich was concerned above all with searching in the Himalayas and the Altai for the real-life location of the land of Shambhala, fabled in Buddhist mythology. Accordingly, Roerich tied his views of the Altai's role in the ethnic and linguistic history of Eurasia tightly to his belief that Central Asia and the Himalayas were peopled with descendants of the original inhabitants of Shambhala. Moreover, Roerich sprinkled his writings on these matters with references to Atlantis, the lost continent of Lemuria, and the root races spoken of in the Theosophical tracts of Madame Helena Blavatsky. It was in this vein that Roerich approached his 'scholarly' investigations of the Altai's ethnic history and prehistory. It was in that same vein that he approached his studies of the region's legends and myths, as described below.

Sacred stones, underground dwellers, and white waters: Roerich and Altai myth

As clandestine as many aspects of Roerich's journeys may have been, the 'Roerich Central Asian Art Expedition' was a well-publicized affair, with openly declared purposes. As Roerich himself wrote in the introduction to his travelogue, *Heart of Asia*,

Of course, as an artist, my main inspiration in Asia was toward artistic work [But] in addition to its artistic aims, our expedition planned to study the location of the ancient monuments of Central Asia, to observe the present condition of religions and creeds, and to note the traces of the great migrations of nations.¹²

Roerich was sincere about his 'artistic aims': at great expense and effort, he carted with him over mile upon mile of the most difficult terrain on earth enough paint, pencils, brushes, and paper to complete more than 500 sketches and paintings. As described above, he was also interested in the 'traces of the great migrations of nations,' albeit not in the strictly academic spirit in which he, for public consumption, claimed to approach this topic.

Roerich was also determined to investigate 'the present condition of religions and creeds,' just as he indicated in *Heart of Asia*. In general, Roerich wished to examine and analyze the myths and legends of Central Asia, Mongolia, and the Himalayas. As with his theories regarding prehistory and the diffusion of culture and ethnicity throughout Eurasia, Roerich's conclusions about Asian folklore and belief were highly selective and shaped strongly by his own mystical

speculations. His tendency was to pick and choose a *pot-pourri* of elements and motifs from Asian – even world – religions and mythologies, pressing them into the service of a master narrative of his own. Just as he shaped bits and pieces of archaeological, linguistic, and anthropological evidence into a totalizing theory about a universal Stone Age culture of the past, Roerich drew upon carefully chosen symbols and teachings from Eurasian faiths to create a totalizing theory about the future – a theory that envisioned the imminent return of a pan-religious Messiah, the coming of a new cosmic era, and the establishment of an everlasting realm of truth.

With respect to myths and creeds, Roerich's goal in the Altai was not a comprehensive survey of the intriguing *mélange* of religious beliefs and traditions that had formed there over centuries – including forms of Buddhism, shamanism, Christianity (Nestorianism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Old Belief in more than half a dozen variants), and more. Roerich was most interested in those tales and traditions that best fit his and his wife Helena's mystical expectations.

One figure from Altai tradition that Roerich appropriated for his own use was the White Burkhan, along with his supposed messenger, the holy Oiroi. Burkhanism was an important thread in the rich tapestry of Altai religious practices, brought to the region by the Oirots, a tribe originally from western Mongolia. This tradition – also known as the 'white faith' – venerated a specific manifestation of the Buddha, known as the Burkhan, a term that derived from a Mongolian Lamaist word for 'deity.' Over time, Burkhanism was blended in syncretic fashion with the shamanism of the Altai's indigenous Turkic peoples. At various moments, including the first decade of the twentieth century, Burkhanist movements rose up in protest against the ever-increasing influx of Russians – Orthodox and Old Believers alike – into the region.¹³

Roerich was intrigued by legends of the White Burkhan, but not so much for their own sake as for how they could be inserted into his own messianic vision. Since the late 1910s and early 1920s, Roerich and his wife had come to believe that all of the world's messiah figures were cloudy reflections of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future foretold in many Buddhist doctrines of India and the Himalayas. Roerich respected the messianic traditions of virtually all of Eurasia's minor and major faiths, but regarded them as imperfect understandings of the ultimate truth, as represented by the destiny of Maitreya – who, Roerich believed, would in fact return to earth some time during the 1930s.¹⁴

In 1925, before arriving in the Altai, Roerich had already painted *Oiroi – Messenger of the White Burkhan*, a fantastical, blue-and-white mountainscape depicting the holy Oiroi, the spiritual messenger of the soon-to-appear Burkhan, on horseback in the golden light of the full moon. It is worth noting that this work was but one of an entire set of paintings: the 'Banners of the East' series, a collection of almost twenty canvases that depicted the great spiritual leaders and teachers of Eurasia. Along with the Burkhan's sacred messenger, Roerich painted Confucius, Jesus Christ,¹⁵ the Tibetan hermit Milarepa, Mohammed, the Russian sage St Sergius, Moses, Padma Sambhava (who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet), the 'Mother of the World' (the feminine embodiment of

all things wise and sacred), Lao-tse, the Tibetan lama Dorje, and others. In other words, Burkhanism was one of many traditions that Roerich absorbed into his own grandiose, eclectic myth.

A second legend that Roerich treated in a similar way – subsuming a specific myth into a larger, all-encompassing one – centered on the fabled existence of a sacred stone, contained within a holy chalice.¹⁶ Preceding the return of Maitreya, Roerich believed, would be the reappearance of a sacred stone that had first appeared as a ‘gift from Orion’ – in other words, as a meteorite falling to earth eons ago. The true manifestation of this sacred stone was Chintamini, the ‘Treasure of the World,’ which Roerich painted a number of times as a flaming gem contained within a chalice or casket. The main body of this stone was, as the Roerichs believed, kept safe in the hidden (but soon to be revealed) kingdom of Shambhala. A sliver, however, ‘wander[ed] all over the earth, keeping magnetic connection with the main stone.’¹⁷ According to Roerich, this ‘wandering sliver’ of Chintamini had been in the possession of Solomon, Akbar the Great, and the warlord Timur. It was the foundation of the Grail myth in medieval Europe: Roerich believed that it had given succor to the embattled Albigenians in their citadel of Monsalvat (or Montserrat), and he equated it with the Lapis Exilis, of which the bard Wolfram von Eschenbach had sung ‘Und dieser Stein ist Gral gennant!’ (‘And this Stone is called the Grail!’).¹⁸ Roerich even speculated that Mecca’s Black Rock, or Kaaba, had some sort of affinity with Chintamini. Standing stones erected by civilizations worldwide were linked with the Chintamini myth, and Roerich was also obsessed with Central Asian and Mongolian petroglyphs.¹⁹

The specifically Russian reflection of Chintamini that Roerich sought in the Altai was the Alatyry. Russian folklore is replete with references to this magic stone, the source of all water, possessed of great healing powers. Located in the mythical land of Buyan – traces of which Roerich attempted to search for throughout southern Siberia – the Alatyry figures most prominently in the medieval epics (*byliny*) of Il’ia Muromets, the great hero-warrior (*bogatyr*), but also elsewhere.²⁰ Just as Roerich employed the image of the Burkhan as a way of confirming his beliefs regarding Maitreya, he hoped to find in the Alatyry myth confirmation of the hopes and aspirations he had pinned on the appearance of Chintamini.

Thirdly, Roerich made use of Altai geography – legends about the region’s high and low places – to give an added dimension to his cosmography. In several ways, this involved a curious mirroring of the Himalayas, as exemplified by the title of one of his two accounts of the 1925–1928 expedition, *Altai-Himalaya*. Ultimately, his interpretation of Altai myth went toward furthering his own dreams of the revival of Shambhala, as well as his, less-publicized political goals for the southern Siberian-Himalayan wilderness.

One geographical feature Roerich focused on was Belukha, the sacred peak of the Altai. Roerich painted Belukha several times, or at least included it as an element in his canvases. Beyond that, Roerich viewed Belukha as a local Altai counterpart to Mount Kailas, the holiest of the Himalayan peaks in Tibet. To

Roerich's way of thinking, Belukha and Kailas were geographic and metaphysical twins. More profoundly, Belukha and Kailas were both earthly manifestations of Mount Meru (or Sumeru), the sacred peak that is prominent in many variants of Buddhism, especially in locales in or near the Himalayas – and which, through a process of syncretism, can be found in (or at least has been absorbed in some way by) a number of Siberian and Central Asian shamanic traditions. Like many anthropologists and historians of religion who are drawn to symbolic commonalities and broad patterns in Eurasian myth and legend, Roerich saw Belukha–Kailas–Meru as a reflection of what he felt was a universal tendency of all faiths to create central cosmological structures that were vertical in nature – be they mountains, such as Olympus, trees, such as Yggdrasil, or built structures, such as the ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia. Whatever its physical form, any such *axis mundi*, around which the universe revolved, linked the earthly world with heaven above, and also with whatever underground realm existed below.

Attracted as he was to the mountains above, Roerich was also intrigued by the underground tunnels and caverns that existed below the earth. Indeed, in the symbolic language of his middle and later paintings – the works that postdate the Russian revolutions of 1917 – esoteric wisdom is revealed most often in one of two locations: far above the earth, on the peaks of high mountains, or deep beneath the earth, in subterranean chambers hidden far from the sight of man.²¹

Therefore, one of the Altai legends that most excited Roerich was the tale of a vast tangle of tunnels purported to honeycomb the underground realms deep beneath the mountains. Years before he came to the Altai, in the travel accounts of explorers such as Przhevalskii and the studies of ethnographers such as Potanin, Roerich had read of stories told throughout the region of an ancient people known as the Chud. According to the legends, the Chud had been oppressed by an evil ruler, the White Tsar. To escape his wrath, the Chud withdrew from their earthly existence, retreating into caverns deep underground. Over time, the Chud created their own subterranean kingdom, vast and mighty.²²

In 1913, Roerich, having re-read Potanin's essays on the legends of the Chud, painted the canvas *The Chud Descending Beneath the Earth*. By the 1920s, Roerich had expanded his 'understanding' of the myth, blending it with other legends and folklore and, in the end, connecting the Chud – and therefore the Altai – with Tibet, the Himalayas, and his long-dreamed-of Shambhala, both for metaphysical *and* for political purposes. Drawing upon tales of the supposed existence of an underground people beneath the Himalayas called the Agartha (or Agarthi) – tales which, incidentally, had been filtered through the fanciful memoirs of the traveling occultist Ferdinand Ossendowski, *Beasts, Men, and Gods* – Roerich envisioned an intricate network of tunnels and chambers linking the Altai with the Himalayas. Even the Dalai Lama was drawn into Roerich's speculations, for, as he thought, the tunnels of the Chud led all the way to Lhasa and the Potala Palace. Not only have Roerich's theories regarding this 'inner world' and these lost tunnels survived as a fairly prominent substream within

contemporary mystical, or ‘new age,’ thinking, but they also served as a crucial element – perhaps *the* indispensable device – by which Roerich was able to link the disparate components of his occult theories and his worldly ambitions and tie them together into a coherent whole.

For if, as Roerich had come to believe, the tunnels of the Chud connected the Altai to the Himalayas, then a number of his metaphysical speculations seemed more likely, and a number of his practical goals seemed more feasible. Ethnic, linguistic, and religious similarities between dozens of peoples separated by vast distances could be more easily explained. Roerich’s constant mirroring of the Altai and the Himalayas appeared much more sensible. And even though Roerich’s aspirations – both political and millenarian – were centered on Shambhala, Russia and Siberia were no longer made irrelevant by the inconvenient fact that the supposed location of Shambhala was the distant range of the Himalayas. Accordingly, Roerich felt justified in searching in the Altai for signs of far-off Shambhala itself. Indeed, just as he had twinned Belukha with Kailas, the Chud with the Agartha, and other aspects of the Altai with Himalayan counterparts, Roerich found an Altai double for Shambhala – in the fabled land of Belovod’e, or the Land of White Waters, legends of which captivated Roerich.

Belovod’e had occupied a place in the mythic geography of southern Siberia and its surrounding regions for centuries. At least since the early 1700s, various groups of Russian sectarians and Old Believers, fleeing religious persecution in the Russian heartlands, had migrated eastward and southward to Siberia, including the Altai. Many of these communities sought not only safety and freedom to worship as they chose, but also a promised land of sorts that existed somewhere in the southern Siberian-Mongolian borderlands. This promised land was Belovod’e.

The most likely origin of the tales of Belovod’e was stories of lakeside caravan stops or towns along Central Asian trade routes. For example, Nikolai Przhevalskii, in 1861, came across a lake called Lob Nor, approximately 500 miles south of the Altai, in Chinese Turkestan. A group of Old Believers had convinced themselves that this was Belovod’e and settled there. And, in fact, Lob Nor is a melded Indo-European/Mongol phrase meaning ‘White Lake.’²³ Over time, all sorts of magical and spiritual qualities were attributed to Belovod’e, and aspects of the “white water” tales were blended with elements of other Russian myths of lost cities or secret lands – such as Kitezh, the pure city that allowed itself to sink beneath the waves of a nearby lake rather than surrender to Mongol invaders, or Buyan, the land of healing waters, where the Alaty’ stone was rumored to be hidden.

Roerich believed implicitly that Belovod’e existed, somewhere in the Altai. He believed it was the Altai counterpart to the Himalayan kingdom of Shambhala, which he hoped to locate later in his journeys, somewhere in Tibet. He also believed that Belovod’e in the Altai, Shambhala in the Himalayas, the holiest sites of Tibet, and many other points were all interconnected by the tunnels and underground chambers of the Chud. Moreover, as detailed in the next section of this essay, Roerich believed – and hoped – that Belovod’e and the Altai would

be at the heart of his geographical and political ambitions in Central and East Asia.

The Great Plan: Pan-Buddhism and Altai-Himalayan theocracy

Verily, it will come to pass. Pilgrims are going to Shambhala and Belovodye Behind the White Mountains, the bells of the abodes are ringing The Radiant City stands upon a pure lake. Four Brotherhoods lead to it. The Oriental Brotherhood of John – a brotherhood of religious creativeness and preaching of the Spirit. The Northern Brotherhood of Boyanov – the brotherhood of the magic of art. The Pythagorean Brotherhood – a western brotherhood of science and philosophy. The Southern Brotherhood of Mikula – the brotherhood of Love and Sacrifice.

(Nicholas Roerich, 'The Radiant City')

According to the Roerichs' own recollections, as well as the diaries of their closest compatriots, what came to be known to them as the Great Plan first took shape in September 1923 and was fully revealed by October 1924. However, this plan grew out of the Roerichs' earlier occult convictions, which had been greatly intensified by the stress and strain of World War I, the revolutions of 1917, and emigration from Soviet Russia. Perhaps earlier, but certainly while drifting through Finland, Sweden, and Great Britain between 1918 and 1920, the Roerichs became convinced that holy messengers – specifically the Himalayan masters Morya and Koot Hoomi, the Tibetan adepts who, according to the writings of Helena Blavatsky, had revealed to mankind the secret wisdom of Theosophy – were in constant communication with them, via automatic writing or, more commonly, astral projection. By the time they reached New York City in September 1920, the Roerichs claimed to have had enough hidden teaching revealed to them by Morya and Koot Hoomi to feel sufficiently confident to establish their own occult tradition, called Agni Yoga.

In general, Agni Yoga was one of the many 'new age' movements appearing in Europe and the United States during the 1920s, based loosely on Hindu and Buddhist teachings and foretelling the imminent arrival of a new cosmic era of peace and justice. In particular, Agni Yoga, as discussed above, predicted the rebirth of Shambhala and the coming of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future.

That the Roerichs believed and hoped that a new era, complete with its own Messiah, was soon to appear is, by the standards of the many occult movements and mystical sects of the early 1900s, hardly out of the ordinary. What made Agni Yoga so unusual is that the Roerichs believed that they themselves, and their own decisive actions, were crucial preconditions for the unfolding of the momentous cosmic events they expected to transpire. In other words, the Roerichs felt that it was not enough for them to await the reawakening of Shambhala and the appearance of Maitreya. Unless the Roerichs themselves took a hand in events, these things would never come to be.²⁴

This great plan, the Roerichs asserted, was revealed by Master Morya to Helena Roerich in her dreams. It was detailed in full to the Roerichs in 1923 and 1924. Whereas the wider teachings of Agni Yoga were heavily publicized throughout New York, the United States, and Europe – and interwoven with Roerich’s famous cultural undertakings and his internationally renowned efforts to lobby for a treaty protecting artworks in times of war – the Great Plan was kept secret. The full extent of the Roerichs’ beliefs and aspirations was made known only to a small inner circle of confidants and supporters in New York.²⁵

Aside from Roerich himself and his wife Helena, the inner circle included Roerich’s sons, George (Iurü), a gifted student of Asian languages, who accompanied his father on all of his travels, and Sviatoslav, who, like his father, became a noted painter. Roerich’s brothers – the architect Boris, still then in the USSR, and the agriculturalist Vladimir, an exile in the Manchurian city of Harbin – were privy to Roerich’s plans. Outside the family, there were Maurice and Sina Lichtmann, a Jewish couple living in Manhattan, scraping out a living by teaching piano. Sina, a Russian *émigrée*, became the most loyal of Roerich’s followers, fiercely dedicated to his cause and beliefs her whole life. Maurice’s sister Esther joined the inner circle as well, but later, in the 1930s, abandoned Roerich. Equally crucial to Roerich’s efforts were the Horches: Nettie and Louis. The latter, a millionaire, was an international currencies broker, who, for a decade and a half, bankrolled Roerich’s activities, both in New York and worldwide, and provided him with valuable contacts. By the mid- to late 1930s, however, the Horches, with Esther Lichtmann, grew disillusioned with Roerich and turned on him. Another member of the inner circle, Frances Grant, an educator and human rights activist, remained faithful to the Roerichs’ cause, just as Maurice and Sina Lichtmann did.

Briefly put, the Roerichs’ vision was as follows. Helena’s astral messengers had revealed that Maitreya would reappear in the very near future, after which Shambhala would rise again (eventually the date was set for 1936). In preparation for this, the Roerichs were to seek out a holy place in Asia, build a place of worship there, and create a pan-Buddhist, transnational community to await the coming of Maitreya and Shambhala. How large this theocratic state would be was left somewhat vague, but it was to include parts of or the entirety of Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan, Tibet, and Siberia (by the 1930s, the Roerichs would refer to this territory-to-be as the Sacred Union of the East). Helena described such a conglomeration in an extraordinary letter – something of a sales pitch – to President Franklin Roosevelt in February 1935:

. . . a Great State will be created in the East. That which is indicated in the Cosmic Laws ought to be created. . . . The alliance of the nations of Asia is decided, the union of tribes and peoples will take place gradually, there will be a kind of Federation of countries. Mongolia, China, and the Kalmuks will constitute the counterbalance of Japan, and in this alliance of peoples, Your Goodwill is needed, Mr. President.²⁶

Although the eventual hope of the Roerichs was that Shambhala would re-emerge as a result of their theocracy's establishment, the heart of the theocracy itself was to be the Altai.

Precisely what were the Roerichs to do in the Altai? According to the spiritual mentors they claimed to be channeling, the Roerichs were to find a high place in the Altai. At 12,000 feet, they were to build a 'Place of Meeting.' Below, at 7,000 feet, a temple was to be constructed according to architectural plans drawn up by Roerich's son Sviatoslav. In the valley below, a city would appear, named Zvenigorod, after the 'city of bells' in Russian folklore (not to be confused with the real-life Zvenigorod, a medieval fortress town on the Moscow–Smolensk road). Roerich had been fascinated with tales and images of Zvenigorod since before World War I, sharing his interest with, among others, the avant-garde author/poet Aleksei Remizov (the two also corresponded frequently about the occult and, particularly, sacred stones).²⁷ In this new Zvenigorod, which was to rise upon the shores of the 'radiant lake' of Belovod'e, an 'Indestructible Kremlin of Beauty' would be erected. At that point, as Helena Roerich wrote, 'Siberia [would] become the center of civilization'²⁸ – or, at least, a twin pole to Shambhala, farther to the east in Tibet.

Of course, to say that this was an ambitious plan is an understatement of some magnitude. Nonetheless, it is incredible just how much of his plan Roerich was able to accomplish. He secured the funding and diplomatic permission to travel not once, but twice, through some of the most remote and politically sensitive territory on earth. He built a vast network of followers and allies (some aware of what his real goals were, others less so), ranging from New York to Berkeley, to Harbin and Riga, to Prague, Paris, and London. In addition to his thriving Roerich Museum in Manhattan, Roerich, with his inner circle, established printing presses and planned corporations (all unrealized) to develop Central Asia's communications, mining, and agricultural potential. From the late 1920s to mid-1935, one of Roerich's most devoted followers, in the truly occult sense of the word, was Henry Wallace, FDR's Secretary of Agriculture and later Vice-President.

From 1924 to 1929, Roerich even managed to secure Soviet backing for the Plan – or at least what parts of it he chose to reveal. Starting in 1924, he and his American backers petitioned the Soviet government to allow their so-called "Belukha Corporation" to establish a mining concession in the Altai.²⁹ Simultaneously, Roerich secretly contacted Soviet diplomats, chief among them Nikolai Krestinskii of the USSR's Berlin embassy and the People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs himself, Grigorii Chicherin, whom Roerich had known personally as a student at St Petersburg University.

Although Roerich made no secret of his mystical tendencies, he kept much of the Great Plan hidden from the Soviet authorities. Instead, he claimed to represent certain 'mahatmas' who desired to reform Buddhism by attuning it to modern communist principles. These mahatmas and lamas, Roerich added, hoped to free Tibet and India from the yoke of British imperialism and – taking advantage of religious fervor and supposedly current prophecies about the

return of Maitreya – to lead Buryats, Tuvans, Kalmyks, Mongols, and other Buddhist peoples in the formation of a “sacred union of the east.” This Buddhist commonwealth would be anti-British and friendly to the USSR. Roerich proposed that his upcoming expedition could further the creation of this eastern union by persuading Tibet’s two most important leaders, the Panchen (or Tashi) Lama and Dalai Lama, to put aside their differences and support this enterprise.³⁰

What most Soviet officials who came to know of Roerich’s plan thought about the more mystical aspects of it can be summed up in Chicherin’s derisive quip that the artist was a strange sort of ‘half-Communist, half-Buddhist.’³¹ Still, the Soviets were, during most of the 1920s, interested in attracting foreign capital and granting concessions for the purpose of developing the industrial potential of remote regions. Accordingly, while Roerich himself set off on the first stage of his expedition, his followers – the Lichtmanns, the Horches, and his brother Boris – managed to persuade the government to allow the Roerich expedition to conduct preliminary surveys in the vicinity of Belukha, in conjunction with scientists from the Academy of Sciences and the Geological Commission.³² Even more broadly, while the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the OGPU were dismissive of what they considered to be Roerich’s religious fantasies (with the possible exception of a few individuals who seem to have been attracted to the notion of Buddhist-Communist fusion), they were extremely interested in expanding the Soviet sphere of influence in Asia beyond their foothold in the Mongolian People’s Republic. Chicherin several other foreign policy and intelligence figures concluded that, while his plan *in toto* might seem like moonshine, to support Roerich’s expedition might very well incline Tibet more favorably toward the USSR, undermine British rule in India, spark anti-British or pro-Soviet feelings among the various peoples of Chinese Turkestan and Outer Mongolia, or put the Soviets into closer contact with potentially revolutionary elements in South and East Asia.³³ Thus, to allow the Roerich expedition (which was technically American) into Soviet territory and to give it weapons, fuel, supplies, and vehicles to travel as far as Mongolia was a small investment to make for what could be a potentially large return. On the off chance that his decidedly odd expedition might further their covert operations and foreign policy goals in Asia, the Soviets were happy to make use of Roerich.³⁴

Of course, Roerich seems to have been doing the same in reverse. He and his wife Helena may well have been sincere about their desire to infuse Buddhism with communist ideals.³⁵ Their diaries and those of their followers show conclusively that they viewed Russia – Soviet or otherwise – as a key actor in bringing about the new age. Nonetheless, it was that new age that remained the Roerichs’ chief concern, not left-wing or right-wing politics. If cooperation with the USSR was necessary to bring about the creation of Roerich’s new state, so be it. If the Soviet option proved unworkable, he would turn elsewhere – and, indeed, he felt no compunction about courting and using various (even competing) governments for his own purposes.

Whatever Roerich's tactics, the idea of a pan-Buddhist state had not sprung out of thin air. Roerich was aware of and affected by a number of other conceptions of pan-Buddhism that wed religious belief to international politics. As early as 1878, the explorer Przhevalskii, first and foremost a military man, drafted a memorandum to the Russian Ministry of War, in which he advocated using common cultural and religious ties to unite Tibetans, Kalmyks, Mongols, Buriats, and other peoples of Central Asia, Mongolia, and the Himalayas under Russian sovereignty – thereby outflanking and threatening British rule in India and other European powers' growing influence over China.³⁶ Likewise, in 1893, the Buryat monk, herbalist, and tsarist agent Pyotr Badmaev submitted to Alexander III a proposal entitled "On the Union of Russia with Mongolia, Tibet, and China." Vladimir Solov'ev, one of Roerich's old mentors, had written (with concern) about the prospect that Siberia and Eurasia would be engulfed by pan-Mongolism and pan-Buddhism. The monk and spy Agvan Dorjiev, another pan-Buddhist, had at least two points of contact with Roerich: during World War I, both were on the committee that designed and built the Buddhist temple that still stands today in St Petersburg. In addition, one of the monks who accompanied Roerich's expedition during the 1920s was a pupil of Dorjiev.

Moreover, Roerich was doubtlessly influenced by the example of the notorious White general Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg. During the Russian Civil War, Ungern-Sternberg saw himself as the reincarnation of Genghis Khan, whose purpose was to unite all of eastern Eurasia, from the Volga to the Pacific, under a Buddhist theocracy.³⁷ As it happens, Ungern-Sternberg's subcommander for supply and transport was none other than Roerich's younger brother Vladimir, who (unlike Ungern-Sternberg) survived the Civil War and emigrated to Harbin – where he lived and served as a key go-between for his older brother. Beyond this, Theosophists, as Roerich well knew, had a long tradition of interfering (or seeming to interfere) with Asian, particularly Indian, politics. British authorities never ceased to regard Helena Blavatsky as a spy, and the Theosophical Society's second president, British activist Annie Besant (with whom Roerich corresponded in 1919–20), was jailed by the British government in India during World War I for her anti-colonial agitation and her intimate ties with the Indian National Congress.³⁸

Whatever Roerich's inspiration, European and Asian powers took seriously the chance that a plan like Roerich's might succeed. All during the 1920s and 1930s, political authorities on many sides – British, Chinese, Japanese, Mongolian, and Soviet – viewed as dangerously plausible the possibility that a charismatic individual or small group might inflame all of Central Asia by appealing to pan-Buddhism and common ethnic and traditional heritages, rendering modern geopolitics, artificially imposed state boundaries, and the desires of Europe's and Asia's great powers irrelevant. Similarly, Roerich would have viewed the political awakening of the Central Asian-Himalayan expanse by mystical and religious means as an entirely feasible undertaking – one certainly worthy of a Great Plan. Certainly the Plan and all its details lay at the heart of

Roerich's travels – and the Plan occupied a central place in his thoughts during the weeks he and his family spent in the Altai.³⁹ Practical work beckoned as well: the Roerich expedition did in fact conduct a mineral survey of the Belukha region, linking up with official Soviet expeditions to compare their findings. The site of the Roerichs' proposed concession was rich in copper, coal, asbestos, and, especially, molybdenum.⁴⁰ The Plan would not lack for an economic foundation.

It was also with hopes of furthering the Plan that the Roerichs set forth from the Altai in the fall of 1926. Provided with Soviet vehicles and equipment – which meshed oddly with the US flag and Buddhist prayer banners under which the expedition traveled – the Roerichs and their companions moved eastward. From the Altai, the Roerichs went on to Ulan-Ude, then the commercial center of Kiakhta. The expedition wintered in Ulan Bator, then, in April 1927, set out for the Gobi Desert. Beyond all this, the ultimate destination was Tibet – the potential location of Shambhala and, in Roerich's idealized worldview, the conceptual twin of the Altai. How well these supposedly mirrored images would reflect each other, once Roerich encountered the reality of Tibet, remained to be seen.

Beyond Belovod'e: an epilogue

In the end, Roerich was disappointed by the results of his first expedition. The capstone of his journey was to be his visit to Tibet, culminating in a meeting with the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. Roerich now cast himself as the head of a 'Mission of Western Buddhists,' hoping to confer with His Holiness about a congress of Western Buddhists taking place that November in the United States (in reality, a meeting of Roerich's own followers in New York). Here, Roerich's motives remain somewhat unclear. Was he hoping that the Dalai Lama would cooperate with the Great Plan? Was he attempting to incline the Dalai Lama away from his pro-British stance and toward a pro-Soviet one? Or toward an attempt to stir up Indian agitation against British colonial rule?

Another goal may have been to discuss the strained relations between the Dalai Lama and the Tashi, or Panchen, Lama. If Roerich truly hoped to effect some kind of *rapprochement* between the two lamas, he was hopelessly naïve, for the differences between the two were irreconcilable. Did he wish to displace the Dalai Lama in favor of the Tashi Lama? The Soviets would have been glad to see this happen, given the Dalai Lama's pro-British stance, and those who suspect Roerich of having been a Soviet spy argue that this might have been his mission. But, as noted above, Roerich was not pursuing the Soviets' goals here (even if they thought or hoped he was). Also, not only did deposing the Dalai Lama not square with Roerich's spiritual agenda (although, after the Tibetans' poor treatment of his expedition, he later became virulently hostile to the Dalai Lama – the key point here being 'later'), but the expedition surely had nowhere near the capacity to do so.

As it transpired, whatever Roerich intended to do in Lhasa very quickly

became moot. After traversing Mongolia and the Gobi Desert, the Roerichs reached Tibet, but immediately upon crossing the border, they were detained by the authorities for five months. British Foreign Office records show that the British Resident in Sikkim, Colonel George Bailey, telegraphed the Dalai Lama to warn him that Roerich was a Soviet, or, at the least, an anti-British, agent.⁴¹ Roerich's party spent a brutal winter in semi-captivity, encamped on the Tibetan plateau, losing dozens of pack animals and five expedition members to illness and exposure. Finally, in the spring of 1928, the expedition was given permission to leave Tibet. By May, the Roerich party had managed to straggle back to India, to Darjeeling, from where it had set out in 1925. In May 1929, the Soviet government ended its negotiations with the "Belukha Corporation" – so, for now, the Roerichs' dreams of finding Belovod'e and building their new city in the Altai were dashed.⁴²

Roerich made one more attempt to realize his Great Plan; after all, Maitreya's arrival was still expected in 1936. By the 1930s, Roerich and his inner circle in New York had gained the support of agriculturalist Henry A. Wallace – who, after the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, became the US Secretary of Agriculture. Wallace, himself a devotee of occult practices, was enthralled with Roerich's mystical beliefs and supported the Great Plan (at least the parts of it Roerich and his followers told him about). In his famous 'Guru letters' to Roerich, Wallace referred to the 'Sacred Union of the East,' the theocracy-to-be, by the code name 'Kansas.'⁴³ In the meantime, Wallace also played the primary role in boosting Roerich's public efforts to create a treaty protecting cultural treasures in times of combat. Roerich had been nominated once for a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts in this field. When, in April 1935, the United States and twenty-one Latin American nations signed the "Treaty between the United States of America and the Other American Republics: Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Historic Monuments," the artist was nominated for the Peace Prize a second time. To this day, the UNESCO charter that protects artwork and cultural artifacts during wartime is based largely on the text of what was commonly known as the Roerich Pact.⁴⁴

In 1934–1936, Wallace sponsored Roerich's second and final expedition, this time to Manchuria and Mongolia. Officially, Roerich and his son George were retained as regional 'experts' to accompany a Department of Agriculture botanical expedition that was searching for drought-resistant grasses to help with the Dust Bowl crisis in the United States. Straight away, however, the Roerichs abandoned the botanists, sprinted to Harbin, ingratiated themselves with the Japanese authorities there, and met with the White *émigré* community (courtesy of Roerich's brother Vladimir). The Roerichs assembled their own expedition, made up of several former White officers, among others, then headed off for the Mongolian border. Exactly what they were going to do there is less than completely clear. In any event, every government in the area, or with an interest there, became convinced, not surprisingly, that Roerich and his group were spies. But for whom? Were they Red spies? White spies? Japanese agents? American agents? In embarrassment, the Agriculture Department cut off the

Roerichs' funding and ordered them back to India, where they went – and remained from that time forward. Henry Wallace, along with Louis Horch, Roerich's chief financial backer, turned on the painter. Wallace requested an Internal Revenue Service investigation of Roerich's tax returns, while Horch sued the Roerichs for ownership of the Roerich Museum and all the movement's other New York assets. Roerich never returned to the United States, and died in India in 1947. While there, the Roerich family grew close to the Indian independence movement, and became great friends of people like the poet Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru, ultimately the leader of free India.

In short, the Great Plan never materialized – indeed, far from ushering in an everlasting epoch of peace and beauty, the mid- to late 1930s paved the way for the outbreak of the global Armageddon that was World War II. Not only did the Roerichs never build their Radiant City by the shores of Belovod'e's white waters, but they never again visited the Altai. Nonetheless, the Roerichs' presence still lingers there. A Roerich Center in Barnaul promotes Roerich's mystical beliefs and humanitarian goals. And devotees of Agni Yoga continue to visit the Altai, hoping either to build the new Zvenigorod or to await its appearance – just as, over half a century ago, Roerich himself awaited the appearance of Maitreya, Shambhala, and the new age.

Notes

* This article originates from a paper presented, in modified form, at the 2001 National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Crystal City, Virginia. I am grateful to my fellow panelists, Alex Ogden and Andrei Znamenskii, as well as to the panel's chair/discussant, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, for their insightful comments and suggestions. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities (US) and the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, both of which funded much of the research upon which this essay draws.

1 The literature devoted to the life and career of Nicholas Roerich [Nikolai Rerikh] is considerable. In English, the best-known (albeit uncritical and thinly-researched) biography is Jacqueline Decter, *Messenger of Beauty: The Life and Visionary Art of Nicholas Roerich* (Rochester, Vt.: Park Street Press, 1997). Several Russian biographies exist, but they tend to be poorly documented and weak in discussing Roerich's life abroad, especially in the United States and India. The best of the Russian biographies include L. V. Korotkina, *Nikolai Rerikh* (Leningrad, 1976); E. I. Poliakova, *Nikolai Rerikh* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1985); and P. F. Belikov and V. P. Kniازهva, *N. K. Rerikh* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1972) (revised and expanded (Samara: Agni, 1996)).

Among the few authors, Western or Russian, who have written in an objective and well-informed fashion about Roerich's expeditions are Robert C. Williams, *Russian Art and American Money: 1900–1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1999), 448–91; Alexander Andreyev, 'Soviet Russia and Tibet: A Debacle of Secret Diplomacy,' *Tibet Journal* XXI, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 4–33; Robert Rupen, 'Mongolia, Tibet, and Buddhism or, a Tale of Two Roerichs,' *Canada-Mongolia Review* 5, no. 1 (April 1979): 1–36; and Vladimir Rosov, *Nikolai Rerikh: Vestnik Zvenigoroda* (St Petersburg: Aleteia, 2002).

Roerich's own writings about the 1925–1928 expedition consist of the famous *Altai-Himalaya* (New York: F. A. Stokes, 1929), and *Heart of Asia* (New York: Roerich Museum Press, 1929). As detailed below, further accounts of the 1925–1928 trip, written by other members of the expedition, have recently been published, shedding further light on Roerich's hopes and intentions. Among these are Z. G. Fosdik (Sina Lichtmann Fosdick), *Moi uchitel'ia: po stranitsam dnevnika, 1922–1934* (Moscow: Sfera, 1998); K. N. Riabinin, *Razvenchannyi Tibet* (Magnitogorsk: Amrita-Ural, 1996, orig. 1928); P. K. Portniagin, 'Sovremennyi Tibet. Missiia Nikolaia Rerikha. Ekspeditsionnyi dnevniki, 1927–28,' *Aryavarta* 2 (1998): 11–106; and N. V. Kordashevskii, *Tibetskie stranstviia polkovnika Kordashevskogo (s ekspeditsiei N. K. Rerikha po Tsentral'noi Azii)* (St Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1999). Also see Elena Rerikh (Helena Roerich), *Letters of Helena Roerich*, 2 vols (Riga: Latvian Roerich Society, 1935–40). Multiple editions and various collections of both Nicholas's and Helena's letters and diaries are currently being issued in great volume and at rapid pace.

2 Robert Craft, *Conversations with Stravinsky* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), 105.

3 Among the most recent speculations on this count are Oleg P. Shishkin, *Bitva za Gimalai: NKVD – magiia i shpionazh* (Moscow: OLMA-Press, 1999), and his articles in *Segodnia* (October 29, 1994; November 19, 1994; and December 10, 1994); and Anton Pervushin, *Okkul'tnye tainy NKVD i SS* (Moscow: OLMA-Press, 1999). Although popular and, at least in Shishkin's case, backed up by some archival documentation, these works are highly sensationalistic in tone, and many of their conclusions are less carefully arrived at than one might like.

4 Roerich was inducted into the Russian Archaeological Society and gave lectures at the Imperial Archaeological Institute. He regularly worked at excavations in the Novgorod, Pskov, Iaroslavl', Tver', and Vologda regions. For samples of Roerich's archaeological writings, see 'Na kurgane,' *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Sytin, 1914), 1–26; 'The Closed Eye,' *Fiery Stronghold* (Boston: Stratford, 1933), 56–63; and 'Iskusstvo i arkheologiia,' *Iskusstvo i khudozhestvennaia promyshlennost'* 3 (December 1898): 185–94, and 4–5 (January–February 1899): 251–66.

5 Roerich, *Heart of Asia*, 42.

6 There is an irony here. While Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes commissioned Roerich to design *The Rite of Spring* and the earlier *Prince Igor* based largely on his long-established reputation as a historical painter of painstaking authenticity, Roerich himself had become much less concerned with such strict accuracy. Therefore, *The Rite of Spring* and even *Prince Igor* cannot be considered as archaeologically or ethnographically accurate as they long have been. On this, see John McCannon, 'In Search of Primeval Russia: Stylistic Evolution in the Landscapes of Nicholas Roerich, 1897–1914,' *Ecumene* 7, no. 3 (July 2000): 271–97; idem, 'True North? Nicholas Roerich and the Moscow Art Theater Production of *Peer Gynt*, 1912–1913,' *Slavic and East European Performance* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 30–44; Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 71–3; and Millicent Hodson, 'Nijinsky's Choreographic Method: Visual Sources from Roerich for *Le Sacre du Printemps*,' *Dance Research Journal* 18 (1986–7): 7–15.

7 Roerich, 'Radost' iskusstvu,' *Vestnik Evropy* 2 (April 1909): 508–33. Also in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 116–53; and *Adamant* (New York: Corona Mundi, 1924), 108–24, 125–39.

8 Viacheslav Ivanov, 'Religiia Dionisa: ee proiskhozhdenie i vliianiia,' *Voprosy zhizni* (June 1905): 190.

9 Roerich, *Altai-Himalaya*, 50–1. Roerich also wrote that the European Basques strongly resembled the mountain peoples of Asia (ibid., 70–2).

10 On German (and Nazi) interest in Tibet, see Meyer and Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows*, 509–28; and Nicholas Goodrick Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

11 For example, see Roerich, 'The Sword of Gesar Khan,' *Fiery Stronghold*, 301.

12 Roerich, *Heart of Asia*, 5.

13 Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, ed., *Shamanic Worlds: Rituals and Lore of Siberia and Central Asia* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 91, 108nf, 147ng; Lawrence Krader, 'A Nativistic Movement in Western Siberia,' *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 2 (April 1956): 282–92.

14 See Roerich, 'Maitreya,' *Fiery Stronghold*, 309–32.

15 Roerich had a deep interest – and an equally deep belief – in the legends of the 'lost years' of Christ. According to this tradition (which, all questions of veracity aside, is genuinely indigenous to many parts of Asia), Jesus, or Issa, traveled to India and Tibet, either during his adolescence or after his resurrection. See Roerich, *Altai-Himalaya*, 18, 23–4, 33–5. For a popular 'new age' exposition of the 'lost years' thesis, see Elizabeth Clare Prophet, *The Lost Years of Jesus: On the Discoveries of Abhedananda, Roerich, and Caspari* (Malibu, Calif.: Summit University Press, 1984).

16 Roerich, 'Shambhale Lam,' *Himalayas: Abode of Light* (London: David Marlowe, 1947), 89–101; 'Sacred Land,' *Himalayas: Abode of Light*, 102–17; 'Frontiers of Shambhala,' *Himalayas: Abode of Light*, 118–23; 'Light in the Desert,' *Himalayas: Abode of Light*, 130–55; 'Shambhala-Monsalvat,' *Himalayas: Abode of Light*, 124–5; and Riabinin, *Razvenchannyi Tibet*, 145–6, 148, 149–52, 189–90, 197, 199, 219.

17 Roerich, 'Sacred Land,' 113–17.

18 *Ibid.*

19 For example, see Roerich, 'Frontiers of Shambhala.' Dozens of Roerich's Mongolian and Himalayan landscapes feature stones covered with mysterious sigils.

20 James Bailey and Tatyana Ivanova, eds, *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 37–8, 398.

21 Although the normally prudish Roerich would almost certainly have recoiled from any interpretation of his work that was gendered or sexual in nature, the contemporary observer is understandably tempted to apply a Freudian decoding of Roerich's peaks and caverns as obviously phallic and uterine symbols. Given Roerich's own emphasis on the embodiment of divine wisdom in the principle of the eternal feminine, as well as the centrality in many Hindu and Buddhist traditions of the idea that the cosmos is perpetuated by the metaphorically sexual interaction of male and female principles (for instance, Shiva and Shakti), a gendered reading of Roerich's work may be more warranted than the artist himself would have admitted.

22 Roerich, 'Sacred Land,' 102–17; and *idem*, 'Subterranean Dwellers,' *Shambhala the Resplendent* (New York: Roerich Museum Press, 1930), 210–22.

23 See K. V. Chistov, *Russkie narodnye sotsial'no-utopicheskie legendy XVII–XIX vv.* (Moscow, 1967), 239–89; T. S. Mamsik, *Pobegi kak sotsial'noe iavleniia: pripisnaia derevnia Zapadnoi Sibiri v 40–90-e gg. XVIII v.* (Novosibirsk, 1978), 6–21, 85–114; Donald Rayfield, *The Dream of Lhasa: The Life of Nikolay Przhevalsky, Explorer of Central Asia* (London: P. Elek, 1976), 98; and T. B. Allen, 'The Silk Road's Lost World,' *National Geographic* 183, no. 3 (1996): 44–51.

24 Such a direct insertion of himself into the mechanics of his spiritual convictions makes Roerich stand out even among the sizable group of Russian and Western intellectuals who were attracted to the occult at the turn of the century. Perhaps the artist who comes closest to Roerich in this sense is the Russian composer Aleksandr S Scriabin, who, while he never met Roerich in person, shared his interest in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Theosophy and knew many of the same poets, writers, and musicians. Scriabin spent the last years of his life trying to complete a massive symphonic work, *Mysterium*, which, according to his grandiose plans, was to be premiered in the Himalayas – and whose week-long performance, he believed, would trigger a turn of the great cosmic wheel and, quite literally, the end of the world.

25 Certain details of the Great Plan can be teased out of sources that have long been available, including Roerich's own writings. The materials that came to light after the mid-1930s, when Roerich fell out with several of his US followers, including the highly-placed government official Henry A. Wallace (Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary

of Agriculture, then Vice-President), revealed elements of the Great Plan as well – especially the proceedings from the lawsuit that followed and the ‘Dear Guru’ letters written by Wallace to Roerich and his associate Frances Grant. The pioneering scholar who first began to untangle these details was Robert Williams, *Russian Art and American Money*, 111–46. Also see Charles J. Errico and J. Samuel Walker, ‘The New Deal and the Guru,’ *American Heritage* 40, no. 2 (March 1989): 92–9. Ironically, the mass of diaries and memoirs published by the Roerich movement over the past half-decade or so, including those sources cited in footnote 1, has done much to expose the controversial underside of Roerich’s expeditions – an underside that certain elements of the Roerich movement had long tried to deny and conceal. Of particular value in elucidating the Great Plan are Sina Fosdick’s diaries, *Moi uchitelia* (see footnote 1). Newly-unearthed documents in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation (AVP RF), and other holdings have been used effectively by scholars such as Vladimir Rosov (and much less judiciously by journalists such as Oleg Shishkin and Anton Pervushin).

26 Letter from Helena Roerich to Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 4, 1935. Official File 723, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. Helena wrote a series of letters to Roosevelt from October 1934 to January 1936. There is no evidence to suggest that Roosevelt ever replied to any of Helena’s missives.

27 For Roerich’s and Remizov’s correspondence, see the Manuscript Division of the State Tretyakov Gallery (OR GTG), f. 44, op. 1, ed. khr. 1188–96. In 1924, Remizov published *Echoes of Zvenigorod*, with the Roerich-controlled press Alatas (Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 144–5).

28 Cited in Fosdik, *Moi uchitelia*, 196, 201–2.

29 Several years of negotiations between Roerich’s New York representatives and the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, the Academy of Sciences, and the Main Concessions Commission (Glavkontsesskom) are recorded in GARF, f. 8350, op. 1, dd. 729–30. A companion company, Ur, was designed to expand Belukha’s operations to the Tuvan Republic.

30 Roerich’s proposals to the Soviet government are discussed at length in the diaries of Helena Roerich and Sina Lichtmann, as well as in the archive of the Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York. Soviet reports on them can be found in GARF, f. 8350 (Glavkontsesskom), op. 1, dd. 729–30; AVP RF, f. 04 (Chicherin), op. 13, p. 87, d. 50117; and elsewhere.

31 AVP RF, f. 04, op. 13, port. 87, d. 50117, l. 14.

32 GARF, f. 8350, op. 1, d. 729, l. 81.

33 For example, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 13, port. 87, d. 50117, l. 14; and AVP RF, f. 8/08, op. 9, port. 101, pap. 19, ll. 19–20.

34 For years, how Roerich received permission from the Soviet government to travel to the Altai – or even to enter the USSR – was the most perplexing question surrounding his expedition. Although he was personally friendly with many cultural luminaries who remained in Russia after the October Revolution, Roerich left Russia in December 1917–January 1918. He bitterly denounced the Bolsheviks as ‘destroyers of culture,’ and his mystical inclinations could hardly have endeared him to the Soviet authorities.

As described in the text, in late 1924, Roerich visited the Soviet embassy in Berlin to apply for permission to enter the USSR during his upcoming expedition. Permission was eventually granted by Chicherin, but by the time the paperwork arrived, Roerich had already moved on to India. During the expedition itself, Roerich approached the USSR through Chinese Turkestan and the Takla Makan Desert, arriving in Urumchi, on the Soviet border, in April 1926. Here, the Soviet representative, A. E. Bystrov, arranged for the Roerichs to enter the Soviet Union and travel to Moscow (a leg of the trip that the Roerichs were *not* at pains to publicize in the US, although the *New York Times* quickly uncovered it). By June, the party had reached the capital. What happened

next remains a matter of debate, although recent archival revelations seem to be unclouding the issue.

Older biographies, both Soviet and Western, mention only that Roerich presented a series of mystical paintings to the Soviet government and conveyed the greetings of various 'mahatmas' from India and the Himalayas. He also brought a casket containing soil from the site of Buddha's enlightenment, to be placed in Lenin's tomb (Decter, *Messenger of Beauty*, 109; Poliakova, *Nikolai Rerikh*, 244–5; Belikov and Kniazeva, *N. K. Rerikh*, 178–9). In Moscow, Roerich not only renewed his acquaintance with old colleagues such as painter and curator Igor' Grabar' and architect Aleksei Shchusev, but met with Chicherin, People's Commissar of Education Anatolii Lunacharskii, and Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaja (Igor' Grabar', *Moia zhizn'* (Moscow and Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1937), 296–7). For a long time, the preferred version of events among Roerich's followers – and in the standard biographies – was that Roerich came to Moscow with the sole intention of bringing the greetings of the above-mentioned mahatmas and proposing a peaceful religious-cultural mission, entirely devoid of political content. Strictly on this basis, the Soviet government generously assisted him in his efforts.

It goes without saying that this interpretation cannot stand. The version of events presented in this essay fuses the long-standing theories of scholars such as Robert Williams and Robert Rupen with more recent work by Karl Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, Aleksandr Andreev, and, especially, Vladimir Rosov (see footnote 1).

Several contemporary Russian writers have, in a somewhat lurid fashion, argued that Roerich was an active Soviet spy from 1920 onward. If one is to believe Oleg Shishkin, the OGPU's 'Special Department' (whose purpose was to study the possible application of parapsychological phenomena to intelligence work) arranged for the agent Iakov' Bliumkin (best known as the Socialist Revolutionary who assassinated the German ambassador to Russia in 1918) to travel with Roerich's expedition disguised as a Buddhist lama. But no proof of this has come to light, and the archival record indicates strongly that Shishkin's assertions about Roerich's supposed espionage-related activity prior to his expedition are unfounded.

A secret police file on Roerich does exist, and it would doubtlessly shed much light on these questions. At the moment, this file is in the possession of the International Center of the Roerichs in Moscow, which, to this date, has made it unavailable to non-Roerichite researchers. Therefore, certain questions pertaining to Roerich's relationship with the Soviet regime are likely to remain unresolved for quite some time to come.

35 See, for example, Helena Roerich, *Osnovy Buddizma* (Urga, 1926; multiple editions); and the *Obshchina* volume of the Roerichs' thirteen-volume 'Agni Yoga' series.

36 Rupen, 'Mongolia,' 4; and Rayfield, *The Dream of Lhasa*, 52–3.

37 Fitzroy Maclean, *To the Back of Beyond* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), 120–34; and Charles Gallenkamp, *Dragon Hunter: Roy Chapman Andrews and the Central Asian Expeditions* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 74–6.

38 Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Penguin, 1997), 7, 25, 244.

39 Indeed, some authors believe that Roerich, with help from the USSR and Mongolian People's Republic, left the Altai for ten days to attend a secret meeting in Peking with representatives of the Tashi (Panchen) Lama. It should be noted, however, that this assertion is supported only by slender and flawed evidence. The Sinologist B. I. Pankratov, who was attached to the Soviet Embassy in Peking and served in an intelligence capacity there (and who may also have been 'Golubin,' a Russian who accompanied Roerich's expedition along part of its route), attested that, in 1928, he met Roerich in Peking, where the latter outlined his hopes about the emergence of Shambhala and his plans for Lhasa. Aleksandr Andreev, *Ot Baikala do sviashchennoi Lkhasy* (Samara: Agni, 1997), 193–200, believes that the meeting took place in 1926, and that Pankratov, recalling the episode years later, misremembered the date. Shishkin, *Bitva za Gimalai*, and Pervushin, *Okkulitnye tainy*, have followed his lead, proposing that Roerich traveled from

the Altai to Peking during ten so-called 'missing' days, during which Roerich's movements are not accounted for in the diary of Doctor Riabinin.

However, for Roerich to have slipped away from the Altai to Peking would mean that he managed to travel a straight-line distance of over 1,600 miles in four days (covering some of the most rugged terrain in the world), hold a one-day meeting in Peking to settle the details of an incredibly complex military-political undertaking, then travel back along the same route in another four or five days. While physically possible, such a journey seems improbable. It is more likely either that Pankratov remembers his dates correctly and that his meeting with Roerich took place in 1928, after the expedition was concluded – or that, if Pankratov is mistaken about the date of the meeting, and it did take place in 1926, he in fact met with Roerich's brother Vladimir, who was living in Harbin and is known to have been involved in Roerich's Great Plan.

40 GARF, f. 8350, op. 1, 729, ll. 68–9.

41 For an encapsulation of these records, see Meyer and Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows*, 618–19.

42 GARF, f. 8350, op. 1, d. 729, l. 207.

43 These letters, which almost surfaced during the 1940 Presidential election, were made public during the 1948 Presidential campaign. Copies are housed in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, in Hyde Park, New York, as well as the Henry A. Wallace Papers at the University of Iowa.

44 See Official File 723 (Roerich Peace Pact, 1933–1945), Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library; Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, File 504.418 B1, National Archives (College Park, Maryland, US); Richard Dean Burns and Charyl L. Smith, 'Nicholas Roerich, Henry A. Wallace and the "Peace Banner": A Study in Idealism, Egocentrism, and Anguish,' *Peace and Change: A Journal of Peace Research* (Spring 1973): 40–9; Karl E. Meyer, 'Limits of World Law,' *Archaeology* 48, no. 4 (July–August 1995): 51; M. M. Boguslavskii, 'Pakt Rerikha i zashchita kul'turnykh tsennoitei,' *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo* 10 (1974): 111–15; 'Treaty between the United States of America and the Other American Republics: Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Historic Monuments,' appendix 8; Elizabeth Thompson, ed., *The Spoils of War* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 286; and the UNESCO website (www.unesco.org/culture/laws/hague/html_eng/page1.htm).