

The rise and fall of the extrasense

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By



In 1989, a well-timed visitor to the Soviet Union could bear witness to a very peculiar mass phenomenon. Public spaces would suddenly empty out—adults rushed home from work without so much as checking out what was on offer in the neighborhood store, children abandoned their games in the street, and the elderly women that occupied the benches outside virtually every apartment building would cut short their endless conversation and shuffle back to their homes as rapidly as their ailments would allow. This behavior was not a response to a bomb drill—virtually everyone was rushing home to assume comfortable positions on the futon and tune into one of two state channels that broadcast nation-wide.[\[1\]](#)

The television would show a stern-looking man with intense brown eyes who wore his dark hair in a slightly uneven caesar cut. Dressed in a simple, dark shirt the man sat at the front of a large stage, positioned behind a plain desk heaped with letters. Behind him was a thick blue curtain, and in front of him was a microphone. Soft music, dominated by a soothing piano melody, played in the background. Every seat in the cavernous, dimly lit theater in front of the stage was filled, and although there were many young children in attendance, the audience was rapt with attention. With his hands interlocked in front of him, the man would lock his gaze on the camera and begin speaking in a calm but firm baritone. He would start counting, interspersing the numbers with detailed descriptions

of the invigorated state his viewers were to experience. Reassuring the audience that it was perfectly fine to feel as though they felt nothing, and equally fine if they found that they suddenly lost control over their neck and limbs, he slowly made his way up to twenty, firmly promising that at the end of the session those who suffered from chronic pain would find it disappeared, those with high blood pressure would have it return to normal, new mothers having trouble with milk supply would start lactating, and everyone would feel a profound sense of health and well being.

Millions of Soviet citizens watched the six televised Kashpirovskiy sessions, and uncounted numbers reported being healed of various ailments (a similarly uncounted number complained of becoming afflicted with various ailments following the sessions). Anataolii Mihailovich Kashpirovskiy was not the only extrasense healer (more on this term below) to enjoy mass popularity in the waning years of the Soviet Union—[Allan Chumak](#), who, in addition to treating patients over the airwaves, claimed to ‘charge’ water and topical creams with healing properties, also enjoyed a large following and regular access to state television—but he was, nonetheless, unique.

What set Kashpirovskiy apart from Chumak and other healers was his education. Unlike Chumak, who had a background in journalism; or the numerous if generally less renowned *babki*—traditional women healers who often lacked formal education and employed herbal medicines as well as incantations in their craft—Kashpirovskiy was a psychiatrist with formal medical training and over 25 years of practical experience.[\[2\]](#)

Kashpirovskiy’s performances were remarkable for several reasons. First, for their reach. They were broadcast on national television—no mean feat considering that there were only two national TV channels—and they were watched by practically every man, woman and child. And second, for the way they transgressed the boundaries and conventions of the Soviet biomedical establishment while drawing, at least in part, on the legitimacy of that establishment—despite his decidedly unorthodox methods, Kashpirovskiy’s gained access to the national stage with the apparent cooperation of the mainstream medical structures. His first appearance on Soviet national television on March 31, 1988, consisted of remotely hypnotizing from a Moscow studio a patient undergoing a lumpectomy in Kiev (a similar appearance, this time with the patient in Tbilisi and Kashpirovskiy in Kiev, followed in 1989). The hypnosis took the place of anesthesia, to which the patient was severely allergic. This operation was organized by Nikolai Bondar’, a former classmate of Kashpirovskiy and a leading Ukrainian oncologist.[\[3\]](#)

Finally, the very occurrence of such performances in a nation with a highly educated population that espoused scientific rationality as a central value

is remarkable in itself. One particularly interesting aspect of this phenomenon is the role that Kashpirovskiy as a public figure occupied on the Soviet national stage in the last years of the Soviet Union. He was neither positioned nor perceived as a magician, a clown or a faith healer. Rather, he became his own category—the extrasense healer—blurring the boundary between and drawing on the power of both the scientific and the occult. I appropriate the term extrasense directly from the Russian, where the noun denotes a person who possesses extrasensory perception. This isn't the same thing as a medium, because what the extrasense claims access to is not the spirit world, but a restricted dimension of reality that is understood to be beyond scientific understanding not by definition, but by virtue of remaining at the frontier of that understanding.



Equally intriguing is what the Kashpirovskiy phenomenon has to tell us about Soviet society in the last years of the USSR. It seems to suggest a terminally ill body politic, both in the physical and in the spiritual sense. Undiagnosed but liminally aware of the illness that is steadily eroding its grip on reality, this body politic searches for a way out—a portal into another dimension in which it will be able to sustain both faith and reason and regain a hold on the present so that it can have a future.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kashpirovskiy went through a series of transformations. He rode the crest of his popularity into politics, getting elected to the State Duma in 1993 as a member of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's ultra-nationalist party. His political career was short lived, however—he left the Duma in July of 1995, at what seemed like a high point in his political career—shortly after the terrorist attack in Budenovsk, where he appears to have played a critical role in negotiating the release of hostages from a state hospital occupied by Chechen militants.

Thereafter Kashpirovskiy disappeared from the public stage for over a decade, returning in 2009, this time apparently as a figure of the lunatic fringe. Since the Russian Federation enacted laws that prohibited broadcasting the kinds of hypnosis sessions that made him famous, Kashpirovskiy renewed his TV presence by hosting a TV show about paranormal phenomena. Although the show was ostensibly about the exploration of the paranormal, the opening montage, strongly reminiscent of his Soviet-era appearances in its visual format and accompanied by his verbal reassurance that he knows what the audience wants from him and that they will get it, suggests that it was also a vehicle for promoting his activities as healer. In addition to the TV show, he has resumed touring the country, supplementing income from ticket sales with the sale of DVDs, photographs and packets of salt that are supposed to serve as vehicles for his healing energy when patients are not in his direct presence.

While no longer a household name, he has enough followers to occasionally attract attention from the mainstream media. But his public persona is no longer that of the extrasense. He is now seen as a hypnotist, a faith healer, a crackpot. Some, such as *The Observer's* correspondent Marc Bennetts, have even labeled him Russia's new Rasputin.^[4] But he is no longer in a category of his own, and that too tells us a great deal about Russian society.

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^[1] A very similar picture could be observed during the showing of the first soap opera broadcast in the Soviet Union, the Brazilian *Esclava Izaura*, which also riveted the national attention around this time.

^[2] Julie Brown and Nina Rusinova, "['Curing and Crippling': Biomedical and Alternative Healing in Post-Soviet Russia](#)," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol 583, Global Perspectives on Complementary and Alternative Medicine (Sep. 2002), pp. 160-172.

[3] Georgii Mheidze, "S vami govorit televizor." Retrieved from <http://www.bg.ru/article/8299/> July 31, 2011

[4] Marc Bennetts, "[Anatoly Kashpirovsky: Russia's New Rasputin](#)," *The Observer*, June 5, 2010.

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