

# *Interview with Dr. Marina Alexandrova*



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## Interests

History of Political and Cultural Dissent in Russia, Russian Revolutionary Movements, International Avant-Garde, Spirituality in Imperial Russia, Russian Intellectual History, Theosophy, Helena Blavatsky

## Biography

Born and raised in Saratov, Russia, Marina Alexandrova received her MA in English from Saratov State University, and her PhD in Comparative Literature (Russian and Spanish American Literatures) from the University of Texas at Austin. Her dissertation analyzes the formation of literary public spheres in Russia and Argentina, focusing on avant-garde literary groups and their complex interactions with the state.

Voted "Texas 10" most popular UT-Austin professors in 2019, Dr. Alexandrova teaches a variety of courses on Russian history, culture, and language. Her current research interests include international modernism and avant-garde (1870s-1920s), Russian radical and revolutionary movements, spirituality in Imperial Russia, and, most recently, cultural and spiritual ties between Russia and the United States. Her recent Signature Course, UGS 303 "Tsars and Mystics," examines (un)Orthodox spiritual practices and unusual spiritual advisors of Russian rulers from Ivan the Terrible to Nicholas II.

She has directed and produced two plays with her students of "Advanced Russian through Drama," Vladimir Mayakovsky's controversial comedy "Bedbug" (1928) in 2018 and Anton Chekhov's "The Seagull" (1895) in 2019, partly supported by a grant from Experiential Learning Initiative. In 2018, Dr. Alexandrova worked with the Austin Shakespeare Company on their innovative production of Anton Chekhov's play "The Seagull." In 2019, she was the dramaturg for Penfold Theatre's production of "Crime and Punishment." As part of her mission of fostering greater awareness of Russian literature and culture, she co-taught a course on Dostoevsky's "Notes from the Underground" at Travis County Correctional Complex for Inside Literature. As a visiting professor at Université Paris Nanterre during spring 2020, Dr. Alexandrova taught two graduate seminars, "Russia through American Eyes" and "The International Avant-Garde in New York."

Recently, Dr. Alexandrova shared her expertise in Russian Imperial history as an onscreen expert for the acclaimed docudrama *The Last Czars* (currently streaming on Netflix). To hear more about Dr. Alexandrova's experiences and future plans, listen to her recent interview for [The Slavic Connexion podcast](#). She has also appeared on a major Russian-language TV station RTVi discussing current political and social unrest in the United States for Russian-speaking audiences around the world.

Dr. Alexandrova is currently working on a monograph about Helena Blavatsky's legacy in Russia. Read her commentary on the controversies surrounding the publication of Blavatsky's complete works, "The Unveiling of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky," which is part of the German-Russian Research Project on New Age in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. In 2021, Dr. Alexandrova gave two interviews about Helena Blavatsky's life and works for the [Secret History of Western Esotericism Podcast](#) and a talk for the

Theosophical History Conference. In May 2022 she will lead a UT Maymester program called “In Search of Russia’s Soul: Spiritual Traditions, Past and Present,” based in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

## Interview

***Igor Santa Cruz***<sup>1</sup>: The works *The People of the Blue Mountains*, *Durbar in Lahore*, and *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* as you said in your paper were “used ... as an opportunity to dismantle stereotypes about the country and reveal deep similarities between India and Russia, two seemingly disparate cultures.” How widely were these three books disseminated and read in Russia?

***Dr. Alexandrova***: While Blavatsky’s first articles in the Russian press had limited reach, the three travelogues you mention gained enormous popularity and wide readership in Russia in the 1880s and 1890s. “From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan” was published in installments in two of the leading periodicals of the time, “Moscow News” and “Russian Messenger,” with a circulation of around 10,000 each. It was published as a separate volume in 1883, and was reprinted several times. Interest in Theosophy was tremendous in Russia at the end of the 19th - beginning of the 20th century, and especially after the censorship restrictions were loosened in 1905 and Theosophical works could be finally disseminated. With the official branch of the Theosophical Society established in Russia in 1908, Russian Theosophists commenced the monumental task of translating and publishing the works of Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Mabel Collins, and others. We know that there were plans to translate and publish all of Blavatsky’s English-language works in Russian, but these plans had to be abandoned because Theosophical circles were banned under the Bolsheviks.

***Igor Santa Cruz***: In your paper you said that “The Caves was the first official introduction of

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<sup>1</sup> Igor Santa Cruz has been an Independent Theosophist since 1987 and officially an Affiliate Fellow of The Theosophical Society since 1997, where he was Vice-President of the Alvorada Lodge. Since then he has been lecturing, writing, and researching Theosophy. He studied freelance journalism in London at the British College of Journalism, and writes as a freelance journalist in his spare time. He is a member of The Blavatsky Lodge in London, UK., and he works as a lawyer in Brazil and Portugal, and is active in other fields as well.

the Masters to her Russian audience”. How did the Russian public react to it at the time? I assume with great fascination...

***Dr. Alexandrova:*** I believe that at the time of the publication of “The Caves,” Russian readers did not quite understand who HPB’s mysterious guide was. Since her English-language articles and “Isis Unveiled” (1877) were virtually unknown in Russia at that time, her readers wouldn’t make the connection between HPB’s Mahatmas and the characters in her travelogues. Gulab Lal Singh was probably perceived as part of a gallery of colorful and somewhat fantastical local characters. In 1892, one of Blavatsky’s biggest detractors in Russia, Vsevolod Soloviev, published a sensationalist and largely inaccurate “expose” of HPB, in which he claimed that Blavatsky told him that Gulab Lal Singh was her Mahatma Morya.

***Igor Santa Cruz:*** The strict censorship of the Tsarist Government was well demonstrated in your paper, but what about the communist context? Did they keep the same censorship policy in place after the October Revolution in 1917?

***Dr. Alexandrova:*** It only got worse after the October Revolution, especially for the seekers of transcendental truth and spiritual fulfilment. All the religious circles and organizations were banned, their members were forced to emigrate or were arrested, and esoteric and spiritual literature was confiscated and destroyed. Theosophical and other spiritual literature circulated clandestinely for the duration of the Soviet Union, primarily in hand-written copies, and only among trusted friends.

***Igor Santa Cruz:*** Blavatsky sided with Garibaldi, who was a socialist, in a struggle against the Vatican. Do you know if she ever declared herself to be part of the right or left wing? According to your research on which side does Blavatsky belong?

***Dr. Alexandrova:*** That’s a great question! I don’t think we can possibly define Blavatsky’s set of beliefs as one or the other. She often claimed to be completely apolitical, and at the same time demonstrated much more than a superficial knowledge of world affairs. Blavatsky was certainly interested in improving the lot of common people and lessening their suffering, but from what we understand, she wanted to do it by expanding their awareness and showing them the way to the truth. On the one hand, we find in her written work a strong anti-colonial rhetoric and the vision of an ideal society as a universal brotherhood regardless of race, gender, and creed. This kind of radical equality at certain points in history has been

associated with the left. On the other hand, her belief in personal responsibility and individual autonomy, together with her passionate admiration and support of her conservative publisher, Katkov, has the potential to place her on the other side of the spectrum. Yet it is true that the Theosophical movement certainly attracted many socialists and activists, like Annie Besant, who fought tirelessly for women's rights and Indian liberation from British colonial rule. Under Besant's leadership, the Theosophical Society definitely entered a more socially engaged phase, with its numerous educational, charitable, and social projects in India and abroad.

**Igor Santa Cruz:** Traveling was expensive in her day. . Do you know where her resources came from?

**Dr. Alexandrova:** Blavatsky said that initially her relatives, especially her father, financially supported her extensive travels. She was also able to stay with her wealthy relatives and friends while abroad. During her first trip to England in 1851 she stayed with the old Princess Bagration, and in Cairo her traveling companion was another noble woman. From Blavatsky's sister, Vera Zhelikhovsky, we learn that Blavatsky supported herself through various business ventures, until she was able to devote herself fully to writing.

**Igor Santa Cruz:** Blavatsky denounced the abuses of the British Rule in India frequently in her writings, but she wrote her books in English and ended up living her last years in London, UK. Does this apparent contrast mean that she ended up reconciling with the British Empire?

**Dr. Alexandrova:** Her decision to move to London was prompted by several considerations. As an "Outer Head" of the "Esoteric Section," Blavatsky probably found it more convenient to be closer to her disciples in London, where she also started publishing her new periodical, *Lucifer*. It was a very productive period for Blavatsky despite her declining health. In addition to meeting with disciples and maintaining active correspondence, she continued working on *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) and wrote several other important works, including *The Voice of the Silence* and *The Key to Theosophy* (1889). Her decision to live in London did not mean that she became less critical of the abuses of British colonial rule in India; if anything, she could exert more influence on the situation while residing in England. For example, she met with Gandhi when he was a young man, and may have played an active role in his intellectual and political development.

**Igor Santa Cruz:** What did the Russian Orthodox Church think of Blavatsky during her lifetime, and how does it see her today?

**Dr. Alexandrova:** Its attitude toward Theosophy has changed through the years. Initially, when Theosophy was just introduced in Russia, many Russian Orthodox priests viewed it positively, and even became members of Theosophical circles – for instance, the Smolensk Theosophical Society – until Russian Orthodox Church authorities decided that the Theosophical teachings were incompatible with Christian dogma and banned their priests from participating in Theosophical circles. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the situation repeated itself. Although there was a brief initial period of benign curiosity, in 1994 Church authorities officially rejected Theosophy in a document entitled "On pseudo-Christian sects, neo-paganism and occultism". So there was certainly a period of hostility in the 1990s – one prominent priest even published a book entitled *Satanism for Intelligentsia* in which he harshly condemned both Theosophy and the Theosophy-based teachings of Helena and Nicholas Roerich, known as The Living Ethics (Agni Yoga). Currently there seems to be an atmosphere of neutrality. The Theosophical Society in Russia as an officially registered organization with a robust membership and vibrant programming, doesn't seem to be under any restrictions, political or religious.

**Igor Santa Cruz:** Could you cite some other researchers in Russia who also have been fascinated with Blavatsky's writings and are engaged in similar work?

**Dr. Alexandrova:** In recent years, there has been an unprecedented surge in interest in Blavatsky's works and Theosophy in Russia and Ukraine, but it's just the beginning of a long journey towards a comprehensive evaluation of her body of work. The obstacles are many, from the incomplete availability of Blavatsky's works in Russian to ingrained misconceptions about her among Russians. There are exceptions, of course. The Blavatsky Museum in Dnepro, Ukraine, is one of the main centers for the academic study of her legacy. A number of scholars in Russia and Ukraine have been working since the 1990s to make Blavatsky's works available more broadly in printed academic volumes and online. Aleksandr Tiurikov, Yulia Shabanova, Oleg Boldyrev, and Pavel Malakhov are among those scholars whose contributions to the study of Blavatsky and Theosophy today are invaluable. There haven't been yet any monographs produced by Russian scholars that present a sober and well-researched

examination of Blavatsky's life and works. I hope that my work will invite Russian speakers to learn more about Blavatsky.

***Igor Santa Cruz:*** From all you have researched about Blavatsky what has touched your heart the most?

***Dr. Alexandrova:*** Initially, I was struck by the fact that HPB spent her formative years in my hometown, Saratov, in the house of her grandfather, Andrey Fadeev, the Governor of the Saratov region. I discovered that she lived across the street from my favorite park, affectionately called "The Linden Trees." Even though the park has changed over the years, chances are that Blavatsky and I played in the shade of the same beautiful linden trees, some of them planted in the early 1800s. HPB's inimitable sense of humor, generosity of spirit, and warmth touch my heart every time I read the letters she wrote to family and friends.

***Igor Santa Cruz:*** Thank you very much Dr. Marina Alexandrova for your superb work on this fascinating project about H.P. Blavatsky!