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## The Sacred Union of the East:

### Great Depression, New Deal, and Roerich-Wallace Spiritual Utopia

Late in the summer of 1934, a peculiar sage-looking European appeared in Manchuria and then proceeded to Chinese Mongolia. Plump with a round face and a short neatly trimmed beard, this strange man moved around like a high dignitary and spoke English with a heavy Slavic accent. He announced to local officials that he was on a special mission sent by the US Department of Agriculture to collect drought-resistant plants. Yet, the head of the botanical expedition was interested not only in herbs. He was also involved into exploring the local political situation and even tried to stir local religious prophecies. He was especially interested in plugging himself into the Buddhist legend of Shambhala. Very popular in the Mongol-Tibetan world, Shambhala was viewed as a legendary land of spiritual bliss – a Tibetan Buddhist paradise – that the faithful believed would arrive after a world-wide Armageddon battle between the forces of light, the proponents of the “true” Buddhist faith, and the forces of darkness (*lalo*), the people of alien beliefs. The legend, which emerged in the early Middle Ages when Buddhists had to fight Muslim advances into northern India, eventually became a potent spiritual force popular in the Tibetan-Mongol world. The name of the man who tried to step into the world of this prophecy was Nicholas Roerich (1874 – 1947), a Russian émigré painter who divided his time among the United States, Western Europe, and northern India. The person who commissioned him to embark on this strange expedition was Henry Wallace (1888 – 1965), the Secretary of Agriculture and subsequently Vice-President in the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s and

the 1940s. Since the entire northeastern portion of China was occupied by Japan in 1931, the odd behavior of this “botanist” raised the eyebrows of Japanese intelligence.

Recent research (Rosov; Andreyev, *The Myth of the Masters Revived*) into this and other Asian ventures pursued by Roerich and his wife Helena in the 1920s and in the 1930s has revealed that their ultimate plan was to establish what they called the Sacred Union of the East. This utopian theocracy was expected to bring together people of the Mongol-Tibetan world and Siberia and to show the world “perfect living” based on high spirituality and cooperative labor. In their scheme, Shambhala and related prophecies of Inner Asia were to be used as a spiritual glue to rally together the people of that area. The adventurous couple contemplated the Sacred Union of the East as an ideal state with cooperatives as its economic foundation and with a universal religion based on their own version of Theosophy and reformed Buddhism cleansed from what they called Dalai Lama’s “shamanic superstitions.” In their correspondence with Wallace and other members of their circle, the Roerichs also referred to this project as Kansas, the New Country, or simply as the Great Plan. In this paper, I am going to use the expression the Sacred Union of the East, because it best of all conveys the essence of that venture.

Existing literature usually treats the “botanical expedition” without paying too much attention to the contemporary historical context of the 1930s. This concerns not only the writings that either glorify or condemn Roerich but also the two most comprehensive scholarly studies of Roerich’s spirituality and geopolitics (Rosov; Andreyev, *The Myth of the Masters Revived*) that restrict themselves to a factual account, glossing over broad circumstances that made the Manchurian project possible. It is even more so with those spirituality authors (e.g. Drayer) who hold the Roerichs in a high esteem as great spiritual teachers and peacemakers. If and when they mention the 1934-1935 Manchurian expedition, the spirituality writers usually

refer to this event as a purely scientific expedition of “Professor Roerich.”<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, the biographers of Wallace who are sympathetic to him (Walker; Culver and Hyde) either downplay the Manchurian venture or portray it as an aberration – a temporary spiritual seduction of the politician by the unscrupulous New Age guru. In contrast, those authors (Flynn) that are critical of Wallace and President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal in general, describe the Secretary of Agriculture as a crackpot idealist going wild.

I am going to argue that the 1934-1935 US Department of Agriculture botanical expedition with a spiritual and geopolitical twist was not an aberration and not a result of Wallace’s naiveté, but rather a marginal manifestation of the idealistic utopian mindset prevailing during the interwar period. During the 1920s and the 1930s, in the wake of social calamities caused by World War I and the Great Depression, one could find plenty of grand schemes and prophecies that promised to resolve from up above all human problems once and for all. The most popular trends of that time represented by National Socialism in Germany, aggressive Stalinist modernization in Soviet Russia, Fascism in Mussolini’s Italy, and Roosevelt’s New Deal provide numerous examples of small and large ventures and schemes that sought to find ultimate solutions to all social, economic, and spiritual problems. Yet not infrequently, as J. C. Maloney (94) reminds us, those schemes ended up as “bureaucratic dreams running amok.” For example, talking about the New Deal in the United States, one can point to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration’s bizarre plan of slaughtering six million pigs in the hope to boost pork prices in a “noble” desire to help suffering American farmers (Sowell 56). The New Deal also saw attempts made by John Collier, the US Commissioner for Indians

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<sup>1</sup> Although Nicholas Roerich did not have any academic degrees, he liked to be called “professor.”

Affairs, Department of the Interior, to build up “Red Atlantis” on Native American reservations. Driven by a utopian desire to blend ancient tribal collectivism and modernity, he introduced “tribal corporations” in Indian country (Philp, Taylor). One also can name the Arthurdale project in West Virginia, a little known and wasteful experiment of making a “new American man” by planting unemployed coal miners on land and turning them into model farmers (Maloney). In other words, if one puts the Sacred Union of the East in the context of the time, it does not look so strange and bizarre.

The purpose of this article is to show that the Wallace-Roerich venture perfectly fit the spirit of the interwar period. Although seemingly an insignificant historical episode, the 1934-1935 US botanical expedition into north-eastern China gives us a small insight into the utopian idealism that informed the minds of Western intellectual and political elites in the 1920s and the 1930s.

#### “PRACTICAL IDEALIST”: EDUCATION OF NICHOLAS ROERICH

In prerevolutionary Russia, Nicholas Roerich was known not only as a painter but also as a socialite in St. Petersburg bohemian circles, who occasionally toyed with spiritualism. By moving out of the Russian capital to Finland before the 1917 Bolshevik takeover, he and his family were fortunate to avoid the anarchy, hunger, and civil war holocaust that reigned in Russia until 1922. In 1918, invited by a sponsor to exhibit his painting in England, Roerich moved to UK, where he and Helena plugged themselves deeply into occult and spiritual life. They became especially drawn to Theosophy, intensively reading the writings of Helena Blavatsky (1831 –1891), the founding mother of that movement. The spouses also frequented

spiritualist salons, and eventually set up their own offshoot of Theosophy, which they labeled Agni Yoga (Fire Yoga).

One needs to underline several important things about the Theosophical movement, which are relevant to the entire argument of this article. A forerunner of current “New Age,” Theosophy sprang up in the 1870s and 1880s as a “scientific religion,” catering to the aspirations of well-rounded educated segments in Europe and North America, who were disenchanted with mainstream church denominations and who at the same time still craved for spirituality. That was the time when rapid and tectonic shifts in science and technology led many among the Western intelligentsia to a profound disillusionment in conventional religions as the way to explain the world - the attitude that best of all was expressed in the famous Nietzsche phrase “God is dead.” Theosophy, which blended Western esotericism and the traits of Buddhism and Hinduism with scientific jargon (von Stuckrad 122), became a response to those sentiments.

The cornerstone of the Theosophical doctrine was a belief into a progressive spiritual evolution of humankind (a tribute to the popular Darwinian theory of evolution) through various stages toward the ultimate perfection, which would happen when the so-called sixth race of highly spiritual people descended upon the earth. Theosophists believed that the human evolution was navigated by the Great White Brotherhood, enlightened masters, who from time to time sent out their messengers to work among the masses in order to move them into the “right direction.” The brotherhood was believed to guard ancient knowledge that had answers to various contemporary social, economic, and spiritual problems. This profound knowledge, which was hidden from the eyes of unenlightened people, could be revealed only to the initiated (Goodrick-Clark 216). The Roerichs were convinced that they belonged to this group of the

elect and that they were also assigned to become the messengers of the brotherhood to help speed up the spiritual evolution of the humankind.

Since the time Blavatsky launched her new spirituality, it was assumed that the hub of the Great White Brotherhood was Inner Asia, particularly northern India and Tibet. Moreover, Blavatsky pointed to a specific “door” to the otherworld that she claimed to have opened a few times to receive the ancient knowledge. It was the Tashulumpo monastery, the headquarters of the Panchen Lama, who was considered the spiritual leader of Tibet (Goodrick-Clark 211, 213). Unlike its current version, the early Theosophy was heavy steeped in images, keywords, and forms borrowed from Buddhism and Hinduism, the practice that later became popular with Western spiritual seekers in the 1960s and the 1970s. Incidentally, it was no accident that eventually both Blavatsky and later the Roerichs moved to and settled in India in order to be closer to the Tibetan spiritual “vortex.”

Tibetan Buddhism caught Nicholas Roerich’s eye as early as 1909, when he was not yet a committed theosophist. At that time, a group of Tibetan Buddhists living in Russia and headed by Agvan Dorzhiev, a Buryat Buddhist monk and the envoy of the Dalai Lama to the Russian court, received Tsar Nicholas II’s blessing to erect a Tibetan Buddhist Kalachakra temple in St. Petersburg. Roerich, who helped to design stained glasses for the temple, became fascinated with Dorzhiev’s stories about Tibetan Buddhism and the Shambhala legend. No less captivating was the Buryat lama’s dream about bringing all Tibetan Buddhist people together into a united state that would exist under the protection of the Russian tsar, whom Dorzhiev declared a reincarnation of the Shambhala king (Meyer and Brysac 454).

Somewhere between 1919 and 1920, Helena and Nicholas began claiming that they were messengers of the Himalayan brotherhood, receiving instructions from the same virtual

otherworld masters that had been claimed earlier by Blavatsky, their spiritual predecessor. Moreover, Helena Roerich insisted that, just like Blavatsky, she met these spiritual teachers named Morya and Khut Humi at London's Hyde Park. Eventually, for some unknown reason, Khut Humi dropped out of the picture, and it was only Morya who remained their sole spiritual commander and navigator. By the early 1920s, after the couple already moved to the United States, Nicholas (N. Roerich 11) and Helena (H. Roerich *Vysokii put'* [*High Path*] 45, 51, 65) came to the conviction that, as part of the grand reconstruction of humankind, through master Morya, the sacred brotherhood chose them to establish a Buddhist theocracy in the heart of Asia.

It is notable that between 1924 and 1928, the spouses had already made a first abortive attempt to use the Shambhala prophecy to jump start the Sacred Union of the East. It was a long and perilous journey with an ultimate goal to penetrate Tibet and dislodge the 13th Dalai Lama by using his rivalry with the Panchen Lama. In this first geopolitical scheme, the Roerichs attempted to solicit the support of Red Russia, which at that time was interested in spreading the gospel of Communism to Asia. Particularly, Nicholas and Helena traveled to Moscow, where they met with several Bolshevik dignitaries (Fosdick 206, 265), who promised some logistic support to the Roerichs' expedition (Brachev 234–35). Yet the Bolsheviks refused to give the adventurous spouses a direct back-up (Rosov 1: 180). Despite this blunder, with a group of friends and relatives, Roerich boldly ventured to Tibet, where the Dalai Lama's border guards blocked his expedition and marooned it for several months in freezing mountain weather. The angry painter promptly denounced the Lhasa ruler as the "Yellow Pope" who betrayed the noble truth of original Buddhism and indulged instead into dark shamanic superstitions (N. Roerich 5, 47, 61).

Yet, being convinced about the reality of the spiritual mission entrusted on them by the Great White Brotherhood, the stubborn Roerichs' did not give up. The spouses were firmly convinced that sooner or later, through master Morya, the brotherhood would signal when to jump start the Shambhala kingdom by sending another sign. In the meantime, they were building up their institutions in the United States and creating support groups in Europe. Financial back-up was coming from one Louis Horch, a rich currency speculator, who agreed to throw his \$1.25 million assets into Roerich's projects. Marked with a horrible facial trauma from early on, Horch obviously felt insecure. Besides, he and his wife lost their only child and were in a deep emotional crisis. The Roerich circle stepped in and provided them with a needed spiritual comfort. Still, the Roerichs wanted to move further to acquire not only financial sponsorship but also a political back-up, trying to befriend senators, congress people, and other governmental officials.

#### HENRY WALLACE: SEARCH FOR *NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM* (NEW SECULAR ORDER)

Roerich's biggest coup was making friends with Wallace, US Secretary of Agriculture and later Vice President in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration. Wallace came to the political spotlight in the wake of the Great Depression, when millions of unemployed workers, bankrupt farmers, and the majority of intellectuals came to a conclusion that the days of capitalism were over and that the future belonged, if not to Communism and Socialism, then to at least a greater welfare state that would take care of people and tame unruly capitalism.

The Great Depression created a sense of apocalyptic doom, which drove people to search for a new order. Incidentally, it was only natural that during that time the popularity of Communism and its mild form Socialism dramatically increased: both ideologies essentially

represented secular prophecies. In addition to these two, in the 1930s, the United States saw the rise of agrarian utopias, religious revivalism, and, on a minor scale, Fascism and National Socialism. What was common across that entire political spectrum was the faith in the omnipotent power of the state that was capable to set up some new order that could resolve social problems through collective action. People viewed the huge breach in the industrial machine of capitalism not only as an economic catastrophe but also as a deep spiritual trauma. Not only in Europe, which traditionally held collectivism in a high esteem, but also in the United States, which was steeped in the tradition of individualism, there spread a sensation that capitalism was not proving people a sense of community. Many both on the left and on the right crusaded against individualism and blamed free enterprise for the Great Depression catastrophe (Pells 98). Hence, the popularity of ideas that looked forward to partially or completely phasing out “cold” capitalism and instead engineering a “warm” collective commonwealth. Or, as Wallace (cited in Culver and Hyde 129) emotionally put it, the way to the elimination of the “vomit of capitalism” was through planting the virtues of cooperative achievement and generosity.

Still, Wallace was never hooked on then politically fashionable Socialism and Communism. Rather his anti-capitalism was coming from American populist and progressive tradition, which he later merged with esotericism and some traits of Oriental religions. Politically, before he took over as the Secretary of Agriculture, Wallace belonged to a segment of American progressive intelligentsia that was preaching the use of modern technology, science and governmental power to be used to revive the American countryside. As one who was born in a lineage that was traditionally active in Iowa farmers’ issues, he took close to his heart the plight of American farmers, many of whom lost their homesteads during the Great Depression.

Yet, in his quest to overcome “harmful individualism,” Wallace looked beyond social and economic change, contemplating a spiritual transformation of the human being. A deeply spiritual man, he attributed many social evils both to the materialism of Western civilization and conventional Protestant Christianity, which eventually brought him to Theosophy and Orientalism. It seems that Wallace pictured the ideal society as a scientifically planned modern utopia with economy based on cooperatives and with ideology coming from esoteric Christianity, Theosophy, and Eastern religions.

Wallace (cited in White and Maze 53) wrote, “Economics, sciences and religion are all re-examining the facts under pressure from the common man who is appalled by the tragic nonsense of misery and want in the midst of tremendous world stocks of essential raw materials. Science has given us control over nature far beyond the wildest imaginings of our grandfathers. But, unfortunately, the religious attitudes which produced such keen scientists and aggressive business men make it impossible for us to live with the balanced abundance which is now ours as soon as we are willing to accept it with clean, understanding hearts.” The religious attitude he criticizes here is the Protestants ethics of capitalism, the *laissez faire* ethos that stressed individualism and self-reliance. According to Wallace, the undoing of the “evils” of the Protestant ethics and bringing the “kingdom of heaven on earth” would require a powerful spiritual reformation greater, as he noted, than that of Luther and Calvin.

From early on, Wallace was disenchanted with the Presbyterian faith of his parents and moved toward Catholicism, which later upset him as well. As a person, who was concerned about farmers’ problems, Wallace linked some of his spiritual pursuits to agriculture. Thus, he dabbled into astrology, trying to figure out how the position of planets affected corn crops. At one point, Wallace became involved into Native American shamanism and made a special trip to

an Iroquois Indian reservation to explore their rain-making practices. At the same time, Wallace was grounded in “hard science,” becoming a successful student of genetics and even developing the first hybrid corn for commercial use. His interest in then popular eugenics was an integral part of these pursuits (Wilson 11). Therefore, it was only natural that Wallace, a progressive spiritual seeker who believed in the power of science and efficient organization, eventually drifted to the “scientific religion” of Theosophy. In fact, his first introduction to Blavatsky’s teachings happened when he was a young adult between 1910 and 1913. Thus, he read her *Secret Doctrine* (Blavatsky), the major theosophical treatise, and also the writings of other theosophists such as Annie Besant and Rudolf Steiner (Wilson 10). The ultimate goal of his quest was to find a “scientific method,” some sort of a unified theory that could explain the world and help to find absolute knowledge in order to resolve spiritual and social problems. The New Deal agenda and his position as the Secretary of Agriculture provided Wallace a niche to experiment and search for such “super knowledge.”

In 1929, the first year of the Great Depression, Wallace was still looking for his spiritual anchor. Eventually, acting on advice from Dmitri Borodin, the plant physiologist from Columbia University, who had earlier acted as Roerich’s liaison with the Bolsheviks (Fosdick 242), Wallace literally wandered into the Roerich museum in New York City and became drawn into the painter’s circle. Two years later, Wallace accepted the Russian painter as his spiritual master and began calling him “my guru.” Wallace was admitted into the inner circle, receiving a ring and the esoteric name Galahad—a reference to the legendary hero who, along with Parsifal, took the Holy Grail to the Orient. Moreover, Wallace’s trust into Roerich and his agenda increased to such an extent that by 1933 he already felt that during his regular morning meditations the faces

of master Morya, the otherworld teacher of the Roerich circle, and the Russian guru merged into the image of one great teacher (Rosov 143).

Wallace was considered one of the strongest persons in Roosevelt's cabinet, who the President frequently turned to for advice on broad social and economic issues. Many even viewed Wallace as an unofficial philosopher of the New Deal and a possible FDR successor. There was certainly a practical consideration here; the Secretary of Agriculture was considered the mouthpiece of farmers' interests, who delivered to the President  $\frac{3}{4}$  of all votes. Besides, Roosevelt liked Wallace as a person. The religious and economic idealism of the man from Iowa impressed and inspired FDR, who referred to Wallace's ideas as "practical idealism" (E. Schapsmeier and F. Schapsmeier 137).

In the wake of the Great Depression, the American political scene was filled with various New Deal schemes pitched as quick fixes for various social and economic problems. The blueprints for many of them originated from the mobilization and regulation of society by the government during World War I. That experience was considered by the New Dealers useful for the time of the economic emergency. What united all those schemes was a top to bottom social engineering approach that James Scott (1989) well described as "seeing as a state." All-embracing nationwide projects, which trampled local needs and concerns, was a standard practice in the 1930s, and "big is beautiful" became the mantra of the day. Wallace was not an exception in this case.

Although he was a committed pacifist, like the rest of New Deal decision makers, he (Wallace 5) celebrated indirect "positive" consequences of World War I. The Secretary of Agriculture was convinced that war was a great learning experience that provided useful tools and means of state control to mobilize people for collective action in order to usher in a bright

future: “Individualists are compelled to recognize in time of war the necessity of fitting in with the social will. The forces set in motion during a great war, whether they have to do with financial dislocation between nations or with the stimulation of technological impacts, continue for a full generation after a great war.” In other words, to Wallace, social and economic regulation that entered the life of people during the war was here to stay to benefit society because, as he added (Wallace 5), it provided “beauty and direction to life.” Wallace’s stance was a classic example of the ratchet effect of the war on social and political decision-making, which was well described by economic historian Robert Higgs in his *Crisis and Leviathan*.

Talking about the erratic policies during the New Deal, Higgs (*Against Leviathan* 36) also stressed that many economic and political advisors surrounding President Roosevelt (his so-called brain trust) were in fact political and economic utopians who peddled projects that were expected to provide a magic cure for social and economic problems. Moreover, FDR himself was not a stranger to various megalomaniac dreams (Best 143). Wallace was one of these “brainy guys” who liked to think of themselves as brave visionaries. Mordecai Ezekiel (23), one of Wallace’s advisors in the Department of Agriculture, praised his visionary approach to social and economic life: “We do not yet have ‘Schools of Social Engineering’ [...], but we do have men, such as Henry A. Wallace, who in the stress of participation in political life, have become ‘social engineers,’ and as such are helping create and mold the economic institutions of the future.” The fact that FDR liked to call his Secretary of Agriculture – a person with strong mystical inclinations – “Old Common Sense” says a lot about the President himself and his inner circle.

The mindset of the New Dealers found its symbolic expression in the phrase “Novus Ordo Seclorum” (New Order of Ages), the words from the reverse side of the US Great Seal,

which also depicts a sacred pyramid and the All-Seeing Eye of Providence. That phrase caught Wallace attention somewhere in early 1934, which incidentally was the peak of the Wallace-Roerich friendship, as something that expressed the spirit of the New Deal. As a result, at Wallace's inspiration, in July of 1935, FDR decreed to place that reverse side of the Great Seal on a US one dollar bill (Wilson 8; MacArthur). Although there is no reliable evidence that Roerich was somehow involved in designing the one dollar bill, which is a popular subject in conspiracy literature and YouTube video clips, the Eye of Providence is indeed represented on his various paintings, including his famous 1932 canvas "St. Sergius," which the Russian artist completed on the eve of his "botanical expedition." This particular canvas depicts this Greek Orthodox warrior saint (with Roerich's face) in charge of a mighty army.

Whether Roerich inspired Wallace in that case or not, it is clear that in the Secretary of Agriculture, the Russian painter found a kindred soul, who was willing to throw governmental resources to find the key to a radiant future. In one of his letters, stressing that they were on the same plane, Wallace wrote that "Roerich's mysticism has a decidedly practical aspect and eventual significance to the scientific world" (White and Maze 61). Another fact about their relationships in the early 1930s is even more revealing. The Russian painter was the first person with whom Wallace shared the happy news about his appointment as the Secretary of Agriculture. Wallace (cited in Wilson 7) pointed out to his spiritual mentor that this new appointment opened wide opportunities for bringing to life a new social and spiritual order.

#### THE GREAT PLAN: BOTANICAL EXPEDITION AND THE QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL THEOCRACY

Available documentary records such as Helena Roerich's diaries, notes and letters of Francis Grant, who served as a liaison between the Secretary of Agriculture and Nicholas Roerich, and

also diaries of Zinaida Fosdik, a long-time secretary of the painter, reveal that Wallace knew about the painter's spiritual and geopolitical agenda. From 1929 to July 1935, when the relations between Wallace and the Roerich circle abruptly ended, there was an intensive exchange of letters and notes between the "guru" and his "student." In the 1940s and 1950s, Wallace had much of his personal papers regarding the occult and esotericism destroyed. Still, remaining documents (letters and his appointments calendar) as well as his public utterances in 1933 and 1934 directly or indirectly point to the fact that the Secretary of Agriculture was sympathetic not only to the spiritual side of the Roerichs' quest (Great White Brotherhood, enlightened masters and so forth) but also to the geopolitical component of the painter's plan.

Thus, on December 7, 1933, speaking before the Federal Council of Churches, Wallace stressed that in that time of crisis, American society should move toward a benevolent theocracy. He particularly noted (cited in Flynn 207) that the hard times would eventually convince humankind "to join together in the modern adaptation of the theocracy of old." On another occasion (E. Schapsmeier and F. Schapsmeier 135), he noted that the "religion of the future" would bring up "the kingdom of heaven on earth." Moreover, by 1934, when he completely immersed himself in the Roerich project, Wallace wrote in one of his essays (cited in E. Schapsmeier and F. Schapsmeier 135): "The millennium is not yet here, although the makings of it are clearly in our hands." In March of 1933, in a private letter to the painter (cited in Culver and Hyde 134), he addressed the painter as "dear Guru" and wrote, "I have been thinking of you holding the casket- the sacred, most precious casket.<sup>2</sup> And I have thought of the New Country going forth to meet the seven stars and under the sign of the three stars. And I have thought of the admonition 'Await the Stone.' We await the Stone and we welcome you again to this

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to the casket that contained sacred Chintamani stone revered by Roerich followers.

glorious land of destiny, clouded though it may be with strange fumbling fears. Who shall hold up the compelling vision to those who wander in darkness? In answer to this question we again welcome you. To drive out depression. To drive out fear.”

Both Wallace and Roerich were convinced that by an act of collective will people were capable of moving away from *laissez faire* cut throat competition and creating instead a cooperative society of highly spiritual individuals. Wallace did acknowledge that rugged individualism had served Americans well in the past, helping to conquer wilderness and to create material abundance. Yet, in the twentieth century, as he argued, when time came for everybody to share this accumulated wealth, competitive spirit became a huge stumbling block on the way to progress. Hence, individualism and the primacy of private property must be cast aside in favor of what he liked to call new social machinery for the production of justice in distribution (E. Schapsmeier and F. Schapsmeier 131). To Wallace, the way to build up this new machinery that would subordinate individual interests to the general welfare was through planting the seeds of a cooperative movement in economy and spiritual revolution in the minds of people. In fact, for many who wanted to find a third way between the “rotten” individualism of the United States and Soviet-style extreme socialism, cooperatives became an answer. In addition to Wallace, who peddled this idea in his speeches and essays, Roosevelt personally became interested in cooperatives and had a special desk established to sponsor this movement as part of his National Recovery Administration. Moreover, the President sent out overseas a special expedition to study the experience of European cooperatives in the hope to find a “middle way” between Capitalism and Socialism (Roosevelt 1936). Roerich, who was promoting cooperatives since as early as the 1920s, readily plugged himself into this rhetoric. In fact, “cooperatives” and a

“commune” (understood not in a literal sense but as a community of like-minded people) are among the major key words that pepper the writings of the painter and his wife.

The original idea to send a botanical expedition to Manchuria and Mongolia under the Roerich leadership emerged somewhere in conversations between Wallace and FDR in the fall of 1933. The President had actually been familiar with Roerich since the early 1920s, when Roosevelt was the governor of New York, clearly took a personal interest in Roerich’s causes (Culver and Hyde 136). In order to put the botanical expedition project in a historical context, one needs to note that in the wake of the so-called Dust Bowl, which made large areas of the Central Plains unusable, the Department of Agriculture was ready to shop around for samples of drought-resistant plants in the desert areas of the globe. Although the appointment of the Russian émigré painter to head the US Agriculture Department’s botanical expedition was certainly an odd thing, the idea of such an expedition itself was not something extraordinary. It was one of several similar projects that the department was running in those years.

In addition to the Roerich expedition, Wallace commissioned studies to explore the influence of cosmic rays and planetary movements on crops. He also was involved into the investigation of the so-called corn-hog cycle: the relationship between the prices of corn and pork; Wallace and his advisors from the Department of Agriculture believed that by controlling production and prices of corn and pork, one could monitor agricultural prosperity and predict the coming of hard times in farming. In fact, cycles fascinated the Secretary of Agriculture so much that he tried to pinpoint a mathematical basis for them. All these efforts originated from his compulsive desire to bring order and certainty to the surrounding world and to harness the effect of spontaneity and disorder on human life (Wilson 12).

Assigning Nicholas Roerich and his son George Roerich, who was an accomplished linguist and an expert on Tibet and Mongolia, to go to Eastern Asia for a botanical expedition, Wallace felt that some of his colleagues might raise uncomfortable questions. To ease these concerns, the Secretary of Agriculture added to the expedition two actual botanists, who travelled separately. In addition to the botanical part and cooperatives, Wallace carefully introduced FDR to another agenda of the expedition. On December 3, 1933, the Secretary of Agriculture drew the President's attention to the fact that "the political situation in this part of the world is always rendered especially intriguing by the effect on it of ancient prophecies, traditions, and the like" (White and Maze 83).

From Roerich's viewpoint, the political timing in the Inner of Asia for launching the Sacred Union of the East was very favorable. In 1931-1933 this area was in great turmoil. The Japanese army invaded north-eastern China, where, in occupied Manchuria, she set up a puppet Mongol state. This aroused nationalist expectations of Mongol nomads who were fighting against Chinese land encroachments. Simultaneously, in 1931-1932, Red Mongolia saw a popular revolt against the Bolshevik onslaught on Buddhist religion and monastery lands. Many Mongol nomads shared a popular apocalyptic Shambhala prophecy that predicted a horrible end of the world battle and the coming of a great redeemer who would lead them to the triumph of the Buddhist faith. Roerich contemplated riding this particular prophecy in order to fulfill his spiritual and geopolitical plans.

After a brief stay in Japan, the botanical expedition started in May 1934 with the arrival of the painter and his son to the Chinese city of Harbin, where, in addition to scientific goals, they immediately began talking about their cultural and spiritual mission. Simultaneously, the Roerichs were able to reach out directly to FDR through the President's mother, Sara, a lady with

strong occult inclinations. As a result, Helena Roerich began exchanging letters with FDR, using Horch as a courier. It is unclear how seriously FDR took her “fiery messages,” as Helena referred to her letters to the head of the United States. At the same time, Roosevelt repeatedly replied to her by dictating his responses to Horch. It appears that FDR was interested in Helena’s take on monetary and political issues. For example, on December 27, 1934, she advised the President that for “the inner welfare of the Country a Control ought to be established which would supervise that the prices of products should not rise” (Rosov 2: 234).

Wallace suggested that the whole plan be revealed to the President and advised Roerich’s associates: “How about presenting to the WO [Wavering One, one of the nick names that Wallace and the Roerich circle used for FDR in their correspondence] the Kansas [the Sacred Union of the East] idea, as one in which father [Roerich] is interested. Suggest that a strong Kansas might check the rulers [the Japanese] and make for a balanced situation. Paint the Kansans as very picturesque and worth preserving in their own right. Get WO blessing and suggestions” (White and Maze 94).

A month later, in February of 1935, Helena (cited in Rosov 2: 235-236) eventually felt comfortable to bring up the Great Plan to the Roosevelt’s attention:

Thus has come the time of reconstruction of the East, and let the friends of the East be in America. The alliance of the nations of Asia is decided, the union of the 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 Good Will is needed, Mr. President. You can express Your Will in all its multiformity and the thoughts can

be affirmed in this direction. Hence let the cultural construction begin in the heart of Asia. Nothing impedes America to adhere to Our direction. Let the cultural Corporation grow and the peaceful cooperation attract the nations. Many are the tribes which already aspire to adhere to Our action. Can America not adhere to the healthy structure?

After delivering this particular letter to Roosevelt and meeting with him a few more times, on March 8, 1935, Horch unveiled the details of their plan of setting up, in Inner Asia, agricultural and mining cooperatives financed by the United States. It appears from Horch's diary that the President became intrigued with a geopolitical opportunity that this venture might open for the United States in this area. A week later, Horch met Roosevelt one more time, and "another prolonged discussion of cooperatives followed" (cited in Rosov 2: 211-213).

Unfortunately for Wallace and Roerich, as soon as the painter set his foot on Asian soil, the Great Plan began falling apart. One of the major reasons was the very personality of Roerich. Driven by megalomaniac dreams, the painter widely publicized his presence in East Asia, inflating his significance and cultivating his image as a cultural and spiritual celebrity who could bring people together. Besides gathering drought-resistant plants, Roerich openly turned to local politics and prophetic legends.

In all fairness, the Roerich expedition, which recruited on the spot a Chinese botanist with a research assistant and one Russian émigré plant expert to do the actual botanical work, gathered 300 samples of drought-resistant plants. In addition, George and Nicholas drew a map of vegetation of Northern Manchuria and composed a Chinese-Latin-Japanese dictionary of

medicinal plants of Manchuria (Rosov 2: 222).<sup>3</sup> Overall, the formal part of the expedition was fulfilled. Moreover, the painter sent to the President a flamboyant essay titled “The Deserts Shall Bloom Again,” in which Roerich painted an attractive picture of how in ancient times people of Central and Inner in desert areas Asia were able to launch great empires with blooming gardens and gigantic irrigation projects. In this essay, which Roerich sent to FDR through Wallace, the painter optimistically wrote, “Gigantic deserts of Central Asia might bloom again, causing the rivers that had disappeared to flow again.” In his reply sent to Roerich, FDR asked the painter to find out in what Buddhist monasteries there were records of that wondrous ancient country that was able to tame the desert.

Still, Roerich had a more important agenda to attend to. While traveling through Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, he met the leader of local Mongol nationalists, promising him American support. He also had his inspirational biography published by several Buddhist monasteries. In this brochure, Roerich had himself pictured as the savior who would come to help people in a time of trouble. This text (cited in Andreyev, *Gimalaiskoe bratstvo* 372), which was clearly designated for propaganda purposes, went beyond all limits in crude and outlandish praises showered on the painter: “The name of the Great Teacher Roerich, which is spreading all over the whole world, became the greatest in all countries. In future, if a trouble comes, this

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<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Yu-Li Keng (1897-1975), the Chinese scientist who collected plants for Roerich, published a journal article (Keng 1938) that analyzed fifty drought-resistant samples, including six specimen that were not known to science. It is notable that he named one of these new specimen, *Stipa roerichii*, after Roerich: “The species is named in honor of Professor Nicholas de Roerich, a famous painter of Russia, who was the head of our expedition to Inner Mongolia during the summer of 1935” (Keng 308).

name will teach you and lighten your path.” Moreover, in the Manchurian city of Harbin, Roerich delivered public talks and gave interviews, in which he positioned himself as the spiritual leader of “White” Russian émigrés. Recently, Russian historian Rosov (2: 79-80) discovered a travel journal kept by George Roerich, in which he recorded in detail the topography of Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, marking convenient strategic sites, the location of Japanese troops and their military installations. It is notable that, in addition to Tibetan Studies, George underwent special military training in France.

Although weary of the Roerich activities in north-eastern China, Japanese intelligence did not seek to openly expel the painter. Yet, they did not mind to compromise him by using his letters they intercepted as early as in the 1920s. In these letters, Roerich shared with his brother Vladimir, who lived in China, his utopian theosophical dreams about the Inner Asian theocracy. Inspired by the Japanese intelligence that tightly controlled local Russian émigré media, several newspapers used those intercepted materials to fantasize about the painter as the messenger of the Rosicrucians and Free Masons, which was not true. They also mentioned that his plan was to jump start the “Siberian state” with one of the chiefs of the Theosophical movement in charge.<sup>4</sup> It was clear that, although in a heavily distorted form, Roerich’s geopolitical and spiritual agenda was revealed. Suspicion increased after Roerich received several rifles and pistols from American military barracks in China to arm his expedition before venturing in unsafe areas of Inner Mongolia that were infested with warlords and bandits. These activities also drew attention from American media and the US State Department. Although several times the latter

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<sup>4</sup> For more about Japanese intrigues against Roerich and his activities among White Russian émigrés in 1934, see Dubaev.

questioned the project, Wallace insisted that it was a legitimate enterprise. He even penalized a subordinate from the Department of Agriculture who asked too many questions.

The Secretary of Agriculture backed up his guru and was in denial to the very end. It was only when “Galahad” finally realized that the Great Plan was falling apart and that his career was on the line that he had to publicly cut all ties to the Roerich circle. In June of 1935, Roosevelt urgently cabled to Horch, asking him to immediately arrive to the White House to discuss the situation (Rosov 2: 239). As a result, the following month, Wallace and FDR decided to completely dissociate themselves from Roerich in fear that his reckless actions and publicity, instead of benefitting the United States, would get the government into diplomatic trouble. At the end of 1935 and the beginning of 1936, Wallace, Roosevelt, Horch, and Esther Lichtman (one of the former members of the Roerich Circle) met together to assess the damage and find a way out. Eventually, they decided to present the painter as an unscrupulous swindler and initiated a tax evasion lawsuit against Roerich. The President personally took the trouble to call a judge to make sure that the right verdict be issued (Rosov 255). Thus, the grand utopian dream to set up an American-sponsored spiritual theocracy based on cooperative labor failed miserably.

Later, in the 1950s and the 1960s, Wallace did everything to downplay his links to Roerich. Eventually, he placed the entire responsibility for the Manchurian expedition on FDR, who by that time was conveniently deceased. Wallace and his relatives destroyed many of his papers related to his fascination with non-Western religions and Theosophy (Wilson 4-5). Yet, some of his correspondence to Roerich did end up in the hands of reporters, including letters where he addressed Roerich as “my guru.” In 1948, confronted by these letters, Wallace at first claimed that they were fake. Then he came up with a weak explanation that Roerich somehow hypnotized him.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Wallace-Roerich botanical venture into north-eastern China, which cost the US Department of Agriculture \$75,000 (Culver and Hyde 137), was not an aberration but a marginal example of the erratic utopian idealism that was characteristic for the New Deal years. In the wake of the Great Depression, the sense of social calamity in society nourished apocalyptic feelings among many Americans. This drew to Washington, DC a whole host of social and economic “magicians” who promised absolute solutions to the country’s problems. Such personalities as Wallace were not simply arrogant enlightened masters who acted upon the innocent populace. They were the natural product of their time that demanded from politicians and intellectuals to act and think big. In the 1930s, from San Francisco to the Ural Mountains, people were eager to unite themselves into national and class “aggregates” and act collectively under the leadership of wise political messiahs to put an end to economic and social misery (Schivelbusch). The spirit of the time (scholars like to call it *zeitgeist*) that revolved around three key trends – activist state, community, and social engineering – opened the window of opportunity for such visionaries as Wallace and made possible projects that today one may view as bizarre.

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