

A new Rasputin cleanses pockets of his followers

From LOUISE BRANSON, in Moscow

SEVENTY years after the death of Rasputin, another religious mystic has been touring the Soviet Union extracting life savings from men and getting women to undress as he "purifies" them with his supernatural powers.

Unlikely as it may sound in an officially atheist country, the success of the tall, shaven-headed Mirzabai Kimbatbaev approaches that of the original mad monk and debauchee Grigory Rasputin who had a hold even over the Tsar's wife.

In the past three years Kimbatbaev has built up a reputation as a mystic and healer who preaches salvation through poverty and chastity. His cult following includes members of the intelligentsia and scientific communities, and he even won the patronage and protection of the editor of a central Moscow newspaper.

Kimbatbaev came to the attention of authorities only after a girl under his influence apparently committed suicide. He is now standing trial along with several of his cult members on undisclosed charges.

The Soviet public has been given some details about Kimbatbaev in two articles in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* newspaper which have touched off a heated debate in the country.

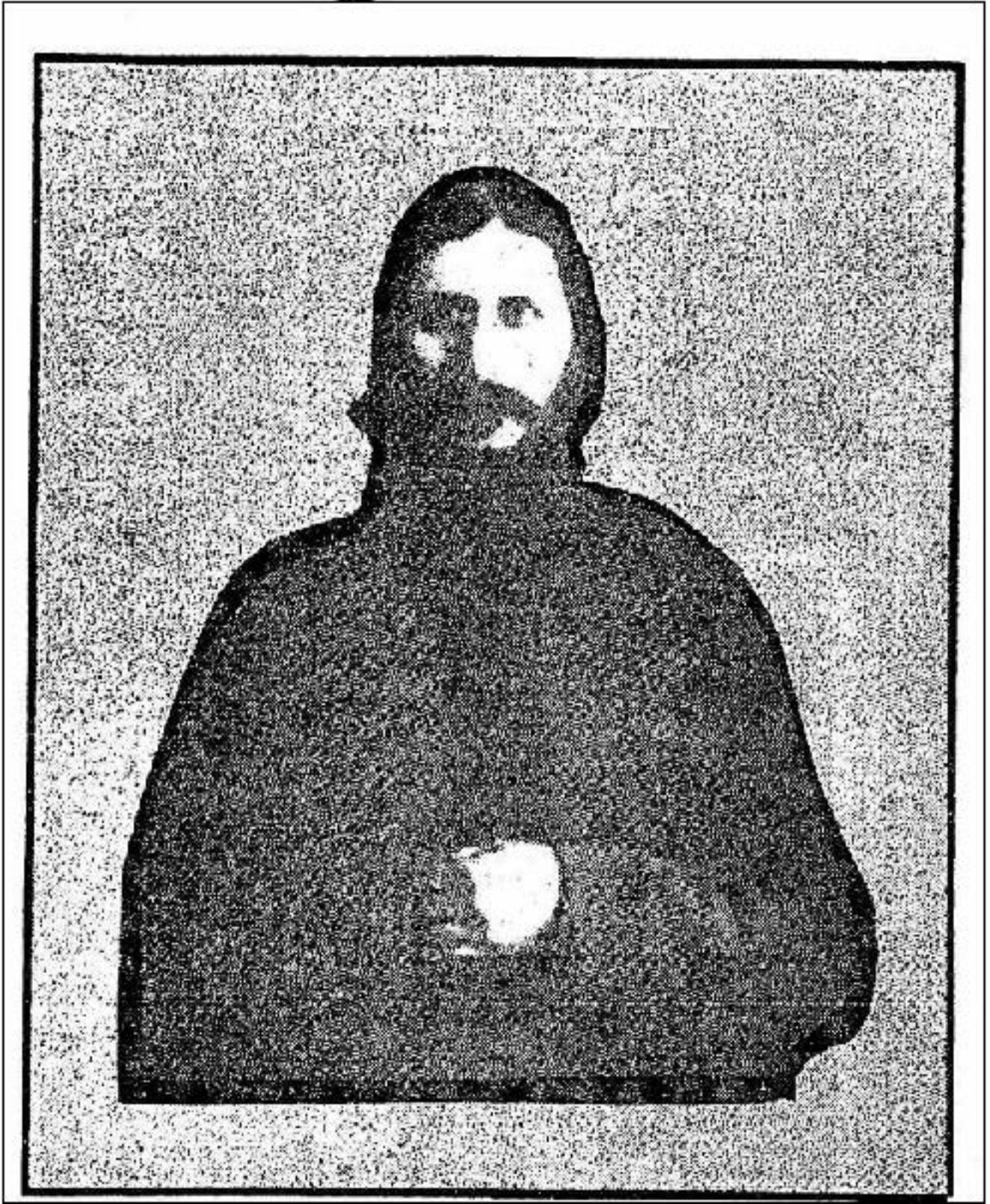
The strength of the reaction, including arguments in his defence, combined with the extent of Kimbatbaev's influence are evidence of a continuing Russian superstition that persists after 68 years of State atheism.

It's a deep-seated trait that dates back centuries. Even Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century was too afraid to quell a naked lunatic monk who publicly denounced him as the limb of Satan. He was quite happy, however, to put out the eyes of the architects of St Basil's Cathedral on Red Square so they would never create a similar cathedral for the ruler of another country.

This inclination largely explains why many in the Soviet Union, including some high officials, will seek out faith healers rather than official doctors to cure illnesses. It also explains the passionate interest many of them have in anything smacking of the supernatural from the occult to unidentified flying objects and exotic eastern religions.

"There are almost no books or information on most of these subjects because they can challenge scientific communism," one young university teacher said. "We get information as best we can — sometimes through foreigners."

Hundreds of unofficial healers have practices and never lack for customers. Soviet friends say another reason people go to them



Rasputin

is because of a lack of availability of many medicines.

"I know one healer whose house is always packed out," said one woman. "People pay him hundreds of roubles to treat them. He lays his hands on people and has the power to cure them. We took my mother there to treat her for cancer."

Not all the healers are unofficial. The most famous is probably Djuna Davitashvilia, a dark-skinned 40-ish woman with long black hair who has been given official status at the academy of sciences where her "powers" are being studied. She enjoys a celebrity that she encourages by handing out photographs of herself that enhance her witch-like features and show rays of light emanating from her fingers.

Her patients are reported to include several of the highest officials including the late President Brezhnev and Nikolai Baibakov, the chairman of the State Planning Commission.

A former waitress of Middle Eastern origin, Djuna lived in the southern republic of Georgia until her powers were discovered. Her apartment in central Moscow is filled with icons that she says are gifts from patients she has cured. A man sat on a chair below the icons recently and unwound bandages from his

recently and unwound bandages from his gangrenous foot. She moved her hands over the foot for several minutes before he bound it up again. She told him to come back the next week. He was a doctor.

"I treat several doctors," she said and ex-

plained that she was about to establish an institute to teach other people how to use her methods of healing. Her theory is that everyone has a "biological energy field" and she is exceptional only because she has it to an unusual degree.

Articles in newspapers have attacked her and praised her. It is against this background of official ambivalence toward such healers that Kimbatbaev's success can be understood.

Literaturnaya Gazeta readers are eagerly awaiting the outcome of his trial — and to know what charges he faces.

What the newspaper has said about Kimbatbaev so far is that he was from a village (in central Asia) and was considered an ill-mannered good-for-nothing until he met some pilgrims in the Uzbek town of Sultan Baba three years ago. He learnt some religious expressions, dressed himself in a full-length cassock and put on a skull-cap and beads, creating an image not too unlike Rasputin's.

"He constantly swore oaths, muttered about space which would be pulverised and . . . put

space which would be pulverised and . . . put his hand out for alms of which he received plenty," *Literaturnaya Gazeta* wrote.

Then came a further turn in his life. Kimbataev met a man called Abai Borubaev who helped him "discover in himself a supernatural force". The two were on to a good thing. Borubaev introduced him into scientific and intellectual circles in Moscow and the Baltic as "the healer from Beruni".

He gathered a following, particularly among young people who took to wearing medallions with his portrait on. He began to use Rasputin's methods to extract money and favors from those he influenced.

"He created an image of asceticism and disdain for elementary comforts to influence people's psyches, make them subservient to the will of the 'healer'," *Literaturnaya Gazeta* said. "And he did do 'wonders' — he cleaned the pockets of his admirers, saying while doing this that getting rid of their money was the first step towards a 'correct' life."

When women came to see him "he took them to a changing room. He himself got undressed and forced the women to take off their clothes and then he went swimming with them in a pool. Husbands would sometimes stand at the edge amazed but would not utter a word".

Kimbataev may have asked sexual favours from women though *Literaturnaya Gazeta* only hinted at this, observing a Soviet Press tradition of silence on sexual matters.

Not every letter to the newspaper about the case has condemned him. "He was the chastest of men with a toothy smile."

... has condemned him. He was the crassest
of men with a truly cosmic awareness," wrote
Natalya Ivina, one of his followers. "We are
lucky he is on this earth."