

Nina Kulagina

Nina Kulagina (1926–1990) was a Russian woman whose apparent ability to move objects by means psychokinesis attracted the interest of Russian and Western parapsychologists from the 1960s.



Life and Career

Nina Kulagina was born 30 July 1926 in Leningrad (now St Petersburg), where she lived her entire life. Her full legal name at birth was Ninel Sergeevna Mikhailova. ‘Ninel’ (‘Lenin’ spelled backwards) was a popular name for girls in Leningrad at the time of her birth. In Russian media she was referred as Nelya Mikhailova; in the West she became known, erroneously, as Nina Kulagina.^[1]

According to a short biography by parapsychology author James Conrad,^[2] Kulagina took part in the Red Army’s defence of Leningrad during the Nazi siege along with her father, brother and sister, becoming a radio operator in a tank regiment at the age of fourteen. Aged seventeen she was wounded in the abdomen.

After the war she married Viktor Vasilievich Kulagin, a Russian naval engineer, and bore three children.

In the early 1960s, Kulagina was hospitalized for a nervous breakdown, possibly as a result of chronic pain from her wound or from delayed post-traumatic stress disorder. Early in December 1963, she heard a radio report about a woman who could ‘see’ colours with her fingers, and declared, ‘I can do that!’, recalling that while convalescing in hospital she had been able to pick the coloured threads she needed for her embroidery from an opaque bag without looking at them. To convince her disbelieving husband she demonstrated this ability while blindfolded: in repeated experiments she showed that as well as correctly identify colours she could read text, discern the dates on coins, and accurately reproduce simple drawings made by him in a separate room.

These experiments came to light some weeks later when the couple told a doctor about them. Two decades of investigation followed, mostly by Russian scientists but also, intermittently, by five Western scientists who became aware of Kulagina through a 1968 documentary film:^[3] Jürgen Keil, B Herbert, J Gaither Pratt, Montague Ullman and JA Fahler. More than one hundred (perhaps more than two hundred sessions) were undertaken, some in laboratories.

After a long period of poor health Kulagina died of a heart attack on 11 April 1990, aged 63.

Testing

In 1976 Keil, Herbert, Pratt and Ullman published a survey of scientific findings with regard to [psychokinesis](#) (PK) to that date.^[4] They note that Kulagina produced ‘directly-observable voluntary PK effects’, now generally referred to as ‘macro-PK’, the type that can be perceived directly, as

opposed to 'micro-PK' effects generated in laboratory conditions by such means as dice throwing or random number generators, which can only be discerned by means of statistical analysis.

The authors affirm that 'all our observations suggest that the investigations carried out by our Russian colleagues were carefully controlled, skilfully executed, and at times involved laboratory facilities of a high order of sophistication'.^[5] However, they add that these investigations were intermittent and somewhat haphazard, being undertaken by scientists of different institutions using a variety of equipment, rather than comprising planned steps of a single long-range study. The Western scientists also controlled more rigorously to prevent fraud.

Characteristics

Typically, Kulagina sat at a small table and was observed to move small objects placed in front of her, without touching them, apparently by a process of mental concentration. The objects included such items as matchsticks, an empty box of matches, a cigarette, an empty metal saltshaker and a wristwatch. The usual starting distance between her and the objects was about half a metre but successes from up to two metres away were reported. Sometimes she succeeded with objects placed on a chair or on the floor.

Initially, the objects moved towards her; in the later phase they tended to move away. At first Kulagina moved her body or pointed her head, but later she also made hand movements, which she felt aided the process.

The movements were sometimes fairly smooth, at other times jerky. For an extended movement, several spells of short motion were performed. The movements were slow and did not achieve momentum, requiring the continued application of force to maintain, although they would sometimes continue for a short time after Kulagina stopped concentrating. She found it easiest to move a long object standing on its end: even one as light as a cigarette tended not to fall over while being moved.

Objects ranged in size from a single match to a 10-centimetre plexiglass cube (which moved while she was attempting to move items inside it). The Russian scientist GA Sergeyev reported that she moved objects as heavy as 500 grams. She was able to move a single object among many along a predetermined course, or several at once in one direction, or two in different directions.

She was also observed to

- spin a compass needle 360 degrees in either direction
- stop a pendulum or change the direction of its swing
- move a hydrometer floating in water within a wire cage
- prevent a scale from unbalancing when extra weight was placed on one of its pans

Black and white photos show her levitating a small ball between her hands, though their original source is not clear (see figure 1, below). Sergeyev stated that he observed this feat.

Figure 1: Nina Kulagina levitating a ball. Source: [Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#).

Kulagina was reported to have stopped the beating of a disembodied frog's heart and to have revived fish that were near-dead, including one that was floating upside down and another lying motionless on the aquarium floor: they swam for several minutes.

Kulagina reportedly could induce the sensation of heat on a person's skin with light contact of her hand, the intensity depending on the person. Herbert described it as unbearable pain while Keil and



Fahler felt
endurable
heat and
pain, and
retained
'burn'
marks
without
blistering.
A

thermometer placed between her hand and the observer's showed no change in actual temperature.

Sergeyev stated that Kulagina was able to psychokinetically 'draw' simple patterns on photosensitive paper, but Western scientists obtained no tangible evidence of this.

Inhibiting Factors

Kulagina was able to successfully produce PK effects in some 80% of her attempts on average, Keil and his co-authors estimate. The presence of hostile observers inhibited her, but if she persisted she would eventually succeed. Screens made of various materials had no inhibiting effect. Notably, she was unable to move an object in a vacuum, although this may have been a result not of the vacuum itself but of the object being concealed in a hermetically-sealed container, which appeared to have an inhibiting effect.

Kulagina stated that PK was difficult to achieve during hot weather and storms. Sergeyev determined that high humidity was an inhibitor also.

Physiological Changes

Kulagina's heart rate was found to increase during her PK attempts, as high as 240 beats per minute. Ullman measured a resting heart rate of 85 and a working heart rate of 132.

Kulagina tended to lose as much as two kilograms weight during sessions – more than would typically be lost in a similar period by means of strenuous physical exercise. Adverse effects reported by her included extreme exhaustion, dizziness, pain in the neck, upper spine, legs and feet, general aches, and a metallic taste in her mouth. She sometimes required breaks of one or more days between sessions.

EEG monitoring showed marked changes during PK effects, including a concentration of energy in the direction Kulagina was gazing.

Film

Kulagina's PK effects were filmed by many people, starting with her husband. Many clips can be found on YouTube, some shown [here](#), showing the addition of hand movements, tests with the compass, and subjective sensations of heat. This video also shows experiments with what seems to be genuine heat used to mark plastic and cut cords, and her final test, in which she was unable to perform PK.

[This video](#) includes a short interview with Keil and film from when he and Pratt unexpectedly dropped in on Kulagina, and she invited them to stay for dinner and a PK demonstration.

Commentary

In a paper on his neuropsychiatric model of psi, psychiatrist Jan Ehrenwald observes that psi appears to extend the typical boundary between ego and non-ego (that is, what a person considers 'I' as opposed to 'not I') and in this respect is the mirror image of physical paralysis, in which something which was 'I' becomes 'not I' for all intents and purposes.^[6] Ehrenwald notes that the degree of effort expended by psychics such as Kulagina in moving small objects is strongly reminiscent of a patient's attempts to move a paralyzed limb.^[7]

Liudmila Boldyreva notes that Kulagina's inability to move objects in a vacuum rules out the notion that her PK involved emitting a flow of particles, which a vacuum would not prevent. To her, this and other apparent properties suggest the psychic's mental 'push' travels through a perturbed superfluid, influencing the spins of fermions (pairs of oppositely-charged particles).^[8]

Parapsychologist Stephen Braude observes that twentieth century reported instances of macro-PK such as Kulagina's appear to be achieved at greater cost in terms of effort and discomfort than those of earlier feats by individuals such as DD Home. He hypothesizes that increasing general fear of psi and its implications might have caused this change. 'If a psychic has to expend such an effort to do so little', Braude writes, 'then (in a careless line of thought characteristic of much self-deception) it will seem that no (or only a fatal) human PK effort could produce a phenomenon worth worrying about'.^[9]

Criticism

From the outset, critics in Russia and in the West argued that Kulagina used illusionists' techniques such as hidden magnets, invisible threads and blown air on the objects.

According to her husband, the first Soviet scientist to invite her into a laboratory, LL Vasiliev of Leningrad University, was open to the possibility that her abilities were real, having previously written a book on psychokinesis; however, his junior associates believed she was 'fooling the gullible old professor' by using invisible threads,^[10] and the university authorities ordered him to cease experimenting. Similar problems plagued her and Russian scientists throughout the investigations. One scientist, Eduard Naumov, was arrested by the KGB and imprisoned for a year in a work camp because of his work with Kulagina.

In the West, two cofounders of the Center for Skeptical Inquiry, columnist [Martin Gardner](#) and illusionist James Randi – neither of whom ever met Kulagina – ridiculed her and condemned her as a faker. Conrad quotes Gardner as saying:

Nina Kulagina, in Russia, using magnets and invisible thread in ways familiar to magicians, made dupes of scores of investigators.^[11]

And Randi:

I was sitting in New York with a group of magicians and we were very highly amused – we were falling off the chairs laughing because it's all the same kind of stuff we've been doing on restaurant tables for years now with a little piece of thread...^[12]

Authors of books purporting to debunk paranormal research state that Kulagina was caught cheating by Russian scientists,^[13] but cite no sources to support this claim.

In response to sceptic claims, Conrad posted footage showing that investigators controlled for the presence of threads by passing their hands between her and the table, by not allowing her to touch the objects beforehand, and by having her move multiple objects, both in open air and inside clear boxes, and from more than one location at the table.

Conrad notes that a compass was used to detect whether any magnets were present, and detected none.^[14] Keil and his co-authors quote reports by Russian scientists that their instruments detected a strong magnetic field around Kulagina, but also that she moved objects made of non-magnetic materials such as 'glass, plastic, aluminium, copper, bronze, silver, ceramic, paper, fabric, water, wood and other organic materials, including bread'.^[15]

In 1986, Kulagina sued a Soviet government-owned magazine which had published an article accusing her of fraud. Several reputable Russian scientists, a journalist, a documentary filmmaker and others testified in her defence; Naumov pointed out that Kulagina had shown no desire for publicity or profit. She won the case on the basis that no proof of fraud had ever been obtained, though the jury stopped short of declaring her abilities to be real.^[16]

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Conrad (2016).
- 2.^ Conrad (2016). All information in this section is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
- 3.^ Kulagin (1991), no page number.
- 4.^ Keil, Herbert, Ullman & Pratt (1976). All information in this section and the next is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
- 5.^ Keil, Herbert, Ullman & Pratt (1976), 200.
- 6.^ Ehrenwald (1976), 247-9.
- 7.^ Ehrenwald (1976), 260.
- 8.^ Boldyreva (2007).
- 9.^ Braude (1993), 10.
- 10.^ Kulagin (1991), no page number.
- 11.^ Gardner (1992), 208
- 12.^ Conrad (2016). [Source video](#).
- 13.^ e.g., Kravitz & Hillabrant (1977), 301; Levy (2002), 44; Dash, M (1997).
- 14.^ Conrad (2016).
- 15.^ Keil, Herbert, Ullman & Pratt (1976), 213.
- 16.^ Keil, Herbert, Ullman & Pratt go on to report other PK cases, namely Alia Vinogradova, Felicia Parise and Suzanne Padfield, as well as one subject who preferred to remain anonymous. Ullman (1974) made a detailed comparison between aspects of Kulagina's and Vinogradova's PK abilities.