

## Julia Zuber

**Eliot Borenstein. *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019. 288 pp. ISBN 9781501716355.**

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Eliot Borenstein has contributed a rich and insightful study of conspiratorial narratives in Russian films, media, and fiction to the growing scholarly field of post-Soviet conspiracy theory (Astapova et al. 2020; Gentile and Kragh 2022; Yablokov 2018) describing how these narratives function to construct conceptions of Russia's statehood, identity, and destiny. As the book's title—*Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*—encapsulates, Borenstein identifies attacks against Russia or "Russianness" as the central theme of fictional and nonfictional conspiratorial narratives about Russia's fate, the so-called Russia narratives. However, the author is quick to assert that his study is neither a "demonization of Putin" (p. ix) nor an expression of Russophobia but the result of years of observation of how ideological fantasies created in the cultural field interact with attempts to formulate a legitimizing myth about "the country's political destiny" (p. xi). The motivation to write this book stems from the fact that under the current Russian government conspiracy narratives have moved from the fringes closer to the center of the cultural and political scene. Ideological narratives are certainly not unique to Russia, considering that all ideology is an internally consistent fantasy (pp. xi, 13), and are not an invention of President Vladimir Putin's propaganda department, as Borenstein points out several times; rather they were already circulating in mass culture and rose to prominence during Putin's third term as president because he was able to seize on prevailing perceptions.

The introduction, where the author lays out his theoretical approach and method based on the analysis of fantasy and science fiction, is followed by six thematic chapters, each focusing on different frameworks and ideological constructs to analyze a vast array of conspiracy theories. The discussion of theories and concepts is not restricted to the introduction, as a variety of theories are employed or further developed throughout the book, moving from Jacques Lacan's conceptual triad (pp. 17–19) to Richard Hofstadter's "diagnosis" of the paranoid style (chapter 1) to Jean Baudrillard's discussion of a simulacrum in his *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (pp. 202–203). For readers not familiar with contemporary Russian popular culture *Plots against Russia* can make for a challenging read, as Borenstein discusses a broad range of conspiracy narratives in productions like children's literature, novels in all sorts of genres (liberpunk, historical fiction, or thrillers by Polina Dashkova), films, political and philosophical tracts, blogs, news articles, and broadcasts, just to name a few. While themes of Russia or "Russianness" are found in most of these narratives, Borenstein also takes into consideration discourses that depict broader cultural trends relating to Russia. This reflects the variety of narratives and the author's abil-

ity to bring together different subjects and theories in a dense discussion of conspiracy and paranoia. As the author states himself: "'Plots against Russia' is not a simple trip down the proverbial rabbit hole; there are multiple rabbits spread throughout numerous interconnected warrens" (p. 52).

In the introduction, titled "Russia as an Imaginary Country," Borenstein argues that terms like the *Russian idea* as a static representation of Russia's essence could not establish themselves as a solution to an identity crisis, which stemmed from the uncertainties about the country's purpose after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is why he focuses on the narrative for his analysis: "it is in the form of story, of narrative, that collective fantasies about Russia's destiny take on their most compelling shape. And, as with most ideological fictions, their fantasies are effectively transmitted to the extent that the stories encoding them capture their audience's attention" (p. 7). Having established the centrality of narrative for the popularity and dispersion of conspiratorial thought, Borenstein states that he is not interested in assessing the "Russia narratives" on their truth content or historical accuracy, but rather looks at how successfully they persuade the readers to immerse themselves, even if temporarily, in a fictional world "whose effectiveness depends on its congruity with its audience's prior understanding of the world around them, an understanding that is always already conditioned by earlier fantasy narratives" (p. 8).

With the aim of understanding the beliefs posited in the narratives and their great appeal, the narratives are read in the conventions of the "wrong genre": "I want to treat realist fiction about the contemporary world either as if it were historical fiction about an imagined past, or fantasy about an imaginary world that bears a striking resemblance to contemporary Russia" (p. 8). Applying this productive method, drawing on the analysis of fantasy world building, Borenstein shows how the fictional and nonfictional Russia narratives construct an "imaginary Russia" as a secondary world. What characterizes this secondary world is that it is simultaneously recognizable, to the extent that the reader can relate to this world as something they seem to know, and "prescriptive" in offering explanations and instructions on how to change the apparently disordered state of the (primary) world (p. 11). Connecting the imaginary Russia with Lacan's triad of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, the author asserts that the Russia narratives reveal an "imaginary understanding" of the world, portraying Russia and its enemies in an essentializing and reductive way and assuming that the other is based on one's imaginary understanding of self (pp. 19, 23).

As an American scholar researching Russian culture, Borenstein regularly points out examples of conspiracy thinking that also apply to the United States. But he also identifies distinct features of the Russia narratives that could prove to be very useful for conspiracy studies in other fields or regions. The Russia narratives place Russia at the center of global history and create a bond between soil, geography, and character traits, leading to identify people with Russian territory. In this narrative, Russia is surrounded by envious enemies, who throughout history have posed a danger to the country's resources and territory (p. 22). For this reason, emigration is seen as an attack against Russia, as expressed by Putin in his accusation that the West is causing a brain drain by effectively luring away young Russians with grants to study abroad.

Chapter 1 is central to the discussions in the following chapters and reads as an extended introduction. It is here that Borenstein productively engages with theories in the field of conspiracy studies and elaborates on Hofstadter's controversial "paranoid style" to then develop his own approach of a paranoid and nonpermanent conspiratorial subject position that moves on a spectrum of conspiratorial thought. The opposite points at the edges of the spectrum are defined as Michael Barkun's large-scale theory of the superconspiracy and the small-scale conspiratorial mode that can be adopted or dropped anytime. Borenstein sees Barkun's superconspiracy as a productive model to be applied to the Russia narratives, as it highlights the connections between different conspiracy theories, assimilating them in the superconspiracy. The paranoid subject position occurs when a person adopts a different subject mode, for example from a book or film. Taking up the discussion from the introduction about immersing oneself in a fictional secondary world, Borenstein posits that the conspiratorial narrative produces an altered subjectivity, the consumer becomes a believer, even if it is for a short period of time.

Chapter 2 looks at conspiracies within the two frameworks of the apocalyptic and of melodrama, highlighting the features of discursive catastrophes and destruction in many of the Russian conspiratorial narratives. These are played out in the melodramatic genre, incorporating a dualistic worldview of good and bad as well as a moment of revelation. Chapter 3 examines the ideological construct that lies at the heart of Russian identity narratives and functions as an explanation or reason for the apocalyptic narrative: Russophobia. The fourth chapter is devoted to the construction of threatening forces focusing on different foreign or internal enemies and nonnative values that are harmful to Russia. These include liberals and liberalism, tolerance, the LGBT-community and migrants, whereas the tool for the dispersal of these foreign values is political correctness. Russia is then depicted as a defender of traditional values against the attacks of minorities who want to subvert native morals. Chapter 5 turns to the zombification discourse seen as a process aiming at brainwashing the media consumer, who loses all agency in this narrative. Chapter 6 turns to the war in Ukraine and the methods employed by the Russian media to create conspiratorial narratives that discredit Ukrainian statehood by targeting history, geography, and iconography.

Overall, Borenstein's monograph offers the reader an in-depth analysis of conspiratorial culture and its mechanisms, showing how Russian conspiracies are structured, how they affect prevailing attitudes, how Putin was able to instrumentalize them, and why they are so easily dispersed by the media. Borenstein also provides a sophisticated, critical, and productive discussion and further development of theories on conspiratorial thinking that could be applied to conspiracy narratives outside of Russia. It makes for an insightful and often entertaining read.

## REFERENCES

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