**Plots Against Russia. Conspiracy and Fantasy After Socialism**

*Eliot Borenstein, Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 2019, xiii + 288pp., $24.95 p/b.*

[Magda Dolińska-Rydzek](https://www-tandfonline-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/author/Doli%C5%84ska-Rydzek%2C%2BMagda)

Pages 1395-1396 | Published online: 20 Aug 2021

[**Europe-Asia Studies**](https://www-tandfonline-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/journals/ceas20)

Volume 73, 2021 - [Issue 7](https://www-tandfonline-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/toc/ceas20/73/7)

Nowadays we can observe how what hitherto drifted on the fringes of public debate has permeated the mainstream. This applies to, among other things, conspiracy theories that, until recently, were mostly limited to radical circles, including nationalists and religious fundamentalists. Russia is no exception in this respect as paranoid thinking and the conspiratorial belief that the Russian Federation is a besieged fortress, which omnipotent enemies want to destroy, increasingly appears in different contexts. This became especially apparent during Putin’s third term and is the subject of Borenstein’s monograph. However, as the author points out, this is not a book about ‘real life’, but ‘about media, culture, and discourse’ (p. 149).

‘This is an uncomfortable book to write’ (p. ix) states Eliot Borenstein, professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University, in the first sentence of his monograph. As it was not easy to write, it is not easy to review, given the multitude of topics and works tackled by Borenstein. Exploring various Russian fantasies and obsessions in a broader context, the author shows that what is considered bizarre and fringe (or not) can tell us a lot about society and culture. Aware of his position as an American researcher who has been studying Russia for years from the outside, the author provides us with a broad yet in-depth and insightful analysis of the phenomena that have been taking place in Russia since the collapse of the USSR.

In his monograph, Borenstein analyses Russian visions of the country’s past, present and future. He also discusses discourses focused on finding an overarching explanation of Russia’s place in a wider political context. For this purpose, the author employs various theories ranging from Lacan and his concept of imagery, Lévi-Strauss’s bricolage, Baudrillard’s simulacra, the Cartesian model of the subject, Carl Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty, and many others. Additionally, Borenstein provides readers with an overview of the most important accounts on conspiracy theories from Richard Hofstadter’s conception of paranoid politics to more modern and critical approaches. However, the most important, from the point of view of the methodology applied by Borenstein, is Barkun’s conception of ‘superconspiracy’ as the conspiracy that encompasses all other conspiracies.

Leaning on Barkun’s conception, Borenstein proposes looking at conspiratorial discourses as ‘a continuum from isolated instances of suspicion to full-fledged paranoia, a conspiratorial spectrum on which we can be located, even as those locations may be subject to dynamic change’ (p. 40). In this light, he analyses the dynamics and characteristic features of conspiracy theories prevalent in post-Soviet Russian discourses, including the belief in the unique role of Russia in world history and the presumption that all Russia’s misfortunes are orchestrated by its enemies. Furthermore, Borenstein proves that what determines the reproductiveness of conspiracy theories is their ‘catchiness’ (p. 47)—the memes of conspiracy migrate and ‘infect’ other discourses, including political ones, as did the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a theory about the Dulles Plan being aimed at destroying Russia by demoralising Russian youth with American cultural patterns, and the conviction that Gorbachev was the Antichrist.

Borenstein’s monograph is organised into six chapters. The starting point of his analysis is a brief discussion of the most important theoretical approaches to conspiratorial discourses. The first chapter focuses on theories that contribute to highlighting the political and social importance of conspiracy theories as compelling narratives necessary to describe the world in moments of turmoil and uncertainty. Chapter 2 is devoted to the analysis of conspiratorial narratives ranging from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to more contemporary ones focused on the obsessive idea that Russia is a besieged fortress surrounded and threatened by enemies hatching plots. All these discourses are analysed in the framework of the Apocalypse, which Borenstein sees as an example of the melodramatic, Manichean model in which forces of Good (Russia) combat forces of Evil (the rest of the world). In the third chapter, Borenstein explains what Russophobia is. He argues that the concept, introduced by mathematician and dissident Igor Shafarievich in the late 1980s and often used to discredit political adversaries by presenting them as biased and blinded by hatred towards Russia, is now enjoying increasing popularity in Russian political discourses. Chapters 4–6 discuss, as Borenstein puts it, ‘the pillars of contemporary Russian conspiratorial culture’ (p. 28). The fourth chapter focuses on how liberalism and political correctness believed to characterise the morally rotten ‘Grayropa’ are perceived as the main threat to traditional Christian values represented by Russia. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the phenomenon of zombification as brainwashing through television and how this is evident in the media reporting of the war between Russia and Ukraine that started in 2014.

Overall, Borenstein looks at a wide spectrum of contemporary Russian discourses ranging from narratives that do not focus primarily on Russian identity but reflect broader cultural trends and narratives in which Russia’s identity and its role in the world are the focal point, to political writings about what Russia and true ‘Russianness’ are and should be, as well as discourses about current events in the news, media and online. Emphasising that Russia is not the only country where conspiracy theories flourish, Borenstein draws readers’ attention to a specific historical moment and discusses how these discourses are currently used by Russian political elites to centralise power through television, printed and online media by creating compelling and persuasive narratives.

Brilliantly written and captivating, sometimes very funny as well as academically well-grounded, Borenstein’s monograph provides an in-depth analysis of Russian contemporary conspiratorial culture. It will undoubtedly be useful for scholars dealing with post-Soviet Russia within disciplines such as cultural, literary and media studies, and should not be overlooked by historians, political scientists and sociologists, as the phenomena it describes are crucial for better understanding the political landscape of present-day Russia. Furthermore, thanks to vivid language, interesting examples and its tackling of important contemporary issues, Borenstein’s monograph will be of interest to non-academic audiences as well.

**Magda Dolińska-Rydzek**

Magda Dolińska-Rydzek, Independent Scholar, Poland. *Email*: magda.dolinska@rydzek.pl