

periods when repressive mechanisms are momentarily relaxed—or, perhaps more precisely, following the dissolution of major political, economic, and social institutions like serfdom or the Soviet state. Once invented, they may percolate with greater or lesser virality, but seem unlikely to change significantly in substance. This model is borne out in *Fortress Russia*'s final chapter, which examines Russian conspiracy culture following the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. In the years since Crimea's annexation, Yablokov observes a wider dissemination and more pointed political instrumentalization of existing conspiracy theories—all snarled around a central kernel of paranoia about Western malevolence—rather than the prolific invention of new ones.

Fortress Russia offers important insight into the origins, functions, and nature of Russian conspiracy theories, emphasizing continuities in their development since the Imperial period. It is sure to be a useful resource in a wide variety of subfields within Russian and East European Studies, while also offering generalizable insights that expand its relevance to historians, political scientists, and scholars of global cultural history.

Maya Vinokour, New York University

Borenstein, Eliot. *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. xviii + 288 pp. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 978-1-5017-3577-6.

Recently, Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* fame told his former colleague Stephen Colbert that he is happy to be out of the “turd-mining business,” notwithstanding the “turd asteroid” that has rocked U.S. politics since 2016. What Stewart did for the American public is what Eliot Borenstein continues to do for Western Slavists, and we should all thank him for actually watching *Russia Today* and reporting back to us about it. *Plots against Russia* is his latest such report, which does double duty—it gives an overview of a whole host of post-Soviet conspiracy narratives that circulate on an alarmingly large scale in contemporary Russia, and it also theorizes the ways in which fear-mongering fantasies of “Gayropa,” “Russophobia,” “the Bilderberg Group,” and, as always, “the Jews,” reproduce and morph into one another, in response to the unfolding history of the post-Soviet Russian regime. I say the word “regime” advisedly—Borenstein is careful not to ascribe the task of conspiracy-production simply to “the Kremlin.” However, it is the case that as the Russian state has evolved into post-2012 Putinism, it has mainstreamed conspiracy. Moreover, it is precisely the reduction of Russia to the proverbial “Kremlin”—the idea of a state entirely controlled by its ruling elites (or shadowy counter-elites)—that plays a central role in the plethora of plots against it. The sad irony of *Plots against Russia* is that it is a scholarly account of the enduring impact of low-brow pseudo-sociology in which the hero—contrary to everything “we” sophisticated Western (post)enlightenment scholars and our audiences understand, and contrary to Borenstein’s generation of Russianists who threw off the yoke of Cold War Kremlinology—is once again the old bogeyman of the Cold War era. The eye of Sauron on the cover says as much.

Opening his monograph with the Russian Ministry of Culture’s 2015 ban of the American box-office flop *Child 44*, Borenstein immediately puts on the table questions that might stumble a rational observer: Why does the Russian state react to some cultural products and not others; Why in 2015 and not in earlier years; Why via figures like Vladimir Medinsky and not through other intermediaries? As we proceed through the introduction and the first three chapters, we come to see that incidents like this are driven by a pervasive web of conspiratorial discourse, in which any public event, be it the publication of a text, the release

of a film, the marketing of Kit-Kats, or the war in Ukraine, is immediately recognized as the latest turn in an on-going anti-Russian scheme by a Western cabal. Borenstein argues that much of this discourse circulates as “memes,” that is, portable, easily communicable bits of a protean conspiracy narrative structure (p. 46). Many of these memes originated in the perennially panic-stricken, disaster-addicted 1990s Russian public sphere. The early Putinist period (prior to 2012) was a time when these memes often made their “species jump” from fringe fiction and tabloid fodder to more mass-audience-friendly formats (p. 15). Crucially, during the species jump, the memes’ more problematic aspects, such as virulent anti-Semitism, often seemingly disappeared from the surface (p. 131). However, the structural position of the proverbial “Jew-Mason” at the heart of the nefarious plot persists, and the original xenophobic content easily reactivates and/or combines with homophobia and misogyny as the meme continues to circulate. Putinism after 2012 is when many audience-friendly conspiracies explicitly become central to the discourse of the regime. The last three chapters of *Plots against Russia* drive this point home, while also revealing the extent to which Russian conspiracies directly quote American conspiracy discourse, as part of a global ecosystem of reactionary rhetoric. The text’s final chapter provides a superb account of the Russian propagandistic media landscape surrounding the war in Ukraine. Here, we can see how the various strains of anti-Western conspiracies coalesce into an infernal symphony, following a state directive to Russian television producers to “make it more hellish” (p. 232). Most poignantly, with Russia’s official response to the 2014 downing of flight MH17 by Russian-supported separatists in the Donbass, we see the moment in which a distillation of several decades of anti-Western conspiracy theorizing gets loudly projected outward at the highest diplomatic level, to the bewilderment of the international community.

There is one major way in which Borenstein’s narrative can be challenged. Borenstein repeatedly maintains that he aims to show how conspiracy circulates as a form of Derridean play, in which catchy turns of phrase percolate from the fringe into the mainstream at the hands of impermanent, unreal subjects. This approach has its perks. It is certainly satisfying to ironize about the trash fiction roots of contemporary Putinism. More importantly, in treating post-Soviet conspiracy as “art” Borenstein highlights the internal logic of psychoanalytic *enjoyment* within it (p. 41), and this point is pertinent for understanding post-Soviet Russian culture, to the extent that it is still powered by what Serguei Oushakine has described as “aphasiac” subjects—masses of people both high and low who engage in bricolage to make sense of a social world without convincing bearings. The endlessly malleable “plot against Russia” is yet another way for all of those people to enjoy their post-Soviet symptom, and given the fact that recent Russian state propaganda is apparently all too happy to serve it up, we would have to conclude that from this vantage point the “post-Soviet” era is still not over. However, what if we were *not* to assume the “memetic” perspective? That would mean drawing genealogies of a different sort. Then the meaning of, say, “zombification,” would be explained not via 1990s tabloid panic about the Maria Devi Khristos cult, but via pre-Soviet and Soviet mainstream intelligentsia discourse about the *narod*. Or, to give another example, the anti-Ukraine rhetoric of the various Russian “Voldemort of state propaganda” (p. 208) would be explained in relation to its near verbatim repetition of someone like Vassily Shulgin, the turn-of-the-century monarchist who was known and admired among the late Soviet “Russian Party” (Mitrokhin), a powerful, institutionalized semi-public social milieu that quite directly—not just discursively—gave birth to progeny like the contemporary Russian media figures Kiselyov, Soloviev, et al. Borenstein does not go down this path, perhaps because focusing on the evolution of material institutions of political power in post-Soviet Russia might lead one to underestimate the enduring immaterial, aestheticized power of “post-truth,” whether in Putinist Russia or in Trumpist America. Lacan’s quip, “*les non-dupes errant*,” comes to mind. Still, Borenstein’s

study lays open the possibility of telling a different narrative, of swapping out the post-modern interpretive toolkit for one of ideology-critique, and I for one hope that the latter way of engaging with contemporary Russia is pursued further by scholars in our field.

Plots against Russia, then, is a study that both answers a number of questions about the post-Soviet Russian public sphere and signals other possible ways to interrogate its workings. As such, it should be read by all specialists in contemporary Russian culture. Moreover, I think this text needs to be read by scholars of *American* reactionary thought—both because of how well Borenstein’s subject matter reveals the circulation of contemporary reactionary discourse in and out of the United States, and also because, with the example of Russia, we can better see the stakes of this discourse. Last but not least, Borenstein’s text is so well written and entertaining that it will easily hold the attention of undergraduate students of post-Soviet Russian culture, history, and politics.

Pavel Khazanov, Rutgers University

Yavlinsky, Grigory. *The Putin System: An Opposing View*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. xxiv + 231 pp. \$28.00. ISBN 978-0-231-19030-5.

This book sets out to describe and analyze the nature of Russia’s current political system. There are quite a few such books. What makes this one stand out is the identity of the author. Grigory Yavlinsky once was one of Russia’s most prominent economists and politicians, although over the last fifteen years he and his Yabloko political party have been marginalized at the national level.

He still participates in politics, quixotically running for president in 2018 not because he could win but, he says here, to tell voters “what was really going on in the country” (p. 200). What is going on in the country, Yavlinsky states, is the construction and entrenchment of a political system he calls “peripheral authoritarianism” (the title of the 2015 Russian version of this book).

Yavlinsky’s argument is that Russia’s political system of peripheral authoritarianism is a consequence of the nature and global position of Russia’s “peripheral capitalism.” The Russian economic model, he writes, is based on natural resource exports and large state and state-affiliated companies, from which the bureaucracy extracts and distributes rents. Given this model and the size of the economy—less than 2 percent of the world economy—Russia is economically peripheral to the core developed industrial countries. He borrows the notion of a global “core” and “periphery” from Immanuel Wallerstein’s world system theory.

The book is divided into five chapters, in addition to a new preface and afterword that bring the story up to date. The three core chapters (chaps. 2–4) describe the past, present, and future of peripheral authoritarianism in Russia. Chapter 2 analyzes the building of an authoritarian political system starting, according to Yavlinsky, in the 1990s under Boris Yeltsin and continuing under Vladimir Putin. Moreover, under Putin Russia eventually pursued “a conservative, stagnation-prone type” of authoritarianism, as opposed to a modernizing form of it (p. 54).

Chapter 3 describes the functioning of this peripheral authoritarian system. Key components of authoritarian control include dominance of the media and the most significant sectors of the economy, such as natural resources and big banks. Elections are sham affairs, corruption is endemic, state institutions atrophy, and the regime promotes a conservative, anti-Western ideology to brainwash the public.

The future of authoritarianism in Russia, Yavlinsky suggests in chapter 4, looks fairly stable. Although he contends in the conclusion that Russia “is headed toward a dead end of