

these scholars' new materials and concepts would not only support the ideas Wojnowski presents in this book but also enlarge his reading audience by adding the fresh and original research of his international colleagues in the field of Ukrainian studies.

SERGEI I. ZHUK

Ball State University

Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism. By *Eliot Borenstein*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019. Pp. xviii+288. \$95.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper); \$11.99 (e-book).

Putin's Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century. By *Kate C. Langdon* and *Vladimir Tismaneanu*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. Pp. xii+248. \$84.99 (cloth); \$64.99 (e-book).

These books were published before the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Both, however, respond to the "Trump moment" in Western democracy precisely because they deal with post-Soviet Russia rather than America. The obvious explanation for this paradox is Trump's alleged collusion with Putin in securing his 2016 election victory. This review takes its lead from a second, related explanation: the uncanny play of sameness and difference prompted by the juxtaposition of Trump's America and Putin's Russia. Are they really so different? What does it take for liberal democracy to tip into fascistic authoritarianism, and how can it be protected against this possibility?

Such questions, whose importance is only bolstered by Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, invoke Trump's role in destabilizing liberal democratic identities by pointing to the demonic other grinning from the recesses of the national self. There are wider questions also driven by the identity/difference dynamic and likewise addressed by both books. How different was Soviet authoritarianism from Putin's? How unique are Trumpian populism and Putin's neo-authoritarianism? Overarching these conundrums is the ethical challenge that academics committed to open-ended investigation confront when researching regimes antithetical to that value: the obligation to continue dispassionately weighing the messy, empirical evidence, even when it might pollute with the taint of "difference" the message of universal condemnation that such regimes merit.

Sameness and difference also emerge when we compare these (or any) two books. Thus, both offer thought-provoking responses to the dilemmas outlined. They are similarly unusual in genre. *Putin's Totalitarian Democracy (PTD)* is a polemic that breaches scholarly etiquette. *Plots against Russia (PAR)*, via an emphasis on popular culture and discourse, applies theoretical paradigms that originate in the psychoanalytical branch of cultural studies to topics usually covered within political communication, serving as a fine exemplar of the incipient discipline of critical geopolitics. As Borenstein indicates, Trump's popular cultural origins render this frame appropriate for the "Trump" moment in Putin's Russia. Borenstein's playful style, which perfectly captures the mind-boggling absurdity of his material, contrasts with the earnest gravity of Langdon and Tismaneanu, from whom, however, their moral advocacy demands nothing less. Finally, conspiracy theory pervades both accounts. For *PTD* it is one of many deleterious practices of a serially reprobate regime, whereas in *PAR* it is a dominant discourse reflecting a broader fantasy mode that has moved from the peripheries to the center of Russian political culture.

Borenstein draws on the three orders of Lacanian psychoanalysis: Imaginary, those prefabricated images that enable us to (mis)identify our experiences; Symbolic, the sign systems collectively structuring our understanding of those experiences; and Real, the primal physicality that precedes all signification. Borenstein's version of the tripartite apparatus associates "entry into language" with the Imaginary, rather than the Symbolic, as in Lacan, but is no less effective for that. Thus, conspiracy, a "disease of the Imaginary" (20), insists on "mistaking the Imaginary for the Real . . . reading everyday life as allegory" (27). Conspiracists embrace "hyper-semiosis" in a world in which "all noise is construed as signal" (26).

Far from exceptionalizing Russian conspiratorialism, Borenstein presents Russia as a case study for conspiracy theorizing more generally (21). Alert to the link connecting the Imaginary (in which the outside world serves as multiple homogenized hypostases of the self) with essentialism, Borenstein proposes that, rather than a fixed attribute of a particular culture, conspiracy theories are the predicate for a "paranoid subject position" (45); essentializing Russian conspiratorialism risks merely duplicating it. This awareness of the pitfalls of abstract theorizing enables Borenstein to deploy his own theoretical model deftly to texts drawn from popular culture, mass-market literature, political tracts, philosophical treatises, and viral internet memes.

The deftness is apparent in the balance struck between the chronological and the thematic. Borenstein's opening chapter theorizes conspiracy as a subject position. His next chapter traces conspiratorial thinking's journey to the center of Russian political culture, from the recurring resonance of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, through the Cold War paranoia elicited by the mythical "Harvard Project" to its post-Soviet mutations. The identification of a Russian variant of the apocalyptic mindset underlying the Elders narrative in which the end of the world is, in Imaginary style, equated with that of Russia, introduces Borenstein's central theme: "Russophobia" as the Russian state's guiding narrative. Chapter 3's account of this narrative as a "super-conspiracy" facilitates the demonstration in chapter 4 that in various manifestations (politically correct, feminist, multiculturalist, pro-LGBT), liberal democracy elicits antipathy less on ideological grounds than because it is "being done to Russia."

Borenstein links Russophobia's super-conspiratorial function to its "ideological emptiness" and to Derridean deferral, such that each meaning of the term invokes another in an infinite series that constitutes Russia as both victim and explanation, generating the tautologous proposition that "Russophobes hate Russia because . . . it is Russia" (132). The antidote is the similarly empty, and Imaginary, concept of sovereignty which, for Russia, is bare and performative—a sovereignty that confuses social constructs of border and citizenship with their prediscursive foundations, and whose entire purpose is sovereignty itself (112–13).

Chapter 5 addresses Russian contempt for "zombified" media audiences as a "meta-conspiracy" in which television (the medium for disseminating conspiracy theories) is itself a conspiracy to stupefy viewers. Noting liberal dismissals of Russian audiences as *bydlo* (cattle) and the slang term for television—*zomboiashchik*—used by both sides, Borenstein equates zombification narratives with the politics of "affect" playing out across a world in which "ideological opponents are, *a priori*, zombified" and where "words are not trusted" (200).

The final chapter associates Russia's approach to the Ukraine crisis with its refusal to accept its neighbor as fully "other" or wholly of the "self." In Borenstein's scandalizing language, Ukraine's ambiguous status makes it "a poorly guarded . . . orifice that renders Russia vulnerable to all manner of unwanted penetration" (218). But the hilarity of this paradox reinforces the truth that since "all nations are consensual fantasies" (or, arguably,

a result of the Imaginary's subsumption by the Symbolic), it takes little for one nation to "break the laws of the fantasy genre" (207) and deny the sovereignty of another.

PAR's conclusion—"Making Russia Great Again"—returns us to a "home soil" shockingly "othered" when Trump shattered the laws of the related genre that binds the consensual fantasy of liberal democracy. The assertion that "Trump's relationship with American fascism is more symbiotic than Putin's connection to right-wing conspiracy mongers" (240) is as sobering as notions of "the Russia scandal" engulfing Trump as a "liberal counter-conspiracy" (241). By adumbrating the "rapprochement between America and Russia on the discursive level" (240), *PAR* compellingly showcases the capacity of humanities methods to illuminate the most intractable contradictions of our nondiscursive world.

PTD, too, rejects familiar preconceptions about its subject. It reminds us of our collective responsibility not merely to explain, but to confront authoritarianism. Langdon and Tismaneanu echo Borenstein in showing that it is the irrationality of authoritarian fantasies that renders them dangerous. They pose excellent questions about what propelled Putin to power; and why, despite his depredations, he enjoys widespread support.

PTD's seven chapters cover Putinism's origins, Putin's rise to power, the intellectual underpinnings of his "ideology," its political culture, educational, media, and religious buttresses and foreign policy implications. *PTD*'s dismissal of "top-down" accounts of a gangster-like anomaly visited upon an unsuspecting populace is commendable. The authors rightly underscore democracy's fragility, rejecting facile idealizations of Putin's domestic opponents that ignore the embeddedness within Russian society of the drivers of authoritarianism. They helpfully contextualize Russia's self-serving justifications for its incursions in Ukraine with reference to other imperialists (129).

However, the relentless polemic generates excesses attributable to an absence of the self-reflexivity with which Borenstein navigates the play of sameness and difference. *PTD* projects homogenizing identity onto a world of complexity (we are invited to believe that Russia is a spatiotemporal morass of authoritarian-craving sameness) yet perceives fundamental moral difference (between authors and subject, "true democracy" and fascist authoritarianism) where instead there are varying levels of analogy and collusion.

PTD's homogenizing moral crusade has consequences. It means that the "popular desires for authoritarianism" constituting the "culture that gives way to Putin" (6) are responsible for an undifferentiated tyrannical autocracy unifying all Russian history. It equalizes the relationships between the Kremlin, Russian elites and Putin, and between Soviet and post-Soviet authoritarianisms. Moreover, the assertion that "Putin's ideology," "the Kremlin's ideology," and even "Russian ideology" are "interchangeable" terms leads to the alarming proposition that "talking of . . . the Russian people when referring to the regime's crimes is not only more appropriate, but more accurate" (113).

The implications of such conflation include the realization that casual dismissals of a single "Russian media" whose reinforcement of Putin's "totalizing lie" renders it "subservient to the state" (157) erase from the scene the courageous journalists of *Novaya gazeta*, *Dozhd'* and *Mediazona*, not to mention extreme nationalist outlets like *Svoboda*. Meanwhile, dismissals of "the Russian people" as immoral dupes who fail to "wrack their brains to understand potential opposite perspectives" and "fall repeatedly" for the "Russian media's deceptions" (159) replicate the Kremlin's own dehumanizing mindset. Tellingly, any scholar who dares to contradict *PTD*'s uncompromising narrative is angrily berated as "preposterous," "ridiculous," "laughable," and "pathetic."

The purifying "sameness" of this totalizing account is sustainable if those who introduce complexity into the picture are ignored. Thus, there is no acknowledgment of Greene's and Robertson's rigorous empirical analysis (replaced in *PTD* by scattered authorial anecdotes), revealing that, despite the consensus he co-constructed with his

electorate, Putin's grip on power is fragile.¹ Galeotti's nuanced demolition of the "Putin as totalitarian" narrative goes unmentioned.²

The most troubling conflation is that of the metaphorical notion that Putin has "murdered the individuality . . . of his citizens" with the actual genocides of Hitler and Stalin (230), particularly as we are made to wait until page 230 to be told that "as with the term 'fascism,' the definition of 'totalitarianism' is beyond the scope of this text." Without definitions, the authors resort to selective lists of shared attributes, and circumlocutions maintaining that, to validate their theory, "there is no need to . . . prove totalitarianism in every instance" (232).

Similar issues arise with efforts to pin to Putin an identifiable ideology while acknowledging that this ideology "is a . . . deliberately inchoate . . . conglomerate" (113). When we read that "the . . . outright paradoxes that result from the combination of so many -isms do not dilute or negate Putinism" (98), we are reminded of the tautologous, Imaginary logic of anti-Russophobes: "Putin is a Putinist . . . because he is Putin."

The presentation of Putin as the quintessence of a universalized, yet undefined, totalitarianism is driven by a mishandling of the sameness/difference dynamic that leads to him being posited as cause rather than symptom of right-wing populism; he is accused of "reawakening [Europe's] inner demons" (238). As Trumpism revealed, xenophobic hatred and disinformation in liberal democracies owe more to local conditions than they do to Putin's rag-tag army of ineffectual internet trolls.³

Nonetheless, *PTD*'s bracing certitude forces adherents to liberal democratic values of impartiality to defend those values against the accusation that, in certain contexts, their overzealous pursuit diminishes their moral power. The tension is captured in Naval'nyi's recent prison sentence, following mass protests by brave supporters throughout Russia: a turn of events that simultaneously confirms and negates *PTD*'s message.

With neither Trump nor Putin nor Naval'nyi truly vanquished, with Russia's war on Ukraine still raging, and with the fantastical confusion of identities generated by their encounter deepening, the debates engendered by *PAR* and *PTD* will continue to matter indefinitely.

STEPHEN HUTCHINGS

University of Manchester

¹ Samuel Greene and Graeme Robertson, *Putin vs. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven, CT, 2019).

² Mark Galeotti, *We Need to Talk about Putin* (London, 2019).

³ Yochai Benkler, "The Russians Didn't Swing the 2016 Election to Trump. But Fox News Might Have," *New York Times*, October 24, 2018.