

## "Truth" and Fiction: Conspiracy Theories in Eastern European Culture and Literature

Deutschmann, Peter (Ed.); Herlth, Jens (Ed.); Woldan, Alois (Ed.)

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Peter Deutschmann,  
Jens Herlth,  
Alois Woldan (eds.)

# “TRUTH” AND FICTION

Conspiracy Theories  
in Eastern European Culture  
and Literature

[transcript] Culture & Theory

Peter Deutschmann, Jens Herlth, Alois Woldan (eds.)  
"Truth" and Fiction

**Peter Deutschmann** (PhD), born in 1968, is full professor of Slavic literatures and cultures at the University of Salzburg, Austria. His main fields of research include Russian and Czech literature.

**Jens Herlth** (PhD), born in 1971, is full professor of Slavic literatures at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. His research interests include Polish intellectual history, Russian and Polish literature in the context of the history of ideas, and the relationship between literature and the social sciences.

**Alois Woldan** (PhD), born in 1954, is full professor of Slavic literatures at the University of Vienna, Austria. His fields of research are Polish and Ukrainian literature, comparative Slavic literature and literary life in Austrian Galicia.

Peter Deutschmann, Jens Herlth, Alois Woldan (eds.)

## **“Truth” and Fiction**

Conspiracy Theories in Eastern European Culture and Literature

**[transcript]**

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## Introduction

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In 2020, and in light of the beginning of the third decade, the current situation in the world seems increasingly shaped by anxiety, mistrust and a cutback in international cooperation between nation states and political and economic associations. This reminds one of the situation of the Cold War, when the atmosphere was heavily loaded with mutual accusations and suspicion. Oppositional groups were often blamed for secretly supporting the political enemy on the other side of the Iron Curtain, be it the United States or the Soviet Union.

A very similar constellation can be discerned today: the Russian government accuses non-governmental organizations of being sponsored by foreign powers and hinders their activities. Since 2012, organizations that pursue, or are considered to be pursuing, “political activities” and which receive funding from abroad are required to be registered and labelled as “foreign agents.” Although the Russian legislation rejects any comparison of this administrative term with Soviet times, its semantics sufficiently suggest that the “foreign agent” organisation does not act out of an intrinsic motivation, but for another interest, one that “stands” behind and supports it.

On the other side, supporters of the opposition tend to claim that anybody who holds a more or less prominent position and openly expresses an understanding of the Russian government’s viewpoints “is on Putin’s payroll.” The underlying concept of such legal arrangements or rhetorical figures of speech is pertinent to the idea of conspiracy which implies that actions or utterances are not simply performed straightforwardly; instead, real or relevant interests are concealed “behind” them. The mode of conspiracy-thinking is shaped by fundamental dualities, which may be characterized by oppositions such as open/secret, overt/covert, official/unofficial, simulated/real, dissimulating/sincere, phenomenological/ontological, illusive/real or even fictitious/factual.

With respect to conspiracies and conspiracy thinking (i.e., conspiracy theory), though, these distinctions are made in the world of human action and behaviour or, to put it more generally, in the world of culture. Its roots reach into the

fundamental human condition of the opacity of minds and the restrictions of embodied knowledge. Humans neither never fully know what others have in mind nor are they able to obtain knowledge about actions that happened in another time and in another place. This is especially evident in drama and tragedy—to name but a few: Corneille’s *Cinna*, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Goethe’s *Torquato Tasso*, Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov*—have drawn on this irreducible insecurity about the intentionality of others which is the precondition that, firstly, conspiracies can be planned and carried out, and that, secondly, a conspiratorial state of mind can speculate endlessly about the “real” meaning of other people’s actions.

Conspiratorial thinking comes close to paranoia:<sup>1</sup> Although this way of thinking often seems highly irrational and “mad” in the truest sense of the word—especially in severe clinical cases of individual psychopathology—its manifestations in the world of culture are often not that easy to rebut, for reasons of a lack of clear evidence. Think about the most notorious conspiracy theory emanated in Eastern Europe: for ordinary people it was impossible to determine whether or not the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*<sup>2</sup> were authentic. Even after their unambiguous falsification, there are still people nowadays—especially in Arabic countries—who believe in the probability of a Jewish plot to obtain control over the world. These convictions are most likely grounded in deep anti-Semitic attitudes that are present in these cultures, but the impossibility of an inspection of the situation described—i.e., the blatantly absurd, but at the same time unverifiable assumption that once, in days gone by, a world-council of Jews met secretly to discuss matters of how to seize power and control mankind—significantly contributes to the persistence of such beliefs.

Other than conspiracy theories, conspiracies themselves are also a means of struggle against an adversary and are conducted secretly. The deployment of conspiracies often indicates an imbalance in power-relations in the social sphere

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- 1 The concatenation of ideology, conspiracy theory and paranoia was introduced in the analysis of political culture by Richard Hofstadter in essays written as early as the 1950s and which were published cumulatively in Hofstadter 1965. For a recent critical appraisal of Hofstadter’s assessments see Boltanski 2012: 266–73.
  - 2 Although it has long been proven that the *Protocols* are not authentic, the accounts of their fabrication and dissemination are not yet fully known and themselves rely on invention and imagination – see the critical account in Hagemeister 2008. There are also other English translations of the title of the *Protocols* such as *The Protocols of the Meetings of the Learned Elders of Zion* or *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*; in this volume, though, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is used.

in which the conspiratorial plot takes place; at the same time, their secrecy implies that either the sought-for goal, or the means applied, will not be met with broad acceptance, especially not from the side which is the target of the conspiracy. Partitioned Poland is a prominent example of a culture of conspiracy. Polish anticolonial insurgency discourse developed on the basis of the question of conspiracy, particularly in the years after the Napoleonic Wars and until the early 1860s: Is plotting a feasible, effective and morally justified means of political action? Would the use of conspiracy in the political struggle leave a moral stain on Polish society and, therefore, would overt insurrection—although this was probably more easy to subdue—not be a more noble means of pursuing the interests of the nation?

When one takes a look at history, especially at the history of Eastern Europe, one may be tempted to see a correlation between societies' political constitution and the implementation of conspiratorial strategies in the political struggle: the more restrictive the access to power and to the throne, and the more despotic the exercise of power on the society, the more likely people are to resort to plotting and to conspiratorial activities. Examples extend back to the reign of Ivan IV ("the Terrible") in the sixteenth century, to the political upheaval in the Russian and Ottoman empires throughout the nineteenth century until the end of World War I: the Decembrists in the aftermath of the Russian war against Napoleon, the insurrections in Poland in 1830–31 and 1863–64. The Poles invented *wallenrodism*, based on a poem by Mickiewicz, as a strategy of undermining Russia's overwhelming power. The Russian administration, for its part, discovered harmless associations of young scholars like the Vilnius "Philomates and Philarets" of 1823 or the Kievan "Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood" of 1847 to be politically dangerous conspirations. The revolutionary terrorism under the tsars Alexander II, Alexander III and Nicholas II and the movements of the Black Hand and Young Bosnia would not have been possible without clandestine forms of organization that could be considered conspiratorial. As soon as the political system allows for legal access to power, then conspiratorial activities often lose their relevance and recede from the political scene.

Along with conspiracy itself, conspiracy *theory* can serve as a political means as well. The relation of the former to the latter corresponds to the opposition of secrecy and plainness or concealment and bluntness. Whereas conspiracies have to be prepared secretly for the sake of them not being revealed, conspiracy theories are discourses that strive for acceptance and social dissemination. Their realm is publicity, rather than secrecy—conspiracy theories take aim at mass-media in order to be spread more swiftly. Communication is necessary for conspiring, certainly, but it still has to remain undercover and must not es-

cape the control of the conspirators who anxiously avoid publicity by applying techniques of encryption and exclusivity.

The strong reliance on publicity and significant dissemination leads to an analogy that might seem surprising at first glance—historically, conspiracy theories were an important tool in the struggle against the authorities, the church, the court and against other powerful institutions in late modern Europe.<sup>3</sup> In a way, the exposure of conspiracies—i.e., the elaboration of theories serving to bring *real* intentions and concealed interests behind political actions to light—was a crucial goal of the Enlightenment. It is no accident that many conspiratorial ideas that persist to this very day (the struggle against alleged plots organized by the Illuminati, the Jesuits, the Freemasons, the Jews, or the Judeo-Masons...) emerged at a time at which the legitimacy of the political and religious authorities of ancient regime Europa were being questioned.

Conversely, the French Revolution itself was seen as the work of a conspiracy by many traditionalist intellectuals.<sup>4</sup> The printing press was certainly a powerful instrument in this context. It allowed for campaigns to be launched that reached large audiences. However, one crucial feature of conspiracy theories made itself felt: the high productivity of the conspiratorial mode of thought and its inability to limit itself. More often than not, the conspiracies one could read about in brochures, pamphlets or newspapers or hear about in gossip and talk of the town were not real, but made up—these were no longer real conspiracies, but “conspiracy theories” in the contemporary, pejorative and disqualifying sense of the term.<sup>5</sup>

The conceptual link between conspiracy and conspiracy theories is, therefore, not just substantiated by the fact of real conspiracies that boost the suspicion that secret forces lurk behind any social phenomenon and influence its trajectory.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, conspiracies and conspiracy discourse are closely entwined: for instance, many people were accused of taking part in huge anti-Soviet activities during the ill-famed Stalinist trials of the late 1920s and the 1930s: these charges were deliberately disseminated by the authorities and significantly contributed to a Soviet culture of conspiracy that pervaded all spheres

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3 See the chapter “Verschwörungstheorien der Aufklärung” in Klausnitzer 2007: 179–249.

4 Cf. Hofman 1993.

5 Cf. “Une théorie du complot est une théorie non seulement fausse mais dangereuse. Une théorie paranoïaque” – Boltanski 2012: 274.

6 This connection is too narrow and does not fully capture the differences between conspiracies and conspiracy theories – see Johannsen/Röhl 2010.

of society.<sup>7</sup> Openly encouraged suspicion of ubiquitous conspiracy was expected to contribute to the reduction of privacy and secrecy, which is vital for real conspiracy. Conspiracy discourse was systematically introduced in order to raise anxiety and cautiousness, on the one hand, and to strengthen belief in revealed conspiracies (no matter how far-fetched and absurd the accusations might have been) on the other. So, by virtue of the necessary publicity, conspiracy theories are closer to the official sphere, even being endorsed thereby, whereas conspiracies are never organized before anybody's eyes (or they are dissimulated if they are carried out openly).<sup>8</sup>

Conspiracy theories can be considered in terms of a specific version of the "world" (or at least, of some social phenomenon) and as manifestations of discourse (understood here in its Foucauldian sense as socially relevant utterances which bear a close relation to institutions of knowledge and power and with particular truth claims). As such, they are highly indicative of issues and conditions in societies and cultures. The political situation in contemporary Poland, for example, significantly relates to interpretations and versions of the airplane disaster that took place in Smolensk in April 2010, when a Polish Air Force aircraft crashed due to a failed landing attempt. 96 people, among them the president and his wife, alongside other representatives of Poland's elite, fell victim to the crash. Many people in Poland adhere to the opinion that the crash was concocted by Russian secret service; some even suspect Donald Tusk, then prime-minister, to have had a hand in it. Cultural memory is particularly relevant in the emergence of this belief: manifold historical experiences, many of them lying not that far in the past as the time of the partitions, seem to have led to an almost endemic mistrust of Russia among the Polish people. The plane's passengers were on the way to a remembrance ceremony in Katyń, a place where the NKVD had killed about 4,000 detained Polish officers, representatives of the military elite of inter-war Poland in early 1940. The truth about what had happened in Katyń was carefully hidden from the public, a fact that probably paved the way for the immediate emergence of conspiracy theories after the fatal event and during the period of communist rule in Poland. Although the speculations about a malicious Russian attack constantly point out some more or less astonishing details in the accounts of the crash, they lack either substantial factual evidence or a convincing motive for such a violent operation on the part of Russia's secret services. It

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7 For a convincing functionalist analysis of the officially endorsed conspiracy thinking in the Soviet Union, see Rittersporn 2001 and as well Dentith 2014: 85–90.

8 For a typology based on the opposition of secrecy/non-secrecy; see also Barkun 2003: 4–5.

is safe to say that the suspicion fell on Russia for historical reasons. Given the complicated history of Polish-Russian relations and the symbolic density of the circumstances—members of the Polish elite fall victim to a catastrophe in the immediate vicinity of the spot where thousands of Polish prisoners of war had been executed seven decades ago, a crime ordered by Soviet authorities that had been officially abnegated for decades—it would, in fact, have been rather surprising had this event *not* given rise to conspiracy theories.

Both conspiracies and conspiracy discourse induce remarkable mistrust in social and political communication. When one takes for granted that other people are substantially non-transparent, at least in their intentions and private thoughts, then the mere idea of hidden motives and aspirations easily leads into cautious reservations, disbelief and distrust. Over time the other person easily falls under the general suspicion of harbouring evil intentions. One extreme consequence of this insecurity and mistrust is that it can lead to paranoia, a mental disorder which significantly correlates with social circumstances and positions. Those occupying leading positions within a group or society often guess the enviousness of the people that surround them and suspect latent conspiracy which is directed against them (most peculiarly, historical drama develops this motif). At lower positions, people who have some knowledge of secret services and their practices are more inclined to fear falseness on behalf of others or to fear their uncandid treason.

A frequent *topos* that is encountered in the analysis of conspiracy theories is information complexity: one might feel inclined to resort to “easy” models of explanation when confronted with the impossibility of establishing causal relations or sound explanations for particular events. A more or less common model is the identification of someone who might be—in the long run—responsible for the social *explicandum*. This desire for an explanation is understandable; it fuels scientific or scholarly accounts of reality as well as conspiracy thinking. Reductiveness is not a feature to be encountered solely in conspiracy thinking. Given the complexity of the world, any explanation cannot but reduce this complexity in relation to the principles of methodology and disciplinary practice.

Conspiracy theories do not significantly differ from other modes of explanation, be they scientific or not, with regard to complexity and its necessary reduction. Therefore, the difference cannot be discerned either in the motives—the urge to make sense of an event or a sequence of events—or simply in the propositions given as explanations. A cardinal feature that allows for the discrimination of conspiracy theories lies in another direction: whereas scientific explanations should be congruent with methods and a disciplinary framework, conspiracy theories usually do not dwell on principles and methodology; instead, they put



their explanations at the fore. Whereas science is—with regard to its objects—highly self-referential, conspiracy thinking is nothing but hetero-referential. Its truth is always “out there” as something more or less obvious: conspiracy theories usually only refer to data, co-occurrences, causal relations and “revealed” links, thereby creating the illusion of careful empirical examination and rational judging, where the necessity of elaborating on the methodology is concerned. Apart from that, the discourse of conspiracy theory refrains from revealing the theoretical framework informing it. Scholarly explanations do not usually hesitate to pay tribute to their sources and inspirations, something which would often be too embarrassing for the promoters of conspiracy-thinking (‘As our *premise* we have taken an evil force behind many phenomena’). The basic assumptions behind the “theory” are not reflected upon at all; instead, the “investigation” always arrives at the detection of conspiracies.

Contrary to its name, a conspiracy theory is not a theory in a scientific or even scholarly sense, but rather a sort of story or narrative pretending to explain certain affairs in another way than official accounts do. On behalf of their narratedness, conspiracy theories (manifesting themselves in—nowadays often multimedia—narratives) are greatly interesting to literary scholars, especially for narratology. The relevancy of conspiracy theory for scholars of literature must not be confused with fictionality as a cardinal feature of literary texts. Conspiracy theories claim to be truthful and authentic; it would be misleading, therefore, to classify them as fictitious from the outset. The problem resides rather in finding a “demarcation line permitting to distinguish ... real conspiracies”—and their respective description or “theory”—from “imaginary” ones.<sup>9</sup> One may arrive at such a distinction after an examination of the conspiracy story narrated.<sup>10</sup> However, immediately qualifying conspiracy narratives as a kind of fiction is hardly a proper approach to such an astonishing and manifold cultural phenomenon. Moreover, proving or disproving an account of events often demands meticulous work and deliberation; in many cases it is impossible to definitively determine whether a given conspiracy theory is true or not.

Beyond a rigid discrimination of true and false (resp. fictitious) “stories,” the examination of conspiracy narratives provides access to a society’s problems, expectations and worries. Although their factual basis is most often rather questionable, if not outright nonexistent, conspiracy narratives remain a highly instructive indicator for the state of public discourse and collective imagination in

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9 Boltanski 2012: 280.

10 Most likely, a part of the conspiracy story indeed refers to real persons and events whereas a more or less great part of the story is fictitious.

a given society. In this respect they are similar to literature and the literary imagination which, free from the constraints of referentiality and truth, can still refer to real historical events and real social conditions. At least this would be the case for the mimetically oriented poetics of “realist” fiction—the events narrated have to be “probable.” “Probability,” whether we like it or not, is also a prerequisite for the success of conspiracy theories.

Literary fiction, in particular, qualifies for the depiction and deployment of both conspiracies and conspiracy discourse: discharged from the constraints of many other genres of discourse, literary discourse can also construct and represent plots (e.g., in drama or narratives). Literature can demonstrate ways of human reasoning and its appropriateness to the “world” (through fictitious introspection into the character’s minds and by describing an entire situation from a distanced and omniscient vantage point as well). Furthermore, the act of reading literary fiction, or even poetry, generally bears some similarities to reading and interpreting the world in a conspiratological way: there is some obvious “first-hand” meaning, but is there also not another hidden second (or third) meaning behind these erratic signifiers? Just as readers of a (literary) text often speculate about its more or less plausible interpretations, so too do people often wonder about whether particular phenomena could also be assessed in other ways than from the ordinary viewpoint.

For these reasons, this volume contains theoretical texts on conspiracies as it deals with accounts of Eastern European social and political issues that usually pass for conspiracy narratives. Although the textuality of conspiracy theories and narrative accounts of conspiracies converge in some respects, they must not be confounded, given that in the first case truth claims are made, whereas literary discourse generally refrains from the pretention of explaining the states of affairs in the “real” world. The chapters of this book shed some light on a few more or less prominent cases of conspiracies and conspiracy thinking in Eastern Europe. They do so from a point of view that does not generally aim to solve the puzzles of a fragmented reality, but instead by observing the people who are (pre-)occupied with the puzzles and the texts produced thereby.

Peter Deutschmann/Jens Herlth/Alois Woldan

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# Conspiracy Theories, Discourse Analysis and Narratology

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*Peter Deutschmann*

## **Keywords**

narratology; discourse analysis; fictionality; mass media; systems theory

One very common and understandable approach can be discerned when talking about conspiracy theories in terms of the following questions: how can it be that so many conspiracy theories swirl around? Why do so many people believe in them? Aren't there any means through which to confine their influence in modern societies? In itself, this approach already presupposes that it is possible to delineate between factual accounts of events that take place in the world and erroneous versions spread through conspiracy theories. Although it is highly desirable to distinguish between true and false statements, it is not at all easy to do so. This is why conspiracy versions of events arouse so much interest. Conspiracy theories propose alternative versions which also vie for plausibility in relation to already existing versions of how certain phenomena or events probably happened.<sup>1</sup> Popular books on conspiracy theories are often structured by juxtaposing different stories: widely-accepted official accounts are confronted with conspiracy versions of the same phenomena.<sup>2</sup> More or less complex chains of events are represented in the form of "tellable" stories for the general public, making the different accounts of events resemble a contest of stories. The narrative nature of

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1 As Eva Horn and Anson Rabinbach put it, in a short introduction to the proximity of conspiracy theories and fiction, "[c]onspiracy theories take the opacity of reality as a point of departure to venture on an alternative interpretation about the order of things." – Horn/Rabinbach 2008: 6.

2 E.g., Southwell/Twist 2004.

the discourse on conspiracies therefore allows for a narratological approach which discusses both the most important aspects of the conspiracy narratives and their discursive environment.

## Two Case Stories

According to a binary dichotomy of conspiracy theories,<sup>3</sup> there are two kinds of theory: cynical and kynical ones (the former being actively directed at certain groups which are being blamed for an evil, while the latter are musings about the possible reasons for the deplorable state of affairs).<sup>4</sup> For instance, speculations about the erratic oscillations of prices belong to the group of kynical theories, given that they seek explanations for an economic misery. Yet the distinction is not as sharp as it might first appear. Take, for example, the linking of the oil price development and international politics which Aleksandr Etkind and Ilya Yablokov have referred to in a paper on the contemporary Russian administration's inclination towards conspiratological thinking.<sup>5</sup> Russia's economic dependency on oil and gas exports provides fertile soil for conspiracy theories. The ruble exchange rate's obvious dependency on the international price of a barrel of oil inevitably leads to readily voiced speculations about secret agreements between international stakeholders who might want to weaken Russia's economy by deliberately keeping oil and gas prices low. When representatives of the Russian political elite speculate about the reasons for low prices on oil and gas, it is often difficult to determine whether they take a cynical or a kynical stance. For a classification as cynical one must qualify the fact that official statements by political leaders are always ideological (given that they not only yield an explanation alone, but also strive to hold onto power).<sup>6</sup> Although the same speculations about oil prices can also be made by an ordinary Russian citizen idly wondering

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3 Cf. Raab/Carbon/Muth 2017: 179–80 and 186–87.

4 The distinction goes back to Slavoj Žižek's use of a distinction made in Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983). Žižek considers that someone in power who knows that his ideological explanations are wrong, but stills applies them without admitting their falsity, is a cynical person. A kynical person instead ironically points out the false ideology of the powers that be; cf. Žižek 1989: 29.

5 Etkind/Yablokov 2017.

6 Among the many different meanings of "ideology," I am referring here to a concept of ideology as a complex of uttered ideas serving the legitimization of the powers that be; cf. Eagleton 1993: 7.

about the decline of his salary's purchasing power (which would justify a classification as cynical), the simple fact that a high-ranked person spreads such speculations via the media (and, in so doing, at the same time denies any responsibility for Russia's economic development) makes it a cynical form of conspiracy theory.

The fluctuations and oscillations of the prices of important goods are always subject to certain erratic elements. Economic theory can describe some basic interrelations and influences, but it cannot reliably forecast price developments. The opacity of markets excites fantasies about forces operating in the dark, exerting secret influence and bargaining for the sake of personal gain.<sup>7</sup> The most curious fantasy pertaining to power and influence on the world economy, one which Etkind and Yablokov mention in their article, was the one propagated by Vladimir Yakunin, a former director of the Russian Railways who now holds a chair at the Department of State Policy at MGU, the Moscow State University.<sup>8</sup> In a lecture he gave there in 2012, Yakunin retold the already retold story of an unnamed leading European politician<sup>9</sup> who maintains that he had a meeting with eight people on the top floor of the Empire State Building during which he was asked for his evaluation of the economic perspectives of various European countries. They then had dinner and the anonymous politician claimed that after this dinner he witnessed how the people he had been speaking to contacted 150 fi-

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7 One should keep in mind that Karl Popper refutes a "conspiracy theory of society" (in his understanding this is a theory which explains historical phenomena mainly by referring to the intentions of persons involved) by describing simple market mechanisms: If someone demands an item, he/she inevitably and unwillingly raises the price of the demanded good; if someone offers an item, then he/she lowers the market value of it (cf. Popper 2006: 14). Popper suggests that the intentions of individuals cannot significantly exercise influence on the prices—he discusses simple small markets (selling and buying real estate in one village), but his idea can be extended to complicated markets based on the circumstances that it would be even more difficult to realize one's intentions on complex markets. Popper's criticism of the idea that history is the result of the realization of purposeful intentions is also resumed in Butter 2018: 40–42.

8 Etkind/Yablokov 2017: 79–80.

9 The sequence of narrators is as follows: the leader ("premier") of a large European state spoke about his experience at the top of the Empire State Building to a diplomat and the diplomat told it to Yakunin who tells it to the audience at Moscow University and on the internet.

nancial institutions and ordered manipulative transactions amounting to 200 billion dollars.

To substantiate the story he has just retold, Vladimir Yakunin added that he himself had also once been to this location at the top of the Empire State Building, “admittedly on another occasion.”<sup>10</sup> This homodiegetic addition to a very curious story, of course, makes it more authentic than a mere repetition of a story about the meeting of the high-finance elite.

While Yakunin’s tale about the central hub of international financial power being located at the top of the Empire State Building is remarkable, for indicating that conspiracy stories are told and spread by people very close to Russia’s political elite, another reference in Etkind and Yablokov’s paper is even closer to the subject of conspiracy discourse and narratology. This “amazing case,” as Etkind/Yablokov describe it,<sup>11</sup> is related to mind reading. In 2006, one major of the Russian secret service, the FSB, stated in an interview that the unit he commanded at the FSB possessed a new technology which made it possible to read other people’s minds and ideas. The technology is said to have been applied to George Bush Sr., as well as to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Probing into Mrs. Albright’s mind, the FSB claimed to have read that she thoroughly disliked Russia’s ownership of territories so exorbitantly rich in natural resources.<sup>12</sup>

### Three Dimensions of Stories

In pursuing a discussion of stories told within conspiracy discourses, one should refrain from judging conspiracy narratives as totally wrong or misleading, but instead simply treat them as narratives whose ontological status—true, false, or fictitious—is often unclear, at least initially when confronted with such a story. The two stories about Russia’s political elite not only indicate a certain bias amongst Russian politicians towards conspiracy theories, they also allow some insight into the close relationship between conspiracy narratives and literary discourse.

This proximity can be illustrated from three different perspectives which will each be discussed in detail in the following sections:

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10 «правда, по другому поводу» – “Novyi mirovoi klass i vyzovy chelovechestva,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OvqfkCyMMc> (ca. 8:00–11:30).

11 Cf. Etkind/Yablokov 2017: 63.

12 <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/06/22/64636-patrushev-i-olbrayt-kak-fraza-kremlevskih-trolley-stala-simvolom-very-kremlevskoy-elity>



- textual-narratological/syntactical/formal;
- referential/semantic;
- pragmatic (encompassing social aspects of communication and discourse).

### **Textual-Narratological/Syntactical/Formal Perspectives**

Conspiracy narratives usually do not have obvious textual-narratological markers that would allow for them to be identified as fiction;<sup>13</sup> their authors avoid markers of fictionality, instead they prefer text types which are typical for factual (world-imaging) texts. The textual-narratological perspective is not particularly relevant to conspiracy narratives, but the following two perspectives—referential and pragmatic—are.

### **Referential/Semantic Perspectives**

Usually, conspiracy narratives claim to be factual narratives and, as such, they are to be considered in terms of the distinction between truth and falsehood.<sup>14</sup> Whereas fiction or fictitious narratives can be described as explicitly and deliberately conveying untrue statements without any deceptive intention, factual narratives can be seen as world-imaging narratives, which is to say that they are ascertained to be true or false with direct reference to the real world.<sup>15</sup>

Factual discourse necessarily involves truth claims consisting, as it does, of statements about the world. However, due to their very nature, conspiracy narratives which are not true cannot simply be dismissed as lies, especially when we take into consideration the extent to which the narrators seem to believe in them;

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13 According to Nickel-Bacon/Groeben/Schreier, some textual markers indicating fictionality include, e.g., reported inner speech or an obvious literary (“overstructured”) organization of the text; cf. Nickel-Bacon/Groeben/Schreier 2000: 396.

14 The case of conspiracy narratives that are clearly paratextually marked as fiction is not of interest here.

15 “World-imaging texts as representations of the actual world are subject to truth-valuation; their statements can be judged true or false. Fictional texts are outside truth-valuation; their sentences are neither true nor false.” – Doležel 1998: 24, cf. as well Gorman 2005: 163.

they ought, in fact, to be judged as erroneous statements.<sup>16</sup> Usually, the mental state of the person supplying the text should not be decisive when judging upon the fictionality or factuality of a text (given that it cannot be accessed in an objective way). Similarly, after considering a narrative as a world-imaging text, one should better concentrate on the measure of accuracy and leave speculations about the mental states of the narrators aside. However, the promulgations of truthfulness and degree of sincerity which accompany the narration remain relevant.

With world-imaging stories, people assume that the narrator believes what he or she is saying and that he/she bears responsibility for the accuracy or truth of the story told. An argument may arise pertaining to the truth claims of the specific narrative in question, of course.

What exactly are the semantic criteria according to which narratives can be classified as either fact or fiction? Promulgators of conspiracy narratives strive to prove the story in question with recourse to all kinds of material and references. On the semantic level, it is not easy to distinguish proper accounts of events from the false ones.<sup>17</sup> Conspiracy narratives do not usually venture too far into

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16 Due to their truth claims, conspiracy stories should best not be compared with fiction. Because of this wrong conception Horn/Rabinbach suggest that “*conspiracy theory, like novels, is a form of fiction* [sic! my emphasis], but unlike most serious fiction, it is devoid of any reflexive insight into its own fictionality.” – Horn/Rabinbach 2008: 6. If one treats conspiracy stories not as fictional, but as factual discourse, such specifications are not necessary at all. More accurate distinctions also outline the differences between fiction and factual discourse: “The conditions for satisfying the criteria of factual narrative are semantic: a factual narrative is either true or false. Even if it is willfully false (as is the case if it is a lie), what determines its truth or its untruth is not its hidden pragmatic intention, but that which is in fact the case. The conditions for satisfying the criteria of fictional narrative are pragmatic: the truth claims a text would make if it (the same text, from the syntactic point of view) were a factual text (be the claims true or false) must be bracketed out.” – Schaeffer 2014: 191. The distinction factual/fictional, thus, is decisive for the attitude towards a represented narrative, but the distinction itself is usually neither made from the perspective of formal/syntactical considerations, nor is it made from the semantic perspective, but it is guided by pragmatic decisions which can take both the formal and the semantical perspectives into account.

17 There are only very few, rather marginal, narratives in which it is more or less obvious that the story told must be fictional or wrong, such as David Icke’s assertion that pow-

the world of fantasy, which makes it far harder to determine their truth. Yakinin's story about the top floor of the Empire State Building, as the hub of international financial power, is hard to disprove; on the basis of probability, it would be difficult to either verify or falsify the possible truth of his account. Yet the very notion of mind reading already pushes the story of the FSB major into the realms of the untruthful, to the extent that the *Novaia Gazeta*, which printed the interview, treats the story sarcastically.

One should also take into account that people usually inform each other about factual events: an expectation of "true" messages is the "default" attitude towards communication; deviations are usually explicitly marked (as dreams, possibilities, fiction and the like).<sup>18</sup> On the level of "semantics," then, one usually needs a more thorough and detailed knowledge of what actually happened. One solution to this problem would be to gather further information through intense research and deeper inquiry. This solution, however, often leads to further problems, such as a surplus of data and a mass of information being open to a wide range of interpretations and, as such, not able to help to clarify anything. Don DeLillo's Kennedy-assassination novel, *Libra*, provides a good depiction of the notion of data surplus and the ensuing impossibility of solving the puzzle at hand. The fictitious character Nicolas Branch is overwhelmed by the amount of information that he has to deal with when examining the case of JFK's murder.<sup>19</sup>

Interesting conspiracy stories usually have some element of credible probability. The general public cannot indulge in minute verification processes on the amount of their truthfulness, so the "ordinary reader" of a story—which is to say, average persons not directly involved in the events, but informed by the media—cannot do anything but compare the story to their own knowledge of the world; this often consists not only of direct or firsthand information, but also of works of fiction, such as crime novels, films and the like.<sup>20</sup> The interpretation and classification of narratives—whether they are truthful or not, or whether they are only possible or actually real—rest partly on the recipient's experience with literary texts or "realistic" fiction in general. With respect to this, modes of reception which have been acquired from fictional texts might also play a significant role, e.g., a predisposition for believing in fictional representations—one should think of the capability of imagining that one thing is, at the same time, something dif-

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erful reptiles from outer space live in the caverns inside the Earth and transform their shape from reptilian to human and back again.

18 Zipfel 2014: 100–01.

19 Cf. DeLillo 1988: 300–01 and 442–43.

20 Cf. Boltanski 2013: 392–95.

ferent (a special form of a cloud is an animal or a face). The subsequent immersion into fictional worlds enhances the belief in the stories told, no matter whether they are fictional or factual. When “make believe” can be regarded as an essential operation for the production and reception of fiction,<sup>21</sup> then the familiarity with this operation makes it easier to believe stories towards which disbelief should better not be suspended willingly.

In the interesting cases of conspiracy narrative, then, there are not usually any obvious semantic traits which would enable the recipient to categorize the postulated narrative as false or fictitious. Analyses that could verify or falsify the narrative are usually complex; these analyses cannot normally be conducted by the general public. As a result of these obstacles, the general public can only, ultimately, either believe or not believe the proffered story.<sup>22</sup>

## Pragmatic Perspectives

As we have seen in the case of conspiracy theories, textual-narratological and semantic perspectives on conspiracy narratives tend not to provide sufficient evidence for ascertaining the truthfulness or fictionality of a story. This is no great surprise insofar as the texts in question are not intended to be unequivocally qualifiable. Instead, they always contain a level of intentional ambiguity. Therefore, the pragmatic level is of major importance when it comes to judging a text and when delineating factual and fictional texts. In combination with aspects of the textual-narratological and the semantic levels, it is the pragmatic level at which the relevant decisions about the text’s character are made.<sup>23</sup> The participants engaging in a given communicative exchange have to take various aspects into account when trying to ascertain the truth or falsity of a given text, including both general aspects of the text and the message it conveys, as well as the situative context more generally. The recipient is confronted with paratextual information and with questions pertaining to the narrator and his reliability. Luc

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21 Cf. Bareis 2014: 51.

22 This position shall not deny the heroic educational efforts of authors who have worked on methods of how to dismantle conspiracy theories, such as Hepfer 2015 and Raab/Carbon/Muth 2017. Their mostly instructive suggestions serve as a remedy against many conspiracy stories; nevertheless, their main problem rests in the necessity of special training. Only then can the situation of “exposure” to stories, of various reliability, be tackled.

23 Cf. Nickel-Bacon/Groebe/Schreier 2000: 290.

Boltanski has analyzed letters to the editor of *Le Monde* with respect to particular markers of conspiracy postulations or markers of insanity. His analysis revealed that there were indeed pragmatic markers that allowed a more or less consensual identification of paranoid writers of conspiracy fantasies: e.g., when people described themselves as victims of a powerful group of conspirators that even went so far as to have recruited their close relatives, or when they boasted of their status using dubious titles,<sup>24</sup> there was usually hardly any doubt about the fantastic character of the stories told.<sup>25</sup>

By far the most intriguing aspects of conspiracies lie in their cultural embeddedness and in their potential to shape interpretative groups, cultures or subcultures. Conspiracy theories create a type of imagined communities comprised of all of the people who subscribe to a given narrative. This social process of creating groups that are united by their shared interpretation of a narrative helps to sharpen some important distinctions. Whereas conspiracies are clandestine actions directed against an enemy, conspiracy narratives are overt speech acts which create at least two groups: those who believe in the narrative and those skeptical non-believers who do not, whereby the very notion of a conspiracy theory implies that the plausibility of the narrative is inevitably hard to ascertain. As has been stated previously in relation to the interplay of fictional texts in the reception of world-imaging narratives, belief is of central importance when it comes to describing the reception of conspiracy stories because the interpretative process involves a significant amount of trust and belief: the addressees decide whether or not to believe a particular narrative. In most cases, it is hardly possible to verify the truth of the facts presented, so one simply has to rely on the narrator or on the media sources disseminating the narratives; pragmatic aspects, thus, are highly relevant in this respect.

This is where the problem of knowledge enters the field. Following Anton/Schetsche/Walter, societies contain both official/orthodox and heterodox “knowledge.” Orthodox knowledge is widely accepted and confirmed by the authorities and among leading media companies, whereas heterodox knowledge dwells in subcultures and in their media.<sup>26</sup> Conspiracy theories, in the ordinary sense, therefore belong to heterodox knowledge, which is rejected, discarded and disqualified by the official position. The position that conspiracy narratives take up

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24 When authors make pretentious use of academic titles, they try to obtain more acceptance; however, academic titles on book covers can often provoke suspicion and skepticism in people who are engaged in the academic field.

25 Cf. Boltanski 2013: 386–89.

26 Cf. Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2014: 14.

along the sliding scale between orthodox and heterodox can vary; heterodox knowledge may even become orthodox knowledge and vice versa.<sup>27</sup>

As has been stated previously, conspiracy narratives belong to factual discourse; to that end, they are closely intertwined with the various dimensions of discourse in general, especially with power relations on the one hand and with claims to truth on the other.<sup>28</sup> Conspiracy narratives often explicitly refer to both real and imagined power relations in societies; at the same time, though, they are also informed by these power relations, even though this is often overlooked, ignored or denied. Instead, the narrative claims to “tell the truth.” How can one best understand this denied relationship between discourse and power? First, it is worth noting that discourse always governs the scope of possible utterances: that which can be said in a given discourse does not always have to be true. The notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, for example, are still regarded by many people as proof of a Jewish conspiracy, even though their inauthenticity has been well known since 1921, when *The Times* published a series of articles proving that the *Protocols* were a forgery constructed on the basis of a fictitious French dialogue. This shows that the power of anti-Semitic-discourse is sometimes stronger than clearly proven sound argumentation, as was evident in Hitler’s declaration that even if the *Protocols* were a forgery, they were true insofar as they expressed the sinister aims of the Jews as he saw them.<sup>29</sup>

So, when there are two opposing or antagonistic narratives, which both describe an important event or a particular state of affairs, it is not advisable to be too optimistic about one’s ability to make a rational choice between them on the basis of deliberate reasoning in the sense meant by Habermas. Instead, the discursive environment that people are embedded in often exerts quite a strong coercive force, and people choose options that go against widely accepted and confirmed knowledge.

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27 This does not happen very often, but see the chapter written by Alois Streicher on the possibilities of varying assessments of the plane crash of Lech Kaczyński and other representatives of the Polish authorities.

28 Michel Foucault developed his idea of discourse in many writings on different subjects in such a manner that is not at all easy to determine central passages in which the main ideas are expressed. Some commentaries, though, provide a concise and helpful overview of the Foucaultian notion of discourse and its interrelation with truth, power and knowledge. For our purposes, Mills 1997: 60–76, proves helpful.

29 Cf. Benz 2011: 107–08, see also Marmura 2014: 2382.

## Mediated Reality

However, the possibility that truth might be overruled by the sheer power of discursive conditions need not lead to an impasse amounting to an equivalence of orthodox and heterodox interpretations of narratives. Instead of denying the possibility of distinguishing between true and false narratives, or of right and wrong ones, considerations about the role and function of the mass media in contemporary societies might be helpful in a situation in which examining the truthfulness of stories is hardly possible. The media work in terms of distinguishing between information and non-information.<sup>30</sup> It is clearly evident that any account of an extraordinary event fulfills the condition of providing information, but a heterodox view participates as a parasite feeding on the orthodox account. The differences between the orthodox account and the heterodox one is, in itself, a new piece of information, its truth or falsehood notwithstanding. The media, according to Niklas Luhmann, do not disseminate true accounts of what happens in the world:

Although truth or at least the presupposition of truthfulness is indispensable for news and reports, the mass media do not follow the code true/not true, but even in their cognitive realm of programming they follow the code information/non-information. One can discern this on the circumstance, that untruthfulness is not used as a value worthy reflection. For news and reports it is not important (or at most during inquiries which are not conveyed to the public) that untruthfulness can be excluded. Differently than in science, information is not examined in a way that a truthful way allows for excluding untruthfulness before truthful statements can be proclaimed.<sup>31</sup>

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30 This statement refers to Niklas Luhmann's analysis of the functioning of mass media — cf. Luhmann 2017: 28.

31 "Obwohl Wahrheit oder doch Wahrheitsvermutung für Nachrichten und Berichte unerlässlich sind, folgen die Massenmedien nicht dem Code wahr/unwahr, sondern selbst in ihrem kognitiven Programmbereich dem Code Information/Nichtinformation. Das erkennt man daran, daß Unwahrheit nicht als Reflexionswert benutzt wird. Für Nachrichten und Berichte ist es nicht (oder allenfalls im Zuge von nicht mitgemeldeten Recherchen) wichtig, daß die Unwahrheit ausgeschlossen werden kann. Anders als in der Wissenschaft wird die Information nicht derart durchreflektiert, daß auf wahre Weise festgestellt werden muß, daß Unwahrheit ausgeschlossen werden kann, bevor Wahrheit behauptet wird." — *ibid.*: 52–53.

Mass media provide information about society, for society. Like any other system in the modern world, the media reduces the complexity of the world according to principles pertaining to their respective system. The media's governing system (or "code," as Luhmann puts it) is the distinction between information and non-information. This difference alone does not enable us to distinguish between true and false information, because anything "new," regardless of whether or not it is correct, still counts as information.

The point is that much of our knowledge of the world stems from the media system, and that this system has two sides: its thematic side, which is oriented towards the world and provides information about it, and its operative side, which usually remains concealed and is not generally visible in media-based communication. Any mediated information is selected and reworked by the media system. This gives rise to the general suspicion that the news is always somehow manipulated and that "certain interests" underpin the functioning of media system.<sup>32</sup> This suspicion itself is also interesting and informative and would make a good subject for media communication. The idea that our knowledge of the world is manipulated to our detriment is a side effect of the media system because it is easy to understand that information is always necessarily processed by people who cannot be totally neutral or objective.

In contrast to the information selected and spread via the media, it is sometimes tempting to consider "what is left out," or "what is not said," that is: the alternative side of the information selected. This is a current issue regarding contemporary politics and diplomacy in relation to Russia: any information that is spread is said to be motivated by self-interest. One need only think of "news" about current affairs: something is communicated by the media and, as a standard reaction, the audience and political commentators focus in on the source, thus questioning its bias and in so doing already unwillingly casting a shadow of doubt. This happens symmetrically: if the Russian media report something, then people who are critical of the Russian government tend to treat the information skeptically (something is left out, the report is not accurate...), but the same thing takes place when a Russian audience judges reports (preferably about Russia) issued by "Western" media. Both audiences assume some influence on the part of politics on the media system in their respective countries ("or spheres of

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32 Boris Groys has generalized this idea of suspicion and extended it from the world of media to a philosophical description of the interrelation of subjects in the modern world, cf. Groys 2000: 19–54. This general suspicion of manipulation, though, is irreducible—a media company can by no means prove that no manipulation is going on and this stimulates further communication; cf. Luhmann 2017: 56–57.



influence”) and question the “objectivity” of that media. This general suspicion towards mediated information is entertained not only towards state-controlled media (the general attitude towards Russian news), but also towards media which are not overtly under the tutelage of the state apparatus. “Manufactured consent” inevitably arouses suspicion and provokes conspiracy speculations.<sup>33</sup>

Because of how the media system functions, any information communicated can be accounted for by the vested interests of the source, as well as the catenation of orthodox and heterodox narratives that are pertinent to the media as our main source of cultural knowledge. If the media contribute to the dissemination of orthodox narratives, then any heterodox version already counts as “information” (as something new and “interesting”) and can, therefore, be communicated in the media system.

Nevertheless, even though the media significantly construct our reality and contribute to our knowledge of the world,<sup>34</sup> the fundamental rules and nature of the media system preclude false information in the long run. To put it bluntly: if *heterodox* narratives were more than merely interesting versions of the world, if their truth claims could be taken seriously, then these alternative narratives would be of too great a value to the media to remain neglected. Instead, the media would pounce on the narrative in question and appropriate it, because it would be a “breaking news” story in the true and literal sense of those words. This inherent self-correction of the media system precludes that overtly false narratives can, in the long term, spread via the media system.

It is in this respect that “traditional” mass media differ from the “new” social media: via the latter, not only can anything be stated and communicated, there is often also no social responsibility for the communication in the sense that the sender represents a media enterprise (broadcasting company, media house, news agency and the like). This lack of responsibility corresponds to the annulment of self-reference on the part of the sender (which manifests itself in the use of avatars, nicknames and pseudonyms). If there is no “palpable” self-reference, one cannot even speak of a system.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the traditional media count as rather complex systems<sup>36</sup> operating in the real-world and are, therefore, intrinsically

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33 Cf. the analysis of right- and left-wing conspiracy thinking in the U.S. in Marmura 2014.

34 Cf. Luhmann 2017: 83.

35 Or only of an “odd” system in which the established link between sender and receiver significantly differs from face-to-face interactions, due to the circumstance that one does not know the identity of the disguised interlocutors.

36 Their complexity even corresponds to the amount of self-reference in the system.

tied thereto. Therefore, media companies—no matter which interests lurk in the background—must be distinguished from internet “troll armies”: although these armies might have a great influence in reality, their lack of transparency and their anonymity, at the same time, devalue the messages spread.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

Why conspiracy theories “flourish” can easily be explained by way of how the media system functions. It prefers complex and mysterious cases because they easily attract publicity over an extended period of time, particularly if it seems that there is still something left unsolved.

Unresolved events (“mysterious cases”) are not just interesting to the media. The history of conspiracy theories very clearly shows that the political system can also make good use of them. If something unusual or harmful simply happens by chance, then nobody can be blamed for it. Conspiracy narratives, on the other hand, imbue a given story with suspected responsibilities which are difficult to rebut, for example when European and American politicians are accused of influencing the price of oil and gas, as mentioned previously. In the field of politics, thus, conspiracy narratives serve to identify a scapegoat who can be blamed for undesirable effects or events.

Conspiracy narratives, like factual narratives, must not be confused with explicit lies to the extent that, in many cases, the person professing believes in them and, moreover, he/she does not primarily aim to deceive the audience. The amount of truth in them is generally difficult to examine, so that it is very difficult to ascertain their ontological status on the vertical axis—the relationship of a given text to the world. The horizontal axis of the narrative situation links the narrative discourse with discourses pertinent to societies and cultures. The example of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* shows that these horizontal relationships between narratives and cultural discourses can sometimes even outweigh the vertical referential axis, so that a narrative is held to be true even though its falsehood has been proven comprehensively.

When viewed from a systems theory perspective, conspiracy narratives fit the media system and provide a certain degree of mediated “knowledge” of the

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37 The moment at which social media are used by media companies, they, of course belong to the social system of the companies, whereas state-sponsored troll armies do not belong to the system of mass media, but rather to the political system or to an organization.

world, their truth or falsehood notwithstanding. Conspiracy narratives should also be regarded as an inevitable side effect of contemporary society in its dependency on the media as a pervasive system—not because of the conspiracy itself, but because of the way the media work. Whenever information is provided, it is to be expected that someone will always question the “completeness” of the information and suspect that something is being withheld. In this way, conspiracy narratives fill in the gaps, occupying up the shady side of our contemporary, media-based society and modern culture.

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## Abstract

Conspiracy theories are often considered as being a danger to modern societies; they weaken trust in institutions by spreading dangerously false information. Apart from such a pessimistic view on the phenomena, this chapter tries to show that conspiracy theories are an irreducible side effect of the mass media. Due to their intrinsic entwinedness with the media system, one should not put great hope in the possibility of eliminating conspiracy theories but rather regard them as an interesting cultural phenomenon. This chapter votes to not qualify conspiracy theories automatically as fictional discourse, but as factual discourse whose truth claims are difficult to verify. Different perspectives of conspiracy narrations—syntactic, semantic and pragmatic—are discussed. Pragmatic aspects and considerations from media theory can be deemed of primary importance for an analysis of conspiracy theories which does not lend itself to alarmism.

# The News and What Is Behind It: Social Disorder and Conspirational Reading in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature

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Jens Herlth

## Keywords

conspiracy theory; conspirational mode of reading; Faddei Bulgarin; *Diary of a Madman*; *The Demons*; *War and Peace*

“The human mind cannot grasp the causes of events in their completeness, but the desire to find those causes is implanted in the human soul.”<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy’s *Voina i mir* (*War and Peace*), from which this quotation has been taken, can be read as an exploratory enquiry into the world’s complexity in post-revolutionary times; a time when the novel, due to its multilayeredness and pluriperspectivity, seemed to be the only medium fit to analyze and to counter monocausal, misleading, and biased explanations of historical events. Tolstoy famously challenged historical writing in general, and French historiography in particular, rejecting the common cult of the “great man” and replacing it with his own, rather mythicized, understanding of “national spirit.” *Voina i mir* is *not* a novel about conspiracy theories, of course, but it *is* a novel about the epistemological and communicational patterns that can lead to their emergence. One should also bear in mind that, in the novel’s “Epilogue,” the main character Pierre Bezukhov is involved in the beginnings of what would eventually become a real conspiracy and culminate in the Decembrist revolt of 1825.

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1 Tolstoy 2010: 1062. «Для человеческого ума недоступна совокупность причин явлений. Но потребность отыскивать причины вложена в душу человека». – Tolstoy 1940: 66.

## Faddei Bulgarin and “Jewish Postal Service”

On the most general level, Tolstoy’s novel was primarily concerned with understanding Russia—its society, its history and its historical fate—like most of Russia’s serious prose writing during the era of high realism. For Tolstoy and his peers, the novel was a mode of gaining knowledge and seeking the truth about Russia in a time when no other all-encompassing, “thick” descriptions of society were available due to heavy censorship restrictions on all forms of non-fictional sociological and political analysis. However, the novel was of course not the most apt instrument for comprehension where the social reality of everyday life was concerned, for the obvious reason of both its fictionality and its detachment from real-life time, space, and people. No Russian reader would expect information about recent incidents in her town, on her street or in remote parts of the world from a novel. The novel would not be the first port of call for such requests, since there was journalism for at least the 1820s onwards. Although a proper “mass-circulation press” did not emerge in the Russian Empire before the 1860s, the newspaper as a source of information gained some relevance as early as in the late 1820s and 1830s with *Severnaia pchela* (*The Northern Bee*), then the only private newspaper authorized to publish political news.<sup>2</sup> Faddei Bulgarin (1789–1859), the owner of *Severnaia pchela*, was also a prolific writer. His novel *Ivan Vyzhigin*, published in 1829, was a huge success and was translated into several foreign languages. The recipe for success was the adaptation of the model of the French picaresque novel *Gil Blas* to Russian imperial realities. Bulgarin kept the satirical tone and caustically mocked the weaknesses of Russian society of the time—from the Belorussian provinces to Moscow and further afield to the very outskirts of the European parts of the Empire. Bulgarin himself came from the Belorussian provinces and was a descendant of the landed gentry of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As a young man in Wilno he started writing for Polish newspapers. After moving to St. Petersburg in 1819 he launched several publishing projects, the most important of which was notably *Severnaia pchela*. Other than what is suggested by its romantic name, *Severnaia pchela* was notorious for publishing not only sublime pollen, carefully collected from the blossoms of contemporary arts and thought, but everything—from political news to talk of the town, gossip and rumors.

Bulgarin was at the core of news in an age during which political stability was seen as being threatened by dark forces, organized in conspiracies. Russia during the reign of Nikolai I, was, of course, post-December Russia, but it was

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2 Cf. McReynolds 1991: 20.

also post-1789, post-1801, and in a way still post Time of Troubles and post-*pugachevshchina*-Russia. Nikolai's reign was marked by a paranoid fear of conspiracies; the public sphere—if one can even speak of something like a public sphere at this time—was subjected to a whole system of measures the aim of which was to prevent the dissemination of seditious ideas. Conspiracy—and it was clear for Nikolai and his counselors that conspiracies lay behind the French Revolution, the murder of Pavel I in 1801, and the uprising of the Decembrists of 1825—was only possible if people had the means to conspire, i.e., to exchange ideas and information. The most efficient way to not let this happen was to control the press.

Bulgarin was, by all accounts, a professional in the detection, transmission, and disclosure of information. Notoriously, he was also a prolific informer to the “Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery,” and the literary circles of St. Petersburg despised him deeply for this.<sup>3</sup> In an epigram, Pushkin ridiculed him as “Vidocque Figliarin,” referring to the infamous French criminal and chief of Police Eugène François Vidocq, thus pointing to Bulgarin's precarious position at the point at which news was produced, transmitted, and often distorted and instrumentalized.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely Bulgarin's practical expertise in these matters that makes his text so instructive for an analysis of the link between conspiracy theories and the media in early to mid-nineteenth-century Russia. There is a curious passage in *Ivan Vyzhigin* in which the narrator speaks about the role of information and of those responsible for its transmission:

In the evening, Josel, the Jew, made his appearance, who rented all the mills and karchmas on the property. This Josel was the general agent for the whole house, privy counsellor both of master and servants, walking newspaper, and relater of all political news, and scandalous anecdotes within a circle of a hundred miles round, and teller of everything good and bad.<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, this episode takes place in the Pale of Settlement, in the Belorussian provinces that had until recently fallen under Polish-Lithuanian reign and where

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3 Cf. Reitblat 2016: 12–14, 123–62.

4 Pushkin 1948.

5 Bulgarin 1831: 17. «Вечером являлся Иосель, Жид, арендатор мельниц и корчем во всем имении. Этот Иосель был всеобщим стряпчим целого дома, тайным поверенным господ и слуг, олицетворенною газетою, или источником всех политических сношений, соблазнительных анекдотов, в окружности двадцати миль, и пересказчиком всего доброго и худого». – Bulgarin 1829: 29.

the landowners belonged to the ethnically Polish landed nobility. Josel's position as a "personalized newspaper" is, at least for the narrator of the novel (that is, Ivan Vyzhigin), highly problematic since Josel is a Jew and holds the monopoly over news transmission in this part of the Empire. The "Jew" in general, as the narrator explains, is so conscious of the high value of information that he uses Vodka to "pick ... out of the peasants and servants all the secrets, all the wants, all the connections and relations of their masters, which makes the Jews the real rulers of the actual landholders, and subjects to Jewish control all affairs."<sup>6</sup> The landowners, for their part, are blissfully ignorant of what is going on:

The landlords in these provinces have, in general, no idea of business, and receive their commercial information solely from the Jews. Throughout a whole government, there are only a few persons who take in newspapers, and they merely for notices of law-suits, and for the convenience of reference, if the conversation should turn upon politics.<sup>7</sup>

The landowners depend exclusively on what the Jews tell them. What we have here is, of course, not yet a conspiracy theory, but it is the germ *of* or the allusion *to* one—the idea that Jews, perceived as mobile and crafty, stick together and tend to rule secretly over those among whom they live.<sup>8</sup>

In general, the greater part of the small country-gentry regard the Jews as the best-informed people in everything, even in politics; and, in place of subscribing to a newspaper, expend the money which would otherwise be applied for that purpose, on punch and wine, and the time which would be lost in reading, they prefer to spend in dialogues with the Jews on the state of affairs all over the world.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Ibid.: 57. «Он посредством водки выведывает у крестьян и служителей все тайны, все нужды, все связи и отношения их господ, что делает жидов настоящими владельцами помещиков и подчиняет жидовскому влиянию все дела и все обстоятельства». – Bulgarin 1829: 98–99.

7 Bulgarin 1831: 62. «Помещики в тех странах вообще не имеют никакого понятия о торговых делах, и получают коммерческие известия только чрез Жидов. В целой губернии едва несколько человек выписывают газеты, и то единственно для тяжёбных объявлений и для запаса к нелепым толкам о политике». – Bulgarin 1829: 108–09.

8 For more about Bulgarin's anti-Semitism and his novel *Ivan Vyzhigin*, see Katz 2007: 413–20.

9 Bulgarin 1831: 66. «Вообще бóльшая часть мелких помещиков почитают жидов сведущими во всех делах, даже в политике, и вместо того, чтобы подписываться



The novel depicts the problem of informational isolation in the backward provinces of the Empire in a satirical manner. For Bulgarin, the only remedy could be provided by newspapers—and the money that one is required to pay for them. According to him, it was highly dangerous to leave the sensitive field of information to the Jews since, in his opinion, they used it recklessly to exploit peasants and landowners. As is well known, Bulgarin’s novel is full of anti-Semitic stereotypes,<sup>10</sup> but the emphasis he puts on the problem of communication has been widely neglected to date.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the ‘Polish’ regions of the Empire are familiar with a phenomenon, called “*poczta żydowska*” (Jewish postal service), traces of which can be found in the works of eminent Polish writers, such as Józef Ignacy Kraszewski or Adam Mickiewicz.<sup>12</sup> As Aleksander Hertz pointed out, the Jews became an “instrument of the distribution of news,” which was all the more important given the isolated existence of local communities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> This was a side effect of the Jews’ social and legal situation in the Belorussian and Ukrainian provinces; merchants were more mobile than peasants and landowners as a result of the requirements

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на газеты, деньги, которые надлежало бы заплатить за них, они употребляют на пунш и вино, а время, которое должно б было терять на чтение, проводят в разговорах с Жидами о всемирных происшествиях». – Bulgarin 1829: 116–17.

- 10 Weisskopf ascribes them to the “tradition of Polish anti-Semitism” (2012: 48). However, Bulgarin could have borrowed this idea from one of the anti-Semitic pamphlets that were already circulating in the early nineteenth Century (e.g., de Bonald’s “*Sur les Juifs*,” 1806); he could have picked it up during his childhood years in the Belorussian provinces, but he could as well have been inspired by Russian sources: None other than the great poet Gavriila Derzhavin wrote in a report on the living conditions of Jews in Belorussia (1800) that, “predestined to rule over others,” the Jews who now are “humiliated” and must live under “foreign yoke” nevertheless “dominate those among whom they live” («Древле предопределенный народ владычествовать, ныне унижен до крайности, и в то самое время, когда пресмыкается, под игом чуждым, по большей части *властвует* над теми, между которыми обитает»). – Derzhavin 1878: 276). Derzhavin is equally fascinated and frightened by the Jews’ purported ability to “instantly communicate everything among them” («потчас все сообщают друг другу» – *ibid.*: 287).
- 11 Contextualizing the depiction of Jews in *Ivan Vyzhigin*, Elena Katz points out that Jews in fact often served as “intermediaries between the Orthodox Belorussian peasants and the Polish Catholic landowner.” – Katz 2012: 419.
- 12 Hertz 2014: 288.
- 13 *Ibid.*: 291.

of their professional activities. It is highly telling that Bulgarin links the Jews' supposed proficiency in information transmission to their alleged tendency to conspire—by then already a common motif in anti-Semitic discourse. Those who control the flux of information are ultimately the secret rulers of society—which is why, following Bulgarin's logic, newspapers are crucial and that is why his *Severnaia pchela* is crucial as a weapon of Enlightenment.<sup>14</sup> Newspapers are the “good,” uncorrupted, and unbiased way of passing information, so to speak. There is a structural link between Enlightenment strategies of demystification and uncovering of hidden intentions on the one hand and the emerging awareness of news transmission's problematic effects on the other.

### **Newspaper Reading and “Paranoiac Overdetermination” in Gogol's “Diary of a Madman”**

In order to assess this argument's validity it is useful to take a closer look at the case of one specific reader of *Severnaia pchela*:

I've been reading the little Bee. A crazy lot, those French! What *do* they want? My God, I'd like to give them all a good flogging. There was a very good account of a ball written by a landowner from Kursk. They certainly know how to write, those landowners from Kursk.<sup>15</sup>

Poprishchin, the hero and narrator of Gogol's “Zapiski sumasshedshego” (“Diary of a Madman”), has a hard time in the department in which he works as a scribe. He is criticized by his superior for putting wrong characters, numbers, or dates in the documents that he is copying. He is shocked when he overhears a conversation between two dogs on a Saint Petersburg street; however, he is less shocked by the fact that dogs can speak and he mentions accounts from newspapers<sup>16</sup> reporting incidents like a fish uttering two words in a “strange lan-

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14 Analyzing Bulgarin's anti-Semitic discourse, Mikhail Weisskopf speaks of a combination of “a loyalist pathos with the remains of eighteenth-century Enlightenment tradition.” – Weisskopf 2012: 146.

15 Gogol 2005: 177. «Читал Пчёлку. Эка глупый народ французы! Ну, чего хотят они? Взял бы, ей богу, их всех да и перепорол розгами! Там же читал очень приятное изображение бала, описанное курским помещиком. Курские помещики хорошо пишут». – Gogol' 1938: 196.

16 «Читал ... в газетах» – Gogol' 1938: 195.

guage”<sup>17</sup> or two cows coming into a shop to order a pound of tea.<sup>18</sup> What *really* troubles him is the fact that the dogs talk about some letters that they were exchanging, that is, their ability to *write*:

I’d stake my salary that that was what the dog said. Never in my life have I heard of a dog that would write. Only noblemen know how to write correctly. Of course, you’ll always find some readers or shopkeepers, even serfs, who can scribble away: but they write like machines – no commas or full stops, and simply no idea of style.<sup>19</sup>

What unsettles Poprishchin so much is, it seems, his impending loss of status. As a nobleman, he insists on his right to maintain a privileged status in a society, at least symbolically, as this position is becoming more and more precarious. If birth is no longer the only criterion for social success, then some social climber might one day challenge him for his job in the department: “Does he [the head of the department] think I’m the son of a commoner, or tailor, or a non-commissioned officer? I’m a gentleman!”<sup>20</sup> he insists desperately.

Poprishchin’s mind is hyper-focused, which makes him see connections between things that are remote from one another and which “normal” people would not realize. How do these things enter into his mind? I would argue that this occurs through his reading of *Severnaia pchela*. In the fall of 1833, at the time during which the story is set, *Severnaia pchela* was covering the so-called “Spanish affairs.”<sup>21</sup> There was a regular section that chronicled recent developments in this conflict about the succession to the throne of Spain, the first of the so-called “Carlist Wars.” The sources were mostly French newspapers.<sup>22</sup> The un-

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17 Gogol 2005: 176. «Говорят, в Англии выплыла рыба, которая сказала два слова на таком странном языке, что ученые уже три года стараются определить и еще до сих пор ничего не открыли». – Gogol’ 1938: 195.

18 Ibid.

19 Gogol 2005: 176. «Да чтоб я не получил жалованья! Я еще в жизни не слыхивал, чтобы собака могла писать. Правильно писать может только дворянин. Оно конечно, некоторые и купчики-конторщики и даже крепостной народ пописывает иногда; но их писание большею частью механическое: ни запятых, ни точек, ни слога». – Gogol’ 1938: 195.

20 Gogol 2005: 179. «Я разве из каких-нибудь разночинцев, из портных, или из унтер-офицерских детей? Я дворянин». – Gogol’ 1938: 198.

21 Cf. Zolotusskii 1987: 145–46.

22 Among others: *Journal de Paris*, *Journal des Débats*, *Mémorial des Pyrénées*, *Moniteur*—as quoted in *Severnaia pchela* from 2 December 1833 (p. 1099).

clear situation surrounding the succession to the throne—a fundamental threat to the stability of monarchies—makes Poprishchin start to meditate about his own identity:

Perhaps I don't really know who I am at all? History has lots of examples of that sort of thing: there was some fairly ordinary man, not what you'd call a nobleman, but simply a tradesman or even a serf, and suddenly he discovered he was a great lord or a sovereign. So if a peasant can turn into someone like that, what would a nobleman become? Say, for example, I suddenly appeared in a general's uniform, with an epaulette on my left shoulder and a blue sash across my chest – what then? What tune would my beautiful young lady sing then? And what would Papa, our Director, say? Oh, he's so ambitious! But I noticed at once he's a mason, no doubt about that, although he pretends to be this, that and the other; he only puts out two fingers to shake hands with. But surely, can't I be promoted to Governor General or Commissary or something or other this very minute? And I should like to know why I'm a titular councillor [sic]? Why precisely a *titular* counsellor?<sup>23</sup>

His assumed enemy, the director of his department and the father of his would-be beloved, must be a Freemason, of course, since Poprishchin is already completely absorbed by the conspirational mode of thought—'nothing is as it seems to be, and sinister forces are plotting against him.' In the above-quoted fragment, conspiracy and the fear of the loss of status converge. If his supervisor is a Freemason and if Grisha Otrep'ev, the False Dmitry, was the son of Ivan IV, then he, Poprishchin, might also be someone other than a miserable *titularnyi sovetnik*—which was his grade in the imperial table of ranks (Gogol himself was quite un-

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23 Gogol 2005 187–88. «Может быть я сам не знаю, кто я таков. Ведь сколько примеров по истории: какой-нибудь простой, не то уже чтобы дворянин, а просто какой-нибудь мещанин или даже крестьянин – и вдруг открывается, что он какой-нибудь вельможа, а иногда даже и государь. Когда из мужика да иногда выходит эдакое, что же из дворянина может выйти? Вдруг, например, я вхожу в генеральском мундире: у меня и на правом плече эполета и на левом плече эполета, через плечо голубая лента – что? как тогда запоет красавица моя? что скажет и сам папа, директор наш? О, это большой честолюбец! Это масон, непременно масон, хотя он и прикидывается таким и эдаким, но я тотчас заметил, что он масон: он если даст кому руку, то высовывает только два пальца. Да разве я не могу быть сию же минуту пожалован генерал-губернатором, или интендантом, или там другим каким-нибудь? Мне бы хотелось знать, отчего я титулярный советник? Почему именно титулярный советник?» – Gogol' 1938: 206.

happy with being only a *kolezhskii assessor*,<sup>24</sup> but this was still one grade higher than Poprishchin). The issue of *samozvanstvo* (imposture) was a popular topic at the time: it was none other than Bulgarin who published a novel about the tribulations of the “False Dmitry” Grisha Otrepev in 1830.<sup>25</sup> The reigning dynasty, the Romanovs, had come to power in the aftermath of the Time of Troubles. Tsar Nikolai I’s ascent to the throne had been overshadowed by a short period of confusion that triggered the December uprising of 1825—the conspirators thought that Nikolai’s elder brother Konstantin was the legitimate heir to the throne. They did not know that the latter had renounced his claim in an unpublished note. The most prominent example of a usurper and a magical rise from a modest origin, albeit a noble one, up to the highest scale of political power was of course Napoleon.<sup>26</sup> Read against this backdrop, the “Spanish affairs,” so meticulously reported by *Severnaia pchela*, can be seen as an allegory of the political order’s general instability in post-1789 Europe.

Poprishchin loses his orientation; he can no longer be sure of his position in society. Even his superior position as a human being is called into question in a world in which dogs correspond with each other, cows order tea, and bees collect and disseminate news. His imaginary attempt to reestablish order by the traditional Russian measures, so dear to the landed gentry (“Those French! ... I’d like to give them all a good flogging”),<sup>27</sup> is of course nothing more than pathetic, given the scope of the crisis that struck *ancien régime* Europe.

Poprishchin is not prepared for a world in which one is confronted with events from remote countries on a daily basis; he reads the global news through the prism of his own individual situation—and *vice versa*. At the same time, this is the world, where political order is put in jeopardy by conspiracies and intrigues. Fears over the loss of status and fears about political instability, induced by dark conspiracies, come together. In fact, reading the issues of *Severnaia pchela* from the fall of 1833, one is prompted to note that the way Bulgarin’s newspaper was covering the events did not inspire much confidence—the respective articles are all based on accounts taken from other sources in the style of “According to French newspapers ...,” “As the *Messenger* related in its latest edition ... .” The editors often explicitly point out that one cannot be entirely sure about the verisimilitude of the reported “facts.” These “facts” are an end-

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24 Cf.: Gogol’ 1940: 343.

25 Faddei Bulgarin. *Dmitrii Samozvanets. Istoricheskii roman*, 4 vols, Sanktpeterburg 1830.

26 Zolotusskii 1987: 148.

27 See above, footnote 15.

less series of intrigues, murders, executions, confiscations. The protagonists bear exotic names, often all too familiar to readers of romantic literature, such as Don Carlos, Queen Isabella, Don Miguel, Don Pedro Pastor, Donna Maria. All this fires Poprishchin's semiotic imagination and nothing is there to stop the flames from spreading. This confusion calls for a great, all-encompassing disentanglement and he eventually understands:

There *is* a king of Spain. He has been found at last. That king is me. I only discovered this today. Frankly, it all came to me in a flash.<sup>28</sup>

However, we, the readers, know that nothing is as it seems, of course: the Great Inquisitor approaching Poprishchin—"a mere tool of the English,"<sup>29</sup> as the well-trained newspaper-reader Poprishchin assumes—is obviously none other than a keeper in a madhouse. We know this, since we understand the semiotic structure of Poprishchin's diary—the author, Gogol, conspires with his readers behind his protagonist's back. But can we really be sure that we are immune to the "flash of lightning" that makes us think we understood what *everything* is all about (while it is evident to some invisible author/reader that this very flash of lightning is the most ridiculous aberration possible)? We are never safe from falling prey to the conspirational mode of reading the world, as long as there might be others out there with their own undisclosed intentions—e.g., dogs—who will not admit to their sinister dealings, even when Poprishchin confronts them ("Tell me everything you know.").<sup>30</sup> All he can do is jot down: "Dogs are extraordinarily shrewd [literally: "extraordinary politicians"], and notice everything, every step you take."<sup>31</sup>

Poprishchin progressively adopts the "paranoiac overdetermination" that Svetlana Boym described as one of the basic features of "conspirational thinking."<sup>32</sup> This formula matches the psychosemiotic core of Poprishchin's problem perfectly: from a certain point onwards, he correlates everything to the "Spanish affairs"—and then to himself. In this context, it is highly instructive to see how

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28 Gogol 2005: 189. «В Испании есть король. Он отыскался. Этот король я. Именно только сегодня об этом узнал я. Признаюсь, меня вдруг как будто молнией осветило». – Gogol' 1938: 207.

29 Gogol 2005: 195. «орудие англичанина» – Gogol' 1938: 214.

30 Gogol 2005: 181. «расскажи мне всё, что знаешь» – Gogol' 1938: 200.

31 Gogol 2005: 181. «Она [собака] чрезвычайный политик: все замечает, все шаги человека». – Gogol' 1938: 200.

32 Boym 1999: 97.

Gogol's contemporary, Vladimir Odoevskii, came to a quite similar formula when analyzing the semiotics of insanity in his article, entitled "Kto sumasshedshie?" ("Who Are the Insane?"), published in the journal *Biblioteka dlia chteniia* (*Library for Reading*) in 1836.

In insane people, all the notions, all the feelings, are gathered in one focus; in them the particular power of one specific idea draws in everything that belongs to that idea from all over the world; it acquires the ability, so to speak, to rip off the objects parts that are connected to each other for a healthy person, and to concentrate them in a kind of symbol ... We call a person insane when we see that he finds connections between objects that we think are impossible.<sup>33</sup>

Gogol greatly appreciated the literary representation of madness in Odoevskii's stories about artists.<sup>34</sup> Gogol had initially planned to make the protagonist of "Zapiski sumasshedshego" a musician; then his story would have remained in the framework of the romantic paradigm of 'inspirational insanity.' The shift to a civil servant and copyist was also a shift to the more general (and more *realistic*) topics of semiotics, scripture, and mediality.

Gogol was convinced that we are lost in a world of signs and that there are no guidelines whatsoever to help us out of this mess. In modern times (and Gogol's story is of course about modern times) this problem is the problem of a reality constructed on the basis of information obtained by way of mass communication. Russian literary fiction had been dealing with this problem, to greater and lesser degrees, from the 1820s onwards. A particularly interesting case in this regard is Gogol's novel *Mertvye dushi* (*Dead Souls*, 1842). The inhabitants of the town of N followed Bulgarin's advice and subscribed to newspapers:

At that time all our landowners, officials, merchants, shopmen, and all our literate folk, as well as the illiterate, had become—at least for all of eight years—inveterate politicians.

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33 «В сумасшедших все понятия, все чувства, собираются в один фокус; у них частная сила одной какой-нибудь мысли втягивает в себя все, принадлежащее к этой мысли, изо всего мира; получает способность, так сказать, отрывать части от предметов, тесно соединенных между собою для здорового человека, и сосредоточивать их в какой-то символ... Мы называем человека сумасшедшим, когда видим, что он находит такие соотношения между предметами, которые нам кажутся невозможными». – Odoevskii 1836: 61–62.

34 Cf. Mann 2012: 358–59. Cf. Gogol's letter to I. I. Dmitriev, 30 November 1832 in Gogol' 1940: 247–48.

The *Moscow News* and the *Son of the Fatherland* were read through implacably and reached the last reader in shreds and tatters that were of no use whatsoever for any practical purposes. Instead of such questions as “What price did you get for a measure of oats, my friend?” or “Did you take advantage of the first snow we had yesterday?” people would ask, “And what do they say in the papers? Have they let Napoleon slip away from that island again, by any chance?” The merchants were very much afraid of this contingency, inasmuch as they had utter faith in the prediction of a certain prophet who had been sitting in jail for three years by now. This prophet had come no one knew whence, in bast sandals and an undressed sheepskin that reeked to high heaven of spoilt fish, and had proclaimed that Napoleon was the Antichrist and was being kept on a chain of stone behind six walls and beyond seven seas but that later on he would rend his chain and gain possession of all the world.<sup>35</sup>

In Bulgarin’s logic, newspapers were an instrument of counter-conspiracy, heralds of Enlightenment, so to speak. What Gogol shows in *Mertvye dushi* is quite the reverse: the reading of newspapers alienates the town of N’s inhabitants from their everyday life. Instead of dealing with issues that would really concern them, they have to digest disconnected bits of information that do not make any sense. It is left up to them to “concentrate” them into “some kind of symbol”—which is why they come up with absurd theories about Napoleon being the Antichrist who is aspiring to world domination.

The modern world, according to Gogol, is marked by “politics,” newspapers and the effect that is inevitably triggered by the merging of politics, print culture and a public sphere under rigid censorship control: conspiracy theories. In Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, newspapers are torn to pieces that are “of no use whatsoever.” Their material defectiveness reflects the insecure status of the world-view that is

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35 Gogol 1996: 205. «В это время все наши помещики, чиновники, купцы, сидельцы и всякий грамотный и даже неграмотный народ сделали, по крайней мере на целые восемь лет, заклетыми политиками. ‘Московские Ведомости’ и ‘Сын Отечества’ зачитывались немилосердно и доходили к последнему чтецу в кусочках, не годных ни на какое употребление. Вместо вопросов: ‘Почем, батюшка, продали мерку овса? как воспользовались вчерашней порошей?’ говорили: ‘А что пишут в газетах, не выпустили ли опять Наполеона из острова?’ Купцы этого сильно опасались, ибо совершенно верили предсказанию одного пророка, уже три года сидевшего в остроге; пророк пришел неизвестно откуда, в лаптях и нагольном тулупе, страшно отзывавшемся тухлой рыбой, и возвестил, что Наполеон есть антихрист и держится на каменной цепи, за шестью стенами и семью морями, но после разорвет цепь и овладеет всем миром». – Gogol’ 1951: 206.



induced *by*, and becomes possible *through*, newspapers. The reader, as an eternal plot-maker (i.e., an “inveterate politician”), is trying to capture whatever sense may be around. If he relies solely on what newspapers tell him about the world, then he will inevitably slip into the conspirational mode of thought. This will make him prone to all sorts of manipulations.<sup>36</sup>

### **Reading Between the Lines and the Conspirational Mindset in Dostoevsky’s *The Demons***

When speaking about the nineteenth century, a time during which literary studies were only just developing and when there could be no question of any media studies of course, it is a good idea to turn to the expertise of writers and journalists if we wish to understand the effects of mass media on individual minds and on the public sphere. Fedor Dostoevsky was active in both fields and he had some experience in clandestine, perhaps even conspirational, activities dating back to the late 1840s when he attended the meetings of the Petrashevskii Circle.<sup>37</sup> He was obsessively interested in the way revolutionaries made use of texts to propagate their ideas and to communicate among themselves. This is what his novel *Besy* (*The Demons*, 1871–72) is about.

In *Besy*, the printed word is surrounded by an aura of significance that can mean both: highest value and the utmost suspicion. It can turn out to be absolutely worthless as well. Stepan Verkhovenskiĭ, the provincial town’s leading intellectual, suddenly understands this in a key scene of the novel when, during a charity event organized by the towns’ ladies and while holding a revolutionary leaflet in his hands, he exclaims:

This is the shortest, the barest, the most simplehearted stupidity—*c’est la bêtise dans son essence la plus pure, quelque chose comme un simple chimique*. Were it just a drop more intelligently expressed, everyone would see at once all the poverty of this short stupidity. But now everyone stands perplexed: no one believes it can be so elementally stupid. ‘It

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36 It is important to note in this context that Poprishchin was very much aware of the fact that the public sphere was under the control of censorship: After a visit to the theater, he jots down that he is surprised that the body of censors “let through” (“пропустила”) the play that he had seen. – Gogol’ 1938: 198.

37 Frank 1979: 239–91.

can't be that there's nothing more to it,' everyone says to himself, and looks for a secret, sees a mystery, tries to read between the lines—the effect is achieved!<sup>38</sup>

This “between the lines” is precisely the point at which politics and the printed word meet in mid-nineteenth-century Russia and it was fertile ground for conspiracy theories. In 1848, the “Buturlin Committee,” an organ that supervised the censorship institutions during the last years of Nikolai's reign, ordered that censors should no longer content themselves with a superficial control of the written texts, but that they should read “between the lines” as well.<sup>39</sup> This new orientation was probably induced by a note on censorship that was addressed to the Tsar in 1848 by the poet and *homme de lettres* Petr A. Viazemskii. He suggested that the censors should not only search for “forbidden words” in what was actually written, rather they should also take the sense that is often “hidden under other words” into account. “In every word there is a hint. Our literature, and especially some of the Saint Petersburg journals are full of these hints and allusions that are transparent for clever readers.”<sup>40</sup>

The nameless provincial town in *Besy* is populated with these sorts of “clever readers” who know all too well that the seemingly harmless surface of the words might only be a cover-up for some hidden message. The novel is full of examples of this conspirational mode of reading. This mode of reading and interpreting *texts* can easily be extended to a reading and interpreting of the *world* in which they live. However, the constant awareness that nothing is as it seems—and this is the crucial point that the narrator makes in his account of the events—makes it impossible for the inhabitants of the town to know what is *really* going

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38 Dostoevsky 1995: 484. «Это самая обнаженная, самая простодушная, самая коротенькая глупость, – c'est la bêtise dans son essence la plus pure, quelque chose comme un simple chimique. Будь это хоть каплю умнее высказано, и всяк увидал бы тотчас всю нищету этой коротенькой глупости. Но теперь все останавливаются в недоумении: никто не верит, чтоб это было так первоначально глупо. ‘Не может быть, чтоб тут ничего больше не было’, говорит себе всякий и ищет секрета, видит тайну, хочет прочесть между строчками, – эффект достигнут!» – Dostoevskii 1974: 371–72.

39 «между строк» – Skabichevskii 1892: 344.

40 Petr A. Viazemskii: [Zapiska o tsenzure]. «Смысл этих [запрещенных] слов ... может притаится под другими словами ... На каждое слово есть обиняк», Viazemskii pointed out, «Литература наша и особенно некоторые из петербургских журналов исполнены этих обиняков и намеков<ов>, прозрачных для смышленных читателей». – in Gillel'son 1969: 324.

on. This is why it is so easy to deceive them. Stepan Verkhovenskii, who does not understand very much throughout the whole story, understands this at least: the generalization of suspicion is tantamount to its invalidation. The real conspiracy consists in this generalized suspicion that renders futile any attempt to make sense of the events that shook the provincial town.

The narrator himself seems to be satisfied with Stepan Trofimovich's finding that "nothing is behind all this." We know that this was exactly Dostoevsky's reaction when he witnessed the trial of Nechaev.<sup>41</sup> This stance would be the most legitimate and the most appropriate, on condition that there indeed had been no conspiracy, if there were no sinister forces at work. However, the novel's entire semiotic structure clearly indicates that there is in fact something behind all the events contained therein.

Every value ascribed to the printed word *can be* and *is* in fact most often invalidated: one example is the most ridiculous ageing writer Karmazinov who represents "literature," another is Stepan Verkhovenskii who is taking a volume of de Tocqueville to read in the garden, all the while hiding a novel by the popular writer Paul de Kock in his pocket.<sup>42</sup> Governor Lembke likes to assemble (to "glue") models in his leisure time until his wife forbids it, allowing him to write a novel instead, "but on the quiet" (*potikhon'ku*).<sup>43</sup> The climax of this meta-hermeneutic grotesquery is the charity ball and the ominous "quadrille of literature" in the third and the "most difficult part of my chronicle," as the narrator confesses.<sup>44</sup> One could hardly imagine, he writes, "a more pathetic, trite, giftless, and insipid allegory than this 'quadrille of literature.'"<sup>45</sup> It "consisted of six pairs

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41 "I never would have imagined that this was all so simple, so straightforward. I do admit that until the very last moment I thought that there was something between the lines" (my translation – J. H.). «Никогда я не мог представить себе, чтобы это было так несложно, так однолинейно глупо. Нет, признаюсь, я до самого последнего момента думал, что все-таки есть что-нибудь между строчками». – Dostoevskii 1975: 205.

42 Dostoevskii 1974: 19.

43 Dostoevsky 1995: 311; Dostoevskii 1974: 244.

44 Dostoevsky 1995: 502. «Сам[ая] тяжел[ая] часть моей хроники» – Dostoevskii 1974: 385.

45 Dostoevsky 1995: 508. «Трудно было бы представить более жалкую, более пошлую, более бездарную и пресную аллегорию, как эта 'кадриль литературы'». – Dostoevskii 1974: 389.

of pathetic maskers,” some of them representing letters (X and Z), one embodying “honest Russian thought”:<sup>46</sup>

“Honest Russian thought” was presented as a middle-aged gentleman in spectacles, tailcoat, gloves, and—in fetters (real fetters). Under this thought’s arm was a briefcase containing some “dossier.” Out of his pocket peeked an unsealed letter from abroad, which included an attestation, for all who doubted it, of the honesty of “honest Russian thought.” All this was filled in orally by the ushers, since it was hardly possible to read a letter sticking out of someone’s pocket.<sup>47</sup>

“What on earth is this?” one person asks. “Some sort of silliness,” a second person answers. “Literature of some sort,” a third person supposes.<sup>48</sup> But we already know what it is: It is a game of blowing up and popping balloons of significance. The unfortunate “quadrille” ends abruptly when the news of an outbreak of fire in the Zarech’e district arrives. “There’s something behind this fire,”<sup>49</sup> the crowd will suspect in the morning. They have no choice but to apply the conspirational mode of reading, imposed on them by the semiotic structure of the public sphere in the provinces of imperial Russia. Governor Lembke loses his mind and, of course, losing one’s mind means gaining insight into some secret meaning: “A dull smile appeared on his lips—as if he had suddenly understood and remembered something,” the narrator remarks.<sup>50</sup> Literature, madness, and conspiracy theory converge.

*Besy* is of course a novel about a conspiracy (or a multitude of conspiracies), but this is well known and does need not to be analyzed further. Even more

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46 «Состояла из шести пар жалких масок ... честная русская мысль». – Dostoevskii 1974: 389.

47 Dostoevsky 1995: 508. «‘Честная русская мысль’ изображалась в виде господина средних лет, в очках, во фраке, в перчатках и – в кандалах (настоящих кандалах). Подмышкой этой мысли был портфель с каким-то ‘делом’. Из кармана выглядывало распечатанное письмо из-за границы, заключавшее в себе удостоверение, для всех сомневающихся, в честности ‘честной русской мысли’. Все это досказывалось распорядителями уже изустно, потому что торчавшее из кармана письмо нельзя же было прочесть». – Dostoevskii 1974: 389.

48 Dostoevsky 1995: 509. «Это что ж такое? ... ‘Глупость какая-то’ ... ‘Какая-то литература’» – Dostoevskii 1974: 390.

49 Dostoevsky 1995: 518. «Горели неспроста» – Dostoevskii 1974: 397.

50 Dostoevsky 1995: 511. «Тупая улыбка показалась на его губах, – как будто он что-то вдруг понял и вспомнил». – Dostoevskii 1974: 392.

importantly, it is a commentary on the semiotics of conspiracy theory. It lays bare the semiotic and social features that induce “the characters’ paranoia and conspiracy theorizing”;<sup>51</sup> and its whole structure is, in itself, one big conspiracy—since the narrator is apparently unable to penetrate the mystery, let alone the truly apocalyptic scope that lies behind the events that shook the society of his town. The narrator’s incompetence is, of course, part of the game: all we—the readers—can surmise is that there is possibly more going on behind the scenes than he is able to tell us.

It might as well turn out that in the modern world, in which information about goings-on is transmitted by means of mass communication exclusively, the conspirational mode of deciphering reality is ineluctable. “But isn’t there a text that remains untouched by this game of convertible signifiers?,” a Dostoevsky-reader might be prompted to ask. What about the Gospel, normally the last resort for the unsettled characters of Dostoevsky’s novels? Unfortunately, even the Gospel is not exempt from the dubious status of any printed matter in *Besy*: In the last chapter of the novel, Verkhovenskii is impressed by a woman who wanders the land selling the Gospel, and he offers to help her, unfortunately not without suggesting to “correct the mistakes of this remarkable book” in his oral explanations.<sup>52</sup> Even the Gospel is drawn into the whirl of doubt and suspicion. For contemporary readers this fact was probably less astonishing than it is for us today. The first officially sanctioned translation of the Gospel was published in 1860, only ten years before the first installments of *Besy*. During the oppressive reign of Nikolai I, the very idea of a Russian translation of the bible carried an oppositional aura.<sup>53</sup>

The sole remedy is, it seems, a certain straightforward and open-hearted naïveté which alone can put an end to the “unlimited semiosis”<sup>54</sup> that is unsettling the townspeople’s minds. The suspicious mind will always find another hint that allows him to build up a new theory about how everything is linked to everything else and how sinister forces pull the strings in the background. The anonymous narrator of *Besy* refuses to enter into this game. He simply relates what happened. His judgment is clear and univocal, often at the expense of a certain shortsightedness, but this is only for the better. If he is too easily impressed by Stepan Trofimovich’s theatrical gestures and his playing the *maître à penser*

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51 Lounsbery 2007: 225.

52 Dostoevsky 1995: 645. «В изложении устном ... исправить ошибки этой замечательной книги». – Dostoevskii 1974: 491.

53 Men’ 2002: 419.

54 Boym 1999: 110 (Boym is referring to Umberto Eco).

in the beginning of his narrative, then he successfully emancipates himself throughout the course of the events—and during the process of writing. As Svetlana Boym has pointed out, “Conspiracy theory is a conspiracy against conspiracy; it does not oppose the conspirational world view as such but doubly affirms it.”<sup>55</sup> Dostoevsky’s narrator does not participate in this double affirmation; his chronicle is a sober account of events; he relates actions and reveals intentions, but above all he points to the disproportion between the aura of significance and the actual meaning behind it that is, according to his observations, the source of the catastrophes that happened in his town.

What can we conclude from this? Bulgarin suspected a conspiracy of Jews in the Belorussian provinces through their monopolization and control over the transmission of “news.” His antidote was the newspaper (and we know what motivated this decision—he was the owner of one). In his “Zapiski sumassheshego,” Gogol demonstrated what happens to a society that is struck by political crisis and, for the first time in history, has access to news from remote parts of the world on a daily basis. Dostoevsky in *Besy* showed that the constant suspicion directed against any kind of printed information leads to a situation in which nothing is as it seems and every word is suspected of containing a secret meaning. There is no way around this. As early as 1836, a casual remark in Pushkin’s journal *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*) stated that our time is the “epoch of an uncovering of all mysteries.”<sup>56</sup> This is a “dialectic of the Enlightenment” of sorts: the urge to unmask mysteries wherever they are (or even where they are *not*) has become the cornerstone of journalism; it shapes the poetics of journalistic texts and, more importantly, it shapes the way in which readers will read newspaper articles and the world around them.

### **“Entangled threads”: The Fallacy of the Conspiracist Worldview in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace***

Of the stories and novels I have mentioned so far, only Tolstoy’s *Voyna i mir* does not specifically deal with the problem of the construction of reality through journalism, which is of course something of a truism: The novel is set in the first two decades of the nineteenth century when the press did not yet have the importance it gained over time from the 1820s onwards. It is for this reason that Tols-

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55 Ibid.: 97.

56 «epoch[a] разоблачения всех тайн» – Editor’s remark (“Ot redaktsii”) in *Sovremennik* 1836/2: 312.

toy's approach to the problem of the construction of reality and conspiracist epistemology is of particular interest here: Tolstoy refutes the very idea of intentionality in history—an idea that is crucial for conspiracy theories. At the end of the novel, however, Pierre Bezukhov is presented as “one of the principle founders” of a certain “society,”<sup>57</sup> which is quite an unambiguous allusion to his future role as one of the conspirators of December 1825. This is not the germ of a conspiracy *theory*, but the beginning of a story about conspirators whose aim it was to reform Russian statehood and society. Tolstoy makes this quite explicit when he lets Pierre explain the current situation in Russia (by 1820) in the following way: “Arakcheev and Golitsyn ... are now the whole government! And what a government! They see treason everywhere and are afraid of everything.”<sup>58</sup> According to Pierre, the problem was not conspiracy itself, but the fact that people like Arakcheev and Golitsyn, two highly influential counselors from the inner circle around Aleksandr I, suspected conspiracy everywhere. Pierre, the future Decembrist, was convinced that “he was chosen to give a new direction to the whole of Russian society and to the whole world.”<sup>59</sup>

‘I only wished to say that ideas that have great results are always simple ones. The whole of my idea is that if vicious people are united and constitute a power, then honest folk must do the same. Now that’s simple enough.’<sup>60</sup>

In the context of a discussion about conspiracy theories, Pierre’s “that’s simple enough” sounds quite alarming of course. There is a detail that subtly undermines his self-regarding ideas about the future of Russia. Only after having talked about his marvelous success at some meeting in Petersburg Pierre remembers that his wife had been about to say something:

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57 Tolstoy 2010: 1246. «Одного общества, которого Пьер был одним из главных основателей». – Tolstoi 1940: 270.

58 Tolstoy 2010: 1255. «Аракчеев и Голицын – это теперь всё правительство. И какое! Во всем видят заговоры, всего боятся». – Tolstoi 1940: 280.

59 Tolstoy 2010: 1267. «Ему казалось ..., что он был призван дать новое направление всему русскому обществу и всему миру». – Tolstoi 1940: 293.

60 Tolstoy 2010: 1267–68. «Я хотел сказать только, что все мысли, которые имеют огромные последствия, – всегда просты. Вся моя мысль в том, что ежели люди порочные связаны между собой и составляют силу, то людям честным надо сделать то же самое. Ведь так просто». – Tolstoi 1940: 293–94.

‘And what were you going to say?’

‘I? Only nonsense.’

‘But all the same?’

‘Oh, nothing, only a trifle,’ said Natasha, smiling still more brightly. ‘I only wanted to tell you about Petya: today nanny was coming to take him from me, and he laughed, shut his eyes, and clung to me. I’m sure he thought he was hiding. Awfully sweet!’<sup>61</sup>

This must be read as an implicit comment on Pierre’s blindness regarding his own future role in the history of Russia, a role about which he is so childishly proud. Pierre’s lofty ideas and his exaggerated self-esteem are juxtaposed with his baby son’s belief that he is invisible when he closes his eyes. Pierre reads the world from his own highly biased standpoint; he is convinced of his philosophical superiority (compared to his brother-in-law Nikolai, a slow reader of Rousseau, Montesquieu and Sismondi).<sup>62</sup> He sees himself as an autonomous subject, the conscious master of his intentions and deeds, ready to act in a field that is historically open and which awaits his arrival upon the scene. However, the whole novel (and especially the theoretical *second* part of the “Epilogue”) was written in order to prove that this perspective is misleading, since the individual’s will is not a decisive factor in history. These two standpoints—Pierre’s self-image as a sovereign master of his deeds and historical agent and the perspective of history—inevitably collide, with this collision showing us the inconsistency of any reductionist understanding of history and the world. “It’s *not* that simple” is what Tolstoy wants to tell his readers. Or rather *it is* simple, but in another way. We, the readers, know that Pierre’s plans will fail (as all his other plans had, including his most ridiculous personal super-plot to kill Napoleon). We know that he will draw himself and his family into a catastrophe and Russia to the brink of a civil war, but at the same time we can admire his truly childlike enthusiasm. There is no viewpoint from which totality could be attained. We either have Pierre’s limited point of view or the zero focalization of the narrator’s (or rather the author’s) reflections on the theory of history. They are mutually incommensurable; to overcome this incommensurability, to *ignore* or to *neglect* it, would mean to enter the conspirational mode of reading the world.

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61 Tolstoy 2010: 1268. «А ты что хотела сказать?» – ‘Я так, глупости.’ – ‘Нет, все-таки.’ – ‘Да ничего, пустяки’, – сказала Наташа ... ‘Я только хотела сказать про Петю: нынче няня подходит взять его от меня, он засмеялся, зажмурился и прижался ко мне – верно, думал, что спрятался. Ужасно мил’». – Tolstoy 1940: 294.

62 Tolstoy 1940: 292.



The case of *Voina i mir* is crucial here, given that the novel ends with the description of the nucleus of a future conspiracy and the ironic highlighting of the tendency for self-deceit that inevitably accompanies any action in the sphere of politics—according to Tolstoy at least. Pierre’s insistence that his secret “society” is a “society of true conservatives,” of “gentlemen in the full meaning of the word”<sup>63</sup> is highly telling in this regard. He notably claims that the secret society is necessary to prevent a *coup d’état*, allegedly planned by Arakcheev. However, Pierre’s brother-in-law, Nikolai, tries to prove that “all the danger [Pierre] spoke of existed only in his imagination”<sup>64</sup> and declares that he is determined to fight back against any secret society that will launch an assault on the political order of the Empire.<sup>65</sup> Nikolai is not as well-read as Pierre, he clearly lacks convincing arguments in the discussion, but he *feels* that he is right<sup>66</sup> and that Pierre is a “child” (*rebenok*) and a “dreamer” (*mechtatel*).<sup>67</sup> Nikolai’s rejection of any revolutionary endeavor (though obviously *not* his frequent recourse to violence) and his emotional way of reasoning makes him the author’s mouth-piece here.<sup>68</sup>

Again, Tolstoy uses a child’s or an adolescent’s point of view in order to show the fallacy of the conspiracist worldview: Andrei Bolkonskii’s 15-year-old son Nikolen’ka dreams of himself and Pierre being heroes, resembling the protagonists in an edition of Plutarch, “leading a huge army” on a battle field. The army consists of “white slanting lines that filled the air like the cobwebs that float about in autumn,” but these threads eventually became entangled “and it became difficult to move.”<sup>69</sup> The philosophy of history that Tolstoy elaborates in

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63 Tolstoy 2010: 1259. «Общество настоящих консерваторов ..., джентльменов в полном значении этого слова». – Tolstoi 1940: 284.

64 Tolstoy 2010: 1259. «Никакого переворота не предвидится ... вся опасность ... находится только в его [Пьера] воображении». – Tolstoi 1940: 285.

65 Tolstoi 1940: 285.

66 “He [Nikolai] was fully convinced, not by reasoning but by something within him stronger than reason, of the justice of his opinion.” – Tolstoy 2010: 1259. «Николай почувствовал себя поставленным в тупик. Это еще больше рассердило его, так как он в душе своей не по рассуждению, а по чему-то сильнейшему, чем рассуждение, знал несомненную справедливость своего мнения». – Tolstoi 1940: 285.

67 Tolstoi 1940: 287, 289.

68 Cf. Trigos 2009: 33.

69 Tolstoy 2010: 1268. «Войско это было составлено из белых, косых линий, наполнявших воздух подобно тем паутинам, которые летают осенью ... Вдруг нити,

the theoretical digressions of his novel makes it clear that there can be no puppet master holding the threads that guide people in the real historical world; there are actually not even any threads in the first place.

## Conclusion

The texts that I have examined here involved themselves in a field that is latently structured by the conspirational mode of reading. Literature is capable of capturing and mapping the complexity of the semiotic order in a public sphere that is dominated by this mode. But, apparently, it has no other means to step out of this mode than by simplification: Nikolai is clearly less intelligent and less well-read than Pierre, but he is still more right than his brother-in-law. Mr. G-v, the narrator of *Besy*, is naïve and a bit shortsighted, yet his chronicle seems to be the only means to reinstall political order. Though not concerned with the conspirational mode of reading induced by journalism and the press in the “epoch of an uncovering of all mysteries,” Tolstoy, in the concluding pages of *Voyna i mir*, devaluates conspiracy as a political strategy; he ultimately ridicules Pierre’s desire for fame. The paradigm of individual heroism, evoked here through the mentioning of Plutarch and impersonated in the figure of Napoleon, is possibly the most effective conspiracy theory of the nineteenth century. The idea that a chosen individual, by some secret force, some inner “genius,” could change the course of history left a deep imprint on the minds of the epoch—in historiography, in novels as well as in daily life. The motif of threads, guided by an alien force, often recurs in conspiracy theories. It is of course no accident that in Nikolen’ka’s dream they are denoted in *French* (“le fil de la Vierge”) by his tutor Desal’. Nikolen’ka’s self-indulgent vision of greatness, inspired by his godfather’s political speeches, is the dream of an adolescent who longs for recognition from his (dead) father.<sup>70</sup> What follows is the second, theoretical part of the epilogue, in which Tolstoy explains his views on history; he notably confronts the “ancients’” view on history with the nineteenth century’s obsession with Na-

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которые двигали их, стали ослабевать, путаться; стало тяжело». – Tolstói 1940: 294.

70 Cf. the last sentence of the first part of the Epilogue (Nikolen’ka’s thoughts): ““And my father? Oh, father, father! Yes, I will do something with which even he would be satisfied...”” – Tolstoy 2010: 1269. «А отец? Отец! Отец! Да, я сделаю то, чем бы даже он был доволен...». – Tolstói 1940: 294.

poleon and ends up with the crucial question: “What force moves the nations?”<sup>71</sup> Against the backdrop of the ever-growing knowledge about factors that have an impact on historical events and which predetermine the acts of individuals, he then discusses the problem of freedom and necessity. The crucial argument in his discussion is less about the factual side and more about the problem of consciousness. It is “necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist, and to recognize a dependence of which we are not conscious.”<sup>72</sup> That means that we have to opt for an (impossible) double-point of view: in our story of the world, we have to be narrators and characters at the same time. In order to be able to act, we have to assume that we are the sovereign masters of our actions, but we should nevertheless bear in mind that there are objective factors that reduce our freedom—virtually to zero, as Tolstoy, a child of his positivist era, puts it. Only novelists can deal with this problem; they are able to switch between points of view, between dream and reality, between the individual and the general. The stories’ characters implicitly suspect that they are puppets in some puppet master’s theater (which they ultimately are); this is why they are in constant danger of falling victim to self-deception, to paranoiac over-determination, to conspiracy theories.

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71 Tolstoy 2010: 1274. «Какая сила движет народами?» – Tolstoi 1940: 300.

72 Tolstoy 2010: 1308. «Необходимо отказаться от сознаваемой свободы и признать неощущаемую нами зависимость». – Tolstoi 1940: 341.

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### **Abstract**

Literary fiction in Russia has been dealing with the problem of the transmission of news and information and its relevance for political communities since the 1820s. Faddei Bulgarin, in his novel *Ivan Vyzhigin*, stressed the importance of newspapers as a crucial feature of a modern, enlightened public sphere. It was up to literature to discuss the dangers induced by the widening of the scope of the individual's worldview—from the limited sphere of face-to-face conversations in villages and provincial towns to a situation in which people in a provincial backwater could apprehend news from all around the world. Some of them fall victim to “paranoiac overdetermination” (S. Boym); they try to make sense of the irredeemable complexity of the modern world by constructing conspiracy theories. Writers, such as Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy tried to counter this tendency by shedding light on the semiological and medial mechanisms underlying these processes.



# ***Be on the Lookout!***

## **Soviet Conspiracy Drama of the 1920s and 1930s**

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*Valery Vyugin*\*

### **Keywords**

Soviet drama of the 1920s and 1930s; spy-mania; conspiracy drama

When we consider spies as fictional figures, we can readily agree that the most suitable place for them is in detective narratives, in adventure literature, or perhaps, in parodies. In fact, they initially also appeared in early Soviet art as characters in action-focused, plot-driven novels and films, sometimes involving fantastic or grotesque elements and slapstick comedy. One could mention Mariëtta Shaginian's *Mess-Mend, ili Ianki v Petrograde* (*Mess-Mend, or Yankees in Petrograd*, 1924–1925), together with its screen adaptation *Miss Mend* (1926) by Boris Barnet and Fedor Otsep, Aleksei Tolstoi's *Giperboloid inzhenera Garina* (*The Hyperboloid of Engineer Garin*, 1925–1926), Viktor Shklovskii's and Vsevolod Ivanov's *Iprit* (*Mustard Gas*, 1925) and Lev Rubus' *Zapakh limona* (*The Smell of Lemon*, 1928). These novels are good examples of so-called “pinkertonovshchina,” a fiction written in the manner of Pinkerton's detective stories which, however, did not persist for long in the USSR.

By the end of the 1920s, adventure fiction and cinema had been ousted from the center of the public sphere on the grounds that they were bourgeois and, consequently, harmful. They were replaced by “serious,” “realistic” narratives about

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spies and saboteurs, which now moved into the limelight. The flexible and relatively inexpensive theater system<sup>1</sup> played a significant role in the development of this area of mass culture. Both dramatists, whose names were soon forgotten, and prominent writers who held their high positions in the Soviet literary pantheon until the collapse of the USSR were involved in such “spy hunting.” These sorts of plays were intended for professional theaters and amateur troupes alike. Their authors focused primarily on the current situation and often expressly indicated the exact time of the play’s action, which was either immediately contemporaneous or else pre-dated the audience’s present by a few years, at most.

Diverse theater productions of the 1920s and 1930s, all connected by their exaggerated interest in spies and saboteurs, can be considered as a separate genre named *conspiracy drama*.<sup>2</sup>

*Conspiracy drama* occupied a specific place in the Soviet official culture, responding to the authorities’ political demands and influencing public opinion in its own rather unique way.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that this genre had its functional equivalents in prose, cinema and posters (not to mention official public discourse),<sup>4</sup> it managed to preserve its individual character.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 In his speech, entitled “Zadachi sovetskogo teatra” (“The Aims of the Soviet Theater”) at the first All-Union Conference of Theater Directors in 1939, Stalin’s Prosecutor-General, Andrei Vyshinskii, corrected Lenin by expanding his famous phrase, “Concerning the struggle against all kinds of vestiges of private ownership, individualistic psychology, ... the most powerful of the arts is—besides the cinema—the theater.” – Vyshinskii 1939: 4. And he was probably right. According to Soviet statistics, “by 1 January 1940, in the RSFSR there were 387 theaters, including 95 for collective farms and 36 for children.” In 1939, for the USSR as a whole, more than 86 million people visited 825 theaters; see Zograf 1960: 8–9.
  - 2 The attempt to define this sort of play as a genre does not, of course, exclude treating them, in more general terms, as a form of conspiracy theory discourse or as “a powerful cultural narrative;” see Arnold 2008: VIII.
  - 3 Critics certainly realized the integrity of drama focused on spies (none, of course, used the term “conspiracy drama”). For example, in 1939, Boris Emel’ianov, a theater observer, made the following diagnosis: “We have sufficient evidence to state the fact of the existence of a remarkable trend in our drama which has accumulated all the peculiarities of the detective genre, although, to all appearances, it has been burnished with the intention of increasing vigilance and nurture patriotism.” – Emel’ianov 1939: 119.
  - 4 In this chapter, in order not to drown in details and comparisons, I will exclude from considering representations of the theme of “enemy within” in all of the other arts, confining myself only to mentioning the fact that “conspiracy genres” could be found



The origin of conspiracy drama can be ascribed less to aesthetic reasons than to the paranoid character of state politics<sup>6</sup> in the late 1920s and 1930s, although we should be aware that the inclination to search for “hidden enemies” characterized Soviet art from its inception. Dramatists who dabbled in this genre were stimulated by major political events (the series of public show trials, for examples) which provoked an escalation or a certain shift in the genre’s evolution and, as a result, its re-evaluation by literary critics.

However, the “conspiracy dramatists” were guided by the political impulses of the party and government, unofficially licensed to hunt imaginary foes, and were permanently vulnerable to critical attacks. They were blamed for a wide range of sins—from aesthetic defects in their writing to much more serious ideological mistakes. But when we remember that any artistic practitioner was by definition at risk of persecution, under Stalin, the use of the stick instead of the carrot should not come as a surprise. Uneasy relations with the authorities could not prevent the genre from remaining in demand until the 1950s,<sup>7</sup> although by 1938 or 1939 the redundancy of spies on stage already provided a ready target for the genre’s opponents. What the experts did not like, according to the press reports, was popular success.

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everywhere and were similar in many respects. By the same token, I will not discuss plays intended for children, although there are many significant examples among them: Leonid Makariev’s *Timoshkin Rudnik* (*The Mine of a Boy Timoshka*, 1926), Daniil Del’s *U lukomor’ia* (*By the Curved Seashore*, 1938), Aleksandr Kron’s *Nashe oruzhie* (*Our Weapons*, 1937), Georgii Gaidovskii’s *Iasno vizhu* (*I See Clearly*, 1937), etc.

- 5 Of course, the Soviet “conspiracy drama” cannot unreservedly be treated as a unique phenomenon. Narratives prevalent in the Third Reich or in Hollywood’s anti-communist films produced between 1947 and 1954, due to “recasting the familiar gangster genre to fit the Communist conspiracy” (Goldberg 2001: 32), represented similar responses to more or less similar political factors, determined by the general strategies of the central authorities.
- 6 Gábor Rittersporn in his article “The Soviet World as a Conspiracy” discussed the “conspiracy” nature of the Soviet order under Stalin in detail; see Rittersporn 2001: 103–24. Even earlier, Popper, describing the Nazi project, pointed out the possibility for conspiracy theorists to win political competition; see Popper 1962: 123. Pipes also wrote about the period between two World Wars when adherents of conspiracy theories came to power in Germany and the USSR; see Pipes 1997: 11.
- 7 Aleksandr Shtein’s *Zakon chesti* (*The Law of Honor*, 1947), Konstantin Simonov’s *Chuzhaia ten’* (*Alien’s Shadow*, 1949), etc.

These dramatists' aspirations to produce plays about spies and saboteurs with "realistic" plots,<sup>8</sup> apparently rooted in everyday life, show once again that "conspiracy drama" belongs among the many other discursive manifestations of general conspiracy theory which, in the case of the USSR, was advocated and propagandized by the authorities.<sup>9</sup> Although they were fictional statements about hidden enemies, these plays genuinely assumed the role of factual discourse. The rhetoric upon which they were based aimed to persuade the audience that the imaginary, on-stage spies had real-life analogues, who were both numerous and tangibly close. Like the show trials of the so-called "enemies of the people" mounted by the government, these plays were an attempt to render fiction as reality via aesthetic conceptualization.

What were the topics that the conspiracy drama tackled? What were the boundaries of this near-forgotten genre? What were its ethical and ideological agendas? What was conspiracy drama teaching, persuading, and imposing upon audiences? In which forms, in conspiracy drama, did the project of mass art exist that later succeeded it?<sup>10</sup> These are the questions addressed in this chapter.

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8 Peter Knight, who includes literature, cinema and other variations of entertainment culture in his analysis of the circulation of conspiracy theories in the U.S. points to the difference between "culture of conspiracy" and "culture *about* conspiracy;" – see Knight 2000: 3. In practice, it is not often easy to draw the boundary between the first category and the second, but I believe that Soviet "conspiracy dramatists," like Soviet politicians, wanted their fictional constructions to be accepted as reality (the politicians) or as more or less "realistic" (the dramatists). In any case, this was a "commodified" form of knowledge; see Birchall 2006: 39.

9 The idea that the government apparatus is the main center of the conspiracy theory influence does not contradict a more general premise about the naivety of the belief that morbid attention to the "enemy within" arises from propaganda and manipulation of public opinion (see, for example, Gudkov 2004: 558). I would like to stress that, in the USSR, the media which expressed these social anxieties and hopes enjoyed unprecedented support from the state. This support was much more substantial than what the experts dealing with conspiracy theories in the U.S. and Europe describe.

10 Of course, some of the plays I will mention have been analysed by other scholars, more than once. A considerable amount of literature on several of them has already been published in the USSR—mainly on Maksim Gorky's and Leonid Leonov's plays, although not from the perspective of conspiracy specifically. After the collapse of the USSR, narratives of this type immediately attracted attention as a subject for revision. In 1993, Evgeny Dobrenko considered them in the context of "defensive-patriotic" art; see Dobrenko 1993: 189–96. Violetta Gudkova in her monograph *Rozh-*

## Boundaries

At the end of the 1920s, Pavel Ial'tsev (1904–1941), one of many authors who joined the hunt for fictional spies, published a play with the not terribly original title of *Na granitse* (*On the Border*, 1928), which used a typical plot formula about a failed attempt by masked enemies to enter Soviet territory. An attractive Polish girl, Marina Zbrozhek, persuades a Soviet border guard, Vasili, who has fallen in love with her, to allow her relatives, including a former White army officer, to cross the Soviet border under cover of night. She claims that her relatives, after much suffering abroad, long to return to Russia in order to start an honest life under a new identity. The naturally kind Vasili reluctantly agrees to assist them, but a random accident disrupts their plans. Vasili's brother, a staunch Communist, replaces him on patrol and is killed as a result. Regretting his deviance from the rules, Vasili helps to expose the nest of spies: without compunction, he shoots his fiancée as she attempts to escape.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that the interest in spies taken by border guards or counter-intelligence officers at the state border, however genuine, does not necessarily imply any efflorescence of conspiracy theory or even transient spy-mania in the public sphere. "Conspiracy culture" derived from the strong suspicions intensively cultivated in society when the "rhetoric of distrust" extends beyond the limited "frontier" zones into other territories and spheres of everyday life. Soviet art successfully displayed this expansion.

In the new Soviet "conspiracy" landscape, spies were attracted to remote collective farms in the borderlands, and dramatists took full advantage of this circumstance. For example, the plot of Édouard Samuilenok's (1907–1939) popular play *Gibel' Volka* (*The Death of Wolf*, 1939) revolved around the life of one such spy. The play was written in Belarussian, first performed at Belarussian Drama Theater and immediately translated into Russian. Apart from the language of composition, the author's nationality did not impinge upon the narrative's reception. However, Samuilenok's case is intriguing precisely because it does not differ from the prevailing Soviet formula of the time.

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*denie sovetskikh siuzhetov* (*The Origin of Soviet Storylines*), an indispensable commentary on Soviet pre-war drama, devoted quite a few pages to saboteurs and to other enemies as well; see Gudkova 2008. But "spy drama" was not yet debated as a complete and comprehensive whole, nor was it examined in sufficient detail.

11 Ten years later, another "conspiracy dramatist" Vladimir Bill'-Belotserkovskii was inspired by the same idea and wrote his own piece with an almost identical plot. His play had the title *Pogranichniki* (*Border Guards*, 1938).

Samuilenok's characters, Soviet peasants, are faced with gradually increasing problems: a haystack starts to burn, grazing lands flood, barley fails to grow, etc. These misfortunes make them suspect that an enemy has infiltrated their community with his accomplices. One character reflects, "The man seems like an ordinary fellow: a bright face, a cheery grin, a voice like a nightingale, but the soul of a wolf."<sup>12</sup> Soon their suspicions are justified. A "spy-saboteur," the ex-landowner Shabinskii, who yearns "to re-install himself as the lawful master on the backs... of his former slaves"<sup>13</sup> has illegally crossed the border. Helped by a forester disguised as a loyal citizen and by a few other criminals, he plans to poison horses intended for the Red Army and then to totally incinerate the collective farm. However, border guards and local Komsomol members keep the whole area under such strict control that he is reduced to hiding in a damp dugout at the edge of the forest. Even a high-ranking official (also a secret saboteur) who arrives from the local district capital is unable to help him. Both (as well as all other baddies) are ultimately arrested.

Apart from this official from the local authorities, another "big man" from Moscow, to whom the spy Shabinskii has tried to forward coded messages from abroad, is mentioned in *Gibel' Volka*. From this point, independently of the author's volition and irrespective of the "big man's" ultimate unmasking, the narrative begins to subvert the ideology that it serves. The point is that the play risks persuading its audience that, despite solid barriers, the USSR remains vulnerable to hidden enemies not only on the frontiers, but even in the heart of the state. Meanwhile the author ignores the paradox that borders remain permeable despite the officially impenetrable level of border protection; in fact, Soviet drama in the 1930s typically ignored this paradox.<sup>14</sup>

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12 «Кажется – человек, как человек: обличье светлое, усмешка веселая, голос – точно у соловья, а душа волчья...». – Samuilenok 1939: 9.

13 «На спинах... бывших рабов восстановить свое право законного господина». – Samuilenok 1939: 26.

14 Though sometimes this paradox of permeable borders did inspire conscious doubt. Thus, when in 1937, Evgenii Shvarts wrote his play *Nashe gostepriimstvo* (*Our Hospitality*) about representatives of the Soviet young generation who suddenly met saboteurs who landed by plane in the Russian steppes, the critic L. Maliugin from the journal *Teatr* accused Shvarts's work of appearing unnatural; see Maliugin 1938: 96.

## Expansion

Areas vulnerable to espionage were not limited to frontiers or to special military enterprises and army structures, or even to the capital which could easily be imagined as an appealing place for enemy agents. In the Soviet “fictional reality,” the interests of foreign aliens could affect the remotest, obscurest towns and villages; it could even affect people in the most peaceful professions.

In Semen Semenov-Polonskii’s<sup>15</sup> play *Na otshibe* (*A Remote House*, 1939),<sup>16</sup> a stranger comes to a lonely woman who lives in a house at a distance from a collective farm village. At first she takes him on as a poultry-farming instructor, but quickly identifies him as a masked foe; she locks him in the cellar.

Similarly, Ial’tsev’s *Afrodita* (*Aphrodite*, 1938)<sup>17</sup> describes the everyday life of an upcountry estate museum that is managed by an elderly intellectual. In this conspiracy play, a young art expert from Moscow—a female character, appearing unexpectedly but opportunely—immediately uncovers a plot between a foreigner named Frost, who is visiting the museum to study a canvas called *Aphrodite*, and the young director’s wife. Frost and the director’s wife have replaced that valuable picture with a copy in order to sell the original abroad illegally.

The history of Soviet drama owes much to Nikolai Virta (1906–1976), whose *Zagovor* (*Conspiracy*, 1939), is an outstanding example of “conspiracy theory expansion” in the field of theater. The plot of Virta’s play covers 1936 and 1937, set at one of numerous land offices in central Russia, headed by a certain Ol’ga Petrovna Popova who courageously battles bureaucracy and so-called “wreckers” (*vrediteli*). Everything is turned upside down when an important official from Moscow, Balandin, arrives in order to assist Popova in her struggle. As their conversation reveals, both Popova and Balandin are members of a clandestine group planning a coup d’état in the USSR. With this aim in mind, the conspirators poison cattle, impose backbreaking grain taxes on peasants, compelling the latter to hide their harvest from the authorities, and imprison hundreds of loyal individuals while sending secret orders to shoot honest citizens. The plotters are revealed to include the supporters and associates of real-life individuals such as Nikolai Bukharin, Leon Trotsky, Mikhail Tukhachevskii (who

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15 According to Viacheslav Ogrzyzko, two authors, who were under close surveillance by Soviet secret police since 1938, wrote under the pseudonyms “Semen Zakharovich” and “Semenov-Polonskii.” They were Klavdiia Aleksandrovna Novikova (1913–1984) and Leonid Vladimirovich Sobolevskii (1912–1942); cf. Ogrzyzko 2005: 20.

16 Semenov-Polonskii 1940.

17 Ial’tsev 1938b.

has undertaken to seize the Kremlin shortly), as well as ordinary, lower-profile spies.

Unsurprisingly, at the last moment and with Stalin's moral support, these internal enemies' plans are frustrated. Once again the spectator encounters an unresolved paradox: he or she sees on stage only a few thoroughly respectable party members and representatives of the state. By constructing his universe of infinite conspiracy, Virta managed to populate his fictional USSR almost exclusively with conspirators, leaving few roles for loyal citizens.

But espionage discourse spread beyond these purely territorial and pure thematic aspects. Ultimately, its expansion led to the corrosion and deformation of the genre structure, even in traditionally "peaceful" forms of narration, such as melodrama, family drama, domestic drama, and comedy.

## The Corrosion of the Genre

The 1917 Revolution and the Civil War almost immediately gave birth to a new (for Russian culture at least) narrative variation, focusing on the relations between spouses or pairs of lovers belonging to opposing political camps. Konstantin Trenev's play *Liubov' Iarovaia* (1926) and Boris Lavrenev's story *Sorok pervyi* (*The Forty First*, 1926) are the best examples of such literature. Meanwhile, the political and military context also influenced traditional genres in which love affairs and various aspects of family life traditionally constituted and, with some exceptions, exhausted the content of narration. A new espionage/saboteur discourse began filtering through them as well.

Mikhail Zoshchenko's play *Opasnye sviazi* (*Dangerous Liaisons*, 1939)<sup>18</sup> exemplifies this new formula.

A married, high-ranking official, Bessonov, has a young mistress for whom he is looking for a room to rent. Once the place of refuge has been found, the protagonist acquires yet another love interest. She is the daughter of the owners of the rented room, and her parents enthusiastically encourage Bessonov to win her favor. They want him to leave his wife and to marry their daughter. The plot thickens, but instead of ending with a denunciation of immorality and bourgeois ideological legacy (as would have been typical for Zoshchenko's writings of the 1920s), the play closes with the unexpected and unconvincingly motivated escape and arrest of the protagonist, who turns out to be a former *agent provocateur* of the tsarist secret police, now acting on behalf of members of the opposi-

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18 Zoshchenko 1940.

tion. The metamorphosis of a morally wicked person into a political enemy, thereby shifting a romantic plot into the “conspiracy genre,” is so surprising that one might well wonder if it was added to the plot exclusively in order to please the authorities and critics.

Something similar happens in Leonid Leonov’s *Volk* (*The Wolf*, 1938).<sup>19</sup> On one level, the play tells the story of an individual trying to hide from the NKVD; on another level, Leonov pays excessive attention to romantic and familial relations between his characters. Spectators spend most of their time following the development of tension within a family. The author touches on all of the other subjects only in passing until the end of the second act (the play has three acts), when a certain Luka Sandukov appears. Luka Sandukov is, additionally, a relative who pretends to be a brave polar explorer who has just returned from an expedition. But in fact he is a “wolf” in the guise of a “hero” (“wolf as enemy” was a popular metaphor), and this “beast” is now in a hopeless situation: he is trying to flee both the police and his fellow conspirators.

Justifiably, another Leonov play *Polovchanskije sady* (*The Gardens of Polovchansk*, 1938)<sup>20</sup> can also be considered an example of generic ambivalence. The same bias distinguishes one of the most prominent Soviet writers, Maksim Gorky, in his conspiracy play *Somov i drugie* (*Somov and Others*, 1931),<sup>21</sup> which was (with perhaps a few exceptions) the only literary work in which the founder of Soviet literature depicted life in the USSR. Curiously enough, Gorky did not risk publishing it himself.

## Semantic Transgression

The genre hybridization, which was intrinsic to “conspiracy drama,” corresponded to the rhetoric and even perhaps to the pure linguistic fusion, which was peculiar to Soviet public space under Stalin. Without introducing new elements, it embodied the “logic of rhetoric” that was obvious in official discourse of the 1930s and which, on the one hand, related merely to terminology but, on the other, fruitfully participated in constructing the social phenomena that the terminol-

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19 Leonov 1940.

20 Leonov 1938.

21 Gorky 1941.

ogy addressed. Thanks to this logic any individual in the USSR, except for the dictator, could be declared a spy.<sup>22</sup>

As observed previously, there were two major trends in Soviet art, motivated by the aim of exposing spies and “conspiracy.” For example, the show trials held in the 1920s and 1930s, accompanied by wide media campaigns, provided scrupulously detailed information about the networks of spies and saboteurs which they revealed. It is not surprising that fiction, cinema, and theater often followed the same formula, exhaustively presenting proofs of their characters’ criminal activity: they described when, where, and who committed an offense or treason in detail.

At the same time, the explicit “conspiracy” narration competed with a drastically different, obscurer way of presenting the topic. Maksim Gorky’s aforementioned *Somov i drugie* belongs to dramatic literature of this second kind. In his play, Gorky preferred to focus rather on the indirect manner of undermining a character than on an extended description of his illegal activity. So, the central character Somov, an engineer and fascist agent, indirectly unmasked himself before the theater audience through his sexual habits: he seduces his wife in a lighted room, and thus after arousing brute animal instincts in the unfortunate woman, he inflicts severe psychological and moral suffering upon her. The sex itself was, of course, not shown. In other words, thanks to an *ad hominem* argument, a character needed do nothing, at least before the spectators’ eyes, in order to be exposed as a spy. Ethical deviations, together with hints about his double life more than compensated for the absence of explicit demonstration and discussion of character demolition. Zoshchenko’s *Opasnye sviazi* and Leonov’s *Volk* resemble Gorky’s play in this respect, although Leonov’s case is not so obvious. The invention of “passive espionage” fitted well with the image of Soviet “witch hunting.”

But in advancing the idea of conspiracy, Soviet dramatists, of course, did not always choose such sophisticated ways of writing. More often, the national context helped them to produce a similar effect. The terms “wrecker,” “saboteur,” “spy,” etc., immediately became interchangeable after they were adopted by the Soviet public discourse. Moreover, the set of lexical items denoting a “hidden enemy” permanently expanded. The theater subordinated this more general process and at the same time took part in “stoking” it.

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22 The nationality of a character did not play a significant role in Soviet conspiracy drama. As Violetta Gudkova wrote, “The Jewish question, openly discussed in the earlier Soviet drama, was later put out of sight and did not manifest itself in censored dramatic writings.” – Gudkova 2008: 300.



The identity between the political opposition and hostile intelligence services was presented as self-evident. Thus, in Leonid Karasev's play *Ogni maiaka* (*Lighthouse Signals*, 1937),<sup>23</sup> which inspired its audience by showing how Soviet individuals heroically fought Japanese secret agents on an island in the Pacific Ocean, an unmasked saboteur confesses to being recruited straight away for this work by a *Trotskyist* called Petrov.

Two more demonstrative texts utilize considerably different devices to produce essentially the same result. In Vladimir Bill'-Belotserkovskii's (1885–1970) play *Golos nedr* (*The Voice of the Core*, 1929), which depicts the reconstruction of a derelict mine, only those enthusiasts ready to work selflessly and unpaid for up to two years are recognized as loyal citizens. All the other workers are portrayed either as unwitting saboteurs or as obvious spies' accomplices.

However, in spite of the potentially unlimited set of synonyms referring to the notion of "inner enemies," one strong distinction between them and other law breakers was established. Leonov stressed this particularity in his "quasi-conspiracy" play *Metel'* (*Snowstorm*, 1939). I refer to *Metel'* as a "quasi-conspiracy" because it only superficially corresponds with the pattern of the "spy/saboteur" plot. In fact, the author evidently plays with the audience's expectations, provoking spectators or readers to view it from the conspiracy perspective in order to frustrate them at the end. Finally, it becomes clear that the key villain in Leonov's play, a factory director suspected of espionage and sabotage, is only guilty of "accepting bribes from foreign companies when he offered them contracts."<sup>24</sup> A remark by his wife Catherine, an honest Soviet woman who (like the audience) expected much more severe misdeeds from her husband, is notable: "I thought he was an enemy, but he turned out to be a mere thief."<sup>25</sup>

Following this logic, we can conclude that, with minor exaggeration, only a person who committed a common crime could avoid the accusation of espionage.

Although it does not perfectly fulfil the requirements of the "conspiracy" genre, *Metel'* certainly belongs within it. Even after standing the conspiracy plot

23 Karasev's play was permanently under critics' attacks for its relatively, by the Soviet standards, adventure bias, for the reason that "Karasev builds the intrigue of his play specifically on the base of the audience's unhealthy curiosity" («Карасев интригу своей пьесы строит именно на разжигании нездорового любопытства зрителя»); cf. Mlodik 1938: 151.

24 «...брал коммиссионные от фирм, когда распределял советские заказы». – Leonov 1940: 72.

25 Катерина: «Я думала, он враг, а он просто вор...». – Leonov 1940: 72.

on its head, it retains the pathos of the genre, its concern with revealing hidden evil. In his play, Leonov has simply replaced spies and saboteurs with conspirators and slanderers.

I doubt whether Aleksei Faiko's (1893–1978) play *Chelovek s portfelem* (*A Man with a Briefcase*, 1928) can be numbered as conspiracy drama without reservation. Instead, it marks the limitations of the genre when relocated beyond its traditional territory. Faiko tells the story of a prominent academic at the so-called State Institute for Culture and Revolution in Moscow who is trying to conceal his participation in an anti-Soviet group named "Russia and Freedom"<sup>26</sup> which was uncovered by the NKVD several years previously. This protagonist is incontrovertibly alien to Soviet society; moreover, he is a genuine murderer. But now his motives have gone beyond espionage and sabotage. His main aim is to survive his dangerous situation and to build a career as a respectable Soviet academic. He is teaching his son survival skills, following this agenda, "You will live among wild animals and you must become the best of them."<sup>27</sup> In this play, the audience encounters neither scenes of sabotage nor signs of espionage. In addition, the protagonist's extreme individualism in Faiko's work resists the construction of a story about conspiracy.

Vsevolod Rukk's<sup>28</sup> play *Inzhener Sergeev* (*Engineer Sergeev*, 1942),<sup>29</sup> about spies who infiltrate a new Soviet electric power plant, represents a borderline example of the opposite type. Its storyline fits the genre's standards propagandizing vigilance against masked enemies, and the enemies it visualizes are typical of this milieu. The only moment that violates the general scheme of conspiracy drama is the time of action, set in the second part of 1941 when Germany had already begun attacking the USSR. Thus the reality of wartime has displaced imaginary espionage activity in the storyline.

But despite certain exceptions, it should be apparent that all these "transitional" or "quasi-conspiracy" plays owe their existence to the pivotal corpus of definitely "conspiracy" drama texts. They were written either with the intention to fit perfectly within this canon or to depart from the most obvious specimens of the genre.

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26 «Русь и Воля»

27 «Ты будешь жить среди зверей и ты должен стремиться стать лучшим зверем». – Faiko 1929: 61.

28 Vsevolod Rukk was a pen name of Vsevolod Merkulov (1895–1953), a high-ranking GPU officer, and a close associate of Lavrenty Beria.

29 Rukk 1942.

## Irrationality and Logic

A well-known approach to conspiracy theories, which involves treating them as “a specific kind of irrationality associated with a stubborn, highly rational, and highly operational logic,”<sup>30</sup> is easily applicable to the case of “spy theater” in the USSR. Despite a diversity of dramatic realizations, Soviet plays about hidden enemies generally suggested a rather coherent vision of reality.

If we consider the key ideas and notions that underpin this fictional construction, but which lack any direct connection with the *topos* of espionage, then Soviet “conspiracy dramatists” did not present anything new to their audience that might have contrasted with the authorities’ official, factual discourse. Many plays fixated on the conflicted questions of factory or collective farm labor; therefore, the heroic enthusiasm of the masses naturally became one of their most prominent themes for many of them. This effusion of enthusiasm was characteristically expressed by chief engineer Nikolaev, a character from Iakov Rubinshtein’s (1891–1930)<sup>31</sup> play *Na raznykh putiakh* (*Upon Different Ways*, 1930), who warns his colleagues: “If we don’t finish by the first of February, I’ll shoot myself.”<sup>32</sup>

The idea of the militarization of labor was vital for conspiracy drama. Implicitly, the conspiracy dramatists inculcated the slogan “labor is war” as zealously as any other Soviet writers and artists; but in Rubinshtein’s play another character, the chief engineer’s wife, explicitly expresses the same message. She states: “We could not feel more enthusiasm if the war were about to start.”<sup>33</sup>

The slogan “Vigilance!” (*bditel’nost’*) also appears both natural and proper in this atmosphere of “almost-war.” In the words of an aged and very experienced member of the Communist Party, a female character from Aleksandr Afinogenov’s (1904–1941) play *Strakh* (*Fear*, 1930): “If class enemies still dare to make bureaucratic delays, burn collective farms, poison canned food and speak

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30 Groh 1987: 4.

31 Iakov L’vovich Rubinshtein was an influential manager in the fisheries industry as well as a dramatist. He was shot in 1930, according to the information received from Tat’iana Kukushkina (The Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Science/Pushkin House).

32 «Если мы не закончим к первому февраля, я застрелюсь». – Rubinshtein 1930: 13.

33 «Энтузиазм прямо как перед войной». – Rubinshtein 1930: 15.

from this lectern, it means that they are not scared enough. It means that we must redouble our vigilance.”<sup>34</sup>

In turn, this politics of vigilance, which purported the destruction of a hidden enemy, linked to a revised notion of “humanism,” in a manner of speaking, to the “merciless humanism” finds expression in, for example, Boris Voitekhov’s (1911–1975) and Leonid Lench’s (1905–1991) play *Pavel Grekov* (*The Communist Pavel Grekov*, 1939). Immediately before the curtain falls, one character claims, “Don’t allow the enemy to strike you, strike him yourselves. ... Be merciless towards enemies. This is true humanism!”<sup>35</sup>

The citations provided above are exceptionally bald and straightforward, but “conspiracy drama” impressed the identical message on their audiences by every available, sometimes very sophisticated and theatrical means.

The word “vigilance” (*bditel’nost’*) normally carries positive connotations; at the same time it relates semantically to a wide set of lexemes referring to the field of sensory experience which, in contrast to “vigilance,” imply negative behaviors by the actor: “suspiciousness” (*podozritel’nost’*), “distrustfulness” (*mnitel’nost’*), etc. But the “conspiracy” dramatists, like Soviet writers in general, rarely fell into this trap of synonymy. They preferred to use an alternative term popular in the 1920s and 1930s: “scent” (*chut’e*).

Dramatists, like other Soviet public figures, regularly refer to *chut’e* in order to stress that rational reasoning was insufficient to reveal an enemy. Here is only one example to show how this mechanism worked in conspiracy drama.

In Ial’tsev’s play *Katastrofa* (*A Railway Catastrophe*, 1937), one of the positive characters, Engineer Novikov, doubts whether or not a railroad accident which took place was really accidental; perhaps conspirators were responsible. Novikov discusses his suspicions with a colleague, and the following exchange of cues ensues:

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34 «Когда классовый враг ещё осмеливается разводить волокиту, поджигать колхозы, отравлять консервы и говорить с этой кафедры, – значит он недостаточно боится. Значит надо удесяттерить бдительность». – Afinogenov 1931: 69.

35 «Не допускайте, чтобы враг бил Вас. Бейте его сами. ... Будьте беспощадны к врагам, в этом подлинный гуманизм!» – Voitekhov/Lench 1939: 123.

Barsov: But evidence! Where is the evidence?

Novikov: I don't have direct evidence yet. But I scent something. Something stinks here, Nikolai Vasil'evich.<sup>36</sup>

It would seem that, while Soviet epistemology never dismissed the significance of intuition, the fictional narratives vastly inflated its utility.

Normally a protagonist has an unerring ability to “scent” trouble and trusts this feeling completely. If the character fails to trust his intuition, retribution is inevitable. Thus, in Mikhail Shimkevich's (1885–1942) drama *V'iuga* (*Snowstorm*, 1931) depicting the construction of an hydroelectric power plant on a river, a selfless, almost ideal communist named Voronov generously orders the release of a suspicious monk who had been detained near the dam of the power plant at night, as there is no direct evidence against him. “Of course, he isn't one of us,” Voronov explains, “but what more can we do? We cannot catch an empty cassock.”<sup>37</sup> Voronov resists the emotional arguments of his more perspicacious comrade-in-arms, a female character, who immediately identifies the monk as a typical anti-Soviet White Guard sympathizer. As a result, a year later, the “pseudo-monk” kills Voronov's comrade. On the one hand, her death is regarded as the severest moral punishment of the protagonist; on the other, she becomes, inevitably, a sacrifice to the cult of vigilance. The last act of the play closes with a symbolic scene in which workers standing on different banks of the river call out to each other, “Be on the lookout! Be on the lookout! Be on the lookout!”<sup>38</sup>

Rational reasoning retained its importance for the investigation of conspiracies: not, however, as a tool for revealing the truth (which was already known through intuition) but rather as an element of rhetorical arguments without which no criminal could be denounced and punished.

From the perspective of the “sociology of the total conspiracy,” which was suggested to Soviet audiences, ideas about kinship and family relationships lost their traditional meaning. Or, to be more precise, conspiracy drama (and other genres, too) implied that the natural human affection and trust for one's relatives had to be disregarded in a socialist society.

36 Барсов: «Но доказательства! Где доказательства!» – Новиков: «Прямых доказательств у меня пока нет. Но я чую. Здесь дурно пахнет, Николай Васильевич» – Ial'tsev: 1938a: 16.

37 «Конечно, он не наш ... Ну, а дальше что? Схватить и взять пустую рясу?» – Shimkevich 1931: 77.

38 «Будь на-чеку! Будь на-чеку! Будь на-чеку!» – Shimkevich 1931: 124.

This substitution of older concepts of kinship and family relationships with the idea of a single social organism perhaps came to a head in Georgii Mdivani's (1905–1981) play *Chest'* (*Honor*, 1937) about the aged hunter Iagor. During an action sequence, one of his sons, a border guard, is killed by spies. Another son, revealed as an enemy agent, was killed by Iagor himself. As soon becomes clear, a bosom friend of Iagor guides saboteurs across the border; Iagor exposes him in public. Prior to this revelation other people, including Iagor's border guard son, had suspected Iagor himself. Finally, Iagor's former friend's daughter, who is the widow of Iagor's honest son, repudiates her father.

The demolition of kinship and family relationships is topped off with a dialog between Iagor's son, the border guard, and this son's platoon leader, which contains the following statement:

Platoon leader: Aren't you ashamed to hide your thoughts from me, Nadir? You have never done anything like that before. (*He is drawing nearer to Nadir, embracing him.*) The two of us were like a single man, like a single heart...<sup>39</sup>

After an attempt by Nadir to separate from the "collective body," his death is predetermined.<sup>40</sup>

The politics of vigilance, based on the identification of a peaceful life with military action, also directly influenced more intimate (sexual) relations between characters. Consequently, such relations were also considered criminal: let us remember here Pavel Ial'tsev's *Na granice* (*On the Border*, 1929) or Gorky's *Somov i drugie*.

If we focus on feelings and emotions in general, Afinogenov's play *Strakh* can serve as the best illustration of how an ideal positive character succeeds in controlling his basic instincts and emotions. Afinogenov's play persuades the audience that "eternal unconditioned stimuli, such as love, hunger, rage, and

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39 «Как тебе не стыдно, Надир, скрывать от меня свои мысли? Разве это когда-нибудь раньше бывало? (*Подходит к Надиру, обнимает его за плечи.*) Оба мы были как один человек, как одно сердце...». – Mdivani 1938: 28.

40 At the same time we should note that, in the beginning, family relationships occasionally contained the opposite meaning. For example, in Anatolii Lunacharskii's (1875–1933) play *Iad* (*Poison*, 1925) it is affection for his close relative which awakes a sense of responsibility in the 18-year-old son of a prominent member of the Soviet government and which prevents this son from poisoning his father on the instructions of a prostitute in the pay of foreign agents; cf. Lunacharskii 1926.

fear”<sup>41</sup> have been replaced in the Soviet individual with “collectivism, enthusiasm and the joy of life.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, Afinogenov clearly puts social life and politics in opposition to basic human instincts, keeping the leading role for the former.

Adapting the almost paramilitary enthusiasm attributed to the New Soviet Man, Soviet writers (“engineers of souls”) transform the *meaning of the instinct of self-preservation* in a particular way. This is not to say that their characters consciously control this instinct. Simply put, their instinct of self-preservation turns off in certain situations which always coincides with a climactic narrative event. If Soviet art normally cultivated the virtue of self-sacrifice, then conspiracy drama produced its own extreme form of this virtue.

In the simplest cases, which pre-date the plays of “conspiracy dramatists,” a captured Soviet soldier prefers suicide to captivity. Conversely, spies choose life. Let me mention in this connection Bill’-Belotserkovskii’s play *Pogranichniki* (*Border Guards*, 1938). A negative character in Ial’tsev’s play *Na granitse* states: “Any man clings to life, Mr. Stenshinskii... .”<sup>43</sup>

Another, less widespread, more sophisticated and therefore more interesting from a rhetorical perspective, representation of the idea of heroic self-sacrifice is based on legal terminology and expresses itself in terms of the logic of “pre-emptive justice.” Under these terms, a character who has failed to be vigilant blames himself in advance and demands the death penalty.

In Ial’tsev’s play *Na granitse*, a guilty border guard first executes his fiancée (a secret agent) and, still agonized by his mistake, insists on justice for himself too:

Okunev: Comrade Strepetov! This is an illegal trial...

Vasilii: Yes, it is. This is an illegal trial. Take me away. I let this gang through... I allowed them to cross the border... I did not stand firm. I let everyone down... There is no place here for men like me!<sup>44</sup>

In the same manner, a character in Ial’tsev’s *Afrodita*, a museum director, sen-

41 «Вечные безусловные стимулы: любовь, голод, гнев и страх». – Afinogenov 1931: 7.

42 «Коллективность, энтузиазм, радость жизни» – Afinogenov 1931: 21.

43 «Всякий человек цепляется за жизнь, пан Стеншинский...». – Ial’tsev 1929: 49.

44 Окунев: «Товарищ Стрепетов! Это самосуд!» – Василий: «Да, самосуд... Берите и меня. Я открыл этой шайке дорогу... Я пропустил их сюда... Не крепко стоял... Проскользнулся... Такому здесь не место!» – Ial’tsev 1929: 52.

tences himself to be shot after he allowed criminals to replace an original painting with a copy. “No! Put me up against the wall, me!,” the museum director insists, “I was trusted to keep this painting safe. A brilliant creation, our pride... Dear God!!”<sup>45</sup> We find similar scenes in plays mentioned previously, such as Bill’-Belotserkovskii’s *Golos nedr*; or, for example, in Afinogenov’s *Malinovoe varen’e* (*Raspberry Jam*, 1926),<sup>46</sup> Boris Romashov’s (1895–1958) *Konets Krivoryl’ska* (*The End of The Town of Krivoryl’sk*, 1925–26).<sup>47</sup> The list goes on.

Thus, the meaning of the notion of *bditel’nost’* influenced the “deepest psychology” of the Soviet “*homo conspiratus*” both metaphorically and actually, acting on his basic needs and motives, sometimes simply refuting them. In so doing, conspiracy drama mostly followed the mainstream of Soviet art. But, as I have shown, it was also distinguished as a genre by specific variations, peculiar premises, and certain poetic devices.

### “Thematic Contraband”

In spite of their widely ranging fantasy, Soviet dramatists had to show the audience a reality which at least partly resembled everyday life in the USSR. One of the tasks which conspiracy drama sought to tackle was to draw the audience’s attention away from various routine problems and dangerous themes or to give the latter a more attractive appearance. Nevertheless, undesirable “thematic contraband” all too often entered these plays. Trips abroad, foreign life, and foreigners as subjects of desire were the most popular “illegal” topics that the conspiracy drama dealt with. For example, in Iakov Rubinshtein’s play *Na raznykh putiakh*, Soviet girls are fascinated by an American engineer, knowing that his mother wishes to see him get married in Russia. Thanks to this trick, the spy gains the confidence of one of his vulnerable victims. The same motif appears in Zoshchenko’s play *Opasnye sviazi*, Ial’tsev’s play *Nenavist’* (*Hate*, 1928),<sup>48</sup> etc.

Another sort of implicit undesired content characteristic of this genre might be called “a negative discourse of everyday Soviet reality.” Often, authors do not direct particular attention to this content. It is incidental in the sense that authors

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45 Директор: «Нет, это меня надо к стенке, меня! Ведь мне же доверили эту картину. Величайшее произведение, наша гордость... Боже мой!». – Ial’tsev 1938: 240.

46 Afinogenov 1935.

47 Romashov 1935.

48 Ial’tsev 1929.



are helpless before its power, in spite of their aspirations to paint a cheerful, rose-colored life. Let us look at one example among many. Miners from Bill'-Belotserkovskii's *Golos nedr* complain to the chief engineer about the barracks built for them: "We moved in only three months ago. And already the plaster has come off, the walls have cracked, the window frames have sagged. ... In the barracks bedbugs and fleas bite."<sup>49</sup>

Helplessness before the everyday reality with which one is faced is typical not only of the "conspiracy" genre, although the paranoid thinking which distinguishes it makes depictions of daily life even more absurd. The representations of total state terror in conspiracy dramas are more specific. Afinogenov in his *Strach* provides a lot of frightening images but the most disturbing of these plays is perhaps Virta's comedy *Kleveta* (*Slander*, 1939).

Virta's play tells the story of a respectable Moscow official, Anton Ivanovich Proskurovskii, about whom a rumor circulates that he is under suspicion and will be soon arrested. After Proskurovskii's wife Mar'ia Petrovna tries to reach her son by telephone, who lives elsewhere, she is informed that her son never resided at the address she knows to have been his, she does not doubt what has happened to him. "Now it's clear: my son Petia's been arrested!" she concludes.<sup>50</sup>

When her husband reasonably remarks, "Mashen'ka, you are going crazy from fear,"<sup>51</sup> Mar'ia Petrovna replies: "It is too easy to go crazy from what is going on around!... Say a word, and you will be jailed straight away!"<sup>52</sup> Moreover, her paranoia is justified on every count. Before long, many of the neighbors stop talking to Proskurovskii while others begin surreptitiously to sympathize with his predicament. Suddenly, a young man who rents a room in their apartment and is courting their daughter moves to another flat. Then, Proskurovskii's housekeeper asks him for money to buy some bread in order to put it in the oven and make dried rusks for him to take to prison. After that, Proskurovskii (who was about to make a business trip abroad as a trusted official) is fired without notice, and his wife becomes disappointed in the fact that she is married to him. Finally, a new person appears in the apartment intending to replace Proskurov-

49 «Только три месяца как пожили, а уж штукатурка отвалилась; стены потрескались, рамы скосились. ... В казармах клопы едят, блохи грызут». – Bill'-Belotserkovskii 1930: 61.

50 «Так, ясно: Петку посадили!» – Virta 1939b: 97.

51 «Машенька, ты просто сошла с ума от страха». – *ibid.*

52 «Сойдѣшь с ума, ежели кругом такое... Ты что-нибудь скажешь, а тебя как цапнут!» – *ibid.*

skii, who has apparently been “arrested”; and as a result the rearrangement of the apartments begins. In other words, intentionally or unintentionally Virta presents a detailed picture of the typical situation of an individual denounced as a saboteur. The comic effect of the plot, according to Virta, is based on the fact that the *peripeteia* the character undergoes arises not from “real” conspiracy, but from a slander which is soon exposed.

If Virta’s play *Conspiracy*, the action of which took place in 1936 or 1937, was over-saturated with spies and saboteurs, soon after, when Nikolai Ezhov was denounced (which implied the end, or at least the suspension, of the Great Purges), spies and saboteurs were replaced by slanderers and “paranoiacs.” In terms of the “rhetoric of genre,” Virta suggested a very simple way of solving the problem of the sudden shift in Stalin’s politics. He suggested transforming the “spy discourse” into comedy.

## Detective Genre

Although the discourse of total terror infiltrated the conspiracy drama in one way or another, one subject related to this theme was placed under strict taboo. This unspoken prohibition probably played a noticeable role in shaping the new form of the fictional narratives about “enemies within” which appeared before World War II but developed into a “genre factory” from isolated cases only after Stalin’s death. The genre that I have in mind embraces various detective narratives in their Soviet adaptations—within fiction, cinema, and drama. By taboo subjects I mean representations of the common practice of intimidation and torture of defendants and suspects.

The link between the prohibition on discussing tortures and the interest in deduction is easily explained. In this respect, art resembles real life: if violence is not allowed, one should rely upon intellect instead. But some nuances that arise here should be examined.

Such “humanity,” that is passing over in silence the matter of violence during investigations, did not tacitly mean the victory of logic which, in conspiracy drama as we have already observed, was opposed by “intuition.” It is not to say that “torture” was substituted by the capacity of “scent” (*chut’e*), but this “scent” definitely ousted the professional detective as a character from the center of the dramatic narrative. It is not surprising, therefore, that in most cases the investigation itself did not attract a lot of authors’ attention in conspiracy drama.

Conspiracy drama contains some elements of poetics of the detective genre but only isolated elements. More often than not, party officials, collective farm

chairpersons, and ordinary vigilant citizens (but not GPU or police/militia) are involved in the sort of spy hunting depicted by conspiracy dramatists. As a rule, professionals appear only at the end and often only in order to escort a suspect to jail. They sporadically act in Voitekhov's and Lench's *Kommunist Pavel Grekov*, in Afinogenov's *Volch'ia tropa* (*The Wolf's Path*, 1927) and *Strach*. Their activity is more noticeable than in others in Romashov's play *Konets Krivoryl'ska*. One of the main characters of Virta's play *Zagovor* serves as a district prosecutor, but his investigation is rather slack: it seems that the conspirators are ready to fall into his lap.

However, conspiracy drama directly relates to the development of the Soviet spy detective genre, a genre which was consolidated only after Stalin's death. It was the environment into which one of the first and most important examples of the latter type emerged. I am referring here to the Brothers Tur's<sup>53</sup> and Lev Sheinin's (1906–1967)<sup>54</sup> play *Ochnaia stavka* (*Confrontation*, 1936), which was not fully typical of this class of play.

This is not an attempt to explain the fact that the Brothers Tur and Sheinin made the central character of their play an investigator only for aesthetic reasons. But it is evident that they hoped to profit from the *defamiliarization* of genre standards. Before the beginning of the main action, they make the following remark:

Lartsev as an investigator is extremely different from the traditional figure of the investigator from other plays, in which characters of this kind played a minor role.<sup>55</sup>

In this play, the Brothers Tur and Sheinin successfully combined the propaganda of labor enthusiasm and hysteria about the "internal enemy," on the one hand, with a full-fledged detective plot on the other. The investigator Lartsev is a desperate workaholic, and at the same time, according to the authors he "is far from being a person with gloomy searching eyes, looking mistrustfully from under the

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53 The pen name of Leonid Davidovich Tubel'skii (1905–1961) and Petr L'vovich Ryzhei (1908–1978).

54 As is well-known, Lev Sheinin worked as an investigator in the 1920s and 1930s. He was then imprisoned but was released soon thereafter; in 1945 Sheinin participated in the Nuremberg trials, then he was repressed again.

55 «Следователь Ларцев разительно не похож на традиционный тип следователя из пьес, где, правда, ему отводилось обычно второстепенное место». – Tur/Sheinin 1938: 15.

brows and speaking with a metallic voice.”<sup>56</sup> To a certain degree, one can treat Lartsev as a sort of “incarnation” of Lenin, as the latter was presented in the Soviet iconography. As the Brothers Tur and Sheinin describe him: “He is an ordinary cheerful individual with vivid, smiling eyes.”<sup>57</sup> The victory of detective genre conventions over the formulaic agenda of conspiracy plays is expressed clearly in the following advice by Lartsev:

*Don't believe human eyes too much, Lavrenko... Although, of course, try to see every detail... Again and again knock together facts and facts, evidence and hypotheses, intuition and reality. Set them, like dogs, on each other. Knock their foreheads together! (emphasis added).*<sup>58</sup>

In this respect, the Brothers Tur's and Sheinin's protagonist behaves not like a character from a typical “conspiracy” play, but like a character from a detective story: he teaches his assistant to be skeptical with regard to first impressions and to bring together intuition and real facts. There is nothing similar here to other plays from the 1930s, even those explicitly about spies and saboteurs.<sup>59</sup>

By any consideration, *Ochnaia stavka* is still a conspiracy play. In some respects it is a striking example of the genre. For instance, Lartsev explains the failure of the spy mission he has exposed by the fact that “170,000,000 ‘non-secret’ agents” (that is the whole population of the USSR) serve the GPU. Moreover, the “conspiracy theater” continued to work successfully after the triumph of both the play itself and its screen adaptation *Oshibka inzhenera Kochina* (*Engineer Kochin's Mistake*, 1939), directed by Aleksandr Macheret. On the whole, however, what these experiments in the detective genre did was to mark out one of the blurred boundaries of totalitarian art.

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56 «Это отнюдь не кислый хмурый человек с мрачными испытывающими глазами, подозрительным взглядом исподлобья и металлическим голосом». – *ibid*.

57 «Это обыкновенный жизнерадостный человек с живыми, смеющимися глазами». – *ibid*.

58 «А глазам человеческим всё-таки не очень верь, Лавренко... Хотя, конечно, старайся замечать всё... И снова и снова сталкивай факты и факты, улики и гипотезы, интуицию и реальность. Стравливай их, стравливай, Лавренко. Сшибай их лбами!» – Tur/Sheinin: 23–24.

59 Critics did not like plays by the Brothers Tur or Sheinin, but they were greatly popular with audiences.

## Conclusion

The development of conspiracy drama is directly related to the birth of Soviet detective fiction and cinema, including their sub-genres that focused on espionage. Although, of course, prose fiction (such as Lev Ovalov's and Lev Sheinin's novels and stories) played an important role in pushing forward the process as well. Later, the outdated conspiracy drama detective genre conquered the territory for itself in the sphere of entertaining literature and cinema for a mass audience. The value of this transition from "serious" "conspiracy art" to detective writing can scarcely be overestimated, if one considers detective genres jointly alongside adventure narratives and stories from the erotic and horror genres as significant forms of public discourse which respond to some basic, and not always legitimate, individual needs. I believe that "genre tolerance" and "genre xenophobia" are symptoms that clearly indicate a society's character: finally, the beginning of the era of Soviet detective fiction and cinema coincided with a time of relative social freedom.

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## Abstract

This chapter describes how 'spy mania,' which affected both public and private life in the Soviet Union (particularly in the 1930s), intersected with Soviet literature and theater. Diverse theater productions during the 1920s and 1930s, linked by their exaggerated concern with spies and saboteurs, can be considered to be a separate genre, *conspiracy drama*. Conspiracy drama occupied a distinct place in Soviet official culture, responding to shifts in ideology, in Stalin's policy, and influencing public opinion in its own, rather unique way. What were the boundaries of this near-forgotten genre? What was conspiracy drama teaching, persuading, and imposing upon audiences? What was its agenda aesthetic or ideological?





# Alternative Constructions of Reality in Maksim Kurochkin's Play *Medea Type Fighter*

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*Evgeniya Safargaleeva*

## **Keywords**

Russian “new drama”; Maksim Kurochkin; constructions of reality; conspiracy and fiction

Conspirology is the interpretation of historical and political events and facts that can be characterized as an endeavor to reveal ‘the one truth’ that has been hidden from most of society’s members. It is based on the theory of conspiracy, i.e., “on the entirety of hypotheses trying to represent an event or a process as the result of a secret group’s conscious actions with the intention to influence a historical process.”<sup>1</sup> Conspiracy theories have gained particular prominence in the twenty-first century, and that is for a good reason. The new media, especially the so-called social media, are associated with a perpetual and total stream of information, a stream with which not everyone is able to cope. The contemporary rhythm of life and its continuous acceleration provoke chaos in an individual’s processes of thinking. Furthermore, the new media forces recipients to comprehend whole chunks of diverse, often contradictory information at a time, to discern truth from falsehood and to abandon obsolete information.<sup>2</sup> Examples of this kind of information include the presentation of new or alternative reasons for a catastrophe, alternative developments in history, documentaries or pseudo-documentaries about ‘secret societies,’ propaganda for the polarization of the world, for its division in terms of good and evil, etc. As a result of such an overwhelming amount of information, the individual is increasingly less able to ana-

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1 Pavlova 2013: 144.

2 Cf. Rudnev 2011: 8.

lyze the events in the world and the human mind becomes susceptible to manipulation.<sup>3</sup>

In order to separate real conspiracies in history from hypothetical ones, scholars from various disciplines—historians, social scientists, and philosophers—have tried to understand how and why conspiracy theories spread, and just what makes them so popular. Correspondingly, specialists in language and literature speak of the beginning of an era of fiction evolving around conspiracies and conspiracy theories. One example of such fiction is the conspiological novel. Scholars have recently tried to identify the dominant features of novels belonging to this genre, certain narrative formulas that influence the basic forms of the poetics of fiction, such as plot, subject, composition, the system of characters, the motifs, and the images. The following features may be considered as characteristic of conspiological narration:

- extreme polarization of the protagonists (their division into “good and evil” characters) and of space
- exciting and captivating subjects such as emergencies and the protagonists’ desires to solve a mystery
- a concept of two worlds in the text
- a new way of playing with worlds (the creation of ideal, concealed worlds, and the search for an ultimate, final objective reality)<sup>4</sup>

The question of society’s organization, and of interpretations of reality as such in the light of new media, is not merely one of the most important questions for scholars, but also one of the prominent subjects in the work of Russian writers and playwrights alike. One expressive and authentic playwright who refers to conspiracy theories throughout his work is Maksim Kurochkin (\*1970). On the basis of an analysis of his play *Istrebitel’ klassa Medeia* (Medea Type Fighter,<sup>5</sup> 1995), it will be shown which particularities of conspiological narration are present in the text and which goals the author strives to achieve by using them.

Maksim Kurochkin—a historian by profession—is one of the most noted and significant representatives of young contemporary drama. Having started his creative path at the Lubimovka Festival, he has since actively worked with junior

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3 Cf. Pavlova 2013: 144.

4 Cf. *ibid.*: 145–49.

5 The text has only been published on the Internet ([http://www.theatre-library.ru/files/k/kurochkin/kurochkin\\_1.html](http://www.theatre-library.ru/files/k/kurochkin/kurochkin_1.html)), therefore the further quotations are made without reference.

playwrights. He has also been a member of the organizational committee and an invited expert at the beginner playwrights' festival *Prem'era* (Moscow). Furthermore, he has worked with young participants of the project *Dokumental'nyi teatr*. Layers of time and the space of the past and the future are always shown from an unusual point of view through the usage of certain artistic skills, no matter what Kurochkin writes about in his plays. "It is always one monolithic, entire continent which is made up of fantasy and reality, and in which objects, things and people are transferred from one age to another."<sup>6</sup>

The distinguishing feature of Kurochkin's works is how he playfully employs cultural discourse. The playwright not only stylizes a certain cultural atmosphere, but also creates a dialogue between cultural mythology and contemporary language and experience. This may occur at the level of the external subject. The inner subject, however, becomes increasingly more important than the level of the external subject. The protagonists surpass the boundaries of their historical role and start discussing the situation of the play's subject from a contemporary point of view. The protagonists project their everyday life experience onto the mythological past. The famous researcher of the phenomenon of "New Drama," Mark Lipovetsky, defines Kurochkin's historical plays as anti-utopias that have more or less come true. Accordingly, Kurochkin represents the cultural myth in which the phantasmagoria found in the original, is confirmed by the contemporary experience of reality.<sup>7</sup> In other words, through his texts the author expresses that nothing has really changed since ancient times. Despite all of humanity's progress and achievements, peoples' minds are still archaic, dark, and primeval. Kurochkin vividly displays how savagery and offended feelings are ever lurking behind a facade of culture. These motifs can be found in his plays *Kukhnia* (*Kitchen*, 2000) and *Vodka, eblia, televizor* (*Vodka, Fucking, Television*, 2005). A quotation from the latter goes as follows: "As in ancient times, as in the Stone Age, simple gods reign over us."<sup>8</sup> These gods are in fact exposed as human instincts. Kurochkin combines historical events with a real experience in the present, and reality confirms the phantasmagoria of a mythological or legendary situation. The myth and the languages of European high culture act as an intermediary of the dialogues between the events of the past and the reality of today. A

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6 «И всегда это монолитный, единый художественный материк, сплавленный из фантастики и жизненной достоверности, где предметы, вещи, люди из одной эпохи спокойно переносятся в другую». – Gromova 2009: 176.

7 Cf. Lipovetsky 2012: 222–23.

8 «Как в древности, как в каменном веке нами правят простые боги». – Kurochkin 2005: 28.

psychological footprint of violence—a trauma—characterizes these languages. The playwright takes a certain turning point in the life of the protagonists or a mythological situation, and illustrates that this very situation only emerges due to a “traumatic paradox.”<sup>9</sup>

The myth of Medea and the Argonauts is one such myth in the play *Istrebitel' klassa Medeia*. The play shows the last war in humanity's history. It evolves around an alternative future in which all conflicts in this world—racial, religious, international, social, and political—have been surmounted; only one war rages: a war between men and women. In his stage direction, the author warns us that “not a single one of those sitting here in this hall shall live to see the events this play is about.”<sup>10</sup> A truly apocalyptic image of destruction emerges in the play brought about in the aftermath of an assault by the destroyer squad carrying the name of the mythological heroine—the avenger Medea.

The myth of Medea and the Argonauts, which has become famous through the classical interpretations of Euripides, Seneca, and Corneille, remains significant even in the twenty-first century, given that it deals with ethical and moral questions which concern human beings when faced with the choice between offended feelings and the morally forbidden. The myth represents the protagonist's inner fight trying to achieve her goal, which is to take revenge for the inflicted injustice.<sup>11</sup> In our analysis, we will, first and foremost, deal with the part of the myth that details how Medea cruelly takes revenge on Jason by murdering their shared children—an episode with tremendous meaning for the understanding of the author's intention and the basic idea of the text.

As we know, during the quest for the Golden Fleece, the Argonauts were helped by the sorceress Medea who fell in love with their leader Jason. Jason reciprocated her feelings. Thanks to Medea's skills, he acquired the fleece and, making her his wife, went home with her. According to the myth, Medea and Jason soon had children upon their arrival in Corinth. But Jason, captivated by the beauty of another woman, decided to leave Medea. However, only with Medea's assistance, could he accomplish such a great feat as the retrieval of the Golden Fleece and could avoid death several times.

Medea, having learned of her husband's betrayal, fell into despair, which grew into fierce anger and a thirst for revenge. However, Medea's rage affected

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9 Lipovetsky 2012: 223.

10 «Ни один из сидящих с этом зале, не доживет до событий, о которых пойдет речь». – Kurochkin 1995.

11 Cf. Savinykh 2017: 126–27.

not only the guilty party, Jason, but also their children. In other words, Medea turned her anger against herself.

In the play, the playwright realizes this motif in an unexpected way: he draws a picture of a last great war, a war that affects the whole world, which is further illustrated by the presence of three characters from different countries and the fact that they are united by the shared desire to survive, i.e., there is an emergency situation—an indispensable condition for a conspirological narrative. Somewhere on a small piece of land on Coney Island, three soldiers—Uncle Kolia, a Ukrainian sergeant; Sergei, a Russian; and Peter, an American—are all struggling to resist the brutal ‘man-haters.’ There is a categorical division into ‘bad’ and ‘good’ characters, which is another important hallmark of a conspirological narrative.

The men would rather die than surrender to the savage female warriors. For men, captivity turns out to be a fate worse than death, since the exterminators make “housewives” out of their captives: they force them to “do the dishes and wash their socks.” By the end of the play, however, it turns out that the conflict, which has been built is a false one, because there are no more real, “ancient” men. They were slaughtered long ago, and women now play the role of men. This becomes evident when the soldier Sergei takes off his shirt, revealing his female breasts in a bra. It becomes clear that the women are waging war against themselves:

Sergei: If you are asking about the ancient men, well, they were all slaughtered at the beginning of the war. I didn't cross any of them.

Woman: So whom have we been fighting with all this time? With ourselves.

Sergei: You have been fighting with men. With those who feel and act as men. The ancient ones didn't make it. They were weak. Now we are men.<sup>12</sup>

The mystery is revealed: initially, it appears to the reader that the play presents a gender conflict—a conflict with the social other, but in the end it turns out that women are exterminating themselves. The pseudo gender conflict turns out to be an existential conflict, as the only female character speaks about her inner anxieties and contradictions.

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12 Сергей: «Если ты говоришь про древних мужчин, то их перебили ещё в самом начале войны. Я их уже не застал» – Женщина: «Так с кем мы всё это время воевали? Сами с собой» – Сергей: «Вы воевали с мужчинами. С теми, кто чувствует себя мужчиной и поступает как мужчина. Древние не справились. Они были слабыми. Теперь мы мужчины».

The play begins with the men crawling out from under the rubble. The action takes place “among the chaos, destroyed guns, shell boxes, rubble, helmets, backpacks, dead bodies and other military debris,”<sup>13</sup> the stage set is created using minimal artistic means. The initial description of the scenery creates an apocalyptic atmosphere and the feeling of an extremely exposed world on the verge of extinction. The debris is a warning to civilizations what the consequences of the outbreak of war could be, because war always fatefully turns on its instigator. It is symbolic that the play begins and ends with scenes of destruction. At first, the viewer does not understand who the characters are fighting against, the enemy is not referred to by name. The play’s structure is strongly linked to the creation and preservation of intrigue from beginning to end. Each of the three male characters has a name, an indication of rank, and a nationality, while the only female character, simply called Woman, is a kind of universal category, a collective image of all women. Initially, there is only the knowledge of the war between two camps, but the very essence of this war is revealed only on the last pages of the play. The “mystery” of what is happening gradually dawns on the viewer in accordance with the laws of the conspirical strategy of narration. One could argue that there is a bipolar system of characters: three male characters as “positive heroes,” allegedly seeking to defeat evil, on the one hand, and a woman as a villain or antihero and the embodiment of this evil on the other, which is another integral feature of conspirical narrative.

Interestingly the play does not emphasize and elaborate on how the characters look and what their motivations are, but instead strives to create a terrifying picture of the world and a specific war (Sergeant: “At this terrible moment, when our own way of thinking and the very existence of our species is threatened”<sup>14</sup>). A war that is absurd and paradoxically meaningless in its essence and in which there can be no winners as a matter of principle, because if one gender is destroyed, then the other will simply disappear. Thus, the forces actually waging war are revealed closer to the finale and gradually, we come to understand that the war is being fought not between different genders, but within the same sex—women.

In the play, the characters are portrayed in a state of confrontation with extremely tense feelings. Realizing that they actually have nothing to lose, the characters return to the fundamentals, begin to look for the meaning of life, and

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13 «Среди хаоса, развороченных орудий, снаряженных ящиков, щепня, касок, ранцев, мертвых тел и прочего военного мусора».

14 «В этот страшный момент, когда свойственный нам образ мыслей и само существование нашего вида находится под угрозой».

make attempts to find themselves. This becomes obvious in the second act, when the Woman asks Sergei to teach her how to pray. In addition, some time before the murder of Sergei, the heroine hesitates in doing it leading the spectator to suppose that she longs for a “real” man. However, her doubts do not last long. They are replaced almost immediately by confidence in the righteousness of the act she is supposed to commit—Sergei must die. The next sign of conspirological narration appears here: the hint of a new secret. The reader inevitably asks the question: “What will follow next?” Before the play’s finale in which the reader is offered a new riddle we briefly gain access to the Woman’s inner world, to her mental anguish:

Woman: “Then why all this? War, these corpses? We are told: fight to win. If we win, we will destroy the worst men. Only those who do not want to wash the dishes and wash socks. And then we will live, better than before ... Aaa, I don’t want to live! I do not want to – kill me ... Why live? Who shall I kill? Who shall I love?”<sup>15</sup>

Although it turns out that the women are not fighting their enemies, they continue their destructive actions, they continue to kill each other out of habit. The parallels with the myth of Medea are thus realized on several levels in the play. The title itself sets the stage and doubles the motif given—the image of Medea is transformed into an instrument of the extermination of men, which is again emphasized by the choice of military weapons (fighter aircraft). Seen from the outside, the traditional plot motivation of revenge comes down to the confrontation of the sexes; the reason for the killings is the desire to affirm matriarchy. It seems that the use of the myth is limited to these superficial functions at first glance. As is known, Medea, having decided to take revenge on the unfaithful Jason, raised her hand not only to him, but also to herself, killing their shared children. This is exactly what the women in Kurochkin’s play do; they exterminate themselves even after they have found out what is really going on: there are no more real men. That any war is pointless and absurd is one of the play’s main ideas, but the author develops this idea further, giving it a metaphysical meaning: no matter what kind of war, against or for whom and whatever its ideals—war is always self-destruction. It is a defeat for both sides. Therefore, the

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15 Женщина: «Зачем тогда всё это? Война, эти трупы? Нам говорят – войдите, чтобы победить. Когда мы победим, то уничтожим самых плохих мужчин. Только тех, которые не хотят мыть посуду и стирать носки. И тогда мы заживём – лучше, чем раньше... А-а-а, не хочу жить! Не хочу – убей меня... Зачем жить? Кого убивать? Кого любить?».

original situation in the play is brought to the point of absurdity: women were fighting men when it turned out that there were no men anymore. However, women continue to fight because war itself has become their reason to live. The idea of the absurdity of war is reinforced by the incompatibility of two concepts that the author combines: on the one hand, the fact that it is women who are created by nature to give life. On the other hand, war means cruelty, violence, and death. In the play, these features are united in one entity, that is, in the women as fighters and as destroyers. Women are the embodiment of violence in the world.

The world as depicted has been divided in two: the “ancient” real men have become extinct, one half of humanity remains truly female, while the other half has decided that they know how real men should behave. This latter half even feels like men and, therefore, starts to play their role. Men, in their understanding, should be despots and some kind of uncouth boors (it should be noted that this is a kind of playful playing with stereotypes):

Sergei: “Men are not gone. They stayed. Close your eyes. I smell like men’s sweat and tobacco. I know how to swear, you bet. I will never wash the dishes after dinner, I will sink into the sofa and look only at the newspaper. If I get drunk, then I can fulfill my marital duties. ... It is easier for me to remove the socks from a slain enemy than to wash them myself. I pick my teeth at dinner. I will chase after every skirt. I will hide my salary from you. I will never notice your new dress, your new hairstyle. Never.”<sup>16</sup>

The author creates an unexpected cultural conflict: the entire world’s culture, up to recent centuries, was created not by women, but by men. Within this culture there are many examples of art and literature in which a certain image of an ideal woman has been formed, as well as the unspoken rules for her behavior. Men formed an image of femaleness that was both flawless in their eyes and convenient for them, and women were brought up accordingly, modeled after men’s ideas. In the play, the opposite situation can be observed: although women have

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16 Сергей: «Мужчины не умерли. Мужчины остались. Закрой глаза. Я пахну мужским потом и табаком. Я умею материться. Я знаешь, как умею материться. Я ни за что не стану мыть за собой посуду после обеда, я завалюсь на диван и уткнусь в газету. Если меня хорошо напоить, то я могу исполнить свой супружеский долг. ... Мне легче снять носки с убитого врага, чем постирать их. Я ковыряюсь в зубах за обедом. Я буду волочиться за каждой юбкой. Я буду прятать от тебя зарплату. Я никогда не замечу твоего нового платья, твоей новой прически. Никогда».



exterminated men, they continue to create the image of them that they want to see. The conflict cannot be solved: gender roles have been reversed, but the situation remains unaltered.

The system of images and motifs in the play is linked to mass media metaphors and stereotypes that are broadcast in popular culture. The exposure of such stereotypes is often another sign of conspiriological narration. It should be noted that the choice of place (America) is determined not only by the author's desire to illustrate the global nature of the conflict, but is also a play on various fictional hypotheses related to the political relations between Russia and America, as well as to common gender clichés. The characters of Uncle Kolia, Sergei, and Peter are indispensable to introducing the reader to the course of events and to forming ideas about the male world ("I like to lie down and watch baseball,"<sup>17</sup> as one of them remarks), although there is no unity even among these representatives of the male world. Internal ethnic conflicts flare up throughout the course of events. Furthermore, the motif of American culture's dominance ("Sergeant: Some [pointing to Sergei] have been cleaning rotten potatoes in camps since their childhood, while others have been eating fricassee sitting in banks. Don't worry, it's quite alright."<sup>18</sup>) and the notion of the Americans as "a stupid people" can be clearly identified. We learn that the whole world has been destroyed more or less; the play mentions Moscow, Kiev, and New York as the last bastions that still continue to exist. In addition, the motif of the Inquisition, the return to the Middle Ages, which in turns is connected with all sorts of gender stereotypes, can also be found in the play. Women, as Sergeant Uncle Kolia understands, are a terrible dark force that must be extinguished at all costs ("Sergeant: Let your steadfastness and your very death ... Your very death ... stop this eternal dark power humanity has nurtured on its bosom."<sup>19</sup>). The male characters use supernatural mechanisms to try and influence the course of the war. Thus, men's secret weapon is hatred, which traps enemy fighters with the help of a special device. This device, the so-called indicator, which generates a certain emotional field, is the author's attempt to play with a stereotype: Women are considered to be more frequently guided by an emotional impulse than by rational reasoning.

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17 «Я люблю лежать и смотреть бейсбол...».

18 Сержант: «Одни (показывая на Сергея) с детства в лагерях гнилую картошку чистят, а другие в банках в это время фрикасе едят. Всэ нормально, ничего тут такого».

19 Сержант: «Пусть ваша стойкость и сама ваша смерть... Сама ваша смэрть... остановят эту извэчную тэмную силу, которую пригрело на своей груди чееловэчэство».

In the play, this idea manifests itself in its literal, grotesque meaning. Women are some sort of mythical creatures for the three male characters, they are shrouded in a veil of mystery. It is not by chance that Uncle Kolia asks Peter if it is true that the Statue of Liberty is a woman, as if he could not believe that a woman could embody freedom.

The artistic space of the play can be called two-worldliness: the initial false conviction that the play shows a war of the sexes (the war of women against men), and the subsequent dispelling of this belief reveals a second layer of reality, which is the natural and logical ending of what is happening. As a result, the reader discovers the actual reality; namely, that the species of men has been exterminated, women are killing each other, their time is running out, and humanity is on the verge of extinction. It is particularly important to realize that the play's two-worldliness has nothing to do with the two-worldliness of romanticism, when two different places intersect only in the protagonist's imagination. *Istrebitel' klassa Medeia* is localized on a single plane, the line between the worlds is embedded in the initial misconception of reality, in the erroneous interpretation of the events. Therefore, concepts such as "ideal" or "enemy" become vague, indefinite, easily blurring the line between each other. The world that is revealed in the play is a fanatical and inhuman one.

The creation of alternative constructions of reality eventually arises from the space of two-worldliness. Women live in self-deception and it is easier for them to close their eyes than to admit the truth and end the war. It is vital for them to recognize an enemy in someone and to destroy them. In addition to an existential and cultural type of conflict, there is a conflict over the spectator's perception of the play. The question put to the audience is the following: "Is wounded pride really worth such sacrifice; is it worth starting a war for this?" The author shows what is going to happen if people continue to fight each other—all of humanity will be doomed. The recipient of this message may come to the conclusion that conflicts need to be resolved otherwise, that is, by agreeing and uniting. These are the thoughts and the conclusion that the audience is supposed to come to while reading the play. The author does not force any decisions upon the reader, he simply shows the consequences. The play's central idea can be summed up as follows: if people fight each other, then they are doomed.

It is in fact thanks to the construction of an alternative world that the following fact becomes obvious: the confrontation of men and women has existed since the beginning of time; the conflict of the sexes has always been and will always be. Yet, the author develops this confrontation to the point of absurdity: he shows that there can be no winners in the conflict between the sexes, because in any case the victory of one side inevitably means its simultaneous defeat.

Sergei knows that he is a “she,” but the role of “the new man” has been forced upon him. He lives as a misconception of his own identity—an identity made that way by somebody else. The scene in the play in which the bra he is wearing under his clothes is first mentioned, comes as a surprise to the reader. This represents an equally big surprise for the female protagonist. Consequently, we deal with a greater conspiracy in the text. Someone had previously made the decision that a group of women shall identify themselves as men and act accordingly. The question of who remains open throughout the play. Since the sexes have been waging war against each other for centuries, and the original men were extinguished long ago, then the following may be presumed: it was either the last original men (*drevnie muzhchiny*) or the first women who claimed to be the “new men.” In the first case, it would be a legacy: those women who were willing to see themselves as men were supposed to preserve men’s place on earth. In the second case, it would be a usurpation because the women who saw themselves as “new men” forced another group of women to pretend to be men so that the sexes could continue fighting each other and so that the concept of the enemy could be perpetuated. Thus, they occupied a position that they are not in fact entitled to. The conflict is based on an intrigue that conceals the fact that there is no actual reason for the conflict.

Thus, in this play, we see the creation of alternative constructions of reality. This is achieved by transforming the plot of a famous myth, which provides the playwright with additional opportunities to express his individual position as well as the play’s central message, which in turn encourages the reader to think independently about ambiguous processes that occur in society. Furthermore, the creation of such an alternative reality contributes to the reader’s ability to come to their own conclusions, being aware of the existence of stereotypes and clichés imposed by mass media.

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### **Abstract**

The new media, especially the so-called social media, are associated with a perpetual and all-embracing stream of information, a stream with which not everyone is able to cope. The question of society's organization and of imaginations about reality as such, in the light of new media is one of the most prominent subjects in the work of Russian writers and playwrights alike. The twenty-first century is characterized by freedom and the diversity of artistic expression as well as the author's desire to develop their individual strategy. This is most clearly visible in drama, which becomes active during periods of crisis in society due to its generic characteristics. The goal of "new drama" is to reveal the secret and hidden, to expose hidden actions and processes, to reflect upon and organize them and to point out situations of conflict. The famous contemporary playwright Maksim Kurochkin deals with exactly these questions throughout his work. This article is devoted to the problem of artistic representations of reality in his dramaturgy. Using the example of Kurochkin's play *Istrebitel' klassa Medeia (Medea Type Fighter)* it is possible to analyze and to interpret such alternative constructions. One may conclude that the depiction of collective elements of imagination is an integral component of the process of constructing reality and affects the properties of the artistic space in his plays. The result is the author's individual position regarding the opposition of "truth – fiction," offering original, non-standard mechanisms as a solution.

# “Thinking Spiritually” about the Last Tsar’s Murder: Religious Discourse and Conspiracy Theories in Late Soviet Russia

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*Sergei Shtyrkov*\*

## **Keywords**

conspiracy theory; political eschatology; Russian Orthodoxy; Metropolitan Ioann (Snychev); Konstantin Dushenov; religious nationalism

The concept of a conspiracy theory serving as a research object, especially given its close connection with the beliefs and practices of political eschatology, could be hardly listed as a popular theme among the social disciplines. Nevertheless, in this field there are some classic texts<sup>1</sup> and widespread conventional presuppositions.

One of the field’s central themes is set out as follows: religious conspiracy theories, like any other ones, along with related fields of knowledge about the world—eschatology, alternative history, and applied political science—are always a “work in progress,” and the most conservative religious groups often prove to be the most creative in this respect. For example, in the Russian Orthodox Church, until quite recently, many eschatological believers considered the Internet to be the main weapon of the “world government” and the easiest way for people who use it to embrace the Antichrist. Now, former opponents of the Internet find each other on the global network and discuss the spiritual harm caused by the most recent information technologies. For many years, fears over individual taxpayer numbers and social security numbers, as well as passports

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1 Barkun 2003.

and electronic cards, was the central point of vernacular Orthodox discourses in Russia. Nowadays, this concern has been displaced by upcoming discussions about climate weapons developed by enemy powers. In response, Orthodox believers from a Vladikavkaz congregation (North Ossetia), whom I know through my field work, applied to Patriarch Kirill with a request to fly around the entire border of the Russian Federation by airplane carrying icons to protect the country from “meteorological attacks” in the summer of 2017 (the Patriarch has not yet responded to this request). After several months, President Putin’s statement about American structures that are allegedly gathering “biological material” from Russian people for secret purposes (October 2017) engendered an avalanche of interpretations amongst the same believers, which led to the development of new narratives about a conspiracy of foreign special services. At present, the authors of the letter, as far as I am aware, are no longer interested in this “climate weapon” (or in the story about “biological materials”) but are instead interested in other conspiracy issues. This demonstrates that these attitudes are very transient.

At the same time, if we evaluate the entire repertoire of conspiracy narratives that have circulated amongst Orthodox believers in Russia for the last three decades, we can conclude that a number of ideas have remained popular for more than 25 years; moreover, they constitute part of the everyday knowledge of an average Orthodox Christian. They are related to certain stories about the history, current state and future of both Russia and the world and they are built primarily on the idea of a secret warfare enacted against the Russian people and the Orthodox Church.<sup>2</sup> This conspiracy theory’s basic ideas and images can be found in the works of the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, Ioann (Snychev). These ideas were published between 1992–95, reprinted in different formats and remain very popular among politically active Orthodox advocates.<sup>3</sup>

## **Perestroika and the Search for Russia’s True History**

The second half of the 1980s, the era of Perestroika, threw the USSR into a political and economic crisis. However, the party leadership assured themselves and the Soviet people that everything was not so bad, and that the country was able to change, driven by the political elite’s ability to reflect and analyze, to discover

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2 See Rossman 2002: 195–255; Mitrokhin 2007; Ahkmetova 2010: 176–214; Shnirel’man 2017.

3 Ioann 1992, 1992a, 1993, 1993a, 1994, 1944a.

and to use new resources. Given that institutions of religion—traditional Russian ones or some other—were almost totally prohibited under Communist rule, these resources were to be found somewhere outside of the USSR—in Western countries, in the Russian émigré community. The most socially significant aspect of this propaganda campaign was probably the persistent repentance for the Soviet regime’s crimes. Several years were enough to assure the Soviet audience that any narrative about the national past lay on the principle of a sad truth, previously hidden and then revealed, and that no Soviet historians could be trusted. All this was planted within the context of late-Soviet panic about the imminent loss of historical (cultural) memory. In that context, historical memory meant remembrance about the pre-Soviet national past. A distinguishing feature of this time was the concept of the *mankurt*, which became extremely popular in public discourse. Invented or at least introduced into public discussion by the well-known writer Chingiz Aitmatov, the word ‘mankurt’ referred to a story told in a novel from 1980, entitled *Burannyi polustanok* (*The Buranny Railway Stop*), another name for which is *I bol’she veka dlitsia den* (*The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*). It was about one cruel tribe’s custom (most probably non-existent) in which they deprived their prisoners of their memory through an agonizing and complicated procedure, thereby turning them into hardy and disciplined slaves devoted only to their owners, without the slightest intention to flee. The story, told in the form of a legend, finds its dramatic peak when the main character—a young mankurt—not only fails to recognize his mother who sought him out to take him home, but kills her masterfully at his owner’s command who does not want the mankurt to return to his family.<sup>4</sup> This term’s popularity, and the image behind it, clearly reflects the common social imagination of the 1980s and early 1990s. Aitmatov’s thought captured many people’s attention throughout these years: a person can be true to himself only if he keeps ethnic traditions and treasures the national history.

Perhaps the most important consequence of the deepening reflection on the past and public representation of Soviet history was the fast and furious destruction of the Soviet regime’s legitimacy in the eyes of politically and economically active people. The memory of the GULAG, the huge losses of the Second World War and the eroding heroic etiological narrative of the October Revolution and Russian Civil War turned life under the rule of the CPSU into a kind of political pathology, catastrophic for the population of the country ruled by people who did not spare their population, or, rather, who systemically destroyed it. More and more popular dystopian narratives (the novels *1984* by George Orwell,

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4 Aitmatov 1981.

*My [We]* by Evgenii Zamiatin, the film *Pokaianie [Repentance]* by Tengiz Abuladze) were reasonably seen by people as allegorical descriptions of life in the USSR. Many people wanted to live in a completely different country. Some people (and there were more than a few) simply left the country. For instance, one hundred thousand evangelical Christians fled to the western parts of the USA and Canada. Some stayed in former national republics, which were rapidly gaining political independence. Some began to change their own country.

Almost all of the later initiatives for creating a new Russia (or for recreating some version of the previous one) involved a historiographic component, which, in its turn, was required to solve three tasks: 1. to determine some model period in Russia's history (either Pre-Petrine or pre-revolutionary time for example); 2. to correlate it with the Soviet era (which is not the right period for the country); 3. to tell us where we could find the "source" of the real Russia, in order to use it to replace the fake (but actual) one.

The third question was usually answered in the following way: the place in which the true Russia was preserved lay in emigration, or in the anti-Soviet underground, or—Russia was still there—it simply could not be seen from under the communist-international ideological veil, which masked authentic Russian life.

As for the first two questions, for many (especially Orthodox believers whose faith, or at least churchliness, was born a couple of years or, sometimes, months previously) the real Russia had existed before the Bolsheviks came to power. Accordingly, the Bolsheviks were considered the destroyers of Russia and the period of their rule was a pathology (in a variety of meanings of that term) of national development.

Driven by this obsession with history, the past, and distrust in the Soviet historiographical heritage, many people started to actively search for new sources of facts, and—what is more important for this chapter's purposes—they started to develop new ways to work with them, that is, they produced new methods of interpretation. One of the most influential discursive moves to remake Russian history can be found in Metropolitan Ioann's writings.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Speaking about the literary activity of Metropolitan Ioann at that time, it should be pointed out that the academic and an 'ecclesiastical publicity community' are still discussing the question of the real authorship of these texts. The fact is that in those years, the press secretary of the metropolitan was Konstantin Dushenov, who later became a well-known political publicist. He is often considered to be the author of the most vivid texts that are officially thought to be written by his patron (Verkhovskii 2003: 21). It is now difficult to assess the degree of Dushenov's participation, but it is



A general analysis of Metropolitan Ioann’s conspiracy texts<sup>6</sup> leads us to believe that they are built upon a different category of arguments. On the one hand, it is a philosophy of history in a general sense. According to the texts, the whole historical process is not just determined by, but really *is* the permanent struggle of Satan against his Creator, a plight which is doomed to eventual failure. Accordingly, the fate of all people is, in some way, connected to this struggle.

Considered from a different, but also rather general, perspective, the world historical process is almost entirely conditioned by what happened in the past with the Jewish race. These people, having misunderstood the idea of God about Jews as the chosen people (they thought God had chosen them to dominate the world), did not accept Christ as the Messiah. The Lord punished the people of Israel with dispersion. Then, according to this narrative about the global Jewish conspiracy, the Jews, scattered around the world, decided to fight for power over all of humanity. This plan was hampered by Christianity spreading around the world which liberated people from the power of their base passions. The plot organizers planned to stoke these passions in order to execute their plan.

Nevertheless, the worldwide conspiracy to establish the power of the descendants of the “scribes and Pharisees” is turning into reality, which can be clearly seen in the fact that the Western world is moving away from Christianity. However, this “mystery of lawlessness,” according to apostle Paul’s prediction, will not work, “until He [who now restrains] is taken out of the way” (2 Thess. 2:7). Specifically, this is something or someone that can and/or should prevent this plan from happening. This role is assigned to Russia, the Russian people, headed by an Orthodox monarch. They are the “natural” enemies of world Jewry. Russia’s entire history is considered from this perspective, but also the history of Russia in the twentieth century—the Revolution of 1917, and the collapse of the USSR particularly. These events are interpreted as attempts by the conspirators to remove Russia and its Tsar (or his functional deputy) from their path to world domination. In this context, the fate of the last Russian emperor is extremely important for understanding the entire history of the nation and mankind more generally.

The narrative about holy Russia, the wicked who seek to destroy it, and the heroes who sacrifice themselves for the good of others was well-known and appears throughout late nineteenth-century Russian literature and journalism and is

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obvious that Metropolitan Ioann knew something about these texts and understood them. He undoubtedly shared (or pretended to share) ideas published under his name.

6 One can find a brief and clear description of Metropolitan Ioann’s general ideas in an article by Konstantin Kostiuk (2002).

similar to some other conspiracy theories that were prevalent in different parts of the world (to give several examples, I might mention the anti-papistical narratives in seventeenth-century England, the Roman Catholic Church's anti-masonic theories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the German Nazis' anti-Semitic meta-myth and the American right's anti-Communist myth in the twentieth century). These narratives are similar both in terms of the function of the historical drama heroes, and in terms of the nature of the relationship between them. So what is it that actually makes Metropolitan Ioann's theory interesting?

In trying to answer this question, I have to clear up a particular issue: how did Metropolitan Ioann (alone or together with Dushenov), being a child of the Soviet era, so skillfully create a specifically religious narrative about the destinies of the world and Russia on the basis of conspiracy ideas? How did he learn to present history in this very certain, analytical, and discursive way? It is pretty obvious that in order to represent history in such a manner, one must pretend to see the so-called spiritual sense of events in political, economic, and cultural life. It is supposed that a real sense of world history is beyond the understanding of people who do not have "spiritual vision"; alternatively, as opponents of this view would say, this includes people who are not inclined to interpretative activities of a certain type (paranoia for example). Of course, Metropolitan Ioann's history of the centuries-old secret war of the Jews against Christ, the Church, and Russia has its roots in the conspiracy thinking of Soviet times. But they did not delve any deeper than some general presuppositions. One such presupposition is the idea about Russia's (or the USSR's) responsibility for the destiny of the whole world, its leadership in the movement towards religious or secular salvation of all of humanity. That is why it is hated by those who do not want this salvation, but instead pursue their narrow self-serving interests. Ideas of this type are widespread at least from the time of Reformation. The second presupposition is related to mechanisms of historical interpretation and is referred to as teleology. According to this way of thinking about the world and national history, every historical event and phenomenon is a step or a stage toward the main aim of history in its entirety. This is the basic principle of most historical grand narratives, including Soviet ones. Usually such narratives are not intended to disclose the secret meaning of what is happening to man and the world. Of course, we can say that the Soviet philosophy of history, especially in its practical application, was based on quasi-religious ideas about the messianic potential of the proletariat or the Soviet people, but this view of historical events usually did not involve a disclosure of any secrets. Meanwhile, Metropolitan Ioann did not just examine secrets, but also the meaning of events that are inaccessible to participants themselves, because the real reason for what is happening cannot be found in the ma-

terial world. Marxists, as we know, tend to explain any immaterial phenomena by way of material theories. So, both Metropolitan Ioann and his secretary (a former member of the Communist Party and a former Soviet Navy officer) were more familiar with the discourse and argumentation of historical materialism than Orthodox historiosophy (or metahistory). However, unlike Metropolitan Ioann and Dushenov, these skills could be found in many representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church abroad (ROCA), where connection with the pre-revolutionary Russian tradition of spiritual interpretation of history went uninterrupted. By this tradition, I do not mean a high-flying religious philosophy, but rather a popular Orthodox literature, with its most vivid representative being Sergei Nilus—publisher of the classic conspiracy theory text *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It is ironic that this mysterious book published and interpreted by the mystic is not about mysteries, but instead concerns itself with very rational plans allegedly created by extremely practical people for material reasons. The very interpreter reveals the spiritual foundation of those rationalistic decisions. However, Nilus’s heirs benefited from his skill, as they saw the mystical in the rational and the seemingly understandable. In this search for meaning, both revelations and analytical methods, including search techniques, were used as sources of information. It is the ability to leap from the level of political analytics into the space of visionary discoveries that determined the discursive style of the post-Soviet Orthodox conspiracy, which is largely believed to have been founded by Metropolitan Ioann.

One problem arises from the fact that he and his secretary were almost entirely disconnected from the world of traditions set by Nilus and similar writers: specifically, they were quite remote from the representatives of the Russian Church abroad, which Metropolitan Ioann describes as absolute strangers in his early works. Of course, the Soviet Church stayed in contact with the so-called foreigners, but a whole range of different people were engaged in this communication. At the time of the Soviet system’s collapse only late-Soviet public and domestic anti-Semitism could be used from all of Metropolitan Ioann’s ideological and discursive baggage. However, this conception did not involve “mysteries of lawlessness” or any mysteries at all, except for state secrets and imaginary undercover operations by secret services, such as the CIA and the Mossad.

## **Learning to Speak about History Spiritually**

So, what might explain the origin of Metropolitan Ioann’s skills as employed for the analysis of historical events and processes from the point of view of spiritual

content, which usually boiled down to the struggle of Light and Darkness? This skill can be partly explained by his probable familiarity with the pre-revolutionary publications of Nilus's works. In any case, the Metropolitan believed that the *Protocols* were not a forgery and that the world was living according to the plans of their authors. But this was clearly not enough to create the so-called Russian Symphony—a doctrine that focused on the meaning of Russian history.

And here we must return to Dushenov's role in the creation of Metropolitan Ioann's theories. While Dushenov might not have written the articles, he did, in my opinion, introduce his patron to the basic skills of interpreting events of political and social life in the spirit of Orthodox conspiracy theories, and also told him several "important facts from Russian history" that were unknown to Soviet people, but which were actively discussed among emigrants. He seemed to take all this from the members of the Christian Revival Union, an Orthodox-monarchical organization (Dushenov communicated with them at meetings of nationalists).<sup>7</sup>

The original name of the aforementioned union was the "Christian Patriotic Union" (CPU), established at its First Congress in Moscow on December 17, 1988. It was, in turn, set up on the basis of an initiative by a group known as "For the Spiritual and Biological Salvation of the People" (July 23, 1988), chaired by an old Orthodox dissident and prisoner of conscience Vladimir Osipov. Osipov was elected chairman of the CPU. However, he was removed from leadership as a result of a number of intrigues. In the beginning of the 1990s, Osipov and the CPU members faithful to him created a new structure, which was developed, independently of Osipov, by publicist Viacheslav Demin and poet Aleksei Shiropaev to a large extent. They had close ties with the most anti-Soviet part of the Orthodox Russian emigrant groups and they had been actively mastering the lexicon and the ideology of radical conspiracy historiography and historiography since 1988. As of May 1990, they began publishing a semi-underground newspaper *Zemshchina* ("Realm, Land"), which was very popular among Orthodox nationalists and was published until 1993 (it had 97 issues in total). Close to *Zemshchina* in ideology and its team of authors, was *Tsar'-Kolokol* (*Tsar Bell*), an almanac published from 1990–1991. *Zemshchina* and *Tsar'-Kolokol* republished conspiracy materials from émigré and pre-revolutionary publications. For example, *Tsar Bell* published a book by the emigrant Mikhail Skariatin in 1990 entitled *Zhertva* (*The Sacrifice*), which contains very important materials to prove the ritual character of the royal family's murder. This information (or rather, translation and decipherment of mysterious signs from the

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7 LD 2003: 105.

house of Ipatiev, in which the Bolsheviks executed the family of the last emperor) was then actively used in other Orthodox nationalists’ conspiracy arguments.

In his memoirs, Viacheslav Demin describes the sources of information that formed the ideology of future members of the “Christian Revival.” Recalling the events of 1988, he writes:

I found the books by Nilus and other counter-revolutionary authors, Orthodox-convinced monarchists, banned in the Soviet Union, at the house of my friend Vadim Kuznetsov, whom I once met in Arbat. ... His house was always crowded, filled with: lamp oil, incense, candles, rare historical and modern photographs, icons, and, most importantly with ecclesiastical and monarchical literature, which he copied in large quantities. ... It was at his house that I first saw copies of icons of the Royal Martyrs, glorified by the foreign Church in 1981, and learned a lot of new and mysterious information about the Ekaterinburg crime, which, as it seems, was of a ritual nature.<sup>8</sup>

This narrative about the ritual murder of the royal family, developed by Russian emigrants, deserves a separate study. Here I will only point out that the narrative took shape as early as the beginning of the 1920s. It was based on the testimonies of those who were part of the crime investigation team, or somehow came to know about it (investigator Sokolov, General Dieterichs, and a British journalist referred to as Wilton), after the troops of Admiral Kolchak in 1918–1919 temporarily freed Ekaterinburg from the Bolsheviks.

This evidence laid the ground for the formation of a narrative about the killing of the Tsar and his family, which was said to be not just a political execution without charge of trial, but a religious or quasi-religious ritual.<sup>9</sup>

Dieterichs and Wilson generally formulated a picture of the murder of the royal family as follows: the execution of Nicholas II and his relatives was carried

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8 «Книги Нилуса и других запрещённых в советской стране контрреволюционных авторов православных убеждённых монархистов я нашёл у своего приятеля Вадима Кузнецова, которого однажды случайно встретил на Арбате. ... В его доме, доверху забитом лампадным маслом, ладаном, свечами, редкими, историческими и современными фотографиями, иконами, и главное церковной и монархической литературой, которую он размножал на ксероксе большими тиражами, всегда было многолюдно. ... Именно у него я впервые увидел копии икон Царственных Мучеников, прославленных зарубежной Церковью в 1981-ом и узнал много нового и таинственного о екатеринбургском злодеянии, которое, оказывается, носило ритуальный характер». – Demin 2008.

9 Slater 2007: 60–80.

out by “Jewish Bolsheviks” under the direction of Germany, which sought to destroy Russia, the evidence for which was that it was a black magic ritual. The main evidence for the involvement of religious Jews in the incident were four strange signs inscribed on the walls of the execution room. They were discovered during the investigation and later interpreted as secret Kabbalistic writings, deciphered by Enel (M.V. Skariatin) in 1925, as mentioned previously, to read as follows: “Here, by the order of mysterious forces, the Tsar was sacrificed for the destruction of the State—all people are to be notified about this.”<sup>10</sup>

The version of ritual murder was deeply rooted in some Orthodox émigré communities. It was repeated in sermons by certain prominent hierarchs of ROCA several times (for example, Archbishop Averkii of Syracuse [Taushev] and Bishop Nectarii of Seattle [Kontsevich]). It is important that the version received a new “spiritual” interpretation in this context and that its meaning was scaled up to an eschatological level.

This murder was thought out and organized and had to be carried out, by any means, by servants of the coming Antichrist—those who sold their soul to Satan and those who intensely prepared for the speedy triumph of the enemy of Christ—the Antichrist. They perfectly understood that their main obstacle was Orthodox Tsarist Russia. Therefore, it was necessary to destroy Orthodox Russia and arrange in its place an evil state opposed to God that would gradually spread its power over the entire world. And for the earliest and certain destruction of Russia, it was necessary to destroy the one who was the living symbol of the country—the Orthodox Tsar.<sup>11</sup>

This interpretation of the events of 1918 became the basis and source of inspiration for the Russian Orthodox historiosophy of the early 1990s.

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10 On this publication see: Panin 2017: 116–18.

11 «Это убийство было продумано и организовано никем другим, как слугами грядущего Антихриста – теми продавшими свою душу сатане людьми, которые ведут самую напряженную подготовку к скорейшему воцарению в мире врага Христова – Антихриста. Они отлично понимали, что главное препятствие, стоявшее им на пути, это – Православная Царская Россия. А поэтому надо уничтожить Россию Православную, устроив на месте ее безбожное богоборческое государство, которое бы постепенно распространило свою власть над всем миром. А для скорейшего и вернейшего уничтожения России надо было уничтожить того, кто был живым символом ее – Царя Православного». – Averkii 1975: 299.

Indeed, the texts by Demin and his companions demonstrate their knowledge of émigré nationalist literature, which was not available to the majority of believers in the Soviet Union. It was Demin and his followers who, taking the idea of Nicholas II’s holiness from emigrant books, began to collect signatures for his canonization in the ROC MP. This practice of collecting signatures was critiqued by the church leadership repeatedly, but persisted among believers wishing to canonize certain revered people.

Among the main methods of analysis of historical events and phenomena in this context was the discovery of “spiritual meanings” that lay behind certain actions, actions which, incidentally, were usually reduced to the fact that the authoritarian (ideally monarchic) form of governing Russia was the instrument of God’s care for the salvation of “the chosen” under the conditions of the Antichrist’s triumph. Here is what Viktor Shnirel’man wrote about this in his recent book:

The return of Orthodoxy to public discourse of nationalists was accompanied by a growing interest in eschatology, which helped them to comprehend the crisis phenomena unfolding before their eyes ... Moreover, it [the discourse] was recognized at two levels—phenomenological and metaphysical. The first dealt with current events and their discussion in political, social, and economic terms. But the second employed the traditionalist concept of involution, drawing a picture of inevitable swirl from the Golden Age down to decay, explained by the Christian eschatology as “satanic forces” clearing the way for Antichrist. These forces could only be confronted by “the Restrainer,” and therefore, from this point of view, the main world conflict arose between him and the “forces of evil,” whoever they were.<sup>12</sup>

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12 «Возвращение православия в общественный дискурс и обращение к нему национал-патриотов сопровождалось ростом интереса к эсхатологии, помогавшей им осознать развивающиеся на их глазах кризисные явления... При этом он [дискурс] осознавался на двух уровнях – феноменологическом и метафизическом. На первом речь шла о текущих событиях и их обсуждении в политических, социальных и экономических терминах. Зато на втором в дело вступала традиционалистская концепция инволюции, рисующая неизбежное движение от Золотого века к упадку и разложению, что христианская эсхатология объясняла действием “сатанинских сил”, расчищавших путь антихристу. Этим силам мог противостоять только “удерживающий”, и поэтому, с этой точки зрения, основной конфликт в мире возникал между ним и “силами зла”, кем бы они ни были». – Shnirel’man 2017: 264.

The members of the “Christian Revival” learned to “speak spiritually.” This means that they could use the conspiratorial language of Orthodox mysticism in the discursive context of modern Russian political eschatology.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Tsar’s Murder as a Ritual and Cosmic Drama**

In order to understand the working principle of that discursive and analytic method, let us analyze two of the first articles to appear in the newspaper *Zemshchina*. The first one is Aleksei Shiropaev’s article “Pobeda imperatora Nikolaia II” (“The Victory of Emperor Nicholas the Second”).

Shiropaev builds his picturesque narrative around the criticism of popular ideas about the personality of Emperor Nicholas II and the meaning of his murder.<sup>14</sup> He does not trust legal and, most importantly, ethical interpretations of the events of 1917–18. He tries to overcome common-sense logic, overturning the social reality interpreting method that Paul Ricœur meant when he wrote about the so-called “school of suspicion.”<sup>15</sup>

From this point of view, any attempts to remain in the practical domain when discussing those historical events are not just a mistake, but a malicious hoax: “Dark forces are trying ... to suggest that the Ekaterinburg crime was conducted under a moral and legal imperative in order to hide ritualistic and mystical meaning of what ‘happened’ on 17 July 1918.”<sup>16</sup>

Shiropaev puts forward a simple and seemingly non-ideological word “happened” in quotation marks. In so doing, he tries to point out that the events of Nicholas’s life cannot be interpreted using terminology which implies randomness. These events could neither have been caused by a confluence of circumstances, nor by hastily taken political decisions. These events were by no means a crime committed by some people against others. And here Shiropaev points out two secret (and hidden) meanings behind the execution of the royal family. The first relates to the disclosure of the murderers’ real motives. They did not just seek to kill the Tsar, who incidentally was no longer in power and who had no

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13 For some sources and details of this discursive tradition, see Hagemeister 2018: 428–33.

14 For a brief overview of different conspiracy versions of this event, see Rossman 1999.

15 Ricœur 1970.

16 «черные силы пытаются ... перевести Екатеринбургское злодеяние в плоскость нравственных и юридических оценок, дабы скрыть ритуально-мистический смысл того, что “произошло” 17 июля 1918 года». – Shiropaev 1990.



influence over the events of the Civil War. Instead, the organizers of that maleficent execution sought to destroy the metaphysical image of the Russian state and nation: “In the murder of the Anointed, there was a certain ritual, dark meaning: the destruction of the State and the desire to enslave the soul of people.”<sup>17</sup>

But the author does not stop at this level of interpretation (ritual-mystical crime). He believes that this simple meaning “lies on the surface.” Therefore, he goes beyond conspiracy theories. He not only understands the crime that the villains secretly committed, but he looks to go further when he brings in “non-random” mystical coincidences. For example, the murder occurred on the day commemorating St. Right-Believing Grand Prince Andrei Bogoliubskii who was killed by court conspirators in 1174. Prince Andrei is considered to be the creator of the Moscow state by some radical monarchists, so the parallel between the fate of the first and last rulers of Russia unites the entire history of the monarchy in an integrated narrative. Yet this is not enough, and Shiropaev aspires to go to the second level of interpretation—“to see in the Ural events” not just another political assassination, but “the Divine Providence, overshadowing all devilry.”<sup>18</sup> From this point of view, the death of the last Russian Tsar is not a tragedy, but a triumph of the forces of Light over the forces of Darkness. Here the author has likened the execution of Nicholas to the death of Christ on Calvary to promise the future resurrection of Russia. As the resurrection of the deceased Christ is a reliable guarantee of immortality to a Christian, so the death of Nicholas is a firm promise of the Russian nation’s immortality: “On 17 July 1918, the Russian Tsar and His Family gave their lives for their Motherland—a great, all-victorious sacrifice.”<sup>19</sup>

To convince the reader of such an optimistic view of the emperor, and of his family’s death, Shiropaev declares non-religious interpretations of Nicholas’s personality to be mythology. To eradicate this “false consciousness,” we must learn to see everything from the point of view of the “church’s mystical positions.” It turns out that multiple descriptions of the emperor’s weak will, given by his contemporaries, are nothing less than evidence of the Tsar’s great Christian humility, which can only be maintained by a very strong will. The Tsar’s shortsightedness, his inability to understand the current political processes also

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17 «В убийстве Помазанника был вполне определенный ритуальный, черный смысл: разрушение Государства и стремление поработить душу народа». – *ibid.*

18 «Увидеть в Уральских событиях ... смысл Божий, затмевающий всякую бесовщину». – *ibid.*

19 «17 июля 1918 года Русским Царем и Его Семейю совершена великая всепобеждающая жертва за Родину». – *ibid.*

evolves into his amazing gift to see the real meaning of the global historical process in political routine.

From this point of view, all of Nicholas's reign becomes not a failed ruler's career, but the path of Christ, who initially knew how and why he would have to go. Shiropaev easily finds biblical parallels in the life of Nicholas. He finds several individuals who betrayed their teacher and benefactor to play the part of Judas; he interprets the emperor's behavior during abdication as the Lord's prayer in the garden of Gethsemane and so on. In the latter case, the gesture of weakness and helplessness is an act of the greatest willpower—he could have changed everything, but he decided not to do so.

Thus, such behavior, which is understood by many secular historians as a forced one, is consecutively interpreted by Shiropaev as conscious and voluntary. For him, then, it was not a political murder, but a divine sacrifice.

In the Ipatievskii cellar there was a clash of Kabbalistic ritual with the indestructible force of the Christian sacrifice, which Emperor Nicholas II made to atone for the sins of the Fatherland, a sacrifice for which his whole life served as preparation. And the outcome of such a clash has always been, is and will be one and the same—the disgrace of dark forces.<sup>20</sup>

Three levels of historical process can easily be distinguished in this version of a “spiritual interpretation” of Russian history. The first presents the execution of the royal family as a political murder. At the second “secret” (or conspiratorial) level, this event is understood as a ritual sacrifice. Incidentally, the assumption that this was a ritual makes the event religious. This is no longer just a murder, but a sort of rite-of-passage that was carried out with the purpose of changing the course of world history. Finally, at the third “sacred” level, the event appears to be a sacred act of redeeming Russia and its people from the eternal curse expedited by the servants of the Antichrist.

Another example of historiosophical reflection about Russia's destiny as well as its place in global history, can be found in the article “The Orthodox kingdom and the false monarchy” by V. Kovalevskii, an author from the small town of Kostroma. Kovalevskii begins his argument by saying that God made Russia as an ideal model for a state and, thereby, endowed it with the role of savior of the

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20 «В Ипатьевском подвале произошло столкновение каббалистического ритуала с несокрушимой силой христианской жертвы, которую принес за грехи Отечества Император Николай II по которой Он шел всю жизнь. А исход такого столкновения всегда был, есть и будет один – посрамление сатанинских сил». – *ibid.*

world from satanic conspiracy. These intrigues are aimed at replacing the Russian monarchical state with an illusion, which looks like an Orthodox kingdom, but in fact is the realm of Antichrist.

The martyr’s feat of the last Sovereign and his victory over the forces that seek to capture the world is of cosmic significance. But the meaning of these events cannot be appreciated by the spiritually blind people of modern Russia. This meaning is revealed in its entirety only in the eschatological perspective of the triumph of the Antichrist’s kingdom.

The Emperor knew that the main goal of all efforts of Antichrist’s servants was not the destruction of the Russian monarchy and establishment of a different state system other than that bestowed by God, but the substitution of the source of power.<sup>21</sup>

The dark hierarchy, which had already come to power in Russia in 1917, pushed Nicholas II to unleash the terror of power against the people. Allegedly he was offered the possibility to install “fifteen thousand gallows on the Nevsky [prospect], and then for twenty years nothing would be heard about a revolution in Russia.”<sup>22</sup> But such an outcome would deprive the institution of monarchy of its sacral status and, accordingly, of the name of a role-model state system. “In a critical moment for the entire world ... the sovereign, after praying before the image of the Savior all night, decided to abdicate the Throne, with his whole family voluntarily treading the path of humility and sorrow destined to him from birth.”<sup>23</sup>

Loyal to his faith and ready to accept death voluntarily, like Christ, the emperor sacrificed his life for his people and all mankind, and “the world was released from the impending disaster.”<sup>24</sup>

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21 «Государь знал, что главной целью всех усилий слуг Антихриста было не уничтожение Российской монархии и установление иного, отличного от дарованного Богом России государственного строя, а подмена источника власти». – Kovalevskii 1991.

22 «Пятнадцать тысяч виселиц на Невском, и тогда двадцать лет о революции в России не будет и слуху». – *ibid.*

23 «В критическую для всего мира минуту... государь после молитвы перед образом Спасителя, длившейся всю ночь, принял решение об отречении от Престола, со всей своей семьей добровольно ступив на предначертанный ему от рождения путь смирения и скорби». – *ibid.*

24 «Вселенная была избавлена от надвигающейся катастрофы». – *ibid.*

Kovalevskii also reflects on the historical process, differentiating three levels. At the first level (the level of political history), some forces provoke Nicholas II to make tough political decisions, and he wisely rejects this scenario. At the conspiracy level, there was an attempt by conspirators to discredit the principle of monarchical rule (Nicholas II preferred to abdicate, rather than to tarnish the throne with the blood of his subjects). At the “spiritual” level of interpretation, the dark forces sought to replace the sacred Russian monarchy with the kingdom of Antichrist in order to condemn the whole world to eternal perdition. But the emperor repeated Christ’s feat, destroyed Satan’s plan and saved the world. Thus, the “external” aspects of the historical process come to light, and behind them we see the meanings that live beyond the material world, accessible only for “spiritually shrewd” people.

As we can see, Shiropaev’s and Kovalevskii’s mystical historical theories, like many of their followers, including Metropolitan Ioann, are not just a collection of ideas, but also a discursive skill of arranging arguments. Explanations of different natures—be they eschatological, soteriological or political—should clash within one text, should come into conflict, and then lead to the discovery of hidden meanings of well-known events. This kind of “spiritual speaking” presupposes the art of conspiracy thinking as a prerequisite to any statement about history.

The ability to see the invisible meaning of events makes it possible to create narratives about the past and the present state of affairs, which are alternative to an “official” interpretation of history. Those narratives are used by people who strive to see themselves as a counter-elite, a group that can compete with academic institutions in producing knowledge about the past. In order to do this, authors turn to traditional religion, which has its own way of presenting information about core values. One of those values resides in the “real meaning” of national and world history. Therefore, this alternative version of the past is presented as a genuine historical narrative, one wrongly disregarded by Soviet and post-Soviet secularists.

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## **Abstract**

Evaluating the repertoire of conspiracy narratives that have circulated amongst Orthodox believers in contemporary Russia, one might conclude that a number of ideas have remained popular for more than 25 years. These ideas are related to certain stories about the history, current state and future of both Russia and the world, and they are built primarily on the suggestion of secret warfare enacted against the Russian people and the Orthodox Church. This conspiracy theory’s basic ideas and images can be found in the works of the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, Ioann (Snychev). This chapter’s purpose is not just to investigate the source of these ideas but also to analyze the unique discursive presentation of events from the past (particularly the execution of the last Russian emperor and his family) which reveals “the real mystical meaning” of national and world history and supplies Orthodox intellectuals with a conceptual base to enable them to compete with secular academic institutions as they attempt to deepen our knowledge of the past.

# Alternative Healing Practices, Conspiracy Theory, and Social Trust in Post-Soviet Russia

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*Konstantin Bogdanov*\*

## **Keywords**

post-Soviet Russia; alternative healing practices; conspiracy theory; mass psychosis; social trust; semantic satiation; Anatolii Kashpirovskii; Allan Chumak

By the end of the 1980s, Russia was rocked by the appearance of two ‘healers’ on national television, who quickly became extremely popular figures in the Russian mass media. Their names were Anatolii Kashpirovskii and Allan Chumak. Their performance on national television attracted an audience of several millions and caused a remarkable phenomenon that could be referred to as, without exaggeration, as a “mass psychosis.” In modern psychology, “mass psychosis” refers to the manifestation of direct, indirect and induced effects on groups of people whose behavior is characterized by extraordinary suggestibility and imitation. In this definition, not every element of this psychosis is unproblematic, since any human behavior is more or less characterized by the effects and effectiveness of suggestion and imitation.

But in this case, it is sufficient to rely on the fact that the target audience’s behavior when confronted by Kashpirovskii and Chumak—despite all the difference in the methods that they used—was remarkable in its massiveness and apparent irrationalism. The television appearances of Kashpirovskii (born 1939), a professional psychotherapist who had worked at the psychiatric hospital in Vinnitsa for 25 years, began after his speech in March 1988 on the program *Vzgliad* (*The View*) which covered the live surgical operation on TV in Kiev of a

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patient (Liubov' Grabovskaia) who suffered from breast cancer. The surgery for breast resection was performed without anesthesia (the patient had contraindications to this) under Kashpirovskii's remote hypnotic influence; Kashpirovskii himself was at the Ostankino television studio in Moscow. The operation was successfully completed. A few months later, Kashpirovskii repeated the same procedure at a distance from Moscow to Tbilisi with complicated operations to remove cavitary ventral hernias from two girls (O.B. Ignatova and L.N. Iurshova), one of whom demanded champagne excitedly during the operation, and the second moaned softly; and after coming out of her trance, one girl stated that she had experienced several orgasms at once. Participants in both the first and second operations were, by the way, respectable and highly regarded doctors of the country, and their rave reviews contributed greatly to Kashpirovskii's triumph in public opinion. In 1989, he became the host of the program *Seansy zdorov'ia vracha-psikhoterapevta Anatoliia Kashpirovskogo* (*Sessions on health by the doctor-psychotherapist Anatolii Kashpirovskii*) which was broadcasted by Central Television. Kashpirovskii would look at the audience with a heavy, unblinking gaze and a monotonous voice, calling on them to trust him. Kashpirovskii treated young and old alike and he saved children from all over the country from enuresis, dealt with internal "alarm clocks," resorbed postoperative sutures, and generally inspired hope in the restoration of health to all those who thought of themselves as sick. In 1989, these programs ran during prime time—immediately after the program *Vremia* (*Time*), which covered the main events of the day in the rapidly changing world of the perestroika USSR.<sup>1</sup> Kashpirovskii's star career on television was supplemented with tours around the country and mass medical sessions, during which dozens of patients fell down on the floor in hypnotic trance, waved their hands over their heads, lamented and laughed, and some stood up from their wheelchairs.<sup>2</sup>

According to Leonid Kravchenko, the first deputy chairman of the USSR State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, Chumak's public appearance on television in 1989 was caused by circumstances similar to those of

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- 1 I would also like to note that the fifteen-minute program, which was just after the program *Vremia*, resembled an "adult" version of *Spokoinoi nochi, malyshy* (*Good Night, Kids*) with its famous lullaby soundtrack "Spiat ustalye igrushki" ("Sleeping tired toys").
  - 2 The literature dedicated to Kashpirovskii is extremely extensive. For a revealing, if general, idea of how commendably Kashpirovskii was perceived by the masses in the late 1980s and early 1990s see Maksimov 1990; Morgovskii 1990; *Psikhoterapevticheskii i dukhovnyi fenomen A.M. Kashpirovskogo* 1992; Shenkman 1992.



Kashpirovskii's invitation: perestroika television was looking for new heroes and found them among those who were able to perform in a new format of communication with the audience.<sup>3</sup> Chumak (born 1935), a journalist by training, was an alternative to Kashpirovskii. He was not a psychotherapist capable of demonstrating the wonders of tele hypnosis, but he was close to the television community and had been working on Moscow television for many years (as a sports commentator). However, Chumak was not completely ignorant of the basics of psychological influence. Since 1983, he worked at the Educational Psychology Research Institute of General and Pedagogic Psychology of the USSR Academy of Pedagogic Sciences.

Chumak looked much more ordinary, quite unlike the athletic and dressed-all-in-black Kashpirovskii who seemed to be charged with the “demonic” aura of a magician. His program was called “Health Sessions” and was broadcast early in the morning, so that viewers had time to see it before work. A modest, everyday-dressed intellectual with thick glasses appeared in front of the audience. He was mostly silent to begin with, plunged into a mysteriously sleepwalk-like state and then began to make strange cross-shaped movements with his hands. These passes, or gestures, were able to “charge” various substances and things—ointments, creams, water in glass jars, tapes, etc., which the viewer was invited to place near the screen. Over the next three years, hundreds of thousands watched Chumak's programs, receiving tons of miraculous water as a reward, the consumption of which guaranteed the elimination of various diseases (the programs also became more specialized over time: some episodes were intended for patients with cardiovascular diseases, others for gastrointestinal distress and so on).<sup>4</sup> Like Kashpirovskii, Chumak also began to tour the whole country, relying on an audience that can be defined as “believing in a miracle” (this would be the English translation of Chumak's book *Tem, kto verit v chudo*, 2007), even though he did not call himself a psychotherapist.<sup>5</sup> In this case, public sessions of “charging” water may serve as a vivid example of the psychological setup that programs a response with the placebo effect: for example, Chumak simply suggested that the public compare “uncharged” cream to “charged” cream to see whether there was a therapeutic difference.

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3 Cf. Tsvetkova 2014.

4 In 1992, the Moskvoretiskii experimental beer factory established a line of Chumak's “charged” water. It was initially assumed that 100,000 bottles a year would be produced. Chumak himself estimated that amount as a “drop in the bucket” for Moscow, cf. Vandenko 1992. The production was subsequently curtailed.

5 Chumak 2007.

Crowds near newsstands in Moscow on 1 September 1989 can be regarded as the apotheosis of collective trust in Chumak. The object of the people's desire was to acquire a copy or a number of copies of the newspaper *Vechernaia Moskva* (*Evening Moscow*), which was, as previously reported in the media, "charged" with the healer's beneficial energy (it was well-known that second-hand dealers of this issue sold it at exorbitant prices, and suffering individuals ate pieces of the newspaper).

By order of the Ministry of Health ("Ob uregulirovaniu netraditsionnykh metodov lecheniia" – "On the settlement of non-traditional methods of treatment"), some television programs were banned in 1993 and the mass psychosis, caused by the activities of Kashpirovskii and Chumak in 1989–92, began to decline; however, the two kept on sporadically appearing in their own "tour" activities.

One should also mention the activities of their increasingly multiplying competitors. In the 1990s, Dzhuna (Eugenia Davitashvili, 1949–2015), specialized in the practice of "contactless massage" and claimed to be an Assyrian queen, astrologer, "honorary academician of 129 world academies," as well as a personal therapist for Brezhnev and other party and artistic celebrities. Nikolai Levashov (1961–2012) treated incurable diseases at a distance and claimed that he had repeatedly saved Russia from various disasters, such as hurricanes, fires, ozone holes and radioactive contamination (once Levashov saved humanity as a whole from the collision of the Earth with the neutron star of Nemesis). Iurii Longo (Golovko, 1950–2006) once excited audiences with television sessions of magic—specifically telepathy, telekinesis, levitation, etc. Especially remarkable were his famous performances of "resurrections of the dead" (as it turned out later, during these sessions he was assisted by a friend who effectively played the revived dead).

Adepts and preachers of these movements usually appealed not to science, but to alternative and traditional medicine—from urine therapy and "healthy" starvation to magic and ritual procedures. Social trust in these cases is attained and maintained by persuading the public that the alternative methods of treatment can be used as a deliberate opposition to institutional medicine—an approach based on the logic of "we know your enemies." It is believed that the mistrust of institutional medicine and the rejection of professional medical care in Russia was motivated by such social factors as the destabilization of the national health system, a significant deterioration in clinical care, the collapse of the insurance institutions, the emigration of physicians, etc.<sup>6</sup> But apart from

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6 Cf. Field 1987, Schechter 1997, Cockerham 1999, Maximova 2002, Rose 2000, Reshetnikov 2003.

these social reasons, the social trust in alternative medical treatments was also maintained through a number of cultural and psychological traditions in Russia.

The Soviet Union's collapse, a result of the reforms of perestroika, led to a profound defamation of scientific knowledge as a whole and to a major loss of credibility among the country's scientists and medical professionals.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the public was increasingly attracted to alternative methods of treating conditions that regular science could neither explain nor cure. This interest was due to, on the one hand, the general mood of protest during the perestroika period and to the rise of "non-rational" and "irrational" hopes for change that often arise in situations of social instability, revolution, and ideological and economic crisis on the other. In my previous work on the cultural history of Russian medicine—in particular, in the study of the history of the cholera epidemics in Russia in the nineteenth century—I pointed out how a situation of danger and risk "constructs" social protest and helps to create an emotional consensus in distinguishing between "us" and "them."<sup>8</sup> Cholera epidemics, for example, often contributed to the emergence of the "enemies of the people," who were seen by the public as guilty of contagion. Another important phenomenon that emerged in these cases was linked to what is known in ethnographic studies as "cargo cults." In an article on the history of the Russian intelligentsia, Sander Brouwer made a witty comparison to the first representatives of the natives of Melanesia in the period in which "cargo cults" were also active. The natives believed that if they followed certain behavioral ceremonies, their unknown benefactors would one day bring them the gifts of social and economic prosperity. According to Brouwer, Russian intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century were similarly expecting that the West would bring them the gift of acculturation and modernization.<sup>9</sup> I find that this metaphor applies to different historical contexts as well: the few years that are associated with Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms can, in my opinion, also be compared with a popular cargo cult, a kind of quickly spread social imagination in which the norms of rational criticism were suspended and the non-rational hopes and faith were emphasized.

Demand creates its own supply: at the end of the 1980s, bookshelves were filled with literature on occultism, magic, extrasensory phenomena, astrology; religious and mystical literature was republished frequently. These years also marked the beginning of an industry in which the emergence of new miracle-working healers was accompanied by the expansion of the market of paramedi-

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7 Lonkila 1998.

8 Bogdanov 2005.

9 Brouwer 1999.

cal services, which were officially distributed among the population.<sup>10</sup> It quickly became big business from this point on, behind which lay not only individual scams but also officials charged with the production of innovative medicines and devices; such advertised and well-sold novelties included zirconium bracelets, neutrino generators for the treatment of cancer, bioactivators and biocorrectors. One type of these biocorrectors was patented by Dzhuna—holographic stickers allegedly protecting from exposure to harmful emissions from mobile phones and televisions etc. It is characteristic that the Commission on Pseudoscience and Research Fraud of Russian Academy of Sciences, created in 1998 at the initiative of Academician Vitalii Ginzburg (1916–2009),<sup>11</sup> immediately aroused and continued to provoke fierce attacks in the press and on the Internet by adepts of various kinds of alternative “sciences.” It is necessary to remark that many of these adepts are institutionally connected with the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences, willingly encouraging fantasies about torsion fields, “wave genomes,” ophthalmogeometry, ufology, etc.

Mass psychosis, associated with the hope created by miracle healers and various extrasensory practitioners, was sometimes ideologically, but more often emotionally connected with the spread of new religious movements throughout Russia, whose preachers largely appealed not to the traditional, but to the folk or alternative medicinal traditions—from urine therapy and starvation to magical manipulations. In the course of the last fifteen years, these methods have been actively promoted, for example, on the pages of the newspaper *Vestnik ZOZH* (*Health Promotion Review*), published twice a month with more than 3 million sold copies (considered alongside the most popular newspapers in the country, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* and *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, which sell only 2 million and 400 thousand copies respectively). By reading this newspaper one can learn, for example, that urine relieves obesity, alopecia, thyroid problems, acne, sweaty feet and liver diseases. It also improves eyesight, if the eyes are wiped with it. A headache is well treated by bumping one's head into cold glass rhythmically, given that this beat neutralizes the electrostatic charge. One can also easily cope with alcoholism at home: by taking three apples, sticking six nails into each of them, then taking out the nails, and eating apples and continuing to do this for a month and a half. As for women who are worried about their facial hair growth, it is recommended that they stop using condoms, because they influence such growth.<sup>12</sup>

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10 Pachenkov 2001, Brown/Rusinova 2002.

11 Problemy bor'by s lzhenaukoi 1999.

12 Cf. Timonina 2015.

Taking into account the oddity of these texts, both the texts and their context are significant for understanding discursive and emotional mechanics that structure social trust, which in turn is “responsible” for this newspaper’s huge audience. In general, there are three mechanisms: the urgency of treatment, the recognition of an illness and the conviction that scientific medicine is unable to cope with it. Talcott Parsons writes that patients become sick not when they feel pain, but when they are ready to become patients, undergo medicalization, and assume the “sick role.”<sup>13</sup> It is sociologically correct to think that any medicine “constructs” diseases and appropriates or, in the words of Ivan Illich, expropriates health.<sup>14</sup> A patient should know what and who is opposing them. In this sense, Kashpirovskii’s patients, Chumak’s charged water supporters, and the readers of the Health Promotion Review likewise know their enemies—i.e., diseases and physicians.

As mentioned previously, it seems reasonable to assume that people’s distrust of institutional medicine and refusal of professional medical assistance during the perestroika years were, by and large, determined (and continue to be determined) by the influence of such objective social factors as the destabilization of the national health care system, the deterioration of clinical care, the collapse of insurance systems, and the emigration of physicians.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, psychological and even cultural factors also came into play. In one of my previous works, I have already had the opportunity to point out that in a situation of danger and risk, the “construction” of social protest, helps to achieve an emotional consensus in maintaining the distinction between “own” and “alien.”<sup>16</sup> Social trust in these cases is constructed and maintained by building (self)confidence in the reliability of (alternative) treatment methods based on an identifiable, deliberate and adversary-controlled opposition with adherents consolidating themselves based on the rule “we know our enemies.”

Starting with Erik Erikson, who saw the basic social unit of the human personality in social trust, psychologists and sociologists have written about the rational and “positive” nature of trust as an innate confidence in the good will of other people and a generalized social expectation that other people are likely to fulfill their promises. The pragmatic and theoretical implications of social trust were considered to be both psychologically and economically appropriate—be it

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13 Cf. Lupton 1994: 89–90, 105–06.

14 Illich 1976.

15 Cf. Field 1987, Schecter 1997, Cockerham 1999, Rose 2000, Maksimova 2002, Reshetnikov 2003.

16 Bogdanov 2005: 351–54.

the anticipation of actions through a clarification of the common motives, the consolidation of social networks, the minimization of risks when making decisions under conditions of information deficit, the stabilization of expectations, the reduction of transaction costs in practices of economic exchange, and so on.<sup>17</sup> However, it is important to emphasize that building and maintaining the spheres and networks of social trust can be psychologically dramatic and epistemologically absurd, since they often rely on various “conspiracy theories.” This theory should be shared by all those who are included in the network of social trust (which is known as the phenomenon of “group secrets” in child psychology). Medical conspiracy theories include the persistent ideas, opinions and rumors about the secret and coordinated activity of physicians, pharmacists and other members of the medical profession who are accused of deliberately damaging the health and lives of their patients. Medicine, as a practice and field of scientific knowledge, is directly connected with the health and life of people and has repeatedly been the subject of the social suspicion that its representatives use their knowledge and skills for malicious purposes. The question remains: what are these theories and how are they supported? Emile Durkheim, in his study of the dynamics of change in religious rituals, wrote that social trust acts as a form of moral solidarity and conformity to common symbols and signs of collective identity that are perceived as self-evident and beyond critical discussion. These symbols and signs can be both material (e.g., visual) and linguistic. Therefore, alternative healing practices (if we do not reduce them to just quasi-medical curiosities) deserve to be studied as a practice of linguistic and extralinguistic (nonverbal) social construction.

If we call these symbols attributes or, for example, “fixed objects” and reduce them to their defining semantics, then it will highlight their connection with threats and danger. In the social conditions of informational asymmetry, as Peter Kollock has shown, risk forms the basis of confidence: the more extreme the threat is seen to be, the more extreme the expectations associated with the exploitation of trust will be (as, in particular, it happens in the practice of multi-level marketing built on the principle of financial pyramids: for example, American *Herbalife*).<sup>18</sup> This fact was confirmed by studies by Craig Parks and Lorne Hulbert, who came to the conclusion that the degree of trust in others depends on the degree of reaction to the danger.<sup>19</sup>

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17 Cf. Kollock 1994, Sztompka 1999.

18 Kollock 1994.

19 Parks, Hulbert 1995.

Put otherwise, strengthening social trust requires the construction of danger. There is nothing new here, of course. History is full of examples in which the achievement of such trust—and, accordingly, the confidence in those who embody it—is provided by the image of enemies who threaten or allegedly threaten a society. But from the linguistic and, more extensively, semiotic point of view, it is interesting how the discursive attributes of such trust are maintained at the communicative level—within the group of those who share this trust. I believe that one of the most effective factors in maintaining such trust is the predictability and repeatability of those markers that are correlated with the communication within this group. So, for example, if for an orthodox person an icon serves as such a marker, then for supporters of these two healers such markers would be a hypnotizing view of Kashpirovskii and silent manipulations with water jars of Chumak. In a certain sense, these are examples of predictable communication which, following linguist Lev Yakubinskii, can be referred to as a “stereotyped interaction”: a situation of emotional rather than verbal commonplace.<sup>20</sup> Communicators do not need to understand each other if they agree to perform protest communication against a particular danger. It would be sufficient if this communication is marked in a specific way and is reproduced regularly. This is, in particular, the function of slogans, various memes and precedent texts, which are aimed not at defying and explaining something, but at pointing out those who associate themselves with them.

The reproduction of common symbolic attributes is interesting in this case due to its semantic vacancy. It has been observed that a word, phrase or utterance loses its meaning when repeated again and again. In linguistics, this phenomenon is called verbal or semantic satiation and it is actively investigated with relation to speech activity in most diverse aspects.<sup>21</sup> In recent years, interest in this phenomenon has been shown by experts in the field of cognitive science and by neurophysiologists in particular. One of their explanations for the nature of this phenomenon is that the repetition of the same word activates the corresponding neurostructure (i.e., a group of neurons) in the cerebral cortex. The activation of the same neurons, in turn, strengthens their reaction inhibition. The intensity of neuroreaction to this very word decreases with each subsequent repetition.<sup>22</sup> In such a situation, words and the “objects” associated with them—understood

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20 Yakubinsky 1986.

21 Cf. Fillenbaum 1967, Jakobovits/Hogenraad 1967, Negnevitskaya 1970 and 1976, Black 2003.

22 Smith 1984, Smith/Klein 1990, Frenck-Mestre/Besson/Pynte 1997, Pilotti/Antrobus/Duff 1997.

as a complex of systemic and semantic links—serve as attributes of trust, that are always connected with them, regardless of what they mean or can mean. Kashpirovskii, Chumak, and other healers from the 1990s preached their methods of healing as protection from the world of dangers, illnesses and misfortune, as well as the dangers of official scientific medicine. These cases can serve as examples of how social confidence becomes non-reflexive. Trust in this faith is something that turns faith itself into something more closely resembling psychosis.

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## Abstract

This article provides a study of post-Soviet methods of alternative healing: beginning in the late 1980s, these methods include hypnosis, "folk" and innovative forms of therapy, astrological predictions, spells and rituals, and new kinds of narcotics and medicines. Some of these methods were widely propagandized in the media during the perestroika period; their distribution was also accompanied by both radical ideological changes and the communicative transformation of the

languages of social trust in the public sphere. In my view, the intensification of social trust requires the construction of danger, particularly in terms of images of enemies who are portrayed as threatening to society. From a semiotic point of view, some of the most relevant factors in support of this trust are the predictability and repetition of markers associated with communication within a given group. Such instances can be examined as examples of “stereotyped interaction” (in Lev Iakubinskii’s terms) and this is a situation of emotional, rather than verbal, prejudices and assumptions. All these factors, from the weakness for otherwise implausible alternative treatments to the mechanics and semantics of social trust, played into the social context existing at the time.



# The Dulles Plan for Russia: Conspiracy Theories and Moral Panics in Post-Soviet Societies

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*Alexander Panchenko*\*

## **Keywords**

conspiracy theory; moral panics; Cold War; post-Soviet societies

A conspiracy theory is a powerful explanatory model or way of thinking that influences many cultural forms and social processes throughout the contemporary world. Conspiracy theories can include a number of principal ideas and concepts that make them adaptable for a broad variety of discourses and forms of collective imagination; they are generally defined as “the conviction that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some part thereof.”<sup>1</sup> Conspiracy theories produce ethical models that oppose “us” to “them,” “victims” to “enemies,” “heroes” to “anti-heroes,” explaining and identifying evil as a social and moral category. At the same time, conspiracy theories are extremely teleological; they do not leave any room for coincidences or accidents and explain all facts and events as related to intentional and purposeful activities undertaken by “evil actors.” Quite often, conspiracy theories are grounded in a holistic worldview that leads, in turn, to a particular hermeneutic style. Reality is always considered to be deceptive; it provides “simple,” “superficial,” and “obvious” explanations, which must give pride of place to more complicated intellectual procedures aiming to disclose a “concealed truth.” From this perspective, the concept of mystery appears to be the most powerful element

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1 Fenster 2008: 1.

of conspiratorial narratives that operate in both pre- and post-industrial societies. Recent academic research into conspiracy theories provides a set of interpretations, ranging from medicalization (“social/political paranoids”) to the concept of “popular knowledge,” as a specifically postmodern phenomenon. It is obvious, however, that the social, political, and cultural power of conspiratorial narratives should not be underestimated. Conspiracy theories often motivate political action and social praxis, accompany transformation of institutional and informational networks, and provoke moral panics and changes of identities in both modern and postmodern societies. Still, the roles played by conspiracy theories in various societies, discourses, and social contexts can be quite different, even in the age of globalization.

This chapter deals with present day conspiratorial discourse in Russia, which could perhaps be discussed as the universal symbolic language of post-Soviet collective imagination. That does not necessarily mean that most Russians today take conspiracy theories seriously and base their everyday behavior on social paranoia. Instead, this “language of suspicion” appears to be the most adaptable set of memes and meanings that link people to each other, thereby providing them with collective identities. Yet, it is necessary to explain how and why the language of suspicion has obtained this privileged position in Russian society and what mimetic advantages it possesses.

In his recent publications, Serguei Oushakine has suggested that post-Soviet conspiratorial thinking is a specific form of the “patriotism of despair, with its combination of the traumatic and the conspiratorial,” that “has become especially emblematic of the postmillennial Russia.”<sup>2</sup> As Oushakine argues, our

... inability to convincingly explain individual or collective losses has resulted in an intensive production of popular conspiracy narratives aimed to bring to light hidden forces and concealed plans of “evil outsiders.” ... In these narratives, references to pain and suffering are often linked with fundamental economic changes in the country. Emerging market relations both polarized people and simultaneously activated what Jean and John Comaroff have fittingly called the “will to connect.” ... The post-Soviet uneasiness about the increasing social role of capital is translated into stories about universal lies and deceptions. The perceived exposure to foreign values and capital is often counterbalanced with ideas of an enclosed national community and unmediated values. Increasingly, Russo-Soviet culture is construed as “inalienable wealth,” as a particular form of socially meaningful

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2 Oushakine 2009: 74. On conspiracy theories in post-Soviet collective imagination see also Bennett 2011: 132–52; Yablokov 2018; Borenstein 2019.

property that could be shared among people, but that could not enter commercial circulation or exchange.<sup>3</sup>

Although Oushakine is certainly right in pointing to conspiratorial narration as a specific social device, one employed to make sense of “unsettling and dislocating experiences of the post-Soviet transformation,”<sup>4</sup> it is obvious that many of those narratives have appeared and become popular during the late Soviet decades; therefore, their popularity cannot be interpreted only in the context of economic and social transition.

The case that I will deal with in this chapter, and a number of other examples demonstrate that many post-Soviet conspiracy theories emerged in the late Soviet decades, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. This means, in turn, that in order to look for at least some roots of post-Soviet conspiratorial discourses, we will first need to pay greater attention to ideologies, social settings, and the everyday practices of the late Soviet period. This will also mean that we will have to deal with cultural continuity, rather than breaks and changes. What, then, was so peculiar about the decades under examination?

In his book about the “last Soviet generation,” Alexei Yurchak argued that

... the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union was completely unexpected by most Soviet people and yet, as soon as people realized that something unexpected was taking place, most of them also immediately realized that they had actually been prepared for that unexpected change. Millions became quickly engrossed, making the collapse simultaneously unexpected, unsurprising, and amazingly fast. This complex succession of the unexpected and the unsurprising revealed a peculiar paradox at the core of the Soviet system.<sup>5</sup>

Yurchak explains the paradox by introducing the concept of “performative shift,” i.e., the “process in which the performative dimension of ritualized and speech acts rises in importance (it is important to participate in the reproduction of these acts at the level of form), while the constative dimension of these acts become open-ended, indeterminate, or simply irrelevant.”<sup>6</sup> In the context of late Soviet authoritative discourse

... it became less important to interpret its texts and rituals literally, as constative descrip-

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3 Oushakine 2009: 74–75.

4 *Ibid.*: 75.

5 Yurchak 2005: 282.

6 *Ibid.*: 26.

tions of reality, and more important to reproduce them with great precision. ... The reproduction of the forms of authoritative discourse became powerfully constitutive of Soviet reality but no longer necessarily described that reality; it created the possibilities and constraints for being a Soviet person but no longer described what a Soviet person was. As a result, through its ritualized reproduction and circulation, authoritative discourse enabled many new ways of life, meanings, interests, relations, pursuits, and communities to spring up everywhere within late socialism, without being able to fully describe or determine them.<sup>7</sup>

Following this logic, it is possible to consider the shift as having challenged the very nature of social reality, making it dubious, deceptive, and susceptible. Perhaps this was at least one of the social factors that supplied fertile ground for conspiratorial imagination. There could be some others, though, and I will turn to them later.

We can ask what “performative shifts” from late Soviet discourse were adopted and transformed by “communities of loss” in the 1990s and 2000s: Why did the conservative nationalism of the 1970s become so significant for Russian popular culture forty years thereafter? What messages are encoded by the symbolic language of moral panics and conspiracy theories related to the “imaginary West” in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian society? These questions can be partly answered by an analysis of the so-called “Dulles Plan for Russia,” a conspiratorial forgery that has been widely publicized in Russia since 1992. In the following analysis I will focus on the document’s history, ideological contexts, and popular reception in present day Russia.

Ironically enough, on 7 April 2015, a local court in the Sverdlovsk region added the text of the Dulles Plan to the “federal list of extremist materials” (i.e., texts, images, videos, and websites that are banned for distribution in the country). The court resolution mentions that “in the city of Asbest, certain unrecognized individuals distributed flyers with the text of the ‘Dulles Plan to Destroy the USSR (Russia)’ on one side and the text of the ‘Last Wishes for Ivans’ on the other.”<sup>8</sup> An expert from the local criminal laboratory of the Federal Security Service concluded that the flyer promoted “information aimed at stimulation of

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7 Ibid.: 286.

8 «В г. Асбесте УФСБ России по Свердловской области выявлен факт распространения неустановленными лицами среди жителей г. Асбеста текстового материала “План Даллеса уничтожения СССР (России)” и “Последние пожелания Иванам” экстремистского характера». – “Reshenie Asbestovskogo gorodskogo suda Sverdlovskoi oblasti po delu № 2-414/2015”



hatred of public agents in contemporary Russia.”<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the full text of the expert’s report is not available, but its final statement seems to be quite doubtful, if not an outright Freudian slip, since the only passage in some versions of the “Dulles Plan” that could be interpreted in that way is a vague mention of certain “officials” with their “bureaucratic despotism” and “flourishing of bribery and lack of principle.”<sup>10</sup> In any event, the official ban of the “Dulles Plan” seems to be quite symptomatic, in terms of scope at least, of its receptive contexts in contemporary Russia. I will return to this topic later.

Generally speaking, the text of the “Dulles Plan” does not include any ideas that could be regarded as exclusively novel or as original in the history of modern conspiratorial thinking. It narrates a plan for the moral and social corruption of the Soviet Union, allegedly formulated in the mid-1940s by the American diplomat, lawyer, and the first civilian director of the CIA, Allen Dulles (1893–1969). According to the text, the secret postwar politics of the U.S. towards the Soviet Union was to concentrate on disseminating “false values,” the “vulgarization of national morality,” “weeding out all social significance from art and literature,” making public administration chaotic and confused, the promotion of “the basest feelings,” of drunkenness and drug addiction, nationalism, and ethnic hatred.

In fact, however, the text had no relation to American Cold War politics towards the USSR. The “Dulles Plan” was publicized for the first time in 1993, in two slightly different versions and was compiled from the novel *Vechnyi Zov* (*Eternal Call*, 1971–76) by Soviet writer Anatolii Ivanov (1928–1999), a prominent member of the Brezhnev period’s literary establishment. Ivanov was the editor-in-chief (as of 1972) of the nationalistically oriented literary journal *Molodaia gvardiia* (the *Young Guard*), a member of the board of the Union of Soviet Writers, and even a member the USSR’s Supreme Soviet between 1984–89. In 1984, Ivanov, whose books sold more than 30 million copies and appeared in screen-adapted versions produced by various Soviet studios, was awarded the honorary title of a “hero of socialist labor,” one of the most prestigious awards in the USSR. In short, Ivanov’s literary career, for a man who had been born to an ordinary peasant family in eastern Kazakhstan, must be considered a model social paragon of the late Soviet period. Meanwhile, in the 1970s and 1980s he was

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9 Cf. “Reshenie Asbestovskogo gorodskogo suda Sverdlovskoy oblasti po delu № 2-414/2015”

10 Hereafter I quote the translation of the Russian original of the “Dulles Plan” by Eliot Borenstein (cf. 2019: 90–91). However, Borenstein proceeded from an incomplete version of the text, so in some cases I quote my own translation of its parts.

one of the informal leaders of the ‘Russophile’ or ‘national-conservative’ wing of Soviet writers.

Leaving to one side the details of Ivanov’s literary biography and political views, I will focus on those episodes from his novel that were later used by the compiler(s) of the “Dulles Plan.” The ideas, which were then ascribed to the director of the CIA, are here expressed by the most evil character of the book, Arnold Lakhnovskii. The reader learns about him for the first time in the prologue, in which he appears as an investigator from the Tomsk gendarmerie department (the events take place in 1908, and Lakhnovskii is about 35 years old) pursuing revolutionaries and forcing one of them, Petr Polipov, to become a traitor. Lakhnovskii then disappears from the scene for a long time, and we get to know about his life at the time of and following the October Revolution only in the second volume of the novel. Here, the setting is quite different with the year 1943 passing and Lakhnovskii, now an SS officer, in command of the collaborationist “People’s Liberation Army” that fights against the Soviet forces. Ivanov, however, is now eager to tell his readers more about the biography of the vicious character. It appears that “before the end of the civil war in Siberia” Lakhnovskii “moved to Moscow where he took part immediately in the activities of Trotskyite groups.”<sup>11</sup> The Trotskyites in the novel are portrayed according to the Stalinist political tradition and propaganda; however, as we will see, that is not the only meaning of imaginary Trotskyism for the writer. At any rate, as a Trotskyite, Lakhnovskii is mostly engaged in what was known as “wrecking” or “sabotage” (*vreditel’stvo*). In 1922, he establishes “sabotage groups” in Donbass; after that, he returns to Moscow and works at Trotsky’s office. At the same time, however, he soon becomes an agent of the German intelligence and continues to spy after the fall of Trotsky. In 1941, Lakhnovskii joins the Nazis and later becomes the founder and chief commander of the “People’s Liberation Army.” It is in some village in the territory occupied by the Germans that he relates a Trotskyite plan for the post-war moral corruption of the Soviet Union and “the demise of the last unbroken nation on Earth” to an old acquaintance of his, Petr Polipov.

I have already mentioned that Ivanov, on the whole, follows the official Stalinist historical tradition and interprets the events of the 1930s in terms of a “Trotskyite conspiracy,” the latter being responsible not only for the USSR’s problems of social and economic development, but even for the “extremes” of Stalinist repression:

Due to Lakhnovskii and people like him, the Trotskyite underground penetrated most of

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11 Ivanov 1981: 423.

the big cities of the country and many parts of the gigantic state machinery including the army. The Trotskyites were still active, they wrecked and perverted various good deeds and undertakings.<sup>12</sup>

At first glance, the aims of the underground seem to correspond with the principal ideas promoted by Stalinist propaganda. However, the very episode of the novel that was used for the fabrication of the “Dulles Plan” refers to more ambitious plans by Lakhnovskii and his brothers-in-arms. Their purpose, as it appears, is not only to restore capitalism in Russia, but also to subordinate the Soviet people to some mysterious forces.

Before discussing this passage’s subtexts and possible meanings, I would first like to briefly examine the history of the “Dulles Plan” conspiracy theory and the public figures involved in its dissemination. Although the history of the forgery has been repeatedly discussed by Russian journalists, the only academic publication that deals with it, that I am aware of, is an article by Serghei Golunov and Vera Smirnova.<sup>13</sup> They argue that the passage from the novel by Ivanov was initially ascribed to Allen Dulles in the pamphlet *Kniaz’ T’mu: Dva Goda v Kremle (The Prince of Darkness: Two Years in Kremlin)* (1992) by the Ukrainian poet and member of the CPSU Central Committee between 1990–91 Boris Oleinik (Oliinyk). However, this statement is not correct. The text by Oleinik was published in two different editions between 1992–94,<sup>14</sup> and the full version of the “Dulles Plan” was included only in the second one. Furthermore, the first publications of the passage from *Vechnyi Zov* attributed to Dulles appeared in the spring of 1992 in a number of pro-communist Russian newspapers. Here the “Dulles Plan” was included in a set of partly falsified and partly distorted “statements by the enemies of Russia” (apart from Dulles, the list included Napoleon, Goebbels, John F. Kennedy, and James Baker). The first set of these “fake quotations” known to me was published in 1992 in St. Petersburg in the pro-communist newspaper *Narodnaia pravda* (the *People’s Truth*) under the title “Otkro-

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12 Ibid.: 435. «Благодаря деятельности таких, как Лахновский, троцкистское подполье было организовано в большинстве крупнейших городов страны, во многих ячейках гигантского государственного организма, включая и армию. Оно помаленьку действовало, вредило, занималось тем, что доводило до абсурда, до своей противоположности различные добрые дела и начинания».

13 Golunov/Smirnova 2015.

14 The first edition was published three times (Oleinik 1992, 1993a and 1994). The second was published in 1993 in two journals (*Roman-gazeta*, No 3, and *Molodaia gvardiia*, No 7; see Oleinik 1993b) and separately as Oleinik 1993c.

veniiia zakhvatchikov” (“Revelations by Invaders”).<sup>15</sup> Later that same year, the text was republished by a number of other newspapers.

However, the pamphlet by Oleinik addressed Mikhail Gorbachev directly and does indeed seem to boost the “Dulles Plan” as a separate conspiratorial narrative. After reciting the passage from *Vechnyi Zov*, Oleinik writes:

You should recall this, Mikhail Sergeevich! The words are by Dulles himself, and he pronounced them even in 1945 when he was dealing with the postwar American doctrine against the USSR. Now, let’s look around—haven’t we made a reality of the dream by the American strategist, haven’t we realized his program? And you are still living in your irrational world (or pretending to live), you still argue that the Perestroika is your invention. But even [James] Baker has clearly announced that “we have spent trillions and trillions of dollars over the last 40 years in winning the Cold War against the USSR,” that is, following the Dulles’ program!<sup>16</sup>

Another publication that contributed to the popularity of the *Dulles Plan* was the article *Bitva za Rossiyu (The Battle for Russia)*<sup>17</sup> by Ioann Snychev (1927–1995), the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg, and one of the leaders of the Russian nationalist movement in the early 1990s. It was published on February 20, 1993, in the newspaper *Sovetskaia Rossiia* (the *Soviet Russia*) and included a historical discussion of Russia’s struggle against its imaginary enemies since the eleventh century and up until the present day. After paying a great deal of attention to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (with the remark that “the *Protocols* may or may not be authentic, but the eighty years that have passed since their appearance give us ample material for reflection” and “the world history ... has followed the

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15 Inozemtsev 1992.

16 Oleinik 1993b: 38. «Неужели не вспомнили, Михаил Сергеевич?! Да это же Даллес, да-да, тот самый, который сказал это еще в 1945 году, разрабатывая план реализации американской послевоенной доктрины против СССР. А теперь оглянитесь окрест: не правда ли – почти один к одному мы с Вами наконец исполнили заветную мечту американского стратега, то есть реализовали его программу? А Вы еще и до сих пор, пребывая (или, скорее, прикидываясь, что пребываете) в иррациональном мире, доказываете, что “перестройка” – Ваше изобретение! Когда даже Бейкер черным по белому заявил: “Мы истратили триллионы долларов за последние сорок лет, чтобы одержать победу в “холодной войне” против СССР”, то есть реализовать программу того же Даллеса!»). The quotation from James Baker also comes from the *Revelations by Invaders*.

17 Snychev 1993.

plan laid forth in the *Protocols* to a surprising degree”<sup>18</sup>), Ioann finally presented the text of the “Dulles Plan.”

The same ideas that link the “Dulles Plan” to imaginary “Zionist forces” were expressed by Oleinik in his publication in *Molodaia gvardiia*. Ironically, Ivanov still worked as the editor in chief of the journal, so he was obviously aware of this unusual use of this literary piece by Oleinik and other supporters of the “Dulles Plan” conspiracy theory. While referring to the Perestroika as a part of the “Dulles Plan,” Oleinik did mention its original source however. In a footnote he wrote:

As we got to know, these ominous words were included in the second volume of the novel *Vechnyi zov* by Anatolii Ivanov ... For more than a decade, however, they were not authorized by the censorship under Kremlin-Zionist control. For the first time, the author managed to publish the passage in the fourth volume of his collected works in 1981. However, neither the high and mighty nor our celebrated ideologists, neither literary critics nor intellectuals [intelligentsia], in short, nobody except ordinary readers paid attention to this warning about the plans by Zionist forces for our country and our people—plans that have already become real practice. Today, the results are obvious.<sup>19</sup>

I am not able to claim how accurate Oleinik was when he spoke about the censorship that had not allowed the publication of the full text of Lakhnovskii’s confessions. However, a close analysis of this passage certainly reveals its three dif-

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18 «Подлинны “Протоколы” или нет, но восемьдесят лет, прошедших после их опубликования, дают обильный материал для размышления, ибо мировая история, словно повинувшись приказу невидимого диктатора, покорно прокладывает свое прихотливое русло в удивительном, детальном соответствии с планом, изложенным на их страницах».

19 Oleinik 1993b: 38. «Эти зловещие слова писатель Анатолий Иванов, как нам стало известно, включил в текст 2-й книги романа “Вечный зов”, опубликованной в 1970 году. Но в течение более 10 лет эти слова выбрасывались цензурой, находящейся под кремлевско-сионистским контролем, из всех изданий. Впервые автору удалось их опубликовать в 4-м томе собрания сочинений, вышедшего в 1981 году. Однако ни власть имущие в СССР, ни прославленные наши идеологи, ни литературные критики, ни интеллигенция – словом, никто, кроме рядовых читателей, не обратил внимания на это предупреждение писателя о намерениях сионистских сил в отношении нашей страны, нашего народа, намерениях, давно уже превратившихся в активную практику. Результаты этой практики ныне налицо».

ferent versions, presented subsequently in the first journal publication of the novel (1976), in its separate edition (1977), and in its final version included in Ivanov's collected works (published in five volumes in 1981). The second and the third redactions included more radical additions that could be interpreted as a nationalistic criticism of culture and society of the late Soviet decades. For that reason, it might have been subject to certain censorship corrections. More important, though, is what Ivanov himself wanted to tell his readers when he was writing his "ominous warning."

The most visible example, even though it still requires some competence in corresponding "cultural encoding," is the passage's anti-Semitic subtext. For members and supporters of the so-called "Russophile" (or "national-conservative") party in the late Soviet literary establishment, the label of Trotskyism (as well as Zionism) was a common euphemism for Jewishness and Judaism and, in this context, a part of conventional "language of struggle," to use the formulation of Nikolai Mitrokhin,<sup>20</sup> against imaginary Jewish (or Judeo-Masonic) conspiracy. It is possible that Russian nationalists of the late 1970s and 1980s see the passage from the novel as a kind of manifest of "legal anti-Semitism," so to speak, a short adaptation of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* for a general but still "competent" reader. It was no accident, of course, that Ioann Snychev discussed the *Protocols* and their predictions "coming true" before introducing the "Dulles Plan" to his readers.

One more subtext of the confessions by Lakhnovskii is related to polemics between, roughly speaking, the Russophiles and the Westernized among Soviet intellectuals, writers, and artists of the 1960s–1980s. The mentioning of arts and literature lacking social significance and proclaiming "the basest of human feelings" as well as of the "cult of sex, violence, sadism and betrayal, in a word, immorality" promoted by the "so called creators" clearly refers to those debates that were recently analyzed by a number of scholars dealing with nationalistic trends in late Soviet literature and culture (e.g., Yitzhak M. Brudny, Nikolai Mitrokhin).<sup>21</sup>

This subtext or context, however, can be extended to political issues more broadly. Both the communist elite and the Soviet propaganda of the 1970s and 1980s paid a lot of attention to the imaginary moral degradation of the younger generations, which was allegedly induced by Western influences generally and by American popular culture in particular. This propagandistic trend perhaps accounts for ascribing the authorship of the imaginary conspiracy to the American

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20 Mitrokhin 2003: 535.

21 Brudny 1998; Mitrokhin 2003.

intelligence agency. From this perspective, Allen Dulles was a perfect candidate for the position of chief conspirator, being generally considered to be a somewhat mysterious and suspect figure of the Cold War global political scene, the “king of spies,” both in Russia and the U.S.<sup>22</sup> He was also well known enough for the Russian audience, due to the enormous popularity of the Soviet television series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (produced in 1973 by the Maxim Gorky studio, based on Iulian Semenov’s novel) in which a Russian spy operating in Germany in 1945 is ordered to collect information about secret negotiations (known as the *Operation Sunrise*) between representatives of the German Military Command and the Western Allies coordinated by Dulles. As James von Geldern remarks, “Semenov ... was retelling old Cold War myths of American treachery in *Seventeen Moments*. Yet he also managed to portray Nazi leaders with a sympathy unknown to Soviet viewers, and to use Nazi Germany to offer a sly critique of Soviet society.”<sup>23</sup>

The late Soviet propagandist obsession with moral purity and dangers is obviously related to general politicization of moral reasoning in the USSR since the early years of the Khrushchev period. It is not easy to decide on the extent to which both Soviet society and its leaders believed in the twenty-year program of building communism, which had been proclaimed at the Twenty-Second CPSU Congress, but the idea that the “moral standards” of the average Soviet person standing on the threshold of communist society should be transformed met with a certain amount of support from the liberal intelligentsia. In this context, the notorious “Moral Code of the Builder of Communism” included in the Third CPSU program was taken quite seriously by many, more seriously perhaps since it was the only part of the broader program oriented towards the formation of a new communist morality. In 1959, “the first scientific conference on aspects of Marxist-Leninist ethics” was held in Leningrad, and departments of ethics and aesthetics were set up in Moscow and Leningrad state universities a year later. In 1961, the first university textbook and the first reader on Marxist ethics were published. There is a strong analogy between this new moral culture and journalistic campaigns of the late 1920s against *meshchanstvo* and the “petty bourgeoisie.”

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22 Symptomatically enough, the American journalist David Talbot has recently published a book in which he accuses Dulles of manipulating and subverting American presidents and of being involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy – cf. Talbot 2015.

23 Geldern (n. d.).

It is possible to explain the new politics of morality taking into consideration a number of reasons including social and demographic changes (the rapid growth of the urban population in particular) as well as ideological expectations of the communist utopia. One might ask, however, what moral or ethical norms and standards were claimed to be “positive” and “negative,” appropriate or inappropriate for the “builders of communism.” Although the topic, of course, deserves a longer discussion, I would suggest that the debates did not result in any consistent model of ethics or moral reasoning. It is equally important that actual relations between moral habitus or moral practices and official moral ideologies, as well as moral identities, in late Soviet culture were quite complex and not necessarily consistent at all. Here I would return to the book by Alexei Yurchak in which he introduces the principle of performative shift as informing the logic of late Soviet ideological production. Still, moral meanings were produced and reproduced there, albeit in a more complicated way. If we look back at the “Dulles Plan,” we might assume that “immorality” and “false values” here generally refer to individualistic and consumerist trends of everyday social life. Perhaps this is the key to understanding the continued popularity of this conspiratorial narrative. Ivanov obviously intended to criticize the current state of affairs in the USSR in the 1970s, and explained what he thought to be the moral degradation of contemporary Soviet society in terms of a Trotskyite or Zionist or Jewish conspiracy. His narrative also appeared to be effective and adaptable in a much wider context as a tool for what can be called social self-description or even self-criticism related to the social changes of both the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. In arguing this, I mean that the reasons behind the fabrication of the “Dulles Plan” might be explained not only in terms of “Cold War mythology” or “emotional adaptability” of the text by Ivanov, but also as related to continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet society. The *Dulles Plan*, then, seems to be a kind of self-representation of a society that witnesses suspended and authoritarian modernization, as well as the relatively rapid growth of consumerist culture.

Let me return, in conclusion, to the post-Soviet history of the “Dulles Plan” conspiracy theory. We have already seen that it was initially disseminated by the “anti-liberal” opposition of the early 1990s, which comprised both secular communists and religious nationalists. Quite soon thereafter, however, the narrative became perhaps the most popular “indigenous” post-Soviet conspiracy theory and penetrated many different political, religious, and ideological communities in Russia. Like many other conspiratorial narratives, the “Dulles Plan” has not lost its popularity in the aftermath of the disclosure of its actual sources that have been made known by journalists since the late 1990s. At present, its supporters discuss either Ivanov’s prophetic gift that allowed him, somehow mystically, to



learn about the intentions of Dulles or his contacts with certain KGB officers that shared their knowledge of the CIA's secret plans with him. The variety of post-Soviet social, cultural, and economic phenomena discussed in terms of the "Dulles Plan" is really broad, from Scientology and juvenile justice to urban graffiti. Both the "Dulles Plan's" huge popularity in present day Russia and ambivalent reception given to it by Putinist officials (bearing the legal ban of 2015 in mind) seem to prove its effectiveness as a tool of social self-description or, in terms of psychoanalytic anthropology, projective inversion. A popular meme that could be found on the Russian Internet presents a black frame that reads as follows: "The 'Dulles Plan'—does not exist, but is still effective."<sup>24</sup> Anybody who cares to can upload a picture of his or her own to the frame, informing potential viewers of particular aspects of everyday life that should be interpreted in relation to the imaginary American conspiracy. To my mind, this meme presents the clearest idea of how this and other conspiracy theories work in contemporary post-Soviet societies and beyond.

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24 «План Даллеса: не существует, но работает».

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## Abstract

This chapter deals with present day conspiratorial discourse in Russia, which could perhaps be discussed in terms of the universal symbolic language of the post-Soviet collective imagination. That does not necessarily mean that most Russians today take conspiracy theories seriously or that they base their everyday behavior on social paranoia. Rather, this “language of suspicion” appears to be the most adaptable set of memes and meanings that link people to each other and provide them with collective identities. Still, it is necessary to understand the messages that are being encoded by the symbolic language of moral panics and conspiracy theories related to the “imaginary West” in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian society. These questions can be at least partly answered by an analysis of the so-called “Dulles Plan for Russia,” a conspiratorial forgery that has been widely publicized in Russia since 1992. This chapter focuses on its history, ideological contexts, and popular reception in present day Russia.

# Conspiracy Theory and Neoconservative PR Strategies in the 2000–2010s: The Case of Aleksandr Prokhanov

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Anna Razuvalova\*

## Keywords

Aleksandr Prokhanov; conspiracy theory; neoconservative community; PR strategies

Aleksandr Prokhanov (born 1938) has written a number of novels since the first half of the 1990s that offer a conspiracist interpretation of political life in post-Soviet Russia. In *Poslednii soldat imperii* (*The Empire's Last Soldier*, 1993), republished in 2007 as *Gibel' krasnykh bogov* (*The Death of the Red Gods*), the 1991 Soviet coup d'état attempt and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR, were presented as the result of a major operation conducted by Western intelligence services and a Soviet intelligentsia who shared Western values. In *Gospodin Geksogen* (*Mr. Hexogen*, 2001), a series of apartment bombings in Moscow in 1999 and the subsequent Chosen One's rise to power were regarded as the result of KGB-planned actions. In *Politolog* (*The Political Scientist*, 2005), the death of children during the Beslan school siege and parliamentary election results also appeared to be steps taken by a security force's secret operation aimed at establishing "biological fascism" in Russia. In *Virtuoz* (*The Virtuoso*, 2009), a power struggle between the national spiritual leader Dolgoletov (Vladimir Putin) and President Lampadnikov (Dmitrii Medvedev) was introduced as a network of sophisticated conspiracy intrigues. *Vremia zolotoe* (*The Golden Times*, 2013) showed how mass protests at Bolotnaia Square and the threat of the

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“Orange Revolution” were neutralized with the help of a carefully designed secret operation. And, finally, in *Krym (Crimea, 2014)*, the protagonist’s unintentional participation in conspiracy was interpreted as a grievous sin that must be atoned for.

Prokhanov is not only an author of conspiracy fiction. As the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Zavtra (Tomorrow)*, he has also written a number of articles primarily discussing conspiracy theories. In many of these works, he criticizes political decisions taken by Russian authorities, although his accusatory rhetoric has become more moderate in the aftermath of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Interestingly, his critical approach did not prevent him from becoming a sought-after media personality. Prokhanov is a frequent guest on various talk shows. In 2012, a documentary about him, *Soldat imperii (A Soldier of the Empire, 4 episodes)* was made by the state-owned Russian television channel *Russia-1*. That same year he headed an influential conservative think-tank by the name of “Izborskii klub” (Izborsk Club). Prokhanov is a very informed person due to his long-standing connections to Russia’s political elites, security services, and military forces. In the past few years, he has positioned himself not only as an advocate of ultra-conservative views, but also as a figure whose beliefs and writings have a real impact on some of the representatives of the Russian ruling elite. In an interview with Aleksandr Dugin, the writer mentioned his private conversation with the President of Russia. Prokhanov underlined—and his remark is of a primary interest to my chapter—his intention to influence the Russian leader’s worldview.

It seems to me that Putin feels his mission. I had a private conversation with him a few weeks ago. I told him about himself, the way I see him and understand him, by means of mysterious Russian codes that are awakening in him. He listened to me with interest, attention, and understanding.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes Prokhanov’s inclination to conspiracy theories is interpreted fairly broadly: for instance, Lev Danilkin examines the writer’s conspiracy thinking in relation to the “sacral topography” of his novels and publications.<sup>2</sup> However, I

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1 «Мне кажется, что Путин чувствует свою миссию. У меня несколько недель назад была с ним личная встреча, и я рассказывал ему о нем самом, так, как я его вижу и понимаю через таинственные русские коды, которые в нем просыпаются. Он слушал это все с интересом, вниманием и пониманием». — “Chetvertaia politicheskaiia teoriia” 2017.

2 Cf. Danilkin 2007: 85–86.

will examine Prokhanov as a conspiracist in the strict sense, implying the use of conspiracy explanatory models in public discussions or in political analysis. Prokhanov has earned a reputation as a conspiracy theory supporter thanks to his novels *Poslednii soldat imperii* and *Gospodin Geksogen*, which have been generally perceived by scholars as a manifestation of post-Soviet conspiracy thinking. It is worth taking into account that conspiracy theory in these novels came from the protest moods of the 1990s. At that time, conspiracy models were used mainly by politically marginalized groups that did not have any access to outlets of real power. Their interpretation of the decade's major developments (from privatization to the shelling of the Russian "White House" in October 1993, from the confrontation of media corporations to military operations in Chechnya) sharply challenged an official opinion and delegitimized Russian liberal elites who had come to power, supposedly, as a result of long-term subversive activities and conspiracies. In response to this criticism, the authorities and liberal politicians declared conspiracy theorists to be social and political losers unable to put forward any satisfactory (that is rational) arguments.

Prokhanov's novels are rightly regarded as an attempt to articulate "the post-Soviet unconscious" and to express an experience of "mass-reproducible trauma."<sup>3</sup> *Poslednii soldat imperii* and *Gospodin Geksogen* are examples of the creation of "a new master narrative of social suffering"<sup>4</sup> and they can therefore, be considered from the perspective of the construction of collective trauma through the implanting of "traumatic" meanings into interpretations of destructive social processes and events. Economic, political, social, and cultural causes that led to the collapse of the USSR were thus reduced by the writer to a single cause: the use of conspiracy technologies (from brainwashing to magical practices) by geopolitical enemies. Mastery over these weapons was still attributed solely to an enemy, while the novel's protagonist was presented as totally defenseless and vulnerable to them. Issues fundamental to collective identity, such as control, governance, guilt, and responsibility, were discussed in these novels within a conspiracy discourse in which the line between the victim and the culprit was sometimes extremely vague. This resulted in the fetishization of painful experience and in the persistent recurrence of the latter in different types of discourse. This is what Prokhanov has been engaged in for many years, including in his late novels, journalism, and public appearances<sup>5</sup>—he has been creating an atmo-

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3 Ryklin 2003: 288.

4 Alexander 2003: 97.

5 Motifs of penetration into the brain and the body, fear of loss of (self-)control—the infernal images of these two novels were a cultural representation of morbid experienc-

sphere of anxiety and calling for the utmost vigilance against faceless, cunning, and ubiquitous enemies.

Despite Prokhanov's more recent novels seem to be repeating previous conspiratorial ideas and metaphors (for instance, fear of enemy invasion, the potential loss of control, self-sacrifice, and a determination to sacrifice other people), they are certainly being written within changed cultural and political circumstances. The novels concern the conservative turn in Russia in the 2000s–2010s that directly affected neoconservative circles. It is well known that the patriotic milieu, represented by Prokhanov, was skeptical of Vladimir Putin at first. When Putin required a new image and new PR strategies in the first years of his presidency they could not offer him anything because the patriotic opposition, as Aleksandr Dugin put it, “was exhausted by the years of marginalization and by the government pressure.”<sup>6</sup> However, by the middle of the 2000s, the patriots' state of mind and their attitude towards Putin had changed, so Prokhanov might have felt the possibility to influence the Russian authorities' rhetoric in order to enlighten them, and to offer them new self-identification models. Such an approach is characteristic of the post-Soviet neoconservative community that has existed and developed, in Maria Engström's words, as a “metapolitical intellectual movement ... at the junction of art, literary, philosophy, and politics.”<sup>7</sup> Engström supposes that these metapolitical communities consider culture to be a political instrument and that they try “to influence public opinion in order to establish the dominance of pro-conservative political power and/or to introduce ‘the new order.’”<sup>8</sup> By creating “a new mythology of the empire,” they have been primarily solving social mobilization tasks, which is why their texts “do not represent some political program, but rather resemble futurist manifestos and pamphlets.”<sup>9</sup> Prokhanov's books, written after 2005, exemplify these intentions and strategies vividly. His novels *Virtuoz*, *Vremia zolotoe*, and *Krym* increasingly resemble literary and ideological schemes with the articulated enlightenment-

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es of abrupt and unexpected social changes, but at the same time the ideology and imagery of Prokhanov's writings paved the way for a contradictory social mythology of “the restoration of order” in the 2000s with Putin. In this respect, his novels might be considered as a rich source of metaphors that are typical of different kinds of conservative political demonology.

6 «Патриотическая оппозиция ... за годы маргинализации и прессинга со стороны власти выдохлась». – Dugin 2012: 13.

7 Engström 2014: 358.

8 Ibid.

9 Engström 2016: 329.

prognostic message addressed both to a wide audience and a particularly important reader—the Russian authorities.<sup>10</sup> These novels’ conspiratorial ideas were formulated by Prokhanov from the perspective of groups sympathizing with a current political course of the Russian authorities and sought to keep their influence. I believe Prokhanov’s novels of the 2000s–2010s are the quintessence of neoconservative “strategies of influence” based, among other matters, on conspiracy theories and appropriate rhetoric devices. In this essay, I will focus on the question of how the writer exploits conspiracy theories as a tool for maintaining traditionalist ideological trends. But first it is worth giving at least a general outline of the contexts and ideas, which have predetermined the writer’s propensity to conspiracy thinking.

### “In the Beginning There Was a Conspiracy...”

The factor that influenced Prokhanov’s conspiracy views was his enthusiasm towards esoteric knowledge. As is known, in the late 1960s he contacted the Iuzhinskii circle in which esoteric concepts were being passionately discussed and occultism was being intensively practiced. Despite the writer’s social background and ideological preferences being different from those of the circle’s members,<sup>11</sup> he appeared to be impressed by a macabre atmosphere of the “occult underground.”<sup>12</sup> Later, he carefully read Dugin’s *Konspirologiia: nauka o zavorakh, tainykh obshchestvakh i okkul’noi voine* (Conspirology: The Science of Conspiracies, Secret Communities, and Occult War, 1993, 2005) which bore ob-

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10 It would be incorrect to say that Prokhanov’s contribution to the expansion of conspiracy rhetoric directly influenced the official ideological discourse; it is doubtful that Russian politicians read his novels and became infected with a virus of “political paranoia.” A mutually beneficial alliance, however, began to form precisely at that time. On the one hand, the contemporary Russian Neo-Conservatism and the political regime that was formed in Putin’s Russia appeared to be quite susceptible to conspiracy rhetoric and adopted some of its devices. On the other hand, conspiracy theories supporters who were not very similar to the agitated “seekers of truth” used the favorable ideological conjuncture for their self-promotion.

11 Cf. Prokhanov 2015.

12 In his *Aleksandr Prokhanov and Post-Soviet Esotericism* Edmund Griffiths (2016) examines thoroughly the writer’s ideology imbued with Gnostic beliefs and with ideas borrowed from Nikolai Fedorov’s *Filosofia obshchego dela* (*The Philosophy of the Common Cause*).

vious marks of the author's contacts with the Evgenii Golovin's "mystical underground." Prokhanov's new conspiracy ideas and style have been largely inspired by Dugin's provocative book. According to Prokhanov, various conspiracies are historically specific versions of an eternal struggle between God and the Devil, or of a *superconspiracy* interpreted in the vein of millennialism.<sup>13</sup> The writer, basically, recognizes the occult nature of conspiracy and views the latter as the manifestation of a "dark side" of being, or, in René Guénon's terms, a form of counter-initiation, that is "a special type of tradition in which ... all the accents are rearranged oppositely."<sup>14</sup> That is why to deny conspiracies and conspiracy theory, in his view, is absurd. It is like denying the existence of evil as such. "[World] history," as Prokhanov put it, "is a history of conspiracies."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, he believes the "classic" conspiracy theories (the international Jewish conspiracy, Masonic conspiracy theories, etc.) need to be updated.<sup>16</sup> Trying to avoid associations with caricature paranoid conspiracists, he describes himself as an artist who tends towards conspiracy thinking and at the same time as a researcher of the mass interest in conspiracy who is exploiting conspiracy theory because it is "very convenient for a text ... Such a flow of events ... All this can be organized only through rather simplified conspiracy metaphors ..."<sup>17</sup> He specified:

Starting with the September 11 attacks and ending with the horrors of Beslan ..., all of these [conspiracy theories] programmed public consciousness in a special way. People tend to think that all the most interesting things are produced by certain secret structures. ... I can be accused of encouraging these conspiracy attitudes that play into the hands of enemies of Russia. I do not claim that the notorious bombings of houses or the submarine disasters were directly executed by security services. ... The bottom line is, the authorities

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13 According to Michael Barkun's classification, "this term refers to conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically. ... At the summit of the conspiratorial hierarchy is a distant but all-powerful evil force manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors" – Barkun 2003: 5–6.

14 «Особый тип традиции, в котором ... все акценты переставлены на противоположные». – Dugin 2005: 28.

15 «Всемирная история – это история заговоров». – "Aleksandr Prokhanov v programme *Shkola zlosloviia*" 2002.

16 Latysheva 2007.

17 «Очень удобна для текста ... Такой поток событий ... Все это может быть организовано только через довольно упрощенные метафоры заговора». – Aleksandr Prokhanov v programme *Shkola zlosloviia*" 2002.



feel the effect of their helplessness before series of catastrophes better than the others and use it in their own interests. ... [E]verything I described is just a reaction to this effect of helplessness.<sup>18</sup>

Being ironical towards the traditional conspiracy rhetoric, however, Prokhanov is well aware of its powerful mobilizing effect. If history, as Dugin alleges, “is ruled by the combination of archetypal schemes, expressed in various ideological forms,”<sup>19</sup> then conspiracy theory, combining political and “basic religious facts,” using the language of symbols and metaphors, gives an opportunity to form some ideological strategies and to appeal primarily to the emotional sphere. Such a view of conspiracy theory refers to both “the paranoid style,” described by Richard J. Hofstadter, and to the link between this phenomenon and political populism (the difference being that Prokhanov simulates the paranoid belief in conspiracies). In his analysis of Hofstadter’s work, Mark Fenster adds that “conspiracy theory is a particularly unstable element in populism,” and “its successful and thorough-going incorporation within a large populist movement would most likely occur in authoritarian or fascist regimes.”<sup>20</sup> To be sure, Prokhanov was familiar with the use of conspiracy theories by totalitarian regimes and tried to exploit this experience in the present-day political situation. He has usually taken inspiration from the conspiracy culture of the Stalin era, borrowing metaphors and rhetoric to excite and to mobilize his audience. He has provided various images of the enemy and has used populist clichés since the early 1990s, when a confrontation between new “corrupt” political elites and the “deprived” Russian people became commonplace in his fiction and journalism. Depending on the political situation of the time, his novels’ political demonology has in-

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18 «Начиная от 11 сентября 2001 года и заканчивая ужасами Беслана ... – все это [теория заговора] по-особому кодирует общественное сознание. Люди начинают постепенно думать, что все самое интересное производится действиями неких закрытых структур. ... Меня могут обвинить в том, что я поощряю эти конспирологические настроения, которые могут сработать на руку врагам российского государства. Я не утверждаю, что пресловутые взрывы домов или гибель подлодок были инспирированы напрямую спецслужбами. ... Главное другое – власть чувствует лучше других эффект своей беспомощности перед серией катастроф и использует его в своих интересах. ... все, описанное мной, – лишь реакция на этот эффект беспомощности». – Prokhanov 2005.

19 «... управляется комбинацией архетипических схем, выраженных в различных идеологических формах». – Dugin 2005: 54.

20 Fenster 2008: 89.

cluded satirical images of manipulated Russian politicians, sinister images of the oligarchs like Berezovskii or Gusinskii, as well as of corrupt KGB officers, political technologists, lying journalists, spoilt representatives of “the creative class,” etc. Obviously, such a demonology has clearly identified Russia’s enemies and appealed to mass resentment. In more recent articles and novels, it has allowed for the simulation of a kind of ridiculous conspiracy panic towards Russia’s ruling elites<sup>21</sup> thereby provoking a mobilizing mood.

As mentioned previously, Prokhanov has been inclined to a very broad understanding of conspiracy. Everything that seems to him to be an activity by “servants of the devil” is treated as a conspiracy to prevent Russia from the implementation of its messianic mission.<sup>22</sup> It is also worth taking into consideration that the USSR’s collapse became a paradigmatic situation of a successful conspiracy for Prokhanov and his like-minded public. This catastrophic development, the writer asserts, occurred as a result of the prolonged use of a so-called “organizational weapon” (*organizacionnoe oruzhie*)<sup>23</sup> against the USSR. In Pro-

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21 Prokhanov has been ready to discover signs of diverse psi-attacks against the current Russian President everywhere. He has often defined any anti-Putin statements and actions as attempts to compromise the President, thereby weakening the Russian state. For instance, the writer interpreted Aleksandr Litvinenko’s death as a “shahid” suicide and a vivid “episode of the psychotronic operation that is being conducted against Putin personally. It aims at exhausting his psyche, deforming his will, inducing him to abandon the third presidential term and to open thereby the way to a ‘liberal revenge’” («...часть психотронной операции, которая проводится против Путина лично. Она имеет целью измотать его психику, деформировать волю, побудить отказаться от Третьего президентского срока, что открывает дорогу “либеральному реваншу”». – Prokhanov 2011: 220). The murder of Anna Politkovskaia was another example of the same psychotronic “explosion.” This crime, from the writer’s point of view, was supposed to have an occult implication, so it was committed on Putin’s birthday, when his psyche was most “exposed to external influences” («открыта для внешних воздействий» – *ibid.*).

22 Cf. “Metafizika russkoi istorii” 2013: 28–29.

23 In the early 1990s, Prokhanov most likely began to use the term “organizational weapon” as a result of the influence of two Soviet scholars, Spartak Nikanorov and Sergei Solntsev, experts in the field of conceptual design of control systems. – cf. Danilkin 2007: 393–95. Nikanorov supposed that it was Solntsev who used the term “organizational weapon” for the first time “to refer to a wide variety of techniques to block a productive activity of organizations. ... The term became popular quickly. The tragedy of the collapse of the Soviet Union was explained as a consequence of the

khanov's interpretation, the notion of the "organizational weapon" implied a wide range of means and methods that influences collective and individual identity—from attacks on the population's psyche to the use of psi-generators, from discrediting the opponent's moral values to sophisticated intelligence service operations. In other words, the "organizational weapon" in his writings has always been an emphatic metaphor for a clandestine subversive activity, which is more dangerous the harder it is to detect. Therefore, Prokhanov insists on developing various skills to defend oneself against the "organizational weapon" and on creating special institutions that would deal with it. Russia, he believes, should master new technologies to influence consciousness and to exploit them in its conspiratorial counter-play and/or within "soft power" strategies as efficiently as its opponents have been doing. Prokhanov's novels of the second half of the 2000s–2010s were written when the post-Soviet "culture of influence"<sup>24</sup> was beginning to take shape rapidly; moreover, they actively contributed to its formation, providing it with flashy metaphors and appropriate rhetorical schemes.

## A Political Scientist as a Hero of Our Time

The novel *Politolog*,<sup>25</sup> which retrospectively might be called a bridge between the protest conspiracy theory of *Poslednii soldat imperii* and the later novels' conservative conspiracy theory, has been usually read as evidence of Prokhanov's complete disappointment in most political actors in the mid-2000s. A

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organizational weapon application" («Для обозначения широкого разнообразия приемов, блокирующих продуктивную деятельность организаций. ... Термин очень быстро стал популярным. Трагедия краха СССР объяснялась как следствие применения против него организационного оружия». – Nikanorov 2011). Some of Nikanorov's ideas, and those of his colleagues, shone through in Prokhanov's novel *600 let posle bitvy* (*Six Hundred Years After the Battle*, 1989). In addition to the language of Soviet analysts-conceptualists, belief in the organizational weapon and psi-effects in Prokhanov's articles and novels refer to popular topics of the post-Soviet culture of the 1990s.

24 «культура воздействия» – Prokhanov 2011: 229.

25 It is symptomatic of this phenomenon that Prokhanov deliberately merged the profession's two designations—"political scientist" and "political technologist." This is probably because their functionality and professional domains were not differentiated clearly in the Russia's political culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

new character—the political technologist, Mikhail Strizhailo, who personified all of the Russian elite’s most repulsive features, replaced the two previous conspiracy novels’ protagonist, an intelligence officer and a mystic, Belosel’tsev. The writer attributed to him some features of well-known political technologists, primarily Stanislav Belkovskii and, to a lesser extent, Gleb Pavlovskii. Prokhanov’s interest in political technologists, however, could also be predetermined by deeply personal motives. As Stanislav Belkovskii wittily remarked, Prokhanov has always been not so much a writer as a PR man:

The best job for him would have been Leonid Il’ich Brezhnev’s media spokesman in the late 1970s and early 1980s because the young, still very handsome Prokhanov would have looked great at Kremlin briefings, talking about Leonid Il’ich’s good firm handshake, and he could have changed the Secretary General’s image, both within the country and abroad. But then again there was no such position as media spokesman at the time, so Prokhanov became a writer.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, Prokhanov’s preoccupation with political activity and his ambition to be at the center of public events, maintaining contacts with the ruling elite expressed his aspiration, inherited from the late Soviet period, firstly to be integrated into a stable management system and secondly to affect public attitudes and to construct a new worldview. It is noteworthy that Prokhanov often describes his activities as a writer, a public figure, and an editor by comparing himself with a gardener, a collector, or a design engineer.<sup>27</sup> Put differently, his ambitions have never been limited to creating a new literary (fictional) world, but also extended to the creation of a social reality.

The appearance of a new protagonist also highlighted Prokhanov’s susceptibility to political tendencies that emerged in the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s. In fact, the role played by political technologies in Russia’s public life at that time was enormous. An empirical study of this phenomenon was provided by Andrew Wilson who believed that the intensive use of political technologies

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26 «Идеальное для него поприще было бы пресс-секретарь Брежнева Леонида Ильича в конце 70-х–начале 80-х годов прошлого века, потому что тогда Проханов, молодой, еще очень красивый, прекрасно смотрелся бы на кремлевских брифингах, рассказывая о крепком рукопожатии Леонида Ильича и мог бы несколько изменить имидж генсека и внутри страны, и за ее пределами. Но тогда такой должности не было, пресс-секретарь, поэтому Проханов ушел в литературу». – Bez durakov 2014.

27 Cf. Prokhanov 1997.

in post-Soviet Russia, based on media manipulations, an “administrative resource,” dirty tricks, and “active measures” developed by both tsarist Okhrana and by Soviet secret services, had given rise to virtual politics. This created a quasi-democratic facade (“faking democracy”) by eliminating genuine democratic procedures: “Politics is ‘virtual’ or ‘theatrical’ in the sense that so many aspects of public performance are purely epiphenomenal or instrumental, existing only for effect or to disguise the real substance of ‘inner politics.’”<sup>28</sup>

Prokhanov, like other Russian writers of the 2000s (Viktor Pelevin being chief among them), shared the widespread opinion that Russia’s politics had a virtual nature. However, “democracy” in Wilson’s formula of “faking democracy,” seemed to cause a lot more irritation in the writer. From his perspective, it was precisely electoral democracy that could provoke the rapid development of a market for political technologies. Shifting the focus to a public space, democracy requires additional evidence of the authorities’ legitimacy (for example, during honest elections) and thereby stimulates virtual political techniques that imitate notorious “democratic procedures.” Being an ardent supporter of a strong state power, and an equally zealous opponent of “democratic procedures ... and the disgusting nonsense of constitutional order,”<sup>29</sup> the writer insists on the exact opposite: authority is legitimate when it is able to hear a mystic “call of history” and to direct the nation to the fulfillment of its mission. Political technologists, who professionally create simulacra, are only able to offer a virtual political and ideological project. In Prokhanov’s eyes, political technologists personify all the main defects of Russia’s ruling elites, who feel comfortable within fictional political realities and postpone the launching of a new modernization project. The latter would require the willingness to use violence on the part of the authorities and a high level of engagement and sacrificial efforts by the Russian people.

As a matter of fact, Prokhanov identifies political technologies by the various methods of influence on consciousness and mind control, specifically those related to the sphere of conspiracy. In a sense, he follows the popular opinion by attributing many of the capabilities of an all-powerful manipulator, and a creator of conspiracy intrigues, to a political technologist. It would seem that there is every reason to closely associate the methods of constructing conspiracies and the use of political technologies: they are both created behind the scenes and are based on manipulation and they both claim to control public attitudes and behavior (following the same arguments, Samuil Markov called political technologists

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28 Wilson 2005: 47.

29 «... демократических процедур, ... и бреда отвратительного конституционного» – “Desiat’ vekov russkoi demokratii” 2006.

the “heroes of political behind-the-scenes”).<sup>30</sup> However, in response to the demonization of political technologists, Pavlovskii has argued that the keen interest in the manipulators themselves merely demonstrates a drive to be manipulated and to be involved in conspiracy.<sup>31</sup> Prokhanov has expressed this neurotic tendency in his novel once again. The identification of political technologies with methods of influence on consciousness was also rooted in his longtime interest in social management issues combined with the broad interpretation of mind control practices in the vein of New Age culture.

Shifting the focus from the unlucky conspirator to the creator of sophisticated behind-the-scenes intrigues, Prokhanov nevertheless retained the plot scheme of *Poslednii soldat imperii* and of *Gospodin Geksogen*: the protagonist, who considered himself as a kind of Demiurge and claimed to solve the most complex intellectual and creative tasks, suddenly realizes that he has ended up as a puppet, obediently playing a role in another, much more sinister conspiracy. Having observed the death of the children in Beslan, Strizhailo eventually realized that this bloody sacrifice had been designed to shock Russian society and, in so doing, to prepare it for the establishment of a regime of biological fascism. He tried to expose the conspiracy, but he failed. His death, on the one hand, was equated by the author with a ransom sacrifice, and on the other, he argued that any conspiracy always “devours its children.” *Politolog*, like Prokhanov’s previous conspiracy writings, can again be called a symptom that shows a desperate attempt to regain control over the course of events, as well as the failure of these attempts. Nevertheless, the subsequent novels do demonstrate a partial success in these attempts.

### ***Virtuoz* and *Vremia zolotoe*: Conspiracy and Political Technologies vs. the “Call of History”**

Prokhanov continued to discuss the use of political technologies and conspiratorial intrigues in his subsequent two novels, in which the eccentric and narcissistic postmodernist Strizhailo, brought up in the atmosphere of the late 1990s, gives way to the tragic characters of Balaev (*Virtuoz*) and Beketov (*Vremia zolotoe*). Both protagonists were portrayed, in typical fashion, as the real power behind the throne. These characters, as the writer argued later, were inspired by

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30 «геро[и] политического закулисья» – Markov 2005: 9.

31 Quoted in Izmailov and Gamalov 2001.

contacts with the Deputy Chief of the Russian presidential administration Vladimir Surkov,<sup>32</sup> whom Prokhanov held in high regard:

He is such a clairvoyant ... he understands the structure of society and he constructs it according to his own patterns. To be sure, this is a feature of a major political strategist. Although the society he had been constructing is deeply hostile and alien to me, but that does not prevent me ... from praising him as a master and as a virtuoso.<sup>33</sup>

The renewed ideology of conspiracy theory in both novels took shape during discussions about Putin's third presidential term. Prokhanov gave unreserved support to Putin's re-election for a third term using all of his eloquence and his criticism to convince Russia's society and the leadership of this option's appropriateness. During the discussion surrounding the issue of the third term, the writer persistently paid attention to Putin's patriotic and statist views and reminded him about a leader's mission, namely about starting a new modernization project in Russia. In fact, at that time, Prokhanov had transformed his conflicting evaluations of Putin's activities into a completed narrative based on the conspiratorial idea about the controllability of Russia's leaders. Since the early 1990s, he has been obsessed by the issues of loss of control and controllability, and the post-Soviet society's vulnerability to external hostile influence. In both *Poslednii soldat imperii* and *Gospodin Geksogen*, he argued that while Russia seemed to be a sovereign state in the 1990s, Gorbachev and Yeltsin were in fact under the control of secret para-Masonic organizations (hence Prokhanov's fears and prophecies about secret societies' plans to turn Russia into the Second Khazaria and to set up a regime of biological fascism). Given the circumstances of Putin's emergence onto the political scene, the writer believed him to be a product manufactured by Berezovskii, the notorious Yeltsin Family,

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32 Marlene Laruelle argues that "Surkov played a key role in structuring a public landscape during Putin's second term and Dmitrii Medvedev's presidency, and in orchestrating many patriotic projects" – Laruelle 2016: 628. "Surkov's worldview," she continues, "largely opposes that of the Izborsky club," and the latter was able to emerge as a unified platform for nationalists "only after Surkov fell from grace" – *ibid.*: 628–29.

33 «У него такое ясновидение, он понимает устройство общества и выстраивает его под свои лекала. Это, конечно, способность такого крупного политического стратега. Хотя общество, которое он выстраивал, оно мне глубоко враждебно и чуждо, что не мешает мне ... высоко его превозносить как такого мастера, как виртуоза». – Prokhanov 2013.

and by political technologists. That is why Prokhanov depicted Putin as a puppet or as a kind of clone: for example, “Putin had never existed before. He was cloned like Dolly the sheep.”<sup>34</sup> Later in *Gospodin Geksogen*, the Chosen One was described as an obscure figure: the conspirators found him to be an obedient and easily manipulated puppet, but the writer stressed this character’s mutability and uncertainty. In 2002, unsatisfied with an inconsistency in the President’s political decisions, Prokhanov called Putin “the genius of emptiness,”<sup>35</sup> who was acting in his patrons’ interests by taking cover behind, in the words of Dugin, “verbal patriotism.”<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, Prokhanov’s depiction of Putin’s political career took on a new twist: after a while the writer asserts that Putin gained strength and began acting against a “world corporation,”<sup>37</sup> i.e., against the secret structures that had brought him to power. For example, from Prokhanov’s point of view, the conspiratorial message to Putin was encrypted in the James Bond movie *Casino Royale* (2006). The writer found a striking similarity between Putin and Daniel Craig, who played the main part, and this circumstance provided a stimulus for the conspiratorial interpretation of *Casino Royale*. According to Prokhanov, *Casino Royale* presented a scenario that the “world corporation” would like to impose on Putin (it was about rejecting the third presidential term in exchange for a high office in a reputable international organization like the United Nations). In order to get rid of their influence and to turn Russia into a strong and independent player in the world political arena Putin, however, came into conflict with “secret para-political centers.”<sup>38</sup> For this reason, as Prokhanov claims, Putin must run for a third term regardless of the constitutional restrictions.

When the government ignored Prokhanov’s calls, the writer, trying to defend his position, depicted the possible tragic consequences of this decision in *Virtuoz*. Russia’s political life during the presidency of Lampadnikov (Dmitrii Medvedev) was presented as a power struggle, threatening the stability of the State. Balaev, the ideologist of a new Russia’s statehood and a “behind-the-scenes Kremlin maestro,”<sup>39</sup> nicknamed “Virtuoso,” is placed at the heart of these intrigues and conspiracies and seems to manage them well. All credit for image-

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34 «Путина раньше не было. Его клонировали, как овцу Долли». – Prokhanov 2011: 28.

35 «гений пустоты» – Prokhanov 2011: 141.

36 Dugin 2012: 11.

37 «мировая корпорация» – Prokhanov 2011: 220.

38 «секретные парapolитические центры» – *ibid.*: 238.

39 «закулисный кремлевский маэстро» – Prokhanov 2009: 6.



making of the former President Dolgoletov (from the reinterpretation of the Kursk submarine disaster to the Munich speech writing) and for constructing a political system, preserving the stability of Russia after Dolgoletov's rejection of the third presidential term, is given to Balaev by the author. But all of the Virtuoso's efforts are destroyed as the pro-Western liberal Lampadnikov, who was brought to presidency just to observe legal formalities, begins plotting against the national spiritual leader Dolgoletov. Lampadnikov's proponents organize a kind of a coup d'état, resulting in liberal elites coming to power. As a political technologist, however, Virtuoso is fully integrated into an existing system of power relations. So, even after having been morally crushed by the triumph of the liberals, he seems ready to serve his new masters.

The fact that political technologies and conspiratorial methods are ineffective when they encounter the mysticism of Russia's history is illustrated in Dolgoletov's life story: over the years, he had distanced himself from the control of the behind-the-scenes circles and had prepared a "development" project, but having been scared of unfavorable predictions, he handed over power to his old friend Lampadnikov. The absurd death of Dolgoletov, the narrator claims, becomes a retribution for trying to refuse his historical mission. Thus, the main novel's storylines are unfolded against the backdrop of multiple conspiracies. In a sense, political technologies and conspiracies are normalized and legitimized as a tool to protect the Russian State from internal and external enemies. This legitimization, however, remains limited. Russian history's mysticism and its inherent sacrificial impulse, in Prokhanov's opinion, can destroy the most intricate conspiracies, given that these are at work only on the political level, and not the spiritual one: "Politics, however, differs from history in that the latter is being created not by technology but by Providence."<sup>40</sup>

In *Vremia zolotoe*, Prokhanov pursued his efforts to rehabilitate political technologies and conspiracies, in a word, the "culture of influence," applied for neutralizing ideological enemies. It is noteworthy that the novel's character Prime Minister Chegodanov (Putin at the end of Medvedev's presidential term), who yearns to regain the presidency, pins all his hopes on an "éminence grise," a political analyst and technologist Beketov, capable, in his opinion, of suppressing the liberal protest on Bolotnaia Square. Being a stalwart supporter of rigid political power, Beketov, like Balaev in *Virtuoz*, is ready to use any method to defend the State. At the same time, like Belosel'tsev in *Poslednii soldat imperii*

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40 «Однако политика отличается от истории тем, что последняя творится не технологиями, а промыслом». – Prokhanov 2009: 15.

and *Gospodin Geksogen*, he is a bearer of “mysterious knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> Creating a secret scenario to counteract liberal unrest, he follows his visions and Orthodox prophecies (the Russian Orthodox Church is presented here as a loyal ally of Russia’s government in protecting the State against a rebellious spirit and dissident elements). For example, his toughest actions towards the opposition leader Gradoboev (Aleksei Naval’nyi) are preceded by a conversation with a monk, Father Filip. The latter likens protestors to demons and refers to the prophecy about the appearance of a young tsar after which Russia will become “invincible.”<sup>42</sup> In this novel, a series of conspiracies developed by Beketov is again interpreted as a countermeasure to neutralize another secret operation aimed at shaking the Russian State’s foundations, but which is disguised as a protest against electoral fraud. This activity is led by all of the same secret para-political centers and the world Jewry that want to discredit Chegodanov, who had freed himself from their influence, and to replace him with Gradoboev. They continue to practice psi-attacks against Russia’s leadership, but now they also use new technologies: the Internet and social networks are presented in the novel as the main tool for mobilizing the liberal community and for discrediting the authorities.<sup>43</sup> *Vremia zolotoe* can be regarded as an eloquent illustration of, in Il’ia Kalinin’s words, “antirevolutionary exorcism,”<sup>44</sup> of the tendency of Russia’s current political elite to stigmatize any spontaneous mass movement as a manipulated one, a potentially destructive one, something that causes chaos and catastrophic revolutionary changes. Prokhanov, however, not only explicates the ruling elite’s deep fears but also shows how these fears, integrated into appropriate discourses by professional political technologists, can be used to form public moods. Beketov claims:

It is necessary to do everything so that the square would be crowded with people. So that the number of new protestors would increase more and more ... We should show to the people the horrible face of rebellion ... It is necessary to compare the Bolotnaia Square to Perestroika, Yeltsin, the Belavezha Accords. Russia is destined to be disintegrated and to be occupied like the USSR. It is necessary to convince people—no matter how abhorrent

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41 «таинственное знание» – Prokhanov 2012: 37.

42 Ibid.: 45.

43 Some ideas of *Vremia zolotoe*, in particular about the Internet’s fundamental importance for starting mass anti-government protests during so-called “revolutions 2.0,” have gained wide currency within the radical conservatives’ environment. – Cf. Cheremnykh and Voskanian 2013: 60–93.

44 Kalinin 2013: 130.

you may appear—that you are the last protector of the State. Your destruction is a destruction of the State.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, the fear of social chaos and of revolution is not just a culturally significant mass emotion for Prokhanov and for his novel's protagonist, but also a tool of political technologies used by Beketov against the opposition.

Interestingly, Prokhanov portrays Beketov once more as a mystic who can decode hidden meanings in Russian history (for a long time Prokhanov considered the detection of mysterious signs and codes to be his main creative task).<sup>46</sup> Beketov has managed to destroy its opponents' conspiracy by using Russia's enemies' methods, so that liberal "demons" fail to reverse the course of events. At the end of the novel, Beketov, who has been subjected to disgrace, goes to a small Russian town to wait for the appearance of the Chosen One from the old royal race.

Thus, the novels in question offer various ideas that are fundamental for Prokhanov's "theory of power" firstly, this involves the confrontation of conspiracy and history; secondly, it concerns the political and religious mission to be implemented, or the chosenness of a leader and the Russian State, and finally it concerns the sacred and mysterious nature of power and the authorities. This "theory of power" is, in fact, a set of authoritarian ideas that discredit the rational (legal) aspects of the management of State affairs and emphasize the allegedly irrational and unfathomable nature of Russian statehood.

Inspired by the annexation of Crimea and guided by his "theory of power," Prokhanov has rushed to showcase a positive scenario of Russia's development in the novel *Kрым*. He once again describes mysterious forces that try to obstruct

45 «Надо делать все, чтобы площадь ломилась от народа. Чтобы на ней появлялись все новые и новые бунтари. ... Надо показывать народу чудовищное лицо бунта. ... Надо сравнивать Болотную площадь с перестройкой, Ельциным, Беловежьем. Россия уготована судьба СССР, распад, оккупация. Надо убеждать людей, что ты, каким бы нелюбимым и ненавистным ни выглядел, являешься последним защитником государства. Твое уничтожение является уничтожением государства». – Prokhanov 2013: 59.

46 Prokhanov never stops portraying his own personality: he endows both novels' characters, who are his *alter ego*, and their opponents with some facts of his own biography and with his own psychological characteristics. For example, Verkhoustin, a key figure in the conspiracy against the Russian authorities (*Kрым*), collected folk songs and participated in writing an open letter "A Word to the People" («Слово к народу») on the eve of the August coup (1991) just like Prokhanov.

Russian history's messianic course, but this time without getting into details about conspiracies. A central figure of the novel, Lemekhov, the Deputy Prime Minister for defense issues and a possible successor to the President, turns out to be involved in the conspiracy against the Russian State and President Labazov personally. Following his political ambitions, Lemekhov does not suspect that he has been manipulated. He believes that he is implementing his own political project to create a new *Victory Party*. But there is a weird philosopher among Lemekhov's proponents, Verkhoustin, who represents a deeply secret intelligence organization *Acorn* (these are allusions to the conflict of two secret "orders," one of which includes pro-Western-oriented KGB officers—they apparently are *Acorn*—and another one which brings together patriotic GRU officers).<sup>47</sup> Verkhoustin is a collective image of a conspirator, many-faced and elusive, like a werewolf. He possesses all means of mind control, including singing folk songs and reading Pushkin's poems aloud. Lemekhov has become the main target of conspirators because he really has been chosen by Russian history to become Russia's next president. So, Verkhoustin and political technologists familiar to him have managed to compromise the protagonist in the eyes of President Labazov, but Lemekhov atones for the sin of political ambitions and for his backroom political tactics. As a result, he is forgiven by the President and, probably, would return to power to participate in the "Great Project" finally initiated by Labazov. The annexation of Crimea is interpreted by Prokhanov as the beginning of this Great Project, which has been launched largely thanks to Lemekhov's spiritual efforts and through Labazov's political will. In contrast to the psychotic experience expressed in *Poslednii soldat imperii* and *Gospodin Geksogen*, Prokhanov asserts that serving the State and, as he puts it, a "Russian miracle" could weaken the potential impact of any underhanded enemy's activities. In this novel, as in *Virtuoz* and *Vremia zolotoe*, there is a heuristic aspect (that is unmasking conspiracy and conspirators) which seems to be subordinated to a performative aspect of conspiracy rhetoric: in *Krym*, it serves primarily to create and to reproduce an image of the mysterious and dangerous enemy, or of the omnipotent Other who constantly threatens Russia. Moreover, taking part in protest is considered by Prokhanov to be evidence of participation in a liberal anti-Russian conspiracy that is headed by world para-political centers, although its participants appear not to realize that they are being manipulated. In this sense, the conservative conspiracy discourse functions in a proven way—it is adapted

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47 In Dugin's *Konspirologiia*, it has been suggested that the "Eurasian" and patriotic GRU are waging war with another secret service, the "Atlantic" and cosmopolitan KGB. Later, Prokhanov developed this idea further in *Gospodin Geksogen*.

to construct the enemy through the projection of our own fears and desires onto them<sup>48</sup> (the fact that the image of liberal opponents is based on psychological projection has been usually emphasized by a symmetrical logic of conspiracy thinking: any conspiracy requires a counter-conspiracy, this involves fighting a strong enemy using the same methods, weapons and strategies as the enemy).

Another function of conspiracy rhetoric in Prokhanov's late novels, especially in *Kрым*, is to maintain and reinforce mass anxiety that, according to the writer, can be the best basis for social mobilization. Such a paranoid persecution of the enemy and their demonization dates back to the conspiracy culture from the time of Stalin and similar cases of conspiracy panics for political purposes (for example, the witch hunt in the USA during the McCarthy era), but given that the conspiracy discourse is considered by the writer to be a weapon in the information wars, the functioning of the latter is defined by the rules of modern media. It turns out that a referent is not necessary for a widely interpreted conspiracy, into which—according to Prokhanov—his political opponents are involved. He claims:

When there are battles, wars—to hell with the truth! ... And what is the truth anyway? I understand what an “information war” is, but I do not understand what “truth” is. “We, journalists, stand solely for truth” ... What nonsense is this? There is no truth in the information space—there is only war.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, conspiracy, still functioning as an effective political tool, turns into a phenomenon of a virtual reality within which it is more important not to prove the existence of real conspiracies, but to manage the various emotional effects on an audience. In this case, however, Prokhanov's previous criticism of political technologists, who have moved political life into a “symbolic space,” no longer appear to be justifiable, given that the writer exploits the very tricks practiced by political technologists.

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48 Cf. Ryklin 2003: 288, 291.

49 «Когда идут сражения, войны—какая на хер правда! ... Да и что такое правда? Я понимаю, что такое “информационная война”, но не понимаю, что такое “правда”. “Мы, журналисты, только правду...” Ну что за хрень! В информационном пространстве нет правды – есть война». – Prokhanov 2016.

## Conclusions

Prokhanov, as we see, remains committed to conspiracy explanatory models and to appropriate metaphors thereof, but he alternates the manner in which he represents them in his works. For example, the grotesque monstrous images from *Poslednii soldat imperii* and *Gospodin Geksogen* are replaced by the pseudo-realistic style of *Krym*, which is supposed to remind the reader about both Russian classical literature of the nineteenth century and novels of socialist realism. The liberal/mondialist conspiracy (the rather obvious anti-Semitic subtext of Prokhanov's novels suggests that he is talking about an international Jewish conspiracy too) was, and remains, the main object of the writer's unmasking efforts; thus, he seems to welcome any ways to use conspiracy theories in order to expose the enemy.

In his novels and political journalism of the 2000s–2010s, Prokhanov has pursued his long-standing ambition—to create a new imperial ideology. Since the collapse of the USSR had been the main impetus in the creation of this resentment ideology, the latter turned out firstly to be permeated with conspiracy motifs and secondly to be aimed at legitimizing institutions that are capable of developing and implementing counter-conspiracies to protect the Russian State. According to Prokhanov, nowadays conspiracies are usually realized in political and cultural spheres, although they always originate from mystical spiritual reality: political conspiracies go back to the eternal conflict between Good and Evil, God and the Devil, but the important target of the enemy's secret subversive activities are the Russian authorities and the State. This is because they serve, in Prokhanov's words, as tools to perform the "Russian miracle."<sup>50</sup> Proceeding from such an understanding of conspiracy, the writer endows any action, or any step taken in politics or culture, with a hidden meaning in order to interpret them from the perspective of strengthening/weakening the Russian State.

At the same time, Prokhanov makes good use of conspiracy explanatory models to achieve specific tactical objectives, particularly to strengthen the position of Russia's neoconservative circles, to exclude any opportunity for liberal-minded politicians to come to power, and finally to encourage Putin to start the conservative modernization project, by inspiring him with the idea of having been chosen. In a sense, the intensive exploitation of conspiracy rhetoric is dictated by precisely this tactical consideration.

Exacerbating anxiety-provoking situations, trying to reveal to Russia's leader the true mystical meanings of some political developments, Prokhanov, in my

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50 «Русское чудо» – cf. Prokhanov 2014: 207.

opinion, tends to invent a special stance in the political field. He persistently defines himself not only as a political analyst, but as a visionary, knowing “spiritual codes” that are accessible to only a few “metaphysicians” with “mystical experience.”<sup>51</sup> He spares no effort in enhancing the relevance of such a cultural figure that would be valuable for the authorities, on the one hand—as a political expert and a wise adviser connected with exalted spiritual spheres—and for the Russian people on the other hand as the creator of an inspiring myth. In this new stance, Prokhanov mobilizes all of the institutional and symbolic resources available to the political analyst and the writer to promote the traditionalist mythology of power, according to which normally functioning institutions, legal procedures, and political mechanisms can never replace a charismatic leader who has comprehended a sacred meaning of power and the “theory of the Russian state which ... will create Heaven on Earth.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, the use of conspiracy models can be considered a feature of the Neoconservatives’ self-promotion strategy and a time-honored way of flirting either with Putin as a personified quintessence of power or with the representatives of the security services (*siloviki*). Turning the world of politics into a world of conspiracy, Prokhanov and his proponents perform like ‘panic entrepreneurs’ who influence public moods and the authorities’ intentions and make a profit on it.<sup>53</sup>

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51 Prokhanov 2007: 348

52 «Теория о Русском государстве, которое... созиждет Земной Рай». – Prokhanov 2014: 297.

53 No matter how ridiculous or hypertrophied Prokhanov’s fears about the psi-attacks on the President are, they seem to have achieved certain goals, namely the encouragement of those who can protect the authorities and the prevailing political order, i.e., both the well-developed and modernized security structures and the Russian Orthodox Church. Hence, the references to monks who pray in monasteries for the President and repel magical psychological attacks, or to the allusions about the mysterious connection between Putin and Father John (Krest’iankin) and Father Nikolai (Gur’ianov). – Prokhanov 2011: 209.

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*Translated by Anna Razuvalova and Yaroslava Zakharova*

## Abstract

Aleksandr Prokhanov, writer, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Zavtra* (*Tomorrow*), and leader of the post-Soviet neoconservatives, is an individual who actively contributed to the expansion of conspiratorial thinking and rhetoric into the field of political analysis. Since the USSR’s collapse, he has attempted to provide insight into both the occult nature of secret subversive activities and into the use of conspiracy technologies in politics. Although conspiratorial ideas have always been a crucial element of his prose, in his recent novels these ideas are formulated from the perspective of groups that sympathize with the conservative turn of the 2000s and the Russian authorities’ current policies. This article focuses on Prokhanov’s attempts to create the Russian version of a so-called “culture of influence,” to promote a traditionalist mythology of power, and to legitimize

conspiracy theories as a tool to protect the Russian State from both internal and external enemies.

# Plots against Russia: Conspiracy, Sincerity, and Propaganda

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*Eliot Borenstein*\*

## **Keywords**

apocalypse; russophobia; conspiracy narrative; rumors; Putin

After spending enough time on the Russian Internet, flipping channels on state television, leafing through extremist newspapers, or simply reading the latest action-packed potboilers, it's easy to come to the conclusion that Russia is under siege, from within as well as from without. The country's apparent enemies include jihadists, Communists, oligarchs, the CIA, the FSB, Georgians, Ukrainians, a rainbow coalition of "color revolutionaries," homosexuals, Harvard University, and let's not forget the Jews (because trust me, no one else has). The building blocks of conspiracy may change (or, more likely, simply increase in number), but their possible combinations and permutations are limited only on the level of small details.

If it seems that I'm picking on Russia, I hasten to point out that anyone with a Facebook friend who watches Fox News can testify that my own home country, the United States, is hardly immune to syncretic conspiratorial thinking. After all, that country has, on two separate occasions, elected a gay Kenyan Muslim black separatist socialist secular antichrist (proving yet again that for a black man to succeed in America, he has to overachieve). The fact that he was succeeded in office by a man who praises Alex Jones's *Infowars* and *The National*

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\* Parts of this chapter have been published already in Eliot Borenstein: *Plots against Russia. Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. Copyright ©2019 by Cornell University.

*Enquirer* while hyping the non-existent threats of voter fraud and murderous illegal immigrants speaks for itself.

So Russia is not alone when it comes to conspiracy. Indeed, we could see the growth of conspiracy theory in both Russia and the United States as yet another manifestation of a decades-old rivalry: which country can outperform the other in conspiracy theory production? The rise of conspiratorial thought in the United States is a well-studied, and sadly relevant, phenomenon, and I talk about it a bit in my book.<sup>1</sup> Russia's multiple brands of conspiracy are far less familiar on a global level, but the country has not been idle: for at least fifty years, Russia (along with the Russophone diaspora) has been a reliable provider of conspiratorial narratives, overfulfilling virtually any conceivable paranoid plan with Stakhanovite zeal.

I use the hackneyed Stakhanovite metaphor advisedly, since it has been decades since Russia could be accused of the hyperproduction of anything besides oil. Or at least, of anything tangible. Here I recall Mikhail Epstein's marvelous essay, "Labor of Lust,"<sup>2</sup> in which he demonstrates that any failure to produce factories, heavy machinery, and weapons on the scale demanded by the various five-year plans was easily remedied by a proliferation of images and texts (i.e., discourse) *about* factories, heavy machinery, and weapons. In the symbolic realm, Russia and its precursor, the Soviet Union, was a powerhouse of productivity, an indefatigable manufacturer of simulacra and simulation.

## Known Unknowns

Conspiracy, however, is not mere simulation. It takes all the various mythemes available to it and turns them into a persuasive narrative; that is, conspiracy is a kind of discursive *bricolage*. Even this formulation is not entirely satisfactory, since it looks at conspiracy on too large a scale. The basis of all the mythemes and tropes that form a conspiracy theory is a much more fundamental substance: information. Conspiracy is a disease of information, and a communicable disease at that. A better word, though, would be disorder, if it weren't for the fact that conspiracy's relation to information is to take what is *dis*-ordered and express it as a surplus of order. It is a disorder of signal to noise, in which all noise is construed as signal.<sup>3</sup>

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1 See Borenstein 2019: 76–84 and 237–41.

2 Epstein 1995.

3 I am referring to Umberto Eco's instructive explanations in Eco 1976: 18–47.

Conspiracy does what centuries of crackpots' failed attempts at perpetual motion machines could not: conspiracy fights entropy without increasing entropy. Operating according to an inversion of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, conspiracy concentrates all information into an increasingly orderly system. Trying to define "conspiracy theory" is a thankless and ironic task. Thankless, in that there is a vast body of literature on the subject that must be addressed. Ironic, in that the term "conspiracy theory" is so familiar as to be part of *common* knowledge, while the philosophy of the conspiracy theory is based on the idea of *hidden* knowledge. We know a conspiracy theory when we see it, but what we know is that it is an argument that there is something we don't know because we can't see it. It is the unknown that we know everything about.

Conspiracy takes on its form and character in direct relation to a given society's information ecosystem, that is, to the media/cultural habitat that can facilitate and/or restrict the circulation of information. In Russia over the last fifty years or so, we find three particular information ecosystems that give rise to three distinct phases of conspiracy theory: the first is late socialism, the second is roughly coextensive with perestroika and the Yeltsin years, and the third is today's era of Putinist conservatism and the rise of social media. Unlike so many patterns that Slavists are used to seeking and finding in modern Russia, these phases are not characterized by rupture; indeed, the very syncretism that is so fundamental to conspiratorial thought admits no rupture, to the extent that it admits no contradiction. Though conspiracy's approach to information is anti-entropic, its development is usually expansionist and hegemonic: everything fits, and every seeming contradiction can be turned into another confirmation. In the American context, Michael Barkun shows us the confluence of initially separate conspiracy theories into one master conspiratorial narrative whose complexity would put *Foucault's Pendulum* to shame: any good conSPIROLOGIST knows that the Elders of Zion and the Freemasons are actually working with both the lizard people who dwell within our hollow earth and the gray-skinned aliens who are somehow never satisfied, no matter how many anal probes they perform on unwilling abductees.<sup>4</sup> (Apparently, anal probes are like potato chips: you can't stop at just one.)

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4 Cf. Barkun 2013.

## Rumor as Currency

Late socialism functioned as a petrie dish for conspiracy theories, providing the ideal conditions for their development. First, we must acknowledge that there was no need to invent conspiracy whole cloth. It is Tsarist Russia that bequeathed the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (n.d.) to the world at large, though, in one of Russian culture's perpetual ironies, even this native product turned out to have been initially taken from France, like Neo-Classicism or *salat oliv'e*, and Russified to near-unrecognizability. Added to this semi-native heritage is the lesson that the *Protocols*' pedigree teaches us: conspiracy theories cross national boundaries with the greatest of ease, which means that the entire European heritage of conspiracy theory was at late socialism's disposal.

Yet it was more than just this heritage that made late socialism such an amenable home for conspiracy theory. The Brezhnev era was marked by any number of shortages of this or that consumer good, but what was truly in short supply was information. The state media and government famously restricted access to news and cultural production. Though the USSR's official ideology was, of course, communist, its approach to information was decidedly mercantilist: information was a scarce resource to be conserved, if not hoarded, and the State jealously guarded its stash of information like a dragon sitting on its treasure trove of gold.

But the absence of gold encourages the development of alternative currencies. The paucity of reliable information, and the nakedly partisan nature in which information was presented, not only facilitated skepticism about official pronouncements, but also left a knowledge vacuum easily filled by speculation and rumor (far from hard currency, but it was all that people had). If we follow through on my currency metaphor one last time, facts were Deutschmarks, while conspiracy is Bitcoin.

Again, the effects of information deprivation went far beyond the national boundaries; in the West, Kremlinology thrived on a paranoid, conspiratorial epistemology that combed over every word in *Pravda* and every movement in state funerals for something on which to construct an often shaky hypothesis.

It is this skepticism that shows the weakness of the cold war propaganda model of mass culture: in response to the clear limits of official information, Soviet subjects of late socialism did not simply accept everything they heard uncritically, just as most of them did not become anti-Soviet dissidents. Rather, the assumption that people are being lied to produced an entire genre of what might be considered urban folklore, or at least urban folk knowledge: alternative theories about what's really going on, and who is really in charge. Engaging in this sort

of speculation did not necessarily entail adopting an anti-Soviet subject position. Quite to the contrary: casual, everyday conspiricism could even be viewed as *defining* the late Soviet subject position. The assumption that all leaders and bureaucrats are self-interested liars is certainly cynical, but by no means revolutionary, in that its challenge is not to the utopian ideology of the regime (a better future through communism) but to the utopian anthropology that justifies it. Late socialist casual conspiracy turns its skeptical eye on human nature far more than it does on this or that political system.<sup>5</sup>

The situation evolves with the dynamics of glasnost and *chernukha* (that is, pessimism, naturalism, and muckraking): while the policies of glasnost purported to fill in the “blank pages” of history, these pages had never been truly blank.<sup>6</sup> The facts had been known or suspected, or speculation had filled in the gaps. Glasnost functioned on the boundaries of revelation and confirmation, since what was brought to light was never entirely unknown. Rather, it is the fundamentally melodramatic ritual of exposure (*razoblachenie*) that endowed the disclosure with meaning and power. It is not that the truth could “set you free”; the truth *itself* was set free, released from the confines of conspiratorial epistemology.

Yet glasnost, rather than sounding conspiracy’s death knell, gave it a new lease on life. The exposure of the hidden truth may have meant the end of specific secrets, but it ultimately confirmed the prevalence of secrecy and the validity of conspiratorial epistemology. What could be a more valid response to all this than to ask, “Who knows what else they’re keeping from us?” which is the antecedent to the biggest conspiratorial meme of Putinism, “Who is beyond this?”<sup>7</sup> This is particularly understandable given the pendulum swings of Soviet-era reforms, dating back to Khrushchev: partial truths were doled out during the Thaw, only to be elaborated under Gorbachev, but the slow, multi-step process of revelation was not conducive to the belief that the “whole truth” had been disclosed.

## Mass Culture as Information Warfare

So late Socialism encouraged a kind of casual conspiricism, and glasnost’s confirmation of decades of government lies and omissions only intensified the distrust that lay behind conspiratorial thinking. But there were already more com-

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5 For an overview of the role of conspiracy theories under Stalin, see Rittersporn 2014.

6 Cf. Borenstein 2007.

7 “Кто за этим стоит?”

mitted versions of conspiricism ready for more widespread adoption with the changes in the media in the perestroika and post-perestroika eras. More committed conspiricism directly challenged the regime of power/knowledge that constituted late Soviet ideology. Here we have right-wing dissident counter-narratives, complete with their own myths of origin. For the sake of brevity, let me simply mention two of the more important conspiratorial narratives floating about at this time.

Each of them is a variation on the theory that the United States has been conducting covert operations to destroy the Soviet Union/Russia by subverting public morals and destroying Russian culture. As so often happens with conspiracy theory, there is an undeniable grain of truth here: after all, was not the very existence of Radio Liberty an open attack on official discourse? (Which renders RT, the former Russia Today, a long-delayed attempt at striking back.)

The most elaborate version of this narrative was developed in emigration, but made its way back to Russia in *samizdat*: the writings of Grigorii Klimov. In both his non-fiction and his novels (which were intended to be read as fictional glosses on hidden truth), Klimov warned his readers about the sinister “Harvard Project” (*garvardskii proekt*). The Harvard Project gives the anti-Semitism of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* a pseudoscientific veneer, updating them with the preoccupations of the Cold War (mind control, the American threat) and contemporary sexual panic (predatory homosexuals and militant lesbians), and reinforcing the religious dimension by approaching Biblical texts and confessional differences in terms of genetics and evolution. The beauty of Klimov’s formulation is that it is both Soviet and anti-Soviet: the Cold War enemy is truly a threat, but both America and the Soviet Union have been controlled by Jews from the very beginning. Klimov developed an all-purpose demonology that gives the appearance of rigor while actually being extremely flexible. The result has all the hallmarks of the most baroque conspiracy theories to attract attention in the West, such as Lyndon LaRouche’s assertion that the Queen of England is an international drug kingpin working with the Rothschilds. Klimov finds his enemies slightly closer to home: for decades, Russia has been under siege by a cabal of genetically defective Jews and homosexuals (virtually synonymous in Klimov’s lexicon), plotting the country’s downfall from behind the ivy-covered walls of Harvard University.<sup>8</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, a close cousin to Klimov’s theory actually found its way into an officially published work of Soviet fiction: the anti-Soviet brainwashing campaign that would eventually take the name “The Dulles Plan.” Rem-

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8 Cf. Klimov 1998a, Klimov 1998b, Klimov 1998c, Klimov 1998d.



iniscient of both Klimov's novel *Imia moe—Legion* (*My Name Is Legion*, 1998) and Verkhovenskiĭ's speech in Dostoyevsky's *Besy* (*Demons*, 1872), the broad contours of the plan first appear in Iurii Dol'd-Mikhailik's 1965 novel *I odin v pole voin* (*I Am the Only Soldier in the Field*), but reach a much broader audience when attributed to an SS Officer in Anatolii Ivanov's miniseries *Vechnyi zov* (*Eternal Call*)

When the war ends, everything will work itself out. And we will throw everything we've got, everything we own: all the gold, all the material strength on turning people into idiots! The human brain, people's consciousness are all capable of change. After we seed chaos in them, we will imperceptibly switch out their values for false ones and make them believe in these false values! How, you ask? How?! ...

We'll find like-minded people: our allies and our helpers in Russia itself!<sup>9</sup>

Though this particular line of thought would only be christened "The Dulles Plan" in 1993, it already provided a broad framework for understanding the Cold War in terms of conspiratorial melodrama, while still casting the relations between opposing sides in terms of symbolic exchange.

One of the most striking things about the text of the Dulles Plan is its obsession with popular culture. The Dulles Plan is as much media theory as conspiracy theory, a perhaps unintentional example of an outdated model that assumes propaganda works as intended, and that audiences are helpless to resist.<sup>10</sup> Consistent with Soviet policies that carefully restricted access to media, culture, and information, the Dulles Plan can only make sense if culture is understood in narrow, quasi-biological terms. The Dulles Plan is based on an implicit definition of media and consumer, emphasizing media's nutritional content. While some forms of cultural production are, quite simply, good for you (the classics, for instance), there are others that are not merely innately harmful, but whose entire purpose is moral or ideological harm. The audience, meanwhile, is totally pas-

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9 «Окончится война — всё как-то утрясётся, устроится. И мы бросим всё, что имеем, чем располагаем: всё золото, всю материальную мощь на оболванивание и одурачивание людей! Человеческий мозг, сознание людей способно к изменению. Посеяв там хаос, мы незаметно подменим их ценности на фальшивые и заставим их в эти фальшивые ценности поверить! Как, спрашиваешь? Как?! ...

Мы найдём своих единомышленников: своих союзников и помощников в самой России!»

10 The Media Effects School or Hypodermic Model, most recently resurrected in by Pomerantsev 2014.

sive. The media consumer is, essentially, an open orifice receiving all input indiscriminately.

Compare this with the conspiratorial mania that characterized the Stalin years: certainly, censorship was strict and propaganda was unrelenting, but the crimes of which alleged conspirators were accused were not restricted merely to anti-Soviet agitation. “Wreckers” were sabotaging industrial projects, and spies and internal enemies were engaged in assassinations and attempted murder.<sup>11</sup> The Dulles Plan turns out to be perfect for both the Cold War and its aftermath; violence and subversion are now entirely discursive.

Equally important is the Dulles Plan’s focus on youth. By positing nearly all forms of popular youth culture as dangerous (something the Plan shares with moral panics throughout the modern world), the Dulles Plan weaponizes the generation gap. Young people are not merely strange and perhaps impertinent (the perennial complaint about “kids today”), they are the victims and perpetrators of warfare against everything the country stands for.

It is the combined focus on media and youth that ensures the Dulles Plan’s longevity. The structure of cross-generational misunderstanding can endure even as the content of youth culture changes (as Americans with long enough memories will recall, the evolution of popular music is also the story of successive moral panics, from jazz to rock to hip hop). The generation vilified by the Dulles Plan in its early days is now the generation that could find itself appalled by its own children’s culture.

If we borrow the language of Putin’s third term, the Dulles Plan is all about values. Thanks to the Plan, conspiracy is a culture war. Or, to once again borrow from today’s terminology, information war.

## **Selling Russia**

The Dulles Plan’s formalization in 1993 points to the second phase of the informational ecosystem I have mentioned: perestroika and the 1990s. This ecosystem gives us the opposite extreme from that of late socialism: we move from information deprivation to information overload. Here we are dealing with a more recognizably postmodern condition (recognizable, because it is the version of the condition that has long obtained in the West). This new embarrassment of informational riches could have served to debunk conspiratorial thinking entirely, but in fact the opposite occurred: revelation after revelation about the

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11 See Rittersporn 2014.

hidden crimes and corruption of the Soviet Union served as confirmation of a paranoid mindset. This is when conspiratorial thinking moves from the underground to the mainstream.

I do not wish to dwell on this period as much, because it is also the version of conspiracy with which we are probably most familiar. In *Overkill. Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*, I argued that in the 1990s, everyone learned the language of crime.<sup>12</sup> Today I would add that they also learned the language of conspiracy (which, like that of crime, was a subcultural language that was now given unprecedented popular exposure). As in the West, conspiracy provides the basic framework for thrillers and action stories (the heroes are inevitably fighting those who plot against Russia), often using a conspiratorial framework that seems to be stripped of its conventional ideological content (the heroes fight organizations that *look* like right-wing visions of Jews and Masons, but are not *called* Jews or Masons). In the 1990s as conspiratorial narratives are now free to combine and recombine like viruses swapping genes, they tended to revolve around one of the dominant paradigms of the post-Soviet era: catastrophe. With catastrophe, conspiracy manages to be both a myth of origin and a prophecy of the future: here is how our secret enemies brought us to our knees, and here is how they are planning to utterly destroy us in the coming days. Just as Engels brackets all of human history between a primitive communitarian lost Eden and an eventual communist Golden Age, so, too, does Yeltsin-era conspiracy enclose modern Russian history with identically catastrophic origins and endings.

We see this with the evolution and eventually replacement of the Harvard Project. The Harvard Project reaches its apotheosis in a trilogy of novels by Sergei Norka that combine Klimov's ideas with the structure of a thriller, the establishment of an actual Inquisition in Russia, and the country's salvation by a "Dark Horse" who looks very much like Vladimir Putin.<sup>13</sup> From this point on, though, the Harvard Project, once its own independent force for xenophobic paranoia, is superseded by the Houston Project. Or, to be more precise, it is subsumed: annexed, like a disputed discursive peninsula, by a larger, neighboring narrative with quasi-imperial ambitions. This produces a peculiar imaginary geography, where Harvard and Houston (two names rarely uttered in the same breath) coexist on opposite sides of a shared border. For the early Putin era, though, this game of imaginary topography is actually prophetic: ideas (Harvard) are trumped by oil (Houston). Not to mention the fact that Putin's first terms in

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12 See Borenstein 2007.

13 Norka 2000, Norka 2004a, Norka 2004b.

office coincide with the presidency of a former Texas governor. An imaginary, evil Texas is the perfect straw man to petrify a petrostate.

The Houston Project, while as much a flight of fancy as the *Protocols* or the Dulles Plan, appears to share one of the few saving graces of the Harvard project: it is not the result of plagiarism. In fact, it seems to be entirely unourced. Appropriately enough for a digital phenomenon, it may not even have a clearly defined original. Searching for the “Houston Project” reminds us of the beauty and complexity of conspiracy as a viral Internet phenomenon: no one really owns it. As a result, its manifestations and elaborations vary wildly.

Compared to the Houston Project, both Harvard and Dulles look like under-achievers. It is with the Houston Project (as elaborated by General Petrov and his many imitators) that conspiracists really start thinking big. Harvard and Dulles conceive of the apocalypse as local event: the end of Russia may as well be the end of the world (if you live in Russia), but otherwise, who knows? The Houston Plan loops around to global annihilation while never losing sight of the centrality of Russia.

The Houston Plan goes back to the conspiratorial well (no, not anti-Semitism; that particular poisoned well was already tapped out by the Harvard Project): the cabal of multinational schemers who *really* run the world. The renewed emphasis on the cabal is the result of a Western import. By the beginning of the twenty-first-century, many of the more popular English-language conspiratorial tracts are translated and published in Russia. John Coleman’s *Conspirator’s Hierarchy: The Committee of 300* (1992) is repeatedly referenced in Houston and Houston-adjacent conspiratorial writings; as the title suggests, it describes the machinations of our true overlords. Many of Coleman’s tropes were then picked up by RT, the Russian English-language television channel that has provided a home for the lunatic fringe.

Thus Russian conspirators and Western conspirators end up speaking the same language, constantly referring to the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Bilderberg Group. The Bilderberg Group is an elite club whose secrecy has sparked a predictable set of claims as to their true activity, and whose leaders (the “Olympians”) are conspiring to corrupt the world’s youth along the lines laid out in both the *Protocols* and the Dulles Plan.

The Houston Project is predicated on one of the obsessions of post-Soviet political culture: the fate of Russia’s natural riches. The Project’s plan to destroy Russia as a state by dismembering it into dozens of tiny statelets is, at first glance, nothing more than a resource grab, supported by numerous fictitious quotes by Western leaders. Since 2006, the Russian media and blogosphere have been claiming that former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright lamented the injus-

tice of Russia's share of the world's oil and mineral wealth (Siberia should therefore be under international control). Albright herself has denied saying any such thing, while Putin has managed to have it both ways ("I'm not familiar with this quote by Madame Albright, but I know that such thoughts wander through the minds of certain politicians").<sup>14</sup> This fake with Albright's "quote" is part of a perfect feedback loop, reinforcing both the rapaciousness of Americans (and particularly the Clinton administration, responsible for the bombings in Serbia) and the greatness of Russia itself. And its way was paved by the Houston Project.

For the Houston Project, the expropriation of Russian resources is only the beginning. The real goal of Western conspirators is far more evil, and also a much more primal threat to blood-and-soil notions of Russian identity. The Houston Project makes literal one of the primary metaphors of national betrayal: that Russia is being bought and sold. Now the truth comes out: the West is plotting to take the Russian land itself. Why?

It seems the West wants to move to Russia. It turns out that Moscow isn't just the Fourth Rome; soon, all of Russia will become the next Mt. Ararat (even though the first one is practically a neighbor). When the rest of the world succumbs to ecological catastrophe, only Russia will remain habitable. This scenario is the result of yet another mutation in Russian conspiracy theory. Just as the Houston Project is packaged as the next, more detailed iteration of the Harvard Project, its detail is drawn from yet another set of sources. Much of the content of Houston Project is filled by the growing lore accruing to a powerful local, Russian conspiracy called "Zolotoi milliard" (The Golden Billion).

## Russia as Post-Apocalyptic Real Estate

First put forth by A. Kuz'mich (the pen name of Anatolii Kuz'mich Tsikunov) in a book called *Zagovor mirovogo pravitel'stva: Rossiia i 'zolotoi milliard'* (*The World Government Conspiracy: Russia and the Golden Billion*, 1994), "Zolotoj milliard" was quickly popularized by the prolific Sergei Kara-Murza and has become a staple of contemporary Russian conspiratorial thought.<sup>15</sup> "Zolotoi milliard" represents a real change in the Dulles/Harvard rhetoric of conspiracy, in that it is based less on (bad) social science than it is on (bad) natural science.

In a refreshing change from what is familiar to followers of American conspiracy and right-wing discourse, "Zolotoj milliard" takes the prospect of eco-

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14 See Smolchenko 2007.

15 Cf. Kara-Murza 2004.

logical change seriously. So seriously, in fact, that most of the plans of the “world government” are predicated on looming global disaster. The coming cataclysm is not just a matter of climate change or even the depletion of fossil fuels; “Zolotoi milliard” is a nightmare vision of overpopulation. It weaponizes Malthusianism. The “milliard” (‘billion’) in its name refers to an imagined, ideal population for a sustainable planet; the “zolotoe” (‘golden’) part describes the class dynamics on which the conspiracy is built. The developed world is maneuvering to a point where one billion people (the wealthier people from the wealthiest part of the globe) populate the planet. It is not the meek, but the rich who shall inherit the earth (which makes some sense, since they have the most experience with inheritance).

“Zolotoi milliard” also has the attraction of an uncompromising Russocentrism. If the only inhabitable territory left on the globe were in, say, Africa or Australia, the theory would be far less compelling. Russia would be destroyed, but only as part of a larger story of calamity. “Zolotoi milliard” tells the opposite story: it is the God-given right of Russia to survive the apocalypse, but the West is conspiring to steal Russia’s very destiny. Here the power and desirability of the Russian land are reinforced precisely by the covetousness of the enemy, and the struggle against this plot can be yet another heroic tale of the defense of Russia from invasion.

“Zolotoi milliard” gathers together many of the most important tropes of benighted, post-Soviet Russia (the need to defend the country’s natural resources from a rapacious West, the West’s demoralization of Russia’s youth, destruction of Russia’s economy, and destruction of public health) into one compelling narrative, a story combining historical touchstones (the Great Patriotic War) with science and pseudoscience. It also builds on and sustains the hostility towards population control encountered throughout the Russian media in the Putin era, in which the distribution of condoms is a clever Western plot to bring down Russian birth rates. This idea is often reinforced by an unsourced, but frequently repeated quote from Margaret Thatcher, that “Russians should be reduced to 15 million.” All of this can be summed up in a phrase that is common to Russian extremist discourse, and made more mainstream by the conflict in Ukraine: “The genocide of the Russian people”<sup>16</sup> In a Russocentric world, there could be no ending more catastrophic than that.

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16 «геноцид русского народа»

## Russophobia Begins at Home

Which brings us to the supremacy of Vladimir Putin. If under Yeltsin conspiracy became a common language, under Putin (particularly since his return to office after Medvedev), conspiracy is a meta-language. One of the many brilliant moves of Putin and his supporters is to coopt the language of conspiracy and falsification so thoroughly that all symbolic exchange of truth value collapses into false equivalencies. As the 2012 protest movement captured video after video of suspicious election activity, police brutality, and corruption (i.e., uncovering a state conspiracy to claim power through unlawful means), state television responded with charges that the falsification itself has been falsified. Here I should note the contrast between the way conspiratorial accusations used to be handled in the U.S., and the way they are handled in Putin's Russia. In the States, the guiding principle before Trump was not to engage, because engaging simply feeds the beast (hence the long months before Obama's final, anti-climactic release of his long-form birth certificate). The Kremlin's response is to engage at all costs, because feeding the beast is in the regime's best interest.

Two television documentaries in the wake of the protest movement highlight this new dynamic. First is the three-part mockumentary *Rossia: polnoe zatmenie* (*Russia: Total Eclipse*)<sup>17</sup> which, though broadcast on NTV, looked exactly like a typical muckraking NTV documentary. Here the director gives a seamless facade of utter seriousness as he takes the familiar tropes of the last few decades of conspiracy theory and claims to expose their actual truth. One part tells us about the secret cabal of homosexuals who control the media; another exposes the genetic basis of fascism; and all of them repeatedly invoke the Dulles Plan as established fact. This deliberate confusion of fact and fancy is itself the perfect commentary on today's media environment, in which truth claims can be so easily faked that fiction may as well be fact, and fact fiction.

Most notorious is *Anatomiia protesta* (*Anatomy of a Protest*).<sup>18</sup> Here we discover that every move made by the protest movement has been funded by the U.S. State Department and Georgian plutocrats, while every instance of police brutality is simply a "provocation" designed to produce the appearance of police brutality as a weapon against the regime. Even the footage of ballot stuffing turns out to be footage of a pre-election ballot-casting exercise, reconfigured by the treacherous protesters as evidence of vote tampering.

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17 Cf. Loshak 2012.

18 Kisliakov et al. 2012.

At this point, conspiracy reaches total semiotic overdrive, as well as becoming the perfect state of total simulation: everything becomes conspiracy, including the attempt to expose conspiracy. The whole MH-17 airline disaster is a clear example of what happens when conspiracy moves from the margins to the center, to be embraced by the state and the media. The large-scale conspiracy theories can be invoked or alluded to, but their main purpose is to serve as an available backdrop or heuristic device when constantly accusing one's opponents of being the tools of evil Western governments hell-bent on Russia's destruction. The mindset of conspiracy becomes reflexive, a continuous loop both based on and reinforcing a sense of anti-Russian hostility.

Are there plots against Russia? Absolutely. But they should be a source of Russian pride rather than anger, since they are such a reliable and useful domestic product. In 1979, before the advent of cell phones, there was an American horror movie about a babysitter being threatened on the phone, only to be told by the police (over the phone) that the calls are not coming from far away; the killer is right there, because (to quote the movie's tag line) the "calls are coming from inside the house." So it is with anti-Russian conspiracies. The plots against Russia are being hatched within Russia itself.

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### Abstract

Conspiracy theories have been a perennial feature of Russian culture for more than a century. This prevalence is related to the vexed status of information in the Soviet and post-Soviet world, starting with the nakedly partisan presentation of the news in Late Socialism. Since World War II, Russia and the Soviet Union have undergone three different periods of conspiracy theorizing, corresponding to three distinct informational ecosystems: the first, under Brezhnev, was predicated on information as a scarce resource, supplemented by rumor and speculation. The second, starting in Perestroika and continuing through the 1990s, responds to the sudden surplus of information, when competing narratives challenge and one claim to truth and validity. Finally, in the Putin era, conspiracy theorizing is coopted by the regime itself.



# Odessa 2014: Alternative News and Atrocity Narratives on Russian TV

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*Eva Binder/Magdalena Kaltseis*

## **Keywords**

Ukraine crisis; Russian television; propaganda; TV news; TV talk shows

On 2 May 2014, the city of Odessa<sup>1</sup> was shaken by violent clashes between two warring political groups. Among the total number of 48 fatalities, six people died during the street clashes, while 42 people fell victim to the fire in the Trade Union building that spread a few hours later. Roughly speaking, the two opposing groups consisted of protesters of a pro-Russian (or anti-Maidan or pro-federalism) orientation on the one hand, and of pro-Ukraine (or pro-Maidan or pro-unity) activists on the other. However tragic the incident was in itself, it also marked a crucial point in the heated sentiments of spring 2014. The event was instantly converted into a psychological weapon in the political and military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, backed up by an unprecedented propaganda campaign launched by public Russian TV. Accordingly, the coverage of the tragedy on Russian TV screens was enormous and intense, while the question of what had ‘really’ happened required months of investigation<sup>2</sup> and could not be answered when public interest in the case was at its peak.

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1 Except for ‘Odessa,’ the English translation of the Ukrainian city ‘Odesa,’ all other toponymies in this article are referred to by their Ukrainian names.

2 In April of 2014, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe established an International Advisory Panel (IAP), which was to supervise the Ukraine authorities’ investigations into the violent incidents that occurred during the protests on the Maidan in Kiev from 30 November 2013 onwards (Report of the IAP 2015: 5). Accordingly, the IAP reviewed the investigations that were conducted in Odessa and presented a relia-

The Odessa events of 2014 and their representation on Russian TV can be regarded as highly revealing against the backdrop of questions concerning today's mass media communication and constructions of reality. In the analysis that we have undertaken, we will go a step further by scrutinizing the 'fabrication' of facts—a process that is frequently encompassed by conspiracies and conspiracy theories and which will be referred to in our study as 'alternative' news. In so doing, the Odessa case will serve as an example, and as a model, in order to better understand how alternative news is created and how it is spread effectively by contemporary mass media, for which attention is a hotly contested commodity.

## 1. Persuasive Mass Communication in a Hybrid Media System

Despite the rapid growth of internet users in the last two decades, public TV by far still remains the most efficient nationwide means of mass communication in Russia. According to opinion polls, the vast majority of Russia's population relies on TV as a source of political information. The two main state-run channels, *Pervyi kanal* (Channel One) and *Rossia-1*, have a nationwide reach of 99% and

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ble report on what had actually happened on 2 May 2014. On this day, local pro-Ukraine activists and city residents (about 2,000 people) wanted to "hold a rally in support of a united Ukraine" before the start of a football match in Odessa (Report of the IAP 2015: 11). While marching towards the football stadium, the rally was assaulted by approximately 300 pro-Russian protesters near Hrets'ka Square. In these violent clashes, the pro-Ukraine protesters finally gained the upper hand and pursued the retreating opponents towards the pro-Russian protesters' camp at Kulykove Pole Square. Facing the approaching pro-Ukraine protesters, pro-Russian activists fled into the nearby Trade Union building. The pro-Ukraine activists "destroyed and set fire to the tents of the AntiMaidan camp," while the pro-Russian protesters who were inside the Trade Union building exchanged shots and Molotov cocktails with their opponents outside (Report of the IAP 2015: 13). At around 7:45 p.m., a fire broke out, spreading rapidly, the fire brigade arriving only at 8:09 p.m. In the report, the number of victims and their cause of death was summarized as follows: "48 persons died (seven women and 41 men). Six persons died as a result of firearm injuries they had received during the clashes on and around Hrets'ka Square and 42 died as a result of the fire in the Trade Union building. Of those 42, 34 died as a direct result of the fire and eight died as a result of jumping or falling from a height; no other violent cause of death was established." – Report of the IAP 2015: 15.

95% respectively. TV's leading role has led to perceptible, far-reaching consequences when Russian TV screens had to deal with the conflict in Ukraine from the end of 2013 onwards. The Russian sociologist Denis Volkov describes the effects of political influence on mass media as follows: "With the beginning of the Ukraine conflict, the propaganda tone in broadcast rose dramatically, and for nearly two years, TV channels worked in emergency mode."<sup>3</sup> However, it would be too simple to equate the proclaimed 'information war' with the state control over mass media in Soviet times. The same can be said with regard to propaganda strategies and techniques which in 2014 were definitely not new in their general features, but which had changed significantly with respect to their potential impact and to new possibilities of dissemination.

It is commonly agreed that contemporary media systems are characterized by complexity and hybridity. This implies, according to Andrew Chadwick, "incessant processes of boundary-drawing, boundary-blurring, and boundary-crossing, as the logics of older and newer media interact, compete and coevolve."<sup>4</sup> A direct consequence of this "boundary-blurring" and "boundary-crossing" on Russian TV screens appears to be the blending of professional and non-professional media and media producers, the specific placement of which can be utilized to enhance the audiovisual media's manipulative effects. Amateur videos have become an integral part of the visual material used in news broadcasts and they are exploited for the immediacy and authenticity that they seemingly convey. Further crucial elements of the interaction between older and newer media on Russian TV include the numerous references to the 'new' social networks that are made in the supposedly 'old' media of television. This, again, allows for additional manipulative effects, through the launching of impious verbal abuse as a form of 'factual' commentary by a political opponent on current events for example.<sup>5</sup>

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3 «С началом украинского конфликта резко вырос пропагандистский накал вещания, и почти два года телеканалы работали в чрезвычайном режиме». – Volkov 2016.

4 Chadwick 2013: 184.

5 In the Odessa case, a demonstrative example of this strategy of referring to social networks on TV in order to vilify political opponents is the news broadcast of 3 May entitled "The Odessa events did not leave anybody cold, but everyone reacts differently to what happened." One of the messages supposedly posted on Twitter and quoted in the news item reads as follows: "Evromaidan @Dbnmjr: 'Odessa, I'm proud of you! Ten thousands of townsmen cleanse their land of pro-Russian activists. Kiev and the whole Ukraine are with you #Odessa'" («Євромайдан @Dbnmjr: "Одесса,

One of the most effective propaganda strategies is repetition, which to some extent was reliably utilized by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. In his famous *Language of the Third Reich: LTI—Lingua Tertii Imperii*, the German diarist Victor Klemperer scrutinizes the propagandistic use of language in Nazi Germany, highlighting the power of repetition:

No, the most powerful influence was exerted neither by individual speeches nor by articles or flyers, posters or flags; it was not achieved by things which one had to absorb by conscious thought or conscious emotions. Instead Nazism permeated the flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms and sentence structures which were imposed on them in a million repetitions and taken on board mechanically and unconsciously. ... And what happens if the cultivated language is made up of poisonous elements or has been made the bearer of poisons? Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, today's television broadcasting with its 24-hour news cycle, round-the-clock transmission and its numerous channels provide the ideal conditions for maximum propagandistic impact. In addition, Russian state-run TV has developed highly appropriate programming in order to reach its viewers "mechanically and unconsciously" by repetition. The two main channels, *Pervyi kanal* and *Rossii-1*, both offer their primetime news *Vremia (Time)* and *Vesti (News)* at 9 and 8 p.m. respectively. Both news programs are preceded by talk shows: *Priamoi éfir (On Air Live)* with a starting time of between 6:15 and 6:30 p.m. on *Rossii-1*, and *Pust' govoriat (Let Them Talk)* starting around 7:45 p.m. on *Pervyi kanal*.

Apart from repetition, propaganda strategies in audiovisual media rely on both argumentation and rhetoric on the one hand, and emotional effects achieved and enhanced by specific means on the other. Thus, when questioning audiovisual media's potential impact, it appears to be crucial to analyze both the rhetorical-argumentative and the rhetorical-affective structures of TV broadcasts. Regarding the rhetorical-affective side, visual material in general and images in particular are commonly regarded as equally powerful as, or even more powerful

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горжусь тобой! Десятки тысяч горожан очищают свою землю от колорадов. Киев и вся Украины [sic!] с тобой #Одесса"». – "Sobytiia v Odesse nikogo ne ostavili ravnodushnym, no reagiruiut na sluchivsheesia po-raznomu", *Vremia*, 3 May 2014.

6 Klemperer 2002: 15.

than, argumentative verbal discourse. Images are supposed to draw the viewer's attention more effectively and are thought to be remembered more accurately and for a longer period of time.<sup>7</sup>

One of the first film theorists and practitioners who explored the emotional impact of particular images, as well as film as a whole, was Sergey Eisenstein. There is no doubt that Eisenstein anticipated the affective logic of contemporary mass media with his "montage of attractions" which he formulated in 1923 while still engaged in theatrical work. For Eisenstein, "attractions" are impact factors produced by cinema—images that have the potential of attracting intensified attention and of "subject[ing] the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact."<sup>8</sup> By being deliberately exposed to "aggressive" moments in theater, the spectator was supposed to experience "emotional shocks." As a consequence, she or he would "perceive the ideological side of what is being demonstrated—the ultimate ideological *conclusion*."<sup>9</sup> Eisenstein's first films, *Stachka (Strike, 1925)* and *Bronenosets Potemkin (Battleship Potemkin, 1925)*, can actually be regarded as experimental laboratories for two different types of "attractions," namely for shocking pictures (in particular images of violence against children) on the one hand and scenes of atrocity and violence that are unfolded by narration on the other.

With regard to propaganda strategies developed for TV specifically, we can assume that placing a talk show before the primetime news opens up the possibility of emotionally 'attuning' the TV viewers to the 'factual' information that follows. The melodramatic stories conveyed in talk shows, dealing with love, family or friendship, aim to affect the viewers, stirring their feeling of happiness, shock, disgust, astonishment or fear. Returning to Eisenstein's understanding of sensual and psychological impacts, then, we can say that the talk shows emotionally prepare the TV audience to perceive what will be transmitted on an ideological level in primetime news.

This particular affective function of talk shows on Russian TV has been described by Anna Kachkaeva, a media scholar at the Moscow-based Higher School of Economics. She argues that "[w]hile policymakers and straight news shows define the agenda, the political talk shows provide 'emotional support'. ... They just support the atmosphere that exists and heat it up."<sup>10</sup> This is definitely

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7 See Dauber/Robinson 2015.

8 Eisenstein 1974: 78.

9 Ibid.

10 "Russia's TV talk shows smooth Putin's way from crisis to crisis." – *The Washington Post* (Newspaper article, 2015).

one reason why talk shows on Russian TV are not only numerous, but also occupy a significant part of the daily airtime—up to 11 hours on *Pervyi kanal*, to be precise. Moreover, a number of new politically oriented talk shows were launched during the Ukraine crisis, such as *Tolstoy. Voskresen'e (Tolstoy. Sunday)*,<sup>11</sup> *Vremia pokazhet (Time Will Tell)*, *Struktura momenta (Structure of the Moment)*, *Pravo znat'! (The Right to Know!)* and *Spisok Norkina (Norkin's List)*. The sudden increase in 2014 of broadcasts that had a focus on political and social issues is confirmed by Iuliia Dolgova, a researcher at the Department of Journalism at Moscow State University:

In February of 2014, the situation escalates dramatically in Ukraine, where the political crisis changes into a phase of active hostilities between the opposing forces. In this period, the numbers of broadcasts on political and social issues begin to increase. Many of these broadcasts primarily deal with the ongoing events in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

In comparison to the media landscape of the 1920s, the time at which Eisenstein developed his theories on film, media, and art, the extent to which today's everyday life is permeated by the media appears to be incomparably higher. The journalist and social scientist Sergei Medvedev goes even further by suggesting a totality of impact by comparing Russian TV to the air that we breathe:

TV is like air or water. And suddenly all the water running out of the tap is flavored with vanilla. Or with blood. Exactly the same happens with TV. The air of the media and the information that we breathe is usurped with propaganda.<sup>13</sup>

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11 The title of this show was based on the name of its presenter, Petr Tolstoy (a great-great-grandson of the writer Leo Tolstoy) and is also a play on words. The show was broadcasted on Sundays, and the Russian word for this day of the week is identical to the Russian title of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection* (1899).

12 «В феврале 2014 г. резко обостряется ситуация на Украине, где политический кризис переходит в фазу активных действий противоборствующих сторон. В этот период на российском телевидении начинает расти количество передач общественно-политической тематики, выпуски которых посвящены преимущественно событиям на Украине». – Dolgova 2015: 163.

13 «[Т]елевидение ... – это как воздух или вода. И вдруг вся вода из крана начинает течь с привкусом ванили. Или с привкусом крови. И то же самое происходит с телевидением. Это тот медийный, информационный воздух, которым мы дышим, и он узурпирован пропагандой». – “Effekt zombioishchika” *Radio Svoboda*, 8 November 2017.



## 2. Odessa 2014 in Primetime News and Talk Shows

This section will analyze the coverage of the events that unfolded in Odessa in May 2014 by *Pervyi kanal's* primetime news *Vremia* and in TV talk shows. From a quantitative angle, the coverage of the Odessa events in *Vremia* was extensive: Starting with a newsflash on the fire on the evening of 2 May, there was a total number of 23 news items dedicated to Odessa between the date of the fire and 11 May, the total running time amounting to ca. 109 minutes. Several broadcasts stretch over 7 minutes and more—the most extensive one running 12:54 minutes on 11 May. Additionally, this increase in attention on the Odessa events was sustained right until the end of May by dedicating newsflashes and two features, on 15 and 23 May, to the fire in Odessa.

As far as talk shows are concerned, four programs on the two main state-run TV channels addressed the Odessa events in May of 2014: On *Rossiiia-1*, the news appeared on the talk show *Priamoi ěfir* (*On Air Live*) on 5 and 12 May, as well as on *Spetsial'nyi korrespondent* (*Special Correspondent*) on 20 May. On *Pervyi kanal*, they featured on the show *Politika* (*Politics*) on 14 May. *Priamoi ěfir*,<sup>14</sup> placed right before the primetime news on *Rossiiia-1*, can be classified as a 'confessional' or 'daytime' talk show,<sup>15</sup> its focus being on the life stories of ordinary citizens as well as social problems, such as crime, drug abuse or prostitution. In comparison to *Priamoi ěfir*, *Spetsial'nyi korrespondent* and *Politika* are political talk shows with guests who primarily work in the area of politics or the economy (e.g., members of parliament, political experts, etc.).

From the viewers' perspective, TV news programs are expected to focus on hard news and to present information in a more or less impersonal and objective way. By contrast, talk shows are television *shows*, which are *per se* characterized by the phenomena of "boundary-blurring" and "boundary-crossing" between information and entertainment, facts and fiction. By assembling different guests, and by giving a voice to people ranging from eyewitnesses to experts, there is practically nothing that cannot be stated in TV talk shows. In their study on threat narratives on Russian TV, the members of the non-governmental organi-

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14 *Priamoi ěfir* started broadcasting in April 2011 on *Rossiiia-1*. From 2013 to 2017, the host of the talk show was Boris Korchevnikov, who then became the general director of the orthodox TV channel *Spas* (*The Savior*). *Priamoi ěfir* is the equivalent of the popular *Pust' govoriat* on *Rossiiia-1*, which has been on air on *Pervyi kanal* for more than a decade. Both are broadcasted right before the primetime news and, according to opinion polls, enjoy great popularity; see Levada 2015.

15 See Haarman 2001: 34; Shattuc 2015: 194–98.

zation ‘Ukraine Crisis Media Center,’ Makukhin, Tsybulska, and Kavatsiuk stress the role played by talk shows in the spreading of disinformation:

Television talk-shows became a real godsend for the Russian disinformation machine. The political talk show format allows [the] Kremlin to launch necessary messages in the informational field and avoid accusations of misinformation and propaganda. Continually repeated, these messages become part of public discourse. The talk-show format also allows to give voice to the most [sic] radical messages without taking responsibility.<sup>16</sup>

On a more general scale, TV talk shows can be characterized in terms of tabloidization, the three decisive techniques of which are dramatization, personalization, and emotionalization. According to Timberg et al., among TV talk shows’ guiding principles, whether they are live or taped, is their “present-tense immediacy.”<sup>17</sup> The title of the Russian talk show *Priamoi éfir* clearly addresses this principle. In contrast to the impersonal tone that dominates TV news, talk shows create a more private and intimate atmosphere as the host addresses the public directly, speaking “to millions as if to each alone.”<sup>18</sup>

By focusing on the two different TV formats, news and talk shows, we will demonstrate how the affective potential of the ‘real’ Odessa events was enhanced, intensified, and maximized on Russian TV, as well as how TV viewers were manipulated by alternative news and by images and narratives indulging in atrocity. While we will focus on the rhetorical-argumentative structures of the messages for the analysis of alternative news, the discussion of atrocity narratives will shed light on the rhetorical-affective side of the Odessa coverage. With regard to the talk shows that addressed the Odessa events, the main focus lies on the *Priamoi éfir* issue of 5 May 2014 for two reasons: First, this issue can be qualified as a striking example of TV sensationalism; second, it was the first talk show on either of the two main TV channels dedicated to the Odessa events.

### **3. Alternative News**

As Russian-born British journalist Peter Pomerantsev and his colleague Michael Weiss have pointed out, after the decline of the “grand narratives” of socialism, ideology in post-Soviet Russia has come to resemble “an interchangeable and

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16 Makukhin/Tsybulska/Kavatsiuk 2018: 31.

17 Timberg et al. 2002: 4.

18 Ibid.

contradictory set of accessories,”<sup>19</sup> in contrast to Soviet ideology, which “presented a coherent, self-sufficient, and seamless world-view.”<sup>20</sup> This has serious consequences for the credibility and reliability of facts or about what is presented as fact in Russian mass media, as Gleb Pavlovskii, a former consultant to Vladimir Putin, states: “Even if they [the Soviet propagandists] were lying, they took care to prove what they were doing was ‘the truth.’ Now no one even tries proving the ‘truth.’ You can just say anything. Create realities.”<sup>21</sup> Viewed from the perspective of current international discussions on filter bubbles, social media and troll factories, Russian mass media communication during the Ukraine crisis marks a turning point in what is publicly claimed and regarded as true or false, fact or fiction. This challenge, which emanates from contemporary media realities, has found its expression in the term ‘alternative facts’ or ‘alternative news,’ which can be understood as pieces of information that appear to be uncertain—either because they are highly biased or because they have been deliberately fabricated and disseminated. Conspiracy theories, unlike alternative news, lean towards totality and face the world’s ‘big’ questions and relations. In mass media communication, both phenomena coexist and complement each other.

The first report on primetime news of 2 May was little more than a description of what had happened on that day in Odessa and what was still ongoing. However impersonal and matter-of-factly it might have appeared, the report already included hints about how the event would be interpreted in the days that followed, and how it would be linked to the Russian media’s discourse on the Ukraine crisis more generally:

The activists of the “Right Sector” and “Self-Defense” from Kharkiv and Kiev, who earlier this day provoked mass riots in the center of the city, set fire to the tent camp of the anti-Maidan. In the camp at the square of the Trade Union building people collected signatures for a referendum and for the status of Russian as official language. The fire spread to the building. Neither the police, nor the fire brigade can be seen.<sup>22</sup>

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19 Pomerantsev/Weiss 2014: 5.

20 Arkhangelskiy 2016.

21 Pomerantsev/Weiss 2014: 9.

22 «Активисты “Правого сектора” и “Самообороны” из Харькова и Киева, которые ранее сегодня спровоцировали массовые беспорядки в центре города, подожгли палаточный городок Антимайдана. Это на площади перед облсоветом профсоюзов, там собирали подписи за референдум и государственный статус для русского языка. Огонь перекинулся на здание. Ни милиции, ни пожарных не видно».

The first report already exhibits a rhetorical-argumentative structure by presenting what happened in binary categories: On the one side, there are the “activists” (note the rather neutral word used here) who came from outside (from Ukraine’s largest cities Kharkiv and Kiev), and the “anti-Maidan protesters” on the other. In the news broadcasts that followed, the events of Odessa were represented in the—by then already established—friend-foe pattern of Ukraine “nationalists” (*natsionalisty*), “fascists” (*fashisty*), “radicals” (*radikaly*), “Ukraine ultras” (*ukrainskie ul’tras*), “neo-Nazis” (*neonatsisty*), or “Euromaidan” (*evromaidan*) on the one hand, and of “supporters of federalization” (*storonniki federalizatsii*) and “activists of an anti-fascist meeting” (*aktivisty antifashistskogo mitinga*) on the other.

From the first report in the primetime news of 2 May onwards, the set of statements and narratives that was developed from the news coverage of *Vremia* can be summed up as follows: The peaceful, local (i.e., Odessan) supporters of a federal Ukraine were attacked by nationalist and fascist radicals from outside and were literally slaughtered.<sup>23</sup> The police and other Ukrainian governmental institutions did not act and react adequately. They did not turn up when the Trade Union building caught fire (as was clearly stated in the first report) and in the days that followed, they did not conduct the necessary investigations. There are two central ‘alternative narratives’ developed in *Vremia*: One refers to the fights that took place in the streets of Odessa, the other one depicts what happened during the fire in and around the building.

In his report of 4 May,<sup>24</sup> Pavel Pchelkin presents the first narrative that would be repeated in the numerous broadcasts that followed until 23 May, when

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– “V Odesse gorit zdanie obshcheta profsoiuzov” (“The Trade Union building in Odessa is burning”), *Vremia*, 2 May 2014.

23 In the news broadcasts, the term “carnage” (*boinia*) is repeatedly used for what happened in Odessa. This is particularly the case in the first broadcast of 3 May, in which the word is used six times: first for establishing the image (it was a “real” [*nastoiashchaia*] and a “bloody” [*krovavaia*] carnage), then already rather matter-of-factly in phrases such as “during the carnage” or “from the place of the carnage.” – “V Odesse boeviki Pravogo sektora zashhgli protestuiushchikh v Dome profsoiuzov” (“In Odessa combatants of the Right Sector burnt the protesters in the Trade Union building alive”), *Vremia*, 3 May 2014.

24 See “Odesskaia tragediia ostavliaet mnogo voprosov” (“The Odessan tragedy leaves many questions”), *Vremia*, 4 May 2014.

the last lengthy news item<sup>25</sup> on the Odessa events was broadcast. According to Pchelkin's reasoning, which is backed up by audiovisual material and presented with the support of animation (see Figure 1), the two conflicting groups were infiltrated by Maidan agitators and professional combatants of the Right Sector. The combatants who mingled with the pro-Russian activists were wearing camouflage Saint George's ribbons. Their aim was to provoke the opposing crowd of football fans and to lead them in the direction of Kulykove Pole where they attacked the tent camp. The second narrative was developed with regard to the fire in the Trade Union building and runs as follows: The Right Sector's combatants invaded the building, set it on fire, and committed a number of atrocious murders ranging from the use of gas to carving up bodies.<sup>26</sup> Both narratives provide alleged evidence for a conspiracy behind the Odessa events—as a plan plotted by the Ukrainian Security Service and its secretary Andriy Parubiy, as claimed in the news broadcast of 6 May.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, it became the self-proclaimed task of Russian (TV) journalism to “disclose secret links” (*raskryt' tainye svyazi*), as

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25 See “Oni napisali ubiistva—stsenaristy odesskoi tragedii” (“They wrote the murder—the screenwriters of the Odessan tragedy”), *Vremia*, 23 May 2014.

26 Different stories behind this “mass murder” (Iuliia Ol'khovskaia in her report of 7 May) are primarily conveyed—mostly by eyewitnesses—in the lengthy reports of 6 and 7 May; see “V Odesse kolichestvo pogibshikh v Dome profsoiuzov mozhet byt' bol'she, chem utverzhdaiut ofitsial'nye vlasti” (“The number of dead people in the Trade Union building might be higher than the official authorities claim”), *Vremia*, 6 May 2014; “Mezhdunarodnye eksperty obnarodovali novye dannye o tragedii v Odesse” (“International experts revealed new facts about the Odessan tragedy”), *Vremia*, 7 May 2014). Additionally, the report of 6 May opens up another productive field of uncertainty and speculation by contesting the official Ukrainian death statistics. Numbers varying from 60 to 200 fatalities, once again purported by eyewitnesses and interviewees from Odessa in several news broadcasts in the days that followed, were utilized to spread distrust in the Ukrainian political institutions. The same subject is taken up by talk shows, as in the *Politika* issue of 14 May, where the alleged eyewitness Dmitrii Odinov, the leader of the Odessan self-defense militia, claims that more than 218 people died during the Odessa events.

27 See “Poiavilos' video, na kotorom sekretar' SNBO i predvoditel' sotni Maidana ob-suzhdaiut sotrudnichestvo” (“A new video appeared, on which the secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine and the Maidan Hundreds commander discuss collaboration”), *Vremia*, 6 May 2014.

news presenter Ekaterina Andreeva stated on 23 May when introducing the report with the telling title “Oni napisali ubiistva—stsenaristy odesskoii tragedii.”<sup>28</sup>

Figure 1: Animation



Vremia (News broadcast, 6 May 2014)

The friend-foe pattern is equally conveyed in talk shows, but it is expressed in a more vulgar, highly metaphoric language. Thus, when addressing the Kievan government, the Ukrainian army or the Ukrainian Security Service, talk show participants label their representatives “ugly creatures” (*urody*), “jerks” (*pridurki*), “gangsters” (*bandity*), “monsters” (*izvergi*), “beasts” (*zveri*) or “non-humans” (*neliudi*). In contrast to this, the pro-Russian victims of the Odessa events are termed “peaceful people” (*mirnye liudi*), “simple people” (*prostye liudi*), “orthodox people” (*pravoslavnye liudi*), “heroes” (*geroi*), or even “angels” (*angely*). The fire in the Trade Union building is referred to as a “lethal fire trap” (*smertel’naia ognennaia lovushka*) and a “planned carnage” (*boinia splanirovannaia*) which resulted from an “extermination order” (*prikaz na unichtozhenie*). Additionally, religious metaphors are used as the Odessa events are referred to as “hell” (*ad*), “ritual murder” (*ritual’noe ubiistvo*), or a “special satanic action” (*spetsial’naia satanicheskaia aktsiia*).

With regard to the two central narratives conveyed in the news broadcasts, the talk shows focused solely on the second narrative of the “carnage” in and

28 “They wrote the murder—the screenwriters of the Odessan tragedy”; see footnote 24.

around the Trade Union building, where “organized killers” (*organizirovannye ubiitsy*) and “fascist Ukrainian nationalists” (*fashistskie ukrainskie natsionalisty*) gassed, tortured, burnt and massacred peaceful people. The talk shows utilized the affective potential of the inadvertent disaster and maximized its emotional effects by extending upon already circulating narratives and by enhancing their thrilling and horrifying moments. Accordingly, the number of puppet masters behind the alleged plan is expanded to include perpetrators from outside Ukraine. In *Priamoi éfir* of 5 May, Evgenii Fedorov, the deputy of the Russian State Duma, even spoke of a “foreign intervention” (*inostrannaia interventsia*): “This is a foreign intervention, achieved by a coup d’état and punitive actions with the help of local punitive forces. ... This is an intervention from outside, both against Ukraine and Russia.”<sup>29</sup> It is noteworthy that the speaker repeats the catchword “punitive action” (*karatel’naia operatsiia*)—a term used previously by Vladimir Putin in his famous Crimean speech on 18 March, in which the keywords for the official rhetoric on the Ukraine crisis were coined; these included “fifth column” (*piataia kolonna*), “neo-Nazis” (*neonatsisty*) and “national-traitors” (*national-predateli*).<sup>30</sup>

The ‘alternative narratives’ presented in the news broadcasts were not only enhanced and expanded in the talk shows that focused on the Odessa events, but were also linked to anti-Western conspiracy theories. In *Priamoi éfir* of 5 May, invited experts repeatedly claimed involvement by the United States. Among these accusers was Aleksandr Iakovlev, a journalist working for the tabloid newspaper *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, who stated: “Let’s be honest. The punitive action has been ordered, the customer being situated across the ocean.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, alleged outside intervention was implied when Ukraine was referred to as a “hostage” (*zalozhnitsa*) in the *Politika* issue of 14 May, or when it was claimed that Ukraine had been supported by foreign specialists in *Priamoi éfir* of 5 May. To complete the picture, the circle of conspirators extended to inde-

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29 «Это иностранная интервенция, путём государственного переворота и карательных операции с помощью местных карательных частей. ... Это интервенция иностранная, и против Украины и России». – “Maiskaia Odessa: Khatyn’ XXI veka” (“Odessa in May—Khatyn’ of the 21st century”), *Priamoi éfir* 5 May 2014.

30 See “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii” (“Address by President of the Russian Federation”), 18 March 2014.

31 «У карательной операции есть заказчик. ... Заказчик карательной операции находится за Океаном, давайте скажем это честно». – “Maiskaia Odessa: Khatyn’ XXI veka” (“Odessa in May—Khatyn’ of the 21st century”), *Priamoi éfir* 5 May 2014.

pendent Russian media, in particular to the radio station *Ėkho Moskvy* and the TV channel *Dozhd'*, when, in the *Priamoi ěfir* issue of 27 May, the military columnist at *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, Viktor Baranets, called these media the “mouthpiece of the Kievan junta or the European Union.”<sup>32</sup>

In news broadcasts and talk shows alike, the central technique of disseminating alternative news and spreading rumors was to involve eyewitnesses, local interviewees, and invited ‘experts.’ The appearance of allegedly authentic people on screen opens up the possibility of transmitting statements about reality and expressing emotions that could never be articulated by the authoritative voice of state institutions. The montage of three women and their statements on the Odessan tragedy in the first news report, of 4 May, clearly shows how the voice of the ‘people’ is deliberately used to shape public sentiment and to enhance circulating narratives.<sup>33</sup> While the first woman embodies the popular outrage by demanding: “We are a peaceful city, we want to live here! We don’t want war!” The second voice names the crimes that have been committed by exclaiming: “People jumped out of the building, they murdered, they beat them, finished them off—this is a genocide of their own people!” Finally, the third woman offers a rational explanation of what happened: “This is not accessible to the intellect. To detain, burn people, and to find pleasure in it. In order to do this, you have to be a fascist.”<sup>34</sup> (see Figures 2 and 3)

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32 «В тылу нашего государства, точнее в центре Москвы орудует рупор ... Киевской Хунты или Европейского союза». – “Uzniki khunty: Za kem ochotiatsia karateli?” (“Prisoners of the junta: Who are the chastisers hunting for?”), *Priamoi ěfir*, 27 May 2014.

33 See “Odessity shturmovali militsiiu, chtoby ottuda vypustili protivnikov Kievskoi vlasti” (“Odessans assaulted the police in order to release the opponents of the Kievan government”), *Vremia*, 4 May 2014.

34 (1) «Мы мирный город, мы хотим здесь жить! Мы не хотим войны»; (2) «Люди выпрыгивали из зданий, они убивали, они их били, добивали — это геноцид своего народа!»; (3) «Ведь это умом не достижимо. Взять, сжечь людей и получить от этого удовольствие. Для этого нужно быть фашистом».



Figure 2



Vremia (News broadcast, 4 May 2014)

Figure 3



Vremia (News broadcast, 4 May 2014)

Talk shows exploit techniques of fictional genres and other TV formats and must, therefore, be situated in an interspace between the factual and the fictional. Although the invited guests are ‘real world’ people, they act as if they are on a stage and, thus, are subject to the rules of that particular talk show’s format. The oscillation between factual and fictional becomes particularly apparent in the huge number of guests invited for the *Priamoi éfir* issue of 5 May, as well as in the roles they play in their ‘real’ lives and on stage. With regard to their ‘real life,’ they can be assigned to three different fields: The first group consists of ‘experts,’ including journalists and writers; the second group are people involved in politics, such as activists from militias, armed volunteer groups, non-governmental organizations, or deputies of the Russian Parliament; finally, there is the huge group of eyewitnesses. However, when taking a closer look at the latter group, eyewitnesses often turn out to also be members of militias, armed volunteer groups, or non-governmental organizations. By presenting and giving a voice to representatives of militias or NGOs, Russian TV demonstrates that there is an active mass movement against the Euromaidan in Ukraine. This stress on anti-Maidan-activism can be regarded as part of a general strategy which was, and still is, pursued in Russian political discourse and subsequently in mass media; it aims to confront Western democracies with their own “mirror image.”<sup>35</sup> In the political crisis of 2014, this strategy inverted the Western perception of what was happening in Ukraine by asserting that fascists were the driving force at the Maidan in Kiev, and that pro-Russian democratic civic movement is being repressed by those who came to power in Kiev after the Euromaidan.

Although the talk show guests seem to only represent themselves, and are therefore regarded as authentic, their on-screen appearance is simultaneously clearly marked as theatrical—staged for the particular *show* the spectators expect. As actors on screen, they exhibit strong emotions like anger and grief by yelling, crying or jumping up with rage and in so doing heat up the atmosphere

in the studio. In addition to this, their performance is subject to the rules and techniques of a particular genre or format which, in our case, include hyperbole and the burlesque as characteristics.

A vivid example of the blending of real-live-roles, staging, and genre rules is Tamerlan Surovyi, an activist of the self-defense militia in Odessa, as well as an alleged eyewitness of the events. He appears three times in three different talk shows addressing the Odessa events: first in the two *Priamoi éfir* shows on 5 and 12 May, and finally in the *Spetsial'nyi korrespondent* issue of 20 May (see Figures 4 to 6). The most obvious signal of his fictionality is the activist's name: His first name, Tamerlan, is reminiscent of the fourteenth-century Turco-Mongol conqueror and military leader of the same name, while his surname, consisting of the adjective *surovyi* (harsh, severe), elicits associations with both heroic figures of medieval history (such as Ivan Groznyi) as well as the characters of popular fiction or comics.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, Tamerlan Surovyi greatly resembles a character from a TV series who moves from one talk show to another and should be recognized as such by spectators. Furthermore, Tamerlan Surovyi's appearance is masked in a theatrical fashion, his face never being fully visible, but covered with a balaclava or by sunglasses. This mask, of course, also signals that Tamerlan has to conceal his 'real' identity so as not to run into danger. Similarly, other talk show guests are also disguised, their masks leaning towards the burlesque, which is particularly true of the guests with head bandages—a blunt, eccentric sign of direct involvement. In this way, eyewitnesses combine the humorous with the atrocious<sup>37</sup> and function as one more means by which to transform the real events of Odessa into attractions in Eisenstein's sense and, as a whole, into a TV spectacle that is able to capture the spectators' attention.

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36 Tamerlan Surovyi is not the only nickname of this kind in talk shows. Another notable example is the allegedly wounded Vladimir Tverdyi (hard, strong) in *Politika* on 23 April 2014.

37 Aronson describes humor and atrocity as the two elements of Eisenstein's attraction; see Aronson 2003: 212.

Figure 4: Tamerlan Surovyj and another eyewitness

Figure 5: Tamerlan Surovyi

Figure 6: Tamerlan Surovyi



*Priamoi éfir*  
(Talk show, 5 May 2014)

*Priamoi éfir*  
(Talk show, 12 May 2014)

*Spetsial'nyi korrespondent*  
(Talk show, 20 May 2014)

#### 4. Atrocity Narratives

Images and narratives that convey atrocity and horror form the core of the rhetorical-affective side of the Odessa coverage. With regard to impactful factors, the atrocity narratives developed for the Odessa events can be divided into two groups: First, the fire topos, which is represented by the numerous amateur shots of the burning building and, as such, is reminiscent of the visual memory of the Second World War that has been primarily shaped by cinema. Second, we encounter images and narratives of the alleged carnage that went on inside the building, which are characterized by a representational gap due to, on the one hand, the improbability that such a life-threatening situation would be filmed at all and the impossibility of representing a traumatic experience of this kind on the other.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it is worthwhile to ask how the news programs dealt with this specific gap, i.e., how they presented the unrepresented and unrepresentable.

Regarding the fire topos, a strong focus lay on the discursive level, while the visual material of the Trade Union building in flames was impressive by itself and had a voyeuristic appeal of being able to watch the catastrophe from a safe distance. In the first news report of 3 May, which provides a description of what happened, the visual sequences and the verbal messages transmitted by the off-voice commentary interact to create dense images of human suffering—of people “driven into a fire trap,” “burnt alive” or “jumping into death.”<sup>39</sup> Visually, the

38 For questions concerning ‘media’ and their possible involvement in traumatic processes see, e.g., Paech 2014.

39 «загнанные в огненную ловушку», «сгорели заживо», «разбились насмерть».

people's struggle to survive is represented by shaky amateur shots that show people escaping the fire by climbing the cornice.

Apart from the present-tense immediacy that emanates from the sight of a burning building, the emotional impact of the fire topos is created by linking the fire of Odessa to the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The point of reference is the well-known Belorussian Khatyn', which has been commemorated in Soviet literature and cinema alike, as in the famous film *Idi i smotri (Come and See, 1985)* by Elem Klimov. In 1943, the German SS extinguished a whole village by locking the inhabitants up in a barn and setting it on fire. Those who were able to escape the flames were shot.

The link between Khatyn' and the burning Trade Union building was established immediately, but while the source of the established reference was mentioned in the first news report of 3 May—"What happened then is already described as a 'New Khatyn'" by journalists and bloggers"<sup>40</sup>—the similarities became more self-evident with every further repetition. Important elements of the Khatyn' mass murder were transferred to the present in order to enhance the correspondence, when in the news report of 3 May news reporter Ol'khovskaia stated that "those who tried to escape were shot."<sup>41</sup>

In contrast to the news broadcasts, talk shows again maximize the affective potential by working in terms of exaggeration. The first talk show about the Odessa events on 5 May was entitled "Odessa in May—Khatyn' of the twenty-first century"<sup>42</sup> and in the talk shows that followed—in *Priamoi éfir* of 12 May, as well as in *Spetsial'nyi korrespondent* of 20 May—further parallels to Nazi crimes were drawn by asserting that people inside the building were gassed with Teren, Chloroform or Sarin in Odessa.

The unrepresented and unrepresentable pictures of people dying in the fire or being—as the Russian TV news suggested to their spectators—slaughtered inside the building were substituted by presenting the result of the lethal fire. There is a set of about 15 different amateur photos depicting corpses, among them severely burnt bodies (see Figure 7). Together with the amateur footage of people stan-

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40 «То, что происходило дальше, журналисты и блогеры уже называют новой Хатынью». – "V rezul'tate stolknovenii i pozhara v Dome profsoiuzov Odessy pogibli 42 cheloveka, bolee 200 raneny" ("As a result of the clashes and the fire in the Trade Union building 42 people died in Odessa, more than 200 are wounded"), *Vremia*, 3 May 2014.

41 «Тех, кто пытался бежать, расстреливали». – *ibid*.

42 See "Maiskaia Odessa: Khatyn' XXI veka" ("Odessa in May—Khatyn' of the twenty-first century"), *Priamoi éfir*, 5 May 2014.

ding on the building's cornice, they form the visual core of atrocity images that were repeatedly presented in the news reports. Although the source of these pictures is usually indicated,<sup>43</sup> this does not tell us anything about their reliability or about who actually took them and where they were taken. The most controversial photo from the Odessa series depicts the corpse of a woman, her body bent over a table, which, in the mode of sensationalism, was identified as the body of a pregnant woman who had been strangled with a wire (see Figure 8).<sup>44</sup> In the *Priamoi éfir* issue of 5 May—a day before the photo was shown on *Pervyi kanal*—the story of atrocity was unfolded by the alleged eye-witness Galina Zaporozhtseva, a retired Colonel of the Militia in Odessa:

She has been strangled with the cable of a teakettle. There were frames, when she was screaming, everybody was listening and yelling: “Shut her mouth!” She screamed: “Help me!” and then, they hang out a flag, a Ukrainian flag, from the window that the screams were coming from. That is to say that they strangled a pregnant woman under the Ukrainian flag.<sup>45</sup>

In comparison to news broadcasts, the effects of direct participation and giving evidence are enhanced in the talk shows. In *Priamoi éfir* of 5 May, the set of atrocity pictures that circulated on *facebook*, *YouTube*, and numerous other websites were projected onto the studio screen. While the talk show host Boris Korchepnikov repeatedly requests the studio guests and the spectators to take a

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43 Some of the indicated links are still valid, as the blog in *Live Journal* (<http://rocorus.livejournal.com/225528.html>), others are of no value at all, such as “YouTube.com” or just “facebook.”

44 The identity of the dead woman, her age (actually 59), and the real cause of her death was disclosed by the Ukrainian StopFake project; see “Russia’s top lies about Ukraine. Part 2.” *Stopfake.org*, 10 July 2014.

45 «Она была задушена шнуром от чайника. Были кадры, когда она кричала, все слушали и кричат: “Закройте ей рот!” Она кричит “Помогите!” и потом из этого окна, из которого были крики, выставили флаг, украинский флаг. То есть под украинским флагом задушили беременную женщину»; see footnote 40. It is worth noting here that in the news report of 6 May, the connection between the female screams, the flying of the Ukrainian flag and the photo of the strangled woman was established simply by montage; see “V Odesse kolichestvo pogibshikh v Dome prof-soiuzov mozhet byt’ bol’she, chem utverzhdaiut ofitsial’nye vlasti” (“The number of dead people in the Trade Union building might be higher than the official authorities claim”), *Vremia*, 6 May 2014.

look—“Posmotrite!”—, the alleged eyewitnesses complement the visuals by recounting what they have seen with their own eyes.

Figure 7: Pixelated shock picture of a dead body



*Priamoi éfir* (Talk show, 5 May 2014). The same picture was also shown in *Vremia* (News broadcast, 6 May 2014).

In the news, an analogous voyeuristic effect is achieved—though by contrary means—when the news anchorman, right before the visual material is presented for the first time in the primetime news of 3 May, directly addresses the spectators and expresses a warning: “We will show what has happened, but possibly not everybody should see it, particularly not children and sensitive people. Certain scenes are just not imaginable in a country in the middle of Europe in the twenty-first century.”<sup>46</sup>

46 «Мы сейчас покажем, как все происходило, но возможно, что не всем стоит это видеть. Детям и впечатлительным зрителям уж точно. Отдельные сцены просто не мыслимы для страны в центре Европы в XXI веке». – “V Odessa boeviki Pravgogo sektora zazhivo sozhgli protestuiushchikh v Dome profsoiuzov” (“In Odessa combatants of the Right Sector burnt the protesters in the Trade Union building alive”), *Vremia*, 3 May 2014.

Figure 8: Strangled woman



*Vremia* (News broadcast, 6 May 2014). The same picture was also shown in *Priamoi ěfir* (Talk show, 5 May 2014).

Although the corpses in the pictures are pixelated, this does not lessen the emotional effect emanating from these images. What is visually not represented and not representable, is filled in by the spectators' imagination, and the particular thrill of these pictures that supposedly document the events definitely lies in the spectators' knowledge that this is real—no matter what is actually visible. Additionally, particularly in the talk shows, the eyewitnesses provide atrocity narratives to underline the visual material. Thus, in *Priamoi ěfir* of 5 May, there are claims that a man has been “raped” and that his face has been “beaten to a pulp.”<sup>47</sup> Tamerlan Surovyi asserts that people inside the Trade Union building have been “doused with petrol” and “set on fire”.<sup>48</sup> The mode of exaggeration again determines the atrocity narratives told in the *Priamoi ěfir* issue of 12 May, when the already mentioned Galina Zaporozhtseva asserts that cannibals have raged in the Trade Union building of Odessa: “Now we have the information ...

47 «его изнасиловали», «разбили все лицо».

48 «их сверху обливали бензином», «сжигали людей».

the factual information on cannibalism in the Trade Union building.”<sup>49</sup> Subsequently, a video is shown, depicting a group of men screaming “Come here, we will slightly grill them!”<sup>50</sup> and a man holding a pack of table napkins in his hands joins them. The burlesque display finally reaches its peak when artefacts are presented as evidence of the carnage, among them a sixteenth century torture device that was allegedly used to kill people in Ukraine.<sup>51</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Although manipulation by mass media is anything but a new phenomenon, the TV coverage of Odessa 2014 shows that there are new means and techniques, new formats and new strategies of making events visible and of representing the ‘real.’ As our analysis shows these new techniques are, above all, the results of the technological innovations of the past two decades which, at the present moment, appear to be most powerful when digital new means of mass communication merge with supposedly ‘old’ media. While the most effective means of mass communication in Russia today remains state-run TV, the propaganda campaign launched during the Ukraine crisis of 2014 heavily relied on social networks and internet platforms such as *YouTube*. Thereby, the production and dissemination of information was at least partly delegated to the users, proving themselves to be powerful instruments of manipulation, as were the textual strategies of transmitting alternative news and atrocity narratives. Thus, Marshall McLuhan’s assumption that in the age of mass communication intensity and immediacy are of much greater significance than content once again proves its validity.

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49 «Сейчас есть информация ... есть факты о каннибализме в доме профсоюзов». – “Den’ pobedy na barrikadakh: vystrely v minutu molchaniia” (“The Victory Day on the barricades: shots in the moment of silence”), *Priamoi éfir*, 12 May 2014.

50 «Иди сюда, прижарим их!» – *ibid*.

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- “Odessity shturmovali militsiiu, chtoby ottuda vypustili protivnikov Kievskoi vlasti” (“Odessans assaulted the police in order to release the opponents of the Kievan government”), *Vremia*, 4 May 2014. [http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-04/40904odessity\\_shturmovali\\_militsiyu\\_chtoby\\_ottuda\\_vypustil\\_i\\_protivnikov\\_kievskoy\\_vlasti](http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-04/40904odessity_shturmovali_militsiyu_chtoby_ottuda_vypustil_i_protivnikov_kievskoy_vlasti)
- “Odesskaia tragediia ostavljaet mnogo voprosov” (“The Odessan tragedy leaves many questions”), *Vremia*, 4 May 2014. [http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-04/40906-odesskaya\\_tragediya\\_ostavljaet\\_mnogo\\_voprosov?start=auto](http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-04/40906-odesskaya_tragediya_ostavljaet_mnogo_voprosov?start=auto)
- “Majskaia Odessa: Khatyn’ XXI veka” (“Odessa in May—Khatyn’ of the twenty-first century”), *Priamoi éfir*, 5 May 2014. [http://russia.tv/video/show/brand\\_id/5169/episode\\_id/985531/viewtype/calendar/year/2014/month/05](http://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/5169/episode_id/985531/viewtype/calendar/year/2014/month/05)
- “V Odesse kolichestvo pogibshikh v Dome profsoiuzov mozhet byt’ bol’she, chem utverzhdaiut ofitsial’nye vlasti” (“The number of dead people in the Trade Union building might be higher than the official authorities claim”), *Vremia*, 6 May 2014. [http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-06/41070-v\\_odesse\\_kolichestvo\\_pogibshih\\_v\\_dome\\_profsoyuzov\\_mozhet\\_byt\\_bolshe\\_chem\\_utverzhdaiut\\_ofitsialnye\\_vlasti](http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-06/41070-v_odesse_kolichestvo_pogibshih_v_dome_profsoyuzov_mozhet_byt_bolshe_chem_utverzhdaiut_ofitsialnye_vlasti)
- “Poiavilos’ video, na kotorom sekretar’ SNBO i predvoditel’ sotni Maidana obsuzhdaiut sotrudnichestvo” (“A new video appeared, on which the secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine and the Maidan Hundreds commander discuss collaboration”), *Vremia*, 6 May 2014. [http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-06/41072-poyavilos\\_video\\_na\\_kotorom\\_sekretar\\_snbo\\_i\\_predvoditel\\_sotni\\_maydana\\_obsuzhdaiut\\_sotrudnichestvo](http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-06/41072-poyavilos_video_na_kotorom_sekretar_snbo_i_predvoditel_sotni_maydana_obsuzhdaiut_sotrudnichestvo)
- “Mezhdunarodnye éksperty obnarodovali novye dannye o tragedii v Odesse” (“International experts revealed new facts about the Odessan tragedy”), *Vremia*, 7 May 2014. [http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-07/41160-mezhdunaronye\\_eksperty\\_obnarodovali\\_novye\\_dannye\\_o\\_tragedii\\_v\\_odesse](http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-07/41160-mezhdunaronye_eksperty_obnarodovali_novye_dannye_o_tragedii_v_odesse)
- “Den’ pobedy na barrikadakh: vystrely v minutu molchaniia” (“The Victory Day on the barricades: shots in the moment of silence”), *Priamoi éfir*, 12 May 2014). [http://russia.tv/video/show/brand\\_id/5169/episode\\_id/987016/viewtype/calendar/year/2014/month/05](http://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/5169/episode_id/987016/viewtype/calendar/year/2014/month/05)
- “Oni napisali ubiistva—stsenaristy odesskoi tragedii” (“They wrote the murder—the screenwriters of the Odessan tragedy”), *Vremia*, 23 May 2014. [http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-23/42422-oni\\_napisali\\_ubiystva\\_stsenaristy\\_odesskoy\\_tragedii?start=auto](http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-05-23/42422-oni_napisali_ubiystva_stsenaristy_odesskoy_tragedii?start=auto)

“Uzniki khunty: Za kem ochotiatsia karateli?” (“Prisoners of the junta: Who are the chastisers hunting for?”), *Priamoi éfir*, 27 May 2014. [http://russia.tv/video/show/brand\\_id/5169/episode\\_id/990684/viewtype/calendar/year/2014/month/05](http://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/5169/episode_id/990684/viewtype/calendar/year/2014/month/05)

### **Abstract**

In early May of 2014, the city of Odessa became the scene of violent clashes between pro-Russian and pro-Ukraine activists, resulting in nearly 50 casualties. Commentators on Russian TV reacted immediately and presented a highly biased interpretation of what had taken place in Odessa. This article examines the representation of the events in Russian news broadcasts and TV talk shows. The focus lies on ‘alternative’ news and the ‘fabrication’ of facts on the one hand, and on atrocity narratives as a highly effective means of attracting and stimulating the viewers’ attention on the other. Furthermore, questions concerning the interaction of the supposedly ‘old’ media of TV and the ‘new’ digital media will shed light on propaganda strategies and techniques, which while definitely not new in their general features, have changed significantly with respect to their potential impact and to new possibilities of dissemination.

# After the Final Full-Stop: Conspiracy Theories vs. Aesthetic Response in Miloš Urban's *Poslední tečka za rukopisy* (*The Final Full-Stop after the Manuscripts*)

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*Gernot Howanitz*

## **Keywords**

conspiracy theories; aesthetic response; Miloš Urban; Czech literature; nation building in literature

On 16 September 1817, Czech linguist Vacláv Hanka discovered a medieval manuscript in the crypt of St. John the Baptist in the church of Dvůr Králové, Bohemia. The manuscript contained six poems about important events that took place throughout Czech history and a collection of folk songs; all of the texts were written in Old Czech. Hanka dated the manuscript back to the thirteenth century and used them as demonstrable proof of a long-lasting Czech literary tradition. He translated the texts into modern Czech, which in turn served as the basis for a German translation. This translation was published in 1819 and was well-received throughout Western Europe. The manuscript was integral to the shaping of the Czech nation; for example, it inspired historian František Palacký to write his history of Bohemia, and parts of it were set to music by world-famous composer Antonín Dvořák.

The manuscript's authenticity was a topic that was heatedly debated from the outset; this was perhaps because Hanka's discovery was not the only one from that time. In 1816, Josef Linda—a close friend of Hanka—found another manuscript in Prague, and an anonymous scholar sent yet another manuscript, purportedly from the eighth century, to the National Museum in Prague in 1817. A plethora of scholars from diverse disciplines, such as linguistics, literary studies, history, chemistry, forensics, paleography, etc. tried to prove or disprove the au-

thenticity of the manuscripts; many prominent figures from Czech history had their say in the so-called “fight over the manuscripts” (*spor o rukopisy*). Nowadays, the various manuscripts ‘found’ by Hanka and Linda are considered to be fake, by and large, as a recent 900-page study argues;<sup>1</sup> only the Czech Manuscript Society (*Česká společnost rukopisná*) still insists on the benefit of remaining doubt, as a fairly recent book entitled *RKZ dodnes nepoznané (Manuscripts, to this Day Unrecognized, 2017)* demonstrates.<sup>2</sup>

Miloš Urban’s debut novel *Poslední tečka za rukopisy (The Final Full-Stop After the Manuscripts, 1998)* is based on this 200-year-long “fight over the manuscripts.” In the novel, the manuscripts are real and, therefore, an extra layer of conspiracy is added to the commonly accepted historical ‘truth.’ Hanka and Linda made the manuscripts seem forged not in order to harm the nascent Czech nation, but for another, even more sinister purpose: to abolish patriarchy. Moreover, the two scholars seem to have hidden identities. The novel’s protagonist Josef and his girlfriend Marie slowly uncover what actually happened by means of painstaking archival research, and then Josef uses their findings to further his academic career.

Most critics view Urban’s novel as a typical example of postmodern, meta-reflexive playfulness.<sup>3</sup> Not only are the protagonists in literary mystery novels written by Umberto Eco and Dan Brown professional scholars familiar with reading and interpretation, but the narrator often self-reflexively addresses the novel’s readers. Moreover, the text offers meta-reflections on the process of reading, on the relationship between reader and text, and it also implicitly alludes to Wolfgang Iser’s theory of aesthetic response.<sup>4</sup> In my opinion, these reflections and the focus on reading are not just examples of postmodernism, but these features are closely interlinked with the novel’s plot-shaping conspiracy theory. Urban’s novel points out how reading and misreading reality can be used to create conspiracy theories and, at the same time, uses artistic devices to illustrate these processes; oftentimes, the text deliberately leads its readers astray.

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1 Cf. Dobiáš et al. 2014.

2 Cf. Nesměrák et al. 2017.

3 Aleš Haman (1999: 11) sees the text as a post-modern literary game, Vladimír Stanzel (1999: 4–5) understands it as a game that Urban plays with the reader, and Jiří Peňás (2002: 89) points out that the text is, in many ways, playing with the various set-pieces of the detective novel.

4 Iser’s “Wirkungsästhetik” is often conflated with reader-response criticism, but Iser himself suggested translating the German term as “aesthetic response,” cf. Iser 1980: x.

Thus, the hunt to uncover the ‘truth’ becomes a reader-oriented phenomenon throughout the text’s multiple layers of truth and equally multiple layers of conspiracies.

In this chapter, I will attempt to show what might happen after the final full-stop of a “conspiracy narrative.”<sup>5</sup> I argue that Iser’s theory of aesthetic response applies not only to literary texts but can also be instructive in the context of conspiracy theories. I use Urban’s novel as an example because it not only shows how readers shape a literary text to their liking, and how conspiracy theories are based on (mis-)reading reality, but it also intertwines these two strands. In the first section, I will focus on theories of conspiracy theories which I will then, in the subsequent section, examine alongside Iser’s theory of aesthetic response. Both literary texts and conspiracy theories rely on reader agency; the only apparent difference is that in the case of conspiracy theories, it is not a text that is being (mis-)read, but all of reality. In the third section, I will summarize the plot and analyze Linda’s and Hanka’s feminist conspiracy in a close reading informed by the theory of aesthetic response. In the fourth section, I will reflect upon the connections between fact and fiction and draw further examples from Urban’s novel.

## Conspiracy Theory Theories

Before attempting to apply literary theory to conspiracy theories it is first necessary to reflect on their mutual relationship. Are conspiracy theories literary texts, even just to a certain extent? Following philosopher David Coady’s definition of conspiracy theories, there are indeed certain links between them and fictional texts:

A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an historical event in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an ‘official’ explanation of the same historical event.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Mark Fenster proposed the term “conspiracy narrative” to cover both fictional texts and real-world conspiracies, see Fenster 2008: 133–35.

6 Coady 2006: 117.

In other words, there are at least two different narratives involved in conspiracy theories: An ‘official’ one and a conspiratorial one. Both ‘explain’ historical events, and in so doing contradict each other. Given that the official explanation is *also* a narrative, similar techniques as those used in the conspiracy-informed theory have to be used. This realization is reminiscent of Hayden White, who has pointed out the influences of narrative patterns on historiography;<sup>7</sup> one should certainly not confuse an ‘official’ narrative with ‘truth’ or ‘historical reality.’ Following this understanding, the difference between conspiracy theories and official explanations becomes blurry: neither of them ought to be considered exclusively in terms of facts. However, there are differences to be found between official and conspiracy narratives. According to Brian L. Keeley, one key trait of conspiracy theories is that the conspirators have bad intentions.<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, Michael Butter boils conspiracy theories down to “a group of evil agents, the conspirators, has assumed or is currently trying to assume control over an institution, a region, a nation, or the world.”<sup>9</sup> Mark Fenster speaks about the “perpetrators of the evil conspiracy”<sup>10</sup> and Brotherton and French call the conspirators “a preternaturally sinister and powerful group of people.”<sup>11</sup> The association of conspiracies with evil agents is not an unsurprising one: Following poststructuralist theory, Jack Z. Bratich detects a power divide between official discourses and conspiracy theories: “The scapegoating of conspiracy theories provides the conditions for social integration and political rationality. Conspiracy panics help to define the normal modes of dissent.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Joseph E. Uscinski interprets conspiracy theories as an “accusatory perception.”<sup>13</sup>

But conspiracy theories are not merely counterpoints to, and at the same time cornerstones for, ‘official’ truth and power; they are also a narrative game. In a way, the conspiracy theories’ focus on evil makes for compelling stories; ‘official’ explanations, on the contrary, often follow the ideal of scientific objectivity—although they also have to be considered an expression of a specific ideological background. One constituent of a conspiracy theory’s narrative—or more specifically semiotic—game is misunderstandings, as Michael Butter points out:

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7 Cf. White 1973.

8 Cf. Keeley 2006: 51–52.

9 Butter 2014: 1.

10 Fenster 2008: 119.

11 Brotherton and French 2014: 238.

12 Bratich 2008: 11.

13 Uscinski 2018: 235.



Conspiracy theories are an expression ... of a semiotic [crisis of representation] ... As the conspirators constantly disavow the intentions that conspiracy theorists ascribe to them, they are producing signs which ... are supposed to mislead their unsuspecting victims.<sup>14</sup>

It has to be noted that Butter argues from the perspective of believers of conspiracy theories, i.e., the “unsuspecting victims.” But Brotherton and French underline the fact that a conspiracy theory’s success should not be attributed to the conspirators who are producing misleading signs; instead, it is the believers’ lack of reasoning skills which makes conspiracy theories believable. Brotherton and French outline the psychological background for the belief in conspiracy theories in the following manner:

Under conditions of uncertainty, people’s statistical intuitions are often at odds with objective laws of probability. In particular, people often misperceive the co-occurrence of the ostensibly unrelated events as being more likely than the occurrence of either component alone. The current findings suggest that ... conspiracy theories, similar with other anomalous beliefs, are associated with reasoning biases and heuristics.<sup>15</sup>

Bias, misperception, and misinterpretation are rife and a conspiracy theory is a misreading of reality that people fall for because of their cognitive biases. Similar ideas have been voiced by both Brian L. Keeley, who argues that conspiracy theories operate on “errant data” in official explanations and link unrelated events,<sup>16</sup> and by Mark Fenster, who states that a “conspiracy narrative is compelling ... in its attempt to explain a wide range of seemingly disparate past and present events and structures with a relatively coherent framework.”<sup>17</sup> Again, I wish to point out that the official narrative is by no means to be confused with ‘truth’ or ‘reality.’ In fact, both the conspiracy theory and its conflicting official explanation are narratives that have a varying degree of realism and adherence to facts.

In sum, a conspiracy theory is a narrative and, at the same time, it is a sign-reading game. Thus, the connection between literature and conspiracy theories is twofold: On the one hand, a conspiracy theory is a narrative that resorts to strategies and artistic devices from fictional texts. On the other hand, conspiracy theories exemplify reading processes. They rely on the power of the (mis-)reader to

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14 Butter 2014: 17–18.

15 Brotherton/French 2014: 246.

16 Keeley 2006: 51–52.

17 Fenster 2008: 119.

connect dots which are not necessarily connected. It is precisely this focus on the reader and her/his perception which has led me to subscribe to Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response which presents itself as a proper tool to analyze conspiracy theories. In the following sections, I will elaborate on this thought in greater detail.

## **An Aesthetic Response to Conspiracy Theories?**

According to Wolfgang Iser, the readers are responsible for the consistency of a literary text. This is especially true of longer texts where it is crucial that the readers be able to 'connect the dots':

Large-scale texts such as novels or epics cannot be continually 'present' to the reader with an identical degree of intensity ... The reader is likened to a traveler in a stagecoach, who has to make the often difficult journey through the novel, gazing out from his moving viewpoint. Naturally, he combines all that he sees within his memory and establishes a pattern of consistency, the nature and reliability of which will depend partly on the degree of attention he has paid during each phase of the journey.<sup>18</sup>

The meanings that are produced from combining individual signs can, in turn, become signs which can be connected further. Textual elements may help the readers to associate individual signs of the text and, thus, bring forward the "gestalt" of the text, i.e., a consistent interpretation as opposed to a connection of random elements that create arbitrary meanings.<sup>19</sup> One of those textual elements that shapes text-reader interaction is the so-called "blank" (*Leerstelle*). In this case, the text 'does' nothing at all and leaves everything—i.e., its inner consistency—up to the reader:

The blank ... designates a vacancy in the overall system of the text, the filling of which brings about an interaction of textual patterns. In other words, the need for completion is replaced here by the need for combination ... They [the blanks—G.H.] indicate that the different segments of the text *are* to be connected, even though the text itself does not say so. They are the unseen joints of the text, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously trigger acts of ideation on the reader's

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18 Iser 1980: 16.

19 Cf. *ibid.*: 120.

part. Consequently, when the schemata and perspectives have been linked together, the blanks ‘disappear.’<sup>20</sup>

In a way, a text is a superposition of multiple possibilities and interpretations that collapse only when the readers have subconsciously decided how they want to fill in the blanks. As Iser notes, the blanks “marshal selected norms ... into a fragmented, counterfactual, contrastive or telescoped sequence, nullifying any expectation of *good continuation*.”<sup>21</sup> The reader then “cannot help but try and supply the missing links that will bring the schemata together in an integrated gestalt.”<sup>22</sup> When conspiracy theories operate on “errant data” and focus on “blanks” in official narratives, it is not out of something like spite; this operation is simply a byproduct of the reading process. A conspiracy narrative is born when especially an official story cannot deliver what fulfills the readers’ aforementioned “expectation of *good continuation*.”

Iser also comments on the relationship between fact and fiction, between text and reality, which “are to be linked ... in terms not of opposition but of communication, ... fiction is a means of telling us something about reality.”<sup>23</sup> However, the text can never make the connection to ‘real’ reality; instead, the reader can only

... assemble the meaning toward which the perspectives of the text have guided him. But since this meaning is neither *a given external reality* nor a copy of an intended reader’s own world, it is something that has to be ideated by the mind of the reader. A reality that has no existence of its own can only come into being by way of ideation, and so the structure of the text sets off a sequence of mental images which lead to the text translating itself into the reader’s consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

A few pages later, Iser once again stresses that “no literary text relates to contingent reality as such, but to models or concepts of reality, in which contingencies and complexities are reduced to a meaningful structure.”<sup>25</sup> A literary text cannot relate to ‘reality,’ but “must bring with it all the components necessary for the construction of the situation, since this has no existence outside the literary

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20 Ibid.: 183, emphasis in original.

21 Ibid.: 186, emphasis in original.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.: 53.

24 Ibid.: 38, emphasis mine.

25 Ibid.: 70.

work.”<sup>26</sup> In this regard it is not possible to distinguish between literary texts and conspiracy theories: both are to be read as self-contained *simulations* of reality, but both stress their connection to a contingent reality to a certain extent. For conspiracy theories this relation is a necessity, but it is also heavily implied in some literary genres such as historical novels, autobiographies or documentary fiction. It seems a bit unfair to blame conspiracy theories for something that also applies to literary texts, especially given that the label ‘conspiracy theory’ is often used as a discursive weapon. This realization opens up another parallel between conspiracy theories and literary texts: According to Iser, literary texts have a specific intention. Rather than trying to reproduce reality, literary texts strive to put meanings to the forefront that have been neutralized or negated in reality<sup>27</sup> in order to “answer ... the questions arising out of the system.”<sup>28</sup> To a certain extent, literary texts provide narratives that oppose the ‘official’ stories, just as conspiracy theories do. Conversely, conspiracy theories may fulfill the same socio-critical functions as literature. In the following section I will try to further unravel these interferences.

## **A Feminist Conspiracy**

Literary scholar Josef Urban, an assistant professor of Czech philology at Charles University in Prague, and his girlfriend Marie Horáková, a postdoctoral researcher, set out to find the truth about the manuscripts from Zelená Hora and Dvůr Králové. The main impetus comes from Marie, while Josef, who also serves as a first-person narrator and poses as the book’s author, acts as her sidekick, her “Watson.” During archival work, Marie and Josef each uncover two letters from the correspondence of Vacláv Hanka, which provide further clues to the mystery of the manuscripts; however, Josef keeps one of them from both Marie and from the reader. More and more facts about the ‘real’ truth behind the manuscripts become uncovered; finally, Josef can solve the literary puzzle because of information provided in the last letter, a letter he alone knows about. He then goes on and (mis)uses Marie’s and his joint work to serve as his ‘habilitation.’<sup>29</sup>

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26 Ibid.: 69.

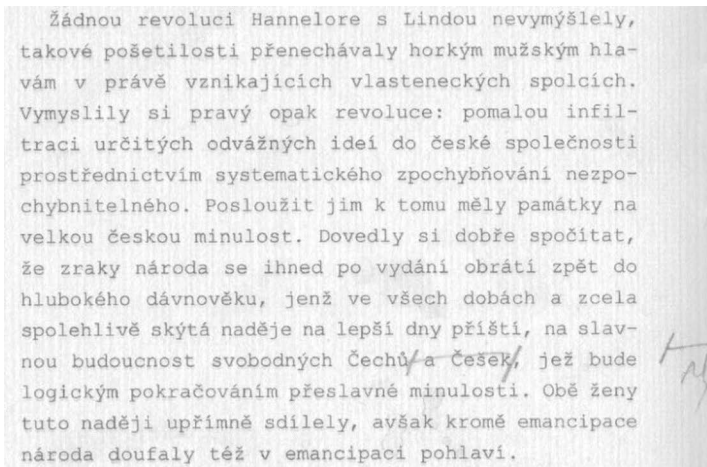
27 Ibid.: 72.

28 Ibid.: 73.

29 A habilitation is a second thesis which is needed to get tenure in the Czech academic system.

In Urban's novel, the manuscripts are real. Vacláv Hanka and Josef Linda, who were in fact both women, created the fabrication; they created errors and little details that do not add up and which would then lead attentive readers to doubt the manuscripts' authenticity. The goal of Linda, Hanka, and their fellow feminist conspirers—among them also Božena Němcová, the 'godmother' of Czech literature—was to sow the seed of doubt into Czech society so that Czech people would distrust everything and, ultimately, put an end to the patriarchy. In this context, Josef's habilitation is a twofold "final full-stop": Not only is the text intended to end all discussions about the manuscripts, given that it presents the 'full' truth, but it also implicitly shows that the conspirers' feminist dream has utterly failed: Josef harvests all of the academic glory, in spite of Marie being the driving force behind their shared research. Marie may be emancipated all right, but the old patriarchal hegemony is still going strong nevertheless. The last chapter of Urban's novel, consisting of the typescript of the introduction to Josef's habilitation, even *visually* shows us how women are removed from academic discourse. In the sentence "the future of free male and female Czechs,"<sup>30</sup> the part about female Czechs is crossed out in a handwritten comment (cf. Image 1). Hanka's and Linda's conspiracy has failed, the patriarchy is still in full effect and their carefully planted seed of doubt has been eradicated.

*Image 1: The typescript of Josef's habilitation shows how women are removed from the story.*<sup>31</sup>



30 "budoucnost svobodných Čechů a Češek" – Urban 2005: 225 (all translations G.H.).

31 Urban 2005: 225.

The novel's pivotal point is Josef's realization that V. Hanka and J. Linda are actually women, namely Hanka V. (Vierteliová) and Linda J. (Jannowitzová). The forgers being female is a compelling twist which relies on a misreading of reality: Hanka's and Linda's surnames are misread as female first names. In this context, it is no accident that gender equality is a recurring theme throughout the novel. Susceptibility to conspiracy theories, for example, is linked to gender: Marie states that: "I am a woman, who is able to create a complicated history out of naked facts ... you are a man, a philologist with a clear mind ... You like sharp contours, bright light and unambiguous concepts."<sup>32</sup> According to Marie, only the cold, rational man can uncover the truth, whereas women might transform any fact into a "complicated history." This idea of the 'cold, rational man' is subverted by the fact that Marie is the one who deciphers most of the clues under consideration, and that Josef is the one to actually solve the puzzle not by using his "clear mind" but more by using deception and outright treachery. Ironically, Marie's quote also applies to Hanka and Linda: In their feminist quest, they plant signs which are intentionally ambiguous and lead the readers astray. What is a fact in the novel—the manuscripts' authenticity—becomes "complicated" fiction, a fabricated fabrication.

In a way, Urban's novel also operates in a similar fashion, creating false leads and misdirecting the reader. The text occasionally presents fabricated historical 'facts' which are not crucial to the story, but which challenge the reader's historical knowledge. One such example concerns the burial place of Czech poet Karel Havlíček Borovský. In the novel he is buried in Slavín, the Czech 'pantheon' on Vyšehrad hill in Prague, but in reality he found his final resting place in Prague's largest cemetery, Olšany.<sup>33</sup> Another example of the novel engaging the reader is when Urban smuggles his literary inspiration, novelist Peter Ackroyd,<sup>34</sup> into a list of Marie's favorite English-language authors:

Swift, Fielding, Richardson, Sterne, Defoe, Austenová, Shelleyová, Radcliffová, Reevová, Eliotová, Gaskellová, Brontěovy, Dickens, Thackeray, Hardy, Scott, Carroll, Conrad, Wilde, Maugham, Bennett, Galsworthy, Lawrence, Joyce, Woolfová, Huxley, Lewis, Lehmannová, Compton-Burnettová, Forster, Westová, Wells, Waugh, Orwell, Rhysová,

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32 "[jsem] ženská, co je i z holého faktu schopná udělat složitou historii ... Ty jsi mužský, filolog s jasnou myslí. ... Máš rád ostré kontury, jasné světlo a jednoznačné pojmy." – Urban 2005: 70–71.

33 Cf. Slomek 1998.

34 Peter Ackroyd's novel *Chatterton* (1987) specifically served as an influence for Urban's novel; cf. Nagy 1999: 19 and Ficová 2000: 13.

Murdochová, Sparková, Lessingová, Beckett, Durrell, Greene, Wilson, Golding, Hartley, Fowles, Johnson, Trevor, Wain, Braine, Amis, Amis, Burgess, Gray, Carterová, Bainbridgeová, Tremainová, Weldonová, Wintersonová, Byattová, Drabbleová, Brooknerová, Gallowayová, Barkerová, Rushdie, Barnes, Boyd, McEwan, *Ackroyd*, Miller, Swift ...<sup>35</sup>

Here, the reader needs to have extensive knowledge of English literature and a liking for close reading, otherwise this hint, which is hidden at the very bottom of the list, can be overlooked easily. Furthermore, Josef claims that “I never heard about most of them in my whole life,”<sup>36</sup> so even this riddle on the meta-level can only be solved by Marie. A final example of reader activation may be found in the acknowledgments section of Josef’s habilitation, which concludes the novel:

I have the honor to add my thanks to a person, who stood right at the source of my interest for the described facts who during the course of the research activities kindly offered encouragement, always was willing to selflessly help and give good advice. This person, without whom my scientific work barely would have seen the light of day, is lecturer Dr. Jaroslav Sláma.<sup>37</sup>

Josef claims that he could not have written his thesis without one very dear and special person. Of course the reader suspects that finally Marie will be recognized for her contribution. This hope is fueled by the use of “osoba” for “person” which has a specific consequence: All verbs and participles have to be put in the female form (“stála,” “byla nakloněna,” “ochotna,” etc.). Thus, Marie is evoked in the reader’s mind. This expectation is crushed in the final sentence, when Josef enthusiastically thanks his nemesis, the department head Jaroslav Sláma. The use of feminine forms, however, ensures that at least some ambiguity is preserved: Perhaps Josef indeed wanted to thank Marie, but then he was too weak to fight academic tradition; maybe he did feel remorse for having ousted Marie and planted some hints in his habilitation which point to the ‘real’ author. In a similar vein, the previously mentioned use of gender mainstreaming in Josef’s habilita-

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35 Urban 2005: 145–46, emphasis mine.

36 “O většině z nich jsem v životě neslyšel.” – Urban 2005: 146.

37 “Dovoluji si připojit děčné poděkování osobě, jež stála u zrodu mého zájmu o popisované skutečnosti a v průběhu výzkumných a badatelských prací mi byla laskavě nakloněna svou přízní, vždy ochotna obětavě pomoci a dobře poradit. Tímto člověkem, bez něhož by má vědecká práce sotva spatřila světlo světa, je Doc. Dr. Jaroslav Sláma.” – Urban 2005: 229.

tion is removed by his advisor (cf. Image 1). Josef fights for gender equality, but only when it comes at no cost. As soon as he is opposed—mostly by more powerful men than himself—he tucks his tail between his legs.

That we are dealing with a feminist conspiracy as part of Urban's conspiracy narrative does not come as a surprise, given that conspiracy narratives, as Michael Butter puts it,

... articulate ... conflicts between classes and religious denominations, concerns about proper political representation and the undue influence of certain groups, or anxieties about race and gender relations and 'proper' sexual behavior as fears of subversion and infiltration.<sup>38</sup>

In Urban's novel, the Czech feminists of the nineteenth century could not openly advocate feminism but resorted to "subversion and infiltration." The "crisis of representation" mentioned previously applies in a twofold manner here: Czech nationalists agitated hard to establish a Czech nation; gender relations were not their primary concern. So, first there is the crisis of representation of the Czechs in the German-dominated Habsburg empire, and on top of that the crisis of representation of women. Realizing this, Linda and Hanka piggybacked on the nationalist cause to be able to realize their emancipatory goals in the long run. Worth mentioning here is that most conspiracies and conspiracy theories follow a specific pattern; they strive to take over the world which one could argue is a 'masculine' idea. The feminist conspiracy presented in Urban's novel just wants to position ideas in the official Czech discourse—and thus, not conquer, but rather subvert it; patriarchy should not be followed by matriarchy, but rather by an equal rights society. Hanka's and Linda's conspiracy is fueled by good intentions and does not have negative consequences for anyone, which sets it apart from the majority of other (literary) conspiracies.

## Fact and Fiction

Urban's novel is not only about a feminist conspiracy, it is also about fact and fiction, which becomes evident when the question of genre is addressed. The novel itself claims to be an example of the "nolitfak" genre—an abbreviation of "New factual literature" (*nová literatura faktu*). This genre pretends to be as factual as possible and claims not to use any literary devices: "Everything is clear

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38 Butter 2014: 283.



and authentic—*nolitfak* does not need any imaginary narrator or protagonist. Here, their roles are played by the author.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, there is also no protagonist in the novel. Josef Urban poses as author, narrator, and protagonist; Miloš Urban at first even used a pseudonym so that the novel itself would have been written by one Josef Urban. Of course, he could have named the protagonist Miloš as well but then he would have lost a plethora of allusions: from the biblical Joseph and Mary to the forger Josef Linda and Božena Němcová’s husband Josef Němec. Looking at these allusions it becomes immediately clear that “*nolitfak*” is in no way close to authenticity. Nonetheless, the text underlines that its author is not even an author, given that all he does is present facts and nothing more. The specific (invented) genre of “*nolitfak*” is a caricature of “*litfak*,” which at times dealt with the manuscripts, see, for example, Miroslav Ivanov’s book *Tajemství rukopisů královédvorského a zelenohorského* (*The Secrets of the Manuscripts from Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora*, 1969).<sup>40</sup> The genre implies a specific perspective of reception, or at least the “author” hopes that this reader position is invoked: “Who works with facts, has readers’ trust guaranteed.”<sup>41</sup> This is a very easy and lazy position: “You have to understand that I do not want to leave anything to the reader’s imagination. My life and my physiognomy are both naked facts.”<sup>42</sup> The readers literally do not have to do anything, and they are specifically told to deactivate their imagination. This is a good thing, because then “the reader can concentrate ... on the trustworthy narrator’s fluent delivery, a narrator of flesh and bones, who he or she actually can touch.”<sup>43</sup> The “author” downplays his own influence on the text, while at the same time he tries to trick the readers into thinking that they do not have any control over the narrative. But the narrator’s claim that the text is solely fact-based soon crumbles, as his jealous personality comes to the fore: “When you are interested in what some novelist or poet did and worked on for a living, ... why are you all of a sudden acting as if you are not interested in *my* life?”<sup>44</sup> Even a solely factual “*nolitfak*” cannot

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39 “Vše je však ryzí a autentické—*nolitfak* žádného imaginárního vypravěče ani hrdinu nepotřebuje. Jejich roli zde zastává jen a jen autor.” – Urban 2005: 82.

40 Cf. Machala 2008: 302; for the book, see Ivanov 1969.

41 “Kdo pracuje s fakty, má důvěru čtenářů zaručenou.” – Urban 2005: 35.

42 “Pochopte, že nechci, aby cokoli bylo ponecháno čtenářově fantazii. Můj život a má fyziognomie, to jsou přece holá fakta.” – Urban 2005: 31.

43 “Čtenář ... může se soustředit na plynulý přednes věrohodného vypravěče z masa a kostí, vypravěče, na kterého si může sáhnout.” – Urban 2005: 24.

44 “Když vás zajímá, co dělal a čím žil kdekterý romanopisec a básník, ... proč se najednou tváříte, že vám nic není po *mém* životě?” – Urban 2005: 32, italics original.

force readers to accept everything, and when the narrator's life is boring, the audience does not have to like it.

The novel's specific—and cliché-laden—comments on the relationship between reader and text hyperbolically contradict Iser's positions and, thus, seem to implicitly support them. At the same time, the text directly alludes to Iser's idea of the "blank." "Slender, not yet 30, ... and, as you already know, with a prominent ... nose... What? I haven't told you about any nose? Why should I have? You imagined her being nose-less?"<sup>45</sup> Although the narrator never mentioned any nose, the readers implicitly assume that Marie does have one and, in a similar fashion, they fill in all of the other blanks the text was not able, or did not care, to address. Of course the fact that Marie indeed does have a nose is in no way relevant to the plot; what happens here is a meta-reflection on the impossibility of covering *all* of reality in a literary text. In this regard, the text traces a development: In the beginning, the narrator claims that it is possible to write a text which is completely factual without any fictional elements; for these texts he proposes the genre of "nolittak." However, soon Josef has to admit that "I was brought into the magical labyrinth of her narration, to the maze with two exits: truth and lie."<sup>46</sup> Here, the text is suddenly navigating the fringe between truth and lie. Finally, Marie comes to the realization that "we can finally stuff ourselves with your gray Wahrheit, ... Dichtung und Dichtung is her credo, Dichtung und Dichtung."<sup>47</sup> This is of course a variation on Goethe's autobiography entitled *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, 1811–1833). When "Dichtung und Wahrheit" becomes "Dichtung und Dichtung," literature is marked as something entirely fictional; there might be connections to 'real' facts, but they are simply of no importance whatsoever. In what seems to be taken from post-structural theory, the signifier does not refer to any external object, but rather points to the world of signs.

What led to the uncovering of the truth about the manuscripts is actually an arbitrary decision. "I could have chosen a different box ... The world would

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45 "Štíhlá, ještě ne třicetiletá, ... a, jak už víte, s prominentním ... nose... Co prosím? Že jsem o žádném nose zatím nemluvil? A proč bych měl? To jste si ji představovali beznosou?" – Urban 2005: 40.

46 "Já jsem byl volky nevolky nanovo natažen do kouzelného labyrintu jejího vyprávění, do bludiště se dvěma východy: pravdou a lží." – Urban 2005: 61.

47 "Máme se s tou svou šedivou Wahrheit konečně vycpat, ... Dichtung und Dichtung, zní její krédo, Dichtung und Dichtung." – Urban 2005: 149.

have kept turning, and you would have read a different factual text.”<sup>48</sup> So there is no universal truth, everything is just a story which could have turned out otherwise. Of course, from the reader’s perspective this decision is everything but arbitrary. Josef has to find the clue, otherwise there is no conspiracy narrative or rather: there is no conspiracy narrative which is to be uncovered. In a similar vein, small clues are able to turn everything on its head: “In the air hangs a new puzzle, a brain-teaser, whose decipherment, if it happens sometimes, provides further knowledge, which root-and-branch overthrows our old certainties and turns many a belief upside down.”<sup>49</sup> Urban’s novel puts this fragility of both the narrative and truth at the very forefront and thereby comments on the relationship of fact and fiction in very much the same way as Iser does: fact and fiction are communicating inasmuch as fiction can be seen as a commentary on real-world facts.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

*Poslední tečka za rukopisy* shows how conspiracy narratives work as a performative phenomenon of reception; what is interesting is that Hanka’s and Linda’s conspiracy does not follow common traits of conspiracy theories, but rather tries to anchor poststructuralist deconstruction in Czech society. Correspondingly, the novel itself is often considered to be a typical example of postmodern playfulness and irony; but as the application of aesthetic response has shown, there is more to the text. In many ways, the novel illustrates how conspiracy theories operate and at the same time demonstrates that if literary texts overstress their connection to facts, they fail miserably. As Iser put it, literary texts might operate with fragments from reality, and they might comment on reality, but they are not to be confused with ‘real’ truth and reality. The key difference between literary texts and conspiracy narratives, then, becomes the derogatory function of the latter. Urban, however, opposes this common interpretation of conspiracy theories as something sinister and negative by means of imagining a positive example. Hanka and Linda try to make the world a better place. Unfortunately, they ulti-

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48 “Mohl jsem si vybrat jinou krabici ... Svět by se točil dál a vy byste četli jinou literaturu faktu.” – Urban 2005: 91.

49 “Ve vzduchu visí nový rebus, hádanka, jejíž rozluštění, podaří-li se kdy, přinese poznatky, jež nám od základu převrátí staré jistoty a postaví na hlavu nejedno přesvědčení.” – Urban 2005: 20.

50 Cf. Iser 1980: 53.

mately fail. The continuation of the patriarchy is embodied by Josef, who is dependent on Marie in every aspect, but nonetheless manages to betray her in the end. Though if we accept Josef's habilitation—specifically the acknowledgements—as a further puzzle piece in this ongoing literary mystery, then the circle of semiosis has not ended and doubt might still run rife.

The way in which Urban plays with his readers is quite telling, as it mimics the way conspiracy theories are born and propagated further: false traces on the author's part are complemented by misreadings on the reader's part. In this context, Iser's theory of aesthetic response has proven helpful because it identified elements of the text which rely on reader participation. Especially significant are the parts where the narrator denies the readers' control over the text, because in most of these cases he later has to admit that he was wrong.

What happens after the final full-stop of a text has been written? As Urban's novel points out, the final full-stop is only the beginning of a complex semiotic process of shifting meanings and reading between the lines. In a way the promised final full-stop, which would end the "fight over the manuscripts" once and for all, is misleading; most of the semiotic processes start to happen only *after* the final full-stop of a text has been written, after a conspiracy theory sees the light of day.

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## Abstract

Miloš Urban’s debut novel *Poslední tečka za rukopisy* (*The Final Full-Stop after the Manuscripts*, 1998) retells the story of a central Czech nation-building myth: the manuscripts of Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora. These two purported medieval manuscripts were used in the nineteenth century to demonstrate Czech literature’s long history and were later discovered to be fake. In Urban’s version, a feminist conspiracy is added to this already complicated story. The protagonist and his girlfriend, two philologists at Charles University in Prague, uncover that the manuscripts are real and that Božena Němcová, one of the most prolific Czech writers of the nineteenth century, simply tried to make them look fake to-

gether with two other female conspirators. In this chapter, I study the fictional conspiracy as described by Urban. In so doing, I point out parallels between literary texts and conspiracy theories and show the advantages of applying Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response to conspiracy theories.

# Trauma, Conspiracy, Memento: Representations of the Munich Crisis in Czech Cinema

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*František A. Podhajský*

## **Keywords**

Munich crisis; Czech cinema; narratology; memory studies; traumatic story; conspiracy story

Cultural traumas emerge when “members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event,” but these “events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma.”<sup>1</sup>

Instead, the process of the “socially mediated attribution” is what determines its generic identity and the extent of its dissemination.<sup>2</sup> In this way, one could paraphrase the main argument of Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of cultural trauma, which, despite its sociological anchoring, also creates a good precondition for an exploration of the artistic representations of these traumas: “Representation of trauma depends on constructing a compelling framework of cultural classification. In one sense, this is simply telling a new story.”<sup>3</sup>

The question is what kind of story this would be. According to Alexander, it is a master narrative that combines four different elements: the pain, the victim, the wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility.<sup>4</sup> Such a definition is insufficient from the perspective of the analysis of concrete representations of cul-

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1 Alexander 2012: 6 and 13.

2 Ibid.: 13.

3 Ibid.: 17.

4 Cf. *ibid.*: 17–19.

tural traumas, however, because it only describes the level of social communication within which the trauma is processed, not the level of the story itself.

In order to define a traumatic story, we will first have to turn to a smaller analytical unit, Gerald Prince's term *minimal story*, for example, which defines the basic narrative sequence as follows: state A becomes non-A as a result of event B. In other words: "John was happy, then John met a woman, then, as a result, John was unhappy."<sup>5</sup> The traumatic story is specific in that it does not develop this basic scheme any further. John just remains sad.

In one of his late works, Lubomír Doležel also noted the special nature of the fictional worlds that are generated by this kind of story. "Passive fictional worlds," as he called them, "arise in such a way that the dominant component of the world moves away from the actions of the agents to the 'passivity' of the affected characters."<sup>6</sup> According to his findings, such worlds are characterized by a "tendency to narrative staticness" and usually also by a "strong dynamic of inner, mental life of fictional persons."<sup>7</sup> Despite all of these limitations, however, the passive worlds have "as strong narrative potencies and as rich diversity" as the worlds of action.<sup>8</sup>

The traumatic story, thus, derives only from the first element of Alexander's scheme, but the supposed source of this "pain" may actually be the starting point for a different type of story in which the main task is "to establish the identity of the perpetrator."<sup>9</sup> Detective stories are extraordinarily widespread and are for the most part completely independent of the original traumatic story. One of their variants is also a conspiracy story, which is based primarily on the impossibility of identifying or convicting the perpetrator. The reason for this is that it is not just an individual, but a whole network of perpetrators whose share in crime is difficult to detect and prove. As a social practice, this kind of story represents a "narrative structure capable of reuniting ... the collective and the epistemological."<sup>10</sup> Conversely, the epistemological power of such a story is often uncertain and may also result in the destruction of the scapegoat.

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5 Prince 1973: 35.

6 "Trpné fikční světy vznikají tak, že se dominantní složka světa přesunuje od akcí konatelů k 'trpení' postižených postav." – Doležel 2010: 423.

7 "sklonem k narativní staticnosti", "silnou dynamičností vnitřního, duševního života fikčních osob" – ibid.: 425.

8 "stejně silné narativní potence a stejně bohatou rozmanitost" – ibid.: 439.

9 Alexander 2012: 19.

10 Jameson 1992: 9.



Contrary to Alexander's idea of a single master narrative, which governs individual stories that are initiated by a particular trauma, these introductory remarks have shown that representations of cultural traumas operate in a far more complex narrative framework. However, in order to properly defend this thesis, first a concrete historical sample is needed.

## The Munich Crisis and Its Emplotments

The political crisis of September 1938, which led to the loss of a significant part of Czechoslovak territory for the benefit of Nazi Germany, left a significant mark in the collective memory of the Czech nation and was, for some time, also the source of extensive cultural trauma. Historian Zdeněk Beneš, who examined the portrayal of this crisis in Czechoslovak and Czech history textbooks, discovered three different narrative patterns through which this trauma was presented over time.

In the brief period of the Third Czechoslovak Republic (1945–48), when the Munich events were still “perceived as part of the present,” there were textbooks dominated by renditions of the crisis in the form of a traumatic story.<sup>11</sup> However, a new emplotment was established in the textbooks after February 1948, when the political regime was changed. The conspiracy story, which formed the basis of the official interpretation of the time, was in fact realized in two different variants. On the one hand, it developed the story of the betrayal of the Western Allies and, on the other hand, the story of traitors within the nation, whose roles were cast by some important representatives of the pre-war Czech bourgeoisie.

In the new framework, the previous traumatic story has also lost its importance because the “new social order ... has pushed the Munich crisis, its causes and immediate consequences, into the past.”<sup>12</sup> After November 1989, long-recurring conspiracy stories also followed the same fate and “Munich” took the form of a memento, which provided students with an opportunity to experience the fateful events from a distance and in a broad context. As one of the post-November textbooks summarizes: “The adoption of the Munich decisions raises

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11 “pocit'ované jako součást přítomnosti” – Beneš 2004: 282.

12 “nový společenský řád, který Mnichov odsunul, jeho příčiny i bezprostřední důsledky, do minulosti” – *ibid.*: 286.

an eternal question: should we or shouldn't we defend ourselves? There is no simple and clear answer."<sup>13</sup>

The research undertaken by Zdeněk Beneš has confirmed that cultural trauma can be expressed in various emplotments. However, in addition to the traumatic story and the conspiracy story that we have inferred from Alexander's scheme, he adds one more: memento. But is this really an emplotment? Is it not, instead, some broader narrative strategy? Can we also find the same time sequence in the history of artistic representations of the Munich events? A more detailed survey of the films inspired by the Munich crisis can provide answers to these questions.

### **Nine Years after the Crisis**

*Uloupená hranice* (*The Stolen Frontier*, premiered on 14 March 1947) was the feature-length neorealist debut of director Jiří Weiss (1913–2004), who worked in Great Britain during World War II, where he made a number of war documentaries as a member of the government's Crown Film Unit. The screenplay for the film was based on a story by Miloslav Fábera ("Dny zrady"/"Days of Betrayal"), but Weiss intervened in the script while filming, removing unnecessary pathos and paper dialogues from the film.<sup>14</sup>

The story of a local community living in the Czechoslovak border area in the Ore Mountains takes place at the time of the Munich crisis from 22 to 30 September 1938 (the passage of time is marked by a calendar hanging in the office of the local police station). The escalating relationships between the Czech minority and the German majority are depicted by the tragic fate of the Langer family. The German father and the Czech mother symbolize the bygone ideas of the mutual rapprochement of both nations, but their children face the current political struggle against each other. Anna Marie, who helps with cleaning at the local police station, tells the *gendarmes* that her brother is involved in smuggling weapons for German illegal troops. Her brother, Hans, explicitly emphasizes his chosen identity by using the German version of his first name: "I'm not Honzíček, I'm Hans!"<sup>15</sup> Eventually, he deceives his sister to get out of prison and set fire to the police station.

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13 "Přijetí mnichovských rozhodnutí otvírá věčnou otázku: měli, nebo neměli jsme se bránit? Není na ni jednoduchá a jednoznačná odpověď." – *ibid.*: 292.

14 Cf. Weiss 1995: 96.

15 "Nejsem Honzíček, jsem Hans!"

The story of the Langer family is a story about the separation of the German and Czech communities and it, rather characteristically, culminates at the end of the second third of the film. After an argument with Hans, Anna Marie runs away from the cottage where Old Langer is in a confrontation with the local “Ordner.” A random shot hits his wife, whose final words invoke the names of both of her children, as one of them, Hans, chases after his sister.

The final third of the film is focalized only from the perspective of the local Czech community, which fortified the police station and took care of supplies needed for the incoming unit of the Czechoslovak army. The defensive fight, which is victoriously fought, eventually loses all sense when a message is received from headquarters ordering the withdrawal of all Czech troops. The director himself emphasized the emotional tone of the film’s conclusion: “When Sergeant Vrba lowered the flag of the Republic and the only sound was the creak of a pulley, we all had tears in our eyes. Spontaneous applause always broke out after the last words: ‘We’ll come back.’”<sup>16</sup>

### **The Thirty-Fifth Anniversary**

Another Czech film, on the theme of the Munich crisis, was also based on the aforementioned short story by Miloslav Fábera, who in the meantime had become—in 1970—the director of the Barrandov Film Studio. However, director Otakar Vávra (1911–2011) turned the story of the Czech border community into a minor episode and built his *Dny zrady* (*Days of Betrayal*, premiered on 27 April 1973) as a three-hour documentary drama that gradually depicts the complicated diplomatic negotiations that led to the Munich Agreement.

Based on archival sources, the film shows the individual steps taken by European statesmen and Czechoslovak politicians and illustrates their implications for the domestic population through a series of fictional stories. Nevertheless, these stories and the selection of historical facts depicted already lead to a certain framework of interpretation. Its essence is the title theme of betrayal, which is realized in several forms throughout the film.

First of all, one such betrayal can be seen in the treason committed by Konrad Henlein, chairman of the Sudeten German Party, at his meeting with Adolf Hitler at the end of March 1938. Henlein promises to speak to preserve Czecho-

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16 “Když [četař Vrba] spouští vlajku republiky a jediným zvukem je vrzání kladky, měli jsme všichni slzy v očích. Po posledních slovech filmu ‘My se ještě vrátíme’ vždycky propukl spontánní potlesk.” – *ibid.*: 97.

slovakia's territorial integrity, but at the same time steps up his demands so that the Czechoslovak government cannot meet them. The agreement between the *Reich* and Sudeten German leader is depicted at the very beginning of the film and, thus, represents the starting point of the entire drama.

The next link in the chain are the steps taken by Czechoslovakia's ally, the French government, which is in favor of the British position that Czechoslovakia must surrender its border territories in order to preserve peace in Europe. The situation escalates on 19 September 1938, when the French ambassador tells President Beneš that if these demands are rejected, he can no longer count on French military assistance. Beneš characterizes this stance in a subsequent meeting of the Czechoslovak government: "It is treason! France betrayed us."<sup>17</sup>

Last, but not least, there are separate negotiations led by the chairman of the strongest Czechoslovak political party, Rudolf Beran, and influential financier Jaroslav Preiss. Their intentions are twofold; on the one hand, they want to settle on a new distribution of power in the state with representatives of Sudeten Germans, and on the other hand, they are trying to prevent the Soviet Union's possible involvement in the conflict. The second of these demands is expressed very precisely by Preiss during one of the behind-the-scenes debates: "And if anyone wanted to call the Red Army for help, then we would open the border and let Hitler's divisions into Bohemia."<sup>18</sup>

It is only by combining these individual betrayals and conspiracies that the film can present its basic thesis: "Although the individual participants in the Munich Agreement pursued their specific objectives, they were all jointly and integrally involved in the imperialist conspiracy against peace, the victim of which was Czechoslovakia."<sup>19</sup> This quotation comes from the book *Záříjové dny 1938 (September Days 1938)* written by the Czech Marxist historian Václav Král, who also participated in Vávra's film as an expert advisor.

Král's interpretation of the Munich crisis as a conspiracy relied on a careful study of archival sources, as evidenced by his publication on the political documents *Politické strany a Mnichov (Political Parties and Munich)*; Král 1961) and the monograph *Plán Zet (Project Z)*; Král 1973), in which he mainly used British diplomatic archival records. At the same time, however, he worked with a speci-

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17 "Je to zrada! Zrada Francie na nás."

18 "A kdyby někdo chtěl zavolat na pomoc Rudou armádu, potom otevřeme hranice a pustíme do Čech Hitlerovy divize."

19 "Jakkoli jednotliví účastníci mnichovské dohody sledovali své zvláštní specifické cíle, přece jenom se všichni společně a nedílně podíleli na imperialistickém spiknutí proti míru, jehož obětí se stalo Československo." – Král 1971: 160.

fic framework of interpretation, the beginnings of which can be found in the testimony of the direct witnesses to the Munich crisis. Czech communist journalist Julius Fučík spoke of the “world conspiracy of fascism”<sup>20</sup> in his diary entry of 18 September 1938 and the Communist Party chairman, Klement Gottwald, expressed something similar in his parliamentary speech a few days after the end of the crisis: “We have to do with a far-reaching conspiracy against the people, against the republic and against democracy.”<sup>21</sup>

Vávra’s film also reflected the tension between the documentary point of view and the party interpretation within this conception of the crisis. It manifested itself as a clash between the faithful presentation of historical reality and the figurative rendition of some film characters: caricature for representatives of the bourgeoisie and pathetic for representatives of the proletariat. The latter feature of Vávra’s drama was also noted by contemporary Czechoslovak critics as being his aesthetic shortcomings.<sup>22</sup>

The movie ends, like *Uloupená hranice*, with the departure of Czechoslovak soldiers and the Czech minority from the borderland. Given the earlier detection of the specific perpetrators, however, this farewell to the lost territory sounds far more determined. As one of the soldiers says: “We must expel them. But everyone, who caused that.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, this is not the very end of the story, given that *Dny zrady* is only the starting point for the entire film trilogy. The follow-up wartime film *Sokolovo* (*The Battle of Sokolovo*, premiered on 9 May 1975) depicts the formation of the Czechoslovak combat battalion in the Soviet Union, and the final film *Osvobození Prahy* (*The Liberation of Prague*, premiered on 6 May 1977) tells the story of the Prague Uprising and the arrival of the Red Army. Its intervention also completed the seven-year dramatic arc of Vávra’s trilogy which told a grand narrative about the demise of a Czechoslovakia that was betrayed by the Western Allies and anticipated its post-war reconstruction within the Eastern Bloc.

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20 “Will [the nation] break this world-wide plot of fascism?” (“Zlomí [lid] včas ten světový komplot fašismu?”) asks Fučík in his diary. – Fučík 1958: 9.

21 “Máme co činit s dalekosáhlým spiknutím proti lidu, proti republice a proti demokracii.” – Gottwald 1953: 269.

22 Cf. Lachman 2004: 280.

23 “Musíme je vyhnat. Ale všechny, co to zavinili.”

## Seventy Years Later

This master narrative lost its attractiveness after the collapse of the bloc, of course, but it took a surprisingly long time for filmmakers to return to the Munich events. It was not until around the seventieth anniversary of the Munich Agreement that Miloš Forman, together with Jean-Claude Carrière and Václav Havel, began working on a screenplay for a film based on the novel *Le Fantôme de Munich* (*The Specter of Munich*; Benamou 2007). Its author Georges-Marc Benamou, co-author of the memoirs of François Mitterrand and advisor to another French President Nicolas Sarkozy, captured the Munich crisis in the book through the lens of French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier. Although the film's preparations had reached their final stage, the French production company Pathé failed to raise enough money to produce it. The filmmakers still tried to rescue the project, but director Forman had to resign in the end: "In addition, a movie about the Munich Agreement could be unpleasant to the Germans, the French and the English, so certain people's thinking is that they could lose money."<sup>24</sup>

Five years later, another, albeit less ambitious attempt was successful. Czech documentary and fiction film director Robert Sedláček (1973), in collaboration with popular Czech historian Pavel Kosatík, produced a one-hour television drama *Den po Mnichovu* (*A Day after Munich*, premiered on 3 November 2013). It was the second episode of the quality TV series *České století* (*Czech Century*, 2013–14), which mapped important moments of Czech history from its establishment as an independent state in 1918 to the break-up of the Czechoslovak Federation in 1992.

Sedláček's drama is built around a question that has already been cited from a post-November textbook on Czech history: "Should we or shouldn't we defend ourselves?"<sup>25</sup> The first solution is sought by Czech military commanders, while the opposing position in the dispute is represented by President Edvard Beneš. The first clash between them takes place in the opening, eight-minute sequence of the film. On 21 September 1938, after the British-French ultimatum, the President informs members of the General Staff that France will not fulfill its allied obligations and that the state's military situation is hopeless. Officers blame the President for not having sufficiently informed them previously of how serious

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24 "Film o mnichovském diktátu by navíc mohl být Němcům, Francouzům i Angličanům nepřijemný, takže úvaha určitých lidí je taková, že by na tom mohli prodělat." – Kailová 2011.

25 "[M]ěli, nebo neměli jsme se bránit?" – Beneš 2004: 292.

the situation was: “You lied to us!”<sup>26</sup> Some officers even openly threaten him: “You have agreed to curtail the Republic. You should be arrested, the whole government!”<sup>27</sup> But their proposals are ultimately constructive: they want a new, military government and a declaration of mobilization.

Indeed, in the days that followed, both requirements would be met, but the diplomatic situation was escalating. As the negotiations of the four Great Powers are beginning in Munich, President Beneš reunites with the members of the General Staff to tell them that the loss of territory is inevitable. The only hope is a pan-European conflict, which the President expects sooner or later: “War will be, gentlemen. It will be, but not now. I promise you the greatest war ever.”<sup>28</sup> Staff officers proclaim that they want to defend their country now, and that the President’s decision will not stand. This creates a discernable tension, explicitly expressed in a scene in which the most radical officers are smoking in the toilets. After a while, Beneš comes in and heads to one of the stalls. He sees the officers and stops. One of them says “I will never forget this.”<sup>29</sup> And the President leaves silently.

The second meeting with the General Staff represents the whole drama’s plot culmination, only after that the Munich Agreement is just implemented. However, the final third of the film is primarily devoted to another theme: the unfulfilled effort to reverse an already made decision. Dissatisfied officers meet with politicians to discuss a possible coup. In any case, these are purely theoretical considerations, given that it is difficult to find anyone among them who would announce their fundamental disapproval to Beneš. Finally, Colonel Moravec, lecturer at the military school, whose fate has been followed by the film in parallel with that of Beneš, agrees to take on the task. Their final encounter is primarily a battle of arguments. While Moravec invokes moral values, mainly related to the ethics of struggle (“Your great, glorious victory over Adolf Hitler will be useless, because people will only remember how they did in 1938.”),<sup>30</sup> Beneš defends his strategic thinking: “You have to understand that this is not about the mental health of one nation, but about the question of who will rule Europe.”<sup>31</sup>

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26 “Lhal jste nám!”

27 “Odsouhlasili jste okleštění republiky, za to by vás měli zavřít. Celou vládu.”

28 “Válka bude, pánové. Bude. Ale ne teď. Slibuji vám tu největší válku, jaká kdy byla.”

29 “Tohle vám nikdy nezapomenu.”

30 “Vaše velký, slavný vítězství nad Adolfem Hitlerem bude k ničemu, protože lidi si budou pamatovat jenom to, jak se v roce 1938 podělali.”

31 “Musíte pochopit, že tady se nehraje o duševní zdraví jednoho národa, ale o to, kdo bude vládnout Evropě.”

The final headline of Sedláček's drama recalls that Beneš's opponent, Moravec, became the Czech Quisling during the German Protectorate, and this implicitly supports Beneš's views. The logic of the story, however, requires that Czech passivity be somehow corrected and that the victim eventually become an active participant in historical events. This task was fulfilled by *Sokolovo* in Vávra's trilogy, and in the case of Sedláček's series, the next part *Kulka pro Heydricha* (*A Bullet for Heydrich*, premiered on 3 November 2013) sees a Czech political exile based in London, led by Beneš, prepare to assassinate the Deputy Protector of Bohemia and Moravia.

### ***Lost in Munich as a Counterexample?***

Each of the films studied uses the emplotment of the Munich crisis, which was dominant at the time of its creation. Weiss's *Uloupená hranice* tells the story of a double trauma: the separation of the Czech-German community and the expulsion of Czechs from the border areas. Vávra's *Dny zrady* depicts a complex international and class complot that leads to the demise of Czechoslovakia. Sedláček's *Den po Mnichovu* recalls the historical alternatives that were offered thereafter: acceptance of forced conditions or armed struggle. There is, however, another film about the Munich Agreement which is beyond this typology, at first glance at least. It is an allegorical comedy entitled *Ztraceni v Mnichově* (*Lost in Munich*, premiered on 22 October 2015), written by Czech screenwriter, playwright and director Petr Zelenka (1967).

Zelenka's film consists of three distinct parts: a short introductory sequence that recalls the basic dates of the Munich crisis and their traditional interpretation in the form of a weekly film; a half-hour crazy comedy in which a Czech journalist abducts an eighty-year-old parrot, who belonged to French Prime Minister Daladier at the time of the Munich events and makes shocking statements, such as "Hitler is a good fellow,"<sup>32</sup> with his voice today; finally, a 70-minute making-of that shows why filming this crazy comedy in a Czech-French co-production eventually failed.

The storyline of the making-of film shows that difficulties in filming begin when the lead actor becomes allergic to feathers. This requires a number of adjustments because the parrot is his main acting partner. Alas, when the problem is finally solved, the actor becomes allergic to metals and then to colored substances. The chain of allergic reactions is only explained after a visit to a home-

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32 "Hitler je kámoš."



opath who tells the actor that his body is responding to the Munich theme itself. It soon becomes apparent that the lead actor suffers from Munich's third-generation trauma. As he explains: "Grandpa was mobilized and suffered terribly that we could not defend ourselves in 1938. He even wanted to return the distinction he received as a legionnaire in France."<sup>33</sup>

The main star's psychological troubles cause the director of the film to become more familiar with historical interpretations of the Munich crisis. An essay *Mnichovský komplex* (*The Munich Complex*) written by Czech historian Jan Tesař, an emigré in France at the beginning of 1989, which was originally intended only for a narrow circle of friends and was not published until ten years later, becomes a source of fundamental importance for the director. In his work, Tesař tries to deconstruct the two cornerstones of what he calls the Munich myth; on the one hand, there is the so-called betrayal of the Western Allies, and on the other, we find the question of whether or not Czechoslovakia should defend itself. According to Tesař, both are mere pseudo-problems that are not supported in a real historical situation.<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, it is essential that while the Czech nation has been carried away by military mobilization and hope to defend their state borders, its political leadership, led by President Beneš, only tries to negotiate the most advantageous compromise that would achieve a "partial satisfaction of the aggressor."<sup>35</sup>

Zelenka's film reproduces these arguments and, in the final part of the movie, allegorically represents them too. Just as the emptiness of the Czech-French military alliance was revealed during the Munich crisis, it also shows that the essence of Czech-French co-production was completely illusory. The producer tells the filmmakers that working together was just a trick to get a grant from the European Cinema Support Fund. Since this subsidy was not awarded, there is no money left to complete the film. The anger of the crew members who think that a foreign co-producer withdrew from the film turns against everything "French," including the poor parrot, and the production manager is saved from prosecution only by the accidental death of one of the main actors, because this becomes a false pretext to stop the production of the movie. Zelenka's allegory is based on informational inequalities between leaders (politicians and producers) who play complex games and simple pawns of history (the Czech nation and film crew),

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33 "Děda byl mobilizované a strašně trpěl tím, že jsme se tenkrát v osmatřicátým nemohli bránit. Dokonce chtěl vrátit vyznamenání, který dostal jako legionář ve Francii."

34 Cf. Tesař 2000: 11.

35 "částečného uspokojení agresora" – *ibid.*: 91.

who do not know the essence of these games and believe in various myths. The consequence is what the director emphasizes as the main thesis of Tesař's essay: "The fact that the Czech nation does not participate in its own history."<sup>36</sup>

Does this mean that Zelenka's film should be understood as a conspiracy story that reveals the mechanisms of the intrigues that the powerful are fabricating at the expense of the powerless? Or is it the story of the trauma with which third generation carriers are dealing? Both motifs undoubtedly play an important role in the film but are subject to a more general narrative strategy. This strategy is strikingly similar to what we find in Sedláček's drama. As previously indicated, the *Day after Munich* represents the Munich crisis as a memento; it reenacts Munich events to draw some lessons for the present. Zelenka proceeds in a similar way, but he does not seek lessons in the historical event itself, only in its interpretations. In doing so, he seeks to distinguish true interpretations from false ones, which obscure the essence of the Munich events and, thus, prevent their full understanding. Or as the figure of the director utters in the movie: "The tragedy is the myth that arose from it."<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

The analyzed film and TV representations of the Munich crisis follow the same developmental pattern that Zdeněk Beneš discovered in the textbooks of Czech history. This is a much smaller sample than in the case of the textbooks, but if we compare their production costs, these films represent a much more powerful social force. Rather than this correlation, however, this conclusion will concern itself with the consequences of this study's findings, which could be followed up by further research.

First of all, reflection is needed on the fact that it has not been possible to define the narrative form of the last phase more precisely. It is typical for the "memento" that it connects two time planes—the past with the present, and tries to revive past events through their reenactment, that is, to create the appearance that the events are still unsettled. However, this is not a specific narrative pattern, but rather a broader narrative strategy that governs individual stories in a given work. This also implies a hypothesis that would need to be verified on a larger body of material. The memento represents a transitional phase between the period at which the narrative of a cultural trauma is determined by the logic

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36 "To, že se český národ nepodílí na svých vlastních dějinách."

37 "Tragédie je až ten mýtus, který z toho vzniknul."

of Alexander's scheme, and the moment it becomes an entity in itself independent from the original painful experience, thus opening itself up to a far more diverse spectrum of emplotments.

On a more general level, this hypothesis could be expressed as a transition between communicative and cultural memory. According to Assmann's estimation, communicative memory as a process lasts "80–100 years," which represents "a moving horizon of 3–4 interacting generations."<sup>38</sup> If this estimate is accurate, then our sample is at the final stage of its development, but it is still unfinished. However, this does not mean that we have to wait another twenty years before the story of the Munich events finally becomes part of cultural memory. Rather, it calls for the results of our research to be verified in representations of cultural traumas whose time has already come and gone.

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## Abstract

The Munich crisis of September 1938, resulting in the Munich Agreement between the Nazi Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy and causing the loss of a significant part of Czechoslovak territory, is historically a proof of appeasement policy failure and one of the starting points of World War II. For the Czech population, however, it meant above all a traumatic experience, which was the driving force of its depiction in numerous literary and film works. Four of these film representations of the Munich crisis are analyzed in the present chapter, namely Jiří Weiss's neorealist debut *Uloupená hranice* (*The Stolen Frontier*, 1947), Otakar Vávra's documentary drama *Dny zrady* (*Days of Betrayal*, 1973), Robert Sedláček's quality TV drama *Den po Mnichovu* (*A Day after Munich*, 2013), and Petr Zelenka's allegorical comedy *Ztraceni v Mnichově* (*Lost in Munich*, 2015). Their interpretation focuses on answering two basic questions: First, how these films use the basic narrative patterns associated with telling a certain cultural trauma, that is, the traumatic story and the conspiracy story. And secondly, to what extent the representation of the Munich events in these films corresponds to their emplotments in Czech textbooks of history.

# Treason and Conspiracy at the Polish-Ukrainian Border—Sava Chalyi/Sawa Czały

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*Alois Woldan*

## **Keywords**

Cossacks and Haidamaks; Sava Chalyi; Ukrainian folklore; Polish fiction

The historically documented folk figure of Sava Chalyi (d. 1742) is connected to the Haidamak uprisings of the eighteenth century. He first appeared alongside the early stages of these peasant revolts, not their climax—specifically, the siege of Uman and the massacre that took place there in 1768. The literary echo of these events has undergone significant transformations between Ukrainian and Polish literature on the one hand, and Russian literature on the other.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Sava Chalyi, this transfer has occurred in only one direction, from the Ukrainian to the Polish. It is a transfer that is quite complex, insofar as it also involves a transfer from folklore to higher literature, with Ukrainian epic folk songs becoming transformed into Polish art ballads. However, little attention has been paid by relevant scholars to the migration of the Sava Chalyi story from the literature of Ukraine to that of Poland.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for this migration are complex: On the one hand, East Slavic folklore was commonly picked up in Polish literature, particularly during the Romantic period. In this regard, one need only mention the well-known “Ukrainian

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1 Cf. Woldan 2016.

2 Ievhen Rykhlyk (1929) was the first to investigate this topic ninety years ago. Decades later, Roman Kyrchiv (1965) examined it in a different context. Other relevant works pass over the story of Chalyi, e.g., Herrmann 1969. George Grabowicz (1983) also neglects to mention Chalyi in his contribution to the ninth International Congress of Slavists.

school” in Polish Romanticism. On the other hand, the Haidamak uprisings represent a common historical heritage, a heritage that experienced a reappraisal during the Romantic period. The last of these uprisings, in 1768, represents the final major conflict between Poles and Ukrainians, at least while Old Poland, the *Rzeczpospolita obojga narodów* (the Polish-Lithuanian *Commonwealth of Two Nations*), still existed. This tragic conflict left its mark in the historical consciousness of both nations.<sup>3</sup> This earlier conflict took on a new meaning, especially after Poland’s defeat in the November Uprising against the Russian Empire of 1830–31. Polish émigrés, exiled to France, accorded the failure of Polish-Ukrainian conciliation a major role in their reflections on history (one example being the prophecies of Wernyhora,<sup>4</sup> which first became popular among these exiled Poles). The assimilation of the Sava Chalysi narrative into Polish literature also falls into the post-1831 period.

It is noteworthy that the literary processing of the Haidamak rebellions began half a century earlier than the historic one. Historiographically, examinations of the Haidamak uprisings only begin to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century, which is when the first major texts on this topic were written.<sup>5</sup> It is in this context that the first scientific works about Sava Chalysi appear, works still based strongly on folkloric traditions and, therefore, they portray an exaggerated heroism.<sup>6</sup> It was only later that these embellishments were rectified by V. Antonovych and V. Shcherbina on the basis of previously undiscovered documents.<sup>7</sup> However, the legend of Sava Chalysi had already appeared in the first published folklore collections more than half a century previously.<sup>8</sup>

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3 “In Polish historical consciousness, the Cossacks ... and, most obviously, the bloody events of 1768 which presaged the first partition, were closely associated with the decline and fall of the Polish state.” – Grabowicz 1983: 174.

4 These prophecies were given by a legendary figure, half Pole and half Cossack, and deal with Poland’s decline and rebirth; they were first written down before 1800 and played a particular role in Polish historic consciousness until World War II. – Cf. Makowski 1995.

5 Cf. Mordovtsev 1884, Rawita-Gawroński 1899.

6 Cf. Skal’kovskii 1845 and 1846.

7 Antonovych 1897, Shcherbina 1891.

8 The oldest evidence of the Sava narrative in folklore is placed significantly earlier than the published editions that circulated in the early nineteenth century. Mykhailo Vozniak (1922) already found such a story in a handwritten collection of songs from around 1760.

Returning to Sava Chalyi and his biography,<sup>9</sup> his date of birth is unknown; as a young man he entered the Cossack militia of Prince Czetwertński, but later (in 1734) he defected to the rebellious peasants under their leader, Verlan. With Verlan's band of raiders, he robbed merchants and took part in various plundering raids. After the uprisings were suppressed, the Polish commander Malinowski announced an amnesty for the band's ringleader and offered their members the possibility of serving in the Polish army. In 1736, Chalyi pledged an oath of allegiance to the *Rzeczpospolita*. From this point in time, he led successful campaigns against his former comrades and persecuted the Haidamaks. From 1737 onward, Sawa stood in the service of the crown. He was promoted by Hetman Józef Potocki to colonel in the latter's private Cossack militia, and was invested with two villages. He undertook raids and pilfering skirmishes on Zaporozhian territory, in which he sacked a number of winter storage sites and burned a church down. It was this last misdeed that seems to have been the straw that broke the camel's back: the Cossacks swore revenge. Led by Hnat Holyi, a former comrade-in-arms, a small troop attacked Chalyi's farmstead in the village of Stepashky. Chalyi was killed; his wife was able to escape with their infant son.

Sava Chalyi's son is historically much more well-documented than his father and is sometimes confused with him. Sawa Caliński Józef (ca. 1736–1771)<sup>10</sup> grew up in his Polish stepfather's house, who turned the boy into a Pole. Caliński's activities are marked by the last three years of his life when, as a young man, he led a very successful fight for the Confederation of Bar against the Russian troops in Poland, making him a legend in his own lifetime. In May 1771, Caliński was badly wounded in a battle and fell into the hands of the enemy. He died shortly thereafter. Unlike his father, Sawa junior was neither a defector nor a traitor, and he did not die as a result of a conspiracy, but fell while fighting for his political beliefs.

### Sava's Transfer from Ukrainian to Polish Folklore

The first written account of Sava's story in Ukrainian folklore can be found in Mykhailo Maksymovych's famous collection *Malorossiiskii Piesni* (Little Russian Folksongs, 1827). Bearing the title "Duma o Kazakie Savie" (*Duma*<sup>11</sup> of the

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9 An overview of Ukrainian and Russian historical studies on the biography of Chalyi is found in Rychlyk 1929: 66–67; for Polish works cf. Korduba 1938.

10 Cf. Szczygielski 1994.

11 A *duma* is a kind of epic song.

Cossack Sava), it is quite close to a ballad, with its division into twenty-one four-line stanzas,<sup>12</sup> and ballads were a popular genre during the Romantic era, even in Slavic literature. The ballad's plot is mostly told in the form of dialogues, which is characteristic of this genre. These can be broken down into the following sections:

1. Sava returns home from a spree with the Poles in Nemyriv;
2. Suspicious things happen around his farmstead;
3. Sava writes letters while his wife rocks the child;
4. He sends a maid to the cellar to fetch horilka, beer and wine;
5. The avengers, who have broken into the house, ask about Sava's riches;
6. While fighting with them, Sava is killed;
7. His wife flees through a window, a maid hands her the little child;
8. Sava's son plays the kobza.

Sections 3 and 4 do not really promote the active storyline; instead they serve the function of slowing down the plot progression. Sava has drinks brought from the cellar three times to entertain his uninvited guests, something typical of both folkloric poetry and fairy tales. While the boy is still in a cradle in section 2, by section 8 he is already an independent young Cossack playing the kobza, undoubtedly a sign that the legend originally spread as a folksong: the legacy of Sava lies in the continued existence of his legend.<sup>13</sup>

Sava's historic betrayal is barely mentioned in this ballad; it is assumed that this is already well-known. The question of the source of Sava's riches is alluded to midway in the text: "What have you taken, enemy son, from the Cossacks' goodwill?!"<sup>14</sup> Clear references to a conspiracy, however, are found in the steps leading up to Sava's murder. The conspirators first pretend to be guests, then tell their host to say goodbye to his wife and child, and finally demand several times

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12 Rykhlyk sees the breakdown into 4-line stanzas with a line length of 8 or 6 syllables as a constitutive factor in the folkloristic Sava narrative – cf. Rykhlyk 229: 68. However, he does not consider that the so-called "Galician variant" of the narrative does not have a stanza structure and contains long lines of more than 10 syllables. This circumstance is probably due to the differences between the folkloric forms of song and epic.

13 For Rykhlyk, the last section is not part of the basic Sava narrative and seems to have been mechanically adopted from other songs – cf. Rykhlyk 1929: 70. However, this does not explain the possible meanings latent in this section.

14 «Що ты нажив, вражій сыну, зъ козацької ласки!» – Максимович 1962: 36.



that Sava reveal where his riches are hidden. But this, too, is just a pretext to disguise the actual purpose of the visit—revenge for his having turned traitor. Accordingly, in Ukrainian folklore, the story pivots around the conspiracy against Sava and his murder. The hero is at least partially justified throughout the process. He is portrayed as a defenseless victim who is given no chance by his avengers. His real offense, defection to the Polish enemy, is only hinted at; uninformed readers might consider the conspiracy as a form of common robbery.

A quite similar version of the Sava narrative can be found in Iakiv Holovats'kyi's large collection *Narodnyia piesni Galitskoi i Ugorskoi Rusi (Folk Songs of Galician and Hungarian Ruthenia, 1878)*. The author was told the story by a blind singer in Zolochiv, that is, in Galicia—far from the scene of the Haidamak rebellions.<sup>15</sup> This means that the Sava narrative was also solidly situated in West Ukrainian folklore by 1878. Holovats'kyi does not specify when he recorded the text, but it was certainly long before he published it. The author undertook fieldwork in Austrian Galicia while still in his youth. This transcription is also strophic, but has only fifteen stanzas and is, therefore, much shorter than the variant recorded by Maksymovych. The relatively short length of the verse lines (7–9 syllables) points to their song-like character.

The narrative handed down by Maksymovych, with its dramatic insertions and echoes of the art ballad genre, was taken up by Polish folklore collectors. Kazimierz Władysław Wójcicki included it in his collection *Pieśni ludu Białochrobatów, Mazurów i Rusi znad Bugu (Songs of the White Croats, Mazurians and the Rus at the Bug, 1836)*, under the title “O Sawie” (“About Sawa”) and also identifies its source, Maksymovych's collection. It is a faithful transcription of the text in Latin script according to the rules of Polish orthography, a practice customary in Galicia in the first half of the nineteenth century. The transcription is conspicuous in that it follows phonetic principles, in contrast to Maksymovych, who for the most part uses historic orthography (cf. “*w kinco stola*” in Wójcicki, “*в концѣ стола*” in Maksymovych). Otherwise, this version is an exact copy of the Ukrainian original, which serves to integrate it into the collection: a Ukrainian song that is also part of the folklore of the regions mentioned in the collection's title.

More interesting still, however, is the so-called “Galician variant” of the Sava narrative, which can be found in the famous collection *Pieśni polskie i ruskie ludu Galicyjskiego* of Waclaw z Oleska (pseudonym of Waclaw Zaleski, *Polish and Ruthenian Songs of the Galician Nation, 1833*); this earliest Polish record in

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15 «Записана отъ слѣпца лирника Фомы Зеленчука въ Золочевскомъ Уѣздѣ». — Golovatskii 1878b: 10.

Latin letters also reflects a Ukrainian text. It is surprising that Sava Chalyi shows up in Galicia: although he came from Podolia, his part in the Haidamak uprisings took place much further east than that. Apparently, his figure was so popular nevertheless that he also found a place in the folksongs of the West Ukrainian Galicians. This corresponds to the lively presence of the Haidamak uprisings in Galician literature in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Zaleski's variation on the Chalyi narrative was not given a title, but is referred to as a text accompanied by music.<sup>17</sup> The strikingly long lines (14 syllables, with a break after the 8th) are not divided into verses and have paired rhymes. On the one hand, this is reminiscent of folkloric epics, but it is also similar to the syllabic tradition of Polish poetry on the other. In terms of the plot, this variation deviates only slightly from that handed down through Maksymovych: upon his return home, Sava learns that his wife has given birth to a son; he sends a servant, not a maid, to the cellar for the drinks; before he is back, the avengers have already surrounded the house; it is the maid who helps his wife escape, handing the newborn baby through window.

Strikingly, the text extends further than the end of the plot—one third of the narrative consists of rhetorical questions about the whereabouts of his treasures, posed to Sava as he lies in his own blood.<sup>18</sup> An allusion is also made to the historically documented destruction of a nearby church: "You should not have robbed a church, Sir Sava!"<sup>19</sup> In the description of Sava's funeral in the final lines, folkloric images are linked to those of Christian burial ceremonies: a Ukrainian owl brings the murdered man's burial shroud ("Many people saw the Ukrainian owl / bringing the burial shroud to Sir Sava.")<sup>20</sup> and then all of the church bells in the village start ringing ("All the bells in the village rang for Sir Sava.")<sup>21</sup> This reference to Christian burial rites may also serve to indicate the hero's moral exoneration.<sup>22</sup>

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16 Cf. Woldan 2017.

17 "Z muzyką" – z Oleska 1833: 502.

18 Rykhlyk explains this break in the action's logic by stating that these questions were added later – cf. Rykhlyk 1929: 73.

19 "Oj ne bulo, pane Sawa, cerkow rabowaty!" – z Oleska 1833: 503.

20 "Hej baczly mnohi lude wkrainsku sowoczku, / szczo prynesla panu Sawi smertelnu soroczku." – z Oleska 1833: 504.

21 "Zadzwońyly panu Sawi razem we wsi dzwońy." – z Oleska 1833: 504.

22 Rykhlyk refrains from interpreting these images: in his opinion, they are merely set pieces, as are often found at the end of Polish and Ukrainian folk songs – cf. Rykhlyk 1929: 74.

This addendum, which underlines the ballad's dramatic character, is of great importance for the judgment of Sava: Sava is not a defector, he is a wealthy robber who has plundered his own land and amassed a great fortune. The conspirators are thus not coming to take revenge, but to rob him: "The Cossacks came to rob Sava."<sup>23</sup> Although Sava has committed a sacrilege by destroying a church, the Christian bells—together with the heathen birds—provide him his funeral cortege and contribute to his absolution. There is no longer any mention of treason. From the short dialogue between the murderers and their victim it is not made clear why Sava must die; only a reader familiar with the Sava tradition would know the connotations of the conspiracy against him.

The popularity of this "Galician" variant of the Sava narrative, with its special inflections, is also supported by the fact that it is included, albeit in a Cyrillic version, in Holovats'kyi's collection from 1878, although the source mentioned is Zaleski's transcription.<sup>24</sup>

Of particular interest is a variation of this "Galician version" found in the aforementioned collection by Wójcicki (his collection contains even two Sava tales!). This one, however, is a Polish translation and takes the form of a ballad, with stanzas of four to eight lines and dialogue passages (in which the person who is speaking is called "Sawa" or "Sawicha") which emphasizes the dramatic character of the narration. Striking in contrast to the Ukrainian model is the hero's lamentation, which has been inserted by the translator: Sava, lying on the ground in a pool of his own blood, laments not only his fate, but he prays and commends his soul to God. He is, thus, clearly stylized as a penitent sinner: "But Sir Sawa weeps and lies on the ground: / and he prays and commends his soul to God the Lord."<sup>25</sup> With this version, which the collection's publisher no longer calls a Ruthenian *duma*, but now just a historic song,<sup>26</sup> we actually find the first treatment that goes beyond the mere adoption of a folkloric text. The anonymous translator from Ukrainian not only translated the original tale, but also revised it. This variation—which is no longer the folkloric text, strictly speaking—stands at the transition between the adoption of texts from folklore by editors and their literary paraphrasing by authors. In this Polish appropriation, Sava's redemption is more thorough than in the original Galician variant. The list of his thefts is shorter, any reference to the church desecration is absent, and no mention is made ei-

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23 "Pryjichaly kozaczeńki Sawu rabowaty." – z Oleska 1833: 503.

24 Cf. Golovatskii 1878a: 18.

25 "A Pan Sawa płacze sobie leżący na progu: / i modli się, i poleca duszę Panu Bogu." – Wójcicki 1976: 28.

26 "duma ruska", "piesń historyczna" – Wójcicki 1976: 299–303, 26–29.

ther of Sava's treason or his having become a renegade. Instead, the penitent sinner prays in his final hour, with all the bells ringing at his funeral.

### Shifts in Polish Romantic Fiction

The first adaptations of the Sava legend by representatives of Polish Romanticism also appear in the 1830s. In 1838, a "Duma o Sawie Czajym Kozaku" (Duma on Sawa Czajły, the Cosack) was published by Adam Pieńkiewicz. As is apparent from its subtitle ("Based on a Little Russian sketch")<sup>27</sup> it is close to the original from the collection by Maksymovych. But this version not only paraphrases the original, it also places new emphases on different aspects of the story. From a formal point of view, the model's literarization has also now become clear.

The four-line stanzas follow the trochaic meter typical of Polish verse and have an alternate rhyming structure; the regular meter and stanzas suggest the genre of the ballad. As for the sequence of the plot, Pieńkiewicz initially follows Maksymovych's model. However, he expands the conversation between Sava and his murderers to emphasize Sava's guilt and thus to provide a motive for the subsequent revenge. Here, the betrayal Sava has committed for the sake of money is described explicitly: "Where is the gold / that the enemy pays you, / so you, villain, betray your Cossack brothers."<sup>28</sup> Instead of pursuing a common cause—not mentioned in detail here—with his Cossack brothers, Sava let himself be dazzled by the Poles' gold. This is why he cannot buy his life back now with his treasures, which is what he would like to do. An example must be set so that other Cossacks do not come up with similar ideas: "As an example for our compatriots, / you will pay for blood with blood."<sup>29</sup> The last stanza makes the matter of why Sava has to die clear from the narrator's perspective. It is the just reward for someone who has sold out his brother: "Sooner or later, that will be / the lot of anyone / who, instead of spilling blood for a man, / sells his brother."<sup>30</sup>

The author modifies the model to make it clear to his reader that the murder of Sava is a punishment; Sava is also negatively judged from a patriotic-moral

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27 "Ze szkicu małoruskiego"—Pieńkiewicz 1838: 152.

28 "Gdzie jest złoto, / Co wróg tobie płaci, / Abyś zdradzał, ty niecnoto, / Twych kozaków braci?"—Pieńkiewicz 1838: 154.

29 "Dla przykładu zaś rodakom, / Krwią za krew zapłacisz!"—Pieńkiewicz 1838: 155.

30 "Prędzaj, później, tego czeka / Taka to zapłata, / Kto, zamiast krew lać za człeka, / Zaprzędaje brata."—Pieńkiewicz 1838: 156.

viewpoint—he is someone who has betrayed and sold out his brothers.<sup>31</sup> This point of view, here presented by a Polish author attempting to put forward a rationale for the Ukrainian struggle for their cause, can be generalized in both directions, as the last stanza shows. This is the reward for any traitor, no matter whether Ukrainian or Pole. This clear rejection of treason, according to Rykhlyk, is related to Pieńkowski's general political belief in Polish-Ukrainian accord, in which the betrayal of either partner was unacceptable.<sup>32</sup> Concentrating on the protagonist, as a negative example of fraternal behavior, is sufficient reason not only to drop the conspiracy's background, but also the rescue of Sava's wife and son—they are unimportant aspects for the example being set by the Sava tale.

A few years before the appearance of this ballad, in which Sava is stamped a traitor, August Bielowski (1806–1876), a well-known representative of the Lviv Pan-Slavic group *Ziewonia* (the name of a Slavic deity), modified the Ukrainian model in another way. His ballad "Sawa" (1834) consists of twenty-two four-line stanzas, these again with an alternate rhyming structure in trochaic meter. While the plot also follows the known model quite closely, there is a significant deviation in the last section: Sava's wife does not flee with the small child, but invites her husband's murderers to a banquet: "With not a worry, the young woman / calls to the servant: / 'Come with me, we want to live comfortably, / happily and cheerfully.'" <sup>33</sup> And after they have plundered and burned down the farmstead, this woman finds herself in the company of the head of the robbers, together with Mykita, the man who killed her husband: "In the midst of the horde the lyre is played, / the drunken mob leaps about; / But at the head of the dance / is Mykita with Sawicha." <sup>34</sup> Now another form of betrayal has been introduced: the young woman, apparently was also part of the conspiracy against her husband and is also a traitor. Sava appears as a victim of this conspiracy, <sup>35</sup> murdered for his treasures, not as punishment for his treason. It is unclear where Bielowski found this variant of the Sava narrative, but it seems unlikely that he in-

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31 For Kyrchiv, one reason for a positive reception of this paraphrase of the Sava narrative is that the act of treason is emphasized – cf. Kyrchiv 1965: 70.

32 Cf. Rykhlyk 1929: 79.

33 "Młoda żona niestwożona / Woła ku czeladi: / 'Chodźcie ze mną, żyć przyjemno, / Weseli i radzi.'" – Bielowski 1962: 280.

34 "Między zgrają kobzy grają, Skacze czern popita; / A na przedzie rej im wiedzie / Z Sawichą Mykita." – Bielowski 1962: 280.

35 For Kyrchiv, this positive portrayal of the protagonist is a reason for evaluating Bielowski's treatment negatively – cf. Kyrchiv 1965: 58.

vented it himself.<sup>36</sup> Commenting on this *duma*, he writes, “our people sing various songs about Sava, each quite different.”<sup>37</sup> In West Ukrainian folklore, a woman who betrays her lover is found in the Dovbush tradition—it is conceivable that this was a source of contamination in this text.

This pattern of using other sources had at least one other adherent in the Polish tradition of transcribing Ukrainian folklore namely Wiktoryn Zieliński. In 1841 he published a poem entitled “Ataman Sawa. Duma Ukraińska” (Ataman Sawa, Ukrainian *duma*), which due to its length (54 stanzas of 6 lines each) combines several storylines. In the first part (verses 1–12), Sava, a proud *ataman* and dreaded ringleader in the fight against the Haidamaks, has evil forebodings about his wife while dining with friends in Niemirów. In the second section (verses 13–16), she receives her lover at the distant farmstead. In the third section (verses 17–25), while Sava is on his way home, his ride through the night is disturbed by evil omens. In the fourth section (verses 26–34), the Haidamaks attack the farmstead, kill Sava and abduct his wife. In the fifth section (verses 35–42), the leader of the Haidamaks, who is also the lover of Sava’s wife, ties her to a tree in the middle of the forest as punishment for betraying her husband. In the sixth section (verses 43–48), Sava is mourned and buried by his people. And in the seventh and final section (verses 49–53), Sava’s wife suffers a gruesome death—she is eaten by wolves, and birds of prey pick at the remains of her body. In the final stanza, the narrator lets the ‘veil of forgetfulness’ drop over his characters.

This narrative’s focal point is clearly the betrayal of Sava’s wife, who is a member of the Haidamak band and thus part of the conspiracy. However, the motives of the individual conspirators differ: the head of the Haidamaks is Sava’s wife’s lover, which is why she wants to get rid of her husband. But the Haidamaks, who storm the farmstead with her help, want to take revenge on Sava, since he has killed so many of them (“Do you remember, devilish spawn, / how many of ours you buried, / faithful servant of the Poles? / May the muck of your blood / flow over their graves / to rectify them.”)<sup>38</sup> Sava’s wife, in turn, becomes a betrayed betrayer, left behind in the middle of the forest tied to a tree;

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36 Also Rykhlyk believes that Bielowski based this motif on various other folklore versions – cf. Rykhlyk 1929: 77.

37 “Lud nasz spiewa o Sawie kilka piesni, wcale od siebie różnych” – Bielowski 1962: 280.

38 “A pamiętasz, bisów plemię, / Ileś naszych posłał w ziemię, / Lachom wierny sługa? / Niechajże nad ich mogiłą / Płynię im pociecha miła / Twojej juchy struga!” – Zieliński 1841: 671.

she is called a serpent that the leader does not want by his side (“No snake shall be near my heart...”).<sup>39</sup> It is she who is responsible for Sava’s untimely death, because she incited the Haidamaks to attack her husband; this is evident from the funeral lamentations of Sava’s companions: “The scandalous deed of a wicked woman / drove the band of murderers on you.”<sup>40</sup> Sava, through his death, goes to the afterlife almost a martyr: “You already have a wreath in heaven / ... may your soul find peace!”<sup>41</sup> There are no such statements about the wife; while she has also been punished for a betrayal, any of her bones not eaten by wild animals have been scattered in the forest. Drastic descriptions of violence and torture, even in the portrayal of Sava’s murder, give the ballad a melodramatic atmosphere. Betrayal and conspiracy, central motives in the Sava narrative, are here shifted to Sava’s wife, who has become the protagonist. Treason is punished in any case. But the wife, the main culprit, is also responsible for her husband’s death; her punishment as the betrayed betrayer is particularly cruel and even after dying, she is not forgiven.

Another paraphrasing of the Sava narrative, the 1841 “Kozak Sawa” (Sawa the Cossack) by Michał Jezierski,<sup>42</sup> has departed furthest from the original Ukrainian folktale. The plot revolves around a love triangle: Sava, returning from a campaign, learns that a Polish nobleman has kidnapped his beloved, Fedora, and imprisoned her in his palace. Sava decamps with his division, attacks the palace, frees Fedora, and flees with her on his stallion. A sorceress helps him escape his pursuers, who in turn have the sorceress hanged. In a sort of epilogue, the narrator visits the cross that Sava erected on the grave of the sorceress and discovers that she still haunts the site as an owl.

Apart from the protagonist’s name, almost nothing remains of the Ukrainian original, but there are considerable echoes of a well-known work by the so-called “Ukrainian School” of Polish Romanticism, Seweryn Goszczyński’s *Zamek Kaniowski* (*The Castle of Kaniów*, 1838). This text contains the same triangular constellation of a Polish-Ukrainian competition for a Ukrainian girl, but the narrative ends tragically in this case. In the case of Jezierski’s ballad, the plot leads to an adventuresome chase in which the protagonist is able to escape through magical means, a literary model borrowed from motifs in folklore and folktales. The story’s open end is balanced by the conclusion, which the narrator arrives at

39 “Ja przy sercu nie chcę węża...” – Zieliński 1841: 673.

40 “Złej niewiasty hydny srom, / Zwiódł na ciebie zbójczy grom, / Młodych zbawił lat.” – Zieliński 1841: 674.

41 “Ty już w niebie wieniec masz, / ... pokój duszy twei!” – Zieliński 1841: 674.

42 Jezierski 1841: 211–16.

when visiting where the story took place, something also reminiscent of *Zamek Kaniowski*.

### **Sava as a Hero of Ukrainian and Polish Drama**

Appearing at the same time as various Polish paraphrases of the Sava story was the first play in Ukrainian literature about our protagonist, Mykola Kostomarov's *Sava Chalyi. Dramatichni stseny (Sava Chalyi. Dramatic scenes, 1838)*.<sup>43</sup> It is one of Kostomarov's earlier works, dating back to before 1847 when the later historian was still publishing his poems and plays under the pseudonym "Teremisia Halka."

Kostomarov has his hero change sides because of disappointed ambitions: Sava's father Petro is elected hetman, not the popular and youthful hero, so Sava defects to the Poles (with regard to the historical Sava, the position of hetman plays no role). The Polish side, represented by St. Koniecpolski, offers Sava the hetmanship, but on one condition—he has to introduce the Union to Ukraine (this refers to the Church's Union of Brest). But this is not something that Sava will do. Although a traitor in the political sense, he would never be unfaithful to the beliefs of his fathers. Thus, in the depths of his soul, Sava is not a traitor, but remains true to at least one principle of Cossack-Ukrainian identity—the Orthodox Church.

The real traitor in this play is Hnat Holyi, Sava's former friend and comrade-in-arms. He convinces Sava to defect to the Poles, only to discredit him a little later among the Polish rulers as an unreliable partner; on the Ukrainian side, Holyi incites the Cossacks against Sava and they organize a conspiracy to murder him. As soon as Sava is dead, Holyi's intrigues come to light, whereupon he receives his just punishment as well. There are also unfulfilled passions behind Holyi's maneuverings—he has lost out in the competition for a woman, Kateryna, who prefers Sava, and thus avenges himself by hatching the plot against Sava.

Sava, however, is a tragic figure<sup>44</sup>—it is no coincidence that Kostomarov's play has five acts, which is reminiscent of the structure of a tragedy. Having committed a grave error, he must pay with his life. There is no way to rectify this error, not even by refusing to support the Union. The conspirators also kill his

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43 Halka 1930: 141–84.

44 Shamrai has compared the titular hero of Kostomarov's play to tragic figures in Shakespeare, such as Caesar and Coriolanus – cf. Shamrai 1930: 9.



wife and young son, which proves their brutality and makes the scale of the tragedy greater still.

There is one more Polish voice in this polyphony of interpretations. One of the central texts in Polish literature about the Haidamak uprisings is Juliusz Słowacki's play *Sen srebrny Salomei* (*The Silver Dream of Salomea*, 1843), which as far as the chronology is concerned, is the last significant text on the subject. In its list of characters, there is also one Sawa Caliński, whose name at least indicates that he is Sava Chalyi's son. But here Caliński is not fighting on the side of the Confederation of Bar against the Russians, as is historically documented, but instead takes part in the Haidamak uprisings against Poland, thus moving him closer to his father. Słowacki's Sawa, a Ukrainian in Polish service, is also reminiscent of his father because he then pursues the Haidamaks, his compatriots, with extreme severity, thus helping the Poles defeat the rebellion. In so doing, Caliński is transformed into a committed supporter of the Poles: "This is what I swore!!! That Polish heroism / dispels the Cossack blood [in me – A.W.] / That the Ukrainian girls will weep / and throw curses and spells against my sword, my horse: / For I will be like the sword of revenge, / the scythe that reaps the meadow..."<sup>45</sup> He also has to become Polish, because only as a Polish nobleman can he win the hand of his beloved lady. George G. Grabowicz has shown that this play is also constructed at the level of its characters, with its mythological structure of opposing pairs.<sup>46</sup> For example, in the play's constellation of figures, there is one Ukrainian who can be regarded as Sawa's counterpart, namely, the defector and conspirator Semenکو. He is first a servant of a Polish gentleman, but then changes sides to lead the Haidamaks on their vendetta, as a bloodthirsty avenger with the new name Tymenko. Both of the Ukrainian tactics combined in the single person of Sava Chalyi—defecting to the opposite side and fighting on the Polish side against the Ukrainian Haidamaks—are found in Słowacki's play, but have been split between the two protagonists.

Semenکو/Tymenko, traitor to the Poles and defector to the Haidamaks, receives a just punishment: he is cruelly executed, his strategy has failed. Sawa Caliński, who fought with all his might for the Polish cause, is rewarded—documents are found that prove his aristocratic blood and so he can marry the woman he desires. Here again the clear rejection of treason and conspiracy, as it seems at first glance, is relativized by the traitor's end, as has been pointed out

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45 "Przysięgłem!!! Że kawalerstwo / Polskie wygna krew kosaczą! Że Ukrainki zapłaczą / Na mój miecz, na mego konia / Rzucają klątwy i czary: / Bo ja będę jak miecz kary, / Kosa ścinająca błonia." – Słowacki 1983: 150–51.

46 Grabowicz 1987: 23–60.

by Edward Kasperski.<sup>47</sup> When Tymenko is burned alive, two streams of blood flow from his body, forming the sign of the cross: “A specter haunted me: / And only here, in front of the farmstead, / did it fall into the golden sand, spilling two coral red / streams ... which, as it seems, inscribe the most holy shape of Jesus’ cross...”<sup>48</sup> At least a partial rehabilitation of the traitor can be seen here and this is the redemption that is most commonly found in Polish variants of the Sava narrative.

## Conclusion

What was the appeal of Sava Chalyi for Polish literature? The story of few other figures in Ukrainian history were adopted or paraphrased as often as his, be it in folklore or in fiction. Of course, the Polish Romantics had a general interest in Ukraine—one need think only of the so-called Ukrainian School or the Pan-Slavic oriented Lviv authors in the *Ziewonia* circle—but there seems to be other reasons too, political ones. Sava Chalyi embodies a model of Polish-Ukrainian coexistence that was reconsidered following the lost November Uprising (all of the texts analyzed here were written after 1831), not only by the émigrés in Paris, but also within both countries, Galicia and Congress Poland. In these accounts, treason plays a special role, a role in politics that had been discussed since Mickiewicz’s *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828). Sava is not a traitor in the sense of Wallenrod, who furtively goes over to the stronger enemy only to go on to defeat it through treachery. Sava openly changes fronts, defects to the side of the stronger, whether due to the promise of material benefits or because he sees this position to be the right one. This corresponds to the traditional view of the superiority of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic: as a non-Pole in this state, one also had to adopt the Polish ideology. There was only subordination to this hegemony, other political positions did not have equal status.

This idea lost its validity during the Romantic period. Moreover, the catastrophe of the partitions was reconsidered, and reasons were sought for the Polish state’s downfall. These could be found in the eighteenth century, not only in the decline of aristocratic democracy, but also in the Polish dealings with their Ukrainian neighbors: Polish obtuseness and Polish rigidity had led to pivotal

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47 Kasperski 2012: 390.

48 “Goniło za mną widziadło: / I aż tutaj, pode dworem, na piasek złoty upadło, / Wylawszy dwa koralowe / Strumienie... co zda się piszą / Prześwięte Y Jezusowe...” – Słowacki 1983: 233–34.

conflicts with the Ukrainians, although they would have been ideal allies against the superior forces of the Muscovites.

Against this background, Chalysi's treason was the wrong path to take, even if he is considered positively as a person. This is because he sacrificed the interests of his own people to Polish rationality. Treason is no longer a path to political success; treason is denounced, even if some of the texts incriminate the wife more than the hero. Here, treason leads to conspiracy, which in turn leads to the murder of the protagonist and, ultimately, to a dead end: the two sides are still bitterly facing each other after Chalysi is dead, just as they were at the starting point of the narrative. There would be new Haidamak uprisings, and indeed this happened, as we know from history.

Kostomarov's tragedy also somehow confirms, from the Ukrainian side, this assessment of the person of Sava and the program he represents—he will fail, even if he recognizes his mistake and is not ready to hand himself over to the Poles at every point. The tragedy of someone who switches sides is testimony to the futility of such a political program. This is clear in Słowacki's play as well—the Ukrainian traitor Semenکو fails in his Wallenrod strategy against the superior Polish opponent, although he is rehabilitated in death. His opponent, Sava, the Pole of Ukrainian descent who has completely gone to the stronger side, will clearly not succeed with his program, as is expressed by the author in the Wernyhora prophecies at the end of the play.

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## Abstract

Sava Chalji was a historic person from the Haidamaks' uprisings in the late eighteenth century, who defected from the Ukrainian to the Polish side. In the early nineteenth century his story gradually moved from Ukrainian folklore to Polish folklore and fiction. While the initial Polish versions of this tale (word-for-word transliterations into Latin characters) still concentrate on betrayal and revenge, later versions turn out to be paraphrases rather than translations of the original and focus on new topics like Sava's wife, who then became the real traitor. Sava Chalji is not only a hero of folklore and literary ballads, but has been made the hero of two plays, Slowacki's *Sen srebrny Salomei* (*The Silver Dream of Salomea*) in Polish and Kostomarovs *Sava Chalji* in Ukrainian literature, both of which continue the theme of betrayal and revenge in new ways.



# Norwid's Critique of Conspiratorial Reason

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Christian Zehnder\*

## Keywords

Cyprian Norwid; Polish Romanticism; conspiracy; transparency; Prophetic Pragmatism

Critical remarks on conspiracy are ubiquitous in the writings of the Polish late Romantic Cyprian Norwid (1821–1883). An inquiry into this network of remarks, both discursive and poetic, could commence, in a way, from any point. I suggest entering it through a literary text, *Quidam* (1862), to then consider, in various nineteenth-century contexts and with a flexible conceptual framework, Norwid's prose writings, i.e., letters, essays, and scattered notes on conspiracy and "openness" which he passionately advocated as an antidote to secret agitation.<sup>1</sup>

*Quidam* is one of Norwid's most important and original works. If this digressive Roman epic has any external organizing factor or graspable "motor" of the plot then it is, interestingly enough, a conspiracy, namely the conspiracy that (according to the fictional world of *Quidam*) led to the Jewish revolt of Bar Kokhba (AD 132).<sup>2</sup> Rome's decadent elite, including Caesar Hadrian, is incapable of

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1 I should point out that my treatment of conspiratorial motifs in Norwid's work is anything but exhaustive. Instead, I will focus on particularly productive passages. For an excellent advanced key word search see the internet-based dictionary of Puzynina/Korpysz.

2 Cf. Fieguth 2011: 300.

anything but “idle” gestures and is provoked by news of riots from the province of Judea to mobilize its power. As a result of this declaration of the state of war, two of the main characters, the Greek philosopher Artemidor and Rabbi Jazon Mag, are expelled from Rome. The anonymous fictional protagonist Quidam, this truth-seeking “someone,” loses his life in an out-of-control ritual bull sacrifice at the Roman Forum Boarium (*Plac Przedajny*), which had probably been organized for the sake of the enhancement of social cohesion, again, as a reaction to the threat to imperial integrity from the margins.<sup>3</sup> One could even say that conspiracy has the last word in *Quidam*, given that it closes with an exclamation by the Roman statesman, Lucius Pomponius Pulcher, to the conspirators, “I did not know you, Jews.”<sup>4</sup>

The Christians have a remarkably small impact on the *plot* of the epic, even though the reader clearly feels that they represent the Empire’s actual new force and enjoy the author’s sympathy. Their appearances are sparse. The parable of the mustard seed from the Gospel according to Matthew (Mt 13:31–32)—spread throughout the text as a leitmotif<sup>5</sup>—shows how Norwid conceives of the mission and transmission of the Christian message: as careful labor within the realm of the *small*. However, this carefully circumscribed labor, in an inverse proportionality, is supposed to bear all the more fruit, in analogy with the tree in the parable of the mustard seed.<sup>6</sup>

Zygmunt Krasiński, the third “bard” (*wieszcz*) of Polish Romanticism and a more or less close friend of the notorious outsider Norwid, reportedly called *Quidam* utterly obscure and incomprehensible to the Parisian salon worlds of the Polish émigré community.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Krasiński might have also criticized the fact that Christianity was not triumphant in *Quidam*. Norwid’s epic referred to

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3 Cf. Fieguth 2011: 301. For a comprehensive study of the Bar Kokhba revolt see Mor 2016. As Mor (*ibid.*: 2) notes: “It is not surprising that the enigmatic character of Bar Kokhba and the lack of sufficient sources to understand him have fired the imagination of writers and led to a rich flowering of literary works on this subject in Israel and around the world.”

4 Norwid 1971–76/III: 232 (Song XXVIII, v. 59). All translations are mine, Ch. Z. All emphasized passages from Norwid are original.

5 Cf. “Kto siał gorczyzyczne ziarno, zgorzknął, zbawił: / Gorczyzyczne ziarno liche i pieprzowe, / Prochowi równe, który noga zwiewa, / Lecz wyżej serca urasta, nad głowę, / I tak się staje podobieństwem drzewa, / Że ptak niebieski gniazdo na nim miewa.” – *ibid.*: 146 (Song XIII, vv. 305–10).

6 Cf. Trybuś 1993.

7 Cf. Chlebowski 2014: 132.



Kraśiński's own Roman drama, *Irydion* (1836),<sup>8</sup> in which a Christian perspective did triumph insofar as the failing conspirator Irydion, a pagan, was resurrected by the author in the epilogue and sent from Ancient Rome to nineteenth-century Poland with a Christian mission.<sup>9</sup> While intervening through his epilogue, as a *deus ex machina*, Kraśiński eventually gave Christianity a national scope in his drama.<sup>10</sup> Irydion's revengefulness towards imperial Rome (he has a Greek father and a "barbarian" mother) and his plan to murder Caesar Heliogabal is not effectively conducted but, in a way, perpetuated through the trick of the epilogue. In the preface to *Quidam*, presented in the form of a "fragment of a letter" to Kraśiński, Norwid, then, reacts not only to Kraśiński's objection but also to the very premises of *Irydion*. He writes: "Civilization and its Christian womb are made up of the achievements of Israelite, Greek and Roman knowledge, and do you indeed believe that, in the self-conscious reality, it [Christianity] has already been triumphantly revealed?"<sup>11</sup>

Now, the fact that in *Quidam* the Jews act "cabbalistically" (the term appears several times) in the "shadows" must surely be viewed from the context of nineteenth-century anti-Judaism and its set of stereotypes. However, Norwid is clearly not in line with the anti-Semitic theory of Jewish world conspiracy, for which no one other than Zygmunt Kraśiński had provided the founding myth with his *Nie-boska komedia* (*Un-Divine Comedy*, 1835).<sup>12</sup> The key difference between Kraśiński and Norwid, in that regard, lies in the fact that *Quidam* does not suggest infiltration and subversion as features of the Jewish conspiracy. Rather, it is depicted as an anti-imperial emancipation movement, that is, as at least a partially *legitimate* answer to the despotic (religious) policy of the Roman Empire under Caesar Hadrian.<sup>13</sup>

With "prophetic words" (*słowa wieszczce*), Jazon Mag sends his disciple Bar-chob to Judaea to make him the leader of the uprising and, what is more, the longed-for Messiah.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the conspiratorial complex of motifs related to Ja-

8 See, among others, Rzońca 2005: 76–85; Fieguth 2014: 172–78.

9 Kraśiński 1967: 159–68 ("Dokończenie").

10 See, for example, Śliwiński 1992: 130–31.

11 "Cywilizacja składa się z nabytków wiedzy izraelskiej – greckiej – rzymskiej, a łono Jej chrześcijańskie, czy myślisz, że w świadomej siebie rzeczywistości już tryumfalnie rozbrłyśło?" Norwid 1971–76/III: 80 ("Do Z.K. Wyjątek z listu", 79–80).

12 Cf. Janion 2014: 90–115.

13 For a recent discussion of Norwid's peculiar stance between "philo- and anti-Semitism" see Samsel 2017.

14 Norwid 1971–76/III: 170 (Song XVI, v. 169).

zon's mission inevitably, if summarily, makes the reader think of Polish Romanticism and of Adam Mickiewicz's Romantic politics in particular with its combination of Messianism and an anti-colonial agenda.<sup>15</sup> It is plausible, then, that Krasiński found *Quidam* to be not only confused literarily but also unacceptable in its conceptual layout: the Bar Kokhba revolt parallels the rebellious Polish Romanticism—at least potentially so—whereas there are no allusions to Polish patriotic features whatsoever in the representation of the early Christians.

If the Jewish conspiracy in Norwid's epic nonetheless turns out to be evaluated as clearly negative, that is, as a *particularistic* endeavor, then this is a Christian and quite clearly anti-Judaistic criticism. Still, it should be noted that Norwid directed the reproach of particularism, in a broadly homological way, at Polish Romanticism throughout his oeuvre. He had accused many of the exponents of Polish "Romantic" nationalism precisely of a lack of public spirit, of a narcissistic understanding of emancipation and of a glorification of violence. At the same time, the fact that Norwid mostly writes *konspiracja* when dealing with what the Polish language calls *spisek* ('conspiracy') points to a virulent European dimension of the problematic including, for instance, the iconic nineteenth-century conspirator Giuseppe Mazzini and his myriad of secret actions all over the continent. Mazzini not only had lively connections to clandestine Polish activists, but was also an admirer of Adam Mickiewicz.<sup>16</sup> Norwid, by contrast, praised himself for having fought the revolutionary movement, as represented by Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Mickiewicz, on Pope Pius IX's side (he ran on the Quirinal Hill trying to stop the surging crowds of demonstrators in April 1848 together with Zygmunt Krasiński).<sup>17</sup>

In *Quidam*, while relating Barchob's acceptance of his "messianistic" mission to the Province of Judaea, the narrator asks: "What did he feel?"<sup>18</sup> The answer the narrator provides is: "Ardor" (*żar*), but, again, a kind of ardor that lacks both "sails" and "anchor" as it knows neither authentic "inspiration" (*zapał*) nor

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15 Mickiewicz's specific traits within the descriptions of Jazon have been repeatedly identified by Norwid scholars. See, among others, Zaniewicki 2007: 28; Zieliński 2011: 386. Norwid's association of Mickiewicz with Jewish characteristics is no surprise if one thinks of the fact that he harshly rejected Mickiewicz's idea that Israel was an equal "elderly brother" in faith for the Church (in the latter's 1848 "Skład zasad"). On this problematic see Piechal 1937: 72.

16 Cf. Koropeczyk 2008: 399–400.

17 Cf. Trojanowiczowa/Dambek 2007: 312; and Walicki 1983: 296–98.

18 "Co czuł?" – Norwid 1971–76/III: 169 (Song XVI, v. 161).

a foundation in scrupulous and constant labor.<sup>19</sup> The narrator's comment on Bar-chob's last walk to the city of Rome goes: "Obscurity—and a new abyss became visible. / Thoughts, uncertain of shape, though sublime in content."<sup>20</sup> Clearly, the narrator is hinting once again at the mustard seed, which would eventually "grow beyond the heart, beyond the head":<sup>21</sup> the Christians' public confession of faith, their martyrdom, is compared to a "kernel" (*gorczyczne ziarno*), an elementary form out of which things most "elevated" may grow one day. By contrast, the idea of an insurrection, motivated both politically and messianistically, is shown to be a deceptive affect ("sublime in content") without any distinguishable contours.

### The Conspirator as Monk and Tightrope Walker

To widen the perspective and to turn from *Quidam* to a broader corpus of prose pieces, one can say that the most common feature of Norwid's conceptualization of conspiracy is that he places himself, his narrator or his lyrical speaker outside of it as a *non-participating observer*. By virtue of this attitude, he creates space for both the devastating rejection of, and a sympathetic testimony to, conspiracy. Norwid wrote in a letter in 1866, during the Austro-Prussian War and three years after the failed January Insurrection in Poland, that:

So much do I think it is right (in *unjust ages*) to be on the side of the vanquished and the non-triumphant that I am *not only today with Austria, but that I almost went deaf in a wet prison together with Polish conspiracy ... so much ... that, of course not as a martyr and confessor, but why not ... as an amateur.*<sup>22</sup>

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19 "bo nie zapał – żagle, trud – kotwicą" – *ibid.*: v. 163.

20 "I mrok – i znowu otchłań rozwidniona. / Myśli, niepewne kształtem, treścią szczytne" – *ibid.*: 170 (Song XVI, v. 166–67).

21 "wyżej serca urasta, nad głowę" – *ibid.*: 146 (Song XIII, v. 308).

22 "Tak dalece (w Epokach-niesprawiedliwych) uważam za słuszne być po stronie zwyciężonych i nietriumfujących, że nie tylko jestem dziś z Austrią, ale nawet straciłem słuch w wilgotnym więzieniu z konspiracją polską ... tak dalece ... naturalnie, że nie jak męczennik i wyznawca, ale tak sobie ... jako amator." – Letter to Karol Ruprecht, soon after 8 April 1866; Norwid 1971–76/IX: 214. This letter refers to Norwid's imprisonment in Berlin in June–July 1846 after he helped two compatriots escape from the Kingdom of Prussia in 1845 and 1846 respectively. To one of those fugitives, Maksymilian Jatowt, he had handed over his very own passport. When Jatowt later

To return to *Quidam* once again, the historical age narrated in it—Rome under Hadrian—is undoubtedly precisely one instance of such an “unjust age.” Accordingly, there is, as sketched out above, a kind of sympathy with the conspirators, the critical distance notwithstanding.<sup>23</sup> The point is, however, that according to the epic’s logic, conspiracy would be a *false* “martyrdom” at best. This is made manifest in contradistinction to the Christians’ *genuine* (to Norwid) martyrdom. In his many comments on conspiracy, he seems to know exactly how to regulate his “amateurism” (*amatorstwo*) and not to let himself go with it. In that context, a letter from 1863 is of particular interest, in which he portrays the conspirator as a hybrid being:

There is only one thing [the Poles] estimate higher than bigos and sauerkraut soup: technical conspiracy—but! Any juggler can do the same on the hippodromes. I (as you know) have always avoided conspirators. I sat at the edge of the table ... and drew something in the sand ... but to listen to them, I was never unhappy about that ————

The technical conspirator of the nineteenth century (a Titan) is something between a monk and a ballet dancer, and just as it is impossible to combine the rigor of a monk with the elasticity of a tightrope dancer and juggler, so if you nonetheless *do*, you give up your loyalty and you become, without knowing it, a hybrid being. –

(No one has ever brought a monk and a dancer into one without charlatanism.)<sup>24</sup>

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identified himself with this document at the Russian Embassy in Paris, Norwid—who was staying in Berlin—came to the attention of the Prussian authorities and was arrested. – Cf. Trojanowiczowa/Dambek 2007: 183–228; and Trojanowiczowa 2010.

23 The way Norwid works his way through conspiracy is, in a way, reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi, who essentially developed his program of non-violent, anti-colonial resistance in critical confrontation with the notorious conspirator Giuseppe Mazzini – see Donno 2008. I thank Thomas Newbold for pointing this parallel out.

24 “[Polacy] [u]mieją nad bigos i kapuśniak cenić tylko jedną rzecz – konspirację techniczną – – ale! na hipodromach toż samo umie każdy saltymbanka. Konspiratorów (jak wiesz) zawsze unikałem – siedziałem w kącie stołu ..., rysując sobie coś na piasku.... ale ich słuchać nierad byłem nigdy – – – – / Konspirator-techniczny XIX wieku (Tytan) jest to coś między mnichem a baletnikiem, et comme il est impossible de réunir la sévérité d’un moine avec l’élasticité d’un danseur de corde et saltimbanque, il en résulte qu’en réunissant l’impossible on devient peu loyal et sans le savoir sujet à la duplicité. – / (Mnicha i baletnika w jedno bez szarlatanizmu nie zebrał nikt.)” – Letter to Karol Ruprecht, March 1871; Norwid 1971–76/IX: 481.

It is remarkable how carefully, or should we say how *amateurly*, Norwid develops the image of the monk and the tightrope walker only to then denounce that “hybrid being” more mercilessly. Anyone familiar with Norwid’s poetics will hardly deny the coexistence of asceticism (stylistic and ethical) on the one hand and a tricky playfulness (most notably, a powerful paronomastic predilection) on the other; they are deeply characteristic of *his* work. He was a “voice in the wilderness”<sup>25</sup> within the Paris salon or, as Jan Zieliński once aptly described him, a “Christ figure with a cigar.”<sup>26</sup> There is something deeply oxymoronic about Norwid, both in style and behavior. As a matter of fact, is not the seemingly cool “listener” to the conspirators precisely a ludic rigorist?

I believe that one need not have recourse to psychoanalysis or deconstruction to notice in Norwid’s letter the expression of a *faible* for something that he denounces in the very same paragraph as “charlatanry.” Just as a Jewish conspiracy could become an allegory of Polish political Romanticism in *Quidam*, so here conspiracy as such, apparently so “disloyal” to the truth, becomes a plausible, however subliminal, description of Norwid’s own poetic outlook.

### “Openness” versus “Machination”

It is not my intention to diminish Norwid’s rejection of conspiracy. This rejection is, more often than not, completely unambiguous. To mention just a few examples: In his early drama *Zwolon: Monologia* (*Zwolon: A Monologue*, 1851) he subjects the second Romantic generation to a devastatingly pejorative portrait. The young conspirators follow a blind compulsion for revenge and the hero, Zwolon (roughly meaning, the “excepted”) objects that they transform life into a “cemetery.”<sup>27</sup> More than twenty years later, Norwid dramatically wrote: “Peoples in decline have only *conspiratorial* or *machinating* reason, there is no historical and open [*jawna*] reason in them, for if there were any their nation would

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25 Cf. the title poem of Norwid’s famous collection of verse *Vade-mecum* (1866), “Klaskaniem mając obrzękłe prawice...” (With swollen hands from clapping...): “He [the finger of God] commanded me to live in the desert of life!” (“Żyć mi rozkazał [Bożypalec] w żywota pustyni!” – Norwid 1971–76/II: 15, v. 10).

26 Zieliński 2002.

27 Cf. Kubale 1983: 53, 56.

still be alive.”<sup>28</sup> What is necessarily omitted in conspiratorial reason is—and here we are at the heart of Norwid’s criticism—an *open* engagement with history and historicity. The Polish term for openness, *jawność*, can be translated as ‘public,’ ‘medial discourse,’ ‘free press,’ and the like. However, I hold that it is important to capture in this concept the very idea of *open appearance*. In what follows, I therefore suggest not translating, and not rendering too specific, the concept of *jawność*.

By the end of the 1840s, Norwid called *jawność* a “cornerstone of this age”<sup>29</sup> and counted it among men’s “most conservative instincts.”<sup>30</sup> His position in that regard certainly seems to be conservative. As Stefan Chwin has shown in his book *Literatura i zdrada (Literature and Betrayal, 1993)*, conservatives categorically refused so-called “Wallenrodism,” i.e., the strategy of infiltration of the enemy labelled after Mickiewicz’s epic tale *Konrad Wallenrod (1829)* as irreconcilable with the Polish gentry’s old republican virtues.<sup>31</sup> Any mimicry of the hegemonic power would be in discordance not only with an aristocratic codex of honor, but it would also affect the moral integrity of the conspirator himself. The latter argument strongly resembles Norwid’s reproach of machination, disloyalty and charlatanry; it is not by chance that all of these are moralistic categories. When he affirmed: “It was Mickiewicz’s right to say, Wallenrodism, I say [following Słowacki], Winkelriedism,”<sup>32</sup> he puts the readiness to self-sacrifice in Juliusz Słowacki’s *Kordian (1834)* above the longing for revenge in Mickiewicz’s *Konrad Wallenrod*. It may be assumed, however, that Norwid is pointing specifically to the *ambivalence* of Słowacki’s own representation of conspiracy. In the conspiratorial scene in the crypt of Warsaw’s Saint John Cathedral from *Kordian*, Słowacki had the leader of the young conspirators say the following

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28 “U ludów gasnących jest tylko inteligencja konspiracyjna albo intrygancka, ale historycznej i jawnej nie ma – bo, gdyby była, naród żyłby.” – Letter to Józef Bohdan Wagner, early December 1874; Norwid 1971–76/X: 33.

29 “... probierczy kamień wieku: jawność!” – Letter to Stanisław Egbert Koźmian, September 16, 1847; Norwid 1971–76/VIII: 53.

30 “Ale emigracyjne wszystkie ruchy niewczesnymi będą (tak jak były), póki z miejsca warunków wyprężnięte, a w czas jedynie – że tak powiem abstrakcyjnie – rzucone wychodźców umysły przeciw-wagi w pracy, w prawdzie, w jawności, w konserwatywniejszych (że tak nazwę) obudzeniach instynktów – mieć nie będą.” – Norwid 1971–76/VII: 23 (“Listy o Emigracji” – Letters on the [Polish] Emigration).

31 Cf. Chwin 1993: 25–29 (ch. “Etos rycerski wobec etosu maski”).

32 “Mickiewicz miał prawo mówić: Wallenrodyzm, ja mówię: Winkelrydyzm.” – Norwid 1971–76/VI: 444; in the 1860 Paris Lectures on Słowacki.

words: "May the black face of conspiracy not see the light of the world, / For there the sun of God shines over the wide world!"<sup>33</sup> Norwid's emphasis on *jawność*, then, has to be understood not only "civically" but also metaphysically, as an option for the divine law, as an approval of the biblical commandment "You shall not kill," and as a call for spiritual purity. It is not by chance that Zwolon, the saintly but tragic hero of Norwid's eponymous drama, ends up being walled up (*rozmurowano*) after boldly speaking out against the lethal logic of his young fellow activists.<sup>34</sup> That is, both the conspirators and the state fail to recognize the liberating power of *jawność*. In this context, one should recall the juxtaposition of the Jewish conspiracy and Christian martyrdom in *Quidam*. What is at stake here is precisely Norwid's distinction between a problematic latency and the courage to disclose oneself. Thus, we read in *Quidam*: "The Jew remained silent in his chambers contained like coffins. / The Christian vanished, but publicly [*jawnie*] and actively."<sup>35</sup>

I hasten to add that poetically, *jawność* is not the only or perhaps not even the most crucial principle for Norwid. In his short essay "Jasność i ciemność" ("Clarity and Darkness," 1850), in which he defends himself against the accusations of being "obscure," he reverses the logic of those objections and calls darkness "the outline and contour of the shape of truth."<sup>36</sup> The tension between austerity and playfulness mentioned above then seems to be doubled by a differentiation within Norwid's very rejection of obscurity. He argues that clarity too is only a "quality" (*przymiot*) of truth, namely its "color," not an end in itself. As a poet he holds that truth in order to be grasped needs both clarity *and* obscurity. Now, this dialectical view of the transparent and the opaque, I assume, does not invalidate or fundamentally undermine the functioning of the positive concept of *jawność*. Still, Norwid's fascination with conspiratorial obscurity and its use as a means for *jawność*, reflect the aesthetic, epistemological, and hermeneutical argument of "clarity and darkness" to a certain degree.

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33 "Wstrzymać ich na Boga! / Niech myśl młodych, ciemnicy nie przestąpi proga, / Niech spisek z czarną twarzą na świat nie wychodzi, / Bo tam na świecie białym błyszczą Boga słońce!" – Słowacki 1986: 83; Act III, scene IV, v. 148–51.

34 Norwid 1971–76/IV: 78 (v. 44).

35 "Żyd – milczał w izbach zawartych jak trumny; / Chrześcijanin zniknął, lecz jawnie i w czynie." – Norwid 1971–76/III: 61; Song XIII, v. 60–61.

36 "obrysowaniem i konturem kształtu prawdy" – Norwid 1971–76/VI: 599–600. The text is addressed to "A. C." and "Z. K.," that is, to August Cieszkowski and Zygmunt Krasiński.

To conclude this section, I will mention that Adam Mickiewicz, in his Paris Lectures in the early 1840s, had introduced the highly interesting paradox of an “open conspiracy.” On the Decembrists’ plot against the Tsar in the 1820s he remarked that: “They were conspiring openly [in French, *On conspirait ouvertement*; in Polish, *Spiskowano jawnie*] ...; officers and civil servants gathered in houses with windows overlooking the streets. Public opinion ... imposed more than government threats.”<sup>37</sup> To be sure, Mickiewicz judged “open conspiracy” to be too dangerous and eventually irresponsible (he had witnessed the Decembrist’s plot at close range while being exiled in Saint Petersburg). Still, Mickiewicz was able to describe it with admiration. By contrast, even the possibility of such a conspiracy, worn and covered by public opinion, is nowhere to be found in Norwid’s writings. I suppose (had he commented on it) that he would have condemned it on the basis of his radically binary thinking to be a risky “hybrid.” Both the oxymoronic and the dialectical dimensions, although they may considerably affect the “binary code” at times, generally remain undeclared in his rhetoric.

### **To Make Use of One’s Freedom**

I will now address a second point of reference for *jawność* in Norwid’s writings. Because many of his remarks on conspiracy date from the 1860s and 1870s, it is hardly plausible to conceptualize them within the framework of Romanticism solely, or even against the background thereof. They should also be seen in the context of a new system, namely Positivism. I would like to briefly discuss this reframing with reference to Eliza Orzeszkowa’s notion of “simple virtues.” According to Orzeszkowa, the great female writer of Polish Positivism/Realism, the disregard for the “simple virtue of sincerity”<sup>38</sup> lies at the root of any societal evil. The topic of Orzeszkowa’s essay is not conspiracy, but rather the culture of informality in a broader sense, which she argues undermines the possibility of agreements and in particular renders the observance of contracts impossible. In Norwid’s analysis of conspiracy, however, there is a highly similar strand of critique: the idea of the right use of legality. Thus, in 1869, he emphatically recalls “that nations have been wiped out as a result of their non-sensitization to, and non-use of, laws and/or rights, their distrust of legal institutions, and instead,

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37 In Polish: Mickiewicz 1952: 338. In French: Mickiewicz 1849: 289. Cf. Chwin 1993: 30–36, especially 33 (“Psychospołeczny paradoks ‘jawnego spiskowania’”).

38 “prost[a] cnot[a] uczciwości” – Orzeszkowa 1884: 35.



confidence in rumors and chatter and their crystallization, i.e., conspiracies.”<sup>39</sup> Norwid—like Orzeszkowa—deplores the lack of what we today call civil society. Conspiracy, conversely, becomes a metaphor for the voluntary renunciation of a public sphere. “[H]ere,” he notes in the 1870s, “here ... where no one wills to make use of his freedom—here no one, too, reveals himself.”<sup>40</sup> Norwid describes this shortcoming as a specific form of an abuse of power. Conspiracy turns out to be self-enslavement.<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere, as early as in 1851, Norwid remarked, “he who does not fulfill his civic vocation will sink into the deeper category of those dissatisfied or of the conspirators who did not use their power by truth and by *jawność*.”<sup>42</sup> Here, the warning about the “black face” of conspiracy from Słowacki’s *Kordian* is once again palpable. On the whole, however, the call to *make use of the law and of one’s rights* and the idea of a cultural flourishing within a given legal framework (as rudimentary as it may have been in partitioned Poland), is obviously far removed from the “Prophetic” model of Romanticism.<sup>43</sup> To make use of the law and of one’s rights in a non-subversive way

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39 “narody bywają z historii wymazane za nieczujność, za nieużywanie praw, nieufanie władzom prawnym, a ufanie plotkom, gawędkom i ich krystalizacji, to jest konspiracjom.” – Norwid 1971–76/VII: 170 (“Kwestia bieżąca Zmartwychwstańców” – “The Current Question of the Resurrectionists”).

40 “u nas ... gdzie nikt wolności nie używa – nikt nie objawia się.” – Norwid 1971–76/VII: 190 (“Dopiski na egzemplarzu broszury ‘Pożegnanie pułkownika Adama Kozłowskiego’” – “Postscript on a Copy of the Brochure ‘Farewell to the Colonel Adam Kozłowski’”).

41 Cf. “Polak tylko jest w stanie coś podobnego wypowiedzieć! Trzeba na to być sto lat niewolnikiem i kilkadziesiąt konspiratorem, aby ... coś podobnego napisać ... Tak powiedziałby Anglik, Amerykanin, Szwajcar, Grek Peryklejski i Rzymianin za Scypionów – ale tak nie powie Polak dzisiejszy żaden, dlatego że się rodzi z niewolników, a zenitem jego myśli jest personalna konspiracja.” – Letter to Józef Rusteyko, February 1870; Norwid 1971–76/IX: 445–46.

42 “nie spełni swojego Obywatelskiego powołania i przejdzie na kategorię niższą mal-kontentów lub konspiratorów, którzy władzy swojej w prawdzie i jawności nie użyli.” – Norwid 1971–76/VII: 110 (“Memoriał o młodej emigracji” – “The Young [Polish] Emigration Memorial”).

43 Adam Mickiewicz, like many after him, including Norwid, analyzed the partitions of Poland as cynical instantiations of legalism and thus stressed the perverse potential of the “written law” (*prawo pisane*). That does not mean, however, that Mickiewicz simply dismissed legal considerations. He was obviously an heir of the (French) natural rights tradition: According to him, the Poles should make reference to their “innate

must be tantamount to *unoriginality* when measured by a worldview of the “re-volt against the mediated world” (to put it alongside a phrase by contemporary German writer Botho Strauß).<sup>44</sup> By contrast, Norwid is a poet and intellectual who in the context of late Romanticism is trying to save the honor of the mediated world, that is, of law, diplomacy, journalism and so forth. This is, to be sure, a peculiar enterprise, for it soon becomes clear that his way of thinking remains incompatible with Positivism in a crucial respect. Thus, in the poem “Prac-czoło” (“The-Forehead-of-Labor,” 1858), the Positivist approach to economic matters is referred to derogatively as “your *real-school* of the day”<sup>45</sup> doomed to “shallowness” and “insincerity.” There *is* a deep-seated skepticism towards institutions and institutional rationalization in Norwid, which in the end is certainly still romantic, and it even leads him to severely limit his mantrically repeated ideal of *jawność*.<sup>46</sup>

Norwid wrote in 1849 that “*jawność* is the only remedy in the political sphere—for what is *jawne* is not addressed to anyone personally, but only to this time as such.”<sup>47</sup> The category of “impersonality” (*impersonalność*) appears to be the condition of possibility for *jawność*. However, impersonality in Norwid’s lexicon also designates an anti-expressivist stylistic ideal, which shows that it can hardly be meant to propagate technocratic neutrality. Instead, he suggests a series of polemical counter-concepts to institutionalism with regard to French public life all of which directly attack the reduction of *jawność* to daily news. Still in 1849, he wrote:

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right” (*prawo przyrodzone, prawo wrodzone*) in their struggle for freedom. See the seven-page entry on “Prawo” in the *Słownik języka Adama Mickiewicza* (Górski/Hrabec 1969). Typically, late German Romanticism is considered to mark the end of natural rights universalism in the name of the “national spirit” (*Volksgeist*). Mickiewicz’s position could be, then, defined as a complex mix of the natural rights tradition and national spirit historicism. – See Gottfried 1968 and Lizisowa 1994.

44 Strauß 1999. Strauß’s text was first published as an afterword to the German edition of George Steiner’s *Real Presences* (1989; *Von realer Gegenwart*, 1990).

45 “wasza dziś *realna-szkola*”, “zarówno płytka, jak nieszczera” – Norwid 1971–76/II: 92

46 For a general account of civilizational skepticism in nineteenth-century Poland see Jedlicki 1999: 140–41 and *passim*.

47 “*jawność* jedynym jest lekarstwem na fata morgana polityczne – bo co *jawne*, to nie jest do nikogo osobiście zmierzonym, ale do czasu tego tylko.” – Norwid 1971–76/VII: 31 (“[Odpowiedź krytykom ‘Listów o emigracji]” – “Reply to the Critics of the ‘Letters on the [Polish] Emigration’”).

*Jawność*, which is in particular the quality of being present, has enclosed the French mind in that interim state, in that slimming of the present that is becoming a daily fact and accordingly, is of ephemeral value.

For the present (i.e., for *jawność*)—the link with the relatively non-present, i.e., with the non-obvious, i.e., with both the past (tradition) and the future (addition) is broken—there is virtually no sequence, or if there is, then only a governmental and mechanistic one—which is why everything becomes sequence-less.<sup>48</sup>

Public life in the West would be that which is evident *right now*, regardless of both the origin and possible anticipations of the outcome, a kind of pre-stabilized interplay of politics and journalism or an institutional self-reproduction. Norwid, then, is seeking a stance on the narrow ridge between the unreliability of “personal conspiracy” (*personalna konspiracja*<sup>49</sup>) in Polish communities on the one hand and the all too “impersonal” public life in the West on the other. How can we make sense of this “third” position? What is clear is that it would have to answer the two key criteria of (a) openness and (b) the ability to make use of one’s rights. But that openness would have to be non-sensational and, instead, embrace an archeological dimension, that is, a readiness to “dig” into cultural memory. Similarly, the use of one’s rights would have to be distinguished from the pre-emptive of individualistic and hedonistic consumption.

### ***Jawność* between Utopia and Prophetic Pragmatism**

We now begin to see that the sphere that Norwid is trying to occupy as an intellectual has not yet been defined—unless we admit very generally that the eleven or eighteen volumes (*Pisma wszystkie* or the more recent *Dziela wszystkie* respectively) of his *Collected Works* sufficiently represent that sphere. Again, that

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48 “*Jawność*, będąc przymiotem obecności szczególnie, zawarła tu umysł francuski w tę doraźność, w te obecności zeszczuplenie, które dniowością już się staje i efemeryczną też ma wartość. / Dla obecności (to jest *jawności*) – z nieobecny-m-względnie, to jest z niejawnym, to jest z przeszłym (z tradycją) i z przyszłym (z addycją) pozrywano – sekwencji nie ma prawie żadnej, albo guwernemantalna i mechaniczna tylko – niekonsekwentne zatem wszystko.” – *ibid.*: 32.

49 See n. 41. Maria Janion has shown, on the basis of confessions made by members of the “Association of the Polish People” (*Stowarzyszenie Ludu Polskiego*, second half of the 1830s), how shallowly their “conspiratorial ethics” was often rooted and how easily it could be “broken” during interrogations. – Janion 1976: 33–35.

would be inappropriate even from Norwid's own perspective because his writings remained largely *unpublished* during his lifetime. One of his many remarks on journalistic issues may give us an indication. He wrote:

There is not one single [Polish journal] that would, I do not even dare to say, answer the question, but that would even ask it, What is man? What is life? What is time? What is labor? What is money? What is the higher? What is harmony? What is *jawność*?<sup>50</sup>

What Norwid is imagining here is a fundamental journalism of *essences*. My proposal would be, then, that the sphere of *jawność* clearly bears “metaphysical” traits, as I mentioned above while discussing Norwid's high esteem for Słowacki's *Kordian*. Moreover, that sphere in a political sense reveals many utopian features and therefore *programmatically* escapes graspable concretizations to a certain extent. This tendency may be illustrated by the fact that Norwid often deliberately seems to ignore the tight limitations of engagement in the partitioned Poland of his times. In so doing, he presents *jawność* as radically possible even if it in fact was not. Now, it might be helpful to understand this utopia more as a hypothetical or even counterfactual strategy with a very *practical* aim; namely, to persuade (future) readers to completely exhaust the limits of what can be done legally. Consequently, a utopian interpretation of *jawność* would make way for a “prophetic pragmatism” reading of sorts—to use Cornel West's paradoxical phrase.<sup>51</sup>

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50 “Ani jednego [pisma polskiego] nie ma, które by, nie powiem już: odpowiedziało, ale zapytało przynajmniej: co jest człowiek? co jest życie? co jest czas? co jest praca? co jest pieniądz? co jest wyższość? co jest ład? co jest jawność? — — — zatraćają Serio!!” — Letter to Marian Sokołowski, 2 August 1865; Norwid 1971–76/IX: 184.

51 To be sure, the social philosopher Cornel West introduced the concept in a completely different context historically, politically, and religiously. West defines prophetic pragmatism as “a form of American left thought and action in our postmodern moment,” inspired by prophetic Christianity, especially the black liberation movement (Martin Luther King Jr. and others). Prophetic pragmatism's aim is the “reinvigoration of a sane, sober, and sophisticated intellectual life in America and ... a regeneration of social forces empowering the disadvantaged, degraded, and dejected.” — See West 1989, 239. The emphasis on sanity, sobriety, and sophistication in public discourse is reminiscent of Norwid indeed. The advocacy for the disadvantaged is too, to a certain degree. One cannot fail to think of Norwid's two poems on the abolitionist John Brown which are marked by a deep sense of solidarity (“Do obywatela Johna Brown” [To the Citizen John Brown, 1859]; “John Brown” 1863). — See also Dickenson 1990.

The conspirator in the epic *Quidam* was characterized by a one-sided, self-encapsulating “gloom.” The Romantic conspirator, Norwid’s contemporary, is a “hybrid” of monk and tightrope walker, an obscene mix, according to Norwid, of ascetic rigidity and the agility of a trickster. But even that irreconcilability may not have been foreign to Norwid the poet. One could put it as follows: just as there is a kind of metaphorical intimacy with conspiracy in his writings, there is also a certain vagueness about Norwid’s panacea, *jawność*. But there is a performative power to this vagueness, a power to enact the very process of disclosure, which is promised by *jawność*.

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## Abstract

This chapter addresses a series of critical statements about conspiracy, both as a political means and as a social attitude, made in the writings of the Polish late Romantic Cyprian Norwid (1821–1883). “Peoples in decline,” he notes, “have only conspiratorial or machinating reason, there is no historical and open reason in them.” Norwid laments the existence of an informal system of gossip that “crystallizes” into conspiracies. With regard to nineteenth-century Poland, his rejection of conspiracy is tantamount to a strong critique of political Romanticism, i.e., of some key aspects of the Polish insurgent tradition. What Norwid calls for instead is a culture of “openness” and a transparent, non-revolutionary, truth-seeking ethos. However, one cannot fail to observe a kind of fascination with conspiracy in his writings. This ambiguity, the chapter argues, reflects Norwid’s dialectical understanding of the role played by “clarity” and “obscurity” in his poetics.





# Truth under Attack, or the Construction of Conspiratorial Discourses after the Smolensk Plane Crash

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*Alois Streicher*

## **Keywords**

Smolensk plane crash; Polish-Russian relations; Katyn

## **1. Introduction: On the Genesis of Conspiracy Theories**

In a 2001 essay about conspiracy theories in Poland, journalist Teresa Bogucka writes that the word *conspiracy* does not have a bad connotation in Polish, quite the opposite. Since the eighteenth century, the country's history has abounded with conspiracies, both real and fictitious.<sup>1</sup> After describing a series of real and alleged conspiracies involving Freemasons and Jesuits during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Bogucka mostly dwells on the avalanche of anti-Jewish propaganda launched by the Polish communists in 1968. This campaign dealt with an alleged plot by the enemy of the classes—including Jewish residents who remained in the country after the Holocaust—against the Polish state. Bogucka proclaims that after the fall of communism, the era of politically instrumentalized conspiracy narratives had come to an end in Poland. Fortunately, the times in which the government actively reinforced hatred in public campaigns, fueling unjustified fears against whole groups of the population are long gone.<sup>2</sup> But is this statement, made in 2001, still true today in a country that has undergone significant change?

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1 Cf. Bogucka 2001: 125.

2 Cf. *ibid.*: 135.

In this chapter, I contend that Poland's present situation does not allow one to diagnose the end of conspiracy theories or their instrumentalization for political purposes. Quite the converse, conspiracy theories have been *en vogue* in Poland again since at least 10 April 2010. On that day the plane TU-154M, which was supposed to carry Polish President Lech Kaczyński to the city of Smolensk in Western Russia for a commemoration ceremony, crashed in the course of a tragic catastrophe, claiming the lives of all 96 people on board. The fact that an important part of Poland's military, political, and religious elite fell victim to the catastrophe was a huge shock for the Polish public. After a phase of mourning, however, the length of the investigation, the inefficient cooperation between Polish and Russian authorities, as well as political strife within Poland all contributed to a heated atmosphere; finally, it was claimed that the plane crash had actually been the result of a plot. Different theories emerged to explain the catastrophe in the wake of the investigation, each supported by different political and social groups. The decisive question was of course: was it an assassination attempt or just a mere accident?

The following analysis does not try to answer the question of which version of the events about the Smolensk plane crash is true or false. Such an undertaking would go far beyond the scope of this chapter and the expertise of its author. This chapter's objective is rather to shed light on the genesis of discourses commonly labelled as *conspiracy theories*, and to do so under a variety of different aspects. The Smolensk catastrophe and the conspiracy theories it spawned are suitable for conducting such an analysis for a simple reason. The Smolensk incident is a single, distinguishable event that happened quite recently. This makes it easy to access contemporary reactions, media reports, and other publications about it. This enables us to document various stages of the event's coverage in the media, speculations about the course of events, and eventually the emergence of two opposing theories, each accusing the other of a lack of truth. Thus, the following pages are an initial attempt at describing and analyzing discourses that can be described as being at least partially conspiratorial.

In order to achieve this objective, the first part of the chapter contains a theoretical overview of the concept of a *conspiracy theory*. This analysis aims to refrain from any form of value judgement and—drawing on an approach adopted by the sociology of knowledge—to define conspiracy theories as an additional form of knowledge or discourse existing alongside other forms.<sup>3</sup> The following section deals with the historical context of the Katyn massacre, which plays an important role in the construction of conspiratorial discourses surrounding the

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3 Cf. Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2012.

2010 plane crash. Then follows a description of the catastrophe based on the Polish Lasek report (at the time of its publication, the official government version). In the course of the lengthy investigations, this initial document was followed by many other reports and commissions that were increasingly characterized by political conflicts, including accusations that important information had been concealed or destroyed and that the plane crash was in fact an orchestrated operation planned by a foreign power. Thus, the present chapter aims to give a comprehensive overview of the whole process of the genesis of a conspiracy theory: from the event itself until the complete discourse that develops its own dynamics within society and media.

## **2. Conspiratorial Discourses and the Smolensk Plane Crash**

### **2.1 Conspiracy Theories as a Form of Unorthodox Knowledge**

Conspiracy theories are a topic that is hard to deal with in a neutral way. Therefore, the academic treatment of this phenomenon has frequently been characterized by the preconceived notion of conspiracy theories as morally “wrong” or manipulative knowledge. This kind of knowledge not only serves as a fertile ground for all kinds of political and religious extremism, it also allows for rather explicit conclusions regarding the intelligence, rationality or even assertions about the mental health of its adherents.<sup>4</sup> This view of the term *conspiracy theory* is also popular outside of the academic context, where such theories are often qualified as “bizarre private opinions” whose followers advocate “stereotypical and monocausal worldviews”; many critics argue that it would be better if these people did not take part in public debate in a rational society.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the fact that people increasingly accuse each other of believing conspiracy theories is an indicator of increased aggression in current public discourse today. If conventional criticism does not suffice, then it is still possible to accuse your opponent of believing in conspiracy theories, trying to completely exclude them from the discussion.

Let us now take a closer look at the structural features of conspiracy theories and conspiratorial discourses. Historical experience, ranging from the plot against Julius Caesar to the Watergate affair, shows that the topic of such theories—i.e., conspiracies—is a very real phenomenon. Conspiracies, defined as “secret, planned agreements between a group of several participants, aiming at

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4 Cf. Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2014: 10.

5 Cf. Lau 2016: 11.

their own advantage to the detriment of the majority of people” have always been a part of human life.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge about real conspiracies inevitably leads to speculations about other, more secret ones which have simply gone undiscovered to date. These speculations are referred to as *conspiracy theories* in everyday language as well as in academic discourse. However, the expression *theory* is actually a misnomer, since they are not theories in a strictly scientific sense: conspiracy theories cannot be disproven by falsification, as is the case in natural sciences. Instead, more or less empirical data are connected into statements that are not to be doubted and single incidents are often read as indicators for all-encompassing conspiracies.

Therefore, it is not surprising that some researchers prefer the term *conspiracy myth* to the conventional *conspiracy theory*.<sup>7</sup> Here, the term *myth* should be associated with a pre-scientific, quasi-religious, and uncritical worldview. This automatically stigmatizes the search for alternative explanation models of events practiced by conspiracy theorists as dubious, if not outright dangerous. The same theorists often attribute the development of conspiracy theories to psychological or social effects, like e.g., *cognitive dissonance reduction*.<sup>8</sup> This term, taken from psychology, means that certain individuals—overwhelmed by the complexity of the modern world—search for simple explanations and solutions to their problems. As a consequence of this, multi-faceted phenomena like wars, economic crises or catastrophes are often viewed as elements of a ‘big plan,’ while certain social minorities, e.g., Jews, communists or Freemasons, are blamed as having orchestrated these situations.

However, this depiction of conspiratorial thought presents two significant weaknesses. The first problem is concerned with the relationship between reality and fiction in a broad sense, the second one arises because the expression *conspiracy theory* is not a neutral term, but a derogatory term. As for the first point, Karl Hepfer in his introductory work *Verschwörungstheorien. Eine philosophische Kritik der Unvernunft (Conspiracy Theories: A Philosophical Critique of Irrationality, 2015)* remarks that since the time of René Descartes, the question of truth can no longer be answered unequivocally. Descartes, by systematically questioning the validity of human perception and empirical knowledge, left humanity his famous *cogito ergo sum* as the only and last certainty, shattering the then-prevailing notion that one only had to find out the truth about the world by

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6 Johannsen/Röhl 2012: 24–25.

7 Cf. Lau 2016: 11.

8 Cf. Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2014: 11.

means of empirical observation.<sup>9</sup> Today it is a commonsense notion that human beings—up to a certain degree—construct their subjective realities and truths themselves. Consequently, no propositions can be made with absolute certainty, which also holds for the perception of the world surrounding us every day. There always exists a possibility of deception, inaccuracy of our own perception or of misinterpretations. Taking this into account, Hepfer arrives at *two* remarkable conclusions. First, he does not view conspiracy theories in an entirely negative light, asserting that—with their doubt of firmly established beliefs and narratives—they stand in a long tradition which he connects with Descartes and to other rationalist philosophers.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is possible that at least *some* conspiracy theories are triggered by emancipatory thinking in accordance with the values of the Enlightenment. Second, in a world without final certainties, it is logically impossible to completely and absolutely refute conspiracy theories. As Hepfer stresses, there always remains a lingering doubt as to whether the conspiratorial interpretation of an event might be true after all, even if it sounds outrageously ridiculous in the beginning.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as historical experience shows, there are numerous examples of unlikely scenarios and interpretations that nonetheless eventually turned out to be true.

The second drawback of the conventional understanding of conspiracy theories is that researchers always *a priori* depict them as a reaction by individuals unable to cope with the complexity of the world, or as a consequence of social disappointment. In other words: the world is evil, unfair and meaningless, which is why people come up with their own simple explanations. However, this claim is not valid for two reasons: first, the complexity or simplicity of a theory does not contain any direct information about its probability. Simple explanations for complex events, such as plane crashes, economic crises or military conflicts are not automatically wrong, nor can they always be excluded as improbable. Furthermore, an approach that categorically rejects alternative explanations as pathological, supports the development of unreflective political and psychological ideas of normality. Thus, the participants in the discourse—implicitly or explicitly—adopt common sense classifications offered by mainstream media and the majority culture.<sup>12</sup>

What follows from this? It is of crucial importance that we be aware of the fact that neither conspiracy theories nor their academic treatment in the humani-

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9 Cf. Hepfer 2015: 52–53.

10 Cf. Hepfer 2015: 54.

11 Cf. *ibid.*: 55.

12 Cf. Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2014: 12.

ties are located outside of social reality. The mere labelling of ideas and opinions as a *conspiracy theory* already has a delegitimizing effect, striving to exclude adherents of such theories from public discourse. The analysis of conspiracy theories should, therefore, observe one basic principle: conspiracy theories, as with any other form of discourse, cannot be evaluated by an ideal and neutral “außersoziales Realitätsverständnis” (*extra-social understanding of reality*), operating with absolute values of truth and fiction. Conspiracy theories are part of social knowledge inventories and, therefore, we always have to analyze them in relation to this knowledge.<sup>13</sup> This leads us to a notion of conspiracy theories as just one more type of social knowledge among many others.

In their monograph on the sociology of conspiratorial thought, Anton/Schettsche/Walter describe conspiracy theories as nothing other than a *heterodox* form of knowledge, one that is in contradiction to socially recognized and conventional forms of knowledge, which they call *orthodox*.<sup>14</sup> Hence, a sociological approach to conspiracy theories has to place its focus on the processes which generate and facilitate differences between heterodox and orthodox—i.e. alternative and conventional respectively—forms of knowledge in discourses. In this context, concrete social factors always play a crucial role: which population groups and/or institutions are involved in the creation of heterodox forms of knowledge, who tends to adopt them and who rejects them?<sup>15</sup> In conducting such an analysis, one has to keep in mind that it is not possible to confirm or refute a discourse—be it heterodox or orthodox—simply by analyzing it. Instead, the sociological approach presumes that knowledge in the form of public discourse is produced throughout the course of a social process, one which is not directly linked to the extra-discursive world.

Taking the abovementioned points into account, this chapter is based on three main methodological principles. The first principle is the impossibility of proving or refuting assumptions about the real world with absolute certainty. Therefore, the focus of this chapter rests on the origin and the structure of conspiracy theories as *discourse*, rather than the relation of this discourse to the extralinguistic world to which it refers. Second, it is necessary to liberate the term *conspiracy theory* from its negative connotation as deliberately wrong, potentially extremist manipulation. Rather than that, we have to view them as a special type of socially constructed discourse concerned with the interpretation of historical events or current processes, described by them as the direct results of con-

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13 Cf. *ibid.*

14 Cf. *ibid.*: 13.

15 Cf. *ibid.*: 14.

spiracies. Conspiracy theories are also subject to the same processes that any other form of discourse is. The only difference is that a conspiracy theory per definition represents a discourse that is publicly unaccepted and, hence, constitutes a form of alternative or *heterodox* knowledge. The third principle of the present analysis is its diachronic approach. As Johannsen and Röhl remark, conspiracy theories always have to fit into the collective imagination of a certain group or society in order to tap into previously existing fears and stereotypes.<sup>16</sup> Hence, the analysis of a conspiracy theory originating in Poland should take the prevailing moods, underlying sentiments, social fears and the attitude towards conspiratorial ideas within Polish society into account. Without such information, any description of conspiratorial discourses will be incomplete. Therefore, the next section begins with a short historical contextualization of the dramatic events of 10 April 2010.

## 2.2 Katyn: Trauma with Consequences

It seems necessary to first provide a short historical overview of the massacre of Katyn, a Soviet war crime committed during World War II, given that is not only directly connected to the Polish President's journey to Smolensk on 10 April 2010, but also plays at least an indirect role in the emergence of related conspiracy theories.

The massacre of Katyn is the most prominent incident in a series of politically motivated war crimes committed by the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) in April and May 1940 against more than 25,000 Polish citizens—mainly soldiers, but also representatives of the social elite.<sup>17</sup> The reason for this war crime can be found in the aftermath of the Soviet annexation of Eastern Poland in 1939, in accordance with the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. 250,000 Polish soldiers found themselves in Soviet camps, causing problems for the Soviet authorities who were not prepared for such high numbers of prisoners.<sup>18</sup> The head of the People's Commissariat, Lavrenty Beria, turned to the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, asking him for permission to execute the Polish prisoners by firing squad in a letter dated 5 March 1940. Stalin and the Politburo gave their consent and ordered Beria to treat the cases of 25,700 Polish prisoners of war by means of a special procedure—i.e., without any legal procedures at

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16 Johannsen/Röhl 2010: 29.

17 Cf. Zaslavsky 2007: 9.

18 Cf. *ibid.*: 21.

all—and to apply the maximum sentence: death by firing squad.<sup>19</sup> Immediately, the Poles were removed from the camps. More than four thousand Polish officers were brought into a forest near the village of Katyn in the Smolensk district from one of the main camps in the Russian city of Kozelsk; here NKVD officials killed 4,143 Poles through shots in the back of the head.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the Soviets killed many more Polish prisoners in other places throughout the Soviet Union.

The propagandistic abuse of the massacre that followed can be taken as a typical example for the deliberate construction of orthodox discourse in a totalitarian society, showing that the mainstream interpretation of an event does not necessarily have anything to do with historical facts. When Nazi-German soldiers discovered the mass graves in Katyn in the course of their war against the Soviet Union in 1943, they announced this to an international public, hoping to instrumentalize the massacre for their own propagandistic purposes.<sup>21</sup> Among the Western allies, neither the US nor the UK were interested in an investigation of the matter—the alliance with Stalin to fight Hitler was more important. When the Prime Minister of the Polish government in-exile confronted the British Prime Minister Churchill with proof that over 15,000 Polish officers had been killed by the Soviets, the latter is reported to have answered: “If they are dead, there is nothing that will bring them back to life. ... We must beat Hitler, this is not the right time for bickering and accusations.”<sup>22</sup>

Still during the war, two investigative commissions—one that was set up by Nazi Germany and one by the Red Cross—arrived at the same conclusion: the Polish officers were shot in the spring of 1940, i.e., at a time when the area was still under Soviet rule.<sup>23</sup> Soviet authorities appointed their own investigation committee immediately after the Soviets had liberated the region from the Nazis, which carried the lengthy name *Special commission for the assessment and investigation of the circumstances leading to the shooting of Polish prisoners of war by fascist German invaders in the Katyn forest*.<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, this commission came to the conclusion that the executions were carried out over one year later by the Germans. In the course of events, this version became part of

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19 Cf. *ibid.*: 43.

20 Cf. Roth 2015: 99.

21 Cf. Zaslavsky 2007: 63.

22 Cf. *ibid.*: 64.

23 Cf. *ibid.*

24 Cf. *ibid.*: 67. «Специальная Комиссия по установлению и расследованию обстоятельств расстрела немецко-фашистскими захватчиками в Катынском лесу военнопленных польских офицеров».



official Soviet as well as official Polish (communist) historiography. Until the end of the 1980s, it was not possible to officially and publicly talk about the causes for the massacre, neither in the Soviet Union nor in Poland. It was only Mikhail Gorbachev that publicly declared the NKVD's responsibility for the executions.<sup>25</sup> In 1989, the Russian public office of military prosecution even undertook steps to resume the investigation of the massacre. However, this came to an abrupt halt in 2004, the justification being that investigative action had not confirmed that a genocide of the Polish people had taken place.<sup>26</sup>

It is not hard to understand that this event, along with the subsequent efforts to cover up everything, have remained in the collective memory of Polish society up until today. Zaslavsky, among many other researchers, contends that the Poles never believed the Soviet version. An overwhelming majority of the Polish population never doubted that the Soviets were responsible for the killings.<sup>27</sup> Their experience of a historical truth was suppressed and could not even be mentioned, while the official version was a blatant lie. This went down in Polish history as the 'Katyn lie.' It is a topic that still casts its shadow upon Polish-Russian relations today. Moreover, the history of the Katyn massacre serves as bitter proof that cover-ups and historical lies *do* exist in the real world and that one should never blindly believe in an official version, simply because it comes from the authorities. In this context, knowledge of the Katyn massacre is necessary for an understanding of Poland's reactions in the aftermath of the 2010 Smolensk plane crash.

### 2.3 The Plane Crash of 10 April 2010—an Overview

The immediate cause for the Polish President Lech Kaczyński's journey to Russia was the seventieth anniversary of the Soviet massacre of Katyn. The Polish government decided to hold the official ceremony on 7 April 2010 in the course of a meeting between the Prime Ministers of both countries—Vladimir Putin and Donald Tusk. Since this event was scheduled to take place in the absence of the President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński had scheduled his own visit to take place three days later.<sup>28</sup> Commentators attributed the reason for the President's and his Prime Minister's separate visits to the existence of a political conflict between them. Tusk, a member of the liberal-conservative *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO,

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25 Cf. Roth 2015: 102.

26 Cf. Zaslavsky 2007: 9–10.

27 Cf. *ibid.*: 77.

28 Cf. Roth 2015: 109–10.

*Civic Platform*), advocated a more moderate relationship towards Russia, while Kaczyński of the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS, *Law and Justice*) party was known for his anti-Russian sentiment. There were reports circulated in the media that talked about political games through which Tusk and the PO wanted to harm the President to keep him away from the remembrance ceremony. In a report published by Antoni Macierewicz, a PiS politician and member of the Polish Parliament, it states:

From 2009 onwards, the Polish council of ministers was playing a game together with the Russians in order to prevent President Kaczynski from taking part in the Katyn anniversary. The representatives of the council of ministers agreed to a script devised by the Russians only to denigrate the President of the Polish Republic.<sup>29</sup>

Roth also writes that the Tusk government actively tried to exclude the President—who was known for his anti-Russian stance—from the meeting in order to improve Polish-Russian relations.<sup>30</sup> In any case, the question of setting the date for the visit was already a matter that gave rise to speculations and heterodox explanatory models.

According to official information, the president's plane, a Russian Tupolev TU-154M, took off from Warsaw Chopin Airport at 7:27 AM (Central European Time). Its destination was the military airport Smolensk-North located near Katyn. At about 10:24 AM (Moscow Time), the aircraft was approaching the destination airport for landing; however, the ground personnel informed the crew that a landing was not possible at that moment due to bad visibility conditions. Nonetheless, the captain asked the head of the tower crew for permission to try out a landing approach in order to determine the exact conditions. At the same time, however, he informed the diplomatic chief of protocol that they probably had to prepare for a landing in one of the Belorussian airports of Minsk or Vitebsk, as the weather conditions and especially the thick fog did not allow for a landing.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, the aircraft tried out a landing approach with the consent of the Russian ground crew. Problems arose during the initial descent towards airstrip D 26. The internal TAWS (*Terrain Awareness and Warning System*) indicated a

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29 "Od połowy 2009 r. Rada Ministrów RP prowadziła grę ze stroną rosyjską zmierzającą do wyeliminowania Prezydenta RP Lecha Kaczyńskiego z udziału w katyńskich uroczystościach ... . Przedstawiciele Rady Ministrów RP przystali na scenariusz rosyjski w celu dyskredytacji Prezydenta RP." – Pechowicz/Pacewicz 2016.

30 Cf. Roth 2015: 111.

31 Cf. Komisja Laska 2015.

higher flight altitude than was actually the case. At 10:40:50 local time, the pilot eventually wanted to end the landing approach, giving the order “Initiate a go-around.”<sup>32</sup> Only a few seconds later, at 10:41:00, the plane came into contact with objects on the ground, due to its low altitude. Despite a slow rise in altitude, the relative height of the plane did not increase due to the composition of the terrain. At 10:41:02, the plane hit a birch tree that ripped off about a third of the left wing and made the aircraft unmaneuverable, tilting it to the left. After a final order by the ground crew to abort the landing approach, the plane hit the ground at 10:41:07 at a speed of 260 km/h. It was completely destroyed through the collision and none of the crew or the passengers survived the accident; 96 people died, including the President of the Republic of Poland.<sup>33</sup>

This version is a broad summary of the results published by the Polish federal commission for the investigation of the catastrophe; it is, however, not the only version of the events, as will be shown in the following section.

## **2.4 A War of Commissions: Conflicts about the “Truth of Smolensk”**

Although not everybody would agree with the description of the events provided above, it is largely based on observable data such as recordings of the communication between the plane crew and the ground personnel or the technical instruments of the plane. Of course, this version does not provide a full explanation for the reasons for the catastrophe. Many questions remain unanswered: why did the pilots try to land despite the bad conditions? What exactly was the effect of the damaged TAWS system? Might there have been any other factors that played a role? Moreover, one has to take into account that in the days and weeks directly after the plane crash, there had not been any official version yet. From a sociological view, this is an interesting point in time: a tragic event took place, the interpretation of which is still completely open. There are no orthodox mainstream versions and no heterodox alternatives to them. Society awaits a narrative that consistently explains how the tragedy could happen.

A common means to fabricate such narratives are investigative commissions. They are not only official in nature, but also consist of reputable experts and politicians who do extensive research into the matter and publish a report at the end of their work that sums up their findings. These reports have a huge influence on

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32 “Odchodzimy na drugie zejście.” – I.e., abort the landing and gain altitude again. – Komisja Łaska 2015.

33 Cf. *ibid.*

the way certain events are perceived in public—one might think about the report by the Warren Commission about the assassination of President Kennedy or the 9/11 Commission Report. Nonetheless, it is clear that all of the different groups that were somehow involved in the plane crash immediately started to support a discourse that would show themselves in a more positive light. Therefore, the best way to conduct an investigation into a matter like the Smolensk plane crash is to call upon an uninvolved third party, which can best guarantee the neutrality and independence of the process. However, in the case of the Smolensk incident, no investigation was carried out by a third party, e.g., an international commission. On the contrary, it was a federal Russian commission that mostly did the work of investigation. This in turn led to constant skepticism on the part of the Poles who questioned the neutrality of the Russian experts from the outset.

The first Russian commission that dealt with the Smolensk plane crash was set up by the Russian civil aviation committee MAK.<sup>34</sup> It presented its final report on 12 January 2011 in Moscow.<sup>35</sup> This report was neither accepted by the Polish public nor by the Polish political elites, since it placed the sole responsibility for the accident on the Polish pilot and the cabin crew. According to the MAK report, the main reasons for the catastrophe were failure to abort the landing approach earlier, in spite of bad weather conditions, ignoring the internal warning systems as well as psychological pressure exerted on the pilot by the Diplomatic Chief of Protocol, Mariusz Kazana, and the Commander of the Polish Air Force, Andrzej Blasik. Moreover, the speed of the descent was much too high. Apart from that, Commander Blasik supposedly had alcohol in his blood.<sup>36</sup> The commission asserted that Blasik had a blood alcohol level of 0.06 percent when he forced the pilots to try a landing approach. The tower crew in Smolensk also offered the Poles an alternative airport. They had not given explicit permission for landing.<sup>37</sup> Prime Minister Donald Tusk described the MAK-report as incomplete: “The MAK-report is incomplete, there will be talks with Russia about the creation of a common version. ... The other side should also have the courage and readiness to show the whole picture.”<sup>38</sup> Jarosław Kaczyński, member of parliament and the late President Lech Kaczyński’s brother, called the MAK-

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34 Межгосударственный авиационный комитет.

35 Cf. Roth 2015: 191.

36 Cf. Wassermann/Rymanowski 2015: 134.

37 Cf. Roth 2015: 191.

38 “Raport MAK jest niekompletny, [będą] rozmowy z Rosją o ustalenie wspólnej wersji. ... Druga strona powinna także mieć tę odwagę i gotowość do pokazania całości obrazu.” – Wassermann/Rymanowski 2015: 134.

report a “derision of Poland” and the then Defense Minister Klich stated that the MAK-report was politically motivated and that its aim was to embarrass the Polish nation by depicting one of the most important commanders of its army as a drunkard.<sup>39</sup> Despite this harsh criticism, the MAK-report quickly obtained a quasi-official status, not only in Russia but also in a broader international public. In Poland, however, it was not only members of the national conservative PiS that rejected the Russian report, but the ruling Civic Platform also expressed its dissatisfaction.

In addition to the investigation of the plane crash undertaken by the Russian MAK, the Poles set up their own federal commission to look into the case—the Committee for Investigation of National Aviation Accidents.<sup>40</sup> This commission—better known by the name of its chairman, Jerzy Miller, minister of the interior at the time—published its own closing report about the causes of the plane crash on 29 July 2011.<sup>41</sup> Although the report does not substantially differ from the Russian MAK commission’s findings, it does place an emphasis on the partial responsibility of the Russian ground crew, due to inadequate communication between the tower crew and the pilot as well as the airport’s bad equipment.<sup>42</sup> As opposed to the Russian version, the Miller Commission was not able to detect any direct psychological pressure that was exerted on the pilots. However, the Polish report mentions indirect pressure because of the importance of the state visit:

What can, however, be confirmed, is that there was pressure which influenced the crew in an indirect way, and was connected with the rank of the flight, presence of the most important people of the state onboard and importance of the ceremonies in the Forest of Katyń.<sup>43</sup>

The publication of the Miller report represents an interesting point in Poland’s internal debate about the Smolensk plane crash. While most Polish experts and all political parties had agreed upon the incompleteness of the MAK-report, there were very different positions concerning the validity of its findings after the publication of the Miller report. These differences are mostly connected to

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39 Cf. Roth 2015: 192–93.

40 “Komisja Badania Wypadków Lotniczych Lotnictwa Państwowego” (KBWLLP).

41 <https://wayback.archive-it.org/all/20120906032711/http://mswia.datacenter-poland.pl/FinalReportTu-154M.pdf> (English language version)

42 Cf. Roth 2015: 194.

43 Komisja Millera 2011: 235.

the political or ideological opinions of groups and institutions. Liberal media like the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* and government politicians praised the commission's work, highlighting in particular the independence and high qualifications of its members who investigated the catastrophe for over a year and who were on the site of the plane crash in Smolensk only a few hours after the disaster took place.<sup>44</sup> However, the conservative PiS and other opposition parties harshly criticized the report from the very beginning. The main reason for their discontentment was the fact that the members of the Miller Commission were, to a large extent, the same politicians that were politically responsible for, or at least involved in, the president's flight to Smolensk—among others the Chief of the Chancellery of the Polish Prime Minister, the Minister of the Interior, and the Minister of Defense. They should not have been chosen for these positions, since this entailed a conflict of interests.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Russian authorities had not enabled Polish investigators to access the original flight recorders, which led to the Polish commission writing its report without the original equipment at hand. The Russian MAK also withheld numerous documents and means of evidence necessary for a detailed investigation.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, some political commentators described the Miller report as, at best, worthless if not actively manipulated: the daughter of one of the victims stated in an interview: "The whole report belongs in the trash can."<sup>47</sup> Without any access to original documents and evidence, the commission had not even properly conducted any investigative action, some claimed: "This is probably the only commission of this type in the whole world that investigated a catastrophe without even getting up from their desks."<sup>48</sup>

Dissatisfied with the investigations' development, and skeptical about the actions of the Russian side, the opposition party PiS initiated its own parliamentary committee for the investigation of the TU-154M crash in Smolensk. This group was led by Antoni Macierewicz, PiS politician and member of the Polish Parliament. It published its first report, entitled *Biała księga smoleńskiej tragedii* (*White Book of the Smolensk Tragedy*), on 29 June 2011. Although it did not offer any new narratives or changes to the findings of the previous reports, the basic message of the *White Book* was that the MAK report, as well as the work of the Miller Commission, were incomplete and faulty. According to the opposition

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44 Cf. Roth 2015: 195.

45 Wierzchołowski/Misiak 2013: 18.

46 Cf. Roth 2015: 195–96.

47 "Cały raport nadaje się więc do kosza." – Wassermann/Rymanowski 2015: 161.

48 "To chyba jedyna taka komisja na świecie, która badała katastrofę, nie odchodząc od swoich biurka." – Wassermann/Rymanowski 2015: 163.

report, the government either had not taken into account serious facts or—worse still—had deliberately suppressed them. In the report, it states:

Polish public opinion and the parliament were systematically given wrong information by the Russian side and by the government of Donald Tusk, concerning the catastrophe and the course of the investigation. This behavior points towards a deliberate cooperation between the government of Donald Tusk and the authorities of the Russian Federation to the detriment of Polish investigative efforts in order to make it impossible to find the truth.<sup>49</sup>

With this document, the open conflict about the truth of Smolensk and—consequently—the orthodox explanation of the plane crash gained momentum. In the beginning, the main goal of Macierewicz's parliamentary group aimed mainly at refuting the findings of both the MAK report and the Miller Commission, e.g., the notion that psychological pressure on the pilots had contributed to the catastrophe or the assertion that the Commander of the Polish Air Force had alcohol in his blood. However, in the course of its existence, Macierewicz's group conducted a variety of (sometimes controversial) experiments, published interviews with scientists and other experts and offered a number of alternative scenarios concerning the course of events leading up to the plane crash. All of these efforts were intended to disprove the official, governmental version about the pilots' main responsibility. Among these efforts were some that were viewed as respectable and reasonable by the public. Other efforts, however, instead served the opposite purpose and made the group a laughingstock in the media; their attempt to simulate the plane crash using sausages and empty beverage cans for example. The Polish journalist Bogdan Rymanowski described the government's and of parts of the public reaction, towards these experiments in the following way: "They are pseudo-scientists compromising themselves with experiments using sausages and empty cans of energy drinks."<sup>50</sup>

It is important to note that from that point onwards both narratives, the version of the government and the opposition's alternative, were developing more

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49 "Polska opinia publiczna i Sejm RP były systematycznie dezinformowane przez stronę rosyjską i rząd D. Tuska w najistotniejszych kwestiach dotyczących katastrofy oraz badania jej przyczyn i okoliczności. Takie postępowanie wskazuje na w pełni świadome współdziałania przedstawicieli rządu D. Tuska z władzami Federacji Rosyjskiej na szkodę polskiego śledztwa w celu uniemożliwienia dojścia do prawdy." <http://static.presspublica.pl/red/rp/pdf/kraj/bialaksiega.pdf>

50 "To pseudonaukowcy, kompromitujący się doświadczeniami z parówkami i puszkami po napojach energetycznych." – Wassermann/Rymanowski 2015: 169.

and more in different directions. The first version—supported by the ruling PO party, Prime Minister Donald Tusk, and many of the country’s most important media outlets—talked about the primary responsibility of the Polish cabin crew and about an unfortunate landing approach that was not stopped until it was too late. The second version—advocated by the largest opposition party PiS, some scientists, as well as the conservative Catholic environment—emerged as a critical response to the government report and the report by the Russian MAK Commission. Even after the government’s official conclusion of the investigation, the Macierewicz group carried on its work, introducing a further element into the debate that can probably be described as the focal point of most alternative explanations of the plane crash. The group raised the question: “Was there an explosion onboard the plane that led to the crash?”<sup>51</sup> In order to promote and discuss his theories, Antoni Macierewicz has regularly held so-called “Smolensk Conferences” since 2012. After the first conference, his parliamentary group published a new report titled *28 Months after Smolensk*, in which he claimed that the plane had not crashed because of bad weather or the pilots’ mistakes, but because of explosions in the aircraft.<sup>52</sup>

Macierewicz’s parliamentary group’s actions forced the government to defend its own version of the events, as described in the Miller report. Consequently, the Prime Minister set up another government commission in 2013, headed by engineer Maciej Lasek. This commission was expected to answer the last remaining questions concerning the Smolensk catastrophe beyond any doubt.<sup>53</sup> The name of the commission “Parliamentary group for the clarification of public opinion, information, and materials concerning the reasons and circumstances of the Smolensk catastrophe”<sup>54</sup> already hints at the fact that the sole purpose of this commission was to inform the public about the ‘real’ background of the events. Since the Lasek Commission, as it came to be known, did not conduct any new investigations, the opposition did not take it seriously and ignored its reports. Thus, the frontlines between the government and the opposition were hardening even more.

After a PiS victory in the parliamentary elections of 2015, Antoni Macierewicz became defense minister and turned his parliamentary group for the investigation of the plane crash into an official commission run by the defense minis-

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51 Cf. Roth 2015: 204.

52 Cf. *ibid.*: 205.

53 Cf. *ibid.*: 208.

54 “Zespół do spraw wyjaśnienia opinii publicznej treści informacji i materiałów dotyczących przyczyn i okoliczności katastrofy pod Smoleńskiem.”



try; its task has been to continue investigating the matter and it is still in operation today.<sup>55</sup> In an article published on the Polish news site *oko.press*, the authors list twenty four conspiracy theories, most of which are supposed to have been influenced directly or indirectly by Antoni Macierewicz. They write: “Without doubt, most credit for the creation, finding and propagation of conspiracy theories must go to Antoni Macierewicz. For five years he has been looking for an appropriate explanation for the tragedy.”<sup>56</sup> It is also interesting which of the Polish media outlets are associated with the propagation of various conspiracy theories. Apart from the Macierewicz commission’s website, they also list some very right-wing newspapers and magazines like *Nasz Dziennik (Our Daily)*, *Gazeta Polska (Polish Newspaper)* or the online portal *wPolityce.pl*. These conservative media outlets have supposedly adopted the ‘Smolensk tragedy’ as one of their main topics in order to gain political capital from it.<sup>57</sup>

The basic situation has remained more or less unchanged in Poland. However, the change of government in 2015 initiated an interesting turn concerning the interpretation of the events in the Polish public from a sociological point of view. Whereas the theory of an assassination attempt was only supported by opposition parties and some experts prior to 2015, now it was the Polish government that officially casted doubt upon the findings of the Miller Commission published by its predecessor. Jarosław Kaczyński, Chairman of the ruling PiS party, continues to speak of a conspiracy in his speeches, stressing that the truth has not yet been uncovered: “Truth is constantly concealed . . . . We know with a high degree of certainty that it came to an explosion.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, an alternative theory that emerged out of doubt towards an official version has itself become official. A heterodox version has become orthodox. At the same time, however, the Civic Platform clings to the version of the events as described in the Miller report and defended by the Lasek Commission.

In conclusion, two possible observations might be made here. First, the Smolensk catastrophe is being instrumentalized in the current political climate in Poland, a climate characterized by grave tensions and severe conflict. Second, the last word about the events leading to the Smolensk plane crash has not yet been

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55 Cf. Pechowicz/Pacewicz 2016.

56 “Największe zasługi w wytworzeniu, tropieniu i propagowaniu teorii spiskowych ma bezsprzecznie Antoni Macierewicz. Od pięciu lat szuka odpowiedniego wyjaśnienia tragedii.” – *ibid.*:

57 Cf. *ibid.*

58 “Prawda jest ciągle odsłaniana. . . . Z bardzo wysokim stopniem pewności wiemy, że doszło do wybuchu.” – Skarżyński 2017.

uttered. It seems that a lot of time will have to pass until Polish society can agree upon one version of the events. At present, political conflict and mutual suspicion prevent the responsible forces from such an agreement.

### 3. Conclusion and Outlook

In a 2010 monograph, Wolfgang Reintaler put together a collection of twenty-six theses concerning conspiracy theories. One of them reads: “Conspiracy theories are no impartial instruments of knowledge, but rather ideological and political tools serving to determine one’s enemies.”<sup>59</sup> This thesis is true in a double sense: first, it depicts conspiracy theories as ‘instruments of knowledge’ by means of which we are enabled the construction of meaning from the often enigmatic events and phenomena surrounding us. Second, the thesis disputes the impartiality of these instruments—they *a priori* always respond to an internal scheme of ‘friend’ and ‘enemy.’ It has not been my objective in this chapter to refute this thesis, but rather to extend it in order to include not only conspiracy theories but—at least partially—all forms of discourse. In the first section, the difference between heterodox and orthodox ‘instruments of knowledge’ turned out to be a merely gradual one. Even theories that are socially endorsed and supported cannot be completely impartial and always carry traces of ideological and political influences within them.

The topic of the Smolensk plane crash as well as the ensuing controversies concerning the investigation of the catastrophe, the supposed or real motives behind different social and political groups, and the alleged hush up of important information, work well to illustrate this point. Taking the burdensome historical background of the Katyn massacre as described in the first section into account, the death of many members of the Polish elite in the Smolensk plane crash and the complex judicial, political, and medial aftermath provided a fertile ground for the emergence of conspiratorial discourse. The political constellation of two rivaling parties, gradually building up and promoting their own version of the events, just accelerated this process. The *Civic Platform* (PO) stressed its excellent cooperation with the Russian authorities and the responsibility of the Polish pilots; the *Law and Justice* (PiS) party in turn sharply rejected this version. The main responsibility for the tragedy, they maintain, lies with Russia and the

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59 “Bei einer Verschwörungstheorie handelt es sich nicht um ein unparteiisches Erkenntnisinstrument, sondern um ein der Feindbestimmung dienendes ideologisch-politisches Werkzeug.” – Reintaler 2010: 150.

Polish government who obstructed a full and effective investigation for political reasons. Eventually, the *Law and Justice* party came up with an alternative explanation model: there had been explosions onboard the plane. PiS is striving to prove this version even today, with the help of parliamentary commissions and conferences.

One of the most striking turning points in the aftermath of the Smolensk catastrophe is the rise to power of the *Law and Justice* party in 2015. Thus, a party promoting a heterodox explanation model for the Smolensk tragedy—in other words, a conspiracy theory—took over the government. Time will tell if the PiS will be able to turn its narrative of the explosions and of a political assassination into a dominant, orthodox discourse. In this context, it would be interesting to conduct further research into the social preconditions for the genesis of conspiracy theories. Which conditions must be fulfilled in a society to make it vulnerable to conspiratorial thinking? Which types of discourse spread particularly fast? And which factors decide if a theory is heterodox or orthodox? It is especially the more recent cases of conspiracy theories—the Smolensk plane crash for example—that are suitable for the examination of these types of question.

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## Abstract

There has probably been no event more tragic in Poland's recent history than the crash of the presidential airplane, Tupolev TU-154M, that took place near the Russian city of Smolensk on 10 April 2010. The aircraft was supposed to carry the Polish President Lech Kaczyński along with a delegation of politicians, military officers, and state officials to Smolensk. Kaczyński travelled there to attend a ceremony marking the seventieth anniversary of the Katyn massacre, a series of mass executions of members of the Polish mass executions of Polish military

officers carried out by the Soviets in 1940. However, after a series of unfavourable circumstances including thick fog, technological trouble and communication problems with the ground crew, the aircraft descended far below the expected approach path, collided with a tree and crashed into the ground. All members of the delegation—including President Kaczyński and his wife—died in the crash. Poland declared a three-day national mourning period; for once, the Polish people as well as members of all political camps were united in sorrow and remembrance of the dreadful events. Yet, when it came to examining the exact course of events and answering the question of who was responsible for the tragedy, a bitter conflict ensued over the causes of the tragic plane crash. While some believe that the Polish pilots were responsible, others maintained that the catastrophe could not have been a mere accident and that there must be more to the matter. Many people believed an act of political violence or a terrorist attack had taken place, one that had probably been coordinated by Russia. Thus, the question of the truth behind the Smolensk plane crash has not only become a question of political beliefs in today's Poland, but it is also a fertile ground for alternative explanation models and conspiracy theories. This chapter takes a closer look into the creation and circulation of some of these narratives and poses the question of how a certain discourse can change its status from a marginal one to a dominant one and vice versa.



# **Wallenrodian Conspiracy Revisited Twice and Not Quite: Marcin Wolski's *Wallenrod* and Szczepan Twardoch's *Wieczny Grunwald***

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*Bob Muilwijk*

## **Keywords**

intertextuality; alternate history; romanticism; Wallenrodism; contemporary Polish literature

The story of Adam Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828)—a Lithuanian boy grows up to become Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, which, after he finds out his true identity, he betrays in an act of national fervor before committing suicide—might at first not appear to be much more than an unremarkable, typically *romantic* story that could have come straight from a Walter Scott novel. However, due to Mickiewicz's choice to tell the story as a narrative poem and in a highly achronological fashion, and supported by the historical context—it was published in 1828 Saint Petersburg for a Polish audience under a Russian yoke—it became both highly regarded and highly influential.

Adam Mickiewicz was a trendsetter in Polish literature in more than one respect. He was certainly one by 1832 when, in the prologue of *Dziady III (Forefathers Eve III)*, he revisited his earlier work *Konrad Wallenrod* with the famous scene in which his protagonist, Gustaw, declares his resurrection as Konrad on his prison walls. This is commonly regarded as a reference to Konrad-Wallenrod-the-character's patriotic altruism, which now takes the place of Gustaw's romantic individualism. While these two characters share the same name and might be alike, they are far from being one and the same and differ in many other respects. The former is merely an adaptation of the latter, an intertextual reference, albeit a highly relevant one. This change emphasizes the widespread 'notoriety' that the protagonist of *Konrad Wallenrod* had already gained in the four

years since its publication. Mickiewicz would have been sure that his readers understood the point that Gustaw was making in shuffling off his nomenclative coil and exchanging it for a different one: they would have known it was *not just any name*.

Authors writing adaptations of their own work or referencing it is, of course, nothing new, nor is it at all that remarkable when other authors do likewise. It either becomes interesting when the narrative of a certain work becomes a literary topos or when an existing literary topos becomes associated with a certain work to such an extent that the two appear synonymous. Within Polish literature, this seems to have happened with *Konrad Wallenrod* and the Wallenrodian treason for the national cause derived therefrom.

While foreign critics, such as Ukrainian poet Ivan Franko, see *Wallenrodism* as a typically Polish cult of treachery for which Mickiewicz himself is solely to blame,<sup>1</sup> and while it figures frequently in conspiracy theories concerning Poland, Polish critics see it mostly as an inadequate form of resistance, draining power from more overt forms. This did not diminish the role of Mickiewicz's paradigm that "the slaves' only weapon is deceit"<sup>2</sup> in Poland itself. However, the—at first glance at least—remarkably positive view of such conspirational thought in Poland offers possibilities for instrumentalization abroad. One can observe this after the 1830–31 November Uprising, when the attitudes of Russian intellectuals such as Pushkin or Bestuzhev towards Poles generally soured considerably: they saw their assumptions about Polish "untrustworthiness" confirmed.

This chapter can, of course, not sound the length, breadth and depth of Polish literary history in its entirety for works that take up this topos, nor is this necessary in the first place: most of this monumental task has already been completed by Polish literary scholar and author Stefan Chwin in his 1993 work *Literatura i zdrada (Literature and Treason)*.<sup>3</sup> I would instead like to analyze two of the most recent traces that Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod* has left during its almost 200 year march through Polish literary history—two works that Chwin, for the obvious reason that they were published almost twenty years after his monograph, did not take into consideration: Szczepan Twardoch's *Wieczny Grunwald, powieść z za końca czasów* (Eternal Grunwald, A Novel from Beyond the End of Times, 2010) and Marcin Wolski's *Wallenrod* (2010). Both of these works ap-

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1 Cf. Franko 2016.

2 "... jedyna broń niewolników – podstęp." Mickiewicz 1997: 290–91. All translations in this chapter are mine, B.M.

3 Cf. Chwin 1993.



peared in the National Center of Culture's alternate history series *Zwrotnice czasu* (The Switching Points of Time).<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the National Center of Culture propagates alternate history writing with its own book series should be viewed in the light of a wider trend in Poland where alternate history has flourished since 1989—not only in literature, as Netflix's first Polish original series *1983* has shown. As Magdalena Górecka pointedly notes, this is in part because utopias of the future have been discredited in Poland since the failure of the last utopian project that was attempted within its borders—that of Communism. According to her, the place of utopias has been relocated from the future to the past.<sup>5</sup>

### **Wallenrod or The Double Wallenrod**

The first novel, Marcin Wolski's 2009 *Wallenrod*, is a spy novel set in an alternate history whose point of deviation is Piłsudski's death; thanks to treatment by a mysterious French doctor, the Marshal of Poland, instead of passing away in 1935, lives until 1941, which changes the course of history. Under Piłsudski's continued guidance Poland complies with German demands for Danzig and a road and train connection between Germany proper and East Prussia, cooperating with Germany in a "Zerschlagung der Rest-Tschechoslowakei" (its Czech parts become a German protectorate while Slovakia becomes a Polish one) eventually partaking in a successful invasion of the Soviet Union together with Francoist Spain, Italy, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. After a war in the West against the Netherlands, Belgium and most importantly Great Britain and France, which is easily won by mostly German troops, the novel comes to its grand finale—Hitler gathering Europe's heads of state in the city of "New Jerusalem," built on the shores of the Dnieper River. This city is intended to serve as the capital of a newly established "Jewish Republic," on which he plans to use the first atomic bomb. Thanks to the bravery of a Polish fighter pilot who is smuggled aboard the plane that is carrying this deadly weapon, the bomb obliterates not Europe's heads of state and a large part of its Jewry, but instead annihilates practically the entirety of Nazi German leadership. After a successful Operation Valkyrie, Germany subsequently slides into a civil war which ends in the restoration of German democracy.

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4 For a greater overview of this series, cf. Lemann 2011.

5 Górecka 2014: 12.

The novel is told from the perspective of Halina Silberstein, the daughter of a Jewish communist and a Polish *szlachcianka* ('noblewoman') who becomes Hitler's private secretary as a part of the Polish secret service and under the guise of the German Helena Wichmann. Aware of Hitler's "New Jerusalem" plot, she initiates its reversal under "my new pseudonym, which is close to the heart of every Pole: 'Wallenrod'!"<sup>6</sup> The fighter pilot who carries out the eventual bombing is Silberstein's cousin, who himself has to betray his gay lover: the German pilot assigned for the job.

*Wallenrod* is embedded in several significant traditions. Firstly, and most obviously, a *Wallenrodian* one—this is alluded to as early as in the work's title—which seems, of course, to be closely connected to the genre of the spy novel more generally. The novel's 'novelty' lies in its doubling: both the protagonist and Poland itself play *Wallenrodian* roles and achieve the right ends by the wrong means. Silberstein is the microlevel; Poland the macrolevel. This is made explicit in Silberstein's, sometimes ruthless, methods on the one hand and by Hitler himself repeatedly raping her on the other: both are mirrored in the novel by Poland's Realpolitik. Moreover, like Mickiewicz's Konrad Wallenrod, both Silberstein and Poland wait many years for the right time to strike.

The second tradition concerns World War II alternate history writing which, as Kathleen Singles notes, "constitute[s] perhaps the largest 'cluster,' related by choice of historical subject, of such works from about 1940 to present in the Western world."<sup>7</sup> As Singles points out, the most convenient and most popular events that serve as so-called points of deviation are "those which have been emplotted in history as having the most significant and wide-reaching consequences: wars, assassinations, inventions, elections,"<sup>8</sup> and World War II simply stands out as an event of singular importance in history in general and in Polish history in particular. The connection of Piłsudski's postponed death to World War II consists in his leadership steering Poland in a different direction in this conflict than its historical leaders had, radically changing the course of the war. Piłsudski's vision is emphasized time and again in the novel—examples of this are Winston Churchill's last words, spoken in a bunker underneath Whitehall in an all but occupied United Kingdom, shortly before his suicide:

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6 "... moim nowym pseudonymem, bliskim serca każdego Polaka: 'Wallenrod'!" – Wolski 2012: 384.

7 Singles 2013: 50–51.

8 Ibid.: 49.

“We are all guilty of what happened. When, in the afterlife, I shall meet Piłsudski, I shall congratulate him on his choice and his farsightedness—only he was right when he proposed stopping Hitler before he grew strong.”<sup>9</sup>

Halina Silberstein’s thoughts, as she looks out at a London in ruins, play into that, too:

As I gazed upon this destroyed and humiliated city, my heart grew heavy and I thought of those Polish cities, flowering Warsaw, bustling Lwów and romantic Wilno. What would have become of them if we had not had Piłsudski’s plan?<sup>10</sup>

The reader, of course, knows what would have happened to them, because it did: Warsaw was “destroyed and humiliated” instead of London; Lwów became a Ukrainian city and Wilno a Lithuanian one.

This brings us to the third tradition from which Wolski is writing and which is already present in the paratext: the novel is dedicated to Paweł Wieczorkiewicz (who also appears as one of its characters: “the famous historian”<sup>11</sup> by the same name). It is Wieczorkiewicz, a historian from the University of Warsaw and the Academy of Humanities in Pułtusk, who propagates the idea that Polish cooperation with Nazi Germany had been “the better choice” leading up to World War II in his 2004 story “Rydz-Śmigły na Placu Czerwonym w Moskwie w 1940 roku. Co by było, gdy Polska przyjęła żądania niemieckie?” (“Rydz-Śmigły on Moscow’s Red Square in 1940. What if Poland had accepted the German demands?”). This idea, however, is older than Wieczorkiewicz. One of its most prominent proponents was Jerzy Łojek in his study *Agresja sowiecka 17 września 1939. Studium aspektów politycznych* (“The Soviet Aggression of 17 September 1939. A Study of its Political Aspects”), which appeared in the Polish underground press in 1979.<sup>12</sup>

One example of this school of thought’s survival beyond Wolski’s novel is referred to on the back of its second edition: the blurb, which laments the fact

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9 “Wszyscy jesteśmy winni temu, co się stało. Kiedy w zaświatach spotkam się z Piłsudskim, pogratuluję mu wyboru i dalekowzroczności – on jeden miał rację, proponując powstrzymanie Hitlera, póki nie urosł w siłę.” – Wolski 2012: 286.

10 “Gdy patrzyłam na ten obraz zniszczonej i upokorzonej stolicy, ścisłało mi się serce I myślałam o polskich miastach, o kwitnącej Warszawie, gwarnym Lwowie i romantycznym Wilnie. Co stałoby się z nimi, gdyby nie plan Piłsudskiego?” – *ibid.*: 299.

11 *Ibid.*: 399.

12 Cf. Łojek 1979.

“that professor Wieczorkiewicz [who passed away before the novel’s publication] could no longer read it,” is provided by Piotr Żychowicz. This history writer, who was also one of the initiators of the campaign “Against Polish Camps,” caused some controversy with his book *Pakt Ribbentrop-Beck czyli jak Polacy mogli u boku Trzeciej Rzeszy pokonać Związek Sowiecki* (*The Ribbentrop-Beck Pact or How Poland could have defeated the Soviet Union side by side with the Third Reich*, 2012), in which he attempts to counter several “myths of Polish victimhood,” by showing how the Polish minister of foreign affairs Józef Beck supposedly time and again made fatal assessments and by highlighting the advantages of Polish cooperation with Nazi Germany which included saving parts of its Jewish population.

Żychowicz’s book was highly criticized, by fellow historians Stanisław Salmonowicz<sup>13</sup> and Andrzej Nowak for example, who claim that this book

... fulfills the wish of Russian and other propagandists, who want to show that Poland wholeheartedly wanted to join Hitler to murder Jews but did not do it because of its own stupidity. As such Poland (in this worldview) is both malicious and stupid.

Mr. Piotr Żychowicz wants to save Poland from the charge of stupidity, but, in fact, emboldens it with his considerations ... . Considerology, whatifology cannot, in the end, be verified or not. But one can practice it more or less responsibly. Mr. Piotr Żychowicz practices it very irresponsibly. I think that his master, Mr. Paweł Wieczorkiewicz, even though he started these considerations, would not have agreed with them. Surely, he would not have taken them this far, to such a treatment of Polish history, as Żychowicz has.<sup>14</sup>

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13 Willma 2013.

14 “Realizuje ona dokładnie, dokładnie, zamówienie propagandystów rosyjskich i tych z innych narodów wrogich Polsce, którzy chcą pokazać, że Polska z całej swojej duszy chciała iść z Hitlerem i wymordować Żydów. I tylko z własnej głupoty tego nie zrobiła. A więc Polska jest (w tej wizji) połączeniem podłości z głupotą.

Pan Piotr Żychowicz chce ratować Polskę przed oskarżeniem o głupotę, ale de facto pogłębia to oskarżenie swoimi rozważaniami ... . Historyczna mniemanologia, gdybologia, nie ma ostatecznej warsztatowej weryfikowalności. Ale można ją uprawiać w sposób mniej lub bardziej odpowiedzialny. Pan Piotr Żychowicz uprawia ją w sposób bardzo nieodpowiedzialny. Myślę, że jego mistrz, pan Paweł Wieczorkiewicz, choć zaczął te rozważania, nie pochwałaby tego. Na pewno nie posunąłby się do tego, do takiego traktowania polskiej historii jak Żychowicz.” <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/140224-prof-andrzej-nowak-o-ksiazce-pakt-ribbentrop-beck-piotra-zychowicza>

Nowak clearly sees Żychowicz's use of the conspiratorial *Wallenrodian* idea as grist for the mill of conspiracy theorists targeting Poland, who see their assumptions about supposedly maliciously scheming Poles confirmed. One example of such thinking includes Russian ambassador to Poland Sergei Andreev's 2015 interview with Polish television station TVN, in which he judged Poland as guilty for starting World War II.<sup>15</sup> Another example is that of Russian ambassador to Venezuela Vladimir Zaemskii's article in the Venezuelan state-owned newspaper *Correo del Orinoco* from that same year, in which he alleged that Poland had wanted to be an ally of Nazi Germany and that Poland's Nazi-friendly politics had rendered cooperation between the USSR, France, and Czechoslovakia impossible.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, both ambassadors denied the 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland as such. Both ambassadors caused diplomatic upheaval with their claims. In any case, Nowak's words on Żychowicz could also be said about Wolski's novel (which, as should be stressed, is presented as a work of fiction and not as an assessment of a historical situation claiming scientific merit) although in less radical terms.

In his novel, the romantic idea that literature should not describe reality, but prescribe the future, from which *Wallenrodism* stems, has shifted: history is not described as it *has* been, but as it *could* have been—implying that this is also how it *should* have been. This carries in itself the risk of crediting the wrong means employed and discrediting the right ones (regardless of the ends). It also complicates a differentiated view of the Second Polish Republic, as it becomes the alternate version of the current Third Polish Republic that came into being after the democratic transition in the years 1989–91. It is therefore unsurprising that the Wiczorkiewicz school of thought, including his apostle Łojek and his disciples Wolski and Żychowicz, enjoys a certain popularity among the Polish far right—it figures prominently in right-wing newspapers like (formerly) *Uważam Rze* (whose editor in chief was Żychowicz), *Do Rzeczy* (for which he is currently an author) and *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, as well as far right websites such as [www.nacjonalista.pl](http://www.nacjonalista.pl). This is certainly a setting in which one is tempted to repeat Ivan Franko's harsh words about Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod*: “this grisly masterpiece ... has for decades been dripping corrupting poison into the souls of the Polish youth.”<sup>17</sup>

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15 Cf. Grysiak 2015.

16 Cf. Zaemskiy 2015.

17 “[D]ies grausige Meisterwerk ... träufelt seit Dezennien verderbliches Gift in die Seelen polnischer Jugend ein.” – Franko 2016: 260.

## ***Wieczny Grunwald* or Not Quite *Wallenrod***

Twardoch's novel *Wieczny Grunwald*, which he claims was the one "in which I found my own voice and thanks to which I thought for the first time that I might actually be a writer,"<sup>18</sup> appeared on the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald, which gives the novel its name, and is cut from a wholly different cloth than Wolski's *Wallenrod*. Its narrator and protagonist, Paszko, is the bastard son of Casimir III the Great, King of Poland, and a Silesian girl, who grows up in medieval Nuremberg and eventually dies in the Battle of Grunwald, as Katarzyna Śliwińska phrases it, "fighting everyone."<sup>19</sup> He is, however, condemned to reliving the Polish-German conflict, as symbolized not only in the Battle of Grunwald, but in many other historical and future conflicts too, as well as eternally re-dying during these conflicts, playing roles on both the Polish and the German sides.

With his novel, Twardoch also takes up Mickiewicz's *Wallenrodian* glove, but not in such an obvious fashion as to allude to it in his title, as Wolski had done. Instead, the *Wallenrodian* scheme is deconstructed and subverted. This is initially made possible by Paszko's incessant doubt about his nationality. While Twardoch's hero and Wolski's heroine have their mixed heritage in common—Paszko is half Polish, half German and Silberstein is half Polish, half Jewish—they draw an entirely different conclusion. Silberstein, like Mickiewicz's *Wallenrod* after he rediscovers his national identity, is wholly committed to the cause of her nation and neither questions her inclusion therein nor others' exclusion therefrom. Paszko, who grows up in Nuremberg with some notion of his father's identity, is neither German nor Polish initially, i.e., he is both. In stark contrast to Wolski's Halina Silberstein, who might also have had reasons to doubt her sense of national belonging but does not, Paszko does. This *priori* undermines the *Wallenrodian* scheme.

Following this line of thought, whereas *Wallenrod* ends in a decisive Polish victory, *Wieczny Grunwald* is a novel-length stalemate that lasts until the final pages, where Paszko—who has become an "aanthropic" (sic!) half-human, half-robot—has had enough of the both senseless and ceaseless Polish-German conflict:

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18 "... w której znalazłem swój własny głos i dzięki której po raz pierwszy pomyślałem, że może rzeczywiście jestem pisarzem." – Szczepan Twardoch on his Facebook account, 27 March 2019.

19 Śliwińska 2015: 290.

And suddenly I understand: I remember the myriads of my Grunwalds and Tannenbergs, and I remember all my deaths and not-dyings, and after myriads of times—I understand. And suddenly I understand: I do not have to do what I want to do and always will do. I drop my sword, throw off my kettle hat, I catch the reins of a horse, not mine, I catch the reins of a horse, whose owner is lying here, sinking into the field, I mount his horse and ride off.<sup>20</sup>

If we are to better understand *Wieczny Grunwald*, Jan Zając's view of the novel as the culmination, both in scope and the author's skill, of Twardoch's earlier stories *Oblęd rotmistrza von Egern* (The Insanity of Captain von Egern, 2003) and *Otchłań* (Oblivion, 2005) as well as his novel *Sternberg* (2007), is helpful.<sup>21</sup> These two stories and this novel are all situated in an alternate history in which the French Revolution did not happen in France, but in Austria, and their protagonists—von Egern in *Oblęd* and *Otchłań*, the brothers Alexander and Carl Sternberg in their eponymous novel—are all conservative opponents of this revolution. Just one of these three manages to even remotely reach his own goals: Carl von Sternberg. He does so by means of compromise. These means seem to be unknown to von Egern, who goes insane, kills himself and, like Paszko, is condemned to re-living and re-dying, although not on the grand scale of *Wieczny Grunwald*. Alexander von Sternberg continues to fight a guerilla war without any hope of victory. The conservative attitudes expressed by all three protagonists can, of course, not be attributed to the author himself, but they do highlight that Twardoch is seeking a confrontation with the conservative, right wing school of thought in Poland.

He sought such a confrontation rather vehemently in 2011 after being honored by the Józef Mackiewicz Literature Prize committee for *Wieczny Grunwald*: in an essay entitled “Mackiewicz jako atropa” (Mackiewicz, the Dummy) he writes that the Polish right's reading of Mackiewicz “can hardly be called a reading at all”<sup>22</sup> and, according to him, is a misreading and that Mackiewicz

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20 “I nagle rozumiem: przypominam sobie miriady moich Grunwaldów i Tannenbergów, i przypominam sobie wszystkie moje śmierci i moje nieumarci, i po miriadach razy – rozumiem. / I nagle rozumiem: nie powinienem robić tego, co chcę zrobić i co zawsze robię. Odpinam miecz, zrzucam kapalin, chwytam wodze konia, nie mojego, chwytam wodze konia, którego właściciel leży już tutaj i wsiąka w to pole, dosiadam tego konia i jadę.” – Twardoch 2013: 208–09.

21 Cf. Zając 2016.

22 “Gwałtem tym jest potoczne odczytanie Mackiewicza, chociaż trudno tutaj w zasadzie mówić o czytaniu” – Twardoch 2011.

does not fit the one-dimensional image purported by the right. In the framework of this essay, he also comments on his own novel:

My *Wieczny Grunwald* is among other things a phantasmagoric attempt to face the problem of humanity ruthlessly confronted with national identities, be they Polish or German.<sup>23</sup>

While one should hesitate to cite auctorial self-analyses, in *Wieczny Grunwald* this confrontation is, to a large extent, certainly achieved. In placing the possibly problematic nature of national identity at the center of his novel, a novel which has everything in common with a *Wallenrodian* story at first glance, Twardoch not only undermines the *Wallenrodian* scheme, as stated previously, but also pinpoints how this scheme works: those striving to be “Wallenrod” have to be perfectly sure of their national identity. This correlates with what Chwin calls Mickiewicz’s “forgetfulness” in creating his own Wallenrod—anything positive concerning the Teutonic Order, anything negative about Lithuania is simply not mentioned, so as not to tarnish his protagonist’s commitment.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps it would be a little far-fetched to draw any wide-reaching conclusions from this brief commentary. It is, however, safe to say that *Wallenrod* and *Wieczny Grunwald* are indeed variations of the same Wallenrodian theme: Wolski’s novel emphasizes and doubles it, Twardoch’s novel negates it and renders it impossible. Even though it is tempting to conclude that this opposition has to do with the political standpoints of the two authors, the least we can say is that neither Wolski nor Twardoch could neglect Mickiewicz’s hero in their rewritings of Polish history.

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23 “Mój ‘Wieczny Grunwald’ jest między innymi fantasmagoryczną próbą zmierzenia się z problemem człowieczeństwa skonfrontowanego z bezwzględnością tożsamości narodowych, polskiej i niemieckiej.” – Twardoch 2011.

24 Cf. the chapter “O czym wołał nie pisać Mickiewicz w *Konradzie Wallenrodzie*?” in Chwin 1993: 422–47.



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## Abstract

Since its publication in 1828 the material of Adam Mickiewicz’s *Konrad Wallenrod* has frequently been taken up and used by other authors. This chapter explores two of the most recent examples of this, Marcin Wolski’s *Wallenrod* (2010) and Szczepan Twardoch’s *Wieczny Grunwald* (2010), and tries to answer

the question how Wolski and Twardoch confirm and/or subvert Mickiewicz's *Wallenrodism*, while placing their texts in a historical as well as political context.

# **“The Conspiracy, or The Roots of the Disintegration of European Society.” Danilo Kiš’s Fictionalization of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion***

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*Dagmar Burkhart*

## **Keywords**

Danilo Kiš; collective memory; thanatopoetics; conspiracy; Book of Kings and Fools; Protocols of the (Learned) Elders of Zion; pogroms

Conspiracies have probably been a part of life ever since societies started to become more complex and at a time when those in power developed conflicting interests. The basic, literal meaning of the verb *conspire* (from the Latin *conspirare* and its derivative, *conspiratio*, “agreement, union, unanimity”) is “to breathe together,” whereby breathing together was taken to mean “to agree, to concur to one end,” whether that purpose be good or evil (e.g. *Genesis* 37,18; “They conspired against [Joseph] to slay him”). Since the middle of the fourteenth century *conspiracy* has been used in English to mean, first and foremost, “a plotting of evil, unlawful design; a combination of persons for an evil purpose.” The word *conspire* has, thus, assumed primarily negative connotations: “to secretly plot or make plans together, often with the intention to bring bad or illegal results.”<sup>1</sup>

Most conspiracy theories are generated in times of crisis. They occupy the space between political constellations and psychological mechanisms. They have much in common with paranoia: the loss of one’s ability to put things into perspective, a static perception, the narrowed outlook of an extremely egocentric or

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1 See “conspire” in *Wiktionary, the free dictionary*. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/conspire>

group-driven point of view.<sup>2</sup> One of the conspiracy theories that has been most relevant in building an enemy stereotype is based on anti-Semitism, which supplied the greatest impetus for the persecution of Jews and legitimated the use of violence against them. Johannes von Frankfurt published his *Malleus Iudaeorum* (*Hammer of the Jews*) in 1420, in which he elaborates upon the pejorative figure of thought portraying the Jew as a corrosive force striving for domination.<sup>3</sup> This attitude was adopted in later writings, such as the *Judenspiegel* (*A Mirror of the Jews*) by Hartwig von Hundt-Radowsky (1821). The term “anti-Semitism” became popular for a hatred of the Jews based on race in the territory of the German Empire, founded in 1871; it was sparked by historian Heinrich von Treitschke’s polemical works and pamphlets by the journalist Wilhelm Marr such as *Der Sieg des Judenthums über das Germanenthum* (*The Victory of Judaism over Teutonism*, 1879). After the First World War, Germany was flooded with anti-Semitic pamphlets. During the Weimar Republic, the ‘völkisch’ or populist organizations mounted campaigns aimed at defaming the first democratic state on German soil as a “Jewish Republic.” Anti-Semitic works started to appear, such as Arthur Dinter’s best-selling novel *Die Sünde wider das Blut* (*The Sin Against the Blood*, 1917) or Paul Bang’s *Judas Schuldbuch* (*The Dept Register of Judah*) published in 1919 under the pseudonym Wilhelm Meister, or the first non-Russian edition of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, published by Gottfried zur Beek and titled *Die Geheimnisse der Weisen von Zion* (*The Secrets of the Wise Men of Zion*). The second edition in German was published in 1920 by Theodor Fritsch’s anti-Semitic publishing house in Leipzig, the “Hammer-Verlag,”<sup>4</sup> entitled *Die Zionistischen Protokolle: Das Programm der internationalen Geheimregierung*. (*The Zionist Protocols: Program of the Secret International Government*). Walther Rathenau, a German Jew and Foreign Minister of Weimar Germany, was targeted by anti-Semitic terrorists. He was murdered in 1922 by right-wing radicals who saw him as one of the “Elders of Zion,” a conspiratorial group they believed really existed. By the time the Nazis seized power in 1933, 33 editions of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had been published in Germany. Starting in 1920, translated versions of the *Protocols* were also circulated in

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2 Cf. Jaworski 2001: 22.

3 Cf. Schreckenberg 1994: 502.

4 The völkisch Hammer-Verlag, the publishing house Theodor Fritsch founded in 1902 (the name alluding to the inflammatory anti-Semitic *Malleus iudaeorum/Judenhammer* (*Hammer of the Jews*) also produced a magazine called *Der Hammer: Blätter für deutschen Sinn* (*The Hammer: The Paper for German Essence*) for which Fritsch personally penned the lead articles.

France, Great Britain, other European countries, and in the USA (funded by Henry Ford).<sup>5</sup>

### **The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Their Fateful Propagandist Success**

The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is the most widely read anti-Semitic publication. One major reason why the conspiracy tale was, and continues to prove so successful, is because it presents a simple explanation of the world owing to the fact that all manner of unpopular phenomena (e.g. the trappings of modernization) may be blamed upon on a single scapegoat, the Jews. The *Protocols* first appeared in the early 20th century—the first Russian edition was published in 1903 in Tsarist times: the anti-Semitic journalist and member of the Duma, Pavel A. Krushevan, published the work under the title *Programa* (sic!) *zavoevan'ia mira evreiami* (*Programme for the Conquest of the World by the Jews*) in August/September 1903 in the St. Petersburg newspaper *Znamia* (*Banner*) no. 190–200 (10 September 1903–20 September 1903). In 1905, Sergei Nilus, an impoverished landowner turned mystic, published *Protokoly sobranii Sionskikh mudretsov* (*Protocols of the Meetings of the Elders of Zion*), an expanded version of Krushevan's text, in the appendix to the second edition of his apocalyptic work *Velikoe v malom i Antikhrisť, kak blizkaia politicheskaia vozmožnost'* (*The Great within the Small and Antichrist as an Imminent Political Possibility*) in Tsarskoe Selo. Another edition was printed in Moscow in 1911.

At the heart of this text is a secret Jewish association whose alleged aim is to corrode Christian peoples through materialism and atheism, and to wear them down by revolution and anarchy in order to attain world dominion. The final stage would be reached when all peoples submit to a Jewish king from the Davidic line who would then rule over a perfectly controlled, but contented, world as a benevolent dictator.

The text is divided into 24 “meetings,” each chapter purporting to be the minutes of a speech given before the “Elders of Zion.” Presenting the text as minutes, or “protocols,” is intended to make the content more credible. Nevertheless, doubts were soon voiced about the veracity of the text. As early as 1921, Philip Graves wrote a series of articles in *The Times* in which he revealed the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to be forgeries. Between 1933 and 1935, the document was examined by a Swiss court which concluded that the text was to be

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5 Cf. Abbott 2004: 129–31.

classed as “pulp fiction” and was a plagiarism. The authors of the *Protocols* had plagiarized and changed the intention of works such as the satire by Maurice Joly *Dialogue aux enfers entre Montesquieu et Machiavel* (*Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*) published in 1864 and directed at the authoritarian policies of Napoleon III. They also probably borrowed from Herzl, Sauvages, Barruel, Sue and Dumas.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, the narrative setting is taken from one of Ottomar Friedrich Goedsche’s novels, who used the pseudonym Sir John Retcliffe and worked for the Prussian secret service. The scene is found in his novel *Biarritz* (1868) which is set in the Jewish cemetery in Prague. Every hundred years, according to the novel, representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel meet there to discuss progress towards global conquest. The author attributes the key political and economic developments of the second half of the nineteenth century to conspiratorial activities on the part of the Jewish minority. He thus provided a reference text on which other authors could base their writings. From 1881 onwards, this particular scene was published separately as *Rede eines Oberrabbiners in geheimer Versammlung* (*The Speech by a Chief Rabbi at a Secret Meeting*) and was translated into numerous languages. To this day, the location, the means by which the *Protocols* were written, and how they were disseminated remain unknown; however, fabrications and false assertions abound on the topic. Therefore, they are surrounded by “an aura, which is both stigmatizing and fascinating.”<sup>7</sup>

Even though the *Protocols* had been shown to be forgeries and a plagiarized fabrication in 1921, with the help of Mikhail Raslovlev, the text nevertheless continued to be widely read. In terms of the propaganda effects of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, however, whether they are genuine or not is of secondary importance. Evidence that the *Protocols* were fake was dismissed (by Hitler and others) as lies spread by Jewish media moguls, and this phantasm itself became part of the legend disseminated.

In the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* one reads of an alleged Jewish global conspiracy, a concept also anchored in the thought structures behind Nazi anti-Semitism. Leading National Socialists repeatedly referred to the *Protocols* in their own speeches and writings, e.g., Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* (1925) or when talking to close companions. Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg devoted numerous articles in the party newspaper to this topic and also wrote a book on the subject, *Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion und die jüdische Weltpolitik* (*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and Jewish Global Policy*) which was re-

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6 Cf. Horn 2012: 9–10.

7 Hagemester/Horn 2012: VIII.

printed many times from 1923 onwards. The *Protocols* were printed as a popular edition by the NSDAP party publishing house and were required reading in schools, and the Nazi propaganda machine distributed the book as far afield as Japan and South America. After the end of the Second World War, right-wing extremist groups in Europe and the USA cited the *Protocols* to support Nazi genocide. The work was, in some cases still is, used by governments in Arabia and Eastern Europe as a propaganda instrument in the struggle against the state of Israel, founded in 1948, and the alleged center of a Zionist conspiracy.

Conspiracy theories are expressed in texts that are passed on orally or in writing. The question is, where do they fit into narrational, fictional systems, and in particular, what place does a forgery such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* occupy? In his book, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre (The Fictive and the Imaginary)*, Wolfgang Iser replaces the simplifying dyad reality/fiction with a triadic model of the real, the fictive and the imaginary:

- The “real should be understood as referring to the empirical world, which is a ‘given’ for the literary text and generally provides the text’s multiple fields of reference.”<sup>8</sup>
- The fictive, that which is made up or shaped as fiction yet possesses object reference, i.e., relates to the extra-textual world.<sup>9</sup>
- The imaginary, that which is dreamt up, imagined, possessing no object reference, that manifests in seemingly arbitrary conditions or as a stream of decontextualized associations.<sup>10</sup>

The real or factual claims to be something true or genuine, whereas the fictive and the imaginary do not. If one subsumes a forgery (akin to the fantastical) into the “imaginary” category, because it possesses no object reference and given that it is purely a product of fantasy, then it represents a kind of counter-fiction: unlike the fictive and the fantastical, it does indeed claim to be both true *and* genuine.

The word *Protocol* is deliberately chosen in the title *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* because it signals writing that is authentic. Authentic protocols can take the form of minutes that record the proceedings of a meeting or an interrogation and are presented as an objective rendering of the attested truth of the facts. An authentic protocol, thus, categorically precludes all elements of the

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8 Iser 1993: 305 (note to p. 2).

9 Cf. *ibid.*: 2.

10 Cf. *ibid.*: 3.

symbolical, metaphorical, or imaginary. Two types of protocols (or minutes) may be found in literature; the fictive, with no claim to be true such as Albert Drach's *Das große Protokoll gegen Zwetschkenbaum* (*The Grand Protocol against Zwetschkenbaum*) (1939/1964), and pseudo-protocols (from the Greek *pseudos* "lie, falsehood"), which claim to be true and genuine; the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* belong in this category.

### **Faction and Thanatopoetics: Danilo Kiš and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion***

The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* have entered literature by being taken as the basis for an artistic text by authors including the Serbian Jew Danilo Kiš.<sup>11</sup>

As Kiš writes in the "Post Scriptum" to the last of his books published during his lifetime, *Enciklopedija mrtvih* (*The Encyclopaedia of the Dead*, 1983), it had been his intention in the early 1980s to write an essay about the genesis of the *Protocols* and their publisher and commentator Sergei Nilus. However, he then decided to complement, from his imagination, the story with parts that the historiography had left open:

My intention was to summarize the true and fantastic, "unbelievably fantastic," story of how *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* came into existence ... The intended essay on the *Protocols* fell apart the moment I tried to supplement it by imagining the parts of the book's history which have to this day remained obscure and will probably never be clarified ... and I started imagining the events as they might have happened.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Danilo Kiš (born in Subotica 1935, died in Paris 1989) was the son of a Montenegrin mother and Hungarian Jewish father. He grew up speaking Serbian and Hungarian. After laws were passed in Hungary in 1938 and 1939 to drastically curtail the rights of Jews, Danilo Kiš's parents had their son baptized in order to protect him. In January 1942, the family was living in Novi Sad when a massacre of the Jews and Serbs began; it lasted several days but Kiš's father survived and the family moved to Hungary. In 1944, during the German occupation, Kiš's father was deported to the death camp at Auschwitz where he and most of his relatives were killed. After the war, Danilo and his mother and sister were repatriated to Yugoslavia.

12 Kiš 1991b: 196–97. "Namera mi je bila da izložim ukratko istinitu fantastičnu, 'do neverovatnosti fantastičnu', povest nastanka *Protokola Sionskih mudraca* ... Taj zamišljeni esej o *Protokolima* raspao se sam od sebe onog časa kada sam pokušao da dopunim, da domislim, one delove te mutne povesti koji su do dana današnjeg ostali u



When facts or documents are mixed with fiction a hybrid text emerges, namely “faction,” in which the imagined material enters into a correspondence with the historical material. This is the case in “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” (“The Book of Kings and Fools”), the eighth of nine tales published in the compilation *Enciklopedija mrtvih*. Kiš explains the isotopy, i.e., “death,” underlying all nine tales and the reason for the title of the *Encyclopedia of the Dead* in the self-referential “Post Scriptum”:

All the stories in this book, to a greater or lesser extent, come under the sign of a theme I would call metaphysical: ever since the Gilgamesh epic, death has been one of the obsessive themes of literature.<sup>13</sup>

Kiš's poetics, focusing on the metaphysical phenomenon of death, is thanatopoetics *par excellence*. In “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” (hereafter abbreviated to KKB), it manifests itself in the framework into which the tale is inserted. In the beginning (framework section I) therefore, there is a reference to A. P. Krushevan, who incited the pogrom at Kishinev (with fifty fatalities) and was the first publisher of the *Protocols*, which—and of this the narrator is convinced—were responsible for Nazi crimes 40 years later:

The crime not to be perpetrated until some forty years later, was prefigured in a Petersburg newspaper in August 1906. The articles appeared serially and were signed by the paper's editor-in-chief, a certain Krushevan, A. P. Krushevan, who, as the instigator of the Kishinev pogroms, had a good fifty murders on his conscience.<sup>14</sup>

Thanatopoetics also colors the end of the tale in its cyclical framework, because KKB is constructed according to the principles of cause and effect. The circle closes (framework section II) with a description of the scene in a death camp

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senci i koji, po svoj prilici, neće nikad biti razjašnjeni ... i kada sam počeo da zamišljam događaje onako kako su se mogli dogoditi” – Kiš 1999b: 244–45.

- 13 Kiš 1991b: 191. “Sve priče u ovoj knjizi u većoj ili manjoj meri u znaku su jedne teme koju bih nazvao metafizičkom; od speva o Gilgamešu, pitanje smrti jedna je od opsesivnih tema literature” – Kis 1999b: 237.
- 14 Kiš 1991a: 135. “Zločin koji će se dogoditi nekih četrdeset godine kasnije bio je nagovešten u jednom peterburškom listu avgusta hiljadu devetsto šeste godine. Članci su izlazili u nastavcima a potpisivao ih je glavni urednik tih novina izvesni Kruševan, A. P. Kruševan, koji je kao podstrekivač pogroma u Kišinjevu imao na duši pedesetak ubistava.” – Kiš 1999a: 165.

(Bežec is meant) in 1942 and of Captain Wirth, the man responsible for stage-managing the deaths, and who carries a talisman<sup>15</sup> in his breast pocket—a leather-bound version of the *Protocols*:

In the middle of it all stands Captain Wirth. And in the upper left-hand pocket of his tunic is a leather-bound copy of *The Conspiracy* published by Der Hammer in 1933. He had read somewhere that the book saved the life of a young non-commissioned officer at the Russian front: a bullet fired from a sniper's rifle lodged in the pages, just above his heart. The book makes him feel secure.<sup>16</sup>

The first word in the story KKB, covering some 40 pages and divided into 20 parts, is “zločin” (crime), and the last is “sigurnost” (security). Looking at these two words together, there are two interpretations: The first is that Kruševan's publication of the *Protocols* was undoubtedly a crime, because, in the narrator's view, it led to the extermination of Jews by Nazis like Wirth. The second focuses on the irony of fate: one of the main perpetrators of the crime, such as camp commandant Christian Wirth, gives himself a false sense of security. The “astute reader”<sup>17</sup> challenged by the “appellate structure”<sup>18</sup> of the open ending, easily picks up the information that Wirth was shot and killed in 1944 fighting Yugoslavian partisans, and that the bullet hit him in the back.

The story's two thanatopoetic framework sections (I and II) are complemented by scenes of violence: there is initially an imagined horror scene in section I: “Throughout the darkened rooms, mutilated bodies lie in pools of blood and raped girls stare wild-eyed into the void from behind heavy, rent curtains.”<sup>19</sup>

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15 The motif of an apotropaic object that protects its bearer from stab or gun wounds or works as a lucky charm, is common in literature, cf. Conrad Ferdinand Meyer's novel *Das Amulett* (*The Amulet*, 1873), Johann Nestroy's musical farce *Der Talisman* (*Talisman*, 1840) et al.

16 Kiš 1991a: 174. “Na sred kruga stoji kapetan Virt. U gornjem džepu vojničke bluže, na levoj strani, drži primerak *Zavere* u kožnom povezu, izdanje *Der Hammera* iz godine 1933. Negde je pročitao da je ta knjiga spasla na ruskom frontu mladog podoficira: metak ispaljen iz snajperske puške zaustavio se između stranica, tik iznad srca. Ta mu knjiga uliva sigurnost” – Kiš 1999a: 217.

17 Kiš 1991b: 198.

18 Cf. Iser 1970.

19 Kiš 1991a: 135. “Po polumračnim odajama leže u lokvama krvi unakažena tela muškaraca, a silovane devojčice izbezumljenih očiju zure u prazno iza teških pokidanih zavesa” – Kiš 1999a: 165.

This is followed by a verbatim excerpt (marked by quotation marks) taken from a text (an article published in the *New York Times* of 7 December 1903, cf. Zipperstein 2018: 10): “Pieces of furniture, broken mirrors and lamps, linen, clothing, mattresses, and slashed quilts are strewn about the streets. The roads are deep in snow; eiderdown feathers everywhere; even the trees are covered with them.”<sup>20</sup>

In section II, prior to the last scene with camp commandant Wirth, there is an extract from an authentic document (which Kiš names in the “Post Scriptum”). The text in question is a report<sup>21</sup> about Kurt Gerstein, the “tragic hero of the German resistance”<sup>22</sup> and eyewitness of the mass murder of the Jews in the gas chamber of the Bełżec camp in 1942, “thirty-six years after Krushevan’s articles first appeared”.<sup>23</sup>

“They remain standing”, the unfortunate Kurt Gerstein wrote, “like basalt pillars; they have no place to fall or lean. Even in death, one can make out families holding hands. It is hard to separate them when the room must be cleaned for the next load, blue bodies tossed out, soaked with sweat and urine, legs stained with excrement and menstrual blood. Two dozen workers check the mouths, prying them open with iron levers; others check the anus and genitals, looking for money, diamonds, gold. In the middle of it all stands Captain Wirth...”<sup>24</sup>

Semantically, the two scenes are heightened by a kind of refrain that closes the ring, in which the explicit insistence that the corpses are actual facts offers thanatopoetic reinforcement:

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20 Kiš 1991a: 135. “Po ulicama, razbacani komadi nameštaja, ogledala, razbijenih lampi, rublje i odeća, madraci, razvaljeni perine. Ulice su pokrivene snegom: svuda je popadalo perje, pa i po drveću” – Kiš 1999a: 165.

21 Cf. Poliakov/Wulf 1955: 107–08.

22 Kiš 1991b: 198.

23 Kiš 1991a: 173.

24 Kiš 1991a: 174. “‘Kao bazaltni stubovi’ – zapisuje nesrećni Kurt Gerštajn – ‘Ljudi još stoje uspravno, nemajući ni najmanjeg mesta da bi se srušili ili nagnuli. Čak i u smrti, još se mogu prepoznati porodice, po stisku ruku. S mukom ih rastavljaju, kako bi ispraznili prostoriju za nov tovar. Onda bacaju modra tela, vlažna od znoja i mokraće, nogu uprljanih izmetom i menstrualnom krvi. Dvadesetak radnika proveravaju usta, otvarajući pomoću gvođenih poluga. Drugi proveravaju anus i genitalne organe, tražeći novac, dijamante, zlato. Zubari čupaju kleštima inleje, mostove, krunice. Na sred kruga stoji kapetan Virt...’” – Kiš 1999a: 216–17.

- in part 1 of the KKB: “The scene is real enough, as real as the corpses”<sup>25</sup>
- in part 20 of the KKB: “But the stage is real, as real as the corpses”<sup>26</sup>

Within this framework formed by parts 1 and 20, the genesis, passing down, and use of the *Protocols* is recounted. First and foremost, the poetic method chosen by Danilo Kiš is that of *defamiliarization*, and this estrangement of facts and names acts to fictionalize his KKB. For example, the name of the actual historical figure Pavel A. Krushevan becomes A. P. Kruševan; he in fact published the *Protocols* in August/September 1903, not in August 1906, and the first pogrom in Kishinev took place at Easter, namely from 19 to 20 April 1903.<sup>27</sup> Presumably Kiš chose the year 1906 in “summary,” because around 650 pogroms were launched in the Russian empire between 1903 and 1906, claiming thousands of victims.<sup>28</sup> As further defamiliarization, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are not given their usual title in the story KKB.<sup>29</sup> The unnamed narrator figure of the KKB speaks instead of a “book” to which he gives the fictitious, but meaningful, title of *The Conspiracy, or The Roots of the Disintegration of*

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25 Kiš 1991a: 135. – “Prizor je, međjutim, stvaran, kao što su stvarni i leševi” – Kiš 1999a: 165.

26 Kiš 1991a: 174. – “Scena je međjutim stvarna, kao što su stvarni i leševi” – Kiš 1999a: 216.

27 Steven Zipperstein argues that the vehement global reaction to the pogrom, which was in most cases also directed against the Tsarist regime and conservative practices in Russia, bolstered the anti-Semitic attitudes of the Russian nationalist forces and contributed to the spread of anti-Jewish conspiracy beliefs: “Kishinev, as they saw it, was an ideal launching pad for Jewish designs on world domination” (2018: xix). To support his arguments, Zipperstein takes a closer look at the role played by Pavel Krushevan. The latter is, according to Zipperstein, a crucial link between the pogrom and the *Protocols*. Despite the fact that he was the publisher of Kishinev’s daily newspaper *Besarabets* (The Bessarabian), in which numerous anti-Semitic articles appeared claiming that a Christian boy had been the victim of a ritual murder, Krushevan denied any responsibility for the pogrom. Instead he believed that a Jewish conspiracy was behind the media discourse in which articles were directed against Russian conservatism in general and against Krushevan personally.

28 Cf. Grill 2017: 471.

29 In his KKB, Kiš avoids words such as “Zion” or “Jew/ish” because he does not want to be labelled a “Jewish author” but seeks recognition as a European writer.

*European Society*.<sup>30</sup> The change in designation from “protocol” to “book” signals the fictionalization of a factual text on the one hand. On the other hand, though, “book” is a word with a special aura, above all when it refers to an enigmatic or unique book such as *Conspiracy (Zavera)*, which is compared several times, in ironic manner, with the Bible and whose origins and propagation remain largely in the dark. Thus, the well-known saying by Terentianus Maurus “Habent sua fata libelli” (Books have their own destinies) is very pertinent to the origins and fateful effects of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Moreover, the book *Conspiracy (Zavera)* proves the opposite of “the commonly accepted notion that books serve only good causes.” Both religious and political fanatics have always claimed *one* book as their authority: “Books in quantity are not dangerous; a single book is.”<sup>31</sup> Finally, it is significant that the story “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” places the lexeme *knjiga* (book) at the beginning of the title, i.e., of the first paratext. “Post Scriptum,” i.e., “Addition to a text/book,” is the title of the second paratext, which is an explanatory metatextual supplement to the book *Knjiga kraljeva i budala* and ensures that the recipient’s attention is repeatedly drawn to the transformation of the factual into literature.<sup>32</sup>

So, in Kiš’s story a key topic is the relationship between a person and a book, whereby the person may be the author, compiler, translator, someone reading to himself or to an audience, the buyer or the seller. The opening protagonist in KKB is Sergei Nilus, author of the apocalyptic piece *Antikhris* to which the *Protocols*, taken from Krushevan, formed the appendix. Here Nilus refers to himself as a reader and a “holy fool,” i.e., as one able to reveal the truth: “Wherever he went, he studied the lives of saints and holy fools, and discovered in them analogies to his own spiritual life.”<sup>33</sup> The fictionalization of historical figures extends to the Tsarina; after her death at the hands of the Bolsheviks it is alleged that a copy of *Conspiracy (Zavera)* marked with “a swastika, symbol of happiness and divine grace”<sup>34</sup> was found among her personal effects. Likewise fictionalized is an officer in Denikin’s forces, who incites his soldiers to launch pogroms by reading to them from the book. Above all, the figure of the unknown person X is fictionalized. A figure who in Constantinople in August 1921 buys a

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30 Kiš 1991a: 136. “Zavera ili Gde su koreni rasula evropskog društva” – Kiš 1999a: 166.

31 Kiš 1991b: 197.

32 Cf. Petzer 2008: 115.

33 Kiš 1991a: 138. “Izučavajući po lavrama životopise svetaca i jurodivih, otkriva u njima analogije sa svojim sopstvenim duhovim životom.” – Kiš 1999a: 168.

34 Kiš 1991a: 144.

leather suitcase full of books from a Russian émigré called Arkadii Ipolitovich Belogorcev. There is a long list of the book titles in part 9 of KKB, which serves to characterize the owner. Among the books thus acquired is a copy of Maurice Joly's book. When the nameless X discovers remarkable similarities between *Conspiracy (Zavera)*, with which he is familiar, and Joly's *Dialogue aux enfers (Dialogue in Hell)* he contacts the Istanbul correspondent of *The Times* who then writes a "sensational" series of articles in August 1921 proving that the *Conspiracy* is a forgery. In Kiš's story, the mysterious Mr. X—actually the poet and translator Mikhail Raslovlev, a Russian nobleman and monarchist who died in 1987 in exile in France—becomes a figure whose thought processes and memories are known. For example, he remembers the cavalry colonel Dragomirov, who read aloud from his softcover copy of *Conspiracy* and thereby provoked the pogrom in Odessa.<sup>35</sup> Because it is such a significant aspect of the conspiracy theme, this description is set exactly half-way through KKB, in part 10, and the description of the Kishinev pogrom in part 1 is repeated in paraphrases. Here too, poetic use is made of snow, the leitmotif running through the text and a symbol for Russia. Mr. X's hopes are dashed now that the book compiled by "the talented and ill-fated"<sup>36</sup> Petr Rachkovskii,<sup>37</sup> head of the Russian secret service in Paris, has been exposed as a forgery; the book will cease to have any effect and even serve to exonerate the alleged conspirators. The spread and malevolent effects of *Conspiracy (Zavera)* continue unabated. Even Hitler and Stalin, the representatives of evil, not mentioned by name, but instead described as, "the amateur painter who wrote the infamous *Mein Kampf*" and the "anonymous Georgian seminary student who was *yet to be heard from*,"<sup>38</sup> are influenced by the book. Part 19 of KKB thus closes, in order to emphasize the authenticity of the document, with five consecutive verbatim examples from *Conspiracy (Zavera)*, chosen because "they will demonstrate why the text has had so fateful an

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35 To the "informed reader," to whom the narrator of KKB refers repeatedly, "Odessa" means the great pogrom of 1905 in which more than 400 were killed, innumerable women and girls raped and 1,600 homes destroyed.

36 Kiš 1991a: 163.

37 With this version of how the *Protocols* originated in France, Kiš is referring to the book by Norman Cohn written in 1967, which is mentioned in the "Post Scriptum." Most recent research (De Michelis, Hagemester) has, however, shown that the *Protocols* were probably written in the Russian Empire. A number of Ukrainianisms in the text could serve as proof.

38 Kiš 1991a: 171–72.

impact”:<sup>39</sup> “Men with evil instincts outnumber men with good instincts. Governing by violence and terror therefore yields better results than governing by academic argument.”<sup>40</sup> Or “Our right lies in might,” and “our duty is to spread discord, strife and animosity throughout Europe and then to other continents” because “politics has nothing in common with morality. ... We shall therefore punish mercilessly any armed opposition to our power.”<sup>41</sup>

As mentioned previously, Kiš wrote in his “Post Scriptum” about why, in relation to the topic of death, the collection was called *Enciklopedija mrtvih*. However, he offers no explanation for the title of the eighth story, “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” (“The Book of Kings and Fools”). As far as I am aware, those who study Kiš have skirted around this topic. The title is so ambiguous that a number of interpretations are possible. Firstly, the title “The Book of Kings and Fools” is evocative of the Old Testament “Book of Kings,” which is divided into two parts concerning the lives of King David, his son Salomon and his successors and recounts the history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. That Kiš’s reference to the Old Testament “Book of Kings” (“Knjiga kraljeva”) stands for Judaism is apparent in the ninth story of the *Enciklopedija mrtvih*, in which he speaks of “royal blood” (with reference to the Jewish-Russian poet Osip Mandel’shtam).<sup>42</sup>

The Fools in the title of KKB refer, *inter alia*, to the numerous passages in the Bible in which fools are contrasted with wise men, e.g., “The wise in heart will receive commandments: but a prating fool shall fall.”<sup>43</sup> Or, “wise men lay

39 Kiš 1991a: 172. “Svedoče o sudbonosnom uticaju te lektire” – Kiš 1999a: 214.

40 Kiš 1991a: 172. “Treba primetiti da je više ljudi sa zlim nego sa dobrim instinktima; stoga se u vladanju s njima postižu bolji rezultati nasiljem i strahovladom nego akademskim raspravama ...” – Kiš 1999a: 214.

41 Kiš 1991a: 172–73. “Naše je pravo u sili ... Naša je dužnost da u celoj Evropi, a posredstvom nje i na drugim kontinentima, izazovemo nemire, razdore i neprijateljstva ... . Politika nema ničeg zajedničkog sa moralom. ... Stoga ćemo nemilosrdno kažnjavati sve one koji se našoj vlasti suprotstave s oružjem u ruci” – Kiš 1999a: 215–16. It would seem that Kiš used a Croatian translation of the *Protocols* published in 1929 in Split by M. Tomić, although in KKB this reference has been defamiliarized and given the title “Prave osnove” (“The True Foundations”) written by a certain “A. Tomić” – Kiš 1999a: 211. The narrator quotes from this with page references 216, 218, 235 and 268. In my copy of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* by J. Sammons, these quotations may be found in the first, seventh, fifteenth, and nineteenth meetings, pages 29, 31–32, 77–78, and 95–96.

42 Kiš 1991c: 188; “carska krv” – Kiš 1999c: 233. See also Delić 1995: 332.

43 Proverbs 10:8 (Twenty-First Century King James Version).

up knowledge, but the mouth of the foolish is near destruction.”<sup>44</sup> By the end of the Middle Ages, a “Literature of Fools” had become popular with works such as Sebastian Brant’s *Narrenschiff* (*Ship of Fools*, 1494) or Erasmus’s *Encomium moriae* (*In Praise of Folly*, 1509) in which human follies are caricatured and satirized.

A crucial role in Kiš’s choice of title was most probably played by the (identical) *Psalms* 14:1 and 53:2, in which the fool is not only stupid, but, above all, a disbeliever, someone evil who denies the existence of God: “The fool hath said in his heart, ‘There is no God’. They are corrupt and have done abominable iniquity; there is none that doeth good.”<sup>45</sup> Illustrations for *Psalms* 53 in Mediaeval *psalters* (L. “Dixit insipiens in corde suo: Non est Deus”) show a figure standing opposite a king. This figure is the fool, the unwise man (L. *insipiens*) mocking King David, the wise man (L. *sapiens*) who stands for faith.

Since God created Man in his likeness, according to *Gen.* 1:27, such an imperfect, perverse creature as the fool could not possibly be in the likeness of God. Therefore, the fool, being distanced from God, became a negative figure more akin to the Devil, considered the origin of all foolishness. Opposition to the wise king (David) on the part of the fool (the atheist) is really about the struggle between the forces of order/orthodoxy against those of disorder/heterodoxy and it is this aspect that Kiš addresses by taking the symbolic antithesis kings/fools as the title of his story. Describing the (alleged) creators of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as “wise” is to be seen as irony against the backdrop of the discourse on fools, and this bitter irony is what characterizes the subtext in Kiš’s KKB.

The combination of secular kings and fools also alludes to the king-fool duopoly that has existed since antiquity: as part of the king’s retinue, it is the fool’s job, through his own imperfections, to remind the king that power and fame (Lat. *vanitas*) are transient. He is the wise fool, the only person allowed to tell the ruler the truth to his face without having to fear punishment, the “fool in Christ” (Russ. *iurodivyi*). In this sense of the fool’s license not only Nilus, who sees himself as a “holy fool,” gives *his* version of the truth but also the author by presenting historians and readers with *his* truth, namely *poetic veritas*.

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44 Proverbs 10:14.

45 *Psalms* 14:1 and 53:2.



## The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as Integral Element of the Discourse about the Shoah

The phantasm of the *Protocols* and their fateful effect does not stand in isolation in Danilo Kiš's works but is an integral element of how he deals with the Shoah (Holocaust). In 1971, he wrote a letter to the magazine *Ovdje (Here)* in which he called the *Protocols* a "knjiga-ubica," a "murderous book" because in his view it—together with the *Malleus Iudaeorum (Hammer of the Jews)* and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* or Céline's *Bagatelles pour un massacre*<sup>46</sup>—was partly responsible for the Shoah.

This discourse about the Shoah was manifest in his first prose work the *Psalm 44 (Psalm 44)*<sup>47</sup> that was published in 1963. It is especially pronounced in the last part of his trilogy, ironically termed a "Family Circus," in the 1972 text *Peščanik (Hour-Glass)* about the life and fate of his father, whose real name was Eduard Kohn (later Kiš), but in Danilo Kiš's books is called Eduard Sam or E.S. In *Peščanik*, roof beams and tiles come crashing down when Eduard Sam's house in Novi Sad collapses and he narrowly misses the fate of the "senior physician Dr. Freud," whose brains spilled out of his smashed skull onto the street in the massacre of 1942. He compares these scenes to the ice pick brought down on the head of Leo Bronstein, alias Leon Trotsky. It is the hammer of a "vengeful fate" or, in other words, the *Malleus Iudaeorum*, that smashes Jewish skulls: "The roof beams and tiles would have crashed onto his head (like the ice pick onto the head of Lev Davidovich Bronstein), onto the clearly visible tonsure in his ash-gray hair, a tonsure pre-destinated, as it were, to receive the ice pick of a vengeful fate: *malleus Iudaeorum*."<sup>48</sup> Naming in *Peščanik* the book *Malleus Iudaeorum*, in the same context as roof beams and an ice pick, serves to identify it as a likewise potentially lethal instrument. Moreover, the name of the book evokes associations with the Hammer publishing house that issued the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. As the protagonist E.S. in *Peščanik* explains to a Jesuit during a train journey, this *Protokol* (sic!) *sionskih mudraca*, is a fabrication, an

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46 Cf. Petzer 2003: 335.

47 As a code name for Auschwitz, the title *Psalm 44* points above all to verses 9 and 11: "But thou hast cast off, and put us to shame"; "Thou hast given us like sheep appointed for meat."

48 My translation, D. B. of: "Grede i cigle srušile bi se na njegovu glavu (kao pijuk na glavu Lava Davidoviča Bronštajna), na tek označenu tonzuru njegove pepeljaste kose, tonzuru koja kao da beše predodređjena za pijuk osvetničke sudbine: *malleus iudeorum*" – Kiš 1983: 116.

evil pastiche of a Utopian text that appeared in 1864 in Brussels entitled *Dialogue aux enfers entre Montesquieu et Machiavel*, written by Maurice Joly.<sup>49</sup>

Umberto Eco has also worked the *Protocols* into his literary output, e.g., into the 1988 novel *Il pendolo di Foucault* (*Foucault's Pendulum*) and again in 2010 in the novel *Il cimitero di Praga* (*The Prague Cemetery*); as well as in the sixth of his Harvard lectures *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994) about narrative theory including the attempt to reconstruct a “genealogy” of the *Protocols*. Whereas Eco, the Italian semiotician and novelist, is primarily interested in conspiracy texts as a phenomenon of intertextuality, their ramifications and interpretation, Danilo Kiš sees them as a “a parable of evil”<sup>50</sup> and real historical threat. As people marked by their Jewish destiny, Kiš’s “characters cannot afford the playful and ambiguous repertoire of Eco’s computer games.”<sup>51</sup> The immediate effect and personal impact of the edition of *Conspiracy* (*Zavera*), i.e., of the *Protocols*, that was published in 1944 in Hungary is treated in an autoreferential pointer by the first-person narrator of KKB, behind whom the author Danilo Kiš and his own biography remain hidden. The boy (nine at the time) personally experiences—literally “in his own skin” (“moje kože”)—an anti-Semitic attack when someone fires a rifle into his parents’ home:

The editorials provoked by the Hungarian edition (1944), which includes the woolly wisdom of a certain László Ernő,<sup>52</sup> were directly responsible for a hunting rifle’s being fired at the windows of our house. (So, one might say, the *Conspiracy* affair closely concerns me, too.<sup>53</sup>

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49 Cf. *ibid.*: 106.

50 Kiš 1991b: 197. “parabola u zlu” – Kiš 1999b: 244.

51 Boym 1999: 114.

52 Shortly before World War II broke out László Endre, whose name Kiš alters to László Ernő, an anti-Semitic propagandist, published a book arguing in defense of the *Protocols* as a genuine record. In 1944 he became Secretary of State in occupied Hungary and Adolf Eichmann’s right-hand man who ordered the deportation of Hungarian Jews. Endre organized the deportations which began on 15 May 1944 and within six weeks 450,000 Jews had been transported to Auschwitz, including Kiš’s father.

53 Kiš 1991a: 171. “Novinski komentari, koje izazvalo mađarsko izdanje (1944), popraćeno mudrovanjem nekog Lasla Ernea, imali su neposredan odjek: hitac ispaljen iz lovačke puške u prozore naše kuće. (Tako bi se, dakle, moglo reći da se stvar *Zavere* tiče i moje kože)” – Kiš 1999a: 213. – I (D. B.) believe the English translation “closely concerns me, too” to be too unspecific, because it does not give any weight to the elementary, bodily witnessing of the deed.

Just as the historical experience of the persecution of the Jews was written on the skin of the witness (*testis*) and left deep scars (*testimonium*), so too have the *Protocols* left significant tracks in Kiš's works. Whereas Umberto Eco's work is based on mythopoetics, Danilo Kiš is dedicated to a thanatopoetic process, which leads him to inscribe the victims of pogroms and death camps onto mankind's cultural memory. In his narratives, starting with *Psalam 44*, progressing to *Grobница Borisa Davidoviča* (*A Tomb for Boris Davidovič*) and thereafter in "Knjiga kraljeva i budala," he erects a cenotaph to these victims, to save them from being forgotten: it is literary remembrance performed as an ethical act with poetic means—"po-ethics," as Kiš termed it.

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*Translation: Angela Weckler, M.A.*

## **Abstract**

Danilo Kiš wrote from memory and for our collective memory—in the tradition in which the written and spoken word is set against the backdrop of death and decay. But there is also a horrific and intimate connection between his memories and death, from which his specific thanatopoetics emerged. A book title such as *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* indicates that the contents concern an age when an unparalleled descent from civilization to barbarity turned half of Europe into a slaughterhouse. Kiš's elaborate poetic language neither embellishes nor takes anything away from his account and has few peers in the post-Auschwitz age. Taking the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as his example, Kiš shows in his short story "Book of Kings and Fools" how the belief in a *conspiracy* can so manipulate people's thoughts and actions that it paves the way to violent pogroms and death camps.



# Spying on the Balkan Spy. Paranoia and Conspiracy in the Works of Dušan Kovačević

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Goran Lazičić

## Keywords

Yugoslav drama; paranoia; comedy; political satire

## *The Balkan Spy revisited*

Dušan Kovačević (b. 1948) is more than just a prominent playwright in contemporary Serbia; he is also a prominent figure in ex-Yugoslav culture. Used almost daily, many sentences from his plays or film scripts have become a part of everyday language, so much so that speakers often do not even know of their actual origin. Kovačević's theater plays<sup>1</sup> and the films based on his screenplays are among the unforgettable classics of Serbian and Yugoslav cinema.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is not at all simple to create a critical distance when speaking of his dramatic *oeuvre*. The widely popular film adaptations of his plays seem to have somehow "sealed" the texts, not just for new stage productions, but also for critical read-

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- 1 Selected plays: *Maratonci trče počasni krug* (*The Marathon Family*, 1972), *Radovan Treći* (*Radovan III*, 1973), *Sabirni centar* (*The Gathering Place*, 1981), *Klaustrofobična komedija* (*Claustrophobic Comedy*, 1987), *Profesionalac* (*The Professional*, 1989), *Urnebesna tragedija* (*Tragedy Burlesque*, 1990), *Kontejner sa pet zvezdica* (*Five-Star Dumpster*, 1999), *Doktor Šuster* (*Doctor Shoemaker*, 2001), *Generalna proba samoubistva* (*Dress Rehearsal for a Suicide*, 2009)
  - 2 Selected film scripts: *Ko to tamo peva* (*Who's Singin' Over There?*, S. Šijan, 1980), *Balkanski špijun* (*Balkan Spy*, B. Nikolić and D. Kovačević, 1984), *Underground* (E. Kusturica, 1995), *Profesionalac* (*The Professional*, D. Kovačević, 2003), *Sveti Georgije ubiva aždahu* (*St. George Kills the Dragon*, S. Dragojević, 2009)

ings of those texts. However, when it comes to *Balkanski špijun* (*The Balkan Spy*, 1983), the new staging of the play at the National Theater in Belgrade<sup>3</sup> changed not only the play's plot, but also its entire social context was transferred from the early 1980s to the end of the 2010s. This aided and abetted the rediscovery of the work's semantic flexibility and openness.

Ilija Čvorović, the main protagonist of Kovačević's play, is an everyday Belgrade man residing there in the times of Socialist Yugoslavia. At the beginning of the plot, he is invited by the police to an "informative talk." The new subtenant in Ilija's house, Petar Markov Jakovljević, attracts the police's interest because he recently returned to Yugoslavia from France. The conversation triggers a paranoia in Ilija and he begins to secretly spy on the subtenant, convinced that he is a professional spy from the capitalist "imperialist powers" and is, as such, a part of a wide-ranging conspiracy against socialist Yugoslavia. Gradually, both his wife Danica and his twin brother Đura also succumb to Ilija's paranoia, while their daughter, Sonja, worries about her father's mental health. This tension leads to a conflict between the daughter and the mother. In the play's closing scene, Ilija and Đura interrogate and torture the subtenant in order to obtain a confession from him about his alleged espionage activities. During the interrogation, Ilija suffers a heart attack and this is how the play ends.

### **Amateur Spy as (Anti-)Detective**

*Balkanski špijun* is a parody of both detective and spy stories, with the main protagonist playing the comical character of a self-conceited, incompetent and incapable detective. Not only does he have an inappropriate, exaggerated self-perception that is far from reality, he also simultaneously has a similar paranoid-augmented perception of the subtenant as a professional spy and as his fierce opponent. The protagonist's paranoid worldview is reflected in the structural and generic levels of the play as it becomes a parody of a detective story over time. The classical work of this genre "should present a problem, and the problem should be solved by an amateur or professional detective through processes of deduction."<sup>4</sup> The spy story, conversely, does not usually contain a puzzle. The detective genre is based on the questions *Who?*, *Why?* and *How?*, whereas the

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3 The play premiered on 1 October 2018, directed by Tatjana Mandić Rigonat, who also adapted the text.

4 Symons 1992: 13.



spy story only concerns the last one—*How?*.<sup>5</sup> In *Balkanski špijun*, Ilija's investigation turns out to not just be an incompetent search for truth and a failed attempt to solve a mystery, but, due to its paranoid roots, it becomes increasingly complicated as his quest progresses. This moves the protagonists away from the solution to the mystery (which actually would be a realization that there is no real mystery at all and that the subtenant is not actually a dangerous spy).

The boundaries between paranoia and the mechanisms found in classical crime fiction are actually much more permeable than is often thought. In his detailed and convincing study of crime fiction, paranoia and the modern society, French sociologist Luc Boltanski argues that a detective character in crime fiction behaves essentially like a paranoid person, with the difference being that detectives are not only considered to be mentally healthy by society, but that they are also usually appointed to conduct their investigations by the state.<sup>6</sup> Both the detective and the paranoid person strive to solve a mystery; both are trying to expose the deeper, (supposedly) *real* reality that lies behind the superficial, visible one and both are doing their best to identify and defeat the hidden causes of evil in their society. In this sense, Boltanski argues that when it comes to the structural level of their investigative quest, the detective, the paranoid and the social scientist are all dedicated to similar studies of their respective social realities.

The genre of the Anglo-American detective story traditionally stands “strongly on the side of law and order,”<sup>7</sup> at least in its classical form. The detective is perceived as society's agent, he is a hero and savior of society, is generally super-intelligent, though often eccentric. He is the one who is allowed to even go above and beyond the law in order to keep society from danger. The prime example of this type is Sherlock Holmes, who is also a role model for the character of the detective as a private person, i.e., one who does not act as a state's official.<sup>8</sup> Probably the best-known character of the other type—i.e., the profes-

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5 Ibid.: 15–16.

6 Cf. Boltanski 2013: 46. Crime fiction emerges and develops as a genre simultaneously with the invention and description of the phenomenon of paranoia in 1899, by the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin (1856–1926); see *ibid.*: 45–46.

7 Symons 1992: 20.

8 Cf. Boltanski 2013: 128. Boltanski generally sets the anglophone tradition of crime fiction apart, in which the detective is almost exclusively a private person, i.e., an amateur detective, in contrast to the French tradition in which the detective is a professional, a member of the police or of official security forces with few exceptions; *ibid.*: 151–52.

sional detective as an official of the state—is Georges Simenon’s commissioner Maigret. When it comes to the comparison of those two characters, it should also be noted that Maigret is an ordinary official, as well as a very ordinary, down-to-earth person, unlike the aristocratic and intellectual detective (like Sherlock Holmes). The character of Ilija Čvorović encompasses and parodically undermines features of both of the aforementioned types: firstly, he is an amateur detective and, secondly, he is an ordinary, lower-middle-class man, undoubtedly *petit bourgeois* in his education, essentially *proletarian* in both his manners and taste. Both Ilija and his twin brother Đura have some character features that are reminiscent of a comic type of yokel or *agroikos*.<sup>9</sup> Ilija’s violent nature, which surfaces at the end of the interrogation scene, corresponds to Commissioner Maigret’s “*petit bourgeois sadism*,” as Boltanski formulates it.<sup>10</sup>

### **Behind or Within the Social Reality**

Boltanski states that a detective story or a crime novel—unlike the fantasy fiction or picaresque novel—is not possible without a predefined social reality in which the plot is situated.<sup>11</sup> The plot of *Balkanski špijun* takes place in Belgrade, the capital of former Yugoslavia in the early 1980s, which means that the play referred to the actual political situation of the time. The 1980s were a time of deep economic and social crisis in the country. The Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia existed for another decade after Tito’s death in 1980. Holm Sundhaussen describes this period as the country’s “self-destruction.” Economic growth slowed dramatically, the number of registered unemployed increased, large parts of the population were rapidly pushed into poverty, inflation soared and the mismanagement and corruption of the Communist officials destroyed the political elite’s credibility. The technological backwardness, the International Monetary Fund’s drastic repayment requirements and the Yugoslav economy’s lack of liquidity boosted the crisis and social tensions increased.<sup>12</sup> The social and economic crisis had radical ideological and political consequences: ethnic nationalisms (and partly racism) increased and the rapid erosion of Communism, as well as the idea of Yugoslav unity, continued unabated.

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9 Cf. Kuzmić 2014: 121–22.

10 Boltanski 2013: 201.

11 Cf. *ibid.*: 36–40.

12 Cf. Sundhaussen 2007: 379.

Kovačević's play was written in 1982 (and was premiered one year later), at a time when these processes, which would end in the Yugoslav wars, were just beginning. This backdrop of the political "self-destruction" of Serbian (i.e., Yugoslav) society is the context in which the play is set and it decisively framed the context in which Ilija's paranoia emerges.

The "re-coding of the past,"<sup>13</sup> which also took place during the 1980s, had many aspects. A series of taboos were broken, primarily started in fictional literature. These included: the unmasking of the partisan myth, the distancing of itself from Tito's cult of personality and the rehabilitation of various quisling organizations and "war criminals" from the Second World War, etc.<sup>14</sup> The reconstruction of the historical and political background of *Balkanski špijun* must also include the taboo of Goli otok. In the initial years after Tito's death, the breaking of the taboo of silence concerning the prison and work camp on the small Adriatic island Goli otok—which had been installed immediately after Tito's break with Stalin in 1948 with the official aim of "re-educating" the Stalinists—was on the rise in some remarkable works of contemporary Yugoslav literature.<sup>15</sup>

### Suspicious Persons, During Communism and Previously

An analysis of *Balkanski špijun* cannot avoid comparing Kovačević's play with two other canonical texts from the Slavonic drama tradition, namely Nikolai Gogol's *Revizor* (*The Government Inspector*, 1835) and *Sumnjivo lice* (*A Suspicious Person*, 1888/1923) by Serbian author Branislav Nušić. The character of the subtenant in *Balkanski špijun*, Jakovljević, along with the characters of Khlestakov (by Gogol) and Đoka (by Nušić), belong to the comical tradition of a *suspicious person*, a stranger that suddenly appears in a closed community, bringing turmoil and causing trouble. The alleged identity of all three characters

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13 Ibid.: 380.

14 Cf. *ibid.*: 379.

15 Following the argumentation of contemporary Yugoslav literary critic Predrag Matvejević, Nicole Münnich analyzes the novels by Branko Hofman *Noć do jutra* (*Night till Morning*, 1981), Antonije Isaković's *Tren 2* (*The Moment 2*, 1982) and Slobodan Selenić's *Pismo/glava* (*Heads or Tails*, 1982) as the seminal texts of the so-called Goli otok literature. She also adds Dušan Jovanović's theater play *Karamazovi* (*The Karamazovs*, 1981) and Vitomil Zupan's novel *Levitani* (*Levitani*, 1982) to the "broader core" of this canon; see Münnich 2006: 209–10.

is not of their own construction, but the identity that has been imposed on them from the outside by others, or more precisely, by the *paranoid* others.<sup>16</sup> Like *Balkanski špijun*, the plays by Gogol and Nušić are also examples of a hybrid drama genre that encompasses both a comedy of manners and political satire, meaning that the characters are primarily representatives of the state apparatus, and only secondarily are they private persons and family members.

The outline of the plot in Gogol's play is as follows: After receiving a confidential announcement that the state government's inspector will soon arrive to their town, the town's mayor and clerks, in a paranoid hysteria, start to believe that the unknown young man from St. Petersburg—actually an adventurer who accidentally happened to arrive in this town—is none other than the inspector, who—for the sake of his investigation—arrives incognito. Nušić modified this plot primarily with respect to the fact that the assumed identity of the suspicious person is not actually a representative of the state, but its enemy. The comical confusion outlined by Nušić lies in the fact that the alleged political criminal and dangerous anarchist is actually the secret fiancé of the mayor's daughter, who also arrived in town incognito.<sup>17</sup>

According to the Russian playwright, the falsely identified stranger stands for the public order established and maintained by the state, while the alleged spy represents the enemy of the state and a threat to the public and national order according to his Serbian successors. In other words, Gogol's work is the jumping off point where the object of the paranoia is a part of the state; according to Nušić and Kovačević this individual is the enemy of the state. At the same time, while Ilija Čvorović is portrayed as morally faultless, his character is ethically completely transparent, thus resembling the classical tragic hero. The characters as outlined in Gogol's and Nušić's plays, on the other hand, are morally corrupt and hypocritical, which makes them typical comical characters.<sup>18</sup> Although

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16 Cf. Zelinsky 2012: 168.

17 *Sumnjivo lice* was written by Nušić in 1888 but didn't have its premier until 1923. In 1928, the author wrote a preface stating that the subtitle of the first draft version of the play was "A gogoliad in two acts," which was later changed in the final one to "A comedy in two acts." – cf. Nušić 1957: 161–62.

18 The parodied figure of a spy also appears as an episode character in Nušić's *Sumnjivo lice*. Aleksa Žunjić has a business card that openly states that he is a "county spy." He did this for strategic reasons, as explained by the captain's assistant: "He [the spy] says, when he was hiding himself, he couldn't find out anything, and now everybody is telling him details directed against each other." ("Он каже, пре док је крио није могао ништа да дозна, а сад му сви казују један против другог." – Nušić 1957:

Gogol's Khlestakov is not a deliberate trickster or even self-consciously manipulative, he also cannot be considered to be a positive character either.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, according to Kovačević, all characters in *Balkanski špijun* are *per se* actually positive, morally impeccable and faultless. In this respect, all members of society in *Balkanski špijun* are allegorically represented as victims of the system which is itself corrupt, full of inherent aberrations and structural injustices.

In the works of both Gogol and Nušić, the rivalry between the mother and the daughter is no more than a conventional comical motif. In the work by Kovačević, however, the conflict between Sonja and Danica represents a deep generational and ideological fracture in the family as well as a metaphorical fracture in society. In this respect, Nikola Janković argues that Ilija's paranoia could itself be understood as a consequence of this generational gap, i.e., the conflict between the generation that created the Socialist state and the subsequent one that would later decisively contribute to its dissolution.<sup>20</sup>

The other important difference between the plays by Gogol and Nušić and the one by Kovačević, is that in *Balkanski špijun* there is no peripety in the plot, there is no sudden discovery about the true identity of the main character (Gogol and Nušić include an intercepted letter to achieve this effect). Until the last seconds of the play Ilija Čvorović believes that the subtenant is a professional spy.

According to Kovačević, the subtenant is nevertheless the figure of reason in the play (a typical figure in a classicist comedy), while Gogol deliberately constructed his main character in a domain beyond that tradition. One could argue that the only element that stays inviolable, honest and decent in Gogol's work is actually the state itself.<sup>21</sup> However, the local civil officials are also representatives of the state, which is thereby also being portrayed and satirized by Gogol as corrupt and immoral; they are actually being represented as malfunctional parts of the state that should be removed by the real government inspector as the true representative of the state. The inspector's message for the mayor occurs in the play's last lines. Khlestakov is just a projection surface, a "phantom,"<sup>22</sup> his intercepted letter to his friend in St. Petersburg is *literally* a sort of moral mirror for all of the town's inhabitants. In the last scene of Kovačević's play, however, the

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193–94. All English translations of the original quotations in the text are mine, G.L.) The parody is even more striking, considering that it is actually the spy Žunjić who brings the—false—information about the arrival of the alleged terrorist.

19 Cf. Zelinsky 2012: 167.

20 Cf. Janković 2011: 69.

21 Cf. Zelinsky 2012: 177.

22 *Ibid.*: 185.

shifting of the dialogue towards Ilija's monologue automatically pushes the sub-tenant's position into the role of the rational(izing) mirror, a mirror through which Ilija's paranoia is reflected.

## **Paranoia and Conspiracy, in Communism and Beyond**

Conspiracy theories—the “belief that powerful, hidden, evil forces control human destinies,” as Michael Barkun concisely defines the phenomenon<sup>23</sup>—are usually significant subcultural phenomena in a social sense, the emergence of which are connected with existential anxieties and shocking and traumatic events. However, conspiracy theories are becoming more than just a subcultural form of escapism or paranoia observed in some socio-historical contexts or some political and ideological systems; rather, they are often becoming a powerful discursive instrument of political populism.

The literal and clinical use of the term *paranoia* notwithstanding, there is also its metaphorical meaning. In his essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (1964), Richard Hofstadter uses the notion in this symbolic meaning in order to analyze the right-wing extremism in the United States after the Second World War (most notably McCarthyism). Hofstadter distinguishes, on the one hand, the clinical paranoid as a person who believes to be a target of a personal conspiracy, one that is “directed specifically *against him*,” and the political paranoid, on the other hand, as the person for whom the conspiracy threatens the whole society. It is in other words, “directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life.”<sup>24</sup>

Another symbolical use of the notion of paranoia can be found in some seminal theoretical works on postmodernism.<sup>25</sup> In this theoretical context, paranoia is usually regarded as a symptom of a counter-Enlightenment, anti-rationalist post-modern worldview. In postmodern fiction, which in this case correlates almost exclusively to the late capitalist societies of the West, paranoia first stands for a

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23 Barkun 2006: 2.

24 Hofstadter 2008: 4. In his essay, Hofstadter draws a line tracing the diachronic succession in American conspiracism from anti-Catholicism, anti-Masonry and on to anti-Communism.

25 See Hutcheon 2000 and Lucy 1997. Some other influential critics, however, consider the phenomenon of paranoia to be a part of the “epistemological” paradigm of high modernism, the phenomenon thereby laying beyond the “ontological” interest of post-modernism; cf. McHale 1996: 23–24.

hyperactive individual imagination and it is a kind of substitute for the stable explanation of the world that has been lost. As Patell puts it, “the only way to be ‘inside, safe’ and thus simulate the benefits of community is to pick your own metaphor and your own paranoia.”<sup>26</sup> In this way the common perspective is reversed; conspiracy theories are not perceived as a result of paranoia, but paranoia gradually becomes a means of defense, even a strategy for a cynical counter-attack against conspiracy theories that are imposed and instrumentalized by the power structures and systems of total control.<sup>27</sup>

The epistemological structure of paranoia is spiral. It usually begins with an ordinary everyday fact or action, but it turns out to be a trigger, prompting the paranoid person irreversibly into the spiral of paranoia. From that moment on, everything that the person experiences automatically becomes part of the paranoid construction, everything becomes connected to everything, everything seems to be part of a certain conspiracy, or as Niall Lucy formulates it:

A feature of paranoia is its potential to become a totalizing discourse, a discourse with no ‘outside.’ For the paranoid, everything can count as evidence of a particular theory of the truth, a theory that is otherwise (from outside the space of paranoia, to which the paranoid is blind) understood to be grounded on a false assumption and so the ‘truth’ it sees is only a delusion based on a miscalculation or a misreading. But the theory itself, as a set of rules and procedures, is not necessarily wrong.<sup>28</sup>

This collision of the paranoid perception of the outer world with an objective reality—or at least with the one considered by the society/theater audience to be objective and true—makes a sharp counterpoint that Kovačević often uses in the play as a source of humor.

According to Barkun, the core principles of every conspiracy theory are the following:

1. Nothing happens by accident.
2. Nothing is as it seems.
3. Everything is connected.<sup>29</sup>

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26 Patell 2001: 150.

27 Cf. Lucy 1997: 229–30 and Hutcheon 2000: 120.

28 Ibid.: 13.

29 Cf. Barkun 2006: 3–4.

Conspiracy theories are purely Manichaeic in their structure and strictly dualistic in their worldview. When it comes to their scope, Barkun distinguishes three types of conspiracies:

1. Event conspiracies
2. Systemic conspiracies
3. Superconspiracies<sup>30</sup>

Hofstadter's definition of the paranoid political worldview actually comprises the second and the third of Barkun's types postulating namely that

... the distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. History is a conspiracy set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade.<sup>31</sup>

In *Balkanski špijun*, the starting point of Ilija's paranoia is his retort to Danica given at the very outset of the play: "When did the police ever care about a normal and decent person?!"<sup>32</sup> After the briefing in the police station, he is absolutely convinced that the subtenant has worked against Yugoslavia abroad. The spiral of paranoia starts to progress and quickly absorbs Ilija's entire psychical reality. His *credo* become two sentences that actually paraphrase Barkun's description of paranoia: "Everything is the opposite of what it seems to be"<sup>33</sup> and "The spies are among us, all you need to know is how to recognize them."<sup>34</sup> He soon develops a fixed version of a vast conspiracy around the subtenant's activity, reaching the proportions of Barkun's systemic type of conspiracy: "He was sent from abroad to organize enemy units. He brought money to buy and bribe people."<sup>35</sup> Towards the end of the interrogation scene, Ilija offers the subtenant a

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30 Ibid.: 6.

31 See Hofstadter 2008: 29.

32 „Када се милиција интересовала за обичног и поштеног човека!“ – Ковачевић 2002: 76.

33 „Све је супротно од онога што изгледа да јесте.“ – *ibid.*: 110.

34 „Шпијуни су међу нама, само их треба знати – препознати.“ – *ibid.*: 112.

35 „Он је послат из иностранства да организује непријатељске групе. Донó је паре да купује и подмићује људе.“ – *ibid.*: 89. Danica is wondering who sponsors all of this, to which Đura replies: "The one they work for is paying. CIA, my sister, CIA.



chance (as a kind of compromise, as seen from his perspective) to surrender to the authorities, and then to start to work for the Yugoslav secret police as a repenting double-spy. The culmination of Kovačević's parody of political paranoia is the point at which Ilija's conspiracy theory practically matches Hofstadter's definition and becomes a version of a *superconspiracy*. After he discovers two badges of the Polish civil movement "Solidarity" among the subtenant's personal belongings, Ilija tells him:

"And do you know, sir, who organized those young people on the Square of Marx and Engels to carry a banner with this sign? Huh? You don't know that was the idea of your Professor friend... And do you know who brought the foreigner Pope, after six hundred years, to the Vatican throne? Huh? Not only a stranger, but a Pole? Huh?"<sup>36</sup>

As mentioned previously, the paranoia and conspiracy narratives in *Balkanski špijun* are induced in the specific, highly contradictory social and ideological context of Yugoslav Socialism. The main features of this political system, in the way in which they are represented in Kovačević's play, show some striking similarities with the basic thesis of Milovan Đilas' book *The New Class*.<sup>37</sup> One could argue that Ilija's paranoia is, in fact, the logical and unavoidable consequence of the Communist "tyranny over the mind," as Đilas calls it.<sup>38</sup>

Once Communism consolidated its power, it established Marxism and founded its so-called dialectical materialism as the dogma and the universal intellectual method of a society. As a result, the system "pushes its adherents into the

They've destroyed a half of the world!" („Плаћа онај за кога раде. ЦИА, снајка, ЦИА. Уништили су пола света!“ – *ibid.*: 113)

36 „А да ли ти је познато, господине, ко је организовао оне омладинце, на Тргу Маркса и Енгелса, да носе транспарент са овим знаком? А? Није ти познато да је то смислио твој пријатељ професор... А да ли ти је познато ко је довео Папу-странца, после шесто година, на престо Ватикана? А? Ем странац, ем Пољак? А?“ – *ibid.*: 136.

37 Milovan Đilas (1911–1995) was a Yugoslav revolutionary, a highly ranked Communist official at the time, but by the end of his life he was viewed as a dissident. *The New Class* was written in 1955 and 1956; it was first published in English in the USA in 1957. Đilas was sentenced to seven years in prison in Yugoslavia for publishing the work. The first legal edition of the book in Yugoslavia was published in Belgrade in 1990.

38 Cf. Djilas 1962: 124–46.

position which makes it impossible for them to hold any other viewpoint.”<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as with any other totalitarian ideology which tries to represent itself as the only true and universal explanation of the world, Communism became “increasingly one-sided and exclusive” over time and “created half-truths and tried to justify them.”<sup>40</sup> This makes Communist society a very fertile soil for various conspiracy theories: anyone can turn out to be an enemy, and the enemy could be everywhere and attack at any time. Instead of the presumption of innocence, the presumption of guilt becomes ubiquitous:

A citizen in the Communist system lives oppressed by the constant pangs of his conscience, and the fear that he has transgressed. He is always fearful that he will have to demonstrate that he is not an enemy of socialism, just as in the Middle Ages a man constantly had to show his devotion to the Church.<sup>41</sup>

For Gogol, conversely, the social context and preconditions for the *paranoid inclination* of the town’s inhabitants are not only historically contingent and more specific but are also a result of their personal shortcomings and moral transgressions (simply the offender’s fear of being caught). The comical plot of *Revizor*, based on the mistaken identity (*qui pro quo*) of the alleged inspector, was, however, not just one unique anecdote from the Russian province of the time. Unexpected, unannounced state inspections to provincial towns were not actually unusual and were a consequence of the efforts by Emperor Nicholas I (1825–1855) to sharpen the control of the administrative system in the provinces. Moreover, the inspectors were sometimes disguised as strangers or travelling *incognito* through the provinces in order to investigate the situation in the communities more efficiently and objectively. This was the precondition for the emergence of a type of constant, latent paranoia among the civil servants in the provinces of being constantly under secret surveillance. Over time this could make the townspeople suspicious of contact with any stranger.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Ibid.: 124.

40 Ibid.: 129.

41 Ibid.: 132.

42 Cf. Zelinsky 2012: 165–66. However, an indication of a broader paranoid vision of the events can also be found in Gogol’s play. At the very outset of the plot, the local judge Ammos Fiodorovich Liapkin-Tiapkin warns the mayor that the situation with the inspector is probably part of a large-scale secret political strategy by the government: “In my opinion, Anton Antonovich, the situation is complex and rather political. It means that Russia... yes... intends to start a war, and the Government has secretly

The *paranoid predisposition* of Ilija Čvorović seems to be a consequence of the very essence of the political system in which he is living. The worldview and the way of thinking of the ordinary citizens under Communism, as well as of intellectuals, always has “two faces—one for themselves, their own; the other for the public, the official.”<sup>43</sup> The collective, but also individual, schizophrenia seems to be an inevitable consequence of the ideological dogmatism and totalitarian control.<sup>44</sup>

According to the official ideological worldview, which corresponds—at least publicly—with Ilija’s personal point of view, the subtenant is not only a suspicious *stranger*, but moreover, due to his family origin, he belongs to a defamed, perilous social class from the time prior to the Second World War, namely the *bourgeoisie* from the Yugoslav Monarchy. As Đilas emphasizes:

Communists settle accounts with their opponents not because they have committed crimes, but because they are opponents. ... From the Communist point of view, these opponents are punished by ‘due process of law,’ although there may be no legal basis for their being convicted.<sup>45</sup>

This is the essence of Ilija’s paranoia: firstly, it is perceived as “normal” to preventively act against potential or real opponents; secondly, this action is perceived not only as morally unproblematic and justified, but also as completely legal and ideologically advisable. The typical mechanism of political processes in Communism, as described by Đilas, includes organized provocateurs and the fake, illegal organizations led by the secret police as a trap for possible dissidents and opponents of the system. This mechanism can be clearly recognized in the way in which Ilija—locked within his paranoid conspiracy narrative—sees his situation with the subtenant and in how he conducts his investigation.

One could argue that, if the subtenant is chiefly the rational(izing) mirror from which Ilija’s paranoia is reflected, then Ilija’s character itself is, to some extent, primarily the projection field for Communist ideology, the body and the mind upon which the ideology is being imprinted and operating through.

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commissioned an inspector to find out if there is any treason anywhere.” («Я думаю, Антон Антонович, что здесь тонкая и больше политическая причина. Это значит вот что: Россия... да... хочет вести войну, и министерия-то, вот видите, и подошла чиновника, чтобы узнать, нет ли где измены». – Gogol 1985: 11)

43 Djilas 1962: 132.

44 See also Deutschmann 2006.

45 Cf. Djilas 1962: 90–91.

## Between Comedy and Tragedy

*Balkanski špijun* is a dark comedy or absurdist tragicomedy for the great majority of critics.<sup>46</sup> This is yet another link that connects Kovačević with Gogol, whose *Revizor* is often interpreted as an essentially modern example of drama in which the tragical potential of the play is being induced *out of* and *through* the comedy.<sup>47</sup> According to Zoran Milutinović, *Balkanski špijun* ought to be labeled as a tragicomedy, unlike *Sumnjivo lice* by Branislav Nušić which is a true comedy.<sup>48</sup> As Milutinović emphasizes, the tragicomedy in twentieth century drama differs from earlier examples of the genre; the main feature of the newer form lies in the fact that “the tragical content is being represented using the traditional means of comedy, but thereby, however, not losing its tragical quality.”<sup>49</sup> Nušić’s character of the town mayor, Jerotije Pantić, is based on a drastic, comical portrayal of someone who is disproportionately and unrealistically ambitious. However, this ridiculous character is not actually dangerous for those around him.<sup>50</sup> Ilija Čvorović, on the contrary, is a “man of ideology,” his ideological blindness is comical in the first place, but it turns out to be very dangerous in the end, not only for him personally and for his family, but also for the entire society.<sup>51</sup> After the premiere of the play in 1983, theater critic Jovan Ćirilov emphasized the metaphysical aspect of Ilija’s paranoia comparing Kovačević to Kafka: If *Der Process (The Trial)* is “a tragedy of one causelessly persecuted,” then *Balkanski špijun* is “a comedy of a persecutor without a cause,” wrote the critic.<sup>52</sup> At the archetypal level, Ilija’s character is an example of a shunned individual or former delinquent who seeks to redeem himself by accomplishing an extraordinary endeavor, and in so doing might regain his status within the community that expelled him.<sup>53</sup>

In the list of *dramatis personae*, Ilija is ironically described as “the owner of the house, the garden, his wife, and the idea of a free man and a free country.”<sup>54</sup>

46 Cf. Simović 2002: VII; Jakšić Provčič 2012: 51–52; Pantić 2013: 233.

47 Cf. Zelinsky 2012: 52–53.

48 Cf. Milutinović 2010: 95–96.

49 Ibid.: 99.

50 Ibid.: 97.

51 Cf. ibid.: 99–105.

52 As cited in Jakšić Provčič 2012: 72.

53 Cf. Kuzmić 2014: 85.

54 „Газда куће, окућнице, жене и идеје о слободном човеку и слободној земљи“ – Kovačević 2002: 72.

The fact that Ilija is called “the owner of his wife” is only partly related to the patriarchal order that prevails within the family: Ilija is the owner of Danica because she is trapped in the spiral of his paranoia. The statement that he is “the owner of the idea of a free man and a free country” turns out to be an ironic juxtaposition: Ilija is being governed by an ideology that is only nominally based on freedom. In fact, he is a marionette, an object—in the Foucauldian sense—of the ideology.

The character of an ideological paranoiac could be paradigmatically compared with a classical tragic hero. The predestined, unchangeable fate of the tragic hero, upon which he cannot have any influence no matter what decision he makes or what action he undertakes, and which inevitably leads him to catastrophe and death, appears at the structural level to be identical with the obsession of a paranoid with a particular idea or ideology and his inability to escape the spiral of paranoia in which he is encapsulated. One could, therefore, argue that Ilija Čvorović, when it comes to the inherent structure of his character, represents a tragic hero placed in the structural context and poetical mechanisms of comedy. In this respect, Petar Marjanović’s thesis is very intriguing as he points out that even if every trace of Ilija’s Stalinist complex would be removed from the play, the plot would still function in the same way.<sup>55</sup>

In the closing interrogation scene, Kovačević’s tragicomical character ends up in a kind of self-analysis and he tries to deal with the principal reasons for his own paranoia. The subtenant gives him the friendly advice that he should immediately undergo psychiatric treatment. Ilija begins this by trying to defend and justify himself, more or less directly speaking about the psychological, but at the same time the socio-historical and ideological causes which made him suitable to fall into such paranoia. These include his deep, innate hatred and frustration with the fact of being born in the inferior, exploited social class, his resentment of the fact that he had become, without being asked to, the cannon fodder of the vast totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century.

### **The *Other* New Class**

“It has been said in jest that the Communist leaders created a Communist society—for themselves. In fact, they do identify themselves with society and its aspi-

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55 As cited in Kuzmić 2014: 85–86. The thesis, which indirectly proved to be correct, was carried out by T. Mandić Rigonat in the aforementioned adaptation of the play in 2018.

rations. Absolute despotism equates itself with the belief in absolute human happiness, though it is an all-inclusive and universal tyranny.” This is how Đilas describes the position of the *new class* in Communist countries.<sup>56</sup> He uses this notion with respect to the political bureaucracy of the Communist party, which transforms into the ruling oligarchy in those allegedly classless countries. The power itself becomes the aim for the Communist political leaders, instead of being the means through which to develop a classless society. Đilas rejects the critical definition of real socialism as a “total state capitalism,” arguing that it is not the state who owns and runs the public property, but it is the new class. In that sense, he sees the reality of communism at that point (the end of the 1950s) as a peculiar hybrid form that absorbs various “feudal, capitalist, and even slave-owning” elements.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to Đilas’s analysis, Kovačević’s play reveals the deep ideological contradictions that reside in the foundations of socialist Yugoslavia, e.g., the sharp ideological divisions that were only temporarily vanquished by the Communists on the surface of the society. These controversial events include the liberation of the country in 1945 and Tito’s break with Stalin in 1948, with the subsequent persecutions of Stalin’s followers. The most notable labor camp of this time, which later took on great symbolical meaning within the anti-communist narratives, was Goli otok, as mentioned previously. Nicole Münnich notes, for example, that after Tito’s death, at the beginning of 1980s, the taboo of Goli otok was primarily and decisively broken in literature. This phenomenon was initially part of liberalizing tendencies, but by the end of the decade, in the wake of emerging nationalism, the topic lost its subversive role.<sup>58</sup>

After the Second World War Ilija was—like his brother Đura—a keen and enthusiastic Stalinist, which was in accordance with the newly established official state ideology at that time. However, since they did not change their political beliefs and inclinations after Yugoslav official state policy underwent a radical turnaround in 1948, they ended up spending a couple of years in prison. Ilija tells the subtenant the following about his relation to Stalinism:

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56 Djilas 1962: 131.

57 Ibid.: 172.

58 The narrative of Goli otok was hardly suitable for national(istic) attribution, unlike, for example, Jasenovac, a concentration camp for Serbs, Jews and Roma led by the Ustashe in the fascist Independent State of Croatia, or Bleiburg, where members of the Ustashe movement were massacred shortly after the end of the Second World War; see Münnich 2006: 217–18.

“You know for sure, your people told you when you moved in with me, that I had served two years in prison. You know that. I don’t know if they told you about Đura, probably they did, he was also there for over three years... . Yes, I loved him the way someone loves God, or, say, children, mother... Stalin was everything for me. He is credited with all sorts of things today: some things are true and some things are not. He is being charged with crimes he did not commit. Some of that he did. That is well-known and I admit it. However, then, at that time, I thought he was sinless. I was young, stupid, angry, I would take a gun and go fighting. I would die thinking I was dying for a great, universal justice. I needed sobriety, and that was a good one, to stop, think a bit, and tell myself: who imprisoned you, wished you well, not to haste and to suffer. And today I am grateful to them.”<sup>59</sup>

After spending years in prison, Ilija is terrified of any state institution and scared to death of just the idea of having anything to do with state authorities. This constant fear is the actual birthplace of his paranoia. Therefore, he impulsively, from pure survival instinct—one could argue even consciously and strategically—unquestioningly appropriates the official ideological point of view and he unconditionally subjugates himself to the ruling political discourse. “Ground in the wheels of ideology, ‘re-educated’ and tamed into a subject,”<sup>60</sup> Ilija finally, so one could ironically remark, became a good and exemplary citizen in the Communist system.

The key question of Kovačević’s political satire is the following: How could it happen that an apparently normal person starts to behave like Ilija Čvorović? In which ideological system is that possible? Ilija and his brother are represented as both perpetrators and victims of that ideological system. However, the question of whether the system has created Ilija Čvorović or Ilija Čvorović, being an

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59 „Вама је сигурно познато, то су вам ваши рекли, када сте се усељавали код мене, да сам одлежô две године затвора. То знате. Не знам да ли су помињали и Ђуру, вероватно јесу, и он је био преко три године... . Јесте, волео сам га кô што неко воли Бога, или, рецимо, децу, мајку... Стаљин је за мене био све и свја. Њему данас приписују свашта: и што је истина и што није. Оптужују га за злочине које није починио. Нешто јесте. То се зна и ја то признајем. Међутим, онда, у оно време, мислио сам да је безгрешан. Био сам млад, глуп, љут, узô би’ пушку и борио би’ се. Погинô би’, мислећи да гинем за велику, светску правду. Требало ми је отрежњење, и то добро отрежњење, да станем, размислим, и да себи кажем: ко те је затворио желео ти је добро, да не срљаш и не страдаш. И данас сам им захвалан.“ – Kovačević 2002: 138.

60 Pantić 2013: 227.

avid Communist and Stalinist, helped to create the system remains open. In other words, to what extent does Ilija bear responsibility for the emergence of such a system to which he himself falls victim in the end? Towards the end of the interrogation scene he admits to the subtenant: “My whole life I have been on the verge of killing someone, armed with many rights, including nobody having the right to blame me. Don’t make me let you pay for all those who have insulted, humiliated and trampled on me.”<sup>61</sup>

In his intriguing allegorical interpretation, Nikola Janković sees Stalinism (Ilija) and Liberalism (the subtenant) as the play’s two dominant ideologies. Pushed to the periphery or even outright demonized and persecuted during Titoism, these ideologies started to show up again on society’s surface with the economic crisis and the changes underway after Tito’s death. In this respect, at the time of its premiere at the beginning of the 1980s, *Balkanski špijun* “confronted the then-actual ideology of liberalism with the seemingly anachronistic ideology of Stalinism.”<sup>62</sup> According to Janković’s interpretation, Ilija is a former, subjugated enemy of the system, and the subtenant is the current, approaching one (though in a broader historical respect he would actually be an old, originally defeated enemy). Just as Ilija got a “second chance” after being “re-educated” on Goli otok, now, in the course of his own “re-educating” of the subtenant, he offers him a “second chance.”<sup>63</sup>

The tragic feature of Ilija’s character lies in the fact that those who oppressed and exploited him (before the Second World War) and who sent him to jail (after the war) even though he was innocent—at least in a structural sense—did not disappear when one political and social system (monarchy, capitalism) was replaced by another (Stalinism, followed by Yugoslav socialism). Deceived and manipulated by the ideological fog of the new system, Ilija is unable to comprehend that his oppressors actually belong not only to the ruling class, but also to the old capitalist system. In his concluding monologue, Ilija fathoms—albeit unconsciously—the imminent contradictions of Yugoslav Socialism, primarily the opportunism of the Yugoslav political elite. In the social reality of the country, the emancipation narrative of the working-class gradually became an empty slogan, and the workers’ self-management project turned out to be practically dys-

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61 „Ja sam ceo život bio na ivici da nekog ubijem, sa puno prava, čak da mi niko ne zameri. Nemojte vi da mi platite za sve koji su me vređali, ponižavali i gazili.“ – Kovačević 2002: 140.

62 Janković 2011: 56.

63 Cf. *ibid.*: 68.



functional and a sort of rhetorical mask used by the ruling *new class* to retain its own positions and privileges. As Dilas points out:

Despite oppression, despotism, unconcealed confiscations, and privileges of the ruling echelons, some of the people – and especially the Communists – retain the illusions contained in their slogans. Although the Communist revolution may start with the most idealistic concepts, calling for wonderful heroism and gigantic effort, it sows the greatest and the most permanent illusions.<sup>64</sup>

One could argue that Ilija's character stands for a convinced, idealistic Communist, while the Yugoslav Communist elite gave up its declared ideological principles. His ardent belief in the ideal of a Communist society—contrasted against the pragmatism and opportunism of the social setting in which he is living—is the crucial feature of both the comic and tragic sides of his character.

### **Conclusion: Towards the Political, in the 1980s and Beyond**

The comical subversion of Communist ideology, as well as the sociopolitical satire of the practical failures of Yugoslav Socialism are the main topics in several other plays by Dušan Kovačević, particularly in those written during the turbulent period starting from the end of the 1980s until the mid-1990s, such as *Klaustrofobična komedija* (*Claustrophobic Comedy*, 1987), *Profesionalac* (*The Professional*, 1989), *Urnebesna tragedija* (*The Tragic Burlesque*, 1990) and *Lari Tompson, tragedija jedne mladosti* (*Larry Thompson, the Tragedy of a Youth*, 1996). Zoran Milutinović labels these four plays as Kovačević's series of "sociopolitical and satirical plays" and points out that a concrete political topic, as well as specific and local political context lie in the very core of each of those works.<sup>65</sup>

The alleged spy conspiracy in *Balkanski špijun* is the result of Ilija's ideologically induced paranoia, and with the aim of opposing and stopping it, he actually starts to behave and to act as a professional detective. In the background of the plot, Kovačević is satirically targeting the corruption and malfunctioning bureaucracy; his targets are the double moral standards of the country's political elites, but also the social impact of the severe economic crisis in the early 1980s in Yugoslavia. This is the reason why some other critics, unlike Zoran Milutinović

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64 Djilas 1962: 30.

65 Cf. Milutinović 2010: 7.

vić, argued that, for instance, *Balkanski špijun* and *Profesionalac* are the two paradigmatic plays for Kovačević's political and satirical works.<sup>66</sup>

To label *Balkanski špijun* as a political satire might not in itself be incorrect, but the crucial question is then: What is the exact target of the author's satirical intention? If it is a general critical subversion of Yugoslav Socialism, as an ideological and sociopolitical system, then one must conclude that Kovačević's satire, at the time of its publication in the early 1980s, was rather indistinct and simplifying. This satirical image of Communism, allegorically derived from Ilija's fictional biography, would correspond to a historical moment in the years following Tito's break with Stalin. In this sense, *Balkanski špijun* is pendant of *The New Class*: Kovačević's picture of communism is fundamentally in line with the analysis given by Đilas, or more precisely, it could be seen as its artistic transposition. The play, however, centers on the opposite pole of the social system, on the *other new class*, not on the one of the exploiters in communism (*red bourgeoisie*), but on the one of the exploited (*red petite bourgeoisie*). Within the analysis of Milovan Đilas, the historical praxis of communism—as of the mid-1950s—is principally seen as a development “from a revolutionary dictatorship to a reactionary despotism.”<sup>67</sup> One could argue that Kovačević, writing his play at the beginning of the 1980s, generally *essentializes* communism as an ideological and socio-historical system, without making any practical or crucial difference between Stalinism and Titoism. This is in fact similar to Đilas' perspective, who also—although he details some differences between Yugoslavia and the other countries of the Eastern Bloc—ultimately generalizes his *diagnosis* for all socialist and communist systems of the time. These views are perceived of—to summarize—as examples of basically one system that has an inherent structural failure that cannot be fixed and which inevitably led to its paradoxes, misfortunes and, ultimately, to its crimes.

But if Đilas's critique corresponded with the actual moment of its publication and offered an accurate and lucid diagnosis of contemporary communism, Kovačević's critique of Yugoslav socialism would prove to be anachronistic and bypasses the complexity of this system, as if nothing had happened and changed in the social and ideological respect in Yugoslavia between the late 1940s and early 1980s. This is already evident in the reception of the two works, or rather in the status of their authors: Đilas's book was banned and he ended up in prison for seven years, while Kovačević's play was premiered in one of the most renowned Belgrade theaters, and shortly afterwards, its film adaptation was widely popular

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66 Cf. Pantić 2013: 226–27.

67 Đilas 1962: 90–91.

and won several awards at prestigious Yugoslav festivals. One could argue that some clichés and schematization of the characters were necessary to create the comic effects, but on the other hand, they set some limits and simplifications when it came to the representation, or better to say, to the narrative deconstruction of the contemporary political and social system in the play, as well as in the movie.

In this respect, the play is much more relevant and significant as a socio-psychological drama study of a character than it is as a socio-political satire. Such an interpretation would (incidentally) also be in line with the author's openly declared intention. In an interview given in 2003, Kovačević specifically stated that his goal in the play was not to make "a political poster, but to analyze paranoia and the mentality of the people who, out of fear, become police collaborators."<sup>68</sup> The character of Ilija Čvorović is typical, or even symptomatic, for one social milieu and for one ideological totalitarianism (Stalinism), but is based on his fictional life trajectory, whereas the social system of Yugoslav socialism cannot be appropriately satirically dissected. The lack of deeper characterization and the dramaturgical neglect of Sonja and the subtenant further substantiate such argumentation. As mentioned previously, the main function of those persons in the play is to comically contrast Ilija's character. However, a more complete and complex satirical allegory would have to also actively include the fictional representatives of such social positions.

The later historical development, which brought about the breakup of socialist Yugoslavia and the nationalist-inspired wars, opens up new interpretive perspectives into *Balkanski špijun*. Situating the play within the canon of the so-called *Goli otok*-literature is also not unproblematic; if this view is adopted, then it could find its place only in the broader corpus of that canon, as Nicole Münich defines it. This is simply because there is no detailed treatment of that historical complex in the play, it is not even directly named in the text. One possible interpretation could be—in fact at the metadramatic level—to read the biography of Ilija Čvorović as an allegory of the very emergence of *Goli otok*-literature itself in the early 1980s. The structure is clear: suppressed trauma, external circumstances allow it at some point to ascend to the surface, which is then followed by the search for its own articulation, i.e., for the appropriate narrative or literary form (the conspiracy theory in the play). Such an allegorical reading from the current perspective, following the collapse of Socialism and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, must also encompass the later, post-communist legacy of anti-communism: the fact that the narratives about the victims of communism

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68 Cit. after Janković 2011: 41.

were instrumentalized in inciting ethnic hatred and in justifying new, nationalist-inspired crimes and genocide.

As an anti-communist satire, *Balkanski špijun* has lost its political subversiveness today. This can be seen most clearly in the aforementioned current setting of the play in the National Theater in Belgrade, in which the causes of Ilija's paranoia no longer have anything to do with either Stalinism or with Titoism but lie in the post-Yugoslav transitional *totalitarianism of social hopelessness*. As a tragicomical character study, the indisputable artistic mastery and actuality of *Balkanski špijun* can be found in the conveying of one historically specific psycho-pathology—in a somewhat Kafkaesque manner—not only at the universally existential, but also at the archetypal and metaphysical levels.

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## Abstract

This chapter focuses on the play *Balkanski špijun* (*The Balkan Spy*, 1982) by Serbian author Dušan Kovačević. The play's principal subject concerns a grotesque tragicomedy with ideologically induced paranoia in Socialist Yugoslavia. The play's main character is examined based on the typological and generic distinction between the figure of an amateur and a professional detective/spy, and in his relation to similar characters in the drama tradition of Eastern Europe (Gogol, Nušić). Paranoia, as a political and ideological phenomenon, is analyzed firstly in general theoretical terms and then within the specific socio-historical contexts of (Eastern European) Communism and Yugoslav Socialism. The relation of the play with the corpus of the so-called literature of *Goli otok* in Yugoslavia is also discussed. Concluding remarks concern the play's political significance and implications draw upon the interrelations between its comical, tragical and satirical features.



# Books and Leeches: Conspiracy Theory in Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Literatures

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*Davor Beganović*

## Keywords

Danilo Kiš; David Albahari; fiction and conspiracy theories; paranoia; desintegration of Yugoslavia

## Conspiracy and Crisis

When Reinhart Koselleck published his influential study *Kritik und Krise (Critique and Crisis)* in 1959, it was immediately clear that it would open a new chapter in Western European historiography. The complex argumentation developed in the book is difficult to summarize without weakening its validity and expressiveness. Still, there are some moments in it that could be stressed and taken out of its overarching context in order to approach general questions concerning societal conditions in nineteenth-century Europe. Koselleck writes: “European history has broadened; it has become world history and will run its course as that, having allowed the whole world to drift into a state of permanent crisis.”<sup>1</sup> He finds the origin of that crisis situation in the period of transition from absolutism to Enlightenment. The enlighteners are those who rose up against the royal power and caused a crisis by doing so. According to Koselleck, this initial situation is conditioned by the European Enlightenment’s utopian belief in the unity of the world. While absolutism can be understood as one, almost necessary, reaction to the atrocities of civil war, the political theory of the Enlightenment was

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1 Koselleck 1988: 5. “Die europäische Geschichte hat sich zur Weltgeschichte ausgeweitet und vollendet sich in ihr, indem sie die ganze Welt in den Zustand einer permanenten Krise hat geraten lassen” – Koselleck 1973: 1.

formed as a reaction to the aberrations of that same sort of absolutism itself. The political theory of the Enlightenment is particularly directed at reducing state power to single persons. This is a situation in which the crisis of society seems to be inevitable. According to Koselleck, the enlighteners understood the crisis in this manner and criticized it in their publications. His main thesis is as follows:

[T]hat the critical process of enlightenment conjured up the crisis in the same measure in which the political significance of that crisis remained hidden from it. The crisis was as much exacerbated as it was obfuscated in the philosophy of history. Never politically grasped, it remained concealed in historico-political images of the future which caused the day's events to pale—events that became so much less inhibited in heading for an unexpected decision.<sup>2</sup>

Koselleck's thesis was already understood as an expression of cultural criticism.<sup>3</sup> However, one of the book's dimensions went unnoticed for quite a long time. It was Dieter Groh who first drew attention to the fact that Koselleck's book can be read using a different code. He stresses:

*Critique and Crisis* is a highly sublime form of conspiracy theory. The book propagates, in seductive formulations, the conviction that the critique by enlightenment philosophers, the process that they strove for in the name of reason, and in secret circles against the absolutist princely state and their *arcana imperii* led causally to the crisis of the *Ancien Régime* and aggravated it further. Eventually, the French Revolution, with which the pathogenesis of the bourgeois world begins to be universal, is itself a consequence of the crisis initiated through the critique. Considering the findings of political and social history, this derivation, based on historico-philosophical premises of Carl Schmitt, seems to be exaggerated.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Koselleck 1988: 9. “[D]er kritische Prozess der Aufklärung hat die Krise im gleichen Maße heraufbeschworen, wie ihr der politische Sinn dieser Krise verdeckt bleibt. Die Krise wird so sehr verschärft, wie sie geschichtspolitisch verdunkelt wird; sie wird nie politisch erfaßt, sondern bleibt verborgen in geschichtspolitischen Zukunftsbildern, vor denen das Tagesgeschehen verblaßt: umso ungehemmter konnte dieses auf eine unerwartete Entscheidung zusteuern” – Koselleck 1973: 5–6.

3 Cf. Müller 2003.

4 “*Kritik und Krise* [ist] eine höchst sublime Form von Konspirationstheorie ... Das Buch propagiert nämlich in bestechenden Formulierungen die Überzeugung, die Kritik von Aufklärungsphilosophen, der Prozeß, den sie im Namen der Vernunft und im geheimen Zirkel gegen den absolutistischen Fürstenstaat und dessen *arcana imperii*



The crisis caused by the critique is a part, moreover a central component, of the conspiracy that the enlighteners forged against the absolutist state. That is the core of Groh's interpretation. In this sense, he incorporates the element of crisis in the intellectual activity of criticizing and transfers the achievements of philosophers to an overarching conspiracy which is, in a concrete historical event, realized as an activity, an occupation almost, by conspirators who are actually the revolutionaries.

Yet there are some more moments connecting the crisis with conspiracy that should be taken into account. "Times of crisis are times of conspiracy,"<sup>5</sup> emphasizes Wolfgang Wippermann in his pertinent book *Agenten des Bösen (The Agents of Evil)*. Unlike Koselleck, he does not say that the conspiracy theories are indeed the cause of the times of crisis. To the contrary, he thinks, and this is a reversal much more appropriate for our epoch, that the conspiracy theories can serve as an explanation for precarious conditions we are witnessing nowadays because of the already existent crisis. Wippermann states:

'Conspiracy theories' or 'conspiracy myths' always have an ideological character. Therefore they can be appropriately denoted as 'conspiracy ideologies'. The origin of every conspiratorial ideological thought is the belief that the absolute evil—the devil—is responsible for every malady in the world. But the devil—the personified, incarnated evil—cannot do all of the devils work on his own. He needs accomplices: the agents of evil.<sup>6</sup>

Koselleck writes accordingly of one mild conspiracy that is, in the strong sense of the word, not a conspiracy at all. Conversely, Wippermann postulates unambi-

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angestrenzt haben, hätte die Krise des Ancien Régime ursächlich herbeigeführt und dann weiter verschärft. Letztendlich sei auch die Französische Revolution, mit der die „Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt universal zu werden beginne, Folge der durch die Kritik initiierten Krise. Angesichts des politik- und sozialgeschichtlichen Befundes erscheint eine solche, auf geschichtsphilosophischen Prämissen Carl Schmitts basierende Ableitung jedoch übertrieben" – Groh 1992: 278.

5 "Krisenzeiten sind Verschwörungszeiten" – Wippermann 2017: 160.

6 "'Verschwörungstheorien oder 'Verschwörungsmythen' haben immer einen ideologischen Charakter und sind daher treffender als 'Verschwörungsideologien' zu bezeichnen. Ausgangspunkt allen verschwörungsideologischen Denkens ist der Glaube, dass für jegliches Übel in der Welt der Böse schlechthin – der Teufel – verantwortlich ist. Doch kann der Teufel – das personifizierte, das leibhaftige Böse – nicht alles Teufelswerk allein tun. Er braucht Helfershelfer: die Agenten des Bösen" – Wippermann 2007: 7–8.

guous theses about cancerous conspiracy theories that, like a real plague, are infected with examples drawn from different parts of the world. Can we find a position that is able to unite the two positions or makes them at least compatible? I think that it is possible. To prove this, I will take an example from Yugoslavia and Yugoslav literatures. Moreover, I will use two different periods in the country's historical and political development, from the two respective lands that were created in its aftermath. In a sense, Yugoslavia is a litmus test to show how the conspiracy theory could be entangled in a web of lies and how the conspiratorial arrangements can be revealed as, not necessarily world-shaping, but still existent and thoroughly effective.

If one follows the history of Yugoslav disintegration, it is almost immediately obvious that its history is comprised of a sequence of narratives representing a continuous line of cumulating political and economic crises. They exploded in an apocalypse that had a devastating effect, for those involved at least, followed by a discourse of criticism that was to be found in every spectrum of political theory, from nationalism to leftist liberalism. This history offers an open field for conspiracy theories that deliver an alleged explanation, albeit the most prominent one, for catastrophic occurrences. The most pronounced conspiracy was the one purportedly created by the Vatican and Freemasons against Serbia. It is not necessary to emphasize that this theory was used as a pretext for starting the war against Croatia. But this theory was only one, if most prominent, of many that were brought into circulation during the late eighties to late nineties of the last century. Even after the official end of hostilities, conspiracy theories could be observed all over former Yugoslavia. Literature reacted to this development in society with unique vehemence.<sup>7</sup> In the following sections, I will concentrate on two texts, written at different times, but which are capable of delivering a plausible clarification for the proliferation of conspiracy theories in Yugoslavia and states that emerged in the wake thereof.

The first text that I will deal with here is the story “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” (“The Book of Kings and Fools”) from the collection *Enciklopedija mrtvih* (*Encyclopaedia of the Dead*, 1983) by Danilo Kiš. In a broader context it could be considered to have anticipated the attempts at conspiracy theories mentioned previously in Yugoslavia from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Kiš takes the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as his starting point. In so doing, he does not refrain from transforming it into a text with universal meaning. He uses them as a universal metaphor, as an original text, of an all-encom-

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7 On the role of literature in disintegration (and integration too) of the Yugoslav society see Wachtel 1998.

passing conspiracy theory. At the same time, it serves as a projection surface for the broadening of his specific literary practice and correlates with the role of the document in literary text. Here it is important to note that Kiš recognizes the fact that conspiracy theories are inevitably connected with production of scientific discourse which is eventually revealed as a pseudo-scientific discourse. “The fact that the conspiracy theories often use a considerable inductive safeguarding suggests the suspicion that for them it is important to retain at least the outer semblance of scientificity.”<sup>8</sup> Kiš’s literary representation of conspiracy theory applies a pseudo-scientific method (documents as a paradigm of historicity) to call into question this very method, or to show how its abuse can lead to pure falsification and deep falsehood.

The second text that I will deal with in this essay was written by David Albahari, a representative of the new generation of Serbian-Jewish authors. Unlike Kiš, who died in 1989, Albahari was personally affected by the catastrophe of the disintegration to a large extent. Therefore, he draws on an alternative literary procedure. His novel *Pijavice (The Leeches)* written in 2006 is set in the Zemun district of Belgrade. From there, the allegedly Jewish conspiracy spreads around the whole world. Its roots are to be sought in the deeper layers of history, in Ottoman Hapsburg times specifically. Back then, the local Jews gained their wealth in trading leeches from the Danube. This story examines the twentieth century to determine if there is any possibility of saving the world from the mischief that threatens to destroy it. The good conspirators are, however, confronted by the evil that wants to annihilate the fine social fabric of the world and throw it off course. Consequently, Albahari multiplies the possibilities of the expansion of conspiracy theories and intensifies the literary analysis of their devastating results, but at the same time asks if there is something positive we can gain from their impact. In short: Is there a benign conspiracy, a conspiracy that could lead to something that is ultimately good?

Examples from these two texts will help me to show how conspiracy theories played a role in the process of Yugoslavia’s destruction and became extremely powerful as well how they managed to substitute the foundation of society, grounded on the socialist belief in the strength of science and in its ability to explain everything, with a new foundation made of prejudices and, last but not least, based on pseudo-scientific conspiracy theories.

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8 “Die Tatsache, dass Verschwörungstheorien oft mit einer umfangreichen induktiven Absicherung aufwarten, legt den Verdacht nahe, dass ihnen wenigstens der äußere Anschein der Wissenschaftlichkeit wichtig ist” – Hepfer 2015: 69.

## Conspiracy Disguised as a Book

As I have mentioned previously, the book *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the urtext of the modern conspiracy theories, provides the foil for Kiš's story that tries to reveal the core of the way of thinking in the mode of conspiracy. The book itself has long since been exposed as a forgery, but it is still vehemently accepted and received as veritable.<sup>9</sup> Kiš denotes the book as *Zavera* (*Conspiracy*) and the title "The Book of Kings and Fools" is a periphrastic signature. Hidden behind this disguise is deep irony, probably even sarcasm, against a text that is suitable for all kinds of readers, regardless of level of education. At the same time, it indicates that no one can be safe from being fooled by this forgery. Kiš uses a strategy of shortening and omitting, which accelerates the narration and offers a summary of the genesis and dissemination of the book, in order to represent this forgery in a plausible way in literature as well. Svetlana Boym describes Kiš's literary procedure in the following way:

Kiš ... insists on the need to return to self-reflexive modernist literature and the practices of estrangement and perspectivism in order to think through ethical ways of confronting the absurdity of evil and politics of paranoia that haunted much of Eastern European writing and life.<sup>10</sup>

What Boym here denotes as "self-reflexive modernist literature" can be, in Kiš's case, understood as "postmodernism." Kiš produces the estrangement effect addressed by Boym through the application of a non-literary practice within a literary text—a strategy that can be identified with metatextuality. Kiš had previously applied it masterfully in his *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976).

To explain the conspiracy theory *par excellence*, he narrates the history of that theory in a manner that is in itself strangely distorted or, to use Boym's terminology, estranged. The estrangement emerges out of the hybrid mixture of diverse styles within the text. The parts written in a pseudoscientific style collapse because they collide with parts of the text that are marked as strongly lyrical. Those parts are displaced in their own right, put unexpectedly in brackets

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9 Numerous books revealed the fictional character of the book, found its sources and showed the ways in which it emerged from the marginal position to unbelievable prominence in the anti-Semitic circles. The most important of which are Cohn 1970 and Ben-Itto 2005.

10 Boym 1999: 99.

or in footnotes. Here is an example of the first discursive structure, the characteristic pseudo-scientific style:

We shall now try to investigate the origins of this text, glancing briefly at those who created it (endowing my insolent procedure with the prerogatives of divine anonymity), and, finally, pointing out the devils that followed from it.<sup>11</sup>

And here is the one determined by lyrical literariness: “When chance, fate, and time meet in a favourable constellation, their point of intersection shall fall on that book and, like a sunbeam, illuminate it ‘with a great light’ and save it from oblivion.”<sup>12</sup>

If we now compare these two modes of literary discourse, we will see that the first one tends to be impersonal,<sup>13</sup> while the second operates with an increased amount of rhetorical devices that are prone to the production of pure literary discourse.<sup>14</sup> The result is astonishing and harrowing. On the one hand, there is the objectivization of something that withdraws from that very objectivity. On the other hand, there is the subjectivization of something that cannot be explained in terms of subjectivity. The impact of the intention hidden behind this technique of mixing different discourses cannot be easily explained at first glance. Svetlana Boym stresses that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* would

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11 Kiš 2015: 110. “Ovim tekstom pokušaćemo da istražimo njeno poreklo, da bacimo jedan letimičan pogled na one koji su je stvorili (pridavši svom bezočnom postupku prerogative božanske anonimnosti) i, najzad, da ukažemo na pošasti koje su proistekle iz ovog gesta” – Kiš 1983: 150. The neutrality of discourse is slightly disorderly in the translation due to the introduction of the possessive pronoun “my” which is not present in the original and implementing “the devils” on the place of “pestilence” in original.

12 Kiš 2015: 130–31. “Kada se slučaj, sudbina i vreme nađu u povoljnoj konstelaciji, presek tih sila pašće na tu knjigu, osvetliće je kao sunčana zraka ,svetlošću jakom’ i izbaviti je od zaborava” – Kiš 1983: 176.

13 The best proof of impersonality is of course the use of the first person plural which is the marker of scientific objectivity. On the general role of tenses in “The Book of Kings and Fools,” their change from present to future and past, see Beganović 2007: 174–75.

14 The indications of this, even in this short passage, are numerous. For example, the inversion “svetlošću jakom” or the mixture of “chance, fate, and time” find themselves in astronomic constellations and are capable of enlightening the book and saving it “from oblivion.”

remind somebody more of a premodern than of a modern collage, written “in Borgesian fashion.” Nevertheless, “their ‘translator’/publisher Nilus is a modern author who appropriated contemporary means of technological reproduction in order to propagate a radically antimodern message.”<sup>15</sup>

Kiš’s narrative strategy is to be found exactly here. He dismantles a modern text that stages itself as premodern. The new interpretation emerges from this exposure. It clearly (and very persuasively) represents the clarified backgrounds of the cruel forgery and incredibly bold plagiarism in a new and illuminating light and does so multiple times. The story is situated at the threshold between the fictional and factual.<sup>16</sup> It maneuvers between two poles and, in so doing, unfolds the possibility of retelling the old and well-known story in an innovative way, so innovative that it can experience unknown and hitherto unforeseen hermeneutical turns. Kiš’s provocative and ironic narrator acts as if he himself does not realize whether he operates in fiction or writes about the facts only. On the one hand, he writes a scientific explanation of the conspiracy; on the other hand, it seems to him that historiography itself became unreliable and consequently unable to deliver a plausible explanation of the improbable, even fantastical events. The scientific or documentary discourse is shaken by the introduction of obviously fictional characters who appear in the enumeration of conspirators as well as parts of the story constructed in narrative mode.

From the treasury of its ‘irresponsible and occult organization’ comes funding for such adversaries of law and faith as Voltaire, Rousseau, Tolstoy, Wilson, Loubet, Clemenceau, Eduard Sam, and Lev Davidovich Bronstein. Among those who fell prey to its intrigues are Tsar Alexander II, General Selivyortsov, and Archduke Ferdinand. Its members, the executors of its will, include Machiavelli, Marx, Kerensky, B. D. Novsky and Maurice

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15 Boym 1999: 105.

16 Renate Lachmann emphasizes the importance of mixture of fact (document) and fiction in Kiš’s texts as follows: “In Kiš’s prose we are dealing not only with a more or less transparent combination of factography and fiction, but also with the complicated semantics of fabricated documents, originating from the knowledge about the factual; it has something to do with the production of an artefact” – Lachmann 2011: 107 (“Es geht bei Kiš nicht nur um eine mehr oder weniger transparente Kombination von Faktographie und Fiktion, sondern auch um eine komplizierte Semantik fingierter Dokumente, die dem Wissen ums Faktische entstammen, und es geht um die Herstellung eines Artefakts”).

Joly himself (a pseudonym, an anagram in fact, whose origins are easily decipherable in the name Maurice).<sup>17</sup>

The characters from Kiš's previous texts found their place in the present one. Eduard Sam is the father from the *Family Trilogy* and Boris Davidovič Novski is the hero of the title story in *Tomb of Boris Davidovich*. The effect is ironical in two directions. The book, *Conspiracy*, is made ridiculous; but at the same time the narrator directs his irony to the supporters of the conspiracy theory, showing them how unsubstantiated their worldview is.

Two distinctly fictional characters operating in the factographic part of the story are Mister X. and the German officer Wirth. Mister X. is a white emigrant who bought the private library of the white officer Arkadij Ipolitovič Belogorcev in Istanbul. Belogorcev himself was an agent of the Russian Secret Service. In the library he finds two books—one is without a front page and the other is the *Antikhris*t by Father Sergei Nilus. The first book is of course, *The Protocols*. Through meticulous philological analysis, caused by accident, Mister X. discovers that the book by Nilus is a forgery of the second one. Only through their parallel existence in the personal library of a stranger—that leads to simultaneous reading—can he be sure that these two books remain in ominous relation to each other. He confides this discovery in a journalist from the London *Times*. The actual conspiracy that involves the plagiarism is in that way finally revealed. The second book, the one without a front page, is the anti-Napoleonic script *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* by the Belgian Maurice Joly which was mostly destroyed by French police who hindered its smuggling into France. One copy left was subsequently used by the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service in order to construct the alleged Jewish conspiracy, the ostensible aim of which was to rule the world. Kiš conveys his overarching idea in concealed form: although it is clear that the book is a plagiarism, it is nevertheless accepted and received with enthusiasm and credulity by adepts. That is exactly the central paradox of all texts at whose core there is a conspiracy theory. The more their falsehood is revealed, the more they are taken for truth.

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17 Kiš 2015: 141. "Ta 'okultna i neodgovorna organizacija' plaća iz svojih mračnih fondova rušioce vere i zakona, na njenom e spisku vode Volter, Ruso, Tolstoj, Vilson, Lube, Klemanso, Eduard Sam, Lav Davidovič Bronštajn. Kao žrtve njenih intriga pali su car Aleksandar II, general Selivestrov, nadvojvoda Ferdinand; njeni su članovi i izvršioći njene volje Makijaveli, Marks, Kerenski. B.D. Novski, pa i sam Moris Žoli (to je lažno ime, anagram, čije je poreklo lako dešifrovati u imenu Moris)" – Kiš 1983: 193.

How is the circle of conspiracy closed in this multi-layered and extremely complex narrative? In the end, one character appears who was until then not mentioned at all. He is introduced without warning, obviously without any direct contact with previous events represented in the text. This character is the German officer Wirth. His function in the narrative economics of the story lies in the final fusion and negation of the documentary and factography. He confirms the book's double structure, its fictionality and facticity. In a sense, he makes a holy object of it, something that reaches its fulfilment in a higher mission. Wirth carries the book as an amulet:

In the middle of it all stands Captain Wirth. And in the upper left-hand pocket of his tunic is a leather-bound copy of *The Conspiracy* published by Der Hammer in 1933. He has read somewhere that the book saved the life of a young non-commissioned officer on the Russian front: a bullet fired from a sniper's rifle stuck in its pages, just above the heart. The book makes him feel safe.<sup>18</sup>

The "truth" of the conspiracy theory finds its verification in the applicability of the book, as an object *nota bene*, in the salvation of human life. In an inverted ethical position, the narrator, who is once more revealed as highly ironic, removes any doubt that the book, *The Conspiracy*, is authentic. Its authenticity is achieved through utility. Moved back from the abstract world of conspiracy, the book has arrived in reality. It becomes the symbol of survival, the saving object, in the literal as well as figurative sense. That is a sad conclusion embedded in the generally pessimistic attitude of the *Encyclopaedia of the Dead*. In the all-encompassing tragic structure of the book, "The Book of Kings and Fools" appears as the climactic moment of revelation: the power of conspiracy that uses a forged conspiracy as a *carte blanche* for its misdeed is unabated, steady, and more stable than ever. And if we realize that Kiš wrote his story in 1983, we can see that he reports about the old evil book, predicting the future of the history of the world. We are now inhabiting this future and know that his prophecy has become truth.

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18 Kiš 2015: 146. "Na sred kruga stoji kapetan Virt. U gornjem džepu vojničke bluže, na levoj strani, drži primerak *Zavere* u kožnom povezu, izdanje *Der Hammera* iz 1933. Negde je pročitao da je ta knjiga na ruskom frontu spasla mladog podoficira: metak ispaljen iz snajperske puške zaustavio se između stranica, tik iznad srca. Ta mu knjiga uliva sigurnost" – Kiš 1983: 195.



## Conspiracy in the Aftermath of Yugoslavia

David Albahari writes in another epoch. He paradoxically arrived in the bleak future that was proclaimed and expected by Kiš in the eighties, and conspiracies and conspiracy theories had become a part of everyday life. Yugoslavia has disintegrated, existing only in vague and dazzled memories. Serbia finds itself in the middle of the dark era of Milošević's government. The starting point of *The Leeches* is 8 March 1998. On that day, the narrator goes for a walk in Zemun along the Danube riverside. He witnesses a peculiar incident there: a young man slaps a young woman across the face without any visible reason. The narrator's curiosity is piqued; he follows her through the entangled lanes in the inner town. He loses sight of her during the pursuit, but resumes his stalking on the following day. While stalking her, he discovers various traces that suggest her presence. The main point of reference is one button. "The button was still there, in the exact same spot. I picked it up, then noticed a little sign under it, probably written with a felt tip pen: a triangle inscribed in a circle, and inside it, another triangle pointing the other way."<sup>19</sup> The narrator becomes obsessed with the sign. He loses control of his conduct and tries to discover the secret meaning behind it. At the beginning of the novel the suspicion is already aroused that the slap was not accidental but happened with the purpose of bringing him into play. He suspects a conspiracy behind this act but is still not sure, what it might be about. He mentions this possibility to his friend Marko. Marko plays the part of the sceptic and is therefore not suitable to offer help in the complex situation. For he thinks:

People who buy into conspiracy theories ... have a void in their head and don't know what to do with it. So they fill it with junk, and sooner or later, they become victims of sketchy plots, secret organizations with one goal only: to drag that person into something that promises to undermine the very foundation of the world.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Albahari 2012: 5–6. "Dugme je ležalo na istom mestu. Vratio sam se i podigao ga, i tada sam ispod njega ugledao mali znak, napisan verovatno flomasterom: krug u koji je bio upisan trougao sa obrnutim trouglom upisanim u njega" – Albahari 2006: 9.

20 Albahari 2012: 17–18. "Svako ko veruje u teoriju zavere ... ima praznine u glavi sa kojima ne zna šta da radi, pa ih onda popunjava zakukuljenim pričama u kojima, ranije ili kasnije, postaje žrtva nekih nejasnih okolnosti, nekih tajanstvenih organizacija koje imaju samo jedan cilj: da tu osobu uvuku u nešto što preti da podrije temelje strukture sveta" – Albahari 2006: 20.

The text's essentiality is defined from the very beginning. From this moment on, the whole structure of the novel develops as one construction that is completely directed towards the conspiracy, its potentials, and the realization of exactly those potentials. Everything else is overshadowed.

The events and signals amass that indicate that the narrator is increasingly blundering into something that eludes common sense. He receives secret messages that he has already deciphered using advertising sections of different newspapers and a manuscript entitled "The Well" (serb. "Bunar") reaches him in a clandestine way. But it is not just him. The origin of the text, and the way it was treasured, testify to its special nature. It originated in seventeenth-century Zemun and has had a special function in the Kabbalistic tradition from the beginning of time. The manuscript was found in the legacy of a Belgrade Jew whose wife donated it to the local Jewish museum. The title was given because the first word in the manuscript, which was delivered without its front page, was "bunar."<sup>21</sup> "Bunar" materializes as the second stream within the novel. In itself, it is an intricate text that ultimately is constrained in two narrative threads: The history of the Jewish community in Zemun on the one hand and "a collection of several Kabbalistic threads that kept tangling and untangling"<sup>22</sup> on the other. The origin and the significance of the manuscript are discovered only later, according to the interpretation of Margareta, the young woman who had been slapped and who explains the manuscript's importance to the narrator. An examination of the text leads the narrator to the contemporary Jewish community in the town. But this activity is not without consequences. He feels that he is being observed and is

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21 "In that case, Margareta told me she'd read me a part of the translation of the text, which, as she had mentioned, began with the words 'The Well', words that, it bears saying, no matter what changes appeared in the text, always were first. It is not entirely clear to me what they mean, but perhaps, she said, the initial mechanism is concealed in those words, a given sequence of letters or sounds that set in motion what we have described as the program that changes the text" – Albahari 2012: 232–33 ("U tom slučaju, rekla je Margareta, može da mi pročita deo prevoda teksta koji, kao što je pomenula, počinje rečju 'bunar', rečju koja, treba to naglasiti, uprkos svim promenama u tekstu uvek ostaje prva reč. Nije sasvim jasno šta to znači, ali može da se pretpostavi, rekla je, da se u toj reči na neki način sakriven inicijalni mehanizam, određeni raspored slova ili glasova koji pokreće ono što smo nazvali programom koji modifikuje sam tekst" – Albahari 2006: 216).

22 Albahari 2012: 35. "Skup nekoliko kabalističkih niti koje su se stalno zaplitale i rasplitala" – Albahari 2006: 35.

confronted with anti-Semitic watchwords written on the walls of his house. His friend Marko comments on his condition as paranoid.

Renate Lachmann has emphasized the relation between conspiracy and paranoia in a pointed way: “The complot figure as a deceptive meaning or as a meaning phantasm in literary texts, in the psychopathographic text as delirium or paranoia.”<sup>23</sup> The topic of paranoia becomes particularly interesting if one assumes that the literary text does not necessarily have to be fantastic in order to represent a paranoid plot that is actually a complot. The narrator of *The Leeches* seeks the help of another friend, the mathematician Dragan Mišković, to solve the riddle of the mathematic form that follows the appearance of the signs.<sup>24</sup> He successfully explains to him the mathematic dimension of the riddle, but answers the question of how everything is related to everything else, with a clear denial of further explanation: “It is late for a conversation about paranoia.”<sup>25</sup> The narrator has been, thereby, already designated as potentially paranoid by two textual instances.

One question still remains. Why is this Jewish alliance in Zemun so important, important enough to suppose conspiracy behind it? Even to forge one? This is precisely because of the fact written in the manuscript:

Today, it says in this chapter, somewhere in Zemun is a place where the forces of good and evil intersect, and where it is possible, if a person knows the right words, to pass from one world into the other, and even to move into the realm of endless possibilities, or into the realm of endless worlds that emanate from ten divine Sephirot, endlessly multiplying and forging anew the reality we dwell in.<sup>26</sup>

Its Kabbalistic nature becomes more than clear. Here a mixture of two possible

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23 “Als Trugsinn oder Sinnphantasma figuriert das Komplott im literarischen, als Delirium oder Paranoia im psychopathographischen Text” – Lachmann 2002: 140.

24 It will become clear, only later in the novel and very slowly, that Mišković himself is a part of the “positive” conspiracy, the one aiming to save the world.

25 Albahari 2012: 45. “Kasno je za razgovor o paranoji” – Albahari 2006: 44.

26 Albahari 2012: 53. “I danas, piše u tom odeljku, negde u Zemunu postoji mesto u kojem se ukrštaju sile dobra i zla, i gde je moguće, ukoliko čovek zna prave reči, preći iz jednog sveta u drugi, pa čak i stupiti u područje bezbrojnih svetova koji zrače iz deset božanskih sefira, neprekidno se umnožavajući i iznova stvarajući stvarnost u kojoj prebivamo” – Albahari 2006: 52.

conspiracies takes place that I can denote as “positive” and “negative.”<sup>27</sup> On the one hand there are Jews from Zemun who supplied the narrator (who himself, and this is crucial for their plans, is not a Jew) with a manuscript; on the other hand there are Serbian racists who are unhappy with his activities (especially with journalistic articles that condemn anti-Semitism in Serbia) and who threaten him physically. Are they conspirators too? Marko is once more the one who negates the possibility of a conspiracy in Serbia. He increasingly assumes the role of *advocatus diaboli* who transfers the narrator back to reality, but whose statements produce insecurity too, especially because they are often induced under the influence of drugs. The danger that the trust between them would deteriorate, that the narrator’s confidence would be diminished, that he would follow the signals indicating that Marko is probably on the other side, the side of evil, that he himself is maybe part of the complot, is hidden by Marko’s central position as an adviser and auxiliary in the narrator’s life. Again one has to pose the question whether the narrator is becoming increasingly paranoid or if his perception is in accordance with reality. Again, it is impossible to answer the question unambiguously. It remains a matter of “hesitation” (to use Todorov’s terminology).<sup>28</sup>

The narrator increasingly addresses the distance between the narrated time and the time of narration. The narrated time covers a period of approximately six years, stretching out between the events and their representation in the narrative. The narrator conveys the impression of prudence and authenticity that is able to take away suspicion from the recipient of the narrative, concerning the latter’s version of the conspiracy theory. This suspicion should be furthermore authenticated by the manner in which the narrator slowly advances to the secret of the “conspiracy.” As he peruses the clandestine text, the conspiracy becomes increasingly clear to him—which means that truth is conveyed in written form. However, the text also results from the perception of the conspiracy through Margareta’s reading out loud—which means that the conspiracy stems from one

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27 Again, one important fact must be mentioned here. If I talk about a “positive” conspiracy, I find myself on a slippery slope. Namely, the “positive” side of conspiracy is almost always related to the weak. But how can the weak be the bearers of such a powerful action as a conspiracy? “The weak and marginalized are rarely seen as able to pull off a successful conspiracy. If they are, it is because they are assumed to have much more power than they actually have” – Uscinski 2018: 235.

28 As is well-known, Tzvetan Todorov (1975) defined fantastic literature as a moment of hesitation between the marvellous and uncanny that can be determined by the reader as well as the narrator or characters. For a potential reading of the “Book of Fools and Kings” as a fantastic text, see Beganović 2007: 173.

person transmitting it orally. Consequently, a mixture of media is produced that retains the conspiracy. The obvious result is a hybrid confrontation with a reality that additionally complicates, but also emphasizes and amplifies, the interpretation of the narrator's possible paranoia. Margareta's explanations deviate slightly from the manuscript, its archaic structure, and move in the direction of the present time. The endangered Jewish community must find a savior, the precise one that was described by the anonymous author of "The Well." Therefore, the slap was meant to serve as bait<sup>29</sup> that should have led the narrator to the corresponding person. This person, the savior, is the narrator himself. His non-Jewish status helps to prepare him as an ideal candidate for this responsible role.

But, as I have stated previously, we can now see that here is the clue to the entire novel. Parallel with this "positive"<sup>30</sup> conspiracy, which aims to save the Jewish people, the "negative" conspiracy proceeds in Serbia, led by local fascists who aim for the eradication, or at least expulsion, of those same people. According to the expectations founded on symbols within the text, the negative part wins the day and the pessimistic interpretation of history prevails once more.

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29 *Mamac (Bait, 1996)* is the name of an important autobiographic novel by Albahari in which he describes the destiny of his family during and after WWII. *Bait* is often a strong symbolic lure that involves an attraction to some object, person or event which is then used to manipulate the victim of the bait and lead him/her in the desired direction.

30 The narrator summarizes one more time here: "Finding an enemy in such places is a favourite pastime, relished in equal measure by ordinary people, the political elite, intellectuals and artists. There is nothing better than a well laid-out conspiracy, for everyone except those singled out as the conspirators, whose repeated denials are seen as proof of the very opposite intentions. [The more you defend yourself, the more you prove that something is out of order, why should you defend yourself so frantically if you were not guilty. – *This sentence is left out in the translation; the translation here is mine, D. B.*] Of course it's one thing to practice this as a theoretical discourse and another to be part of it at the crossroads of converging hatreds" – Albahari 2012: 264 ("Nalaženje neprijatelja je u takvim okruženjima najomiljenija zabava, kojoj se s podjednakom strašću prepuštaju običan svet, politička elita, intelektualci i umetnici. Ništa nije lepše od dobro pripremljene zavere o postojanju zavere, izuzev za one koji su izdvojeni kao nosioci navodne zavere, i u čijim se poricanjima pronalaze dokazi suprotnih namera. Što više se braniš, time u većoj meri dokazuješ da nešto ipak nije u redu, jer zašto bi se toliko grčevito branio ako nisi kriv. Naravno, jedno je znati to kao teorijski diskurs, a drugo je biti deo praktične razrade i naći se na vetrometini mržnje" – Albahari 2006: 242–43).

The narrator is forced to flee, first in the underground then in exile. The newspaper for which he worked, and where he supported minority rights, was attacked and its offices destroyed. His Jewish friends went underground. Some of them were killed. The conspirators who fought against the real conspiracy, as well as the narrator who was promoted from journalist to the book's author, leave the country. Nothing else remains for him but to write his story from Canadian exile and to convince his readers that he was not paranoid and that he did not become paranoid. But before he departs, he must accept still one more disappointment: towards the end of the novel, Marko disappears in a mysterious way. The narrator does not want to believe in his departure and makes a call to his apartment. He sees lights and hears the voices there. The local fascists threaten him again and after this scene he goes to the studio of one of the conspirators, a painter by the name of Jaša Alkalaj, only to find that he has been murdered. Two hooded men leave the rooms. One last time the narrator goes to Marko's apartment:

I could hear footsteps and laughter. Marko opened the door and squinted, as if trying to make me go away. Behind me, on the coat rack, hung a black hooded sweatshirt. From inside the apartment a man's voice asked who was there. No one, said Marko, and opened his eyes wide. We stared at each other for a few moments, then he slammed the door with all his might. Crumbs of plaster sprayed the floor, the light in the hallway went out, I sprinted down the stairs in the dark and didn't stop until I was back at my apartment.<sup>31</sup>

It is obvious that Marko was either one of the killers or that the killers are in his apartment. Marko's treason is the pivotal point of the text; there is no longer anything to be narrated, but there is nothing to be learned either. The only exit for the narrator is exile in Canada. From there he writes his book about the conspiracies.

The crisis that haunted Yugoslavia, from the historical point of view, and since the beginning of the 1980s, climaxed in the bloody wars of the 1990s. That crisis produced a multitude of conspiracy theories that found their way into

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31 Albahari 2012: 307–08. “Čuli su se koraci i smeh, a onda je Marko otvorio vrata i, ugledavši me, zažmurio, kao da bi to učinilo da nestanem. Iza njega, na čiviluku, visio je crni duks sa kapuljačom. Iz unutrašnjosti stana muški glas je pitao ko je došao. Ni-ko, rekao je Marko i polako raširio kapke. Gledali smo se još nekoliko trenutaka, potom je on svom snagom zalupio vrata. Mrvice maltera pale su na pod, svetlo u hodniku se ugasilo, u mraku sam strčao niz stepenice, i nisam stao sve do moje kuće” – Albahari 2006: 283.

literature as well. Conspiracy theories, according to Fredric Jameson, possess a collective character. It is necessary to examine them “to test the incommensurability between an individual witness—the individual character of a still anthropomorphic narrative—and the collective conspiracy which must somehow be exposed or revealed through these individual efforts.”<sup>32</sup> In the two texts that I explored, the discrepancy between the individual effort to overcome thinking in terms of conspiracy theories or to reveal them in their falsehood, and the collective unwillingness to accept these endeavors, cannot be overstated. Yugoslav literature triumphs in the representation of conspiracy theories and their disastrous consequences. However, this is a rather sad success, since literature cannot do anything to prevent these consequences. In the beginning, there was a long-lasting political and economic crisis. It was followed by a strong critique of the all-encompassing situation. The people who brought it up came from diverse societal strata. In the end, the nationalists prevailed and brought about the demise of society. At least some signals indicate that there was a real conspiracy behind their actions and deeds. Still it would be too simple to say that conspiracies destroyed Yugoslavia.<sup>33</sup> There was enough potential within it to resist the acts of destruction. Conspiracy, or some variation thereof, was just one of them. The “task” of literature was to describe this. And it accomplished that task in an effective, even brilliant way.

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32 Jameson 1992: 10.

33 For more on these matters see Jović 2009: 36–37.

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## Abstract

Following Koselleck’s thesis that every critique is at the same time in crisis, in this chapter I try to prove the ways in which these concepts correspond with the assumption that the Enlightenment itself aimed at the production of crisis. Koselleck’s thesis was already taken up by Groh who concludes that the philosophers of the Enlightenment were themselves apologists of conspiracy theories. The historical conclusion could be that times of crisis are times of conspiracies. I take examples from two texts from Serbian literature—the story “The Book of Kings and Fools” by Danilo Kiš and the novel *The Leeches* by David Albahari—to show that the time of crisis in Yugoslavia was ripe with conspiracies. These two



texts help to show how conspiracy theories became extremely powerful in the process of the destruction of Yugoslavia and how they managed to substitute the foundation of society, which had been grounded on the socialist belief in the strength of science's ability to explain everything, with a new belief in prejudices based on pseudo-scientific conspiracy theories.



## Contributors

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**Davor Beganović** is lecturer in the Slavic Department of Tübingen University and adjunct lecturer in the Slavic Department of Zurich University and the Slavic Department of Constance University. Research interests: theory of literature, especially narratology, studies in cultural memory; contemporary South-Slavic literatures. He is the author of *Pamćenje traume. Apokaliptička proza Danila Kiša* (Sarajevo, Zagreb 2007); *Poetika melankolije. Na tragovima suvremene bosansko-hercegovačke književnosti* (Sarajevo 2009); *Protiv kanona. Mlada crnogorska proza i okamenjeni spavač* (Ulcinj 2010). He has co-edited *Krieg sichten. Zur medialen Darstellung der Kriege in Jugoslawien* (München 2007), *Unutar-nji prijevod. Antologija* (Zagreb, Podgorica 2011) and *Cultures of Memory in South-Eastern Europe. Spotlights and perspectives* (Bielefeld 2020).

**Eva Binder** is a senior researcher at the Department of Slavonic Studies, Innsbruck University. Her research interests include contemporary Russian and twentieth-century Soviet culture, film and media. Recent publications: *Opfernarrative in transnationalen Kontexten* (ed. with C. Diem, M. Finkelstein et al., De Gruyter, forthcoming 2020); *Lyrik transkulturell* (ed., with B. Mertz-Baumgartner and S. Klettenhammer, Königshausen & Neumann, 2016).

**Konstantin Bogdanov** is a senior researcher at the Institute of Russian Literature (The Pushkin House) of the Russian Academy of Sciences and a professor at National Research University Higher School of Economics in Saint Petersburg. Among his main research interests are Russian literature and folklore, historical and theoretical aspects of Russian literature and culture of the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, the history of ideas, the history of Russian and European rhetoric. His publications include *Everyday Life and Mythology: Studies on Semiotics of Folklore Reality* (in Russian, 2001, 2014), *Physicians, Patients, Readers: Pathographical Texts of Russian Culture of the Eighteenth to Nineteenth Centuries* (in Russian 2005, 2017), *Vox Populi. The Folklore Genres of Soviet*

*Culture* (in Russian, 2009) and *Variable. The Weather of Russian History and Other Stories* (in Russian, 2014).

**Eliot Borenstein** is professor of Russian & Slavic Studies at New York University. His most recent book is *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*. His next book, *Pussy Riot: Speaking Punk to Power* will be published in late 2020.

**Dagmar Burkhart** (retired 2002) was professor of Slavic Literatures, Balkanistics and European Cultural Anthropology at the Universities of Hamburg and Mannheim. Her fields of research include comparative cultural theory, intertextuality and intermediality. She is the author of “Osip Mandelshtam and the Grand Lie of Stalinism” (2012), “Skin and the Senses in Imre Kertesz’ Novel *Fateless*” (2013), “Komparatistik und Cultural Animal Studies” (2018).

**Peter Deutschmann** is professor of Slavic Literature and Culture Studies at Salzburg University. He is the author of *Intersubjektivität und Narration: Gogol’, Erofeev, Sorokin, Mamleev* (2003); *Allegorien des Politischen: Zeitgeschichtliche Implikationen des tschechischen historischen Dramas, 1810–1935* (2017). His research interests include Russian and Czech literatures and cultures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, narratology, drama and political history.

**Jens Herlth** is professor of Slavic literatures at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). His research interests include Polish intellectual history, Russian and Polish literature in the context of the history of ideas, and the relationship between literature and the social sciences. Recent publication: *Stanislaw Brzozowski and the Migration of Ideas: Transnational Perspectives on the Intellectual Field in Twentieth-Century Poland and Beyond* (ed., with E. Świdorski, Bielefeld 2019).

**Gernot Howanitz** holds a post-doc position at the University of Innsbruck. He is author of the monograph *Leben weben. (Auto-)Biographische Praktiken russischer Autorinnen und Autoren im Internet* (Transcript, 2020) and editor of the Open Access journal *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*. His research interests include Russian, Polish and Czech literature from 1850 onward, reception theory, new media, and digital humanities.

**Magdalena Kaltseis** is pre-doc-assistant at the University of Klagenfurt. In her doctoral thesis she examines propaganda strategies in Russian TV talk shows during the Ukraine crisis 2014. Her research interests include mass media in contemporary Russia, Russian culture and politics of the twentieth/twenty-first century, East-West relations, discourse linguistics and visual communication.

**Goran Lazičić** is currently a DOC-Fellow of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in the Department of Slavic Studies at the University of Graz, where he is completing his PhD-thesis (working title *Satire and Political Allegory by Dubravka Ugrešić, David Albahari and Svetislav Basara*). He has completed his undergraduate studies at the Department of Serbian Literature at the University of Belgrade and his master studies at the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Vienna. He is the editor of *Restart: Panorama of New Poetry in Serbia* (in Serbian, Belgrade 2014).

**Bob Muilwijk** is a PhD candidate in Slavic Literature and Culture Studies at the University of Salzburg. He has published articles on Zbigniew Herbert and Witold Gombrowicz, translations of Herbert and Michał Szymbański from Polish to Dutch and is currently working on a PhD thesis on Herbert and Czesław Miłosz. His research interests include the interplay of twentieth century and contemporary Polish literature with politics as well as Polish and European romanticism.

**Alexander Panchenko** is Director of the Research Center for Literary Theory and Interdisciplinary Studies at the Institute of Russian Literature (The Pushkin House) of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Director of the Center for Anthropology of Religion at the European University in Saint Petersburg. His research interests include vernacular Christianity, New Age religion, conspiracy theories, contemporary folklore and popular culture, and anthropological approaches to the study of Russian literature. He has published more than 100 research works (including three books) in Russian and other European languages. His recent publications include “The Beast Computer in Brussels: Religion, Conspiracy Theories, and Contemporary Legends in Post-Soviet Culture” in *Folklore* 69 (Tartu, 2017).

**František A. Podhajský** is a post-doc at the Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences, as well as a founding member of the Brno Narratological Circle. His research interests include Czech intellectual history and culture, Central European modernisms, and digital humanities. He edited the col-

lective monographs *Julek Fučik—věčně živý!* (Julius Fučik Forever, 2012), and *Fikce Jaroslava Haška* (Jaroslav Hašek's Fictions, 2016).

**Anna Razuvalova** is Senior Research Fellow in the Literature Theory and Interdisciplinary Research Group at the Institute of Russian Literature (The Pushkin House) of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg. She is the author of *Pisateli—"derevshchiki": literatura i konservativnaia ideologiya 1970-kh* (*Village Prose Writers: Literature and Conservative Ideology of the 1970s*, 2015) as well as of several journal articles and chapters to a number of books (e.g., *Sibirskii tekst v natsional'nom siužetnom prostranstve*, Krasnoyarsk 2010; *Sibirskaiia identichnost' v zerkale literaturnogo teksta*, Moscow 2015). Her research interests include conservatism and nationalism in late and post-Soviet Russian literature, regionalist ideas in contemporary Russian literature.

**Evgeniya Safargaleeva** is PhD student at the University of Giessen. She has been working on her dissertation *Textpraktiken des russischen „neuen Dramas“ im europäischen Kontext* since February 2017. Her research interests include modern Russian literature, especially drama and poetry. Recent publications: "Theater als 'Pulp Fiction': Textpraktiken bei Jurij Klavdiev," in: *Zwischenzeiten, Zwischenräume, Zwischenspiele* (Hamburg, Berlin 2019); "Kategoriia narušennoi kommunikacii v p'esakh V. Durnenkova," in: *Revitalizace hodnot* (Brno 2019); "Zhanrovoe svoeobrazie p'esy Ju. Klavdieva 'Pobedonosec,'" in: *Acta universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria Rossica* 12, 2019.

**Alois Streicher** is a teacher of Latin and English in Salzburg. He studied English and Classics at Salzburg University and is currently doing his BA in Slavonic studies. He wrote a diploma thesis on *The Reception of Czesław Miłosz in the United States*. His interests include Polish literature—especially poetry—, reception theory and foreign language instruction.

**Sergei Shtyrkov** is assistant professor at the Department of Anthropology of the European University at St. Petersburg. He is the author of *Historical Legends on Foreign Invasion: The Peasant Narrative and Mythology of Landscape*, 2012 (in Russian). His research interests include anthropology of religion, nationalism studies and folk narrative studies.

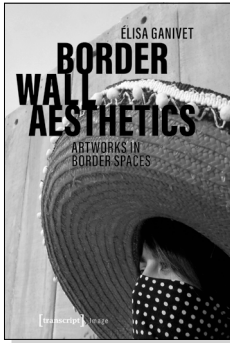
**Alois Woldan** is professor of Slavic Literatures at Vienna University. He is author of *Beiträge zu einer Galizienliteratur* (2015, Polish version: *Studia Galicyjskie*, 2019) and *Der Österreich-Mythos in der polnischen Literatur* (1996;

Polish version: *Mit galicyjski w literaturze polskiej*, 2002). His research interests include *Polish and Ukrainian literatures and inner-Slavic comparative studies*, first of all in the field of Austrian Galicia.

**Valery Vyugin** is a senior researcher at the Institute of Russian Literature (The Pushkin House) of the Russian Academy of Sciences and associate professor of Saint Petersburg State University. He is the author of *Politika poëtiki: ocherki iz istorii sovetskoi literatury* [*The Politics of Poetics: Essays on the History of Soviet Literature*] (St. Petersburg 2014), *Andrei Platonov: poëtika zagadki. Ocherk stanovleniia i èvoliutsii stilia* [*The Poetics of Enigma: An Essay on the Development of Andrei Platonov's Style*] (St. Petersburg 2004), the editor of the volume *Vtoroi Vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei (1954): Ideologiia istoricheskogo perekhoda i transformatsiia sovetskoi literatury* [*The Second Congress of Soviet Writers (1954): The Ideology of a Historical Transition and the Transformation of Soviet Literature*]. Saint Petersburg 2018). His research interests include Russian literature, cinema, and theatre of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

**Christian Zehnder** is a postdoctoral researcher in Slavic literatures at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). His research interests include Russian and Polish literature in the context of the history of ideas and religion and unofficial cultures in Russia and Poland. Recent publication: *Izobilie i askeza v russkoi literature: stolknovenii, perekhody, sovpadeniia* (ed., with Jens Herlth, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2020). In 2019, he published the novel *Die verschobene Stadt* (Otto Müller Verlag).

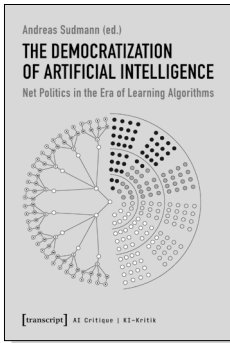
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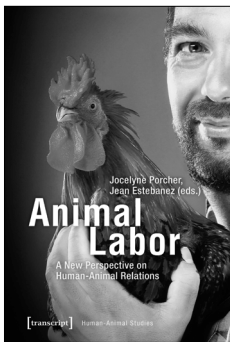
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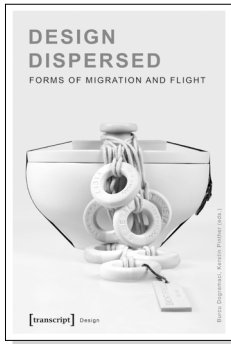
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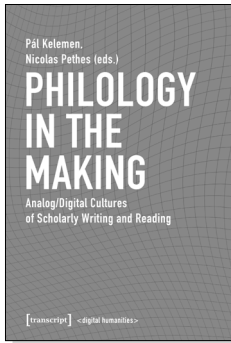
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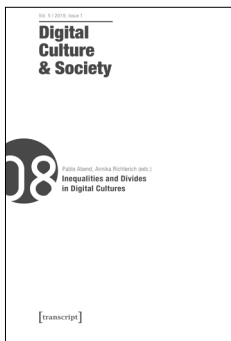
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