Anti-Jewish conspiracy theories in Putin's Russia

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Abstract

Putin's Russia has often been described by the foreign media and observers as the country where conspiracy theories proliferate in the public discourse. To a large extent this is true: many Russians believe that there is a foreign plot to undermine Russia, and accordingly they share anti-Western attitudes which, in turn, can be used by the authorities. Yet Russia's long history of antisemitism offers a particularly curious case for analysis: how antisemitism has manifested itself during Putin's years of rule. While many Russians in the 1990s have been keen on antisemitic conspiracy theories, after 2000 the extent of anti-Jewish slander in the public realm has rapidly gone down. Moreover, many high ranking politicians and elite journalists who were caught sharing antisemitic ideas in public have had to apologize for their behaviour. This article seeks to explore the peculiarities of antisemitic conspiracy theories, in contrast to the culture of conspiracy, which have been developing post-1991.

For more than a century Russia has played a central role in the history of antisemitic hatred: we can see this in the pogroms of the late 19th century, the turbulence of the First World War and the Bolshevik revolution, and the anti-Jewish campaigns of the late Soviet period. Mikhail Gorbachev's freedom of speech (or *glasnost*), which was introduced in 1987, opened the gates to all possible types of hate speech, including active and open speculation on the idea of a Jewish conspiracy against the Soviet people.[1] Zvi Gitelman has observed that amidst the turbulent socio-economic changes, the shadow of pogroms reappeared in the Soviet Union, and Jews have been accused of disloyalty, domination of the elite positions in society, and causing all of the troubles which have emerged in the lives of Soviet people.[2] In many ways, the last years of the Soviet empire were closely related to the spread of antisemitic conspiracy theories which have been one of the signs of the time.[3]

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and throughout the 1990s, the free and democratic political rhetoric left a wide space for anti-Jewish conspiratorial speculations. American historian Alexander Yanov warned that Russia would slip into the abyss of fascism after Yeltsin resigned and far-right politicians took a leading role in the country.[4] This scholar made his argument after an extensive analysis of speeches and texts by far right politicians who reached the highest point in their public careers in the late perestroika period. People like Aleksandr Barkashov, leader of the

far right *Russian National Unity*, or Igor Shafarevich, writer and mathematician, who were already known for their antisemitic conspiracy theories in the Soviet period, received a new boost to their public careers once Russia became a democratic state. In parliament, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the flamboyant far-right leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, the Communist party leader Gennadii Ziuganov, and numerous second-ranking members of his party, regularly slipped into anti-Jewish slander, accusing Jews of running the country and stripping it of its financial assets.[5] As Vadim Rossman noted, Zhirinovsky's crusade against Zionism often won over supporters of the idea of an anti-Russian Jewish plot, whilst Zhirinovsky himself attempted to build links with anti-Zionists across the world.[6] Yet, as Vyacheslav Likhachev suggested, despite the presence of outright antisemitic statements in the rhetoric of political parties in the 1990s, these ideas have rarely become the main driving force of their ideologies.[7] There were numerous attacks against Jews in Russia in the late 1990s that were related to the serious economic crisis of 1998 that put a lot of Russian families on the brink of survival.[8] The Anti-Defamation League observed the growth of anti-Jewish attitudes in Russia in 1999, paying particular attention to the notion that Jews rule Russia by controlling its economy and political elites.[9] Both on the local and federal levels of the Russian government, the concept of a Jewish/Zionist conspiracy against the Russian people has also been gaining prominence.[10]

Putin's ascendance to the Kremlin as the president in 2000 and the nation-building policies of the Russian government, which have emphasized the multi-ethnic nature of Russian culture, have had a serious effect on antisemitic statements in Russian society and, especially, Russian politics.[11] On the rhetorical level, antisemitic conspiratorial claims have been condemned by political leaders, whilst the number of anti-Jewish attacks has also dropped in comparison to the 1990s.[12]

At the same time, the Russian political leadership chose another villain to accuse of anti-Russian activities: the West. Starting from the mid 2000s, the idea that the West, understood as a single, undifferentiated enemy, has been preparing plots against the Russians to destroy the country and obtain its natural resources, has reached a new height. Multiple writers, journalists and mainstream politicians regularly and actively spread anti-western conspiracy theories amongst the Russian population, effectively turning these ideas into an important weapon of popular mobilization.[13]

Given the drastic change in the prominence of anti-Jewish conspiratorial ideas during the presidential terms of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, this article explores

several cases of anti-Jewish conspiratorial rhetoric which have occurred at a mainstream political level in the last decade.[14] How do anti-Western conspiracy theories differ from those directed against Jews? What ideas are related to the anti-Jewish conspiratorial discourse in Putin's Russia and what are the reasons for their emergence? Who puts forward anti-Jewish theories in Putin's Russia, what form do these theories take, and what is the reaction of the political elite to these theories? Are there any repercussions for those who spread antisemitic conspiracy theories? This article provides a media discourse analysis of these cases, with the aim of exploring the difference between the two discourses of conspiracy theory (anti-Western and anti-Jewish), and studying the overlaps and differences between these two discourses.

How are conspiracy theories studied and why are they popular in Putin's Russia?

"Conspiracy theory" is a catchy term: the notion that the world is ruled by malevolent forces behind closed curtains has become a popular tool with which to interpret reality. The occurrence of both major events and minor accidents can be attributed to the actions of a secret cabal of conspirators. The academic study of conspiracy theories began in the mid-20th century when Karl Popper coined the term "conspiracy theory of society".[15] Since then, study of the phenomenon has evolved into numerous projects in political science[16], psychology[17], history[18], sociology[19], anthropology[20] and even international relations.[21] Notably, the approach to the study of conspiracy theories also changed over the course of the 20th century. Back in the 1950s, American historian Richard Hofstadter described conspiracy theories in the US as a paranoid style, thus attaching a label of clinical disease to a social phenomenon.[22] This resulted in a tendency to denigrate conspiracy theories as the tool of crackpots, and this led to a serious breach in understanding the depth of the phenomenon in the culture of modern humanity. In the 1990s various new approaches emerged that applied a more complex methodology to the study of conspiracy theories which slowly became an essential part of modern popular culture.[23]

The last three decades have seen a growth in the study of conspiracy theories in various regions of the world. Whilst the case of US conspiracy culture is so far the most developed, scholars have paid attention to other regions and countries in order to investigate the sociocultural and political contexts in which conspiracy theories arise

and are fostered.[24] The former Soviet states are no exception. In 2012, Stefanie Ortmann and John Heathershow suggested that conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet space should be examined within the broader context of current conspiracy culture worldwide.[25] The authors argued that conspiracy theories are a product of anxiety over lost control of reality. In the post-Soviet Russian situation, in which the state had effectively collapsed, conspiratorial logic appeared to be a useful means of comprehending the world. Moreover, the weakness of democratic institutions denied many people the opportunity to realize their political rights, which reinforced the feeling of powerlessness and further contributed to the proliferation of conspiracy mythmaking.[26]

In the new millennium, scholars have noted an ideological shift from fears of the "Western conspiracy", which is traditionally popular amongst Russian nationalists, to fears of the "migrant conspiracy", which seeks to destroy the Russian nation by infiltrating it.[27] Although the shift has not affected the entire spectrum of nationalist groups, this trend—indicating a gradual integration into Western European of radical nationalist thought—has marked several conceptual changes in the pattern of Russian ultranationalist conspiracy mythmaking.[28] It is precisely because of this turn Russian Jews are getting less prominent in the mainstream conspiracy culture, but the conspiratorial image of the Jew still occupies a prominent position in the marginal, niche ideological movements.

Russian historian Victor Shnirel'man outlined in the 2000s a few of the elements of antisemitic conspiracy thinking that could be found among Russian devotees of neo-paganism, and investigated the origins of the antisemitic myths which had become essential to the conspiracy narratives found in the corpus of Russian national patriotic literature.[29] At the same time, philosopher Vadim Rossman offered a comprehensive analysis of various aspects of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories among pro-communist forces (National Bolsheviks), national patriotic forces (Neo-Eurasians and Neo-Slavophiles) and Russian Pagans.[30] This analysis demonstrated how broad and diverse the spectrum of antisemitic conspiracy conceptualisations was among different social and intellectual groups in post-Soviet Russia.

Yet very little research provided a complex, methodologically compelling understanding of the nature of conspiracy theories as a part of the popular political discourse in Russia. Based on Mark Fenster's reading of conspiracy theories as part of a populist theory of power that divides the social between the Other and the

"people",[31] I suggest looking at conspiracy theories in Russia as an instrument of political mobilization of supporters of the political actors that spread conspiracy theories. As Fenster demonstrated, conspiracy theories could be a useful element of all types of political ideologies, whilst branding them paranoid would mean an "ideological misrecognition of power relations" which may occur in any political system.[32] Conspiracy theories thus express a lack of satisfaction with the current state of affairs in society and can signify an important problem that the elites or authorities are unable/unwilling to resolve. The populist rhetoric, as shown by Ernesto Laclau,[33] can unite various elements of the social into a group which would represent the powerless and would resist the attempts of the powerful to cause even more damage to this group. Thus, conspiracy theories serve to describe and justify the unfortunate state of affairs of the powerless group that can successfully be used by politicians who either challenge the existing political order or try to strengthen its basis of public support.

The latter approach can be applied to Vladimir Putin's Russia, where anti-Western conspiracy theories play a crucial role in public mobilisation. The notion of the West as a single hostile entity has been important for Russian nationalists and is a key feature of the Kremlin's domestic policies since the mid-2000s. It is invoked in the claim that the West (specifically the US, the UK or other foreign countries to the West of Russia) has tried to destroy the state from within, and in the insistence that major conflicts and economic and political crises that have occurred in Russia are part of a malevolent plan to destroy the country. It has been popular among Russian conservative and nationalist elites for decades, starting from the mid 19th century. Most importantly, it was the foundation of state ideology at the time of the Cold War and, later, under Vladimir Putin.[34]

From 2003 the Kremlin employed anti-Western conspiracy theories as an instrument to generate public support of its policies and, in particular, of Vladimir Putin as leader of the country. Various ideas about the West (which was often seen as synonymous with the USA) being a geopolitical menace to Russia have been spreading across the country through the speeches of high-ranking politicians, media professionals and amateur writers who have been dominating the public sphere for years. As a result, by 2018 anti-Western conspiracy theories had become a popular trope to explain events both in Russia and in the world, and the authorities often use

these theories to justify action against the opposition or to identify negative effects on the common people of the Kremlin's unpopular policies.

It is important to note that in contrast to the 1990s, the expression of anti-Jewish attitudes in Putin's Russia has decreased. In comparison with other phobias, antisemitic conspiracy theories have become significantly less potent both on the level of political rhetoric, and on the level of day-by-day human relations. In fact, Russians have demonstrated increasingly positive attitudes towards Jews and the state of Israel.[35] President Putin has often presented himself as Israel's ally, and even the military clashes between Russia and Israel in the Syrian conflict were not able to shatter this relationship.[36] As experts have noted, the number of hate crimes against Jews fell significantly in the 2000-2010s, with violence against symbolic Jewish places, such as cemeteries and synagogues, the only popular manifestation of antisemitism. In turn, migrants from Central Asia and ethnic minorities from Northern Caucasus have become the main targets of xenophobic attitudes.[37] In that context the ambivalent image of the 'treacherous West' has taken the attention of the Russians, helping them channel their hatred for the economic upheavals on the US President Obama.[38]

For Russian Jews this trend is certainly positive, given the long history of state-initiated policies against them. Yet, as scholars often note, antisemitic conspiracy theories have not disappeared and successfully develop on the margins of popular culture.[39] What is more important is to see when anti-Jewish conspiracy theories reveal themselves at the public level and become short-term media events that divide Russian public space.

Case 1: The "Lampshades" of the Russian opposition

On 12 May 2013, a Russian politician and a long-time member of the oppositional parties, Leonid Gozman, posted a blog entry that discussed the premiere of a television series about the counter intelligence officers SMERSH ("death to spies" in Russian) during WW2. Gozman hinted that if the Soviet officers were replaced with officers of the SS, the picture would be the same. Gozman compared the war crimes of the Nazi forces and the repressions against Soviet soldiers which had been carried out by counterintelligence throughout the war. "The very word SMERSH should be equal to SS, NKVD and Gestapo, it should cause fear and loathing, instead of being used for the titles of patriotic action films."[40]

The next day the staff writer of the tabloid newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda,* Ul'iana Skobeyda, posted an op-ed that summed up the online discussion of Gozman's blog post; the most controversial part of Skobeida's article was the original lead that stated: "At times it's a pity that the Nazis have not produced lampshades out of the ancestors of today's liberals. We would have had less problems today."[41] This lead caused an even bigger public uproar in the hours following its publication, after the lead was changed to: "The liberals are reconsidering our history in order to cut the ground from under our country."[42]

The original lead can still be found today on search engines; hence the scandal did not end with the editorial changes. The deputy mayor of Moscow refused to speak to the newspaper.[43] The government authority Roskomnadzor, responsible for monitoring the media in Russia, officially warned the newspaper that it had breached the law.[44] The commission of journalists accused the newspaper of unethical reporting, something which does not happen often in the Russian media.[45] Editor in chief of *Komsomolskaya Pravda,* Vladimir Sungorkin, apologized for the article, explaining that it had been published because he was unable to control what appeared on the website.[46] Eventually Skobeida herself apologized for the statement, explaining it in terms of her "emotions" and arguig that her own relatives had fought in the war and died in the gas chambers.[47] Yet what is particularly interesting about the argument is not how quickly the journalist retreated from her openly anti-Jewish statement, but how the issue was framed.

In the original article the discussion about Gozman's piece took place between hypothetical "liberals" and abstract "users", with "users" uttering pro-Russian statements and liberals trying to put Stalin's USSR and Hitler's Nazi Germany on an equal footing. Notably, Skobeida used the names of only two real people who she saw as liberals who happened to be Jewish (Gozman and writer Mikhail Berg). While the comment on "lampshades" was quickly removed, the names, linked to Jewish identity, remained in the original piece. Moreover, the line in which liberals were accused of anti-Russian activities was reinforced: "Why do liberals need to do this: reconsider history? Why do they try to pull the rug out from under the feet of the country: to re-evaluate and spit on everything to do with the war - the most sacred memory the people who survived the collapse of the USSR still have? Why have 'Gozmans' taken us from Victory - to theft?"[48]

The final statement of this piece called on the Russian counterintelligence to uncover the anti-Russian plot allegedly committed by the so called “liberals.” Overall, this fragment of the text is the most revealing: it shows how the issue of historical memory is intertwined with the current political agenda and how the anti-Jewish conspiratorial elements are worked into this discourse.

The memory of victory in the Second World war is, by no means, the major idea that promotes social cohesion in the late Putin era.[49] The memory of the war has been one of the most popular events reproduced for nation building purposes.[50] At the same time, remembrance of victory has been turned into a powerful tool to use against political opponents[51] and unite the Russian masses in support of the Kremlin’s controversial policies both at home and abroad.[52] Thus, Skobeida’s argument is aimed at those who question the achievements of the Red Army and can undermine the Kremlin’s ability to utilize the victory in WW2 to justify its current claims for power in the country.

What is also remarkable is that the victory in WW2 is juxtaposed to another crucial milestone in 20th century Russian history: the collapse of the Soviet empire. From 1991 onwards the public has been showing a gradually growing tendency to treat the events of 8 December 1991 as the most tragic of the century. On that day the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus signed the Belovezha agreement that officially proclaimed that the USSR ceased to exist. The trauma of the state collapse haunts the ruling elites of the country as well as many ordinary Russians: the most striking thing is that at least half of the Russian population remember it acutely and fear that there could be another collapse of the state. In contrast to the collapse in 1991, many aspects of the Soviet past are perceived more positively. The recent poll conducted in November 2018 showed that 66% Russians are nostalgic about the Soviet Union.[53] Accordingly, the Kremlin uses positive attitudes towards the Soviet past as a tool to create social binding.[54] The idea that the Soviet collapse was orchestrated is also in the Kremlin’s playbook and is very actively developed by pro-government intellectuals, politicians and media professionals.[55]

Thus, in the context of Skobeida’s apology, the image of the “liberal,” even one of Jewish origin, can be related to a bigger group of Russian opposition activists that criticize Putin for whitewashing the crimes of the Soviet regime. In her apology a week after the original article was published, she claimed that her article did not support Nazi methods, but was opposed to the attacks by liberals against the Soviet victories

in WW2. Yet she also referred to an anonymous comment left under her publication that accused “gozmans” of making profit out of criticizing Russia and destroying its spiritual bonds. The constant mudslinging by critics of the Kremlin, who, according to many pro-Kremlin spokespeople have no connection with the Russian people, is a traditional trope for undermining the legitimacy of the Kremlin’s opponents which has regularly been used from the mid-2000s against the regime’s critics. Still, in the current case the constant reference to Gozman, as a politician and as a Jew, leaves an undeniable trace of antisemitic rhetoric.

The approach taken by Skobeida and her editor-in-chief, who called on Gozman to apologize for his inappropriate statement, is characteristic of political discussions in the late Putin era.[56] Even if a speaker makes an extraordinary statement, the discussion slips into “whataboutism,” in which conspiratorial elements arise as a part of a campaign to sling mud at the speakers. In Skobeida’s case, her supporters accused the liberal opposition of having a monopoly on information in the country and described Gozman as a representative of the Jewish lobby that controls the media in the country.[57] Thus, the attempts of both the journalist and the media outlet to avoid accusations of spreading antisemitic conspiracy theories have been picked up by openly anti-Jewish writers and turned into yet another example of the Jewish conspiracy against Russia.

Case 2. Back from the Pale of settlement: Petr Tolstoi and St. Isaac’s Cathedral

The anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution in 2017 marked a controversial centenary for the ruling regime. In the eyes of the Kremlin, revolution of any kind is a menace and must be avoided at any costs. Fear of revolution originates not only in the tumultuous times of the Soviet collapse, but also in the succession of regime changes in the mid 2000s in the post-Soviet states that the Kremlin treated as its own sphere of influence.[58] What came as a surprise at that time was later re-evaluated as part of a Western plan to invade Russia and strip it of its status as an international power.[59] Therefore, the political elite showed an indifferent attitude to the anniversary and suggested that people did not “celebrate tragedies that touched every family in Russia, for political reasons” and that they treat the families on both sides – Bolsheviks and the pro-monarch White Army - as heroes.[60]

The Russian Orthodox Church as the dominant confession in Imperial Russia had suffered a lot under the Soviet regime: priests were arrested and purged, church property was confiscated, and believers underwent cruel repressions. The revival of the church in the late 1980s resulted in the state returning its property and providing it with a number of perks to help it recover financially after the years of oppression.[61] What was planned to happen in St. Petersburg in 2017 was supposed to be just a tiny element in this process. The city authorities declared St. Isaac's Cathedral – the emblem of St. Petersburg – to be transferred to church ownership within the next two years. This caused an immediate reaction from the local population, which went en masse to rallies to protest against that transfer.

In the midst of the rallies, Petr Tolstoi, the deputy head of the Russian Parliament and former news presenter of the major television channel, contended that the protesters were "the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those who destroyed our churches, who jumped out of the Pale of Settlement with revolvers in 1917."[62] Tolstoi added that "nowadays their great and great-great grandchildren, who occupy various respected jobs – on radio or in parliaments – continue what their grandfathers and great grandfathers had been doing."[63]

Just as in the case of Skoibeda, this statement triggered a heated discussion and an immediate reaction on the part of politicians and religious activists alike. Tolstoi's statement tapped into a rich field of anti-Jewish conspiratorial allegations which argued that the Jews were behind the 1917 revolution. Even before the revolution took place, scholars note that there was a wave of anti-Jewish criticism which insisted that Jews had incited the crisis which led to revolution.[64] After the revolution and throughout the 20th century the idea that the Bolshevik regime was irrevocably linked to the Jewish plan to control the world has been integral to antisemitic conspiracy theories across the world.[65]

The wave of criticism appeared across Russian social networks for several days, which included the day of commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust at the end of January. Borukh Gorin, press secretary of the Jewish communities, and Yuri Kanner, president of the Russian Jewish Congress, called the statement "openly antisemitic", "nationalistic" and not based on facts.[66] Next day, the head of Parliament, Viacheslav Volodin, asked discussants not to slip into an interethnic conflict, and suggested that they were trying to spot antisemitism where it was not present. "This term was applied to prisoners, then these prisoners were appointed to the leading

roles in the revolution. Maybe he [Petr Tolstoi] meant this? Has he been asked [to clarify]?"[67] Volodin's position was somewhat defensive; he called on people not to threaten the interethnic peace in the country by throwing out antisemitic accusations. Tolstoi's response included an illusion to conspiracy:

> Only people with a sick imagination and without knowledge of the history of their country can see "signs of antisemitism." On the contrary, this was a warning not to repeat the same events that took place 100 years ago, after which thousands of cathedrals were demolished, while hundreds of thousands of people were exiled and shot. It's clear that someone really wants to attach this label [of antisemitism] in order to split the public discussion along lines of nationalist conflict.[68]

A couple of days later, he personally asked for an apology from Russia's chief Rabbi Alexander Boroda, who had earlier also accused Tolstoi of antisemitism and emphasized the unique nature of Russian multi-ethnic harmony.[69] In addition, Tolstoi repeated the accusation against "irresponsible journalists" who were intent on pushing this case in the direction of antisemitism. Boroda claimed to be satisfied with Tolstoi's words.[70]

Tolstoi has become prominent and reached a high-ranking political position due to his active propaganda work at his weekly television programme on Channel One. The high point of his work has been his reporting on the Ukraine crisis and the war in East Ukraine, where the degree of extremely biased coverage and the amount of fake news has been exceptional.[71] Tolstoi has even been banned from entering Ukraine because of his blatantly anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian lies.[72] Therefore, Tolstoi's rant against the protesters in St. Petersburg can be seen as yet another highly biased political statement that, for reason unknown to the author, contained antisemitic charges. The clear focus of Tolstoi's verbal attack were members of the opposition who participated in the rallies in St. Petersburg, most notably Boris Vishnevskii and Maksim Reznik, members of the St. Petersburg parliament who were also prominent mouthpieces of the democratic opposition and active participants in local initiatives Perhaps Tolstoi saw their oppositional background as sufficient reason for his verbal assault, especially since he has never been challenged by anyone during the TV shows he has presented.

The active role of civil society in the protection of the historical heritage of St. Petersburg is of particular importance in this case. The city's population in the 2000s demonstrated particularly well what solidarity and active protests can do to reach their goal in the battle against the authorities. In the last decade alone there were several very successful public initiatives carried out on the local level to help protect houses, public libraries which were threatened with destruction, and try to save the European university after it's license have been revoked.[73] At the same time, both of these deputies have received unprecedented support from the local population, which has appreciated their participation in causes important to local inhabitants. The grass roots movements of activists across Russia are the principal political activity which the Kremlin has been trying so hard to eliminate through the 18 years in which Putin has been in office.[74] Thus, the rallies to protect St. Isaac's cathedral, a landmark for locals, has been seen by them as another attempt on the part of Moscow politicians and the Russian Orthodox Church, which is a major stakeholder in Russian politics, to curtail local freedoms.[75]

What makes this case similar to that of Skobeida is the vague allusion to a "Liberal conspiracy" against the Russian nation. In both statements Tolstoi talked of the power that the "accusers" have in the media, and the ability this gives them to ruin reputations. What is particularly interesting about this case is that even prominent anti-Western conspiracy theorists have been trying to divert attention from what is clearly an antisemitic conspiratorial statement and have suggested that Tolstoi's meaning has been misunderstood. Nikolai Starikov, for example, Russia's leading anti-Western mouthpiece, has repeated Volodin's criticism of the media and has insisted that the Russian people generally hold pro-Jewish feelings.[76] Whilst Starikov has developed links with the authorities and usually acts as a spokesperson through which they attack both the West and the opposition inside Russia, independent conspiracy theorists have actively supported Tolstoi's actions.[77]

Case 3: The ritual murder of the Romanov family

It is notable that although Tolstoi's antisemitic remarks were related to the scandal surrounding the return of the Church's property, virtually no clerics participated in the discussion. Yet, as we will see in this next case, Russian Orthodox clergy still adhere to antisemitic conspiracy theories. This case concerns the fate of the royal family, who were murdered by the Bolsheviks in July 1918.

The ritual murder of the Romanov family during the Civil war has also been an important element of the antisemitic conspiracy theories which were popular amongst Russian émigrés throughout the 20th century.[78] It has been claimed that the investigators who arrived at the house where the family was murdered found strange symbols and inscriptions on the walls. This information is almost impossible to confirm since the house has since been destroyed. All the same, for those people who believed that the Communists were a great menace to the world, the murder of the royal family was a crucial event in the history of the revolution and the Civil war, and the possibility that it was a ritual murder made sense to them.

The opening of this discussion by high-ranking Russian clergy on the 100 anniversary of the October revolution in 2017 was more than symbolic. In November 2017 the Moscow Patriarchy organized a conference entitled "The case of the Royal Family Murder: a new assessment and materials," in which clergy and scientists discussed whether to approve the remnants of the bodies excavated in Ekaterinburg in 1991 as those of the royal family. The Patriarch, Kirill, stated that the Church disagreed with the previous results because the process of identifying them had not been transparent and so the church had not participated in it.[79]

The fact that the remains of the royal family had been examined three times by three different laboratories in Russia, the USA and the UK in the 1990s was not convincing enough for the high-ranking clergy. They insisted that the Church must take part in the confirmation process and make sure that the bodies of the royal family, who had all been canonized in 2000, were authentic. According to the Patriarch, Putin supported this claim and approved the new commission.[80]

Bishop Tikhon, one of the organizers of this summit, made a more revealing comment: "We relate most seriously to the view that this was a ritual murder. What's more, for a significant part of the church commission there is no doubt that that is what happened."[81] This remark was supported by the senior officer of the Investigation Committee, Marina Molodtsova, who confirmed that the Investigation Committee carried out a "psychological-historical examination" to check the claims that this had been a ritual murder.

Given the context in which the hypothesis about a ritual murder was put forward, there were few doubts that the anti-Jewish conspiracy claim lay behind it. The Russian Orthodox Church, especially in the late 20th century, has been a fruitful ground for anti-Jewish conspiracy mythmaking.[82] The fact that these ideas were expressed at

the highest level of the church hierarchy gave the case particular significance. The public reaction was almost immediate: again, the head of the Jewish communities, Boroda, responded that the blood libel has been the worst and the longest of all anti-Jewish accusations.[83] Media across the world also reported that the Russian government was digging up the case of the royal family murder using ancient anti-Jewish hatred.[84]

In response, the Kremlin said that it had no interest in taking part in the investigation. Meanwhile, in an interview with the major television channel Rossia-1 devoted to the ritual murder accusation, Tikhon insisted that the murder of the monarch was seen as a highly ritualistic act by the bearers of Communist ideology, and explained what he meant by this: [85]

> The figure of the abdicated emperor Nicholas II was still sacred and symbolic… For believers he was the Anointed One. For the Bolsheviks he was a symbol of the 300 year long regime that they were fighting against…Therefore, the murder of Nicholas II, his successor, his children and wife, of course, had a very symbolic importance. They all wanted to be the monarch's murderers.[86]

Tikhon, who is widely rumoured to be Putin's personal confessor, is a particularly powerful figure within the Church hierarchy.[87] As the superior of the Sretenskii Monastery in the centre of Moscow, Tikhon welcomes high-ranking officers of the Federal Security Bureau (FSB), Russia's most influential law-enforcement agency, who work around the corner from the monastery at Lubianskaia Square. Putin, who has an FSB background himself, went to the reopening of the monastery in autumn 2017 after its grand renovation and stood shoulder to shoulder with Tikhon. Tikhon, who had recently been promoted to the position of Metropolitan and was rumoured to be the next Patriarch, is often seen as one of ideologues of the Kremlin's domestic policies.[88]

Unlike the previous two cases, the investigation of the "ritual murder" is ongoing. It is no surprise that the clearly antisemitic claim made by such a powerful individual caused an instant controversy. It is also important that Tikhon quickly tried to clarify what he meant, whilst not making a public apology. His weight in Putin's power vertical, and his proximity to the Kremlin, leave him a considerable amount of space for carefully uttered diatribes. Pro-Kremlin conspiracy theorists rushed to

support Tikhon and claimed that the royal family was murdered not by the Jews, but by an emissary of the UK, the country most interested in the destruction of Russia as a global power.[89] Although this explanation is no less absurd than the notion of a ritual killing, putting the blame on the UK or the West is a safe option for many pro-Kremlin conspiracy theorists.

Conclusion: the ever changing image of the Jew

The cases I have discussed here make it clear that antisemitic conspiracy theories are not disappearing from Russian public discourse. Yet in comparison to the 1990s the number of anti-Jewish crimes and statements in the public sphere have declined. In the mid 2000s the Russian chief rabbi called Russia a safe haven for Jews and Vladimir Putin called on European Jews to come to Russia to escape the menace of antisemitic attacks by radical islamists.[90] Putin is very careful in his handling of antisemitism and anti-Jewish hatred. Geopolitically, Israel is Russia's closest ally in the Middle East and there are very few ways in which this special relationship has been challenged, despite the Kremlin's support of the Syrian regime and the Palestinians. Inside Russia, as the cases show, the Kremlin prevents anti-Jewish claims from further escalation. What is important for the Kremlin is to preserve the image of Russia as a nation that cherishes its multi-ethnic character. Yet, as my cases demonstrate, this does often does not work out well.

All the same, research suggests that antisemitic narratives have been evolving and spreading from the margins of post-Soviet popular culture. It is certainly fair to claim that the abstract but negative image of the West has overshadowed the traditional fear of the Jews. Yet, as Shnirel'man observes, many public intellectuals in today's Russia adopt euphemisms and metaphors to interpret the events both of the past and the present day, and very often they slip into antisemitic conspiratorial discourse.[91] A variety of stories - from Apocalyptic narratives, to neo-Nazi theories of racial superiority - can be found in countless works of fiction which are freely available online and in book stores. Article 282 of the Russian Criminal law, which was adopted in the mid-2000s to punish extremism and nationalist incitement, has not proved to be an obstacle for these authors. The stereotype of the conspiring Jew, forming and controlling the media and business elites, is very hard to eliminate.

A close look at the image of the Jew in the media and popular culture of Putin's Russia demonstrates its instability. The mantra of interethnic harmony in Russia,

prevents the outbursts of antisemitic conspiracy theories in public. During the Ukraine crisis, Ukrainian fascists and radical nationalists were portrayed as Russia's principal bogeyman on Russian television. Images of these people were juxtaposed with others signifying the (relative) interethnic peace in Russia, with the Russian government trying to tame its own nationalist movement by pushing it to the Donbass or incarcerating its most obvious activists.[92] The analysis of television shows by Hutchings and Tolz in the pre-2014 period shows that, on the one hand, a person of Jewish origin is always used to illustrate the multi-ethnic and multi-religious peace; no press conference or event about Russian interethnic issues takes place without the chief rabbi standing behind Vladimir Putin. Yet talk shows and highly biased documentaries sometimes feature Jewish images created along the lines of the anti-Russian Other: a Liberal, a foreigner or a morally corrupt person. The media coverage of the Pussy Riot incident in the Church of Christ the Saviour is a case in point: journalists have castigated supporters of the band amongst the Moscow Jewish intelligentsia, have suggested that Jews were the possible instigators of the performance and have even alluded to the historical claim that Jews were always interested in destroying the Russian Orthodox Church.[93]

Nevertheless, what makes antisemitic conspiracy theories different from anti-Western theories is the fact that those who have voiced them have been called on to explain what they meant, and in the majority of cases the initial statement has been retracted and followed by an apology. Skobeida, Tolstoi and even Father Tikhon – the closest political figure to Putin – had to clarify what they meant and chose to apologize for the incorrect wording of their ideas to avoid further escalation of the conflict. Yet no one is criticised for spreading anti-Western conspiracy theories. On the contrary, these theories, which are used to denounce political opponents of the Kremlin, are actively developed and popularized by the media, an in some ways become the new norm. This does not mean that there is no chance of the idea of the omnipotent Jew emerging in the popular mind: the real popularity of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories has yet to be explored by sociologists and anthropologists.[94] However, in the current political regime of state-sponsored conspiracy hysteria, spreading antisemitic conspiracy theories is out of fashion. This is indeed a rare example of good news relating to Russia.

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