



This is a repository copy of *Conspiracy culture: post-Soviet paranoia and the Russian imagination*. By Keith Livers. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 307 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$37.50, hard bound..

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/219711/>

Version: Accepted Version

Book review:

Yablokov, I. orcid.org/0000-0001-7766-8867 (2022) Review of: *Conspiracy culture: post-Soviet paranoia and the Russian imagination*. By Keith Livers. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 307 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$37.50, hard bound. *Slavic Review*, 81 (4). pp. 1120-1121. ISSN 0037-6779

<https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2023.77>

This article has been published in a revised form in *Slavic Review*

<https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2023.77>. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works. © Author(s).

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Conspiracy culture: post-Soviet paranoia and the Russian imagination. By Keith Livers.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020, 307 pp.

It's an uneasy task to write a review on the book about Russian conspiracy theories in the time of the war in Ukraine. Triggered by the conspiratorial imagination of the Russian top power echelon, this war is the best example of the extent to which the Russian society is saturated with the fears of external plots today.

Thanks to the previous studies of Russian conspiracy theories, we know a bit more about the cultural, social and political background of these fears. Keith Livers takes us on a slightly different path: to explore and challenge the conspiratorial frames in the works of Russia's most significant cultural artefacts of the post-soviet era: Viktor Pelevin's novels, Timur Bekmambetov's films *Night Watch and Day Watch*. Livers adds to this analysis classic examples of the post-Soviet conspiratorial thinking – The Dulles Plan and Aleksandr Prokhanov's novels. This diverse set of cases is a clear illustration that conspiracy theories are not simply tools for crackpots on Russia's far right, whose views Prokhanov represents in the mainstream. One way or another they creep into the Russian cultural mainstream, conquer imagination of the masses and facilitate the spread of the binary vision of the world between the forces of Good (always represented by Russia) and the evil forces of the outside world (usually represented by the West, or more particular by the Americans). Livers' powerful and engaging analysis shows that the uneasy coping with the lost greatness can be seen, for instance, in Bekmambetov's fairy tale narratives. At the same time, Pelevin's (anti)conspiratorial novels in fact reveal the most conspiratorial patterns of perception of reality that traumatizes the post-soviet men and women.

Unfortunately, Livers' focus is not on the most recent examples of conspiratorial thinking: the book's conclusion discusses Putin and Trump – the bad bromance that seems to have taken place decades ago (or in fact just five). But clearly in the last five years the Kremlin's elite have gone miles ahead in their beliefs in the plots from the West and brought with them the Russian population with the help of the well-oiled propaganda machine. Yet, what adds to the book a particular value is its focus on the main actor of Russia's rise to greatness: *siloviki*, or the men of power, former or current intelligence officers that can be found throughout Livers' book.

Looking at the 30 years of the Russian conspiracy culture from today it becomes reasonably clear that the diminished human agency that followed the soviet collapse was compensated by the beliefs in the warriors of light who will fix the Russian economy, its technology and return the feeling of self-respect to the Russian citizens. The siloviki with Vladimir Putin at their top were seen to bring stability and order to the chaos unleashed by the collapse of the superpower. As Livers convincingly argues, their portrayal as the Order of Light, the enlightened patriots, brings geopolitics to the dimension of popular literature and thus gets into the head of ordinary Russians. First, in the 2000s, as a metaphor, these portrayals of power were part of the post-modernist performative politics. Later, in the 2010s performance was replaced by warmongering and weaponization of conspiracy theories as the tool of the Kremlin, far from the literary technique. Pelevin's irony of the chekists fighting against the mirovaya zakulisa (the global conspiracy of the powerful few against Russia) has been counterbalanced by Prokhanov's bone rattling anti-Westernism that inspired nostalgia and a drift to the Ukrainian catastrophe. Russian society had the chance to overcome the trauma of the Soviet collapse, but its elite and its people preferred to believe into heavy peppered fairy tale stories of Russia's greatness and magic spells of the Russian soul. The price of this is unimaginable. And when the nightmare of the Russian invasion to Ukraine will be over, Livers' book will be among the popular studies to understand what brought Russia to the war and where to look for the clues to avoid such disasters in future.

Ilya Yablokov (University of Sheffield)