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.
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It is an uneasy task to write a review on a book about Russian conspiracy theories in a time of 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 Russian society is saturated with fears of external plots today.

Thanks to 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 and Timur Bekmambetov's films *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*. Livers adds to this analysis classic examples of 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 the imagination of the masses and facilitate the spread of a 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 Americans). Livers's powerful and engaging analysis shows that the uneasy coping with 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 perceptions of reality that traumatize post-Soviet men and women.

Unfortunately, Livers's focus is not on the most recent examples of conspiratorial thinking: the book's conclusion discusses Vladimir Putin and Donald 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 belief in plots from the west, and brought the Russian population with them with the help of the well-oiled propaganda machine. Yet, what adds a particular value to the book is its focus on the main actor of Russia's rise to greatness: *siloviki*, or men of power; former or current intelligence officers that can be found throughout Livers's book.

Looking from today's vantage point at the thirty years of Russian conspiracy culture, it becomes reasonably clear that the diminished human agency that followed the Soviet collapse was compensated by beliefs in warriors of light who will fix the Russian economy, its technology, and return a feeling of self-respect to Russian citizens. With Vladimir Putin at their top, the siloviki were seen to bring stability and order to the chaos unleashed by the collapse of a 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 as a metaphor in the 2000s, these portrayals of power were part of post-modernist performative politics. Later, in the 2010s, performance was replaced by warmongering and weaponization of conspiracy theories as the Kremlin's tool, far from 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 in heavily 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's book will be among the popular studies to understand what brought Russia to the war and where to look for clues to avoid such disasters in the future.

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Picturing Russia's Men: Masculinity and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Painting. By Allison Leigh. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020. xvi, 296 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Figures. Plates. $117.00, hard bound.
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Picturing Russia's Men, a richly illustrated monograph, explores how the ideals of masculine virtue and stringent gender standards impacted the lives and shaped creative works of the constellation of nineteenth century Russia's most appreciated artists. Allison Leigh's innovative approach examines art production through masculinity studies in order to reveal how gender stereotypes and conflicting desires were reflected in artists' practices and aspirations and how they formed nineteenth century Russian art as we know it. Leigh's primary focus is on the "short" nineteenth century, the period between 1825, the aftermath of the Decembrist rebellion, and 1881, the year of Alexander II's assassination. It encompasses the most important shifts in Russian imperial history, but contrasts with the common term, "long nineteenth century," which encapsulates the historic period from 1789 to 1914 in western Europe. This alternative periodization "echoes the rise of Russia's earliest modern art movements, namely, romanticism and realism" (20). The book includes three parts, each divided into two chapters, which Leigh defines as "microhistories of the masculine." She analyzes several micronarrative case studies and dissects individual biographies to explore how "both gender norms and the ways men negotiated, upheld, or transgressed them—often all three—over the course of a lifetime" (21).

The first part, "Autocratic Masculinity," is devoted to Karl Briullov and Pavel Fedotov. "A military-style education," subordination and rigidity were the basis of a hierarchical social order and were commonly reflected in the patriarchal, oppressive relationship between fathers and sons (39). Leigh examines Briullov's unfinished self-portraits and concludes that his inability to complete the self-portraits resulted from the artist's complex relationship with his father. Fedotov's transformation from a military officer to an artist and his contradictory experiences of masculinity is the subject of second chapter. Leigh views Fedotov's paintings of masculine worlds, such as his friends in the regiment or men playing cards, as tokens of the artist's belonging to a conventional manhood. Fedotov's "failure as a captain, as an artist, and as a man" and his shifts from "one set of norms to another" resulted in a tragic fiasco to meet societal expectations and lead to a breakdown (92).

The second part, "Homosociality and Homoeroticism," features chapters about Alexander Ivanov and the Artel of Artists. Ivanov's life and art are seen through the prism of his self-asserted homosexual identity. Male nudes, homoerotic ephebes and androgynous figures in his works suggest that "sexuality and its investment in real bodies are mobile, existing in a state of flux that goes against heteronormative assumptions about male desire" (117). The Artel of Artists was formed as a result of the revolt of fourteen students who exited the Academy of Arts due to their rejection