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The Antichrist and His Plot Against Russia: Conspiracy Theories and Eschatology

Abstract

In post-Soviet Russia, there is a relatively widespread conviction that events such as the Bolshevik Revolution, World War II, and the collapse of the Soviet Union were not the results of historical contingency but of a complex vicious plot exercised by some evil forces aiming to destroy Russia. Depending on political needs, the enemy plotting against Russia has the face of a Jew, Muslim, Freemason, oligarch, or liberal, operating both from outside and inside of the country. Interestingly, many conservatives and religious fundamentalists seem to believe that the plot against Russia is orchestrated not by human agents but by the embodiment of all evil and the herald of the end of the world – the Antichrist. In my paper, I will address these beliefs and discuss the proximity between conspiracy theories and eschatological discourses. Referring to the literal meaning of the Greek word *apokalypsis* (to disclose, to unveil), I will attempt to explain the role of apocalyptic and conspiratorial narratives that offer to reveal the hidden reality behind what ordinary people can see. Also, I will demonstrate their implications in the broader context of the public discourse in contemporary Russia.

Keywords: post-Soviet Russia, eschatology, conspiracy theories, apocalyptic narratives, Antichrist.

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From Margins to Mainstream

Numerous Russian Orthodox radicals imagine that the Antichrist and his agents have been plotting for centuries to destroy Russia. According to them, apocalyptic forces not only inspired Patriarch Nikon's 17th-century reforms, which resulted in the split (*Raskol*) within the Russian Orthodox Church, but are also behind the diabolic reforms introduced by Peter the Great, the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution, the murder of the Romanovs as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to the unrest of the 1990s. But why are the Antichrist and his acolytes portrayed as such staunch enemies of Russia in religious and conservative discourses? One of the reasons is that the Antichrist is believed to be a committed Russophobe, who despises Russia because of its political, military, and – above all – moral power (Borenstein, 2019; Dolińska-Rydzek, 2021). Indeed, after the fall of Constantinople in the 15th century, Russians believed that they were the only nation that preserved the true Christian faith (Orthodox), and thus Russia was the *Katechon*¹ – the force restraining the Antichrist's arrival in the world.²

Although the beliefs discussed above may seem peculiar and odd, Russian historian and ethnologist Viktor Shnirel'man (2017) argues that they could imperceptibly pass into the mainstream. Even while remaining on the fringes of public discourse, they still influence the imagination of certain – in this case quite substantial – parts of Russian society. Furthermore, the conviction that the Antichrist is behind all misfortunes facing Russia fits into the broader context of conspiracy theories that bloomed on the ruins of the USSR. Indeed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, large parts of Russian society turned to all-embracing narratives that helped them to deal with the anxieties resulting from rapid political, economic and social changes (Khlebnikov, 2012, p. 398; Ortmann & Heathershaw,

¹ *Katechon* is a biblical concept that appears in the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians; it derives from Greek and can be translated as “that which withholds” and “the one that restrains”. Thus, in the Christian tradition, it is believed that *Katechon* is a power that hinders the rule of the Antichrist. Since it does not have established spatial or temporal characteristics, it is believed that the status of *Katechon* could be inherited by any Christian state (Dolińska-Rydzek, 2021). According to Maria Engström (2014), *Katechonic* rhetoric is present in the current Russian political discourse and can be found, for instance, in Putin's speeches.

² This belief is also connected to the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome – the rightful heir of Constantinople and thus the only truly Orthodox empire.

2012; Oushakine, 2009). According to Lynne Viola (1990), apocalyptic discourses often play the same role – they mitigate the fear of the unknown, help to cope with the unexpected, and console the community confronted with a threat or oppression.

In this article, I aim to demonstrate the evident proximity between conspiracy theories and apocalyptic narratives. For this purpose, I discuss three conspiracy theories relatively popular in post-Soviet Russia: a theory about the existence of a Jewish plot aimed at ruling the world and about the authenticity of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the concept of the Invisible Khazaria, and the legend about the computer named Beast that controls humanity and is based in Brussels. All of them not only claim to disclose an all-encompassing conspiracy to destroy Russia and even the entire world, but also allude to eschatological themes, including the apocalyptic figure of the Antichrist. It is important to emphasise that these conspiracy theories prevalent among Russian conservative and religious milieus, like all the other conspiratorial narratives, are mainly distributed through the Runet,³ which plays a crucial role in importing these discourses into the mainstream.

Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatised Knowledge

In recent years, conspiracy theories in Russia and beyond have become a frequent subject of scientific research.⁴ Their rapidly growing popularity has shown that even if a mode of thinking and interpreting the world characteristic of some parts of society might seem absurd and odd, it should not be disregarded. One of the most prominent examples is the Watergate scandal in 1972 – people who, from the beginning, believed that the Nixon administration was involved in the break-in into the Watergate Office Building, which was the Democratic National Committee headquarters, were discredited as paranoid. In this context, the bon mot “just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you” attributed to Joseph Heller, author of *Catch 22*, seems to be grounded in reality. Considering that

³ A Russian-language section of the Internet that has become a prominent research topic in Russian studies in recent years. See, for example: Davydov (2021); Konradova & Schmidt (2014).

⁴ Apart from the works quoted, there exists a vast literature on conspiracy theories and how they are appropriated in the realm of politics and beyond. See, for instance: Bale (2007); Brotherton (2015); Byford (2011); Coady (2006); Pipes (1997).

conspiracy theories are one of many examples of modes of thinking, when studying them it is important to keep a scientific distance and not to fall into the tempting trap of oversimplification. Overall, as Giovanna Parmigiani (2021, p. 506) insists, “conspiracy theories are not fringe ideas, tucked neatly away in the dark corners of society. They are politically, economically, and socially relevant to all of us”.

The view that believing in conspiracy theories is an example of paranoia originates from Richard Hofstadter’s seminal study *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1966). According to him, a conspiracy theory is a conviction about a “vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character” and aiming to “undermine and destroy a way of life” (Hofstadter, 1966, p. 14). To explain how such narratives work, he employed the notion of “paranoia”, taken from clinical psychology, and insisted that what contributes to spreading conspiracy theories within a given political community is fear. In a similar vein, Mark Fenster (2008) and Ilya Yablokov (2018) argue that, by using social anxieties, conspiratorial narratives serve as a tool of political manipulation.

Nevertheless, throughout the years, many scholars have criticised the approach proposed by Hofstadter as being too reductionist. According to them, Hofstadter’s theory not only marks conspiracy theories as an example of political extremism but also fails to see them as specific explanatory models. In other words, conspiracy theories should not be reduced to the attribution of clinical paranoid tendencies because, rather, they represent a particular hermeneutic style of explaining reality which, due to its internal logic, provides people with overarching narratives that order the world and make it seem a safer place in their perception (Bratich, 2008).

Following this line of thought, Clare Birchall (2006) provides an interesting perspective on conspiracy theories. She insists that they are an example of “popular knowledge” – not only do they “arise out of radical doubt about how knowledge is produced” but also, thanks to the mass media and popular culture, become “open to a wide range of people”. Michael Barkun (2003) also refers to the links between knowledge production and belief in conspiracy theories. According to him, conspiratorial discourses are an example of what he calls “stigmatised knowledge”, which he defines as “claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalisation of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error – universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like” (Barkun, 2003, p. 26). According to Barkun, the fact that the so-called

“knowledge producers” stigmatise and ridicule conspiracy theories often contributes to their credibility: those who believe in them seem to think that the fact that they are being silenced means that there indeed exists a secret plot. Following Barkun’s argument, in this study I approach conspiracy theories as the result of suspicion towards hegemonic discourses and how knowledge is produced as well as an example of comforting narratives, which impose order on an incomprehensible and complex reality.

Unveiling What Cannot Be Seen

The belief that there exists a reality hidden from the sight of “ordinary people” characterises not only conspiracy theories. A similar conviction is at the heart of apocalyptic discourses which do not so much warn of the coming end of the world as try to make sense of the chaos and randomness of the surrounding reality. In this context, it is important to understand that “apocalypse” is not simply a doomsday as we know it from countless works of pop culture. Rather, it is a kind of discourse that reached the peak of its development in the 1st century AD. John Joseph Collins, an Old Testament scholar, provides the following definition:

[Apocalypse is] a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing transcendental reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. (Collins, 1979, p. 9)

In other words, the “apocalypse” is not a synonym for “catastrophe”, as many tend to think. Instead, it is a type of narrative that not only intends to unveil what is hidden behind the known reality but also attempts to transcend the present, earthly circumstances and interprets them in the light of God’s intentions (Yarbro Collins, 1996).

The most canonical apocalyptic narrative in human history is the Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse of John. Written in a mystical and symbolic language, nearly two millennia after its composition the last book of the New Testament remains puzzling and mysterious. Through the centuries, almost every aspect of this prophecy has stimulated numerous analyses, debates, and interpretations. Not only the date of its creation and the historical circumstances in which it emerged were subject to controversy, but also the authorship and the meaning of the opaque symbols and eerie images with which it is suffused. Nevertheless, there exists a consensus that the Book of Revelation was a response to

the persecutions of early Christians in the Roman Empire (Bauckham, 1993). By concealing historical events under multilevel metaphors, John's prophecy was supposed to serve as a consoling narrative to bring hope to the repressed minority by promising a moral triumph over evil in an unspecified future. In this context, John is a "human recipient" who had a "revelation" and now reveals to his people the concealed truth about God's intentions behind mundane events.

As already mentioned, conspiracy theories work in a very similar way. Therefore, in a sense, they can be approached as new versions of apocalyptic discourses. Karl Popper (1967), who dealt with conspiratorial theories at a similar time as Hofstadter, claimed that they owed their popularity to the fact that they offered an answer to the processes of secularisation that led to the gradual removal of religion from the public space. He called conspiracy theories "the secularisation of religious superstition", where God was replaced with "the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists". In this context, the place of deities was taken by omnipotent individuals and groups governing politics and economics, "miracles" were replaced by "secrets", and the truth became hidden from the "ordinary man in the street" behind a "superficial and misleading veil" through which only the chosen ones – "seers, prophets, apocalyptic thinkers" – could see (Hagemester, 2006, p. 252; Panchenko, 2020).

Another commonality between conspiracy theories and apocalyptic discourses is that they resemble traditional and mythical modes of thinking. They impose the Manichean view on politics and history and help to unite a given community against the ultimate evil "Other", often seen as "a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman – sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving" (Raab, 2016, p. 85). In addition, both types of narrative have an ahistorical character. In them, the fight between good and evil, just like the existence of a mysterious conspiracy, is imminent – not only do they present each conflict as an earthly reflection of the struggle between Christ and the Antichrist, but they also blur the boundaries between past and present. In consequence, historical and political events are interpreted arbitrarily in accordance with specific ideological needs in order to "reduce the complexity presented by such events, contain the uncertainty they generate, and translate unspecific anxiety into focused fears" (Barrett & Lawson, 2001).

Interestingly, many conspiracy theories are not only eschatological in nature, but also spread in a similar manner to apocalyptic fears (Murawska, 2016). This process has accelerated with the development of popular

culture and the internet, where one can find a plethora of narratives according to which all political, economic and health crises – from all kinds of wars to the Covid-19 pandemic – are the result of the Antichrist’s work and herald the imminent end of the world. Such narratives are especially popular among religious and conservative circles, who see themselves as oppressed minorities and believe that the goal of fighting the ultimate enemy of Christ sanctifies even the most extreme means. In this context, Russian conservative and Orthodox milieus are no exception. According to them, all the misfortunes that have plagued Russia for centuries, including the *Raskol*, Napoleon’s invasion, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the collapse of the Soviet Union are the result of the actions of the Antichrist and his minions, who, depending on the needs, include communists, liberals, Catholics, homosexuals, Jews, Khazars, Ukrainians, and many others (Dolińska-Rydzek, 2021). To demonstrate further that there is clear proximity between conspiracy theories and apocalyptic discourses, in the following sections I discuss three examples of conspiratorial narratives that claim to reveal wicked plots orchestrated by the Antichrist and aimed at destroying Russia, in which politics is presented as a battlefield of the ultimate fight between good and evil.

The Fate of a Certain Pamphlet

The collapse of the Soviet Union contributed to the emergence of ideas that had so far “buzzed” underneath the surface. This applies not only to anti-communist and liberal worldviews but also to right-wing and religious discourses. Moreover, new forms of spirituality such as the New Age have become fashionable among certain parts of Russian society, along with belief in astrology, UFO, and other paranormal phenomena (Panchenko, 2018). Like many other previously suppressed narratives and ideas, conspiracy theories also made their way into the public debate. This process was accelerated by popular culture and the increasing accessibility of the internet. Also contributing to their popularity was the free circulation of writings and speeches by various public figures, including Metropolitan Ioann Snychev, Aleksandr Nazarov, Oleg Platonov, Tatyana Gracheva, and Olga Chetverikova,⁵ who tried to explain a complex reality in an understandable

⁵ All of these authors are from religious and conservative backgrounds. Being public figures – clergymen, writers, journalists, and academics – they leave their mark on public discourse in post-Soviet Russia, especially on the right side of the political spectrum.

way, often claiming that the misfortunes befalling Russia and the Russian people were orchestrated by the Antichrist and his servants (Laruelle, 2012; Oushakine, 2009; Yablokov, 2018). Indeed, many conspiracy theories that became popular in the 1990s and whose popularity has survived to this day, being especially present among conservative and right-wing circles of Russian society, often employ eschatological and apocalyptic ideas. Their prevalence is rooted in the specificity of Russian culture, which in times of crisis and uncertainty often turns to eschatological themes (Dolińska-Rydzek, 2021; Shnirel'man, 2017).

It is important to note that Russia is not alone in its fascination with conspiracy theories. In recent years, we can observe their growing popularity in other countries as well, including the United States, which is the source of many conspiratorial beliefs that have spread worldwide (Hellinger, 2019). As argued by Eliot Borenstein (2019), conspiracy theories tend to migrate across time and space. The most famous example of such a narrative is *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a pamphlet that for over a century has fuelled the antisemitic conviction that behind the great anti-Christian plot are the Jews, who aim to gain global domination. Translated into around 50 languages and claimed to be nearly as famous as the Bible, through the decades *The Protocols* has inspired numerous antisemitic actions. The text not only served as an inspiration for pogroms in the Russian Empire in the years 1905–1907, but was also used to justify the anti-Jewish Nazi ideology (Cohn, 2006).

Despite a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the origins of *The Protocols*, there is a consensus that the pamphlet was created in the early 20th century and was most likely politically inspired. In all probability, it was created in Paris by representatives of the *Okhrana* (Russian secret police) – Pyotr Rachkovsky, Ivan Manasevich-Manuilov, and Matvey Golovinsky (Aptekman, 2006; Boym, 1999). At the time of its publication, many considered it to be authentic minutes taken during 24 secret meetings of the Jewish Sanhedrin, and it was only after a few years that the pamphlet was exposed as a forgery combining a few texts published at the end of the 19th century – Maurice Joly's *Dialogues in Hell*, Herman Goedzsche's novel *Biarritz*, and Wilhelm Marr's brochure describing Jewish victory over the German people.

While *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* travelled to the West together with the so-called “white emigration” after the Bolshevik Revolution, in Russia it owes its popularity to Sergey Nilus, an extravagant playboy who eventually turned into a religious radical obsessed with the Antichrist

(Aptekman, 2006, p. 13). Although he was not the first to publish *The Protocols* in Russia – it was done by Pavel Krushevyan in his newspaper *Znamya* [The Banner] in 1903 – the pamphlet resonated in Russian society only after being added as an appendix to Nilus' book *The Great within the Small and the Antichrist as an Imminent Political Possibility* (1905).⁶ This was a collection of essays discussing the bleak future of Russia and the world plunging into chaos, the cause of which was the Antichrist. Nilus claimed that the rapid changes happening worldwide such as industrialisation, urbanisation, and secularisation proved that the plan of the Elders of Zion was working. The final catastrophe, according to him, could only be prevented by Russia remaining the only genuinely Orthodox Empire and, thus, the Katechon (Hagemester, 2006).

The popularity of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* returned to Russia like a boomerang in the late 1980s due to the rediscovery of Nilus' ideas by the so-called “new Russian right”. While his religious writings were forbidden and pushed underground during the Soviet times, after the collapse of the Soviet Union they have made a remarkable comeback. While Nilus became one of the most important figures for post-Soviet Russian nationalists, associated mainly with the radical *Pamyat* [Memory] movement (Laqueur, 1993), *The Protocols* – published in thousands of copies and distributed through various official and unofficial channels – quickly earned bestseller status. Its popularity has not waned even after it was officially banned in 2010 and placed on the Russian Federal List of Extremist Materials (Minjust.ru), which is an indication of both antisemitic sentiments present in post-Soviet Russian society and the urgent need to find a convincing explanation for what is happening in the surrounding world.

Michael Hagemester (2008), a German historian and Slavist, insists that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which is a flagship example of a conspiratorial narrative, has a lot in common with apocalyptic discourses. Not only does the text explain the reality as a fight between good and evil but also, along with the Book of Revelation and other apocalyptic discourses, it promises to uncover the truth hidden from the eyes of “mere mortals” and unmasks the Jews as the ones behind the anti-Christian conspiracy aimed at destroying Russia and the whole world. In this context, by being

⁶ Another Nilus' book containing *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is *Near Is the Coming of Antichrist and the Kingdom of the Devil on Earth*, published in 1911 by the Holy Trinity Monastery at Sergiyev Posad, which to this day remains a cult site among Russian nationalists.

connected to the apocalyptic figure of the Antichrist, the Jews are portrayed as malicious schemers and eternal enemies of Christ. Although created in the early 20th century, due to its ahistorical character the conspiracy theory about the Elders of Zion plotting to gain power over humanity seems contemporary and relevant. Furthermore, as Svetlana Boym (1999) and Marina Aptekman (2006) suggest, *The Protocols*, similarly to apocalyptic narratives, is a response to emotional uncertainty present in times of chaos and turmoil. It not only explains in a simple way what is wrong and why, but also gives people a sense of moral superiority over the enemy and takes the responsibility away from them by saying that whatever they might do, there are very influential forces outside that hinder all their efforts. In other words, when it all comes crashing down, to many people a Jewish anti-Christian conspiracy seems to be the best explanation for political and economic crises.

Revenge of the Invisible Khazaria

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is not the only example of an eschatological conspiracy theory that contains antisemitic threads. According to Shnirel'man, the combination of the conviction that there exists a wicked plot orchestrated by the Antichrist with a belief that it is executed by his minions, who happen to be Jewish, is relatively common. An interesting example is the theory about the existence of the Invisible Khazaria, put forth by Tatiana Gracheva, head of the Department of Russian and Foreign Languages at the Military Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, in her book series: *The Invisible Khazaria: Algorithms of Geopolitics and Strategies of Secret Wars of the World's Backstage* (2009), *The Memory of the Russian Soul* (2011), and *The Last Temptation of Russia: For Which War Should Russia Prepare Itself* (2013). Gracheva does not use the word "Jews", but since the Khazars were followers of Judaism, in her works the word "Khazar" becomes a synonym of the word "Jew".

In her books, Gracheva demonstrates her interpretation of global politics being a constant struggle between good and evil. As she insists, the Invisible Khazaria is a secret community, the members of which hold prominent positions in international organisations such as the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union. According to Gracheva, they are all enemies of Orthodox Russia, which is the last and only obstacle on their way to creating the global empire headed by the Antichrist (Bassin, 2016; Dolińska-Rydzek, 2021). In her book *The Memory of the Russian Soul*, she writes:

The globalisation of historical memory is aimed at dismantling our Orthodox identity, which is the foundation of our statehood. The goal here is to form a global, ecumenical identity, and to include our people into the global kingdom of the antichrist as slaves and victims to be slaughtered. (Gracheva, 2011, p. 39)⁷

Gracheva believes that one of the steps for Khazaria and the Antichrist on their way to gaining power over the world is to introduce ecumenism. However, to achieve this, they must first destroy Russia. Why is this so important? Firstly, along with many other conservative post-Soviet Russian thinkers, Gracheva is convinced that Russia is the only state where genuinely Christian values are preserved. Secondly, to destroy Russia would be the Khazars' revenge for the crushing of their khaganate in 965 by Sviatoslav the Brave, prince of Kievan Rus' – the history of which Russia acquired as its own.

What is particularly interesting given the Russian aggression against Ukraine, first in 2014, and a full scale invasion in 2022, in her writings Gracheva devotes much space to Ukraine and Georgia. As she argues, due to the processes of Westernisation inspired by NATO, both these countries have become the anti-Russian “centres of the Khazar's revenge”. In her view, Kyiv is particularly Russophobic, as it is currently occupied by Khazars, loyal servants of the Antichrist, who are planning their attack on Russia. This occupation, however, is only temporary. According to Gracheva, the memory of Sviatoslav's victory will soon prevail, “ignite people's hearts”, and “in spiritual warfare will sweep away all these evil spirits, no matter how strong and invincible they may seem now” (Gracheva, 2009, 2011). Only a decade ago, Gracheva's words might have elicited a mocking smile or concern about her condition; today they are a disturbing illustration of how an anti-Ukrainian narrative has been constructed in Russia for years. Although Khazars have been replaced by “Nazis” and “fascists” in the dominant Russian narratives, the way the enemy is established and dehumanised remains the same.

In her books, Gracheva employs the whole conspiratorial arsenal. Not only does she name the enemies and attribute supernatural powers to them, but she also explains in simple terms where Russia's misfortunes have come from. Furthermore, as already stated, in her writings the Khazars share many features with the bloodthirsty and powerful Elders of Zion. Not only are they followers of Judaism,⁸ but they also play the same role as the Jews

⁷ If not stated otherwise, all translations are provided by the author.

⁸ In the 9th century, to centralise a heterogenous state established by a semi-nomadic Turkic nation, Judaism was introduced as the official religion of the Khazar empire (Shnirel'man, 2012).

in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – they serve as an image of the collective enemy whose main target is Orthodox Russia. In short, Gracheva perpetuates the conviction that like the Elders of Zion, the Khazars have three primary goals: the introduction of a new anti-Christian religion, the consolidation of power, and the creation of a unified state with Zionism and Marxism as its ideological foundations. The only difference is that the antisemitic discourse of the Judeo-Mason conspiracy is replaced here by the ostensibly neutral word “Khazar”. In consequence, Gracheva can simultaneously name Russia’s enemies based on antisemitic resentments present in Russian society and pretend that her theory is not antisemitic. After all, she does not say a bad word about Jews.

The idea of the Invisible Khazaria does not have as long a history or as extensive a scope as *The Protocols*. However, given that it was published in relatively big editions of 20,000 copies each, and the fact that Gracheva holds quite a prominent academic position, one can assume that her ideas can reach a significant number of people (Shnirel’man, 2012). Gracheva’s books have also been translated into other languages, including English and Polish.⁹ Of course, the spread of this conspiracy theory, like any other, is also greatly influenced by the internet.

Although not as widely known as *The Protocols*, Gracheva’s theory of the Invisible Khazaria also perpetuates antisemitic, anti-globalist and anti-Western views. Furthermore, Gracheva’s theory is a great demonstration of how conspiracy theories and apocalyptic narratives are often intertwined. In her books, Gracheva not only unveils to others that there exists a plot against Russia, but she also demonstrates that it has an ultimate dimension – as she argues, the existence of Holy Rus’ is endangered by the Khazars, who are servants of the Antichrist. As in the case of other conspiracy theories and the Book of Revelation, there is an illuminated individual (in this case Gracheva) who, prophetically, convinces us that they have looked right through the lining of the world and have figured out the truth hidden from the majority. Now they share this discovery with others and warn of the lurking danger to humanity.

⁹ Interestingly, the book *The Invisible Khazaria: Algorithms of Geopolitics and Strategies of Secret Wars of the World’s Backstage*, published in Poland in 2015 by a small and rather questionable publishing house called *Zapiski* (Notes), is distributed by reputable bookstores such as Znak and PWN.

Electronic Mark of the Beast

Another conspiracy theory that employs apocalyptic motifs and is especially popular among Russian conservatives is the conviction that there exists a “computer named Beast” based in Brussels. Aleksandr Panchenko (2018), a Russian ethnologist who researches conspiracy theories, looked into the origins of this narrative and concluded that it was invented in the 1970s within extreme evangelical circles in the United States, and from there has travelled to other countries, including Russia. Several texts significantly inspired its content. One of them is the anonymous article “The Attack of the Beast” published in 1981 in the Russian journal *Niva* [Cornfield] founded by Pavel Vaulin, a Soviet émigré professor at the University of South Alabama. There are many indications that the article was indeed a translation of an excerpt from the book *When Your Money Fails* (1981) written by Mary Stewart Relfe, a radical evangelical preacher arguing that the international banking system is based on the “number of the Beast” – 666 – and that somewhere in Luxembourg there exists the Computer Beast which controls all banking operations (Shnirel’man, 2017, pp. 127–130).

According to the most widespread variant of this conspiracy theory, there exists a supercomputer based in Brussels that tracks every action of every person in the world. The main goal of its existence is to connect banks all over the world and to progressively enforce a new money system in which everyone will be made to accept an individual number that will replace the credit card. It will be tattooed on the right hand, and no financial transaction will be possible without it. The number is supposed to consist of three groups of six digits, and it will be the apocalyptic mark of the Antichrist as foretold in the Book of Revelation (Barkun, 2003, p. 44; Fuller, 1995, p. 181). Overall, belief in the existence of a supercomputer controlling everything and everyone stems from the anxiety caused by globalisation, distrust of centrally managed cash flows, and the rapid development of new technologies. Also, it fits into a broader trend of technophobia present among Russian conservative and Russian Orthodox milieus, who tend to connect cash flows, stock markets, and credit cards with the apocalyptic Beast.

Furthermore, in many Russian religious and right-wing discourses, the aversion towards modern financial systems often has antisemitic undertones, as the Jews have historically been associated with money and finance. Both in this respect and due to its anti-Western overtones, the conspiracy theory about the computer named Beast based in Brussels

corresponds with the other two conspiratorial narratives discussed in this study. All of them not only see enemies of Russia as servants of the Antichrist who, by the way, are followers of Judaism, but also perceive the West as a hotbed of all evil. In this regard, they channel the anti-Western sentiments of the Russian conservative and religious milieus, which tend to view the conflict between Russia and the West as not mere political rivalry but an earthly reflection of the spiritual battle between Christ and the Antichrist.

Conclusions

In the case of post-Soviet Russia, both conspiracy theories and apocalyptic discourses gained significant popularity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Whereas the emergence of conspiracy theories is a response to a reality that is increasingly difficult to understand, the growing popularity of apocalyptic discourses is an indication of a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity. To demonstrate the proximity between conspiracy theories and apocalyptic discourses, I chose to discuss three conspiratorial narratives that employ apocalyptic motifs: the theory about the existence of the Elders of Zion, the idea of the invisible Khazaria, and the belief in the existence of a supercomputer named Beast. Not only are they relatively widespread and popular in today's Russia, but all of them also explain the existing reality in an apocalyptic key and spread fear of the Antichrist and his minions, who seek to destroy the Christian world, often represented by Orthodox Russia. Indeed, all these discourses promise to unveil what is hidden and unmask forces behind various events and processes, and, at the same time, they impose the Manichean view on politics and history. In them, reality becomes a battlefield between good and evil, where there is no space for ambiguities, grey zones, or in-between spaces.

Moreover, all the discourses discussed here have the potential to comfort and consolidate a community. When everything goes wrong and reality appears incomprehensible, complicated and hostile, these two types of narratives may provide relief. Although perceived by some as harmful nonsense, they are indeed examples of "stigmatised knowledge" (Barkun, 2003) – stemming from "a radical doubt about how knowledge is produced" (Birchall, 2006). Emerging in opposition to hegemonic discourse, they offer a coherent paradigm that helps to interpret the complex reality. In this regard, they serve as "healing narratives" that help to deal with uncertainties, anxieties, and dangers, both real and imagined.

Furthermore, conspiracy theories and apocalyptic narratives emerge in times of chaos and turmoil or when a group is persecuted. Thus, what they share is their alarmist character, as they are intended to draw the public's attention to the impending catastrophe. Just as persecuted Christians turned to apocalyptic discourses when they needed hope that evil would be finally defeated, adherents of conspiracy theories see all of the misfortunes that befall them as the result of a wicked plot. In conspiracy theories employing apocalyptic motifs popular among post-Soviet Russian religious and conservative circles, the victim is the whole country, harassed by internal and external enemies such as Judeo-Masons, representatives of the invisible Khazaria, demonic bankers, and others. In other words, in these narratives Russia is portrayed as a besieged fortress surrounded by enemies whose main aim is to destroy it for the sake of the Antichrist. In such a perspective, enemies are completely dehumanised, which means that to destroy them, any means are allowed.

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Antychryst i jego spisek przeciwko Rosji: teorie spiskowe i eschatologia

We współczesnej Rosji, podobnie jak w innych krajach, można zaobserwować rosnącą popularność teorii konspiracyjnych. Wiele osób jest przekonanych, że wydarzenia takie jak rewolucja bolszewicka, II wojna światowa czy upadek ZSRR nie były wynikiem przypadku, lecz skomplikowanego spisku, którego celem jest zniszczenie Rosji. W zależności od potrzeb politycznych wróg spiskujący przeciw Rosji ma twarz Żyda, muzułmanina, masona, oligarchy lub liberała, działającego zarówno z zewnątrz, jak i wewnątrz kraju. Co ciekawe, wielu rosyjskich prawosławnych fundamentalistów zdaje się wierzyć, że spisek przeciw Rosji nie jest dziełem ludzi, lecz Antychrysta – ostatecznego wroga chrześcijaństwa, który nie tylko uosabia wszelkie zło, ale też zwiastuje rychły koniec świata. W niniejszym artykule, odwołując się do dosłownego znaczenia greckiego słowa *apokalypsis*, czyli „odsłaniać, ujawniać”, zamierzam wykazać narracyjną bliskość teorii konspiracyjnych i dyskursów apokaliptycznych oraz omówić ich implikacje w kontekście debaty publicznej we współczesnej Rosji.

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja posowiecka, eschatologia, teorie spiskowe, narracje apokaliptyczne, Antychryst.

Note

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