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CONSPIRATORIAL THINKING AND THE LEGACY OF THE COLD WAR. FROM LATE SOVIET UNION TO PUTIN'S RUSSIA

Dmitry Asinovskiy

Abstract

The article discusses the phenomenon of conspiratorial thinking as an element of the ideological worldview among the political elites of the late Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. Noting significant differences and shifts, it stresses the continuity of certain patterns in the way conspiracy theories have been shaping the worldview and the decision-making of Soviet and Russian leadership. The article provides a theoretical background for the discussed concepts and contextualizes them for the specific circumstances of the Soviet/Russian political environment. It contributes historical background to the discussion mostly dominated by political scientists and introduces the Cold War as one of the principal origins of conspiratorial thinking in contemporary Russian political elites. The article also specifically addresses one of the conspiratorial themes that can be clearly traced as a Cold War legacy in contemporary Russian policymaking: the one on subversive activities of "the West" tied to violent regime changes in Soviet/Russian allied/client states.

Keywords: Conspiratorial thinking, Conspiracy theories, Cold War, Soviet Union, Post-Soviet Russia; Revolutions, Political Regime Changes; Ideology

1. Introduction

> There will be a war with the Turks […] The war with the Turks for sure, it is all fomented by the French (*frantsuz gadit*). (Gogol, 2011)

In one of his most famous plays, *The Government Inspector (Revizor),* Nikolai Gogol, through one of the secondary characters, postmaster Ivan Shpekin, coined the expression that eventually transformed into a most commonly used Russian cultural reference to the conspiratorial

explanation of geopolitical failures. For the contemporaries, the reading of the expression was unambiguous. Blaming the French for the upcoming war with the Turks was meant to be a sarcastic representation of a foolish habit to blame one's own failures on external powers. However, during the course of the 19th century, the rhetoric around the expression changed. On the one hand, some of those who referred to Gogol were not as convinced as the author's contemporaries that the sarcastic understanding of the phrase was still universally acknowledged. Anton Chekhov, in his letters, referred to Gogol with all seriousness, arguing that blaming "the French, the Jews, Kaiser Wilhelm, capitalists, freemasons, syndicalists, Jesuits" for the problems was not an obvious resort of the fools anymore, but rather a legitimate line of argument in late 19th-century Russia. On the other hand, while Chekhov and some other intellectuals who wrote about the phenomenon clearly referred to Gogol, for a broader public, the phrase "*frantsuz gadit*" got detached from the original source and by the 1870s miraculously transformed. A French man from Gogol's original turned into an English woman (*anglichanka*). Aleksandr Dolinin (2020) noted that this gave the formula a more common flavor opposing to Gogol's literary one. Dolinin fairly explained this transformation: *anglichanka* was a clear reference to Queen Victoria and metonymically to Great Britain. As the Russo-British geopolitical confrontation characterized most of the 19th century, it should not surprise that in the Russian popular consciousness, *anglichanka* became the subversive source of all evil.

By the early 20th century, following the Anglo-Boer War, when the phrase reached its maximum publicity, it had completely lost its sarcastic origins for many Russian nationalist conservative commentators. Instead, it was often presented in their writings as ancient folk wisdom, while its connection to Gogol completely vanished (Dolinin, 2020). Fascinatingly, a century later, this conservative tradition resurfaced after the relative fading out of the phrase in the official discourse and its active sarcastic use in the intelligentsia "kitchen talks" in the Soviet period. In 2016, the anchor of the Russian propaganda television, Dmitrii Kiselev, referred to "*anglichanka gadit*" as "a many centuries-old idiom, so stable in the Russian language, that it seems ineradicable," following the reference with a "news bloc" full of anti-British propaganda (Vesti.Ru, 2016).

This resurrection of the century-old notion of "folk wisdom about British conspiracies" fitted conveniently in the narrative about the evil "West" promoted by Russian propaganda since the mid-2000s. Ilya Yablokov (2018) convincingly showed that the conspiratorial thinking related to

domestic and foreign policy in post-Soviet Russia mostly originated from the political elites that instrumentalized it for the regime's benefit. In this sense, post-Soviet Russia, in Yablokov's terms, was reminiscent of the Middle East, where, according to several researchers, the state traditionally served as the primary source of conspiratorial narratives (Gray, 2010).

The argument about the instrumental use of political conspiracy theories by the post-Soviet Russian leadership also seems legitimate because of the selectiveness in choosing specific theories. While various conspiracy theories about the evil hand of "the West" have been flourishing, other conspiratorial ideas, extremely popular in the past, have been ignored or even actively suppressed by the state. One obvious example is the variety of antisemitic theories about a secret Jewish plot to rule the world. The most famous historical document representing this set of conspiracy theories, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* was not coincidentally fabricated in early 20th-century Russia. In the decades that followed, Russia's place in constructing antisemitic narratives was one of the most important on a global scale. In the last years of the Soviet Union and the first decade following its collapse, these narratives underwent a massive popular revival. These old conspiracy theories, including *The Protocols* and a myriad of new antisemitic myths, reached an extreme popularity (Rossman, 2002). However, under Vladimir Putin, these conspiracy theories received no support from the state. On the contrary, some of the officials and propagandists who tried to employ these narratives were forced to retract their statements and publicly apologize (Yablokov, 2019). Although it is likely that following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the rise of imperial nationalism would push those deeply hidden popular beliefs to the surface of the state's instrumentalization, as of now, this example serves as evident proof of the Russian regime's selectiveness in the promotion of only some particular political conspiracy theories.[1]

Yet this selectiveness does not necessarily mean that the use of conspiracy theories for mass mobilization against the constructed Other is an exclusively pragmatic exploitation of ideas that those in power do not believe in. On the contrary, I argue that personal beliefs espoused in the ideological worldview of the leaders of contemporary Russia serve as a foundation for their selectiveness. In other words, while pragmatic motives play their role in the instrumentalization of certain conspiracy theories, the main reason of the Russian elites for employing these conspiratorial narratives is their own deeply engrained conspiratorial thinking.

That said, the argument about someone's 'true beliefs' is, by definition, unprovable, and as Kragh et al. (2022) show, "since a person's worldview is not directly observable […] we can never conclude definitively that a person who promotes conspiracy theories actually believes in them". Similarly, the adherence to a specific conspiracy theory does not imply that the person's worldview is conspiratorial in general, and the unwillingness to promote a particular conspiracy theory does not necessarily mean freedom from conspiratorial thinking as a mode of analysis. Nevertheless, I follow Kragh et al. (2022) in assuming that "analyses and opinions produced in these fields [foreign and security policy] reflect an established worldview and that such opinions can influence security and foreign policy thinking". Moreover, while for the political scientific analysis of conspiratorial beliefs among contemporary politicians, we simply lack sufficient sources, the historical analysis based on limited yet unique archival sources that include previously classified and unintended for the public internal communications between the decision-makers provide a much more grounded base for analyzing the impropriation of conspiratorial thinking by the political elites.

The rise of conspiratorial thinking among the elites of Putin's Russia, especially in the last decade, is not a breakthrough academic finding. Despite the relative neglect of the post-Soviet space in the studies of contemporary political conspiracy theories, several scholars addressed this issue in their works. Most of these researchers focused on the social origins of the Russian elites, namely their background in the military and secret services (Fedor, 2011; Kragh et al., 2022)[2]. This is indeed an important social characteristic that explains an excessive inclination towards suspiciousness and conspiratorial thinking. After all, the agents of the KGB First Chief Directorate (Soviet Foreign Intelligence Service) were trained to organize the so-called "active measures" against the adversary that would include a variety of subversive activities (Mitrokhin and Andrew, 1999). Therefore, the ideological worldview of those KGB veterans, including Vladimir Putin, who are now leading Russia, inevitably included "active measures" as an immanent tool of international relations. Consciously or not, Russian leaders with a background in the KGB use their training in their politics and seek "active measures" employed against their regime.

Previous researchers also reasonably pointed out that for many of the military and KGB veterans, including those who achieved leading positions in post-Soviet Russia, conspiracy theories about the evil hand of "the West" serve as a therapeutic measure that helps them

deal with the trauma of the Soviet collapse. For example, Fedor (2011) refers to the psychological research of Robins and Post (1997), arguing that "conspiratorial thinking offers a possible form of defense against humiliation". This psychoanalytical theory works perfectly to explain the multitude of conspiracy theories about the Western plot to dismember the Soviet Union. These theories survived the collapse of the USSR and reappeared in the form of a narrative about a new plot to dismember post-Soviet Russia.

Indeed, some of the conspiracy theories most evidently popular among the Russian elites are based on invented and forged documents and statements allegedly produced by U.S. officials and supposedly proving the intention of the United States to dismember the Soviet Union or post-Soviet Russia. One of these forgeries is the infamous "Dulles Plan," the document allegedly designed by the FBI director Allen Dulles in the 1940s that outlined a grandiose plan to destroy the Russian nation (Golunov and Smirnova, 2016; Fedor, 2011). Another example of a forged base for this kind of conspiracy theory, employed on record by Russian officials (in this particular case, at a level as high as the former Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev) is the fake statement of the former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, in which she allegedly claimed that neither Siberia nor the Far East belonged to Russia and, thus, needed to be separated from it (Kragh et al., 2022). Thus, the conspiracy theories based on the trauma of the Soviet collapse certainly proliferated among the elites of Putin's Russia. However, unlike Fedor (2011), I am not convinced that "many former chekists have turned to conspiracy theories as a way of making sense of the traumatic events of the past few decades". I argue that they did not need to *turn* to conspiratorial thinking, as it had already been a part of their ideological worldview, as well as of the ideological worldview of their patrons at the Central Committee (CC) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) long before the Soviet collapse[3].

While contemporary times boosted "the conspiracy culture" through new means of communication such as social media, the Cold War era was a period no less favorable for the development of a conspiratorial mindset[4]. The Cold War ideological confrontation indeed served as a uniquely fertile environment for conspiratorial thinking. Ortmann and Heathershaw (2012), in their pathbreaking article on the lack of sufficient research on conspiratorial thinking in the post-Soviet space, fairly argued that

> Conspiracy theories continued to abound during the Soviet period, not least as part of narratives of the demonization of the Western or Soviet "Other" that fed upon one another, proliferating in a climate of mutual distrust that gave rise to narrative structures that could equally be found in a John Le Carre novel and in purportedly more somber official reports.

Since the studies of conspiracy theories originated in the United States and started from Richard Hofstadter's (1964) work on the paranoid style in American politics, it is not surprising that the U.S. Cold War conspiracy culture is researched far more profoundly than the Soviet side. For one example, Melley (2008) shows how the concept of "brainwashing" appeared in the political discourse during the course and the aftermath of the Korean War as a conspiratorial explanation for a multitude of U.S. PoW's defections and refusals to be repatriated. It was later appropriated by the popular culture and has been normalized in the consciousness of mass audience as an actual practice, despite being a conspiratorial fantasy defined by the Cold War environment. This case study showed that the Cold War ideological confrontation was essential for the transformation of "the conspiracy theory" as a notion. As Melley (2008) argued, "the term *conspiracy* has migrated from its classical sense of a contained plot toward the mysterious operations of a vast *organization, technology, or system*. Since the Cold War, 'conspiracies' have insistently been seen as the work of entities so dispersed and obscure that they are the very antithesis of the traditional conspiracy." In addition, Melley fairly suggested that the growth of the covert sphere in the Cold War times added to the spread of conspiratorial beliefs. The same "brainwashing" theory could not become a viable popular myth without the existence of actual covert experiments in "psychological warfare" conducted in the CIA that simultaneously led to presumptions that the adversary pursued the same path of military-related research, perhaps with more success. Lastly and most importantly, the case of "brainwashing" shows us that the popularity of the rise of conspiratorial thinking in the Cold War period is tied to the fact that it provided a way to think about ideology (Melley, 2008). "Brainwashing" is an extreme example of the ideology's supposed influence on a person's mind, with an underlying thesis that the ideology can be used to falsify the 'normal' mind.

Cold War narratives in the United States traditionally claimed that it was the Soviet Union that was dominated by the ideology, whereas the United States was the bulwark of unideological 'normality'. In this sense,

conspiracy theories allowed to explain the deviation of certain Americans from 'normality' through conscious, well-planned, subversive ideological warfare efforts of the adversary. Since the times of the Cold War, the alleged non-ideological essence of a U.S. liberal democracy was repeatedly challenged and discarded (Hunt, 1987; Westad, 2005). The United States was an ideological side of the Cold War, with the conspiratorial thinking being one of the important symptoms of its involvement in the ideological confrontation. However, the discussion about ideology is not limited to the simple question of its existence or non-existence. For decades, historians of the Cold War have been arguing about what the ideology truly was and what role it played in connection to actual decision-making. If we look at the Soviet case, for quite a while, the discussion revolved around the dichotomy of ideology and pragmatism in foreign policy decision-making during the Cold War. In other words, the question was whether the Soviet Union was ruled by ideologically charged people, or Soviet ideology was just a façade for a realist geopolitical struggle[5]. Although this discussion is unlikely to be over any time soon, several scholars offered a challenge to this dichotomy, arguing that ideology and pragmatism are not mutually exclusive (Gould-Davies, 1999; Kramer, 1999). Building on this argument, I use *ideological worldview*, a term I borrowed from Michael David-Fox (2015), to include both formal doctrine (in the Soviet case, a fluid and changing Marxist-Leninist teaching) and pragmatic geopolitical aspirations of the decision-makers in one term. I define ideological worldview as a system of thinking based on the foundations of the doctrine reflected through personal experience and beliefs. This worldview does not prevent its holders from acting pragmatically and seemingly neglecting their doctrinal beliefs for circumstantial benefits. Yet, the end goal of situational decisions, in this case, is defined by ideological beliefs[6].

Perhaps one of the biggest revelations of the CC CPSU archives of the late Cold War period that have been undergoing declassification in the last decade is that the Soviet leadership of the 1960s-1980s was indeed driven by an ideological worldview. The internal communication between the CSPU Politburo and Secretariat leaders was saturated with Marxist-Leninist language that was, nevertheless, often employed to justify decisions seemingly incompatible with the foundations of Marxism-Leninism. Another detail that the archives reveal is the obsession of the Party leaders and the Central Committee's high- and mid-level bureaucrats with combatting imperialism and Zionism, two enemies whose tentacles allegedly stretched to restrain communism, which in the

late Soviet ideological worldview was intertwined with the geopolitical power of the Soviet Union as a state. Grounded in the Marxist argument about class warfare based on capitalist resistance to progress and in Lenin's argument that equalized capitalism and imperialism, this narrative experienced a profound influence of Russian imperial nationalism in the 1930s-1940s that led to its formation into what Zubok and Pleshakov (1996) referred to as "the revolutionary-imperial paradigm". This setting and the consequent argument about the immanent ("scientifically proven" as Marxism-Leninism based itself on a notion of being a scientific theory) existence of imperialist attempts to weaken the Soviet Union was the main foundation for the appearance and spread of conspiratorial thinking about the subversive activities of the adversaries.

It is noteworthy that this narrative of imperialist tentacles stretched towards the USSR with an intention to weaken and eventually destroy it as a state representation of Marxist-Leninist ideology clearly resembles the conspiracy theories flourishing in post-Soviet Russia discussed above. There are, however, important differences. In contemporary Russia, the experience of the Soviet collapse and the shrinkage of geopolitical influence boosted existential conspiracy theories about "the West" (a new supposedly non-ideological term for "imperialism") plotting to subversively attack and dismember Russia proper as a nation and a state. The elites of the Cold War Soviet Union could not truly imagine this scale of prospective threat to a nuclear power and victorious nation in the Second World War, one that would lead to the collapse of the state. Therefore, the conspiratorial thinking of the Soviet leaders was directed towards less ambitious alleged achievements of the adversary. Perhaps this difference can best be illustrated with an example of the conspiratorial thinking about violent regime changes in the states that were perceived as allies or clients by the USSR and post-Soviet Russia, respectively.

One of the most influential conspiracy theories that likely shaped the whole Vladimir Putin's tenure as the leader of Russia is the theory of the so-called "color revolutions" (Finkel and Brudny, 2013). According to this theory, the United States orchestrated regime changes in Russia's near abroad (Georgia in 2003; Ukraine in 2004 and 2014; Kyrgyzstan in 2005) using the method of "managed chaos" (*upravliaemyi khaos*)[7]. Some of the highest-ranking Russian officials, including the foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and former defense minister Sergei Shoigu, publicly pronounced the United States responsible for using this method in mentioned cases but also during the Arab Spring (in Libya, Egypt, and Syria) and in

orchestrating the protest movement in Russia proper in 2011-2012 (Kragh et al., 2022). These conspiratorial beliefs had very clear legal implications as they were used as pretexts for introducing the concepts of "undesirable organizations" (used massively against Russian NGOs funded from abroad) and "foreign agents" (initially designed to mark organizations and individuals on a foreign government's payroll but eventually transforming into an arbitrary marking of all those considered disloyal by the regime) (Flikke, 2016). Notably, the latter term, which in the Russian language has a semantic connection to espionage and sabotage, appears in great volumes in the conspiratorial writings of military and KGB veterans, albeit in a more direct form: "agents of influence" (Fedor, 2011).

The Russian officials repeatedly explained the use of the mentioned categories as a way of marking those who were the instruments of foreign meddling in Russian domestic affairs, either through recruitment by foreign intelligence or brainwashing (Kragh et al., 2022). Thus, the Cold War notion of "brainwashing" naturally reappeared on the other side of the former Iron Curtain. Following the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022, those categories became the cornerstones for brutal repressions against all those opposing the policies of Vladimir Putin.

Yet returning to "color revolutions," Putin and his team's obsession with the U.S. meddling in the domestic affairs of post-Soviet states may be explained in realistic terms, which some scholars and pundits have been doing passionately in the last two decades. The arguments about Russian security concerns related to NATO's enlargement to the East remain popular even in the context of the Russian aggression in Ukraine that, according to some analysts, was provoked by NATO's reckless disregard for Russian interests[8]. The problem with this kind of argumentation is that while it is not entirely false, it is still extremely misleading as it leads us away from a more profound reasoning for Putin's conspiratorial obsessions. Comparative analyses of the conspiratorial thinking of contemporary Russian elites and their Soviet predecessors should highlight that while, indeed, the conspiratorial fears of today's Russian leaders became more existential, the principle of seeking the hand of Washington was there before there was anything distantly resembling direct security threats to the Soviet Union proper.

Late Soviet leaders were also obsessed with security and threats from the West. Most of them belonged to the generation that went through the horrors of the Second World War as mid-level bureaucrats in the Party and the military. Therefore, they were not as distanced as the top leadership from

the ugly side of the war and were eternally traumatized by the tragedy of the Soviet unpreparedness and the extreme atrocities of the first months of the Nazi invasion. This was the main reason for extensive investments in the military-industrial complex and the constant attention of the CPSU Politburo to Europe. Ironically, this excessive attention made the conspiratorial thinking about the direct threats to the Soviet Union and its allies/clients in Eastern Europe less likely, as constantly keeping their hand on the pulse of events in Europe the Soviet leaders were generally more confident about the security of their Western borders. Yet, conspiratorial thinking found its way around the relatively stable Cold War stalemate in Europe. For the Soviet leaders, the main arena where their belief in U.S. conspiracies found its expression became the Third World. One reason for that was that, there, the global Cold War was nowhere close to actual coldness.

Since the publication of Odd Arne Westad's (2005) pathbreaking book two decades ago, historians of the second half of the 20th century have been actively engaging with the history of the Cold War and decolonization in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. One argument that has been arising continuously in these years is about the necessity to put on or take off the Cold War lens when discussing the history of the non-European world in the second half of the 20th century[9]. This discussion revolves around the question of the agency of the local actors – to what degree developments in Asia, Africa, and Latin America were defined by the Cold War confrontation of the superpowers and to what degree by local factors, actors, and interests. Naturally, the answer is in a balance of the two. There was no place in the world that was not defined by the Cold War confrontation, and yet the more we dig into local sources, the more we see the agency of the locals, including the ability to manipulate the superpowers for the sake of local interests.

However, for the Soviet leaders, this complex picture of intertwined motives and multiple actors with contradicting motives was substituted for a less detailed and much simpler picture that deprived local actors of agency and attributed all of them to one or another side in the Cold War. In this sense, we can see a clear lineage between Soviet readings of the regime changes in the Third World during the Cold War and the obsession with color revolutions in Putin's Russia. In both cases, conspiratorial thinking deprived local actors of agency and attributed violent regime change to subversive activities of the adversary.

As noted above, the tricky part in deconstructing this approach is that the conspiratorial thinking in both cases was not baseless, although in

the case of Putin's Russia, as we mentioned, there is a much more active inclination to founding conspiracy theories on forgeries, fakes and myths. Nevertheless, as Ortmann and Heathershaw (2012) fairly argued, while the U.S. control over the color revolutions through "managed chaos" is nonsense, the United States did fund the opposition groups in Georgia and Ukraine, and U.S. agencies did promote democratization and the reform of regimes there and in Russia. And we should add, NATO did enlarge towards the Russian borders. Similarly, in the Cold War era, the United States was not abstaining from active subversive activities, including organizing violent regime changes, some examples of which are discussed further in the article. However, as Ortmann and Heathershaw (2012) elaborate, "both the form of the conspiracy narrative as well as the social and political context in which it emerges, are significant beyond the veracity of individual story". To take it further, I would argue that some truthful elements in the overarching lies do not make conspiratorial thinking more reasonable and do not justify conspiratorial obsessions. On the contrary, this should urge us to pay close attention to the exaggeration and distortion of the truth that this phenomenon leads to.

Further in this article I discuss several case studies from the Soviet Cold War history that reveal the peculiarities of the Cold War conspiratorial thinking in regard to violent regime changes in the Third World that the Soviet leaders employed to explain unfavorable geopolitical developments.

2. Case Study 1: The Real Conspiracy Misread. The Soviet Union and the CIA Coup against the Iranian Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammed Mosaddeq, 1953.

Dr. Mohammed Mosaddeq was elected the Prime Minister of Iran in 1951. A disciple of the Qajar dynasty that had been ruling Iran prior to the 1925 coup of Reza Khan Pahlavi, Mosaddeq represented the national pride of his compatriots as the first Iranian to receive a doctoral degree in a European university. He had also been engaged in Iranian politics since the years of the 1905-1911 Iranian Constitutional Revolution and developed a reputation as a proud patriot and Iranian nationalist, vehemently opposed to the colonial ambitions of the European powers in Iran. In the years that preceded his appointment as the Prime Minister, Mosaddeq consistently opposed the most emblematic of Iran's semi-colonial agreements – the D'Arcy concession of 1901, even in its renegotiated form agreed in the

1930s. The concession granted the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) (earlier known as Anglo-Persian Oil Company and later known as British Petroleum) exclusive rights for oil extraction in some of the oil-rich territories of Iran with minimal royalties paid to the Iranian national budget[10]. Similarly, in 1944, Mosaddeq managed to convince the Iranian Majlis to decline Joseph Stalin's attempts to gain similar oil concessions for the Soviet Union in Northern Iran (Gasanly, 2016).

Thus, Mosaddeq's views and political program were not secret to any attentive observer at the time of his appointment. Mosaddeq became the Iranian Prime Minister in a volatile period. Only a decade prior, Iran was occupied in a joint effort of Great Britain and the USSR, with Reza Shah Pahlavi forced to abdicate in favor of his young son Mohammed Reza. The end of the occupation was accompanied by one of the first crises of the Cold War, with the Soviet troops unwilling to depart Iran on the agreed date and local separatism of national minorities in the occupied territories fostered from Moscow and Baku[11]. Fearful of Britain and the USSR in the aftermath of these crises, the young Shah was leaning towards the United States, seeing it as the only guarantor of the Iranian sovereignty. This went in resonating contradiction with the popular feelings that were divided between the supporters of Iranian nationalism with the eradication of any foreign dependence and the adherents of communism. In these circumstances, Mosaddeq's appointment was a move that the Shah was not in favor of but was forced to make by the Iranian public.

Immediately after his appointment, Mosaddeq started preparations for his main reform: the nationalization of the oil industry and complete cancellation of the AIOC's concession. In 1951, the nationalization decree was approved by the Majlis, which led to a massive disappointment of the British government. In the following years, British diplomats made several attempts to renegotiate the agreement and find a compromise that would suit both sides, yet Mosaddeq's position remained firm. Eventually, the British government approached the U.S. Administration of Dwight Eisenhower with an argument that Mosaddeq's policies favored the Soviets. At the height of the early Cold War Red Scare, espoused in all kinds of conspiracy theories about Soviet subversive plots (including "brainwashing" and McCarthyistic witch-hunt), the U.S. President fell for this argument and ordered the CIA to cooperate with MI6 in preparation of a coup against Mosaddeq. In August 1953, the Iranian Prime Minister was overthrown in the CIA-planned operation TPBEDAMN[12].

One of the questions that disturbed historians for decades was why the Soviet Union did not support Mosaddeq and did not prevent the coup. Several recent works unveiled the answer to this question. Zubok (2020) and Kalinovsky (2014) convincingly showed, relying on some of the previously unavailable Soviet documents, that Stalin was convinced that Mosaddeq could not be an independent actor that defended the national interests of Iran. Stalin's explanation for Mosaddeq's nationalization efforts was that the Iranian Prime Minister was the U.S. stooge used by the Americans to push the British out of Iran in order to take their place there. The archival documents clearly show that this conspiracy theory was not supported by the intelligence that the Soviet leader received from the ground. On the contrary, the intelligence was rather solid and convincingly suggested that Mosaddeq was a nationalist who sought to defend the Iranian national interests. This did not help to alter the conspiratorial beliefs of the Soviet leader. Moreover, when Stalin died five months prior to the CIA coup, Viacheslav Molotov, who inherited the responsibility for foreign affairs, did nothing to change the Soviet position. In fact, his personal collection of documents in the archive proves that he was no less convinced than Stalin of Mosaddeq's dependence on the Americans. Only years later, with Nikita Khrushchev consolidating power, Molotov's actions were pronounced as a resonant mistake and used against him in Khrushchev's bid for power against Stalin's old guard. Only in the late 1950s Mosaddeq was included in the Soviet pantheon of national liberation heroes in accordance with Khrushchev's new strategy of seeking partners in the Third World. Astonishingly, though, even in this later period, the CIA coup against Mosaddeq did not become the ultimate reference point of the Soviet leaders to the U.S. subversive activities in the Third World, instead giving way to other, much less obvious examples, most notably the Pinochet coup against the president Salvador Allende in Chile.

3. Case Study 2. The Murder of Peaceful Socialism. The Pinochet Coup and an Omnipresent Hand of Washington.

The electoral victory of Salvador Allende and his *Unidad Popular* in Chile in 1970 was a tremendous achievement in the eyes of the Soviet leadership, which was traditionally less involved in Latin American affairs, with the notable exception of Cuba. The reason for this sudden interest

in the developments in South America was that Allende gained power through peaceful means. This was a major example that proved that the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence and fermenting détente was not the revisionist retreat but a crafty strategy for the future victory of global socialism. Challenged on the one hand by Maoist China which publicly denounced Moscow's strategy as capitulationism and on the other hand by guerilla revolutionary groups of the Guevarist kind that despised Soviet orthodox Marxism, statism, and imperialism, the CPSU Politburo saw Allende's achievement as a vivid proof of their dominance over these challenges, a proof that could be presented to the world (Friedman, 2021).

Therefore, Allende's success in the eyes of the Soviet leadership was a crucial element in their ideological struggle against the Chinese and other radical leftists, who refused to acknowledge peaceful means of global revolutionary struggle as no less legitimate than the violent ones. Nevertheless, while the Chilean case was limited to this for the Politburo, for the bureaucrats of the CC CPSU's International Department, the Chilean peaceful revolution turned into a personal endeavor. Although Allende's coalition was quite diverse, and this was one of the major concerns for the Soviet leaders, for the International Department officials, many in the new Chilean leadership, especially in the Communist Party, were more than some distant revolutionary comrades but rather people with whom they had personal, often close, relations. This was often one of the main features that distinguished a colder realist approach of the Politburo that was, in most cases, willing to throw the communist allies under the bus for the sake of beneficial outcome for the USSR and a more personal attitude of the International Department officials.

Allende's radical reforms and his inability to make the Chilean economy function without American investments or aid from fraternal regimes brought Chile to a desperate situation by 1973. To a large degree, this was a result of the mutual unwillingness between Allende and the Nixon Administration to seek a compromise. The U.S. leadership, obsessed with the idea of not allowing the appearance of a "new Cuba" in the Western hemisphere, despised Allende and had already sought once to plot against his ascendance to power. Even more than the Americans, the Chilean regime disturbed the military juntas of the Chilean near abroad, especially the Brazilian one. The rapprochement between the United States and Brazil created grounds for the anti-Allende coup (Harmer, 2011).

Unlike the Mosaddeq coup, the Pinochet one did not come as a surprise to most international observers. As Friedman (2021) argued, it

was likely the most anticipated coup since Caesar returned to Rome. According to Nikolai Leonov, the high-level KGB officer responsible for the ties with Latin America, Soviet arms were already on their way to Chile in hopes of assisting Allende but were turned back after growing concerns that they might end up in the arms of the putschists and used in international anti-Soviet propaganda (Leonov, 1999)[13]. Unlike the coup against Mosaddeq, here there was no direct involvement of the CIA in the coup, but the U.S. and Brazilian governments and secret services were certainly not uninvolved in creating circumstances for the coup and its success[14]. That said, as Brands (2012) fairly put it, "as much as Allende suffered from an adverse international environment, his most critical economic wounds were self-inflicted."

In this sense, the involvement of "the hand of Washington" in the toppling of Allende was much less obvious than in the case of Mosaddeq. Nevertheless, at least for the part of the Soviet establishment, it became a point of no return with regard to seeing U.S. subversive activities in every negative development in the Third World. This was mostly the case for the CC CPSU International Department. As Friedman (2021) showed, in subsequent assessments of the prospects of the U.S. intervention to suppress "progressive" or "anti-imperialist" movements, the officials of the International Department never failed to bring up the Pinochet coup as a reference point. The Politburo's reaction was much less conspiratorial and emotional. Soviet leaders used the overthrow of Allende to score points in their struggle against the Chinese, choosing to break all ties with Pinochet's Chile and highlighting in propaganda Beijing's unwillingness to do the same. Soviet leadership also rather pragmatically used global solidarity with Chilean socialists, standing at the forefront of this solidarity movement (Paranzino, 2022; Gradskova, 2014).

4. Case Study 3. Anti-Imperialism over Common Sense. Soviet support for Ayatollah Khomeini.

The legacy of Chilean events evidently played out as a major factor in the reactions of part of the Soviet leadership, namely the International Department, to the events that unfolded in the late 1970s in Iran. However, initially, the Soviet leadership did not pay too much attention to the growing turmoil in the neighboring country. In the first 9-10 months of 1978, when the protests were accelerating in Iran, the Politburo and the

International Department did not discuss the worrying news from there even once. In this sense, the Iranian official press and the U.S. officials revealed much more conspiratorial thinking in this initial period of the Iranian revolution's build-up. Since the early days of the protests, the Shah's media referred to the political leaders of the protest movement as "black and red reactionaries," i.e., religious and leftist figures as one entity, allegedly controlled by foreign powers (Abrahamian, 1982). Similarly, the officials of the National Security Council (NSC) in the United States were growing more and more convinced with the aggravation of the situation in Iran that the protests were instigated and controlled by Moscow. One of the former NSC officials, Gary Sick, remembered that he had a hard time convincing his colleagues that Moscow had nothing to do with the Iranian turmoil (Welch and Westad, 1996).

Nevertheless, by November 1978, the Politburo finally turned its attention towards Iran. Notably, its reaction had very little to do with the actual developments in Iran. Instead, the Politburo agreed to issue a public statement along with a private message sent via diplomatic channels, warning the U.S. Administration against any form of intervention, active or subversive, in the situation in Iran. The statement published in *Pravda* in the form of Brezhnev's response to a correspondent's question shook the Central Committee's bureaucracy, revealing different kinds of conspiratorial beliefs (Asinovskiy, 2022).

For one example, Leonid Zamiatin, the head of the CC CPSU Department of International Information, started to distribute a version of the Iranian events, according to which the protests were instigated by the United States. Allegedly, the Carter Administration, dissatisfied with the Shah's authoritarian policies and his disregard for human rights issues, decided to teach him a lesson, give him a fright, and make him more cooperative. Yet, according to Zamiatin, the situation went out of control, and now the Shah's position on the throne was in real danger due to these reckless decisions of the U.S. Administration (Asinovskiy, 2024; Yodfat, 1984). Here, we can see a very clear pattern of conspiratorial thinking: the Carter Administration that put human rights at the center of its political agenda, was indeed dissatisfied with the Shah's style of ruling. However, this small truth in Zamiatin's fantasy was taken to a whole new level that had no connection to reality. Quite contrarily to Zamiatin's version, Jimmy Carter, in his 1978 New Year's speech in Tehran, referred to Iran as "an island of stability in the Middle East," clearly not anticipating any radical moves of the anti-Shah opposition. Moreover, as we know today,

the U.S. Administration was extremely concerned with the turn of events in Iran, and there is simply no credible evidence to claim any kind of U.S. involvement in the revolution.

Nevertheless, Zamiatin did not hesitate to announce his version publicly, including on national television. Anatolii Cherniaev, at the time the deputy head of the International Department and later the main foreign policy aid to Mikhail Gorbachev in the times of *Perestroika*, burst out with anger towards Zamiatin's activity in his diary:

> …we have a "competent" opinion of the head of the International Information Department [Zamiatin – D.A.], pronounced on television for all the Union to see: "All these events are a result of the CIA machinations, as if the Americans wanted to scare the Shah a bit because he had not behaved well…" Zamiatin even wrote a note to the Central Committee, proposing "to follow the line of support of stability in Iran" (i.e., to support the Shah!). Suslov and Kirilenko already signed the note with their approval visas. Luckily, the events developed faster than the bureaucracy functioned in the Central Committee apparatus. They overshadowed this "Zamiatin line" (Cherniaev, 2008).

In this passage, Cherniaev appears as a sensible, pragmatic intellectual who, unlike Zamiatin, understood the absurdity of such conspiratorial thinking about the hand of Washington behind the Iranian crisis. However, only a few weeks and several diary pages earlier, same Cherniaev was not as confident in the absurdity of the U.S. conspiracy behind the shaking throne of the Iranian Shah. He noted in the diary a conversation that he had with another Party official, the head of the Leningrad Party Committee, Grigorii Romanov. There, when Romanov asked him about what was happening in Iran, Cherniaev reacted not too differently from Zamiatin:

> – What will happen in Iran? – he almost shouts.
> – I do not know. Perhaps the Americans will topple him [the Shah – D.A.]. He does not suit them anymore (Cherniaev, 2008).

These examples reveal to us that on different levels of the Central Committee's bureaucracy, conspiratorial thinking was so deeply engrained in the consciousness of Soviet officials that even when those who presented themselves as rational and reasonable independent thinkers and criticized others for leaning towards conspiratorialism, were in practice susceptible to the same disease.

The conspiracy about the U.S. involvement in instigating the protests in Iran was proven wrong by the very development of events, which unfolded so quickly that these ideas were turned to the archives before they could seriously influence the decision-making. Yet immediately after the Shah's flight from his country, this conspiracy theory gave way to another one: the one of an inevitable U.S. invasion or subversive interference. In January 1979, the Politburo established a Commission that was supposed to closely follow the developments in Iran and advise the Politburo accordingly for further actions. However, the available reports of the Commission show that the Politburo members were preoccupied exclusively with deterring the United States and cared very little about Iran itself. The reports are filled with alarming passages about possible U.S. intervention to suppress "the anti-imperialist revolution" (Asinovskiy, 2024).

The latter term was attached to the revolution in Iran immediately after its initial successes in getting rid of the pro-American monarch. At that point, the Soviet leadership was not interested in who were the forces that were leading the revolution that had already been labeled as "anti-imperialist." In this manner, the Soviet Union took the side of the new post-revolutionary Iran, which was soon dominated by radical religious jurists led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Throughout the following years, the Soviet leaders grew more and more disappointed with the reactionary developments in Iran, yet they remained convinced that the threat of U.S. intervention was a bigger issue than the transformation of Iran into a viable 20th-century theocracy. The officials of the International Department, including the head of the department, Boris Ponomarev, developed their reactions based on the experience of the Chilean failure less than a decade earlier and were convinced that the U.S. intervention was imminent should the Soviet support for the revolutionary anti-imperialist regime in Iran weaken (Friedman, 2018; Friedman, 2021; Asinovskiy, 2022; Asinovskiy 2024). Thus, the conspiratorial thinking overshadowed reason, proving the point that realism was only one part of the ideological worldview, too often obscured by the latter's less rational elements.

5. Conclusion

The post-Soviet Russian political elite did not come from nowhere. It was formed in the late Soviet Union and, to a large degree, was a part of the late Soviet bureaucratic and military elite. These people did not go through

lustration and migrated to the realities of a new Russian state virtually unchanged. Their worldview, nevertheless, went through a considerable evolution in different aspects since rejecting most of formal dogmatic elements of the Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideology. However, rejecting the communist postulates, the leaders of post-Soviet Russia could not reject a deeply engrained principle of ideological worldview, the immanent part of which was the conspiratorial thinking. Not all of it had its roots in the Soviet period. As we see with concepts revived from earlier years, there is a conspiratorial heritage beyond the Cold War that remains available for active implementation in the ideological worldview and application for more practical use for mass mobilization in the population. In this paper, I sought to highlight the crucial importance of the Cold War heritage for the establishment of conspiratorial thinking in post-Soviet Russian elites and for the development of specific topics in conspiracy theories.

Presented case studies that trace how the conspiratorial thinking of the Soviet leaders developed in the circumstances of the Cold War and how it was applied to different situations represent only one conspiratorial narrative: one of the adversary's subversive activities to overthrow the government in the third country. These examples certainly do not reflect all conspiratorial motives inherited by contemporary Russian leaders from their Soviet predecessors. However, these examples tackle one of the foundational conspiracy theories of Putin's Russia, that of the color revolutions. More importantly, using these elements of legacy, we can investigate more parallels between the ideological worldview of the late Soviet leaders and the one of Vladimir Putin and his cronies. Perhaps the main conclusion of this work is that the search for the origins of the conspiratorial thinking of contemporary Russian elites should not be limited to the realm of the post-Soviet period as it was done till now. The Cold War was essential for the formation of conspiratorial thinking, perhaps more essential than the communicational revolution of the last decades. Its legacy in the formation of our times should be addressed more thoroughly, from this perspective included. This article is only a first approach to stating these research objectives.

Endnotes

1 There have already been evident signs of incorporation of the antisemitic narratives in the anti-Western conspiracy theories through exposing the Jewish ancestry of certain members of Russian opposition (e.g., "conscious or unconscious agents of the West") or employing terms like "cosmopolitans", when referring to the "anti-Russian world government", a clear reference to "the rootless cosmopolitans", a euphemist term for "a Jew" used in late Stalinist antisemitic campaigns. For more, see Kragh et al. (2022).

2 Probably, the only researcher, who does not concentrate exclusively on military and KGB origins of the conspiratorial thinking in the Russian elites is Yablokov (2018). However, Yablokov's work lacks proper historical analysis and, consequently, overlooks the crucial source of the post-Soviet conspiratorial thinking – the ideological worldview of the Soviet elites in the Cold War era.

3 Notably, the KGB veterans tended to stress in their memoirs that unlike the ideologically charged Party officials, the KGB officers used to be pure pragmatists, "the crème de la crème of Russian intellectuals." The researchers of Soviet intelligence tend to attribute this mythology to these self-pleasing memoirs, see Fedor (2011).

4 For more on contemporary conspiracy culture see Fenster (1999), Knight (2000), and Marcus (1999)

5 Some of the works that highlight ideology as the essence of Soviet foreign policy are Westad (2005), Friedman (2015), and Telepneva (2022). As to the realist argument, the most recent and authoritative argument was made by Radchenko (2024).

6 I elaborate on this term in my earlier articles, see Asinovskiy (2022) and Asinovskiy (2024).

7 Notably, the theory of "managed chaos" was not only developed obscurely in the propagandist press or the statements of the politicians but was actively promoted by political pseudoscientists close to the Kremlin. A good example is Andrei Manoilo, a political pseudoscientist with a position of professor at Moscow State University. Despite three degrees in physics, Manoilo made a sudden change of interest to political science in the 2000s and became one of the most prolific authors on "the managed chaos" theory. While Kragh et al. (2022) vividly showed that Russian military science, particularly a handful of military science journals serve as a stage for promoting a broad variety of conspiracy theories, this topic transcends this narrow cluster of Russian "scholarship." "Scholarly" articles about "the managed chaos" were published in a variety of reputable journals and authored by "the scholars" of international relations and political science from most reputable Russian universities.

8 Some of the most notorious and actively promoted arguments of this kind were made by scholars like John Mearsheimer. See, for example, Mearsheimer (2014).

9 I borrow the concept of "taking off the Cold War lens" from Connelly (2000).

10 For more on the D'Arcy Concession see Navabi (2010) and Brew (2017)

11 For more on the Iranian Azerbaijan crisis see Yegorova (1996), Scheid Raine (2001), Hasanli (2006), and Fawcett (2014).

12 For more on the Mosaddeq's oil nationalization reform and the road to the coup see Gasiorowski and Byrne (2004). For the details of the CIA covert operation see Gasiorowski (2013).

13 Notably, Leonov was later among the KGB veterans-memoirists actively promoting the golden myth of the KGB as the oasis of free thought in the 1970s as well as the failure of the Party officials, especially in the Gorbachev era to hear out the warnings of the chekists about the brainwashed agents of influence, see Fedor (2011).

14 For more on the U.S. involvement in the coup see Qureshi (2009), Gustafson (2007), and Haslam (2005).

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