



A Review of VICTOR SCHNIRELMANN, *THE ARYAN MYTH IN THE MODERN WORLD*, in 2 vols. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015, 536 pp.; 440 pp. (Biblioteka zhurnala *Neprikosnovennyy zapas*)

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Abstract: The review is of Victor Schnirelmann's monograph *The Aryan Myth in the Modern World*. The book has made an equivocal impression on the reviewer. On the one hand, its high value as a record of facts is beyond doubt. On the other, its methodology, theoretical horizons and rhetoric raise objections which are sometimes substantial.

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To cite: Panchenko A., 'A Review of Victor Schnirelmann, *The Aryan Myth in the Modern World*, in 2 vols. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015, 536 pp.; 440 pp.', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 2017, no. 13, pp. 327–338.

URL: <http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng013/panchenko.pdf>



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The review is of Victor Schnirelmann's monograph *The Aryan Myth in the Modern World*. The book has made an equivocal impression on the reviewer. On the one hand, its high value as a record of facts is beyond doubt. On the other, its methodology, theoretical horizons and rhetoric raise objections which are sometimes substantial.

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This new book by a well-known specialist on the history of post-Soviet nationalism, neopaganism and antisemitism is devoted, in the author's own words, to the problems of 'the construction of an Aryan identity' and the 'existence of the Aryan myth in both the temporal and political / geographical dimension' (I, p. 5). The concept of the 'Aryan myth' in Schnirelmann's thought comprises the following components: 'a pseudohistorical narrative', 'a basis of new identities', 'a radical right ideology', 'a basis for xenophobia and racism', 'an important attribute of new religious (neopagan and esoteric) rituals and cults', and 'a mythopoetic plot which inspires a number of authors, poets, artists and musicians' (I, p. 10). The breadth of this conception has evidently had a decisive effect on the scope of the monograph, which occupies almost a thousand pages of small type, and has therefore come out in two volumes. I shall return to the advantages and disadvantages of the author's chosen method of presenting and analysing his material, but first it is necessary briefly to summarise the book's contents.

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The first volume consists of seven chapters. The first ('The genesis and evolution of the Aryan myth') is a short discussion of the historical, scholarly and cultural contexts of the 'Aryan theme' in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: romantic nationalism and orientalism, the development of Indo-European

linguistics, the beginnings of physical anthropology. Here too the author mentions the well-known works of the ideologists of the ‘racial approach’ in Western intellectual history, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, Houston Stewart Chamberlain and others, and also the concepts of ‘Aryan Christianity’, which stressed the opposition between the Christian religion and Judaism. The second chapter (‘The Aryan idea in esoteric doctrines’) deals mostly with the Austrian and German ‘ariosophy’ of the beginning of the twentieth century (in particular, the ideas of Guido von List), and its influence on the formation of Nazi ideology. The third chapter (‘The Nazi track’) is already directly concerned with the significance of parascience, historiosophy and occultism in the culture of German National Socialism and Italian Fascism. Particular attention is paid here to the writings of Alfred Rosenberg and Julius Evola, neo-Nazi esotericism, and the history of the swastika as an ariosophist and Nazi symbol.

The first three chapters are in the nature of a review of the material and are to a significant extent based on the research of Western scholars — Léon Poliakov, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Dorothy Figueira and others. In the fourth chapter (‘The sources and roots of the Russian “Aryan myth”’) the author turns to the Russian forms and contexts of nationalist historiosophy. He begins its genealogy with the ‘Slavonic School’ of historiography, i.e. the works of Mikhail Lomonosov, Yuriy Venelin and Z. Dołęga-Chodakowski (Adam Czarnocki), and also of later authors who were inclined towards an unfounded ‘antiquitising’ of the history of the Slavs and Russians and towards exotic hypotheses about the Slavonic ethnogenesis: Aleksey Khomyakov, Egor Klassen, Vladimir Lamanskiy and Dmitry Ilovay-sky. For some reason there is no place in their ranks for Platon Lukashovich (ca. 1809–1887), whose essays in history and etymology, marginal though they be, must undoubtedly be considered the prototype for post-Soviet amateur linguistics and cryptohistory, cf.: [Bogdanov 2014: 81–3]. Supposing that once upon a time all humanity had spoken a Slavonic protolanguage, Lukashovich maintained, for example, in 1877, that ‘the original inhabitants of England were Slavs, and the dominant tribe there were called Brits or Britons because they shaved [*brili*] their beards, leaving only their moustaches, and however much Roman writers may have distorted their Slavonic names, which in any case can only be written in Latin letters imperfectly and with great difficulty, a Slav can still easily understand them, particularly if he has penetrated the properties of the original Slavonic language, which, the older it is, the more it reveals the sophistication and exactitude of its expressions’ [Lukashevich 1877: 6]. Lukashovich regarded his English contemporaries as ‘a mixture of Mongolian peoples and Britons’ [Ibid.: 30], which was his explanation for the imagined ‘hatred of the English for the Slavonic peoples’.

Continuing to trace the history of the ‘Aryan theme’ in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Schnirelmann touches briefly on the discussions — both politicised and purely academic — about the Russians’ ‘Aryan race’, and likewise about the possible primitive homeland of the Aryans, though he does recognise that this topic played no part of any importance in the public nationalist discourses of that time. The imaginary Aryan heritage and cryptohistorical esotericism had a somewhat greater significance for the culture of Russian modernism. At the same time the author suggests that nationalist circles among Russian and Ukrainian émigrés in the second half of the twentieth century, which in one respect or another oriented themselves on the ‘Aryan myth’, played a much greater role in the emergence of modern Slavonic neopaganism. The next sections of the chapter are devoted to an exposition of their views and to the history of the *Book of Veles*, one of the most significant forgeries in modern East Slavonic neopaganism. The chapter concludes with an outline of the discussions about the primitive homeland of the Indo-Europeans and the ethnogenesis of the Slavs that took place in archaeology and linguistics during the last decades of the Soviet Union. Particular attention is paid here to the works of Boris Rybakov, who had a noticeable effect on the ideology of neopagans and nationalists in modern Russia.

The fifth chapter (‘Science fiction and ethnocentrism’) deals with the theme of political nationalism and cryptohistory in late Soviet science fiction (in particular, the novels of Valeriy Skurlatov and Vladimir Shcherbakov) and post-Soviet popular literature. The sixth chapter (‘Russian neopaganism: Dramatis personae’) contains biographies of the ideologues of the radical right wing of contemporary neopaganism and accounts of their views. Finally, in the seventh and last chapter of the volume (‘The myths of Russian neopaganism: Nationalism, megalomania and traumatic consciousness’) the author makes an attempt to describe and explain the fundamental motifs and tendencies of ‘nationalist mythopoeia’ in post-Soviet Russia. Here it is a matter of the contemporary reception of the polygenetic concept of racial evolution developed by the theosophists and esoterics of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries (Mme Blavatsky, Papus, É. Schuré and others), the nationalist politicisation of archaeology (including investigations of the site at Arkaim in the Southern Urals) and the origins of ‘alternative’ linguistics and palaeoslavistics, the search for the ‘Polar homeland’ of the Aryans / Slavs, and the attribution of the most diverse and fantastic knowledge and technology to an ‘ancient Slavonic civilisation’. Schnirelmann interprets all these ideas, motifs and practices, which combine in an intricate manner racism, anti-semitism, and nationalism, ethnogenetic megalomania, occultism

and New Age practices, conspiracy theory and the hermeneutics of cryptohistory, political radicalism and xenophobia, eschatology and messianism, as socio-psychological compensation for the collective and individual traumas produced by the collapse of Soviet ideology and the dissolution of the USSR.

It was in these conditions, having experienced defeat in the political sphere, that the Russian nationalists put their hope in the 'great myth', which was to heal the Russian people of its psychological traumas. <...> The said myth appeals gratefully to racial theory, rehabilitates the idea of polygenesis, extols isolationism and is enchanted by the image of the Northern Civilisation. It is characterised by both victimisation and megalomania, and its idea of the past is founded on the esoteric ideas of cyclism and hypermigrationism. It is intended to raise the Russians' spirits and give them back their self-respect and belief in their own strength. <...> In other words, a profound interpretation of their own failures, starting from contemporary realities, is replaced with a Utopia that appeals to a metaphysical picture of the world that gives current problems a global and eternal character (I, pp. 520–1).

This explanation of the sharp rise in nationalism and conspiracy theory in post-Soviet Russia, which is quite widespread in the social sciences at present (cf. the concept of 'the patriotism of despair' proposed by Serguei Oushakine), does of course have a basis in fact, but nevertheless seems to me inadequate. I shall return to this below.

The second volume of the book consists of five chapters. The eighth chapter ('Neopaganism, Christianity and antisemitism') is devoted, as the title suggests, to anti-Christian and antisemitic ideas in contemporary Russian neopaganism and to their politicisation by the 'national capitalists' and 'national socialists', the 'imperialists' and partisans of a 'Russian national state', post-Soviet communists and neo-Stalinists. The ninth chapter ('The Age of Aquarius and Russian messianism'), deals with the links between Russian neopaganism and New Age ideology and culture (unlike other Russian authors, such as B. Z. Falikov, Schnirelmann translates this expression as *Novaya Epokha*). It should however be said that this chapter will not allow the reader to form an idea of the specifics of this culture that is in any way complete, as the author takes no notice whatsoever of the main academic works on the subject (Wouter Hanegraaff, Paul Heelas, Olav Hammer, Egil Asprem and others). The main focus of attention here are the ideas and writings of Alice Bailey, whose works can hardly be regarded as representative of the New Age of the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, even though it was she, by all accounts, who invented the term. Schnirelmann in fact reduces the whole diversity of New Age culture to chiliastic and eschatological ideas (*New Age sensu stricto* in Hanegraaff's

terminology [Hanegraaff 1996: 96–7]), which is short of completely convincing.

The tenth chapter ('The Ukrainian view') deals with 'current tendencies in the development of Ukrainian neopaganism', which, the author thinks, allow us 'better to understand the general features and specific peculiarities of its Russian twin' (II, p. 158). It should be said, however, that Schnirelmann does not touch the history, ideology or social practices of contemporary Ukrainian neopagan groups, nor does he mention Mariya Lesiv's recent book on this subject [Lesiv 2013], but limits himself to a review of the works published by the ideologists of Ukrainian nationalism and neopaganism. He pays special attention to the writings of G. S. Lozko, which combine the popularisation of Ukrainian 'ethnic religion' with the propaganda of nationalism and antisemitism. There is, in fact, not much difference between Ukrainian and Russian neopaganism in this sketch by Schnirelmann.

In the eleventh chapter the author turns his attention to the 'expansion of the Aryan idea' in certain contemporary cultures in the Caucasus and Central Asia: among the Armenians, Ossetes, Chechens and Tajiks. There is a separate section on the 'Turkic Aryanism' which has been disseminated in intellectual circles in Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Schnirelmann interprets it in the context of the postcolonial 'struggle to have prestigious ancestors' (II, p. 250), as 'an attempt to tap into the "Aryan heritage" of the Iranian-speaking nomads of the late Iron Age' (II, p. 224). Overall this chapter treats exclusively of the geopolitical and historico-political factors that have conditioned the spread of the 'Aryan myth'. Thus when considering the 'Aryan idea' in post-Soviet Armenia, Schnirelmann asserts that it 'primarily serves geopolitical interests', taking no notice of Armenian neopaganism, the evolution of which, to all appearances, in many respects resembles analogous processes in many other countries of the former USSR (cf., for example: [Antonyan 2015]).

The twelfth and last chapter of the book is devoted to the history and contemporary peculiarities of 'Indian Aryanism'. Noting that the use of Aryan ideology in colonial and postcolonial India is full of contradictions, Schnirelmann follows Dorothy Figueira in stressing that the 'Aryan myth' here could serve both 'the ideology of resistance to colonialism' and 'the hegemonic project directed against minorities' (II, p. 300). As an indicative example, the author discusses the change in the ethnogenetic paradigms of Indian historiography: in the colonial period the local intellectuals started from the 'Aryan conquest' migration model, which allowed them 'to emphasise the greatness of their ancestors and their glorious deeds' and to 'show that it was not the colonists who had brought

civilisation and culture to the region, but the distant ancestors of the people who lived there' (II, pp. 298–9). After independence, however, 'the legitimisation of the renewed nation state' required 'a demonstration of its legal and indisputable right to the possession of its territory' and, accordingly, a shift to the autochthonous model, which supposed that their Aryan ancestors had always lived on the territory of modern India, and Ancient Indian civilisation is the oldest in the world (Ibid.).

In his 'Conclusion', the author presents some of the results of his research. Noting that the 'Aryan myth' has over its history been transformed from 'an innocent scholarly hypothesis' into 'the basis for a dense political discourse', Schnirelmann reminds the reader of the 'high social role of scholarship' and that 'scholars do not by any means live in an "ivory tower"', but are interested participants in the political process, which often has a substantial effect on their scholarly activities' (II, p. 301). As an example of 'the influence of nationalism on the paradigms of scholarship', the author once again mentions the polemic between autochthonists and migrationists in historico-archaeological and ethnogenetic research, not limiting himself in this case to the postcolonial context and stressing that the 'territorial question' overall plays quite an important role in the political and ideological representations of the 'Aryan myth'. In this context the search for the 'primordial homeland' is closely linked with images of 'prestigious ancestors' and 'authentic culture'.

Here too Schnirelmann once again emphasises that contemporary representations of the 'Aryan myth' are connected not only with the construction of a cultural and civilisational identity, but also with religious seekings, which do not necessarily have an ethnic or racial tinge. 'The current struggle informed by "Aryan identity"', he concludes, 'has completely disparate goals in mind, and they are by no means always connected with aggressive racism: sometimes it is a question of territorial and political sovereignty, sometimes of protection from discrimination and xenophobia, and sometimes of a monopoly on spiritual values. <...> The Aryan myth provides people with glorious ancestors, equips them with a set of symbols full of profound meaning, helps to forward certain political ideas and underpins a number of new religious movements. At the same time it helps to create an image of the enemy and as such serves as a social mobilisation based on xenophobic attitudes and stereotypes' (II, pp. 311–2). Unfortunately, the reader who has reached the end of the book will not have found any systematic analysis of the social, ideological, economic and other factors which determine why the 'Aryan myth' has proved so adaptable in diverse cultural and political contexts. One may conclude from the author's scattered remarks that he is oriented on a particular version of the psycho-historical

model, in which different representations of the 'Aryan myth' serve as a universal compensatory mechanism for collective fears and alarms ('psychological crisis', 'inferiority complex', 'postcolonial unease', and so forth), resulting from geopolitical shifts and socio-economic transformations.

Schnirelmann's book is undoubtedly very valuable as a record of facts, especially the part that deals with the forms of contemporary mass culture (including religious culture) and political imagination that use the 'Aryan' theme in one way or another. The relevant chapters will be exceedingly useful to researchers working on questions of the ideology and literature of the late USSR, the history of post-Soviet religious and nationalist movements, the analysis of the narratives and hermeneutic practices connected with conspiracy theory, 'alternative history' and cryptolinguistics in the modern Russian and global contexts.

Nevertheless the way in which the author has chosen to present his material does not seem to me to be altogether successful. Since the facts set out in the book are for the most part of interest to academic specialists, it is obvious that they might have been presented in a more systematic fashion (in the form of a reference dictionary, for example) and not as prolix and monotonous retellings of the biographies and writings of 'alternative historians' and the ideologues of neopaganism. And indeed, the views of the authors that Schnirelmann writes about, despite their superficial curiosity and eccentricity, can and should without doubt be studied not only in their historical and genetic, but also in their social and typological aspect. The author, however, often neglects this task, substituting for it a polemic against parascientific ideas and theories. To be honest, the meaning of this polemic is not always altogether clear to me, especially because it sometimes appears insufficiently thought-through. In his argument with the neopagans Schnirelmann makes quite liberal use of debatable discussions of the pre-Christian culture of Eastern Europe. Thus, in order to prove the existence of human sacrifice among the pagan Slavs, he turns not to the written and archaeological sources (the reliability and possible interpretations of which would in any case deserve a special analysis), but to works of popular scholarship by Ya. E. Borovskiy, A. B. Snisarenko and N. R. Guseva, which from the point of view of accurate source criticism and self-consciousness are not much different from the neopagan texts that he criticises. Added to this, Schnirelmann goes on to adduce highly dubious ethnographic data about the distribution of 'ritual murder of old people by the members of their household' which is supposed to have been 'connected with pagan beliefs'. Although Schnirelmann is motivated by an understandable desire to unmask the myth of 'the humane Russian pagan religion', this sort of approach is hardly appropriate

in academic research. In reality this somewhat curious and confused problem needs to be qualified in many different ways: what exactly should be regarded as human sacrifice, which historical, archaeological and written sources may be relied upon in this case, how the hypothetical sacrificial practices are connected with the socio-economic peculiarities of the various Slavonic, Germanic and Finnic groups that inhabited Eastern and Northern Europe in the first millennium B.C., which chronological periods are meant, and so on. By leaving the reader in ignorance about all these questions, the author effectively draws as vague a picture of Slavonic paganism as his opponents.

There are other factual lapses in the book as well. Arguing against the proponents of the genuineness of the *Book of Veles*, who cite the expression 'in thought over wood' from *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*¹ as 'an important proof that people could write on boards in ancient times', Schnirelmann asserts: 'It has long ago been proven that in the original of the *Tale* it did not say *mysliyu* [in thought] but *mysiyu*, that is, "like a squirrel [over a tree]"' (I, p. 150). In fact, of course, there is no question of any proof here, still less can one understand what 'original' of the *Tale* he could have had in mind. Many researchers really are of the opinion that 'the word in the author's text was nevertheless *mys*' [Sokolova 1995: 295], but there are other points of view, and none of them can be definitively proved for lack of the necessary sources. Schnirelmann could just as well have asserted that the *Tale* is a forgery: this position also has a sufficient number of proponents, but to this day no one has been able to provide decisive proof 'for' or 'against'.

Still, minor lapses of this sort (like the illiterate usage of the verb *dovlet* (I, p. 195)) are entirely forgivable in a scholar who is not a specialist in mediaeval culture or Slavonic literatures. More important in the present case, it seems to me, are the problems of a methodological and even ideological nature that the reader of this book will encounter.

It should be said first of all that I have objections to the very use of the word 'myth' in research on contemporary culture. If it is a matter of applying the anthropological and philological theories and methods linked to the study of archaic and classical mythology, then this does not offer any special prospects, and this, in my view, has been perfectly clearly demonstrated by the attempts at 'neo-mythological' research undertaken on various occasions by literary scholars and anthropologists in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Is it possible to retain concepts of 'myth' and 'mythology' which are in the least stable

¹ Also known under the title *The Lay of Igor's Campaign* [Eds.].

when one has abandoned the theory of ‘mythological thinking’ or ‘a mythological picture (model) of the world’, and likewise the stadialist historical poetics that supposed that the myth, as a vague syncretic unity of form and content, preceded the more or less persistent narrative types of folktales and epic? And where, after all, is the boundary between ‘mythological’ and ‘non-mythological’ thinking, or between the ‘myth’ and the ‘non-myth’ as a narrative form? If the ‘modern myth’ is to be understood as political and nationalist ideology, it is far from clear why these concepts need to be equated. Of course, following the reasoning of Clifford Geertz, who interpreted ideological systems as symbolic templates for organising social and psychical processes, one could say that ideology and myth have a lot in common as viewed by symbolic philosophy and anthropology. However, if the recognition of this resemblance may, in general, be regarded as a truism, it is the differences between myths and ideologies that are more deserving of analysis. Finally, if the concept of the myth is simply being used in order to indicate the opposition between the rational and the irrational, or between science and pseudoscience, then it can hardly be accepted as a successful analytical device: it should be borne in mind that parascientific discourses operate with the same rational categories and that one of the key aspects of New Age epistemology (like a number of other postsecular religious cultures) is ‘scientism’ [Hammer 2001: 201–330] — making use of the social image of science and rational knowledge as a whole, as well as scientific and parascientific discourses for the construction of religious metaphors, narrative models and practices.

Actually, as we have seen, Schnirelmann himself attributes very diverse and quite contradictory meanings to the concept of the ‘Aryan myth’. In that case, why does he need it? Since one of the leitmotifs of the book is pointing out the racist, Nazi and antisemitic roots of contemporary nationalist ‘ariosophy’, it is permissible to suppose that this last is treated by the author as a bunch of meanings or a ‘precedent text’ which willy-nilly, covertly or unconsciously, refers one to the relevant ideas and social expectations. Of course, one can hardly doubt the existence of such references, especially when Schnirelmann himself has convincingly shown the racist and Nazi subtexts behind many contemporary writings on the ‘Aryan’ topic. However, these subtexts are not the whole of the problem under discussion. In my opinion, the analysis of the contemporary forms of the collective imagination, which are what the book deals with, requires discussion not only of their racist roots and social traumas, but also of the social status of knowledge in general and scholarship in particular at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, of new types of social networks and identities, of holistic *Weltanschauungen* and new religious cultures,

of globalisation and the 'risk society', that is, of a much wider social and cultural context. To give him his due, I must say that Schnirelmann does pose some of these questions (see, for example: I, pp. 206–7), but I have not found any answers to them that are in the least coherent in his book, nor any references to the research literature in which the relevant problems are discussed. It is worth emphasising that the 'rejected' or 'stigmatised' knowledge [Barkun 2003: 26–9] that this book is about is not unique to post-Soviet or postcolonial cultures, but is quite widespread in prosperous and developed societies, including the USA and the countries of Western Europe. Therefore references to socio-economic and ideological 'traumas' and 'inferiority complexes' do not, in my view, carry much conviction as explanations in the present case.

Finally, I find the denunciatory affect of Schnirelmann's book quite unnecessary. Of course, research into cultures which are in one way or another orientated towards racism and xenophobia does confront the scholar with a number of specific moral and psychological problems. They have been discussed more than once in anthropological literature: one might, for example, recall a relevant discussion ['Forum...' 2008] in which Schnirelmann too took part, and where Sebastian Job's arguments seem to me the most balanced and well thought-out [Ibid.: 48–59]. As far as I understand the position of the author of the book under review, it is that every researcher should be aware of the measure of his / her social responsibility and involvement in socio-political processes. One cannot disagree with this, but in itself such a position does not save us from most of the problems mentioned. Where, when and how should a scholar declare his / her civic position? What are the limits and measure of the empathy that we may have for the people whose lives we are studying? What can the study of the social and ideological Other tell us about our own moral and ideological presuppositions? Should the devotee of tolerance be tolerant towards those who preach intolerance? I do not think that there are any universal answers to these questions or to others like them, and many decisions of this sort have to be taken *ad hoc*, in consideration both of the actual socio-political situation and of one's own conscience. I think, however, that a more or less constant rule here should be to make a distinction between the genres of academic and civic utterance. If we are writing a research work about communities united by racism and xenophobia, what we have to do is to look for the reasons why these communities and their ideologemes came into being, and not denounce them. We have plenty of opportunities, outside academic publications, to express our civic position in public.

This distinction is clearly lacking in the book under review. Over several chapters Schnirelmann constantly denounces the academic incompetence, inclination towards racism and antisemitism, and

political *parti pris* of the authors he studies. This emotion evidently leads him to use some quite curious clichés, which remind one of Soviet social comment and are out of place in an academic work (quoting at random: ‘an orgy of denunciation’ (I, p. 279); ‘the tell-tale signs of Nazism’ (I, p. 349); ‘the neopagans of St Petersburg are sharpening their claws’ (I, p. 410); ‘manifested an unhealthy interest in the swastika’ (I, p. 473)). Was it worth leaving the ivory tower in order to write like a Soviet newspaper columnist? I doubt it.

In short, Schnirelmann’s book made an equivocal impression on me. On the one hand, there is no doubt of its great value as a record of facts. On the other, its methodology, theoretical horizons, and rhetoric raise troubling objections of a sometimes substantial kind.

Acknowledgements

This review was written with the support of the Russian Science Fund, Project No. 14-18-02952 (‘Conspirological Narratives in Russian Culture, 1800–2010s: Origins, Evolution, Ideological and Social Contexts’).

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Translated by Ralph Cleminson