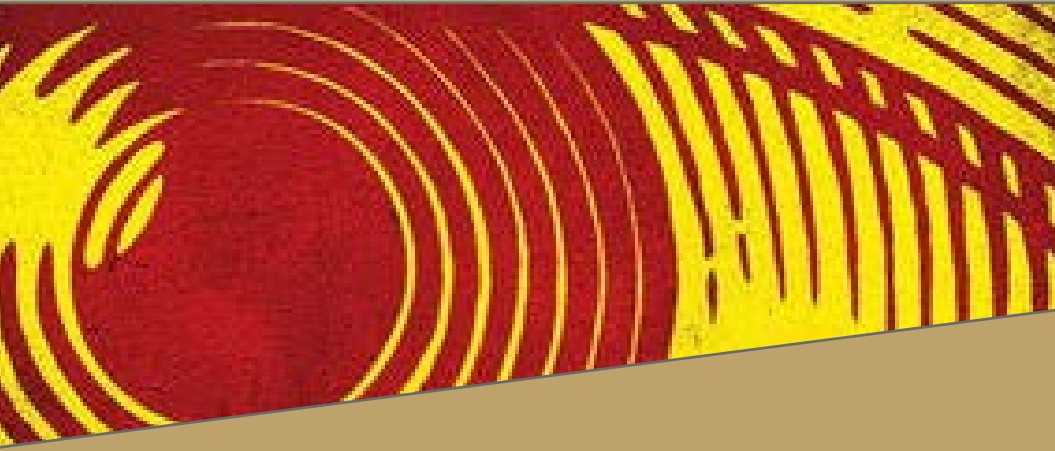


# NewsNet

News of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies



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## *PLOTS AGAINST RUSSIA,* An Interview with Eliot Borenstein

Excerpts from an interview with Eliot Borenstein (New York U) on his book, *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism* (Cornell U Press, 2019), winner of the 2020 Wayne S. Vucinich Book Prize, by Diana Dukhanova (College of the Holy Cross). The interview appeared on [New Books Network, April 16, 2019](#).

**Diana Dukhanova:** *In the preface to your book, you state the following: “This is an uncomfortable book to write. It is also the book that I’ve been preparing to write my entire adult life. Although there is no way I could have known it.” Could you talk about what you meant here and how this book represents, if I understand correctly, the culmination of your scholarly work so far?*

**Eliot Borenstein:** Sure. When I said that it was what I’d been working on my entire adult life, part of it was an acknowledgement that I have an attraction to fringe phenomena and to news of the weird in my own life. I try to develop a kind of healthy distrust of that instinct of my own when it comes to my scholarly work in Russia, because I get concerned that I’m just chasing after something very strange. But it is also the case that since I was in Moscow during the last couple of years of my graduate work or writing my dissertation in 1992, 1993, I was there at this perfect time to start watching some of the most interesting phenomena of post-Soviet culture developed, which led to my second book.

But along the way, I kept reading fringe newspapers, reading the extreme, right-wing red-brown coalition newspapers from the 1990s, buying all of these very strange pamphlets and books and so on, and then eventually following these phenomena online and of

course reading the popular fiction. And when I was working on my last book, *Overkill*, I had included a chapter called “Plots against Russia” about conspiracy and paranoia, and was advised that it didn’t really fit the book, which was fine with me. I really didn’t think I was going to be writing a conspiracy book for quite some time, largely because I was concerned that I might actually be distorting Russian reality or even Russia’s media reality, but enough time passed, and sadly I no longer had that concern.

**DD:** *You’re very cautious to avoid simplistic, demonizing, or orientalizing views of Russia, which the study of these topics might suggest. You describe it as the dangers of exoticising the Other. Can you talk a bit more about how your caution around this issue informs your work and especially your research in this book?*

**EB:** Well, for one thing, when I’m encountering a phenomenon, in this case related to conspiracy, that strikes me as particularly bizarre or hard to credit, I then go back and remind myself of something equally strange in my own native context here in the United States to get in the habit of reminding myself that that strangeness in an extreme thought and belief in things that one might think are impossible to believe in are hallmarks of most cultures. I’m trying to be very careful about that. And then also, to the extent that I can, gauge how prominent a particular phenomenon or idea is. That’s a problem because I don’t really engage in that kind of empirical research and I don’t go looking for statistics. I don’t particularly trust statistics in general and in Russia in particular. But I do try to keep in mind what’s out there that’s not strange and conspiratorial.

**DD:** *And you talk about your work being*

*more on the side of discourse, right?*

**EB:** Absolutely. I feel like, for the past 20 years or so, I practically started every talk by saying that I’m not talking about real life or real people. I’m not doing surveys. In a sense the view that I have is not really a bird’s eye view. I have a kind of internet couch potato surfer view on things. That is, if you ask yourself what view you would get of a culture simply by consuming media and not necessarily by going out inside and talking to people, that’s the material that I’m looking at. And I’m aware that there’s a whole world outside of the internet, apparently, but that’s not a world that I’m actually studying.

**DD:** *This connects to the process of assembling the research for this book, and the process that you’re using now for your next book, which started out as a blog. Can you talk a little bit about the development of this project and how it took its present form?*

**EB:** The blog thing—even though it’s a public-facing thing, and I like to think that some people are reading it—is largely about setting up a device that disciplines me and makes me work. Because what I discovered when I started the *All the Russias* blog was 1) that I really, really liked doing it; and 2) that this was a format that works very well for me and seems really natural for me.

**DD:** *Let’s get into some of the key terminology here. The first one, of course, is conspiracy and conspiratorial thinking. How do you define it? You’re very careful to specify that conspiratorial thought lies on a spectrum.*

**EB:** Yes. That’s a really complicated one because there is a large body of conspiracy scholarship, starting roughly around the post-World war II era. It’s large,

but it’s manageable to read basically all of it. What you see as a certain set of trends, a certain set of controversies that you really have to skirt around. And one of the big ones is the connection between conspiracy and paranoia. And conspiracy here being a bunch of people or entities working together to do something in secret and that presumably is not something that you would want. People point out that surprise birthday parties are conspiracies, but no one calls them that because people don’t tend to be upset by a surprise like this. I think this connection is an easy one to make because paranoia, if you set aside its most extreme clinical version, is a tendency to over-interpret, to make too many connections, and to assume that nothing is random. But the birth of all this, the primal scene of all of this is Richard Hofstadter’s famous essay and book, *On the Paranoid Style*, a lecture he delivered on the day that Kennedy was shot, actually. This essay, which was hugely influential in fact, and has gotten a real revival in the Trump age for, I think, obvious reasons, talks about how there is a paranoid style in politics and American politics in particular that comes around rather cyclically, and how understanding the paranoid style could help you to understand what’s going on with the politics.

This is an argument he made in *Harper’s*, originally. It is one of those arguments that immediately makes sense—you don’t need to be a scholar to follow it—which is exactly the sort of argument that scholars then immediately want to take apart, in part because it looms so large, and in part because, quite rightly, a lot of scholars felt that this connection between conspiracy and paranoia pathologizes people who believe in conspiracy theories and



defines them as essentially mentally ill. I can certainly see why there's been a hygienic impulse to separate the two, but I argue that there's no reason to separate conspiracy and paranoia that carefully as long as you realize that you are using the word paranoid in no way as a medical or psychiatric diagnosis, but in what I'm calling a mode, like irony, or a point of view that you could have or not your entire life. That distinction between a long-term paranoia and what I call the paranoid subject position is the theoretical contribution that I'm hoping other scholars of conspiracy end up noticing.

**DD:** *Could you say a little bit more about the paranoid subject?*

**EB:** I start off, first of all, with the notion that our entire worlds are constructed by narrative. It makes psychological sense to be constantly constructing a narrative because narrative is about taking a bunch of things that might not seem connected and seeing how they're connected so that everything is part of one big story. Paranoia certainly fits in with that quite well. When I'm talking about a paranoid subject position of conspiracy, I argue that in fact, it is fiction about paranoia and stories about conspiracy that condition us to be able to imagine conspiracy as something that's really possible. So the very fact that you can watch an hour of, say, *The X-Files* and for the course of that hour suspend disbelief and live in a kind of epistemological mindset in which aliens and conspiracies are possible, and then, in the next hour, you'll watch something else that's not possible suggests that we are always able to adopt a conspiratorial mindset when it's necessary or when it's useful or handy, and then dispose of it a minute later. There's no need to diagnose someone as paranoid. There's no need to see every manifestation of



conspiratorial thought as a symptom of a complete conspiratorial worldview, that in fact we all adopt conspiratorial modes and drop them back and forth over the course of our day. And that's what makes it possible for some to believe in conspiracy in a much more committed and sustainable fashion. But again, I think one of the mistakes that intellectuals make—and people talk about this a lot lately, particularly with regard to politics—is thinking of everything in terms of rationality. And then when you see a breakdown of rational explanation, you show how something is not working. But this is really a matter of affect, emotion, and habits of thought. And the fact that you can be conspiratorial for a little while and not be conspiratorial right afterward just seems to me very human and discursive.

**DD:** *What is it about post-Soviet Russia that makes the conspiratorial subject position one that is so often taken up?*

**EB:** That is a great question. And I would say that it's part of a longer process that has made Russia and the Soviet Union of the past several decades a great hope for conspiracy theory. Again, I'm saying that not to suggest that other places are not; certainly, the United States is a great breeding ground of conspiracy theory. But I'm coming out of different sources and for different reasons, at least initially. In the post Stalin era, conspiratorial thought was

enabled by the general lack of reliable information in the Soviet Union, and the widespread assumption that you're not being told everything. And in fact, every time there is a revelation of some past crime that is finally doled out, instead of letting you know, finally, the truth, it just reminds you of these other things being kept from you. So the restriction on information in late Soviet times facilitated conspiratorial thought. Then with Glasnost, with the opening up of the flood gates, that did a couple of things: it reinforced the idea that this information is being held from you, and it also made actual conspiratorial tracts, novels, and films available for mass consumption. By the time you get to the post-Soviet era, you have these longstanding habits of conspiratorial thought, but you have it in an informational ecosystem that is almost the opposite of the one you had in late Soviet times, and much more like the informational ecosystem that facilitates conspiracy here in the United States. There's so much information out there, so many competing sources and narratives, that each one relativizes the other and makes it possible to pick and choose or assume that they're all wrong.

**DD:** *That feeds into Russia's perceived role of a world leader on the vanguard of traditional values.*

**EB:** That is a quite recent one, but it's a variation on a longstanding conspiratorial nationalist trope that sees Russia as surrounded by enemies that want to destroy it. The traditional values thing works on multiple levels. For one, it can actually serve as a way for Russia to find allies in the world, but it can also justify why Russia should reasonably perceive of itself as a target, and why people hate Russia so much.

**DD:** *Would you say that the rise and conspiratorial thinking in Putin's third*

*term is connected to this desire to reinforce Russia as a threat?*

**EB:** I think that the Putin regime's use of conspiratorial discourse is related to that. It's remarkable how much of this stuff has gone from margin to center in the past several years. It was happening slowly over the first decade of the 21st century, but really kicked into high gear with Putin's reelection. The embracing of a conspiratorial worldview is hugely useful politically. For years they had been talking about the need for a national idea. If you take together traditional values, the notion that Russia is under attack from all sides—that's not an idea, but it is enough. Those things are enough of a national story to be a unifying fantasy, or at least I think that's what the regime is hoping, and it does seem to work fairly well.

**DD:** *Thinking about the roots of a lot of these conspiracies and key adversaries, anti-Semitism plays a large role, particularly the source text of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. But it goes back much further. Could you talk a little bit about the role that anti-Semitism plays, as well as its limitations, in understanding Russian conspiratorial thinkers?*

**EB:** Anti-Semitism is foundational to a lot of Western conspiratorial thought, going back in particular to *The Protocols*, which is a wonderful Russian plagiarized contribution to the world of conspiratorial lore. But there are obvious reasons why Jews would be a group that would be particularly useful for this kind of narrative. They are a group of people who can look sort of like you, but not entirely like you; a state within a state; a group of people who won't eat with you and won't eat the same foods as you; but are everywhere and therefore don't have local loyalties. All of this is really

well-established in the literature on anti-Semitism. It is particularly Jews, as boundary-crossing people, connected with the institutions of modernity that make them a great target for this kind of conspiratorial narrative, which is particularly well and stupidly embodied in *The Protocols*, which is just so badly written, it's just lots of fun if it weren't for the fact that it was so destructive. The master text of conspiracy for the 20th century and beyond is *The Protocols*. The result is that structurally, if a conspiracy has an international enemy, even if it's not named the Jews, it is homologous to the role that Jews played in *The Protocols*.

**DD:** *I wanted to transition to the idea of "gender ideology" featuring so prominently in conspiracy thinking. Can you talk a bit about why homosexuality is considered an attack Russian culture and values, and how it's used to frame this inimical relationship with the West?*

**EB:** I mean, the short answer is actually now homosexuality and Judaism for a lot of the conspiratorial world are the same thing. In terms of structural homologies, the LGBT people are in a sense the new Jews, the new internal enemies.

**DD:** *In terms of the idea that America is trying to make Russia gay, there's also this critique of liberalism, that over in America and the West, they have this liberal approach to politics that then creates these really harmful social trends. Can you talk a little bit more about this critique or fear of liberalism and particularly how it's used by the current administration?*

**EB:** The fate of liberalism in Russia has some parallels with what's happened and been happening with liberalism in the United States and Western Europe. As we know, liberal can mean at least two things that don't have to have very

much to do with each other. One is liberalism as economic policy, which is the Washington consensus or neo-liberalism, Thatcher and Reagan, and it's not a liberalism about procedural democracy or equality of rights. That liberalism also appears at the same time, but there's no reason to expect any average or even well-educated person who's being exposed to both these things at the same time to be able to distinguish between the two. And neither of them is popular. Economic liberalism led to the destitution of a huge portion of the population. And at the same time, you suddenly have this attention being paid to LGBT people, which a lot of people wouldn't even think of as something to be concerned about, and this change in values really disturbs people. So you end up with this kind of liberal bogeyman that is bad on just about every front. Everything about the 1990s becomes associated with liberalism and whatever liberalism means. And one of the things that Putin and people around him did extremely successfully was use the 1990s as a reminder of how bad things can get and how bad things will be if you don't let the leaders do what they're doing, because the liberals will come back and ruin our culture and economy. [...]

*Listen to the [full interview](#) to hear Borenstein and Dukhanova discuss conspiratorial thinking and the weaponization of information in the conflict in Ukraine, the zombification metaphor, the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, and Donald Trump and the Mueller Report.*

*Diana Dukhanova is a Visiting Assistant professor of Russian at College of the Holy Cross. Eliot Borenstein is Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York U.*

The project, "Building a More Inclusive Future: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies," which is described in detail below, is an innovative undergraduate mentorship program designed to tackle this issue. Generously funded through a grant from the U.S. Russia Foundation, this initiative has been composed of three parts. In October 2019 students from the U of Arizona, U of Puerto Rico, and Howard U participated in a two-day professional and academic workshop in Washington, D.C. They visited institutions that engage with Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies (REEES) beyond academia, learned about different types of professional graduate programs, and listened to more traditional research presentations.

In February 2020 we had an administrative conference where faculty and administrators contemplated how to innovate outreach programs for our field. Summer 2020 was supposed to end with us traveling to Russia with a group of students and administrators from the three participating Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs).

Then the pandemic hit, and we unfortunately had to cancel our trip to Russia; however, we found new possibilities in virtual programming. We developed two initiatives, a Cybersecurity Simulation and a Think Tank, where students worked in teams with academic mentors to produce research projects based on the students' interests. We found out a few important details. First, there are a lot more students of diverse backgrounds interested in REEES than we thought. Second, reaching out to them should not promote traditional exclusionist and elitist practices such as requiring three or four years of Russian before

students can participate in the program. We allowed beginning students to participate, as long as they showed up and put in the effort. Last, but not least, lots of faculty are willing to help mentor these students if you ask. And ask we did. We ended up with over seventy undergraduates from eight universities participating in both programs.

We also saw some of the disturbing national trends reflected in the group that worked with us. A considerable number of the faculty members that volunteered (including myself and a fellow Co-PI) are not tenure-track faculty. Hopefully the success of a program like this will indicate to our institutions the vitality and importance of REEES, and that our respective disciplines are alive, attracting new cohorts of students, and worth investing time, energy, and funds to continue growing.

Best of all, though, were the final projects: the performance on the day of the Cybersecurity Simulation and the digital research projects first presented at ASEEES that will soon be on display on the Howard U Russian Minor homepage. With these successes in mind, I feel confident that this generation will not be alone.

## **II. Project Design and Learning Outcomes** – *Colleen Lucey and Kelly Knickmeier Cummings*

"The whole Think Tank group felt more like a community and not just peers and faculty working together." –Jessica Diez, undergraduate from U of Miami

After the October 2019 student workshop at Howard U, we realized that coordinating our efforts to bring more undergraduate students from underrepresented backgrounds to REEES would require broader support

from faculty and administrators across the U.S. We therefore held a meeting with Howard alumni, faculty from MSIs, representatives from several Title VI National Resource Centers, and a few others at Howard U in February 2020 to review best practices, the state of the field, and how we could coordinate across campuses. We had no idea that a month later we would rapidly transition to fully online teaching in the wake of Covid-19, but the meeting helped set the groundwork for a major outreach campaign to bring students of color to REEES through a mentorship program, a support network, and a comprehensive project that included a research stipend.

At the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester, when it became clear that in-person meetings would not be possible for some time, the four of us reached out to a number of faculty at MSIs and institutions with large populations of underrepresented students to help recruit a cohort of undergraduates who would take part in two concurrent digital programs: 1) "Undergraduate Think Tank: Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in REEES"; and 2) "U.S. – Russia Cybersecurity Simulation with Ambassador Bonnie Jenkins." Thanks to the hard work of the following faculty, our team was able to recruit 33 students for the Think Tank and 38 for the Cybersecurity Simulation: Johanna Bockman (George Mason U), Choi Chatterjee and Timothy Paynich (Cal State LA), Natalie McCauley (U of Richmond), Sunnie Rucker-Chang (U of Cincinnati), Rachel Stauffer (Virginia Tech, James Madison U), and Julia Vaingurt (U of Illinois, Chicago). Together with students from Howard U, U of Miami, and U of Arizona this diverse undergraduate cohort came together with the tremendous help of the above faculty. Zachary Kelly,





Assistant Director of Berkeley's Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, has likewise offered invaluable support over the years and continues to assist with outreach and programming.

Students who took part in the Think Tank were grouped together based on similar interests and over a two-month period prepared a research presentation for the ASEES Convention. To help guide their research and acclimate them to the field, a generous group of scholars emerged to assist the undergraduates in their preparation for ASEES (see list of faculty mentors below). Without their efforts and countless hours of work with students, the project could not have gotten off the ground and we are immensely grateful for their dedication. The incredible support from ASEES staff, particularly Lynda Park, made it possible for this first cohort of undergraduates to take part in the convention; not only did ASEES staff accommodate a quick turnaround organizing panels, they also offered a warm welcome to this new generation of REES scholars.

Individual mentorship combined with the experience of taking part in a national conference offered students a unique opportunity to explore the disciplines of REES, and hopefully inspired them to continue their studies

now and in the future. "ASEES was a unique experience that allowed me to see the range of possibilities that are available to me in the future," reflected Marilyn Robles Valenzuela, a freshman at U of Arizona. "I learned how to adapt to the circumstances and work as a team with my group members," she explained. The Think Tank also successfully brought students together with mentors who are specialists in their topics of interest. Damian Cabrera, an undergraduate at U of Illinois-Chicago, reflected that "one of my favorite parts of this program was being able to connect with all sorts of fellow students and mentors/professors from all over the country, spanning many different ethnicities. This allowed me to gain new perspectives through collaboration."

Working together with their groups, students integrated feedback from their mentors and created a final digital humanities project. These projects will be posted on the Howard U website in March 2021. The wide range of presentation topics—from the African American experience in the USSR, to LGBTQ+ literary works, to climate change in Russia—showcase the variety of interests and expertise the students gained. In addition to developing research skills, students who wanted to complete podcast episodes based on their research

were able to study podcasting with Sean Guillory, host of the *SRB Podcast*. Student feedback illustrated that such projects were one of the most profound aspects of the program. Aissa Dearing, an undergraduate from Howard U, reflected, "I gained more skills in writing concisely, presenting online, and crafting a podcast episode! I also was able to practice converting difficult climate-related biological concepts into a presentation that was easy to understand."

### **III. Lessons Learned and Next Steps** – Krista Goff and Colleen Lucey

As an undergraduate student-centered program that incorporated research projects and mentorship, the Think Tank could become a regular occurrence at the ASEES Convention and other conferences as well. It brought together a diverse cohort of students from across the country and helped them connect not only with other undergraduates but also with expert mentors, graduate program representatives, REES professionals who provided career advice, and ASEES members who attended their conference panels. It was important to us that we foster student autonomy, be flexible, and provide guidance and resources—including student stipends—to empower students participating in this inaugural Think Tank initiative. As De'Vonte Tinsley,

an undergraduate at Virginia Tech explained, "During the course of our research I learned the value of choosing the right topic, and knowing the limits of your skills and funding, which unfortunately can stop you from doing certain types of research. I also learned that it was okay to change direction in your research, as it happens to researchers fairly frequently."

With the support of the U.S. Russia Foundation, we will organize another Cybersecurity Simulation and Think Tank in 2021. We plan to recruit students from more universities, including undergraduates from smaller programs who join not as part of an institutional cohort but independently to gain fellowship opportunities outside their home institution. We also hope to build on last year's successes by maintaining a lasting sense of community among undergraduates, graduate students, and career and academic mentors. Ultimately, we want to foster more pathways between the Think Tank and further studies in REEES.

None of this would be possible if not for the generous partnerships that the program has benefitted from thus far. Going forward, we would like to see this initiative grow and intersect with other efforts to generate and support diverse cohorts of students in REEES. Building a robust network that will help all students feel welcome, less isolated, and excited about the future of this field is essential for the continuation of our disciplines. If you are interested in participating in the Think Tank as a mentor, institutional sponsor, or as an undergraduate scholar, please email Krista Goff ([kgoff@miami.edu](mailto:kgoff@miami.edu)) or [click here](#). We need DH and subject-matter advisors for new student projects this year, but also professional mentors willing to offer career guidance to

participating students.

In planning the project, we sought input from students, scholars, and professionals of color in the field regarding what practices would improve the retention of underrepresented students in our disciplines. They consistently pointed to the need not only for more and better mentoring and networking opportunities for undergraduates, but a reassessment of how we think about programming, curricula, study abroad preparation, access to resources, K-12 outreach, and much more. While considerable efforts are needed to make REEES a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive space, ongoing initiatives like this one can help solidify our field's commitment to promoting and supporting new generations of scholars and professionals as they embark on their academic and professional careers in REEES.

*We would like to express profound gratitude to the following mentors who worked with and supported this cohort of undergraduates: Naomi Caffee (Reed College), Joy Gleason Carew (U of Louisville), Emily Couch (Independent Researcher), Leah Feldman (U of Chicago), Thomas Garza (U of Texas at Austin), Sean Guillory (U of Pittsburgh), Erik Herron (West Virginia U), Julie Hessler (U of Oregon), Yvonne Howell (U of Richmond), Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (U of Pennsylvania), Hilary*

*Lynd (U of California Berkeley), Marintha Miles (George Mason U), Aaron Retish (Wayne State U), Sunnie Rucker-Chang (U of Cincinnati), Valerie Sperling (Clark University), Anika Walke (Washington U in St. Louis), Emily Wang (U of Notre Dame).*

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*Krista Goff, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Russian and Soviet History at the U of Miami.*

*Kelly Knickmeier Cummings, PhD, is a Lecturer in Russian at Howard U.*



## CALL FOR SELF-NOMINATIONS FOR 2021 ASEES BOARD CANDIDACY

We are accepting self-nominations  
for the 2021 ASEES Board candidacy.

Please email at [lypark@pitt.edu](mailto:lypark@pitt.edu) with  
questions or [click through](#) for more  
information.

Nomination Deadline:  
April 15