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History as Therapy: Alternative History and Nationalist Imaginings in Russia, 1991-2014. By Konstantin Sheiko and Stephen Brown. Pp. 232. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2014. €29.90. ISBN: 9783838206653.

Two scholars at Wollongong University, Australia, have authored this highly topical volume on alternative history writing in contemporary Russia. The tendency towards questioning established truths about Russian history has to a large extent been associated with the writings of Anatolii Fomenko, a professor of mathematics based at Moscow State University since Soviet times and a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. As a mathematician, Fomenko is renowned; as a historian, he is a fanciful amateur at best, but he has attracted a lot of increasingly influential followers. Fomenko's principal claim is that the standard chronology of Russian history is flawed in completely missing the existence of a grand Slav-Turk empire that dominated much of the world before modern times. A general theme among Russia's alternative historians and promoted by Fomenko is that the standard, essentially falsified, historical narrative has been forced upon Russia by the West. A Western conspiracy, which is supposed to have been at work since the ascension to the throne of the Romanov family in the early seventeenth century, is the principal explanation for the downplaying of Russian feats in earlier history. The Romanovs, not least the modernizer Peter the Great, had acted as a fifth column, in complicity with the devious West, at that time led by the Germans. Among the claims of the alternative historians is also that the Vikings never played a role in the founding of the first Russian state, the Kievan Rus (a theme that was also nurtured by several Soviet historians); that the Mongol dominion over Russia from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century never took place; that Tsar Ivan the Terrible was essentially a good ruler, but was then replaced by Western imposters who falsely ruled under his name; and so on, all the way down to assertions that Christopher Columbus was, in fact, Russian, as was, in much earlier history, Moses.

The activities of these charlatan historians are important to study for two reasons. Firstly, their books are very popular. In copies sold they by far outnumber the publications by professional historians. The reason for this is indicated by the apt title of the book. When still working to overcome the psychological trauma that the dissolution of the superpower, the Soviet Union, meant for a vast number of Russians, history can be used as therapy. Showing that in the old days Russia wielded unrivalled might and glory makes it easier to claim that Russia of today has a rightful place as a global great power, and that it will, due to its inherent greatness and moral superiority, take up that dominant position again.

Secondly, these sentiments fit well with the general direction of policies associated with Vladimir Putin over the past fifteen years or so. During his presidential tenures, as well as his four years as Prime Minister when Dmitrii Medvedev was filling in for him, the assertiveness of Russian foreign policy has grown and the international climate has almost come to approach a Cold War chill. In this context, the writings of the alternative historians have moved away from the lunatic fringe of pseudo-academia to a central position in Russia's mainstream political debates. This is an alarming development and I wish that the authors of this volume had dwelt on it more. They do give a thorough account of the arguments of the

alternative historians, but only rarely show how the claims of alternative history have been used in political discourse and by prominent political actors, including Putin himself.

In fact, had the authors ventured more deeply into the role that alternative history plays in Russia's political arena, they would have also noticed a certain contradiction between the tenets of the alternative historians and some of the arguments articulated by Putin. The claim that the Romanovs served to denigrate Russia's global importance in earlier history does not sit well with the admiration that Putin, above all in the earlier years of his presidencies, often expressed towards Peter as modernizer, reformer and symbol of Russian great-power prowess. The authors do note that in the eyes of radical Russian nationalists, Putin, often depicted as a bogeyman in Western public discourses, has actually come to be seen as too moderate, too soft, too pro-Western. Maybe their diverging assessments of Peter the Great are indicative of precisely this rift. This is something that the authors could perhaps pick up, should they decide to write a sequel to this thought-provoking and valuable book.

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