

## PERSPECTIVES

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### The Demons of Science Fiction

When future worlds bring back old threats

*Inna Stakser*

Science fiction is a wonderful genre. I am a big fan of books describing possible futures for humanity. The best science fiction, such as works by Ursula Le Guin and Kim Stanley Robinson, address futures as developing out of combinations of human decisions on the one hand and resource scarcity and technological advances on the other.

Aleksandr Gromov is one of the best known post-Soviet science fiction writers. While I often disagree with his worldview, I always find his books both intellectually stimulating and a pleasure to read. There are quite a few other excellent Russian writers in this genre. Evgenii Lukin, Vadim Shefner and Yulii Burkin combine, for example, combine science fiction and fantasy in imaginative depictions of how human societies might develop.

Yet, some late Soviet and post-Soviet works of fantasy or sci-fi fantasy make me uncomfortable. In addressing the resurgence of nationalism that accompanied the ideological and political collapse of the Soviet Union, they fall back on antisemitic stereotypes. For example, in the works of Yuri Nikitin, Vadim Panov, and Vasiliï Golovachev, the protagonists are depicted as honest, hardworking, albeit somewhat naïve

Slavs, whereas the villains are portrayed as devious money-obsessed individuals intent on destroying society.

As Viktor Shnirelman, historian and ethnologist specializing in the myths and ideologies of the far-right, noted in his 2018 study *Three Myths of a Conspiracy: Antisemitic Propaganda in Contemporary Russia*, this association of villainy with Judaism in late-Soviet and post-Soviet sci-fi fantasy represents a disturbing trend: the use of non-traditional platforms to transmit antisemitic ideas to a new generation of Russians.

According to Shnirelman, fiction, especially the genres of science fiction and fantasy, has become a convenient way of circumventing Russian laws against public expressions of racist views. After all, the idea of prosecuting someone for creating an imaginary world populated by a greedy humanoid species with hooked noses or for using racial epithets to describe the long extinct Khazars seems excessive, even absurd.

The popularity of these genres, especially among Slavic youth, is troubling. It suggests that pervasive stereotypes about Jews are being communicated in disguised forms to the leaders of tomorrow.

Shnirelman gives particular attention to the archetypal character of the outsiders in Russian science fiction; they are depicted as either well-known enemies of the ancient Slavic community, such as the Khazars, or as disingenuous persons belonging to a future society who are intent on causing destruction.

These representations, he contends, derive from deeply ingrained antisemitic perceptions that are based on three interrelated myths about the relationship between Slavs and outsiders.

First, there is the myth of the Antichrist who threatens humanity's existence. He is assisted by those who do not belong to the Slavic Orthodox spiritual community. These outsiders, who include all Jews, hate Christians and want to destroy them. The second myth depicts Slavs as a superior race that is engaged in an eternal life-or-death struggle against the inferior Jewish race. The third myth concerns the Khazars, a Turkic people, whose ruling elite in the eighth century converted to Rabbinic Judaism and who were conquered by the Kievan Rus' circa 965–969 CE. It suggests that the Khazars have not been vanquished; they pose as ordinary Russians, and their goal is revenge on the Russian people.

Science fiction and fantasy based on these myths describes contemporary Russians as noble warriors engaged in an ancient and ongoing battle for the salvation of the human race against an evil ethnic outsider. Shnirelman notes that the war between Slavs and some spiritually dark and racially foreign force is a common theme in the works of Yuri Nikitin (for example, *The Holy Graal* and *One from Hyperborea*), Alexander Baygushev (*Lament for the Unwise Khazars*) and other Russian fantasy writers.

Although the ethnic villain in present-day Russian science fiction is almost never explicitly identified as Jewish, the depiction corresponds either with antisemitic stereotypes or utilizes Jewish surnames to make the connection. Occasionally, the association is made

more explicit. For example, in his 2009 novel *The Non-Russians are Coming, or The Bringers of Death*, Vasilii Glovachev indicates the Jewish identity of the villains by having their names, as read from right to left, sound recognizably Jewish.

Certainly, not all Russian sci-fi fantasy authors utilize antisemitic tropes, nor is implicit or explicit antisemitism peculiar to Russian science fiction. As Paul Sturtevant noted in a 2018 article for the *Washington Post*, the goblins in Harry Potter, the dwarves in the Hobbit, and Watto in the Star Wars series, also perpetuate antisemitic stereotypes. Sturtevant showed how these villains draw on the stereotype of the “greedy Jew”.

However, unlike in Russian sci-fi fantasy, this association of greed with evil is not accompanied in Western science fiction by a parallel emphasis on evil as a foreign force invading a homogenous homeland. It is the combination of antisemitic stereotypes and the othering of foreigners in Russian sci-fi fantasy that Shnirelman finds disturbing, because it points to the ever-present danger of Russian nationalism turning towards racism and xenophobia.

Almost one fifth of Russian Jews express concerns about a rising threat of antisemitism, as indicated by a poll conducted three years ago by the Russian think-tank, The Levada Center. A close look at Russian science fiction suggests that they are not necessarily fantasizing.

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