

Mass Dictatorship and Consensus-Building

Veranstalter: Research Institute of Comparative History and Culture (RICH), Hanyang University, Seoul

Datum, Ort: 29.10.2004-31.10.2004, Seoul

Bericht von: Linas Eriksonas, University of Glamorgan

In recent years the countries in the Far East have made a considerable move towards becoming not only economic powerhouses but also knowledge economies. Especially Japan and Korea have embarked on rigorous transformation of university education, introducing postgraduate training and research across the disciplines, thus boosting their international profile as research-producing rather than knowledge-consuming countries.¹ This newly gained confidence found its reflection in new projects in the humanities, undertaken on a previously unimaginable scale. One such undertaking, characteristic of the times in its ambition and scope, is the comparative research project 'Mass dictatorship' run by the newly established Research Institute of Comparative History and Culture (RICH) at Hanyang University in Seoul with the support of Korean Research Foundation and other both public and private sponsors.²

The project is structured around a series of annual conferences organised by RICH led by Professor Jie-Hyun Lim. Each event has a sub-theme which is aimed to serve as a stepping stone towards building a consensus about what 'mass dictatorship' was or, in case of present-day North Korea, is about. Thus, the opening conference in 2003 dealt with the subject of coercion and consent in dictatorship and last-year's one looked into consensus-building in dictatorship.³ The first conference showed that coercion and consent were integral parts of dictatorship, while the second one aimed to explore the forms of support for dictatorship in a

number of cases. The aim of the project, as formulated by its prolific and enthusiastic organiser, is to better explain what made dictatorships appealing to societies - why people supported the oppressive regimes.

The project is as much about the history of modern Korea as about the experiences of Professor Lim with the military regime of General Park Chung Hee (1961-1979) and his successor General Chun Doo Hwan (1979-1987). Being a Marxist intellectual, Jie-Hyun Lim was an outspoken opponent of the regime, which had come to an end at the time when the communist regimes in Eastern Europe started crumbling. Perhaps not incidentally he chose to do his research in post-communist Poland which was also the birthplace of Rosa Luxemburg, the subject of his forthcoming book. Added to his experience with the South Korean regime, Jie-Hyun Lim's personal encounter with Poland helped to distil the ideas which lie at the heart of the mass dictatorship project.

First of all, there is a notion that dictatorship is not a one-man's show or a conspiracy of a few; the success of dictatorship has to be attributed also to a public support which was necessary if the regime was to last longer than one dictator's life. Without mass consent dictatorship could not be sustained in the long run. Thus, it is no surprise that even today Park Chung Hee is regarded by many Koreans as a hero; the economical success of South Korea in 1960s is largely attributed to his rule as a military dictator - he was and remains a popular figure. The same applies for Stalin in today's Russia.

Then, there is an idea that public support for the regime stands and falls on consensus which has to be managed, that is achieved and sustained over the long period of time. Hence, short-lived dictatorships, as a rule, had smaller followings in the post-regime years as comparing to the countries with a longer record of dictatorship; for example, Mussolini and Franco - the latter still has a very strong 'fan base' among the population (though it is a taboo) while the former is cherished by the marginalised far right only.⁴

¹ The THES has recently reported that Korea and Japan are the only countries outside Europe and US with a significant number of students in PhD programmes.

² For more details on the RICH activities see <http://rich.hanyang.ac.kr> (the English language website is forthcoming).

³ For a conference report see Jie-Hyun Lim and Martin Sabrow, 'Coercion and Consent: A Comparative Study on Mass Dictatorship', in *Potsdamer Bulletin fuer Zeithistorische Studien*, nos. 30-31 (Dec. 2003-Jan. 2004): 71-74; also Jie-Hyun Lim, 'Coercion and Consent: A Comparative Study of Mass dictatorship', *Contemporary European History* 13, 2 (2004): 249-52.

⁴ The authorities in Spain do not oppose annual gatherings in commemoration of Franco's death at the mausoleum-type of monument built by Franco as his final resting place in Valle de Caídos (outside San Lorenzo de El Escorial) where both Spanish dictators Franco and José Antonio Primo de Rivera have their final resting place; I witnessed Franco's daughter and the fascist salute given to her when visiting the place on 25th anniversary of Franco's death in November 2000. As for Mussolini, Predappio (near Forlì), where he was born and buried, does not hold any celebrations of that kind, though

Bearing in mind the recent developments in North Korea, last-year's conference was very timely and topical. By examining individual cases it aimed to explain how consent was built in dictatorship with the help of political religion, hero-cults and media representation as well as the ideologies of racism, nationalism and anti-Semitism.

The first session on 'Political Religion' was opened with Emilio Gentile's paper 'The Sacralization of Politics' which, in the absence of the author, was presented by his collaborator and co-editor of *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* Robert Mallet from the University of Birmingham. (The journal will publish selected papers from the conference in its two next issues). Gentile's paper served as a concise and informed introduction into the subject of political religion and helped others to relate their presentations to this keynote text. The paper of Charles Armstrong from Columbia University was a particular delight. Entitled 'Familism, Socialism and Political Religion in North Korea', the paper explained the traits of Confucianism in Kim Il Sung's understanding of North Korea's place in the Communist world-system. It further showed how Confucian ideas about filial piety and maternal love found their expression in the cult of 'the eternal State President' after the dictator's death in 1994. For European participants it was the most enlightening and eye-opening presentation showing that religion played an important part in oiling the wheels of North Korean dictatorship and its governing ideology despite its inconsistency with religion per se.

Marcin Kula (Warsaw University) gave an equally fascinating presentation comparing Communism and religion. According to his analysis, although Communism fought hard against religion, yet paradoxically it came close to resemble it in a number of ways. His point is valid but the provided comparison was not quite adequate: for his comparison Marcin Kula used Catholicism as a generic Christianity but he did not acknowledge liturgical and theological differences between competing Christian denominations. Roman Catholicism in Poland was quite a different type of church from Orthodoxy in Russia and each compares differently with Communism. Thus, for example, the fact that Stalin had been trained to become an Orthodox Christian priest would not say much; much more could be explained by the fact that Stalin's

religious experience came from his training at a seminary of the Georgian Orthodox Church.⁵

Other contributors to this session – from Didier Musiedliak (University of Paris-X) on the religious dimension of Mussolini's thought, from Inho Na (University of Incheon) and Jinwoo Park (Yongsan University) on political religions in Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, and from Martin Sabrow (University of Potsdam) on the sense of time and speed in Nazi Germany and the GDR – each in its own, illustrative way lent their support to Gentile's main thesis that political religion, being the result of sacralization of politics in totalitarian countries, 'rejects co-existence with other political ideologies and movements, denies the autonomy of the individual with respect to the collective, prescribes the obligatory observance of its commandments and participation in its political cult, and sanctifies violence as a legitimate arm of struggle against enemies and as an instrument of regeneration.'⁶ Although contributors came from different academic backgrounds, their papers illustrated the main theme of the conference well.

The second session entitled 'Hero-Cults and Media Representations' aimed at exploring in detail how in individual cases, ranging from Nazi Germany to militaristic Japan, dictatorships were sustained through hero-cults and various representations of the often mythical past. Peter Lambert (University of Wales, Aberystwyth) talked about the heroic myth of Hitler. Won Yong Park (Pukyong National University) discussed the Soviet movement of Stakhanovists as a bilateral interaction between the state and people. Linas Eriksonas (University of Glamorgan) looked at the cult of airmen in the less known cases of interwar Portugal and Lithuania. Michael Kim (Seoul National University) explained how empire was represented in the visual culture of late colonial Korea. Chonghoon Lee (Hanyang University) talked about visual Stalinism and its reflections in posters, paintings and magazine illustrations. And Christoph Clasen (Center for Research of Contemporary History Potsdam) brilliantly rounded up the session by presenting a detailed comparative scheme for analysis

⁵ These links between Stalin's Georgian Orthodox background and later Soviet imperial policies are being explored by Prof. Alfred J. Rieber in his forthcoming book on Stalin as a man of borderlands.

⁶ Emilio Gentile, 'The Sacralization of Politics', in *Mass Dictatorship and Consensus-building, the 2nd 'Mass Dictatorship' International Conference*, [conference proceedings], Seoul: Hanyang University: 13-14.

the place is frequent with latter-day fascists from all over the world.

of propaganda in radio and film in Nazi Germany and the GDR under Stalin. Instead of going into detail about each of these interesting, informative presentations, it is worth instead mentioning the main problematic points which emerged from the papers and discussions which followed.

First, it is clear that it is impossible to seek one-size-fits-all explanations about the varied phenomena given the generic header of dictatorship. Although methodically it can be useful to compare, for example, Nazi Germany and Japan, yet if one takes into consideration Gentile's ideas about political religion and its place in constituting a totalitarian ideology, one has to admit that the comparison could work only when the cases for comparison are selected on the basis of their religious affinity, ie. Catholic Poland compared with Catholic Portugal or Confucian Korea with Confucian Japan.

Second, a more clear distinction should be made between describing who used a hero and who was a hero. Many dictators tried to present themselves as latter-day heroes and successors to the lineage of heroic characters from the past. Yet in many cases examples of true heroism (of human bravery of the most democratic and unselfish nature) were used by propaganda to furnish regimes with faked values and honour.

Thus, when one talks about hero-cults in relation to, for example, Stakhanovits, one should not talk about Stakhanovists as a people and their achievements rather than about their place in the discourse of the Party. The use of the term 'hero' is indeed problematic; it is used in very casual manner by many authors in different contexts.⁷ The 'hero' has a positive connotation in popular discourse; hence when describing hero-cults in dictatorship perhaps we should use a more negative term in order to keep the original term 'hero' unstained from the undemocratic propaganda. Thus, instead of heroes one could talk about phantoms of dictatorship and idols for masses.

The final session of this conference was way removed from the previous two: while the first one discussed theory and the second one tried to apply theory on case studies, the third session was dedicated to 'a real history'. It described different forms of anti-Semitism and racism as it appeared in Imperial Japan (Sakai Naoki), Nazi Germany

(Michael Wildt), Vichy France (Annette Wievior-ka), Communist Poland (Feliks Tych) and Soviet Ukraine (Volodymyr Kravchenko). Due to its wide range of topics involved it was the least balanced session and at times lacked coherence but it was very informative and useful, for it helped to confront the theory-soaked papers with historical material, which showed that many people supported dictatorships because they simply believed or wanted to believe in what the regime was telling them; and many, such as Michael Wildt's with a chilling detail described officers of the Reich Security Main Office, willingly identified themselves with the regime and perpetrated crimes because they believed that that they were on a mission to create a better world.

Scholars tend to seek for logical explanations of why certain people supported certain policies, even if they were aware that these policies would have serious consequences to their own and others' freedom or even life. When a simple truth is revealed – perhaps there was nothing rational but a sheer belief, one is left shell-shocked. The conference gave a healthy doze of food for thought. Now it remains to be seen how the following two conferences will turn these findings into the anatomy of societies in dictatorship.

Tagungsbericht *Mass Dictatorship and Consensus-Building*. 29.10.2004-31.10.2004, Seoul. In: H-Soz-u-Kult 18.03.2005.

⁷ See Linas Eriksonas, 'Introduction' to his *National Heroes and National Identities: Scotland, Norway and Lithuania* (Brussels: P.I.E-Peter Lang, 2004).