Stalin and the Lesser Gods. The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships in Comparative Perspective (1928-1961)

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In the beautiful setting of the EUI, surrounded by the green hills of Tuscany and under a bright azzurro sky scholars from Britain, Germany, Hungary and Poland assembled for a comparative discussion of Leader Cults. While the phenomenon of the Leader Cult is one that can be found in any form of modern government - be it democratic, authoritarian or totalitarian in its nature -this workshop focused on the Stalinist era of Communist societies. Thus far, the emergence, development of the cult of Joseph Stalin had been scrutinized by historians of Communist Russia. In Florence, however, the participants tried to broaden our view of Communist Leader Cults by bringing a wide range of countries from the socialist camp into a comparative discussion. Whilst in any attempt to analyse Communist Leader Cults the adoration of Stalin will remain centre stage, the workshop has shown that historical research dealing with the peripheries of Soviet power may contribute much to our understanding of Soviet-type societies. The papers given in Florence touched on many intriguing questions such as the making of the cult, its functions in the centre of power and at the peripheries of the Soviet empire, the art-history dimensions of leader worship and the dilemmas of de-Stalinization after 1956.

The workshop commenced with an introductory presentation by Arfon Rees (Florence) who drew on Max Weber's concept of charismatic rule in his wide ranging thoughts on the subject. Rees pointed to the cultic tendencies which had shaped socialism and in particular Bolshevism early on. He asked whether the introduction and the blossoming of the Stalin Cult in the 1930s could be linked to the parallel horrors of the Great Terror. Additionally, Rees pointed to the „vacuous nature", the peculiar emptiness of the cult which resulted in a constant ambiguity of signals and messages. While the picture of the leader as the teacher of the people remained an omnipresent image under Stalin, Soviet society became a „classroom" and citizens were permanently degraded to the status of pupils.

The following first session dealt with the „Making of the Cult - Tools and Individuals". Balázs Szalontai (Budapest) spoke about the monstrous cult surrounding Kim-Il-Sung, its hagiographical narratives and its imprint on North Korean society. Using both internal sources and published materials, Sarah Davies (Durham) tried to answer the question what Stalin himself thought about his cult and how he influenced biographical and historiographical materials. Her talk emphasized how much Stalin tried to police his own cult internally whilst simultaneously trying to create an image of modesty which could lead to the illusion that he himself disapproved of the excesses of Stalin worship. Both Árpád von Klimó's (Berlin) and Balázs Apor's (Florence) contributions dealt with the cult of Mátyas Rákosi, the Stalinist dictator of post-war Hungary. While von Klimo examined the case of Béla Illés, a Hungarian writer whom he labelled the „man behind the cult", Apor examined the images of Rákosi in official biographies. These papers demonstrated the immense efforts of the party-state to (re-)construct the biography of the leader and to use the Hungarian intelligentsia in the making of the cult. Balázs Apor argued, that Communist Leader Cults should not be called „cults of personality" but rather „cults of impersonality" because official representations of the leaders were bare of any individual or personal features.

Benno Ennker (Tübingen) and Catriona Kelly (Oxford) pointed in their talks to two different functions of the cult. Using archival evidence from Moscow, Ennker showed how the Stalin Cult was part of the power struggle in the innermost circle of power - the okruzhenie Stalina. In her following presentation on „Uncle Stalin and Grandpa Lenin", Catriona Kelly examined the ways children were exposed to Soviet leader cults. In striking parallel to the Hitler cult, official iconography featured many images of Stalin caring for or

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surrounded by children - an aspect of Leader Cults that thus far has remained understudied.

On the following day, Malte Rolf (Berlin), Jan C. Behrends (Marburg) and Izabella Main (Cracow) spoke about the peripheries of the cult. In a detailed study of the Russian provinces (Black-Earth Region and Western Siberia), Malte Rolf tried to show that the Soviet practise of leader worship initially resulted in a large number of local mini-Leader Cults that were then dismantled as the regional Soviet elites fell victim to the Great Terror. Through the purges a fixed canon of leaders was established and then used in patron-client relationships between Moscow and the Russian provinces. Jan C. Behrends' talk outlined how the Stalin Cult was written into the Stalinized national master narrative of Poland and the German Democratic Republic. Drawing from internal party documents, Behrends described different reactions of the Polish and the German populace to Stalin's 70th birthday 1949 that was celebrated in an international gift exchange extravaganza of hitherto unknown proportions and to Stalin's death in March 1953. Finally, Izabella Main spoke about the Polish regime's attempt to create a cult of Boleslaw Bierut - a difficult undertaking because Bierut himself was hardly a charismatic figure. Thus, although lavish celebrations of Bierut's 60th birthday in 1952 were organised, he can hardly serve as an example of a full-blown local Leader Cult as in the case of Mátyas Rákosi.

Jan Plamper (Tübingen) and Alice Mocanescu (Durham) presented papers on the visual representation of the Leader Cult. While Plamper provided an in-depth interpretation of Aleksander Gerasimov's socialist-realist painting Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin (1938) and explained the modes and the policing of art production in Stalinist society, Alice Mocanescu examined a wide range of different images of the Romanian dictator Ceausescu. While Stalin was certainly the sole centre of the Stalinist visual cosmos and his family remained outside the public eye, Ceausescu was often depicted alongside his wife, Elena. In contrast to Romanian propaganda posters which reveal strong influences from Maoist China, Soviet socialist realism stood firmly rooted in the Russian tradition of realist painting.

The workshop's final panel dealt with the dilemmas of De-Stalinisation after Stalin had officially been declared persona non grata in Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th party convention of 1956. The practise of leader worship was denounced and the whole era of Stalin's rule was labelled the time of the „cult of personality". As Polly Jones (Oxford) convincingly argued, these new policies led to very peculiar local problems in Stalin's town - Stalingrad. World-famous as the site of the Eastern front's decisive battle, many inhabitants clung to the city's name which stood not only for Stalin but for victorious struggle and patriotic pride. But the central authorities of the Soviet Union did not permit such an outpouring of local pride. De-Stalinisation certainly had a large impact on Polish politics and led to the establishment of a new leadership and the turmoil of October 1956. Yet, as Marcin Zaremba (Warsaw) showed, Poland's new leader Wladislaw Gomulka - elected on a anti-Stalinist agenda - was quick to establish his own Leader Cult. Stalin had died, but the practise of leader worship proved hard to kill off.

The vibrant final discussion of the conference touched on many issues that had been raised during two days of intensive scholarly debate. Jan Plamper pointed to the preconditions of a full-blown modern leader cult, i.e. the ability of the state to reach the whole population, the secularisation of society and the development of means to of mass production of the leader's image. The contributions to the workshop pointed to a view Leader Cults as an integral part of a Soviet-type modernity. Through analysing this „closed system of communication" (Malte Rolf) we may gain additional insights to our understanding of Soviet-type societies. By expanding the scope of research to the peripheries of the Soviet empire and by including the post-war era the workshop has raised new questions and broadened our knowledge about Communist Leader Cults.

The conveners will try to publish the bulk of the contributions in an English language volume which is due to appear next year.

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