

**Sammelrez: K. Heller u.a. (Hgg.):  
Personenkulte im Stalinismus**

Apor, Balazs; Jan C. Behrends, Polly Jones (Hg.): *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorship. Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005. ISBN: 1-403-93443-6; 298 S.

Heller, Klaus; Jan Plamper (Hg.): *Personenkulte im Stalinismus. Personality Cults in Stalinism*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2004. ISBN: 3-899-71191-2; 472 S.

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The Stalinist „cult of personality“ has recently attracted the attention of enough scholars to generate two conferences who have now published their results. The cult of personality is particularly well suited for an exploration of one of the cutting edges of theoretical reflection today – the reintegration of cultural and discursive approaches to history with approaches focusing on social, political and institutional practices, of what people say, write, or even think, with what they do. It is of course impossible to do justice to 31 essays in the space a review offers. I will therefore concentrate on three themes here: construction of the cult, reception of the cult, and wider implications for twentieth century history. In the first two themes, something of a consensus seems to exist among the participants of the two conferences; the third theme is in need of further elaboration and research.

Most contributors agree that the Stalin cult was not simply consciously constructed by calculating central actors. Sarah Davies, for example, explores Stalin's reluctant attitude towards the cult around his person. She finds him a Marxist analyst concerned with toning down rather than manufacturing the Stalin cult. Plamper seems to disagree with this analysis, but not with the general consensus that the driving force of the cult has to be found in Stalin's environment rather than with Stalin himself (*Personality Cults*, pp. 30, 21). Ennker (who has essays in both volumes) convincingly relates the genesis of the cult to the dynamics within the highest reaches of the party; the cult was not simply a manufactured

discourse, but „a vital component of the Soviet system of political power“ (*Personality Cults*, p. 162). As in Davies' account, Stalin is not the only, and not even the most important constructor of his cult. Rather, the cult was pushed by his lieutenants in the context of the very real, very bitter, and very dangerous political struggles around Stalin as the center of power (*okruzhenie Stalina*).

In a similar vein, Rolf sees the lesser personality cults of the „little Stalins“ in the provinces as expressions of bureaucratic politics of interest. Rolf's insistence on positioning the Stalin cult within a „wider culture of leader cults“ (*Personality Cults*, p. 197) dovetails well with Barbara Walker's exploration of the roots of the Stalin cult in the world of pre-revolutionary intellectual circles. In Walker's interpretation, the emergence of the Stalin cult was part of the Stalinization of the intelligentsia. In the process, Stalin took over the position of supreme patron and „teacher of life“ from lesser patrons who were either eliminated or subordinated to the new superpatron. The Stalin cult was the cultural aspect of this socio-cultural transformation of the educated elite. Irina Paperno's analysis of the intelligentsia's erotic desire to be dominated by Stalin („O father, o God, love me!") points in the same direction: many intellectuals craved for a leader; the developing Stalin cult appropriated this yearning.

To insist on a wider socio-cultural analysis of the emergence of the Stalin cult does not mean to say that everybody was similarly responsive to it. In fact, many of the contributors go well beyond the unproductive belief/disbelief dichotomy and stress the complexity of popular responses to Stalin's image. Overall, their contributions suggest that the cult was most effective where it could tap into pre-existing desires and needs (such as in the case of the intelligentsia discussed by Walker and Paperno), while it failed where it had to manufacture such responsiveness more or less from scratch. In Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's words, propaganda only worked where it could rely „on a positive inclination, some basic form of attraction on the part of the people toward the cult figure“ (*Personality Cults*, p. 101).

And this inclination was unevenly dis-

tributed. Catriona Kelly demonstrates that even the most impressionable members of the Soviet population – the children – did not simply have the cult inscribed into their consciousness by an all-powerful discourse. Jan C. Behrends explores popular reactions to the Stalinist cult in Poland and Eastern Germany not only in the context of traditions of leadership veneration, but also in the context of the very real and very emotional experience of war and destruction, violence and imperialism. Polly Jones reminds us forcefully that the cult, once internalized, had a life of its own whether or not the state continued to promote it.

Kelly's fascinating exploration of children's reception of the Stalin cult does not stop with the unsurprising naïveté of many children towards what they learned in school. Her account also includes adolescent cynics who called Stalin „rude and treacherous“ (Leader Cult, p. 112), schoolchildren who painted swastikas on their exercise books, defaced portraits of leaders, or formed secret anti-Soviet societies (Leader Cult, p. 116). In Kelly's account, little Soviets were not simply brainwashed (even if some memoirists claim just that): „children were [...] capable of recognising a message and rejecting it“ (Leader Cult, p. 114). What they were taught in school was more complex than a simple inculcation of Stalinism. Russian literature, for example, could provide „a specially vivid sense of the alternative set of values“.

Moreover, education was not confined to the school, either, and even the most orthodox teaching of Stalinist values „could be undermined by the skepticism of parents.“ Peer pressure – one of the favorite tools of Soviet educators – could cut in a variety of ways as well (Leader Cult, 115). For Kelly, the question about „what children believed“ simply cannot be answered in the abstract – there were too many children of too many different backgrounds in Stalinism to make such generalizations. Moreover, many children displayed different loyalties in different contexts (at school and at home, on the playground and in the classroom), which further complicates the picture. As a result of all of these complications, „Soviet schools were volatile places, the haunts of subversion and uneasy

compromise as well as of obedience, deference and belief“ (Leader Cult, p. 116).

If unquestioning belief in the leader was problematical in the Soviet context, it became even more so outside of the borders of the first Socialist state. In postwar Poland and Germany, argues Behrends, the manufacturing of „the kind of unconditional trust and quasi-religious belief in the Soviet leader... that devoted communists had long internalised“ became nothing less than an „utopian goal“ (Leader Cult, p. 163). As Behrends shows with reference to reactions to Stalin's death, this goal was partially reached in certain groups of the population (communist students, for example), who formed one extreme in a whole spectrum of popular responses (Leader Cult, p. 173). Plamper critiques the notion of „reception“ and extensively discusses the shortcomings of the available data, but comes to similar conclusions: the transplanted cult was received in different ways by different people – and sometimes in contradictory ways by one and the same person (Personality Cults, p. 311-27).

In the end, however, it was not necessary that everybody be constantly under the spell of the mythical image of the leader in order to make the cult of personality work. To contribute to the stabilization of the Stalinist system of domination it was enough to speak Bolshevik in public and criticize the totalitarianism of the GDR only in the privacy of one's diary (as Victor Klemperer did; Leader Cult, p. 170). It was even enough if only the citizens' bodies could be compelled to participate in public ritual, no matter where the hearts and minds wandered during the ceremony (Personality Cults, p. 326-27). If in addition to such public display of loyalty the cult of the leader captured the imagination and emotions of at least a significant minority, so much the better.

It is clear from the evidence presented in these two important volumes that the cult did indeed capture the imagination of a significant part of the population in Stalin's Soviet Union. Probably the strongest evidence for such anchoring of the cult in a segment of the population comes from Polly Jones' fine article on resistance to de-Stalinization. Soviet citizens from all over the country not only wrote

angry or distressed letters defending Stalin against the demolition of his cult, but also engaged in other forms of protest such as public speech against de-Stalinization (Leader Cult, p. 227-41). Jones suggests to think of the party during the Thaw as caught in the middle between vocal Stalinists and equally vocal critics of the Soviet order.

The topics explored in these two volumes could form the starting point to very productive comparative research. Thanks to these volumes we now have quite detailed knowledge about the Stalin cult's genesis, semantics, function, export, and reception. What we do not know beyond theoretical speculation is why similar cults developed in other societies as well, that is what is specific about the Soviet case. E. A. Rees claims that an essential difference must exist a priori between leader cults proper and „the glorification of political leaders in other more open political systems“ (The Leader Cult, p. 8).

This thesis is as much in need of empirical investigation as the counter claims raised by other participants in the discussion. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, for example, sees the rise of personality cults as the corollary to the de-individuation and massification of modern society (Personality Cults, p. 86-91). Similarly, Plamper argues that secularization deified political leaders and that thus personality cults were „the norm, not the perversion of modern politics“ (Personality Cults, p. 19). Clearly, not all modern societies at all times developed personality cults. Why did some develop it and others not? Much comparative work could be done in search of the answers to such questions.

To be sure, the two volumes are not devoid of comparative thought. The Heller/Plamper volume starts with a section exploring German, Italian, and pre-Soviet Russian personality cults, and the two separate introductions by the editors raise the question of the wider context as well. The Apor/Behrends/Jones/Rees volume includes essays on Hungary, Poland, and the GDR; and the volume's introduction gestures towards comparative cases beyond the Eastern Bloc. Individual contributors, too, play with cases outside of their field of study. Kelly, for example, argues that

the development of propaganda addressed to children was a quite general twentieth century innovation and compares the levels of indoctrination of teachers in Nazism and Stalinism. Katerina Clark points out that the semi-sacral status literature attained in Stalin's Soviet Union was widespread in other European countries as well.

Walker notes that the image of the leader as „teacher“ is absent from German or Italian discourse, but is part of the cult in the Chinese or North Korean cases. Behrends stresses the importance of the cults of Bismarck, Hindenburg, and Pilsudski, as well as the Hitler cult as contexts of the transplantation of the Stalin cult to Poland and East Germany after 1945. Similarly, Plamper puts the reception of the Stalin cult in the GDR into a wider European context. Ennker and Rolf also engage in implicit comparison when applying Ian Kershaw's notion of „working towards the Führer“ to the Bolshevik case. But there is no real attempt to systematically compare the leadership cults of the Soviet and non-Soviet cases and thus ask the old questions about Sonderweg, modernity, and totalitarianism from a new vantage point.

We should not blame the conference organizers for this weakness, however. It is not a conceptual or theoretical problem. Rather, it is a function of the innovative nature of the research presented here. As the essay by Henning Bühmann on the Hitler cult makes clear, Russian history is for once leading the way thematically: there is, for example, to date no in depth study of the Hitler cult (Personality Cults, p. 109-57). While there is a large literature on the construction of self and the culture of personality in modern societies, the links between this history of individuation, the history of massification, and the history of leadership cults still needs to be worked out in much more detail. One can only hope that historians of Germany, France, Italy, or, for that matter, the United States, as well as historians who transcend these national boundaries will follow the agenda set by these two important volumes.

HistLit 2005-4-154 / Mark Edele über Apor, Balazs; Jan C. Behrends, Polly Jones (Hg.): *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorship. Stalin*

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