Jan Plamper (2014)

Kult Stalina. Studium alchemii władzy

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Wybitna książka o radzieckiej propagandzie, drobiazgowy obraz sztuki w służbie polityki.

Dlaczego miliony radzieckich obywateli nigdy nie widziało Stalina osobiście, ale byli pewni, że go "widzieli"! Jan Plamper zrekonstruował i zanalizował niemal alchemiczny proces z udziałem artystów, aparatu partyjnego, funkcjonariuszy państwowych i samego Stalina, który zmienił dziobatego Gruzina w symbol światowego komunizmu. Jaki wpływ na kult Stalina miało traktowanie Napoleona III we Francji, Mussoliniego we Włoszech, czy Piłsudskiego w Polsce? Na ile fenomen Stalina wyrastał z rosyjskiej tradycji władzy (Tak, potrzebna nam republika, ale z dobrym carem na czele! – powiedział brytyjskiemu ambasadorowi młody rewolucjonista). Do jakiego stopnia wzorem dla apologetów Stalina była tak zwana „leniniada”, czyli pośmiertny kult Lenina? W jaki sposób Stalin sankcjonował, kontrolował, cenzurował i korygował świadectwa swojego kultu? Wreszcie: kto i jak je wytwarzał?

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Rezension von M.A. Milosz K. Cybowski Redaktionell betreut von M.A. Martin Müller-Butz

Among the many books about the Soviet leader published in recent years in Poland, "Kult Stalina" is unique in its approach to the subject. The book is the Polish edition of Jan Plamper's "The Stalin Cult. A Study in the
Plamper’s work is not another biography of Stalin (among those that have been published in the last decades especially the works by Dmitri Volkogonov, Edvard Radzinsky and Simon Sebag Montefiore should be mentioned [1]); instead, the author offers a unique study on the “alchemy of power” – in other words, he looks at the cult of Stalin, answering the questions of its origin, evolution, central elements and the ways in which representations of the cult were created.

One of the significant elements of the book is that Plamper does not consider Stalin’s case as something unique. Interestingly, comparisons with Mussolini and Hitler are not the only ones. Plamper traces the idea of a modern and secular personality cult back to the second half of the nineteenth century and to the French Emperor Napoleon III. This wide context (Plamper also considers cult of tsars) is highly significant, as it suggests that there might have been a longer tradition that contributed towards the way in which the cult of Stalin evolved.

The book concentrates on two aspects of the cult: its representations (“Wytwory kultu”) and the process of creation (“Tworzenie kultu”), what Plamper explains in detail, when he claims that “the ways in which the cult or culture is created cannot be separated from [its] forms” (p. 24). Plamper makes two important choices that contribute to the high quality of his work. The first one is a rather problematizing than a chronological approach to the subject. It allows him to concentrate on particular aspects of the main questions (how the cult was created, how did the cult evolve, what role did the cult play in Soviet culture and politics) within the context of the whole period of the cult (years 1929-1953). Secondly, his study does not even attempt to encapsulate all different forms of representations of Stalin’s cult, concentrating instead on its visual representations (particularly portraits, as “the oil portraits of Stalin played a central role in building his cult, because other media ("środki przekazu") were unable to serve this purpose” (p. 18) ). While other media are still present in this study, they are mentioned only in passing (particularly in the last chapter).

The first part of the book looks at representations of Stalin and their development in time and space. The first significant appearance of Stalin in Soviet newspapers took place in December 1929, when Stalin’s fiftieth birthday was celebrated in a highly unusual way. Although Stalin had worked behind the scenes throughout the 1920s to consolidate his power and to dominate over more prominent members of the Communist party (including Trotsky, Bukharin, Kamenev and Zinoviev), he remained a relatively unknown figure. Additionally, these celebrations of Stalin’s birthday stood in sharp contrast with the official view that the collective should precede the individual and thus led to a slow acceptance of the individual. Interestingly, in that year “the cult of Stalin appeared … and then remained quiet for three and a half years” (p. 65). Sudden appearances and disappearances of Stalin characterised the whole period of his rule. Very often, particularly in the late 1930s and early 1940s, images of Stalin disappeared from the press as an attempt to disassociate him from events like the purges in the Communist party and the Soviet show trials.. A much more complex development of the cult had begun in 1933 with the creation of a canon of pictures, paintings and photographs representing the Soviet leader. While some of the key elements remained unchanged throughout the whole period, Plamper notes significant changes in depicting Stalin in the 1930s (as father of the nation) and in the late 1940s (as the
famous generalissimo).

The second part of the book looks at the more problematic question of the ways in which representations of Stalin were created. Therein Plamper touches upon a very interesting issue of Soviet patronage and puts an end to the widespread belief in "humble Stalin" who disliked all types of glorification. The way in which the author unravels the truth behind Stalin's humbleness is particularly fascinating and shows how, over time, Stalin and his close environment came to control every publication or visual representation of him. By extending his control over the ways in which his photographs or paintings were distributed, published and printed, Stalin made sure that they first represented a good artistic value and secondly complied with the canon. Such a strategy obviously created a whole range of paradoxes: artists were expected to create new paintings of Soviet leaders by only using the canon and a few photographs available to them.

The two last chapters of the book are more descriptive in nature. In "How to paint the leader?" Plamper presents a whole range of institutions linked with the creation of the cult and the control of the individual artists. It includes everyday problems of these organisations and exemplarily shows how the painters had to struggle with such an established canon.

In comparison to other chapters in the book, the brevity of the last one "The Public as the creator of the cult" is striking. It looks at the influence of the Soviet public on the cult by presenting two examples, guestbook entries in galleries and meetings with actors representing Stalin in movies and theatres. Whereas it had been possible in the 1920s that the Soviet public could contribute to the change from abstractionism to realism in Soviet art, that influence diminished in the following decades. As the author concludes, the main purpose of such statements was to give people an illusion of involvement in the process of creating Soviet culture.

Some minor (usually editorial) mistakes and simplifications of Soviet history do not counter the general impression that Plamper's study is highly enlightening. It is a pity that the publisher decided to reproduce only a handful of paintings in colour. The book would have benefited from a greater number of perhaps larger reproductions. The last chapters, how brief and descriptive they might be, fit into the general picture of a seemingly not always explainable "alchemy" of Stalin's cult and power.

After all, the title of the monograph seems slightly misleading. Although Plamper's study convincingly deciphers the impact, which Stalin's cult should make on the whole Soviet society, the author at the end of his monograph concludes that "we end up with the surfeit of unknown" (p. 350). This is by no means the admittance of a defeat. "Kult Stalina" remains an enlightening work on the Stalinist variant of the personality cult and impressively reveals its mystifying elements.

Zitierweise: