

H-France Forum

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Andrew Sobanet, *Generation Stalin: French Writers, the Fatherland, and the Cult of Personality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. xi + 296 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$75 US. (hb). ISBN: 978-0-253-03821-0; \$36 (pb). ISBN: 978-0-253-03822-7.

Review Essay by Lynn A. Higgins, Dartmouth College

In her response to former presidential Chief-of-Staff John Kelly's recent claim that he had warned Trump about his risk of impeachment, White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham made the following pronouncement: "I worked with John Kelly, and he was totally unequipped to handle the genius of our great President." [1]

Discovering grandiose and formulaic fanfare such as this in the daily news is all the more alarming after reading Andrew Sobanet's case study in propaganda and cult formation, *Generation Stalin: French Writers, the Fatherland, and the Cult of Personality*. This is not a book about Stalin, but about how individual intellectuals and writers created a myth of the Soviet leader that infiltrated the public imaginary and shaped public discourses in the cultural and political spheres.

Sobanet reframes the careers and writings of four influential French authors—Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Paul Eluard, and Louis Aragon—in the light of their contributions to pro-Stalin propaganda. Using a wide array of sources, from literary publications, a stage play, and a film to unpublished documents in recently opened archives, Sobanet painstakingly reinterprets key works by these authors, revealing how their celebrated, canonical status has obscured their systematic glorification of Stalin and their fervent, sometimes blind adherence to communism, sometimes in full awareness of its abuses. He also traces their itineraries through successive modulations in the policies of the French Communist Party (PCF) and teases out each individual's blind spots, hesitations, doubts, and changes of heart. It's a risky topic, treated with great insight in even-handed scholarly fashion. Sobanet is also a delightful storyteller, and he has given us a compelling and readable work of revisionist literary criticism.

Generation Stalin amply achieves two of its explicit goals. By resituating the four figures in relation to each other and in their historical and political contexts, the book corrects the airbrushed portraits that have dominated academic and popular understandings of each writer in isolation: Barbusse has been celebrated for his anti-war novel and his 1916 Prix Goncourt; Rolland for his pacifist humanism and his 1915 Nobel Prize; Eluard for his Resistance activities and anti-fascist poetry and, along with Aragon, for his association with the Surrealist movement. As they emerge from Sobanet's study, the four writers look quite different. Secondly, the book identifies and aims to redress an imbalance in twentieth-century French Studies that has consisted of overemphasizing the Extreme Right and the Vichy period (about which Sobanet has also written), leaving the complicity of cultural figures with Far Left ideologies and historical atrocities insufficiently probed.

As a literary and cultural critic, Sobanet's emphasis is on the linguistic, rhetorical, and narrative building blocks of cult construction. After unfolding the complexities of historical and intellectual context, each chapter analyses the ideological strategies of a selected text: a biography by Barbusse, a play by Rolland, a film scripted and narrated by Eluard, and a novel by Aragon. In order to best appreciate Sobanet's approach,

anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss will be helpful: in his famous dissection of the Oedipus story, Lévi-Strauss understands myth as a narrative mechanism capable of structuring contradictions and mediating oppositions so as to smooth or mask social tensions by protecting categories and keeping reassuring distinctions in place. In Sobanet's telling, each of his four writers performed something of a high wire act whose purpose was to reconcile a tension between French patriotism and Communist internationalism in varying historical settings. The book pays close attention to the ebbs and flows over the decades of that tension, which remained latent in the early interwar years but became increasingly urgent in the face of the rising Nazi threat and then through the Occupation and into the Cold War era. Each of the writers mediates this contradiction in a different way, and a great strength of *Generation Stalin* is the book's adeptness at untangling the strands of individual psychology, political culture and cultural politics, and literary voice that were woven together to produce successive modulations of the Stalin mythology, as it struggles to accommodate French traditions to communist dogma.

Chapter one examines the foundational text of the Stalin cult in France, Henri Barbusse's *Staline: Un monde nouveau vu à travers un homme* (1935). Barbusse, a public intellectual in the lineage of Zola and Sartre, emerged from the First World War an ardent pacifist, anti-militarist, and anti-nationalist. Sobanet traces the evolution of Barbusse's thought from his anti-heroic war novel, *Le Feu*, (1916, Prix Goncourt) through his growing fame and alignment with the PCF, which he joined in 1923. Barbusse first traveled to the Soviet Union as honored guest on the 10th anniversary of the Revolution, and he met with Stalin then and on every subsequent visit. Stalin had been seeking a biographer; Barbusse was approved by the culture and propaganda department of the Central Committee and was officially invited to take on the task. Documents and support were provided, and his work was closely supervised, to ensure that Stalin appeared in sufficiently glorious light. Barbusse's biography was published to amplify Stalin's 55th birthday celebration, and it helped solidify the cult in the USSR and launch it in France. Although the book itself enjoyed only a brief shelf life in the Soviet Union, Barbusse's biography became "a blueprint for Communist-aligned intellectual activity in France for a generation" (p. 41).

Sobanet's analysis of the text lingers on its polarized and hyperbolic language, extricating aspects of the book that adhere to historical reality from passages that veer off into propaganda. As in each of the four chapters, the story continues to the book's distribution and reception. Here Sobanet introduces the useful term "mediasphere" to characterize the discursive currents in which texts (and myths) bathe and to which they contribute. Like the three other authors, Barbusse was also involved in the world of publishing: his activities as journalist and editor at *L'Humanité* and *Monde* (which he created) helped disseminate communist propaganda.

Sobanet also lays bare the impact of Barbusse's personal psychology on his myth making. Stalin's biographer showed a marked tendency toward binary thinking and hero worship: Barbusse revered and wrote about Lenin, then Gandhi, then Jesus, all of whom he reshaped to fit his own ideological predilections. We read about the biography's reception and the official tributes to its author, and finally, following Barbusse's death in Moscow, about his funeral in Paris which was, by some accounts, the most pomp-filled funeral in France since Victor Hugo's. Hugo is among the components of the communist propaganda machine's "culture of commemoration," another of Sobanet's unifying themes.

Each of the remaining chapters follows the template established in chapter 1: situating Rolland, then Eluard, and finally Aragon in their respective political and cultural milieus and outlining their engagements in communist activities and the communist mediasphere, followed by analysis of a key text from inception

through reception, and finally assessment of the individual's role in the elaboration of the Stalin personality cult in France. Chapter 2, "Romain Rolland and the Politics of Terror," spotlights Rolland, an associate of Barbusse, as he takes on the mantle of France's leading communist intellectual. Like Barbusse, Rolland emerged from WWI an ardent pacifist and anti-nationalist, and we follow his evolution from anti-fascist defender of intellectual freedom to unqualified supporter of Stalinist orthodoxy, including his reevaluation of the necessity of revolutionary violence.

The assigned text for Chapter Two is Rolland's 1939 play, *Robespierre*, written for the 150th anniversary of the French Revolution, a commemoration appropriated by the PCF for its own political purposes. The play covers the final months of the Terror and the downfall and execution of the Revolutionary leader. Rolland serves the communist cause by portraying the Russian Revolution as a continuation of the French Revolution, with Robespierre as a stand-in for Stalin. Rolland paints Robespierre's purity and martyrdom, dramatizing his justifications of the Terror and, by analogy, of Stalin's show trials and executions (even of people Rolland knew). Attentive to textual details such as the ideological implications of Rolland's "oceanic imagery," Sobanet documents Rolland's public stances using evidence from the play and supporting published texts and compares them to the author's private doubts and disillusionments and even his hypocrisies, as revealed in his private papers. There follows a fascinating study of conflicting understandings both of the controversial figure of Robespierre and of Rolland's play, which has widely been seen as critical of Stalin. Sobanet carefully unpacks the layers of text and paratext, showing how the play's own ambiguities make such divergent interpretations possible, but ultimately, through examination of the play's reception (including the enthusiasm of the PCF), finds Rolland supportive of Stalin.

Paul Eluard arrives on stage in chapter three in time to celebrate Stalin's 70th birthday in 1949. Eluard was already well known as a poet, Resistance activist, and *intellectuel engagé*, and he was thus well placed to mobilize French traditions of dedication to social justice for the communist cause. Within the PCF, he was also already associated with Victor Hugo, who loomed large at the birthday commemorations. Like Hugo, Eluard was already a proponent of a kind of socialist (or poetic) realism, and like Hugo, he made regular appearances for ceremonial occasions and composed panegyrics in support of his chosen causes. Like Barbusse and Rolland, he received a hero's welcome in the USSR, where his work—and his opposition to both Nazi Germany and Cold War America—were appreciated. Sobanet shows how Eluard's more provocative statements and activities have been minimized or erased in standard interpretations of the poet's career and *oeuvre* (e.g. in the Pléiade edition). Along the way, the book also clarifies some of the notorious infighting among the Surrealists, whose fallings out and excommunications (notably Eluard's ruptures with Breton and Aragon) often pivoted around the poets' respective and continually evolving relations to the PCF.

Such is the "discursive context" for Sobanet's reading of the film *L'Homme que nous aimons le plus*, written and narrated by Eluard. The film made the poet one of the most famous contributors to the Stalin cult at the time, although it is virtually unremembered today. A blend of documentary and scripted scenes, it portrays Stalin as benevolent father figure: his supposedly modest origins, his status as Lenin's disciple and successor, his love for the people, his genius as political theoretician and military leader (he is given credit for defeating Hitler), and his creation of a Soviet utopia are all portrayed in line with official Soviet stances. Sobanet reads the film's narrative construction and its propagandistic rhetoric and juxtaposes it with similar, though less noticeably partisan references in Eluard's postwar poetry. (Here, more even than elsewhere, I would have appreciated inclusion of the original French text, at least in footnotes.)

Chapter four, "Louis Aragon and the Great Patriotic War," traces the career of a communist militant whose support for Stalin and the USSR never wavered, but who also thought deeply about literature and its relation

to ideology. The chapter provides a thorough and nuanced exposition of the turbulent events and complex currents that influenced Aragon's career: he was both a decorated veteran of the First World War and a soldier in the Second (during which he participated in the evacuation of Dunkirk), and he was active in the communist and intellectual Resistance as co-founder of *Les Lettres Françaises* and the Comité National des Ecrivains. Throughout his life, he would keep his public views on nationalism and on justifications for violence in line with the party.

The literary focus of the chapter is Aragon's multi-volume novel, *Les Communistes*, first published in 1949-51 and significantly revised by the author in 1966. Originally entitled "Le Roman de France" and conceived to chronicle the period from the Nazi invasion of Belgium and France through the Liberation, it finally covered only the period from February 1939 to June 9, 1940. Sobanet's textual and contextual analysis shows how the novel's historical content, originally cast in light of Cominform orthodoxies, was later revised in response to the launching of de-Stalinization. It's a fascinating and valuable case study in how a novel can function as political propaganda. Especially riveting is the analysis of the novel's "testimonial" passages, recounted by a first-person narrator (later explicitly identified as the text's author) and inserted for the 1966 revision, which Sobanet mines for what they reveal about the doubts and hesitations and even changes of heart and regrets that Aragon never explicitly articulated.

The book concludes by bringing us back to the present day to focus briefly on the resurfacing of the Stalin cult since Putin's rise to power in 1999. Scrutinizing today's Soviet news outlets and internet activities confirms the contemporary relevance of the book's methodologies and its analyses: "By understanding the ways in which French Stalinist discourse was formulated during pivotal decades in the twentieth century, one can get a better understanding of how strains of Stalinism resurface in the contemporary context" (p. 260).

In sum, *Generation Stalin* offers a pathbreaking new perspective on an under-examined (or until now mis-examined) convergence of twentieth-century French culture and politics. Sobanet understands his protagonists' complexities and grasps the key personality traits that bring them to life for us, and his scholarly voice remains strong, engaging, and credible throughout. In an argument that holds its subjects accountable for their blindness or cowardice in the face of atrocities, it is of vital importance that the critic weigh his own position carefully in order to avoid becoming enmeshed in the politics of complicity that he seeks to chart. While he is not afraid to offer strong interpretations and draw potentially controversial conclusions, Sobanet carefully navigates the twin pitfalls of waxing polemical on the one hand or remaining too reticently neutral on the other. His judgments are understated but bold, well prepared, and ultimately convincing. The book is thus also itself an inspiring model of engaged scholarship in the Humanities, a work that will help us teach our students the value of critical reading. As an introduction to the book, students might be encouraged to listen to the interview with Sobanet posted on March 14, 2019 on the "New Books in French Studies" podcast in the New Books Network. Rumor has it that Sobanet is at work on a cultural history of the PCF. We can look forward to reading that.

NOTES

[1]"Former WH chief of staff says he warned Trump on Impeachment," *Associated Press*, October 27, 2019. <https://apnews.com/0464a8dd5357414994d3900c4834ce9f>

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