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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 Jean-Philippe Mathy, University of Illinois

Andrew Sobanet's extremely well-documented study of four prominent writers of the pro-Soviet "Generation Stalin" (Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Paul Eluard, and Louis Aragon) shows in great detail their continuous backing of totalitarianism. It uncovers the dynamics, sources, and consequences of such support in the face of mounting, undeniable evidence from victims, former communists, historians, and journalists of the existence of forced-labor camps, unnecessary famines, political purges, show trials, and state-sponsored assassinations that led to the death of an estimated twenty million people, including one million to 1.7 million for the Gulag alone. Sobanet's illustration of the writers' "sacralization of political power" rests on an impressive display of erudition. The charge involves both a commitment to detailed literary and cultural analysis and an interpretive stance that remains in sharp focus all the way to his parallel between Stalin's USSR and Putin's Russia in the conclusion. *Generation Stalin* brings to mind other influential books from Anglo-American scholars of France denouncing what Sobanet calls "the complicity with authoritarianism" of many French writers, philosophers, artists, essayists, and public intellectuals in the twentieth century. Studies by Alice Kaplan (*The Collaborator*, 2000), and Richard Golsan (*French Writers and the Politics of Complicity*, 2006) focused on apologists of the Vichy regime such as Brasillach, Giono and Montherland. Tony Judt's *French Intellectuals 1944-1956* (1992) remains one of the most critical assessment of how many members of the postwar intellectual left (Sartre, de Beauvoir, Mounier, and others) were, in Judt's own words, "swept into the vortex of communism."

The book raises a number of the questions brought up by those earlier studies. Why did Barbusse, Rolland, Eluard and Aragon keep deluding themselves regarding the true nature of the Soviet Union, and what were (and are) the consequences of such self-delusion? In addition to providing detailed answers, Andrew Sobanet brings to the fore the responsibility, not only of the authors themselves and of the communist mediasphere and propaganda machine, but also of those literary critics and biographers who have later downplayed, obfuscated, or simply ignored the compromising past of these cultural icons. "One of the goals of this study," he writes in his introduction, "is to recalibrate received ideas about these writers' legacies, such that their Stalinist phases are properly taken into account" (p. 28). Why this insistence on excusing intellectuals who have celebrated autocratic regimes? Is it because we wish to see them as "secular moral guides" (p. 5)? In 1985, Milan Kundera shared in an interview that he had been "shocked" when learning that the "great French communist poet Paul Eluard publicly approved the hanging of his friend, the Prague writer Závěš Kalandra," victim of a Stalinist show trial in 1950. Kundera characteristically adds, contrasting prominent writers with brutal dictators and vile apparatchiks:

“When Brezhnev sends tanks to massacre the Afghans, it is terrible, but it is, so to say, normal – it is to be expected. When a great poet praises an execution, it is a blow that shatters our whole image of the world” (p. 170). For all his outrage, the Czech novelist was careful to keep literature and politics separate. Eluard’s statement may have been shocking, but its author remains for Kundera a great poet for the ages. Is it legitimate to separate aesthetic considerations from ideological ones when assessing a writer’s legacy? Conversely, should intellectuals be held up to a higher standard, as Kundera suggests, than the politicians, militants, and voters who favor the very same brutally repressive autocratic regimes? To cite a couple of highly debated cases, are Heidegger and Céline’s contributions to philosophy and literature irrevocably tainted, and forever disqualified, by the former’s involvement with National Socialism or the latter’s virulently anti-Semitic pamphlets? Far from dissociating thought from power, or the man from his works, Pierre Bourdieu, among others, argued in *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (1991) for a close structural affinity between the philosophical theses of *Sein und Zeit* and the conservative revolution their author championed during the Third Reich.

Andrew Sobanet stakes out the middle ground, insisting on the political responsibility of the four pro-Soviet writers, while acknowledging the value and relative autonomy of their literary accomplishments. He describes *Le Feu* (1916), which earned Barbusse the prestigious Prix Goncourt, as “a touchstone for the World War I generation” (p. 44), and views Aragon as “nothing short of a giant in his era, for the sheer breadth and quantity of his writing (...) and for his commitment to the fusion of ideology and aesthetics” (p. 208). *Generation Stalin* provides many instances of the way Aragon and his cohorts performed the fusion of ideology and aesthetics, through close readings of Rolland’s play *Robespierre*, Aragon’s novel *The Communists* and Eluard’s filmic hagiography of the Man of Steel, *L’Homme que nous aimons le plus*. With the help of analytical notions such as “discursive context,” “didactic function” or “signposts of fictionality,” the author convincingly demonstrates how these texts used literary tropes, semiotic forms, and narrative strategies to produce propagandistic effects.

The wealth of quotations from various members of the communist literary galaxy also confirms some of the major interpretations of what led so many intellectuals to fall for what François Furet (a former communist) called “the mythology of the USSR” in *The Passing of an Illusion* (1999). Barbusse, Rolland, Eluard, and Aragon did not belong to the same generation demographically (the first two were old enough to be the younger men’s fathers), but they were forever marked by World War I, which led them to pen some of the most highly acclaimed texts of the immediate postwar period. And yet, their ideological trajectories toward Stalinism show varying degrees of temporal and ideological complexity. Rolland was at first a pacifist and a humanist, a champion of the writer’s independence of mind and intellectual freedom, and a strong critic of revolutionary violence who ended up describing the Jacobin terror as “a deplorable necessity” in his play *Robespierre* (1939). Barbusse, “the Zola of the trenches,” was a socialist, antimilitarist, and internationalist who admired Woodrow Wilson, initially saw the Bolsheviks as murderers, and admonished his readers to “always, always separate men from ideas” (p. 53). In the case of these two writers, individual ideological confluences may account for their eventual embrace of Stalinism. Their opposition to the militarism, imperialism, colonialism and nationalism of the West found an echo in the Bolsheviks’ active promotion of world peace and “the defense of culture”

against fascism amid increasingly tense international relations. Both writers were fervent admirers of Gandhi, and showed a propensity to look for spiritual and political figures who could lead the world out of the civilizational collapse they had witnessed in the trenches.

How does one go from Gandhi's non-violence to Stalin's "necessary Terror"? Some of the key biographical moments chronicled by Andrew Sobanet point to another context than the Great War for the conversion of these former idealists to the Soviet cause. Barbusse finally became a communist in 1923, after several years as a regular contributor to *L'Humanité*. Eluard joined the PCF in 1926, but soon espoused Trotskyist views, like André Breton and many French Surrealists, only to return to the "Party of France" in 1942, once its members had rallied the Resistance following the breakup of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of non-aggression. Aragon's life-along attachment to communism started in 1927 and never stopped. He followed the PCF's docile alignment with the twists and turns of the Comintern's geopolitics, from early revolutionary internationalism to alliance with the *Radicaux* and the Socialists in the *Front Populaire* to the German-Soviet pact to patriotic resistance to the Nazis to postwar de-Stalinization to 1970s Eurocommunism and *Union de la gauche*. Rolland, for his part, remained a fellow traveler, and his gradual *rapprochement* with Bolshevism took half a decade, from 1925 to 1930. The timing of these decisions, however, is quite remarkable: the rise of fascism(s), rather than the First World War or the Russian Revolution, led them to take the leap.

What Sobanet aptly calls Barbusse's "tendency to view the world as divided into inherently hostile binaries" (p. 46) goes for his fellow writers as well, and defines the political dynamics of the interwar. The failures of capitalist economies after the Crash of 1929 convinced many at the time to discard the triangular model of a struggle between communism, fascism and liberalism in favor of a binary system: either Stalin or Hitler. This led in turn to accepting the "deplorable necessity" (Barbusse) of supporting the Soviet Union in its heroic resistance against its enemies for fear of playing into the hands of fascism and betraying the hopes of millions of workers. A similar argument had been used by the National Convention and the revolutionary committees during the Terror of 1793-1794, and later by "Jacobin" historians of the French Revolution such as Albert Mathiez or Albert Soboul. The double threat of the Royalist insurrection in the Vendée and of foreign invasion by European monarchies justified the use of extraordinary measures to save the homeland and the Republic. The logic of two, and only two, opposing blocs excluding any "third way" was easily transferred to the Cold War after the defeat of Nazism (structurally replaced by U.S. imperialism), including the famous imperative, falsely attributed to Sartre, not to "drive (the Renault autoworkers of) Billancourt to despair."

Dictators are notoriously suspicious of intellectuals, even those who sing their praises and serve their power as "useful idiots," as Lenin is reported to have said of his supporters in the West. Those whom Stalin acclaimed, and rewarded for his benefit, as "the engineers of the soul" (p. 49), would prove at times to be unreliable in their commitment, riddled as they were by doubts and pangs of conscience about their ability to continue dissembling for the cause. Throughout their years in the orbit of Stalinism, the four remained steadfast in their contributions to the General Secretary's cult of personality, while harboring misgivings they kept mostly to the privacy of their journals. Public statements ranged from the ridiculous to the abhorrent, as in Barbusse's tribute to

Stalin as “a Robinson Crusoe of the frozen tundra” (p. 9), and Eluard’s previously mentioned statement after Kalandra’s execution: “I have too much to do for the innocent who proclaim their innocence to deal with guilty people who proclaim their guilt” (p. 170). With time, some of the truth would come out, as when Rolland expressed in his journals, after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, his astonishment at the way the PCF immediately adopted the Moscow line, prompting Maurice Thorez, the party’s leader, to desert the French Army. “I know so well,” Rolland wrote, “that these men – that this Thorez – are good people, who love their country passionately, who have, for the last three years, praised its patriotic faith and energies, sung *La Marseillaise* . . . that I am not able to understand such an aberration, such an abdication” (p. 150). Twenty years later (1966), Aragon would come to share some of his elder’s inability “to understand,” which led him to rewrite parts of his postwar multi-volume epic “novel of France,” *The Communists*, originally published in 1951.

Andrew Sobanet devotes many pages to the rewriting of *The Communists*, and these pages are some of the most riveting in his book, because unlike Barbusse, Rolland and Eluard, Aragon lived long enough to witness de-Stalinization and to provide elements of an *autocritique* (a preferred genre among ex-communists), although in a subtle, cryptic, and somewhat disingenuous way. According to another lapsed party member, Pierre Daix, the poet had reportedly been “profoundly disturbed by the widespread persecution of Jews in 1952-1953” in the USSR (p. 210), while his subsequent public criticism of the repression of the Prague Spring in 1968, as Sobanet rightly notes, was consistent with the PCF’s gradual distancing from the Brezhnev’s regime and concurrent shift to Eurocommunism. However, it is Aragon’s personal and intimate expression of his disenchantment with orthodoxy that sheds the most interesting light on what made intellectuals adhere to the cause in such great numbers and for so long. The “testimonial intervention” of the narrator-author in the new version of *Les Communistes* allowed Aragon to dialogue, not only with his readers, but also with a somewhat critical and repentant double, risking some confessions that his public self, as the most revered writer in the French revolutionary left, could not afford to share in the open. “Am I the guilty one?” he wondered, revealing that “it is enough for me, to have my own wrinkles, those on my face, and those on my ideas” (p. 240). One of the most poignant, and telling, moments in this strange, half-hearted, and guarded confession, is when he admits to belonging to a category of people “who, their whole lives, believed *desperately*” (Aragon’s emphasis, p. 242). The quote ends there, but it is hard not to surmise that he is referring, among other things, to communism as “the God that failed,” to quote the title of one of the most widely read collections of testimonies about disillusionment with communism ever published (in 1949). As he was editing *Les Communistes* in the mid-sixties, Aragon inserted a new comment in one of the original scenes in the novel: “*C’est beau la confiance*” (*trust is a beautiful thing*), an addition that, as Andrew Sobanet suggests, could “be interpreted as a lament for a bygone faith” (p. 244).

André Gide, together with an international group of renowned literary figures including Richard Wright, Ignazio Silone, Arthur Koestler, Stephen Fender and Louis Fischer, was one of the contributors to *The God that Failed*. Gide remained the wild card in the Politburo’s ceaseless efforts to attract prominent French authors, the counter-example to his peers’ unrepentant sycophancy, the proof that one could escape the spell of Stalinism. His *Return from the USSR* (1936) did not earn him many friends among the members of Generation Stalin whose frequent

trips to “the spiritual homeland,” as Sobanet puts it, never led them to the same apostasy. Faithful to the binary, “it’s either-us-or-them” mental structure mentioned earlier, Rolland predictably accused Gide of playing into the hands of the capitalist/fascist camp. Gide responded to his critics in *Retouches à mon “Retour de l’URSS,”* describing his own submission to the attractive power, both ideal and material, of Stalinism in religious terms (temptation, seduction, conversion, etc.): “I assure you that there is something tragic in my Soviet adventure,” he wrote in 1937. “As an enthusiast, as a convert, I had visited to admire a new world, and they offered me, in order to seduce me, all the privileges that I loathed in the old world (. . .) Had I written a panegyric text on the USSR and Stalin, what a fortune I would have made!” (p. 77).

As previously mentioned, Andrew Sobanet notes at the start of his book that the impact of his four writers’ complicity with Stalinism was “particularly significant in the context of post-Dreyfus France, when intellectuals often attempted to serve and were viewed as secular moral guides” (p. 5). Interestingly, the author revisits the issue at the end of the book, but with a difference, the inclusion of a simple word putting the question of whether intellectuals are to be revered as beacons of morality in an entirely new perspective. Referring to the late 1940s and early 1950s, Andrew Sobanet argues that lavish public praise of the USSR from Nobel laureates, Goncourt prize winners and canonical authors such as Rolland, Barbusse, Eluard and Aragon were integral to the success of Stalin’s personality cult in France. “Those were potent affiliations,” he writes, “in a country where, at mid-century, intellectuals were *still* widely viewed as venerated moral guides” (p. 188) [the emphasis is mine]. Still? Are we to conclude that it is no longer the case in today’s strongly anti-institutional and anti-elitist mood, marked by a widespread crisis of representation and legitimacy affecting those in positions of authority, whether political, cultural, ecclesial, or otherwise? *Generation Stalin* suggests that the unqualified veneration of renowned writers in matters of ethics and politics might be fast becoming a thing of the past.

Jean-Philippe Mathy
University of Illinois
jmathy@illinois.edu

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