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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 Donald Reid, University of North Carolina

Cults of personality have plagued and continue to plague Communist states. Such leader cults are common to authoritarian regimes of the left and the right, but they are particularly problematic in states that ostensibly explain and legitimate themselves in Marxist terms. Because Lenin and Mao led successful revolutions that made Communist states in situations where Karl Marx did not think they were possible, it is their superhuman essence that becomes the basis of cults of leaders and their successors in these regimes. Theorists can find a place for such leaders, but poets and novelists are better equipped to develop cults of personality. Andrew Sobanet's *Generation Stalin* is an important contribution to the study of this phenomenon among the intellectuals of twentieth-century France.

Literary critics generally address texts whose exceptional qualities they recognize and want to reveal in new ways. Sobanet begins *Generation Stalin* by telling readers that the four authors he addresses—Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Paul Eluard, and Louis Aragon--have been highly praised as artists (p. 27). However, he does not follow the standard path of using this as the rationale for studying them. Sobanet recognizes that they did not so much turn their talents to honoring Stalin as they used their reputations to do so. It may be that study of the cult of Stalin necessarily involves a certain denigration of the figures who are shown to have participated in it. No one became great praising the greatness of Stalin. Sobanet does not treat the works he examines as art, but as propaganda. Perhaps other works by these artists are aesthetic successes, but one would not know this from reading *Generation Stalin*. Sobanet focuses on the content and historical context of selected works, but there is more that could be learned about participation in the cult of Stalin by comparing the composition, structure and language of the philo-Soviet works with the remainder of the authors' oeuvre and by examining the effects of composing these texts on the authors' psyches.

Sobanet rightly criticizes biographers and literary scholars who have devoted insufficient attention to these authors' philo-Communist texts and contribution to the cult of Stalin in order to protect their subjects and because they believe that other elements of these authors' lives and works are why they merit our attention today. That a short film praising Stalin, *L'Homme que nous aimons le plus*, for which Eluard wrote the script, "has fallen into nearly complete oblivion" surprises Sobanet (p. 173), but it is not a surprise for movie buffs who catch it on YouTube. No one today would watch this film for its cinematic qualities. As Sobanet suggests, devotees of Eluard may ignore the film for what it reveals about Eluard's contribution to the cult of Stalin, but the aesthetic qualities of the script, whatever its politics, will not create new fans of Eluard.

Sobanet helps us understand better the situation of the Communist artist and intellectual. The authors he examines were presented with a myriad of decisions that increasingly decided future decisions and a bureaucracy antithetical to any urge to speak truth to power. Reading *Generation*

Stalin, one senses a kind of laziness—aesthetic performances that were all the easier and more comfortable because they foreclosed critical engagement and thought. The enclosed counterculture in which Communist intellectuals were welcomed and celebrated and in which they praised one another nurtured this sensibility. Sobanet sees the successful Communist party authors André Stil and Jean Fréville as “creatures” of the French Communist Party (p. 27), but leaves it at that. Does the work of the authors he examines resemble that of these “creatures”? Do they write in different ways or do they use the same “host of narrative techniques” (p. 29)?

Sobanet offers a revealing reading of Romain Rolland’s play, *Robespierre*. He observes that what appear to be criticisms of Stalin are delivered by unsympathetic characters. These function to make other passages that can be read as praise of Stalin and the Soviet experience acceptable as something other than propaganda to Rolland’s French audience. Yet, why did Rolland put what Sobanet recognizes as a criticism of the leader cult in the play at all? At the very time Rolland was praising publicly the Soviet Union and Stalin, he was writing portions of texts and a diary quite critical of them. These materials remained unpublished until long after his death. However, this juxtaposition suggests that in *Robespierre*, Rolland may have wanted to articulate criticism of the cult of Stalin but felt guilty if he were to go public and thereby damage the image of the Soviet Union. He therefore presents his repressed thoughts in the speeches of undesirable characters. Such an interpretation is not particularly charitable to Rolland as an intellectual in the “J’Accuse” tradition. However, it is not a direction that Sobanet takes. He interprets the play in terms of its historical context, finding the meaning of the text in the French Communist party reception, not in a literary/psychological reading of the play as Rolland’s self-exploration. Sobanet is clearly wary of “tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner” interpretations.

The cult of the personality of Stalin in France required artists like those Sobanet discusses. However, it is not clear what impact the Stalinophile works had outside of the world of party officials and party intellectuals. They earned praise from the French Communist party and the Soviet Union, but were they successful in influencing other audiences? What did critics outside the party think of these works? In his discussion of Rolland’s *Robespierre*, Sobanet cites one contemporary non-Communist critic, Benjamin Crémieux. Crémieux says that Rolland’s “Robespierre is above all a man who did not want to be Stalin” (p. 126), an interpretation of Rolland not in line with that Sobanet offers. How did other non-Communists read the play and what place do their interpretations have in the assessment of Rolland’s contribution to the cult of Stalin?

Sobanet takes a different approach than he followed with Barbusse, Rolland, and Eluard in his analysis of Louis Aragon. For one thing, Aragon is the only one of the four writers about whom he says anything nice, speaking in admiration of his bravery in military service in World War I and World War II (pp. 207-208). That Aragon was a life-long Communist without secret diaries like Rolland presents Sobanet with a new problematic. If Sobanet appears as something of the enemy of the other authors, revealing what biographers and literary critics have ignored in the interest of protecting their subjects, this is not the case with Aragon. He is also the sole author discussed in *Generation Stalin* to have outlived the Soviet leader. Aragon remained a Communist after de-Stalinization, but his later critical discussions of the Stalin years are not always easy to decipher. Sobanet’s psychological and literary analysis of Aragon’s 1966 redo of his novel *Les Communistes*, originally published in 1949-1951, is excellent. He makes Aragon’s sense of his

self and his changing relation to the Stalinist party clear and comprehensible. Sobanet has a different relation to *Les Communistes* than to the philo-Communist works of the other authors he examines. On completion of *Generation Stalin*, the only work Sobanet analyzes that one wants to read or see is Aragon's *Les Communistes*.

Sobanet concludes with a discussion of fawning representations of Vladimir Putin, but what *Generation Stalin* reveals is the difference between Putinophilia and the Stalin cult, not parallels. Sobanet points to Marine Le Pen's praise of Putin, but does not cite any French artists who join her, like those he examines in *Generation Stalin*. Why are they absent? Of course, the Rassemblement National is not part of a contemporary Putin-led Comintern-like organization. However, one cannot imagine saying of Marine Le Pen what Sobanet says of the leader of the French Communist party: "The intellectual sphere was as important to [Maurice] Thorez as the political." (pp. 217). The French Communist Party gave artists and intellectuals honor and an important place. Contemporary populist movements are prone to cults of personality, but they do not have the same place or need for party intellectuals like those Sobanet examines. In fact, they embrace an anti-elitism directed against such figures. In Communist parties and states, cults of personality provide an alternative to party and state bureaucracies. These cults draw upon artists and intellectuals who in turn experience a lack of status and respect from bureaucracies in state socialist societies and business in capitalist societies. A populist party like the Rassemblement National does not value intellectuals and therefore does not attract respected authors who celebrate Vladimir Putin (or Marine Le Pen) in the same way as Sobanet shows their predecessors celebrated Stalin and Thorez.

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