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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 Susan Rubin Suleiman, Harvard University

One thing I admire about Andrew Sobanet's book is how readable it is--a work of deep erudition that is also a pleasure to read is a rarity! Sobanet succeeds by not straying from his declared subject: the almost mysterious, in some ways, incomprehensible way that important French writers allowed themselves to join in the cult of personality around Joseph Stalin, before and after World War II. The four writers he discusses belong to two different generations (Barbusse and Rolland were both born around 1870, while Aragon and Eluard were born in the years just before 1900); but they were marked, in various ways, by the two World Wars. While that fact is not discussed in *Generation Stalin*, I believe that the experience of two enormously destructive conflicts, separated by only twenty years, played an important role in these writers' political affiliations and in their willingness to be drafted into service for celebrating Stalin. (Barbusse actually died before World War Two, in 1935, but by then the threat of renewed conflict had become clear).

The older generation, many of whom saw combat in World War I, saw its world destroyed, and mourned it. Barbusse became famous as the author of the antiwar novel *Le Feu* (1916), based on his personal experience in the trenches; Rolland, whose fragile health and more advanced age exempted him from military service, wrote his famous antiwar essay, *Au-dessus de la mêlée*, almost immediately after the outbreak of the war (it appeared in the *Journal de Genève* on September 15, 1914). After it was all over, in 1919, Paul Valéry made his famous summing up: "Nous autres civilisations, nous savons maintenant que nous sommes mortelles." Valéry, unlike some of his contemporaries, was not tempted by communism--as a young man, he had been an ardent anti-Dreyfusard, and after that maintained a largely apolitical stance. But Rolland and Barbusse, as well as some of their contemporaries (including André Gide, who was an active "fellow traveler" before his disillusionment with Stalinism in the mid-1930s), saw hope in the Russian Revolution.

As for the younger generation, some of whom were just old enough to be drafted in World War I, it judged the civilization of its elders, which had led to the war, as bankrupt, and looked to the Red Star in the east as a hope for renewal. Both Eluard and Aragon had served in the ambulance service in the war, and saw terrible destruction of lives; not by chance, they were both founding members of the Surrealism movement, which proclaimed the necessity of total revolution in both life and art. Eluard and Aragon went on to become leading lights of the Communist Party after their break with Surrealism and were celebrated for their resistance poetry during the German occupation of France. To them, the Soviet Union was not only the homeland of the Revolution but also a country that had played a major role in the victory over Nazism.

Three of the writers who are featured in *Generation Stalin* (Rolland, Eluard, and Aragon) are truly giants of French literature (Barbusse is not quite of their stature as far as his literary accomplishments go), whose lives and works have been studied by scholars all over the world for

many decades. Andrew Sobanet is right to insist that scholars who study these writers often downplay their years of what must be called blind allegiance to the French Communist Party and its fluctuating party line, which during those years included the cult of personality devoted to Stalin. It's truly astonishing, when one thinks about it, how a great novelist or poet can continue to maintain such allegiance (at least in public) over many years or even decades, despite evidence that should open his eyes—such as the purge trials of the 1930s in the Soviet Union or of the 1950s in Czechoslovakia, to mention only the most glaring examples. A Bourdieusian analysis would no doubt emphasize the importance of complex psycho-sociological factors at play: the *habitus* of writers affiliated with the Communist Party included not only ideological allegiances but group loyalty.

My perspective being mainly that of a literary scholar, I was particularly drawn to Sobanet's chapters on Eluard and Aragon, whose novels and poetry are still read by many people today and are taught in schools and universities. One cannot teach a course on Surrealism without reading at least one or two texts by Eluard and Aragon—nor can one teach the literature of the Resistance during World War II without citing Eluard's most famous poem, "Liberté," or Aragon's volume *Les Yeux d'Elsa*. Rolland is somewhat different, because even though he received the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1915), very few people today have actually read any of his literary works, including his best-known multivolume novel *Jean-Christophe* (which appeared before World War I). Sobanet analyzes in detail Rolland's 1939 play, *Robespierre*, and shows how his portrayal of the Jacobin leader dovetailed with the PCF's party line on the French Revolution and on Robespierre, who was a kind of precursor to Stalin. But I wonder, did this play ever get seen beyond what Sobanet aptly calls the "PCF mediasphere"? It was very well reviewed in the Communist press, but did it have any success beyond it? It has certainly not been staged anywhere in recent memory.

Of course, this leads to further questions: Did the most sectarian of Eluard's and Aragon's works (comparable to Rolland's *Robespierre*) ever get beyond the mediasphere of the Party? It's one thing for us to read their earlier Surrealist texts or their poetry from the Resistance, but what about Eluard's screenplay for the celebratory film about Stalin for his 70th birthday, which Andrew Sobanet analyzes in detail? Did anyone other than Communists see that film at the time--and more importantly, would it be worth our while to see it today?

The most interesting work about which we can ask that question is Aragon's multivolume novel *Les Communistes*, first published in 1951 and then reissued in a significantly altered version fifteen years later. Sobanet's discussion of the changes that Aragon made for the later edition is wonderfully enlightening: he shows how Aragon complicated the simple schema of what Sobanet calls the propagandistic novel ("good" vs. "bad," Communists vs. others) by the insertion of a self-conscious narrative voice that seems to cast into doubt--at least occasionally, at key moments--the ideological certainties of the earlier version. I studied one of Aragon's earlier Communist novels, *Les Beaux Quartiers* (1937) in my book on the thesis novel or *roman à thèse*, *Authoritarian Fictions* (1983). There I argued that although *Les Beaux Quartiers* was indeed a *roman à thèse*, presenting a strong ideological thesis, it was also quite a good novel because of the "openings" it creates, allowing the reader to breathe, whereas the tendency of the *roman à thèse* is to shut down all interpretations but one, squeezing the reader into a corner. *Les Beaux Quartiers* is a double apprenticeship story, showing the antithetical itineraries of two brothers from the provincial

bourgeoisie who move to Paris just before World War I: the brother who is exemplary, or “right,” Armand Barbentane, ends up joining the Communist Party; the other brother, Edmond, ends up as the lackey of a wealthy capitalist. That binary division provides the ideological structure that makes *Les Beaux Quartiers* a *roman à thèse*—but Aragon allows us to root for the “misguided” anti-exemplary brother, Edmond, in the novel’s subplot involving a beautiful young woman, Carlotta.

My argument was that, paradoxically, *Les Beaux Quartiers* succeeded as a *roman*--and it *was* read by people outside the PCF—precisely to the extent that it was a less than “perfect” *roman à thèse*. Of course, it’s also true that the perfect *roman à thèse* would be so airtight as to be well-nigh unreadable—not to mention that it might end up alienating or even infuriating the reader instead of persuading her of the rightness of its value judgments.

I would say that the first version of *Les Communistes* was a more “perfect” *roman à thèse*, but a less good novel than *Les Beaux Quartiers*. Not by chance, Armand Barbentane reappears in *Les Communistes* as a hardened WWI veteran and Communist leader, the perfect Communist hero, while the charming Edmond, as I recall, is no longer around. What Aragon did in the later version of *Les Communistes* was to open up, at least relatively speaking, the strict bipolar schema of the thesis novel (“right” versus “wrong,” good vs. bad) by introducing at least an occasional moment of doubt or uncertainty.

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