

*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.

Author's Response by Andrew Sobanet, Georgetown University

I am honored and grateful to have the opportunity to participate in H-France's Forum. It was fascinating to read, all at once, four reviews of *Generation Stalin*, each one written by a distinguished scholar. Taken as a whole, the reviews present a variety of disciplinary perspectives, ranging from the primarily historical to the primarily literary. Lynn Higgins's review is reflective of her extensive work on French cinema, the twentieth-century novel, literary theory, and literature and national identity. Jean-Philippe Mathy's review demonstrates his deep engagement in the study of European intellectual history and his knowledge of modern French politics and culture. Donald Reid's review reflects his substantial work on French political history and collective memory. Susan Rubin Suleiman's review is indicative of her expertise in the literature and history of twentieth-century Europe, especially her investigations into the *roman à thèse*. I am grateful to each of them for their thoughtful analyses. Special thanks go to Masha Belenky for her careful work in bringing together this group of scholars. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Forum's chief editor, Venita Datta, for her work in maintaining this important venue for dialogue around recently published books in French studies.

*Generation Stalin* emerged from a long investigation into a pivotal period of French and European history. When I began work on this, my second book, I did not set out to write on this topic. My initial intent was to write on a subject that in many ways would have been the inverse of *Generation Stalin*: French writers who abandoned the far left in favor of liberalism. I had envisioned the book (working title: "The Turn from Communism: French Intellectuals, 1920-1956") as something of a response to Tony Judt's *Past Imperfect*, the book that Jean-Philippe Mathy rightly describes as one of the most critical assessments of French intellectuals' engagement with Communism. I also saw "The Turn from Communism" as a project complementary to *The God that Failed*, a collection of captivating first-person narratives in which writers and intellectuals—André Gide among them—describe their disillusionment with Communism. But as I began to explore the long history of intellectuals affiliated with or working within the French Communist Party (PCF) [1], I came across a piece of information that I found simply incredible, in a literal sense, in that I couldn't believe it: that the first official biography of Joseph Stalin was written by a French novelist, and a Goncourt winner on top of it. That writer is Henri Barbusse, whom I had only heard of in relation to *Le Feu*, his documentary novel on life in the trenches during the First World War. Some initial research revealed that there were no studies of Barbusse's 1935 biography of Stalin, and that the text had only received cursory and sometimes dismissive treatment by historians specializing in Stalin and Stalinism. My eventual work on Barbusse's *Staline: Un monde nouveau vu à travers un homme* (*Stalin: A New World Seen through One Man*) would prove foundational for the rest of this project. For not only, as I argue in my book, should *Staline* be read as a prototype for the dictator's official biographies into the early Cold War period, but Barbusse's engagement with the

PCF would serve as a blueprint for Communist-aligned intellectual activity in France for a generation.

Prior to that investigation, my understanding of Barbusse's career—with an outsized emphasis on *Le Feu*—was reflective of broad tendencies in scholarship. Indeed, criticism and biographical work on Barbusse almost universally overlooks, elides, or obfuscates the important role that *Staline* played during his lifetime. When seen in the broader trajectory of his career, the Stalin biography represented the culmination of fifteen years of writing, editorial work, and engagement as a public intellectual in promotion of revolutionary violence, the Soviet Union, and its leadership caste. Reception of Barbusse's work thus also served as a sort of road map for understanding the ways in which the Stalinist political and literary activity of French intellectuals had been selectively remembered by the broader public and treated by critics and historians. Despite considerable scholarship devoted to the relationship between French writers and Communism, the Stalinist side of such political engagement had yet to be explored comprehensively. *Generation Stalin* aims to fill that void.

It was above all my exploration of what I call the PCF mediasphere that shaped my approach to this topic. That investigation sharpened my understanding of how the works of each of these writers fit into a broader cultural and discursive context. Periodicals were especially revealing. I focused above all on publications that were officially produced by or affiliated with the PCF and those that were nominally independent but had close ideological or financial links to the party and/or the Soviet sphere. These included *L'Humanité*, *Les Cahiers du bolchévisme* (later called *Les Cahiers du communisme*), *Monde*, *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, *Commune*, *La Nouvelle Critique*, and *Les Lettres françaises*. Study of these and other PCF-aligned publications (spanning a lengthy period, from the early 1920s through the early 1950s) allowed me to see trends and tendencies that would have otherwise remained obscure. Indeed, it had long been known that the party was hospitable to intellectuals. But it was through this investigation of periodicals—alongside novels, short stories, poetry, essays, pamphlets, and films—that I was able to isolate for the first time the four major writers most closely affiliated with the party in the Stalinist period: Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Paul Eluard, and Louis Aragon.

As the reviewers have noted, each of these writers had achieved a notable measure of fame beyond the party orbit: Barbusse and Rolland are foundational figures for the modern French intellectual left; Eluard is renowned for his surrealist work, as well as his wartime literary activity; and Aragon is a canonical figure in twentieth-century French literature. Alongside these four luminaries, there is, to be sure, a large group of writers that achieved prominence mainly (for some, exclusively) within the party itself—in other words, writers who were actively contributing to party periodicals and whose books were published by affiliated presses, but who were generally unknown to the broader public and are largely absent from literary criticism and historiography. In his review, Donald Reid asks an interesting question regarding what shared characteristics may have existed between the work of such party “creatures” and the four prominent figures on whom I concentrated in *Generation Stalin*. The most noteworthy of such party writers was André Stil, who was awarded the 1952 Stalin Prize for literature for the first volume of his *Premier choc* trilogy [2]. I had originally intended to include a chapter on that trilogy, a series of books that typified party-aligned artistic production during the Cominform era. A protégé of Aragon, Stil wrote that trilogy in large part to criticize the Atlantic tilt of French foreign and domestic policy (NATO, the Marshall Plan,

and the American “occupation” of France). In the end, I decided against including Stil in the book, in part because he lacks the stature of the other four writers. He furthermore has virtually no readership today. There is a reason for this: the quality of Stil’s work from the late 1940s and early 1950s is noticeably inferior to that of the four writers I cover in *Generation Stalin*. His *Premier choc* trilogy is largely unreadable and impenetrable--despite the praise lavished upon it in the Soviet sphere. The three books in that trilogy serve perhaps as models of the “perfect” *romans à thèse* aptly described by Suleiman. Stil’s works share many of the ideological propensities of those I treat in my book. At the same time, they lack the aesthetic, thematic, and dramatic qualities that render noteworthy the fiction and non-fiction I analyze in *Generation Stalin*. The four writers I studied were ultimately able to craft texts that allowed for critical investigation beyond the purely political: this was not the case with Stil, whose work was promoted by the party because of its ultraorthodox ideological tendencies. Furthermore, the works of Barbusse, Rolland, Eluard, and Aragon are readable, teachable, and worthy of scholarly exploration because of the long and complex paths these authors took toward Stalinism. For instance, it is fascinating and perplexing to read Rolland’s passionate antiwar texts from the mid-to-late 1910s alongside his work written in service to the party in the 1930s. Stil’s early trajectory lacks this complexity: he and other intra-party writers achieved some measure of success mainly because of ideological conformity early in their careers. Barbusse, Rolland, Eluard, and Aragon had established literary careers that were marked by a high degree of independence and creativity before producing work in support of the general secretary and the USSR.

The case of André Stil—and the distinction I have made between him and the four authors treated in *Generation Stalin*—brings up another point made by Donald Reid, who asserts that Aragon is the only author about whom I had “anything nice” to say. That was not my charge, nor should it have been (readers should look to the reviews by Higgins, Mathy, and Suleiman for cogent renderings of the book’s overall goals and stakes). Even so, by his own standard, Reid’s statement is not accurate. As noted above, these writers are worthy of exploration in part because of the breadth and quality of their bibliographies. Some of their work deservedly received awards and accolades, and I recognized this—it is one of the reasons I chose to focus on them (and a reason I regularly teach their texts). When appropriate, my analysis involved commentary on the literary and aesthetic merits of their work. This was the case with Barbusse’s eloquent descriptions of the suffering of soldiers in the Great War, Rolland’s powerful pacifist writing in the World War I era and the early and mid-1920s, Eluard’s timeless Resistance poetry, and Aragon’s masterful writing throughout his long career. Further, as Jean-Philippe Mathy and Lynn Higgins point out, I tried to take a nuanced, middle-of-the-road position on these writers’ work, accounting for complexity in their career trajectories, while seeking to avoid getting trapped in the Manichaeic modes of thought that dominate PCF discourse. Donald Reid states that I am not of the mind that “tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner” and that I might seem like the “enemy” of some of these writers. I would respond to that by stating that I sought to place the work of these writers in a broad cultural and political context. One of my overriding goals was to examine how Stalin as a figure and Stalinist ideology became important phenomena in the domestic French political context. At times, my research resulted in placing these writers in a context that was unfavorable to them. It becomes obvious that their actions were sometimes markedly incongruous with the Zola tradition of intellectual engagement and social justice. At times, I underscored this. These are, after all, writers who contributed to a vast, international propaganda campaign in the service of murderous, dictatorial leadership. On that point, I must remain clear, as I was in *Generation Stalin*. The

counter-examples of Boris Souvarine and André Gide (to name just two of the most famous) illustrate that the politico-intellectual activity of these four writers resulted from a series of choices made over the course of many years, even decades. I am, of course, aware that my own discursive patterns indicate that I staked out a position against authoritarianism and complicity with it, and moreover, that I view more favorably writers like Gide who were able to maintain their artistic and intellectual integrity when confronted with evidence contrary to long-held beliefs. Furthermore, failing to differentiate between, for example, Rolland's *Mahatma Gandhi* and his texts composed in praise of Stalin in PCF periodicals would involve a level of blindness that would be antithetical to critical reading (and a disservice to Gandhian nonviolence to boot). Through a long and patient exploration of primary texts, archives, periodicals, literary criticism, biography, and historiography, I sought to research each of these writers' activity within the party as exhaustively as possible. I aimed to place them in a context both broad and fair—in other words, a context that sought to capture accurately the evolving cultural and sociopolitical milieus in which they were writing. These writers sometimes appear in an unfavorable light because that is where the facts and the research led me. The particular angle I took on complicity with authoritarianism is captured especially well in Jean-Philippe Mathy's review.

The question of the contemporary reception of the works that I cover in *Generation Stalin* also came up in some of the reviews. How and when was Rolland's *Robespierre* staged? Where and when was *L'Homme que nous aimons le plus*, the film written and narrated by Eluard, screened? What was the contemporary readership of Barbusse's *Staline* and Aragon's *Les Communistes*? What influence might these works have had within and outside the party? Beyond published reviews and articles, the reception and influence of these works is very difficult to measure. Here, the question of sources is highly pertinent: when sources were available, I sought to integrate contemporary reception into my analysis. For the most part, however, these sources were limited to the PCF mediasphere, which is an indicator of what was likely a sharply limited dissemination of these works. Rolland's play was performed on French radio in 1939 as part of the sesquicentennial celebration of 1789. Reading groups were organized around early portions of Aragon's *Les Communistes*. Barbusse's *Staline* was, in at least one instance, likened to Boris Souvarine's *Staline*, which was also published in 1935, but is a completely different type of book—in other words, it is anti-Stalinist and rests on a foundation of exhaustive, fact-based research. *L'Homme que nous aimons le plus* was awarded a prize at the 1950 Karlovy-Vary film festival, but the French government sharply curtailed its domestic distribution by banning it. So it is indeed clear that these works had a reach that was limited, especially when compared to other texts by these same authors (Barbusse's *Le Feu* and Rolland's "Au-dessus de la mêlée" come to mind, not to mention any number of works by Eluard and Aragon).

Does this relative lack of dissemination make these works less important? I submit that it does not. I would argue that it is of central importance that these works became part of the overall propaganda campaign of the party. Irrespective of its influence, reception, or persuasiveness, propaganda is an expression of power: how it is structured, how it wishes to be perceived. The simple fact that such propaganda was produced, circulated, and promoted within the party orbit is highly instructive and noteworthy. Furthermore, discourse analysis of propaganda can be conducted in rigorous and systematic fashion, by focusing on narrative mechanics and cultural and historical context. In contrast, influence, persuasiveness, and impact are far more difficult to measure, especially with limited sources. Still, Suleiman is right to point out that many of these

works had a limited distribution, an element that led in part to their prolonged obscurity, which includes the very sparse critical and historical treatment of Eluard's *L'Homme que nous aimons le plus* (the fever swamps of the YouTube comment section aside) as well as his poetry and essays written during his Stalinist phase. Recovery of neglected works was a motivating factor in my choice of primary texts for each chapter of *Generation Stalin*. Higgins's review provides a concise overview of the choice of each of these primary texts and of the particular stakes of each chapter of the book. Readers can return there, for instance, for an accurate assessment of Rolland's choice of Robespierre as a stand-in for Stalin (that is, Rolland uses Robespierre as a means of justifying the excesses necessary to continue the proletarian revolution).

In conclusion, as I continue to reflect on these perceptive reviews, I keep returning to the relationship between the Great War and Communism: on the role of the war in the rise of the movement across Europe, as well as how the conflict figured in the life of each of these writers. Barbusse, Eluard, and Aragon were all active on the front, while Rolland's career was radically and permanently transformed by choices he made as an antiwar writer. This was a theme that I thought about as I was writing and that, on reflection, could have been developed in greater depth in the book, as it is a unifying element that exists across the four chapters. In a similar vein, I would have liked to have been able to devote more attention to the PCF's activities in the French Resistance and its slow embrace of de-Stalinization. I plan to give greater attention to these and a number of other topics as my work on the cultural history of Communism in France evolves.

## NOTES

[1] For the sake of clarity, throughout this review (as I did in *Generation Stalin*), I will be referring to the Communist Party in France as the PCF, including in reference to the era when it was named Section Française de l'Internationale Communiste (SFIC).

[2] This group includes, among others, Georges Sadoul, André Wurmser, Jean-Richard Bloch, Jean Fréville, Jean Kanapa, Pierre Daix, André Stil, and Fernand Grenier.

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