

Jan Plamper. *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*. The Yale-Hoover Series on Stalin, Stalinism, and the Cold War. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012. xx, 310 pp. \$60.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-30016-952-2.

The work under review, while pioneering as art history, is problematic at the outset: its title misleads. A more accurate titular phrase might be “Stalin Portraiture and Its Artistic Context.” Plamper’s primary focus is “Stalin portraiture, specifically oil painting,” which the author labels the “center of gravity” of the Stalin cult. (p. xv) The second part of the title, “alchemy of power” is also misleading, I would argue, because the author frequently avoids political context or distorts it. There is very little discussion of Stalin’s own power and how he wielded it in relation to changing reproductions that provided the images for the cult.

Plamper, for example, offers similar explanations for the decrease in the number of Stalin representations between 1929 and 1933 as well as during the war years of the early 1940s. In the first instance the author maintains that diminishment occurred “to avoid linking [. . .] Stalin with the upheavals of collectivization.” (p. 37) In the second instance his image nearly disappeared to remove him from association with the losses and defeats of the war. (p. 229) What political dynamics existed in the early 1930s to encourage decreasing the number of Stalin representations, Plamper attributes to “vestiges of opposition.” (p. 37)

While never citing Matthew Lenoë’s *The Kirov Murder and Soviet History*, Plamper seems to operate under assumptions that Lenoë wisely argues remain open. As Lenoë has observed, “evidence [...] strongly indicates (although it does not prove) that there was no proposal from provincial party leaders to replace Stalin with Kirov at the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1934.”<sup>1</sup> Plamper on the contrary seems to assume an absence of political conflict in the early 1930s except for “vestiges of opposition.”

The author relegates to a footnote reference to Roy Medvedev’s account of serious dissension within the party in the early 1930s. According to Medvedev Stalin faced opposition to his monopoly of power which he did not “quell” until the Central Committee plenum of January 1933 after which “there was an extraordinary intensification of Stalin worship.” (footnote 6, p. 239)

Not only is Medvedev’s version of high politics in the early 1930s left to a footnote but also his name is not listed in the index. In this instance and throughout Plamper’s monograph, the failure to contextualize the Stalin cult within a political framework diminishes the value of the study.

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1. Matthew E. Lenoë, *The Kirov Murder and Soviet History* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2010), p. 673.

The early 1930s in fact offer rich political fare relevant to Stalin's possibly shaky status. More than "vestiges of opposition" existed in 1932 alone, for example. Riutin circulated a detailed opposition platform, the former Left and Right Oppositions uniting in support of it. The year culminated in the death or murder of Stalin's wife. As a backdrop to those events, collectivization roiled the economy and the countryside. Stalin later admitted to Churchill, the rural upheaval had generated more fear than the sound of German guns at the gates of Moscow. The absence of Stalin's image, confirmed so well by Plamper's research, suggests to this reviewer that Stalin himself faced palpable threats to his leadership in the early 1930s.

The author further asserts "Stalin played a peripheral role in the Lenin cult and did not mastermind it as has often been asserted. Nor was he featured in the Lenin cult before the onset of his own cult." (p. 24) Both statements require scrutiny. Stalin in fact initially shied away from association with Lenin as Lenin's Testament calling for Stalin's removal from the leadership began to circulate at the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1924. That dissociation gave way to Stalin's putative closeness to Lenin and his claim to the succession. One could argue that Stalin's contributions to the Lenin cult and the initiation of his own cult grew out of the need to provide an alternative reality to Lenin's Testament.

Plamper on the other hand argues that Benno Ennker in *Die Anfänge des Leninkults in der Sowjetunion*<sup>2</sup> "convincingly proves baseless" Robert Tucker and Nina Tumarkin's "thesis that Stalin orchestrated the Lenin cult." (footnote 95, p. 248) Such a significant point belongs in the text rather than a footnote and requires at least a brief summary of Ennker's argument.

At issue is the political context in which the cult of Stalin emerged; on that subject Plamper's study is weakest. The author's contention that "the Stalin cult burst upon the public scene with a big bang late in 1929" (p. 29) also deserves challenge. Stalin's systematic and relentless victories in the succession struggle provided the foundation and prepared public consciousness for the quantity of Stalin representations in 1929. Their meaning had long been clear before Stalin turned fifty in December of that year.

Kamenev, who served as ambassador to Rome in 1927, observed the emergence of Mussolini's cult coinciding with that of Stalin in the period 1926 to 1928, precisely the period in which both dictators consolidated their power. Moreover, contrary to Plamper's contention that "Stalin controlled the media since at least 1927," (p. 29) Stalin showed his mastery

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2. Benno Ennker, *Die Anfänge des Leninkults in der Sowjetunion* (Vienna: Bohrlau, 1997).

of the media in 1924 when he oversaw the suppression of Trotsky's "Lessons of October" and by the fall of 1925 had excluded Kamenev and Zinoviev from the party press. He had had several years before 1929 to enlarge his cult.

Plamper further argues for "the inter-connectedness between [. . .] leader cults" and their "entangled modernities." (pp. 14-15) Yet Mussolini and Stalin have far more in common with each other, I would argue, than either had with Hitler. Stalin and Mussolini fought tradition within their respective cultures militating against a leader cult: the restraint and modesty of Russian radicalism and of Lenin himself and the democratic tradition in Italy dating from the Risorgimento. Hitler on the other hand simply embraced the role of Fuhrer/Leader from Above, already embedded in German culture from nineteenth century Volkisch thought and legitimized by it. Finally, with regard to Roosevelt, whom Plamper invokes in the discussion of leader cults, there is a serious error. FDR never made "weekly fireside chats." (p. 18) His press conferences occurred on a weekly basis. Fireside chats were strictly rationed, occurring months apart.

He succeeds when the focus turns to the Soviet art world and its contribution to the Stalin cult. The author has begun to map the "maddeningly complex field of institutional and personal operators" that contributors to the Stalin cult in painting had to navigate. (p. 172) Voroshilov emerges as a major player in that world, conveying Stalin's demands to artists at the same time that he served as "a patron of socialist painters." (p. 224)

Portraiture under Stalin acquired the status of "master genre of Socialist realist art." (p. 192), according to Plamper. I would also argue that portraiture in the years of the Stalin cult should be seen in a wider context. It reflected not only leader cults in the first half of the century, but belonged to the age of portraiture in the interwar years. The great Soviet artists: A. M. Gerasimov, E. A. Katsman, and D. A. Nalbandian in their own way belong with Laura Knight, Otto Dix, and Kathe Kollwitz as masters of the human face in the decades after World War I.

In addition to pioneering research into the Soviet art world under Stalin, Plamper has provided in his footnotes an invaluable list of the literature on the Stalin cult for the past two decades (the book lacks a bibliography). It remains for Plamper and other scholars to connect the representations of Soviet artists to the larger political context of Stalin's time.

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