

West German, intellectual circles since the 1950s, draws attention to the original debate and its legacies, provides helpful interpretations and propositions, and stimulates further reflection on the aforementioned points.

doi:10.1017/S0008938923001073

The Stalin Cult in East Germany and the Making of the Postwar Soviet Empire, 1945–1961

By Alexey Tikhomirov. Translated by Jacqueline Friedlander. Lanham and Boulder: Lexington Books, 2022. Pp. xiv + 369. Cloth \$125.00. ISBN: 978-1666911893.

Matthew Stibbe

Sheffield Hallam University

Ostensibly, this new book by Alexey Tikhomirov is about the role of the “Stalin cult” in the emergence and formative years of the German Democratic Republic, and its contribution to the building of the post-1945 Soviet empire in East Europe more generally. Tikhomirov pays particular attention to the ideological content, the visual, spatial, and semantic aspects, and the popular reception of the ritualized devotion to Stalin, as well as to resistance to it. The Soviet leader was cast in many roles before East Germans: father, victor in war, prophet, savior of the German nation, “fighter for peace,” theorist of Marxism-Leninism, and, in his final years in particular, advocate of German unity (above all through his “Note” to the Western Allies in March 1952).

For the ruling *Sozialistische Einheitspartei* (Socialist Unity Party, SED) and its Soviet masters, success in propagating the “Stalin cult” was measured first and foremost in quantitative terms: over two million young East Germans signed a statement saluting Stalin on his seventieth birthday in December 1949; membership in the German-Soviet Friendship Society surpassed three million by the early 1950s; and the population of the model industrial town of Stalinstadt (before 1953 known as Fürstenberg an der Oder and after 1961 as Eisenhüttenstadt) rose from 2,400 in 1952 to 15,150 in 1955 (173, 179, 217).

But even more than the “Stalin cult,” this study seems to be about continuities in notions of honor in Germany from the interwar to the postwar eras. The word “honor” itself appears repeatedly, especially (but not) only in the book’s early chapters, where it is linked to what Tikhomirov calls the “emotional economy of victor and vanquished” (73). Thus “[t]he image of Stalin as the victor was promoted against a backdrop of mass disillusionment with Hitler,” just as the “Hitler Myth” (Ian Kershaw) was built against the humiliation felt at the Treaty of Versailles (78). In both cases, recovery was centered on a masculinist restoration of “the national honor and the dignity of the state” (85).

Building on the metaphor of recovery, Tikhomirov also suggests a continuity with the biological identity politics found in 1930s Germany, in which—as he explains it—shame was felt at an instinctive, almost bodily level and the “‘enemy’ was compared to an active pathogen and a bacillus...” (204) Thus the East Germans’ “emotional need to insult and humiliate symbols of Soviet power in order to avenge their damaged national honor” (258), whether at the micro level or (as in June 1953) on a nationwide scale, might find its 1930s counterpart in the everyday performative acts of violence directed against Jews, which were part of the Third Reich’s self-construction as an “empire of shaming.” (See Martina Kessel, “An Empire of

Shaming: Laughter as Identity Politics in Nazi Germany”, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2021): 3–29.) Controversially—and without much supporting evidence—Tikhomirov presents the June 17, 1953 revolt and the “practices of violence” against the SED state and the Soviet authorities on that day as being directed towards the restoration of “shared positive emotions of national purity and unity” (255).

Yet can these mentalities really have survived the totality of defeat in 1945? And if so, can they really be cast in terms of a single category such as “honor”? Elsewhere in the book, Tikhomirov admits that 1945 did represent a break, at least for members of the Hitler Youth generation, for whom “trust”—which in their eyes had been so badly breached by the leaders of the Third Reich—was a key issue (175). The author also concedes that there could be rational reasons for young East Germans to embrace the “Stalin cult,” including access to “material resources and leisure-time activities . . . as well as various privileges and ‘small pleasures’” that before 1961, and especially before 1956, “were hard if not impossible to come by otherwise” (178).

However, somehow the author fails to grasp the sheer, visceral depth of the sense of shame that Germans of all generations felt when encountering Russian soliders, at least in the immediate postwar years. This spiritual mortification was captured best by the German writer Hans Fallada in his penultimate novel *Der Alpdruck* (*The Nightmare*), written in 1946 but not published until after his death in February 1947. Fallada vividly describes the emotions that took hold of his main character, Dr. Doll, when the first three Red Army fighters arrived in his Mecklenburg home in late April 1945: “Everything he had long hoped for from this end of the war collapsed ignominiously... The fantasy that it would only take a word, a look, to come to an understanding with peoples of other nations, that not all Germans were complicit, this delusion too was gone.” (*Der Alpdruck*, new Aufbau edition [2015], 39).

Shame, here, cannot be reduced to loss of honor, and nor can recovery from shame be demoted to mere embrace of the heroic, super-masculine aspects of the “Stalin cult,” or—in June 1953—open, violent, “purifying” resistance to it. There was too much ambiguity, too many unspeakables and unmentionables, for things to be quite so straightforward. Rather, as uncomfortable as this may sound in retrospect, the “Stalin cult” offers a good example of what Harald Jähner has recently described as the “paradoxical process of repression coinciding with an attempt at enlightenment” (*Aftermath: Life in the Fallout of the Third Reich* [2021], 300).

To adapt even more from Jähner, the cult around Stalin presented an “opportunity to engage verbally” as well as visually and spatially “with the historically unprecedented maelstrom in which . . . [East] German[s] found themselves” between 1945 and 1961, “engagement” here implying varying degrees of accommodation and rejection and bringing together both guidance and rules dictated “from above” (important too in setting out the limits of de-Stalinization after 1956) and social practices or modes of self-expression negotiated “from below” (*ibid.*). This context-dependent interpretation offers a much more convincing framework than the category of “honor” for understanding what was really novel and historically specific about the East German contribution to the building of the postwar Soviet empire.

doi:10.1017/S000893892300119X