The ‘cult of the personality’: comparisons, competitors, classifications

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DRAFT PAPER FOR NOT CITATION OR CIRCULATION

In his study of Charles De Gaulle, *The Futurist of the Nation*, Regis Debray makes the argument that ‘Professions of faith by the Left are always officially declined in the plural’. While this is certainly a commonly held view, it’s not difficult to think of a host of figures, from Bakunin and Lassalle to Lula and Hugo Chavez, suggesting that it is at best a considerable over-simplification. Most striking of all is the systematisation of the leader cult within the communist movement, epitomised by the Stalin cult, and by the founding Lenin cult from which Stalin’s claimed to derive its legitimacy. These cults have given rise to a flourishing literature focusing on the USSR, notably Nina Tumarkin’s book *Lenin Lives* and Jan Plamper’s study published just last year, *The Stalin Cult.*

A possible limitation of these accounts, despite their richness in some other respects, is that their evaluation of the cult phenomenon is one which very much emphasises its peculiarly Russian features. This especially a feature of Tumarkin’s work, in which explanation of the Lenin cult begins with the significance of saints’ lives and the popular veneration of the Tsars. Plamper, more than Tumarkin, also offers initial pointers as to a comparative typology within which the Stalin cults may be located, including a five-part definition of the modern personality cult as initially prefigured in a case like that of Louis Napoleon in France. He also writes that the so-called ‘revenge of Muscovy thesis’ is not sufficient to explain the multiple and different ingredients that combined to produce the Stalin cult. Even so, the only contemporary comparators Plamper seems to acknowledge are the fascist cults which may be linked with Stalin’s under the rubric of totalitarianism. This is brought out in the collection of essays on the stalinist leader cults which Plamper co-edited with Klaus Heller, whose only comparators are the Hitler and Mussolini cults. It is also a feature of Moshe Lewin’s discussion of the Stalin cult in the collection of comparative essays on Stalinism and Nazism which he co-edited with Ian Kershaw. Here Lewin stresses the manufactured character of the Stalin cult, the lack of any real roots in the politics of personality even under Lenin, and the relevance instead of the earlier precedents of the *tsar-batiushka.*

Literatures on the communist leader cults thus provide some support for Debray to the extent that the Lenin and Stalin cults are largely dislocated from the histories and professions of faith of a wider left. This is explicit in Tumarkin’s account, where she argues that the Lenin and Stalin cults reveal ‘less about Communism in general than … about Russia and … the process of forming a new political culture in the wake of the revolution’. Lewin also argues that: “Socialism” would not do the trick.” Instead, he identifies Stalinism with magic, rituals, the demonisation of the enemy and the ‘dogmatic canonisation of thought and of a leader who controlled the terms of praise that are showered on him’ – all of which he describes as ‘archaic’ if not necessarily as specifically Russian ingredients. Plamper does try to work within a broader frame of reference. Even so, the more specifically socialist features that he stresses are peculiarly Russian, and he suggests a particular link, in my view wholly unconvincingly, between the supposed cult of the circle leader within the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia. Plamper’s wider
observations also seem to me either problematic and simply mistaken: for example in arguing that marxism ‘started as a movement around cult figures, Marx and Engels’, or that Plekhanov provided ‘dialectical justification of the supreme role of the individual in history’.  

For all these reasons, an important step in our understanding of the cult phenomenon was taken by Balázs Apor and his colleagues in providing a comparative exploration of a range of eastern-bloc countries in a collection published in 2004. By extending discussion beyond the Russian case, this opens up a number of important issues that might otherwise be neglected. One is the construction of a hierarchy of cults, and the generalisation within the communist movement of a sort of leadership principle. Another is the way in which these cults were informed by, or drew upon, different national histories and political cultures. A third is the transmission or reproduction of the Stalin cult itself, in contexts that may have been very different from the Russia of the plans in which the Stalin cult was first fully expounded. What the collection does also implicitly reaffirm is the connection between the personality cult and the exercise of power. In Arfon Rees’s introduction to the collection the distinction this rests upon is actually quite explicit, and Rees postulates a basic difference between leader cults proper and the glorification of leaders in more open polities. Plamper also underlines the distinction between ‘modern personality cults and the image politics practised in more open societies’, and this would also be consistent with those conceptualisations of totalitarianism in which the leader cult is a central and possibly indispensable defining principle.

Communism, however, was not just a system of government and of ruling parties but a political movement of unprecedented international scope and cohesion. Coming to the subject as a historian of British and other west European communisms, it’s not surprising that I should have a different take on some of these questions from those of Soviet specialists. It’s not just that the British or French communist press contain abundant evidence of the transmission or adaptation of the Lenin or Stalin cults. It’s not even just that within these other parties mimetic cults were practised of figures like Harry Pollitt or Maurice Thorez. What in my view makes the wider international phenomenon interesting is that this was not just a synchronised campaign of cult production carried out at Moscow’s behest. Of course, there were strong elements of central co-ordination, particularly in the heyday of the cult phenomenon in the ‘high stalinist’ period of the late 1940s-early 1950s. Nevertheless, study of any local communist party reveals how key elements of the cult phenomenon can be traced, at least in embryo, from an early period, and drew on what were manifestly local predispositions. Even on an international scale, it is arguable that some key features of the cult can be traced earlier in a country like Weimar Germany, in the shape of Ernst Thälmann, than in Russia itself. Key documents or artefacts of the cults were produced through interaction between the USSR and the outside world. The most obvious example is the first full biographical study of Stalin, which was published by the French communist writer Henri Barbusse in 1935. A more controversial case would be the portrait of Stalin which Picasso published in the French communist press on Stalin’s death, in what was obviously considered defiance of all the canons of socialist realism. Yves Cohen in a recent article has referred to the communist leader cult as presenting one of the most complex questions of twentieth-century history as considered as a phenomenon of international scope. In this respect, however, Cohen also makes the point that the subject remains surprisingly under-researched.
Consideration of ‘closed’ parties operating within ‘open’ societies can therefore raise important questions regarding the relations between them, and provide a crucial way of exploring and where necessary problematising the distinction proposed by Rees and others. The present paper is in the nature of a preliminary outline of themes to be addressed in a larger study to be completed in the next year or so. It arises in part from smaller-scale comparison of some key feature in the projection of Thorez, Pollitt and Thälmann as national communist leaders. It also draws on comparative reflections stimulated by the contributions to an inaugural special issue on leader cults of the journal Twentieth Century Communism. There isn’t a vast literature to draw on. In the English- and French-language literature with which I’m familiar, the one substantial study I know discussing the transmission and reproduction of the cult phenomenon in the context of a non-communist state is Jean Marie Goulemot’s Pour l’amour de Staline, first published in the late 1970s and reprinted in 2009. Not coincidentally, there is also a significant body of work on the case of the PCF general secretary Maurice Thorez, whose cult was arguably the most extravagantly developed of any in a major but non-ruling communist party. In a similar fashion to Goulemot, but in a more expansive comparative framework, the project on which the present paper draws will be an attempt to engage with the internationalisation of the cult phenomenon as manifested both in the defining Lenin and Stalin cults and in figures like Thorez, Thälmann, Dimitrov and Pasionaria who in certain features or contexts could even threaten to overshadow them.

As with any essay into comparative history, the object is to register variations as well as common patterns in the character of the communist leader cult. This may hopefully assist in the better understanding both of the leader cult itself as a political phenomenon, and of the wider communist movement as giving rise to such a phenomenon. Though this is not much touched upon in present paper, what I also hope to do is contribute to the comparative study of personalised forms of leadership through comparison of the communist leader cult with other forms of leader cult (fascist or populist) and the personalisation of leadership within multi-party leadership. This is work based on the collection of materials over a number of years, but at a still preliminary stage in respect of the formulation of the arguments. What I therefore want to do in the present paper is to outline a number of possible themes or variations I intend exploring more fully in the monograph itself. These variations, put very schematically, are ones of (a) timing and extent; (b) forms of party and ideological competition; (c) political culture and traditions of leadership; (d) social character; (e) forms and media of expression; (f) promotion or appropriation of the individual; and (g) political rationale and functionality. In the rest of the paper I will offer brief reflections on each of these in turn.

The most obvious variation is in the timing of the cults and the seriousness with which they were promoted. As already mentioned, the cults both of Stalin and of individual communist general secretaries was well established in some parties in the 1930s, and even going back into the 1920s. It was only in the Cold War years that the cults were more systematically promoted, as exemplified by the grotesque scale of the celebrations of Stalin’s seventieth birthday in December 1949. Nevertheless, even at this point there are significant variations to be noted. A first examination of British communist periodicals in this period has revealed nothing at all relating to the Stalin or other contemporary cults except in December 1949. Though the coverage at this point is unstinting in its praise, the impression given is of an international responsibility dutifully carried out, rather than a conception of the leader that was fully internalised within the British party. The formalistic character of these
observances is already discernible in the pre-war British communist party, and seemingly contrasts with the profuseness and excess of its nearest counterpart, the PCF.

For those who would trace every such variation to the hand of Moscow, such differences might be attributed to the varying pressures to which different parties were subjected, with the CPGB to its own regret not even being admitted to the Cominform. However, it seems implausible that these should not also have reflected indigenous variables, for example, those of political culture and the forms of party competition. One of the unresolved inconsistencies of Plamper’s account is that, on the one hand, he describes the cults as by definition emerging only in societies sufficiently closed as to rule out the projection of competing cults; and yet, on the other hand, he also dwells at length on what he calls the ‘deadly standoff’ between the cults of Stalin, Hitler, Churchill and F.D. Roosevelt and describes how the ‘modern personality cult emerged ... in the company of an “other”’ and defined itself in contradistinction to this other.\(^{16}\) This certainly underlines the importance of the transnational dimension of the phenomenon which is somewhat inconsistently acknowledged in Plamper’s account. If, as Plamper puts it, speeches and images of these leaders could theoretically be projected into any place in the world, then Lenin, Stalin, Mao or Fidel must themselves be regarded as figures potentially of international significance, while the contradistinction of rival cults may also be detected at a purely domestic level. In the context of Weimar Germany, for example, one may already identify the ‘deadly standoff’ between rival leadership figures which may help explain the early emergence of a Thälmann cult. One may also bring in institutional factors, such as the presidential elections which demanded a single party figurehead which Thälmann provided already in 1924. In Britain, by contrast, the single-member constituency combined with the fluctuations of multi-party competition so that the CPGB could not even predict which seat in any given election was likeliest to return a communist MP. It was thus that Gallacher, to Pollitt’s evident chagrin, emerged as the party’s lone parliamentary representative in 1935, to be joined in 1945 by the relatively unknown figure of Phil Piratin – while Pollitt was left to lament the absence of any obviously safe constituency or party list.

The French Fourth Republic, which saw the apogee of the Thorez cult, was not of course a presidential system of the type which de Gaulle later introduced. On the other hand, one will also want to look at issues of political culture which may explain why cultic phenomena seem so much more deeply embedded in some countries, like France, than in others, like Britain. In a domestic political context, Dutt’s *Labour Monthly*, which in 1950 somehow forgot to notice Pollitt’s sixtieth birthday commemoration at all, stood out against the sort of personalisation (or perceived trivialisation) of politics which saw ‘only Attlee, Bevan and the “Hand of Moscow”’, and never the working class.\(^{17}\) In this depersonalisation of communism, whether conceived of as threat or as movement of the future, one might find confirmation for the point of Debray’s with which I began. On the other hand, it is a commonplace that ‘professions of political faith’ in France have been more frequently identified with the charismatic or symbiotic individual than some other political cultures.\(^{18}\) This does not, as we shall see, mean that Maurice Thorez should be regarded as a sort of Napoleon of the left. On the other hand, it is impossible to read some of the tributes to Stalin reproduced by Goulemot without being reminded of Napoleonic precedents. It is similarly within its particular national or regional context that one must view a phenomenon like Brazil’s ‘Cavalier of Hope’, Luiz Carlos Prestes.\(^{19}\)
Effective leader cults were not simply projected in isolation. Rather, they may be identified with a wider reevaluation of the role of the individual in history which might be described as a sort of communist pantheonisation. Given the heterogeneous cultural attributes with which he was accredited, Maurice Thorez might almost be regarded as a one-person Panthéon to whom the grateful vanguard of the nation paid its tribute. But the birthday tributes which were lavished on figures like Thorez must also be linked with the wider communist fixation on anniversaries and commemorations, which increasingly in the heyday of the cults were commemorations of individuals. In searching through British communist journals for the traces of the leader cult, the most striking articulation of such individualisation that I found is actually a piece by J.D. Bernal on the quincentenary of Leonardo’s birth. Bernal indeed cites at length the Maxim Gorky who, in a phase of pronounced Nietzschean influence, had identified the ‘rapid development of the power of the individual’ with periods of social storms in which ‘the personality becomes the focal point of thousands of wills which have selected it for their instrument and we see the individual divinely strong and beautiful, illuminated by the bright flame of the desires of his people, his class or his party’.

Whether this be seen as reflection of contemporaneous leaders cults, or as a factor conducive to the promotion of such cults, it is difficult not to see the connection between this view of history and the cult of a figure like Stalin – about whom, indeed, Bernal had written the extraordinary article ‘Stalin as scientist’ only the previous year.

The commemoration of a figure like Leonardo shows how the communists laid claim to the broader field of human culture, and more specifically to the cultural achievements of the bourgeoisie as a rising class. In respect of the contemporary leaders whose birthdays they honoured, Claude Pennetier and Bernard Pudal have nevertheless argued that the cult of the leader was also and necessarily a cult of the workers as epitomised in the leader. This is certainly true of the French case on which they focus, and Thorez’s *Fils du peuple* was the quintessential literary expression of this variant of the cult. It is equally true of other industrialised countries with well-established labour movements, and therefore of worker (or workerist) cults like those of Thälmann in Germany and Pollitt in Britain. Nevertheless, even in western Europe, cases like that of Togliatti in Italy and Kuusinen in Finland suggest that this was not invariably the case. Prestes in Brazil suggests another possible variation drawing on dashing military precedents. Conceivably the ambiguous example of the Stalin cults licensed variation in this respect; for although Stalin’s humble origins were strongly emphasised, he was less securely attached to the specificities of class or social context. ‘Underground worker, party organiser, theoretician, military commander, international leader, inspirer of Socialist construction … tactician of the revolution’ – for almost every political role he provided a reference point, but one bereft of any specificity of social context.

In Barbusse’s account he appears above all as a professional revolutionary for whom neither family ties, locality, occupational identity or cultural preference provide any distinct coloration, and who was neither worker or intellectual alone but the ‘perfect blend’ of the two.

In this respect too there is therefore scope for fruitful comparison of the international projection of the founding Soviet cults and the construction of apparently mimetic cults locally. An aspect that is particularly worth exploring is the gendered quality of the cults. Pollitt’s and Thälmann’s, for example, were both very much cults of the male worker, or of the worker as a male, though the conceptions of masculinity were in many respects rather different. Plamper argues in more general
terms for what he calls the patristic quality of the modern personality cult. He attributes to the refraction through these cults of existing power relations, though without really exploring why the cults could be projected as subversion or defiance of some existing power relations (e.g. of social class) but not of others (e.g. of gender). The masculinist character of the communist leader cult would bear closer examination in respect of its political specificities, and possible exceptions like Pasionaria may be considered in order to get a better measure of the highly gendered character of these cults.

These different social constructions are obviously bound up with the forms and media through which the cults were disseminated, and this suggests another possible variation to be considered. Plamper’s argument in the Soviet context is that Stalin’s cult was an ‘overwhelmingly visual phenomenon’. Even within its Soviet context, the main basis for this claim seems to be that Plamper himself has been looking mainly at visual sources, and in crucial contexts like the press coverage of Stalin’s first major birthday commemorations in 1939 it appears that these weren’t particularly abundant. In any case, there must again have been significant variations internationally. If the Stalin cult, as Plamper puts it, was ‘tailored to a population whose mental universe was shaped primarily by images’, it would necessarily require adaption to labour movement cultures in which the printed word was of such central significance. In any case, forms of the cult were dependent on the resources available, and this again meant crucial distinctions between state-sponsored cults and relatively minor cults. A Pollitt or a Thorez could dominate a printed page just as impressively as Stalin could, but it’s difficult to imagine the sky above Pollitt’s Hendon home filled with aeroplanes in formation spelling out the letters of his name. The same of course applies to representations of the cult in statues or public monuments or in films aspiring at very least to the sorts of production values routinely extended to Will Hay or George Formby. In a society like Britain’s where the tsars or their counterparts still existed, and where in the year of Stalin’s death they staged a coronation ritual of such grotesque and arcane profligacy that the great helmsman might have approved, an oppositional cult had to be expressed in alternative and not merely mimetic forms if it was to avoid the twin pitfalls of ridicule and bathos.

Consideration of the forms in which the cults were articulated connects with the crucial issue of the personalisation of the cults and the relation between the individual and the collective, and more particularly the collective as embodied in the party. This can be most fruitfully explored through the genre of the exemplary party life. Though William Gallacher’s *Revolt on the Clyde* (1936) is often taken as the first of these, the most extensively studied and cultic in form is Thorez’s *Fils du peuple*, published at the height of the first international wave of cult productions in 1937. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this text for the French party: in Goulemot’s book, one can read how in the last three months of 1949, in other words simultaneously with the build-up to Stalin’s birthday celebrations, the second edition of *Fils du peuple* sold some 338,000 copies and gave rise to Soviet-style campaigning enthusiasms, some of whose more regrettable effusions were even expressed in verse (‘Après une lecture de *Fils du peuple*’ by Jean Frévillé; not in the French Parnassus). Though an illustrated edition was produced, with a drawing of Thorez by Picasso as the frontispiece, image in a case like this was clearly secondary to text. Another interesting feature of *Fils du peuple* is that it was, according to Pennetier and Pudal, the only such autobiographical document of a living communist leader in France. It thus underlined the cult in this instance of the individual general secretary rather than
the more collective conception of the leadership that may perhaps be associated with the several such exemplary lives published in the same period in Britain.27

Nevertheless, extensive discussion of *Fils du peuple* has strongly stressed its ‘anti-individualism’ as a text.28 Rather than the elevation of Thorez above his party, it has been as expressing a symbiosis of the individual and the collective, or even, as Thorez’s autobiographical ‘I’ gives way to the ‘we’ of the party, in the sinking of the individual identity even of the highest leadership figures. This is also apparent in the cult of Stalin himself, and in the stylised and atrophied biographical forms in which Stalin’s cult only somewhat belatedly found expression. This does link with the visuality of the Stalin cult as evoked by Plamper, and he makes the interesting observation that this did not lend itself to fictional representation, and in particular that of the Bildungsroman implying some necessary process of self-development as if Stalin were not already born a leader.

That the expression of these cults in individualised forms was thus constrained suggests that the personalisation of power within communist parties and systems of government was a decidedly double-edged weapon. Though the cults were intended to express and consolidate the party’s corporate authority, and beyond it that of Moscow, they could also and simultaneously threaten these through accumulations of personal political capital. Cults that were not clearly subordinated to or dependent upon that of Stalin himself could undermine the discipline and sense of hierarchy that was the first principle of ‘proletarian internationalism’. Moscow’s dilemma was thus that Stalinised leadership structures required the assertion of authority domestically without diluting its concentration in Stalin himself. Deployment of cultic practices within the communist movement was consequently ambivalent in character and frequently fraught with tension. This might be likened to the phenomenon of ‘little Stalins’ within the USSR itself, but accentuated by geographical as well as cultural distance. With the export of cultic practices to the post-war people’s democracies, it was conspicuously the ‘strong cults’ around Tito, Enver Hoxha and Ceauşescu that were associated with instincts of independence. Anti-cults like that of Trotskyism – a ‘figment invented by Stalin’ (Kolakowski) – underlie the potentially disaggregating effect. Posthumously ‘Leninism’ provided a creed and identity transcending the role of individuals; but communists did not usually identify themselves as ‘stalinists’ (their opponents did) and personalisations in this form (‘Trotskyism’, ‘Titoism’) identified the charismatic individual as threat. Similar constructions can be found in other countries, and their prevalent features highlight the anti-individualism of the authentic party cult.

A final theme is that of the political rationale or functionality if the cult. Citing Weber, Rees stresses the integrating effect of veneration practices as a point of cohesion for fragmented or unsettled societies. Tumarkin thus identifies post-revolutionary Russia with ‘a process of mounting anarchy that called for new symbols to confer meaning upon the chaos’.29 Similar constructions could also underpin the leader cult in communist parties afflicted by internal factionalism, and this may have relevance to a party like the German Communist Party in the 1920s. Nevertheless, for those parties seeking not to exercise power, but to contest it through movements of protest or resistance, a ‘mobilisation’ figure was at least as important as an integration figure.30 For such a role the figure of Stalin the statesman or generalissimo offered no model. For the orator’s posture, the accusing finger, the menace or defiance of the clenched fist, examples were necessarily sought elsewhere, and cults were constructed from diverse sources across national, generational and political boundaries. One may note that when the novelist and critic Ralph Fox envisaged a conception of the
revolutionary novel with the leader as hero at its centre, it wasn’t Stalin that he had in mind but Dimitrov. That is again suggestive of how oppositional cults like those of Dimitrov or Pasionaria might have a greater resonance internationally. It also suggests that the leader cult as instrument of mobilisation was one turned outwards, beyond the party or society in question – which also means that a cult like Lenin’s could figure simultaneously as an integration figure within a Russian/Soviet context and as a mobilisation figure for the communist movement internationally.

5 Tumarkin, Lenin Lives!, pp. 2-3.
6 Lewin, ‘Stalin in the mirror of the other’, p. 111.
7 ‘By continuing the circle tradition of the opposition intelligentsia, the Bolsheviks … not only violated the Marxist principle of collectivism but also unwittingly slipped into a century-old tradition of replicating the reciprocal relationship between the loathed tsar and his eulogists …’ (Plamper, Stalin Cult, pp. 19-20).
8 Plamper, p. 19.
9 B. Apor et al, eds, The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships. Stalin and the Eastern bloc, Palgrave, 2004. The Heller/Plamper collection does also contain an essay by Plamper on the Stalin cult in the GDR, but this is a secondary theme in the volume.
10 E. A. Rees, ‘Leader cults: varieties, preconditions and functions’ in Apor, Leader Cult, ch. 1.
11 Plamper, p. 5.
13 Twentieth Century Communism, 1, 2009. special issue; ‘Communism and the leader cult’ including contributions on the French, Belgian, Hungarian, Vietnamese, Brazilian, British and Finnish cases.
15 For example, in the monthly Communist Review in the years 1948-50 the only such items are a piece on Stalin by William Gallacher on Stalin’s seventieth birthday (December 1949) and a piece by Peter Kerrigan on Pollitt’s sixtieth birthday the following year (December 1950). Palme Dutt’s Labour Monthly has a Stalin anniversary number in December 1949 and occasionally features some article of Stalin’s hitherto unpublished in English. Otherwise, there is nothing in these same years – and conspicuously at the time of Pollitt’s birthday celebrations, though the relevant issue does contain a length, fulsome tribute to Bernard Shaw on his death, which rather underlines the omission.
16 Plamper, pp. 5, 14-15, 222.
22 ‘Sixty years old today’, Daily Worker, 21 December 1939.


Plamper, p. xv.


Tumarkin, p. 2.