

***The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power.*** By Jan Plamper. Yale-Hoover Series on Stalin, Stalinism, and the Cold War. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. xx, 310 pp. Appendix. Notes. Glossary. Index. Illustrations. Plates. Photographs. \$55.00, hard bound.

In this book on the “alchemy” of Iosif Stalin’s cult of personality, Jan Plamper actually dispels much of the mystery surrounding the cult itself—how it was developed and according to what formula; who was responsible for its individual components and overall concoction; what elements and circumstances contributed to its maturation and ferment; and how Stalin regarded the admixture that resulted. More than alchemy, then, the cult turns out to have been a logical aspect of Stalinist governing practices.

*Plamper focuses much of his analysis* on a single dimension of the Stalin cult—the visual representation of the leader in newsprint and oil portraiture. At first glance a rather narrow case study, it nevertheless produces a pathbreaking book that challenges many of the field’s most timeworn assumptions about the cult and the personality that it celebrated. Plamper begins by attempting to resolve the paradox surrounding how an ostensibly materialist, Marxist-Leninist society like the USSR could embrace the organized worship of its leaders. Historically, many authors have attributed the cult of personality to Stalin’s supposed psychological insecurities and craven need for supplication, while others (myself included) have argued that the cult fulfilled an instrumental, mobilizational role informed by Max Weber’s theory of charismatic political authority. Plamper rejects both of these explanations and opts instead for Edward Shils’s concept of sacral authority, paired somewhat incongruously with Georgii Plekhanov’s materialist thesis on the role of the individual in the Marxist historical process. Rejecting the notion that the cult was deployed instrumentally, Plamper argues that the Bolsheviks embraced this practice after Vladimir Lenin’s death due to a predisposition for the cult-like veneration of leaders that dated to their days in prerevolutionary underground study circles. An explanation that suggests that the personality cult was a normative, organic outgrowth of the Russian Social Democratic tradition, it probably exaggerates the prevalence of cult-like activity among the Bolsheviks (or Mensheviks, for that matter) before 1917.

In the empirical core of this study, Plamper supplies two sweeping chapters on the practices and patterns of the cult’s representation in Soviet mass culture—“Stalin in Time” and “Stalin in Space.” These observations set up two more chapters on the inner workings of cult production, dissemination, and display. Here, Plamper resolves long-standing questions about who supervised the cult and how centralized its command and control structure actually was. He also explains who the patrons were and why world-class painters would accept such a “social-commission” (*sotsial’nyi zakaz*) when they knew that there would be little opportunity for artistic self-expression. Perhaps most important, Plamper breaks with long-standing psychoanalytical explanations for Stalin’s personal involvement in the cult (as well as newer research claiming that the general secretary only grudgingly tolerated the hallelujahs) in order to suggest that Stalin’s attitude ought to be regarded as “immodestly modest” (123–35). Stalin, Plamper claims, willingly accepted the veneration that the cult supplied, took an active role in its development, and criticized it only when it produced art that broke with convention, intruded upon his personal life, or celebrated his comrades-in-arms too enthusiastically.

In the final section of the book, Plamper addresses how those at the center of the cult’s creative processes—the artists and their bureaucratic handlers—gauged the cult’s effectiveness. A fascinating stretch of analysis, it suggests that those involved in the production of this quintessentially top-down campaign were very concerned

about the public's reaction to their work. Regrettably, Plamper declines to pursue this line of analysis further to investigate the cult's broader popular reception. He justifies his reluctance to pursue such an investigation by questioning how reliably material from the former Soviet archives actually informs Stalin-era public opinion. But while Plamper is right about the problematic nature of such sources, his decision to exclude them entirely from such a study seems excessive. Plamper's analysis is illuminating, whether he is systematically tracking the contours of *Pravda's* depiction of Stalin or reconstructing the history of specific works such as A. M. Gerasimov's canonical *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1938). Yet this academic approach does not reveal much about the way that the cult was experienced among ordinary people in the USSR. Especially in regard to the study of the personality cult and other forms of official propaganda, the study of reception would seem to offer the only way to catch even a glimpse of how the society at large reacted to the way Stalin was officially represented in the visual arts.

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***Reformulating Russia: The Cultural and Intellectual Historiography of Russian First-Wave Émigré Writers.*** By Kåre Johan Mjør. *Russian History and Culture*, vol. 7. Leiden: Brill, 2011. xii, 327 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$163.00, hard bound.

This book consists mainly of a close reading of four classic works by Paris-based Russian thinkers in the 1930s and 1940s: Georgii Petrovich Fedotov's *Sviatye drevnei Rusi* (1931), Georgii Vasil'evich Florovskii's *Puti russkogo bogosloviia* (1937), Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdiaev's *Russkaia ideia* (1946), and Vasilii Vasil'evich Zen'kovskii's *Istoriia russkoi filosofii* (1948–1950). The thread binding the four texts together was the project of preserving and transmitting Russian culture in emigration with a view to its eventual reconstitution in Russia. But if Russia was the ultimate frame of reference, Kåre Johan Mjør argues that these works may also be viewed as refractions of the experience of exile itself—a condition that is “strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (Edward W. Said, quoted in the epigraph to this volume). In some respects, Mjør's concerns resemble Marc Raeff's in *Russia Abroad* (1990), a work that is cited repeatedly in *Reformulating Russia*. While Mjør affirms the importance of contextualizing the writings of the émigrés, however, the amount of space he devotes to historical description of the emigration is modest. This book is primarily an interpretation of texts, not an analysis of their context.

Of the four thinkers studied, Fedotov receives the most detailed treatment. This is welcome, since the scholarly literature on Fedotov in English is not copious, especially in comparison with what is available on Florovskii and Berdiaev. The inclusion of Zen'kovskii in the study is welcome for the same reason. Fedotov and Zen'kovskii serve also, respectively, to open and close the questions that receive the most attention in this volume: how to define Russian spiritual culture and how to envision its destiny. In *Sviatye drevnei Rusi*, Fedotov offered an idealized portrait of Kievan and medieval Russian Orthodox culture as the template for a reprimed and respiritualized Russia of the future. Few will disagree with Mjør's characterization of Fedotov's project as a “utopia” (97), but this does not mean that the project was uninteresting or irrelevant. With the expansion and consolidation of Soviet power after World War II, utopian visions such as Fedotov's gave way to more concrete and realistic projects, represented here by *Istoriia russkoi filosofii*, in which Zen'kovskii argued that Russian