

Aleksei Tikhomirov, “Luchshii drug nemeckogo
naroda”, Kul't Stalina v Vostochnoi Germanii
(1945-1961 gg.) [“The German people best friend” :
The Stalin cult in East Germany (1945-1961)]

Andreas Hilger



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RÉFÉRENCE

Aleksei TIKHOMIROV, "Luchshii drug nemeckogo naroda", Kul't Stalina v Vostochnoi Germanii (1945-1961 gg.), ["The German people best friend" : The Stalin cult in East Germany (1945-1961)], Moscou : Političeskaja Enciklopedija, 2014, 310 p.

- 1 In June 1951, the security service of the German Democratic Republic arrested an East German citizen. The member of the People's police had attracted the Stasi's attention for several reasons. In private conversations with colleagues the former activist of the East German socialist youth organization FDJ repeatedly had boasted about his crimes against Soviet Prisoners of War. In addition, again and again he had swaggered about his ideas of racial German superiority and advantages of Hitler's domestic and world order. Finally, in his private training sessions with an air gun the arrested had used photographs of Stalin as target. In view of the power relations in the early GDR, the Stasi had to inform the Soviet State Security, the MGB, about ongoing investigations. The so-called Chekists decided to take over the whole case. In the end, judges of a Soviet military tribunal did not investigate possible war crimes. In contrast, they classified the German's rants against Stalin and Moscow and his target practices as

anti-Soviet agitation and terrorism. The prisoner was sentenced to death. In September 1952, he was executed in Moscow, cremated, his ashes were buried in an anonymous field on the Moscow Donskoe cemetery.

- 2 This cruel detail reflects core aspects and spheres of the Soviet presence in East Germany in the early post-war period. Besides the importance of the collaboration of East German institutions and representatives with Soviet authorities, the incident underlines Soviet readiness to persecute mercilessly political and ideological deviations among the German population and therefore the significance of repressive instruments for Soviet rule. Finally, the case demonstrates the almost abnormal relevance of the Soviet Stalin cult for both Moscow's definition of loyal supporter or enemies as well as for the day-to-day life and daily political practices in the periphery of Soviet empire.
- 3 Research on this latter aspect of the processes of Sovietization in the second of "three concentric rings of the Soviet imperial unity"¹ is a comparatively, but not an entirely new field. In general, the author of the given study, Aleksei Tikhomirov, seems to overrate the impact of the classic—reductionist—models of totalitarianism on already available analyses of post-war East Germany and tends to play down existing findings about the complex interplay between East German society and rulers. Besides, the dynamic relation interdependency, that existed between Soviet terrorist measures and symbolic politics and the relative weight of corresponding Soviet (and East German) deliberations or power practices remains unspecified. In this context, for instance, Tikhomirov's insightful discussion concerning generation and exploitation of emotional bonds between rulers and subjects somehow neglects the fact that fear was supposed to play and indeed played an important role in emergence and consolidation of Stalinist regimes. Here, for instance, the chronological sequence of extensive purges and persecutions on one hand and introduction, widening and consolidation of the Stalin cult—and other means of symbolic politics—on the other hand suggests, that the interrelation of Soviet as well as East German priorities, scopes of action, flexibility or lack of malleability, and instruments of power might have deserved a denser analysis. Besides, the ambivalences of Soviet producers of the Stalin cult for and in Germany, who could serve political as well as individual aims, would additionally differentiate corresponding developments.² In a broader perspective, it is at least notable that Tikhomirov's periodization of symbolic politics in East Germany corresponds to traditional phases which are proposed by political, economic, or international histories. In the long run, a comparative perspective on the use of different tools or preponderance of single methods in the process of Sovietization as well as on the successive implementation of specific aspects of Soviet conceptions and models throughout the vast regions of Moscow's influence and interest might deepen our comprehension of the twisted global process with its national characteristics.³
- 4 Such approach would require a coordinated effort by a team of area specialists. It is no minor achievement, that Tikhomirov's study may inspire corresponding multifaceted, necessarily interdisciplinary efforts. Indeed, his differentiated research on the Stalin cult in East Germany definitely enriches our understanding of principles, mechanisms, roles, and limits of fundamental cultural dimensions of the Soviet project of imperial extension. His theoretical conceptualizations use a wide range of impulses from historical, sociological, and psychological angles of view. This broad opening of possible and fruitful perspectives constitutes one of the most valuable parts of the book. On this basis, the author discusses the role of the Stalin cult in formation and legitimization of

the post-war East German satellite. It becomes evident, that the cult was to enable, to support, and to implement the establishment of Stalinist states and societies in newly occupied regions. At the same time, the cult cemented an imperial hierarchy, where Moscow constituted the uncontested center. Incidentally, Tikhomirov's presumptions of the relevance of German senses of guilt and loss for the establishment of a socialist dictatorship in East Germany will provoke further discussions.

- 5 In general, the solid archival fundament testifies, that Tikhomirov managed to translate his ambitious theoretical approach into a convincing research program, although one does not need complex constructs to explain, why East German opposition groups preferred to act under favour of night. Besides, it remains to be seen, whether debates of perceptions of the Stalin cult by the German man in the street win by the use of regional or local archives.
- 6 In general, Tikhomirov's compact description of the continuous broadening of principal target audiences within and outside the communist party helps to retrace the transfer of specific Stalinist representations to East Germany as well as their significance in the complex process of—attempted and often limited—penetration or transformation of East German structures. In December 1949, in the context of Stalin's 70th birthday, the remarkable intensification of the Stalin cult mirrored the creation of the first socialist state in Germany. After Khrushchev's secret speech in February 1956, the more or less abrupt end of the Stalin cult in East Germany once again underlined the ambivalent character of the Soviet-East German project. The SED leadership was to follow Moscow's change of course and adopted the post-Stalinist practice of official oblivion, while simultaneously adhering to the new imperial focus on a refreshed Lenin cult. Nevertheless, given the multi-functionality of the Stalin cult, the Soviet disenchantment of Stalin confronted the SED leadership with several problems. While many East Germans interpreted Moscow's volte-face as justification of their own rejection of Soviet influence and socialist rule, other felt betrayed by the new, unexpected loss of a beloved or respected point of orientation - both perspectives could not but endanger the stability of East German hierarchies. In these multiple contexts, Ulbricht had to secure his own personality cult against emerging criticisms, but at the same time could seize the opportunity of greater latitude to strengthen his position against factional and public challenges.
- 7 In the period between 1949 and 1956, the Stalin cult fully developed its multidimensional functions and meanings in political-ideological, economic, social, and generational relations and spheres. Exemplarily, Tikhomirov's interpretation of the newly designed Stalin Boulevard (Stalinallee) in East Berlin and of Stalinstadt (formerly Fürstenberg an der Oder) brings together the different possibilities, ideas, aims, and inconsistencies of the Stalin cult. Both undertakings underlined the East Germany loyalty to Moscow and the integration in an anti-Western camp. They demonstrated the SED's ambitions to build new societies with new, socialist human beings. In this context, the projects called for new endeavours and held the promises of a golden future for loyal socialist citizens—measured by standards of a more or less capitalist consumerism.
- 8 This latter disaccord ties in with the introductory remarks. Obviously, the Stalin cult could neither eliminate nor completely conceal inherent contradictions of the Soviet project. The cult was an integral and important part of the post-war extension of Soviet power and the consolidation of the SED regime. At the same time, it reflected the

shortcomings and systemic defaults of the exported, partially internalized, partially adapted Stalinist concepts and mechanisms. From this perspective, the cultural Stalinization of East Germany had to work hand in hand with other power instruments to become effective. After 1956, a ritual de-Stalinization alone proved to be insufficient to establish an alternative, viable and widely accepted socialist Republic in East Germany. It was the Berlin wall that finally had to protect post-Stalinist socialist leadership cults. The cults themselves were unable to attract, convince, and integrate the people or to legitimize the post-Stalinist regime in East Germany.

NOTES

1. Hannes Adomeit, *Imperial Overstretch: Germany in Soviet Policy from Stalin to Gorbachev*. An analysis based on new archival evidence, memoirs, and interviews (Baden-Baden: Nomos-Verl.-Ges. 1998), 11-12.
2. See Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
3. See, for different areas: Jan C. Behrends, *Die erfundene Freundschaft: Propaganda für die Sowjetunion in Polen und in der DDR* (Köln: Böhlau, 2006); Patryk Babiracki, *Soviet Soft Power in Poland: Culture and the Making of Stalin's New Empire, 1943-1957* (Chapel Hill : The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Andreas Hilger, "'Sie bringen das Licht der Sowjetkultur'". *Literaturbeziehungen zwischen der UdSSR und Indien, 1945-1964*" in Martin Aust et al., eds., *Osteuropäische Geschichte und Globalgeschichte* (Stuttgart : Steiner, 2014), 197-219.