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Andrew Sobanet. *Generation Stalin: French Writers, the Fatherland, and the Cult of Personality*. Indiana UP, 2018.

E. Nicole Meyer

Augusta University, nimeyer@augusta.edu

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Abstract

Review of Andrew Sobanet. *Generation Stalin: French Writers, the Fatherland, and the Cult of Personality*. Indiana UP, 2018. xi + 296 pp.

Keywords

Sobanet, Stalin, Barbusse, Aragon, Eluard, Rolland

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Andrew Sobanet's book is a tour-de-force case study which explores four French authors, Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Paul Eluard, and Louis Aragon, in relation to how they, as both intellectuals and writers, add to the mythic stature of Joseph Stalin in the public imaginary. According to Sobanet, this mythical image of Stalin is very much part of the French Communist Party's own beliefs, especially from the mid-1930s through the 1950s. One of many attributes of this book is a concise, thoroughly researched, and very cogent presentation of the complex roots of the French Communist Party (PCF), its relation to Soviet communism, as well as Maurice Thorez's pivotal role as party leader in reframing party discourse. Sobanet's extremely well-documented study examines how Barbusse, Rolland, Eluard, and Aragon promoted, and indeed helped to create, the cult of Stalin's personality. These four were unified by their commitment to the PCF, and their role in the party's mediasphere was both "deep" and "enduring" (Sobanet 4) during these years, and thus central to France's cultural and political position in World War II. The four authors promoted complicity and authoritarian tactics through film, biography, novel, theatre, reportage and essays, and thus promoted the Stalin agenda by propagating Stalin's praise and role as leader. At the same time, Sobanet chooses the four in part due to their major intellectual contributions which reach far beyond "their Stalinist phases" (28), while recognizing party echoes which resonate through their better known work.

While many might know Henri Barbusse's 1916 Prix Goncourt novel, *Le Feu* (*Under Fire: The Story of a Squad*), Sobanet examines his 1935 *Staline: Un monde nouveau vu à travers un homme* (*Stalin: A New World Seen Through the Man*), the first official biography of Stalin. According to Sobanet, this latter work exemplifies the French and Soviet Communist parties' agendas, and, in particular, the cult of personality combined with Soviet policy. This foundational biography, he argues, reveals the evolution of discourse starting with those that stemmed from the French Revolution and extended, albeit transformed, into post-World War I French politics (both the PCF and the Front Populaire movement). Sobanet rightfully pulls this text out of relative obscurity, in order to explore its legacy for both the Soviet party and the PCF. Other chapters further develop intersections between the Stalinist party discourses, especially the cult of his personality in different genres. Eluard's film *L'Homme que nous aimons le plus* ('The Man we love the most') contributes to his party-aligned work especially prevalent in the last five years of the author's life. Fascinating editorial changes between the 1949-1951 and the 1966 version of Aragon's multivolume *Les Communistes* reveal the ways that this work seeks to impart important lessons of the Cold War era.

Sobanet analyzes Rolland's play *Robespierre* (1939) in relation to the cultural and political contexts in which it appears. In 1939, the PCF commemorated

the 150th anniversary of the French Revolution, and according to Sobanet, the play's celebration of cult of personality serves to validate the 1930's Moscow purges, with Robespierre substituting for Stalin (106). Fascinating changes in Rolland's political stance complicate his relationship with Barbusse, as the former embraced Gandhian philosophy, thus decrying violence while arguably transitioning to a cult of Gandhi's personality. Rolland's dedication to communism increased and trumped this phase, however. He reembraced the ideals of both French revolutionary figure Robespierre, and those of the Front Populaire. Sobanet's close textual analysis of *Robespierre*, which was well-received by the communist party, adds new understanding of the PCF. And, his thorough research, including use of personal journals, reveals that nothing is simple.

One of the many strengths of Sobanet's volume is in revealing both the complexities of the discourses he traces, as well as their transformation across time both in the works he studies, and in French society itself—in particular, how it relates to the evolution of the Front Populaire and the PCF. The methods in which the French promotion of a leader as both infallible and responsible for faultless policy results in creating a fabricated adulation, which can easily be extended to other World War II leaders, such as Adolf Hitler or Maréchal Philippe Pétain. Sobanet's conclusion focusing on the present Russian revisionist rebranding of the past harks to the current flood of new forms of propaganda—often referred to as “fake news”—as pervasive in the 21st-century context far beyond Russia's borders. Indeed, I would argue that Sobanet's thoroughly supported analysis of the cult of personality provides perceptive ways of looking at certain leaders of the 20th-and 21st-centuries, and proves to be a timely read for the readers of this journal.

E. Nicole Meyer
Augusta University