

Jonathon Dreeze  
Graduate Student  
Ohio State University

**On Regional Variations in the Soviet Empire: Joseph Stalin's Cult of Personality and Soviet Propaganda in Central Asia**

May 29, 2014-August 29, 2014  
Moscow, Russia and Almaty, Kazakhstan

**Research Abstract:** My research argues that within the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin's cult of personality functioned differently in comparison with the country-wide Stalin cult. In previous work, I have argued that the purpose of the country-wide Stalin cult was to initially legitimize Stalin as Lenin's rightful heir, and that as the cult developed in 1930s, and especially after World War II, the main purpose of the cult changed to aggrandizing Stalin's image and persona. However, variations in the depictions of Stalin's image in Central Asia, some of which showed Stalin possessing Central Asian physical features, such as slanted eyes, speak to a different function of the Stalin cult. I argue that Soviet officials in the Central Asian republics used regional variations in the cult to bolster the process of nation building by identifying Stalin as a Central Asian or associating him with Central Asian culture, while at the same time the imagery of the country-wide cult continued to legitimize Stalin's control over the state, as well as aggrandize his persona. On this basis, I argue that the regional variation in the ideological purpose of the Stalin cult indicates the existence of significant variations in ideology, political culture, and propaganda between Moscow and Central Asia.

**Research Goals:** The purpose of this trip was largely exploratory, with my main goal being to acquaint myself with the Russian and Kazakh archives, and to determine whether the sources I require for my project exist. While a stressful, and at times even an unfriendly environment, I feel as though I have become well acquainted with how to enter and use archives in Moscow and Almaty. I found that politeness and an appropriate deference to authority and criticism is the best

way to navigate the archives without upsetting the archivists. Furthermore, I was able to locate a significant amount of relevant material for my work, thereby affirming the viability of my dissertation topic.

A secondary goal of the research trip was to improve my Russian language skills. The time in the Russian and Kazakh archives allowed me to hone my reading skills, and interacting with various people in Moscow and Almaty strengthened my speaking and comprehension of Russian. I had previously taken two years worth of Uzbek and had hoped to interact with Uzbek speakers in Almaty, but I did not meet any and I also discovered that Uzbek is not easily understood by Kazakh speakers, despite similar grammar. For future research purposes I will likely have to learn Kazakh in order to read Kazakh language sources and it is my hope to soon return to Almaty. All this serves the main research goal of collecting materials and documents for the completion of my PhD. dissertation. Ultimately, I felt that this trip was successful and very instrumental in the development of my research.

**Research Activities:** In Moscow I spent the majority of my time working in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), and the Russian State Photography and Film Archive. At GARF I was able to locate a considerable number of documents on Soviet nationality policy in Central Asia during the 1920s and 1930s. Several of these documents dealt with territorial and economic disputes between different union republics, including the Central Asian republics.

While I found evidence of disputes between different union republics at GARF, I found only a handful of documents that dealt directly with the Stalin cult, and almost nothing that connected the Stalin cult to Soviet nationality policy or Central Asia. I did locate a list of names

of officials who were members of the committee that planned Stalin's 70th birthday ceremonies at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. Unfortunately, there was no evidence of minutes or resolutions from the committee meetings. I also discovered that there was a lack of documents on nationality issues after the late 1930s. It is possible that I overlooked the files of the new state body that was managing nationality affairs. The holdings at GARF are massive and it is possible that I glanced over sources that might have been pertinent to my topic. Furthermore, it is possible that these documents simply do not exist.

At RGASPI I was able to find a considerable amount of information and documents on the Stalin cult, as well as transcripts of Stalin's speeches and teachings on Soviet nationality issues. RGASPI possesses the holdings of the former Marx, Engels, and Lenin Institute (IMEL) which was responsible for the cataloguing, study, and publishing of the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, as well as Stalin. The holdings of the department of propaganda and political agitation were also at RGASPI. Most of the documents I looked at were reports on the conduct and nature of propaganda and agitation work in various regions of the Soviet Union, which, almost as a rule, seemed to be subpar. Unfortunately, these reports largely described to what extent the agitation work succeeded or failed and not the exact nature of the work that was carried out. Furthermore, Stalin and the Stalin cult were rarely mentioned in these documents. It was only in discussions of anti-religious propaganda did I find direct references to Stalin's works and teachings within propaganda documents.

I only spent a few days at the State Photography and Film archive. Going through photographs was easier and more quickly done than reading through documents, and I felt that it was pertinent that I spend most of my time at GARF and RGASPI. Despite this, I was able to look through several hundred photographs of the Soviet dictator, dating from the revolutionary

era all the way to his death in 1953. The vast majority of these images were "stock images" of Stalin at meetings, conferences, or standing with other Soviet leaders atop Lenin's Mausoleum. However, there were several images that directly connected to my research, such as Stalin meeting kolkhoz workers from Central Asia in 1935 at the Kremlin.

In Almaty, I worked at the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan. One of my initial fears at working at these archives was that the majority of documents would be in Kazakh, which I do not speak, instead of in Russian. However, the vast majority of the materials I found were in Russian. At the Central State Archive I was able to locate documents relating to the antireligious movement, as well as border disputes between several of the Central Asian republics, as well as a few items on Stalin's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations. The Presidential Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan was the former Archive of the Kazakh Communist Party and contained the files for the propaganda department of the Kazakh communist party. Among these files I found a sizeable number of documents concerning the Stalin cult and its different manifestations in Kazakhstan. I also made a brief visit to the Kazakh Photo and Film archive, which was actually a smaller archive located within the building of the Central State Archive. I spent very little time in this archive, as the holdings were rather small and there were few images that I had not already seen in the Photo and Film Archive in Moscow.

### **Important Research Findings**

During my time in the archives this summer I made several important finds. At RGASPI my most significant discovery was a large manuscript of a photo album, published in 1949 to commemorate Stalin's 70th birthday, with numerous handwritten editorial changes and

comments. The album contained many images of Stalin that I had not seen before. Also, the handwritten comments on the different captions and images of Stalin would likely provide an interesting insight into how Stalin's image was controlled and manipulated by officials at IMEL. However, the handwriting was very difficult to read, and in the future I would have to spend a considerable amount of time deciphering the text to fully comprehend what it says.

At RGASPI there was also a lot of correspondence between IMEL and various organizations, museums, regional communist party cells and councils, as well as local officials requesting biographical information about Stalin's life, in addition to fact checking to make sure that certain exhibits and publications were correct. An analysis of these requests, as well as IMEL's response to them would shed light onto how the Stalin cult was used by different organizations throughout the Soviet Union. One interesting piece of correspondence was a letter, dated April 12th 1941, addressed to Stalin, but processed by IMEL, by an individual named I.K. Kurtseva, the head of a small museum in the village of Narym Parobelskii in the Novosibirsk region. Stalin had apparently spent time in exile in the village and Kurtseva wrote that a museum had been built around the house that the Soviet dictator had lived in during his time in exile. The author of the letter is directly asked Stalin questions, such as what kind of transport he took when he was brought to Narym Parobelskii, with whom did he live in his quarters, the nature of his escape, and which Marxist works he read during his time there. A response from IMEL, dated July 4th 1941, was sent to local party officials in Novosibirsk, along with a small addendum. In the addendum, IMEL officials state that they are providing the information that Kurtseva had requested. The letter also says that such a request, made directly to Stalin, was inappropriate and that party officials in Novosibirsk should discipline the museum director in Narym Parobelskii.

At GARF I located protocols from a series of meetings of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee between 1935 and 1936. The topic of these meetings was the compilation of a photo and picture album titled, "20 Years of Soviet Power." The documents contain not only estimates as to how much it would cost to publish and distribute copies of this album, but also information on what is going to be placed in the album. There are notes on how Stalin is to be portrayed, such as Lenin's closest advisor and legitimate heir, and a lot of panegyrics towards Stalin concerning the Five Year Plans and the 1936 Soviet constitution. These documents are important because they offer insights into how officials discussed the portrayal of Stalin's image in print media.

At the State Photography and Film Archive in Moscow I found numerous interesting pictures of Stalin. The most significant were a series of photographs of Stalin and other Soviet leaders, such as Molotov, Voroshilov, and Kalinin, meeting shock-kolkhoz workers from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, during a reception in 1935 at the Kremlin. The Soviet leaders were all dressed in Uzbek and Turkmen national outfits that the workers had brought as gifts, I do not know to what extent the images were staged, but there are several images of Stalin and others going about the business of the conference while wearing the national costumes. This meeting of Stalin and the other Soviet leaders with the shock-kolkhoz workers in 1935 is something that I plan to examine more closely in the future. A closer examination of these interesting, and almost playful, images of the Soviet dictator and his associates, along with newspaper and magazine articles of the event, might reveal specific ideas or methods that were used to convey the Stalin cult to Central Asians and other groups of non-Russians. On a lighter note, seeing Stalin wearing a lopsided do'ppi (an Uzbek skull cap) and to'n (an Uzbek robe) was pretty comical.

At the Central State Archive in Almaty, my most significant findings were documents on the commissioning of artwork for Stalin's 70th birthday and the anti-religious campaigns in Central Asia, specifically on the League of the Militant Atheist. The documents on the artwork for Stalin's birthday are interesting because it not only shows the different commissions that the artists received for their works, but they also list the different themes that the artists were supposed/allowed to use in the paintings, such as Stalin with Lenin in Gorky, Stalin's birthplace, and Stalin and Lenin at the Smolny Institute. This is important because it is an indication of which images of Stalin were considered to be the most relevant for the 70th birthday celebrations, and is an example of how local party and state officials wanted artists to portray Stalin.

The documents on the League of the Militant Atheist listed the various types of literature that people were supposed to read, which included writings by Stalin evoking the supposedly bourgeois and incorrect nature of religion. The manner in which atheistic agitators were instructed by officials to use Stalin's teachings in the antireligious campaigns is important towards my larger research goals because it reveals one of the functions of the Stalin cult, albeit one that may not be specific to Central Asia, but also provides a non-visual perspective of the Stalin cult. At this point in my research I have been largely focused on the visual images of the cult. Looking at how Stalin's writings were used by agitators in antireligious campaigns and other forms of propaganda could lead to a new areas of expansion for my research.

At the Presidential Archive the most important documents I found were the plans for the celebration of Stalin's 70th birthday in the different oblasts throughout Kazakhstan in 1949. Communist party officials in each oblast had sent memoranda to Almaty, the republican capital, detailing the different events, such as the number of meetings and rallies held, the different types

of slogans that were printed on banners and in newspapers, and lists of articles published about Stalin. Included in these documents was a list of delegates who were to represent Kazakhstan at the main 70th birthday celebrations at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, as well as a long letter from Kazakh state and party officials offering praises to Stalin and thanking him for his wise and fruitful leadership. These documents are very important, not only in that they describe manifestations of the Stalin cult in Central Asia, but in that they provide a perspective of the cult, the 70th birthday celebrations, which can be rather easily compared and contrasted with other 70th birthday celebrations throughout the Soviet Union.

Despite some of the discoveries listed above, I still do not have a solid grasp of whether there existed some type of centralized guidelines or instructions on how to use the Stalin cult. As indicated above, I was able to discover examples in which the image of the Soviet dictator was discussed, but these were all in specific contexts. The use of the Stalin cult by the Soviet state is a major component of my dissertation and I had hoped to find, if not officially written rules, then at least evidence of orally or unofficial rules for using the cult. It would appear that in order to determine how state and party organs used the Stalin cult, or wanted to use the Stalin cult, I may have to rely on published materials, such as newspapers, magazines, and posters rather than on administrative documents. One future avenue of research may be to look at secret police and arrest records for people purportedly jailed for anti-Soviet activities, including insulting, speaking out against, or defacing Stalin cult materials, in order to determine what were the rules and social norms surrounding the cult.

Another future research perspective would be a comparison between Russian, Uzbek, and (hopefully) Kazakh language sources that could reveal some type of overarching rules of the Stalin cultic canon. Such a perspective could prove or disprove my thesis that the Stalin cult

serve different functions in different regions of the Soviet Union. Needless to say, my dissertation topic requires more work with administrative sources in Russian and Kazakh archives, both in order to search for more sources, as well as to more closely analyze sources I found. This is especially pertinent as photography was not allowed in any of the archives I visited and copies of documents were very expensive. Furthermore, I will also need to learn Kazakh at some point in the near future in order to carry out this comparison.

### **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

My research on the Stalin cult is relevant to current United States foreign policy due to the continued presence of personality cults in several countries of the former Soviet Union, as well as in East Asia. While the rise of powerful authoritarian leaders in Central Asia is probably connected to the authoritarian political legacy of the Soviet Union, the existence of personality cults around many Central Asian leaders is likely linked to the Soviet tradition of personality cults, specifically Stalin's cult. Although the bizarre cult of President Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan, in which the days of the week and the months of the year were named after himself and his family members, the more tame cult of President Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, and President Islam Karimov's proxy cult ostensibly centered on Tamerlane in Uzbekistan<sup>1</sup> are considerably different from Stalin's own cult, the origins and techniques of each cult can be traced back to the Stalin cult. For example, during Stalin's rule dozens of cities and town were named after the Soviet dictator, the most well-known being Stalingrad (formerly Tsaritsyn and currently Volgograd), the site of the famous World War II battle, and Stalinabad (currently Dushanbe), the capital of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic and later the independent

---

<sup>1</sup> Laura Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 40.

state of Tajikistan. The tradition of naming places after leaders has continued in Central Asia. During Niyazov's rule, Turkmenistan's main port on the Caspian Sea, Krasnovodsk, was renamed Turkmenbashi, the honorific title that Niyazov gave himself, meaning "father of all the Turkmen." In Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev University opened in 2010 in Astana. Furthermore, in Uzbekistan, the dichotomy between Tamerlane and Karimov within the Tamerlane cult is reminiscent of the Stalin cult's early days, in which Stalin was shown to be the devout pupil of Lenin.

There is also evidence that visual images of president Vladimir Putin in Russian media, as well as various texts and other media, constitute the beginning of a nascent personality cult around the Russian president, albeit one that differs in greatly in use of imagery when compared to the Stalin cult.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, while functioning within a very different cultural setting and over the course of more than 60 years, the origins of the cult of the Kim dynasty in North Korea can also likely be traced back to the Stalin cult. Many of the depictions of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il among adoring crowds or in military uniform are reminiscent of images from Stalin's cult.<sup>3</sup>

Even though the importance and manner of the cults in these countries differ significantly, ranging from the Kims' cult reaching a level of extravagance and pervasiveness that may have been beyond the heights of the Stalin cult, to the increasingly defunct nature of Niyazov's cult due, in no small part, to Niyazov's death in 2006, they all exercised, and continue to exercise, strong influences on the politics and cultures of each of these countries. While the Stalin cult itself may not be the sole explanation for the cult-based authoritarian systems in these

---

<sup>2</sup> Julie A Cassidy and Emily D. Johnson, "Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality," in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 88, No. 4 (October 2010), pp. 681-707.

<sup>3</sup> B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why it Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2011).

countries, an awareness of the workings and the influence that the Stalin cult had in the Soviet Union can provide possible perspectives into the workings of the political and cultural systems in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and possibly, though to a much lesser extent, in Russia and North Korea. This is especially pertinent due to the delicate and complex nature of United States interests in Central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, and on the Korean Peninsula, as well as the recent heightened tensions with Russia. In this manner, understanding the possible influences that the Stalin cult had on the personality cults in the above-mentioned countries can better inform United States diplomatic decisions and security policy in these regions.

### **Co-Curricular Activities**

While in Kazakhstan I attempted to contact history departments at several local universities in order to discuss my topic with local scholars in order gain insight and information that may help with my work, as well as to establish professional connections for possible future affiliations with a Kazakh university in the future. Unfortunately, none responded to my emails. I was able to briefly talk to one history professor I met in the Presidential Archive, however he was less than forthcoming with information and advice.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, I consider this research trip to have been a success. I was able to find a fair amount of information on my research topic, I gained an understanding of how archives in Moscow and Almaty functioned, and I improved my Russian. Even so, I did not find all the sources that I had hoped to discover. Thus, I am going to have to make adjustments to my larger arguments and look for alternative sources and perspectives in order to determine how the Stalin

cult functioned in Central Asia, as well as how Stalin cult propaganda in the Soviet periphery might have differed from the Stalin cult propaganda in the Soviet center.

### **Plans for Future Research Agenda/Presentations and Publications**

Currently, I am in the midst of preparing for my Ph.D. candidacy exams, which I expect to take in late spring 2015. I hope to acquire funding to study Kazakh this summer, either in the United States or in Kazakhstan, and then to spend the 2015-2016 academic year doing further research in Moscow and Almaty. I expect to have enough material to publish several articles on the Stalin cult by the time I return to America in spring 2016. If everything works out, I expect to complete my Ph.D. in the fall of 2018, or at the latest, the spring of 2019.

### **Bibliography**

Adams, Laura. *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010.

Cassiday, Julie A. and Emily D. Johnson, "Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality," in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 88, No. 4 (October 2010), pp. 681-707.

Myers, B.R. *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why it Matters* New York: Melville House , 2011.

