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THE “CULT” OF THE VOZHD':
REPRESENTATIONS IN LETTERS, 1934–1941

The adulation accorded to Stalin, many of his colleagues, and indeed outstanding individuals at all levels of Soviet society, was one of the most striking elements of Stalinist propaganda. This “cult of the individual” emerged strongly in the period 1933–34, contrasting dramatically with an earlier emphasis on the anonymous masses, classes, and party. At the apex of all these cults was that of Stalin, and his cult has been widely discussed, usually from the perspective of its origins, organisation, and representation in the official discourse. Nevertheless, important questions have not been answered satisfactorily. The relationship between the official propaganda and popular representations remains unclear. What was the effect of the propaganda upon its intended recipients? Did the whole Soviet people worship Stalin, their great father, as was alleged in the official discourse? To what extent was the cult phenomenon imposed from above, and to what extent did it emerge sponta-

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neously from below? How far did it harmonize with established attitudes towards authority?

Although these questions could be posed in a theoretical way before the opening up of the Soviet Union and its archives, only analysis of a wide range of new sources will provide more concrete answers and raise new questions. Possible sources include reports from agitprop departments, secret police and Party surveys of popular opinion, oral history interviews, and letters to the vozhd (leaders). This study will concentrate on the latter, while bearing in mind that letters and petitions to leaders are a particular type of source which shed light on certain aspects of the cult phenomenon at the expense of others.

As in any study of popular attitudes, the question of the representativeness of the representations contained within these sources inevitably arises. Hundreds of letters in various archives were examined for this study. Some of these contained little or no information relevant to the question of the leader cult. This in itself is interesting, and suggests that certain people ignored or were not greatly affected by the cult. Although no "scientific" statistical analysis was carried out, when letters did contain representations of the leader, their typicality or atypicality was noted. Thus, certain traditional formulae were observed recurring in letter after letter, while more fanatical "charismatic" representations were far less common. Letters containing overtly anti-cult sentiments were extremely rare. However, as the letter is only one type of source, no grand conclusions can be drawn from this. Letters to the vozhd tended to be written by the more literate, often with utilitarian aims in mind. They required deliberation and forethought, and in this period, the risk that putting pen to paper entailed naturally ensured that their writers adopted a conformist stance. To obtain a broader picture of popular attitudes towards the leaders and their cults, it is desirable to compare the representations in letters with those in other types of source.

Since the letter is a specific source, a brief introduction to the official discourse of the cult will be followed by an analysis of the procedure and role of sending letters and petitions to the vozhd, and a discussion of possible historical precedents for the practice. It is suggested that this was in many ways a continuation of tsarist custom and that "traditional" representations of supreme authority, as well as Soviet propaganda (which in itself inherited tsarist notions) may have influenced popular discourse on the vozhd. The main body of the article will be devoted to an analysis firstly of representa-