

The Invisible Shining: The Cult of Mátyás Rákosi in Stalinist Hungary, 1945–1956. By Balázs Apor. Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2017. 415 pp.

Leader cults in modern European history had strikingly common elements. They emerged and existed in democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian regimes alike, as well as in right-wing and left-wing political systems. Accordingly, the types of these political cults differed from each other. Monographs on this phenomenon have already been published, discussing cultic practices around the persons of Hitler, Hindenburg, Mussolini, Metaxas, Stalin, and Horthy. The authors of these books, such as Ian Kershaw, Anna von der Goltz, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, Marina Petrakis, Ian Pampller, and the author of this review, have investigated the different aspects of leader cults, including the Stalinist type.

The Invisible Shining is a long-awaited work because no detailed and systematic analysis has been published on the Hungarian type of Stalinist leader cult so far. The aim of the book is to analyze the Hungarian Stalinist political system's "attempt to implement the Stalinist leader cult in postwar Hungary" (p.1). The emergence of the Rákosi cult and the cults of other "mini Stalins" were the symbolic consequences of the Sovietization of Central and Eastern Europe after 1945. This occurred because the cult of Stalin, "the adaptation of leader worship to local Party secretaries" (p.15), the international hierarchy of cults, and the Stalinist pantheon with its rituals, myths, and symbols were imported from the USSR at that time. Apor emphasizes convincingly that the cults of satellite leaders were partly based on the Soviet model but, on the other hand, were rooted partly in local and national traditions. In addition, the author underlines that the leader cult of Rákosi seems to be "an example of [...] self-Sovietization" because Moscow's "direct influence," the role of "explicit Soviet orders" in its construction, "remains unclear" (pp.336–37). The careful analysis of the Rákosi cult provided by Apor highlights this complexity.

This book is divided into three parts: the first is about the construction of the cult, the second is about the societal responses to the cult's expansion, and the third is about the dismantling of the cult. Its structure is based primarily on a thematic, not a chronological, order. The thematic order highlights the agents, institutions, and the techniques of the leader cult. A 45-page chapter (I/1) is devoted to the history and the evolution (chronology) of the analyzed cult, which, with the third chapter, adds a chronological outline to the dominant thematic discussion.

A systematic overview of the construction of the cult is preceded by the short analysis of modern Hungarian leader cults. Apor emphasizes that “although the Stalinist leader cult originated in the Soviet Union, the language employed to deify the leaders of the Hungarian Communist Party did not originate there.” The reason for this was the striking similarity “to the verbal repository of interwar cultic representations” (p.45). It means that the leader cults during the Horthy era can also be considered to be the antecedents of the Rákosi cult. This is a very important contribution to the analysis of the Hungarian symbolic politics of the twentieth century.

Apor summarizes the most important aspects of the leader cult of Mátyás Rákosi from its origins and roots, to its phases between 1945 and 1949, and to its fully developed form (1949–1953). The first main chapter analyzes the role and function of this cult, the evolution of the leader’s image, and the techniques, occasions, agents, and increasingly centralized institutions of cult-building. Between 1945 and 1948/1949 his leader cult existed primarily within the framework of the Hungarian Communist Party. Rákosi became a Hungarian party leader, “father figure,” wise, all-knowing “teacher of the nation,” “man of the people,” “caring leader,” and so on. Between 1949 and 1953 the cult existed in a full-blown form: cult-making was institutionalized and centralized, a wide range of institutions and individuals participated in the complex process of constructing it. Apor systematically refers to the occasions (i.e., the meticulously planned public appearances, anniversaries) and the techniques (speeches, articles, letters, telegrams, biographies, visual representation, and so on) of cult-building when he analyzes the evolution of this leader cult.

In the last three chapters of the first part, the author focuses on three important methods of cult-making: the role of biographies, nationalism and the leader, as well as visual representation. First, the biographies were “heavily exploited” to justify the leadership of Rákosi, “to project the mythical images of the Party secretary” (p.25). They presented an oversimplified, constructed, and depersonalized image of the leader who was the embodiment of the Party and whose life was dedicated to the cause. Second, national traditions, myths, especially the Hungarian revolutionary traditions, were used to justify his elevated position. Rákosi was often portrayed as the heir to the Hungarian freedom fighters. As a result, he was presented “as the embodiment of the entire (national) political community” (p.142). Third, besides language, techniques of visual representation (portraits, busts, posters, newsreels, and so on) were also heavily deployed to describe him as an omnipresent leader.

In the second main chapter, Apor deals with the impact of the Rákosi cult on Hungarian society and with the efficiency of the party-state propaganda. This analysis is based on mood reports, surveys of public opinion, letters written to Rákosi, and telegrams. The author emphasizes that due to the lack of reliable representative sources it is difficult to estimate the extent to which the Hungarian population identified itself with this phenomenon. Apor analyzes positive (“communicative practices” [p. 188]) and negative (“spontaneous manifestations of dissatisfaction” [p.211]) responses to this leader cult. Another chapter about popular indifference and the ineffectiveness of propaganda provides further important details regarding how the propaganda machine worked. Apor concludes that “the Rákosi cult [...] found little fertile ground” (p.259), but, on the other hand, this cult “had a remarkable impact on communicative practices, verbal and non-verbal alike;” the population internalized the cultic vocabulary, “even if it generally failed to turn Hungarian society into a community of believers” (p.188).

The third part focuses on the dismantling of the Rákosi cult. The careful analysis is closely connected to the events and trends of political history, first and foremost to the de-Stalinization. The author divides the period into two phases: the decay of the cult (1953–1956), when its significance was slowly decreasing, and its collapse after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, when it disappeared relatively rapidly from public spaces and public discourse.

This monograph, which provides a detailed, valid, and systematic analysis of every important aspect of the Hungarian Stalinist leader cult, is a significant contribution to the better understanding of this political phenomenon. The context of the Rákosi cult was the Soviet symbolic politics, its international system of satellite cults, myths, and symbols, and the Hungarian—especially interwar—cultic traditions, including, the leader cult around Miklós Horthy. The analysis convincingly highlights this complexity. Though the book deals primarily with the Hungarian Stalinist leader cult, it also reflects on important aspects of other parallel phenomena. It provides a theoretically and methodologically valid analysis: the author reflects on, for example, the term ‘charisma’ and ‘the personality cult.’ In all these respects, Apor’s monograph, based on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, is an indispensable work for those interested in leader cults and in the complexities of East and Central European history.

Dávid Turbucz
Hungarian Academy of Sciences