

Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941. By David Brandenberger. New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2011. 357 pp.

Paradoxically enough, the study of Soviet propaganda almost fell victim to historiographical debates during the Cold War. This partly had to do with the importance the totalitarian paradigm ascribed to political indoctrination and mobilizational campaigns in the sustenance of communist rule. Marxist ideology was considered the source of terror, and the practice of disseminating its tenets—i.e. propaganda—was generally interpreted as an attempt to cover up the “true” nature of the Soviet regime and create a society of subservient citizens and atomized individuals. The revisionist response to the claims of scholars advocating the idea of an all-powerful state left the essentialist image of Soviet propaganda largely intact. The focus of revisionist historians was on society and social responses to Stalinist policies, and not so much on the state’s techniques of mass mobilization. In other words, the totalitarian emphasis on the role of propaganda in ensuring loyalty to the state triggered the marginalization of the topic of mass persuasion in revisionist historiography.

David Brandenberger’s book, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, is the first attempt since the Cold War to bring the subject of Stalinist propaganda back into the limelight. While aspects of political indoctrination—political discourse, newspapers, visual propaganda, and so on—have been addressed by historians before, Brandenberger is the first scholar to offer a comprehensive overview of mass persuasion in the Stalinist 1930s. To an extent, the book is a sequel to Peter Kenez’s classical analysis of the emergence of what the Hungarian–American historian famously called “the propaganda state” during the first decade of Bolshevik rule in Soviet Russia.¹ Although published in 1985, Kenez’s book is still remarkably accurate, and many of its claims remain valid despite the fact that the author had no access to archival sources at the time. Brandenberger continues the story from where Kenez left off: *Propaganda State in Crisis* starts in the late 1920s and provides a vivid description of Stalinist propaganda up until the outbreak of World War II. Brandenberger’s narrative is supported by a

1 Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

plethora of diverse primary material, ranging from archival sources to products of Soviet mass culture.

The originality of the book, however, does not lie merely in the fact that it is based on new archival findings. The volume, in general, offers a fresh perspective on the functioning and the efficacy of propaganda in totalitarian regimes. Brandenberger understands propaganda as a complex process, and he analyses political indoctrination at three different levels. First, he looks at how propaganda was constructed by the ideological establishment and who the key individuals were behind the formation of strategies of mass persuasion. Second, he analyses the process of disseminating propaganda messages to the wider population by focusing on the activity of the regime's activists, mostly in the context of party schools and study circles. Finally, he addresses the problem of the popular reception of the party's indoctrination efforts and offers a discussion of the overall impact of Stalinist propaganda on Soviet society. It is this multifocal, yet finely balanced, analysis of construction, dissemination and reception that makes the volume an original scholarly endeavor.

The term 'propaganda state' evokes images of an omnipotent polity—with a vast and smoothly run propaganda machine—the sole purpose of which is to indoctrinate the population along ideological lines. The story Brandenberger tells us, however, is not the story of strength and success, but one of weakness and failure. The Stalinist Soviet Union, he argues, ultimately failed to construct and inculcate a conception of identity that was coherent and distinctively "Soviet" at the same time. The book demonstrates that communist propaganda in the 1930s was far from being a carefully planned and efficiently managed enterprise. It was, in fact, characterized by spontaneity, improvisation, and spectacular inefficiency. Brandenberger offers a fascinating account of the trajectory of a deepening crisis in the attempts of the state to mobilize the masses in the name of ideology and the often hasty and ad hoc responses that the party-state conjured up to overcome the problems it faced on the ideological front. The lack of a centrally devised master plan and the scarcity of competent cadres to implement the party's improvised—and sometimes contradictory—policies exacerbated the crisis and paralyzed the regime's propaganda machine by the end of the decade. Therefore, if viewed through the prism of political indoctrination, the Soviet Union in the 1930s does not appear to have been all-powerful at all; rather it resembled a failing state.

The author's emphasis on system malfunction reflects a recent trend in historical studies of Soviet-type regimes. There is a growing interest in the

role of agency in the functioning of such states and the ways in which the representatives of the system shaped the outcomes and popular reception of the party's policies. Historians addressing this particular aspect of Soviet rule focus not so much on how certain decisions are made, but on how they are implemented and how they are perceived by the population. The narratives that emerged as a result further erode the idea of a monolithic state exercising total control over identity formation.² Incompetence, it seems, was a systemic feature of communism. It contributed to the overall failure of the Bolsheviks to nurture enthusiasm for their utopian goals and aspirations, resulting in widespread popular indifference to the propaganda messages of the party.³ For example, in his recent book on Stalinist Hungary György Gyarmati argues that the general incompetence of the party's cadres almost incapacitated the state in the early 1950s.⁴ While Brandenberger's argument also revolves around the theme of a chaotically managed state on the verge of paralysis, it offers one of the most detailed analyses of the topic so far.

The book is not merely a story of incompetence and failure, however. Some of the chapters in the volume, in fact, present a case of unexpected success: the emergence of a populist version of communist propaganda, dominated by the tropes of heroism and patriotism. While this campaign seems to have struck a chord with society, it did not actually originate in the party headquarters. Although it enjoyed the support of the leadership, the new line did not come from prominent party functionaries and ideologues; it came from the "sidelines," and was most actively advocated and shaped by the intelligentsia, and key figures of the Soviet cultural propaganda machine (Maksim Gorky, for example).

2 While the revisionist school has criticized the notion of the monolithic (totalitarian) state extensively, especially in works that revolve around the concept of "resistance," the efficiency of party propaganda has not been in the limelight of historical research. "Classic" works on popular resistance include, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), and Lynne Viola, *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002). Historical discussions that address—among other things—the efficiency of party cadres in implementing the regime's symbolic policies include Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) and David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

3 For an analysis of the relationship between the incompetence of party agitators and popular indifference see Balázs Apor, "‘Ignorance is bliss’: Cult-Reception and Popular Indifference in Communist Hungary (1947–1956)," in *Der Führer im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Benno Ennker and Heidi Hein-Kirchner (Marburg: Herder Institut, 2010), 90–107.

4 György Gyarmati, *A Rákosi-korszak. Rendszerváltó fordulatok évtizede Magyarországon, 1945–1956* (Budapest: ÁBTL–Rubicon, 2011), 215–19.

Thus, somewhat unexpectedly, one of the most successful projects of Stalinist propaganda did not come from the party's headquarters, but from the margins of the institutional hierarchy. Brandenberger shows that the popularity of the new line was more the unintended consequence of a spontaneous and populist response to a mobilization crisis than it was the result of the implementation of a carefully crafted master plan. Despite this remarkable success, however, the Stalinist leadership decided to—quite literally—terminate the culture of heroes in the late 1930s. The Great Terror and the last few years of the 1930s bore witness to the symbolic and the physical elimination of “heroes” in Soviet political culture and the return in the propaganda of the abstract and inaccessible concepts of dialectical materialism. The book, thus, tells us a story of sudden, unpredictable, and even contradictory zig-zags in the official line, which were largely responsible for the failure of the state to mobilize its citizens to labor for the realization of a communist utopia in the mid to late 1930s.

The book consists of eleven chapters, but it could be divided chronologically, as well as thematically, into four parts. The first three chapters discuss the mobilizational crisis that crippled the Soviet state in the late 1920s and early 1930s and analyze some of the strategies the Bolsheviks implemented to tackle the problems of propaganda. Brandenberger shows how the failure of the party to popularize the key concepts of its ideology in the 1920s triggered the intensification of indoctrination efforts during the first five-year plan and how it contributed to the renewal of attempts to create a credible historical narrative. Although the leadership was very much aware of the crisis, the policies they implemented lacked coordination and were ad hoc in nature. Therefore, they generally remained unable to mobilize Soviet citizens for the cause. Historians had struggled to produce an accessible text on party history that could be used for propaganda purposes, and the quest for the official biography of Stalin was also aborted, after a sequence of events that the author merely describes as “a comedy of errors.”

Where party historians and leading ideologues failed, less influential members of the creative intelligentsia (writers, journalists, film directors, etc.) succeeded. In an attempt to offer a more accessible master narrative to Soviet citizens, newspapers and the Soviet cultural propaganda machine (literature, cinema, etc.) took the lead in promoting new themes—heroism and patriotism—that instantly gained popularity in Soviet society. In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Brandenberger offers a detailed discussion of the emergence of Soviet patriotism and the Stalinist culture of heroes in the 1930s, highlighting the role of key members of the

intelligentsia (such as Gorky) in the process and paying equal attention to the construction of both “real” (members of the Cheliuskin expedition, military commanders, shock workers and Stakhanovites) and fictional (Chapaev or Pavel Korchagin) heroes. The author argues that the shift from the promotion of abstract ideological principles towards more concrete, and even populist, themes fell on fertile ground and was received positively by the population. Whereas the tenets of dialectical materialism had failed to provoke enthusiastic responses in Soviet society before, the tropes of patriotism and heroism were successful in advancing Soviet mass mobilization. These themes contributed to the formation of an accessible historical narrative that was populated by lively heroic figures struggling for the construction of a new world or fighting for the motherland.

While the early 1930s spawned a wide variety of heroes, the end of the decade witnessed their brutal decimation. The purging of the party elite during the years of the Great Terror, in general, had a dramatic effect on communist propaganda. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 analyze the damaging impact of the violent events on indoctrination and mass mobilization. The fall of prominent individuals, including party historians Vil’gel’m G. Knorin and Nikolay N. Popov, put an end to the proliferation of heroes and triggered a drastic readjustment of propaganda material in the midst of a chaotic and traumatic upheaval. Heroes were turned into criminals overnight, textbooks, novels and film scripts were rewritten, and books were removed from shops and libraries as their authors disappeared in NKVD prisons or Gulag camps. While the impact of the terror on Soviet society has been assessed and analyzed by numerous historians before, Brandenberger claims that the extent of the purges in the ideological sphere was far greater than is normally acknowledged. The elimination of the most successful component of communist propaganda—or “the murder of the usable past” to use the author’s phrase—brought communist mobilization to a standstill and provoked an atmosphere of confusion, anxiety, and doubt.

As the last chapters of the book demonstrate, Soviet propaganda was unable to recover from the desolation caused by the terror before the onset of the war in 1941. The mobilization crisis continued despite the party’s efforts to reinvigorate the campaign for ideological indoctrination. Due to Stalin’s personal intervention, a new textbook on party history was published—the (in)famous *Short Course*—which enjoyed the support of the leadership and quickly became the primary material used in party education. The crystallization of a new historical narrative, after more than a decade of failed attempts, was complemented by the publication of an official biography of Stalin in 1939. Despite the successful

realization of these long overdue projects, the new line generally failed to revive popular enthusiasm for the cause. As Brandenberger shows, the new Bolshevik master narrative remained excessively complex, inaccessible and impersonal. Apart from the theme of patriotism, there was very little in the party propaganda that inspired Soviet citizens. The new heroes were stock figures that lacked any depth, and the *Short Course*, with its abstract, theoretical narrative, caused more frustration than intellectual excitement for the students (and teachers) in communist study circles. The elevation of complex, depersonalized texts to the center of propaganda, argues Brandenberger, led to the “ossification” of the official line “into a gray amalgam of stultifying theory, cultish hagiography, and dogmatic catechism” (p.215). Whereas the fabrication of the Soviet “usable past” had failed to produce the results expected by the regime, the war effort certainly provoked a remarkable degree of enthusiasm for the state.⁵ However, it was the patriotic (“national Bolshevik”) aspects of communist propaganda that struck a chord with the population, whereas the uniquely utopian claims of “Soviet” ideology were generally ignored. Although Bolshevik mass mobilization regained some of its momentum after 1945 through the integration of the Great Patriotic War into Stalinist mythology, abstract dogmatism—symbolized by the *Short Course*—continued to characterize Soviet propaganda until the collapse of the state in 1991.

Although the volume offers a detailed analysis of the functioning of the propaganda machine in the Stalinist Soviet Union, the heavy focus of the narrative on individual historians and the production of certain texts may seem somewhat daunting for the non-specialist. In a similar way, the lengthy descriptive paragraphs recounting the plots of Soviet feature films are somewhat excessive. The book would have benefitted from an attempt to balance the dominance of textual and cinematic propaganda with reflections on other visual means of mass persuasion—posters, paintings, etc.—even if there is already a substantial body of scholarly work on the visual aspects of Soviet indoctrination campaigns. A more elaborate engagement with historiographical and theoretical debates on the key concepts discussed in the book (propaganda, agency, reception, state, etc.) would also have contributed to the emergence of a more sophisticated narrative. While the author’s analysis of the malfunctioning state is illuminating, the story needs

5 The turn towards nationalist themes in Communist propaganda has been analysed by the same author in his previous monograph. See Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*. See also Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of the War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

to be interpreted in the broader context of (Russian) traditions of dysfunctional state-building. Chaotically managed states can exist for long periods of time and even demonstrate a certain degree of stability, despite inefficient bureaucracies and failed propaganda campaigns. To what extent was the chaotic administration of the Stalinist state unique in Russian history? Are there any historical parallels that would help us better understand the nature of failing states? However, these objections and unanswered questions notwithstanding, David Brandenberger's book, *Propaganda State in Crisis* will no doubt remain one of the seminal volumes on Soviet propaganda in the years to come.

Balázs Apor