

THE MECHANISMS THAT FAVOR THE UNFOLDING OF A CULT OF PERSONALITY.

Comparative Analysis: Stalin, Mussolini, & Mao

Hypothesis

The mechanisms that made possible the emergence of a cult of personality with Stalin and other leaders of the XXth century are no longer present, or not to the extent they were, in the XXIst century, hindering the appearance of a cult of personality today.

Justification for the topic

The topic chosen for this paper comes from the sociological inquiry of how the cult of personality came to be, taking Stalin as the original scenario to whom it unfolded and comparing it with two other leaders: Mussolini, and Mao. The leaders are from the XXth century, as one of the aims of the paper is to see if the cult can be unfolded nowadays as well or is something specific to a certain period in history. I believe we are seeing signs of what could be a cult of personality developing today with leaders like Trump or Xi-Jinping. Therefore, it is important and useful to look into the past and see how a cult is developed to recognize if the mechanisms that unfold it are present and could potentially lead to modern cults of personality.

Aims of the paper

Compare three examples of the cult of personality in different contexts; understand the influence or the lack of influence that the type of political system has on the emergence of a cult of personality; analyze the relationship/comparison between religion and politics in the appearance of the cult, and; inquire into the possibility of a cult of personality emerging today.

Theoretical framework

The paper integrates Max Weber's theory on charisma to analyze cults of personality, emphasizing the transformative authority of charismatic leaders. Bendix contrasts views on charisma's persistence in secular societies. Additionally, the

paper explores the concept of political religions coined by Eric Voegelin, defining it as a fervent adherence to secular ideologies akin to religious belief systems. And ultimately, explores the cult of personality, tracing its historical roots and defining it as a venerated system centered around a political leader.

Joseph Stalin

Stalin strategically aligned himself with Lenin's legacy, portraying himself as the heir to Lenin's transformative mission, allowing him to consolidate power despite lacking revolutionary charisma. He manufactured charisma through media manipulation, the co-option of Lenin's legacy and the creation of a cult of personality. Stalin's cult, akin to a political religion, fostered blind devotion and ritualistic worship, reshaping Soviet ideology around his leadership.

Benito Mussolini

Mussolini's rise to power unfolded amid post-war turmoil, capitalizing on workers' agitation and socialist fervor. He orchestrated the March on Rome, positioning himself as a destined leader to revive national greatness. Fascism, according to Emilio Gentile, represented a political religion, seeking to institutionalize revolutionary ideals and create a new civilization. Like Stalin's regime, fascism relied on collective rites and myths to sacralize the state and the leader. However, fascism's embrace of religion differed from socialism, as it demanding a cult-like devotion to the ideology and the leader.

Mao Zedong

Amidst the Chinese Civil War, Mao Zedong emerged as a leader. His appeal to peasants fueled a revolutionary movement, later supported by Stalin. Exploiting Japan's invasion, Mao established the People's Republic of China, framing himself as the savior of the people. Parallels with Stalin emerge: both leaders portrayed themselves as ordinary yet extraordinary figures with a transformative mission. But faced loss of charisma over time. Implementing a cult of personality, he substituted empirical success with ritualistic devotion. Maoism, enforced through fear, mirrored a political religion, with Mao as its godlike figure.

Conclusion

Amidst social turmoil of the 1920s and 1930s, charismatic leaders emerged in the cases of Stalin, Mussolini, and Mao, each offering a vision of revolutionary salvation with patriotic overtones. The predominant factor for their emergence was this revolutionary fervor created by a social and material crisis where basic needs are not being met, that seems to be tied to the necessity of a strong leader capable of leading such revolution. They capitalized on societal unrest, promising missions ranging from socialist utopia to fascist revival. These leaders manufactured charisma through media control, propaganda, and ritualistic displays, cultivating devotion akin to religious worship.

From the analysis, some shared mechanisms that gave rise to the cults of personality were extracted:

- A revolutionary fervor, consequence of a socio-materialist crisis
- A messianic leader
- A mission
- Manufactured charisma (manufactured charismatic authority)
- Control of the press
- Ritualistic elements
- Sacralization of the image of the leader

While historical factors fostered their rise, modern conditions, like populist trends and media manipulation, echo past mechanisms. Yet, democratic norms and public awareness serve as checks against totalitarian charismatic authority today. Thus, while the potential for cults of personality persists, contemporary safeguards mitigate their reach.

Bibliography

Bendix, Reinhard. 1967. "Reflections on Charismatic Leadership." *Asian survey* 7(6): 341–52. doi:10.2307/2642609.

Dikötter, Frank. 2022. *How to Be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Gentile, Emilio. 1990. "Fascism as Political Religion." *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25(2/3): 229–51.

Strong, Carol, and Matt Killingsworth. 2011. "Stalin the Charismatic Leader?: Explaining the 'Cult of Personality' as a Legitimation Technique." *Politics Religion & Ideology* 12(4): 391–411. doi:10.1080/21567689.2011.624410.

Voegelin, Eric. 1999. *Modernity without Restraint (CW5): Political Religions; The New Science of Politics; And Science, Politics and Gnosticism*. Columbia, SC: University of Missouri Press.

Weber, Max (S.N. Eisenstadt, Ed.). 1968. *On Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.