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THE MECHANISMS THAT FAVOR THE UNFOLDING OF A CULT OF PERSONALITY

Comparative Analysis: Stalin, Mussolini, &
Mao



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ABSTRACT

English

The paper examines the emergence of cults of personality around the political leaders Stalin, Mussolini, and Mao, exploring mechanisms and contextual factors. Despite differing political systems, all cases share a messianic leader; a revolutionary fervor resulting from a deep socio-materialist crisis, that shapes charismatic leaders; manufactured charismatic legitimation; the existence of a mission and the demand for devotion; ritualistic elements; and a political religion around the ideology of the regime. In modern times, similar conditions can exist, but democratic norms and media scrutiny may mitigate the unchecked rise of charismatic leaders.

Spanish

El artículo examina la aparición de cultos a la personalidad en torno a los líderes políticos Stalin, Mussolini y Mao, explorando mecanismos y factores contextuales. A pesar de los diferentes sistemas políticos, todos los casos comparten un líder mesiánico; un fervor revolucionario consecuente de una crisis socio-materialista que da forma a líderes carismáticos; una legitimación carismática fabricada; la existencia de una misión y la exigencia de devoción; elementos ritualistas; y una religión política en torno a la ideología del régimen. Hoy en día pueden darse condiciones similares, pero las normas democráticas y el escrutinio de los medios de comunicación pueden mitigar el ascenso descontrolado de los líderes carismáticos.

INTRODUCTION

Research question: What are the mechanisms that make possible the appearance of a cult of personality around a political leader?

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 of a specific period in history. Originally, I intended to also analyze Hafez Al-Asad, who is among a larger group of leaders attributed with a cult of personality, which

also includes Kim Il Sung and his successors, but due to the word limitation, it was impossible.

I believe we are seeing signs of what could be a cult of personality developing today with leaders like Trump, Xi-Jinping or Kim Jong Un. 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.

I wanted to take leaders from different countries with dissimilar political, economic, and social systems contexts to find out the similarities and prevailing catalysts of a cult of personality so that the mechanisms go further from being a “communist totalitarian regime” and the case of Stalin.

Aims of the paper:

First aim: Compare three examples of the cult of personality in different contexts to draw the prevailing factors between them to understand how the cult is built.

Second aim: Understand the influence or the lack of influence that the type of political system has on the emergence of a cult of personality.

Third aim: Analyze the relationship/comparison between religion and politics in the appearance and maintenance of a cult of personality. Is there a process of sacralization of politics? How does a secular movement end up treating its leader like a God? Can we apply the concept of political religion in all cases?

Fourth aim: Having seen how the different cults during the XXth century came to be, inquire into the possibility of a cult of personality emerging today.

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.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before getting deeper into the theoretical framework and the actual analysis, I would like to address the elephant in the room, the fact that I have chosen three leaders and they are all men. This didn't happen in a vacuum, but was influenced by the fact that the literature that I found and expect to base my analysis on has a clear tendency towards male leaders. This is not to say that concepts like charismatic legitimation or the cult of personality cannot be attributed to female leaders, but it is undeniable that history shows how traditionally, the role

of strong leaders has been discriminative of women. However, I intend not to inquire more deeply into this gender analysis, as I think it would need a research paper of its own.

The academic research into a leader's personality and what makes some capable of great change and extreme popularity, and others not, is quite extensive. However, there's common ground in taking Max Weber's mentioned work *On Charisma and Institution Building* (1968) as one of the first and most influential sociological research. Weber's conceptualization of charisma, charismatic authority, and the routinization of charisma will be the foundation for analyzing the emergence and maintenance of cults of personality.

Weber presents **charisma** as regards to different types of legitimation of authority, describing it as "a certain quality of an individual personality by which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities" (Weber, 1968, p.48). The recognition of charisma through personal devotion, coming either from genuine enthusiasm or despair, is essential for the charismatic (Weber, 1968). Then, charismatic legitimation imposes a duty or obligation to the followers, the most evident being the recognition of the leader. Weber further explains that the distinctive morality that arises from charismatic legitimation results in not having elaborate systems of rules and procedures to guide the performance of administrative functions, so the charismatic situation is the total antithesis of "routine" of organized social institutions and relations. Consequently, given the absolutistic moral fervor and revolutionary scorn of formal rules and procedures, charismatic authority is inherently transformative and destructive of institutions (Eisenstadt, 1968).

To continue, the concept of **charismatic authority** has to be understood. In contrast to bureaucratic structures that follow an ordered procedure of approval and dismissal, the charismatic leader will "seize the task that is adequate for him and demand obedience and a following by virtue of his mission" (Weber, 1968). He will be successful only if he finds them and maintains his recognition through action. However, the right of the leader to this mission and position is not given to him by the will of the people or through elections, but it is "the duty of those to whom he addresses his mission to recognize him as their charismatically qualified leader" (Weber, 1968, p.20).

Then, the charismatic leader will not deduce his authority from traditional customs or legal documents but will gain and maintain his power by proving himself, by succeeding in his mission.

The origin of charisma, as suggested by Weber, may stem from subjective experiences such as suffering, conflict, or enthusiasm, particularly in times of social change or distress.

Weber emphasizes the importance of understanding how charisma and charismatic authority interact with institutionalized order. He introduces the concept of **routinization of charisma**, where the charismatic personality reorganizes symbolic, cognitive, and institutional structures to ensure continuity beyond their presence. Weber coined the term "charisma of the office," signifying the transfer of charismatic characteristics to institutional reality. This highlights the enduring impact of charismatic leaders in shaping institutional structures beyond individual events or movements.

Moving on, Reinhard Bendix discusses the use of the term charisma to label some leaders of contemporary politics and relates it to Weber's theory, in his article *Reflections on Charismatic Leadership* (Bendix, 1967). The article presents two opposing views on the use of charisma nowadays, following two authors' opinions, Lowenstein and Shils.

Lowenstein (1965) suggests that charisma relies on supernatural qualities, which may decline in secular societies and only remain in areas of the world where supernatural powers and other beliefs are still convincing, like some parts of Africa and Asia. Shils (1965), however, believes all societies possess a charismatic element. How there are always leaders that satisfy the need to provide a comprehensive solution, or promise to do so, to existential doubts. Bendix notes the challenge of distinguishing charisma from conventional leadership and argues that charisma appears with the combination of absolute belief in the leader and his mission and popular enthusiasm led by hope or hopelessness, which require authority and obedience. But highlights the rarity of genuine charisma in secularized societies, where belief in divine gifts is difficult to sustain.

In the second place, I will define what a **cult of personality** is. As for the literature review from the section, I will look at the work of Anita Pisch in her book *The personality cult of Stalin, phenomenon of the personality cult: a historical perspective* (2016) and Robert Strunsky's article *The cult of personality* (1956).

The concept of a cult of personality has been studied by a large variety of academic perspectives, therefore, its definition varies slightly depending on the academic field. Despite the first use of the term being attributed to Nikita Krushchev's 1956 Secret Speech during the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party, the 'cult of the individual/personality' had already been uttered by Georgi Malenkov right after Stalin's death in 1953 (Pisch, 2016). In that context, a cult to someone was seen as anti-Marxist, as the glorification of an individual shifted the focus from the worker's fight for emancipation to a single man, seen as superior to the others.

It is important to highlight that the cult of Stalin was not an isolated event, but existed in the context of a wider network of cults that came before Stalin and during his time. Therefore, we cannot claim that the cult of Stalin was an exceptional phenomenon linked to a specific political regime at a particular point in history, but actually, just a part of a broader tradition that goes back to ancient times. We can trace back to Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, with leaders like Alexander the Great or Caesar Augustus.

Historian E. A. Rees presents the following definition of a leader cult, which can be used as a synonym for a personality cult:

“A leader cult is an established system of veneration of a political leader, to which all members of society are expected to subscribe, a system that is omnipresent and ubiquitous and one that is expected to persist indefinitely. It is thus a deliberately constructed and managed mechanism, which aims at the integration of the political system around the leader’s persona” (Rees, 2004, p.4).

Pisch presents some characteristics of the modern cult of personality: “the elevation and glorification of an individual, the use of symbolism and ritual, the fact that the image or persona of the leader is manufactured and heavily managed, the use of mass media for the dissemination of the cult, and parallels to religious phenomena” (Pisch, 2016, p.54).

The last section of the theoretical framework will be tackling the concept of **political religion**, coined by Eric Voegelin (1938). To fully grasp the concept and its implications for my paper I will take on Graeme Gill’s *The Stalin Cult as Political Religion* (2021) and Pisch’s previously mentioned contribution.

The term political religion was widely accepted and attributed to totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, with the rise of Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and communist Soviet Union. Benedetto Croce claimed that religious belief is central to human existence and that where it has been suppressed, people tend to make one of their own (Pisch, 2016). Therefore, we need an approximation of the definition of political religion. Gill describes it as:

“a secular ideology whose followers took it up with the enthusiasm and commitment normally seen in the adherents of religion. It usually had a transcendent leadership, a millennial vision of the promised future, and gave a real sense of belonging to its adherents; it created a community of believers” (Gill, 2021, p.1).

Pisch argues that the concept of political religions helps to understand the persistence of religious symbols and rituals in a system that is heavily committed to atheism. This brings us to the idea that personality cults are the secularized version of religious cults.

All of the concepts mentioned above have already been worked on and studied by themselves in academic research in the social sciences. The literature gap lies in the interconnection between these concepts and, at the same time, the implementation of this relationship in specific cases to see the similarities and differences between them.

I will be analyzing three cases of political leaders that have been attributed a cult of personality: Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, and Mao Zedong. Stalin will be the model case on which I will base my comparative analysis. I will, for each case, present a brief introduction of the leader and the socioeconomic context in which he arose, and then I will apply the concepts from the theoretical framework and explain how the cult was built.

JOSEPH STALIN

The Russian revolution and Lenin's legacy

Lenin did not officially assign someone as his successor, but he did choose Stalin for the position of General Secretary in 1922 to stop Trotsky, who was against Lenin's New Economic Policy (Dikötter, 2022). Despite his lacking abilities as a speaker, thanks to his position as General Secretary, he acquired more power. Stalin didn't have the aura of a revolutionary man and wasn't an exceptional theorist either.

However, he knew how to get the most out of his abilities and presented himself as a modest servant, a *praktik* devoted to the common good through action and not so much theory (Dikötter, 2022). Nevertheless, he refused public appearances and remained a mysterious figure, in contrast to the omnipresence the population felt of his persona.

Stalin came closer to Lenin until their paths separated in 1923. But Stalin knew Lenin would be useful as a figure, a martyr, after his death, so he pretended to be Lenin's most faithful pupil, despite Lenin writing in his testament for his dismissal (Dikötter, 2022). Not only did Stalin orchestrate that Lenin's body was to be presented in a permanent mausoleum, but he also wrote many conferences on Leninism that were later published in the papers, to consolidate his position as the keeper of Lenin's legacy.

Then, he created a group of henchmen who replaced any opposition to Stalin in the party. He charged against everyone that was against him, Trotsky among those, arguing that it was against Lenin's ideas. Even going to the extent of orchestrating his assassination in Mexico.

Manufactured charisma and the cult to Stalin

The debate does not reside on whether Stalin had or didn't have charisma, as it is evident that he lacked supernatural qualities. However, it is in the fact that he was portrayed as having these exceptional qualities and a transformative mission, which is of importance. And, indeed, Stalin and the cult around him, presented some of the weberian characteristics of charismatic legitimation. His mission was that of constructing a communist state, and even if this mission had already been claimed by Lenin before him, charisma can be passed on from a leader to his disciple. The precedent of Lenin is of remarkable importance, as it planted the seed of charismatic authority. But it was with Stalin that came the routinization of charisma, the establishment of the new order, and its institutionalization.

When applying Weber's theory of charismatic legitimation in the case of Stalin, it can be seen how there was an attempt to legitimize a leader and a certain order through the glorification of such, therefore proving to be artificial. The articulation of a cult of personality was used as a tool that attempted to create legitimation for a leader who lacked traditional or legal authority.

Carol Strong and Matt Killingsworth draw on the idea that the cult of personality was used as a legitimation technique for Stalin's authority and the regime. But add that this was done through the co-option of the charismatic authority generated by Lenin's revolutionary leadership. Therefore, they claim that charismatic authority does not have to be associated with just the charismatic leader, but can be reutilized to support some leaders who do not necessarily have charismatic attributes. This idea, however, is not contrary to Weber's thesis and Stalin's ruling can be analyzed through the charismatic authority lens.

The authors argue that in times of revolution, if the ideas are perpetuated into the post-transitional phase, the message becomes "dogma" because it has not been adapted to the changing context. Therefore, it loses its legitimacy because the post-transitional material interests have suffocated the initial excitement of radical change. The leader will try to maintain popular support by transforming charismatic authority so that it adapts to the new sociopolitical context.

Manufactured charismatic authority is derived from the Weberian idea that charismatic leadership can be transferred through artificial means, also understood as the artificial

routinization of charisma (Strong & Killingsworth, 2011). This manufactured legitimacy was done through mass communication¹ in the form of a cult of personality.

Stalin took advantage of the fact that Lenin did not fully consolidate his revolutionary appeal into an institutionalized authority, so he promised to endure the Bolshevik legacy. “At the most fundamental level, Stalin intended to transfer the levels of enthusiasm and support enjoyed by Lenin as an individual, directly to the system itself and then attribute this energy to his own leadership once fully consolidated” (Strong & Killingsworth, 2011, p. 401). Through media outlets like *Pravda*, Stalin was closely associated with Lenin, who was slowly fading in the background of posters and images, against the all-powerful Stalin.

It is difficult to be certain if a bond between the leader and the led exists in reality, especially in totalitarian regimes where terror suffocated any expression contrary to the ruling group. However, some indicators tell us that the charismatic bond was to some degree present during Stalin’s rule. This was exemplified by the case of Lev Kopelev², who explained what he felt after hearing Stalin.

The Stalin cult as a political religion

As seen above, charismatic legitimation has, undoubtedly, some religious overtones.

The main element through which we see the link between the cult of personality and political religion is through the relationship between the leader and the led. This relationship can imply irrational explanations, only accessible through religious and spiritual faith. Emotions like devotion, awe, reverence, blind faith, and surrender are also present in religious associations. In the charismatic authority model, the led surrender all independent and rational judgment to blindly follow the leader.

Another element of the cult that could be associated with religious cults is the attempt to create a community of believers that were committed to the mission, but most importantly to the leader’s word. Consequently, the creation of a liturgy around Stalin. This liturgy was

¹ “Newspapers, magazines and printed posters create an atmosphere in which the political leader seems ever-present and larger than life. Since the charismatic relationship functions best when the group feels a personal, trusting, infantilizing bond with the leader, the constant presence – in bright images – helps manufacture such leader-led relationships”. (Glassman, 1975, p.630)

² “. . . In my memory the pain and the horror of 1933 and 1937 had not grown cold. I remembered how. . . (Stalin) had deceived us, how he had lied to us about the past and the present. . . And nevertheless I believed him all over again, as did my comrades. I believed him more than at any time in the past. Because, perhaps, at the moment I first felt a spontaneous, emotional attachment to him. . . This belief and heart felt devotion could not easily be broken. It was not broken by many years of prisons and camps”. (Lev Kopelev,; transl. Gary Kern *The Education of a True Believer* (New York: Harper, 1980), p. 266–267.)

manufactured through pictures, posters, statues, and other forms of visual representation of Stalin, which were distributed massively. Stalin himself took part in the manufacturing of the liturgical cult, but it was mostly the efforts of the oligarchs who did not miss an opportunity to glorify the leader, just like the members of a religious organization would do with their god.

Contrary to Marxist and Bolshevik tenets, which claimed that religion and the church would have no place under communism and that the focus would be not on the individual but the proletariat as a group, Stalin and the Party progressively drew the focus around “the Great man” (Gill, 2021). “Like religious doctrine, Soviet ideology molded into its Stalinist form by the cult represented an intellectual framework designed to offer a worldview that its adherents could use to understand the world around them” (Gill, 2021, p.3).

It is also of importance to mention the ritualistic elements of the cult, imitating religious practices. Public performances were injected with the figure of Stalin, first, it was seen in institutional meetings, exemplified by the openings in Congress that transformed from a simple greeting of the speaker (Tenth Congress in 1921 delivered by Lenin) to the prolonged verbal praise of Stalin (Eighteen Congress in 1939 delivered by Stalin)³.

But then, the rituals moved to the wider population and reached every crevice of the nation. For instance, by shaping festivals that were incorporated into the national calendar. The most important being May Day and the anniversary of the revolution on 7 November⁴. “The civic rituals conducted by the regime were thereby reshaped into rituals about Stalin and his leadership” (Gill, 2021, p.6). These practices did not only take place in the public sphere but also the private one⁵. The cult around Stalin mirrored Christian religious elements, with a revered leader⁶ and devoted followers resembling apostles. It promised salvation through a

³ Lenin’s address in 1921 was preceded and followed by “Stormy applause” (Desyatyi 1963, pp. 21 and 40). Stalin’s 1939 address was preceded by the following:

“Stormy ovation, standing the congress meets comrade Stalin. In all languages of the peoples of the great Soviet Union ring out cries ‘Long live comrade Stalin!’, ‘Hooray’, ‘To the leader, teacher and friend, comrade Stalin–hooray!’, ‘Long live our dear, beloved Stalin!’ The ovation lasts for a long time, an expression of the unlimited love of the whole party for its leader. The stormy applause greeting the congress drowns out the bell of the chairman.” (XVIII s’ezd 1939, p. 3)

⁴ On both occasions, there would be a proliferation of images of Stalin and the only thing that could be heard was “Long live comrade Stalin!” (Gill, 2021, p.6).

⁵ Soviet houses used to have a “Red Corner” that would fill up with religious artifacts and icons of the Tsar, which were then substituted by images of Lenin during the revolution, and then of Stalin (Gill, 2021, p.6)

⁶ Kriukova’s ‘Glory to Stalin Shall be Eternal’ illustrates Stalin’s omnipresence:

“(Stalin) looks and looks but can’t get enough; He listens to everything with his keen ear; He sees everything with his keen gaze; He hears and sees how the people live; How the people live, how they work; He rewards everyone for good work”. (Cited in Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations In the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 217).

socialist state, akin to Christianity's promise of heavenly redemption. A written corpus, the *Diamat*, akin to the Bible, and treatment of dissenters as heretics underscored its religious-like nature (Gill, 2021).

BENITO MUSSOLINI

The rise of fascism and Mussolini as the chosen one

In many countries in Europe, the First World War left a deep feeling of anguish and despair which translated into workers' agitations. Taking influence from the Russian Revolution, many workers declared strikes and raised red flags in support of a socialist proletariat dictatorship. In 1919 Benito Mussolini launched what ought to be the Fascist Party but failed to get a single seat in Parliament after the elections. So he sought to get the power through other means. And drew inspiration from the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio who led the raid in Fiume, from whom Mussolini would adopt the concept of *Duce*, the speeches from the balcony, and the parades (Dikötter, 2022). After the fascists were treated as the private bodyguards of the government, the king appointed Mussolini as first minister. But still, he wanted to get approval from the people, so he orchestrated the fake March on Rome, a spectacular parade with the black shirts to the Parliament, where he would impose his power.

He presented himself as a simple man, but also the man sent by destiny to resurrect the greatness of the nation (Dikötter, 2022). He was also a highly capable reporter and a fantastic actor, which he made use of in his public appearances.

In contrast to Stalin, the Duce made numerous public appearances, which he understood as a political necessity. In order to be followed, he needed to be seen. He wasn't as much worried about theory and fascist ideology, as it was always vaguely described, but knew exactly how he would present himself to achieve his mission.

Mussolini the charismatic leader?

In the case of Mussolini, we can also identify a mission, the creation of a fascist civilization. Fascism is understood as a nationalist totalitarian ideology influenced and brought by revolution and in its origins, contradictory to socialism (Gentile, 2000). And he was the man

sent by destiny to bring the country to its greatness through fascism. However, we can see how in the end, the specific doctrine was never clearly theorized, and devotion to the fascist party was far more important than following a specific political program.

A strong bond between the leader and the led could be identified, especially since the Duce invested a lot of time in taking care of his image, for example, he always tried to answer as many of the letters sent to him as possible (Dikötter, 2022).

However, we come to the same conclusion as Stalin. It is impossible to know the extent of the genuineness of this bond, but it seems like the chances of the bond being real are higher in the beginning, during the emergence of a leader, where there are still no methods of coercion or an aura of terror if you go against him.

Parallel to his ascendancy to power, he built the cult around him as an addition to legitimize his persona. The Duce was the master of propaganda and the craftsman of his own image. For instance, the myth of the Rome March was a totally orchestrated event that would be later on used by Mussolini as a symbol of power and genuine devotion. But also through the destruction of the opposition and the mandatory ceremonies and rituals.

Fascism as a political religion and the promise of a new civilization

Fascism was different from other totalitarian regimes in the sense that it involved a revolutionary, patriotic mass movement that aimed at institutionalizing these revolutionary ideals into a single-Party regime (Gentile, 1990).

Gentile described fascism as a political religion because it had its own set of beliefs, dogmas and worldview, which it intended to put into practice through the creation of a “new civilization”. It used the creation of a political cult to sacralize the fascist State and the leader through celebrating collective rites on the transcendent events of its “sacred history”. Through these rites, a special community was created that perpetuated the existence of the myth of the united and fascist State, for instance, with the celebration of the “new birth” of the nation after the fascist revolution or the revocation of Roman greatness (Gentile, 2000). Therefore, “Mussolini's charismatic power was notably increased by the institutionalization of fascism as a religion. For Mussolini himself the myth surrounding il Duce constituted an increase in importance for the ritualistic dimension of the regime's policy towards the masses” (Gentile, 1990, p.236)

If compared to the Soviet Union, we can identify how both political regimes could be considered political religions. However, there are some distinctions. Socialism was an atheist ideology, whereas fascism didn't ban religion. Therefore, we can understand how, in the absence of religion, people turned to Stalin and the Party for some sense of faith and devotion, so Stalin filled this void and used it as a source of legitimacy. But in the case of Italy, fascism demanded a cult. The sacred mission of the ideology was to create a new community, it demanded devotion and blind faith in the revolution and this new civilization, it was like any other religion.

In terms of similarities, both regimes shared with Christianity the concept of missionaries or apostles, as fascists compared themselves to Christian missionaries lost among pagan tribes (Gentile, 1990). And the existence of the "other", in this case, the Bolsheviks. The fascists had the mission "to destroy the desecrators of the nation and purify the proletariat of its anti-patriotic myths and influences, as well as restore the cult of the nation" (Gentile, 1990, p. 234).

MAO ZEDONG

The Chinese Civil War and the rise of Mao as the savior of the people

The year 1924 marked the coalition between China's Communist Party and the Nationalist Party, both financed by Moscow, during the Chinese Civil War. In Mao Zedong's native province, Hunan, the peasants formed revolutionary associations following instructions from the Russians and carried out extremely violent campaigns where they took the power from the rich and instigated their own ruling. Mao was fascinated with what the peasants had done and after the nationalists broke relations with the Communist Party and the communists had to go underground, Mao abandoned urban life and went with the peasants, along with one thousand three hundred men, to seek a following that would help him conduct his mission. Through his own means, he established guerrilla warfare in some rural areas, which angered the Central Committee but caught the attention of Stalin. In 1931 Mao proclaimed a soviet republic in the region of Jiangxi, financed by the USSR. Moscow was facing threats from Japan and Germany and needed a unified communist front, so they began a campaign of glorification of Mao and was perceived as a *vozhd*, a great leader, a term only before attributed to Stalin and Lenin (Dikötter, 2022).

Finally, Mao took the opportunity of Japan's invasion of China and fought to make the nationalists disappear. Japan created the perfect conditions for Mao's success, as it

attenuated the opposition and created a political void and need for a strong leader. After a long and bloody military conquest, Mao succeeded and the nationalists fled to Taiwan, then, the Popular Republic of China was proclaimed, under Mao's command (Dikötter, 2022).

Mao as a charismatic leader

Mao's success in establishing a strong bond with the population was through his personal qualities. In his origins and mentality, he was close to the peasants, who were the majority of the population. He was the son of a poor peasant and was against the big landlords. Still, he had been the only one capable of organizing the peasant associations in Hunan and succeeding in a full-blown revolution. Mao symbolized the transformation of the country (Bendix, 1967). Therefore, we can draw parallels between Stalin and Mao, both were seen as simple men, but still very far from an ordinary person. By the same token, we can also identify a mission that would guide the followers and work as a justification for Mao's authority. As it happened in Russia, Mao's mission was that of a proletariat revolution. The mission was successful and it boosted the enthusiasm of the followers, who came to see Mao as the savior of the people.

However, once the revolution lost its initial passion and the population grew more aware of the power excesses of Mao and the violence with which he treated disloyal people and "non-believers", the problem of the loss of charisma arose. This was exemplified by the Rectification Movement of 1942 and the failure of the Great Leap Forward in 1962 which resulted in the Great Famine (Dikötter, 2022). And the way to solve such problems was the implementation of a cult of personality. Indeed, the veneration of Mao was already existent and the cult can be traced back to the 1930s, but it was brought to its peak in the 60s. Mao substituted the need for empirical evidence of the success of his mission with ritualistic and sacred objects that portrayed him as a God as the primary source of devotion.

An important element to take into account is the importance of *Mao's thought*. Through the publishing of a book that captured Mao's mission and his worldview, the bond between the leader and the led strengthened, but also worked as a way to justify his actions.

Sacralization of Mao's image and Maoism as a political religion

Similarities appear with the case of Stalin. Both were communist countries, which in theory, contradicted the existence of religion. But just as the Stalin cult drew parallels to Christianity, Maoism shared some elements with Chinese folk religion and a general liturgy around Mao built around the sacralization of his image.

The portrayal of Mao as a God was seen in almost all aspects of everyday life. In art pieces, he was painted using light techniques which seemed like he was illuminating the faces of those who faced him (Landsberger, 1996). His portrait was in every home, occupying the central space where religious objects of worship used to be placed. He was almost replacing the traditional Chinese Kitchen God. "Like that deity, Mao kept an eye on what went on in the house, noting the virtues and vices of the household, but unlike him, he did not need to report to a supreme god, already embodying that superior being himself" (Landsberger, 1996, p. 209).

Here it is important to emphasize the existence of an extensive written corpus which was key for the persistence of the regime. Through the publishing of the *Red Book* and later on, the short version of it, Mao kept Maoism in everyone's pocket. And drew similarities to the Bible or other sacred works.

In terms of political religion, Maoism can also be attributed as such. Under communism, religion was prosecuted and seen as a traditional force contradictory to revolutionary thought (Dikötter, 2022). But at the same time, as it happened in the Soviet Union, Mao's Thought was followed like a religion and Mao was seen as the god. This phenomenon intensified during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when the identification of the enemy of communism planted the seed for total control of the population. It wasn't a devotion that arose from genuine faith in the Party and Mao, but a terror-induced response to the fear of being associated as contrary to the leader and facing the repercussions.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the sociopolitical context in which such leaders arose, all three countries were characterized by social agitation and conflict. All three personalities became notable in the 1920s and 1930s, despite consolidating their power as national leaders some time later. The international context was marked by the First World War and its repercussions. Therefore, it is not surprising that a desire for revolution arose in some countries. This is the predominant prevailing factor for the three cases, a 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 a revolution. In the case of Stalin, the revolution had been led by Lenin, a charismatic leader, whose legacy was co-opted by Stalin as an attempt to routinize charisma and preserve the legitimation given to the previous leader. The Duce also promised a revolutionary vision that would lead to a new civilization, a fascist civilization. This happened in the context of social agitation because of the rise of socialism in Italy, so Mussolini promised to destroy the desecrators of the nation. In China, something similar was taking place, the country was divided in a Civil War between the nationalists and the communists. Mao promised to be the savior of the people and in times of conflict and hopelessness, also influenced by the Second World War, that was enough to build a following. In all three cases, the cult worked to create a sense of legitimacy for a newly established, post-revolutionary order. In the absence of a common ideology, authoritarian regimes will try to create a symbolic attachment to a Party and its leader by adopting a new political culture based on emotional bonds between the leader and the led (Martin, 2018). This demonstrates that cults of personality are not exclusive to communism; they can also emerge in other political systems like fascism. Despite these differences, all cases share a common factor: a context of social and material crisis that creates a revolutionary fervor that shapes leaders into heroes capable of manipulating narratives of salvation and renewal to maintain power.

The personal characteristics of the leader itself showed not to be the most important factor in the emergence of the cult. Mussolini craved public adoration, while Stalin shrouded himself in mystery. Initially restrained by glorification taboos, Stalin resorted to a cult of personality to validate his authority, diverging from Marxist principles. Similarly, Mao initially presented himself as a humble peasant but later embraced deification.

By introducing the concept of political religion, the aim was to understand which source of legitimation was better applied in each case. I have concluded that charismatic legitimation

and the cult of personality are preferably used to explain the source of legitimation to a certain leader. However, political religion is preferably used to explain the tool of legitimation of an ideology. Therefore, the attempt to legitimize fascism and Maoism is better understood when associated with political religions, whereas the attempt to legitimize the leaders was done through charismatic legitimation and the establishment of a cult of personality. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize the fact that charisma has religious overtones, and that both concepts cannot be separated from one another.

Finally, some factors appear in all three cases that work as predictors of charismatic authority. These are the existence of a mission and the manipulation of the devotion created by such sacred mission, which translates into a cult of personality. In all cases, the mission was tied to a specific political regime, destructive of previous institutions and highly nationalistic and patriotic. In the case of the Soviet Union, the mission was already embodied by Lenin, and Stalin promised to carry his legacy and establish a socialist society. The Duce promised to be the man sent by destiny to create a fascist civilization. And Mao promised the revolution of the proletariat.

The problem arises when devotion to charismatic authority is manufactured. That is, the artificial manipulation of a leader's legitimation. Through the control of the press, the making of a cult of personality, the elimination of any opposition, and the use of terror to make the population subordinate, it is impossible to ensure whether the devotion expressed was genuine or artificial.

As a result, we can identify the list of mechanisms that gave rise to the cult of personality in the three cases analyzed:

- **A revolutionary fervor, consequence of a socio-materialist crisis:** Such underlying socio-economic struggles make up fertile ground for a revolution that tends to personalize around a leader.
- **A messianic leader:** The existence of a leader that pledges a kind of promised land, demanding devotion and a following.
- **A mission:** Each leader presented themselves as the chosen one with a specific mission. That being a communist state, a fascist civilization, or a proletariat revolution.
- **Manufactured charisma (manufactured charismatic authority):** Their charisma was artificially magnified through propaganda, media control, and manipulation of public perception.

- **Control of the press:** The leaders controlled mass media to create an omnipresent image, reinforcing their authority and fostering a sense of devotion among the population.
- **Ritualistic elements:** Rituals and ceremonies were implemented to reinforce the cult of personality, such as public performances, festivals, and mandatory rituals glorifying the leader.
- **Sacralization of the image of the leader:** Through art, literature, and propaganda, the leaders' images were elevated to near-divine status, fostering worship.

While the sociopolitical contexts of Stalin, Mussolini, and Mao were characterized by social agitation and un-met materialist needs, similar conditions exist in modern times, albeit in different forms. The rise of populist leaders, advancements in media manipulation, and the proliferation of social media platforms have created fertile ground for the emergence of charismatic figures with cult-like followings.

However, the extent to which a cult of personality can emerge depends on various factors, including the political landscape, societal values, and the effectiveness of democratic institutions. While the mechanisms observed in historical cases may still be present, the level of public awareness, media scrutiny, secularization coming from modernization, and resistance to authoritarianism may serve as barriers to the unchecked rise of charismatic leaders.

In conclusion, the conditions for the emergence of a cult of personality may exist in modern politics, the most prominent factor being a 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 a revolution. But the resilience of democratic norms and institutions, along with heightened public awareness, can mitigate the likelihood of such phenomena occurring to the same extent as seen in the past.

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