

Thomas Kunze, Thomas Vogel **Oh, My Beloved Leader**

Contents

“Fold Your Little Hands, Bow Your Little Head,
Think of Him Who Gives Us Our Daily Bread!” 9
*Introduction by Thomas Kunze
and Thomas Vogel*

I. The Individuals **The Great Dictators**

Adolf Hitler –
Führer Cult under National Socialism 15
Thomas Grimm

Josef Stalin –
The “Radiant Sun of the Nations” 35
Markus Herbert Schmid

Mao Zedong –
A Dead Man, 22 Liters of Formaldehyde, and a Myth 53
Thomas Awe

Communist Imitators

Nicolae Ceaușescu –
“He’s the Honey of the World!” 73
Thomas Kunze

The Kim Dynasty –
“More Mother Than All the Mothers of the World” 93
Vera Lengsfeld

Enver Hoxha –
“Knee to Knee with the People” 109
Thomas Schrapel

Josip Broz Tito –
The Sun King on the Adriatic 125
Veronika Wengert

Worker-President Wilhelm Pieck,
Architect of Socialism Walter Ulbricht,
Hobby Hunter Erich Honecker –
Cult of Personality in the GDR 135
Thomas Grimm and Thomas Kunze

Populists and Cult Figures

Kemal Atatürk –
The “Father of the Turks” 151
René Sternberg

Evita Perón –
The Saint Who Musn’t Die 159
Christoph Wesemann

Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez –
The Eternal Revolutionary and His Pupil 171
Nikolaus Werz

Nelson Mandela –
The “Spear of the Nation” 189
Carsten Scharffetter

Nationalists, Military Careerists and Religious Leaders

Rafael Trujillo –
“El Jefe” (“The Boss”) 199
Nikolaus Werz

Ayatollah Khomeini –
The Islamic Revolutionary Leader 211
Arash Sarkohi

Muammar al-Gaddafi,
Zine El Abidine Ben Ali
and Husni Mubarak –
The Arab Despots 227
Andreas Jacobs

Saparmurat Niyazov (“Turkmenbashi”) –
New Gods in Central Asia 239
Hubert Kemper and Peter Boehm

Monarchs and Self-proclaimed Emperors

Emperor Wilhelm II –
“The Best Man That Prussia Ever Had” 253
Martin Sieg

Kate the Sacred Cow –
Cult of Personality in a Parliamentary
and Constitutional Monarchy 265
Alexander von Schönburg

Emperor Bokassa I –
The Napoleon of Africa 275
Reinhart Bindseil and Thomas Kunze

II. The Phenomenon

“Hooray, Mr. President” –
Cult of Personality, Mass Media, and Democracy 286
Thomas Vogel

Dead Eyes See Everything –
Leader Monuments under Socialism 296
Michael Schindhelm

Göring as a Harlequin and
the Emperor in Porcelain –
Art and Personality Cult in Germany 304
*Ingeborg Becker and
Stefan von Finckenstein*

The Drug of Power –
Why Cults of Personality Will Not Die Out 318
Thomas Kunze and Thomas Vogel

Appendix

Photo credits 327

Note on the editors and authors 329

“Hold Your Little Hands, Bow Your Little Head, Think of Him Who Gives Us Our Daily Bread!”

Introduction by Thomas Kunze and Thomas Vogel

Adolf Hitler was ever-present in 1930s and 1940s Germany. “Hold your little hands, bow your little head, think of him who gives us our daily bread. Adolf Hitler is his name, him we as our savior claim.” This was the motto used by the National Socialist People’s Welfare organization, the so-called Volkswohlfahrt, in running its Third Reich preschools. Josef Stalin was ubiquitous in the Soviet Union. There, too, a pronounced cult of personality was one of the classic instruments of power. Even today we are speechless when faced with the question of how millions of people could have fallen into downright hysterical mourning when the mass murderer Stalin died in March 1953.

Cults of personality are not a phenomenon of modernity, they are not limited to communist systems, and they even exist in democracies. They existed among the Pharaohs of Egypt as well as under Caesar and the other emperors of Rome. For as long as leaders have been around, there have always been the cult-like and glorifying worship and veneration of them. The manipulative techniques and ceremonial practices of modern-day cults of personality are not substantially different from those of previous centuries and millennia. Only the means and methods have changed.

At first it was mostly art that served as an instrument of heroization and mystification – in heroic sculptures, for instance, and in paintings with self-assured and victorious poses. Poetry extolled the almighty power and strength of a leader. The advent of printing and – centuries later – new media such as radio, television and eventually the Internet merely

brought technical improvements to this form of rule based on fascination, manipulation and the power of emotions.

Cult-like leader worship over a sustained period was especially pronounced in authoritarian and dictatorial systems of more recent history. The fascist and communist dictatorships of the twentieth century, in particular, were an ideological breeding ground for cults around individual leadership figures. Cults of personality flourished on nearly every continent during the Cold War. The present volume takes into account this widespread geographical distribution, as well as the fact that even today the cultish veneration of heads of state can be found in some parts of the world. In Turkmenistan the rule of now deceased “Turkmenbashi” took on grotesque forms. In Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, a gilded statue of him would rotate to always face the sun. No less bizarre and somewhat threatening is the decades-long rule of the Kim family in North Korea, currently being exercised by “outstanding leader” Kim Jong-un. It is still too early to predict if the personality cult is a dying breed. Fundamentalist Islam is gradually becoming a third totalitarian threat, and totalitarian states are especially prone to ruler cults. No one knows who will succeed toppled Arab potentates such as Hosni Mubarak, Ben Ali or Muammar al-Gaddafi.

It is rare that the protagonists of personality cults take the political stage with empty hands. They usually have something to offer, forging states like Mao did in China, uniting nationalities like Tito in Yugoslavia, holding out dreams of social equality like the Peróns in Argentina, or instrumentalizing religious feelings like the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. Whether by chance or necessity, whether earned or obtained by force or pretense – cults of personality have been an aspect of human behavior ever since the Stone Age, when prehistoric hordes felt the need to choose a leader to improve the organization of their collective affairs. The authority that leaders exude has an influence on the behavior of their followers in any social system. But it is usually a lack of democratic legitimacy that causes

state leaders to turn to a cult of personality. It is like a drug, one that not only helps them consolidate power but also satisfies personal desires. Clan interests and self-aggrandizement are often accompanying motives influencing their political behavior. Rafael Trujillo (Dominican Republic) is a case in point, but also Jean-Bédél Bokassa, who crowned himself the Emperor of Central Africa. And of course there are those who try to profit by jumping on the bandwagon. Lackeys serve their leaders with total obedience in order to bask in the glow of power, poets write rhymes to please them, musicians compose hymns to praise them, and architects design palaces to carve the glory of their leaders in stone. Cults of personality not only need leaders but followers, too.

“All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others,” it says on the barn wall in Orwell's famous novel *Animal Farm*, penned in 1945. This ironic comment on human behavior in relation to power is also a warning about how quickly power can corrupt human beings, and how unrestrained power can turn into megalomania and cruelty. The present book is an investigation of personality cults in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It takes a historical look at the most important and enigmatic representatives of this political phenomenon, and poses a number of questions. How, for example, is it possible that millions of people submit to a regime of one-man rule and follow this person to the point of destruction, as happened with Hitler, or hysterically mourn his loss when he dies, as in the case of Stalin? What kind of personalities can form a cult around themselves to the point of sheer absurdity? How can this paradoxical mixture of charisma, veneration and submission, offset by contempt, brutality and megalomania, be explained? Where does the sense of mission of these leadership figures come from? What mechanisms underlie their self-enactment? Do they really believe in the love of their people and their historical mission, or is it merely the habit-forming pleasure of power rituals? Why do charismatic figures such as Fidel Castro – who gave Cubans their sense of personal dignity back in the early days of his

rule – stay in power well beyond their prime? The answers to these questions are provided by authors of various stripes: historians, politicians, journalists and diplomats. They show how cults of personality emerge, what forms they can take, and which automatisms and mechanisms are at work when power becomes absolute.

Thomas Kunze, Thomas Vogel (Tashkent, Zurich)

Nicolae Ceaușescu

* 26 January 1918 in Scornicești

† 25 December 1989 in Târgoviște (executed)

1965 (until his death): General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party

1974 (until his death): President of the Socialist Republic of Romania

After taking power, Ceaușescu improved socialist Romania's ties to the West and ushered in a period of liberalization. As of the mid-1970s, however, Romania developed into a neo-Stalinist stronghold, becoming one of the most repressive regimes in the Eastern bloc. The 1980s witnessed the de facto economic collapse of the country. Ceaușescu built a cult of personality around himself modeled after Stalin, Mao and Kim Il-sung. In the wake of the revolution of 1989, Ceaușescu was the only leader in the Eastern bloc to be sentenced to death by court martial and executed.

The Heroic Man

He, New Man, devotion to the land

He, Ceaușescu, heros

He, firm as iron through work, love and struggle

Hero and legend for the land.

(Marcu Emilian)

Nicolae Ceaușescu – “He’s the Honey of the World!”

Thomas Kunze

Dearly beloved and esteemed Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu! In the name of millions of Pioneers and Falcons of our Fatherland, as well as of all the children of Romania, we, the participants in the National Assembly of Pioneers, would like to extend to you from the bottom of our hearts – with profound respect and deep admiration – the most exquisite feelings of sincere love and universal appreciation, which the young progeny of our fatherland bear witness to before you, dearest Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu, beloved and esteemed leader of our nation, hero among the heroes of our people, judicious steerer of the new destiny of Romania. We thank you for the wonderful living conditions, for the work and schooling that are guaranteed to us, for your attention and fatherly care with which you permanently watch over our manifold growth and progress, in order, as a human being, to live up to the demands of the true revolutionary Communist.

It was in 1987 that the youth organization of socialist Romania delivered this letter of allegiance to head of state and Communist Party leader Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918–1989). Romania, together with Albania, was the poorhouse of Europe at the time. Ceaușescu, in power since 1965, had run his country into the ground economically. The cult of personality around him had reached proportions that were unique even for communist dictatorships. The example of Nicolae Ceaușescu shows how a man can rise to the highest offices of state almost by accident, and how little such an ascent necessarily has to do with his education and training. And yet he did possess an exceptional talent for ruling. Once in a position of power,

the stigma of a deficient education slowly receded into the background. Ceaușescu proved to be a natural in power struggles, and mastered the rules of totalitarian leadership.

The most important thing to him was to maintain a central ideological fiction superimposed on reality. Like all communist leaders, he used an arbitrary interpretation of Marxism to undergird his absolute monopoly on power with a specious scientific claim. Socialist democracy and dictatorship of the proletariat were the catchwords. He had learned this strict ideological linkage from his mentor Gheorghiu-Dej. As in all totalitarian states, in Romania too this process was accompanied by demagogical mass propaganda, psychological and physical terror, application of the Führer principle, enforced conformity and the cooptation of all areas of society, and the continuous strengthening of the secret police. Lackeys and opportunists rallied around their leader following a kind of inner logic. While it is true that behavior like this can be found in every kind of social system, totalitarian states are particularly notorious for it.

Nicolae Ceaușescu was born in 1918 in a village in Wallachia and grew up in relative poverty. Tending his sheep was the only pastime he knew. Four years at the local village school was the extent of his education, something he would perceive as a deficit all his life. Later, in socialist Romania, he fabricated legends about his past. “He was as fresh as dew,” a farmer from Scornicești, the Ceaușescus’ native village, gushed about the young Nicolae. His teachers suddenly recalled a “brilliant mathematician” and “inquisitive mind” and doctored up the records of a man who now claimed to be almighty and had himself depicted as the greatest Romanian of all times.

His thirst for glory seemed to be the product of a dismal childhood. The young boy was said to be a loner, with a tendency to lose his temper. His uncle portrayed him as extremely nervous, irascible and capricious: “No one liked this boy – and he liked no one

either, didn't try to approach anyone." Nicolae stuttered too. This speech impediment might have been the reason why he hardly had any friends in the village.

And his inferiority complex might explain why, as of 1968, all of his public addresses were immortalized in deluxe editions soon to fill up yards of shelf space in the country's libraries. His speech writers were industrious. By 1989 the collected works of Ceaușescu totaled 33 volumes.

After four years of primary school, the village boy apprenticed with a shoemaker. His master had close ties to the illegal communist movement, and used the young boy as a secret messenger – suddenly a source of excitement in the young boy's otherwise dull and lonely life. For the adolescent Ceaușescu, ties to the communist movement even had an inspirational quality. Not because he was interested in its ideas – highly unlikely for a twelve-year-old – but because it was the first time in his life that he felt he'd been entrusted with important tasks. In 1936, when he was eighteen years old, he was held for two years in the notorious prison of Doftana. It was there that he met his political mentor, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, who would later become the first head of state of communist Romania. The imposing and self-confident Gheorghiu-Dej looked after the diminutive, somewhat lost but ambitious young man from the countryside and furthered his political career. By the time the Second World War broke out in 1939, Gheorghiu-Dej's pupil had already become the secretary of the Bucharest Municipal Committee of the Union of Communist Youth. Romania had cast its lot on the side of Hitler Germany. Like many other communists, Ceaușescu was arrested multiple times and once, in 1943, detained for a longer period at Târgu Jiu concentration camp. The turning point for him came in 1944, when Soviet troops reached Romanian territory and routed the forces of military dictator Ion Antonescu, and a successful coup d'état prompted Romanian generals to turn their weapons against their former ally.

The Oltenian peasant's son and trained shoemaker, meanwhile 26 years old, had his first real taste of lawful power as general secretary of the Union of Communist Youth. His intellectual horizons were marked by the Stalin era. It was a time when the functionaries just returning from Soviet emigration were calling the shots in the Romanian Communist Party. With Gheorghiu-Dej's protection, the youth functionary Ceaușescu was elected to the Central Committee, soon held various deputy minister posts, and finally, in the early 1950s, had gained his first title of rank: Lieutenant-General of the Infantry, in his capacity as deputy minister of defense.

There is one thing the young Ceaușescu failed to learn in this surely rather heady period of his life: the rules of democracy. His subordinates from back then describe him as crude, arrogant and averse to any criticism. Ever since then unequivocal obedience was for him the basis of exercising power.

In 1955, Ceaușescu rose to the Politburo, the real power center of the Party. As secretary of organizational affairs he was directly involved in staffing decisions. It was from this key position that ten years later, in 1965, he would make his bid for the party leadership. Gheorghiu-Dej had passed away. And the old guard, at odds over who to select as his successor, thought the 47-year-old acolyte of the deceased leader was a suitably weak compromise candidate.

They proved to be mistaken. The first thing the new General Secretary did was to make himself no. 1 in the party membership book. Little by little he accumulated a wealth of offices in typical Stalinist fashion. In 1967 he had himself elected Chairman of the State Council; in 1969 he became Commander in Chief of the Army and Chairman of the Defense Council; in 1973 he created the Supreme Council for Economic and Social Development in Romania, which he himself felt competent to run; and in 1974 he seized the crown. The Grand National Assembly, the onetime supreme legislative body of Romania now reduced to

a sham-parliament, voted on March 28, 1974 to “unanimously elect Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu, General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party – the outstanding leader of Party and State, the proven revolutionary and patriot, a figure of singular greatness in international politics – to the function of President of the Socialist Republic of Romania.” He also had himself named Conducător, or “Leader,” following the example of Ion Antonescu, the profascist prime minister of the 1940s. Thus revered, he henceforth appeared at official occasions with a scarf in the national colors and a golden scepter – a communist leader with all the insignia of feudal power. Ceaușescu’s election as president finally paved the way for a cult of personality which soon developed its own dynamic and led, in the 1980s, to the forced schizophrenic behavior of an entire nation.