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The cult of personality as an important feature of totalitarian propaganda

Abstract: The totalitarian system, in contrast to the system of representative democracy (based on impersonal procedures), is strongly related to the position of the leader. Therefore, the cult of the individual not only serves to consolidate the power of a totalitarian leader, but also contributes to the legitimacy of the entire political system. The article presents the propagation and creation of the cult of the individual around three leaders of totalitarian states: Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler.

Key words: propaganda, totalitarianism, individual worship, Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler

1. Introduction

Nowadays a great increase of right-wing (or even antidemocratic) values and political views can be observed in some European countries. Certainly, this can be connected with the enormous flow of migrants to Europe, especially in 2015. Many surveys of political opinion show the growing position of such parties as German AFD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) and *Fronte Nationale* in France. In the latest opinion poll in Germany (carried out in the beginning of May 2016), AFD had gained as much as 15% of support. Just a few weeks ago (at the end of April 2016), in the first round of the presidential elections in Austria, the best results were obtained by the candidates who openly presented antidemocratic and nationalistic values. Nevertheless, the growth of anti-migrant attitudes can also be observed in some countries which are not ‘in the first line of the battle,’ like Poland. However, there is still a long way from such political views to the victory of fascist (or at least neo-fascist) parties in any European country. But you never know, as Lisa Minelli said to Michael York in the final scene of the famous movie *Cabaret* (however in a rather non-political context).

In this article the cult of personality that emerged and developed in three totalitarian states of interwar Europe will be analyzed, namely Italian fascism, German nazism and Soviet communism. All three totalitarian dictators, i.e. Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin developed the cult of personality on a really enormous scale. Nevertheless, this cult of personality served not only to strengthen their position within the totalitarian structure of power but also formed an important part of totalitarian propaganda. That is what this article is about. In my most recent book I present and analyze the question of the mutual relationship between propaganda and terror in the cases of some totalitarian regimes (Żyromski, 2015)

Undoubtedly, taking into consideration the three above-mentioned totalitarian states (Italy, the Third Reich and the Soviet Union) the greatest level of repression and terror

can be observed in the case of Stalinist Soviet Union. No one could be certain of their social and political position or even their lives, especially during the Great Terror of 1937–1938. Therefore, Stalinist propaganda was not especially sophisticated because the terror was more than sufficient to keep the population of the Soviet Union out of politics and to maintain the dominant position of the communist party and of its leader (*vohzd*), Joseph Stalin. Nevertheless, the cult of Stalin reached quite enormous proportions. On the other hand, the level of repression in Italy during the reign of Mussolini certainly was not as big as in the two other totalitarian states. Consequently, both the fascist propaganda and the cult of Mussolini (the *Duce*) were more developed and it was even in concordance with some important features of the Italian society. In my opinion, the German Third Reich took an intermediate position in the relation between propaganda and terror. Undoubtedly, the terror was terrible in Nazi Germany but this terror and repression was directed (before the outbreak of the Second World War) mainly against some groups of German society like Jews or disabled people. Nevertheless, also in the Third Reich, the cult of a totalitarian leader (the *Führer*) and dictator (Adolf Hitler) reached an enormous level and some of its manifestations were very strange, indeed. It is interesting that the position of a totalitarian dictator, and especially the cult of personality was, at it seems, sometimes even greater than the level of propaganda itself, as was the case in fascist Italy.

Certainly, the cult of personality cannot be only limited to the totalitarian regimes. It is not even the invention of modern civilization and political culture. For instance, some great political leaders of antiquity, like the first Roman emperor Augustus developed quite a sophisticated cult of personality (Zanker, 1999). The figure of Octavianus Augustus is especially important in this context because the position of this founder of Principate (the early Roman Empire) was used as a model by Benito Mussolini in building his own political position and his own cult of personality. Nevertheless, the first modern political personality cult emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century when Napoleon III received the crown in France in 1851. Jan Plamper, in the introduction to his very famous book on the Stalin cult, enumerated five features of modern political personality cults (Plamper, 2012, XVII). Before the modern era some personality cults were directed only to the elite of the given society but now such political personality cults are ‘children of mass politics’ because they are directed to the whole society. The second feature is the use of mass media on an enormous scale. Additionally, the modern political personality cults can be observed only in closed societies, they are children of a secular age and they can be described as an exclusively “patricentric phenomenon” (Plamper, 2012, XVIII). Two years after the publication by Plamper, Daniel Leese presented three more features of modern political personality cults. It should be remembered that these three features analyzed by Leese, in addition to Plamper’s five features, can be valid only in case of party dictatorships that developed in Europe in the twentieth century. However, all three political systems (fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union) can best be presented as such party dictatorships. Daniel Leese described his three features of modern political personality cults as follows: “firstly, (they) are often deeply imbued with nationalism and tend to identify the fate of the nation with the fate of the party and its current leader [...] Secondly, the emergence of leader cults is strongly encouraged through the lack of rules governing political ascent and survival [...] Thirdly, party dicta-

tors mostly rely on mass festivals and rituals to stage participation and approval” (Leese, 2014, p. 342).

Undoubtedly, both the introduction and later on the development of different cults of personality served to legitimize the totalitarian regime of power. Certainly, the notion of legitimation of political power is not easy to analyze. As David Beetham pointed out, the question of legitimation of political power has to be presented in three different dimensions (more or less closely interconnected with one another): the legitimate path to power, the use of power in concordance with some political and social preferences of the given society and in concordance with some important legal basis of power (Beetham, 1991, 2001). The question of the legitimation of political power can best be presented in terms of the political process. The given social and political order cannot be legitimate forever. For instance, the communist power in Eastern Europe (for instance in Poland) was not gained in a legitimate process because it was simply enforced by the Soviet Red Army. Nevertheless, thanks to the process of rebuilding the economy and transforming the social structure after the terrible Second World War, even this communist (or, afterwards, socialist) power gained some level of social support. Of course, it was impossible to measure, or even estimate, this level of support because there were no public opinion polls. Yet the true nostalgia for the communist (or rather socialist) times testifies that this power received some legitimacy. The situation is quite the opposite in the case of fascist Italy and, even more, in the case of Nazi Germany. Although the fascists gained their power in an illegitimate way (the march of the so-called ‘black shirts’ on Rome in 1922), the social support for fascist power persisted practically until the end of the regime in July 1943. On the other hand, the Nazis received power (almost) in a democratic and legitimate way, thanks to gaining first good and afterwards even better results in parliamentary elections. Therefore, the Third Reich enjoyed significant social support practically until the military disaster in Stalingrad (February 1943). However, even after Stalingrad, the Nazi power did not collapse suddenly (like the fascist system in Italy) and lasted until the suicide of Adolf Hitler. Thus, the political regime can not only gain but also lose its political legitimacy. “The Communist, Nazi and Fascist regimes of the twentieth century sought to legitimize themselves through a combination of appeals to tradition, legal right and charisma. What is unique and striking about them is the way in which they sought to construct legitimacy, by investing ideas, events, institutions, particular offices and personalities with charisma” (Rees, 2004, p. 3).

2. The cult of personality in the Soviet Union – Lenin and Stalin

In post-revolutionary Russia (and later in the whole of the Soviet Union), Lenin – the leader of the communist revolution of 1917 – became a natural candidate for the political personality cult. Nina Tumarkin devoted a whole book to the question of Lenin’s personality cult. “The cult of Lenin’s memory that dominated Communist Party ritual in the 1920s [...] The cult was built gradually during Lenin’s lifetime and just after his death by people at all levels of Soviet political life” (Tumarkin, 1997, XVII). Nevertheless, as a kind of polemics, Allan Todd pointed out afterwards that, in his opinion, during the lifetime of Lenin “(t)here was no leadership or personality cult [...] after his death

a ‘cult of Lenin’ was created by Stalin” (Todd, 2002, p. 42). But there is significant proof that the personality cult of Lenin already developed during the life of the leader of the communist revolution. As early as 1918, some places were named after Lenin (Davies, Harris, 2014, p. 141). The most important representation of Lenin’s personality cult was connected with his fiftieth birthday in 1920; by the way, the introduction of Stalin’s personality cult was also connected with the fiftieth birthday of the dictator celebrated in 1929 (although Stalin was actually born in 1878 and not in 1879). In the case of Lenin, “Agitprop used his birthday to launch an agitational campaign around Lenin [...] On April 23, 1920, the central press was filled with greetings, paeans, and poems honoring Lenin’s fiftieth birthday. *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* devoted almost all their news coverage to the event and [...] published articles praising Lenin written by leading members of the party” (Tumarkin, 1997, p. 97). Some articles had been written by such Bolsheviks as Trotsky, Zinoviev, Stalin or Bukharin. Moreover, Agitprop published two popular biographies of Lenin – one book (by V. I. Nevsky) was published in as many as 200,000 copies. There were also some posters prepared which stressed the theme of Lenin’s link with the people (*narod*). But the “press campaign of April 23, 1920, which deliberately stressed the emotional bonding between Lenin and the people” (Tumarkin, 1997, p. 100) was especially important. Besides, “in 1920 Lenin was not only the head of the first state to call itself socialist, but was also the acknowledged leader of the international communist movement” (Tumarkin, 1997, p. 99).

As in the case of other totalitarian dictators analyzed in this article, the process of creating personality cult around Lenin served not only to strengthen his personal position but also (or perhaps primarily) aimed to legitimate the power of communists who gained power in an illegitimate way (thanks to the revolution against the existing order). “The evident purpose of this press campaign was to strengthen the perceived legitimacy of the party’s authority by concentrating it in the titanic talent and personal heroism of its idealized ruler. Lenin’s supporters self-consciously equated him with the party and its policies [...] They were turning him into a mythical figure [...] by celebrating the anniversary of his birth as a holiday, they were making him a focus of party rituals” (Tumarkin, 1997, p. 98).

Similar to Stalin, Lenin also had a rather ambivalent position and attitude toward the cult of personality. “Lenin did hate to hear himself lauded in odes and speeches, disliked being the recipient of flattery and extravagant gifts, and avoided photographers, painters and sycophants [...] He was supremely self-confident and had no need of such vanities. What he sought throughout his life was the means to impose his will on a populace” (Tumarkin, 1997, pp. 24–25). During the above-mentioned fiftieth anniversary of his birth (organized by the Moscow party committee), Lenin entered the celebration only after some initial speeches “suggesting that in future the party should find more appropriate ways to mark anniversaries” (Davies, Harris, 2014, p. 138). On the other hand, Hitler, and especially Mussolini, did not have such problems with the cult of personality.

When in 1922 Lenin fell ill, a complete propaganda apparatus was created in order to perpetuate his authority by establishing the first institutions of the Lenin cult. In the very next year, Lenin survived a major stroke (March 9, 1923) and, as early as April 1923, the Moscow party organization decided to establish the Lenin Institute in Moscow (with Kamieniev at its head). Even during Lenin’s lifetime his personality cult was based

mainly on visual propaganda. During the revolution of 1917 about half the population was formed by illiterate people. Therefore, such posters were important, cartoons and other “propaganda trains and ships, which carried the message to the far-flung corners of the new state” (Todd, 2002, p. 42). Just after the death of Lenin the discussion began to build his mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow. “The Lenin Mausoleum combined elements of the Russian practice of venerating tsars and saints. It was designed as an awe-inspiring shrine and place of pilgrimage, situated at the very heart of the country’s capital” (Leader, 2004, p. 6).

Undoubtedly, the Lenin cult fully developed after his death. This cult of personality was used deliberately to strengthen the position of other leading people in the Soviet Union (like Trotsky and later Stalin) and to legitimize the power of the communist party. “A regime that derives its legitimacy from a single ruler risks instability upon his death. But if after death that ruler becomes the object of a cult [...] then that cult can serve as a stabilizing force. This is precisely what happened with Lenin. The cult established nationwide upon his death was based on one theme: Lenin lives! [...] Many statements stressed the immortality of Lenin’s cause” (Tumarkin, 1997, p. 165). The cult of Lenin even transformed to become a kind of secular religion. As Nina Tumarkin wrote, perhaps in too poetic a mood: “the full-blown cult of Lenin was an organized system of rites and symbols whose collective function was to arouse in the cult’s participants and spectators the reverential mood necessary to create an emotional bond between them and the party personified by Lenin. Stylized portraits and busts of Lenin were its icons, his idealized biography its gospel, and Leninism its sacred writings. Lenin Corners were local shrines [...] and its central shrine was the mausoleum on Red Square” (Tumarkin, 1997, pp. 2–3).

After the long struggle for power, the fiftieth anniversary of Stalin’s birth in 1929 (although he was born in 1878) marked not only the beginning of his dictatorial position in the Soviet Union but started the personality cult of Stalin on a really enormous scale. “Stalin’s fiftieth birthday in December 1929 saw the launch of a personality cult to rival Lenin’s” (Merridale, 1990, p. 23). Interestingly, Stalin celebrated only his round birthdays (50, 60 and 70), while Hitler celebrated his birthdays every year and Mussolini simply avoided any single notice of his age, birthdays or health problems. “The cult began on 21 December 1929, when on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday Stalin was glorified on a broad scale in various media – first and foremost in central newspapers like *Pravda*” (Plamper, 2012, XIV). As in the case of Lenin, also on the occasion of Stalin’s birthday as many as eight pages of *Pravda* “were filled with laudatory articles by fellow Party bosses” (Plamper, 2012, p. 29).

However, a significant break in Stalin’s personality cult could be observed soon. In Plamper’s opinion, this break lasted about three and half years and was connected either with the terrible results of the forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture in 1931–1932 or with the process of the concentrating of power in Stalin’s hands. Nevertheless, in 1929, Stalin gained his practically dictatorial position, so the first factor seems to me to be more important.

Similar to the cult of Lenin, “the Stalin cult was an overwhelmingly visual phenomenon [...] 1926 census had revealed an illiteracy rate of 34.6% for males and 63.3% for females” (Plamper, 2012, XV). At first, there emerged some posters, oil paintings and

photographs but in 1937 the movie *Lenin in October* appeared in cinemas with Mikhail Romm as Stalin. Undoubtedly, “in the collective imagination Stalin had become indistinguishable from his portrait. Stalin’s portraits had saturated Soviet space and through portraits Soviet citizens formed an image of their omnipresent leader” (Plamper, 2012, XIII). Jan Plamper introduced the notion of ‘cult products’ which in practice dominated the Soviet space, especially in towns. The Stalin portraits, posters, drawings, statues, busts, films, plays, poems, and songs were simply everywhere. There was no escape from these ‘cult products.’ Similar to portraits of Lenin, Stalin’s portraits were hung in the so-called ‘red corners’ in town flats and village houses of Soviet citizens. It is interesting that in a similar way as sacred icons before the October Revolution, these portraits had to be covered in times of family quarrels. Certainly Stalin was fully aware of the significance of the visual side of his personality cult because he personally and deliberately analyzed every picture before its publication. In sharp contrast with the Third Reich (or even Italy during the dictatorship of Mussolini), in the Soviet Union “there never was anything like a ‘Stalin cult ministry’” (Plamper, 2012, XX).

Victoria E. Bonnell analyzed Soviet political posters under Lenin and Stalin and she observed the significant change in their mutual presentation. On the picture painted in 1925 Stalin was depicted as the best pupil or even closest collaborator of Lenin. “Posters graphically depicted the relationship between the two men creating a visual subtext that implied a connection between Stalin’s sacred aura and his association with Lenin” (Bonnell, 1999, p. 156). Only in the time of the terrible forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture in 1931, Lenin invariably took precedence visually. This changed “on May Day 1932, when identically sized full-face portraits of Lenin and Stalin hung in Moscow’s Pushkin Square. It was not long before some artists began to accentuate Stalin’s image, at the expense of Lenin’s” (Bonnell, 1999, p. 157). Starting in 1933, Stalin was presented on posters and pictures simply as the living genius. “A 1936 poster with a portrait of Stalin appeared in an edition of 250,000” (Bonnell, 1999, p. 160). Also in the mid-1930s, Stalin began appearing in connection with some successes of Soviet industry, sport or even with some expeditions and flights of Arctic explorers and aviators. Similar to Stalin, Mussolini also presented himself as the embodiment of modernity and high technique. At that time we can observe “Stalin’s automatic identification with the successes of Soviet economic and social policy, and by the growing ritualization of greetings, pledges and tributes to the leader. By the late 1930s, glorification of his wisdom, strength and courage, his unique contribution to the development of Marxism–Leninism, and his historic achievement in building socialism in the USSR was mandatory in all spheres of public life” (Barber, 1993, p. 38).

Whereas the celebrations of Stalin’s sixtieth birthday occurred in December of 1939, during the Second World War (however for Russians the war started in earnest on June 22, 1941), the seventieth birthday of the dictator took place after the war, in 1949. “A tremendous manifestation of the ideological front and of support for the Soviet Union occurred with the celebration of Stalin’s seventieth birthday in December 1949” (Aman, 1992, p. 28). In contrast to celebrations of Stalin’s fiftieth and sixtieth birthdays, the celebration in 1949 emerged as a really international affair. “Stalin’s 70th birthday in 1949 was the most extensive celebration of his leader cult” (Behrends, 2004, p. 161). For instance, as part of the preparations – “VOKS, the Soviet agency for cultural ex-

change and propaganda abroad, sent 1455 portraits of Stalin to Poland” (Behrends, 2004, p. 165). In the opposite direction, socialist Poland prepared and sent as many as 563,340 letters to Stalin. Of course, there was nothing spontaneous in these letters. In the socialist state of Poland the “party state demonstrated that it had the means to mobilize society for these festivities” (Behrends, 2004, p. 165). Nevertheless, as early as 1945, in Warsaw, the capital of Poland, one of the main streets in the center (*Aleje Ujazdowskie*) changed its name in favor of Marshal Stalin (*Aleja Marszałka Stalina*). “Communist propaganda claimed that Stalin personally represented Polish interests in the international arena” (Behrends, 2004, p. 164). On the other hand, Warsaw was the only capital city in Eastern Europe in which there was no monument to Stalin. However, the great Palace of Culture and Science (*Pałac Kultury i Nauki*) fulfilled a similar function, which during the communist time was named after Stalin. After the Second World War some cities in Eastern Europe (mainly industrial cities) changed their names in favor of Stalin; for instance, in Poland Katowice became Stalinogród and on August 23, 1950 the Romanian city of Braşov changed its name to Oraşul Stalin (the city of Stalin – Stalingrad) (Anders, 1992, p. 41).

3. Benito Mussolini – *Duce ha sempre ragione*

The leader (*Duce*, derived from Latin *Dux*) is always right. Such was the last (tenth) oath pledged by members of the Italian youth organization ONB (*Opera Nazionale Balilla*). “Mussolini’s photograph was distributed to children who received a gift package for the Epiphany (*Befana fascista*)” (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 79). There was even soap in the shape of Mussolini. In schools every classroom was adorned with a picture of Mussolini and pupils started (and finished) their school day with some reverence toward the *Duce*. Italians have always liked to talk a lot and almost with no end (*ad kalendas Graecas*). During the fascist era such endless discussions finished quite often with this well-known sentence: *Duce ha sempre ragione*. This slogan had been invented by the young fascist Leo Longanes and appeared in a book published in 1926.

In contrast to Lenin and Stalin, but similar to Hitler (with Goebbels), Mussolini had his ‘cult minister.’ Achile Starace, Fascist Party General Secretary (1931–1939), not only created but also orchestrated the personality cult of Mussolini. Nevertheless, in the very beginning of Mussolini’s career “the cult of the Duce owed much of its early momentum to Arnaldo Mussolini, who used his position as editor of *Il Popolo d’Italia* to portray his elder brother as a man of incomparable ability. From the mid-1920s the cult accelerated rapidly” (Duggan, 2008, p. 477). Margherita Sarfatti, a close friend of Mussolini, wrote his biography with a characteristic title *Dux* (1925–1926). This book had 17 editions selling about 200,000 copies just in Italy and it was translated into 18 languages. “As a journalist and propagandist, Mussolini was quick to see the potential of radio and cinema, and the 1930s saw his regime make increasing use of the mass media” (Neville, 2015, p. 113). Both Stalin and Hitler liked to see as many movies as was possible. During such private film shows, they could also discuss some important political problems with their close collaborators. It was Mussolini who ordered the building of the greatest (at that time) film studio in the world, the famous *Cinecittà* situated on the south-eastern outskirts of the Italian capital

Rome. "He was the first politician of the twentieth century to make use of modern communication techniques. Mussolini subsidized several films about his accomplishments, his rambling speeches, voluminous tomes, an autobiography, and several authorized biographies were sold in glossy editions" (Merriman, 2010, p. 1008).

Mussolini was certainly the best educated among totalitarian dictators analyzed in this article. Only the *Duce* spoke foreign languages and, for instance, could hold conversations with Hitler without an interpreter. "An enormous variety of media were used to propagate the cult of the Duce. Newspapers were obliged to give extensive coverage to his daily activities and report his speeches in glowing terms" (Duggan, 2008, p. 478). As in the case of other totalitarian dictators, many 'cult products' (to use Plamper's term) were used to propagate the achievements (both real and false) of the *Duce*. In every Italian town (and perhaps also in every village) there were "innumerable paintings, posters, sculptures, statues and medals. Radio and film became increasingly important vehicles of the cult during the 1930s" (Duggan, 2008, p. 478). Perhaps on every street and almost in every house the portrait or at least a photograph of Mussolini hung, very often there was also some graffiti of the *Duce*. "Every year the fascist party printed a calendar iconographically dominated by Mussolini and encouraged every good citizen to buy it" (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 78).

An allusion to the *Duce's* 'messianic status' played a very important role in the cult of Mussolini. The situation was similar in the case of Hitler, but not in the case of Stalin (perhaps a little bit in the case of Lenin's posthumous cult). "By the early 1930s, Italian journalists were required to capitalize He, Him, and His when referring to the Duce, as they did when mentioning God or Jesus Christ. All Italians at age eighteen had to take an oath to obey Mussolini. Italian press agents worked to enhance his image abroad" (Merriman, 2010, p. 1008).

Quite similar to Hitler, in the case of Mussolini there were two important (but completely different) motifs which were used intensively. First of all, some propagandists stressed the simple origin of the *Duce*, which enabled him to keep close and perhaps even intimate relations with the Italian people. At the same time, however, Mussolini was presented in many 'cult products' as the great statesman, attributed with almost supernatural intuition. Mussolini's simple origins, together with his parents and the place of his birth, received almost a religious significance. "The Duce's blacksmith father became the carpenter Joseph while his patient and long-suffering mother, the schoolteacher Rosa, took the part of Mary" (Duggan, 2008, p. 479). Similarly, the little family house in the tiny village of Predappio (in the region of Emilia Romagna) functioned in Italian mass tourism. However, in this case, tourism was very close to a religious pilgrimage. "Visitors were invited to see themselves as pilgrims and behave with reverence" (Duggan, 2008, p. 479).

It is interesting that the second above-mentioned motive of the *Duce's* cult (i.e. his presumed supernatural possibilities) were demonstrated in practice just after the fascist march on Rome in 1922. The first 'divine' intervention of Mussolini took place as early as June 1923 during his visit to Sicily. "At the time the Volcano Etna was erupting. The moment Mussolini arrived, however, the lava stopped its flow, and according to journalists' reports, a whole village was saved from destruction" (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 71). Afterwards, in just one year (from the end of 1925 to the end of 1926) Mussolini

survived four attempts on his life. The situation obviously strengthened the myth of special powers possessed by the *Duce* – especially his ‘immortal’ qualities. The case of Hitler’s myth (who survived over 40 attempts on his life), especially after July 20, 1944 was quite similar. Starting in 1925, Mussolini’s speeches were transmitted live by radio. The process of the growing deification of Mussolini achieved its peak perhaps in the summer of 1929 when *La Tribuna* (of July 25, 1929) published the Christian *credo* changed in favor of the *Duce*: “I believe in the high *Duce* – maker of the Blackshirts – and in Jesus Christ his only protector” etc. (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 64). Such presumed superhuman qualities separated Mussolini from the Italian people.

In contrast to Stalin (and to a lesser degree also to Hitler), Mussolini liked to travel very much. After a fascist march on Rome in just one year (from November 1922 to October 1923) Mussolini visited most (3/4) regions of Italy. In many places people had never before seen an Italian head of government. “Mussolini in contrast to his predecessors, travelled all over Italy to deliver speeches, and he often returned to the same city more than once” (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 85). The *Duce* not only presented his views in speeches but he quite often engaged in some dialogues with the crowd who usually gathered in the central square (*piazza*) of a town. Before the fascist march on Rome, Gabriele D’Annunzio operated in the same way in Fiume (modern Rijeka in Croatia). “Emotional appeals and direct communication helped Mussolini to enlarge his own audience [...] His face was a spectacle in itself, appropriately coordinated with Mussolini’s oratorical tone and body movements” (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 86). Undoubtedly, such poses that seem very strange for us today were fully in concordance with the character of the Italian people.

In contrast to Mussolini, Stalin probably used the plane only once going to a Teheran conference at the end of November 1943 (the flight from Baku), and Hitler used some planes mainly during his political campaigns, like in his famous ‘flights over Germany.’ Mussolini on the other hand even obtained a pilot’s license. Benito Mussolini, in general, liked to make some experiments with new sports and with new modern mechanical vehicles (like fast cars, motors or airplanes). Besides, “airplanes were symbols of a new era, and aviators, like actors, were saluted as stars” (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 70). The next instance of Mussolini’s ‘divine’ possibilities occurred in North Africa. “In 1937 newspapers reported the news that rains had finally begun to ease the long drought in Tripolitania and Libya. Incidentally, the rain had come at the time of Mussolini’s visit to the area in March 1937. [...] His power overcame human limits” (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 71). In the opinion of Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, the divine character of Mussolini was conveyed by three important features: immortality, omnipotence and omnipresence (or rather his continuous visibility). Besides, “the image of omnipotence that the regime propagandized reflected Mussolini’s own desire to supervise all decisions and take care of every single question facing the regime” (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 67). In practice, there was no escape from the picture and presentation of Mussolini in fascist Italy. “Through his presence Mussolini watched over people: like God, he could see everything [...] The eye of Mussolini resembled God’s eye” (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 82). “Regime’s propagandists spread an extreme and in retrospect ludicrous personality cult in which Mussolini was elevated into an all-seeing and all-knowing god, a Man who Italians were assured, radiated a divine light and possessed an omniscient intuition” (Bosworth, 2005, p. 3).

Benito Mussolini was a spectacle of his own. He appeared in fascist propaganda as an eternally young and virile man, although he was one of the oldest fascists in Italy. Perhaps his sexual achievements also served to present such an image. Mussolini was certainly the ideal man, ideal at least for the Italian population. “Mussolini insisted that this image of the young Duce persist during the regime” (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 71). In contrast to Stalin (who celebrated every tenth birthday) and Hitler (who celebrated his birthday every year), Mussolini not only did not celebrate his birthdays at all but no journalist could ever write on this or on the current age of the *Duce*. It was also impossible to mention his health (the *Duce*, like Hitler, had severe digestive problems) and no newspaper could write that he became a grandfather. Although Mussolini liked to play with his favorite cat, it is perhaps impossible to find any picture or photograph of the Duce with a cat. On the other hand, there are many photographs of Mussolini with a lion (in practice a bigger cat, anyway) or sitting on a horse. Usually such pictures had been taken in *villa Torlonia*, the great residence in Rome rented by the *Duce* for a symbolic 1 lire.

Just like in other cases of totalitarian dictators, the cult of the *Duce* served not only to strengthen the power and position of Mussolini himself. “The cult of the Duce was in many respects the principal unifying force in the fascist regime” (Duggan, 2008, p. 479). On the other hand, the cult of personality had been developed at the expense of the position of the fascist party, Fascist National Party (PNF – *Partito Nazionale Fascista*). The myth of Mussolini (*Mussolinismo*) certainly reflected his own wish for power. At the same time, however, “people believed in Mussolini more than in the party and they often differentiated the regime’s faults from those of the Duce” (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 55). Nevertheless, such is perhaps the fate of all the dictatorial and/or totalitarian regimes (or even some authoritarian systems). Such attitude is also in concordance with the famous myth of a good tsar and bad ministers.

4. Adolf Hitler – *ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer*

The cult (or myth) of Hitler was created and developed together with the process of centralizing power in his hands, which was encapsulated in the sentence: one state (the Third Reich), one nation, one leader (*ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer*). Some information on Hitler’s cult appeared earlier in the previous subchapters. First of all, the cult of Hitler had been created, developed and orchestrated by just one man, Joseph Goebbels. “Goebbels’ greatest achievement as a propagandist was the creation of Hitler’s myth – the *Führerkult*” (Zeman, 1973, p. 35). In his very good and detailed biography of Goebbels, Peter Longerich showed that the Nazi propaganda minister simultaneously fulfilled many functions connected with Hitler’s cult (Longerich, 2014). Goebbels supervised all media that existed in the Third Reich (press, radio and later on also television), he took care of many ceremonies which created the close relationship between the *Führer* and the German people, like Hitler’s birthday (*Führer Geburtstag*), and many military parades and ‘spontaneous’ demonstrations.

In many aspects, Nazi Germany imitated ‘the older brother’ of fascist Italy. For instance, the famous German architect Albert Speer had been sent not only to Greece but also to Italy to see some examples of classical architecture. In a similar way, Benito

Mussolini for quite a long time served as a role model for Adolf Hitler. "While Mussolini kept a bust of Napoleon in his study, Adolf Hitler [...] had long kept a bust of Benito Mussolini in his" (Kertzer, 2014, p. 199). This situation changed gradually together with the growing economic, and especially military position of Nazi Germany.

Similar to the position of Benito Mussolini, in the case of Hitler the Nazi propaganda presented a double picture of this totalitarian dictator: "[t]he necessary double image of Hitler as a superman and a man of the people" (Zeman, 1973, p. 35). It was Goebbels who repeatedly emphasized the simplicity and modesty of Adolf Hitler. Similar to Mussolini, in whose office (on the first floor of *Palazzo Venezia* on *Piazza Venezia* in Rome) the light was deliberately switched on long into the night (like some candles on Napoleon's desk in the past), the *Führer* was presented by the German propaganda machine as the leader who worked all day (and even great part of night) for the sake of the German people (*Volk*). Goebbels presented the presumed loneliness of Hitler, who had resigned from his private life and private happiness for his people. At the same time Hitler, in a similar way to Mussolini, was presented in Goebbels' propaganda as the great leader who ended the greatest economic crisis in the whole of German history and who worked very hard to restore the former glory of German Reich, also in terms of international relations. Even before gaining power in 1933, the important part of the cult of the *Führer* had been formed by some quasi-religious motives and ideas.

Ian Kershaw devoted one of his books to the question of Hitler's myth (Kershaw, 2009). Because there is still no book analyzing the cult of the *Führer*, which is in sharp contrast to the position of Mussolini and Stalin, whose personality cults have been analyzed in separate books and in many articles, the book of Kershaw is so important. Ian Kershaw enumerated as many as seven important bases of Hitler's myth (Kershaw, 2009, pp. 253–254).

Firstly, Hitler was treated as the embodiment of the German nation (*Volk*), who at the same time rose over some particular interests of many groups of German society. Such social attitudes had been strengthened by the well-known incorruptibility and lack of egoistic motives in Hitler's life. Similar to Stalin, Hitler had no great personal fortune and, similar to Mussolini, he owed the greatest part of his income to dividends from his book (*Mein Kampf*).

The second base of Hitler's myth had been created by the previously mentioned economic prosperity achieved after the great economic crisis that hit Germany in the late 1920s. Goebbels' propaganda presented Hitler as the sole architect of this German economic miracle who ended the great unemployment, who boosted the German economy and who introduced better living standards for many groups of the German society (including workers).

The third base of Hitler's myth is connected with the famous 'night of the long knives' of June 1934 when the whole leadership of the SA (*Sturmabteilungen*) was massacred. The German propaganda machine presented it as the proof of the so-called 'people's justice,' embodied by the *Führer* himself.

Ian Kershaw listed as the fourth base the moderation of Hitler in internal German policy which was in contrast with some much more radical and even extremist elements in the Nazi movement. By the way, in quite a similar way, Stalin presented himself as a modest and moderate man amongst the Soviet communists – of course before he obtained supreme, despotic power.

The fifth base of Hitler's myth is connected with international relations. The German propaganda machine presented him as the fanatic defender of German rights who rebuilt the military and political position of Germany on the international stage. When the first diplomatic and political successes of Germany came in the second half of the 1930s (the demilitarization of Rhineland, the naval agreement with Great Britain, the *Anschluss* of Austria and the Munich conference), Adolf Hitler was presented by Goebbels' propaganda as a genial statesman. By the way, quite similar motifs appeared also in the case of other totalitarian dictators (analyzed in this article).

The sixth base of Hitler's myth emerged in the first part of the Second World War (before the aggression on the Soviet Union of June 22, 1941), when the German strategy seemed to be the best (*Blitzkrieg*). Especially the invasion of France, which Hitler started against the strong opposition from many of his generals, strengthened the position of the *Führer* as the great military commander. Nevertheless, at the same time, Goebbels' propaganda machine presented the image of Hitler as someone who understood the position and some needs of a simple soldier perfectly well because he fought as such in the First World War.

The last, seventh base of Hitler's myth is related to some important fears that already existed in German society. Hitler was presented in German propaganda as the protector of the German nation from real (or perhaps imagined) enemies – like Jews or communists.

Similar to other totalitarian dictators analyzed in this article, Adolf Hitler also had many authoritarian and egocentric attitudes and behaviors. He had no tolerance for any critics or even for any opinions only slightly different from his own. Nevertheless, Hitler (in a similar way to Stalin) remained somewhat skeptical about the cult of personality that had been created around the position of the *Führer*, at least in the first years after receiving political power (January 30, 1933).

Similar to the cult of personality built around other totalitarian dictators, in the case of Hitler this cult fulfilled mainly some internal functions. Thanks to this cult of the *Führer*, the attention of the German society had been diverted from many problems of daily life. This cult of personality (similar to those of Stalin or Mussolini) had some importance on the international stage as well. Thanks to this cult of personality, Goebbels' propaganda showed the great support of German society for the *Führer*. Undoubtedly, the situation strengthened the position of the Third Reich in the realm of foreign policy. Together with the weakness of Western democratic states and politicians (the so-called 'appeasement') the cult of personality, as it seems, can be treated also as one of the factors and causes of the Second World War. Jan C. Behrends draws our attention to the important feature which is characteristic only of Hitler's cult of personality: "While Hitler, like Stalin, represented a state with totalitarian aspiration, participation in his cult was limited by racial restrictions. Hitler was *the Führer* of the Germans and the Aryan 'master race'" (Behrends, 2004, p. 163).

5. Conclusions

It is beyond doubt that all cults of personality analyzed in this article that emerged and developed around some totalitarian dictators had a lot in common. First of all, these modern cults of personality were closely connected with great masses of the respective

society. Just like modern European totalitarian dictators (especially Mussolini and Hitler) aroused from the system of representative democracy, also these cults of personality had to center not on the elite (social and political) but had to be directed to social masses. "All cults around political leaders presented their *Duce, Führer, or vozhd'* as men who came from the masses, yet at the same time transcended the masses. These leader cults were interrelated" (Plamper, 2012, p. 25).

Moreover, the cults of personality analyzed in this article reflected the individual traits and attitudes of each totalitarian dictator. "The dictators we are studying were [...] one-man institutions of power. In such cases personality traits and the political game the dictators play merge quite unavoidably" (Levin, 1997, p. 122). As Kevin McDermott wrote, it is simply impossible to distinguish the question of power and the personality of persons in power. It is certainly especially true in the case of some totalitarian dictators. "Like Hitler, Stalin was able to stamp his character on the style and substance of state politics – personality and power cannot be separated" (McDermott, 2014, p. 76).

Nowadays there is no totalitarian regime in Europe and perhaps North Korea can be labeled as the only existing totalitarian system in the world. On the other hand, the evolution of many states and societies toward hard nationalistic values and attitudes could provoke the emergence of some populist leaders who quite easily can transform towards the authoritarian (or perhaps even totalitarian) rule. Therefore, it seems important to always remember some experiences connected with the position and rule of the totalitarian regimes in some European countries. Undoubtedly, the cult of personality formed a very significant part of the position of the totalitarian dictators and, at the same time, formed an important element of the process of legitimation of totalitarian power.

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Kult jednostki jako istotna cecha propagandy totalitarnej

Streszczenie

Ustrój totalitarny, w przeciwieństwie do systemu demokracji przedstawicielskiej (opartego na bezosobowych procedurach), jest mocno związany z pozycją przywódcy. Stąd też kult jednostki nie tylko służy utrwaleniu władzy totalitarnego przywódcy, ale przyczynia się do legitymizacji całego systemu politycznego. W artykule zaprezentowano propagowanie i tworzenie kultu jednostki wokół trzech przywódców państw totalitarnych: Stalina, Mussoliniego i Hitlera.

Słowa kluczowe: propaganda, totalitaryzm, kult jednostki, Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler