

УДК 94 (47).084.5 + 929.2

DOI 10.28995/2073-0101-2018-3-833-843

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Stalin as Imagined by the Population of Soviet Russia in 1920s

Abstract

Lenin's illness exacerbated struggles for succession among the ruling elite of Soviet and party leadership. While Trotsky's superiority seemed absolute, Stalin was coming to prominence. Using mechanisms of party influence, Stalin managed to force his opponents to the background and thus by 1926 took the place of the first party leader, to whom the population (mostly party comrades) increasingly turned. However, among the non-party masses there also rose voices of approval for Stalin's policy. It became obvious that he was to be established as Lenin's sole successor. The task was facilitated by readiness of the population (primarily, peasants) to personify new power. However, analysis of 'information' materials, especially those preserved in

provincial archives (of Bryansk, Gomel, Kaluga, Orel, and Smolensk) shows an ambiguity in perception of new leader by the population. Left in information vacuum and having little trust in official press, the population put credit in hearsay. Rumors that reached population (party members, before all) were unclear and incomprehensible. Many reprehended demands to harden attitude towards opposition, and even more, methods of combating it. Domestic and foreign policies, which increasingly became associated with Stalin's name, were also found dissatisfactory. Even 1929 (Stalin's 50th anniversary) with all praises sung and lip service paid, did not convince the population that Stalin was a worthy heir to Lenin. Any comparison was not in the former's favor. However, when the collectivization began, Stalin's figure became odious. The population was repelled by its methods and was not to be reassured by Stalin's official speeches published in press. Resentment reached such a pitch that rumors sprang up about disagreements among Stalin's comrades-in-arms and even about his death, eagerly awaited by many. Stalin failed to convince even his fellow party members that his claims to the role of party theorist were justified.

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Keywords

Stalin, political struggles, leader, opposition, party, rumors.

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Submitted 20.04.2018, published:

BRYANTSEV, M. V. Stalin v predstavleniyakh naseleniya Sovetskoi Rossii v 1920-e gg. [Stalin as Imagined by the Population of Soviet Russia in 1920s. In Russ.]. IN: Vestnik arhivista / Herald of an Archivist, 2018, no. 3, pp. 833-843. doi 10.28995/2073-0101-2018-3-833-843

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Полностью материал публикуется в российском историко-архивоведческом журнале ВЕСТНИК АРХИВИСТА. Ознакомьтесь с условиями подписки [здесь](#) .