Conclusion

Despite Nikita Krushchev’s Secret Speech condemning the personality cult of Stalin in 1956, the removal of Stalin’s body from Lenin’s mausoleum in 1961, and the eradication of Stalin from Soviet history in the ensuing decades, some manifestations of the Stalin personality cult still exist today. In the last few years, Stalin’s portrait has been (controversially) carried in Victory Day parades in Russia, and his image appears on ‘Soviet’ tourist memorabilia such as T-shirts, mugs, calendars, bronze busts and poster reproductions. Surveys of popular attitudes in Russia suggest that Stalin has not only been ‘rehabilitated’ in the eyes of some sectors of the public, but that there is widespread nostalgia for the Stalinist years. A January 2005 survey carried out by the All-Russia Centre for the Study of Public Opinion in Russia reported in the Moscow News that 42 per cent of respondents wanted the return of a ‘leader like Stalin’. When it came to respondents over 60 years of age, this figure went up to 60 per cent. In 2008, Stalin ranked third in a nationwide poll to find Russia’s greatest ever person. Polly Jones notes that one of the major arguments against de-Stalinisation came from the military sector, which asserted that victory in the Great Patriotic War ensured Stalin a place in Soviet

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history and in the national psyche. The post-Stalin leadership also received numerous letters from non-military personnel claiming that the image of Stalin standing steadfastly at his post and the inspirational speeches he made to the nation were essential to the war victory. Many of these letters expressed their admiration for Stalin using the epithets of the print media and poster campaigns. A study of Soviet propaganda posters remains relevant and timely and the recent availability of extensive material in the Soviet archives has led to a burgeoning of exciting new scholarship in Stalin studies across many disciplines.

Despite the extensive literature available on the Stalin cult, there has been comparatively little focus on the visual arts under Stalin, with even fewer studies devoted to political posters of the era, and no dedicated study on the image of Stalin in posters. This book is an attempt to fill this lacuna. The political poster is shown to have been a key propaganda medium for the Stalinist regime and was central to the generation and maintenance of the cult of Stalin. Soviet public space was saturated with posters and Stalin’s image was a dominant presence in many of them. Over the decades of Stalin’s rule, as Stalin made fewer personal appearances in public life, his image in posters and paintings became the primary contact between the population and their leader. The leader became his portrait and, in posters of the postwar years, Stalin’s image sometimes took on apotropaic qualities.

In this study, Stalinist posters are analysed employing an art historical iconographic and iconologic methodology. The posters are examined as art objects and cultural artefacts, and placed in wider social, political and historical contexts. A major advantage of adopting this approach is that many interesting phenomena, trends and patterns are evident in the visual imagery employed in the posters that may not be specifically articulated elsewhere. By commencing with the images themselves, and conducting a comparative analysis across the large

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6 Jan Plamper opens his book on the Stalin cult with an anecdote about a woman who fainted when she saw Stalin at her front door. When she recovered, Beria asked her what had happened and she answered: ‘I thought that a portrait of Stalin was moving towards me’ (The Stalin cult: a study in the alchemy of power, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012, p. xiii).
sample of posters, subtle variations in the projections of the Stalin image over time can be detected, contributing to the discourse on the Stalin cult across a number of disciplines.

Despite the fact that Marxist systems declare themselves to be ideologically opposed to the notion of the personality cult, whether by design or default, and usually something of both, personality cults flourish in times of turbulence and strife, and particularly in circumstances when a leader needs to mobilise a population to attain urgent goals. Personality cults tap into universal myths and archetypes that provide guidance, comfort, reassurance and a spiritual dimension to a life of struggle and sacrifice. It is argued that Stalin’s image in propaganda drew on mythic archetypes that tapped into unconscious forces in the popular psyche. Posters of Stalin are analysed with reference to a number of archetypes that were employed to create an all-encompassing charismatic persona for the leader. The Father, the Warrior, the Teacher, the Saviour, the Architect, the Helmsman and the Magician became various facets of the Stalin persona — sometimes confusing, contradictory and irreconcilable — but drawing on deep, unconscious associations from mythology and the Church. Stalin was simultaneously imbued with notions of blood ties and kinship with the population, teacher and mentor, brilliant warrior and military strategist, and spiritual guide with superhuman and supernatural abilities.

It is argued that this charismatic persona was intentionally crafted for Stalin in order to mobilise an initially uneducated and illiterate population behind the Party vanguard, to adopt a single ideology and to participate in a number of tangible projects and goals that transformed the immediate physical environment. The leader figure became a symbol for a surprisingly wide number of qualities and entities, both concrete and abstract. Modern personality cults make use of mass media and communication networks with vast reach to disseminate images of the leader and hence create a ubiquitous leader presence. In states like the USSR, where the leader is able to control these networks, almost total control of the dissemination of the leader’s image is possible and the propaganda apparatus can craft an image which is marketed to the population, stressing desirable and charismatic characteristics and deleting anything which does not enhance the desired image. The argument that the use of archetypal qualities in portrayals of Stalin was intentional is supported
by evidence from other areas of Soviet propaganda, including the creation of a hagiography constructed around a series of sacred events in which archetypal roles are highlighted, and the existence of themed rooms at exhibitions that show Stalin in his various roles.

A case has been made for the inclusion of Bolshevism in the category of ‘political religion’. This concept enhances understanding of propaganda posters produced under Stalin because they borrow from, and adapt, Russian Orthodox traditions and symbolism in an attempt to induce ‘religious’ feeling toward the leader, the Party and the state. Belief in the new goals for the attainment of a communist state became a matter of faith, working to achieve these goals became a sacred duty, and veneration of the leader followed thereafter. Detailed analysis of the imagery in posters of Stalin has demonstrated how many of the devices used in the Russian Orthodox icon have been transplanted or adapted to the political poster, and that this occurred both because the icon provided a shared visual language for artists and the population and because several of the most successful early poster artists had studied the art of the icon as a Russian indigenous artform. These artists in turn held teaching posts at some of the most important Soviet art schools, influencing the next generations of Soviet artists.

The use of visual language associated with the icon imbued the image of Stalin with sacred qualities and, coupled with his increasing absence from public life, led to a persona that incorporated qualities of deity. His persona took on an increasingly sacral aura to the extent that when he died in March 1953, there was widespread disbelief. Many Soviet citizens viewed Stalin’s death as a personal crisis and something that they found difficult to comprehend. Literary scholar Raisa Orlova wrote: ‘We saw newspaper photographs of Stalin in the coffin, with arms folded and lips pressed firmly together. And it is still hard to believe that Stalin has died. Somewhere deep inside, we still keep hoping for a miracle.’ Writer Ilia Ehrenburg reflected: ‘And we had long forgotten that Stalin was a human being. He had become an all-powerful and mysterious God. And then God died from a cerebral haemorrhage. That was unbelievable … . I did not feel sorry for the God who died of a stroke at the age of seventy-three … but I felt

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fear about what was to come. The association of Stalin with deity was complex, as Stalin’s image in posters recalled both the figure of Christ and that of the Virgin and he was endowed with both masculine and feminine qualities. Research in the field of leader studies has demonstrated that it is not unusual for a charismatic leader persona to incorporate both masculine and feminine traits.

The employment of mythic archetypes and visual reference to the Orthodox icon were not the only devices used in posters to create a charismatic leader persona for Stalin. Analysis of Stalin posters reveals that Lenin appears with Stalin in approximately one-third of the posters. It appears that the image of Lenin performed important functions in the Stalin personality cult and Stalin was frequently portrayed in close proximity to Lenin as his best student and disciple. One of the devices employed by Stalin in the struggle for leadership after Lenin’s death was to portray himself as the natural successor of the martyred founder of the regime. Throughout Stalin’s leadership, Lenin continued to be invoked as a legitimating presence for Stalin and the Party, particularly during the years of the Great Patriotic War. Over time, Stalin came out from Lenin’s shadow as a humble student and increasingly stood alongside Lenin as a revolutionary thinker in his own right. Lenin’s importance as a legitimating influence was particularly evident in that it survived Stalin and was employed after Stalin’s death to bestow legitimacy on the Party. It is also argued that Lenin’s continual presence had an effect at an unconscious, pre-rational level. The image of Lenin invoked mortality salience in the audience, which served to increase viewer identification with Stalin as leader, and hostility toward enemies of the regime. The employment of binary coding that contrasted Stalin’s image with that of despised enemies further enhanced this effect.

This study has brought to light many previously unpublished posters that illustrate in detail the evolution of the image of Stalin over the period of his leadership. The conclusions that are drawn support and supplement those arrived at in studies of other propaganda media under Stalin, making a particular contribution to the literature on the visual arts. Posters are an informative medium through which to analyse the propaganda trends under the Stalinist regime because

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poster production was particularly tightly regulated and controlled and because the medium itself invites the combination and juxtaposition of images in a stylised and symbolic manner. The addition of text to the visual image directs the viewer to the intended meaning and serves to remove potential ambiguities in the visual image. Posters thus provide an excellent record of the propagandistic priorities of the Stalinist regime, and are one of the most reliable sources of evidence for how the regime wished to present itself and its leader to the wider citizenry.