

Lysenko and the Tragedy of Soviet Science. By Valery N. Soyfer. Trans. Leo Gruliow and Rebecca Gruliow. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994. xxiv, 379 pp. Index. Photos. Hard bound.

In the nineteenth century, Russian literature, and especially literary criticism, performed the important additional function of political journalism. During Russia's recent revolution of 1988–1991, history played a similar role: the political message of anti-communism was propagated in the form of popular historical writings about stalinism that filled the pages of weekly magazines, daily newspapers and literary journals. Though this mixed genre of scholarship should not be confused with academic historical studies, it has made a significant contribution to our knowledge of the Soviet past. The specificity of this genre has to be taken into account by a reader of Soyfer's *Lysenko*.

Writing this book in the mid-1980s was the heroic work of a dissident and a revolt against the official ban on the mention of Lysenko's name and deeds in censored publications. The circumstances of its writing account for negligible use of the western literature on the topic. The story is based primarily on the author's reading of virtually all that had been published by Lysenko and about him in the Soviet press, and on conversations with witnesses still living. In polemics with the 1960s *samizdat* study, "The Rise and Fall of Lysenko" by Zhores Medvedev, Soyfer formulates his main political thesis: rather than being simply a product of Stalin's personal cult and mal-evidence, lysenkoism was the logical outcome of Party dictates in science, and of the belief that the proletariat and the peasantry should exercise control over the intelligentsia.

Despite this general claim, the analysis and understanding of the Lysenko phenomenon in the context of the stalinist political system is not the most inspiring aspect of the book: one is advised to consult David Joravsky's *The Lysenko Affair* (1970) for a far more sophisticated discussion. Soyfer's strength lies elsewhere: his story is more biography than theoretical analysis, a drama with fleshed-out characters and lengthy quotations of their rhetoric. The reader develops a picture of the poorly educated agronomist, whom the newspapers made famous overnight for the discovery of the so-called "vernalization" of wheat. According to some later judgments, vernalization was not useful; according to others, it had been suggested before Lysenko. In 1929, in the midst of forced collectivization, the crisis in agriculture, utopian enthusiasm and the determination to hear good news, politicians, managers and even most agricultural scientists preferred to believe that it was a genuine and revolutionary innovation. During the next 35 years, Lysenko would prove to be a public-relations genius: he made a radical proposal with great practical promise, advertized and received public credit for it and, before it could be carefully checked, shifted public attention to another grand proposal.

The border between practical and academic specialists was relatively transparent in the 1930s, and Lysenko was elected to the Ukrainian and later Soviet Academies of Sciences. Positioned as a recognized scientist and the leader of a research school, he clashed with modern genetics. In contrast to his record of practical "successes," institutionalized agricultural science suffered from having provided little of use to *kolkhozniks*. In the period of purges, this cost several of its administrators their careers and even their lives. In 1938 Lysenko filled the vacant presidency of the Academy of Agricultural Sciences and moved from Odessa to Moscow. Several public disputes of the 1930s ended to his advantage, despite the fact that many of his active scientific critics were party members, while he was not.

This study uses very few archival sources. The one exception is also Soyfer's most important contribution to the theme: he found and published documents about the crucial Zhdanov affair of spring 1948 that provides insight into the hidden mechanisms of stalinist decision making. The episode reflects serious disagreements within the higher bureaucracy over biology: the ideological establishment was leaning toward genetics and the head of the Party's science department, Iurii Zhdanov, even allowed himself a direct critique of Lysenko. Feeling threatened, Lysenko wrote personal letters

to Stalin and the agricultural minister, rhetorically offering his resignation and thus turning the situation to his favor. At the infamous August 1948 session of the Agricultural Academy Lysenko's victory in this bureaucratic intrigue was publicly rationalized in language so ideological that many believe that lysenkoist doctrine was a tenet of Soviet ideology. After Stalin's death in 1953, although Lysenko had less and less support among agricultural practitioners, he managed to remain in official favor and lost power only with the fall of Khrushchev in 1964.

Soyfer met and talked with Lysenko in the late 1950s, and he encountered an unattractive but charismatic individual, with a peasant mentality, tremendous self-confidence and the ability to convince others. Soyfer was not lucky with his timing: it was still too early in 1987 for a Russian-language edition to be published officially. However, in 1989 it could, and should have been published and distributed in the Soviet Union rather than in the US, for then it would have delivered its political message and become an important event. Since then, much more has become known on the topic, including Zhdanov's memoirs, documents from party archives and Stalin's editing of Lysenko's ideological speech. The English version of this book would have profited from this material, as well as of some earlier studies. Unfortunately, it remains just a shorter translation of the 1989 Russian-language publication, probably the last example of dissident literature at a time when the entire genre has become history.

ALEXEI KOJEVNIKOV

Institute for the History of Science and Technology, Moscow

1937-i: Stalin, NKVD i sovetskoe obshchestvo. By O.V. Khlevniuk. Moscow: Respublika, 1992. Dist. Russian Press Service, Inc. 269 pp. \$12.00, paper.

O.V. Khlevniuk, a Moscow-based historian, was one of the first scholars in Russia to gain access to the party archives for the purpose of studying the stalinist period. This book, the product of his archival research, deserves praise for its scholarship and thoughtful, reasoned analyses. Khlevniuk has done an excellent job of combining archival sources with published accounts and memoirs to provide a rich history of the stalinist purges of the 1930s, which challenges some of our conventional views.

Khlevniuk says in his preface that his book represents an attempt to come to terms with stalinism, in particular the purges, and to shed light on one of the most complicated and tragic periods of Soviet history. With this goal, he describes how Stalin prepared step-by-step for the so-called "Great Terror" that began in 1937. Khlevniuk's study focuses on two main issues: first he considers opposition to the purges "from above and from below"; and second he tries to ascertain what Stalin's motives were in instigating the terror.

Khlevniuk demonstrates that Stalin began preparing early for the terror, before the death of Kirov in December 1934. At the time there was still opposition to Stalin's line in the party leadership and Stalin was bent on suppressing it. The terror actually began after Kirov's murder, when Stalin ordered a checking of party cards in 1935. Khlevniuk uses party correspondence from the archives to show that the checking resulted in mass arrests by the NKVD at the time.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is that Khlevniuk presents evidence of considerable resistance to the purges at this time. He cites, for example, a letter from the head of the NKVD's secret political department to NKVD Chief Ezhov, telling of local procurators who refused to sanction NKVD arrests. And he reproduces comments from the party rank and file who could not understand why Kirov's murder had led to such a crackdown. Some brash workers even went so far as to say openly that they thought Stalin had ordered the murder.

Resistance continued during 1936–1938. Khlevniuk tells about petitions that were circulated to protest NKVD arrests and cases in which local party officials refused to go along with claims that individuals were "enemies of the people." In 1936–1937 this