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THE FLOWERING OF LYSENKO

With his election to the presidency of the All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences in the name of Lenin, agro-biologists and geneticist Trofim D. Lysenko, for two decades virtual dictator over Soviet biological science, has been officially rehabilitated to apparently the heights he commanded under Stalin (Pravda, 9 August 1961).

As the best known and most honored of all living, non-Party personalities in the Soviet Union, Academician Lysenko¹ had held the same office from 1938 to 1956. Khrushchev then removed him "by his own request" following grave charges over his competency in theoretical and applied science. The most devastating criticism came when the Botanical Journal charged him with resurrecting "the naive transformist

"the naive transformist beliefs widespread in the biology of antiquity and the Middle Ages and surviving to some extent up to the first half of the 19th Century".²

Lysenko's failure to introduce hybrid corn into agricultural production earned him Khrushchev's displeasure. Khrushchev first proposed corn development in 1939 at CC or Politbureau levels. Lysenko, through Stalin, likely blocked the proposal. At any rate, it was Khrushchev, without the advice of Lysenko, who introduced hybrid seed corn on a practical scale in the Soviet Union.

Lysenko was allowed, however, to keep his post as head of the Institute of Genetics where he shrewdly branched off into another field - soil fertility. With Khrushchev's new emphasis on greatly expanding farm production, Lysenko began advocating means whereby the limited supply of chemical fertilizer could be stretched out by mixing it with limestone and organic matter. Along with other practical suggestions - it was a time when Khrushchev expressed little confidence in his farm scientists³ - Lysenko soon worked back into the First Secretary's favor, so that by 1957 Khrushchev could lash at his scientists at a meeting:

¹Already the recipient of three Stalin Prizes, 7 Orders of Lenin, Order of the Red Banner of Labor, Gold Mechnikov Award, Order of Labor Valor, and numerous medals.

²March-April number, 1955. speech at Leningrad.

³Izvestia, May 27, 1957 - speech at Leningrad.

"Lysenko knows more about soil problems than any other scientist...He gets my vote."⁴

When the editors of the Botanical Journal - Lysenko's persistent critics - were dismissed en masse, after Khrushchev scathingly castigated them at the 1958 agricultural plenum, it was certain that Lysenko was on his return to power.

Since then Lysenko has appeared on the rostrum at the XXI Party Congress, all three agricultural plenums, and at innumerable farm gatherings this Spring, where he shared the honors with Khrushchev.

What does the official rehabilitation of Lysenko presage? It is unlikely that it means a return to the Stalinist stranglehold on the biological sciences.⁵ Lysenko as the supreme arbiter of Soviet science is passe - the achievements in the physical sciences preclude such primitive direction - but Lysenko, the dynamic practical scientist, has been up-graded. He is the symbol of homo-Sovieticus, the up-from-the-ranks scientist who combines practice with theory, and who is the model of the re-organized educational system. This primacy of the practical is clearly mirrored in the careers of both men and is a fount of their anti-intellectual bias. Both are spokesmen of the cult of empiricism. Under the twin pressures to expand industrial and agricultural output, Khrushchev has banked heavily on practical scientists, the men of production. For the job of harnessing the creative powers of the intellectuals and keeping these awakened social forces in ideological line is a continuing struggle in a totalitarian society. Such peasant-type scientists as Lysenko are effective catalysts in the conflict. Yet as long as Lysenko remains identified as the leader in the Lenin Academy of Agricultural Sciences, there can be no true freedom in the biological sciences. His leadership was a blight on Soviet agricultural progress from 1938 to 1956. The fulfillment of the ambitious agricultural goals in the Party program appear more improbable with Lysenko again in power.

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⁴Pravda, 1 April 1957.

⁵Some objective criticism of Lysenko has been permitted in the scientific press. Several scientists suggested the validity of the Weissman-Morgan school of genetics theory, which Lysenko had persistently ridiculed compared to his Michurinist theory of the inheritance of characteristics through environmental influence. Meditzinsky Rabotnik 17 June 1961.