

Radio Free Europe/Munich
Evaluation and Analysis Department
Background Information USSR

June 29, 1960

LYSENKO AMONG THE SQUARES

As the best known and most honored of all living, non-Party personalities in the Soviet Union,¹ Academician Trofim D. Lysenko, agro-biologist/geneticist adviser both to Stalin and Khrushchev, as if by conditioned reflex regularly appears in print to propound his latest 'scientific discovery', or more often, nostrum. As a measure of his standing with the Party hierarchy, in the New Year's List of awards, the newly created medal "for labor valor," initially awarded to 15 top Soviet leaders, Lysenko was the only non-Party recipient. The group's picture, spread on the front page of Pravda, showed Lysenko sitting on the one side of Khrushchev and Voroshilov on the other.² Never during his tenure as Stalin's supreme arbiter over the biologic sciences did the practical agronomist-turned-scientist get much nearer to the source of power than with his present mentor.

In the stress and flurry of the recent international diplomatic and political gatherings, Lysenko's latest contribution to posterity was passed by in the western press -- only the Soviet media gave its undiminished support to the Holy Writ as revealed in a speech during the Kremlin conference of agricultural specialists, June 16-19, 1960.³

Lysenko returned to a subject he tried to popularize during the abortive "Great Stalin Plan to Transform Nature" in 1948, a contentious ideological issue to millions of gardeners and plant lovers the world over: intra-species competition between plants. Lysenko denies that plants of the same species, when planted together, compete with one another. (For example, five tree seedlings planted together in one hole grow as lustily as if planted alone. This contradicts

¹ Already recipient of 3 Stalin Prizes, 7 Orders of Lenin, Order of the Red Banner of Labor, Gold Mechnikov Award, numerous medals.

² Pravda, 1 January 1960. For the extended series on Lysenko, his theories and works, see Background Information, 16 April 1956; 18 April 1957; 16 May 1957; 17 December 1957, 19 February 1958, 22 September 1958; 22 January 1959, 14 February 1959, 23 March 1959.

³ Abstracts of Lysenko's speech appeared in all principal issues of the central press, but the verbatim account is in Selskaya Zhizn, 17 June 1960. He spoke on a number of well known subjects, but the cluster method was the highlight.

contemporary forestry and horticultural scientific practice.) Accordingly, he advocated the cluster-planting of tree seedlings on a wide scale at Stalin's behest to transform nature and thereby control drought conditions that reduced Soviet farm yields so sharply during the immediate post-war period. Large tracts of the tree plantations died out as a result of the competition among the seedlings for plant food and moisture,⁴ and the whole project was unceremoniously abandoned in the 'fifties.⁵ Lysenko went into eclipse for a short period thereafter. So did the square cluster method of tree seeding.

As an artful politician Lysenko exploits and fits current biologic problems with his panaceas. This year's dust storms in the southern farm areas of Russia again dramatized the need to control wind erosion and stabilize farm yields in the heartland of the country. The press promptly took up the urgent need of shelterbelts and reafforestation in the steppe lands, without any reference to the fiasco of "Stalin's Great Plan." Lysenko joined the assault and went all out for the cluster planting of tree seedlings, pleading that in the past some mistakes were made by a "too theoretical conception of biological species and their culture." Now he claims the cluster method of tree planting fully substantiates the "conceptional theory of biological species" that there is no competition between the same plants when planted in clusters. His views on mixed planting of trees (as maples, oaks, larches, etc., planted in alternating rows) are sound. But the issue over which countless gardeners would write indignant letters to the editor, remains the cluster method of planting three to six trees or plants in one hole and not expect retardation. Even the authoritative voice of Pravda was once heard (14 December 1958):

There were actually serious shortcomings in the raising of trees for protective belts. It is of course impossible to recommend the cluster, or any other, method as the one and only method. Local specialists themselves will be able to decide which method is best for them.

So Lysenko's confident and dogmatic dictum that "there is not and cannot be intra-species competition" among plants -- coming so soon after the New Year awards -- and his all-out advocacy of the method is a telling reminder of the quasi-quack's continuing hold on the Soviet biologic sciences, and the intellectual paralysis of hundreds of Soviet scientists in their abject silence to such medieval practices. His shelterbelts will be patchy or stunted in their squares.

cz

4 Botanichisky Zhurnal, March-April, 1955.

5 The editor of the Botanical Journal, Academician V. N. Sokachev, once Lysenko was firmly back in favor, was dismissed from his post along with five others, following dogmatic attacks by Lysenko on their lack of "practical work". See Background Information, 22 January 1959.