

Session Title: Taming the Natural World and Relocating Genetics

THE DEVELOPMENT OF GENETICS IN THE SOVIET UNION FROM THE SECOND HALF OF THE 1960s THROUGH THE FIRST HALF OF THE 1980s

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Abstract

The topic of the paper is devoted to the social, economical and politico-ideological factors in the development of genetics in the USSR. Specifically, it emphasizes 3 main aspects: politico-ideological problems from the second half of the 1960s through the first half of the 1980s, international relationships of the Soviet geneticists, and the material and technical base of genetic research. In those years, the social and political environment became more favourable for the development of genetics in comparison to the previous period of Lysenkoism (1948–1964). Genetics became considered a legitimate field of research and even received some governmental support after Nikita Khrushchev's dismissal (1964). Soviet scientists expanded their international contacts. The XIV International Genetics Congress (Moscow, 1978) was the most visible example of Soviet geneticists overcoming their isolation from their colleagues abroad. However international contacts were very difficult to establish and maintain because of the "Iron Curtain", problems with obtaining permission for travel abroad, increasing tensions between the Soviet Union and Western democracies, and the language barrier. The internal political and ideological context of genetics research improved. However, political and ideological factors had a destructive influence. The impact of Lysenkoism was still felt in many institutions and areas of research; direct criticism of Trofim Lysenko and his theories was not tolerated; in this environment no objective history of the discipline could be produced. Poor material support of research also exercised a negative impact. Economic conditions of a country that was plunging into "stagnation" imposed considerable constraints on research infrastructure and scientists' living conditions. Thus, these years can be seen as the period that witnessed considerable positive changes in genetic research in the USSR, yet the legacy of Lysenkoism was not overcome. Acknowledgments: The research project has been supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanities, grant no. 12-33-01295.