Panel: “Cold War Politics”

Rachel Habegger

Title: “Lysenkoism: A Triumph of Soviet Science”
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ann Livschiz
Paper written for: History D310: Russian Revolution and Soviet Regime (Spring 2014)

Rachel Habegger is a dual major in Biology, pre-medicine, and History. She will graduate this Spring and go on to study at Indiana University School of Medicine in the Fall. She plans to work as a primary care physician in the local area.

Abstract

Both the United States and the USSR realized the importance of public morale to the Cold War. ‘Winning’ the Cold War hinged on the glorification of all things Soviet or, on the other hand, all things American. The Soviet Union was particularly adept at using a sophisticated system of propaganda to garner popular support and manipulate public perception of both the USSR and the “capitalist” west. This system of propaganda was important to survival of the Soviet Union, and Stalin became proficient in its use.

Biology in the Soviet Union had diverged from Western biology just a few decades before the Cold War. Beginning in the 1920s, a plant breeder named Trofim Lysenko began to formulate his own ideas about the nature of heredity. His theories, based on Communist ideology and a then-debunked theory of heredity developed by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, openly attacked Western genetics. By 1948, conformity with Lysenko’s ideologically useful, though questionable, ideas was enforced by Stalin’s regime. Geneticists who disagreed were persecuted—those who failed to support Lysenko would be imprisoned or sent to a labor camp. This threat created unity among most Soviet scientists, and the subsequent presentation of scientific advance was popularly celebrated as a scientific triumph and indication of the superiority of Soviet science over “capitalist”/Western science.

Both the Soviets and the Americans were manipulated by fear of foreign influence—this fear helped to bring about the rise of Lysenko and spurred the American scientific community to form a united front against Lysenko’s ideas. American biologists, driven by the Cold War compulsion to glorify American biology, unified under the idea of “Mendelian” genetics, and praised Gregor Mendel vociferously. The American scientific community had defined its theory of heredity according to how the Soviets viewed it, as “Mendelian-Morganism.” The impact of this exchange, which was shaped by the goals of the Cold War, can still be felt today in how the development of the science of genetics is presented to American students, particularly the emphasis on Mendel.

Bibliographical Note

In order to write this paper, I consulted many secondary sources in the forms of scholarly articles and books. I also relied heavily on a book published by the subject of my paper, Trofim Lysenko,
called *Heredity and Its Variability*. This work is a primary source. Other primary sources that I used were contemporary newspaper articles.