

# Perspectives

## Anecdotal, Historical and Critical Commentaries on Genetics

*Edited by James F. Crow and William F. Dove*

### Tragic History of the VII International Congress of Genetics

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In the history of Lysenkoism those conditions which were created by the Party [of Communists] were decisive. Strictly speaking, the history of Lysenkoism is not a chapter from the history of science as such, but a chapter from the history of the Party.

D. V. LEBEDEV (1991, p. 276)

VERY likely the best illustrative example of illegal and even criminal interference of the Communist Party in purely scientific affairs is the story of the VII International Genetics Congress planned for 1937 in the USSR. The red terror, introduced by Lenin soon after the Revolution of 1917, followed by the exile abroad of more than 2000 outstanding scientists, philosophers, and writers, along with the arrests and public ridicule of leading figures in culture, art, and science, created a repulsive image of the Soviet state in the eyes of the people of the free world. Scientists from these countries refused to hold international meetings in the USSR. Because the organization of scientific Congresses does not depend on governments or ruling parties in particular countries, but is dictated exclusively by the scientists themselves, all the attempts of Soviet researchers to invite colleagues to the next Congress in their country were regularly rejected for a long time. No one wanted to take a risk. Nevertheless, in 1931–1934 the first international congresses took place in the USSR, in particular, the Congress of Soil Scientists, followed by a few more international meetings, such as one on quaternary deposits in geology.

During the VI Genetics Congress, held in Ithaca, New York, in 1932, the Russian geneticist Nikolay I. Vavilov suggested holding the next Congress in the USSR. The reaction of Western geneticists at first was negative, and it required no small effort to prevail over that opinion. By that time other outstanding Russian scientists—Georgy Karpechenko, Theodosius Dobzhansky, Nikolay Tulaykov, Nikolay Maximov, Nikolay Timofeev-Ressovsky, Victor Pisarev, and others—had worked in the United States, and famous Western scientists had gone to the First USSR Genetics Congress in 1929. By that time Russian scientists had achieved outstanding results

in many fields of genetics and other branches of biology. As a result, geneticists gradually began to lean toward Vavilov's suggestion and agreed to hold the VII Congress of Genetics in Moscow in 1937. The International Organizing Committee of this Congress, elected in Ithaca, was supposed to reach a final decision, but owing to debates on the question, it was dragged out until 1935. Finally, matters ended with a victory for Vavilov's supporters. The chairman of the International Organizing Committee of the VII Congress, the Norwegian scientist O. Mohr, on April 16, 1935, informed Vavilov of the decision and proposed that Vavilov form a Soviet organizing committee, which would undertake the job of organizing the Congress [Archive of the Russian Federation President (ARFP), Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, List 7, and Verso].<sup>1</sup> It was proposed that at the same time the committee would also try to interest the Soviet government in partially financing the holding of such a large-scale event and in paying the expenses of some of the invited speakers.

However, in the Soviet Union the matter shifted from the financial to the ideological and political spheres. The change away from procedures familiar to Western scientists happened very quickly. Vavilov understood very well that he could not act without formal endorse-

<sup>1</sup> This document as well as several other documents cited from this Archive (or excerpts from them) were published in the collection in YESSAKOV (2000). The terms used in reference to the Archive are defined as follows: fond, archive holding; opis', inventory; delo, storage unit; list, folio sheet. CC is used throughout for the Central Committee (of the Communist Party). RKP(b) is the Russian Communist Party (of Bolsheviks). VKP(b) is the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks), or *Vsesoyuznaya Kommunisticheskaya Partiya (bolshevikov)* in Russian. This name was changed in 1952 to Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) (*Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Sovetskogo Soyuza*, or KPSS, in Russian).

ment of his every step by the leaders of the country. He sent a letter written by O. Mohr to the Presidium of the USSR Academy of Sciences. The Presidium reviewed Vavilov's request and adopted a decision to support his idea. On July 13, 1935, the Permanent Secretary of the Academy, Professor Vyacheslav Volgin, approached, in writing, not the government of the USSR, that is, the SNK (Council of People's Commissars or *Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov* in Russian), but the Communist Party organ—"the Science Division of the CC of the VKP(b)" (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, List 7, and Verso).

The letter was forwarded to "the Head of the Division, Comrade Bauman" [officially, the position of Karl Yanovich Bauman (1892–1937) was called "Head of the Division of Science, Scientific and Technical Inventions and Discoveries of the CC of the VKP(b)"]. Volgin described in the letter how it happened that the city of Moscow was chosen and how it turned out that a letter with a proposal on behalf of the International Committee to hold such a Congress got to Vavilov; Volgin also explained that Vavilov was the sole representative from the USSR on this International Committee. This was followed by a paragraph with a description of the most important USSR research centers, in which he said that there was much to show in the country.

Let us point to the work on plant selection—the All-Union Institute of Plant Industry, the Saratov and Omsk Selection and Genetics Stations, and Acad. Lysenko's<sup>2</sup> work. Prominent theoretical research is being carried out by the Institute of Genetics of the USSR Academy of Sciences, where one of the world's leading geneticists, the American researcher Hermann Muller, is presently working.

It was reported that the arrival of "not less than 1,000–1,200 foreign scientists" was expected, in connection with a request for "about 5 mil. rubles. . . to pay 40–50% of the expenses of members of the Congress, both Soviet as well as foreign,—as well as to pay half of the transportation costs" (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, List 7, and Verso). K. Ya. Bauman considered Volgin's letter, supported the Academy of Sciences' request, and sent the appropriate letter to three addresses: the First Secretary of the CC of the Party, Iosif V. Stalin; the Secretary of the CC responsible for agriculture, Andrei A. Andreev; and a person who had nothing to do with science or international contacts but was empowered to monitor the intra-Party affairs of Bolsheviks, the chairman of the Party Control Committee of the CC, Nikolay I. Yezhov (soon he would be appointed a chairman of the NKVD, or National Security Ministry). Like all internal documents to the CC, this letter was not designed for casual eyes, especially the eyes of scientists, be they Soviet or Western, and it was classified "top

secret" for many years (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, Lists 5–6).

On July 31, 1935, at the meeting of the Organizing Bureau of the CC of the Party (once again, not the government, but Party big shots!), this letter was included under item no. 24 of the agenda (minutes no. 32) and a decision was reached:

1. To allow the Academy of Sciences to convene a Congress on Genetics in 1937 in the USSR.
2. To entrust the Science Division (of the Party CC) to submit for approval to the CC the agenda of the Congress and speakers (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 970, List 9 and Delo 210, Lists 12–13).

This resolution was adopted on August 2, 1935, as a decision of the Politburo of the VKP(b) CC (protocol no. 34, item no. 196-gc), and the excerpt from this protocol was signed by Andreev. Two members of the CC Organizing Bureau, V. Chubar' and K. Ye. Voroshilov, also signed these minutes, and one of the technical assistants wrote additionally that the mighty CC Secretary L. M. Kaganovich voted for this proposal.

All this went far beyond the scientific framework. Never had hosting countries interfered in such matters, but in the USSR the Communists had completely taken into their hands the most sensitive matter, the putting together of an agenda for a scientific Congress and the composition of the speakers. A decision of the Politburo in a Bolshevik country could be changed only by the Politburo. For the scientists just one avenue was left: to respectfully ask the highest party council to consider their request.

Then, on December 28, 1935 (evidently, on the basis of the proposal received from the Academy of Sciences and the Lenin All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences, or VASKhNIL), Bauman sent to Andreev and Yezhov a memo titled "On the Organizing Committee for convening the VII International Congress of Genetics in the USSR." In the name of the Science Division of the Party CC, he proposed "approving the composition of the Organizing Committee comprising 13 people." Officers proposed were A. I. Muralov, professional revolutionary and the president of VASKhNIL, chairman; V. L. Komarov, botanist and the USSR Academy of Sciences president, first vice chairman; N. I. Vavilov, then the vice president of VASKhNIL, second vice president; and S. G. Levit, the director of the Medical and Genetic Institute and an old Communist, the general secretary of the committee. Other members proposed were N. P. Gorbunov, Lenin's former secretary and now the Permanent Secretary of the USSR Academy of Sciences; Trofim Lysenko; ecobotanist B. A. Keller; cell biologist and geneticist N. K. Koltsov; plant breeder G. K. Meister; geneticists A. S. Serebrovsky and G. D. Karpechenko; cytologist M. G. Navashin; and American geneticist and then Corresponding Member of the

<sup>2</sup> "Acad." stands for the official title of a member of the Academy (or Academician). In the USSR this title was valued very specifically and signified the highest rank of scientist.

USSR Academy of Sciences, Hermann J. Muller.<sup>3</sup> In Bauman's memorandum, the place of work and membership in the VKP(b) was shown for each candidate. Evidently not by accident, in the composition of the organizing committee there were almost as many Party members as non-Party members—six to seven. Serebrovsky was also named as a member of the Party, yet he was still only a candidate; he was never accepted into the full membership of the Party. The last name in the list is especially notable. At this stage the Party bosses even agreed to include the American H. J. Muller on the Organizing Committee.

On January 29, 1936, the Organizing Bureau of the CC of the Party approved this proposal, and on February 2, 1936, the Politburo approved the Organizing Bureau's decision.<sup>4</sup> In the Politburo's decision, it was indicated that Muralov was obliged "within three months to submit to the Organizing Bureau of the CC suggestions regarding the agenda of the upcoming Congress."<sup>4</sup>

Exactly 3 months later, not one day later or earlier, Muralov sent a very long letter to Stalin and the chairman of the SNK, Vyacheslav M. Molotov, with a description of the planned sessions of the Congress (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, Lists 15–19), together with a great deal of other information. He wrote that 900 Soviet and 600 foreign participants were expected and that they planned to invite only 70 people at Soviet expense; the standards of living of guests "of the first category" and "of the second category" were indicated and calculations of repair expenses to a Moscow State University building and several other institutions were given, etc. Appended to this letter was a draft resolution of the SNK with an even more detailed estimate of expenses including long charts with a description of what quantity and what kind of paper, cartons, microscopes, microtomes, etc., were required. Also appended was an hour-by-hour plan of the Congress's program. In a special attachment was a list of candidates invited as president, honorary president, and vice presidents of the Congress, as well as a list of Soviet and Western plenary speakers. Vavilov was named as the presidential candidate, the American Thomas Hunt Morgan as the honorary president, and 16 representatives of foreign countries, one from each country, as vice presidents. Only two of them were not named: the representatives from Czechoslovakia and Turkey (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, Lists 20–28) were to become vice presidents.

At this point the Politburo had to approve all these projects as instructions to the government, because only then would the SNK put them together in the form of

its own resolution. But at first there was a hitch with the approval of the project because for a long time the materials "were still with comrade Molotov." Then on May 29 a new entry appeared: "The matter is being prepared in the SNK." Then another entry read: "There is a decision of the CC—to be controlled by Chernukha" (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, List 14; V. N. Chernukha was the executive of the secretariat of the Politburo). It was clear that some high official or several of them had put the brakes on the matter without leaving a trace. It has not been possible to clarify whether and when this resolution was adopted in the form Muralov proposed. It looks as though this did not happen, since on August 22, 1936, Muralov sent another wordy document to the Secretary of the CC of the VKP(b), Kaganovich, and to the Deputy Chairman of the SNK, Chubar', in which once again he described point by point the importance of holding the Congress in the USSR, indicated the basic Soviet and overseas scientific groups that would be represented, said that 750 applications from overseas (instead of the 600 that had been expected) had already been received, and so on (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, Lists 29–33).

To understand further events in this story, we should explain why discussions regarding genetics had become very acute in the Soviet empire by this time. From 1928 to 1933 Iosif Stalin ordered the collectivization of all agricultural farms. Several influential Communist Party leaders were against this order, but Stalin used every possible means, including Red Army troops, to collectivize all private farms and establish rather large enterprises—kolkhozes and sovkhozes.<sup>5</sup> This totalitarian jump into completely "socialized" agriculture was carried out under the constant resistance of the peasants and required the participation of Red Army troops and the NKVD squads, who shot those who actively resisted collectivization. Almost 10 million of the most successful peasants were arrested and exiled or shot by the NKVD and the army (CHURCHILL 1948). All grain was confiscated from the barns of individual peasants. It is hardly necessary to explain that all existing varieties of grain crops in the USSR practically disappeared after totalitarian confiscation of all grain. The Soviet government began to request that scientists select urgently, within 2–4 years, new outstanding varieties.<sup>6</sup> This task was a typical example of the voluntaristic practice of the Soviet

<sup>3</sup> Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), Fond 17, Opis' 163, Delo 1093, List 7. See also copies of this document at the RGASPI, Fond 17, Opis' 114, Delo 733, List 100.

<sup>4</sup> RGASPI, Fond 17, Opis' 163, Delo 1093, List 7.

<sup>5</sup> "Kolkhozes" (for "collective enterprises") was used in cases in which individual farmers were united in one collective farm that was governed by a chief, who was formally elected by the majority of collectivized farmers. "Sovkhoz" was applied to a state-governed large agricultural enterprise.

<sup>6</sup> On selection and seed industry. The order of the Presidium of the Central Control Commission of the VKP(b) and the Collegium of the USSR People's Commissariat of the Worker-and-Peasant Inspection after the report of the Worker-and-Peasant Inspection of the RSFSR. *Pravda*, Aug. 3, 1931, no. 212 (5017), p. 3.

government: leading scientists and plant breeders rejected this plan as illusory.<sup>7</sup>

Another part of the tragedy of agriculture in the USSR stemmed from a series of severe droughts in all territories of the huge Soviet empire in 1927–1929. Communists needed something to help them to overcome troubles created by the harsh Russian climate.

Under these circumstances, the statement by the Ukrainian agronomist, Trofim D. Lysenko, who graduated in 1925 from the Kiev Agricultural College (Institute) by correspondence, that in 1928 he had developed a new method of transformation of winter wheat into spring wheat, which was accompanied by a sharp increase of grain yield (see SOYFER 1994, pp. 14–27), was accepted by the Communist leaders as a panacea (SOYFER 1994, pp. 18–20). It is worth mentioning that from the very beginning unsubstantiated promises by Lysenko were accepted almost unquestioningly by such scientists as Nikolay Vavilov and Nikolay Maximov, whose importance in the eyes of the Soviet and world scientists was substantial (SOYFER 2002, pp. 165–171 and 180–192). Lysenko made several other equally revolutionary promises to the country's leaders. All of them were based on a very primitive understanding of the nature of biological processes, which followed from a thesis popular among Communists that the environment can easily change the nature of plants, animals, and humans themselves and that the economic and political structure might be easily changed to prevent capitalist exploitation of workers by their bourgeois masters.

Very soon after the formulation of the basic principles of the transformation of one variety into another under changing environmental conditions, Lysenko faced a strong contradiction with the science of genetics. Genetic principles forbade such easy transformation of the genetic nature of species and the creation of a new one. Then Lysenko decided that there was one way: to reject genetic laws, to condemn geneticists for bourgeois trends, and to declare that he had created a new science, the “kolkhoz-sovkhoz science of plant development.” His claims coincided with Stalin's appeal to young researchers: “Don't be slaves of [scientific] traditions, don't be afraid to break down these old traditions, norms, and statements when they impede our forward movement, don't be afraid to break down fetishes of old bourgeois science” (see, *e.g.*, STALIN 1938). In 1935 Lysenko obtained a chance to speak in the Kremlin in the presence of Stalin himself. In his speech Lysenko accused scientists who disagreed with his revolutionary “achievements” of being the same saboteurs who were allegedly active in industry and agriculture. This politi-

cal accusation inspired Stalin. He jumped from his chair and began to applaud Lysenko and shouted to the audience: “Bravo, Comrade Lysenko, bravo!” This acclamation of Lysenko by “the great leader of the Communist world, Comrade Stalin” was publicized in all newspapers in the USSR. Lysenko became an acclaimed hero of the Communist regime (SOYFER 1989).

However, geneticists began criticizing Lysenko for his antiscientific declarations regarding the perniciousness of genetics. Several pointed discussions between Lysenko and Lysenkoites, on the one hand, and geneticists and plant breeders, on the other, were held in the Academy of Sciences and the VASKhNIL. The most dramatic one took place in 1936 during the Fourth Session of VASKhNIL in Moscow (SOYFER 2002, pp. 334–347). But the situation became rather unpleasant for the Communist leaders and especially for Stalin. Stalin himself believed in the direct role of environmental conditions in changing the nature of organisms. Like K. Marx and F. Engels, he considered the process of the changing of heredity as a relatively simple process of acquiring new characteristics by the hereditary apparatus. In his eyes, Lysenko's claims were absolutely justified and the contradiction of scientists was the result of their bourgeois instincts. After all these events, the question of the struggle of Lysenko with scientists was becoming more and more politicized. When Vavilov in 1932 suggested holding the next Genetics Congress in Russia, this process of political intervention of Lysenkoism into the body of science was in its heyday. By 1936 the political role of the struggle became very acute in the eyes of the political bosses of the country, which explains why the question of the organization of the next Genetics Congress in the Soviet Union acquired such a poignant political nuance. Together with their constant desire to view any questions through the prism of their political nature, Communist leaders began to feel that the organization of the Genetics Congress in Moscow might strengthen the positions of the geneticists in their struggle against Lysenko and his supporters. From the plane of purely scientific matters, the question of the Genetics Congress moved to the plane of political struggle, which required from the Communist bosses a tighter control over the purely organizational matters of scientific meetings.

Very quickly the Politburo reacted to Muralov's plan. In the CC Science Division, a special document was drafted, signed by Bauman, and sent to Stalin and Molotov (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, Lists 34–37). In the document the situation with the Congress was described rather pessimistically. First, interference in the scientific program went further: it was stated that “a significant part of Soviet scientists will be speakers on the basic questions.” Second, the list of these “basic speakers” was already looking quite strange: “Academics Lysenko, Meister, Serebrovsky, Prof. Levit and others.” Lysenko, not a geneticist, got pride of place. Then

<sup>7</sup> See a report of the Conference at the People's Commissariat of Agriculture, *Sotsialisticheskoye Zemledeliye*, Sept. 13, 1931, no. 253 (815), pp. 2–3.

there was a paragraph devoted to the story of yet another “appointee selected by officials”—Nikolay Tsitsin, an agronomist who in 1936 promised Stalin personally that he would soon select perennial wheat (he never fulfilled his promises and died in 1980). After two paragraphs devoted to technical matters, a lengthy examination of a politically poignant matter began: how the scientists at the Congress were to discuss the question of human genetics, with emphasis placed on bringing out “criticism of racist theories” of Western scientists. The document continued: “At the same time it is necessary to use antifascist-inclined scientists of other countries. In its turn this criticism must appear as one of the means of mobilizing [world] scientists and all the intelligentsia against fascism.”

Thus, Party leaders began doing what scientists always tried to avoid: turning scientific sessions into forums for resolving political tasks. After this, Bauman shifted to the question of what Lysenko’s place would be at the Congress and what could happen because of the role of this Party favorite. The following excerpt from Bauman’s letter was at the same time surprisingly realistic. This shows that in the depths of the CC of the Party there was a clear understanding of what was actually going on in the milieu of scientists and it was even said that many people were not getting involved in open discussions with Lysenko only because they were afraid of political repressions:

At a time when the majority of geneticists in the USSR and other countries shared the point of view that non-inherited signs are not transmitted to descendants and that heredity is determined by genes and their combinations, Academician Lysenko, based on works by Michurin and his own work, affirms that individual development of organisms changes hereditary traits of organisms.... The meeting of geneticists [*IV session of VASKhNIL—V.S.*] convened by Comrade Muralov on our instructions exposed a great passion of disagreement. All scientists recognize the contributions of Comrade Lysenko—his theory of the multiple stages of plant development and vernalization methods—but at the same time many feel that his general views on genetics are incorrect and contradict, in their view, modern science. Together with this it is necessary to note that although not agreeing in essence with a number of Comrade Lysenko’s genetics propositions, some scientists strive to pass over these disagreements in silence, as if being afraid to come out against Comrade Lysenko, reasoning that Comrade Lysenko enjoys the support of the [Communist] Party and the government and nothing can be gained by arguing with him, although he is wrong (ROSPEN 2000, Delo 210, Lists 35–36).

One could only rejoice at such a sober view of things from Karl Ya. Bauman, who had recently been a candidate for membership in the Politburo of the CC of the Party, were it not for his cunning, which is shown in the following paragraph:

This creates a less than unhealthy atmosphere in the area of scientific thought, and that is why the need and complete opportunity of free discussion in the USSR of moot points

of genetics was stressed by me as the Head of the CC Science Division of the VKP(b) at the session of geneticists (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis’ 33, Delo 210, List 27).

In fact, the central Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* thoroughly covered the sessions of VASKhNIL, but it did so in a specific way. It published open attacks against genetics on a daily basis. In those cases where people such as Muralov and Meister supported genetics and criticized Lysenko, *Pravda* never published these statements, but any of their critical comments on genetics immediately found space in this newspaper. And *Pravda* constantly mentioned the aggressive accusations against the genetic theory of Lysenko and his ideological guru Isai Prezent. Thus there was anything but free discussion.

Together with this, it needs to be admitted that Bauman was acting as a person who understood the poignancy of the discussions and, it would appear, was on the side of the scientists rather than the pseudoinnovators, since in the summary part of his letter to Stalin and Molotov, where it was proposed to resolve the holding of the Congress of Genetics in Moscow, he once again returned to the crux of the disagreements between the geneticists and the “Michurinists.” He wrote that the Science Division for the moment “cannot give an exhaustive appraisal in essence of the disagreement between the prevailing school of geneticists and the Michurin-Lysenko school.” Bauman surmised that further discussions and “a broad discussion of moot points in genetics” would help to arrive at the proper conclusion.

Evidently, all of Bauman’s thoughts remained unused, as were Muralov’s suggestions, and the resolution of the SNK was not adopted after all. In particular, Bauman had proposed a draft resolution to the CC of the VKP(b), in which the first point was the following:

Adopt the proposals of the Organizing Committee regarding the convening of the VII International Congress in Moscow from August 23 to 30, 1937 and approve the proposed procedure for the work of the Congress.

Party leaders at the highest level did not agree with him. On Bauman’s letter is a note “to include in the agenda [of Politburo meeting]”; however, it has not been possible to find any trace of the proposal being included in the agenda of the sessions of the Politburo. It can be surmised that only Molotov with his superkeen intuition regarding Stalin’s thoughts and inclinations could have held up the passage of all the documents.

Meanwhile, throughout the world, preparations were under way for the Congress, and preparations were also being made in the USSR. Lysenko did not obtain any new decisive proofs of the correctness of his ideas. However, his bitterness against geneticists grew, and more and more threatening notes addressed to “harmful” scientists appeared in his rhetoric. Simultaneously, the propagandistic campaign of the struggle against “the enemies of Soviet power” reached a climax in the coun-

try. These “enemies” were being searched for in all spheres of life and were being sent to prisons and camps. The moment of getting even with Lysenko’s many ill-wishers was now very close.

In the middle of November 1936 the Politburo once again returned to an examination of the Genetics Congress matter. In the archives of the Politburo is a small sheet of paper with a retyped old decision dated August 2, 1935, on which the imprinted signature of Stalin appears. Evidently, verbal agreement between Stalin and Molotov had been reached because Molotov wrote in pencil on the resolution:

I propose annulling the decision of the CC on the Genetics Congress as inexpedient (in view of the obvious lack of preparation). V. Molotov.<sup>8</sup>

Underneath this statement, in black ink, the special opinion of Politburo member L. M. Kaganovich was inserted:

It is not the decision of the CC which is inexpedient, but rather the organizers of the Congress are useless for not having submitted a proposal at the beginning, but they did not act on it. It will be necessary to annul it. L. Kaganovich.<sup>9</sup>

Later in the document the remaining members and candidates for membership in the Politburo signed, indicating that they were all in agreement with Molotov and Stalin: Kalinin, Voroshilov, Chubar’, Andreev, and Mikoyan. On November 14, 1936, the Politburo resolved to cancel the Congress “in view of its obvious lack of preparation.”<sup>10</sup>

An interesting detail was the fact that another letter was written almost 6 months later, which was filed together with the Politburo’s resolution and which had been written on a separate sheet of paper. On January 31, 1937, the Head of the Agricultural Division of the CC of the VKP(b), Yakov A. Yakovlev, prepared a memorandum addressed to Stalin and Molotov in which he stated that “the program for the Congress has been compiled incorrectly, and the practical work of the Organizing Committee does not ensure the holding of the Congress in accordance with the interests of our state” (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis’ 33, Delo 210, Lists 42–43). Yakovlev rejected any kind of tricks in connection with how “free discussions” could be ensured. Instead, he proposed introducing Communist Party political control over the organization of the Congress. To give credence

to such a fundamental position, he articulated two points: (1) remove the alleged existing deviation at the Congress in the direction of “fascist genetics” and even the prevalence of it over nonfascist ones and (2) remove the prevalence of anti-Lysenkoists (as it was said, “supporters of anti-Darwinist theories of nonvariability of inherited features in an infinite series of generations”) over the Lysenkoists. To avoid these “prevalences,” which were undesirable to Communists, Yakovlev proposed changing the composition of the Organizing Committee of the Congress: remove the president of VASKhNIL, Muralov, from the position of Chairman of the Organizing Committee and replace him with the president of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Vladimir Komarov; introduce Lysenko among the vice chairmen, along with Muralov and Vavilov; and reduce the number of members of the Organizing Committee to four. He also proposed turning over control of the scientific program of the Congress completely to the Communists, for which “a commission of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR and the CC of the VKP(b), which would be responsible for approving the theses of Soviet speakers and an examination of the list of scientists invited from other countries” should be created, as well as changing the time for convening the Congress, putting it off until August 1938. Yakovlev also worked out a means to change the Congress to a forum under the control of the Communists. To do this, it was necessary to take upon oneself completely the preparation of a scientific program of the Congress. Yakovlev inserted into his letter as his chief point to propose to the Organizing Committee the following as the key issues of the Congress:

- a. Distant hybridization (Academician Meister: work on rye and wheat hybrids; Doctor of Agricultural Sciences Tsitsin: work on wheat and couch-grass hybrids; Derzhavin’s work on perennial types of cereals, etc.
- b. On vernalization and constancy of pure (inbred) lines—the work of the Lysenko Institute.
- c. The material bases of heredity.

Such interference not only in Soviet but also in world science had never occurred before. However, it is unclear whether the Politburo examined this letter or whether it was simply pushed aside without being read. Yakovlev and Muralov would soon be arrested and shot as enemies of the country. Evidently, fear that the matter could get out of the hands of the Party controllers prevailed.

But even at that, the story of the Genetics Congress in Moscow is not finished. The arrest of Izrail I. Agol—who earlier spent several months in American laboratories and then occupied the position of the Head of the Chief Directorate of Scientific, Scientific and Popular Literature, Museums, and Environmental Protection Administration under the USSR People’s Commissariat of Education—coincided with the events being de-

<sup>8</sup> RGASPI, Fond 17, Opis’ 163, Delo 1128, Lists 20–21.

<sup>9</sup> “Scholar” Kaganovich, who never even finished primary school, evidently wrote in his resolution an additional negative by mistake and, more likely than not, the sentence should read as follows: “It is not the decision of the CC which is inexpedient, but rather the organizers of the Congress are useless for *having submitted* [emphasis added] a proposal at the beginning, but they did not act on it. It will be necessary to annul it. L. Kaganovich.”

<sup>10</sup> RGASPI, Fond 17, Opis’ 3, Delo 982, List 40. Minutes of a session of the Politburo, No. 44, item 203.

scribed. Rumors about the arrest immediately reached Western scientists, embellished on the way by different kinds of unproven details. In the West, the ban of the Congress in the USSR, the arrest of the geneticist Agol, and (this was added in the West) the rumor that Vavilov and several other prominent scientists were arrested were all linked together. In its December 13, 1936, edition, *The New York Times* passed on these reports as absolutely true, allegedly uncovered by the newspaper's correspondent in Moscow. To at least clarify something for themselves, a number of Western geneticists decided to use personal contacts and ask their Soviet colleagues for factual information on this score. Two of them wrote to Julius Schaxel,<sup>11</sup> who had emigrated from Germany to the USSR. The letters of request (in English) and Schaxel's reply (in German) were translated into Russian and handed over to the CC Science Division. Schaxel wrote in the tone of a true Communist propagandist:

The International Genetics Congress has not been cancelled at all, but rather postponed. The incident with Agol has nothing in common with scientific pursuits. Agol has long been involved in political activity criminally against the state and for that reason is being held in custody... (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, Lists 48–50).

Then the subject was shifted to an important topic for the Communists—eugenics:

In our country of socialism we view a person not so much as a biological object as we do a member of society. What concerns a human society... we consider the use of methods of zootechnology as a scientific sin and a colossal absurdity... We decisively reject eugenics... Moreover, socialism in our country, which has come about as a result of 20 years of revolution, has presented to any member of our classless society complete personal freedom in the area of choice of occupation, choice of residence, choice of entertainment, and choice of a boy or girl friend for life. For this reason the place of eugenics, a concoction of bourgeois scientists, is an impossibility in a free human society (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, Lists 48–50).

Another of the worried geneticists, the American C. B. Davenport, on December 17, 1936, decided to approach the U. S. State Department with a proposal to send to the Soviet government a protest and demand that the USSR, which “takes a lot from discoveries of [Western—V.S.] scientists and from the use of these discoveries,”

should behave in a civilized way (VAVILOV 1992). The U. S. State Department, in a letter sent to Davenport dated December 29, 1936, refused to carry out the suggestion of the scientist, considering that the “circumstances [mentioned in his letter] do not directly touch American citizens or American interests.”

Vavilov sent a long telegram to the *The New York Times*, publishing it in the newspaper *Izvestiya* on December 22, 1936 (no. 297 [6154], p. 4), in which he wrote:

The lie about Soviet science and Soviet scientists conscientiously working for the cause of socialism has become the specialty of certain organs of the foreign press.... On many occasions I gave reports in the press and orally in many cities of the USA about Soviet science, about the exceptional possibilities granted to Soviet scientists, about the role of science in our country, and about the tremendous progress of science during the Soviet period.

From a small institution during the Tsarist period—the Bureau of Applied Botany—the Institute of Plant Industry that I am in charge of has grown during the Soviet period into a most prestigious scientific institution having few equals in scale in the world. Its staff of about 65 people during the Tsarist period at the present time has reached 1,700 when all its branches in the outlying areas are included. The institute's budget has gone from 50 thousand rubles to 14 million rubles...

We argue, discuss existing theories in genetics and in selection [*plant breeding*—V.S.] methods, we summon each other to Socialist competition, and I have to tell you frankly, this is a great stimulus, which significantly increases the level of work...

I more than many other people am obliged to the government of the USSR for its great attention to the institute I head and to my personal work.

As a faithful son of the Soviet country, I consider it my duty and good fortune to work for the good of my native land and give my entire being to science in the USSR.

Sweeping aside as vile slander of dubious origin your report about me and the fabrications that in the USSR intellectual freedom allegedly does not exist, I insist on the publication of the present telegram in your newspaper.

Academician N. I. VAVILOV (1936).

Having received copies of letters from Western scientists and Schaxel's reply, Bauman sent a brief letter to Stalin and Molotov (ARFP, Fond 3, Opis' 33, Delo 210, List 45). He mentioned that the cancellation of the Congress and the heated discussions between geneticists and Lysenkoites at the 1936 session of VASKhNIL were the focus of interests of scientists in the West, and that the Science Division was explaining to everyone that the Congress had not been cancelled, but only postponed. “In connection with this I consider it expedient to predetermine the convening of the Genetics Congress in the USSR in 1938,” Bauman wrote. The administrative office of the Politburo prepared a draft resolution consisting of two points: (1) the rescheduling of the holding of the Congress to 1938 and (2) the fact that “matters concerning the makeup of the Organizing

<sup>11</sup> Julius Schaxel (1887–1943) studied with Haeckel (he completed his course in 1908). In 1908 he worked with Davydov at the Villafranca Experimental Station in France; from 1908 to 1910 he worked with O. Hertwig and L. Plate at Jena University; in 1911 he was at the Naples Zoological Station; and from 1912 on he was at Jena University (a professor from 1916). He spent a lot of time popularizing science. In 1924 he founded the popular journal “Uraniya,” which subsequently became well known. After the Nazis came to power in Germany, partly because of his Marxist views and partly owing to his Jewish heritage, he was forced to emigrate in 1931 to Switzerland, and then to the USSR, where he was invited to head the Laboratory of Development Mechanics at the A. N. Severtsov Institute of Evolutionary Morphology. Some biologists felt that he committed suicide.

Committee and the program of the Congress are to be handed over to the SNK of the USSR for its decision.”<sup>12</sup> Stalin’s assistant Poskryobyshev signed in the upper left corner of the page, followed by signatures of Stalin, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, and Molotov, and a handwritten entry was made by the secretary that Mikoyan, Kalinin, Andreev, and Chubar’ were “for” the resolution. The resolution was drawn up on March 19, 1937.

A new burst of anxiety for the fate of Soviet geneticists occurred when the contents of an article by Prezent and Nurinov (PREZENT and NURINOV 1937) in the newspaper *Socialist Agriculture* became known in the West. The article contained calls for the immediate harsh punishment of scientists as “enemies of the people,” and first and foremost, of Koltsov and Serebrovsky. Once again there were alarming reports in the European and American mass media of repressions in the USSR. As a reply to these anxieties, a letter translated into English was sent to the West from the leading Russian geneticists. Dated June 23, 1937, it was addressed to the British Communist Professor J. B. S. Haldane. In two and a half pages, the leading Soviet geneticists informed colleagues in the West that there was no basis for panic in connection with the article by Prezent and Nurinov and that a Genetics Congress in the USSR would take place after all:

Prof. Koltsov and Prof. Serebrovsky have never been arrested. Similar to the fantastic news of the arrest of Prof. N. I. Vavilov, which appeared in December 1936 in the “New York Times,” the new sensation regarding the arrests of Professors Koltsov and Serebrovsky is absolute nonsense and a provocation. More likely than not, this provocation comes from certain circles intent on interfering with the organization of the Genetics Congress in the USSR.

In the USSR scientists have the right to make public their scientific views completely freely, and arrests on the basis of scientific opinions are completely impossible and contradict the whole spirit of the Soviet Socialist Constitution.<sup>13</sup>

The letter ended with the words:

We want to emphasize that we have all the necessary conditions for the 7th International Genetics Congress to take place in August 1938 in the USSR and that the USSR Academy of Sciences, the Organizing Committee, and all the genetics institutes in our country will do everything possible to ensure the success of the Congress.

Following this, each of the scientists signed opposite his name—G. A. Levitsky, G. D. Karpechenko, Vavilov, Meister, Navashin, Koltsov, Serebrovsky, D. Doncho Kostov, S. A. Levit, N. P. Dubinin, A. A. Sapegin, D. A. Kislovsky, and S. M. Gershenson. The authors asserted that the construction of new institutes in the USSR is

proceeding at full speed and that Western visitors who travel to the USSR next year for the Genetics Congress will be able to be convinced of that with their own eyes.

But the Congress was not held in the USSR after all. Party leaders did not sanction it. Instead, scientists throughout the world gathered in Edinburgh in 1939. For a long time Vavilov nurtured the hope that he would be allowed to go to the Congress. He even said this in Leningrad on March 15, 1939:

...I have been elected chairman of the International Congress of Geneticists but I do not know whether I will be attending it or not (VAVILOV 1998).

At the beginning of the Congress a letter from Vavilov, dated July 26, 1939, and addressed to Professor F. A. E. Crew, the General Secretary, was read:

The International Committee, however, postponed the Seventh International Congress of Genetics until 1939 and chose as its place of meeting not the U.S.S.R. but another country. Under such circumstances Soviet geneticists and plant and animal breeders do not consider it possible to take part in the Congress.

I wish to thank the members of your Organization Committee and you personally for the great honor of electing me President of the Congress, and to assure you that I greatly regret the impossibility of participating in the work of the Congress and serving as its President.

The program had to be immediately recast, and 50 papers from Soviet geneticists were not given. During the opening ceremony of the Congress the empty chair of the president of the Congress was placed on the stage, and everyone knew that it was designated for Vavilov who “under such circumstances” had not come. Opening the Congress, the director of the local Institute of Animal Genetics, Francis A. E. Crew, said:

I understand that in those places where films are made, every star has his shadow (technically known, I think, as a “stand-in”) who is required to look more or less like his principal and to take his place in the more arduous parts of his role. I would suggest to you that at the moment this is exactly what I am—a stand-in for a star. You invite me to play a part that Vavilov would have so adorned. Around my unwilling shoulders you drape his robes, and if in them I seem to walk ungainly, you will not forget that this mantle was tailored for a bigger man. (PUNNETT 1941).

At that time, as it became known several decades later, the Politburo had decided to forbid Vavilov from traveling abroad, and simultaneously and in utmost secrecy, systematic work was in progress: the volumes of the espionage and saboteur case against him were growing thicker and thicker. But, and I repeat, this side of the Communists’ activities for the moment remained hidden from Vavilov. Also, there were no external manifestations that Lysenko himself was involved in this process. By the sweat of their brow, his people were laboring on a secret front while he openly discredited Vavilov within the Party hierarchy.

<sup>12</sup> RGASPI, Fond 17, Opis’ 163, Delo 1141, List 24.

<sup>13</sup> The letter to Haldane personally signed by the authors. A photocopy of the original letter was kindly provided to me by Professor Joshua Lederberg on June 25, 1999, pp. 1–3.

The events being described unfolded under the backdrop of a new wave of arrests. The lengthy siege of the Presidium of VASKhNIL by Lysenkoists, their statements at meetings of the Party faithful of VASKhNIL at which Lysenko expressed himself in such a way that everyone understood why he was “forced” to go over the heads of the Academy’s leadership on matters dealing with science, the behind-the-scenes, intra-Party struggle, as well as attacks in the press, could not continue interminably. In that very month they led to “organizational measures.” Muralov, the President of VASKhNIL, was arrested in June 1937. Other leaders of VASKhNIL were also arrested with him (A. S. Bondarenko, L. S. Margolin, and several other people). A group of leaders of the USSR People’s Commissariat of Agriculture were arrested. On October 30, 1937, Muralov died (MURALOV 1974); evidently, he was executed by a firing squad.

Nevertheless, immediately following Muralov’s arrest, Lysenko did not manage to take up the chair of president of VASKhNIL. Meister was appointed acting president, and for the time being Vavilov remained vice president. However, Meister did not hold on to the president’s post for long. On August 11, 1937, he also was arrested as “an enemy of the people.” He went crazy in prison and perished in detention. A year before his arrest, the quarter-century anniversary of the founding of the Saratov Plant-Breeding Station was celebrated, which was directed by this outstanding plant breeder, and varieties of spring wheat alone, produced under Meister’s direction, matured on an area equal to 7,241,000 hectares (the total area under wheat in France comprised ~4,000,000 hectares). How better to characterize the successes of Meister? It was confirmed in print:

In Academician G. K. Meister we have a genuine Bolshevik scientist, an energetic fighter for high-yield harvests, a brave experimenter and transformer of Nature who is achieving widespread implementation of the results of his scientific labors for the good of our great homeland (EDITOR 1936).

Now, instead of gratitude to the scientist who literally fed the people of his country, the provider was thrown behind bars. There was no way he could have been called a saboteur, and the provider could also not have been called a spy. It is more likely that Meister’s only “sin” was the fact that on several occasions he justifiably criticized Lysenko’s mistakes!

By the end of 1937 many other leaders of the state, including those who oversaw science and agriculture, were arrested and soon thereafter executed by firing squad: Yakovlev, Bauman, Chernov, Eikhe, Chubar’,

and others. Vavilov was arrested on August 6, 1940, while on a collecting trip. He was originally sentenced to death, and perhaps because of strong pleas for clemency inside and outside Russia, this sentence was rescinded in 1942. He died in prison on January 26, 1943 (POPOVSKY 1984; CROW 1993).

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