The objectives of studying the history of science in the USSR: the situation in 1952

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Abstract. The historiographic situation in the history of natural sciences in 1952 is reviewed based on the archive documents that are introduced for scientific use for the first time. A previously unknown fact from the history of science is established, which is important for understanding the processes occurring in social sciences and the humanities in the USSR in the mid-20th century. The paper describes the conditions characteristic of the period of late Stalinism that had very negatively affected the work of Soviet historians of science, narrowed the scope of research, and sought to turn the history of science into an instrument for ideologically manipulating the society. At the same time, the archive documents we have studied indicate that the Soviet community of historians of science has been striving to overcome the isolationism and dogmatism forced on them by the regime. The analytical memorandum on the state of the studies on the history of science in the USSR and the tasks faced by this discipline, created at the Institute for the History of Science of the USSR Academy of Sciences at the end of 1952, is a valuable source.

1. Introduction

Two important events marked the second half of 1952. Stalin’s last “ingenious creation”, “Economic problems of socialism in the USSR,” was dated 28th of September and the last Stalin’s CPSU Congress (XIXth) was held soon after that, on October 5-14. The USSR Academy of Sciences and, in particular, the research institutes specialising in the humanities and social sciences could not but respond to these events regarded as “momentous” in the context of the latest Stalinism.

A special commission was established at the History and Philosophy Division (OIF) of the USSR Academy of Sciences led by Academician-Secretary B. D. Grekov. The institutes within the framework of the Academy of Sciences were obliged to describe the current situation and prepare the proposals for the measures that would ensure that the scientific area explored by each of these institutes would rank first globally [1, item 12].

The goal of this paper is to introduce for scientific use a previously unknown page in national historiography of the history of science.

2. Materials and historiography

This paper is based on the archive documents introduced for scientific use for the first time. As the event described in this paper has been unknown so far, it has not been covered in the scientific
literature. The overall situation in the history of science in the USSR in the mid-20th century is described in a number of publications [2-6].

3. Results and Discussion
At the time in question, the Institute for the History of Science (Institut istorii estestvoznaniya, IIE, also referred to as the Institute for the History of Natural Sciences) of the USSR Academy of Sciences, established in 1945 on the initiative and under the guidance of the then President of the USSR Academy of Sciences, V. L. Komarov (1869–1945), was part of OIF. Having received the instruction, the IIE administration quickly composed an instruction for its Sectors, tasking them with preparing proposals regarding the analysis of the situation in the Soviet history of science to ensure taking the relevant measures to promote the fastest development of this discipline in the USSR. Based on the questionnaire received from OIF, the IIE administration asked the IIE research divisions to answer the following questions: (a) what problems are now being explored by the Soviet historians of science; (b) what problems that so far remain beyond their scope of research ought to be explored, taking into account, first and foremost, the necessity of countering the standpoint of the bourgeois historians of science with that of the Soviet scientists; (c) what issues in the history of science are being raised by the foreign historians of science, particularly those concerned with identifying the patterns in the history of science during the most important historical periods, in the most important countries [1, items 13–14].

The scientists working at the Institute for the History of Science (as well as in other OIF Institutes) decided to take advantage of this situation and formulate their biggest requests and wishes for future development of their discipline. Thus, in the context of the declared goal to expose the falsifications by the bourgeois historians of science, the IIE Sectors were asked to outline the relevant scientific and organisational measures, “sparing no expense for this line of work – provided that it is motivated by public necessity – in such areas as creation of museums for the history of science, creation of experimental libraries, creation of a bibliographical service, creation of libraries, iconographic and other collections” [1, item 13].

In the context of the objectives for the development of the history of science, this document was quite conceptual. For instance, as regards the basic problem of professional training and continuity of staff in the history of science, the issue of their language training was emphasised, as the broadening of the scope of research into the history of global natural science was impossible without professionals with adequate knowledge of foreign languages, not only the European but also the oriental (e.g. Chinese) and ancient languages. The Sectors were asked to discuss the need for and feasibility of publishing the works of Soviet historians of science in other languages or of parallel publishing of Soviet works in Russian and in one of the foreign languages – or else publishing Soviet works in foreign periodicals on the history of science. To justify the need in creating a journal for the history of science in the USSR, the Bibliographic Sector of IIE was asked to prepare an exhaustive list of the relevant foreign periodicals. The IIE Sectors were obliged to submit their proposals (not exceeding 6 pages) by the 1st of December [1, item 14].

A detailed Memorandum on the state of the history of biology, geology and geography and the measures to ensure their rapid development was submitted by the required date by Professor S. L. Sobol, one of the most eminent historians of science at the time and Head of the Sector of Biological and Geological/Geographical Sciences. It was Sobol’s text that the report “On the state and measures for the development of the history of science” signed by Director of IIE Kh. S. Koshtoyants, Corresponding Member of the USSR Russian Academy of Sciences, and forwarded to OIF was based on [7]. If we disregard several pages of the then typical and obligatory verbal husk, the content of this memorandum is very interesting as, on the one hand, it captures the then current level of the development of the history of science in the USSR and, on the other hand, contains the list of what the historico-scientific community expected and hoped for at the end of 1952. There is a characteristic inversion here that ought to be mentioned: the description of the state of the history of science in the
USSR was, in fact, reduced to the description of activities of the Institute for the History of Science (IIE).

As mentioned in the Memorandum, the works on the history of science appeared back in the 19th century and in the Soviet era too, but it was only in the 1940s, after the Institute for the History of Science was established within the framework of the USSR Academy of Sciences allegedly on Stalin’s ‘initiative’, that the systematic studies on the history of national science began. A new chapter in the development of the history of science after the creation of IIE was marked by the publication of a number of major monographs on the history of animal physiology, microscopy, palaeontology, evolutionism, geographic discoveries, etc., in Russia and the USSR; scientific biographies of many Russian natural scientists were published as well as the new editions of the Russian and Soviet authors’ classical works together with the relevant critical apparatus. The works mentioned in the Memorandum in a general form had concrete authors: Kh. S. Koshtoyants (history of animal physiology in Russia/USSR); S. L. Sobol (microscopy)’ L. Sh. Davitashvili (palaeontology); B. E. Raikov (evolutionism); N. A. Maksimov (botany); L. S. Berg, M. S. Bodnarskii, and D. M. Lebedev (history of geographical discoveries); A. Ya. Skorokhodov (medical microbiology), etc.

Statistical data on the IIE’s publications provided in the Memorandum reflected the Institute’s fruitful work during the period from 1941 through 1951: 5 volumes of the IIE Proceedings (‘Trudy’), 870 books, and 3,453 articles published in the journals and collections of papers. The Memorandum also mentioned as submitted for publication “The history of natural sciences in Russia” in three volumes. Actually, volume 1 was only published in 1957 and the last volume was published in 1961.

It is well-known that the first decade of IIE’s existence passed in the situation of strictest isolationism and shrinking of the scope of research, when the history of science (that initially also included the history of social sciences, philosophy and the humanities) was reduced to the history of natural sciences, geographically limited to Russia/USSR only. The awareness of the faultiness of such approach was reflected in the IIE Memorandum that declared it necessary to first study the history of natural sciences in all of the “biggest” countries and then create the universal history of science. The parallel task was to prepare scientific biographies of the outstanding figures of global importance for the entire humanity, such as Charles Darwin, Isaac Newton, Galileo Galilei, Nicolaus Copernicus, and others.

The problems, difficulties and controversies that hindered the development of the history of science were formulated very clearly. To create a truly scientific history of science, the Memorandum read, the material of “incontestable scientific value” is needed. However, the factual material that has already been discovered by Soviet historians is still very limited, as well as the cadre of professional historians of science. Therefore, as regards the factual history of science, there are numerous blind spots, unclear and controversial moments, etc.

The Memorandum contains the optimistic and future-proof statements that literally everyone who begins to explore any particular theme will before too long come across a significant discovery; that the work associated with studying and describing the life and works of individual scientists from the 18th and 19th century, reconstructing the history of the universities and scientific institutions, and seeking and publishing the relevant archive documents of particular importance, ought to be supported and promoted in every possible way; etc.

The criticisms of ideologically-lacking, decaying, bourgeois, idealistic, anti-scientific, reactionary, etc., Western history of science, which pervade the entire Memorandum, at the same time allowed the author (or, rather, authors) to bluntly put forward and expose their own problems. “A serious drawback in the work of Soviet historians of science is the fact that we publish much less well-documented and excellently illustrated monographs devoted to particular problems and life of particular scientists than they do in the West” [7, item 103].

A much more important obstacle, however, that hindered overall development of research in this area, was the lack of the Soviet journal for the history of science. In the West, however, there were numerous journals and other periodicals and series, devoted to the history of science, which, apart
from research materials, also contained information about scientific activities, abundant book reviews and bibliographies, brief communications, obituaries, various anniversary pieces, etc. The biggest weaknesses, compared to Western European countries, was the lack of reliable and accurate biographic and bibliographic dictionaries and reference books. Even small countries such as Denmark and Norway had the extensive, multivolume dictionaries of their scientists in various fields. “Therefore, the Memorandum read, it must be said straight out that we do not know the huge legacy that was left to us by our scientists of the past. Each historian, setting about to explore any particular theme, has to start systematically looking through all of the old journals on his own in order to find the materials he needs. This leads to extremely ineffective waste of effort and time” [7, items 104–105].

The issue of the museum for the history of science was addressed separately. The Memorandum contains numerous examples of successful functioning of such museums in different countries, both big and small. Naturally, at the time when the Memorandum was prepared, it was absolutely out of question to mention that such museum had practically existed in Leningrad in the mid-1930s under the auspices of the repressed Institute for the History of Science and Technology of the USSR Academy of Sciences. Therefore, the Memorandum only refers to (bitterly) a small M. V. Lomonosov’s Museum in Leningrad and mentions that the museum for the history of microscope and microscopic devices under the auspices of IIE, one of the largest collections of authentic microscopes in the world, ekes out a miserable existence without its’ own premises, staff and funding. The memorial museums of Sechenov, Timiryazev, and others are in an equally dilapidated state, and the authentic old instruments, devices, etc. are constantly deteriorating. A well-justified bewilderment is expressed quite emotionally in the text of the Memorandum: “With the hefty historico-archaelogical museums existing [in the USSR], it is unclear why the Museum for the History of National Science and Technology has not been created yet in our great and rich state” [7, Item 106].

Having identified the main sensitive issues, the Memorandum proceeds to review the measures to be taken to ensure that the Soviet history of science would rank first globally in the next few years. These measures, however, were only concerned with improving the work of IIE. The following was proposed: to gather at IIE all of the most prominent historians of science specialising in all disciplines; to create an effective bibliographic and auxiliary services at IEE; to organise an iconotheque and a library; the Institute also was to be provided with sufficient premises to organise workplaces for its research staff as well as for all of its auxiliary departments and services; in addition to Proceedings of IIE and Scientific Heritage series, a journal for the history of science was to begin to be published (six issues per year) as early as in 1953, etc. The IIE Memorandum for OIF contained other sensible proposals although nothing was said about the international collaboration and Soviet historians of science becoming members of foreign and international associations and societies.

The disciplinary development of any field of scientific knowledge depends on the presence and functioning of necessary infrastructure but, without addressing the problem of professional cadre, it is absolutely impossible. This issue that was difficult to practically implement was given much attention in the Memorandum. The description of characteristics and competences necessary for working professionally in the field of the history of science is still of considerable interest and topicality: (a) an excellent knowledge of the discipline the researcher is to explore; (b) a good knowledge of the universal history of science; (c) a good knowledge of political and economic history; (d) a good knowledge of the histories of philosophy, culture, literature, and even art; and (e) the knowledge of several foreign languages: one ancient language (especially Latin), English, German, French, etc.

In the opinion of the authors of the Memorandum, the main path for training professional cadre in the history of science is through postgraduate education, primarily by referring for postgraduate studies at IIE those “natural science graduates who, in the course of their studies at the higher education institutions, have demonstrated impressive academic performance and high level of culture but have no taste or capacity for experimental research work.” The enrollment of a few postgraduate students from the philosophical and historical faculties was also deemed possible, “provided that these persons have manifested particular interest for some field of natural science and have consented to additionally study the field of their interest at the natural science faculties” [7, items 109–110].
4. Conclusion
The programme for the development in the USSR of the history of science, conceived in the end of 1952, had never been implemented to the full and the Soviet history of science failed to “rank first globally”. It was not only due to excessively inflated expectations and hopes but also to fate stepping in. In the spring of the same year, 1952, the USSR Academy of Sciences initiated the creation of the Institute for the History of Technology under the auspices of its Division of Technical Sciences by merging the Commission for the History of Technology (KIT), Central Polytechnic Museum, and Central Polytechnic Library. This issue had already been reviewed at the USSR Council of Ministers but these plans fell through at the last moment. And then the initiator of this project, Deputy Chair of KIT V. A. Golubtsova, Candidate of Technical Sciences and the wife of the powerful Malenkov, managed to have IIE transformed into the Institute for the History of Science and Technology of the USSR Academy of Sciences. Thus the forcible merger of the history of science with the history of technology occurred in September 1953, which propelled the history of science into a decade-long crisis.

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