

Science as Co-Producer of Soviet Polity

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Abstract

The cultural authority of science reached its peak during the period of high modernity. Various countries and societies partook in this trend, but it found its ultimate expression within the communist, Soviet-type polity. This article discusses the cultural underpinnings of this characteristic feature of Soviet society and examines one of its major ramifications, the key role of scientific actors in creating and shaping the basic features of Soviet civilization. Examples illustrate this role in different time periods: from building the foundations of the Soviet state in the 1920s, through determining the major vectors of Stalinist economic expansion and industrialization, to designing some key priorities of post-Stalin reforms and the later perestroika. Different types of actors drew their power and inspiration from the cultural authority of science- "bourgeois specialists," amateur enthusiasts, engineers-turned-politicians, and nuclear physicists. Some of the important legacies they left behind continue to persist today, even if often misattributed, so that a historical analysis is required to uncover their original roots.

Key words: cultural authority, science and modernity, Soviet polity, experts and political advice

In a 1936 letter to his Danish colleague Niels Bohr, the physicist and inventor Piotr Kapitza drew a figurative description of the relationship between science and politicians in the Soviet Union. The state, according to Kapitza, treated science like its most beloved pet or a hot-house plant, providing great amounts of attention, efforts, and resources otherwise scarcely available for the rest of society. At the same time, state officials often did not quite master the proper way of taking care of their darling, sometimes inflicting great pain.¹ Kapitza had personal reasons to complain about being wronged. Albeit a Soviet citizen, he had been developing an illustrious academic career in Great Britain until 1934, when the Soviet government abruptly and unexpectedly withdrew the permission to work abroad that he had enjoyed for thirteen years. Deprived of his newly built and richly equipped Cambridge laboratory, Kapitza was forced to remain within the Soviet Union, could no longer travel abroad, and had to restart his experimental research from scratch.

Yet Kapitza also felt that the personal injustice he suffered should not make him blind to the outlandish favors that the regime was granting science and its representatives, including himself. After all, a new modern institute was being built for him in Moscow

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¹ Piotr Kapitza to Niels Bohr, 20 October 1936 (Niels Bohr Archive, Copenhagen).