

# De-Stalinization in Soviet Physiology

The rehabilitation of L. A. Orbeli provides an example of historical unwriting in Soviet science.

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Apart from its implications for the struggle now in open evidence within the Communist world, the recent flare-up of public denunciation of Stalin, symbolized by the abrupt removal of Stalin's body from the company of Lenin's, represents only one of the more dramatic episodes in a more general process of de-Stalinization that has been under way in the Soviet Union for some time. In the world of Soviet physiology this has led to actions ranging from attacks on the "cult of the individual" (1) and academic versions thereof (2, 3) to suppression of all mention of Stalin and the excesses of his period.

A consequence of this suppression is a witting falsification of the historical record in the physiological literature through deliberate omission of known pertinent facts or an unabashed tampering with the printed word through re-publication in "condensed" or "editorially revised" form. As an example of these two practices, it is instructive to consider the case of the physiologist, L. A. Orbeli, to whom was entrusted the "exploitation of the [scientific] heritage, bequeathed by I. P. Pavlov" at the latter's death in 1936.

## Attacks on Orbeli

Shortly after Lysenko was declared winner of the scientific "debate" on heredity by the Communist Party in 1948 (4), a meeting of the presidium of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences was called to render total homage and obeisance to the victor. During this meet-

ing Orbeli was subjected to vitriolic attack for his "apoliticism and objectivism" in matters of science as well as for other sins, and at its conclusion a decree was issued depriving Orbeli of his important post of secretary of the Academy's Division of Biological Sciences and initiating a sharp decline in his scientific fortunes (5, 6).

Two years later came further developments. Seemingly all at once, Orbeli was assigned major blame for the widespread failure to hew to the Pavlovian line and "properly to exploit the Pavlovian heritage," was accordingly stripped of his directorship of two major physiological institutes, and, as an authoritative figure, was put into eclipse. This was managed at the joint session in 1950 of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences and the U.S.S.R. Academy of Medical Sciences, called to establish an official Pavlovism for physiology and related disciplines (7-10)—a development adumbrated the year before in the various pronouncements attendant upon the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Pavlov's birth (8, 11). It was here that Orbeli, in fact a loyal defender of the "Pavlovian direction" (12), was defamed and degraded as an "ignorant" and "distorter" of Pavlov by a powerful rival physiologist, K. M. Bykov. The latter, along with A. G. Ivanov-Smolenskii, served as keynoter at this joint session (13) and shortly thereafter took over directorship of a newly created physiological institute, based in no small measure on resources acquired through abolition of the two institutes, formerly directed by Orbeli (14).

The new persecution of Orbeli, publicly initiated by Bykov, was continued at subsequent meetings of the Scientific Council on Problems of the Physio-

logical Theory of Academician I. P. Pavlov, set up under the direction and chairmanship of the selfsame Bykov to monitor the implementation of the newly enthroned Pavlovism (15, 16). In articles (17), in book reviews and criticisms thereof (18), and at meetings called to explain the meaning of the "joint session of the two academies" and to discuss its decisions and those of the aforementioned scientific council (19), Orbeli came under sedulous attack which, on occasion, did not shrink from denigration of his character (9, 10).

Yet, when Orbeli died in December 1958, in the official accounts of his life and work that appeared in six major journals there was not a word about his travail and traduction (20); there had been not a word in articles hailing his 75th birthday the year before (21); and not a word in historical articles summarizing important developments in Soviet physiology since the revolution on the occasion of its 40th anniversary (22). Everything was as if there had been no crises in Orbeli's life, as if his work had continued without dramatic interruption or vicious hectoring. This in spite of the fact that it was only in 1955 that Orbeli had reemerged as an honored participant in scientific meetings (23) and that it was only in 1956, with his appointment as director of the newly constituted Sechenov Institute of Evolutionary Physiology, that he had been restored to a post commensurate with his past standing in the Soviet scientific world, after a lapse of 5 to 6 important years, acknowledged in retrospect as shameful for their excesses (2, 3, 6, 24).

The impression of placid continuity in Orbeli's life and career is reinforced by reference to the post-1955 accounts of the life and work of Orbeli's scourge, Bykov, on the occasions of the latter's 70th birthday in 1956 and his death in 1959. In these accounts there appears no reference to Bykov's leading role in the 1950 "joint session of the two academies," Bykov being noted, if at all, as only "one of the chief speakers" there. Mention of the joint session itself is, with one debatable exception (14), either scanty or lacking, while almost no mention is made of the powerful Scientific Council on Problems of the Physiological Theory of Academician I. P. Pavlov, which under Bykov's direction hounded Orbeli for not toeing the Pavlovian line (14, 16, 25). Thus, several all-important years—in fact the

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crowning years—of Bykov's life are passed over or reduced to minor significance, apparently in order to avoid stirring up vivid recollections of the disagreeable excesses of a violent period in Soviet physiology and to present instead a picture of innocuous harmony and steady development in the Pavlovian direction. In other words, it is as if Soviet physiology had never experienced the whirlwind that it did.

### Falsification of Sources

The deliberate omissions in such writings are serious. Equally serious is the falsification resulting from impairment of the dependability of the printed word. In December 1949, for example, Orbeli read a paper, on the dialectical method in physiological research, at a scientific meeting convened in celebration of Stalin's 70th birthday. The paper, with its fulsome tributes to Stalin's genius, was published soon thereafter and constitutes the public record of what Orbeli at that time reported himself as having said (26). But it also represents the kind of thing which Orbeli, were he alive today, would probably like to wish out of existence. This was posthumously accomplished for him in 1961 with the publication of the first volume of selected works from Orbeli's fund of writings (27). According to an editorial footnote, the aforementioned paper is reproduced in this volume "in condensed form," but a line-by-line comparison of the reproduction with the original reveals not so much condensation as a purging of all references to Stalin along with some rewriting to camouflage the operation. In all, there are introduced into the original text 18 changes, ranging from deletion of phrases to deletion of whole paragraphs.

Thus, the "coryphaei of philosophy and science, Lenin and Stalin" become merely "Lenin and his companions-in-arms"; the "two remarkable works of I. V. Stalin" on which Orbeli bases his discussion turn, with considerable contextual deletion, into the "classical works of Marxism-Leninism"; reference to the "exclusive attention which our dear leader Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin bestows on the development of

our science" simply disappears, as do lines such as those which "wish many, many years of life and health to Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin, the leader of our life and that of our whole country, the leader of our scientific views who has revealed to us in his remarkable creations how to evaluate correctly and to control correctly that path along which we [as scientists] travel" (27).

The cited deletions show how far, indeed, de-Stalinization has gone. But for those interested in understanding the past, present, and probable future course of physiology in the Soviet Union, de-Stalinization, as now practiced, poses problems. For example, it obscures appreciation of the Stalinist pressures behind past writing, for purging this writing of its unwholesome features impedes recognition that what seems to have been written straightforwardly and with conviction was in fact not written freely or was not of autonomous origin—something that becomes evident only when the unaltered original is studied. Obviously, this complicates the task of arriving at an accurate picture of historical developments and possibly of present trends in Soviet physiology.

The researcher in the area of Soviet physiology is accordingly warned to exercise a proper caution in his use of source materials. This means that the appearance of hitherto unpublished lectures, notes, and so on and the publication of historical accounts of one kind or other, however welcome, should be received with circumspection and that, wherever possible, original sources should be utilized rather than sources rendered more accessible through republication. In view of the foregoing discussion, it means also that the usual reliance on the relatively limited range of source materials, justifiable under ordinary circumstances, must be superseded by research practices which take into account the need to explore and collate more extensive and diverse materials.

### References and Notes

1. A possible translation of this phrase is "cult of personality," as it is frequently rendered. This *cult* is a euphemism meaning glorification of the person of a Communist leader; in Stalin's case such glorification took place against a background of terroristic purges and other excesses. The charge of personality-cultism was first leveled against

- Stalin by Khrushchev in 1956 at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party and again more openly by him in 1961 at the 22nd Congress.
2. Zh. Vysshei Nervnoi Deyatel'nosti im. I. P. Pavlova 6, 508 (1956).
3. Fiziol. Zh. SSSR 42, 529 (1956).
4. C. Zirkle, *Death of a Science in Russia* (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1949).
5. *Izvestiya* 32, No. 203, 2 (1948).
6. L. G. Leibson, in L. A. Orbeli, [Selected Works] (U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 1961), vol. 1.
7. [Scientific Session, Devoted to Problems of the Physiological Theory of Academician I. P. Pavlov: Stenographic Report] (U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 1950); I. D. London, *Science* 114, 227 (1951); —, *Bull. At. Scientists* 8, 70 (1952); —, *ibid.* 13, 169 (1957).
8. I. D. London, "Psychiatry and psychology," in *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia on Russia and the Soviet Union* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1961).
9. Yu. Zhdanov, *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 36, 387 (1950).
10. —, *Pravda* 51, No. 209 (1950).
11. L. A. Orbeli et al., *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 35, 1 (1949).
12. A. I. Karamyan, *ibid.* 36, 32 (1950); L. A. Orbeli, *Priroda* 27, No. 4, 34 (1938); —, [Problems of Higher Nervous Activity] (U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 1949).
13. *Scientific Session on the Physiological Teachings of Academician I. P. Pavlov* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1951).
14. A. V. Solov'ev, Zh. Vysshei Nervnoi Deyatel'nosti im. I. P. Pavlova 9, 637 (1959).
15. *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 39, 261 (1953).
16. I. D. London, *Science* 116, 23 (1952).
17. D. A. Biryukov, *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 37, 6 (1951); K. M. Bykov, *ibid.* 37, 389 (1951); E. G. Vatsuro and A. A. Shibano, *ibid.* 37, 528 (1951); —, *ibid.* 39, 375 (1953).
18. M. Lobashev, Zh. Vysshei Nervnoi Deyatel'nosti im. I. P. Pavlova 3, 316 (1953); D. F. Pletsitsyi, *ibid.* 2 (1952).
19. B. V. Pavlov, *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 37, 385 (1951); *ibid.* 40, 383 (1954).
20. *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 45, 123 (1959); Zh. Vysshei Nervnoi Deyatel'nosti im. I. P. Pavlova 9, 158 (1959); *Dokl. Akad. Nauk SSSR* 124, 503 (1959); *Vestn. Akad. Nauk SSSR* 29, No. 2, 58 (1959); *Vestn. Akad. Med. Nauk SSSR* 14, No. 3, 87 (1959); *Med. Rabotn.* 21, No. 99, 4 (1958).
21. A. G. Ginetinskii et al., *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 43, 595 (1957); A. A. Volokhov, Zh. Vysshei Nervnoi Deyatel'nosti im. I. P. Pavlova 7, 629 (1957).
22. I. S. Beritov, *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 43, 1021 (1957); *ibid.* 43, 1005 (1957); I. V. Danilov and P. S. Kupalov, *ibid.* 43, 1008 (1957).
23. D. A. Biryukov and F. P. Vedyayev, *ibid.* 42, 612 (1956); L. A. Orbeli, Zh. Vysshei Nervnoi Deyatel'nosti im. I. P. Pavlova 5, 145 (1955); —, *ibid.* 5, 765 (1955); —, *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 42, 9 (1956); B. V. Pavlov and F. P. Vedyayev, Zh. Vysshei Nervnoi Deyatel'nosti im. I. P. Pavlova 7, 318 (1957); F. P. Vedyayev, *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 42, 129 (1956).
24. Without identification of his traducers, an allusion to Orbeli's fall from grace and subsequent humiliation appeared in 1961 in a biographical essay by L. G. Leibson (6), along with words of praise for his courage and steadfastness in the midst of adversity—the first published acknowledgment since Orbeli's comeback in 1955.
25. *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 42, 135 (1956); *ibid.* 45, 1 (1959); I. T. Kurtzin, Zh. Vysshei Nervnoi Deyatel'nosti im. I. P. Pavlova 6, 346 (1956); *Vestn. Akad. Nauk SSSR* 29, No. 7, 73 (1959); *Med. Rabotn.* 22, No. 39, 4 (1959).
26. L. A. Orbeli, *Fiziol. Zh. SSSR* 36, 5 (1950).
27. —, [Selected Works] (U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 1961), vol. 1.