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These twisted times: The Russian delegation to the 1931 Congress and the battle for Russian science in the 1930s

THERE EXISTS A LIMITED BUT resourceful historiography of the antecedence of the Russian delegation to the 1931 Second International Congress of the History of Science and Technology. Notably, Loren Graham, Paul Josephson, Pablo Huerga Malcon and Gary Werskey have developed various formative themes for the delegation that indicate the plurality of interpretations possible when considering the Russian contributions to the congress. Perhaps the most important feature is the recognition that a heterodoxy existed in conceptions of Marxism, dialectics and the role of politics in science and the history of science.

The delegation represented much of the genuine leadership of Russian science in 1931, alongside those who were to wield an important influence on the future of Russian science in the 1930s. While engaging the congress, subtle fault lines appeared in the Russian delegation's approach and political perspective. This paper traces these fault lines into the period subsequent to the congress and the social environment of Russia on the eve of the Great Terror. During this period, a sequence of ebbs and flows occurred in the attempts to control and repress Russian science, revealing a pattern of deliberate but careful political activity among the various members of the Russian delegation.

This political activity was conducted in the extraordinarily dangerous environment of the attempt to consolidate Stalinist rule and the delegation, mirroring Russian science as a whole, fragmented and entered political combat against each other. There was also important alliances, born during or shortly before the 1931 congress, that sought to defend the relative autonomy of Russian science from Stalinist philosophers, ideologues and the nomenclatura.

This paper outlines some of these alliances, the fault lines of the congress and the continuities and shifts in the political perspectives of those involved. The result is a radically different comprehension of the meaning and significance of the delegation to the 1931 congress.

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