

The Institute of Genetics from 1939 to 1940: Reconsidering Lysenko's Intervention in Soviet Genetics

Hirofumi SAITO*

Abstract

This paper takes up some cases of resistance to Lysenko developing inside and around the Institute of Genetics of the USSR Academy of Sciences from 1939 to 1940. Based on these cases, it reconsiders Lysenko's intervention in the Institute of Genetics, offering a revision of previous interpretations of it. It thus presents a new picture of Lysenko's relationship with the Institute of Genetics before Nikolai Vavilov's arrest. Lysenko's intervention in the Institute of Genetics was not noticed immediately. Geneticists of the Institute of Genetics were still more influential than biologists of the agrobiolgy school of Lysenko around April 1940. So Lysenko "stroved to" establish his own base in the Institute of Genetics, causing resistance from geneticists.

Key words: The Institute of Genetics, The USSR Academy of Sciences, Lysenko, Vavilov, Soviet genetics

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of this paper

The year 1939 to 1940 marked the climax of the prolonged 1930s genetics controversy between agrobiologists, headed by Trofim Denisovich Lysenko, and geneticists, headed by distinguished botanist and geneticist, Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov. During this period, attacks from Lysenko's followers against Soviet geneticists intensified, and the Lysenko school began to intervene in genetics research institutes. The conclusion of this period is well known for its tragedy: the arrest of Vavilov, who had been the Director of two main genetics institutes during the 1930s, the Institute of Genetics (IGEN) of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the All-Union Institute of Plant Breeding (VIR).¹ Many articles and books on the history of Soviet biology faithfully tell of Vavilov's brave resistance to Lysenko's persistent attempts to destroy his reputation and threaten his directorship. This telling creates a strong image of Vavilov as a "martyr" for scientific truth.

Many writings, including some basic historical studies on Soviet genetics,² connect

* Research Associate, Tokyo Institute of Technology. E-mail: saito.h.ag@m.titech.ac.jp

¹ Respectively, the abbreviations of *Institut Genetiki* and *Vsesoyuznyi Institut Rastenievodstva*.

² For the general history of Soviet genetics, my study owes much to the following previous studies: