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Learning and Forgetting About Lysenko in (Post)Stalinist Yugoslavia

Because of the Yugoslav-Soviet conflict, precipitated by the Cominform resolution in June 1948 – just a month before Lysenko’s victory over the “formal genetics” at the infamous August session of the VASKhNIL – the reception of agrobiolgy in Yugoslavia was presumed to be somehow exceptional, but it remained an unknown piece in the intricate mosaic of Lysenkoism as a global affair. Despite this tectonic shift, certain elements of the Michurinist campaign that culminated in 1948-49 were visible in Yugoslavia, too, where Michurinist biology was systematically propagated already since 1945 as part of the attempts to introduce Soviet-styled scientific structures. Largely (and strangely) unsupervised by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and facing changes in the channels of communication with the USSR through which they had been learning about “Soviet Creative Darwinism,” Yugoslav biologists and agronomists became particularly creative in negotiating its intertwined aspects: socialist, Soviet, and “purely scientific.” The lines between the pro- and anti-Lysenkoist camps were blurred and ever-changing. Even without dramatic political resolutions marking either the beginning or the end of Lysenkoism in Yugoslavia, the growing scientific community was well aware of its political implications. This paper examines the strategies that Yugoslav biologists and agronomists employed: reading Lysenko outside the Stalinist framework, separating the deviant Stalinist from sound materialist science, recognizing the moment when it became opportune to present Lysenkoism as inherently Stalinist, and using the controversy to advance their careers in a period when modern scientific structures in Yugoslavia were just being established.