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Efroimson, Vladimir Pavlovich

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EFROIMSON, VLADIMIR PAVLOVICH (1908-1989). Geneticist, seminal figure in the development of population and medical genetics, author of works on sociobiology and the genetics of human ethical and aesthetic behavior.

The son of a successful banker and a nurse, Efroimson was born in the Lubianka apartment building at the center of Moscow that would later become the Soviet Union's most notorious prison and the site of his own interrogations by secret police. He completed his primary education in an elite bilingual German school and read voraciously on his own. As an adult, he was known for his fluent command of six languages and broad erudition in a number of fields, especially world

history. He entered Moscow University just before his seventeenth birthday, and within a few years he had established his reputation as a gifted researcher in genetics, the field he pursued the rest of his life.

Efroimson received his first scientific training in the Department of Zoology under Nikolai Koltsov (1872-1940). In 1925 Soviet researchers were active in international efforts to advance understanding of hereditary mechanisms, population genetics, and the effect of radiation on mutation. In 1929 Efroimson was expelled from the university for protesting the political persecution of his mentor Sergei Chetverikov (1880-1959).

Early Soviet preeminence in genetic research was destroyed when the theory and practice of Mendelian genetics fell into ideological disfavor under Stalin. Because political intrusion into Soviet intellectual life was more sustained and more devastating in genetics than in almost any other branch of science, Efroimson's career was marked by its complicated and often starkly oppositional relationship to Communist Party authorities.

In 1932 Efroimson was arrested on false charges of participating in an anti-Soviet conspiracy and sentenced to three years of brutally hard labor in the Altai region. Just prior to his arrest he devised a mathematical formula estimating the frequency of mutation in humans, based on the premise of equilibrium between spontaneously occurring mutations and the forces of natural selection. Aware of the international significance of his idea, he passed it on to the American geneticist Hermann Muller (1896-1967), a future Nobel laureate then working in Moscow. Muller sent the letter containing the formula to J.B.S. Haldane (1892-1964), who had arrived at a similar idea and published his groundbreaking formula in 1935.

Efroimson returned to civilian life in 1936 as a researcher in the Central Asian Institute of Silk Production in Tashkent. In 1938 he married a fellow biologist, Maria Grigorievna Tsubina (1906-1976), and became stepfather to her daughter. The couple had no children. His doctoral dissertation on the evolution of non-adaptive, correlated traits was based on intensive experimental work in the selective breeding of domestic silk worms. He defended his dissertation in May 1941, one month prior to Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union.

From 1941 to 1945 Efroimson served on the war front as an epidemiologist, medic, and German-speaking spy. During the final march towards Berlin, he sent a formal letter of protest to his commanders, complaining that Russian excesses against the female civilian population of Germany would damage the postwar prestige of the Soviet Union. This protest on behalf of the enemy's rape victims later became the pretext for his second arrest.

After the war Efroimson obtained a teaching position at Kharkov University. As many Soviet geneticists, he strongly opposed the Lamarckian-tinged pseudo-genetics promoted by the politically adroit agronomist Trofim Lysenko (1898-1976). He drafted a 300-page indictment of Lysenko's tactics and falsifications of

data in order to convince party officials that Lysenkoism would bring serious harm to Soviet agriculture.

In 1948 Efroimson's doctoral degree was rescinded and he was fired from his teaching position on the grounds that he translated into Russian and freely disseminated a negative review of Lysenko's work published in America by the emigre Russian geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky (1900-1975). In 1949 Efroimson was arrested and sentenced to eight years of hard labor on charges of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. He was released from prison camp in 1955 and formally rehabilitated in 1956.

As Lysenko's hegemony waned in the 1960s, Efroimson worked strenuously to repair the damage done to Soviet science during its enforced deviation from the international mainstream of genetic research. He resumed research on genetic mechanisms of immunity at Moscow's Institute of Vaccines and Serums. During the five years he spent in the institute, he wrote two foundational textbooks, *Introduction to Medical Genetics* (Vvedenie v meditsinikuiu genetiku, 1964) and *Immunogenetics* (Immunogenetika, 1971).

In 1967 Efroimson was appointed Director of the Department of Genetics in the Psychiatric Institute of the Soviet Ministry of Health. His studies of psychiatric disorders linked to schizophrenia and mania-depression reaffirmed his belief that all manifestations of higher psychic life—including our moral, aesthetic, and intellectual systems –should be investigated from the perspective of evolutionary genetics.

Efroimson's sociobiological views presented a direct challenge to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, which held that human social and cultural behavior was divorced from its evolutionary origins and not amenable to Darwinian or genetic analysis. Therefore, his 1971 article, The Genealogy of Altruism. Ethics from the Perspective of Evolutionary Genetics, created waves of intellectual shock and delight among readers when it was published in the leading liberal journal Novy Mir. In Efroimson's view, using the insights of biology to interpret cultural phenomena provided the framework for a scientific vindication of diversity, pluralism, individual difference, human rights, and ultimately, individual responsibility for one's own actions.

In the last two decades of his life Efroimson wrote voluminously on the intersection of biology and history in the development of human civilization, but all his writings were banned. His posthumously published books *The Genetics of Genius* (Genetika genialnosti, 1998, 2002), *Pedagogy and Genetics* (Pedagogicheskaia genetika, 1998) and *The Genetics of Ethics and Aesthetics* (Genetika etiki i estetiki, 2004) instead became part of the very different intellectual landscape traversed by a post-Soviet generation of Russians.

Efroimson died at home in Moscow in 1989.

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