

AD MEMORIAM

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Zhores Aleksandrovich Medvedev (14.11.1925–15.11.2018)

Zhores Aleksandrovich Medvedev, a Russian gerontologist and Soviet dissident, died on November 15, 2018 in London. Well-known for his history of T.D. Lysenko's sway over Soviet biology, published under title *The Rise and Fall of T.D. Lysenko* (1969), Medvedev lived in exile in London after having been deprived of his Soviet citizenship in August 1973.

The twin brothers Roy and Zhores Medvedev were born in Tiflis (Tbilisi) on November 14, 1925 in the family of Aleksandr Romanovich Medvedev, a Red Army Commissar and Professor of dialectical and historical materialism at the Leningrad Military-Political Academy. Arrested in August 1938, A.R. Medvedev died in a Gulag camp in the Kolyma in 1941 — an experience that left a deep imprint on his two sons' lives and would condition their anti-Stalinist stance. The German attack on the Soviet Union forced the Medvedev family, which had resettled in Rostov-on-the-Don, to flee to Tbilisi, where Zhores and Roy Medvedev were conscripted for military service in February 1943. Sent to the Taman Peninsula in May 1943, Zhores suffered a serious leg injury, and was demobilized a few months later for invalidity.

In October 1944, Zhores Medvedev started studying biology at the K.A. Timiriazev Agricultural Academy in Moscow. From his early student years, he took an active part in discussions over genetics, siding with his mentor P.M. Zhukovskii, then an adversary of T.D. Lysenko's pseudo-scientific theories on the inheritance of environmentally acquired characteristics. After the famous 1948 VASKhNIL session, marking the victory of Lysenko over his adversaries and banning the study of Mendelian genetics, Medvedev decided to transfer to the faculty of agricultural chemistry and pedology and write his Candidate Dissertation independently, to avoid working on a "Michurinist" theme imposed from above. This strategy succeeded, and in December 1950, he successfully defended his dissertation. After a first position at the Nikita Botanical Garden in Yalta, he worked from 1951 to 1962 at the Timiriazev Academy's department of agricultural chemistry and biochemistry.

In 1954, Medvedev was promoted senior researcher and in 1958, he began his first monograph, *Protein Biosynthesis and Problems of Heredity, Development and Aging*. At the time, important discoveries made by Western scientists in the field of genetics, with the cracking of

the genetic code and further discoveries concerning protein synthesis, placed Lysenko's theories increasingly at odds with scientific developments worldwide. This could not but impact the evaluation of Medvedev's work in the USSR. After encountering difficulties with the publication of his book, a chapter of which dealt with questions of heredity from a "Mendelian" perspective, the biologist began to consider publication in the West. Although a Soviet version was eventually published by a more independent publisher in 1963, the monograph also appeared in English in 1966. This first experience of "tamizdat" publication was an important precedent for Medvedev, and the frustration of facing censorship gave him the impulse to start his polemical work on the history of Lysenkoism, which soon made him famous in scientific circles.

Indeed, by the early 1960s, Medvedev had become acutely aware of the pervasive influence of Lysenko's pseudo-scientific theories on Soviet biology and agronomy, which continued into the Khrushchev era. Rather than refuting Lysenko's theories on a scientific basis, as several samizdat authors had done, he decided to write a history of the phenomenon, insisting on Lysenko's role in the repression of other scientists during the Stalin era. A first version of his manuscript, entitled "Biology and the personality cult," was ready by 1962, and Medvedev circulated it among colleagues to collect comments and additional information. However, this led to the spontaneous dissemination of his work through samizdat, and rapidly, thousands of copies began to circulate throughout the country. As he prepared for a new version of his manuscript, Medvedev was violently denounced in the Soviet press in August 1964. Following Khrushchev's ouster, however, Lysenko's views lost their monopoly, and a publication of Medvedev's study was planned. Yet the ideological winds changed again rapidly, and censorship eventually stood in the way of publication. Medvedev felt he had no other choice than to send his manuscript to the West, and with the assistance of his Western colleague Michael Lerner, *The Rise and Fall of T.D. Lysenko* appeared in 1969.

After leaving the Timiriazev Academy in 1962 as a result of pressures from his hierarchy, Zhores Medvedev had become head of the Laboratory of Molecular Radiobiology in the science-city of Obninsk, in the Kaluga region. This change enabled him to shift from experiments on plants to animals and thus move forward in the field of gerontology, which had interested him for a long time. In Obninsk's fertile atmosphere of intellectual ferment, he not only did not scale down his dissident activities, but even pursued them even more actively. Since 1964, the biologist had been friends with the writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and had tried to help him move to Obninsk by supporting his wife's application for a position of chemist. However, the authorities had blocked this move and regarded with suspicion Medvedev's connection to the dissident writer. In early 1969, Medvedev had also actively helped his twin brother Roy send his manuscript on the history of Stalinism *Let History Judge* abroad. Combined with the publication of his own work in the West, these circumstances led to Zhores Medvedev's dismissal from his position in early 1969.

Far from being intimidated by this measure, the biologist prepared two new manuscripts for publication. Based on his own frustrating experience, they dealt with the barriers that the Soviet regime placed on international exchanges among scientists and on the KGB's violation of the secret of correspondence. Although these works were still unpublished manuscripts, the authorities expected that the author would soon send them to the West or release them into samizdat. In May 1970, the local authorities of the Kaluga region where Medvedev lived arranged for his psychiatric incarceration for "incipient schizophrenia" and "paranoid delusions of reforming society." However, an active campaign on his behalf with the support of Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sakharov, and prominent scientists and intellectuals, led to his liberation nineteen days later. Fearing an international scandal, the authorities released him and even

found him new employment in a laboratory in Borovsk. This episode, which the two brothers recounted in a book published a year later under the title *A Question of Madness* (1971), turned Medvedev into a symbol of Soviet political abuse of psychiatry.

The biologist was thus increasingly becoming a thorn in the Soviet authorities' flesh. In June 1972, Medvedev decided to attend the International Congress of Gerontology taking place in Kiev. Although he had been invited by the organizers, the Soviet hosts had removed his name from the program, and as he tried to enter the conference's venue, he was arrested by plainclothesmen and sent back to Moscow by force. It was in this context that Medvedev unexpectedly received a positive response from the Soviet authorities to his application for a one-year stay at the National Institute for Medical Research in London. In the past, despite actively lobbying all possible instances, he had been unable to secure the authorization to attend conferences abroad and to leave for a longer research stay in the West. This sudden change of policy was suspicious, and Medvedev certainly had his doubts upon leaving, especially after another dissident, the human rights activist Valerii Chalidze, was deprived of his citizenship while on tour in the United States, in December 1972. Nevertheless, Medvedev left the USSR with his wife and younger son in January 1973 with the firm intention to return. He hoped that if he refrained from any political declarations in the West, the authorities would have no reason to prevent him from returning. Still, he met the same fate as Chalidze in August 1973 and was forced to remain in exile.

From then on, Medvedev made full use of the liberties offered by his new situation. At the National Institute for Medical Research, he was soon offered a position, and despite some frustrations caused by the various regulations imposed on scientific activities in the West, he was able to take full advantage of the broad scientific network he had formed over the years to pursue his research, working along with his wife, Margarita Medvedeva. But he also became a public figure, whose comments on Soviet politics and dissent were widely publicized. He actively collaborated with his brother and became his representative in the West, managing his finances and book contracts. His assistance allowed Roy Medvedev to thrive as an independent historian living on Western book royalties. Together, they collaborated over a biography of Nikita Khrushchev's years in power. In the 1970s and 1980s, Zhores Medvedev authored biographies of Iurii Andropov and Mikhail Gorbachev. To publish in London *Twentieth Century*, a periodical his brother edited in samizdat in Moscow, he founded a small editorial house in 1976, but the financial burden proved unsustainable.

The biologist also repeatedly toured the United States, giving conferences on gerontology, on Soviet science and Soviet dissent. In 1974, he testified in front of the US Congress Fulbright Commission, in the context of debates over the Jackson and Vanik Amendment, a piece of legislation conditioning American-Soviet trade on an increase of Jewish emigration from the USSR. The Medvedev brothers opposed the Amendment, fearing its negative impact on détente, but their stance raised incomprehension among their fellow dissidents. After 1973, the Medvedevs' relationship with Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn became adversarial, if not confrontational. During one of his conference tours, in 1976, Zhores Medvedev revealed to the world the existence of the 1957 Kyshtym nuclear accident in the Urals, and in 1979 he published the first research on the subject. After the Chernobyl catastrophe, he also authored a book on the consequences of the accident, and repeatedly traveled to the site, starting from 1990. In changed circumstances, in July 1989, he was invited to testify about the Kyshtym accident in front of a commission of the Supreme Soviet.

Zhores Medvedev's Soviet citizenship was restored in 1990, but he chose to remain in London, having acquired British citizenship in 1984. Retired in November 1991, he continued

to publish his historical and scientific research until the last days of his life. His very extensive memoirs, spanning the 1960s to the 2000s, were serialized from 2011 to 2017 in the Ukrainian weekly *Ezhenedel'nik 2000* under the title “A dangerous profession” and appeared posthumously as a book in March 2019.

Barbara Martin

Жорес Александрович Медведев (14.11.1925–15.11.2018)

Жорес Александрович Медведев, российский геронтолог и советский диссидент, умер 15 ноября 2018 года в Лондоне. Дается краткий очерк его жизни, исследовательской и писательской деятельности.