

РЕЦЕНЗИИ И АННОТАЦИИ

DOI 10.24412/2076-8176-2025-3-177-180

Fertile Ground: Franco-Russian Scientific Cooperation in Crop Science during the Interwar Period¹

MARK B. TAUGER

West Virginia University, USA

The review examines E.S. Khablova’s monograph on scientific cooperation between the USSR and France in plant breeding and agronomy during the interwar period (1920s–1930s). It discusses the sociocultural and geopolitical conditions of scientific exchange, the activities of leading research institutions in both countries, and the role of prominent scientists (N.I. Vavilov, V.K. Agafonov, D.N. Pryanishnikov, etc.) in developing international cooperation. Special attention is paid to the application of French colonial experience to subtropical crop development in southern USSR regions, as well as major scientific expeditions of this period.

Keywords: history of Science, Soviet-French scientific relations, plant breeding, agronomy, interwar period, N.I. Vavilov.

This book is a very interesting and informative study of the interactions between Soviet and French agricultural specialists during the 1920s–1930s. One of her main points is that this cooperation proceeded on the basis of personal relations between scientists, aided by “institutional-intermediaries” — relations between scientific institutions in the two countries that promoted interaction independently of official politics.

As Khablova explains in her introduction, the book is based on a wide range of sources, including both scientific publications and memoirs by scientists in both countries, archives from both countries that included extensive correspondence between scientists as well as

¹ Рецензия на монографию: *Хаблова Е.С.* Благодатная почва: российско-французское сотрудничество в области растениеводства в период Interbellum. М.: РАН, Янус-К, 2024, 228 с.

governmental materials, and a variety of sources from museums and research institutions. Khablova admits that on a few topics she does not have sufficient evidence in the sources, but overall the study is well documented and reliable (pp. 14–21).

Her introduction also discusses the pre-existing literature on Soviet–French scientific interaction, which shows that while there has been no comprehensive study of this cooperation, there are still many useful articles and books on specific topics, including some by some of the scientists involved in that cooperation (pp. 9–12).

Her first chapter, on the “socio-cultural conditions” that underlay the development of this scientific cooperation, begins by describing how Soviet official policy looked down on “capitalist science” but still recognized that Soviet scientists need to know what capitalist scientists discovered to avoid duplicating their efforts (pp. 24–25). The political relations between the two countries were unstable in this period, partly because the Soviets refused to pay back the French for French investments in Russia that were lost because of revolutionary events (pp. 27–28).

The scientists, especially the Soviets, were very interested in this cooperation, partly because they had a long history of working with French scientists, going back to the 18th century, and because the Soviet scientists were very aware of their need to learn about western scientific research and incorporate its findings in their own work. The Soviet scientists did not share the official policy’s condescension toward “capitalist science,” so while the political relations were unstable, the scientific relations were strong and growing. Soviet agricultural specialists also had a particular interest in scientific work conducted in French colonies around the Mediterranean that dealt with subtropical plants. The Soviet specialists had to deal with such plants in Central Asia and the Caucasus (pp. 37–41ff).

This first chapter provides a remarkable background to this scientific collaboration by two detailed sections listing and describing agricultural research institutions in France and the USSR (pp. 48–70). These discussions also show how deeply rooted these institutions were in their respective countries, and how much they supported scientific research. The French institutions also included agricultural companies, such as the large firm Vilmorin-Andrieux et Cie, which did extensive work breeding new varieties, and with which the Soviet scientist Nikolai Vavilov worked extensively (p. 13). This was another example of how Soviet scientists did not follow the government’s condescension toward “capitalist science.”

In chapter 2, “time of change,” Khablova focuses on many French scientists and their work with Soviet scientists in France and the USSR. At least one of these French scientists — V.K. Agafonov — was actually a Russian émigré who became a leading French soil scientist and worked with other Russian emigres in France (p. 81). Khablova shows how productively and respectfully these specialists worked with their Soviet counterparts, cited their work, and contributed to their work in the USSR. They also helped each other on research expeditions, including Vavilov in his travels around the Mediterranean in 1926–1927, and the French researcher André-Georges Haudricourt, who travelled widely in the USSR in 1934–1935 to learn about Soviet research projects (pp. 118–130). Based on his travels and meetings with Vavilov and other Soviet scientists, Haudricourt concluded that French genetics was lagging behind, and he also spent 20 years writing a book about “ethnobotany,” an innovative subject in large part inspired by his Soviet travels (pp. 127–128, 189–190).

In her third chapter, Khablova provides a “panorama” of the main types of French–Soviet cooperation during the interwar years. Her examples include two international conferences held in the USSR in 1927 and 1930, which included not only papers and scientific discussions but also celebratory dinners, trips to museums, films, and other entertainment,

and tours of nearby cities and agricultural institutes. These events, of course, were partly meant as propaganda to spread positive impressions of the USSR (pp. 133–143). Her examples also include visits to France by major scientists, like Vavilov, Prianshnikov, Fliaksberger and others, who often used information they acquired on these trips to write substantial studies (pp. 143–154). She also discussed exchanges of literature, but this aspect of French-Soviet cooperation was less successful because the Soviets did not allocate enough finances in valyuta to cover the costs of the French books, and the French publishers were mostly unwilling to send books at no cost. Soviet libraries, such as the VASKhNiL library, however, did continue to receive many French agricultural periodicals, and Soviet scientists in France bought many books to give to Soviet libraries (pp. 155–169). Finally, the largest and most important category of cooperation was the exchange of plants and seeds, which scientists on both sides promoted and grew to include many thousands of samples (pp. 170–182).

Khablova's conclusion provides very good summaries of her main points, and draws important conclusions, especially that "the scientific collaboration between the USSR and France played an important role in the development of agronomy in both countries" (p. 192). She also ended with a paragraph encouraging further work on several aspects of this history (pp. 192–193).

Overall, her study is a very positive and optimistic story, and to some extent I feel that it was overly positive. The reason I feel that is that the interwar decades were also period of serious crises in Soviet history and intermittent harsh attacks by the government on many social groups, including some scientists. One of the topics that would deserve further work, which she did not mention in her last paragraph, could be the effects of Soviet repression on these scientific exchanges. Nevertheless, this is a very well researched and well-written study that can serve as the basis for further work on Soviet scientists' international collaboration.

Рецензия на книгу Е.С. Хабловой «Благодатная почва: российско-французское сотрудничество в области растениеводства в период Interbellum»

МАРК Б. ТАУТЕР

Университет Западной Виргинии, США

Рецензия посвящена монографии Е.С. Хабловой о научном сотрудничестве СССР и Франции в области растениеводства и агрономии в период между двумя мировыми войнами (1920–1930-е гг.). Рассматриваются социокультурные и геополитические условия научного обмена, деятельность ведущих исследовательских учреждений обеих стран, роль выдающихся ученых (Н.И. Вавилова, В.К. Агафонова, Д.Н. Прянишникова и др.) в развитии международной кооперации. Особое внимание уделяется использованию французского колониального опыта для развития субтропических культур в южных регионах СССР, а также крупным научным экспедициям этого периода.

Ключевые слова: история науки, советско-французские научные связи, растениеводство, агрономия, межвоенный период, Н.И. Вавилов.