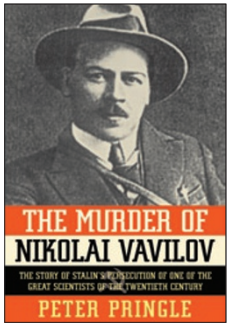


Famed biologist lost to Stalin's terror



The Murder of Nikolai Vavilov: The Story of Stalin's Persecution of One of the Great Scientists of the Twentieth Century

By Peter Pringle

Simon & Schuster, 2008
370 pp., hardcover, \$26
ISBN 978-0743264983

Reviewed by Vadim Birstein

Peter Pringle's new biography of Nikolai Vavilov is a welcome addition to the primary English sources on this outstanding Soviet botanist and geneticist—Zhores Medvedev's *The Rise and Fall of T. D. Lysenko* (1969), Mark Popovsky's *The Vavilov Affair* (1984) and Valery Soyfer's *Lysenko and the Tragedy of Soviet Science* (1994).

The biography begins with the 1905 revolution in Moscow, when Vavilov, the grandson of a Russian serf and the son of a man who rose from extremely humble beginnings to become a wealthy textile trader, was 18 years old. It goes on to describe Vavilov's attendance at the Petrovka Academy, his first trips to St. Petersburg and Europe and his scientific expeditions to the Pamirs, Afghanistan, Abyssinia, the Far East, and Central and South America. These trips resulted in the creation of a unique collection of plant seeds at Vavilov's All-Union Institute of Plant Industry in Leningrad, the formulation of his law of homologous series and the discovery of the centers of origin of cultivated plants. Pringle, a journalist, explains Vavilov's scientific achievements quite well, making his book the best source in English for information on Vavilov's scientific career. The author also describes Vavilov's numerous contacts with Russian and foreign scientists, the main reason why Vavilov was under secret surveillance by the Soviet political police, the OGPU (later the NKVD), from the 1920s on.

The second part of the book focuses on Vavilov's fall from Josef Stalin's favor, which eventually led to Vavilov's arrest, and the rise of Trofim Lysenko, an uneducated agronomist whose crackpot prescriptions for quick agricultural gains appealed to Stalin's desire for simple solutions. Pringle convincingly shows that Lysenko, despite his later protests to the contrary, was personally involved in the destruction of Vavilov, from which he gained a great deal. In 1938, Lysenko was appointed president of the Agricultural Academy, which was created by Vavilov in 1929. Vavilov was demoted to vice president, and after Vavilov's arrest on August 6, 1940, Lysenko became director of Vavilov's Institute of Genetics in Moscow. In May 1941, Lysenko

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personally signed off on a list of NKVD-selected experts who wrote a report supporting the trumped up charges against Vavilov.

All these chapters are vividly written. Unfortunately, numerous small errors detract from the narrative. For instance, the city of Bukhara is located in Uzbekistan, not Tajikistan, and in 1927 Lithuania was an independent country and not a part of the Soviet Union. In chapter 27, more serious problems arise. This chapter, about the NKVD investigation and Vavilov's trial, is too short and contains serious mistakes. For example, Pringle identifies the NKVD officer Lev Shvartzman as "head of the Chief Economic Department," whereas the investigation documents say he was deputy head of the Investigation Department. Also, he incorrectly writes that Aleksandr Khvat, NKVD investigator, "staged face-to-face meetings" between Vavilov and Konstantin Flyaksberger ("Flyaksberg" in the book), Leonid Govorov and Georgy Karpechenko. In fact, Flyaksberger was arrested in Leningrad and investigated in the city of Zlatoust, while, in addition to Govorov and Karpechenko, Vavilov was confronted with Aleksandr Bondarenko, Boris Panshin and Anton Zaporozhets, all of whom Pringle does not mention.

More importantly, Pringle's statement that "there was one option still open to any Soviet citizen. Vavilov could appeal to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet" after Vavilov's "final and not open to appeal" Military Collegium death verdict shows a lack of understanding of the Soviet power structure. These types of death sentences were usually carried out almost immediately. The fact that Vavilov was allowed to appeal to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, a sham organization completely controlled by Stalin, indicates that Stalin had some secret purpose in allowing this reprieve. Stalin seems to have changed his mind, however, because on July 26, 1941, the appeal was denied and Vavilov's colleagues were executed over the next two days.

Vavilov's life was spared as a result of the intervention of Lavrentii Beria, NKVD Commissar, no doubt because Vavilov had become *zachislen za* (attached to) the NKVD special terrorist group headed by the notorious Pavel Sudoplatov, a relationship Pringle does not mention. Tragically, instead of staying with Sudoplatov's group in Moscow during the chaotic days of October 1941, Vavilov was evacuated to the prison in the city of Saratov as one of the convicts on death row.

On June 23, 1942, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet—in reality, Stalin's Politburo—commuted Vavilov's death sentence to 20 years of imprisonment in labor camps. But no medical help was given to the exhausted 55-year-old scientist, and he was placed in the prison hospital only two days before his death of dystrophy. On January 26, 1943, as Pringle concludes, "the eminent plant hunter who had a plan to feed the world had died of starvation."

Despite its problems, Pringle's book is timely and important. After eight years of Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer, as President, Russians are encouraged to remember Stalin as a leader of genius and Beria as a brilliant manager. In May 2008, Yuri Mukhin, the author of popular history books, publicly expressed the attitude of many present-day Russians towards Vavilov: "Vavilov was not a scientist at all... Kikes made up the geneticist Vavilov, and they also used to spit at Lysenko." Books such as *The Murder of Nikolai Vavilov* are becoming crucial for remembering Stalin's victims.