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Professional Culture of the Specialist of the Future

**PAPER TIGER – HIDDEN DRAGON: N.YA. MARR, MARRISM
AND PSEUDOSCIENCE FOR POLITICAL DOCTRINE**

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Abstract

The history of triumph of the Japhetic theory of N.Ya. Marr, which he later made “the new linguistic doctrine”, is one of the most vivid examples of a catastrophe pseudoscientific knowledge recognized by the state can lead to. The purpose of the article is to analyze Marr’s personality in terms of his pseudoscientific theory in the national science, to place the emphasis on its peculiarities and keys to success in 1920s-1930s. The research is based on a wide range of historical sources, including works of N.Ya. Marr, his followers and critics, unpublished materials from The St.-Petersburg branch of archive of Academy of sciences and Handwritten Department of the Institute of history of material culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences. As issues of history of Russian science is often examined under different ideological perspectives and based on certain policies, the author addressed the principles of epistemological neutrality S. Auroux. The author comes to the conclusion that N.Ya. Marr tried to make his utopia reality with the help of Bolsheviks and ambitious, faithful supporters of no principles. The scientist was the only author of his theory, he initiated and promoted it and it was he, who started that grim struggle against his opponents. The analysis of the scientist’s biography and the Japhetic Institute history conducted show that the creator of the Japhetic theory is responsible for a repressions against his opponents and crisis of the humanities (and first and foremost linguistics) of the end of the 1920s-1930s.

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Keywords: Japhetic, marrism, Nicholas Marr, Soviet science, science of 1920’s, the new linguistic doctrine.



1. Introduction

In 1928, Marr jokingly wrote in his article for a wall newspaper that in the future people would speak a “tasty, sonically colourful language” (Marr, 1928). Several years later his strange ideas, fortunately, not so strange, could become dogmatized and incorporated into the study of linguistics in the Soviet Union. Could Marr foresee that? There is no answer. Did he believe in that? We suppose, he did. Much as young advocates of Marxist linguistics supported his theory in the 1930s. Born in the family of an old Scotsman and an uneducated Georgian woman, Nicholas Marr did well at school, but failed to graduate from his upper secondary school with honours due to good marks in logic, Russian and language arts (Student act, 1935). In 1934 his linguistic theory was declared the only genuine Marxist and on the day of his funeral in Leningrad all school classes were canceled.

2. Problem Statement

Scientists throughout the world study Marr’s works and address the issue of his role in the national humanities history (Sidorchuk, 2017). The works of philologists (Alpatov, 1991; Alpatov, 1993; Bazylev & Neroznak, 2001; Dobrenko, 2013) carry strong criticism of Marrism, while archeologists, historians and specialists in library science (Kaganovich, 2007; Selivanov, 2007) emphasize Marr’s enormous contribution to the humanities, and mention his unique management talent. In our opinion, this controversy can be explained by the fact that promotion of Marrism led to the most tragic consequences in linguistics, whereas in other disciplines of the humanities his ideas were less influential. In this research paper we assume that the scientist’s linguistic theory is unscientific and its triumph is a vivid example of a catastrophe pseudoscientific knowledge recognized by the state can lead to. The “paper tiger” turned out to be a dragon demanding sacrifice.

3. Research Questions

The relevance of the study due to the fact that the relationship between science and government in the transitional period of the 1920s in contemporary science investigated not complete and biased. In this regard, this article is aimed at disclosure of such question of why and how the activities of Nicholas Marr and his disciples changed Soviet science.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the article is to analyze Marr’s personality in terms of his pseudoscientific theory in the national science, to place the emphasis on its peculiarities and keys to success in 1920s-1930s. N. Ya. Marr was a devout supporter of his own idea – the Japhetic theory, which he later made “the new linguistic doctrine”. In the late 1920s his theory contained not only mere statements of language families he called “Japhetic” (from Japheth, the name of one of the sons of Noah), but also ideas about different strata of language that corresponded to different social classes, and concepts of all languages relation in accordance with “four elements” or “diffused exclamations”: “sal, ber, yon, rosh”, as well as, denial of western linguistics achievements.

5. Research Methods

As issues of history of Russian science is often examined under different ideological perspectives and based on certain policies, the author addressed the principles of epistemological neutrality S. Aurox.

6. Findings

N. Ya. Marr as the leading scientist in the early Soviet period

LI

Jade Fox drugged her. How did you get here?

YU

We followed Jade Fox.

“Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” (Screenplay)

Considering political environment, the Soviet regime supported scientific projects depending on their application and “focus on current state-building issues solutions” (Dolgova, 2017; L’Hermitte, 1969). Scientific ideas being dominant among power elites, in high demand were initiatives aimed at manufacturing processes transformation, technological progress, military research and development. In this regard, the previously dominant “in the cause of science” idea vanished and every *spiritus rector* of the humanities was put in a predicament. The impossibility of non-state development of science, implementation of private initiatives, and the gradual strengthening of ideological control required a certain strategy of interaction with the authorities to prevent failure. The strategy was partly borrowed from the pre-revolutionary period, when the scientific world had a whole set of tools to raise funds from the ruling elite for scientific projects and even more tools to preserve prerogatives and freedom. The change in ideological orientations and the specific nature of the new nation’s leadership inevitably required certain actions.

In the early years of the Bolsheviks rule any research center was to co-operate with the government and work under extreme conditions. On one hand, research centers could be located in nationalized palaces and mansions, but on the other hand, it didn’t guarantee them prosperity. At that time lack of funds for salaries, publishing, firewood, security protection and furniture was the ongoing issue every research manager was to solve. The majority of them couldn’t or didn’t want to do that, reasoning their refusal by saying they saw themselves as incompetent managers.

Under the circumstances described, N. Ya. Marr became so successful, that he managed such organizations, as the Department of Oriental Languages of St. Petersburg State University, the Academy for the History of Material Culture, the Japhetic Institute, the State Public Library. The Caucasian Historical Archeological Institute led by Marr was one of the few scientific projects implemented under the Provisional Government (Platonova, 1989, p. 6). Managing each center required various skills to build collaborative networks with colleagues and the government. Marr’s greatest success was establishment of the Academy for the History of Material Culture, which replaced the Imperial Archeological Committee, and establishment of a new institution, Marr’s pet project – the Japhetic Institute.

Marr was not the only scientific community representative to contribute to the establishment of the Academy, but he was undoubtedly the key person. In May 1918 he was unanimously elected the staff commissioner to take over after Veselovsky's death, and in November of the same year he was elected Chairperson. Marr agreed he was the one, who "initiated" the establishment of the Academy (Marr, 1935, p. 14). From 5 to 7 August 1919 the next elections to the Academy members were held, and Marr was elected Chairperson. He was the key person of the Academy till the end of the 1920s.

He was the only suitable candidate for the position for several reasons. Firstly, he had incredible managerial abilities. Establishment of the Academy showed, that "archeology became a matter of State" (Pryakhin, 1986, p. 14). Through the work undertaken by the scientists the People's Commissariat for Education provided the Marble Palace in Petrograd for the needs of the Academy. Secondly, Marr did his best to protect the Academy and its members from the government. According to the journal of the Academy executive board meetings, in order to release arrested members of the Academy (Rayevsky, Giers) the scientist used personal ties to call on the authorities (*Logs of the meeting*, l. 15(rev.), 19(rev.), 30(rev.)). It should be mentioned that he tried to alleviate concerns and tension during the Great Turn in 1929. Therefore, the scientist's colleagues managed to put up with him, even being hardly interested in his linguistic theory (Robinson, 2004, p. 147). However, the scientist was not trying to impose his views on the Academy members, for he had the Japhetic Institute.

The Institute, originally called the Institute of Japhetidological Research, was established in 1921 "to study the Japhetic languages of the original population of Europe in their relic pure nature and new formations in the types of speech and to develop language convergence theory" (The provision, 1922, p. 5). At first, the Institute was experiencing certain constraints despite the support of the authorities. The main one was the lack of an equipped and ample room. It was limited to the only room allocated by N.Ya. Marr in his own apartment on the 7th line of Vasilievsky Island. As for the budget, it was so meager that "the Institute could not equip this room". This situation persisted for many years. However, it should be borne in mind that in many other scientific institutions the situation was significantly worse, so the complaints of many Japhetidologists made us recall the proverb "he that is warm thinks all so". In particular, in 1924 a specialist in Slavic studies, Peretz in a letter to Sobolevsky, voiced his disagreement with the Japhetidologists, and delivered himself against the Institute because it "siphoned off government funds" (Robinson, 2004, p. 147). Indeed, Lunacharsky readily allocated funds for the needs of the new Institute (Alpatov, 1991, p. 80-81), and Pokrovsky helped Marr get "agreement of the State Publishing House to publish works on Japhetidology" (*Minutes of the meeting...*, 1923).

N. Ya. Marr and the Bolsheviks

SIR TE

Contacts in the Giang Hu underworld can ensure your position. Be strong, yet supple. This is the way to rule.

"Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" (Screenplay)

N. Ya. Marr's attitude to the Bolsheviks has been studied extensively (Bruche-Schulz, 1984; L'Hermitte, 1987; Lähteenmäki 2006; Reznik, 2007; Sériot, 2009). According to the western and post soviet historiography, during the first post revolutionary years he, as well as the majority of the national scientific

community, disapproved of the Bolsheviks. In his letter to Karpinsky, the President of the Russian Academy of Science (1919), he was complaining about his adverse working conditions (Marr, *A letter to President...*). In his letter of 21 January 1921 to F.A. Braun, the scientist shared his worries about the Democratic republic of Georgia that was about to go down before the Bolsheviks (Marr, 1921). The scientist sympathized with the Georgian Mensheviks, because his son, Yury, worked as an interpreter for the army of the Mensheviks and the English during the Civil War in the Caucasus (Platonova, 2010, p. 240). In the same year, writing from Berlin N. Ya. Marr ironically called one of his colleagues “comrade” and added “comrade in the true meaning of this word” (Marr, *A letter to Michail Ivanovich...*).

Although, the scientist’s political loyalty has never been questioned we believe that he was against the revolutionary movement. Before the revolution he had sympathized with the conservative minister of national education, Kasso and considered the right party leader V.M. Purishkevich one of the most devoted professors of the University (Purishkevich, 1914, p. 106). Marr realized the development of the Academy and the Japhetic Institute was impossible without state support. He believed that “in the nearest decade” he could fulfill projects only with the help of the State (Marr, *About the University...*). He was not a member of any opposition party and was not known or recognized for his political opinion. His loyalty made him a person the Soviet regime was satisfied with.

The scientist recognized the State’s role in science. Besides the head of the People’s Commissariat for Education Lunacharsky and Marr maintained contacts with his deputy Grinberg and the head of the Museums Department N. I. Trotskaya. Both of them contributed to the transfer of the Marble Palace to the Academy for the History of Material Culture, also claimed by the All-Russian Union of Water Transport Workers (Marr, 1919). In 1918, Marr was appointed a member of the all-Russian Collegium on Affairs of museums and protection of monuments (Bykovsky, 1933, p. 94). It is significant that V. A. Mikhankova, N. Ya. Marr’s historian, believed that the contact with the authorities and active participation in the implementation of various projects helped him become a truly Soviet scientist (Mikhankova, 1949, p. 343).

Later N.Ya. Marr argued that the connection between the Japhetic theory and Marxism was pointed out to him by a Bolshevik scholar Pokrovsky. Marr was thankful to Pokrovsky: “His (M.N. Pokrovsky’s) level of credibility is, of course, higher than mine, for he treated the sociological aspect of the Japhetic theory, the Marxist essence of this materialistic language theory, which went beyond my guess based only on synthesis and observations of linguistic facts” (Marr, 1928).

Marr was sure that “short accents serve speaking”, therefore there was nothing bad about “toughly worded” questions and conversations (Marr, *Observations...*), even with the superiors. When negotiating the issues connected with the institutions he managed, he simultaneously demonstrated his loyalty to the government and demanded support for science. For instance, in his letter to the Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, Rykov he wrote concerning the scientific sphere issues that nothing had changed even 9 years after the revolution: “The People’s Commissariat for Education has not set objectives and chosen ways to meet them, but is focused instead on impressionistic plans” (Marr, *Letter (draft) to the Head of Government...*). This quality helped Marr gain respect among colleagues and the government.

From Georgian nationalist discourse to pseudoscience

GOU JUN SIHUNG

Li Mu Bai is your defeated foe, and you don't know his master, Southern Crane?

“Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” (Screenplay)

It's not accidental that the idea of “Japhetic languages” came to Marr. The future scientist was born in a family of a Scotsman who did not speak Georgian, and a Georgian woman who did not speak any other language: “... the main trouble of Marr was the orphanage of his *Muttersprache*. By the beginning of the XX century, most of the languages of Eurasia were members of “friendly families” with a full set of ancestors (protolanguages), brothers and sisters (the offspring of one “mother”) and their offspring (dialects that develop into independent languages). Among the few exceptions was Marr's native language, which, apparently, had no cognate languages except Megrelian, Lak and Svan” (Slezkin, 1999; Tolts, 2013). Suffering from his inferiority, Marr moved to the capital. Platonova wrote the following: “In 1884 a young Georgian nationalist came to St. Petersburg to study. He was a rebellious teenager, deeply embittered and offended by his fate, the government, the Georgians, linguists who have failed to connect Georgian with any of the historically rich language families; indifferent to his language, history, and own kinfolk” (Platonova, 2002, p. 159). In the Soviet historiography of Marrism created on the wave of the struggle against imperialism, it was even alleged that both parents of the scientist were representatives of the oppressed nations – the Scots and Georgians (Bykovsky, 1933).

The scientist's theoretical manifestos were obviously an attempt to seek revenge for his personal and national humiliation: “A savage man came from the wild Caucasus and decided to educate the educated. He imagined that the least studied and rude Georgian language could compete with such culturally rich and classical languages as Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin or at least Old or Middle Persian” (Slezkin, 1999, p. 53). Bykovsky's assertion is also true: “In this situation, the primary foundations of the Japhetic theory were laid, which for many long years of its development was a protest of a young, pro-nationalist scientist against great science” (Bykovsky, 1933, p. 89). The desire to enhance the prestige of his native language was particularly evident because the scientist made his students learn Georgian.

Sweeping aside bourgeois science, Marr's innovative, revolutionary Japhetic theory became especially popular after 1917. Its scale and boldness corresponded perfectly to both the Soviet regime and the era of the avant-garde as a whole. The Bolsheviks supported Marr's utopian and revisionist theory. According to Alpatov, “in the atmosphere of the first years after the revolution the introduction of the Japhetic theory was natural and corresponded to the socio-cultural expectations of that time, even if many of its elements had existed before” (Alpatov, 1991, p. 59). That time Marr benefited from his character trait that had stopped his success before: the scientist never “suffered” from perfectionism. This fact absolutely satisfied the new regime, which appreciated action and preferred practice to theory.

The leading foreign researcher of the phenomenon of Marrism, L.L. Thomas believed that the main reason for the theory success was its applicability (as Marr himself said) when solving any practical scientific problems. Japhetidology had an answer to any scientific problem, on the solution of which success of socialism depended (Thomas, 1957). In the 1920s and especially in the 1930s, any theory in which ideology prevailed over the facts was to win (Vasylykov, 2000).

Marr's language theory wasn't Marxist, it was absurd and unproven, as indicated by his opponents. Subsequently, an executed linguist Polivanov compared Marr with a chemist who claimed that water consisted not of hydrogen and oxygen, but of four mysterious elements (Slezkin, 1999). However, it must be clear that in the discussions of the late 1920s, victories were won not on the scientific, but on the

ideological front line, and belonged to those, whose ideas were not necessarily scientific and Marxist, but were *recognized* as such. Nevertheless, even the supporters of Marr, in particular the head of literature section in the Communist Academy, Friche, noted that the Japhetic theory, with all its advantages, contained “some not entirely Marxist statements” (Fritsche, 1928). L.S. Lipavsky, an avant-garde writer and member of OBERIU [avant-garde collective of writers] compared Marr’s theory with alchemy: “... just like that, it is bold, has some insights and in general is wrong” (Lipavsky, 2005, p. 273).

When studying Marrism, one should not avoid such a delicate issue as Marr’s mental health. This issue has been widely discussed in historiography and shouldn’t be ignored, especially concerning the fact that it influenced the theory itself and its perception by Marr’s contemporaries and future generations. The issue of Marr’s nervous disease became apparent during his school days in Georgia, in 1882 and 1883 (Platonova, 2002). Many Marr’s contemporaries confirmed his nervous disease. In particular, a linguist A.N. Genko would repeat: “Nikolai Yakovlevich was seriously ill” (Platonova, 2002, p. 177). According to a number of colleagues, mental illness progressed in the mid-1920s. Among those who openly spoke about Marr’s mental illness were Yakobson, Trubetskoi, Dyakonov, Nikolsky, and a Swedish linguist Sköld. Trubetskoi compared Marr with Martynov, an amateur linguist and the author of the “disclosure of the mystery of the human language” and called Marr a “loony” (Trubetzkoy, 1971; Martynov, 1897). At the same time, from the confessions of Marr himself we know that his colleagues from Moscow also called him a “loony” (Bogaevsky, 1935, p. 165).

“Take it for granted”

JEN

You think you've been teaching me all these years from the manual? You couldn't even decipher the symbols!

FOX

I studied the diagrams. But you hid the details!

JEN

You wouldn't have understood, even if I had tried to explain. You know... you've gone as far as you can go. I hid my skills so as not to hurt you.

“Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” (Screenplay)

Marr and his supporters used to say, that a scientist’s theory should be accepted, because in order to question it, one has to be as experienced and educated as its creator. In 1930 when commenting on Marr’s report, Pokrovsky said there were just several people, who could check his theory, whereas the rest were to “take it for granted” (Alymov, 2008, 91-92).

The younger generation (not only the Marr’s supporters, but also the representatives of the students in general) was eager to see Marxism in Japhetidology, and it was under this banner that they headed the struggle against “bourgeois linguistics”. For example, Leningrad University students gave the following feedback: “N.Ya. Marr’s theory is to be the new lever to unfix all established notions of bourgeois “Indo-European linguistics”, and become widely used in terms of the origin of languages by the soviet scientists and Oriental faculty students” (*Reviews of honorable guests...*).

N.Ya. Marr always wanted his students to become supporters of his theory. I.A. Orbeli recalled that “he was attracted by the youth and freshness, and it is difficult to imagine Nicholas Yakovlevich not to be surrounded by young people” (Selivanov, 2007, p. 502). Students, especially those, who didn’t have special knowledge or were from the provinces, were willing to support Marrism. By the end of the 1920s among Marr’s students there had been promising young scientists, and those, who used Marrism to build their own careers – Aptekar, Filin, Bashindzhagyan. This period significantly differed from the realities of the early 1920s, when young people were enthusiastic about N.Ya. Marr’s theory, “but nobody considered it proven, much less obligatory” (Ban’kovskaya, 1993, p. 217).

Sometimes young supporters kept paying compliments on Japhetidology. In particular, in 1926 a post-graduate student of the Institute N. Zolotov in the article “Marxism and Japhetidology” compared Japhetidology to “Capital” by K. Marx, believing that they were equally significant in their long, difficult but victorious struggle for recognition. The article ended in a very grotesque manner: “Let’s wish this young, developing theory prosperity and victory. It will win, because the truth will triumph” (Zolotov, *ibid*).

Andreev, one of the leaders of soviet Esperantists, in the article “Marxist language construction” in 1929 wrote: “I am not the only materialistic Esperantist who considers the Japhetic theory the greatest theory of our time, as well as Darwinian Theory and the economic materialism by Marx. But your merit is even greater: both Darwin and Marx had predecessors who had accumulated a lot of facts and had given certain grounds for the theories of Darwinism and Marxism. And who was your predecessor? Who gave you “japhetic” ideas, or at least hints and facts that could help your work?! You have broken new ground ...” (Andreev). A party official, Kiparisov, who was to implement the policy of the Academy bolshevization also compared Marr with Charles Darwin, as well as with Mendeleev and Morgan (Kiparisov, 1935, p. 7).

The “paper tiger” turns out to be a dragon

YU

You're doing calligraphy?

JEN

I'll write your name. Just for fun.

Jen writes Yu's name with great confidence and swiftness.

YU

I never realized my name looks like “sword”.

Jen freezes slightly.

YU

You write gracefully. Calligraphy is so similar to fencing.

JEN

Maybe it is. I wouldn't know.

“Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” (Screenplay)

The Marrists were strong when fighting with the common enemy. Marr tried to make his utopia reality with the help of ambitious, faithful supporters of no principles. Freidenberg wrote: “Aptekar and

other illiterate guys from townships picked up political slogans, Marxist systems, newspaper phrases and behaved as if they were leaders, dictators. They made no scruple to teach scientists and were indeed convinced no knowledge was needed for methodology development and systematization” (Alpatov, 1991, p. 56). Moreover, when struggling against linguists, who were members of the “Language Front” (subsequently, almost all of its leaders were repressed), the Marrists spoke openly about Marr’s mistakes. Bykovsky (1932) and others wrote in the foreword to their book “Against Bourgeois Contraband in Linguistics” the following: “Hitting hard at the “Language Front”, the authors are not trying to take responsibilities for Marr’s and his supporters’ mistakes. Giving credit to academician Marr for the Japhetic theory, one must remember that it should be interpreted with caution and requires critical analysis of mistakes pointed out” (Bykovsky, 1932, p. 5).

For decades N.Ya. Marr was echoing political leaders by saying that class struggle required “desperate fight against right-wingers” (Marr, *Science...*, l. 4). Moreover, when repeating Rykov’s words (“Work!”, “Don’t be a thief!”, “Don’t incite counter-revolutionary mutinies!”), Marr insisted those slogans were good enough for foreigners, but were not sufficient “for internal use” (Marr, *Science...*, l. 5). Therefore, some scientists’ position (Sukhov, 2009) that Marr was a victim of Bolshevism oppressive machine is unacceptable. The scientist was the only author of his theory, he initiated and promoted it and it was he, who started that grim struggle against his opponents. “Historical circumstances” acted as a catalyst and contributed not to the development of scientific idea, but to thrusting his astigmatic fanaticism to the scientific community. The analysis of the scientist’s biography and the Japhetic Institute history conducted show that the creator of the Japhetic theory is responsible for a repressions against his opponents and crisis of the humanities (and first and foremost linguistics) of the end of the 1920s-1930s.

7. Conclusion

The author of the Japhetic theory was striving for leadership in science and triumph of his extraordinary and mostly unclaimed theory. N. Ya. Marr didn’t plan to adapt to the new ideology, for his students did that. At one point he really found Marxism appealing and drew an analogy between Marxism and his theory – bold claims to inclusiveness, omnitude and interdisciplinarity. In the Soviet State N.Ya. Marr’s theory, just like Marxism, was not science, it was doctrine.

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