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*The 1929 Dispute on Soviet Criminology*

The 1929 dispute on the future of criminological research in the USSR gave to Soviet scholars their last opportunity to exchange views on the proper content and methodology of crime scholarship. This debate terminated ten fruitful years of crime research during which many outstanding scholars drawn from several academic disciplines analyzed the phenomenon on crime in research centers throughout the country.

The period following the dispute has been carefully documented, but the outstanding achievements of Soviet criminologists of the 1920s have been generally neglected by Western scholars and only recently analyzed by Soviet researchers. An article published in this journal¹ and a recent book by Peter Solomon, *Soviet Criminologists and Criminal Policy*, analyzed the leadership and organizational changes made in criminological institutes after the dispute to achieve ideological supremacy over the discipline of criminology. The debate, in these publications, is viewed as an antecedent to these more important developments and, consequently, is not discussed in terms of the significant research efforts of its participants and their research institutes.

The debate on the nature of Soviet crime research, however, deserves more attention than it has received in the works of Solomon because this confrontation of Marxist ideologues with methodologically independent scholars marks the turning point in early Soviet criminology. Prior to this public discussion at the Communist Academy, numerous scholars, irrespective of their academic affiliations, published books and articles on the nature of crime and the criminal. After the dispute, objective criminological scholarship was terminated, and the writings of Soviet criminologists served direct ideological and political objectives.

The 1929 dispute on crime provided the meeting place of two decades of criminological researchers. The new form that Soviet criminology would assume became evident as independent scholars of the 1920s were confronted in 1929 by the politically-motivated researchers and practitioners of the 1930s. The organizers of the debate forced the old guard of criminology to cede its

¹The research for this article was done while studying in the Soviet Union on IREX and Fulbright-Hays fellowships.

hold over the discipline and to recognize the need for the development of a strictly Marxist criminology.

**Historical Background**

Before 1929, nearly one dozen criminological institutes in different republics and the RSFSR produced journals and books on the personality of the offender and the types and frequency of crime commission as well as the impact of the Revolution on the nature of crimes committed and the character of the offenders. These publications, based on psychiatric, sociological, psychological, legal and biological research, were analyzed by their colleagues exclusively in terms of their scholastic merit and not by their degree of conformity to ideological objectives. At this time, Soviet criminologists in many ways equalled and even surpassed the academic accomplishments of their Western colleagues as they explored the problems of victimization, female criminality and the effects of rapid social change on patterns of criminality.

Soviet criminology was able to resist the demand for purely Marxist scholarship even after Stalin’s consolidation of power by 1926. While intense ideological pressure was applied to disciplines like history and psychology in the second half of the 1920s, the first attack on Soviet criminological and penological research was made only in 1928. At the All-Union Conference of Penitentiary Workers, held in Moscow in 1928, all scholars whose work deviated from Marxist theory were criticized. Only scholarship that used Marxist methods and analyzed crime in terms of economic and social factors was deemed acceptable.2

The attack on criminology at the Penitentiary Conference was followed by the publication in the beginning of 1929 of “Vozrozhdenie Lombrozo v sovetskoi kriminologii” in the prestigious journal Revolutsiia prava. The article, written by Bulatov, a researcher at the Communist Academy, criticized Soviet criminologists for four principal errors. These mistakes were the preservation of the methodology of Lombroso, the belief that through the study of personality one gets to the root of crime, the authorization given to psychiatrists to participate in the study of crime and, finally, the non-communist behavior of Communists in the Moscow criminological research center.3 The Moscow center which was established with the goal of developing Marxist criminology was particularly criticized for not providing leadership to the rest of the criminological community. Bulatov’s attack on the revival of Lombrosianism, however, encompassed many more researchers than those who devoted themselves to the biological approach to criminology. “Lombrosian” and “neo-Lombro-

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