

“A Sort of Modernist Vitalism? Soviet Darwinism as a Means to Regenerate the Wounded in WWII.”

Dr Pat Simpson, AAH 2019: Paper

Introduction

Video sources:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mg1uQzyQEu0> DMM FILM, Petya Kots 25/12/1991 unfortunately does not work, must have been shut down by Dmm at a guess.xxxx

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8imskoHgAb0> is a video about NLK's work with Joni the chimp in 1913, with amazing classical piano/violin accompaniment.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7n8ymciNm-c> is a video about Alexander Kots

This paper speculatively explores the potentially vitalist implications of the propagandistic, visual and artistic presentations about Darwinism, evolutionary theory and its history, given to wounded male and female Soviet combatants both in military hospitals in Moscow, and also at the Moscow Darwin Museum, during WWII. These seem to have been provided as a form of inspirational evolutionary therapy, by the Directors and staff of the State Darwin Museum in Moscow – principally by the Director, ornithologist, Professor Aleksandr Kots; his wife, the co-Director and zoo-psychologist Nadezhda Ladygina-Kots; their son Rudolf Kots, a cinematographer; the Museum's senior taxidermist Phillip Fedulov; and the currently acting senior museum artist, Konstantin Flërov. Post-war, as a reward for their activities, these individuals were all given a number of medals extolling their patriotism and contributions to the defence of Moscow against the Nazi invaders. Significantly, Aleksandr Kots was also awarded an honour of “Excellence in the field of Public Health”. It would seem, overall, that the Soviet government regarded their activities as having been not only politically and ideologically significant, but also as having an implicitly important impact on the mental and physical health of the war-wounded. My main questions are: why did Kots, his family and his staff pursue “evolutionary therapy” for the wounded, and why was this regarded by the Soviet government and its agencies, as significantly patriotic in relation to the context?

Art, in a variety of senses, was as central to the Darwin Museum's wartime endeavours, as it was to the museum's foundational self-construct. The notion of modernism, at least with a small ‘m’ in the western sense, and possibly also with a larger ‘M’ in the Soviet context, was arguably at stake in relation to the always shifting, but enduringly significant construct of ‘Darwinism’ in the USSR in the period encompassing the Darwin Museum's involvement in WWII. The idea of modernism, as a positive creative attribute arguably had a different meaning in the USSR, especially by the 1940s, and particularly in relation to the initial Bolshevik and later Stalinist constructs of the new Soviet state. In the USSR the term, while still tied to ideas of technological and industrial ‘progress’ that would be familiar in the West, was also tied to very unfamiliar concepts. For example, from its establishment in 1934 Socialist Realism, a legible and largely narrative form of cultural production aimed at inducting the proletariat and peasantry into the ideals of the future communist society, was promoted as a revolutionary, and, by implication, as an ultra-modern form of cultural practice, that pointed the way forward to the future development of the new Soviet society.

Some possible answers to my questions, I suggest, seem to have been embedded in a complex web of historical and more contemporary Russian and Soviet bio-scientific and socio-political constructs

Dr Pat Simpson, AAH 2019: Paper

and concerns regarding Darwinism. As Aleksandr Vucinich has argued, vitalism and neo-vitalism in their more metaphysically orientated forms seem to have held no real interest for Russian experimental bio-scientists and natural historians in the 19th century.¹ This was to carry on into the Soviet period. Yet, as Vucinich has also argued, the blurring of boundaries within Russian (and later Soviet) scientific thought, between Darwin’s notion of the “struggle for existence” and apparently Lamarckian ideas on the inheritability of acquired characteristics and the action of will, took on elements of non-metaphysical vitalist thought, and continued to grow after 1917. This process potentially partially culminated in the ultimately disastrous construct of ‘Michurinist biology’ propagated by Trofim Lysenko, which became triumphant in August 1948, but was already powerful in the late 1930s-40s within the Soviet Union.

Arguably this context allowed for a non-metaphysical, vitalist element to continue to exist in Soviet Darwinism, into the 1940s. My argument will suggest that both the impetus towards the wartime activities of the Moscow Darwin Museum relating to the war-wounded, and the accolades awarded to the staff by the Soviet government, may relate to the propagation of this non-metaphysical element of vitalism, understood to be profoundly patriotic, that was buried deep inside the Russian and Soviet construct of Darwinism, and increasingly entrenched during Trofim Lysenko’s rise to power.

Patriotism

Regarding the idea of patriotism, Kots and his family appear to have had two fundamental and interlinked, very practical reasons for exhibiting exemplary patriotic behaviour during the war. Firstly, and rather crucially, Kots was of German origin, and at the beginning of the war was under potential threat of being “evacuated” to Siberia along with his family, as undesirable aliens. A number of other relations and friends in the same category were thus “evacuated”, and did not fare well.

Kots was initially protected from deportation by a museum colleague....., but it could be argued that from November 1941 he and his family effectively hid in plain sight, by becoming very prominently involved in activities that could be/ and were indeed perceived by elements of the governmental apparatus as “patriotic”. These activities were many and various [list activities of k/nlk & DMM STAFF], and would have been deserving of medals and honours in themselves, without taking account of the work with the war-wounded.

The other strand to Kots’ self-preservational trajectory of interest, concerned the survival and fate of the Darwin Museum itself and of its staff. Central to this was his perceived need for a new and larger space to house the museum. He had been campaigning unsuccessfully for this since the mid-1920s. It is entirely feasible that the museum’s explicit wartime drive towards prominent manifestations of patriotism, had this goal in mind.²

¹ Aleksandr Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, Berkley: University of California Press, pp.

² The Darwin Museum did indeed secure a promise of a new building in 1946, which, however, was not fulfilled

“A Sort of Modernist Vitalism? Soviet Darwinism as a Means to Regenerate the Wounded in WWII.”

Dr Pat Simpson, AAH 2019: Paper

The Darwin Museum and Evolution Therapy

The Darwin Museum was founded in 1907 at the Women’s Higher Courses Institute at the Imperial Moscow University by Aleksandr Kots. By the start of WWII, it was a long-established Soviet natural history museum attached to Moscow State University. It not only provided generalised lecture-tours to a variety of interest groups that included members of the Red Army, workers in the fur industry, school children and school teachers, but it was also an academic research institute. In this respect, the Darwin Museum was particularly concerned with variety and variation in the colouration of game-birds and fur-bearing animals (Kots), and also with comparative behavioural psychology regarding humans and animals (NLK). The former field was that of Aleksandr Kots, while the latter field was that of Nadezhda Ladygina-Kots. One of the unique characteristics of this museum was, and indeed has enduringly been, a deep concern with using original art works to support and illustrate the – sometimes conflicting - stories of evolution attribute to Charles Darwin.

Vitalistic Roots?

Conclusion