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HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

*Ivan Boldyrev, Martin Kragh*

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SOVIET RUSSIA: THE CASE OF  
ISAAK IL'ICH RUBIN**

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*Ivan Boldyrev<sup>1</sup>, Martin Kragh<sup>2</sup>*

## **THE FATE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES IN SOVIET RUSSIA: THE CASE OF ISAAK IL'ICH RUBIN<sup>3</sup>**

Research within the history of economic thought has focused only little on the development of economics under dictatorship. This paper attempts to show how a country with a relatively large and internationally established community of social scientists in the 1920s, the Soviet Union, was subjected to repression. We tell this story through the case of Isaak Il'ich Rubin, a prominent Russian economist and historian of economic thought, who in the late 1920s was denounced by rival scholars and repressed by the political system. By focusing not only on his life and work, but also that of his opponents and institutional clashes, we show how the decline of a social science tradition in Russia and the USSR emerged as a process over time. We analyze the complex interplay of ideas, scholars and their institutional context, and conclude that subsequent repression was arbitrary, suggesting that no clear survival or career strategy existed in the Stalinist system due to a situation of fundamental uncertainty. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the Stalinization of Soviet social sciences occurred as a process over time.

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<sup>1</sup> National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow/Humboldt University, Berlin. [iboldyrev@hse.ru](mailto:iboldyrev@hse.ru);

<sup>2</sup> Stockholm School of Economics/Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, [Martin.Kragh@hhs.se](mailto:Martin.Kragh@hhs.se)

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## INTRODUCTION

Research within the history of economic thought has focused only little on the development of economics under dictatorship. This paper attempts to show how a country with a relatively large and internationally established community of social scientists in the 1920s, the Soviet Union, was subjected to repression. The Stalinization of academia was a major cause of adverse selection, when old specialists were replaced by younger and risk-avoiding scholars with little education and independence of mind (Sutela 2008, p. 177). We tell this story through the case of Isaak Il'ich Rubin, a prominent Russian economist and historian of economic thought, who in the late 1920s was denounced by rival scholars and repressed by the political system. By focusing not only on his life and work, but also that of his opponents and institutional clashes, we show how the decline of a social science tradition in Russia and the USSR emerged as a process over time. We analyze the complex interplay of ideas, scholars and their institutional context, and conclude that subsequent repression was arbitrary, suggesting that no clear survival or career strategy existed in the Stalinist system due to a situation of fundamental uncertainty.

William Coleman (2002, p. 90) has noted how totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century embraced economics to the extent it furthered the realization the leaders' preferences, or 'vision'. Economics, he argues, was always contested, with pockets of 'anti-economics' existing in disharmonious coexistence since at least the 1700s. The meaning of 'anti-economics' is historically elusive, but may include for instance the rejection of ideas such as consumer sovereignty, restraints and alternative costs, and economic liberalism (i.e., no regard for individual economic prerogative). From this perspective, arguably, anti-economics reached its logical limit in the twentieth century under the dictatorships of Stalin and Hitler.<sup>4</sup> But whereas economists were repressed in Germany primarily on racial and/or political grounds, thus leaving certain – primarily the more conservative – institutions almost intact, no such traditions had any chance of survival under the Soviet regime. Stalinist repression was more far-reaching, touching whole institutions and groups of scholars. Knowledge under Stalin's dictatorship, in other words, was cultivated only by the grace of political authority, and economics as a science was antithetical to the dictator's vision.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the Stalinization of Soviet social sciences occurred as a process over time. We take as our point of departure the case of Isaak Il'ich Rubin, a

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<sup>4</sup> For a verification that Coleman's notion of an 'anti-economics' did exist in the Soviet Union, at least in the later Stalin period, see Wiles (1952). See also an official exposition of Soviet economics, published in translation by the *American Economic Review* (Leont'ev et al. 1944), and the commentaries this article stimulated in the same journal (Baran 1944; Lange 1945).

<sup>5</sup> Mathematical economics, more specifically linear programming, did flourish at a later point in time in the Soviet Union. This branch of economics, however, was taught separately from other fields in the social sciences.

Russian economist and historian of economic thought, whose life and subsequent fate became immediately and dramatically intertwined with the violent events of Stalin's 'Cultural Revolution'. Besides being an outstanding scholar in his own right, the choice of Rubin can be explained for primarily two reasons. Firstly, he inadvertently became a key victim in one of the first political 'show trials' against former social democrats (Mensheviks) in 1931, a trial involving "some of the country's best economists in key positions" (Liebich 1997, p. 202). Secondly, Rubin was a prominent and independent-minded authority on the interpretation of Marx, a feature which made him a key opponent for the actors who in the late 1920s forced their ideology of Marxism-Leninism upon not only the social sciences, but virtually *all* fields of science, and the future development path of society (Byrnes 1991; Graham 1993; Gerovitch 1996; Pollock 2006). The Rubin case provides us with a prism through which to gauge the decline of a social science tradition in Russia and other former Soviet republics.<sup>6</sup>

This paper connects to previous research placing the Soviet economic debates of the 1920s and 1930s in their historical and institutional context (Barnett 1998; Barnett 2006; Owen 2009; Shirokorad & Zweynert 2011). The gist of our analysis, in other words, focuses not so much on the analytic content of the economic ideas as such, as on the political and institutional clashes emerging around them (although the two are not readily distinguishable). Following Coleman's thesis, it is an interesting task to investigate what different strategies were adopted by economists in these clashes, and whether certain strategies were also more successful. The formation of a 'Stalin group' of academics and intellectuals in the late 1920s within the social sciences has long been a well-known fact (Fitzpatrick 1999, p. 204). We know, however, only little about these groups, or how their emergence became linked to the general decline of a social science tradition in Russia and the USSR. We contribute to this discussion as regards the case of Rubin and Soviet economics and pose some basic questions: *What were the reasons for the demise of Rubin? Who were the key actors, and what were their institutional affiliations and eventual fates in the Soviet system? And how does the Rubin case fit into the larger political context of Stalinization of Soviet science?*

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first part provides an introduction to the general political context and the conditions for economics research in the 1920s, with special emphasis on key institutions. The penultimate part provides evidence on Rubin's life and work, and situates the

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<sup>6</sup> Two countries with large economies – China (where Marxism-Leninism is still a mandatory framework in institutes of higher learning) and Russia (with a history of Marxism-Leninism) – rank relatively low in academic rankings. In the September 2012 RePEc ranking of countries by number of citations, Russia ranked place 65, immediately above Taiwan, but below Poland, Colombia and Hungary. We believe this relatively low ranking, in relation for example to the size of the Russian economy, can be traced (at least in part) to the destruction of tradition and human capital within the social sciences during the 1920s and 1930s. For a review of the state of Russian economics in the early 1990s, assessing the Soviet legacy, see Alexeev, Gaddy and Leitzel (1992). An overall view is given by Poletayev (2010).

clashes which eventually arose around him in their institutional setting. The last part describes the Menshevik trial and the repression of Rubin in 1931, and situates this case in the larger context of the decline of a social science tradition in the Soviet Union.

## **SOVIET ECONOMICS IN THE 1920s.**

For many years, little was known of the fates of the economists who had fallen at the hands of the Stalinist regime. Occasional references to the purges surfaced in the West, such as when Wassily Leontief – the Russian born economist who had been forced to leave his homeland in 1925 – wrote on the “decline and rise of Soviet economic science” in 1960 (Leontief 1960). Arguably, only scattered information was available until the publication by another exile, Naum Jasny, whose *Soviet Economists of the Twenties. Names to be Remembered* (1972) was for long the only source on prominent Soviet economists who had fallen victim to the repression. Whatever else we knew about the period relied on information which had transpired through biographies, dissident literature, and in official publications through the 1920s and 1930s (Medvedev 1971; Davies 1989). With the opening of the former Soviet archives, historians now have access to a significantly wider source base.

Beginning in 1921, the ‘New Economic Policy’ (NEP) was proclaimed, which until the late 1920s combined government control with a modicum of private enterprise. According to Vincent Barnett (2006, p. 113), the period was also “the heterodox decade *par excellence* in the USSR with respect to the range of different currents that were represented, with only the Gorbachev disintegration period coming close.” Within Soviet academia and administration there was a panoply of economists ranging from the neoclassical tradition, such as the liberal Leonid Yurovsky and the business cycle analyst Sergei Pervushin, to agrarian approaches, such as the neo-Narodnik Alexander Chayanov, and various Marxist currents (Jasny 1972, p. 209). The State Planning Commission, Gosplan, was at the time a “great stronghold of Menshevik forces” (Jasny 1954, 53). Simultaneously, however, sweeping purges by the Soviet security organs (the *Cheka*) led to the closure of several established economic journals – and the involuntary emigration of several talented economists. Old institutions, such as the Academy of Sciences, lost more than half of its prerevolutionary membership to death and migration between 1917 and 1923 (Levin 1988: 262).

The first losses of human capital within economics were associated with the (forced) emigration of scholars such as Simon Kuznets (in 1922), Jakob Marschak (in 1919), Peter Struve (in

1920), Paul Baran (in 1928) and Wassily Leontief (in 1925).<sup>7</sup> These migration patterns marked the beginning of a prolonged flight from Eastern and Central Europe (first from communism, later from fascism and Nazism) to Western Europe and the US which continued unabatedly until the Second World War, involving scholars within virtually all fields of science (Barnett 2008; Leonard 2010). Evsey Domar, notably, left as late as in 1936. It is remarkable, that many migrant economists later became instrumental in the founding of econometrics and mathematical economics – a conscious attempt to create a value-free social science. According to figures in Frey and Pommerehne (1988) and Hagemann (2011), the Soviet Union lost 24 of its 36 most outstanding economists due to emigration, mostly to the USA.<sup>8</sup> In August 1922, it was reported by the security organs to Stalin how repression had been brought against hundreds of doctors, editors, agriculturalists, engineers, writers and economists; important journals such as “The Economist”, “Economic Rebirth” and “Journal of Agriculture” were closed down and their editors were arrested due to their allegedly “tendentious anti-soviet tendencies”.<sup>9</sup>

As old centers of economic analysis were purged and dismantled, the Bolsheviks established also new institutes. It was here many non-Bolshevik economists found refuge when political pressure mounted in society. The internationally most well-known academic institute devoted to economic analysis in these years, the Conjuncture Institute headed by the pioneering Nikolai Kondrat’ev, had been founded in 1920. Kondrat’ev’s theory of ‘long waves’ (originally referred to as ‘large cycles’), notably, was developed during his tenure there, and the institute had links with several foreign research centers, such as the American Economic Association, the Harvard Economic Service and the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) in the USA, and several other sister institutes throughout Europe (Barnett 1995). This way, their publications became known and were cited also in a wider research community, and Soviet scholars also visited colleagues in Germany, Great Britain and the US.

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<sup>7</sup> Baran’s family had left for Germany after the revolution, but Paul returned to study economics at the Plekhanov institute from 1926 to 1928, when he again left. He returned only briefly to Moscow in 1934, for reasons which remain unclear. Two noted experts on the Soviet economic system, Alexander Gerschenkron and Alec Nove, left Russia with their families in 1920 at the age of 16, and in 1923 at the age of 8, respectively.

<sup>8</sup> At least one well-known scholar, Evgeny Slutsky at the Conjuncture Institute under Kondrat’ev, remained in the Soviet Union but moved from economics to statistics and survived the purges of the 1930s (Barnett 2004). Later contributors to economics found an ability to work on theoretical problems within other disciplines, for example Leonid Kantorovich, who was trained as a mathematician.

<sup>9</sup> The measures had in fact been ordered on behest of Lenin, who in May the same year had instructed Stalin: “**the entire** staff of *Ekonomist*, are the most ruthless enemies. The lot – out of Russia. This must be done at once” (Lenin 1996: 169, bold in original). The original reports by the Soviet secret police, listing all the names of scholars to be arrested, have been published in Khaustov et al. (2003, pp. 42–57).

Albeit with its different mission, the history of the Marx-Engels Institute (MEI) shows clear similarities with the Conjecture Institute. The institute, set up by David Riazanov in January 1921, soon became an important archive of socialism and a center for research on Marxism, history of economic thought, philosophy and Western European history among other fields. It was officially decreed that Riazanov would be able to employ also non-communist specialists, a necessary precondition in consideration of how a large share of the pre-revolutionary academia did not adhere to Bolshevik views. Rubín was eventually employed for work on the first collected works of Marx and Engels in German and Russian translation – the so called *Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA) – but the institute also prepared Russian editions of classic thinkers such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Thomas Hobbes. MEI further established a large network of scholars, archivists and academic institutions in other European countries, most notably perhaps the Institute of Social Research at Frankfurt University, with which it enjoyed close collaboration.

The history of the MEI is relevant to our story as it was not only an important academic milieu and the institutional base for Rubín, but also because the fates of Rubín and Riazanov would eventually be dramatically intertwined. Riazanov was a strong and well-known intellectual, who on the basis of his good relations with party leaders was able to secure an independent position for his institute. He also seems to have harbored a strong dislike for Stalin, whom he considered to be brute and intellectually inferior – opinions he did not hide (see Beecher & Fomichev 2006). In other words, the Conjecture Institute as well as the MEI had two distinctive and perhaps paradoxical characteristics which made them fairly unique among Soviet research institutes: they remained relatively autonomous from political interference and pursued original research, and they were able to develop independent networks with foreign scholars and academic institutes (including academic exchanges, joint publications, translations, and citations).

It is therefore no coincidence that both institutes were early victims of Stalin's ascendancy to power in the late 1920s. Kondrat'ev was dismissed already in 1928, seeing his Conjecture Institute disappearing in a merger with the State Planning Commission. In early 1931 the dictator drew on fabricated documents in order to implicate Rubín and Riazanov in a great conspiracy to overthrow the Soviet government, and 127 of the institute's 244 members of staff were purged – among them many skilled translators, archivists, economists, philosophers and historians (Rokityansky & Müller 1996, pp. 116–117). The Marx-Engels Institute was soon merged with the Lenin Institute, becoming a simple tool of propaganda under its new director Vladimir Adoratsky (by whom Riazanov had been openly denounced). Independent scholarship within the social sciences was no longer

permissible, as academic institutions were put under party control and sequestered their international networks (Graham 1993, 93; Trembl 2003).

## ISAAK RUBIN AND SOVIET ECONOMICS

Soviet leaders were convinced that Marxism had a fundamental role to play for the understanding and development of all fields of science, including the ‘exact sciences’ (Joravsky 1961). Current books and debates in Marxist political philosophy enjoyed large audiences and were frequently provided space in official party organs such as *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. Economics, it was argued, had to be placed on a *scientific* Marxist footing. This issue of scientific priority, needless to say, was never seriously questioned. At stake, however, was the issue of interpretation and authority. Over the course of the 1920s, there was a growing intellectual and institutional rivalry, and there were different groups adhering to different interpretations of key issues in Marxism, such as the subject matter of political economy, value theory, state planning and the meaning of socialism. Marxism was at the heart of Soviet political discourse, and the demand for comprehensive books giving a coherent and teachable interpretation of Marxist thought was large among scholars, functionaries and teachers in the post-revolutionary years.<sup>10</sup> Further, seemingly abstract theoretical discussions often reflected current economic and political agendas, giving academic discussions ideological significance. It was therefore a non-trivial question who should provide the analytical supply.

With his influential *Essays on Marx’ Theory of Value* (1923), and the extremely readable and original *A History of Economic Ideas* (1926), Rubin initially provided much of the supply in the 1920s. The books underwent several editions, and circulated widely – regarded by many contemporaries from various fields of social sciences at the time as the most authoritative. So how does it come that Rubin, within a few years time, was subjected to denunciation, persecution and repression? Several factors came to conspire against him, most importantly the fact that Rubin had been a well-known social democrat (Menshevik). This did not distinguish him among fellow economists (most of whom were social democrats, liberals or non-Bolshevik socialists), but his political outlook within short became the loci of his opponents’ attacks. There were also other reasons,

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the diary of a well-known Soviet historian Militsa V. Nechkina (2004) that reflects the interest in the collection of the articles on political economy co-edited by Rubin.

intellectual, institutional and personal. In order to see how, some basic contours of Rubin's life and work could be beneficially sketched.<sup>11</sup>

Isaak Il'ich Rubin was born to a Jewish family on 12 June 1886 in Daugavpils, in what is today independent Latvia. After graduation from the gymnasium in Vitebsk (in what is today Belarus), he matriculated at the Faculty of Law in St. Petersburg where he studied economics and civil law from 1906 to 1910. Some of his teachers there, I.I. Kaufman and M.I. Tugan-Baranovsky, were among the most famous Russian economists at the time. Rubin noted in his biography how his own academic career had begun only in 1919, invited by Riazanov for work on a collected works of Karl Marx. By then he had lived in Moscow since 1912, supporting himself as a lawyer and journalist, and specializing in labor law and other related fields. During the revolution, he contributed articles for journals "Workers' World" and "Industrial Affairs", writing on more pertaining topics such as nationalization of industry, unemployment and revolution. From 1919 he also began to teach within the social sciences, specializing in political economy. In 1921 he was conferred the title of professor at the University of Moscow, while also upholding teaching obligations at the Institute of Red Professors (IRP) and Sverdlovsk University among other places.

Rubin was arrested twice in 1921 due to his affiliation with the Bund and the Menshevik Party. The Bund was a Jewish workers' organization originally constituted in the Pale of Settlement, and Rubin belonged to the fraction which had refused merger with the Bolsheviks in April 1920. He advocated a social democratic and more reformist approach, and had been an outspoken skeptic of the Bolshevik coup d'état in October 1917. As a consequence, he was arrested and confined to Butyrka on 20 February, 1921, a prison where so many political prisoners were to be held during the twentieth century. A member of the Bund since 1904, Rubin had been arrested already in 1905 by the Tsarist police (only to be amnestied on 17 October the same year). Now he found himself in a peculiarly reversed position, being not too far to the left, but to the right, vis-à-vis the regime in power. Even though he was released shortly afterwards, he was arrested also on 5 November, again for only a short while (about three weeks).

These arrests, which were only the first of what was to come, were in line with Bolshevik jurisprudence since the beginning. A unique feature of Soviet law was that it punished not only real enemies of the state, but also *potential* enemies of the state (including people who themselves were not yet aware they were enemies, and therefore had to be unmasked by the security organs). The policy

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<sup>11</sup> The following paragraphs rely on Vasina, Rokityanskiy (1992), Vasina (1994, 2011).

was to keep the Soviet state safe from any individual or group of individuals who could pose a social danger without the actual commission of an illegal act. The policy gave the security organs significant discretion in meeting out repressive measures. People were arrested, imprisoned or executed for who they were, rather than for what they did. The 1918 Red Terror decree, for example, targeted explicitly prominent Mensheviks and members of other parties in order to confine them to prison (Gregory 2009, pp. 109–10).

Rubin, already one of the top authorities in political economy at the time, never ceased his scientific endeavors when in jail or afterwards. After his release, he began preparations for the first edition of his *Essays* (1923), and completed a number of reviews and articles. The same year his book was published, he was again arrested on 14 March and sentenced to a concentration camp for three years (of which 22 months were spent in jail, the remainder in Crimea). This was a punishment for his continued interaction with Russian social democrats, and the help he as a lawyer had extended to members of another oppositionist party, the Socialist Revolutionaries, who had been subjected to the country's first public show trial in 1922 (Wood 2005).<sup>12</sup> In jail, he protested the authorities, and with his wife Paulina Rubina they sought political support for an early release. Among his supporters were Alexei Rykov and Nikolai Bukharin, two of the most high-ranking Bolsheviks at the time, Riazanov, and a number of academic colleagues. As a result, although his term was never shortened, Rubin was allowed to return to Moscow upon his release.

During his jail sentence and exile Rubin completed some twenty scientific publications (following a tradition among Russian socialists to continue intellectual activity in prison). Among a number of translations and re-issues of earlier works, he published his influential *A History of Economic Ideas* (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1926, and then 2<sup>nd</sup> enlarged ed. in 1928, reissued 1929 and 1930, at the same time translated into Ukrainian and Georgian), and the lesser well-known books *Physiocracy* (1925) and *Contemporary Economists in the West* (1927). It is telling of this dedicated scholar, that he upon his transfer from a stronger prison regime to exile by the Black Sea in 1924, asked for the release to be delayed. “In case of an early release”, he argued, “I will not be able to finish a complete draft... and in the best circumstances my work will be put on hold for 2-3 months” (quote in Vasina & Rokityanskii 1992, p. 138). Such conditions for a continuation of a massive research effort had obviously not been possible without the dedicated help from his family and colleagues, who struggled for his transfer to a more hospitable climate and to make sure he had access to important literature. After his release, these efforts also made it possible for him to settle freely within the country.

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<sup>12</sup> Rubin's participation in the Menshevik party and his work as a lawyer for the socialist revolutionaries is confirmed by archival documents, see Galili and Nenarokov (2004, p. 63).

As Rubin came to Moscow in late 1926 he returned to the Marx-Engels Institute, holding the responsible position as head of the department of political economy. As Marx scholar he prepared a new Russian edition of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that became exemplary for all subsequent editions, including an edition within MEGA (Vasina 2011).<sup>13</sup> He further translated Adam Smith's *On the Wealth of Nations* (published in 1931), and continued his teaching activities at various Moscow institutes. Beginning in late 1927, however, a stream of publications came to emerge, openly challenging Rubin on the interpretation of Marx. Soon, these debates evolved into outright political denunciations and the emergence of Leninist dogma. Considering how Marxist thought was at the centre of this conflict, the Rubin case is a fitting illustration of the demise of a social science tradition in the Soviet Union.

## FROM ACADEMIC DISPUTES TO POLITICAL PERSECUTION

Academic disputes were not unique to the Soviet 1920s, and as such they have obviously existed at all places and at all times. Disputes can lead to highly adverse situations for individual scholars, such as denial of tenure, difficulty to publish in select outlets, or the neglect by a wider community of colleagues. Under such circumstances, certain survival strategies may evolve. Different traditions within economics have at times established their own specific journals, communities and institutional affiliations, or tried in different ways to influence the intellectual or political climate (Backhouse 2002). The range of options available to social scientists was much narrower in the Soviet context, and the stakes were potentially much higher. In this section, we draw on the academic attacks initiated against Rubin and his followers – a process eventually known as *Rubinshchina* – in order to illustrate the different choices people made in a period of uncertainty and heightened political repression. By focusing on the actors involved, and their institutional affiliations, we show how Stalinization emerged as a process over time.

The clashes became extrovertly political upon the formation of a more outspoken 'Team Stalin' at the Institute of Red Professors (IRP), a group of young communists who began to openly denounce old specialists and allegedly *burzhua* scholars within all fields of science. One of the first show trials, the 'Shakhty Trial' in 1928 – where a group of engineers and specialists were accused of

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<sup>13</sup> After Rubin's arrest his participation in this edition was suppressed and his name was taken off the list of editors. All subsequent editions were claimed to be made anew, without the participation of either Rubin or Riazanov, although according to Vasina (2011) these "new" translations laid very close to Rubin's editorial work. References and an extensive commentary prepared by Rubin were also crossed out and the last edition with his and Riazanov's names was withdrawn from the libraries.

‘wrecking activity’ – marks perhaps the beginning of this process. The IRP, situated in a building of an old Moscow monastery, is usually considered one of the most important Party schools of the early Stalin era where future experts in the teaching of Marxism and communist ideology were trained (Behrendt 1997; Kozlova 1994). Virtually the whole anti-Rubin group was affiliated with this institute, while interestingly, and to illustrate how complex and to some extent open-ended was the process we observe, Rubin was himself a teacher at the IRP until early 1930, where also he had his own group of students and followers. However, the IRP eventually became a fully orthodox institution, turning into an instrument of power in the hands of Stalin where perfectly loyal opponents of Rubin could be freely recruited (David-Fox 1993, p. 39).

To what extent, and how, political philosophy or ideology may inform a scholar’s scientific outlook has been a topic of much debate among historians of science. Rubin’s first edition of his *Essays* was published in 1923, while still in contact with active Mensheviks. In other words, could his opponents make a credible case that his interpretation of Marx concealed a negative attitude towards Stalin’s agenda for the complete state control and transformation of the national economy? There is some merit to this argument with one important caveat. As the political landscape changed from 1926 until 1931 the debates were more complicated, and to some extent we are observing an object evolving over time. Rubin’s critics were also not uniform, and there were important philosophical traditions which seemingly cut through different political backgrounds.

Before proceeding to the actual institutional and ideological clashes it is necessary to briefly elucidate two main specificities of Rubin’s interpretation of Marx. The first and most important feature of Rubin’s work was his attempt to emphasize social and qualitative aspects of value, rather than the pure physical or technical aspects. The essence of Marx’ theory of value, as Rubin argued, was the specific social form it assumed under capitalism and not the simpler causal relationship between embodied labor time and prices of production. Hence the significance of the concept of ‘value form’ as the social form of the product of labor, which reflects the particular social character of labor in commodity production (Rubin 1978). Value, for Rubin, was inextricably linked to the particular social relations and their forms of appearance in a capitalist market economy, and not just the technological process of transforming labor time into products (see Saad-Filho 2002, p. 27).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This made Rubin one of the main representatives of the so-called ‘value-form approach’ to Marxian economic and social theory. It has become particularly popular in the West after the first English translations of Rubin appeared (Rubin 1972, 1978) and his name was saved from oblivion. For representative evaluations of Rubin’s contribution see Neusüss-Fögen (1973), Faccarello (1983), and Arthur (2004).

The second feature of Rubin's contribution follows the first one. For Rubin, the social form of value involved exchange and money as its essential elements. He took pains to explain how this argument did not boil down to the identification of production and exchange, and proposed specific terminological distinctions. Nevertheless, the general (in fact, Hegelian) idea was fairly straight-forward: essence (value of labor) cannot be separated from its appearance (forms of exchange and money as social phenomena). Therefore, the value of a commodity could not be separated from the exchange process, i.e. from the sale of commodities for money (Likitkijsonboon 1995, p. 90). For a Marxist believing in the virtues of a planned economy, Rubin's interpretation of Marx could be seen as tantamount to a defense of the market (a theoretical 'mistake' which could then be explained by the fact that Rubin was a social democrat). These are the political connotations of the Rubin case.

The first public polemics against Rubin began in 1927. The third edition of his *Essays* contained a new chapter, 'Replies to My Critics', including a lengthy reply to Isaak Dashkovskii, a Ukrainian economist and supporter of the Trotsky opposition, on the issue of abstract labor.<sup>15</sup> Dashkovskii was the first to attack Rubin. Rubin also retorted to criticism from S. Shabs, whose book *Problems of Social Labor in Marx's Economic System* (1928), carried the subtitle 'A Critique of I. Rubin's Essays on Marx' Theory of Value'.<sup>16</sup> Rubin's rather lengthy chapter also contained a large discussion on abstract labor, framed as a response to criticism from Alexander Kon. Summarizing the argument's put forward in these debates one may identify some various types of criticism. Rubin was accused of deviating from historical materialism, neglecting the role of technique and material productive forces in political economy and instead emphasizing the role of social form that for him should be the primary object of study. This allowed his critics to stigmatize him as an idealist and anti-Marxist who praised the market and not planning, ideal abstract forms and not concrete problems of the Soviet economy, Marxist exegesis and not the "true" Leninist materialism.

The centerpiece of the anti-Rubin group was the publication of an edited volume, *Rubinshchina ili marksizm?* ("Rubinism or Marxism?", Bessonov, Kon, 1930), a title which in the Russian language has especially malicious connotations.<sup>17</sup> The two most prominent individuals behind the *Rubinshchina* volume were Sergei Bessonov and the aforementioned Kon. Bessonov was an affiliate with the IRP between 1927-1930, and interestingly enough a former member of the Socialist Revolutionary party (which, from the point of view of the Bolsheviks, was *worse* than the

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<sup>15</sup> Dashkovskii would also be repressed in the Great Terror, surviving several years in a forced labor camp. Upon his return to Soviet society, he continued his work as a historian and economist.

<sup>16</sup> S. Shabs was probably Semen Semenovich Shabs, who himself had been sentenced to a labor camp in 1924-1925 because of his earlier affiliations with Mensheviks. We were not yet able to locate any further sources to verify this information, or to find out more about his subsequent fate.

<sup>17</sup> A similar volume was published against Kondrat'ev, see Miliutin (1930).

Mensheviks). He later served as a diplomat, was repressed in 1937 and executed in 1941. Kon, the second co-editor, was a professor of economics at the Communist Academy (closely affiliated with IRP, later merged) who survived the purges only to fall in the battle of Moscow in 1941.<sup>18</sup> Both men had initiated heated debates with Rubin at the IRP since 1927 already, and both were his rivals as the alleged leaders of Marxist scholarship in political economy, publishing slashing reviews of the third edition of Rubin's *Essays*.<sup>19</sup> They lacked completely, however, the wider competence of Rubin within the history of economic ideas, contemporary economics, or the training to translate and edit original texts by Marx or Engels. It is notable, that their articles contained mostly references to Lenin, treated as irrefutable dogma, and were devoid of original sources in a foreign language.

Other important actors in the *Rubinshchina* volume who were also affiliates with the IRP were Ivan Laptev and Esther Gurvich. Illustrating how complicated the political landscape was at the time, one may note that Gurvich was the second wife (divorced) of Nikolai Bukharin, the prominent Bolshevik who had been dethroned by Stalin and denounced as a 'right-deviator'.<sup>20</sup> Presumably to save herself and her daughter, Gurvich's incentives to denounce Rubin seem fairly straight-forward, although she was later subjected to repression in 1949, spending seven years in the forced labor camps (Gurvich 2010). Laptev, however, was a completely ordinary young Stalinist, who eventually became a well-known agrarian economist. Another contributor was Stepan Batishchev, the father of Genrikh Batishchev, a subsequently well-known Soviet philosopher. Batishchev senior was a perfectly loyal and cautious man, well-trained in the Marxist demagoguery necessary to denounce Rubin.

However, the political situation before the publication the *Rubinshchina* volume – which coincided with Rubin's arrest the same year – had in fact been more complex and did not look completely hopeless for Rubin. One year earlier, a group of young scholars had published a defense of Rubin – *Against Mechanist Tendencies in Political Economy* (Borilin, Leont'ev, 1929) – supporting his arguments against the mechanists (interestingly, all these books were published by the same monopolist state publishing house). They could do it because, first, the political climate had not yet turned overtly repressive and, second, because in philosophy there had been a decisive victory of 'dialecticians' (headed by Abram Deborin) over 'mechanists' (headed by Lyubov' Axelrod) that was readily reinterpreted to fit Rubin into an anti-mechanist camp (Mel'nik 2011); even more so, since Deborin was deputy director of MEI and a close associate of Riazanov. Deborin would himself

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<sup>18</sup> In particular, Kon (1928) published a course in political economy. In this text he criticized Rubin and, as Rubin himself noted, in the second edition revised his previous views (the third edition of the book appeared at Gosizdat as soon as 1929).

<sup>19</sup> Bessonov's review was published in *Izvestiia* (30 November, 1928), Kon's text appeared in *Pravda* (25 January, 1929).

<sup>20</sup> Her repentant letter to the bureau of the party cell of IRP, with confessions of being mistaken, was published in *Pravda* (31 December, 1929).

eventually be denounced as a ‘menshevizing idealist’ and removed from his high-rank position in Soviet philosophy, but at the time the two camps carried equal sway.

The two editors of the pro-Rubin volume, Boris Borilin and Lev Leont’ev (pennname A. Leont’ev), would also come to play crucial roles in subsequent events. In their volume, the editors made two major points. Firstly, Rubin’s position was contextualized and reinterpreted by Leont’ev in relation to the anti-mechanist movement. The mechanists, it was argued, neglected the subtleties of dialectical methodology and were ignorant of the dialectical nature of society, with its conflicting forces at work. They were also criticized for their neglect of what the editors regarded as the inherently and irreducibly social character of economic activity. The ideological component of this theoretical argument was provided by Borilin, who in his article connected the debate to the ongoing industrialization process of the Soviet economy. Social relations of production, he argued, were crucial to recognize at this point in time. And to “confuse” technical and economic categories, like Bessonov and the mechanists allegedly did, seemed to him particularly “dangerous” and “harmful”. In fact, to disregard the social structures at work, was equivalent to equating socialism with electrification (p. 96).<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, Leont’ev contended that Rubin’s approach might be incorrect in its details and specific formulations, but that in general (especially after the third edition of his *Essays*, in which Rubin corrected some definitions to avoid misunderstanding and provided a detailed answer to his critics with a devastating anti-critique) his approach was the more fruitful, especially in comparison to the “awkward” and “self-contradictory” theses provided by his opponents. Further essays in the volume attempted to substantiate this claim by illustrating various inconsistencies in the work of Bessonov and Kon, and its alleged incompatibility with Marxist theory.

Leont’ev and Borilin are interesting to our story, in consideration of how both of them in 1930 – only one year after their edited volume – would publicly denounce Rubin and renounce their own previously held ideas. Both of them had been students at IRP, and would later teach in a number of higher institutes. Leont’ev moved to MEI in 1931 – after Riazanov’s arrest – and published a new political economy textbook for party schools and study groups. In 1939 he became a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences, and was conferred the title of professor at the Higher Party School. From 1946 he became a full member of the Academy of Sciences and a member of the *Pravda* editorial board, remaining highly active for the rest of his life. Borilin had been engaged in party work

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<sup>21</sup> Put into more contemporary language, Borilin emphasized the role of institutions for the transition to a ‘planned economy’, warning against putting too much weight on purely technological development.

since the early 1920s, studying at IRP between 1923 and 1927. Upon graduation he taught political economy, later ‘overcoming’ his own (presumably ‘idealistic’) background with a book in 1930, denouncing the ‘right deviator’ Bukharin. In 1931 Borilin entered a position at Gosplan – which had also been previously purged.

The shift which apparently occurred in 1929-1930 can be explained by the personal intervention by Stalin, who in this period consolidated his personal dictatorship. On 10 February, 1930, he called for a “struggle on two fronts” – a clear reference to Civil War rhetoric – meaning more precisely the struggle “both against ‘Rubinism’ and against ‘mechanism’.” The dilemma, Stalin (1930) argued, was that these debates had “been diverted from the basic questions of Soviet economy” into “the realm of Talmudic abstractions, thus wasting two years of effort on abstract themes—to the satisfaction and advantage, of course, of our enemies.” The above mentioned Borilin, and another young IRP economist, Vladimir Miliutin (who in 1930 also denounced Kondrat'ev), simultaneously published their article “On the Controversies in Political Economy” in the two widely circulated journals “Bolshevik” and “Economic Issues”, denouncing not only Riazanov, Rubin and Deborin, but also mechanists such as Bessonov and Shabs.<sup>22</sup> This was again a somewhat unexpected occurrence, Miliutin being a former Menshevik and Borilin, as we saw, a former student of Rubin. Both of them loyal Stalinists, they were nevertheless swept up in the Great Terror, murdered in 1938 (Manevich 1991).

It is remarkable how quickly a previously independent social science tradition was repressed in the late 1920s. Notably, no clear ‘win-win’ strategy for academic or physical survival during the Stalinization of the social sciences seems to have existed. A study of the individuals involved suggests that both independent economists and perfectly loyal Stalinists could be subjected to repression, and any eventual outcome did not depend on whether a person would for example denounce other scholars or publicly renounce a politically implicated past – two of the most typical strategies adopted in this time period – a result which suggests that repression was also arbitrary. In other words, a story of the debates and confrontations in the Soviet 1920s needs to be sufficiently thick, so that the account of the shifting intellectual, individual and political disputes are not oversimplified. As Coleman (2002, p. 97) has remarked, “the fundamental target [of repression] was not this or that sort of economics, but *any* sort of economics at all.”

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<sup>22</sup> Purges among economists then continued through the 1930s. The journal “Economic Issues”, which had been established as late as 1929, was purged of 8 of its 11 members of staff only one year later (among them Lev Kritzman, Alexander Kon, Sergei Bessonov, A. [Lev] Leont'ev, Abram Mendel'son). In 1932, 9 of the 11 new members were purged again, among them the editor Miliutin and his compatriot Borilin – two steadfastly loyal Stalinists. Lastly, in 1935, new waves of purges hit the journal (Shirokorad, 2010).

## THE MENSHEVIK PROCESS

The last phase in the destruction of a social science tradition in the Soviet Union followed the period of mounting clashes in the late 1920s. It is notable that economists were among the first academic groups to suffer at the hands of Stalinist repression. This process had a clear political rationale, as Stalin established his role as the country's undisputed leader, relying among other groups on loyal followers at institutes such as the IRP. We now know how the dictator drew on these forces to purge more independent institutions such as the Academy of Sciences, Gosplan and the MEI. In 1929 in the Academy of Sciences over 100 old members were purged (the second purge in a decade), many of them historians and archivists. These arrests were later connected to new conspiracies, such as the "discovery" of a new counterrevolutionary organization in 1930 – the so called Toiling Peasant Party (TKP) – which in fact had been orchestrated by Stalin personally. On 5 September a Politburo resolution made official the arrests of Kondrat'ev and Chayanov among others, implicated in this affair (Khaustov 2003, p. 252). On 9 December Stalin instructed a party cell at IRP to "launch a critique with vengeance" and "to prepare for a fight". "Do not forget about Riazanov", he added. "In general, the Marx-Engels Institute needs to be removed" (Smirnova 1989, p. 83).

Archival documents reveal how Stalin personally plotted and closely followed the interrogations by the security police. In a telegram on October 1930 he noted how "the most interesting fact" to have transpired was the link between accused economists and foreign oil companies, whose assets had been expropriated in the Russian revolution. Representatives from the Brothers Nobel Oil Company among others – in their capacity of "the most powerful representatives of capital" – had apparently conspired with the French and British governments to overthrow the Soviet government. Groman, Kondrat'ev and Chayanov among others, he argued, were "by all odds interventionists" and should be "strongly interrogated about the timing of [their planned] intervention". If this was carried out, "it would be a tremendous success for the OGPU [the security police]." "Have you understood?", Stalin finished his letter. It is doubtful his message could be misunderstood. (Khaustov 2003, pp. 256–257).

Rubin was dismissed from his teaching position at IRP in 1930, while at MEI, he agreed to his removal as head of the Department of Political Economy (continuing instead his work as translator and editor). In the night between 23 and 24 December 1930, Rubin – now 44 years old – was arrested by the security police in his apartment. At this point in time public campaigns against Kondrat'ev, Chayanov and Rubin occurred on an almost daily basis in party organs such as *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*. What had previously been the so called Toiling Peasants Party now mysteriously became

the ‘Union Bureau of the Central Committee of the Menshevik Party’, in short known as the ‘Menshevik Process’. It was here, in early 1931, that Rubin and 13 other defendants were publicly accused of ‘counter-revolutionary activities’, and all other sorts of falsifications.<sup>23</sup>

The possible reasons for Stalin to further increase the level of repression have been a much debated topic among historians. Roy Medvedev (1971, p. 110), in his seminal insider account *Let History Judge*, suggested Stalin simply needed further scapegoats, besides the ‘kulaks’ (supposedly rich farmers), for his failed policies. The country’s specialists and intelligentsia, trained before 1917 and thus suspicious by default, were such a possible scapegoat. However, as pointed out by Kendall Bailes (1974, p. 448) and Barnett (2005, p. 127), the repression and show trials served also other interests. Most prominently, these fabricated allegations constituted an effective way of silencing and isolating independent-minded expertise in Soviet academia and institutions. Openly discussing the purges of engineers in June 1931, Stalin (1931) conceded how “naturally... the Soviet Government could pursue only one policy towards the old technical intelligentsia—the policy of *smashing* the active wreckers, *differentiating* the neutrals and *enlisting* those who were loyal [italics in original].”

## THE DEMISE OF RUBIN

On 31 December 1930 Rubin was formally accused of participation in the ‘counter-revolutionary Menshevik Party’ in cooperation with other counter-revolutionary organizations, in order “to overthrow Soviet power through the organization of wrecking activity, and to prepare for intervention.” These accusations were so strong, the interrogator argued, that “citizen Rubin has been sufficiently revealed for [his participation] in these committed crimes” [sic] and could therefore be arrested on charges of “counter-revolutionary” activities. Rubin’s careful and judicially delicate reply, issued on the same document, simply states that he had not upheld “any relations whatsoever to the Menshevik Party since 1923”, and that he did not know of anyone who could be said to belong this group.<sup>24</sup> Due to his refusal to confess fabricated charges, Rubin was subjected to further pressure.

Thanks to the recollections of Rubin’s sister, Bliuma Il’ichna Rubina, made available in Medvedev (1971, p. 132), we have also an alternative source to complement the official interrogation protocols. According to Rubina, her brother had found the first accusations ridiculous,

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<sup>23</sup> Some Western observers, primarily of the communist bent, were convinced the allegations were true. See Holmes (1931) and Ramzin (1931) on the trial against the ‘Industrial Party’.

<sup>24</sup> It seems clear Rubin had been an active participant in the Bureau of the Menshevik Party in 1923. See Galili and Nenarokov (2004, pp. 29, 38), who also guess that Rubin was the author of a letter to German social democrats in 1926 (Ibid, p. 92n).

submitting a written exposition of his views. The investigator tore up the statement in front of him. Still refusing to admit, he was transferred to a prison regime in Suzdal, a former monastery northeast of Moscow, where he was put for days in a *kartser* – a punishment cell the size of a man, where it is only possible to stand or sit right immediately on the stone floor. This technique of interrogation was known as ‘conveyer’ (*konveier* or *vystoika*), where the accused is subjected to uninterrupted interrogation, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement and cells with hot or cold floors or cramped spaces. There could also be physical violence and coercion, such as beatings to face, head, and the sexual organs, being thrown to the floor, and subjection to choking. It remains unclear how exactly Rubin was treated, but according to his sister’s account, the interrogators had a man, Vasil’evskii, shot in front of his eyes on 28 January 1931 for his refusal to cooperate.<sup>25</sup>

Over the course of one month (24 January-21 February), documents reveal how Rubin was interrogated no less than 21 times. Assuming protocols were written and preserved each time, something which was not necessarily the case, this implies virtually daily interrogation. Each interrogation in turn resulted in a new ‘confession’, which was subsequently signed by Rubin and counter-signed by two security police officials. On 24 January, he ‘confessed’ to having rejoined the (non-existing) ‘Bureau of the Menshevik Party’ in 1929, in a conspiracy with other former Mensheviks at Gosplan, MEI and other important institutes. Primarily, Rubin ‘admitted’ to keeping important documents for the organization, documents detailing their relations with foreign conspirators and other topics. In his ‘confessions’, dated 28 January, he renounced his own previous theoretical work in wordings absolutely similar to those of his ideological critics. This was, apparently, unsatisfactory.

It would soon transpire that the confession the security organs tried to coerce related specifically to Riazanov; whom Stalin wanted to implicate in the Menshevik trial. On 29 January, Riazanov’s name begins to occur in the existing protocols. The exact content of the different protocols is fairly irrelevant (and factually incorrect), and as the ‘confessions’ were also re-written (“corrected”) by the investigator, there is no way of reconstructing exactly how Rubin attempted to resist the charges. But it seems clear that he, as far as possible, tried to insulate Riazanov from the accusations. “My brother”, Rubina noted, had told her that “speaking against Riazanov was just like speaking against his own father.” In his cell, Rubina recounted, he ‘began to beat his head against the wall. Anyone who knew how calm and self-controlled Rubin was can understand what a state he had been brought to’ (Medvedev 1971, pp. 134–6). On 2 February, Rubin “confessed” to having provided

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<sup>25</sup> The claim that Rubin was subjected to solitary confinement, and uninterrupted interrogations, is corroborated by archival evidence provided by Litvin (1999, p. 14).

Riazanov with three documents “of great interest to the history of [Russian social democracy]”, documents which Riazanov then agreed to keep safe in case Rubin was arrested (Litvin 1999, p. 588).

This ‘confession’ was the only item needed for Stalin, and no other evidence was ever procured during the Menshevik trial which began in March 1931. On 8 February, Rubin signed a letter personally addressed to Riazanov, rehashing the story of the three conspiratorial documents. Four days later, Riazanov was summoned to Stalin’s office in the Kremlin, where the dictator in a violent tone demanded to see this alleged evidence. “You won’t find them anywhere”, replied Riazanov, “unless you’ve put them there yourself!” (Serge 1963, p. 251). Riazanov was arrested the same night, and on 20 February the interrogators arranged a ‘confrontation’ (*ochmaya stavka*) between the two victims. The absurd exchange, where Rubin simply replied verbatim to the statements by the interrogator, revealed to Riazanov a man “whose nervous system has been completely broken.” The official Menshevik trial, held on 1-8 March the same year, officially indicted 14 individuals, the majority of whom were economists – but we now know from the archives that the actual number of repressed was in fact 122 (Litvin 1999).<sup>26</sup>

The stream of public denunciations of Rubin, Riazanov, Kondrat’ev and other leading economists never ceased. Shortly before the trial, Borilin published in *Pravda* his article ‘Let us Tear *Rubinshchina* by the Roots’, and similar articles were published throughout the 1930s. Yakov Rokityanskii has provided important evidence on Rubin’s last weeks in life. Arrested by the security police in Aktobe (formerly Aktyubinsk) on 19 November, 1937, Rubin was again interrogated. Parts of the protocols bear obvious marks of falsification by his interrogators, but it nevertheless remains obvious that Rubin consistently refused to admit to any participation in a conspiracy to overthrow the Soviet government. Nor did he admit to knowing any individuals involved in such plans. At the end of the interrogation, his plea for reconciliation was in fact registered. “I do not find it appropriate to further discuss here my political views and plans for scientific work. I can only say, that, whatever the possible errors my scientific works may have contained, I, at least, cannot imagine there to be a court for them, as the court of the political and Soviet public, and wish only – even after a long period of time – to hear from them and only them a word of forgiveness and encouragement for the future” (Rokityanskii 1994, p. 832).

On 25 November, a troika of the local security police office convicted Rubin in his absence for participation in counter-revolutionary activity. At the bottom of the short ruling the following words were entered: “Decision. Rubin, Isaak Il’ich DEATH BY SHOOTING, personal

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<sup>26</sup> For an authoritative summary of the official court transcripts, see Jasny (1972).

property to be **confiscated**” (bold in original). Two days later, on 27 November, the ruling was enforced, and Rubin’s life was ended. Rubin was unconditionally rehabilitated in March 1991.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Russia is the largest country in modern history to have lost what was a significant social science tradition for close to six decades. Important work was done throughout the Soviet period in different fields, but scholars suffered from censorship, and they were deprived of correspondence with foreign colleagues or institutes. As the history of economics during the Cold War is now being written, the implications of this fact for social scientists on both sides of the iron curtain needs to be more fully understood. We have attempted to explain the demise of an existing social science tradition in Soviet Russia, drawing primarily on a case study of Isaak Rubin and the institutional and political clashes around him. This process, as we have shown, was a process which occurred over time and which to some extent was also open-ended. No clear win-win strategy seems to have existed under these conditions of fundamental uncertainty, and in the end former opponents of the regime as well as perfectly loyal Stalinists could be subjected to repression (or escape it, depending on the circumstances). Many different factors, intellectual, political and institutional, were important but not determinate.

Tentatively, we find that at least three dominant strategies emerged in the clashes of the late 1920s. Firstly, there were individuals – such as Rubin – who actively defended themselves against their critics. Secondly, there were individuals who opportunistically denounced other scholars, in order to further their careers, and gain intellectual, institutional or political clout. Here we find most of Rubin’s critics. Thirdly, there were individuals, who faced with a barrage of criticism renounced their own past, and publicly converted to the official orthodoxy. The tragic case of Blyumin, whose own work was so strongly influenced by Rubin, is a case in point (Shirokorad and Zweynert 2011). One should also note how some prominent economists of the 1920s escaped persecution completely, perhaps by chance. Scholars such as Slutsky and Pervushin survived the purges and could continue to work within Soviet academia or administration. Their pioneering works on business cycles and statistical methods were finished however, and could not be resumed (Owen 2009).

Our case study fits well into the science politics of the time. The Stalinists downplayed the importance of original research and theoretical studies, emphasizing the importance of techniques and knowledge with more immediate practical applications for planning and industrialization (Bailes, 1974, p. 463; Graham 1973, p. 62). Scientific institutions of all brands were coerced and involuntarily infiltrated by cadres whose primary qualification was their adherence to dialectical materialism. It is

therefore not surprising that whereas a survey of 25,286 scientific workers in 1930 found that only 8 % of the researchers in the 'exact sciences' were members of the communist party, the membership rate within the social sciences had already reached a full 68.7 % (Josephson 1988, p. 255). It is an irony of history, that the research programs expounded by these allegedly more practical economists were found useless during the years of *perestroika* and the transition in the early 1990s, when the new leaders received little of value from Marxism-Leninism to guide them through the deepest changes experienced since precisely the 1920s (Åslund 1987).

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Ivan A. Boldyrev, National Research University Higher School of Economics and Humboldt University, Berlin, [iboldyrev@hse.ru](mailto:iboldyrev@hse.ru)

Martin Kragh, Stockholm School of Economics/Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, [Martin.Kragh@hhs.se](mailto:Martin.Kragh@hhs.se)

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