



Will Others Now Commit Luzin's "Sin"?

Istvan Hargittai

In the summer 2022 issue of the *Mathematical Intelligencer* [4], Alexey Glutsyuk reviewed Roger Cooke's English translation, *The Case of Academician Nikolai Nikolaevich Luzin*, of the like-named book in Russian [3] edited by Sergei Demidov and Boris Levshin. As is well known, mathematician Nikolai Luzin (Figures 1 and 2) was accused in the early 1930s by Ernst Kolman, then the president of the Moscow Mathematical Society, of being an active counterrevolutionary. A number of Luzin's former students supported Kolman's claim. In 1936, Luzin was again the target of attack, this time in the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda*. Among the various accusations made at that time, one particularly resonates with the current trend in Russia of hindering international interactions between scientists.

In a letter of July 6, 1936, to Vyacheslav Molotov in protest of Luzin's treatment (reproduced in Demidov and Levshin's book [2, 3] as well as in [1, pp. 331–333]), Soviet physicist Pyotr Kapitsa (Figure 3) countered a number of the accusations leveled against Luzin in *Pravda*, among them the charge, the "sin," that Luzin had consciously published papers of poor quality in Russian journals, while sending his high-quality papers to foreign journals. As Kapitsa explained to Molotov, if poor papers had indeed appeared in Soviet journals, then it should have been the responsibility of the journal editors to prevent their appearance. It was in the interests of both Luzin and the reputation of all Soviet scientists, Kapitsa argued, to publish their best articles in international journals. This was one of the first (if not *the* first) letters of protest that Kapitsa wrote to Soviet leaders on behalf of repressed scientists. Many more would follow.

Kapitsa himself had been denied permission in 1934 to return to his laboratory in Cambridge, England, following his usual visit home to see his parents. Prior to his letter on behalf of Luzin, his correspondence already contained complaints about his detention as well as about

the circumstances and conditions of science in the Soviet Union. The campaign against Luzin upset him. He became aware of the *Pravda* articles while vacationing in the countryside and immediately penned his protest. He may actually have contributed to the outcome of Luzin's case; Luzin was not arrested, nor was he even expelled from the Academy of Sciences [5]. In a letter of July 18, 1936, to his Cambridge mentor Ernest Rutherford, that is, soon after his letter to Molotov, Kapitsa shared some of his experiences in the Luzin case. In particular, he was critical of Luzin's apparently selfish attitude toward some of his former pupils [1, pp. 291–294], but that did not change Kapitsa's view of the merits of publication in international journals.



Figure 1. Portrait of Nikolai Luzin in the photo gallery on the ninth floor of the Steklov Institute in Moscow (photograph by the author, 2016).



Figure 2. Part of the photo gallery on the ninth floor of the Steklov Institute in Moscow, where the portraits of the mathematician academicians associates of the institute are displayed (photograph by the author, 2016). Identified here by column number (x) from the left to right and by row number (y) from top to bottom, i.e., by x/y , are Arnold 1/3, Bogolubov 2/3, Vinogradov 4/1, Dorodnitsyn 6/1, Zeldovich 6/2, Kantorovich 7/1, Keldysh 7/2, A. N. Krylov 7/3, Kolmogorov 8/2, Kochin 9/1, Lavrentiev 9/2, and Luzin 10/3.



Figure 3. Pyotr Kapitsa in Cambridge (photograph by and courtesy of the late David Shoenberg).

Istvan Hargittai, Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: istvan.hargittai@gmail.com

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Funding Open access funding provided by Budapest University of Technology and Economics.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- [1] J. W. Boag, P. E. Rubinin, and D. Shoenberg, editors. *Kapitsa in Cambridge and Moscow: Life and Letters of a Russian Physicist*. North-Holland, 1990.
- [2] Sergei S. Demidov and Boris V. Lëvshin, editors; Roger Cooke, translator. *The Case of Academician Nikolai Nikolaevich Luzin*. American Mathematical Society, 2016.
- [3] Sergei S. Demidov and Boris V. Lëvshin, editors. *Delo akademika Nikolaya Nikolaevicha Luzina*. RHGI, 1999.
- [4] Alexey Glutsyuk. The case of Academician Nikolai Nikolaevich Luzin. Review of [2]. *Mathematical Intelligencer* 44:2 (2022), 172–174.
- [5] Istvan Hargittai. *Buried Glory: Portraits of Soviet Scientists*. Oxford University Press, 2013.