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Beyond eugenics: the forgotten scandal of hybridizing humans and apes

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the available evidence on one of the most radical ideas in the history of eugenics and utopianism. In the mid-1920s, the zoology professor Ilia Ivanov submitted to the Soviet government a project for hybridizing humans and apes by means of artificial insemination. He received substantial financing and organized expeditions to Africa to catch apes for his experiments. His project caused an international sensation. The American Association for the Advancement of Atheism announced its fund-raising campaign to support Ivanov's project but gave it a scandalously racist interpretation. Ivanov's own motivation remained unclear, as did the motivation of those in the Bolshevik government who supported Ivanov until his arrest in 1930. This paper discusses three hypothetical reasons for Ivanov's adventure: first, hybridization between humans and apes, should it be successful, would support the atheist propaganda of the Bolsheviks; second, regardless of the success of hybridization, Ivanov would catch and bring to Russia apes, which were necessary for the rejuvenation programs that were fashionable among the Bolshevik elite; and third, hybridization, should it be successful, would pave the way to the New Socialist Man whose 'construction by scientific means' was the official purpose of the Bolsheviks. Ivanov's ideas were arguably important for the American proponent of reform eugenics, Herman Muller, and for the Soviet anthropologist Boris Porshnev.

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After the Revolution of 1917, Russia's Bolshevik government sponsored a highly unusual initiative. The zoology professor Ilia Ivanov (1870–1932) organized expeditions to Africa to catch and deliver apes for scientific experiments on their hybridization with humans. When information about the experiments was recovered in the early 1990s, it quickly made its way into *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *Wikipedia*. Multiple articles, a book, and a documentary about Ivanov bear titles such as *The red Frankenstein*, 'Les liaisons dangereuses', 'Half-man, half-beast', and 'The kissing cousins'.¹

The atmosphere of excitement surrounding 'discoveries in the recently open Soviet archives' overshadows the fact that, since their very beginning, Ivanov's experiments were well known in Europe and the US. The French Pasteur Institute supported Ivanov at all practical stages and provided him with facilities in Paris as well

as in Kindia in West Africa. American responses to Ivanov's venture are less known and will be discussed here. International responses to the hybridization project help us appreciate the immense historical change that our attitudes towards humans and animals underwent throughout the twentieth century. They also illustrate the complexity of the inter-cultural transmission of ideas. When a radical project of scientific interference in human affairs migrates into a different culture, it undergoes multiple processes that can be described as either misperception or reinvention. Rather than translating an idea into a 'universalist' language of science, a receiving culture ascribes to this idea new meanings, hopes, and doubts. Lost in translation are the original contexts and connotations of the idea. Gone with the culture that generated the initial project, its original meanings can be reconstructed only speculatively.

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¹ The first substantial publication of Ivanov's saga was serialized in a Russian journal of film studies (Faiman, 1991). Independently, I found evidence of Ivanov's experiments in the archive of the Bolshevik Ministry of Education (Etkind, 1997 [1993]). At the moment of this writing, the most informative sources on Ivanov's experiments are essays by the Russian historian of science, Kirill Rossiiianov, and a book by the Russian journalist, Oleg Shishkin. Recovering important facts and documents, Rossiiianov (2002, 2006) appreciates Ivanov's project as a pioneering attempt at transcending boundaries between humans and animals. Less scholarly but more critical is Shishkin (2003), whose story of 'secret experiments of the Kremlin' ranges from Ivanov's hybridization to the mummification of Lenin.

Ivanov was an expert in artificial insemination who enjoyed international acclaim in his area. After graduating from Kharkov University in Ukraine and studying physiology for about a year at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, from 1898 he worked in St. Petersburg at the Institute of Experimental Medicine. In one of its laboratories, Ivan Pavlov ran experiments on the digestive glands, which in a few years would win him the Nobel Prize. Ivanov successfully applied Pavlov's methods to sex glands, which allowed him to develop effective methods of artificially inseminating purebred horses. On the eve of the First World War, old aristocratic methods of horse breeding were to be replaced by the dispassionate work of experts, proletarians in white robes. Ivanov organized a large laboratory under the auspices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which started to inseminate horses on a pan-Russian scale.

Ivanov was keen to apply his unusual skills to even higher purposes. In 1910, he presented his project of hybridizing humans and apes by means of artificial insemination at the International Zoological Congress in Graz, Austro-Hungary. It was a revolutionary idea, and Ivanov had to wait for the revolution in Russia to launch his project. In 1924, he officially applied to the government with his project of hybridization. Presenting his project in purely scientific terms, he emphasized its importance for anti-religious propaganda. He left it to the Bolshevik ideologues (who at this stage became the Government officials) and eventually to historians to understand the actual meaning and purposes of his extraordinary undertaking. In his photographs, Ivanov looks like a typical Russian professor with a goatee beard, long white hair, and an inspired look from behind iron glasses. The look is not deceptive. He was a respected scientist who was welcomed by his European and Russian colleagues. It is important to recognize that Ivanov's ideas were perfectly in tune with his time and circle.

In 1924–1926, Ivanov's project was discussed on various levels, at the Academy of Sciences, at the People's Commissariat of the Enlightenment, at the Soviet of Labor and Defense and finally, at the Soviet of People's Commissars. [Rossiianov \(2002, 2006\)](#) summarizes the archival evidence on these debates and on the heated correspondence between various bodies of the Bolshevik administration. Rossiianov believes that the main reasons for the Bolsheviks' support of Ivanov were scientific interest and anti-religious propaganda; [Shishkin \(2003\)](#) finds this motivation implausible. Indeed, in 1924, the Bolsheviks had more relevant concerns. The civil war had ended but the war for power in the Kremlin reached its climactic phase. In this difficult time, Ivanov found all kinds of support, from ideological to financial, for the most unusual of endeavors. Characteristically, the project of hybridization was supported by the ambitious intellectuals from the top political leadership while experts (usually scientists with solid pre-revolutionary experience) wrote skeptical or hostile reviews. The positive decision was pushed through by a group of radically-minded officials, whose futurist aspirations and global scope were equal to Ivanov's. A sponsor of the hybridization project was the mathematician, geographer and polymath Otto Schmidt, who is remembered now as the organizer of expeditions to the North Pole and the editor-at-large of the *Big Soviet encyclopedia*; his wife, Vera Schmidt, was the head of the Psychoanalytic Nursery in Moscow. The Schmidts met Sigmund Freud in Vienna and organized the State Psychoanalytic Institute in Moscow, which functioned there in the early 1920s ([Etkind, 1997 \[1993\]](#)). Another important sponsor was Nikolai Gorbunov, a chemical engineer who was close to Lenin and Trotsky and, in the mid-1920s, played a role that can be roughly translated as Kremlin chief of staff. Like Schmidt, the intel-

lectual Gorbunov was later pushed out of the Kremlin to a very distant pilgrimage; after 1928, he led a Soviet–German joint expedition to the Pamir Mountains, a Soviet part of the Himalayas. He was executed in 1937.

In 1925, the top Bolsheviks agreed to finance Ivanov's expedition to Western Africa. Anatolii Lunacharsky (Commissar of the Enlightenment) and Lev Kamenev (member of Politburo, deputy head of the Soviet of Commissars) signed the papers. Like Schmidt, they belonged to the intellectual and futuristic wing of the government, which was precariously led by Lev Trotsky. The main cause for their defeat was, I believe, their inability to realize their unrealistic promises. Ivanov's project was one of them.

From the state budget, Ivanov received \$10,000 to organize a trip to French Guinea to catch the chimps and to start his insemination experiments. He made a long stop in Paris, then visited French Guinea, returned to Moscow for additional money and was back in Kindia, French Guinea, in 1926. Supported by the French governor of Guinea, Ivanov was accompanied by his son and local black servants. Together they successfully caught several live adult chimps. The locals told Ivanov about their fears connected to the apes. From time to time, chimpanzee males raped local women, they said. If such a thing happened, the community forever ostracized the woman. This news confirmed Ivanov's beliefs in the technical possibility of insemination. However, Ivanov realized that he would not be able to inseminate local women with chimps' sperm even if he paid them in dollars, which was the initial plan. So he tried other venues. He inseminated chimp females with human sperm, which may have been donated by his son. He also wanted to inseminate black females with ape sperm without their consent, under the pretext of medical examination in the local hospital. The French governor, however, forbade him from carrying out this part of the project. But Ivanov saw no moral problem here. He angrily reported to his sponsors in the Kremlin about the primitive fears of the blacks and the bourgeois prejudices of the French. In Moscow, a special committee of academics and officials considered the issue and ordered Ivanov to abstain from impregnating women without their consent ([Faiman, 1991](#); [Shishkin, 2003](#); [Rossiianov, 2006](#)).²

Appropriately enough, in the Western press Ivanov's project caused a wave of sensational publications. The recent 'Monkey Trial' of 1925, where a young teacher from Tennessee was tried in court for teaching evolution theory, happened to be 'one of the first "media events" in American history' ([Ryan, 2002, p. xvi](#)). The public wanted either irresistible proof of the theory that men originate from apes or irrevocable evidence that the proponents of this theory commit unspeakable sins. Curiously, Ivanov's project seemed to promise final arguments to both of these camps. Reporting on 'Prof. Elie Ivanoff of Moscow', *Time* and the *New York Times* capitalized on the combined exoticism of this Bolshevik venture among African apes. They speculated about his aims and gossiped about his sources of support. The *New York Times* told Ivanov's story, relying on sources from the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism ([Soviet backs plan to test evolution, 1926](#)). The president of this association, Charles Lee Smith, here asserted that the objective of Ivanov's experiments in Africa was to accomplish 'artificial insemination of the human and anthropoid species, to support the doctrine of evolution, by establishing close kinship between man and the higher apes' (*ibid.*, p. 2). The atheist or, in Bolshevik terms, the anti-religious context of the project had been equally emphasized by Ivanov's supporters in Russia. But in the America of the 1920s, atheism was hybridized with racism,

² Ivanov was planning his experiments in these particular terms of race and gender from the very start. The eminent chemist Vladimir Vernadskii met Ivanov on 9 July 1924 in Paris, when Ivanov was planning experiments in Africa ([Vernadskii, 1998, p. 141](#)). According to Vernadskii's diary, though Ivanov 'did not want to talk much about his idea', Vernadskii understood that the plan was to inseminate primates and also a 'human being (negress)'. Ivanov was seeking money; 'The Bolsheviks, evidently, will give him money', wrote Vernadskii. He was interested but not surprised by this information; I do not know why the Bolsheviks' support of Ivanov seemed 'evident' to Vernadskii.

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