



Making Darwin Soviet

Mirjam Voerkelius, Assistant Professor, History
Spring 2026 Dresher Center Residential Faculty Fellow

Speaking at Karl Marx's funeral, his long-time collaborator Friedrich Engels drew a connection between Marx, the political theorist, and Charles Darwin, the gentleman scientist: "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history." In the Soviet Union, this pronouncement became an oft-quoted stock phrase that underscored the importance of science, biology, and, especially, of Darwinism to the Revolution. Darwinism had long been associated with political radicalism in Russia, and the Bolshevik revolutionaries enlisted it as a weapon in their struggle against religion upon assuming power in 1917. And yet, what exactly was this connection between Marx and Darwin, between the laws of evolution in the natural world and the development of human history? This project explores the frictions and adaptations that were key to making Darwinism Soviet. The vantage point from which the story is told is that of the Moscow State Darwin Museum, which was founded before the Revolutions of 1917 and exists to this day. Although the institution was under immense pressure to adhere to the ever-shifting party-line, a closer look reveals that underneath the surface of conformity it continued to pursue its own agenda, making the case for the importance of micro-histories for a more fine-tuned understanding of life in authoritarian regimes.

Monday, March 23, 2026

Noon to 1 p.m.

In-person, PAHB 216 and. online via WebEx

Advanced registration required for boxed lunch.

