

More on Kolmogorov: the Luzin affair

Kolmogorov, the great mathematician, is reputed to have had broad cultural interests and, at the same time, had a complex mind and personality. Perceived as being genial, broad-minded, and highly spirited, he seemed to possess unfathomed passions and prejudices as well, that reared their heads at fleeting times.

Kolmogorov was a student of N.N. Luzin (1883-1950), one of the father figures of Russian mathematics, who taught and nurtured a remarkable group of mathematicians endowed with overwhelming talent. However, several of these young mathematicians later became embroiled in bitter and ugly conflict centering round Luzin himself who lost his honor and position of eminence when the soviet communist party got involved and discredited him in its then characteristic manner. In a hearing of the Academy of Sciences, USSR, held in 1936, he was charged with serious accusations, and was robbed of all his official positions.

However, when looked at in the background of the familiar methods of Stalinism, Luzin was felt to have suffered rather 'lightly', though even the 'light' punishment handed to him must have been devastating to the mathematician and the teacher, and to a person deeply spiritual.

Notable among the students of Luzin who later became his bitter critics, and active collaborators in the campaign of tarnishing his name, was P.S. Alexandroff, a life-long friend of Kolmogorov's. Kolmogorov himself seems to have participated actively in the campaign against Luzin. His feelings toward his former teacher must have been ambivalent and fiercely turbulent, as revealed by an encounter between him and Luzin when he publicly slapped Luzin on the face, ostensibly as a mark of his support to Alexandroff.

The decision of the USSR Academy of Sciences against Luzin, adopted in 1936, has recently been reversed (2012) by the same Academy, more than 60 years after his death.

The 'Luzin affair', which shook the world of Russian mathematics more than seventy years ago, has much to reveal of the uncharted territories of the minds of mathematicians, of the forces of egotism, prejudice, rivalry, blind loyalty, and feelings of insecurity running in torrents in hidden depths of those minds – minds from where emerge the immaculate mathematical truths – those sublime creations of human intellect.

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