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Through the Bamboo Curtain

The United States policy of not extending diplomatic recognition to certain countries, most notably East Germany and Communist China, is bolstered by efforts to prevent the development of trade and cultural relations with those countries.

Prior to the Geneva conference of 1955, these corollaries of our policy greatly limited our ability to obtain scientific books and periodicals from the nonrecognized countries. Treasury licenses for import or exchange were difficult to obtain and permitted only small acquisitions; the Customs Bureau, acting for the Post Office at points of entry, often delayed and sometimes prevented the delivery of scientific publications to legitimate scholarly institutions in the United States; and the Department of Commerce was reluctant to issue import and export licenses for scientific publications. In practice, the policy limited U.S. consumers of scientific information almost entirely to the purchase of materials that found their way into the world markets of cities such as Hong Kong, Tokyo, London, and Bonn.

Since the Geneva conference, perhaps as a result of representations to the State Department by scientists and librarians, there has been a quiet and unpublicized change in both attitude and practice on the part of the several government agencies that control the flow of scientific information between the United States and the nonrecognized countries. The Treasury has made licenses for purchase and exchange more readily available than in the past; the Customs Bureau now seldom blocks delivery of incoming scientific material; and the Commerce Department readily grants import licenses and has established a general export license that automatically applies to scientific information (but not to technological material unless it is freely available in this country).

Thus, nongovernmental libraries, abstracting services, and scientific academies can, though with some difficulty, directly negotiate for the materials they want from the countries in question. The case is different for government scientists and the government libraries that constitute our great national scientific libraries—the Library of Congress, the National Medical Library, and the Library of the Department of Agriculture. For them, the old obstacles still remain to a considerable extent. Government officials are not permitted to correspond directly with officials in the nonrecognized countries, nor may they enter into direct arrangements for purchase or exchange. Consequently, they either continue to depend upon purchases made outside the countries in question, as does the Library of Congress, or to work through third parties such as the Academy of Sciences in Bonn and private university libraries, as does the National Medical Library. Such third parties can deal directly with people in East Germany and Communist China for purchase of books and periodicals. They may not, however, enter into exchange agreements for their principals. This is a heavy handicap, for the national libraries depend on exchanges for a large fraction of their accessions; the Library of the Department of Agriculture, for example, receives more than 17,000 periodicals by exchange.

Although much has been done to ease the flow of scientific information from the nonrecognized countries, much remains to be done by way of working out satisfactory means of getting such information without jeopardizing the over-all national policy.—G.DuS.