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SCIENCE, which is now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at National Publishing Company, Washington, D.C. The joint journal is published in the SCIENCE format. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Editorial and personnel-placement correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts or for the opinions expressed by contributors. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts and illustrations, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

Display-advertising correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. If possible, furnish an address label from a recent issue. Give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers, if any.

Annual subscriptions: \$8.50; foreign postage, \$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

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Win the Argument and Lose the Debate

A Soviet-American exchange program that each year includes several dozen graduate students recently yielded instruction on how increased contact between the two countries can also mean increased friction. Some ill-feeling arose when each side rejected some of the candidates offered by the other. The Americans rejected Soviet students on the grounds that they lacked proper preparation for the work they proposed to do or because Soviet officials had not furnished us with sufficient information to place the students properly. The Soviets rejected American students on the grounds that they had selected topics for study that no self-respecting Soviet scholar would touch. One American wanted to study the history of a certain religious sect, while a second wanted to study the work of a 19th-century political thinker named Mikhail Katkov, but the Soviets are not enthusiastic about religious sects and Katkov, it turns out, was an odious reactionary.

In selecting American students with such topics, the U.S. committee handling the exchange was not being unreasonable. A story in the 21 June *New York Times* explained that research in these fields actually is being conducted in the U.S.S.R. And the *Times*, in its 16 August letter columns, documented this claim by scholarly references to the journals *Voprossi Istorii* and *Voprossi Filosofii* and to the researches of Professor Klibanoff and Dotcents Zatpadov and Sladkevich. This documentation was offered in answer to a letter by V. Yelyutin, the Soviet minister of secondary, special, and higher education. Yelyutin charged that the *Times* story was misleading in making it seem as if the U.S.S.R., not the U.S., was responsible for difficulties in the exchange program.

Another American entered the dispute at this point with the suggestion that if we want to promote exchange with the Russians, then the way to proceed is not by appealing to evidence or sweet reason, but by being more accommodating. In a letter in the 4 September *Times*, Bryant M. Wedge, a member of the Yale faculty who has visited Soviet universities, saw little hope of settling East-West differences by discussion. On the question of the U.S. rejection of U.S.S.R. candidates, which the Soviets found surprising in view of the candidates' possession of Soviet college diplomas, Wedge suggested that, even if we are not clear about the students' qualifications or how to place them properly, they should be accepted. Given our large and diverse educational system, he said, we surely can find room for whomever the Soviet ministry chooses to send us.

Accommodation seems to be an excellent ideal in exchange programs, and perhaps we can do more than we have done, not only in accepting Soviet students but in selecting American students—and topics—as candidates for study in the U.S.S.R. As an exercise in imagination, we might consider how certain subjects would affect us if chosen by Soviet students for study here. Suppose a Soviet student wanted to investigate how in Philadelphia in 1787 the bourgeoisie succeeded in strengthening its dictatorship of the country. This topic is not inconceivable. As noted last year by Andrew R. MacAndrew in the *New Leader*, Soviet historiography has it that the American Constitution was established because the American "ruling classes," having turned the revolution to their own selfish ends, realized that the Articles of Confederation could not deal successfully with "the resistance of the masses."

Under the principle of accommodation, it follows that we should welcome the opportunity to correct such a Soviet student's sense of history, but it also follows that we should not seek a similar welcome in the Soviet Union.—J.T.