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Censorship, Soviet Style

Governmental power, when used to dictate what is permissible in scientific communication, tends to breed the climate of surveillance and intimidation that has long prevailed in closed societies accustomed to employing censorship to keep the natives in line. As the Soviet experience demonstrates, the habit evolves into an institution.

Sixty years after the founding of the Soviet state, and notwithstanding the eminence of Soviet scientists in the world community, the evidence is that distrust of brainpower remains as profound as in the era of the czars. Not even the brief window of détente, which found American and Soviet scientists mingling and promoting fellowship, changed the facts of life for Soviet intellectuals.

It is instructive to observe the impact of compulsive Soviet censorship on the English-language copies of *Science* that are imported under a long-standing purchase agreement with the AAAS. Systematic blackout is regularly imposed on editorials, letters to the editor, and news features. The effect, one suspects, is to alert Soviet scientists to the missing material and promote a lively underground market for it.

To safeguard the innocence of Soviet scientists during 1982, the censors ranged broadly over the alarming contents of *Science*. Struck from the issue of 23 April 1982, for example, was the entire letters department, in which appeared a protest against the revocation, on political grounds, of academic degrees in the Soviet Union. The censors likewise obliterated Donald Kennedy's editorial on "The government, secrecy, and university research," although it might have consoled Soviet readers to learn that their envied colleagues in the West have a few problems, too. Pressing on, the censors deleted a critical commentary on the MX missile. Of the five issues of *Science* in April, three had the news section amputated in whole. The following month, having rested, the censors were at it again, eliminating the news section for 21 May, which dealt with alternatives to the MX, the fortunes of Livermore National Laboratory in "the laser battle," the downfall of statistics at the hands of the Reagan Administration, and French attempts at reforming education. So it went throughout 1982, as indeed it had gone in every previous year.

To the extent that such mangling signals Soviet dissatisfaction with *Science*, the harm is small and our journal will survive it. The real import is of another kind, for it exposes the insecurity of a society that is unwilling and unable to trust its scientific community. It would not be surprising to find that the withholding of that trust by the Soviet government induces a response in kind and intensity, for the small affair concerning *Science* can only hint at the hostage state of scientists in the Soviet Union.

The Soviets' perennial defense of the censors' actions is that the expurgated materials in *Science* are of no interest to their scientists. It is a peculiar argument, considering what the authorities do *not* censor. We are asked to believe that Soviet scientists could not wait to get their hands on accounts of an audit of an American university's research grants, the Environmental Protection Agency's relaxation of hazardous waste rules, a letter about science and religion, and a news brief on federal security checks on peer reviewers of agricultural research. They were not to be interested, on the other hand, in reports on counterforce weapons or an accident at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN).

It is tempting to deplore the lot of Soviet scientists while exulting in our better fortune. It would be wiser to reflect on the surpassing importance of trust in the contract between science and government in an open society, together with the obligation on both sides to respect it. On that foundation rests the whole of the American arrangement. The authors of the pending national security directive on protecting unclassified scientific information, now being drafted at the White House, should take note.

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