

and offers a surprisingly clear evolutionary record. Says Bull: "This is the study that's going to go into the textbooks."

—GRETCHEN VOGEL

FORMER SOVIET SCIENCE

Ukrainian KGB Puts Heat on Researchers

In an episode that is rekindling memories of Soviet-era repression, Ukrainian security agents last week accused three marine scientists of crimes against the state: shipping sensitive data out of the country and illegally accepting Western currency for research. The unprecedented post-Cold War investigation has stirred an international effort to persuade the Ukrainian government to rein in its version of the KGB before formal charges are brought. Prosecuting the researchers, observers in the West say, could put scientific collaboration with Ukraine into a deep chill.

Like many talented scientists who have chosen to stay put in the former Soviet Union, Sergey Piontkovski and his team at the Institute of Biology of the Southern Seas (IBSS) in Sevastopol, Ukraine, have supplemented their meager state salaries with grants from Western organizations. Piontkovski has been more successful than most, pulling in grants in recent months from the U.K. government's Darwin Initiative; a European Union agency called INTAS that supports former Soviet scientists; and the U.S. Office of Naval Research (ONR). According to several Ukrainian scientists, jealous co-workers at the institute may be trying to take Piontkovski down: "As far as I know, these people wrote a letter to the local KGB," says Alexei Mishonov of the Marine Hydrophysical Institute (MHI) in Sevastopol, now a visiting scientist at Texas A&M University in College Station.

Whatever aroused their interest, on 16 October Ukrainian security bureau (SBU) agents raided the homes and offices of Piontkovski; his former wife, Galina Piontkovskaya, who is also an IBSS scientist; and IBSS deputy director Yuri Tokarev. They seized the researchers' scientific papers, computers, money, and passports. "They confiscated everything," says Piontkovski, who when contacted at his home by *Science* claimed that the SBU was monitoring his telephone calls. If convicted of illegal funds transfers, he says, all three scientists could face steep fines and up to 8 years in prison. Tokarev, Piontkovski says, was also ac-

cused of passing Soviet-era data to the West. The SBU investigation has since expanded to target MHI scientists also funded by the three grants, says Mishonov.

Work under the grants involves analyzing and digitizing a wealth of data on plankton bioluminescence collected by over 50 Soviet ocean expeditions from 1970 to 1990, as well as voyages undertaken by Ukraine and Russia after the Soviet Union dissolved. The grants call for making the information, a measure of the ocean's total biomass, available to the scientific community on CD-ROM. "I can hardly see how this kind of plankton studies can

represent a risk to the national security of any nation," says marine biologist Luis D'Croz of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama. "This is simply absurd." The data "were not classified in any way," adds marine biologist Robert Williams of the Plymouth Marine Laboratory in the United Kingdom, a co-principal investigator on the ONR and Darwin grants, although he points out that the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine prohibited the release of Soviet acoustic data that might give insights

into submarine movements.

Ukraine's Byzantine currency laws make it hard for Western officials to evaluate the allegations of illegal funds transfers. "We have told the Ukrainian government time and again that they are creating a hostile environment for investment," says Gerson Sher, director of the U.S. Civilian Research and Development Foundation. Sher estimates that three times as many tax-free dollars for science would flow into Ukraine if the legal situation were clarified. "It's like the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] in our own country—if they want to get you they'll find a way," he says. Mishonov agrees: "It's very easy to find a currency law that's broken." INTAS director David Gould, however, says his agency has abided by the law in funding scientists under a program sanctioned by the Ukrainian government.

To send a signal that the SBU's own steps are being monitored, the European Union's representative in Kiev has taken up the matter with Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while Piontkovski's colleagues at IBSS and at foreign institutions have appealed to Boris Paton, the powerful academy president, to bring his influence to bear. If the SBU is preparing a broader campaign against Western-funded Ukrainian scientists, warns Williams, he and others who wish to sustain their colleagues may have to keep them at arm's length, for "fear of placing them in jeopardy."

—RICHARD STONE



Price of success? Piontkovski's grants could land him in jail.

ScienceScope

Beijing Brouhaha Brushing aside last-minute objections from an influential congressman, the National Science Foundation (NSF) last week gave the green light to a science policy meeting in China involving officials from both countries. Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI, right), chair of the House Science Committee, was supposed to deliver the keynote address at the 3-day Beijing conference organized by Thomas Ratchford, a senior science official in the Bush Administration who now teaches at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Ratchford has a \$325,000 NSF grant to explore U.S.—Chinese roles in a "borderless, knowledge-based 21st century economy."

But Sensenbrenner pulled out on 20 October, blasting China's "repeated efforts to obtain or misuse sensitive military technologies," and urged NSF to cancel the meeting. Ironically, he broke the news to NSF director Rita Colwell in a call that interrupted a meeting with reporters in which she and presidential science adviser Neal Lane had heaped praise on Sensenbrenner and his Republican colleagues for their help in passing the just-signed 2000 budget for NSF and NASA.

Colwell spent the next day conferring with Lane and other scientists before deciding that the meeting should go on. The seminar "is not linked to [Sensenbrenner's] specific concerns" and upholds "the principle of free circulation of scientists," she says. Sensenbrenner released a statement expressing disappointment with NSF's decision, which he said "prompts further questions about the Administration's handling of S&T issues involving China."

Opinion-Makers How do British scientists think they rate with the public? The Wellcome Trust aims to find out. Next month, with support from the government's Office of Science and Technology, the biomedical research charity will begin face-to-face interviews with a "nationally representative" sample of 1600 U.K. scientists in a bid to discover—among other things—how they see their role in society and how the fuss over genetically modified foods has shaped their attitudes toward the media. Preliminary results of the survey, to be conducted by the market research firm MORI, will be available next spring, with a final report in July.

