

# editorial

## Orlov trial in perspective

The Yuri Orlov trial is not the end of the world—it will not and should not lead to the breakdown of the SALT negotiations, the surrender of detente, or the collapse of official American–Soviet scientific relations. But the collectivity of the spontaneous cancellations of scheduled trips to Soviet conferences and laboratories by US and West European scientists, protesting the treatment of Orlov, will and should impress the Soviet Union with our sense of outrage at the nature of the charge, conduct of the trial and the imposition of a sentence unworthy of a civilized country.

In May 1976, Yuri Orlov addressed an open appeal to all countries (including his own) that had signed the Helsinki Accords. This courageous appeal contained the prescient sentence: “If the collection and transmission of information on violations of these provisions are classified as crimes against the State, then this undermines the very basis of the Accords and deprives them of real content and internal consistency.” The spate of cancellations following the Orlov trial is communicating to the Soviet Politburo our deep disappointment in a country which, 60 years after its “Great Socialist Revolution,” deals so savagely with an esteemed scientist who had the temerity to monitor an international agreement which it signed. As a well-known American scientist explained to his Soviet colleague in writing of his cancellation: “Vladimir, I am a scientist, not a lawyer, and independent of the apparent logic of the law, a scientist knows when the answer comes out wrong. In my view, as I have told you before, Yuri’s actions were not wrong; but his arrest was wrong, the conduct of his trial was wrong, and his sentence was also wrong.”

The fervor of the above statement by a mild-mannered physicist testifies to the special significance of the Orlov case along the rocky road of American–Soviet scientific relations since they were resumed in 1956—two decades after the Soviet “Purge Trials” of the 1930’s. Transgressions by both the Soviet Union and the United States have occurred since 1956, but somehow the effects on our scientific relations were short-lived and did not corrode the spirit of scientific cooperation. Perhaps some historical remarks would be illuminating, particularly since I can speak from personal experience.

In April 1956, Admiral Lewis L. Strauss, who was then chairman of the US Atomic Energy Commission, was persuaded to allow a Soviet delegation to attend the VI International Conference on High Energy Physics held in Rochester, N.Y. This resumption of American–Soviet scientific relations was the first break in the Cold War and made national news. A month later a dozen Americans were attending a high-energy physics conference in Moscow, and we were received with equal warmth and optimism. Indeed, the Russian leadership in our field (Tamm, Landau, Veksler and others) was euphoric and

believed that a new era had dawned not only for the scientific community but for all humanity. Six months later (in November 1956), the Soviet Army suppressed the Hungarian rebellion and American–Soviet scientific relations were temporarily suspended—for example, the Russians did not attend the 1957 Rochester conference. But, by 1958, the “Rochester” conference in Kiev was well attended by the world community of high-energy physicists—with the crushing of the Hungarian revolt a bad memory all too quickly forgotten.

In May 1960, an American delegation toured the Soviet high-energy physics laboratories—in formerly forbidden cities like Kharkov and far-away places like Yerevan—during the height of the U-2 incident and the breakdown of the Eisenhower–Khrushchev summit meeting in Paris. Soviet officials lectured us on the perfidiousness of the US government, but the cordiality between individual Soviet and American scientists was undiminished. In the early 1960’s, our National Academy of Sciences signed an official scientific exchange agreement with the Soviet Academy of Sciences. The Vietnam war and the Soviet take-over of Czechoslovakia led to mutual recriminations—in letters and in conversations between members of the Soviet and American scientific communities—but to no basic slackening of the exchange programs.

Why is the Orlov trial different? I believe that the intensity of feeling in the United States and in Western Europe about the Orlov and similar trials—and hence the likelihood of more lasting damage to scientific relations—stems from several factors. Previous national transgressions were regarded as impersonal manifestations of “State” power, and could be separated from the ongoing bond of scientific collegiality. The “dissident” trials involve colleagues whom we know and respect and whose “crimes” consist of speaking out for the freedoms and openness of communication that are essential ingredients of the scientific enterprise.

Finally, we are appalled at the lack of reciprocity and the affront to human dignity. When the Soviet government requested observers at the Angela Davis trial in the United States several years ago, President Nixon acquiesced. Can the post-Stalin leadership afford to do less? The willingness of the Soviet Union to accept foreign observers at their “dissident” trials would be an important first step forward. Above all, the Soviet government must realize that the alienation of scientists and intellectuals throughout the world and in their own country is too high a price to pay in our increasingly interdependent world.

ROBERT E. MARSHAK  
*present position: President  
City College of the  
City University of New York*