

editorial

Let's not boycott Soviet physicists

The constitution of The American Physical Society states that its primary function is the "advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of physics." In pursuit of this goal the society has worked to preserve and enhance freedom of scientific communication. It has worked, in general, to oppose restraints on scientific activities including those associated with the suppression of the human rights of individual scientists, as has occurred not only in the Soviet Union but also in many other countries, most notably Argentina, the Philippines, Czechoslovakia and Rumania. Would the short-term loss of the freedom of scientific communication as a consequence of an official boycott advocated by some as a response to Andrei Sakharov's exile be compensated by the long-term benefits? Is a boycott the way to induce the Soviet authorities to reverse their present course of action?

I am certain that the members of the physics community join me in condemning the callous and inexcusable actions taken by the Soviet government against our fellow physicist Andrei Sakharov. Academician Sakharov's exile is but one example of the repression visited upon the tiny group of courageous Soviet citizens who are willing to speak publicly, and in Sakharov's case most eloquently, in behalf of the freedoms guaranteed by the Helsinki accords signed by the USSR. We fear that the attempt to silence such a distinguished Soviet citizen as Academician Sakharov foreshadows a more intense level of repression within the Soviet Union.

At the same time, we are saddened and disheartened by these events because of their destructive impact upon the bridges that have been built up patiently and laboriously over the years between the scientists of the US and those of the USSR. Indeed the question of what our policy should be with regard to communication with Soviet scientists must be carefully considered.

The answers to the questions about boycott depend upon the interpretation of the recent events under discussion. Taken together with the resignation of Kirillin, they appear to signal the ascendancy of the "hard liners" in the Soviet Union and a reduction of the importance attached to scientific collaboration in Soviet policy. Whatever leverage US scientists may have had in the past to ameliorate the difficulties of our colleagues in the Soviet Union has been correspondingly reduced. Under these circumstances a boycott of communication in the basic sciences would be a minor perturbation and hence an effective gesture relative to the massive actions being taken by the US government, such as the cessation of technology exchange, the grain embargo and the withdrawal from the summer Olympics.

On the basis of these considerations it would seem best to continue to keep open communication between scientists of both countries in the interest of our own scientific progress as well as to preserve channels to the scientific community and thence to the more liberal elements in Soviet society. But we must now add a condition that any such activity should not be construed as approval, either implicitly or explicitly, of the repressive actions taken against Sakharov, the dissidents and the refusnik scientists. Our disapproval must be explicit and must be expressed directly.

I see no problem in maintaining contact under these circumstances on an individual level. Indeed we should be careful to see that US agencies do not overreact by setting up barriers that would substantially inhibit communication and visits of individual scientists. Inevitably there will be a reduction of scientific intercourse, since many scientists will now refuse to accept invitations from the Soviet Union or will be reluctant to engage in collaborations.

At the level of international meetings, IUPAP (the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics) has a long-standing tradition of reserving the right to refuse to schedule a meeting in a country that has violated the principles of free circulation of scientists. At the same time IUPAP has always supported continued free communication between individual scientists regardless of international political developments.

At the national level, bilateral programs like those of the National Academy of Sciences and the DOE should be continued but again with direct expression in each case of our disapproval of actions taken by the Soviet authorities that violate the rights of scientists, as exemplified by the exile of Sakharov. Such expressions could occur, as appropriate, at planning sessions as well as at the meetings themselves. Most importantly, bilateral meetings should be held only if they are significant scientifically and if all attending can make important contributions to the scientific goals of the meeting. Similarly, collaborations should be continued only where the contribution of each is substantial, that is, that the collaborations are genuine. If these suggestions are followed, we should be able to repeatedly express our deep concern for the rights of Soviet scientists but at the same time we will be able to engage in profitable scientific discussions.

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