

Science and scientists under attack

It has happened, therefore it can happen again
(Primo Levi)

Dear Editor,

A recent Editorial published in your journal illustrated the condition of Ukrainian scientists during the invasion of their country by the aggressor Russian Federation: killed, at the front, or refugees. Just as the international democratic community supports Ukraine from the attack and already plans reconstruction, the scientific community is urged to support its Ukrainian colleagues and their scientific networks.¹ Science and Reason are the natural antidotes to the poison of dictatorship, nationalism, and the violence of imperialism and the war of aggression, ghosts never quite disappeared in Europe and now galloping on the horses of the Apocalypse twenty-five years after the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

In a comment to the Editorial, it was written that it is childish to boycott Russian art forms after the invasion since Art, like Science, has no boundaries or homeland.² This is true without any doubt. But Art and Science are cloaks that must be worn by worthy people. In 1949, after World War II, Leo Alexander wrote «Science under dictatorship becomes subordinated to the guiding philosophy of the dictatorship. [...]. Nazi propaganda was highly effective in perverting public opinion and public conscience, in a remarkably short time. In the medical profession this expressed itself in a rapid decline in standards of professional ethics. Medical science in Nazi Germany collaborated with this Hegelian trend particularly in the following enterprises: the mass extermination of the chronically sick in the interest of saving "useless" expenses to the community as a whole; the mass extermination of those considered socially disturbing or racially and ideologically unwanted; the individual, inconspicuous extermination of those considered disloyal within the ruling group; and the ruthless use of "human experimental material" for medico-military research».³

The abyss did not bloom suddenly. The Nazi doctors and scientists before the war attended the International Congresses, and even then, it was debated whether or not to boycott them. In 1935 an Editorial published in *Nature* reported «Now a new situation is developing which may be fraught with considerable danger to the continued co-operation of workers in other countries with their German colleagues. This new development carried to the limit can only result in the isolation of German men of science in all matters of international organization [...]. International conferences held in Germany are to be sifted of undesirable elements by the authorities beforehand and to survive as meetings approved by the Nazi party. For meetings held outside Germany the control must necessarily be much less, but here too it is possible to influence matters by sending German members to a meeting as a delegation under an appointed leader chosen for his reliability as a member of the Nazi party. [...]. It should be added in fairness to the Germans that internal persecution of a minority is not limited to their country, nor even the use of international gatherings to spread nationalist political propaganda. Both these undesirable practices are to be found in more than one country:

we have no sympathy for either. But when these tendencies spread and a nationalistic movement tries to secure the control of international scientific work, it is time to call a halt».⁴

Should we apply today to Russian scientists the same precautions that were to be applied to German scientists in 1935? Of course, the world is never clear-cut: immediately after the invasion more than 5000 Russian scientists, mostly residents of Russia, spread and signed a complaint against the war. «We, the undersigned Russian scientists and science journalists, declare our strong opposition to the Russian hostilities launched against the Ukrainian people. These hostilities are incurring huge human losses and undermine the foundations of the established system of international security. The responsibility for unleashing a new war in Europe lies entirely with Russia [...]. We demand an immediate halt to all military operations directed against Ukraine. We demand respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state. We demand peace for our countries».

We do not know what happened to the brave signatories; the law with penalties of up to 15 years for those criticizing the so-called *special operation* was issued a few days later. Now the original text is difficult to find on the net, and the names of the signatories are all written in Cyrillic, making it impossible for a Westerner to identify names.

We cannot leave alone such heroic opponents of the Putinian autocracy, but neither can we accept to work and exchange information with scientists complicit with the regime and protected by the dark forces of Russia. There is an urgent need for the international scientific community to provide information on Russian researchers by identifying those undoubtedly compromised with the regime and excluding them from all professional and scientific circuits.

Science walks on the legs of men and women, it is not neutral or aseptic, and once again, after almost a century, we are called to a halt to criminal scientists. When this is over, we all need to know who was on which side. And no brilliant intelligence will redeem anyone for supporting this brutal aggression against an entire people, as in the darkest times of our history.

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