

Karel Hujer:

Science Under Siege

Having recently heard from highest places that "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe," it is most timely to recall an unforgettable incident that will go into the annals of the history of science:

"I, the representative of the troops of the Warsaw Pact, First Lieutenant Orlov Juri Alexandrovitch, order all the staff and members of the Presidium of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences to stop work on 22 August 1968 by 13 hours of Central European Time and to clear all the premises of the Academy of Sciences of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic."

Until then, the Academy had upheld the good name of Czechoslovak scholarship with honor. On August 28, 1968, the Presidium of the Academy was still in position to issue the following statement:

"What we have experienced in the last few days can never be erased from our memories, although we shall be forced to be silent about our feelings and our thoughts. In our future work we shall continue to be guided by the principle that the duty of learning and of scholars is to seek the truth alone, and steadfastly to defend that truth."

In the 15th century the religious reformer, Jan Hus, shaped the ethical foundation of scientific thought for which he was tried for heresy, condemned by the Constance Church Council and burned at the stake July 6, 1415, for his search and defence of truth. Medieval

Pope John XXIII presided over that trial and half a year later was himself put in jail for his depredation. For that reason a humble Italian peasant in our time, for atonement, again took the name Pope John XXIII.

In the 17th century John Amos Comenius, founder of modern pedagogy, was forced to leave his beloved homeland because of his beliefs. Prague University carries an impressive list of scholars such as J. E. Purkyne (Purkinje), founder of modern physiology, B. Hrozny, who deciphered Hittite cuneiform inscriptions, and the only Czech Nobel prize laureate, J. Heyrovsky, founder of polarography. I cherish the memory that he officiated at my graduation at Prague University in 1932.

The doors of Prague University were always open to foreign scholars, and astronomers are aware of the names of great pioneers of celestial science, Kepler and Tycho Brahe, who found all freedom in Rudolphine Prague during the period of anti-reformation. The Augustinian monk, Gregor Mendel, working in Brno, Moravia, laid the foundation of genetics, and the great forerunner of Einsteinian physics, Ernest Mach, taught at Prague University almost 36 years, as did Albert Einstein before World War I.

Now under forced Sovietization, slavishly following the Soviet model, besides a few positive effects, the general result is devastating. For years Mendel's genetics was suppressed by Stalin's stooge, Lysenko, and the

centenary celebration of Mendel's publication was allowed only after Stalin vanished from the scene. In physics and astronomy such Nobel laureates as Heisenberg and Niels Bohr were described as capitalist reactionaries, and their doctrines as dangerous to the Communist "holy gospel of Marxism-Leninism." The Czechoslovak Academy even before the invasion of Soviet troops in 1968 became like its Soviet equivalent, a mighty corporation which tightly controls the activity of even many amateur astronomer groups and their people's observatories. It carefully controls their meetings, checking on any trend of ideas especially in cosmology so they would not divert from a materialist picture of a Godless universe that is made of atoms and void.

Unlike the case of Soviet action after the Hungarian invasion in 1956 where conditions improved with the lapse of time, repressive measures in Czechoslovakia did not start until two to three years after the occupation. So-called normalization does not indicate any return to reason or tolerance, these are nowhere in sight. The situation grows ever more apocalyptic as described by Dr. F. Janouch, physicist and former head of the theoretical nuclear physics department at the Nuclear Research Institute in Prague, now an exile in Stockholm. Since the political crackdown of 1968 the atmosphere has become unbearable.

The systematic persecution of scientists and intellectuals

in Czechoslovakia should be of world concern. It was evident last year at the World Congress of Historians in San Francisco, when the Toronto University historian circulated "Acta Persecutionis" which contained the list of 143 Czech historians who had lost their positions and were left without any occupation or forced to do menial jobs according to similar treatment of dissidents in the USSR. In his report published in the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, Dr. Janouch gives alarming statistics of the disastrous effect on scientific activity due to the Communist party interference in the Czechoslovak Academy. Membership in the Academy is, of course, guided by the party cadre, and the relation to the party is the only ultimate arbiter of "scientific" standing. The defence of any dissertation is subject to prior approval by Party headquarters.

This control of scientific activity by the ruling party will have disastrous consequences into the distant future because it will lead to catastrophic backwardness. Communist propaganda in the Western world tries to produce the impression of changes for the better but the actual situation is a most portentous warning for the entire civilized world. It is particularly ominous when an American president, head of our government, misleads the masses by the illusion that all is well in Poland.

(Dr. Hujer, Guerry Professor Emeritus of Physics and Astronomy, frequently contributes commentaries to this page.)