

# CORRESPONDENCE

## "Drivel" on Katchalsky

SIR,—It is disheartening and distressing to read the outright drivel which has been appearing in both *Nature* and *Science* regarding the murder of Professor Aharon Katchalsky Katzir (for example, *Nature*, **238**, 361; 1972).

Virtually the entire population of the United States now regards the Vietnam war as a horrible blunder, and many of us have held that view since the war began. It is true that in the course of that war innocent civilians have been killed. However, the murder of civilians is not and never has been our Government's war policy. American soldiers are not ordered to kill civilians, and whenever they do so it is either a sick aberration or the result of a horrible error—all in the context of a military conflict.

To equate this wartime killing of civilians by error with the carefully planned, purposeful, braggartly, and wanton murder of random civilians by demented, true-believing zealots, certainly is the high point in sloppy thinking for these troubled times.

Yours faithfully,

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## Scientists and Politics

SIR,—A recent editorial in *Nature* (**238**, 61; 1972) described in graphic detail the insulting treatment of Dr Zhores Medvedev at the recent International Congress on Gerontology in Kiev. The same issue of *Nature* also contains correspondence from Prof. John Ziman pointing out other nefarious practices indulged in by the Soviet Government with respect to their scientists travelling

abroad. These items are more especially newsworthy in the light of the observation that "in the past few years, the Russian authorities have been eager to encourage the use of Moscow and other Russian cities for international scientific conferences . . .". Further testimony to the hypocritical attitude of the Soviet bureaucracy towards international scientific exchange comes from the most recent IV International Biophysical Society Meeting in Moscow which seemed plagued with further examples of political interference.

I am a scientist who has occupied resident alien status in the USA for the past 7 years. Since my naturalization proceedings have not yet been fully completed, I reluctantly still carry a South African passport.

During the months preceding the meeting I faithfully complied with all deadlines for submission of abstracts, clearing of Intourist, and application for a visa to enter the Soviet Union. One week prior to my scheduled departure, the all-too-familiar rhetoric emanating from the Soviet Embassy in Washington led me to seek the assistance of a variety of official sources, including the US Office of the Foreign Secretary, the Soviet Academy of Sciences, the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics, and the Organizing Committee of the meeting. Despite the urgent and, to my knowledge, sincere efforts of these bodies, I was not issued the necessary visa. While the fact that I hold a South African passport might not be viewed with much sympathy in many quarters, this does not seem to me germane to the central question at large—denial by any government of any scientist's right to participate in an international scientific meeting anywhere in the world is a flagrant violation of one of the most fundamental tenets of scientific free-

dom and deserves the unqualified condemnation of that government's action.

Although my information at this point is second-hand, my enquiries during the days immediately preceding the meeting led me to understand that other scientists wishing to attend this meeting suffered a similar fate. I am thus forced to the sad conclusion that the time has not yet come when the Soviet Union can extend its scientific hospitality with candour and conviction, and I would emphatically echo the sentiment expressed in *Nature* that "scientific societies in the west should now seriously consider whether they should continue to participate in plans for holding conferences in the Soviet Union. . . ."

Yours faithfully,

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## Action at a Distance

SIR,—Is it not rather unfair to call action at a distance a mediaeval notion (in *News and Views*: "Elementary Particles and Cosmology", *Nature*, **238**, 69; 1972)? Surely the Schoolmen, who spoke for the Middle Ages on philosophical matters, denied that any such thing happens.

On the other hand, the notion that the future may have some influence on events, which may seem so strange today, would not have surprised the Schoolmen; for they believed in teleology.

Yours faithfully,

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# Obituary

## Sir Gavin de Beer

SIR GAVIN DE BEER, who died suddenly on June 21, 1972, was a zoologist in the great tradition of Ray Lankester and Goodrich; essentially a comparative anatomist and embryologist, always evolutionary in outlook. His research was rigorous, never trivial in aim but adjusted to clarify important issues. His writing was scholarly and lucid,

mainly addressed, in its scientific aspects, to specialists or to undergraduates reading for honours at a university. He was, however, author of one of the best elementary textbooks on vertebrate zoology (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1928) ever written.

Gavin Rylands de Beer was born in 1899. He married Cicely Glynn, daughter of the Reverend Sir Hubert Medleycott, Bt, who survives him. He

was educated at the Ecole Pascal, Paris, at Harrow and at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was a Demy, and served as a Lieutenant in the Grenadier Guards in 1918-19.

On taking his final examination he was at once elected Fellow of Merton College, subsequently becoming Sub-Warden, and Demonstrator in the Department of Zoology at Oxford, where he was Jenkinson Lecturer in Embryo-