

Sorry, for copyright reasons some images on this page may not be available online

## The World Psychiatric Association is about to discuss the misuse of psychiatry. Vera Rich considers the Soviet example

*Orel Prison Hospital, USSR  
(Copyright Peter Reddaway)*

WHEN the Sixth World Congress of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) opens in Honolulu on 28 August, one of the major issues it will discuss is the misuse of psychiatry as a means of repressing political dissent. But with opinions divided over the proper measures needed to combat this abuse, the Congress could face unprecedented controversy.

Some of the seeds of this controversy are to be found in the Soviet Union. Over the past few years, a growing body of information has reached the outside world on the confinement of political dissidents in Soviet mental hospitals. The political abuse of psychiatry is not a specifically Soviet phenomenon—there are reports of 'psychiatric torture' in certain countries of South America, and occasional reports from Eastern Europe of psychiatric measures being taken against would-be emigrants or other protesters. No other country, however, provides such a bulk of material, nor so many well-documented cases.

Public awareness in the West was first drawn to the possibility of political misuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union in 1965, with the publication in Britain of a book by Valerii Tarsis entitled *Ward 7*. This work was essentially an autobiography disguised as

a novel. Within a few years, several individual cases of such abuse made headline news—notably those of Aleksandr Esenin-Volpin, the mathematician, and Zhores Medvedev, the geneticist. The full extent of the problem only became apparent, however, in March 1971, when the International Committee for the Defence of Human Rights in Paris received over 150 pages of documentation, including what were claimed to be exact copies of official forensic reports on dissidents.

### Scrutinised

During the course of the year the documents, which became known as the Bukovskii papers (after their compiler), were scrutinised by Sovietologists and psychiatrists. When the WPA held its Fifth Congress in Mexico in November 1971, strenuous efforts were made to discuss the Bukovskii material. Any firm action, however, was blocked by the Secretary-General of the WPA, Dr Denis Leigh, who averred that nothing in the WPA statutes mentioned that the WPA was responsible for ethical aspects of psychiatry. Nor, he suggested, was there any statute relating to complaints made by one member society against another.

These claims do not seem to agree with the provision in the statutes that

indicates membership of the WPA, both for individuals and societies, may be terminated *inter alia* by suspension. If the WPA cannot deal with such complaints, it is difficult to see on what grounds a member society can be suspended. Dr Leigh contented himself by announcing that the complaints had been "referred to the appropriate quarter, in this case the All-Union Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists"—the very body being complained about. An Ethical Committee was set up to discuss the ethics of psychiatric practice and to draw up an appropriate code of behaviour, to be discussed at the next Congress.

This decision did little to ameliorate things. Indeed, according to former interneers, including Bukovskii himself and Viktor Fainberg, conditions for dissidents in mental hospitals, which had been relaxed somewhat immediately prior to the Mexico meeting, became far more stringent once it was clear that the WPA was not prepared as a body to make a stand on this issue. Dr Gary Low-Ber of Horton Hospital, an active member of the Working Group on the Internment of Dissenters in Mental Hospitals, commented that it was not necessary to have a committee to define the ethics of the issue; what was needed was some means of enforcing the accepted ethical standards.

Since the Mexico Congress, the

Bukovskii evidence has been substantiated by a number of other dissident sources, including two Soviet psychiatrists—Semeon Gluzman (now in a labour camp), who exposed the official chicanery that led to a diagnosis of insanity in the case of General Grigorenko, and Marina Voikhanskaya (now resident in London), who refused to administer punitive doses of psychotropic drugs to sane dissidents. According to Dr Leigh himself, even the Soviet delegates at Mexico were prepared to concede that the case reports in the Bukovskii material were authentic. More recently, the Soviet line when releasing a dissident has been that he or she had been insane but was now cured by Soviet medicine. Independent examination of those internees released to the West immediately after discharge from 'hospital' fail to show, however, that any psychosis had been present.

#### Pattern well known

The general pattern of confinement of political and religious dissidents is now well known: massive punitive doses of drugs, physical restraint, including wrapping the patient in wet canvas which shrinks as it dries, brutal treatment by convict-warders and so on. What still remains in doubt is the stand the WPA should and will take in the matter.

The report of the Ethical Committee will be presented at Honolulu and debated in plenary session. This document will cover a number of issues, including questions of consent to radical forms of treatment, safeguards in the case of involuntary committal, and so forth. So far as is known, the problem of political misuse does not feature specifically, but is contained implicitly in the topic of when treatment is not indicated.

At the General Assembly, however, which represents all 75 member societies, the problem will be specifically raised: the Royal College of Psychiatrists is presenting a motion that the WPA should condemn the Soviet practice of confining dissidents in psychiatric institutions. This motion is not likely to pass unopposed; a number of psychiatrists would prefer to keep 'political issues' out of the Congress, fearing that if the Russians walk out in protest, it would destroy any possibility of diplomatic negotiation. Commenting on this approach, Dr Harold Merskey of the University of Western Ontario observes that the WPA is not an international body like the UN, whose sole purpose is to keep diplomatic channels open; it is a professional body, he says, representing a profession in which ethical standards are all-important in any meaningful

international exchange. He further remarks that "if politics have appeared in the matter, it is the Russians who have introduced them".

A special meeting to discuss individual abuses has been called on the initiative of the American Psychiatric Association; Dr Voikhanskaya is to be one of the floor speakers. The French Committee against Psychiatric Abuse is planning a rally outside the official context of the Congress. The problem underlying all such discussions and protests still remains unsolved: how far is the Soviet psychiatric profession committed to such abuses? And, following from this, what should the stance of individual psychiatrists and psychiatric bodies abroad be?

During the past few years, there has been a certain 'liberalisation' of Soviet psychological and psychiatric theory. This is reflected even in the new (1975) edition of the Large Soviet Encyclopædia. Whereas the previous edition (1955) dismisses psychoanalysis as a "bourgeois pseudo-science", the new version, though still condemning "idealistic" tendencies such as "Freudism", nevertheless acknowledges that the analytic approach has brought into scientific consideration such "important phenomena" as unconscious processes and the effect of the experiences of early childhood.

The historical survey places far less emphasis on Pavlov, who does not even merit a special biographical note, and the former description of psychiatric treatment as the eradication of harmful reflexes and the implantation of healthy ones has been replaced by a less simplistic one. Nor is it any longer stated that psychological "reality" must be understood in the sense of Marxist-Leninist reality. At first glance, the new entries seem almost as hopeful for Soviet psychiatry as the refutation of Lysenkoism was for genetics.

#### Marxist-Leninist science

Nevertheless, since Marxist-Leninism is considered to be a science in its own right and the basis of all Soviet science the outlook is not promising for those psychiatric 'patients' who hold opposing philosophies. The somewhat bizarre diagnoses such as "schizophrenia with delusions of reformism" may, in practice, be simply a useful tag for dropping a political nuisance into a psychiatric oubliette; but the Soviet psychiatric system provides a background that is particularly amenable to such distortions. The Soviet physicians' oath contains a pledge "to be guided by the principles of communist morality"—principles which specifically put the good of the community above that of the individual.

Certainly, many Soviet psychiatrists

are unaware of the abuses. Dr Voikhanskaya states that she herself knew nothing of them for almost ten years; others, at great personal risk, refuse to participate in them. The problem of political psychiatric abuse in the Soviet Union is not, however, simply that of a relatively small number of psychiatrists putting their devotion to the establishment above their professional commitment; any serious consideration of the problem, or plan to protest, must pay serious attention to the background against which they arise and within which they can acquire some kind of 'socio-political' justification. □

Sorry, for copyright reasons some images on this page may not be available online

*Bukovskii: sent documents*

Sorry, for copyright reasons some images on this page may not be available online

*Voikhanskaya: son still in USSR*

Sorry, for copyright reasons some images on this page may not be available online

*Gluzman: still held*  
(This picture and picture opposite courtesy of Peter Reddaway and Sidney Bloch, authors of Russia's Political Hospitals, published by Gollancz)