Hero or villain? Stasi archives shed light on Russian scientist

Sir — Nikolai Timoféeff-Ressovsky (1900–81), one of the most striking personalities in twentieth-century science, did ground-breaking research in the fields of population genetics, radiation biology and evolutionary biology while working in Germany and the Soviet Union (see, for example, D. Paul and C. Krimbas, *Scientific American* **266,** 86–92; 1992). Until now, studies of his life, which began in Tsarist Russia, have been hindered by language barriers, the cold war and inaccessible archives. We have recently unearthed material for the first time from the archives of the Stasi (East German security service) which illuminates some, although not all, of the questions surrounding his life.

The material includes Third Reich material from Timoféeff-Ressovsky and his family; records of interrogations by Soviet officials after the Second World War of him and his German colleagues Karl Zimmer and Hans Born; an official 1988 Soviet investigation into whether he should be rehabilitated; and an East German investigation provoked by a biography.

Soviet officials had accused Timoféeff-Ressovsky of treason on three grounds: failure to return from Germany after going to do research there in 1925; providing Germany with information on Soviet scientific institutes; and contributing to the German war effort. Timoféeff-Ressovsky, who had been running an independent research institute in Berlin since 1937, denied working for the German war effort, although other scientists in his institute had done so.

Zimmer told the Soviet officials that wartime research at the institute had included the biological effect of neutron radiation; the manufacture of radioactive elements, including radium; the effect of X-rays on humans; paints to illuminate instruments in aircraft; X-ray weapons against enemy planes; the effect of cosmic radiation on pilots at high altitudes; and protection from radiation. Zimmer also testified that, beginning in 1939 for the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Brain Research, and in 1942 for Timoféeff-Ressovsky's genetics department, war work was carried out, including research on "weapons of mass destruction": X-rays and neutron radiation.

Born described radiation experiments on animals, on volunteers (including Born himself) and on human corpses. The transcripts of these interrogations make clear that the Soviet security service was mainly interested in military research and experiments with radium and uranium. Afterwards, Timoféeff-Ressovsky spent nearly a year in a prison camp.

During the period of *glasnost*, Daniel Granin's book *Zubr* (Novyj Mir, Moscow, 1987) portrayed Timoféeff-Ressovsky as a scientific genius victimized by stalinism and as an anti-fascist who fought against Hitler: one of his sons had died in a Nazi concentration camp. Perhaps encouraged by this, Timoféeff-Ressovsky's surviving son Alexei sought his father's rehabilitation. Soviet justice officials rejected this request in 1988, on the grounds that his father was a traitor who had worked on weapons of mass destruction for Germany.

In 1989, by contrast, East German officials from the Stasi, the ruling Socialist Unity party and the Academy of Sciences noted that Timoféeff-Ressovsky had only given information to Germany on Soviet institutes during the German–Soviet non-aggression pact, when scientists had been encouraged to cooperate, and that he had stayed away from the Soviet Union to avoid persecution for opposing the then state-approved theory of lysenkoism. They concluded that the war work done at his institute came to nothing. This report by the East German Academy of Sciences may explain why Soviet officials rehabilitated Timoféeff-Ressovsky soon afterwards.

These sources suggest that Timoféeff-Ressovsky did not collaborate with the Third Reich for the war effort. But, as the East German report noted, neither could he be described as an anti-fascist.

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Sorting out the Smiths

Sir — 'J. Smith' published an astonishing 413 papers in the biosciences last year, with interests including radionuclides, retirement communities, HIV, endoglin (a TGF-β receptor-associated protein), childhood sexual abuse and its effect on the dating experiences of undergraduate women, rabies, t'ai chi and "Nice work, but is it science?".

Each of these papers can be accessed through the PubMed database by using the PubMed Unique Identifier (PMID) number — for example, 11232061 will locate the paper on dating experiences. But if you want to find, say, all papers published by the J. Smith working on HIV, you need to use additional qualifiers and/or know where the author has worked.

This suggests that the time may be ripe for the introduction of author-specific ID numbers, or AIDs, similar to PMIDs. These could be provided at the time of publication and would form part of any reference database entry, making database searches considerably easier — though perhaps less eclectic.

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Health-funding boost not enough for Canada

Sir — Your upbeat News (*Nature* **409,** 549; 2001) report of funds being poured into health research via the newly created Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) requires comment. Although it is true that the CIHR budget from April 1999 to March 2002 will be effectively twice that of the former Medical Research Council of Canada, Canada's expenditure on biomedical research remains paltry.

This year's CIHR budget of some Can$477 million (US$310 million) pales in comparison with the current budget of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) at US$20.3 billion. The population of Canada is one-tenth that of the United States, so the CIHR budget would have to be increased to about Can $3.1 billion — US$2 billion — to be comparable in per capita terms to that of the NIH. Because the NIH budget itself is on target to double over a five-year period, the United States will continue to outspend Canada by at least a 6:1 margin in the near future.

Although the creation of the CIHR and the doubling of biomedical research spending are very welcome developments, the truth is that operating-grant funding levels in Canada have improved from abysmal to simply inadequate. For example, only 54% of renewal grant applications and 25% of new grant applications were approved in the last CIHR competition, even though several decades of inadequate support had left only the best and brightest scientists competing for funds.

Moreover, the budgets of the 400 applications funded were reduced by an average of 12.8% from the minimum budgets recommended by the grant committees. The average size of a research grant was about Can$92,000.

Until and unless the Canadian federal government makes several more doublings in the health-research budget, the statement by CIHR president Alan Bernstein — that Canada will be the place for health research in the twenty-first century — will continue to ring hollow.

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