Polish censorship

COPIES of the Polish censorship regulations and instructions for the period February 1974–February 1977 have recently become available, via the unofficial “Social Self-Defence Committee” (formerly the “Workers’ Defence Committee”).

The subjects of banned articles during this period included: reports on industrial pollution of the environment, criticism of the bill on psychiatric medicine, information on the carcinogenic properties of PVC, discussion of the backwardness of scientific education in comparison with the West, errors in the selection of candidates for higher education, and data on the type of parasites afflicting Polish cattle.

The standing “Notes and Recommendations of the Central Office of Control of the Press, Publications and Entertainment” specifically prohibited publication of information on chemical hazards in industry and agriculture, work safety and hygiene, alcoholism, the Katowice mine disaster, and the purchase by Poland of production licences from capitalist countries.

Vera Rich

US soldiers in cancer study

THE US Department of Defense has promised to undertake a “crash programme” to examine the records of military personnel exposed to nuclear weapons tests in the 1950s to see if they provide evidence of any abnormal incidence of cancer. The promise was made by the deputy director of the Defense Nuclear Agency, to a House sub-committee on health and the environment during the course of public hearings last week on the dangers of low level radiation.

The sub-committee has been particularly concerned at evidence suggesting an abnormally high incidence of leukaemia among the 2,235 soldiers who took part in manoeuvres after a 45-kiloton test shot, known as Smokey, which was detonated in the Nevada desert in 1957.

A study of the possible carcinogenic effects of radiation on those involved is being carried out by the Center for Disease Control, whose director, Dr William H. Foege, told the sub-committee that the eight reported cases of leukaemia among the 2,235 was “out of the normal range”.

Earlier Dr Karl Z. Morgan, who at the time of the test shot was director of health physics at the Atomic Energy Commission’s Oak Ridge Laboratory, told the committee that his staff had been unable to retrieve scientific measuring equipment after

the shot because of “residual contamination”. He had “no doubt whatever” that this radiation had caused the leukaemia now found in those who had taken part in the manoeuvres.

Dr Morgan, who is now a professor at the school of nuclear engineering of the Georgia Institute of Technology, criticised scientists who refused to accept evidence that there is no safe level of radiation, and that any dose, however small, can cause leukaemia and other forms of cancer.

“One of the many problems we face today is that many scientists have accepted the threshold hypothesis as a cardinal law and have lived with this hypothesis so long that they have become staid or petrified in their thinking. Now they cannot believe or accept the fact that the threshold hypothesis is wrong”, Dr Morgan said.

David Dickson

Brothers in human rights test case

THE cyberneticist Gol’dshstein brothers—Grigorii and Isai—of Tbilisi, first hit the “human rights” headlines in 1975, when their exclusion from the Tbilisi Conference on Artificial Intelligence led to a confrontation between the international conference committee, who urged their admission, and the Georgian “hosts”. The brothers are now, once again, involved in what may prove to be a test case—Grigorii has been arrested, and Isai has been threatened with arrest on the charge of parasitism and “malicious evasion of socially useful work”.

The charge of “parasitism” (being without visible means of support) was brought last year against refusnik Iosif Begun, who was sentenced to two years exile in Siberia. The authorities refused to acknowledge that he had

any means of livelihood, since his current occupation—teaching Hebrew—was not a recognised profession. The Gol’dshstein brothers, however, until their dismissal from the Mendelev Institute of Metrology in 1971, had been earning 600 roubles (£300) per month each. Since the minimum wage in the Soviet Union is 60 roubles per month, the Gol’dshsteins have managed to convince the authorities that they have been living on savings lawfully laid by from their earnings. Nevertheless, it is claimed, they are evading their responsibilities by failing to undertake socially useful work.

Both brothers were dismissed from their Institute in the routine manner, following their application for an emigration visa—an application which was refused on the familiar grounds of access to secret information. Unlike most refusniks, they have now been “offered” jobs commensurate with their academic status, Grigorii in October 1977 and Isai in January 1978. These jobs, however, are at the “closed” Institute of Explosives Research in Tbilisi, where all work is potentially secret, and both in turn have refused to accept the offers.

On 17 January, Grigorii was arrested, and was released ten days later on a written undertaking not to leave Tbilisi. His trial is expected “perhaps in two to three weeks”. On 19 January, Isai received an ultimatum from the police, that unless he finds a job within a month, he too will be arrested.

The Gol’dshstein brothers are so adamant in their desire to emigrate to Israel that in 1972 they unilaterally renounced their Soviet citizenship. Clearly, they are hardly the loyal comrades one would expect to find working in a secret institution. The jobs proposed for them are, they feel, yet another means of preventing their emigration.

Vera Rich

New threat to helium reserves

A demand that “all appropriate measures” be taken to conserve rapidly-diminishing supplies of helium for potential future use has been made in a report published last week by a committee of the US National Academy of Sciences. The committee, which was set up last autumn to provide the administration with independent advice on the politically-sensitive issue of helium conservation, suggests that there is “a strong case for building a substantial government-owned strategic reserve of helium”. It also condemns the present venting of separated helium into the atmosphere by natural gas-producers.

Most scientists know helium merely as the second lightest element. Some have used its properties as a gas to fill meteorological balloons; others have more recently exploited its superconducting properties at temperatures close to absolute zero—where it remains in liquid form—for experiments ranging from nuclear fusion to the superconducting magnets that will be used in Fermilab’s new energy saver/doubler.

But although current applications remain relatively limited, helium has become a major headache for the US government. Reserves of helium-rich natural gas, from which helium can