

## Aftermath of the Orlov trial

THE imprisonment last week of the physicist Yurii Orlov for the maximum possible term on charges of slandering the Soviet state in connection with his Helsinki Monitoring Group activities is yet another step—but a very large one—along the road that the Soviet Union is taking towards crushing those who dare to question the state's omniscient benevolence. Fortunately the scientific community has it in its power to ensure that every time the state acts to stamp out criticism, the criticism spreads even further. The Orlov trial is as serious a challenge to dissidence as there has been in recent years, but its outcome provides a major opportunity for the advancement of those basic causes of human rights for which dissidents fight. It all depends now, however, on western scientists—not those who are always rallying to the support of distressed Soviet colleagues, but those who until the present may have felt distaste for what is going on but who have not yet been prepared to express their feelings.

Before an excess of piety is unleashed, we should clearly recognise that many socialist countries would claim that their support for human rights was as good as, if not better than, that of capitalist countries. They would point out that there is more to human rights than just the so-called political ones: to go where you wish to, talk to whom you choose, say what you want to and so on. There are also economic and social rights: to be gainfully employed, to be protected from inflation, to have adequate health care; and, they would say, the record on these human rights by no means favours the capitalist world.

This is not a trivial point and much of the ritual tut-tutting to be heard in the West after events such as that of Orlov's trial shows no sign of recognising that there are other points of view. Where such a defence goes wrong, however, is in assuming that in support of economic and social rights the state, with all its massive power, may be justified in curtailing political rights. Certainly there is much to admire in a system which delivers certain minimum standards of living, but does this have to be at the cost of the ruthless repression of

those few who do not see everything around them as quite so rosy as it is portrayed?

Discreet words in ears and mild disapproval obliquely voiced is clearly proving inadequate as the Soviet Union flexes its muscles for more trials. In this issue of *Nature* Valentin Turchin raises the difficult problem of boycotts. He envisages the selective boycott of official links such as exchange agreements and conferences, and, it must be said, arguments against cutting such contacts are not as strong as they used to be. But whilst action on the official level begins to look a serious possibility, there is still much that can be done at an individual level.

There is, amongst Soviet scientists, much buried support for those victimised by the government. As one scientist with no record of public support for dissidents recently put it, when well away from prying ears, "there is in our people a strong religious streak, and many of us see dissidents as the modern equivalent of martyrs". There are counterparts in the West who are disturbed by what they hear but who have not really been called upon to make their views known. No longer can we have the luxury of disapproving thoughts without some form of action. There is amongst scientists so much informal traffic, exchange of correspondence, sending of preprints and reprints, that it is surely the duty of those who are concerned to use these channels to let their Soviet counterparts know of this concern, and thus, maybe, to encourage these counterparts to let their buried views rise nearer to the surface. More formal channels are often vulnerable (*Nature's* Soviet coverage, for instance, is something that our numerous Soviet readers are not always entrusted with by the authorities). The informal ones are almost impossible to eliminate.

Scientists occupy a specially favoured position in international relations. For one thing they can provide prestige, power and even economic growth. For another the very nature of science requires easy communication across national frontiers. For too long we have taken advantage of being global citizens without realising the potential therein for the advancement of liberalising ideas. □