

seemed to signify that the Cold War had come to stay, and its collapse almost three decades later, which seemed to mark the beginning of a period of sweetness and light for Central Europe. In reality, both expectations have been falsified. The Cold War has gone. And reunited Germany is struggling through an unaccustomed spell of economic difficulty brought on by the need to borrow funds to set the five new eastern *Länder* on their feet. Now there are people throughout Germany who believe they are worse off than before. The recent riots against the presence of immigrants in Rostock, and other eastern German towns, is one measure of the discontent occasioned by the wall's collapse.

Another, in its way more serious because its shadow is certain to be long, is the trouble in eastern German universities over the status of academics who, in the shameful past, have enjoyed the favours of the ruling Communist party. It is a haunting problem. To tell that, put yourself in the shoes of a young scientist in one of the Stalinist states of Central Europe in the early 1960s. (Stalin was dead, but Khrushchev's reforms did not touch the Central Committee's control of how the satellite states behaved.) An able person then would have known that, to succeed, he or she would have had to make intellectual bridges with people elsewhere, preferably in the West. But, naturally, exit visas would have been awarded more readily to members of the Party. Moreover, people travelling overseas on business trips would have been required, on their return, to make their peace with the local secret police, the notorious *Stasi* in East Germany. How else could a young person hope to succeed?

The result has nevertheless been an embarrassment throughout Central Europe since the Berlin Wall came down. In Poland, eastern Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the scientists best-known in the West are those who appeared at international conferences (often, desperately, at the last minute) under Party patronage. Their less compliant colleagues, required to make do instead with collaborations in the Soviet Union, are by comparison obscure. How should that army of the disadvantaged respond to the continued presence in academic life of those who took advantage of the Party's past munificence, often acquiring power over their fellows in the process? It is a haunting issue, but one the universities of eastern Germany should be tackling in a more enlightened spirit than that outlined on page 762.

There must be a better way. Tainted researchers and academics, it appears, are being told by commissions that their appointments have been terminated, and are then required (if they have the stomach) to fight their cases through the courts. What should matter more is whether a person compromised by past conduct can yet command the respect of colleagues. Much must hang on colleagues' estimation of compromised people's value as scientists, but also on the terms in which they have sought to explain to colleagues that their previous connections with now-defunct regimes were innocent of malign intent. Indeed, such collegial determinations, whether by universities or research institutes, of a person's continued tenure of his post, are alone able to carry weight. It is a cruel corollary that there can

be no way of making up for past injustice, say the unjust denial of promotion or of exit visas to able people for decades on end. That, sadly, is water under the bridge of history.

The danger in the present way of handling the status of academics compromised by their past is that it will needlessly prolong the inevitable sense of bitterness in German academic institutions at the injustices of the past. Denial of due process now is a means of repaying past with present injustice. Since the Second World War, Germany has had a shining reputation for its scrupulous respect for constitutional procedures, even to the extent that failed medical students have been able to carry their discontents to the constitutional court at Karlsruhe. A more seemly way of defining the status of eastern German academics and researchers is in everybody's interest, the impending trial of Erich Hönicker notwithstanding. Academic institutions should take the lead. □

Diet and breast cancer

Studies show no correlation between dietary fat and breast cancer. It is time to move on.

IF ever proof were needed that the proposition that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between diet and breast cancer far exceeds scientific data, the US National Institutes of Health's plan to conduct a \$10 million clinical trial is proof indeed. Despite abundant evidence that dietary fat bears no relation to development of cancer of the breast, the NIH intends (under the fashionable umbrella of "women's health") to initiate a study of 40,000 women (half of whom will be randomly assigned to consume no more than 20 per cent of their calories in fat) to try once again to prove a link that is probably not there.

Last week, a team of researchers from the Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston reported in the 21 October issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (240, 2037-2044; 1992) that they found no correlation between dietary fat and breast cancer in a continuing eight-year study of 89,494 women between the ages of 34 and 59. This latest study is the largest but by no means the only one to reach this conclusion, which is a great disappointment to those who wish to discover that breast cancer is something over which we have control. But another study of 35,000 women, as well as one including more than 5,000 women, reached the same unpopular conclusion. (Data from the Brigham study do confirm a correlation between fat intake and colon cancer, so that hamburgers and french fries can still be fairly pilloried.)

Why then does NIH insist on spending \$10 million on a study whose hypothesis seems to be little more than wishful thinking? Is it only because of the faddish infatuation with fat as the root of all dietary evil? In the United States, as elsewhere, money for scientific research is in short supply. There are many ways the NIH could better spend its \$10 million. It is not too late to face the facts, however disappointing. □