

Psychiatry as a tool of the state

Psychiatrists, psychologists and Soviet scientists speak out
against unwarranted mental hospitalization of political dissenters
and ask for international intervention and supervision

by Robert J. Trotter

With 1973 here can 1984 be far behind? There are indications that in some ways the predictions of George Orwell's fictional *1984* are in the process of being fulfilled—especially in the U.S.S.R. where psychiatry has been used by the state as a tool to curtail political dissent. One such case recently came to light in hearings before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee chaired by Sen. James O. Eastland (D-Miss.). Alexander Sergeyevich Yesenin-Volpin, a Soviet mathematician now at New York State University in Buffalo, told of being confined in Soviet mental institutions five times since 1949.

Accused of anti-Soviet agitation, Yesenin-Volpin was sent to jail, found to be not responsible for his actions and then interned in a Leningrad prison-hospital for one year. Diagnosed as schizophrenic, he was eventually released and declared to be in remission. On other occasions he was picked up and hospitalized after talking to a foreigner and after publishing a book in the United States. His most recent confinement, in 1968, came because he accepted an invitation to attend a scientific conference in the United States. He was put back in an institution, re-diagnosed as schizophrenic and held until public pressure forced his release. A letter signed by 95 Soviet scientists was sent to the Minister of Public Health of the U.S.S.R. The petition declared that forced detention in a hospital for serious mental cases of a talented scientist fully capable of work is a flagrant violation of medical and legal norms.

Yesenin-Volpin was again released and given a position at Moscow University where he was told by a superior that he could never be promoted "while you continue your obscure social activity." Then, in September of last year, he was notified by the police that his request for an exit permit had been granted. Yesenin-Volpin had made no such request but was, in effect, forced to emigrate.

This case is not unique. Psychiatric imprisonment, the scientist told the sub-

committee, is used often because it has great advantages for the authorities. A person can be sentenced in absentia, no procedural rights need be granted and, of course, the idea of guilt or innocence does not even arise since the question is immaterial in the case of a person pronounced not responsible for his actions.

Yesenin-Volpin's testimony was substantiated by Constantine W. Boldyreff of Georgetown University in Washington who provided the subcommittee with documentation on 18 cases of persons who are being or were subjected to compulsory treatment in Soviet special psychiatric hospitals in spite of public and private protests. Documentation shows that they had not committed any violent criminal offenses and that their behavior never threatened the life or property of others. All were sentenced and committed on the basis of purely political considerations (discrediting the Soviet political system or agitation or propaganda for the purpose of weakening Soviet power).

Six of these case studies were smuggled out of Russia by Vladimir Bukovsky, who is presently serving a 12-year sentence for anti-Soviet actions. In London, David Shaw of the health office, Sidney Bloch of Maudsley Hospital and Ann Vickers of the South-West Regional Hospital Board have analyzed these clinical reports.

They conclude that in none of them is there any firm evidence to warrant the use of the term schizophrenia. They found no cause in the data for compulsory detention in psychiatric hospitals. "The inescapable conclusion must be that Soviet psychiatry is being used for political ends," they wrote in a summary in the *NEW SCIENTIST*. They have urged that the World Psychiatric Association establish a permanent commission to safeguard medical ethics and psychiatric standards and prevent psychiatry from being applied for any purpose other than the welfare of the patient.

The American and Canadian Psychiatric Associations have taken these is-

ssues under consideration, and the American Psychological Association's council of representatives in December passed a resolution condemning the practice of sending political dissenters to mental hospitals.

To date such moves have not succeeded in bringing about the release of all dissenters, but petitions and protests have contributed to the release of a number of persons. The most famous case is that of Zhores Medvedev, the Russian scientist who was released from psychiatric confinement in 1970 after scientists around the world protested in his favor. (A few weeks ago he began a one year's working visit to Great Britain's National Institute of Medical Research.)

"If the civilized world protested in a louder and more courageous voice," suggests Yesenin-Volpin, "we could bring about the liberation of far more victims of the Soviet political-psychiatric terror."

Concern about the misuses of psychiatry is not confined to incidents in the Soviet Union. In the United States, an outspoken Washington psychiatrist, Peter R. Breggin, last year unleashed a torrent of abuse at the practitioners of psychosurgery (*SN*: 3/11/72, p. 174). Last month with the publication of *After the Good War* (Stein and Day, 1973) Breggin presented his predictions for the future—specifically the year 2212. He sees a docile society controlled by an authoritarian government of psychiatrists. Untoward or antisocial thoughts and deeds are corrected by a variety of behavior technologies ranging from group therapy and Skinnerian behavior modification to lobotomy and exotic execution by electrical overstimulation of a pleasure center in the brain.

Breggin's personal vision is radical, though funny at times, and will no doubt stir considerable controversy as he attacks a variety of respected professions (his own included). But as the situation in the Soviet Union demonstrates, potential abuses of psychiatry can easily become actual abuses. □

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