

Soviet psychiatrist criticizes colleagues

Somewhere in the reaches of the Serbsky Institute of Forensic Psychiatry in Moscow, Etely Philippovich Kazanetz works in a near-vacuum. His diligent research and critiques of Soviet psychiatric practices go largely ignored. In the United States, where mavericks within their profession often are glamourized, Kazanetz might be making the talk-show circuit to discuss his latest book. In Russia, other psychiatrists only half-jokingly refer to him as a "schizophrenic." "They pay him no heed," according to former Kazanetz colleagues, now in the United States.

Just how lightheartedly the Russians will react to the publication of this "schizophrenic's" work in one of the United States' most prestigious psychiatric journals, however, remains to be seen. The July ARCHIVES OF GENERAL PSYCHIATRY features an extensive, 20-year study by Kazanetz of 312 patients at the Gannushkin Memorial Hospital in Moscow. And while the research itself is not unique by Western standards, psychiatrists in the United States consider Kazanetz's well-documented criticism of the Soviet psychiatric establishment an act of near-heroism.

"It's a real shocker — I couldn't imagine something like this coming out of Russia," Walter Reich, a U.S. expert on Soviet psychiatry, told SCIENCE NEWS. "Kazanetz's daring is notable, his dissent from the psychiatric mood and ethos that dominate his field important, and the study, as much as we can judge it, evocative, even when taken out of the Soviet context," says Reich, a lecturer in psychiatry at Yale and Research Psychiatry and Program Director of the Staff College at the National Institute of Mental Health.

Psychiatrists worldwide have criticized Russia for allegedly labeling political and other dissidents as schizophrenic or psychotic in order to incarcerate them in mental hospitals (SN: 9/10/77, p. 164). Although Kazanetz does not directly conclude in his study that such political use of psychiatry exists in Russia, that message "emerges between every line," says Reich, whose written commentary on the Soviet psychiatrist's work will appear in the August ARCHIVES.

However, Kazanetz is openly critical of the diagnostic practices of the Soviet psychiatric establishment, headed by "The Father of Russian Psychiatry," Andrei V. Snezhnevsky. The founder of the Serbsky Institute and currently chief of the Institute of Psychiatry of the Academy of Medical Sciences in Moscow, Snezhnevsky has personally trained or worked with many of the leaders in Russian psychiatry and is editor of the only psychiatric periodical in the Soviet Union. Few, if any, Russian psychiatrists have taken public issue with his theories.

In the ARCHIVES study, Kazanetz breaks sharply with the Snezhnevsky school of

diagnosis, particularly its "overextended" definition of schizophrenia. This establishment view, according to Kazanetz, erroneously lumps other behavioral problems — including relatively brief psychotic episodes triggered primarily by "exogenous" or outside life events — under the Soviet equivalent of chronic schizophrenia. As a result, he says, many patients may be hospitalized much longer than necessary (including, some have charged, political dissidents, many of whom Russian psychiatrists continue to insist *are* schizophrenic, by Snezhnevsky standards).

Kazanetz says the study results bear him out. Using more restrictive "nosologic" diagnostic criteria to rediagnose the hospitalized patients, the psychiatrist reports there was an "initial 3:1 overdiagnosis of schizophrenia in patients ultimately proved to have suffered exogenous [short-term] psychoses. Such overdiagnosis was primarily the result of adherence to the kind of criteria currently applied by the Moscow [Snezhnevsky] school of classifying the psychoses." Follow ups at 10 and 20 years showed that many patients rediagnosed as nonschizophrenics with brief, environmentally caused problems "returned to work ... to advance professionally and were successful" while those confirmed as schizophrenics under the nosologic criteria continued to have difficulties, including relapses.

Kazanetz calls for nothing less than "revising many long-standing diagnoses of schizophrenia, especially in persons who have made good social-vocational adaptation. ... One should remember the prolonged retention of individuals on psychiatric dispensary lists long after their recovery infringes on rights and influences a great many things, such as fitness for military service," he says.

Reich calls Kazanetz's published work "remarkable ... striking at a time when his profession ... his own institute [is] being accused of misapplying their diagnostic scheme ... on those with politically deviant views." Reich admits he has been concerned for Kazanetz's welfare — despite the reassurances that the Soviets do not take him seriously — primarily because the study was almost certainly transported secretly out of Russia without official approval. It was somehow transmitted to the ARCHIVES through two U.S. "correspondents," D. M. Bowden of the University of Washington at Seattle and J. H. Grubb of Yale.

Even if it were officially approved, the study would have been "significant," says Jack Weinberg, former president of the American Psychiatric Association and a leading critic of Russia's alleged political use of psychiatry. But for Kazanetz to circumvent official channels to get the study published, he says, "was an enormously courageous thing to do." □

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