

Soviet Psychiatrists Make Preemptive Bid, Quit World Body

In the midst of mounting criticism for the political misuse of psychiatry, Soviet psychiatrists turned the tables last week and quit the World Psychiatric Association, charging their international colleagues with politicization of the scientific society. Several member associations (including the American Psychiatric Association) had in recent months been involved in efforts to suspend or expel the Soviet All Union Society of Psychiatrists and Neuro-pathologists from WPA at the meeting next July in Vienna; so in a sense Western psychiatry has accomplished what it sought. Yet in the wake of the announcement by the WPA secretariat in Vienna, there was little celebration among those involved in international psychiatric affairs, who view the move as surprising, irreversible and destructive.

According to Ellen Mercer, director of the APA's office of international affairs, officials of the Soviet psychiatric society sent a five-page letter to Vienna psychiatrist Peter Berner, secretary-general of the WPA; the gist of the letter was that the Soviets were abandoning the WPA because it had become too political and had allowed other member societies to slander the Soviet Union. American psychiatrists speculate, however, that the motivation for quitting may have been something quite different: realizing that they did not have the votes to avoid censure next summer, some say, the Soviet psychiatrists decided to cut their losses and preempt the public embarrassment in store; others suggest that the decision did not come from Soviet psychiatrists at all, but that it was a signal from government officials to Soviet psychiatrists to close ranks.

The WPA, a loose association of 65 national psychiatric societies, convenes every six years; the brouhaha over Soviet abuses of psychiatry actually began in Mexico City in 1971 and escalated dramatically in Honolulu in 1977, when member societies voted to renounce the USSR for systematically using psychiatric diagnosis and commitment to punish political dissenters. At the Hawaii congress, the WPA also passed an APA resolution to establish a committee to review and investigate complaints about the political abuse of psychiatry.

The 1977 vote to renounce Soviet psychiatric abuse was narrow and inconclusive; members' voting strength was determined by paid dues, and the resolution passed 90 to 88 — although 33 nations opposed it and only 19 supported it. As a result, Western nations have been very interested in making their actions at the 1983 congress more decisive, and for five years they have been trying through the WPA review committee to gather details about

cases of Soviet abuse. According to University of Ottawa psychiatrist Jean Yves Gosselin, chairman of the WPA review committee, the effort of the committee to follow up on complaints has been a frustrating failure. The committee's procedures have been to forward legitimate complaints to the member society being charged (the lion's share of the complaints have involved Soviet abuse, although psychiatrists in Turkey, Romania and Yugoslavia have also been charged with abuse) and allow that society to reply; but with the exception of two recent cases, the Soviet psychiatrists have chosen not to acknowledge the committee's repeated requests. The committee has no investigative or enforcement powers.

In response to the failure of the review committee, several WPA members had been preparing resolutions, for introduction at the July congress, to censure the Soviet psychiatrists. APA had decided to call for the suspension of the Soviet society until it corrected all abuse of psychiatry; the British Royal Society was prepared to go even further and call for the permanent expulsion of the Soviets, and several other members had adopted one position or the other.

These efforts have been rendered moot by the Soviets' sudden decision — a decision that many psychiatrists view as a curious reversal of a recent trend. According to psychiatrist Walter Reich, a fellow at the Kennan Institute of Advanced Russian Studies of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, the Soviet psychiatrists had shown every sign recently that they were prepared to cooperate — or at the least to resist censure. They had finally, after much balking, provided documents concerning two cases of alleged abuse, and after being in arrears for two years, they had paid the \$5,000 they owed in WPA dues — a move that would have given them more voting power this summer. Then, abruptly, they withdrew. Although the letter to WPA was signed by Georgi Morozov, head of the Serbsky Institute of Forensic Psychiatry where most political dissidents have been diagnosed, it was conspicuously not signed by two of the most prominent figures in Soviet psychiatry: Andrei Snezhnevsky, director of Moscow's Institute of Psychiatry, and Marat Vartanyan, Snezhnevsky's deputy and international spokesman for Soviet psychiatry. The implication of these contradictions, Reich says, is that the decision to abandon the WPA may not have originated with the psychiatrists themselves.

Others have suggested that the decision may have come directly from Yuri Andropov, the Soviet leader who was in

charge of the KGB during the time when alleged psychiatric abuses began. But according to New York psychiatrist and Russian émigré Boris Zoubok, that scenario is unlikely. The Soviet psychiatrists' withdrawal was a clever tactical move designed to minimize public scrutiny, he says, and the APA's continuing effort to pillory the Soviets in public has been a tactical blunder reflecting naiveté in international relations. The WPA has always been a "straw body," Zoubok says, but even so it was impractical to close down the only forum for discussion of psychiatric abuse. The Soviets, he says, have lost nothing by withdrawing. Others—including Gosselin, Reich and Mercer of APA — say that they consider the Soviets' decision regrettable. But—Gosselin adds—the review committee made every effort to be neutral and scientific rather than confrontational in its dealing with the Soviet psychiatrists.

Zoubok says that a much more effective move by APA would have been to rescind Snezhnevsky's honorary membership in the American society (as the British have done in theirs). Snezhnevsky and his scientific theories loom in this political controversy, because he more than any Soviet psychiatrist has made popular two diagnostic categories of schizophrenia—what are called "sluggish" schizophrenia and "shift-like" schizophrenia — that critics say can easily be used to punish political dissidents. Reich, among others, has criticized Snezhnevsky's theories as scientifically invalid, but he has also tried to debunk the popular notion that Soviet psychiatrists habitually use the theories to collaborate with the KGB in punishing political dissidents. What is more likely, he says, is that many Soviet psychiatrists, being part of Soviet culture, actually view political dissent, a personally dangerous behavior, as a sign of mental illness.

Others disagree. While not disputing that psychiatric diagnosis is largely cultural, Paul Chodoff, a Washington psychiatrist active in international affairs, says that Reich has underestimated the prevalence of deliberate psychiatric misdiagnosis for government purposes. It is this deliberate abuse of psychiatry (and of human rights), Chodoff says, that has caused the APA and the WPA to be so persistent in dogging the Soviet psychiatrists. While it may have been impolitic to push the Soviets to the wall (the WPA has certainly been diminished, he says), the fact is that abuses of psychiatry continue unabated despite the pressure. "Should we be utilitarian," he asks, "and continue to work within the system, however ineffective, or is it better to express a moral judgment about a practice which is certainly reprehensible?" —*W. Herbert*