

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Dissenters in Soviet mental hospitals

From Professor F. A. Jenner and others  
Sir, Since March 29 Mr Vladimir Bukovsky, a Soviet citizen, has been under arrest on a charge of "anti-Soviet agitation". On March 12, *The Times* had published an appeal by him to Western psychiatrists. He asked them to study the official psychiatric reports and other documents (which he enclosed) relating to the detention, mostly in prison mental hospitals, of persons who had protested against certain actions of the Soviet Government.

In his letter Mr Bukovsky said: "I realise that at a distance and without some of the essential clinical information it is very difficult to determine the mental condition of a person and either to diagnose an illness or assert the absence of any illness. Therefore I ask you to express an opinion only on this point; do the above mentioned psychiatric reports contain enough scientifically based evidence not only to indicate the mental illness described in the reports, but also to indicate the necessity of isolating these people completely from society?" (our italics).

The reports on Grigorenko, Yakhimovich, Gorbanevskaya, Fainberg, Borisov and Kuznetsov, and other materials relating to these people have now been translated by the recently constituted Working Group on the Internment of Dissenters in Mental Hospitals (which includes psychiatrists, lawyers and people concerned with human rights), and are available.

On the basis of the evidence contained in these reports, the undersigned psychiatrists feel impelled to express grave doubts about the legitimacy of compulsory treatment for the six people concerned, and indefinite detention in prison mental hospital conditions. Four of them do not appear to have any symptoms at all which indicate a need for treatment, let alone treatment of such a punitive kind.

As for Gorbanevskaya and Fainberg, according to the official diagnostic reports they had symptoms of mental illness at an earlier period in their lives. With Gorbanevskaya these were minor, involving only a two-week voluntary stay in hospital, and there was apparently no recurrence of them for seven years preceding the demonstration (against the occupation of Czechoslovakia) in Red Square on August 25, 1968—for participation in which she and Fainberg were arrested. Fainberg's earlier illness appears to have been more serious, but there was apparently no recurrence of it for at least eighteen years preceding the demonstration.

So if there were, conceivably, any grounds for some kind of psychiatric treatment for these two people in 1968, prolonged detention in prison conditions would certainly have been quite inappropriate. It seems to us that the diagnoses on the six above-mentioned people were made purely in consequence of actions in which they were exercising fundamental freedoms—as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights and guaranteed by the Soviet Constitution.

The current widespread anxiety could perhaps be mitigated if the Soviet authorities made available further evidence on these matters. The misuse of psychiatry for political and other ends is, of course, an insidious danger, not only in the USSR, but also elsewhere.

We also hope especially that the Soviet Government will reconsider the case of Vladimir Bukovsky, who acted with courage in making his appeal and who appears to have suffered in consequence. The information we have about him suggests that he is the sort of person who might be embarrassing to authorities in any country because he seems unwilling to compromise for convenience and personal comfort, and believes in saying what he thinks in situations which he clearly knows could endanger him. But such people often have much to contribute, and deserve considerable respect. As he has appealed to us to make some sort of statement on persons—outspoken like himself—whom he believes to be the victims of corrupt psychiatric practice, we feel that to answer with a stony silence would be not only wrong but also inhuman.

Finally, we should add that material on other cases in addition to those of the six people named, lend considerable extra weight to the grave doubts we have expressed above. As noted in your excellent leader of July 12, a deeply disquieting pattern, sometimes involving the punitive and potentially dangerous use of powerful drugs, seems to be emerging in the treatment of dissenters in Soviet mental institutions. We therefore call on our colleagues throughout the world to study the voluminous material now available, to discuss the matter with their Soviet colleagues, some of whom we know to have doubts as grave as our own, and to raise the issue, as Vladimir Bukovsky requested, at international conferences such as that of the World Psychiatric Association in Mexico City from November 28 to December 4.

Yours, etc,

F. A. JENNER,	IAN OSWALD.
W. VON BAEYER,	THOMAS L. PERRY
E. F. CARR,	J. PIPPARD,
D. H. CLARKE,	D. A. POND,
H. CLAPHAM,	F. POST,
A. H. CRISP,	K. RAWNSLEY,
D. I. DAVIES,	DEREK RICHTER,
H. V. DICKS,	H. R. ROLLIN,
GRIFFITH	D. ROSENTHAL,
EDWARDS,	P. SAINSBURY,
L. EITINGER,	J. SCHORSTEIN,
T. FERGUSON	MOGHERS SCHOU,
RODGER,	S. SHAFAR,
C. FINN,	D. M. SHAW,
J. A. FRASER	A. M. SHENKIN,
ROBERTS,	E. SLATER,
L. R. GJESSING,	J. R. SMYTHIES,
M. HAMILTON,	K. SODDY,
I. M. INGRAM,	D. STAFFORD-CLARK,
FINAR KRINGLEN,	E. STENGEL,
D. M. LEIBERMAN,	A. STORR,
S. MACKEITH,	W. L. TONGE,
P. MULLIN,	W. H. TRETOWAN,
A. MUNRO.	

University Department of Psychiatry,  
Whiteley Wood Clinic,  
Wrofindin Road, Sheffield.