

Political abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union

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In the Soviet Union, systematic political abuse of psychiatry took place.^{[1]:406[2][3][4]:19[5]:47[6]:293[7][8]:66[9]:490[10]:52}

Political abuse of psychiatry is the misuse of psychiatric diagnosis, detention and treatment for the purposes of obstructing the fundamental human rights of certain groups

and individuals in a society.^{[3][9]:491} Many authors, including psychiatrists, use the terms "Soviet political psychiatry"^{[11][12][13]:179[14]:395[15]:205} and "punitive psychiatry"

instead.^{[16][17][18][19]:60, 77[20]:243, 252[21]:72[22]:148[23]:10, 57, 136[24]:92, 95, 98[25]:292, 293, 294[26]:226[27]:258}

Psychiatric confinement of sane people is uniformly considered a particularly pernicious form of repression^[2] and Soviet punitive psychiatry was one of the key weapons of both illegal and legal repression.^{[26]:226} Soviet psychiatric hospitals were used by the authorities as prisons in order to isolate hundreds or thousands of political prisoners from the rest of society, discredit their ideas, and break them physically and mentally.^[28] This method was also employed against religious prisoners, including especially well-educated former atheists who adopted a religion; in such cases their religious faith was determined to be a form of mental illness that needed to be cured.^[29]

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, it was often reported that some opposition activists and journalists were detained in Russian psychiatric institutions in order to intimidate and isolate them from society.^{[30][31][32][33][34][35][36][37][38]}

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Soviet Union



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Background

Psychiatry possesses a built-in capacity for abuse that is

Legislature

- Congress of Soviets
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- Supreme Soviet
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 - Soviet of Nationalities
 - Presidium
- Congress of People's Deputies
 - Speaker
 - 1989 Legislative election

Judiciary

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 - Supreme Court
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 - Procurator General

History

- 1917–1927
 - Revolution
 - Civil War
- 1927–1953
 - World War II
- 1953–1964
 - Khrushchev Thaw
- 1964–1982
 - Era of Stagnation
- 1982–1991
 - Dissolution

Ideology

- State Ideology
 - Soviet democracy
 - Marxism-Leninism
 - Leninism
 - Stalinism

Economy

- Economy
 - Agriculture
 - Consumer goods
 - Five-Year Plan
 - Kosygin reform
 - New Economic Policy
 - Science and technology
 - Era of Stagnation
 - Material balance planning

greater than in other areas of medicine.^{[8]:65} The **diagnosis of mental disease allows the state to hold persons against their will and insist upon therapy** in their interest and in the broader interests of society.^{[8]:65} In a monolithic state, psychiatry can be **used to bypass standard legal procedures for establishing guilt or innocence** and **allow political incarceration without the ordinary odium attaching to such political trials**.^{[8]:65} In the period from the 1960s up to 1986, abuse of psychiatry for political purposes was reported to be systematic in the Soviet Union and occasional in other Eastern European countries such as Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.^{[8]:66} **Psychiatrists have been involved in human rights abuses in states across the world** when the definitions of mental disease were expanded to include political disobedience.^{[39]:6} As scholars have long argued, governmental and medical institutions code menaces to authority as mental diseases during political disturbances.^{[40]:14} **Nowadays, in many countries, political prisoners are sometimes confined and abused in mental institutions**.^{[41]:3}

Dissidents were locked away in psychiatric wards, the so-called *psikhushka*.^{[42]:32} *Psikhushka* is Russian ironic diminutive for "mental hospital".^{[43]:xii} One of the first *psikhushkas* was the Psychiatric Prison Hospital in the city of Kazan. It was transferred to NKVD control in 1939 under the order of Lavrentiy Beria.^[44] International human rights defenders such as Walter Reich have long recorded the methods by which Soviet psychiatrists in *Psikhushka* hospitals diagnosed schizophrenia in political dissenters.^{[40]:14}

As early as 1948, the Soviet secret service took an interest in this area of medicine.^{[1]:402} It was one of the superiors of the Soviet secret police, Andrey Vyshinsky, who commanded to use psychiatry as a tool of repression.^{[9]:495} A system of political abuse of psychiatry was developed at the end of Stalin's reign.^[45] According to Alexander Etkind, punitive psychiatry was not inherited from the Stalin period that simply did not require such an expensive substitute for the GULAG (the acronym for Chief Administration for Corrective Labor Camps, the penitentiary system in the Stalin years).^{[21]:72} The abuse of psychiatry was a natural product of the later Soviet era.^{[21]:72} From the mid-1970s to the 1990s, the

Society
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demographics ▪ Education ▪ Family ▪ Phraseology ▪ Religion ▪ Transport ▪ Repression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Censorship ▪ Censorship of images ▪ Economic repression ▪ Great purge ▪ Gulag system ▪ Collectivization ▪ Human rights ▪ Mass killings ▪ Ideological repression ▪ Suppressed research ▪ Political abuse of psychiatry ▪ Political repression ▪ Population transfer ▪ Propaganda ▪ Red Terror

Atlas
USSR Portal

Repression in the Soviet Union

General

Political repression • Economic repression • Ideological repression

Political repression

Red Terror • Collectivization • Great Purge • Population transfer • Gulag • Mass killings under Communist regimes •

Political abuse of psychiatry

Ideological repression

Religion • Suppressed research • Censorship • Censorship of images

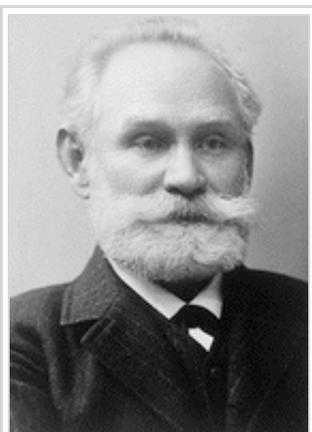
structure of mental health service conformed to the double standard in society, that of two separate systems which peacefully co-existed despite conflicts between them:

1. the first system was punitive psychiatry that straight served the institute of power and was led by the Moscow Institute of Forensic Psychiatry named after Serbsky;
2. the second system was composed of elite, psychotherapeutically oriented clinics and was led by the Leningrad Psychoneurological Institute named after Bekhterev.^{[21]:72}

The hundreds of hospitals in provinces combined components of both systems.^{[21]:72}

Joint Session

Main article: Pavlovian session



Ivan Pavlov (1849—1936), a Russian physiologist in the name of whom the Joint Session was held on October 11–15, 1951

A precursor of later abuses in psychiatry in the Soviet Union and the most somber event in the history of Russian-Soviet psychiatry was the so-called "Joint Session" of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences and the Board of the All-Union Neurologic and Psychiatric Association, held in the name of Ivan Pavlov in October 1951, considered the matter of several leading neuroscientists and psychiatrists of the time (for example, G. Sukhareva, V. Gilyarovsky, R. Golant, A. Shmaryan, M. Gurevich) who were charged with practicing "anti-Pavlovian, anti-Marxist, idealistic, reactionary" science damaging to Soviet psychiatry.^{[46]:540} These talented psychiatrists had to admit publicly to their wrong beliefs and mistakes and promise to profess only Pavlov's teaching.^{[46]:540} During the Joint Session, scientists falsely acknowledged their "wrongdoings" and gave up their beliefs, out of fear.^{[46]:540} But in the closing speech, the lead author of the policy report A. Snezhnevsky stated that they "have not disarmed themselves and continue to remain in the old anti-Pavlovian positions", thereby causing "grave damage to the Soviet scientific and practical psychiatry", and the vice president of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences accused them that they "diligently fall down to the dirty source of American pseudo-science".^[47] The fear and less than noble ambitions of the accusers including I. Strelchuk, V. Banshchikov, O. Kerbikov, and A. Snezhnevsky were also likely to make them serve in the role of inquisitors.^{[46]:540} Not

surprisingly, many of them were advanced and appointed to leadership positions shortly after the session.^{[46]:540}

The Joint Session also affected neuroscience in such a way that the best neuroscientists of the time, such as academicians P. Anokhin, A. Speransky, L. Stern, I. Beritashvili, and L. Orbeli, who headed various scientific directions at that time, were labeled as anti-Pavlov, anti-materialist and reactionaries, and discharged from their positions.^{[46]:540} These scientists lost their laboratories, and some were subjected to tortures in prisons.^{[46]:540} The Moscow, Leningrad, Ukrainian, Georgian, and Armenian schools of neuroscience and neurophysiology were damaged, at least for a while.^{[46]:540} The Joint Session ravaged productive research in neurosciences and psychiatry for years to come.^{[46]:540} It was pseudoscience that took over.^{[46]:540}

After the joint session of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences on June 28 — July 4, 1950 and during the session of the Presidium of the Academy of Medical Sciences and the Board of the All-Union Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists on October 11–15, 1951, the leading role was given to Snezhnevky's school.^{[48]:101} The 1950 decision to give monopoly over psychiatry to the Pavlovian school of Andrei Snezhnevsky was one of crucial factors of the onset of political psychiatry.^{[9]:494} The Soviet doctors, under the incentive of A.V. Snezhnevsky, devised "Pavlovian theory of schizophrenia" on the strength of which they diagnosticated this illness in political oppositionists.^{[49]:30}

Sluggish schizophrenia

Main article: Sluggish schizophrenia

Psychiatric diagnoses such as the diagnosis of "sluggish schizophrenia" in political dissidents in the USSR were used for political purposes.^{[51]:77} It was the diagnosis of "sluggish schizophrenia" that was most prominently used in cases of dissidents.^[52]

According Robert van Voren, the political abuse of psychiatry in the USSR arose from the conception that people who opposed the Soviet regime were mentally sick since there was no other logical rationale why one would oppose the sociopolitical system considered the best in the world.^[3] The diagnosis "sluggish schizophrenia," a longstanding concept further developed by the Moscow School of Psychiatry and particularly by its chief Andrei Snezhnevsky, furnished a very handy framework for explaining this behavior.^[3]

Although majority of experts agree that the basic group of psychiatrists that developed this concept did so on the instructions of the Soviet secret service KGB and the party and understood very well what they were doing, this seemed to many Soviet psychiatrists to be a very logical explanation as they were not able to explain to themselves otherwise why someone would be willing to abandon his happiness, family, and career for a conviction or idea which was so different from what most individuals believed or made themselves believe.^[3]

A. Snezhnevsky, the most prominent theorist of Soviet psychiatry and director of the Institute of Psychiatry of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences, developed a novel classification of mental disorders postulating an original set of diagnostic criteria.^[53] Schizophrenia, for instance, was divided into two forms: continuous and progressive.^[53] Progressive schizophrenia was further divided into three forms: severe, moderate and mild, or sluggish.^[53]

Psychotic symptoms were non-essential for the diagnosis, but a carefully crafted description of sluggish

"The incarceration of free thinking healthy people in madhouses is spiritual murder, it is a variation of the gas chamber, even more cruel; the torture of the people being killed is more malicious and more prolonged. Like the gas chambers, these crimes will never be forgotten and those involved in them will be condemned for all time during their life and after their death."^[50] (Alexander Solzhenitsyn)