

Letter from a concerned scientist:

Oppose the bans on Russian scientists

1 May 2022

This comment was submitted to the World Socialist Web Site.

As part of the anti-Russian campaign that followed Moscow's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, Russian research institutes and Russian scientists are being ostracized from the international scientific community.

The participation of Russian institutes in international collaborations has been suspended and Russian authors have been banned from US and European-based scientific journals. Journals based in Russia are being barred from application to the extremely influential citation indexes of Web of Science and Scopus.

Perhaps the most profoundly universal of disciplines, scientific research is inherently an international endeavor. International collaboration is an essential part of how science is done. There is hardly a research institute in the world that does not participate in international collaborations. Nor is there an individual researcher whose work is not intricately bound with that of his or her international colleagues. Scientific journals, even "national" publications, are, by definition, international works. Not a single serious journal in the natural sciences features an editorial board or authors list that is not composed of members from the international community. In this light, the anti-Russian measures taken by certain scientific organizations are profoundly reactionary.

The achievements of Russian scientists, notably those working in the Soviet Union, have made an invaluable contribution to science and, as a result, to humanity in general. In the USSR, despite the tragic influence of Stalinism on the field of genetics, many areas such as physics, chemistry, mathematics and space travel saw advances which were at the time the cutting edge of scientific achievement and which earned Russian scientists international recognition, even during the Cold War period.

Nikolay Semenov earned the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1956, followed by 10 Soviet scientists sharing six Nobel Prizes in Physics, including Pavel Cherenkov (1958), Lev Landau (1962) and Pyotr Kapitsa (1978). Sergei Novikov (1970) and Grigory Margulis (1978) received the Fields Medal, the highest honor that can be awarded to a mathematician. The Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite, Sputnik 1, into orbit in October 1957. In April 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space.

Although the defunding of science that started in the 1980s and accelerated after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 has weakened the country's scientific activity, Russian researchers continue to play an integral role in the international scientific community. In 2011, Russian authors published 10,000 scientific papers in collaboration with their international colleagues, about double the output of national collaborations. Over 60 percent of these works were coauthored with researchers from European Union (EU) member states and over 25 percent with authors from the United

States. These percentages have decreased slightly during the ensuing 10 years, due to increased tensions in Russian relations with the EU and the US, as new collaborations have shifted to China and India, but in absolute numbers Russia-EU and Russia-US collaborations have remained high.

Now collaborations are being unilaterally severed by western institutions. On March 8, the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) near Geneva, the largest particle physics laboratory in the world, announced that it was suspending collaborations with Russian institutions, as well as those in Belarus. The future of over 1,000 Russian scientists who work at CERN, making up 8 percent of its workforce and whose sudden departure might leave the laboratory unable to function, is now uncertain. The granting of new contracts has been officially suspended for individuals affiliated to institutions in Russia and Belarus.

Since its inception in 1954, one of the aims of CERN has been to promote peace in postwar Europe. A recent article in the journal *Science* has compared the laboratory to a "narrow but sturdy cultural bridge between East and West", which "endured the coldest days of the Cold War."

John Ellis, a theoretical physicist from King's College London, who has worked at CERN for over 40 years, told *Science*, "One of CERN's mottos is 'science for peace', and that goes back to the 1950s, when CERN was actually a meeting place for scientists from the Soviet Union and the U.S. and Europe." Ellis stressed that maintaining such ties is particularly important in times of conflict and that CERN did not expel Russian scientists when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 or Afghanistan in 1979.

Further examples of the ostracizing of Russian scientists includes the suspension of the collaboration of the European Space Agency (ESA) with the Russian Space Agency Roscosmos on the development of the ExoMars Rover for Mars exploration. The mission, intended to search for life and investigate the history of water on Mars, had been on track to leave for the planet in September. The launch is now "very unlikely" according to the ESA.

The swiftest and strongest measures came from Germany, where the Alliance of Scientific Organizations, an association of the country's most important academic organizations, has recommended that all academic collaboration with state institutions in Russia be stopped. The deep-space telescope eROSITA (short for extended Roentgen Survey with an Imaging Telescope Array), a Russian-German collaboration launched to obtain the largest map of black holes in the universe, was switched off at the end of February.

The German Research Foundation (DFG), which in the past three years has funded over 300 German-Russian research projects, involving €110 million, is also "suspending all its funded research projects between academics from Germany and Russia with

immediate effect.”

“What is more, funding proposals for new collaborative projects and renewal proposals for ongoing projects will not be accepted until further notice”, reads a DFG statement from March 2.

On February 25, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) abruptly ended its partnership with the Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology (Skoltech), a private research institute in Moscow established 2011 with a curriculum designed by MIT. Most of the institute’s academic activity has been done in close collaboration with the American university. Now, the future of all such work, including research projects and students’ careers, is in question.

The publishing industry in the US and Europe has also begun to effectively censor Russian research although, for now, few scientific journals seem to be implementing a direct ban on papers submitted by authors at Russian institutions. Elsevier, an academic publisher based in the Netherlands, and one of the most important for scientific, technical and medical content, has refused to specify how many of its journals are practicing anti-Russian censorship, commenting only that the number is “very low”. However, we know of at least one Elsevier Journal, the “Journal of Molecular Structure”, that has openly implemented an anti-Russian ban.

Perhaps most critically, Clarivate, the company that owns the citation database Web of Science (WoS) and publishes the yearly Journal Citation Reports (JCR), has suspended the evaluation of new journals from Russia. It is difficult to overstate the influence the Clarivate publications have on the way international science is done and financed, and the harm that this censorship will do to Russian researchers.

The WoS citation indexes are a widely used resource for the international research community that aids in the discovery of scientific literature based on citations. The publications contained in these collections are selected by a group of experts, thereby giving them a seal of quality as they increase a journal’s visibility internationally. The success of any scientific journal is dependent on its inclusion in Web of Science collections.

Even more influential is the JCR, which every year publishes a list of the most impactful journals, together with their Journal Impact Factor (JIF), a measure of a journal’s citation performance. The JIF is widely used internationally and on every level by Science and Education Ministries, as well as other funding agencies, to evaluate academic institutions, research groups and down to individual researchers based on how many articles they produce in journals published in the JCR. The excluding of Russian journals from this publication will serve to isolate the Russian research community from their international colleagues.

The first signs of this isolation are already apparent. As a reaction to the anti-Russian bans from Web of Science and individual journals, the Russian government has removed requirements for scientists to publish their work in international publications and in those indexed in Web of Science. This contrasts with virtually every other country’s science policy. The Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education will now be developing its own system for evaluating research.

Many in the scientific community oppose the anti-Russian bans. In an open letter opposing the ban, published in the journal *Science* on March 24, five prominent scientists from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom protested the “Shutting down [of] all interaction with Russian scientists” and emphasized “maintaining non-ideological lines of communication across national boundaries, and opposing ideological stereotyping and indiscriminate persecution.”

“I put a very high value on cooperation in science and technology” said John Holdren, a research professor in environmental science and policy at Harvard Kennedy School and one of the authors of the letter. “My colleagues and I who wrote that letter together were alarmed by reports that what was underway was a wholesale demonization and isolation of Russian scientists.” He stressed the importance of Russian scientific efforts on climate change and the Arctic in particular.

While collaboration between governments is “understandably on hold,” the letter continues “not all engagement with Russian scientists should be.” They pointed to the fact that many thousands of Russian academics and students “live and work in the West” and are critical of the Russian government. “Surely these Russians should not be lumped together with leaders of the Russian state. Rather, humanitarian provision should be made to ensure that, as their visas and passports expire, they are not forcibly repatriated to face not only isolation from their Western colleagues but also, very possibly, persecution,” they wrote.

John Ellis, the King’s College physicist that spoke to *Science* about the CERN Russia ban, said, “My personal attitude is that we should really strive to maintain that collaboration, if it’s at all politically possible,” but adds ominously, “The scientists sitting around the table may express their opinions, but it’s basically going to be a political decision.”

In addition to these and other statements by researchers across the globe protesting the anti-Russian ban in science, the author of this letter, a physicist at a Spanish laboratory, would like to point out the staggering hypocrisy of these measures. As the universal discipline of science is being divided along national lines and tens of thousands of Russian researchers are unable to continue working with their western colleagues, Web of Science continues to review journals from Saudi Arabia, whose bombs have killed hundreds of thousands of Yemenis. The *Journal of Molecular Structure* continues to publish papers by Israeli researchers even though that country’s leaders systematically devastate the Palestinian population. And, of course, no one has ever considered banning US researchers from any scientific journal or collaboration, despite 30 years of unprovoked wars of aggression by their government against Iraq, Afghanistan, Serbia, Libya, the list goes on.



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