

Heroes and villains

SIR—Benno Müller-Hill is known not only as a specialist in molecular biology but also as someone involved in establishing the personal responsibility of scientists for inhuman experiments under the Nazis. In his review of Daniil Granin's book (*Nature* 336, 721; 1988) about Nicolai Timoféeff-Ressovsky under the heading "Heroes and Villians", he confirms that Timoféeff-Ressovsky did not participate in such experiments. At the same time, Müller-Hill implies that Timoféeff-Ressovsky, contrary to Granin's opinion, was not a heroic person, because, as head of the genetics department at Kaiser Wilhelm Institute, he had business contacts with proponents of 'racial hygiene'. (Müller-Hill later testifies that Timoféeff-Ressovsky did not himself publish a single anthropological paper.)

An objective look at the past together with a trustworthy evaluation of the personal conduct of those living under totalitarian regimes is very important. Timoféeff-Ressovsky is unique — he had to live and work both in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union.

In our opinion, in order properly to understand and evaluate the life and deeds of Timoféeff-Ressovsky, it is not sufficient to see them through the eyes of somebody living much later in a comfortable democratic society. For example, Pyotr Kapitsa, when rescuing the persecuted Lev Landau, wrote a letter to Stalin. Its content and especially its form seem unattractive by the moral standards accepted in Western democratic societies: in this letter, the prominent physicist humbly asks Stalin to release his guiltless colleague from prison and promises that Landau will not in future act against the state. But taking into account the situation in the Soviet Union at that time, this was an act of heroism by Kapitsa because it could have cost him his life.

Similarly, Timoféeff-Ressovsky's behaviour must be considered in the light of the society in which he lived. Specifically, the basic questions should be answered: What was Timoféeff-Ressovsky's credo? And did he follow it?

Timoféeff-Ressovsky was deeply religious. He believed in the absolute character of good and in the transient character of evil. He considered science a humanistic force, while believing that it was not able to answer the basic moral questions.

When he lived in Germany, he helped many people to hide at the risk of his own life. His voluntary return to the Soviet Union, about which he had thought deeply, almost cost him his life: he was persecuted for having been in Germany and nearly died from pellagra in Gulag.

We wish to stress that the division of

people into "heroes and villains" is a direct consequence of existence under a totalitarian regime which (especially for active people) leaves almost no possibility of choice. Refusing to become a villain, Timoféeff-Ressovsky must have been a hero.

It was in the Soviet Union that Timoféeff-Ressovsky accomplished what was probably his most important achievement: the restoration of communication between different generations of biologists, which had been almost lost because of Lysenko.

According to the opinions of people who knew him well, Timoféeff-Ressovsky — the descendant of the princely Vsevolzhskies — never betrayed his ancestral motto: "Honour above all!"

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