

# Opinion

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## Admission to the Mathematics Faculty in Russia in the 1970s and 1980s

A. Vershik

For a number of years now, the universities of the former Soviet Union have been free of party committees (partkom). These committees were made up of individuals whose job was to see that the party line was followed, and above all to watch over the purity of the cadres—the loyalty of professors and students, the blamelessness of their curricula vitae, and preferment to the necessary people. Now the offices of party committees have been allotted to computing centers, centers for "intellectual investigations," and so on. Many of their present occupants occupied them in the past, but now they investigate problems of the interaction of science and religion, they criticize Marxism, they invite new-wave politicians and psychics, they talk about their past difficulties at work. The one thing they don't talk about is their cadre work during the period of stagnation. The higher partkom secretary of one of the finest Russian universities (Leningrad), who very carefully carried out party directives about the purity of the cadres, is now the director of a cultural center where he organizes evenings of Jewish culture. The prorector of another university (Moscow), once extremely active in all official campaigns and purges and in the organization of "selections" in university admissions, has now become an ardent democrat and an organizer of the most progressive projects.

Of course this is wonderful—only, one may still ask, "Why, gentlemen, are you silent about how things were done, how you managed education, admission to universities, selection of cadres?" It would be useful for the educational community to know how and why the sciences lost hundreds, and possibly thousands, of indubitably talented individuals, potential leaders, hard workers profoundly dedicated to learning, whose lives have been distorted, often irreparably so.

One of the most important objectives of cadre politics at the leading universities, particularly in the capi-

tal, seems to have been to limit the admission of Jews and members of certain other national minorities. Of course, this was not the only objective. It was important not to admit political pariahs (and their children!) as students, aspirants, scientific workers, and professors. Likewise, it was important to help children and relatives of the nomenklatura (party and government officials, KGB) who in reliability were classified with children of work-



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ers — who, in the "proletarian" state, enjoyed a mandatory quota of admissions.

Once emigration was permitted there was, so to say, an official pretext for not accepting Jews or assigning them to prestigious work, for not providing incentives, awarding degrees, etc. Thus one killed two birds with one stone: the country got rid of some of the disaffected, and at the same time one restricted them at home.

But there was one more objective, perhaps the most important one, that one never talked openly about, namely *holding down the number of talented people*. The grayness of official Soviet Russia during the era of mature socialism did not just happen; it was imposed from above and readily accepted below, and was of a piece with the lack of talent in the whole leadership, relieved only by isolated fluctuations.

To this day we don't know the details of the secret instruction of the early 1970s which (I was told) was more or less to the following effect: restrict or delay the admission to certain post-secondary schools of individuals with ties to states whose politics are hostile to the USSR. Apparently, these could only be Jews, Germans, Koreans, Greeks, and possibly Taiwanese Chinese.

Many of us know quite a few concrete stories. I could tell how unbelievable was my admission to the Leningrad Mekh-mat (Faculty of Mathematics and Mechanics) in 1951, at the height of Stalin's war against the cosmopolites; how crudely they used to fail capable students whom I tried to help enter the university in the 1970s by recommending them to the then dean; how I was prevented from hiring talented graduate students and how these very same students eventually managed to find positions at the most prestigious Western universities; and finally, how in 1985, almost in the time of perestroika, my daughter, with a paper in her specialty accepted for publication, was not admitted to the philological faculty of Leningrad University.

It is surprising that so few testimonies of the hundreds of victims and witnesses have so far appeared in print. All we have is G. Freiman's *It Seems I Am a Jew* with some problems and remarks by A.D. Sakharov, and materials collected by B. Kanevskii and V. Senderov (see below).

It is just as surprising that so far, to the best of my knowledge, none of the hundreds of people from the cadre sections, from partkoms, from the lecturers who conducted purges at the examinations—no one from "the other side" has provided testimony. After all, not all of these people are naive, and not all are absolute scoundrels. Some of them were victims of circumstances. They have hardly any reason to fear revenge, even less court action. All echoes of these tragedies are fading; justice demands confessions. But no — they are silent. Some have become democrats, some profess love of Jews, and some propose to emigrate and ask people whom they had earlier slighted for recommendations. Some maintain that nothing took place. And some don't deny that it all happened but insist that all was done "correctly."

There are very few documents left. The perpetrators realized that it would not do to leave traces.

When I approached S.P. Merkur'ev, rector of St. Petersburg University (he died a short time ago) and asked him if it was possible to see the archives of the party committee that dealt with these matters, he offered to help me but warned that I should not overestimate the change since the putsch; almost all the organizers of these things have retained not only their former positions but also power at the University, and, for example, he was unable to remove one of the particularly odious deans.

I soon saw a confirmation. When I attempted to induce two historians — who had earlier been expelled from the University partly because they tried to object to scandalous practices of the kind I describe here — to work in the archives, they refused, saying, "We are afraid that 'they' will get us."

In 1987 I brought an article about a case of admission to the progressive weekly *Moscow News*. The head of the department told me, "We can't print an article dealing with this topic. There will be a flood of angry letters."

But I hope that the conspiracy of silence won't last forever. I am glad that I was able to persuade Alexander Shen, who has worked a lot with university and secondary students, to write of the materials he has collected.

Mathematical audiences (not only in the West) will find it interesting to learn some details and solve the little problems that a school graduate was supposed to solve in a few minutes. Keep in mind the young boy or girl who has made a commitment to learning, who may have good basis for this decision (participation in olympiads, math circles, and so on), and who now faces an examiner who has his instructions and his arsenal of problems. These examiners and admissions chairs were generally boorish and treated the school graduates shamefully. As is often the case, we know the names of those who carried out the instructions (the examiners) but not of those who gave them. It would make sense to list the secretaries of admissions, deans, and so on, who knew of the scandal and covered it up, right to the top of the party-KGB structure. Even these names are not such a deep secret.

We have used here materials only on admissions to Mekh-mat at Moscow State University and only from the 1980s and, in part; the 1970s. There are other faculties, other universities and institutes. And there are problems of defenses of dissertations (VAK), of employment of young scholars, and many others.

Is there anything surprising about the drain of Russian science, emigration, apathy, and the low prestige of official institutes and academies? All of this was predictable from what was done.

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