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Human rights and international collaboration

The March 2018 editorial raises an important question of whether we should limit collaboration with scientists from countries that violate their citizens' human rights. My own experience of living in the Soviet Union supports the editor's viewpoint that collaboration is (almost always) virtuous.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Soviet researchers were rarely allowed to travel to international conferences abroad - even when this travel was fully paid by the organizers. We were often not allowed to submit papers for publication in international journals -- I myself was summoned to the KGB and threatened with jail time for sending my mathematical papers abroad. Even access to international journals already available in Soviet libraries was often limited. For example, several issues of the Notices of the American Mathematical Society (AMS) were not available to us without a special KGB permission -- because, in addition to mathematics, these issues also discussed violations of scientists human rights throughout the world. These issues were not delivered to individual subscribers like me, and issues delivered to the libraries were placed into special classified sections to which we had no access.

After I complained to AMS about missing issues, they started sending me issues by registered mail with return receipt, so I became probably the only one in the Soviet Union (definitely the only one in St. Petersburg) who received these forbidden issues -- which I of course, gladly shared with my colleagues.

These issues correctly mentioned that human rights of scientists in the Soviet Union were often violated, but what was being proposed by our colleagues shocked us. To punish the Soviet leadership for oppressing us, several researchers proposed to decrease international collaboration, in particular to expel all Soviet scientists from the Society and to stop sending us Society's publications. So, on the one hand, KGB was stealing some of the publications from us -- while still allowing some issues to be delivered. And now, on the other hand, our own colleagues were proposing, in effect, to oppress us even more by depriving us of these publications altogether :-(

Luckily for us, saner voices prevailed in the AMS. But my plea is: before proposing anything, please consider how it will affect the very scientists whose human rights are being violated.

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