

## THE ACCUSED RUSSIAN DOCTORS

We print in this week's *Supplement* a statement issued by the council of the World Medical Association on March 27 in Lisbon on the case of the nine Russian doctors recently accused of grave malpractice—indeed of the murder of some of their patients—and of acting as spies for the U.S.A. and Britain. The statement is restrained in tone, and no attempt is made to prejudge the issue. The last paragraph implies that the W.M.A. Council doubts whether the judicial procedure employed in the case of the nine doctors was such as to establish the truth, or at least in a way to convince those outside the U.S.S.R. On April 4 an astonished world learnt that the new regime in Russia declared that the accusations were false and arrived at "through the use of methods of investigation which are inadmissible and most strictly forbidden by the Soviet law," according to the statement published in *Pravda*.<sup>1</sup> The nine doctors, and six others unnamed, have been released. The W.M.A. Council made its protest on behalf of the 700,000 doctors throughout the world belonging to its constituent member associations. Whether or not it had any effect in Moscow, the W.M.A. has done well to voice its anxiety about the fate of doctors in a country which has no medical organization affiliated with it.

What are the facts? On January 13 of this year the Tass Press Agency in Moscow released a press statement which began thus: "Some time ago the security organs of the State discovered the existence of a terrorist group of doctors who had set themselves the goal of shortening through medical sabotage the lives of active functionaries in the Soviet Union." Nine medical specialists were named as belonging to the group, the majority of them apparently being Jews. Through allegedly wrong diagnosis and treatment they were accused of causing the death of Zhdanov and Shcherbakov, and of attempts against the health and life of five highly placed officers in the Russian armed forces. These accusations were arrived at on the basis of "documentary evidence, of investigations and conclusions arrived at by medical specialists, as well as on the basis of the confessions of those arrested." *Pravda* of January 13 elaborated the accusations in terms meant to leave the reader in no doubt of the guilt of the nine doctors, the majority of them allegedly "recruited by a branch of the American intelligence service—the international, Jewish, bourgeois-national organization 'Joint.'" Three of the doctors were accused of being agents of the English secret service. "In front of the whole world," stated *Pravda*, "the true face of the slave-owners and man-eaters from the U.S.A. and England has been revealed."

<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, April 6, 1953.

From January 13 to April 4 these were the facts presented to the world in the Russian press and broadcast widely over the air. As doctors we felt disturbed by this assault upon the professional integrity of our Russian colleagues, and especially by the probable effect of the accusations on the trust patients universally have in the sanctity of the doctor-patient relationship. As members of one of the learned and liberal professions we were alarmed at this renewed threat to civilized values in the anti-Semitism implicit in the charges and echoing the anti-Semitism of the Prague trial at the end of last year. But now the tables have been turned with a vengeance. The accused are released with a clean bill of legal health. The accusers are now accused. The unhappy Dr. L. F. Timashuk, the woman doctor who informed against her colleagues, has had taken from her the Order of Lenin bestowed on her on January 20 for this act. Such a *bouleversement* creates a feeling of both relief and bewilderment. As *The Times* puts it: "Surely there is no precedent in Soviet history for this public admission of fraudulent and evil methods in the State police and judicial system." If this violent loosening of tension between Russia and the non-Communist world is to be more than a nine-days' wonder, we may hope to renew those contacts with Russian doctors that began during the war. The B.M.A.'s invitation of hospitality to individual Russian doctors still stands. The World Health Organization refused to look upon Russia's withdrawal from it as permanent. The World Medical Association, we understand, has informed the Russian medical profession of the First World Conference on Medical Education to be held in London this year in August. If their delegates come to it they will be welcomed. Their colleagues from all over the world want to meet them, to exchange views, to share experiences, to get rid of mutual suspicions in mutual and friendly intercourse. Is it too much to hope that this may yet be possible?

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## A HAPPY EVENT

Women in labour owe much to the events of April 7 one hundred years ago. The *Court Circular* of that date contained the following announcement:

"Buckingham Palace, April 7.

"At ten minutes past one o'clock this day the Queen was safely delivered of a prince."

This referred to the birth of Prince Leopold, Duke of Albany, Queen Victoria's eighth child. And it was the administration of chloroform to the Queen during her son's birth that did so much to dispel the

<sup>1</sup> *Association Medical Journal*, April 15, 1853, p. 318.

<sup>2</sup> *Lancet*, May 14, 1853, p. 453.

<sup>3</sup> *Association Medical Journal*, May 27, 1853, p. 450.