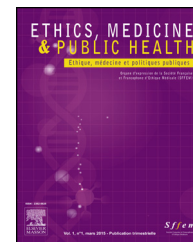




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Fifty years of political abuse of psychiatry – no end in sight



50 ans de maltraitance politique par la psychiatrie – pas de fin en vue

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Summary In October 1989, the General Assembly of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) accepted the Soviet psychiatric association back conditionally, after having been forced to leave the organization six years earlier because of systematic abuse of psychiatry for political purposes. Three weeks later, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, and in 1991, the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist. However, over the past years, an increasing number of reports on the internment of political activists in former Soviet republics made people realize that 25 years after the decision of the WPA, political abuse of psychiatry still has not been eradicated. Using psychiatry as a means of repression has been a particular favorite of totalitarian regimes with a communist State ideology. Cases have been reported from other countries as well, including Western democratic societies, yet nowhere else has it been developed into a systematic method of repression. While probably the overwhelming majority of Soviet psychiatrists were unaware that they had become part of a perfidious system to treat dissenters as psychiatrically ill on the orders of the Party and the KGB, there is also ample evidence that the core group of architects of the system knew very well what they were doing. When the USSR disintegrated, the practice of using psychiatry against political opponents virtually ceased to exist. What came in its place, however, was a very disturbing collection of other forms of abuses, including human rights abuses due to lack of resources, outdated methods of treatment, lack of understanding of human individual rights and a growing lack of tolerance in society. Starting this century, the number of individual cases of political abuse of psychiatry has increased, in particular, over the past few years in Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The issue of Soviet political abuse of psychiatry had a lasting impact on world psychiatry. It triggered the discussions on medical ethics and the

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professional responsibilities of physicians (including psychiatrists), resulting in both national and international declarations and ethical codes that address the interface between human rights, professional responsibilities of physicians and medical ethics.

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MOTS CLÉS

Éthique médicale ;
Droits de l'Homme ;
Loi internationale ;
Répression politique ;
Union soviétique

Résumé En octobre 1989, l'Assemblée générale de l'Association mondiale de psychiatrie (WPA) acceptait le retour conditionnel de l'Association psychiatrique soviétique, après avoir été forcée de quitter l'organisation six ans plus tôt pour abus systématique de la psychiatrie à des fins politiques. Trois semaines plus tard, le mur de Berlin s'écroulait, et en 1991, l'Union soviétique elle-même cessait d'exister. Cependant, au cours des dernières années, un nombre croissant de rapports sur l'internement de militants politiques dans les anciennes républiques soviétiques faisait prendre conscience que, 25 ans après la décision de la WPA, l'utilisation de la psychiatrie à des fins politiques était loin d'être éradiquée. Cette utilisation de la psychiatrie comme moyen de répression a été particulièrement appréciée des régimes totalitaires d'obédience communiste. Des cas ont aussi été signalés dans d'autres pays, y compris dans les sociétés démocratiques occidentales, mais nulle part ailleurs n'ont été développés comme méthode systématique de répression. Bien que sans doute l'écrasante majorité des psychiatres soviétiques ne savaient pas qu'ils étaient devenus partie d'un système pervers pour traiter les dissidents comme malades mentaux sur les ordres du Parti et du KGB, de nombreuses preuves montrent que les architectes du système savaient très bien ce qu'ils faisaient. Lorsque l'URSS s'est désintégrée, l'utilisation de la psychiatrie contre les opposants politiques a pratiquement cessé d'exister. À sa place, cependant, une série troublante d'autres formes d'abus, des violations des droits de l'homme dues au manque de ressources, des méthodes dépassées de traitement, un manque de compréhension des droits humains individuels et une baisse croissante de tolérance dans la société. Depuis quelques années, le nombre de cas individuels de maltraitance politique en psychiatrie a augmenté, en particulier en Russie, en Biélorussie et au Kazakhstan. La question de la maltraitance politique de la psychiatrie soviétique a eu un impact durable sur la psychiatrie mondiale. Il a déclenché des discussions sur l'éthique médicale et les responsabilités professionnelles des médecins (y compris les psychiatres). Il en a résulté des déclarations à la fois nationales et internationales et des Codes d'éthique pour définir l'interface entre les droits, les responsabilités professionnelles des médecins et l'éthique médicale.

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Introduction

Twenty-five years ago, in October 1989, the General Assembly of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) met in Athens with one main item on the agenda: the abuse of psychiatry for political purposes in the USSR and the question whether the Soviet association should be allowed to rejoin the organization or not. Six years earlier, it had withdrawn from membership when it became clear it would otherwise be expelled because of Soviet psychiatry having been turned into a systematic tool of repression. But now, times had changed: the USSR was opening up, political prisoners were being released in large numbers and the Soviets claimed the abuse had come to an end. A large team of investigators sent by the US State Department did not confirm this claim altogether [1], but the winds of change called for leniency and thus the Soviets were allowed back conditionally. Coincidentally, yet very symbolically, the General Assembly took place the day that GDR-leader Erich Honnecker resigned from his position, and it would be only three weeks until the Berlin Wall came tumbling down.

After Athens, developments succeeded each other in a rapid succession. The USSR disintegrated; former Soviet republics became independent and in all of them new psychiatric associations appeared. Most of them became members of the WPA within the next years. By the time the General Assembly of the WPA convened in Madrid in August 1996, a dozen new associations had joined this international body. Political abuse of psychiatry seemed to be a matter of the past, now only a matter of research for historians and political scientists.

However, over the past years an increasing number of reports on the internment of political activists in former Soviet republics led to a resumed interest in the issue of the abuse of psychiatry for political purposes [2]. The fact that all these years these abuses were a frequent and ongoing practice in, for instance, the People's Republic of China [3], did not alert the world that this perversion of medical science had not come to an end. Rather, it was reports on individual cases of such abuses in former Soviet republics such as Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia [2,4], which made people realize that 25 years after the World Congress in

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