

The origins of the Russian National Committee on Bioethics: historical, sociocultural and political contexts*

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Abstract

This article identifies and analyses the historical, sociocultural and political background to the establishment of the Russian National Committee on Bioethics. Soviet society was dominated by “scientific optimism”. While bioethics in the West was institutionalised as a distinct area of research as the downsides of progress in science and technology were recognised, in the USSR this was impeded by ideological constraints. Nevertheless, Ivan Frolov and Boris Yudin worked on problems of the impact of science and technology on society from the perspective of bioethics. In the years of perestroika, against the backdrop of a change in the ideological and intellectual atmosphere, problems including environmental issues and those directly related to bioethics were discussed in public more and more. At the same time, bioethics was being institutionalised. For example, the International Association of Bioethics was established in 1990, and Soviet scientists were invited to join it. This required establishing a Soviet national committee, which Frolov set about organising. On the basis of archive material, this article provides a detailed analysis of a meeting of the Presidium of the Soviet Academy of Sciences on 29 October 1991, which proved to be a landmark event in the history of bioethics in Russia. This meeting revealed two things: that the Presidium’s scientists were poorly informed about bioethical issues, and that public interest in such issues was growing. As such, general trends in the development of science, and an understanding of the social and humanitarian challenges went hand in hand with the emergence of a more questioning society and political liberalisation in the wake of perestroika. In terms of the social history of science, the crisis of consciousness in Soviet society in the late 1980s, when it became possible to speak of its backwardness in many areas of life, including those directly related to bioethics, also played a certain role. In addition, the development of the field of bioethics in Russia was due in no small part to the initiative shown by Academician Frolov.

Keywords

bioethics, Russian National Committee on Bioethics, I.T. Frolov, history of science, history of medicine

The emergence of bioethics in Russia as a distinct area of research and social science practice has a long history. Even so, its institutionalisation in the form of a specialised national committee on bioethical issues (now the Russian Committee on Bioethics) did not take place until the early 1990s, in literally the final months of the Soviet Union’s existence. Indeed, the Committee did not officially start work until 1992, in a new

country. This paradox was not due to chance, but was a consequence of the sociocultural and political features of the development of Soviet society and science.

The Soviet Union positioned itself from the outset as a society built on rational foundations. It was science that was posited as the most important factor in the construction of the new, Communist society. The latest scientific achievements were actively introduced into public life (with varying degrees of success, of course), and the state encouraged scientists to carry out in bold scientific experiments. Often, their work proved in vain, as the implementation of their audacious ideas was stymied by inadequate equipment, a shortage of scientific

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personnel (not least as a result of their persecution by the state), the specific features of the socio-political background, and so on. Despite this, the general message that rational scientific knowledge was omnipotent, that its ideas would soon be made reality, and, most importantly, that science played an exclusively positive role in society remained unchanged. To a large extent, such scientific optimism was a general feature of the twentieth century (Hoffman 2011), despite the horrors of the world wars and then the fear of global nuclear catastrophe during the Cold War years.

A new peak of the cult of science in the USSR came in the 1960s, when, particularly after the successes of the Soviet space programme, it seemed that it would soon be possible to resolve all the urgent problems facing humanity with the help of science (Vayl and Genis 2013, p. 117–126). By this stage, however, the downsides of scientific progress were also becoming apparent. It was recognised that these downsides could not only be global (such as the threat of a nuclear apocalypse), but were also starting potentially to affect every individual in their daily lives (epidemics, organ trafficking, vaccine quality, the testing of new medicines, etc.). Scientific optimism was being criticised more and more, and worries that society was becoming dehumanised in an age of rapid progress in science and technology were increasing (Balalykin and Kiselev 2012, Iltis 2015, Mikhel 2015, Yudin 2018). Something similar happened in the West, but in the USSR public discussion of such problems was greatly restricted, not just by the general ideological environment, but also by the official cult of Soviet science, which was claimed to be superior to Western science, it being held that such problems could arise only in capitalist society, not in a socialist country. Whereas Western countries in the 1970s saw bioethics emerge as a distinct field, these processes were restrained in the USSR, to a large extent artificially. An important factor in the development of bioethics was the human rights movement. In the USSR, for understandable reasons, this was more of an underground phenomenon, and had little influence on public opinion.

A major contribution to the development of the philosophical foundations of bioethics in the USSR was made by the philosopher Ivan Frolov. From the 1960s, he did a lot of work on analysing the impact of progress in science and technology on the individual and society (Akademik Ivan Timofeevich... 2001, Korsakov 2008, Korsakov 2006, Ivan Timofeevich Frolov 2010). He headed the Scientific Council on Philosophical and Social Problems of Science and Technology, which included a bioethical research group. At the same time, this was clearly not enough, and did not answer the problems facing the state and society.

In contrast to traditional medical deontology, which focuses on addressing predominantly ethical issues arising in medical practice, Frolov and those who thought

like him saw bioethics as a meta-discipline, the goal of which was to develop an interdisciplinary approach to addressing issues concerning biology, medicine and social practices.

In March 1985, UNESCO organised an international symposium on bioethics in Barcelona. A second symposium took place in the same city in 1987. Most ‘developed’ countries set up national bioethics committees. In 1990, the International Association of Bioethics was established, and its governing authorities invited Soviet scientists to join it. However, there was a problem in that the bioethical research group could not join the international association as it did not have sufficient administrative and scientific status, so a full-scale Soviet national committee on bioethics had to be established.

Achieving this, however, was not easy. It required not only the scientific community but also Soviet society as a whole to recognise the importance of bioethical issues. Several years later, Frolov admitted that this had taken a lot of work, primarily in terms of providing information and raising awareness (Kruglyy stol... 1992, p. 5).

The age of perestroika encouraged a radical shift in people’s thinking. There was much public discussion of the need to improve the legal culture, for more humanity and less bureaucracy. All this created the necessary background for new principles and priorities of science policy to be promoted. In particular, the environmental movement, which was very much concerned with bioethical issues, became much more active (particularly after the Chernobyl disaster).

The authority enjoyed by Academician Frolov, not least internationally, played a huge role in the lobbying for creation of the new body. Frolov’s personal influence on the Soviet political and scientific elite in the second half of the 1980s should also be borne in mind. In 1987, he was elected as an academician of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and was an aide to Mikhail Gorbachev, from 1989 to 1990 he was Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, from 1990 to 1991, he was a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and from 1989 to 1991 he was Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper *Pravda* (“Truth”). Within Gorbachev’s team, he was a moderate reformer. Accordingly, Frolov had access to administrative and intellectual resources. But even such a scientific and political “heavyweight” ran into difficulties in implementing the project to set up the national committee on bioethics.

The issue of establishing a committee was first raised on 4 April 1991, when the Department of the Biochemistry, Biophysics and Chemistry of Physiologically Active Compounds put such a proposal to the Presidium of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (Korsakov 2006, p. 270).

Later, on 13–15 May 1991, Moscow hosted a landmark event for Russian ethics: an international conference on “Bioethics and the Social Consequences of Biomedical Research”, organised on the initiative of UNESCO. Frolov chaired the organising committee. The main issue was rather broad in scope: “Human rights in the face of modern scientific and technological progress”.¹ The event was organised by the Centre for Human Sciences, part of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, in partnership with the Institute of Philosophy of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the All-Union Scientific Centre of Surgery, with the support of the companies Medigrant and Medikon.²

The key issues addressed at the meeting were set out as follows: 1) organ transplant problems; 2) patient information and informed consent; 3) bioethics and the law; 4) the social institutionalisation of bioethical activities.³ Within the context of these issues, many fundamental and practical matters were considered (Could the situation of poorer countries being organ suppliers to wealthier countries be overcome? Could organ transplant problems associated with patients’ religious and spiritual beliefs be overcome? How could the problem of donor consent be resolved?).⁴

The conference attracted world-leading specialists in the fields of medicine, biology philosophy and law. The resulting resolution recognised that “The Soviet Union belongs to that category of countries where public interest has so far been in little evidence and has not been articulated. At the same time, the development of bioethics is important, both from the viewpoint of moving towards a rule-of-law state and in terms of the humanisation of society, and ensuring the social-mindedness of the individual”.⁵ Accordingly, the development and popularisation of bioethics were seen in the context of the desired direction of evolution for Soviet society.

The meeting’s success significantly increased the chances of a change in the status of bioethics in the USSR as an area of scientific research. At the same time, the basic challenges and difficulties of this process could be clearly seen in a meeting of the Presidium of the Soviet Academy of Sciences on 29 October 1991, at which the question of creating a Soviet national committee on bioethics was raised.

It was proposed at the meeting that a national committee ready to join the international association be established. Frolov was proposed as its Chair, with Academician Aleksandr Baev suggested as his depu-

ty. However, there were problems. Since the issue had been piggybacked onto the main agenda, Academician Andrey Gonchar, a mathematician, expressed doubt as to whether it needed to be addressed urgently, without serious elaboration. Furthermore, he argued, bioethics was a matter for biologists rather than philosophers. There was a risk that the idea would be scuttled by bureaucratic formalities.

Frolov was not at the meeting, so the questions were answered by Baev. Responding to the doubts as to the urgency of the matter, he said: “There is indeed no urgency to this issue, but only because we are at least twenty years too late with it. Only for that reason. Therefore, I absolutely do not understand your question. The fact is that abroad, apart from bioethics societies, there are bioethics departments, there are bioethics journals, and there are highly outstanding bioethics specialists, – i.e. things that we do not have at all. And insofar as this issue has been very much delayed, I think that the Presidium has no basis for avoiding making this decision”.⁶ Gonchar questioned whether Frolov should head the committee, and called on representatives of other departments to be invited to take part. Baev retorted that Frolov had been working on bioethical issues for a long time, unlike biologists, medical workers and chemists, who avoided such problems.

Some members of the Presidium shared Gonchar’s doubts. However, it quickly became clear that many did not even know what bioethics was (something that applies even now). Accordingly, an explanation was required, and Academician Rem Petrov provided one. He argued that a bioethics committee was simply a necessity and that its mission should be to develop general principles for bioethics in the USSR. With regard to who should head it, he did not make any specific suggestions, but pointed out that for example, it was hard for a biologist engaged in animal experiments to oversee their work, as they had an interest in it. In his speech, Petrov provided an illustrative example demonstrating that while Soviet society had in the past (at least officially) been positioned as the most just and advanced, the situation had now changed perceptibly. He observed: “Foreign firms are now offering big money to [our] institutes that have clinics... Because, for example, the French do not let the French administer medicines that have never been administered to people. The British do not want to use British people for this purpose; they want to use Russians and Chinese”.⁷ Soviet (Russian) citizens now appeared to be virtually second-class citizens in the global hierarchy. Leaving aside the question of how fair this view was, what was important was that this was increasingly often being publicly suggested quite unambiguously. This shift in percep-

¹ Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences. F. 2164 (the All-Union Interdepartmental Centre for Human Sciences under the Presidium of the Soviet Academy of Sciences). Op. 3. St. unit 6. L. 2.

² Ibid. L. 6.

³ Ibid. L. 7.

⁴ Ibid. L. 8.

⁵ Ibid. L. 23.

⁶ Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, f. 2 (Presidium of the Soviet Academy of Sciences). Op. 1. D. 1691. L. 96.

⁷ Ibid. L. 99.

tions (which can also clearly be seen in other sources) also encouraged recognition of the importance of bioethical issues in the scientific community. It turned out that many issues directly related to bioethics (organ trafficking, medicine testing, etc.) that had previously been associated with developing countries also affected Soviet society.

The President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Gury Marchuk, summing up the meeting on whether to establish a Soviet National Committee on Bioethics, emphasised that there was now no doubt it was needed. How the project would be managed and put into practice remained to be decided. In conclusion, he admitted recently watching a television programme on problems directly related to bioethics, which had made a great impression on him, and was one reason why he had no doubt that a committee needed to be established. It is worth noting here that public discussion of topical bioethical issues played a significant role in the recognition of their importance within the academic community in the early 1990s.

In December 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved, and the committee had to be established when all as-

pects of life, society and science were undergoing rapid transformation. On 26 February 1992, the Russian National Committee on Bioethics was founded as an independent non-governmental association under the Russian Academy of Sciences. It was co-chaired by Frolov and Baev (Korsakov 2006, p. 270).

As such, a host of interrelated factors contributed to the establishment of the Russian National Committee on Bioethics. General trends in the development of science went hand in hand with the emergence of a more questioning society and political liberalisation in the wake of perestroika. A significant role was played by the initiative shown by Academician Frolov, who had considerable scientific and administrative standing. At the same time, the initiative of one person, no matter how influential, was not enough: there had to be the right sociocultural and intellectual background, a context promoting a better understanding of the importance of bioethical issues for modern society. The crisis of consciousness in Soviet society in the late 1980s, when it became possible to speak openly of its backwardness in many areas of life, including those directly related to medicine and bioethics, also played a certain role.

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