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THE SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF SCIENCE AND LEARNING AND THE POLITICIZATION OF BRITISH SCIENCE IN THE 1930s

ABSTRACT. The Society for the Protection of Science and Learning was begun in London in 1933, and became a key agency in the international effort to rescue refugee scholars. The SPSL also raised political awareness among British scientists, uniting many voices in the struggle against the Nazi assault on academic freedom. This paper traces the evolution of the Society from 1933 to 1939.

INTRODUCTION

On 13 June 1936, Nature hailed the birth of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, founded as a permanent successor to the Academic Assistance Council, established some three years earlier.¹ Sir Richard Gregory, editor of Nature, welcomed the new organization at the centre of the struggle to protect ‘the vital freedom of thought and investigation without which assuredly our present civilization is doomed’.² This was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that Nature put the SPSL and the AAC at the forefront of Britain’s response to right-wing governments in Europe and Asia. The fascist assault on academic freedom produced one of the greatest challenges ever to confront British science; it would soon sweep many from the confines of the academy into the world of political affairs.

During the spring of 1933, many scientists in central and Eastern Europe were displaced from their academic positions. To defend what they believed were fundamental principles of academic freedom, British scientists set out to help their colleagues escape to

¹ The Academic Assistance Council (AAC) became the Society for the Preservation of Science and Learning (SPSL) in 1935. The respective abbreviations will be used for the given periods, but the abbreviation SPSL will be used when referring to both the AAC and SPSL.
Britain and other countries in the West. Their programme soon enlisted scholars of very different political persuasions, who came together to act in concert and to make the public more aware of the fascist threat to human rights. At the same time, they came to assess their own position on Nazi ideology. Anti-Semitism and eugenics were morally indefensible, and rearmament, necessary. While the AAC played no direct adversary role, its members were keenly aware of Nazi oppression, and pressured politicians and civil servants to recognize the threat they posed.

The central role of the AAC/SPSL in the history of academic freedom has not been adequately recognized. In *The Social Function of Science*, published on the eve of the Second World War in 1939, J.D. Bernal analysed the destructive effects of the Nazis on German science, and mentioned specifically the dismissal of German-Jewish academics. However, he said little about the flight of these scholars to other parts of the world, and made little mention of efforts to assist them. For Bernal, to aid scientific refugees was satisfying, but it did nothing to fight fascism. However, it seems that Bernal was either unaware of the SPSL, or disagreed with its tactics, or chose to ignore it. Bernal viewed the leaders of British science as, in the main, apolitical or conservative, and unwilling to support the radical reorganization of science that he believed essential.³

Bernal’s influence can be traced in Gary Werskey’s collective biography of British socialist scientists, *The Visible College*. Werskey argues that the 1930s saw a small group of young radicals waging ideological war with the conservative scientific establishment. Bernal was one of the scientific heroes engaged in this struggle. To Werskey, the crisis of German academic refugees was a lesser issue, one which provided an opportunity for socialists to ‘convert’ or ‘co-opt’ more liberal-minded members of the scientific establishment.⁴ However, Werksey admits that ‘when it came to liberal causes, senior scientists of middle opinion were often level with, if not in advance of the scientific Left’. One of his three examples of a ‘liberal cause’ is the academic refugee crisis. Werskey praises scientists of ‘middle opinion’, including A.V. Hill, FRS, and Sir Ernest (later Lord) Rutherford, for their work in establishing the AAC.⁵

While Werskey praised Hill’s liberal activism in forming the AAC, he earlier suggested that Hill was a conservative, vehemently

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⁵ Ibid., 244.