

# Perspectives

## Anecdotal, Historical and Critical Commentaries on Genetics

*Edited by James F. Crow and William F. Dove*

### H. J. MULLER, COMMUNISM, AND THE COLD WAR

THE OFFICE OF CENSORSHIP  
THE CABLE AND RADIO CENSOR

IN REPLY REFER TO: MV/011/17516

67 BROAD STREET  
NEW YORK, N.Y.

June 23, 1943

Mr. Henry Muller  
Amherst College  
Amherst, Massachusetts

Dear Mr. Muller:

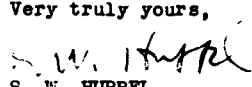
It has come to our attention that you have recently received the following message from LANCELOT HOGBEN, BIRMINGHAM:

"ARISTALESS DEAD WANTS ARISTALESS AND ARISTAPEDIA BADLY LUV"

Will you please be so kind as to furnish this office with the complete explanation of the text, including the location, the full name and identity of the parties mentioned therein.

Please also briefly identify yourself and the sender.

Kindly direct your reply to the attention of the Service Division.

Very truly yours,  
  
S. W. HUBBEL  
By direction

THE wartime censor was not alone in suspecting the political sympathies of H. J. MULLER. MULLER's communist past worried many people, and as a result caused him no small amount of difficulty. But already by the time of the war, MULLER had discarded his communist views, a change of heart that was either not generally recognized or not appreciated.

Among the least forgiving was a host of university deans and trustees, an important factor in MULLER's long inability to find a permanent academic job. Notwithstanding a powerful patron in the Rockefeller Foundation, which offered to contribute to both his salary and research costs, few institutions were willing to take the risk. At the age of 53, MULLER had not

held a regular position since leaving the University of Texas in 1932 at the age of 42; he thus had neither savings nor pension.

MULLER's difficulties trace back to various unhappy experiences at the University of Texas. In early 1932 he suffered a nervous breakdown, culminating in a nearly successful suicide attempt. Shortly thereafter he received a Guggenheim fellowship to work with N. W. TIMOFÉEFF-RESSOVSKY in Berlin. Just before he left Texas, the F.B.I. sent the university's president and all the members of its board of regents evidence purporting to prove that MULLER not only was "mixed up in Russian propaganda and was receiving money for this from Russian sources," but also that he was involved in the publication of a student communist newspaper (W. WEAVER, Diary excerpts, October 30, 1933 and March 2, 1936, Rockefeller Foundation Archives. R.G. 1.2. Series 249. Box 1. Folder 6; see also CARLSON 1981). At the time, Texas was not a very comfortable place for academics with liberal, much less communist, sympathies. WARREN WEAVER, director of the Rockefeller Foundation's Natural Sciences Division, described the atmosphere of the campus in 1933: "The still present Dean of the Engineering College called, a few years ago, a student meeting to give himself the opportunity to make a patriotic speech. He referred . . . to the fact that a foreign government had tried to present a medal to his son . . . and said that he would rather see his son 'dead and white and in his coffin than accept decorations from any other country.' He concluded his speech by opening wide his coat, revealing an American flag wrapped about his body" (Diary excerpt, October 30, 1933).

The following year, MULLER accepted an offer from NIKOLAI VAVILOV to work at the Institute of Genetics in Leningrad, in the process publicly confirming his communist sympathies. MULLER would ultimately clash with Soviet authorities—over both Lysenkoism and eugenics—and leave disillusioned in 1937 (CARLSON 1981). But the incidents at Texas, combined with his subsequent acceptance of a position in the USSR, damaged his chances of finding employment at home. MULLER would not find a permanent job (at Indiana University) until 1945, the year before he won the Nobel Prize.

Indiana's offer was also prompted by the Rockefeller Foundation, which followed up with an appropriation of \$95,000 to the genetics group (which also included TRACY SONNEBORN and RALPH CLELAND) in the hope that "it would stabilize MULLER once and for all" (F. B. HANSON, Diary excerpt, January 28, 1946, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, 1. 200. 143. 1760). By the time MULLER left for Indiana, the Foundation's officers had been actively engaged for eight years in the effort to find him a permanent appointment. His positions at Edinburgh (following

his departure from the USSR) and, following that, Amherst College were both supported by Rockefeller grants. But most places did not even want MULLER for free.

In 1939, MILISLAV DEMEREC told FRANK BLAIR HANSON (of the Rockefeller Foundation) that "it would be impossible to place M. in a State institution in this country and that most privately endowed institutions would also reject him. His long residence in Russia and his widely known book on Communism would militate against his acceptance here" (HANSON, Diary excerpt, September 25, 1939, 1.1. 405. 4. 45). The "widely known book on communism" was presumably *Out of the Night*, a eugenics manifesto with a distinctly socialist twist: MULLER envisioned a social revolution equalizing environments, after which differences among people could be presumed to be heritable and hence selectable. DEMEREC suggested placing MULLER at Cold Spring Harbor. This was attractive for another reason: MULLER could be his own boss and thus avoid conflict with others, as was assumed would occur in a university department. But, after a long period of negotiation, the deal fell through, in large part as a result of the Carnegie trustees' "fear of MULLER's past political background" (HANSON, Diary excerpt, January 8, 1942, 1.1. 200. 128. 1571). An attractive opportunity at Cornell was lost for similar reasons.

During the war, while at Amherst, MULLER did manage to get enough clearance to receive "consultant" status on CURT STERN's Manhattan District project on genetic effects of radiation at very low doses. As supplier of the stocks that STERN was using, MULLER had information crucial to the project. He coauthored none of the manuscripts that resulted from the work and were subsequently published. But he was rather proud of his involvement in such "secret and confidential" work. He feared that roles of an advisory nature might not often come his way as a result of his "having been abroad so long." His association with the Manhattan District provided legitimization in this regard (see, for example, the letter from MULLER to U. FANO, October 1, 1946, MULLER Papers).

Although MULLER could have advanced his cause by disavowing his communist past, he refused to do so. He considered it degrading. He also feared that, in light of the rise of LYSENKO, to do so might draw unnecessarily dangerous attention to his former Russian associates, especially VAVILOV (CARLSON 1981).

However, MULLER's problems were not simply political. While greatly admired as a scientist, he was not generally well liked. He was widely considered to be obsessed with questions of priority (see also CARLSON 1981), neurotic, and touchy in his personal relationships. His appointments at Edinburgh and Amherst began with high hopes and ended with

fault-finding on both sides. Even those most concerned to help considered him "difficult." He also had a reputation as an overdemanding, uninspiring undergraduate teacher. The Rockefeller officers' diaries and reports include numerous references to the tangle of "personal and political deficiencies" that made it so difficult to find him a place, notwithstanding about a dozen possibilities over the years and the concerted efforts of many geneticists such as DEMEREC, L. C. DUNN, THEODOSIUS DOBZHANSKY, CURT STERN, RICHARD GOLDSCHMIDT, LEWIS STADLER, JULIAN HUXLEY and SEWALL WRIGHT.

In August of 1948, TROFIM D. LYSENKO finally succeeded in wresting control of Soviet biology. MULLER no longer had reason to keep political silence. He organized tirelessly to expose Lysenkoism. During the 1940s, MULLER's attitude toward the USSR (and not just LYSENKO) had hardened considerably. In the wake of LYSENKO's victory, he emerged as a fervent cold warrior; for example, testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee, where he opposed having communists teach in most fields, including science (*Chicago Sunday Tribune*, March 15, 1953, Part 1, p. 18).

MULLER's anti-communism shows up most prominently in his assessment of the genetic risks associated with military uses of nuclear energy. It is certainly true that MULLER placed great emphasis on the long-term consequences of an increase in mutations resulting from exposure to fallout. But his concern about fallout, in and of itself, did not lead him to oppose nuclear weapons testing (see also CARLSON 1981). For some years after the war, MULLER's fear of the Soviets was stronger than his fear of the genetic consequences of weapons testing, even the consequences, genetic or otherwise, of nuclear war. By the mid-fifties, his position had become more moderate: he favored a bilateral ban on testing. Failing that, however, he considered the genetic consequences of continued nuclear weapons testing to be an affordable way of checking Soviet aggression [see, for example, MULLER (1955); see also his testimony before the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (1957)]. The following passage from an address to the National Academy of Sciences typifies his views. He complained, "It is natural that those in opposition to us should be making every effort to have nuclear arms prohibited *selectively*. For that would change the military balance greatly in their (the Soviets') favor, in view of the fact that at present we are ahead in nuclear arms and they in conventional arms and armies . . . But for many of us who abhor totalitarianism, that form of slavery appears to be a condition as miserable and as hopeless, if grown worldwide, as the barbarism which total war might bring" (MULLER 1955, p. 212).

But not even such strong anticommunist pronouncements could dissuade some of those who had branded MULLER a communist. AEC Commissioner WILLARD LIBBY, who is reported to have played a major role in excluding MULLER from the International Conference on Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy in Geneva in 1955, never trusted him (CARLSON 1981).

By the mid-fifties, MULLER was making himself heard in an advisory capacity at the most important forums on radiation and social policy: on committees of the National Academy of Sciences, the United Nations and the World Health Organization, and on the National Committee on Radiation Protection. By 1957 MULLER was politically legitimate enough to represent the community of geneticists (along with JAMES CROW, BENTLEY GLASS, WILLIAM L. RUSSELL and A. H. STURTEVANT) before a special session of the Congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy dedicated to "The Nature of Radioactive Fallout and Its Effects on Man" (Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, 1957). MULLER had an opportunity there to reiterate his cost-benefit analysis of nuclear weapons testing. When it came to his own experiences in the Soviet Union, members of Congress expressed an interest only in what MULLER knew about the state of Soviet genetics, wanting to know in particular what the Soviets thought about the genetic effects of fallout. MULLER was no longer a goat for "having been abroad so long"—rather, he was a resource. The hearing closed with a request that MULLER make available for the record the paper that was excluded by the AEC from the Geneva conference. That paper follows MULLER's testimony.

JOHN BEATTY has stubbornly refused to be listed as coauthor despite his extensive substantive and stylistic contributions. This work was supported in part by a grant from the Division of Research Programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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#### LITERATURE CITED

- The letter from the Office of Censorship and the letter from MULLER to U. FANO are from MULLER's papers located in the Manuscripts Department of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington. All other unpublished materials are from the Rockefeller Foundation Archives at the Rockefeller Archive Center, North Tarrytown, New York
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