Within eighteen months of the Revolution thousands of Russian scholars—physicists, chemists and biologists, as well as humanists, artists and playwrights—had fled the Bolshevik regime. Those who stayed behind, some from allegiance to the new government, many out of necessity or misfortune, faced daily uncertainty over shortages of food and fuel, inadequate medical care and arbitrary confiscation of personal belongings by committees authorized by local soviets to seize property of the "bourgeoisie" in the name of the people. Hundreds of scientists perished from starvation and cholera, or froze to death, among them seven of forty-five members of the Imperial Academy of Sciences.¹

In the fall and winter of 1918-19 Maksim Gor’kii, whose close association with the intelligentsia predated the Revolution, approached Lenin and the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom) with an urgent request to protect Russia’s scholars from the impact of war, revolution and civil war. Gor’kii’s efforts resulted in the formation of the Central Commission for the Improvement of Living Conditions of Scholars (Tsentral’naia komissiia po uluchsheniiu byta uchenykh, hereafter TsEKUBU), which offered qualified individuals special food rations, gold rubles (at a time when inflation had destroyed paper currency), and access to sanitaria and special clubs, where colleagues could present the results of their research and leaf through recently received—and therefore rare—books and periodicals.

From the time of his association with such Left Bolsheviks as A. A. Bogdanov and A. V. Lunacharskii during the first decade of this century, Gor’kii embraced “Western culture,” and in particular its “science,” as a panacea for the social, economic and political problems in Russia. His personal contacts with such scientists as the biologist and agronomist K. A. Timiriazev reinforced his belief in the power of experimental science to raise the cultural level of backward Russia. Gor’kii’s unbounded faith in the role that science could play in modern society remained constant

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even when war, revolution and civil war threatened to destroy many of its leading actors. This essay treats Gor'kii’s attitudes toward science and how he applied his views to the task of creating TsEKUBU.

The Russian Revolution and Science

On the whole, Russian scholars welcomed the February Revolution of 1917 and the abdication of the Tsar on March 2. The Tsarist regime had failed to meet the financial, institutional and intellectual needs of the scientist. Russian scientists had labored for years in backward laboratories with inadequate equipment and shortages of reagents, yet had seen first hand well-equipped research centers, most often in Germany. In spite of repeated requests for financial and moral support and appeals for an integrated national policy advocated by such scholars as G. I. Vernadskii and V. N. Ipat’ev, the regime had declined to offer assistance. In such cases as the Kasso Affair at Moscow University in 1911, it had adopted reactionary policies that caused the dismissal or resignation of nearly one-third of the professors, including such leading scholars as K. A. Timiriazev, P. N. Lebedev, S. A. Chaplygin and N. A. Umov. Even during World War I the government failed to recognize the importance of implementing a systematic policy to ensure that science would serve national security and economic purposes, although it did take modest steps in that direction.

Many of the scientific intelligentsia considered their involvement necessary for the full flowering of Russian society and culture, and believed that the liberal Provisional Government installed in March would provide the necessary leadership. Unfortunately, the promise of academic freedom and support offered never materialized; the Provisional Government could not develop a coherent policy toward science and technology, or to support scientists to their satisfaction. It faced protracted hostilities with Germany, increasing administrative disorder at home, continued interference of the Soviets of Workers’ and Peasants’ deputies in governance and the revolutionary agitation of such left-wing political parties as the Bolsheviks. As a result, near anarchy prevailed, and the lot of the scientist deteriorated throughout 1917. Universities closed in the spring and never reopened; publication virtually ceased; and research activities began to grind to a halt.
