

Doubt cast on Sir Bernard Lovell's 'brainwashing'

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In this month's edition of *Physics World*, science writer Richard Corfield casts doubt on the alleged "brainwashing" of the late British astronomer Sir Bernard Lovell by the Soviets at the height of the Cold War and explains how his trips beyond the Iron Curtain laid the foundations for the easing of geopolitical tensions between the UK and the USSR.

Speaking to Lovell's son Bryan, Corfield reveals a more mundane explanation for why Lovell, who founded the Jodrell Bank telescope in the UK, fell ill on his return from the USSR in 1963.

"For me the more likely explanation is that father was simply exhausted—and that gels with the account that he wrote in the contemporaneous diary of the 1963 trip, in which you will find nothing untoward, but plenty of fascinating science," reveals Bryan Lovell, who is the current president of the Geological Society of London.

The alleged brainwashing incident occurred during Lovell's visit to the USSR in 1963 when he was taken on an unexpected tour of the Soviets' new radio-telescope and space-tracking facility in the Crimea, which he was deeply impressed by. On his return to Moscow, Lovell was quizzed on his plans to build a larger telescope at Jodrell Bank, which at the time was the only telescope facility capable of tracking Soviet nuclear-tipped rockets. The Soviets made it clear that if Lovell remained in the USSR and built the facility there, they would give him the money.

Lovell declined the offer and returned to the UK, but immediately fell ill and found that his life had "suddenly turned to dust and ashes", as he wrote in a 2008 memorandum. In the months after his recovery, Lovell was told by the [Ministry of Defense](#) that the illness might have been caused by a Soviet attempt to remove his memory of the recruitment offer and what he had seen during his visit.

Despite the incident, Lovell was a fervent believer in the [collaborative nature](#) of science—a conviction that was confirmed in the diaries he wrote during the Cold War period, which were released by the University of Manchester after his death in August last year.

Indeed, the British scientific collaboration with the Soviet Union also extended to the field of fusion science, which in 1969 led to a group of leading researchers from the UK Atomic Energy Authority sharing their expertise in measuring plasma temperatures with a Soviet group working on the latest nuclear-fusion technologies.

The fusion collaboration forged in the 1960s ultimately paved the way to the creation of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER)—a practical attempt to prove that ideas from plasma physics can be translated into full-scale electricity-producing fusion power plants. The first plasma is expected to be produced by ITER in 2020, with the first real working fusion power plants coming—if all goes well—some 20-30 years after that.

"When—and if—that happens, historians will be able to trace that success back to those early collaborations between Britain and the Soviet Union, and, in part, to the legacy of Sir Bernard Lovell's radio telescope that was used as the earliest of early-warning systems," Corfield writes.

Provided by Institute of Physics

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