

THIS WEEK

EDITORIALS

HISTORY The impact of science and technology on the First World War **p.6**

WORLD VIEW Russian reforms are making life hard a year on **p.7**

MATERIALS Self-folding grippers can grab single cells **p.9**



Academic freedom under threat

The human rights of academics in Egypt are being eroded by the military regime that has taken control of the country. The Arab Spring is on hold.

Emad Shahin, a political-sciences scholar, has been in exile since January, when the Egyptian authorities issued a warrant for his arrest. He was at a conference in the United States at the time and, fearing that he will not get a fair trial in Egypt, he has not been home since. The charges against him, which Shahin declares are “ludicrous”, include espionage and being a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood, the party of former president Mohammed Morsi, who was ousted in a military coup last July. The new regime has declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.

It is true that Shahin has been vocally critical of the new regime. As an internationally renowned professor of public policy and administration at the American University in Cairo, he was also critical of the repressive 30-year dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, and occasionally criticized the Morsi regime that was ushered in after Mubarak was deposed in 2011 following a popular uprising, part of the Arab Spring.

The International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies, based in Washington DC, has actively taken up Shahin's case, and says that it will continue to defend his right to freedom of expression until all charges are dropped. Sadly, Shahin is only one of many Egyptian academics whose human rights seem to be under threat. The network has also expressed concern that, among 41,000 prisoners arrested since the coup, around 1,000 are engineers, physicians and scientists.

In April, a group of Egyptian scholars published a report on the academic victims of the unrest that followed the military coup, documenting by name and affiliation those who had been arrested or killed by the Egyptian authorities. The tally includes 1,347 student arrests and 176 student deaths. Sixteen of the deaths took place during police raids on campus. Seven faculty members have been killed, 160 placed under arrest, 20 put on parole and 25 are on the run.

What frustrated the hopes of the Egyptian Arab Spring? Morsi, an Islamist — who happens to hold a PhD in materials science — only narrowly beat his secular opponents to become the country's first democratically elected president. But moves he made to empower the Muslim Brotherhood alienated many. He proved unable to control the economy, and the country descended once again into political chaos.

Impatient for change after the revolution, in September 2011 thousands of university faculty staff from around the country demonstrated in Cairo, demanding that university leaders — all appointed directly by Mubarak — be replaced. A system allowing faculty members to elect their own rectors and deans was introduced. The protesters had also called for police to be banned from campuses unless explicitly invited by university administrations — a reaction against the oversight of campuses by state security guards during Mubarak's rule.

The new era has reversed both of these reforms. Almost immediately, police moved onto campuses to disrupt frequent demonstrations there against the regime, many organized by Islamist sympathizers angry at Morsi's removal, and many of which interrupted teaching activities. As

the new statistics show, the clashes too often ended in violence.

And last week, Morsi's successor, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, issued a presidential decree that puts the appointment of university leaders once more under his control, a move that is widely believed will allow the regime to oust any supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood who have been elected to the posts.

Democracy cannot be built in a day. Egyptian universities have on occasion been rather naive in their response to their new freedoms. The

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election of academic leaders by faculty members is common in Europe, but is increasingly being phased out as its obvious weakness — that rectors might be appointed on the basis of popularity or in exchange for favours, rather than on competence — has become apparent. More usually, rectors are selected by a university board, and faculty input is indirect. Still,

faculty election is better than crude political appointment.

Few campuses in the world exclude police. Greece, for example, responding to police violence against protesting students during its own previous military dictatorship, banned police entry to its universities in 1982. But as its democracy matured, its universities became more worried about the organized crime that had moved into the safe haven of the campuses — so the law was reversed in 2011. Egyptian police have been unacceptably brutal in dealing with some protesters.

Right now, academic freedom in Egypt looks to be in great jeopardy. Academics outside the country can only look on in despair and hope that the strategy of the human-rights network that represents them can at least win its battle for fair treatment of the academics detained for expressing their opinions. ■

STAP retracted

Two retractions highlight long-standing issues of trust and sloppiness that must be addressed.

This week, *Nature* publishes retractions of two high-profile papers that claimed a major advance in the field of stem cells (see page 112). Between them, the two papers seemed to demonstrate that a physical perturbation could do what had previously been achieved only by genetic manipulation: transform adult cells into pluripotent stem cells able to differentiate into almost any other cell type. The acronym STAP (stimulus-triggered acquisition of pluripotency) became instantly famous.

Soon after the papers were published on 30 January, cracks appeared

in the edifice. As various media outlets including *Nature's* independent news team reported, errors were found in the figures, parts of the methods descriptions were found to be plagiarized and early attempts to replicate the work failed.

The problems that initially emerged did not fundamentally undermine the papers' conclusions. Moreover, replication of such work is not necessarily straightforward or quick, and the ability to use some techniques can be very sensitive to aspects of the experimental protocol.

Nevertheless, the RIKEN research centre in Japan, one of the institutions in which most of the work was carried out, promptly organized an inquiry and found inadequacies in data management, record-keeping and oversight (see go.nature.com/2vrjxs). One author was found guilty of misconduct — a charge that RIKEN reaffirmed following an appeal (see go.nature.com/tnxuhy).

We at *Nature* have considered what lessons we can derive from these flaws. When figures often involve many panels, panels duplicated between figures may, in practice, be impossible for journals to police routinely without disproportionate editorial effort. By contrast, image manipulation is easier to detect. Our policies have always discouraged inappropriate manipulation. However, our approach to policing it was never to do more than to check a small proportion of accepted papers. We are now reviewing our practices to increase such checking greatly, and we will announce our policies when the review is completed.

But only since the RIKEN investigation has it become clear that data that were an essential part of the authors' claims had been misrepresented. Figures that were described as representing different cells and different embryos were in fact describing the same cells and the same embryos.

All co-authors of both papers have finally concluded that they cannot stand behind the papers, and have decided to retract them.

The papers themselves have now been clearly watermarked to highlight their retracted status, but will remain hosted on *Nature's* website, as is consistent with our retraction policy. (In our opinion, to take down retracted papers from journal websites amounts to an attempt to rewrite history, and makes life needlessly difficult for those wishing to learn from such episodes.)

We at *Nature* have examined the reports about the two papers from

our referees and our own editorial records. Before publishing, we had checked that the results had been independently replicated in the laboratories of the co-authors, and we regret that we did not capture the authors' assurances in the author-contributions statements.

We have concluded that we and the referees could not have detected the problems that fatally undermined the papers. The referees' rigorous reports quite rightly took on trust what was presented in the papers.

“We at *Nature* have considered what lessons we can derive from these flaws.”

For more than two years, *Nature* has been publishing articles that highlight the problems that can arise in the analysis and publication of the results of biomedical research.

We have also launched several initiatives to improve our own rigour. For a collection of relevant content, see go.nature.com/huhbyr.

Underlying these issues, often, is sloppiness, whether in the handling of data, in their analysis, or in the inadequate keeping of laboratory notes. As a result, the conclusions of such papers can seem misleadingly robust. Another contributory factor lies in selection bias behind the data presented, whether implicit because the experiment was not randomized or blinded, or explicit in the deliberate selection of data that, usually with honest good intentions, are judged to be representative. (This is not to say that randomizing and blinding is always required, but more is needed than currently occurs.)

A manifestation of these problems has been a growth in the number of corrections reported in journals in recent years. It is hoped that the extension of our methods sections, the addition of a checklist intended to improve the standards of reporting, and our use of statistical advisers will reduce these problems in *Nature*.

In short: although editors and referees could not have detected the fatal faults in this work, the episode has further highlighted flaws in *Nature's* procedures and in the procedures of institutions that publish with us. We — research funders, research practitioners, institutions and journals — need to put quality assurance and laboratory professionalism ever higher on our agendas, to ensure that the money entrusted by governments is not squandered, and that citizens' trust in science is not betrayed. ■

Science and war

As the centenary of its outbreak approaches, Nature looks back on the First World War.

Safe in the twenty-first century, it is easy to look back at the terrible events of 1914–18 and wonder how the world turned on itself with such ferocity. Despite a century of continued conflict, the images of the First World War remain branded on our collective consciousness — the trenches, the barbed wire, the gas masks, the mud, the misery, the slaughter on an industrial scale.

The Great War was more than a clash of armies. It was a fight for supremacy in Europe and a battle to harness applications of science and technology. For the first time, machines gave the bulk of the advantage to the defenders. Science set about correcting that — an effort that climaxed in fire and fury with the dropping of atomic bombs in 1945.

Almost a century since the war broke out, *Nature* this week publishes intriguing takes on the conflict. In a Comment on page 25, Patricia Fara analyses the implications of the wartime move to recruit women into laboratories and factories. And on page 28, David Edgerton applauds writer Taylor Downing's effort to delve beneath the clichés of history and unpick how the conflict built on science from many fields. Much of that work was described in this journal, and *Nature* this month delves into its treasure trove of an archive to publish a collection

of articles from the time, including editorials, news, correspondence and book reviews, available at go.nature.com/zhlclo. Most are directly relevant to the war, but some report on other events that have entered history: the Antarctic voyage of explorer Ernest Shackleton, for instance, and work on “gravitation and the principle of relativity” presented by one “Prof. A. Einstein”.

Others give a flavour of academic life. Surprisingly (or not), little has changed. There are squabbles about advertising for staff while candidates are at war; grumbles about a lack of resources (only poor-quality rubber was available for research balloons, so many burst) and a sniffy response to suggestions that scientific societies cancel their meetings. Perhaps most pertinent are articles that show how central science was to the war effort: a few days after allied troops were first gassed at Ypres, for example, a *Nature* analysis pinpointed chlorine as a probable culprit.

A warning: *Nature* at the time was rooted in the British Empire. That, and a wartime anti-German sentiment, means that some opinions and terms are not in keeping with today's enlightened internationalist attitudes. Apologies for any offence but, well, there was a war on.

The articles are bookended with striking editorials. The first, from September 1914, pointed out that Britain must restructure its industry “broadly based on science”. The final piece, published days after the Armistice in 1918, presciently warned that morals must advance with scientific knowledge, “for it is possible to conceive of a time when the forces at man's disposal will be so strong that a hostile army or an enemy's city may be destroyed almost at the touch of a button”. The war to end all wars was only the beginning. ■

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