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Physicists and Human Rights: Reflections on the Past and the Present

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The great success of science in promoting the wealth and military power of nations has fueled its growth from a hobby of few to a profession of many. By the early decades of the twentieth century these included, particularly in Germany, a good number of Jews. Thus, the official persecution of Jews there, following the coming to power of Hitler in 1933, directly affected many scientists, including some, like Einstein, who were world famous. I will discuss some of the actions—and inactions—of physicists in response to this and to later events directly involving the human and professional rights of colleagues. These include the McCarthy period in the United States, and the refusenik/dissident period, symbolized by Andrei Sakharov, in the Soviet Union. I will also discuss the question of what, if any, are the special social responsibilities of scientists today.