

LA-UR- 09-04707

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<i>Title:</i>	Erice: Its Past and Future roles
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<i>Intended for:</i>	International Seminars on Planetary Emergencies



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Erice: Its Past and Future Roles

Gregory H. Canavan

In the depths of the cold war there were few places where it was possible, let alone acceptable, to discuss global problems and their solution. Erice provided such a venue. Prof. Zichichi built it by inviting friends of international stature to visit Erice to discuss fundamental problems in science, technology, and society. Gradually the discussions were broadened to the more sensitive issues of global war and its consequences, which ranged from strategic forces and their stability to missile defenses and their impacts. Erice was one of the few places that these problems and their possible solutions could be discussed in a dispassionate and productive manner. Much of the reason these discussions remained objective and productive was Prof. Zichichi's "gentle" prodding of participants towards a useful solution that all could accept.

All was not deadly serious. I often accompanied Dr. Teller to the meetings, which he enjoyed enormously because they recalled the free-wheeling discussions he participated in when quantum physics was in its infancy. It was also pleasant to see him interact with Prof. Lee, who still gave Dr. Teller the deference due his old professor, and Dr. Garwin, who had worked with Dr. Teller in Los Alamos.

By the end of the cold war Erice was recognized as a valuable site for such discussions. Perhaps for that reason, when the transfer of power in the Soviet Union evolved into an attempted coup, President Yeltsin sent a large contingent of scientists in his own plane to participate in the Erice seminar. It soon appeared that this contingent was not chosen randomly, but might contain many of the scientists who knew their missile launch codes. Despite their senior status, they quickly proved themselves to be competent scientists and enthusiastic participants.

A by product to that interaction developed the following year when the Russian economy faltered and its science needed external support lest nuclear scientists leave Russia. U.S. scientific contingents formed by State and Commerce for extended fact finding tours to Russia were hosted by many the same people who had come to Erice during the attempted coup. We found that they were the heads of critical design bureaus, but they freely discussed proposed military and civil projects. The teams negotiated projects for cooperation in science and technology that could have been of great benefit to both countries had they been accepted by U.S. administrations.

By that time there were a number of venues for discussion and a large number of groups visiting Russia, so one might think the possibility for contributions by Erice might be diminished. But most of the groups that visited Russia left little behind, particularly in the critical area of energy. That left Erice an important role for the interchange of information on the development of an energy infrastructure that respected the environment. In those discussions western scientists collaborated with Russian scientists like Academicians Velikhov and Fortov, who had often been on opposite the side of earlier debates, in developing the architecture of Russia's energy infrastructure.

Discussions have turned cold again. One can say that the chill is due to geopolitical factors or military actions, but much appears to be due to lack of communication. Discussions of strategic missiles

revive the arguments of the 1960s, and discussions of missile defense ignore the insights developed in Erice in the 1980s and 1990s. Discussion has sunk to levels not seen since the depths of the cold war. In the areas of science, energy, and military much could be gained by resuming those earlier dialogues. While there are now other venues for holding such discussions, none has the scope and record Erice achieved under Prof. Zichichi in its prime. It may be time for Erice to resume the unique service it performed in previous decades. It could be important for it to do so.

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