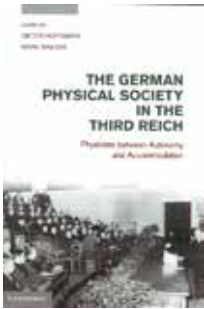


# RECENSIONI



D. HOFFMANN AND M. WALKER (EDITORS)

## THE GERMAN PHYSICAL SOCIETY IN THE THIRD REICH PHYSICISTS BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND ACCOMMODATION

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This book provides a thorough documentation of the impoverishment of the German Physical Society following the dismissals of 1933 under the racial laws imposed by the National Socialist regime, makes a minute description of its “accommodating” modes of “autonomous” functioning trying to cope with the divide between “Aryan” and “non-Aryan” physics, and ends with the attempts of the Society, after the war, to re-establish its national outreach and international relations.

Whenever one finds the courage to read “factual” and nauseating books such as “A Year in Treblinka” (Yankel Wiernik, 1945), “Survival in Auschwitz: If this is a man” (Primo Levi, Summit Books, 1986; Einaudi, 1958), “Les Bienveillantes” (Jonathan Littell, Gallimard, 2006) or any of the hundreds of accounts of this horrendous period of world history, one is likely to stop at every page and ask “how and why could that be?”. The “how” is clear enough but, in the current comfort of our freedom and with the passing of time, it has become nearly unfathomable to understand the “why”. Why could the racist horrors of the totalitarian Third Reich be left to spring up and to develop beyond anything imaginable?

While reading the present book devoted to the comparatively innocuous history of the Deutsche Physikalische Gesellschaft (DPG) under National Socialism, this reviewer could hardly repress a similar and frequent feeling of ... nausea. This compendium written by several distinguished specialists of the period gives a great wealth of historical facts and answers quite thoroughly the “how” question about the dismissals, the fleeing, the arrests of “non-Aryan” physicists and the following efforts of the DPG to accommodate to the political regime. But to understand the “why” is another matter. To understand is not just “to deduce from the precedents what is without precedents” to quote Annah Arendt (“The origin of Totalitarianism”, Gallimard, 2002). “To understand”, she continues, consists in “looking at reality in the face with attention, without prejudice, and to resist it if necessary”.

Did the German physicists attempt to understand, in that sense, what happened to them, to their professional Society and indeed to their beloved Country before and during the war? And when they found themselves liberated from the Nazi clutch, attempting to reconstruct their profession in the ruins of the regime and pressed into introspection by the denazification program of the Allies, did they reflect on the “why” at last? Unfortunately, as documented in perhaps the most depressing chapter of this book, Klaus Hentschel, in Chapter 10, “Postwar recriminations”, provides an unconditional and flat “no”.

Before Hitler’s arrival, fully one third of all Nobel prizes went to German scholars. One of

the most prominent of them, Max von Laue who admirably remained defiant and upright from beginning to end, did not fully grasp the extent of the destruction of the “culture-bearing” class in Germany under the National Socialist regime. Not until his first trip to the USA after the war, as the first President of the re-established DPG, did he understand the full scope of the wave of racist dismissals, the purge of the Civil Services of early 1933. One probably incomplete list of about 150 famous and less famous DPG members leaving the Society as victims of such dismissals is given in the Appendix of the book. And of course many more hundreds of scholars in other fields were expelled or persecuted under the same purge. What a fantastic gift from Hitler to the Anglo-Americans! (“more valuable than gold” commented Max Perutz on the back cover of “Hitler’s Gift”, by Jean Medawar and David Pyke, 2000).

The present book provides a thorough documentation of the impoverishment of the DPG following the dismissals. It then makes a minute description of its more or less “normal”, “accommodating” modes of “autonomous” functioning, having to cope with the largely self-imposed divide between “Aryan” vs. “non-Aryan” physics. The book ends with the attempts of the DPG, after the war, to re-establish its national outreach and international relations under the surveillance of the occupying powers and their impossible program of “denazifying” the profession and the Land.

In his introductory chapter, Mark Walker, the well-known American science historian of the period, concludes “When the war was over and National Socialism was gone, the physicists who had led the DPG and who were trying to re-establish it suppressed the truth, created self-serving myths and legends, and left the telling of its history under Hitler for another day”. Upon reading this scathing judgment, many will think of the ten German nuclear scientists detained at Farm Hall, England after the war, who created for themselves the similarly self-serving myth of having worked exclusively on a peaceful reactor, never on a uranium bomb for Hitler. Von Laue who was at Farm Hall denounced the attitude as “die Lesart”, the reading or revision of history. Strangely enough, neither Mark Walker, a specialist of the

German nuclear program under the Third Reich (see e.g. his “Nazi Science”, Perseus, 1995), nor any of his co-contributors to the present book speak about this activity, perhaps because the subject has indeed been covered by so many dedicated accounts.

The day of telling the truth has now arrived, at last, thanks to this remarkable book courageously if belatedly, organized, assembled and published by the recent authorities of the DPG in collaboration with nine independent, international historians of sciences and philosophy. One of the contributors, Dieter Hoffmann, proposed the survey to the then DPG President, Alex Bradshaw who welcomed it, encouraged it and confided the organization of the project to Mark Walker in collaboration with Hoffmann. The book has a supporting foreword by the current DPG President, Eberhard Umbach, who states that “the work is an act against forgetting” and warns lucidly that “how the future will develop depends quite crucially on our ability to continue to confront our own history and learn from it”.

The readers of this book, physicists, chemists, mathematicians, all of us scientists, should indeed “look at reality in the face with attention, without prejudice” and reflect again on what can happen to us personally, to a culture, to a civilization and indeed to the entire world, when the recurring syndrome of a totalitarian ideology is peaking its ugly head and is allowed to take root. Whenever religious integritism, dialectic materialism, fascism, Nazism, or any other grand “ism” has been allowed to intrude and take over the conduct of human affairs, even our best and perhaps sole protection against dogmas, the empirical sciences have remained a useless defense. Sadly it is likely that science will continue to remain impotent against totalitarianism and scientists will unwillingly escape their responsibility to resist it, as long as the population at large is kept ignorant of the true and ultimate virtue of natural philosophy: the habit of unconditional freedom of thought.

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