

Klaus Hentschel
Die Mentalität deutscher Physiker in der frühen
Nachkriegszeit

On the mentality of German physicists 1945–49

Few scientific communities are better studied than 20th-century German physicists. Yet their behavior and patterns of thinking immediately after the war remain puzzling. Instead of continuing to wage old battles (theoreticians vs. experimenters, Berliners vs. non-Berliners, Prussia vs. the south, university vs. industry, as well as the 'Aryan physics' campaign), a strange solidarity among these factions emerged during these five years. Former enemies were suddenly willing to exonerate each other blindly with whitewash-certificates, and even those who had longed for a rapid end to the horrible Nazi dictatorship, began to write tirades against the 'denazification mischief' or the 'export of scholars and scientists'.



Figures we thought we understood so well (such as Max von Laue or Otto Hahn) are suddenly strange and incomprehensible. Their former personal idiosyncracies vanish in a strangely uniform pattern of rejection or resistance to Allied actions attended by repressed feelings of guilt and self-pity. Politics was once again perceived as a dirty business, far away from their own scientific pursuits. Even those who did not completely suppress feelings of guilt, did not speak about it in public because they were afraid any such statement would only be used as backing for even harder sanctions against their discipline. On the other hand, in the long run the shock of the atomic bomb led to an increased awareness of the political responsibility of scientists

Using tools from the history of mentality such as a close analysis of serial publications and their private correspondence, I analyze several of these tendencies. The perspective of German emigré physicists, as reflected in their confidential letters and some reports about the situation from visits back home will embellish our portrait of this collective with contemporary views from the outside.



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