

Science and Public Policy **24** (1997), 63-4.

Physics and National Socialism: An Anthology of Primary Sources

K. Hentschel (ed.) and Ann M. Hentschel (ed. assistant and translator)

Birkhäuser Verlag, Basel, 1996

ISBN 3-7643-5312-0, hardback

DM 178.–, öS 1299.40, sFr. 148.–

Far more than a mere collection of texts, this book organises, places in context and analyses the effects of policy changes in Germany from 1920 to 1948 through selected newspaper reports, letters and journal editorials.

In any anthology the question of the choice of the selections comes up. The editor appears to have compromised very well in picking documents that have enough direct connections to link them together and illustrate the chronology of events, while at the same time surveying the variety of opinion and events filling this crucial period. The inexorable progress of National Socialist fortunes and their consequences for physicists and physics in Germany are well depicted.

The documents appear in chronological order and are divided into five periods: controversies before 1933, when Hitler and his National Socialists grasped power; 1933-36, when power was consolidated and academic appointments were in turmoil because of encroaching jurisdiction; 1936-39, a period of "ideological schism", when a specifically "German physics", supposedly founded on precise experimental work, was contrasted with "Jewish" (theoretically-based) physics; the six-year period of the war; and, finally, the legacy of National Socialism in post-war Germany. The selections concentrate on persons having a strong contemporary reputation and influence, rather than unknown extremists. Thus, the Nobel-prize-winning German physicists Philipp Lenard and Johannes Stark appear in nine documents as proponents of Nazi science policy and, indeed, "Aryan Science". Lenard and Stark are, in some respects, exceptional in this text: most other quoted

sources inhabit a gray area between what the editor denotes “ the ‘Nazi’ or ‘resistance fighter’ among German physicists”.

Not all historical strands can be made explicit in such an anthology. As most of the documents included were relatively public, the anguish and animosities behind events come through only between the lines. The poignancy of forced resignations and national exile are played out in letters politely requesting exemption or special ministerial intervention for "non-Aryan" scientists deemed useful to the Reich. The scope of the turbulence is well illustrated by a series of documents concerning Werner Heisenberg, who had been branded a "White Jew" by Lenard and others owing to his association with Einstein and his display of traces of formalistic “Jewish thinking”. Heinrich Himmler eventually requested that the Reich Student Leadership allow Heisenberg to publish “something” in their journal, noting that "we cannot afford to lose this man or have him killed, since he is relatively young and can bring up the next generation." Ironically, it was Heisenberg who subsequently headed the wartime German atomic bomb research.

Similarly, the ramifications of policy pronouncements are drily summarised in the footnotes. Thus the Reich Education Ministry decree of April, 1937 excluding Jews of German Nationality from taking a Doctorate is not correlated in the book to other events. The detailing of the insidious growth of restrictions is not always matched by their responses, possibly because such responses proved so impotent and little documented in print.

Hentschel has, in fact, attempted to be admirably ‘objective’ about events that even academics in the post-war world have difficulty in viewing dispassionately. But, unsurprisingly, this anthology is quite different from one that a National Socialist historian might have written. Thus a description of the Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo) notes that “It made arbitrary arrests, used torture and murdered at will.” Overt editorial comment, however, is rare; the documents speak eloquently for themselves.

If there is a complaint about the book, it is that there are too few texts, but this probably is unavoidable in a book already running to over 600 pages – 400 pages of documents sandwiched between 100 page Introduction and Appendices. Through the 121 documents, a few of the lines of discussion by letter-writers and their respondents seem truncated – what happened next? one sometimes wants to ask. For example, the first document, a fascinating letter by an affronted Albert Einstein to a Berlin morning newspaper, is a reply to earlier attacks.

The Introduction and footnotes do an admirable job of filling in the context of the rhetoric. Most of the Introduction analyses the impact of Nazi science policy on physics instruction and research. Changing attitudes of German scientists (and the rising Faculty membership in Nazi organisations) are linked to science policy measures taken after 1934. Two other historiographical themes are developed at length in the Introduction: the emigration of German scientists, and the practice of physics under the National Socialist administration. Throughout, the changing rôle of German institutions, many of which (such as the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft) opted for rapid political realignment after 1933, is detailed. Their staffing, direction and scientific activities inevitably came to follow Nazi policy either by voluntary reordering, as a consequence of government pressure or in response to members' petitions.

The footnotes are an even more useful component of the book. Some 20% of the text is devoted to scholarly annotations which identify the writers, institutions, political circumstances and related contemporary events. These local and incisive explanations are augmented by substantial appendices which provide paragraph-length biographies (127) descriptions of associations and institutions (31), major firms (10) and journals (12). Some 1000 literature references and a name index (but no subject index, unfortunately) complete this comprehensive work. It is worth mentioning, too, that the quality of the translation from German is excellent, with idiomatic English constructions and scarcely an unusual word (but "organizational"?).

What comes across most strongly in the book is the closely interlinked cause-and-effect relationship between policy, scientists and the science they practice, and how rapidly these three can dramatically be permuted. I strongly recommend this book as an introduction to the interplay of science, government and their publics in the particular context of Nazi Germany, and as a cautionary illustration of the immense power of public policy making.

Sean Johnston

Department of History

University of York, UK, YO1 5DD