



Heisenberg and the Nazi Atomic Bomb Project, 1939-1945: A Study in German Culture

By Paul Lawrence Rose

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No one better represents the plight and the conduct of German intellectuals under Hitler than Werner Heisenberg, whose task it was to build an atomic bomb for Nazi Germany. The controversy surrounding Heisenberg still rages, because of the nature of his work and the regime for which it was undertaken. What precisely did Heisenberg know about the physics of the atomic bomb? How deep was his loyalty to the German government during the Third Reich? Assuming that he had been able to build a bomb, would he have been willing? These questions, the moral and the scientific, are answered by Paul Lawrence Rose with greater accuracy and breadth of documentation than any other historian has yet achieved.

Digging deep into the archival record among formerly secret technical reports, Rose establishes that Heisenberg never overcame certain misconceptions about nuclear fission, and as a result the German leaders never pushed for atomic weapons. In fact, Heisenberg never had to face the moral problem of whether he *should* design a bomb for the Nazi regime. Only when he and his colleagues were interned in England and heard about Hiroshima did Heisenberg realize that his calculations were wrong. He began at once to construct an image of himself as a "pure" scientist who could have built a bomb but chose to work on reactor design instead. This was fiction, as Rose demonstrates: in reality, Heisenberg blindly supported and justified the cause of German victory. The question of why he did, and why he misrepresented himself afterwards, is answered through Rose's subtle analysis of German mentality and the scientists' problems of delusion and self-delusion. This fascinating study is a profound effort to understand one of the twentieth century's great enigmas.

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Heisenberg and the Nazi Atomic Bomb Project, 1939-1945: A Study in German Culture By Paul Lawrence Rose Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #3100051 in Books
- Published on: 1998-10-16
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 1.19" h x 6.34" w x 9.32" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 391 pages

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Rose (Jewish/European studies, Pennsylvania State Univ.) addresses several important and interrelated historiographical questions. He analyzes how Heisenberg and other prominent physicists dealt with the moral issues of working for the Nazis and how Nazi ideology intersected, and influenced, their work. Rose argues that Heisenberg misunderstood several key physical principles; consequently, Nazi scientists were directed away from the development of atomic weaponry. Interestingly, Rose uses this information as part of his analysis of Heisenberg's postwar "confessions," in which the scientist described himself not only as apolitical but claimed he never intended to build an atomic bomb. Rose concludes that Heisenberg was attempting to cloud his support of the Nazi state, much as Albert Speer did when he claimed to be an apolitical technocrat. A fascinating book, but not for beginners; recommended for specialized collections on the history of science and modern intellectual history. ?Frederic Krome, Jacob Rader Marcus Ctr. of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati

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From [Booklist](#)

Of the controversies surrounding the dawn of the atomic age, ranking near the top is the matter of Werner Heisenberg and his team's failure to put a bomb in Hitler's hands. Two principal explanations exist. One view, presented in Thomas Powers' *Heisenberg's War* (1993), is that Heisenberg hindered research, and, in any event, was not ordered to go all out for the bomb; Rose adopts the opposing contention that Heisenberg failed not because of moral compunctions but because he miscalculated the moderator required by a plutonium-producing reactor and the critical mass for a U235 bomb. That Rose spitefully condemns Powers' popular book as "entirely bogus" indicates the passion he brings to arraigning Heisenberg and his historical defense; and on bomb technology, the strictly technical side, Rose bests Powers. However, his attempted clinching of the argument by digressions into German patriotism and Heisenberg's mindset is too speculative to be convincing. Deeply researched scholarship for serious students. *Gilbert Taylor*

From Kirkus Reviews

bomb. Here is a close-up look at that failed attempt. Rose (Modern European History/Penn State Univ.; Wagner: Race and Resolution, 1992, etc.) focuses his study on Werner Heisenberg, leader of the German A-bomb project. One of the giants of modern physics, Heisenberg remained in Germany despite his differences with Nazism (he never joined the party and defended "Jewish physics," i.e., Einstein's work, when the Nazis denounced it), heading a project that he must have known had the potential to insure German victory. Rose argues that Heisenberg's actions, including his failure to make a fundamental determination of the mass of uranium required to build a bomb, can be understood only in the context of the moral, cultural, and scientific attitudes of the German scientific establishment. Among these attitudes was a persistent self-delusion, endemic in German culture from the mid-1800s through the end of the Nazi era. Rose begins with a detailed critical analysis of Heisenberg's account of the bomb project, drawing on contemporary documents and subsequent revelations. The book's second part examines Heisenberg's fundamental inability to grasp the principle of an atomic explosive, a failure that ultimately allowed the US Manhattan Project to win the race for the bomb. This failure has been painted by Heisenberg's apologists as a subterfuge to undercut the project; Rose finds little reason to grant his subject that escape hatch. Finally, Rose examines the moral issues of Heisenberg's willingness to work with the Nazi regime, and his postwar accounts of that work, which the author terms "historically false and morally corrupt." While heavily footnoted for the benefit of an academic readership, this meticulously detailed and definitive book should also appeal to any reader

intrigued by the moral dimension of scientific work. -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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