

NEGATIVE CHARGE

What strained the relationship between two of Germany's most respected scientific thinkers?

By Wolf Schäfer

AFTER WORLD WAR II, the great physicist Werner Heisenberg and his colleague Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker often spoke, as has been said, “with one voice.” This impression is rooted in the fact that both scientists rarely, if ever, contradicted one another in their public accounts of the Uranverein, the clandestine project that had attempted to develop atomic weapons for Germany. Their explanations evolved in lockstep over the years, all the way until Heisenberg’s death, in February 1976. But this harmonious performance in postwar West Germany cannot be taken as an indicator of the true nature of their relationship in Nazi Germany. That relationship, it turns out, had at one point been far more explosive.

For the first two-and-a-half years of World War II, the two men were closely aligned in their institutional politics, cultural hubris, and overall zeal. Yet this apparent congruity dissolved when the “easy” phase of the war ended and the hard part began,

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during the winter of 1941/42 when the battle for Moscow got underway. Lightning war morphed into a war of attrition, and the security of a German victory started to wobble. It was in the wake of this development that a sharp contrast between Heisenberg and von Weizsäcker began to emerge.

The cities of central Germany were no longer safe from aerial assaults. Heisenberg’s wife, Elisabeth, fled Leipzig. In April 1943, she moved with the six Heisenberg children (seven, eventually) to the family’s summer home, in rural

Urfeld at Lake Walchen, in Bavaria. (It is there where her husband would later be captured, in early May 1945, by Colonel Boris Pash, the military leader of the Manhattan Project’s Alsos Mission, charged with discovering all it could about the German nuclear project.) As Elisabeth fled, Heisenberg was working for the Uranverein in the embattled German capital. And in one exceptionally candid letter, dated October 14, 1943, he told her how deeply at odds with von Weizsäcker he found himself:

These days, there are constant meetings about the war efforts. Carl Friedrich v. Weizsäcker is here, and yesterday evening I had a long conversation with him about the same questions that you had discussed with Frau Westphal back then. I basically do not get along with him at all; this way of approaching all things on principle and always forcing “the last decision” is so completely alien to me. Weizs. says sentences like this: He would be quite content in a totally destroyed city because then one would know for sure that it would not come back, and that the people, based on the experience of guilt and punishment, would be ripe for another way of thinking – by which he means the new faith, to which he himself professes allegiance. Then he further says that this faith is, of course, irreconcilably hostile to the faith of the old world – that is, the world of the Anglo-Saxons – and that indeed Christ had also said he had not come to bring peace, but rather the sword – whereupon one is back at the beginning, i.e. whoever does not believe the same as I do must be exterminated. I find this eternal circle of belief in the holiest goods that must be defended with fire and sword completely unbearable; obviously, I am in this respect utterly un-German, and in such a discussion I am driven, contrary to my

usual habits, into vehement opposition, so much so that in the end I can only advocate the most boring philistinism (*Spießertum*).

The militancy of von Weizsäcker’s reported outburst is astonishing, and it calls for explanation. But first, let me review Heisenberg’s almost immediate account of the “long conversation” with his former student, trusted colleague, and good friend.

We do not know the questions that were raised in Elisabeth’s exchange “back then” with her best friend, Maria Westphal, but we do know that Heisenberg talked about “the same questions” with his friend. The obliqueness of the reference indicates that both conversations must have entered the taboo zone of Nazi politics, a zone that “apolitical” people such as Elisabeth and Werner Heisenberg normally shunned. Two things are extremely untypical and thus noteworthy: the animus of the Heisenberg/von Weizsäcker discussion, for one, and, second, Heisenberg’s profound admission – as much to himself as to his wife – that he really is not getting along with von Weizsäcker. This is an extraordinary confession. Both men took oppositional positions on some highly charged issues. What could have been that divisive and unsettling?

Based on the quoted topic of “a totally destroyed city” (likely a reference to the total decimation of Hamburg in the last week of July 1943 – Britain’s Operation Gomorrah) and the related “experience of guilt and punishment,” one might assume that the impending destruction of Germany was at issue, as was the question of who was finally to blame for this looming national obliteration.

But what do we know about von Weizsäcker’s professed “new faith” and its main tenets? According to Heisenberg, this militant new faith was approaching everything with the understanding that one has to seek a “last decision” with “fire

and sword;” totally uncompromising in demanding the annihilation of everybody holding a different opinion; and “irreconcilably hostile” to the faith of the “old world” represented by the “Anglo-Saxons.” Hitler’s frequent invocation of a “struggle for the last decision” seems to resonate in these amazing pronouncements. Deeply disturbed, Heisenberg was impelled to tell Elisabeth, “It is good that I can unburden my heart to you.”

The chasm between Werner Heisenberg and Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker was apparently deep and wide. Heisenberg found himself on the “un-German” side, and all he could muster was “the most

in 1943. It is difficult to imagine that either man could ever forget this enormous difference of opinion. This is what makes their cordial postwar performance on behalf of the Uranverein’s wartime history even more curious and impressive.

PHILOSOPHY WAS von Weizsäcker’s original intellectual passion, and learning physics was how he approached it, thanks to Heisenberg. To find the source of von Weizsäcker’s apparent radicalism, we must follow his engagement with philosophy, particularly German philosophy of the early twentieth century – and more particularly, that of Martin Heidegger.

Black Forest. Von Weizsäcker, Heisenberg’s assistant at the time, was brought along. Later, von Weizsäcker recounted what he had witnessed: Heidegger listened until the two discussants had reached a point of mutual incomprehension, then he summarized Viktor von Weizsäcker’s arguments in “three perfectly clear sentences,” after which von Weizsäcker’s uncle admitted that they captured exactly what he wanted to say. Then Heidegger turned to Heisenberg and captured his points in “three completely precise sentences,” and von Weizsäcker’s teacher affirmed that they expressed what he meant to say. Then the philosopher elucidated “in four or five sentences” what the



CARL FRIEDRICH VON WEIZSÄCKER (1949), MARTIN HEIDEGGER (1950), WERNER HEISENBERG (1955)

boring philistinism.” Since Heisenberg does not provide concrete hints about his counterarguments, we should not speculate about them. We may, however, surmise that they were not irreconcilable but rather capable of reconciliation; compromising, not uncompromising. We may also assume that they concerned German versus Anglo-Saxon guilt and punishment. This fact remains: as close as these two members of the Uranverein may have been before the war, in the Blitzkrieg years, and again after the war, their union ruptured dramatically

Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker met Heidegger for the first time in 1935 under circumstances of a major *Vorbild* (role model) constellation. Someone – “*irgend jemand*,” von Weizsäcker is clearly vague about this person – had asked Heidegger to pair the Nobel Laureate Heisenberg with Professor Viktor von Weizsäcker, Carl Friedrich’s uncle and a noted physician and physiologist, for a conversation about physics and medicine. Heidegger invited the two men, and they visited him in his famous cottage in Todtnauberg, near Freiburg, in the

link between the two positions could be, and both speakers agreed with Heidegger’s interpretation. In 1970, von Weizsäcker concluded this anecdote with what he gleaned from the encounter:

This, my first meeting with Heidegger, has made me see that Heidegger . . . is capable of hearing and understanding what is thought, and to understand it better than those have understood it who have thought it themselves. I would say: *That is a Thinker.* ☞

Later, Heidegger is designated “the most important philosopher” in von Weizsäcker’s reminiscence and “the philosopher” of the twentieth century. Since this first encounter in 1935, von Weizsäcker met Heidegger regularly, “at least every two years” for the next 37 years. In order to explain the portent of this biannual pilgrimage, it is important to remember that von Weizsäcker was drawn to role models, and he found his ideal of a philosopher in Heidegger, who became for von Weizsäcker a philosophical *Führer*, as it were. Von Weizsäcker’s view of Heidegger as the thinker who hears and understands “better” what is thought than those who have thought it first thus opens itself to Heidegger’s interpretation of the crucial historical moment of Germany in the early 1940s.

Heidegger lectured at Freiburg University during the summer semester 1942 on Friedrich Hölderlin, who was, incidentally, the one poet von Weizsäcker carried with him to his internment at Farm Hall, in Godmanchester, England, after being captured by the Allied forces. Contemplating the essence of poetry, technology, politics, ancient Greece, and modern Germany through a deep reading of Hölderlin’s hymn on the river Danube, Heidegger clarified the historical situation in the darkening months of World War II:

We know today that the Anglo-Saxon world of Americanism has resolved to annihilate Europe, that is, the homeland [*Heimat*], and that means: the commencement of the Western world. Whatever has the character of commencement is indestructible. America’s entry into this planetary war is not its entry into history; rather, it is already the ultimate American act of American ahistoricity and self-devastation. For this act is the renunciation of commencement, and a decision in favor of that which is without commencement.

Germany had declared itself to be “in a state of war” with the United States on December 11, 1941, four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Yet Heidegger is certain that “Americanism has resolved to annihilate Europe.” And though Hitler was trying to make Europe coextensive with Germany through serial wars that fact did not matter. Europe was the “homeland,” the homeland was “the

commencement” (*das Anfängliche*), and “American historylessness” was the “renunciation of commencement.” (To translate *Anfang des Abendländischen*, by the way, as “commencement of the Western world” is inaccurate. For Heidegger, the Occidental (*das Abendländische*) was not part of what is commonly understood as the Western world. The “Anglo-Saxon” countries, Great Britain and especially the “ahistorical” United States, were un-European and hence un-Western in terms of Heidegger’s definition of Occidental.)

In order to make sense of Heidegger’s mental map, it is important to understand the anti-technological thrust of his philosophy. Heidegger’s mission, as he saw it, was to confront, as the philosopher Michael Zimmerman has written, “the construction of the technological universe.” Germany’s enemy, the enemy of the Occidental – Heidegger’s enemy – was the rising global techno-scientific civilization. Its geopolitical agents – the democratic West and the communist East – surrounded the Occidental, as well as the fatherland. The proponents of this civilization, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union, were the foes of Heidegger’s metaphysical Europe. Therefore it was Germany – “the metaphysical nation” – that was ultimately fighting for the survival of Europe in fighting the Allies of World War II. For Heidegger, a historical battle was raging in 1942 in which, as he wrote, “ahistoricity and historicity are decisively at issue.”

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One year later, in 1943, von Weizsäcker’s subterranean radicalism burst in on Heisenberg – or should we say: Heidegger reached out to Heisenberg through von Weizsäcker? Solely based on Heisenberg’s above account, one can only say that his professed “new faith” is what enabled von Weizsäcker to take a “totally destroyed city” in stride, oppose the Anglo-Saxon world, try to force final decisions, and to defend the most sacred goods “with fire and sword.” Could that not have been articulated as well by Heidegger? No doubt. Heidegger was a militant thinker and fond of aggressive formulations. It is rather von

Weizsäcker, the diplomat father’s son, who is not recognizable in Heisenberg’s tantalizing letter.

The eminent role Heidegger played for von Weizsäcker can be deduced from the many visits, awed conversations, and long walks in the woods with the master thinker. It would be naïve not to assume that Heidegger captivated the young von Weizsäcker, who writes, “In Todtnauberg, the conversation almost always continued on longer walks and many a formulation, then also of a more casual kind, has stayed with me together with the surrounding nature.” Eventually and inexorably, the conversation moved from physics to philosophy: “Proceeding from physics and mathematics one landed inevitably in the middle of the great intellectual decisions of modern and Greek philosophy.”

It is inconceivable that von Weizsäcker’s private conversations with Heidegger about the “great intellectual decisions” of past and present philosophy would not touch the war, modernity, technology, Germany, Hitler, National Socialism, Bolshevism, and Americanism – the topics that occupied Heidegger. We also have to assume that Heidegger listened when von Weizsäcker spoke about modern science, and that von Weizsäcker listened when Heidegger spoke about the Big Issues.

Though Heidegger’s influence on von Weizsäcker was likely very strong, we cannot picture the young physicist and philosopher entirely clearly until von Weizsäcker’s

wartime correspondence and other private sources become available. We only know the mature von Weizsäcker, who kept telling versions of the past, forever memorializing his role model:

I have heard said that even before 1933 he [Heidegger] placed hopes in National Socialism. In the winter of 1933/34 a student from Freiburg told me: “Around Heidegger they invented Freiburg National Socialism.” More quietly they say that the true Third Reich hasn’t really begun yet; that’s still coming.

Heidegger indeed harbored an idiosyncratic idea of “the inner truth and greatness” of National Socialism, but we can’t be absolutely sure about von Weizsäcker. The international debate about Heidegger’s philosophy and its connection to Nazism remains unresolved, yet the discussion of Heidegger and the Third Reich is at least factually fair-

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ly conclusive. Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis, the editors of *Heidegger and Nazism* (1991), have distinguished a “triple turning” of Heidegger’s politico-historical perspectives. First, Heidegger embraced National Socialism. Like so many others, he joined the NSDAP on May 1, 1933. Then, in 1934, after his infamous rectorship of

the University of Freiburg, he turned away from real existing Nazism; he nonetheless kept his Party membership in good standing until 1945. Finally, following the 1934 estrangement from Party officialdom, he spiked his Freiburg lectures with a “utopian’ version of Nazism.”

Unlike Heidegger, von Weizsäcker never joined the National Socialist German Workers’ Party. Though he was tempted, he never committed, perhaps because his father [Ernst von Weizsäcker] had told him, “Listen, don’t trust this Hitler.” Von Weizsäcker heeded the advice “because, in politics,” he wrote, “my father was always an authority for me.” Carl Friedrich might have listened to his father then, but he did not consult him in 1941 when he was playing with the idea of talking to Hitler about the atom bomb, even though he “was actually always very open” with his father. Fearing his father’s laughter, Carl Friedrich self-censored the otherwise open exchange and kept silent about his dream of a nuclear-armed Third Reich pursuing a “policy of peace.” This strategic silence is indicative of von Weizsäcker’s ability to compartmentalize and of his inability to share potentially

“laughable” leanings with people he relied on, such as his attraction to Heidegger’s utopian National Socialism. That Werner Heisenberg was shocked at his friend’s suspiciously zealous proclivities during their conversation that day in October 1943 makes sense in this light. Von Weizsäcker had secrets, and few secrets can be kept forever. 🖱

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Note: For further reading and original German quotations, see Wolf Schäfer, “Plutoniumbombe und zivile Atomkraft: Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker’s Beiträge zum Dritten Reich und zur Bundesrepublik,” in *Leviathan*, 41(2013)3, 383–421, and “Der utopische Nationalsozialismus – Ein gemeinsamer Fluchtpunkt im Denken von Martin Heidegger und Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker?” forthcoming in *Acta Historica Leopoldina*, 64(2013).

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