Joe Waterman

Professor Marcuse

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Operation Epsilon: The Atomic Question Unfolds

Operation “Epsilon” (6th-7th August 1945) National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, RG 77, Entry 22, Box 164 (Farm Hall Transcripts).

Source of German transcript: Dieter Hoffman, *Operation Epsilon: Die Farm Hall Protokolle oder die Angst der Alliierten vor der deutschen Atombombe*. Berlin: Rohwohlt, 1993, pp. 145-77.

Following the Allied occupation of Germany, and its eventual surrender in May 1945, the United States and British Intelligence launched Operation Epsilon under the larger pretext of the “Alsos Mission”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Operation Epsilon entailed the detainment of several top former Nazi scientists within a government owned estate near Cambridge, England. The operation was a viable step in the Western allied retention of prominent former Nazi scientists, and furthermore a documentation of their knowledge. The estate played host to ten Nazi scientists, as they appear in the GHDI transcript: Heisenberg, Weizsacker, Hahn, Diebner, Wirtz, Harteck, Bagge, Korshing, Gerlach, and Laue. The group, gathered in the estate, were made aware of the BBC report announcing the use of atomic weapons by the United States military in Japan, and their subsequent conversations “surreptitiously” recorded. The detainment and recording lasted several months. This section of the translation, specifically, denotes the moments of dialogue following the group and their initial reactions with respect to the deployment of atomic weapons by the United States. The nature of the conversation that followed, and effectively whether or not these very German scientists could have achieved something of that scale on their own, in their war effort, becomes the crux of the conversation between them.

Respectively, the scientists had enjoyed quite meritorious careers in their fields. Heisenberg was notable for his work in quantum physics, a doctorate from the University of Berlin, and a Nobel Prize in physics in 1932.[[2]](#footnote-2) Other prominent credentials of the bunch include: the co-discovery of nuclear fission by Otto Hahn, who also would earn a Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1944.[[3]](#footnote-3) Kurt Diebner was the leader of Nazi nuclear research council.[[4]](#footnote-4) Furthermore Erich Bagge was instrumental in uranium enrichment projects.[[5]](#footnote-5) Finally, rounding out a trio of Nobel Laureates, Max von Laue earned his prize in physics for the discovery of the diffraction of x-rays on crystals. This collection of scientists represented the cutting edge in Nazi nuclear and atomic physics during, and after, the Second World War.

The recordings at Farm Hall were not declassified and made publicly accessible until 1993. Only then were historians able to retroactively unpack the implications of the covert intelligence operation and what it may have spelled out about the state of Nazi research science, especially in the realm of physics, a the time of its demise and leading up to it. From the public release of the tapes in 1993 there was a branching of initial transcriptions and resulting research. The most unrefined and earliest traceable English transcription comes by way of, *Operation Epsilon: The Farm Hall Transcripts, with an introduction by Sir Charles Frank [Bristol and Philadelphia: Institute of Physics Publishing; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993].*[[6]](#footnote-6) While the first initial German transcript is credited to Dieter Hoffman, a contemporary German scientific historian, *Operation Epsilon: Die Farm-Hall-Protokolle oder Die Angst der Alliierten vor der deutschen Atombombe, Wilfried Sczepan, trans. (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1993).* The most notable publishing tied to Operation Epsilon following these initial raw transcripts was *Hitler's Uranium Club: The Secret Recordings at Farm Hall (Woodbury, NY: AIP Press, 1996)* written by Jeremy Bernstein, a PhD. of Harvard University who specialized in theoretical physics and used his understanding of this field to transition into a career as an adept science writer, and ended up on contract for the The New Yorker from the early 1960s through the mid 1990s.[[7]](#footnote-7) Other mentions and renditions are included in *Spies in the Congo: America's Atomic Mission in World War II* written by Susan Williams and published in 2016. Congruently there are discussions about this subject matter featured in a German text from 1989, *Atomic bomb scientists: Memoirs, 1939-1945 : interviews with Werner Karl Heisenberg, Paul Harteck, Lew Kowarski, Leslie R. Groves, Aristid von Grosse, C.E. Larson.*

The host of sources displayed in this work reflect a different understanding of the Nazi atomic capability than what have been initially surmised by the Western Allies at the time of German defeat in the Second World War. A number of the sources interpret the dialogue offered as suggesting a greater capacity for atomic weaponry than that which was displayed by Nazi Germany during the war. Heisenberg, as invoked by several documents, spearheads the idea that the scientists themselves were not only in fact capable of achieving a similar result to that tier displayed by the United States military, but that they were also in fact active in sabotaging the German atomic effort in order to stall out Hitler’s plans for the possible weapon. This take is decidedly divisive in the text as several sources point to this being a tactic designed to protect the groups interest as reformed ex-Nazis and solidify their position as leaders in their respective fields. This sourcing reflects the nature and core of this theory as it has played out text since the declassification, it invokes both English and German reflections and provides a context regarding the discussion of Operation Epsilon and the debate of Nazi Atomic capabilities during WWII.

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

Ermenc, Joseph. “Atomic bomb scientists: Memoirs, 1939-1945 : interviews with Werner Karl

Heisenberg, Paul Harteck, Lew Kowarski, Leslie R. Groves, Aristid von Grosse, C.E. Larson” ABC-CLIO, LLC, (1989)

* This text was released as a series of interviews with major Nazi scientists, the likes of which would make up a small grouping of those who were surveilled at Farm Hall, at the end of 1945 and early 1946. Ermenc, a former professor at Dartmouth University recounts details of the Nazi nuclear and applied physics programs during the time of the Second World War. Featured are prominent names including Heidenberg and Harteck who were named in the Farm Hall transcripts. This collection of interviews was published in 1989 before the declassification of any information connected to Operation Epsilon, suggesting that the material discussed, especially by the likes of Heisenberg, was illuminating to the Nazi cause and still pertinent enough to withhold for several decades. Furthermore, the text serves to draw an understanding of the operation and more overarching operations by the U.S. to secure Nazi intelligence as it was deemed to be of significant value of United States and British intelligence. It remains unclear whether or not the Germans had the ability to match the weapons programs of the United States, however this text was still valuable in that it helped to develop a first hand account of Nazi capabilities according to those scientists present during the war period.

Goldberg, Stanley, and Powers, Thomas. “Declassified Files Reopen “Nazi Bomb” Debate”:

[Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulletin_of_the_Atomic_Scientists). 48 (7). pp. 32–40 (1992)

* This journal relays an important message about what would come to codify the controversy that surrounds the Farm Hall tapes. The question remains: were people like Heisenberg even capable of heading up an operation similar to that of the scope of the United States atomic program? Unfortunately, as this posting denotes, the truth would continue to be nudged further and further out of reach as the post war scene grappled with how to handle these men. Heisenberg, and others now had to play the role of defendants of their cause as the regime they once stood in solidarity with collapsed and they were taken in by western forces. Goldberg and Powers point to the great wealth of knowledge on behalf of the German teams but point out that figures like Heisenberg were not in command of anything in resemblance to what was headed up by Oppenheimer. Remaining still was the question of whether or not those scientists under Hitler did not achieve comparable results because they were incapable or because they did not want to grant their leader the ability to operate on an atomic level, knowing what he may seek to do with the technology. Regardless this journal codifies the arguments raised in the context of the Farm Hall transcripts as it pertained to Nazi atomic capabilities.

Lehmann-Haupt, Christopher. Books of The Times; Did a German Scientist Prevent Catastrophe

in World War II?: *"Heisenberg's War: The Secret History of the German Bomb"* [Review] [New York Times](https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/news/pubidlinkhandler/sng/pubtitle/New+York+Times/$N/11561/DocView/428982516/fulltext/C85AC98D443B46CFPQ/1?accountid=14522), Late Edition (East Coast); New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]08 Mar 1993: C.13.

* This article, published in the New York Times following the release of the Farm Hall Transcripts reviews a related text following personal accounts of Heisenberg and Dohr. Ultimately the review summarizes the text and reflects on its major points as being the debasement of Nazi attempts to make an atomic weapon. Lehmann-Haupt surmises that, based on the text, the American efforts put forth in the Manhattan Project were debased if a proper understanding of the Nazi intention could have actually been understood at the time of the development of the device. The intention, as put forth by Heisenberg was to not even attempt to produce an atomic weapon. The article does suggest, however, that the primary evidence put forth is not entirely well backed. It also points to a reading of the Farm Hall Transcripts, on which the book is based upon, are skewed and do not offer a clear backing of the statements made by Heisenberg. The review concludes with a telling statement about the nature of the books relationship to Nazi operations and Farm Hall, “If this powerful book is right, then its reticent hero may have saved humanity from an unimaginable catastrophe.”

Walker, Mark. “Selbstreflexionen deutscher Atomphysiker. Die Farm Hall-Protokolle und die Entstehung neuer Legenden um die ‘deutsche Atombombe’ Vierteljahrshefte f*ü*r

Zeitgeschichte 41. Jahrg., 4. H. (Oct., 1993), pp. 519-542. [Oldenbourg](https://www.jstor.org/publisher/oldwiss)

[Wissenschaftsverlag](https://www.jstor.org/publisher/oldwiss) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30196573>

* The ideas central to this German text are the apparent harvesting of a narrative by the scientists at Farm Hall that would ensure they were looked upon with favor as they entered a new phase in their professional careers. The text concludes that none of the men were in fact Nazis by political view, and this was used to their favor, in suggesting that they had not produced an atomic bomb, not due to an inability to do so, but because they did not want to grant their regime the power a weapon of that magnitude would grant. This idea was mostly predicated on a conjecture by Weizsacker, but is best relayed in a translation of the abstract of the text: “It is now clear, that fundamental portions of the postwar apologia were all forged in the psychological crucible of Farm Hall, including the myth that it was from Heisenberg's experience during the Third Reich that he had learned that scientists had to play an active role in politics, and that in 1941 Heisenberg and von Weizsäcker had been striving to create an international cooperation of physicists to control nuclear power.”

Hollinger, David. UNIVERSITY PRESSES; Eavesdropping on Hitler's Scientists: [Review]

[The New York Times](https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/news/pubidlinkhandler/sng/pubtitle/New+York+Times/$N/11561/DocView/429279656/abstract/7359DD89C2B9435APQ/1?accountid=14522), Late Edition (East Coast); New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]31 Oct 1993: A.32.

* The mention of Farm Hall is this 1993 book review comes in the form of a mention of the nature of the capabilities of top nuclear scientists like Heisenberg, and their supposed resistance, in the form of operating below scientific capacity. The source also introduces a dichotomy of interests on behalf of those German scientists at Farm Hall who as Heisenberg himself pointed out, “The moment we are no longer dangerous we are also no longer interesting.” The impetus put forth suggests that top men of this nature including Weizacker, as well, were to be careful in their handling of the newly important Cold War political game that had overtaken post World War Two tensions. Their intentions seemed to be to protect their own interests in a post-war context and to attempt to attain some agency for the Western Allies as survivable members equipped with inside information regarding Nazi science. The scientists wanted to ensure a proper return to their facilities, or at least their research, and apparently threatened Soviet defection if they were not ensured this. Furthermore, the article details the nature of Operation Epsilon and a joint operated intelligence gathering operation carried out by clandestine sectors of both British and United States Intelligence. The Operation Epsilon, and Farm Hall mentions in this review are not in depth but rather a means of contextualizing important understandings about post war personal strategies of ex-Nazi scientists as surmised from the dialogues of Heisenberg, Weizacker, and Werner.

Bernstein, Jeremy. Hitler*’*s Uranium Club: The Secret Recordings at Farm Hall (2001)

* This book represents the effective English version of the previous text listed in this bibliography. It comes complete with a rundown of the nature of Operation Epsilon, the Farm Hall Transcripts, and the nature of those scientists who seemed surprised by the dropping of an atomic bomb on Japanese soil. Bernstein, however can not be understated in his value as an American scientific historian and a crucial figure in a retention of this information through an American lens. Bernstein revitalized a scientific understanding of German scientific capabilities and their nature as a defining factor in the U.S. approach to the ten key scientists involved in Farm Hall.

Williams, Susan. “Spies in the Congo: America's Atomic Mission in World War II” (2016)

* This text follows Operation Epsilon and the Farm Hall transcripts into one of their most contemporary renderings. Williams is not deliberate in her employment of the initial transcripts in this particular text, but is chiefly concerned with synthesizing, in a global context, the nature of atomic development around the time of the Second World War. Her concern lies on the material resources that would come to fuel the race for atomic and nuclear weapons not only before but upon their employment on a battlefield. Intermingled are ideas about the German race towards the raw materials that were being fought over within central Africa. The text highlights inefficiencies in the German approach, tactically to securing material resource capable of supporting an atomic military.

1. https://www.atomicheritage.org/history/alsos-mission [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Werner-Heisenberg [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/chemistry/1944/hahn/facts/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.atomicheritage.org/profile/kurt-diebner [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich\_Bagge [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://history.aip.org/web-exhibits/heisenberg/farm-hall.html [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy\_Bernstein [↑](#footnote-ref-7)