

Introduction

During World War II German scientists attempted to harness nuclear fission chain reactions in order to create powerful new energy sources and weapons. This is one of the most important developments in recent history, not because of what the scientists did, rather because of how their efforts were perceived. Without the German uranium project and credible reports about its existence, it is difficult to imagine the United States government investing such great amounts of manpower, resources, and money into making such a futuristic weapon as the atomic bomb. If the American Manhattan Project and the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had not happened, it is equally difficult to imagine the Soviet Union making a comparable effort. Thus without the threat of “Hitler’s Bomb” there is no atomic bomb in the summer of 1945, or nuclear arms race immediately thereafter. The world would have been a very different place.

The second part of the story, the debates and arguments during the postwar period surrounding the German wartime work on uranium, is also important, for it sheds light on how people deal with and learn from the past. Confronted with the terrible legacy of National Socialism, these German scientists had to justify, both to their fellow Germans and to foreign colleagues, having worked within the National Socialist state on weapons of such destructive power. Some of these colleagues were émigrés from Germany who had suffered great personal loss. The result was one of the most enduring and controversial legends in modern science: Werner Heisenberg and Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker’s 1941 visit with their Danish Colleague Niels Bohr in occupied Copenhagen. This book examines the history of the wartime research in Germany, connects this to the postwar criticism and eventual rehabilitation of these scientists, and sheds light on this legend.

