



Hitler's Scientists: Science, War, and the Devil's Pact

By John Cornwell

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When Hitler came to power in the 1930s, Germany had led the world in science, mathematics, and technology for nearly four decades. But while the fact that Hitler swiftly pressed Germany's scientific prowess into the service of a brutal, racist, xenophobic ideology is well known, few realize that German scientists had knowingly broken international agreements and basic codes of morality to fashion deadly weapons even before World War I. In *Hitler's Scientists*, British historian John Cornwell explores German scientific genius in the first half of the twentieth century and shows how Germany's early lead in the new physics led to the discovery of atomic fission, which in turn led the way to the atom bomb, and how the ideas of Darwinism were hijacked to create the lethal doctrine of racial cleansing.

By the war's end, almost every aspect of Germany's scientific culture had been tainted by the exploitation of slave labor, human experimentation, and mass killings. Ultimately, it was Hitler's profound scientific ignorance that caused the Fatherland to lose the race for atomic weapons, which Hitler would surely have used. Cornwell argues that German scientists should be held accountable for the uses to which their knowledge was put—an issue with wide-ranging implications for the continuing unregulated pursuit of scientific progress.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Neither Hitler's rocket blitz of England, nor his use of unprecedented weapons technology, nor--most horrifically--his systematic program of genocide could have been achieved without the purposeful work of Nazi physicists, biologists, mathematicians, and technicians. In *Hitler's Scientists*, John Cornwell asks:

"Were these cases of Germans behaving according to type as Germans? Or scientists in Germany behaving according to type as scientists?"

These chilling questions encompass two more specific points. First, did the scientists who developed poison gas weapons and concentration camps do it for scientific, personal, or political purposes? Second, can scientists claim to remain objective when funded by, and working for, military or government entities? Cornwell, whose last book was *Hitler's Pope*, takes a hard line against those scientists who stayed and helped the Nazis after Jewish scientists were expelled and Hitler's plans became clear. With the weight of evidence, Cornwell lays flat the various personal reasons the scientists gave for their actions during the war and shows that even before World War I, German scientists had shown themselves willing to subvert laws and morality in pursuit of money and power. Cornwell also clearly outlines the popular pseudosciences--"racial hygiene," astrology, glacial cosmogony--that drove Hitler's madness. Were there any German scientists who were swept up unknowing or unwilling in the Nazi war machine? It's unclear, but Cornwell's analysis of whether Werner Heisenberg was a "hero, a villain or a fellow traveler" is crucial to that question. Heisenberg's role in the Nazi's inability to complete an atomic bomb is still a riddle, but Cornwell presents all available facts and allows readers to draw their own conclusions. In his last chapters, Cornwell draws parallels between Hitler's scientists and those working in today's world of political anxiety, terrorism, and attacks on basic science. He demolishes once and for all the outdated, disproven, and dangerous notion of scientists working in a vacuum, free of the "taint" of the outside world, and answerable only to their funders. --*Therese Littleton*

From Publishers Weekly

Cornwell's devastating bestseller *Hitler's Pope* is a tough act to follow. Here, the author again claims the moral high ground to critique the ethical and political choices of scientists in Hitler's Germany and to caution that science under the Western democracies in the Cold War and the war on terrorism also wielded and continues to wield the "Janus-faced power for good and evil." Today's best writers on the Hitler era have outgrown the kind of marginalizing polemic Cornwell employs here. His analysis of Nazi science, while built on sound research and often thoughtful critique, sinks to the sensationalism of "Faustian bargains," "scientific prostitutions" and Arendt's "banality of evil." Unsavory concepts are qualified as "pseudo-science," "half-baked," or simply "science" in quotation marks so that the undiscerning reader won't mistake them for the real thing. All the hot-button issues are on display here: racial hygiene; eugenics; the Nazi purge of academia and Germany's forfeiture of its greatest physicists to the Allies because they were Jewish; and human experimentation on concentration camp inmates. The author also details the science of war in Germany, from rockets and secret codes to radar and the atomic bomb, and how the Allies plundered the country's military technology and expertise after the fall of the Third Reich. Cornwell is a gifted writer with a fascinating story to tell, which he ably and engagingly accomplishes despite the hyperbole. But in his pursuit of comfort in right over wrong, the author forfeits objectivity and perhaps a greater understanding of the sources and the whys of the Nazi phenomenon. Despite this,, the author's articulate though subtly lurid repackaging of Nazi-era crimes and curiosities should guarantee much attention and brisk sales with general

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From Scientific American

What you see in the title of this book is less than what you get. Cornwell, who is in the department of history and philosophy of science at the University of Cambridge, does write about Hitler's scientists and their attitudes toward the warped science of the Nazi regime. But he also looks at German science, good and bad, throughout the 20th century. And he explores an issue of profound importance: the relationship between science and the good society. It would be "naive," he warns, to assume that the relationship is morally sound in a democracy. In the face of such challenges as secrecy, the militarization of science, and abuse of the environment, scientists must not "relax their moral and political vigilance."

Editors of Scientific American

Users Review

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Paul Horn:

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