



# Serving the Reich: The Struggle for the Soul of Physics under Hitler

*Philip Ball*

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After World War II, most scientists in Germany maintained that they had been apolitical or actively resisted the Nazi regime, but the true story is much more complicated. In *Serving the Reich*, Philip Ball takes a fresh look at that controversial history, contrasting the career of Peter Debye, director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physics in Berlin, with those of two other leading physicists in Germany during the Third Reich: Max Planck, the elder statesman of physics after whom Germany's premier scientific society is now named, and Werner Heisenberg, who succeeded Debye as director of the institute when it became focused on the development of nuclear power and weapons.

Mixing history, science, and biography, Ball's gripping exploration of the lives of scientists under Nazism offers a powerful portrait of moral choice and personal responsibility, as scientists navigated "the grey zone between complicity and resistance." Ball's account of the different choices these three men and their colleagues made shows how there can be no clear-cut answers or judgement of their conduct. Yet, despite these ambiguities, Ball makes it undeniable that the German scientific establishment as a whole mounted no serious resistance to the Nazis, and in many ways acted as a willing instrument of the state.

*Serving the Reich* considers what this problematic history can tell us about the relationship of science and politics today. Ultimately, Ball argues, a determination to present science as an abstract inquiry into nature that is "above politics" can leave science and scientists dangerously compromised and vulnerable to political manipulation.

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