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The International Conferences on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy and Cold War confrontation: Scientific internationalism in the 1950s and 1960s

HOW DID NUCLEAR PHYSICISTS react to the political problems which were brought about by the combination of the Cold War and the Atomic Age?

In the period between the Atoms for Peace Conference 1955 and the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty 1963 nuclear scientists favoring international cooperation and control got increasingly relevant to the political decision-making process by opening up new ways of communication to governments, between scientists and to a national and international public. In this paper I focus on the contribution of American and Western European nuclear physicists to the transformation of the Cold War from confrontation to cooperation as two opposing modes of conflict management in the period from 1955 to 1963.

I argue that many of these physicists saw scientific internationalism both as a way towards and as an aim within a peaceful international system. I investigate how their perceptions, interpretations and actions in the political sphere were influenced by the specific scientific background, given their socialization, set of values, and scientific practices which were influenced by the experience of a changing scientific system and social function of science since the Second World War. The American “Atoms for Peace” initiative 1953 and the subsequent “Conferences on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy” 1955, 1958 and 1964 are to be seen in their strategic, political and ideological context in order to be analyzed in their function towards scientific internationalism as envisioned by nuclear physicists and promoted on various levels of the scientific-political sphere.

This paper includes some major results of my PhD project on transnational elites “between ‘total war’ and international peace-keeping” which is part of a special research project (SFB) on “Society and War. War experience in Modern History” located at the University of Tübingen. The SFB project evolves a new concept of “experience of war” based on the social construction of reality as presented by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, thus integrating sociological and anthropological approaches into historical research. With a focus on an international scientific community my study integrates the culturalist approach of the SFB into the history of international relations, working with a transnational outlook recently put forward from different perspectives by Thomas Bender, Winfried Loth and Ursula Lehmkuhl. This study is intended to contribute to the ongoing discussion on new approaches in the field of international history.

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