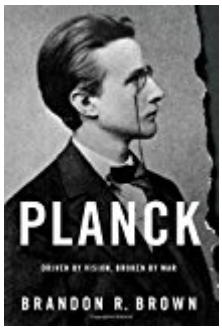
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brandon R. Brown. *Planck: Driven by Vision, Broken by War.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xviii + 258 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-021947-5.



Reviewed by David Mills

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Brandon R. Brown has written a brief but detailed account of the life of the renowned German physicist Max Planck. Brown discusses Planck's rise through the academic ranks in Berlin after the turn of the twentieth century. The strength of this work is its placement in the Nazi era, when many famous and influential Jewish scientists faced ridicule, unemployment, and worse. The book has four main themes: the professional success and personal loss in Planck's life; the rise of Adolf Hitler and the effects of anti-Semitism on German scientists; Planck's attempts to work within the system to stand up to the Nazis; and explanations of the work of noted physicists, many of whom were Jewish.

Brown uses Planck's personal life as the framework of the book, and explains the many tragedies he experienced. For example, Planck's first wife died in October 1909 and he lost his mother in 1914. Planck lost a son and two daughters during World War I, or shortly thereafter. His son died in battle while his daughters died in childbirth. He had another son taken prisoner during the conflict, but the French returned him. Later, the Nazis arrested this son for treason following the failed assassination attempt against Hitler, and executed him in early 1945.

Brown tells his readers that Planck possessed a gifted intellect, but "it is difficult to label Planck a genius in the end" (p. 114). To begin, Plank is the father of quantum theory, for which he won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1918. He excelled as a theoretical physicist as he "elevated the concept of entropy, gave the world the notion of natural units, and discovered the ubiquitous 'zero-point' energy" (p. 131). Brown argues convincingly that Planck was one of the top physicists in a city (Berlin) renowned for scientific achievement and helped to usher in "new" physics at the time when classical physics was on its way out, while Nazi sympathizers clung to it tenaciously (p. 130).

The most famous Jewish scientist affected by the rise of Hitler was Albert Einstein, who left Germany amid growing anti-Semitism. Planck, as the editor of a noted academic journal, was one of

the first to recognize the genius of Einstein's work through a manuscript Einstein submitted to the journal. After Hitler's rise to power, some German scientists embraced the Nazi's racial views and ridiculed the work of Jewish scientists, while Planck tried to protect them. The force of their hatred was too powerful for Planck, however, as the mass of German scientists distrusted "the mathematically oriented Jewish group" (p. 98).

Throughout the book, Brown shows that Planck often tried to use his position and near celebrity status to alter the course of events in Hitler's Germany. He used every ounce of influence he possessed to try to secure the release of his son through appeals to Hitler and Heinrich Himmler, but was not successful. He tried to minimize the Nazi purity laws directed at Jews and their impact on academics, but he failed in this also. Planck may have tried to mitigate the impact of Nazi decisions, but he did not challenge the Nazis directly, and he followed Nazi orders to dismiss a number of Jewish scientists in his department. Additionally, Planck signed his letters with "Heil Hitler" and saluted the Nazi flag, but Brown argues that he never totally aligned with the regime. Planck tried to work within the framework of the government to change its course, reiterating the importance of international cooperation and recognition or amnesty for Jewish scientists. Planck was caught between his loyalty to Germany and his hatred of the Nazi system. Brown makes no excuses for Planck but tries to explain the man's actions.

Historians of leading physicists and their complex scientific theories will appreciate Brown's inclusion of many of them here. He valiantly tries to explain these theories in simple terms, including Einstein's work, but often comes up short. This is not a weakness but an indication that sections of this book are intended for advanced readers. Understanding the science is not necessary to appreciate the main points of the book, however. In the end, Brown's work is not just a reflection of one man, albeit a remarkable one, nor simply an examination of the collective contributions of his many colleagues. Rather, this book is also an examination of evil and the many ways that people reacted to it. Some embraced Hitler's madness for personal but temporary gain while others paid the ultimate price in opposing it. Still others, like Planck, fell somewhere between these two points.