AFTER WORLD WAR II, the great physicist Werner Heisenberg and his colleague Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker often spoke, as has been said, “with one voice.” This impression is rooted in the fact that both scientists rarely, if ever, contradicted one another in their public accounts of the Uranverein, the clandestine project that had attempted to develop atomic weapons for Germany. Their explanations evolved in lockstep over the years, all the way until Heisenberg’s death, in February 1976. But this harmonious performance in postwar West Germany cannot be taken as an indicator of the true nature of their relationship in Nazi Germany. That relationship, it turns out, had at one point been far more explosive.

For the first two-and-a-half years of World War II, the two men were closely aligned in their institutional politics, cultural hubris, and overall zeal. Yet this apparent congruity dissolved when the “easy” phase of the war ended and the hard part began.

During the winter of 1941/42 when the battle for Moscow got underway, Lightning war morphed into a war of attrition, and the security of a German victory started to wobble. It was in the wake of this development that a sharp contrast between Heisenberg and von Weizsäcker began to emerge.

The militancy of von Weizsäcker’s reported outburst is astonishing, and it calls for explanation. But first, let me review Heisenberg’s almost immediate account of the “long conversation” with his former student, trusted colleague, and good friend.

We do not know the questions that were raised in Elisabeth’s exchange “back then” with her best friend, Maria Westphal, but we do know that Heisenberg talked about “the same questions” with his friend. The obliqueness of the reference indicates that both conversations must have entered the taboo zone of Nazi politics, a zone that “apolitical” people such as Elisabeth and Werner Heisenberg normally shunned. Two things are extremely untypical and thus noteworthy: the animus of the Heisenberg/von Weizsäcker discussion, for one, and, second, Heisenberg’s profound admission – as early as he did – to being quite content in a destroyed city because then one would know for sure that it would not come back, and that the people, based on the experience of guilt and punishment, would be ripe for another way of thinking – by which he means the new faith, to which he himself professes allegiance. Then he further says that this faith is, of course, irreconcilably hostile to the faith of the old world – that is, the world of the Anglo-Saxons – and that indeed Christ had also said he had not come to bring peace, but rather the sword – whereupon one is back at the beginning, i.e. whoever does not believe the same as I do must be exterminated.

I find this eternal circle of belief in the holiest goods that must be defended with fire and sword completely unbearable...
and sword;” totally uncompromising in demanding the annihilation of everybody holding a different opinion; and “irreconcilably hostile” to the faith of the “old world” represented by the “Anglo-Saxons.” Hitler’s frequent invocation of a “struggle for the last decision” seems to resonate in these amazing pronouncements. Deeply disturbed, Heisenberg was impelled to tell Elisabeth, “It is good that I can unburden my heart to you.”

The chasm between Werner Heisenberg and Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker was apparently deep and wide. Heisenberg found himself on the “un-German” side, and all he could muster was “the most boring philistinism.” Since Heisenberg does not provide concrete hints about his counterarguments, we should not speculate about them. We may, however, surmise that they were not irreconcilable but rather capable of reconciliation; compromising, not uncompromising. We may also assume that they concerned German versus Anglo-Saxon guilt and punishment. This fact remains: as close as these two members of the Uranverein may have been before the war, in the Blitzkrieg years, and again after the war, their union ruptured dramatically in 1943. It is difficult to imagine that either man could ever forget this enormous difference of opinion. This is what makes their cordial postwar performance on behalf of the Uranverein’s wartime history even more curious and impressive.

*Philosophy was von Weizsäcker’s original intellectual passion, and learning physics was how he approached it, thanks to Heisenberg. To find the source of von Weizsäcker’s apparent radicalism, we must follow his engagement with philosophy, particularly German philosophy of the early twentieth century – and more particularly, that of Martin Heidegger.*

Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker met Heidegger for the first time in 1935 under circumstances of a major *Vorbild* (role model) constellation. Someone – “*irgend jemand,*” von Weizsäcker is clearly vague about this person – had asked Heidegger to pair the Nobel Laureate Heisenberg with Professor Viktor von Weizsäcker, Carl Friedrich’s uncle and a noted physician and physiologist, for a conversation about physics and medicine. Heidegger invited the two men, and they visited him in his famous cottage in Todtnauberg, near Freiburg, in the Black Forest. Von Weizsäcker, Heisenberg’s assistant at the time, was brought along. Later, von Weizsäcker recounted what he had witnessed: Heidegger listened until the two discussants had reached a point of mutual incomprehension, then he summarized Viktor von Weizsäcker’s arguments in “three perfectly clear sentences,” after which von Weizsäcker’s uncle admitted that they captured exactly what he wanted to say. Then Heidegger turned to Heisenberg and captured his points in “three completely precise sentences,” and von Weizsäcker’s teacher affirmed that they expressed what he meant to say. Then the philosopher elucidated “in four or five sentences” what the link between the two positions could be, and both speakers agreed with Heidegger’s interpretation. In 1970, von Weizsäcker concluded this anecdote with what he gleaned from the encounter:

This, my first meeting with Heidegger, has made me see that Heidegger . . . is capable of hearing and understanding what is thought, and to understand it better than those have understood it who have thought it themselves. I would say: *That is a Thinker.*
Later, Heidegger is designated “the most important philosopher” in von
Weizsäcker’s reminiscence and “the phi-
lossoph in Heidegger, who became for von
Weizsäcker a philosophical Führer, as it
were. Von Weizsäcker’s view of Heidegger
as the thinker who hears and understands
“better” what is thought than those who
have thought it first thus opens itself to
Heidegger’s interpretation of the crucial
historical moment of Germany in the early
1940s.

Heidegger lectured at Freiburg
University during the summer semester
1942 on Friedrich Hölderlin, who was,
incidentally, the one poet von Weizsäcker
carried with him to his internment at
Farm Hall, in Godmanchester, England,
after being captured by the Allied forces.
Contemplating the essence of poetry,
technology, politics, ancient Greece, and
modern Germany through a deep reading
of Hölderlin’s hymn on the river Danube,
Heidegger clarified the historical situation
in the darkening months of World War II:

We know today that the Anglo-Saxon
world of Americanism has resolved to
annihilate Europe, that is, the
homeland [Heimat], and that means:
the commencement of the Western
world. Whatever has the character
of commencement is indestructible.
America’s entry into this planetary war
is not its entry into history; rather, it
is already the ultimate American act
of American ahistoricity and self-
devastation. For this act is the renun-
ciation of commencement, and a deci-
sion in favor of that which is without
commencement.

Germany had declared itself to be “in a
state of war” with the United States on
December 11, 1941, four days after the
Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Yet
Heidegger is certain that “Americanism
has resolved to annihilate Europe.” And
though Hitler was trying to make Europe
coexistent with Germany through serial
wars that fact did not matter. Europe was
the “homeland,” the homeland was “the
commencement” (das Anfängliche), and
“American historylessness” was the “renun-
ciation of commencement.” (To translate
Anfang des Abendländischen, by the way, as
“commencement of the Western world” is
inaccurate. For Heidegger, the Occidental
das Abendländische was not part of what
is commonly understood as the Western
world. The “Anglo-Saxon” countries,
Great Britain and especially the “ahistori-
cal” United States, were un-European and
hence un-Western in terms of Heidegger’s
definition of Occidental.)

In order to make sense of Heidegger’s
mental map, it is important to understand
the anti-technological thrust of his phi-
losophy. Heidegger’s mission, as he saw
it, was to confront, as the philosopher
Michael Zimmerman has written, “the
construction of the technological uni-
iverse.” Germany’s enemy, the enemy of
the Occidental – Heidegger’s enemy – was
the rising global techno-scientific civilization.
Its geopolitical agents – the democratic
West and the communist East – surround-
ed the Occidental, as well as the fatherland.
The proponents of this civilization, Great
Britain, the United States, and the Soviet
Union, were the foes of Heidegger’s meta-
physical Europe. Therefore it was Germany
“the metaphysical nation” – that was ulti-
mately fighting for the survival of Europe
in fighting the Allies of World War II. For
Heidegger, a historical battle was raging in
1942 in which, as he wrote, “ahistoricity and
historicality are decisively at issue.”

One year later, in 1943, von Weizsäcker’s
subterranean radicalism burst in on
Heisenberg – or should we say: Heidegger
reached out to Heisenberg through von
Weizsäcker? Solely based on Heisenberg’s
above account, one can only say that his
professed “new faith” is what enabled von
Weizsäcker to take a “totally destroyed
city” in stride, oppose the Anglo-Saxon
world, try to force final decisions, and to
defend the most sacred goods “with fire
and sword.” Could that not have been
articulated as well by Heidegger? No doubt.
Heidegger was a militant thinker and fond
of aggressive formulations. It is rather von
Weizsäcker, the diplomat father’s son, who
is not recognizable in Heisenberg’s tanta-
lizing letter.

The eminent role Heidegger played
for von Weizsäcker can be deduced from
the many visits, awed conversations, and
long walks in the woods with the master
thinker. It would be naïve not to assume
that Heidegger captivated the young von
Weizsäcker, who writes, “In Todtnauberg,
the conversation almost always continued
on longer walks and many a formulation,
then also of a more casual kind, has stayed
with me together with the surrounding
nature.” Eventually and inexorably, the
conversation moved from physics to phi-
losophy: “Proceeding from physics and
mathematics one landed inevitably in the
middle of the great intellectual decisions
of modern and Greek philosophy.”

It is inconceivable that von Weizsäcker’s
private conversations with Heidegger
about the “great intellectual decisions” of
past and present philosophy would not
touch the war, modernity, technology,
Germany, Hitler, National Socialism,
Bolshevism, and Americanism – the topics
that occupied Heidegger. We also have to
assume that Heidegger listened when von
Weizsäcker spoke about modern science,
and that von Weizsäcker listened when
Heidegger spoke about the Big Issues.

Though Heidegger’s influence on von
Weizsäcker was likely very strong, we
cannot picture the young physicist and philoso-
pher entirely clearly until von Weizsäcker’s
wartime correspondence and other private
sources become available. We only know
the mature von Weizsäcker, who kept tell-
ging versions of the past, forever memorial-
izing his role model:

I have heard said that even before
1933 he [Heidegger] placed hopes in
National Socialism. In the winter of
1933/34 a student from Freiburg told
me: “Around Heidegger they invented
Freiburg National Socialism.” More
quietly they say that the true Third
Reich hasn’t really begun yet; that’s still
coming.
Heidegger indeed harbored an idiosyncratic idea of “the inner truth and greatness” of National Socialism, but we can’t be absolutely sure about von Weizsäcker. The international debate about Heidegger’s philosophy and its connection to Nazism remains unresolved, yet the discussion of Heidegger and the Third Reich is at least factually fair.

Unlike Heidegger, von Weizsäcker never joined the National Socialist German Workers’ Party. Though he was tempted, he never committed, perhaps because his father [Ernst von Weizsäcker] had told him, “Listen, don’t trust this Hitler.” Von Weizsäcker heeded the advice “because, in politics,” he wrote, “my father was always an authority for me.” Carl Friedrich might have listened to his father then, but he did not consult him in 1941 when he was playing with the idea of talking to Hitler about the atom bomb, even though he “was actually always very open” with his father. Fearing his father’s laughter, Carl Friedrich self-censored the otherwise open exchange and kept silent about his dream of a nuclear-armed Third Reich pursuing a “policy of peace.” This strategic silence is indicative of von Weizsäcker’s ability to compartmentalize and of his inability to share potentially “laughable” leanings with people he relied on, such as his attraction to Heidegger’s utopian National Socialism. That Werner Heisenberg was shocked at his friend’s suspiciously zealous proclivities during their conversation that day in October 1943 makes sense in this light. Von Weizsäcker had secrets, and few secrets can be kept forever.