

Dieter Hoffmann, member of the FHI Centenary Project and Professor of the History of Science at the MPI, made, in a statement of the Fritz-Haber-Institute, the following remarks on Wöhrle and Thiemann's proposal towards renaming the Institute

Fritz Haber's scientific achievements are undisputed and make him one of the most significant scientists of the twentieth century; just as undisputed is the terrible role he played as the 'father of gas warfare' during the First World War. The former cannot compensate for the latter and above all cannot excuse it. Any attempt to reckon one against the other would be, in our view, not only dubious but also ahistorical.

Let me therefore provide some background on the 1952 renaming of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physical Chemistry and Electrochemistry, the institute founded by Fritz Haber 100 years ago and led by him until his emigration in 1933.

So far as we know, Max von Laue proposed the change. As the new director of the Institute he did not want its pending integration into the Max Planck Society to lead to a duplication of names, and at the time, there already was a Max Planck Institute for Physical Chemistry in Göttingen. Hence, he suggested the name of Fritz Haber for the Berlin Institute. Laue's choice was not accidental. Haber had been a close colleague and even a friend, whom Laue had publicly supported even during the Third Reich. Through the renaming, Laue wanted to call the fate of Fritz Haber to the attention of the post-war era, and issue a reminder that Haber was among the few who rebelled against National Socialist policies of marginalization and expulsion. Haber resigned from his post as Institute Director in protest; though it undermined his life's work, and he died shortly thereafter, a broken man in exile.

For Laue and for the representatives of the MPG, the renaming was a kind of moral atonement, through which they could publicly distance themselves from the horrors and the unjustness of the Nazi dictatorship, whose 'Thousand Year Reign' had ended just seven years earlier and was ever-present in the contemporary conscience. Furthermore, the renaming also functioned as a counterweight to the rampant bestowal of politically and ideologically charged names during the Third Reich. The Nazis not only created a Horst-Wessel borough in Berlin and a Hermann-Göring plant, they also dubbed the universities in Halle and Greifswald, the 'Martin Luther' and 'Ernst Moritz Arndt' Universities. But above all, the renaming was supposed to be a sign that the Max Planck Society, and the Berlin Institute in particular, intended to build upon the scientific tradition represented by Fritz Haber and the refined scientific culture of the 1920s. Historians of science know of course that such designations also have a self-serving aspect. In the present case, the name of Fritz Haber was accentuated, but the NS-era and its crimes, to which the sciences and the supposed technocratic innocence of their representatives contributed a not inconsiderable share, was simultaneously obscured.

The main argument of our colleague from Bremen is captured by the sentence: One cannot honor Haber, when he himself behaved dishonorably – which he undoubtedly did in his firm commitment to gas warfare. But it should not be forgotten that behind Haber's questionable activities stood a devotion that sought primarily not death but speedy victory and therewith an end to the war and its casualties. That he was ruinously deluded to believe this is beyond dispute, but we should not judge our predecessors solely according to present knowledge and standards, but also, and above all, seek to understand them in terms of their own times. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that it is one thing to have never honored a person and another thing altogether to take an honor away; particularly when, as in the case of Haber in 1952, the honor derived, first and foremost, from his incontestable scientific achievements and courageous protest against the racist politics of National Socialism, as well as the tragic fate into which the National Socialists drove him.

Would it not be better, therefore, instead of engaging in an unedifying dispute over appellations, to use the name and the deeds of Fritz Haber to engage critically the social dimensions of scientific research and the ambivalence of scientific knowledge. Haber tragically symbolizes that science can be used to create, but also to destroy. We thus should use Haber not as a monument, but above all as a reminder of all of these questions just mentioned, since their concerns are no less topical and weighty concerns now than in Haber's time.

Along these lines, let me cite a poem from Wolf Biermann, who was anything but a Stalinist, and yet in 1965 wrote 'Eight Reasons to Keep the Name "Stalin Avenue" for the Stalin Avenue' (Translation by Charlotte Melin):

There is a street in Berlin
The Same in Leningrad too
In other cities you've been
You'll find another few

And so it's called Stalin Avenue
Boy, I wish you knew;
And that time is through!

And Henselmann was thrashed
So he would build the street
And since he did it fast
They thrashed him again as a treat

That's also why it's called Stalin Avenue
Boy, I wish you knew;
And that time is through!

And on June seventeen
Many a work brigadier
Got armed, forgot his routine
What flowed was not just beer

Yes, that's why it's Stalin Avenue
Boy, I wish you knew;
And that time is through!

And since by 9:30 at night
The street is quiet too
A grave that's shut up tight
The trees lined up in a queue

That's also why it's called Stalin Avenue
Boy, I wish you knew;
And that time is through!

After the big party congress
Many shat in their pants
And in the fog and darkness
Tore down some monuments

Yes, that's why it's still called Stalin Avenue ...