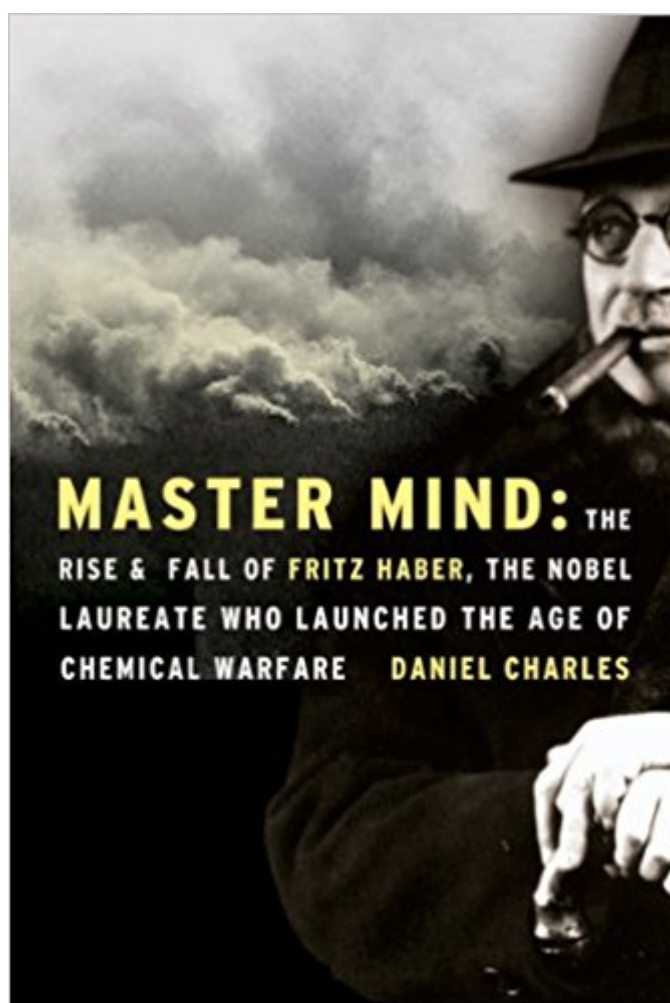


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Master Mind: The Rise And Fall Of Fritz Haber, The Nobel Laureate Who Launched The Age Of Chemical Warfare



Synopsis

FRITZ HABER -- a Nobel laureate in chemistry, a friend of Albert Einstein, a German Jew and World War I hero -- may be the most important scientist you have never heard of. The Haber-Bosch process, which he invented at the turn of the twentieth century, revolutionized agriculture by converting nitrogen to fertilizer in quantities massive enough to feed the world. The invention has become an essential pillar for life on earth; some two billion people on our planet could not survive without it. Yet this same process supplied the German military with explosives during World War I, and Haber orchestrated Germany's use of an entirely new weapon -- poison gas. Eventually, Haber's efforts led to Zyklon B, the gas later used to kill millions -- including Haber's own relatives -- in Nazi concentration camps. Haber is the patron saint of guns and butter, a scientist whose discoveries transformed the way we produce food and fight wars. His legacy is filled with contradictions, as was his personality. For some, he was a benefactor of humanity and devoted friend. For others, he was a war criminal, possessed by raw ambition. An intellectual gunslinger, enamored of technical progress and driven by patriotic devotion to Germany, he was instrumental in the scientific work that inadvertently supported the Nazi cause; a Jew and a German patriot, he was at once an enabler of the Nazi regime and its victim. *Master Mind* is a thought-provoking biography of this controversial scientist, a modern Faust who personifies the paradox of science, its ability to create and to destroy. It offers a complete chronicle of his tumultuous and ultimately tragic life, from his childhood and rise to prominence in the heady days of the German Empire to his disgrace and exile at the hands of the Nazis; from early decades as the hero who eliminated the threat of starvation to his lingering legacy as a villain whose work led to the demise of millions.

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Customer Reviews

Fritz Haber (1868–1934), winner of the 1918 Nobel Prize for chemistry, was, in Charles's eyes, a "modern Faust": "willing to serve any master who could further his passion for knowledge and progress." Having discovered how to manufacture nitrogen-based fertilizer, which allowed the increase of crop production needed to feed an exploding human population, he also developed the first poison gas, used infamously in WWI at Ypres on April 22, 1915. It's this harrowing moral thicket that most fascinates Charles (Lords of the Harvest) in this overly sympathetic biography of the first "scientist-warrior." Haber was passionately committed to German nationalism (Jewish by birth, he converted to Christianity in order to assimilate), and he devoted his skills to Germany's cause in WWI. Approximately a week after Ypres Haber's wife, a scientist believed to have opposed the use of poison gas, committed suicide. Charles, a former NPR correspondent, strays from objectivity, frequently offering his own judgments and opinions, and he sees Haber's life as a cautionary tale: "[S]ometimes," he concludes, "it is the duty of an honest scientist" to refuse to put science in the service of national military goals." B&w photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Charles delivers an eminently readable account of German chemist Fritz Haber's life (1868-1934) and precepts. Despite Haber's scientific and financial success--he became wealthy from, and received a Nobel Prize for, his co-invention of the process underlying the chemical fertilizer industry--he ended up disgraced, doubting his own lifelong values. A Jew in imperial Germany, the young Haber enthusiastically embraced the country's high-velocity industrialization and its intense nationalism. Charles' descriptions of Haber's education and positions are enhanced by an astute estimation of his motivations and character: extroverted and not reflective, Haber was optimistic about technology, gregarious, a poor husband, and quite the superpatriot. Seizing the last trait as a tragic flaw, Charles is sympathetic to Haber's fate, if not to the simplicity of his maxims of duty and loyalty, which, despite Haber's vital contributions to Germany's armaments production in World War I, did not protect him from the early stages of Nazi persecution. A perceptively intelligent writer, Charles, one senses, is the biographer Haber would have wanted. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Review of Master mind: The rise and fall of Fritz Haber by Daniel Charles
CITATION: Charles, D. (2005). Master mind: The rise and fall of Fritz Haber, the Nobel laureate who launched the age of chemical warfare. New York: Ecco. Reviewer: Dr W. P. Palmer
The life of Fritz Haber is a fascinating study, providing issues that present a moral quagmire between good and evil. Haber's scientific invention of the Haber-Bosch for fixing nitrogen pioneered the green revolution, saving millions of lives, but his advocacy of the use of poison gasses in the First World War killed and injured many allied troops. This is just one of the many ironies that a study of his life can illuminate. The book, Master mind, provides us with the life story of Fritz Haber, which can be summarised as follows. His mother died soon after his birth and his father appears to have resented young Fritz as the cause of his mother's death. Haber was relatively unsuccessful as a young man at school and also at university. He quarrelled with his father about his career. Later he converted from Judaism to Christianity, which upset his father and he suffered from nervous attacks for weeks at a time throughout his life. He was eventually successful at solving the problem of the synthesis of ammonia with Carl Bosch in what became known as the Haber-Bosch process, capable of producing fertiliser. The use of the Haber-Bosch process to produce explosives allowed Germany to wage a lengthy war, when overseas supplies of potassium nitrate were cut off, causing huge loss of life. He married the first woman chemist to receive a doctorate from Breslau University, Clara Immerwahr and they had one son. Just prior to the start of the First World War, he became a heroic figure in Germany for his scientific brilliance. He used his influence to persuade army generals to use poison gas in the First World War although there was an international agreement forbidding its use. It was trialled with success, personally supervised by Fritz Haber, on one sector of the front. His wife committed suicide shortly after this, but Haber continued to supervise gas attacks, leaving home and his young son immediately after his wife's death. After the end of the war he secretly continued research on poisonous gasses in defiance of agreement to the contrary. Because of his Jewish heritage, he was dismissed from his position by Hitler and died shortly afterwards. The book is well produced and is accompanied by black and white photographs and historical notes on sources. This is an excellent book for the discussion of scientific and moral issues at high school or university. BILL PALMER

I had been wanting to read about Fritz Haber for some time. When I was reading a lot about the Holocaust, and the science involved in it...of course, Haber's name came up, since a gas he had a lot to do with 'creating' was used in the gas chambers of the Reich to kill the Jews, the disabled, and anyone else the Nazis didn't like. That alone was enough to make me not like the man. Then I saw

something on television recently about his work during World War I, and how he created the chlorine and mustard gases which poisoned so many young men in the trenches. The documentary talked about his first wife committing suicide when he refused to stop working on these chemicals. She couldn't live with what he was doing. So that really colored my perception of him. This book was a good one for me to read. It gave a more balanced view of a very flawed man and scientist. Even though I still see him as a person who made many really bad lapses in judgement, I also saw things from his standpoint as a Jew who was trying to make it in a world that was prejudiced against people like him in science. He wanted so badly to not only fit in, but excel in his chosen field. This often got in the way of his distinguishing between right and wrong in certain situations. His lack of religious background (a non-practicing Jew who converted to Christianity simply because he thought it would help him advance), and his reliance on science also made his decisions different from even his loved ones. He definitely did not see a difference between using poison gases and the use of guns on the battlefield. Haber had a hard time seeing the gray areas or the lines that should not be crossed...even in science. This made him very different from other scientists like Einstein, who had moral qualms about gas and other uses for sciences that could be used against other human beings. By the end of the book, when the author covered the end of Haber's life, when Haber was traveling from place to place, because he lost his home in Germany and his Institute...I ended up feeling sorry for Haber. He had placed his beliefs in the wrong things, and he couldn't change. It ended up hurting him and his family. The only complaint I have about the book, is one other reviewers brought up. Charles, the author, obviously has very strong feelings about the use of new technology (which the use of gas during war was new in WWI), and he inserted some information and a bit of a lecture when he discussed this part of Haber's life. It wasn't that I disagreed with him...it was that what he wrote did not apply to this biography at least at that point. Maybe he could have inserted a separate end chapter on what could be learned from Haber's experiences. But this was in the middle of the book, and you spent a lot of time reading that wasn't on Haber's life. It made the reading of the book somewhat awkward.

This book kept me absorbed throughout the two weeks it took for me to finish reading it. It is full of my highlights and margin notes. I have even discussed it at our monthly book club. I came out with new information and discoveries on the behavior of mankind given a new tool and the mindset of the all powerful European civilization or lack of it vis a vis war and destruction. It was revealing to note that being a Christian convert from Judaism did not do much to improve the lot of the Jew in Europe as Fritz Haber found out painfully despite his fierce loyalty to Germany. The book gives fascinating

details of the intricate partnership between German national pride, German industries, brilliant scientists and the development of hitherto unknown discoveries i.e. chemical fertilizers, poison gas, explosives and the new science of physical chemistry. What an astounding revelation it is to know that without the Nobel Laureate, Fritz Haber and the Haber-Bosch process, there would have been no such thing as chemical fertilizer, no bumper crops and no factory farms with vast feed lots. Conceivably there would not be as many humans today as there are. Also no real insecticide and therefore no poison gas and as an offshoot, no mustard gas which laid the foundation for cancer chemotherapy. In this book there are plenty of little details and anecdotes involving Haber, his wives, Albert Einstein, Max Planck, Charles Willstatter and Chaim Weizmann. The book is both a fine biography and a description of those extremely important years before WW I started and the end of WW II. It is a book for those who have a fascination with history and the people who made it

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