

# 2013

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Conference Report

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### *United Atoms in a Divided World: The Early History of the International Atomic Energy Agency*

#### International Conference

**Conveners:** Oliver Rathkolb and Elisabeth Röhrlich, Department of Contemporary History, University of Vienna

**16–18 September 2012, Vienna**

URL: [http://h-diplo.org/reports/PDF/United Atoms Conference-Vienna-2012.pdf](http://h-diplo.org/reports/PDF/United%20Atoms%20Conference-Vienna-2012.pdf)

Report by **Christoph Laucht**, University of Leeds

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For over five decades, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has promoted the civilian applications of nuclear energy and technology as well as safeguards against the proliferation of atomic technology and materials for military purposes. While the IAEA has received considerable public attention, historians have so far paid little attention to this pivotal institution.

To shed light on this crucial aspect of nuclear history, Oliver Rathkolb (Vienna) and Elisabeth Röhrlich (Vienna) organized the international conference “United Atoms in a Divided World: The Early History of the International Atomic Energy Agency” in the IAEA’s home town of Vienna. Held at the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, the conference was supported by the University of Vienna, the City of Vienna, the Austrian Federal Chancellery and the Austrian Research Foundation. The conference, which brought together scholars and nuclear experts from Austria, Canada, China, Denmark, Germany, India, Italy, South Africa, the United States and the United Kingdom, formed part of a larger project on the early history of the IAEA that is based in the University of Vienna’s Department of Contemporary History and funded by the Austrian Central Bank.

The conference opened with a film presentation in the historic cinema Metro Kino. Curated and introduced by the IAEA archivists LEOPOLD KAMMERHOFER and MARTA RIESS (both Vienna), the collage of archival film footage visualized key episodes in early IAEA history. The presentation, supported by the Filmarchiv Austria, was followed by a reception in the cinema lobby.

The following morning, the conference kicked off with a welcome address by OLIVER RATHKOLB (Vienna), the director of the IAEA History Research Project. Rathkolb outlined some of the project's preliminary findings and offered an introduction to the conference topic and wider framework. He placed the creation of the IAEA within the international and transnational history of the early Cold War era and described the establishment of the IAEA as "the creation of a new political space." As one of the conference's chief aims, Rathkolb proposed to follow an approach that de-centers the Cold War away from the superpowers and a more Western lens.

Chaired by Christian Ostermann (Washington, D.C.), the first panel addressed "The Early Years of International Nuclear Cooperation." Ostermann offered a brief historical introduction to the panel theme and outlined the basic features of the co-operation between the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Washington, D.C.) and the IAEA History Research Project (Vienna), before DAVID HOLLOWAY (Stanford) presented on "The Soviet Union and the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy: The Beginnings of International Control." He examined the Soviet reaction to U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace speech, which developed from scepticism to joining the negotiations on the creation of the IAEA, focusing on the role that the failed American Baruch Plan (1946) on the international control of nuclear energy had on Soviet decision-making. STEPHEN TWIGGE (Kew) explored British attitudes towards the creation of the IAEA. By looking at the third atomic power after the two superpowers, Twigge showed how ambivalently Whitehall reacted to Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace proposal. While the Churchill Government publicly welcomed the American proposal, many Cabinet members harbored reservations about them, fearing that Atoms for Peace might put an end to the country's aspiring civilian nuclear energy programme. Twigge demonstrated the great impact that Anglo-American relations, especially through the American McMahon Act (1946), which was still in effect at the time and cut off Britain from vital US nuclear technology, had on British nuclear policy. As Twigge argued, the British government was afraid of an "atomic Marshall plan." In her talk "From New York to Vienna: The IAEA Headquarters in Austria," ELISABETH RÖHRLICH (Vienna), co-founder of the IAEA History Research Project, then presented some of the preliminary findings of her project on the creation of the IAEA. Röhrlich went beyond the predominant U.S.-centered view of the IAEA by offering a highly original examination of the choice of Vienna as the seat of the IAEA headquarters. Especially the incorporation of the Austrian side in the bilateral, international and multinational negotiations that led to the foundation of the IAEA offered a novel take on the ways in which the Austrian government used atomic energy as what Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim call elsewhere a "socio-technical imaginary" to promote Austrian neutrality. In the panel's final paper, JOHN KRIGE (Atlanta) explored a complex set of political, ideological and economic factors that led the United States Atomic Energy Commission to grant the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) the right to self-inspection. Through his examination of the relationship between EURATOM and the Agency, Krige fleshed out the European angle in the IAEA's early history.

The second panel, entitled "The IAEA and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime," addressed one of the IAEA's key objectives and followed Odd Arne Westad's paradigm of

“the Global Cold War,” looking beyond Western nations. The chair Leopoldo Nuti (Rome) delivered a conceptual introduction to both the wider panel theme and the individual papers. In the first paper, XIN ZHAN (Changchun) examined “China and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime, 1964-1989.” Xin showed how Chinese attitudes towards the non-proliferation regime changed from scepticism and criticism throughout the early 1960s to the late 1970s to partly supporting it and finally joining the IAEA in 1984. While consecutive Chinese governments continued to reject the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), they agreed to application of IAEA safeguards in Chinese nuclear installations in 1988. The paper traced these developments within the context of Soviet-Chinese and U.S.-Chinese relations. In the subsequent presentation, A. VINOOD KUMAR (New Delhi) offered an examination of India’s relations with the IAEA. He demonstrated how the South Asian country played an important role in the creation of the IAEA despite not ratifying the NPT. The paper showed India’s attempts to stay out of the nuclear non-proliferation regime in order not to jeopardize the country’s atomic weapons project. In the panel’s third paper, JO-ANSIE VAN WYK (Pretoria) presented on South Africa’s relationship with the IAEA. She traced four crucial phases in IAEA-South African relations: the country’s relations with the IAEA during the early years of the Agency’s existence; South Africa’s nuclear weapons project that took shape despite the country being an IAEA founding member and led it into international isolation; the abandonment of the South African nuclear arms programme from 1989; and the IAEA’s verification of the dismantlement process. The final paper by ROBERT S. ANDERSON (Vancouver) looked at “The Peaceful Nuclear Explosion Debates.” Based on excessive research in the IAEA archives, Anderson presented some of the preliminary findings of a larger project called “Negotiating Nuclear Power.” He looked at peaceful nuclear explosions (PNEs) and the difficulties faced by the IAEA in drawing a line between purely peaceful nuclear explosions and PNEs with potentially military applications in the period from 1967 to 1977. Special emphasis was paid to Indian-Pakistani relations, two countries that sought to acquire atomic weapons.

A roundtable discussion concluded the first conference day. Chaired by Oliver Rathkolb (Vienna), the three panelists discussed the IAEA’s creation, historical development and role. Journalist, political scientist and publicist GUDRUN HARRER (Vienna) illuminated some key aspects of the IAEA’s work through a case study of the Agency’s treatment of the Iraqi atomic programme. HELMUT RAUCH (Vienna), professor emeritus at the Vienna University of Technology and former director of its *Atominstitut* (Atomic Institute), offered some views from the physicist’s perspective on the IAEA’s work. JOSEPH F. PILAT (Los Alamos National Laboratory), who is senior advisor in the Los Alamos National Laboratory’s National Security Office, shared some of his insights with the audience, including experiences from his participation in NPT review negotiations and from his career as a researcher. The panel demonstrated how historical studies can impact on current political decision-making processes and shape future trajectories.

The second day started with a panel on “Grass-Roots Movements, Environmentalism and the IAEA” and served well to place the history of the Agency within its wider social and cultural contexts. Bernd Greiner (Hamburg) chaired this panel and offered a concise introduction to the theme, highlighting the relevance of the individual papers for the larger

topic. In the first paper, HOLGER NEHRING (Sheffield; read by CHRISTOPH LAUCHT, Leeds) explored the IAEA's absence in debates about atomic energy in these two countries between the mid-1950s and early 1960s. Nehring explained this phenomenon by referring to a "politics of security" that used the mass violence of World War II as a reference point. At the same time, it promoted the peaceful atom as part of modernization. Since anti-nuclear activists were primarily concerned with "uncontrollable dangers of the nuclear arms race" and the Agency, by contrast, with regulating "controllable risks of nuclear energy," the IAEA was of no concern to the anti-nuclear movements. Nehring placed this argument within the wider context of the Cold War and particularly the emergence of NATO in Western Europe. JAN-HENRIK MEYER (Aarhus) then looked at the rise of environmentalism and the nuclear safety issue in Western Europe through a transnational lens. He showed how a transnational approach to Western European anti-nuclear movements helps us to grasp the degree to which international organizations encouraged these protest movements to cooperate with sister organizations and groups across national boundaries, triggering a transnational environmentalist debate about the question of nuclear safety. In the final paper, KARENA KALMBACH (Florence) examined "The IAEA and the Debate on the Health Effects of Chernobyl." Kalmbach demonstrated the criticality of an existing "radiophobia" to debates on the health effects of Chernobyl between national and international organizations like the IAEA, on the one hand, and anti-nuclear activists, on the other. While official narratives often played down the number of casualties, anti-nuclear protesters increasingly questioned their validity and the independence and credibility of organizations such as the World Health Organization.

Chaired by Carola SACHSE (Vienna), the final panel concerned "Promoting the Peaceful Applications of Nuclear Technology." She introduced the panel theme and its broader historical context. The first paper by GABRIELE METZLER (Berlin) looked at the role nuclear energy played in debates about political, social, economic and technological modernization in West Germany during the 1950s and early 1960s. Metzler revealed that atomic energy figured high in these modernization debates despite West Germany being amongst the last Western nations to harness the atom for peaceful purposes. EUGEN PFISTER (Vienna) examined "Nuclear Optimism in European Newsreels," arguing that European newsreels of this period were more sceptical and wary of the atomic future than their American counterparts. They often cited the Western European World War II experience and fears of nuclear war as reasons for a more rigid nuclear control regime. Pfister paid particular attention to coverage of EURATOM and the IAEA in these newsreels. In the final paper, J. SAMUEL WALKER (Washington) explored "Three Mile Island: The First Great Nuclear Power Crisis." Walker offered a detailed account of the first major nuclear accident in the United States, detailing the chain of events that followed the malfunction of a valve in a reactor at the Three Mile Island nuclear power station in Pennsylvania in 1979. He placed the accident within the context of the US nuclear power industry during the late 1970s and examined its causes and severe consequences.

In the concluding remarks, OLIVER RATHKOLB (Vienna) and ELISABETH RÖHRLICH (Vienna) outlined desiderata for future research. Following on from his welcome address, Rathkolb proposed to de-center IAEA history by extending established international and transnational modes of historical investigation through the application of "entangled

history.” Furthermore, he called for expanding the source base by including information pertaining to biographical backgrounds of key personae such as the IAEA’s first Director General Sterling Cole and moving beyond official narratives. Rathkolb then suggested that future research focus more strongly on the relationships between politics and cultures by examining the impact of societal debates on political decision-making within the IAEA context and looking at links between societies as in the South African case or transfers and translations more generally. Finally, he pointed to the crucial role that the production of knowledge and expertise has played in the Agency’s history, especially with regards to cultural and political negotiations over issues such as Chernobyl and the Iraqi nuclear programme.

Elisabeth Röhrlich stressed that the usages of key concepts, ideas and terms in IAEA history like proliferation/non-proliferation or disarmament and peace demanded careful consideration of their ideological and political contexts. Her second point concerned the relationship between science and politics. Citing the congruence of personnel on the scientific advisory panels to the IAEA and the United Nations as well as the transnational activism of scientists as chief examples of this intimate connection of science and politics, she called for a stronger interdisciplinary approach to the Agency’s history, involving diplomatic and political history, political science and the history of science and technology.

### Conference Overview:

Opening Event and Film Presentation: “The Beginnings of the IAEA in Vienna” (Metro Kino) (Curated and introduced by Leopold Kammerhofer and Marta Riess, IAEA Archives, Vienna)

Oliver Rathkolb (Vienna): Welcome Note

#### *Panel 1: The Early Years of International Nuclear Cooperation*

Chair: Christian Ostermann (Washington)

David Holloway (Stanford): The Soviet Union and the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy: The Beginnings of International Control

Stephen Twigge (Kew): The Third Nuclear Power: The UK and the Creation of the IAEA

Elisabeth Röhrlich (Vienna): From New York to Vienna: The IAEA Headquarters in Austria

John Krige (Atlanta): Euratom and the IAEA: The Problem of Self Inspection

#### *Panel 2: The IAEA and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime*

Chair: Leopoldo Nuti (Rome)

Xin Zhan (Changchun): China and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime, 1964-1989

A. Vinod Kumar (New Delhi): India and the IAEA: Pathway to the Non-Proliferation Regime

Jo-Ansie van Wyk (Pretoria): The South African Nuclear Programme and the IAEA

Robert Anderson (Vancouver): The Peaceful Nuclear Explosion Debates

#### *Roundtable Discussion*

Chair: Oliver Rathkolb (Vienna)

*Panelists*

Helmut Rauch (Atominstitut, Vienna)

Joseph F. Pilat (Los Alamos National Laboratories)

Gudrun Harrer (Der Standard, Vienna)

*Panel 3: Grass-Roots Movements, Environmentalism, and the IAEA*

Chair: Bernd Greiner (Hamburg)

Holger Nehring (Sheffield): The Politics of Security: Protests against Nuclear Weapons and International Relations in the 1950s and Early 1960s

Jan-Henrik Meyer (Aarhus): The Question of Nuclear Safety and the Rise of Environmentalism in Western Europe: Transnational Perspectives

Karena Kalmbach (Florence): The IAEA and the Debate on the Health Effects of Chernobyl

*Panel 4: Promoting the Peaceful Applications of Nuclear Technology*

Chair: Carola Sachse (Vienna)

Gabriele Metzler (Berlin): Imagined Modernity: Nuclear Power and West German Society in the 1960s

Eugen Pfister (Vienna): “La domestication de l’atome c’est le steak grillé avec l’énergie nucléaire” – Nuclear Optimism in European Newsreels

Samuel Walker (Washington): Three Mile Island: The First Great Nuclear Power Crisis

Oliver Rathkolb (Vienna) and Elisabeth Röhrlich (Vienna): Concluding Remarks

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