WHO KILLED WILHELM REICH?

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What, in the final analysis, brought the wrath of the U. S. government down upon Wilhelm Reich, M.D.? Was he murdered, and if so, how?

Space does not allow a full discussion of Reich’s biography, but those interested won’t find a better place to start than with Myron Sharaf’s Fury on Earth. There were many dangerous aspects to Reich’s work, from advocating children’s sexual rights, or his thorough analysis of the patriarchal family in fascism and its roots in the emotional character structures of everyday people, and even his invention of the orgone accumulator. In my view, Wilhelm Reich was imprisoned because he stumbled onto frightening facts about nuclear radiation during the early 1950s, a critical point in that newly developed industry.

Simply put, Reich found that there is no shielding possible against the biological effects of nuclear radiation. On January 5, 1951, in what was called the Oranur Experiment, Reich placed a minute sample (1 milligram) of a radium inside a powerful orgone accumulator. Reich’s shocking report, which can be found in the now out-of-print Selected Writings, details how radiation sickness is a function of the organism’s response to the invasive insult, and not a direct result of the radiation poisoning itself. Thus different people may be more susceptible to very minute doses, while others may feel no noticeable effects; each person’s reaction is different according to their own emotional and biological structure.

Few natural scientists have offered the range of practical and concrete discoveries on the scale that Reich did. He invented the psychoanalytic technique in distinction from Freud’s discovery of psychoanalysis per se. In his twenties, he organized the first technical seminar in Freud’s Viennese Psychoanalytic Society. Surprisingly, no such course which dealt specifically with the treatment of patients had been offered, and while the popular culture was soon to realize the validity of Freud’s analysis, the treatment founded on a vague toolkit: word association, hypnotic regression, and dream analysis. Thus Reich trained most of the young analysts who came to America in droves after the Anschluss. Even today, only two broad analytic approaches attract patients in any significant number: “body-work” therapies based on Reich’s Character
Analysis, and Jung’s heirs of the Archetype\textsuperscript{3}. Had Reich packaged his Character Analysis in the manner of contemporary therapeutics (such as Lowen’s Bioenergetics\textsuperscript{TM}, Primal Scream\textsuperscript{TM}, Radix\textsuperscript{TM} and Rolfing\textsuperscript{TM}, to name only a few) he would have been an extremely wealthy man at age thirty.

It will be recalled that there was little understanding of the biological effects of radiation in the 1950s. Many people remember that soldiers were sent directly into test sites shortly after the dust cleared from nuclear explosions. They wore no protection and were merely dusted off afterwards. At this writing (January, 1994) the U.S. Department of Energy has released many documents about the true nature of America’s nuclear heritage. Dept. Secretary Hazel O’Leary has offered full disclosure about the years of chronic abuse of an unwitting population of human guinea pigs by the scientific establishment and the military. So far, reports have focused to the more insane injection of human beings with plutonium without informed consent. Less has been reported about the facts that first came out: that throughout the 1940s and 1950s the military dropped radioactive dust over vast areas of the Western States. To put this into perspective, the military essentially turned each of us into a huge cohort of experimental subjects in an on-going test of the biological effects of radiation poisoning. President Clinton has distanced himself from Dept. of Energy Secretary Hazel O’Leary, who authorized the release of new information, characterizing her forthcoming posture as “very emotional.”

There is little public understanding today of the true nature of Reich’s research. However, the military, as of 1948, was fully comprised of his findings. Indeed, the AEC provided Reich with the radium samples he used in the Oranur Experiment.

When Reich first discovered the specifically biological energy he called orgone, he waited before publishing until he verified the phenomena under a variety of experimental protocols. One such experiment, “TO-T”, measured the temperature difference between an orgone box (constructed with alternating layers of metal and wood which create an enclosed field of concentrated orgone), and a similarly constructed box that lacked the metal lining, but had the same capacity for insulation. An orgone box is generally warmer than the outside temperature, and the temperature difference decreases as the atmosphere contracts before a storm.

Albert Einstein found the question intriguing enough to invite Reich to his home to demonstrate the effect. Reich had written him a cautious letter in the hopes that this “Father of the Atom Bomb” would recognize
that the experiments proved an exception the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the law of entropy, which requires that equal volumes tend to equalize in temperature.

Reich traveled to Princeton with several devices with which to demonstrate the orgone energy. He described his long session with Einstein as a meeting of minds. Einstein observed the phenomena, and said, “If this is true, it would be a bombshell for Physics.” Einstein met once again with Reich and then suddenly dropped the matter. Einstein’s biographers have painted this meeting in a ridiculous light, saying it was an example of Einstein’s eccentricity. Perhaps, but their exchange of letters, which Reich published later, belies this assumption.4

This is important to remember: whatever the validity of Reich’s conclusions, the phenomena he observed, which alone stand in stark contrast to any high school physics text, was in fact real, corroborated and sustained against objections.

But at that very moment, venom was stirred up by Michael Straight’s5 *The New Republic*, under the editorship of pro-Stalinist presidential candidate Henry Wallace6. A reporter interviewed Reich under false pretenses and finally wrote about Reich’s “sex-cult”. This brought the crisis to a head. The FDA launched a multi-million dollar investigation of the orgone accumulator, declared it a fraud, and set about bringing criminal proceedings against Reich. Reich’s FBI files reveal a blistering blizzard of letters directed towards getting rid of Reich from doctors in the AMA, ministers of Christian youth crusades, and one from the Atomic Energy Commission advising the FDA what “a thorn in the side” Reich had been.

Reich never sold more than 500 copies a year of any one of his self-published books while he was alive. That an obscure, new line of research posed such a threat to the medical establishment is on its face inconceivable. Reich had first made contact with the Atomic Energy Commission on April 30, 1948 to discuss unusually high Geiger counter readings in connection with his orgonomic research. It would still be three years before Reich embarked on the Oranur Project, a controlled experiment dealing directly with the biological effects of radiation poisoning. In between, Reich kept the AEC completely informed of his research via meetings, letters and phone calls, as he grew closer and closer to an essential national security issue (i.e., keeping the public in the dark about the real danger associated with radioactivity), while simply trying to figure out why he was getting such unusually high readings on his Geiger counters.
In re-reading his original documentation, I was impressed with Reich’s ability to distinguish between observed facts, corroborated by others; new theories drawn from and supported by these facts; and finally speculation based upon insufficient evidence. Of utmost importance in his research method was an awareness of the attitude of the observer, basic trust in one’s own perceptions and observations. Although he alerted them when his Geiger counters told him something was amiss, he did not trust the response offered by the AEC: don’t worry, everything is fine. In this as in other matters he seems to have been virtually alone.

Reich’s intent for the Oranur Experiment was to investigate the treatment of radiation sickness with the orgone accumulator. For years, he had success in treating terminal “lost-cause” cancer patients with the medical device although he never claimed having found a cure, as the FDA would charge. Since it was well known that radiation sickness could lead to leukemia, Reich planned to investigate the matter at his laboratory in Rangeley, Maine.

As Oranur research progressed, it was decided to test the effect of orgonecharged radium on lab mice in comparison to untreated radium. In preparation for this, a sample of radium was placed in a 20-layer accumulator. After five hours, Reich subjectively noticed a change in the atmosphere, which he described as heavy and oppressive. This subjective change was verified when Geiger counters in the room went off-scale. Workers in the area suffered all the classic symptoms of radiation poisoning. They had discovered the Oranur Effect.

When the radium sample was removed from the accumulator, it was placed in a steel-and-concrete safe away from living quarters. Yet the noxious effects, as well as abnormally high Geiger readings persisted in the accumulator and the room in which it was situated. It was as if the atmospheric orgone had “run amok,” as Reich put it, concluding that the placement of the radium inside the accumulator had set off an atmospheric chain-reaction which persisted long after it had been removed. The next morning, the mice were dying even though they were in an adjacent room, and Reich awoke with a full-body tan in the dead of a Maine winter.

Reich would subsequently state that “it is the organismic OR [orgone] energy within living bodies which continues to react to the NR [nuclear radiation] material for months and even years.” In checking background counts around the safe in which the orgonecharged radium had been disposed, he discovered a more disturbing phenomena: that the steel and concrete enclosure itself comprised an orgone accumulator and that the Oranur effect was still evident. It’s hard to discount Reich’s documenta-
tion of all this, given the complete records and corroboration of his coworkers. He found a persistent, overcharged atmosphere continuing long after the experiment had been concluded. The New York Times (2/3/51) reported that there were unusually high background radiation levels recorded from Rochester, New York to Canada during the last week of January.

There was a bright side. Both the experimental mice that had survived and the workers involved with the project exhibited full recovery and more — they were far better able to withstand the effects of radiation in subsequent work. Reich had found what he was looking for. There were positive indications that Reich had found a method of immunizing against the effects of radiation.

By then the FDA was mounting its case against Reich, aimed first at silencing him on the question of orgone energy. He had been ordered by the FDA and federal courts to cease distribution of the orgone accumulator. When an assistant, Dr. Michael Silvert, transported the devices across state lines, he and Reich were charged with the violation of the court injunction. Unbelievably, the 59 year-old scientist, researcher, and teacher was sentenced to two years in prison and, as with many people his age, this proved to be a death sentence.

Although they are sporadic and brief, documents revealed in a recent FOIA release of Reich’s prison files indicate many details about the tragic final months before Reich died in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania Federal Penitentiary on Sunday, November 3rd, 1957.

Prison officials derided Reich’s marital status (his wife at the time, Aurora Karrer, was “common law”) and his views on compulsory sexual morality. “Since the defendant does not believe in marriage as an institution, he has never developed any strong home ties. Where he lives is mostly a matter of convenience to the defendant and if he has any sentimental attachments they are not connected with the home as an institution.”

Upon sentence recommendations, Reich was ordered to undergo psychiatric counseling. Among these psychiatrists, there was a general agreement that Reich suffered from “paranoid schizophrenia”. They felt constrained to say that this assumption was “not based on personal observation.” “Reich gave no concrete evidence of being mentally incompetent.” Yet they warned, “It is felt that Reich could easily have a frank break with reality, and become psychotic, particularly if the stresses and environmental pressures become overwhelming.” And, “In his discussions he unraveled a rather intricate and somewhat logical system of per-
secutory trends, particularly regarding the Rockefeller Foundation ‘which made me a tool of its socio-economic interpersonal relations’.”

Reich’s jailers didn’t seem to have a clue about their famous charge, as evidenced by a copy of True magazine’s exposé called “The Marvelous Sex Box” filed dutifully in Reich’s background papers. Reich’s parole officer commented that he had an “unusually keen interest in getting an early release.” (Having stewed in federal prisons — filled with such people — I must ask what the officer meant by “unusually keen?”) The parole officer, Frank Walker, Jr., reported that “Reich went on to state that he was the victim of an international conspiracy and that is why he was sent here... that his situation was unique and different because the fate of the planet was involved.” Reich’s appeals for early release were denied.

Reich and those around him had developed an elaborate conspiracy theory involving leftists, government officials, Stalinist spies, and social moralists. He called them the Emotional Plague, signifying the contagious nature of the affliction. His late-period screeds against Communists have been cited by many as evidence of Reich’s instability. Given what we know today, that Michael Straight — owner of the magazine which instigated the media assassination — was a self-admitted Communist cell member who had served as a conduit between the State Department the Soviet Union, Reich may have actually underestimated the situation.

Thus he was suspicious when two volumes of specially-prepared defense briefs, called “Vol IV and V of the Suppressed and Secret Evidence” were sent to him in prison with “different colored binding and handwriting that is familiar to me but which I cannot identify” on one of the covers. Reich believed that someone had tampered with private legal briefs.

Reich openly suspected that a conspiracy of “Hoodlums In Government” had been behind the decade-long, multi-million dollar prosecution. Indeed, his own personal lawyer, Peter Mills, turned up on the prosecution team, and much of the evidence provided by the FDA failed to take into account Reich’s experimental protocol.

Jail must have been pure hell for Reich, an unwilling martyr who had never crossed paths with the law before and who was already well isolated before his sentence. In an effort to find someone inside who could hear him out, he began speaking with the prison chaplains. He introduced himself as the author of a book called The Murder of Christ and began with saying, “Due to my discovery of the cosmic orgone energy and its social implications, I am in deep trouble, emotionally and socially.”
Reich was reaching out to the only officials in the prison who dealt with emotional life, to unburden himself of an unbearable weight.

To Reverend Silber, Protestant minister, Reich wrote in a handwritten "Inmate Request to Staff Member": "It was clear from the very beginning that prayer, and now lyrics, were subverted by such use of stupidities and evasions on our part, especially by the staid reluctance to talk bluntly & take the bull by the horns. The bull is really no more than a few slimy tapeworms eating away at our emotional guts. It is high time to start giving social power to the established functions of Love, Work & Learning as bastions against the tapeworms. (signed) Wilhelm Reich, Sept. 14, 1957."

After Reich's death, Mrs. Aurora Reich requested information about a packet of unsent letters that Reich wanted published after his death. "You may one day read that (not sent) letter [...blank line: erased...] large publishing house my "Silent Observer" or "Creation": The 3rd Volume of The History of Orgonomy. This volume is nearly completely conceived and constructed." This reference, found in Reich's letter to Mrs. Reich dated Sept. 16th, 1957, apparently refers to the mysterious book Reich mentioned having written while in jail. This manuscript has never turned up. If it exists, it would complete a trilogy with The Oranur Experiment and Contact With Space. Reich sent it to the Department of Education, to be forwarded to Mrs. Reich, where she worked.

Mrs. Reich's lawyer wrote to the Warden at Lewisburg in an effort to obtain the missing manuscript, as well as to report that on her last visit, Reich mentioned "that he had asked for aspirin and had been given two pink pills instead. ... I wondered whether you would permit us access to the prison hospital and dispensary record concerning the decedent." In the margins of the letter in the records, the Warden penciled in: "NO."

The autopsy revealed damage to the heart (Reich had previously suffered a heart attack but was in good health when sent to prison). However, the stomach contents were not analyzed, because of "lack of facilities to do so." In any event, Reich's immediate family, in this case, his daughter Eva Reich, M.D., had not even requested an autopsy, believing, as she stated to the coroner, that her father "had died of a broken heart." The prison, in fact, ordered the autopsy.

Conspiracy theories abound as to the nature of Reich's death, and today Eva believes that he was murdered. Reich died only two weeks from his parole date. The official cause of death was a heart attack, and the autopsy showed enough formaldehyde in Reich's system to interfere with testing for other compounds. In the final analysis, the real tragedy in
Reich’s life and death was the silence and obscurity that greeted his important discoveries. As replication after replication of Reich’s experimental findings pile in today\textsuperscript{12}, there is still a conspiracy of silence around the facts. Those who know, don’t say.

**Endnotes**

1. For a full discussion of current experimental evidence concerning the operation of the orgone accumulator and its beneficial use in healing see *The Orgone Accumulator Handbook*, by James DeMeo, PhD., Natural Energy Works, POB 864, El Cerrito, CA 95430

2. A former worker at the San Onofre Power Plant sues over a rare form of leukemia \textsuperscript{1}9\textsuperscript{4}. Since she had never never been exposed to levels of radiation deemed “unsafe” by the Department of Energy, and having a cancer which has been positively linked to radioactive exposure, the issue the court must decide is whether any level of exposure can be deemed “safe.”

3. Unlike Jung, however, Reich did not retire to a Swiss retreat to spend his leisure years in dalliance with the Nazis. Most Jungians dismiss charges of Jung’s anti-Semitism, but that isn’t the point. His engagement with the occult and mystical speculation fit well with Nazi ideology. As the saying goes, some of his best friends were Jews. But even a recent book written by a number of Jungian analysts — many of them Jewish — fails to dispel the historical judgment against Jung (see Maidenbaum & Martin, *Lingeri
g Shadows; Jungians, Freidians, and Anti-Semitism*, Shambala, Boston, 1991). Jung, in association with Herman Göring’s “psychotherapist” nephew, Matthias Heinrich Göring, edited the German *Zentralblatt für Psychotherapie*. While Jung’s supporters allow for his “habits of mind” and “shortcomings,” the fact remains that Jung participated in the Nazi adventure from 1933 until 1939, while the Nazis burned Reich’s books in 1933. Even Robert Bly cannot account for those six years.


5. Michael Straight was an heir to a Payne-Whitney fortune and became associated with Anthony Blunt’s Soviet spy ring while still an undergraduate at Oxford. It was not until long after Reich’s death that Straight admitted in his autobiography, *After Long Silence*, that he had passed State Department documents to a Soviet handler in the 1940s.

6. Carroll Quigley’s discussion of *The New Republic’s* relationship with Wallace lends much credence to Reich’s “conspiracy theories”. See *Tragedy & Hope*, (MacMillan, 1966), p. 938. Michael Kinsley’s role on CNN’s Crossfire reveals that the NR still serves its original function: to provide a tame and convenient foil for corporate ideology.

7. My thanks to Kenn Thomas of *Steamshovel Press* for obtaining these documents.

8. Documents dating from early FBI assessments of Reich as a national security risk contained Otto Fenichel’s privately spoken slander. It was repeated in the prison’s subsequent “diagnosis.”

10. Another intriguing connection with the Soviets: one of Einstein’s assistants, possibly the one that he mentioned as having convinced him to break off the correspondence with Reich, later would return to Poland.

From *The New York Times*, March 17, 1950:

**SCIENTIST'S LEAVE STUDIES**

- Einstein Ex-Associate Seeks to Teach Again in Poland

Ottawa, March 16 — Opposition leader George Drew in the House of Commons this afternoon raised the question of the propriety of permitting Dr. Leopold Infeld, a former associate of Dr. Albert Einstein and at present a teacher of mathematics at the University of Toronto, to return to Warsaw to organize certain educational programs in cooperation with the Communist Government of Poland.

Mr. Drew said that Mr. Infeld, who had been given hospitality as a refugee in Canada and the United States, had gained considerable knowledge of the latest discoveries in the atomic field.

He had several times stated that he would return to Europe if and when a “progressive government was established in Poland,” and he returned there last summer and taught in the Universities of Warsaw and Cracow, Mr. Drew said. Now, Mr. Drew added, he had applied for a sabbatical year during which he would receive half pay from Toronto University in order to permit him to work at educational organization under the Polish Government.

11. Today, the FDA has responds to FOIA requests for this evidence by declaring it no longer resides in their files.

12. To cite a few:

