

Laudatio for Dr. Michael Eckert

Michael Eckert, born in 1949, is a trained physicist and received his doctorate in theoretical physics from the University of Bayreuth in 1979. He had already been interested in questions of the history of physics during his physics studies, so it was no coincidence that he decided to switch to the history of science after completing his doctorate. In the years that followed, his pioneering studies enabled him to make a name for himself as one of the leading and most innovative physics historians of his generation - not only in Germany, but also internationally. Eckert has written an astonishing number of books on the history of modern physics and quite a few of his publications are also available in translation (see his impressive list of publications).

Eckert's most outstanding works include his fundamental studies on the life and work of Arnold Sommerfeld and his Munich School of Theoretical Physics. It all began with the curation of a Sommerfeld exhibition at the Deutsches Museum in Munich in the mid-1980s with the publication of a documentation accompanying the exhibition from the scholar's estate, which is held in the Deutsches Museum archive (1984). This was followed by the much-cited study on the atomic physicists (1993), a genesis of modern theoretical physics using the example of the Sommerfeld school, and it culminated in the publication of Arnold Sommerfeld's scientific correspondence in two large volumes (2000 and 2004) and, last but not least, his Sommerfeld biography: Atomic Physicist and Cultural Ambassador (2013). These weighty monographs are framed by further special studies and source editions of Sommerfeld's scientific work, which make the author the world's leading and most renowned Sommerfeld researcher.

Eckert is not only a proven Sommerfeld expert, however, but has also produced commendable and much-cited studies on the history of solid state physics in his early work, and after his "Sommerfeld period", fluid mechanics and Ludwig Prandtl, one of the leading representatives of this discipline, was the focus of his research interest. The result

was two monographs and several articles in in specialist journals. These have not only received great recognition from historians of science, but also found interested readers in the physical community. Eckert's publications are not only read by colleagues, but also reach a much broader audience that goes beyond the boundaries of his own specialist field. They are thus “advertising texts” for a professionally competent and historically critical treatment of the history of modern physics.

Finally, it should be emphasized that Eckert embedded his figures in their socio-cultural contexts and in the currents of their time. As a result of such a research approach, remarkable studies on the political and ideological framework conditions of the development of physics (and science and technology in general) in National Socialist Germany and, in particular, on so-called “German physics” have emerged.

He is currently working on the history of ionospheric physics and in particular on one of its pioneers, the Munich physicist and long-time director of the Deutsches Museum Jonathan Zenneck, about whom a biography is expected soon.

It should also be mentioned that, in addition to his scientific work, he was also been involved in the committee work of our discipline, including in the History of Physics Association of the DPG, and has also taken on the fronts of editorial work, including as as Editor in chief of the European Physical Journal H for many years and as curator of the Physik Journal.

With his outstanding scientific achievements, in particular his fundamental studies on the life and work of Arnold Sommerfeld and other pioneers of modern physics, he would be a worthy recipient of the Schuster History of Physics Prize.

Berlin, February 2025

signed. Prof (retired) Dr. Dieter Hoffmann