

Abstract

The life and contributions of Gerard Kuiper have been documented by Dale Cruikshank in his National Academy of Sciences biography. I will argue that particularly important in this eventful life was Kuiper's war time experiences. Kuiper's wartime role evolved as the war unfolded, but towards the end he was charged by the US military with reporting German progress with war-related technologies and the activities of scientists under Nazi control. He interviewed a great many scientists, including his own PhD mentor (Ejnar Hertzsprung), and when Kuiper was the only person available, he interviewed concentration-camp victims. He carried briefing sheets that identified the technologies being sought by the allies and the major fraction of these involved infrared equipment. He sent back to the USA boxes of documents, and large amounts of equipment, and he stressed to the military his interest in these for his own research. It seems very likely that in this way an effective PbS infrared detector, so critical to Kuiper's career and the future of planetary science, came to the USA and to Robert Cashman's laboratory at Northwestern University. As the war was winding down, Cashman and Kuiper worked together to develop a practical infrared spectrometer for astronomical use. Within months, Kuiper discovered the CO₂ atmospheres on Mars and Venus.