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Publication Date

1965-04-17

UCRL-16052

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Berkeley, California

Submitted to Journal of Chemical Physics UCRL-16052

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Lawrence Radiation Laboratory
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AEC Contract No. W-7405-eng-48

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Evidence for Two Energy Gaps in High-Purity Superconducting Nb, Ta, and V*

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April 17, 1965

We have made heat-capacity measurements on zone-refined single-crystal samples of Nb, Ta, and V between 0.35 and 25°K. At temperatures below about $T_c/10$, the superconducting-state electronic heat capacity C_{es} is considerably larger than that predicted by the BCS theory,[1] and its temperature dependence differs from any reported previously. The data cannot be explained by energy-gap anisotropy of the usual magnitude. Suhl, Matthias, and Walker[2] have shown that inclusion of interband-scattering terms in the BCS Hamiltonian leads to two distinct energy gaps, and we believe our results demonstrate the existence of these two gaps.

The measurements were made in a calorimeter that permits measurements over the range 0.25 to 25°K, and which will be described in more detail elsewhere. All measurements were made with a sample holder that included a single germanium thermometer and a heater. Below 4.2°K and above 10°K the thermometer calibration was based on well-established procedures, but between 4.2 and 10°K it was based on an interpolation of the resistance-temperature relation for an Allen=Bradley radio resistor. In the latter region the data will be corrected when the germanium thermometer is calibrated accurately. Measurements on a copper sample suggest that the experimental error is less than 1% at all temperatures. The samples were screened from the earth's magnetic field with mu metal, and were not exposed to other magnetic fields between the time of cooling below T_c and the start of the superconducting-state measurements. Thus, there can be no frozen-in flux during the superconducting-state measurements.

Figures 1 and 2 show the heat capacity of two Nb samples. NbII (T_c= 9.13°K; residual resistivity ratio = 24) is a 99.9% polycrystalline sample of material similar to that from which the single-crystal NbI (T_c= 9.26°K; residual resistivity ratio = 110) was prepared by triple zone refining. Apart from a T^{-2} term associated with the interaction of the large (6.14 nm) nuclear moments with the external field, the normal-state heat capacity C_n is consistent with the usual analysis into electronic and lattice contributions, $C_n = \gamma T + (12/5)\pi^4 R(T/\Theta_o)^3$. For both samples, $\Theta_o = 277°K$, in agreement with the elastic constants[3] and other recent calorimetric data;[4,5] for NbI, $\gamma = 7.85$ mJ mole^{-1} deg^{-2}; for NbII, $\gamma = 7.79$ mJ mole^{-1} deg^{-2}. Between T_c and $T_c/6$, $C_{es}/\gamma T_c$ is approximately the same for both samples, and is given by $C_{es}/\gamma T_c = 7.0 \exp(-1.46\, T_c/T)$ for $2 < T_c/T < 6$; for $T < T_c/14$, $C_{es}/\gamma T_c$ is proportional to $\exp(-0.12\, T_c/T)$ for both samples, but with different proportionality constants; at intermediate temperatures $C_{es}/\gamma T_c$ is less than the sum of the corresponding exponential terms for both samples, but the discrepancy is particularly pronounced for NbI.

Few measurements of C_{es} on metals with filled d bands extend to reduced temperatures low enough to compare with the data in Fig. 2. Some of the early measurements below 1°K showed positive deviations from exponential behavior at the lowest temperature reached, but different measurements on the same metals did not agree. Tin, for which deviations had been reported, is one of the more favorable examples for experimental investigation (high Θ_o and T_c), and two recent measurements[6] on high-purity samples agree in showing a simple exponential temperature dependence of C_{es} down to $T \approx T_c/9$, below which C_{es} is lost in the lattice heat capacity.[7] The energy-gap anisotropy that has been observed by more direct methods in other superconductors is far too small to account for the two exponential terms in C_{es} of Nb, and we conclude tentatively that they reflect the presence of two distinct energy gaps produced by overlapping of the s and d bands at the Fermi surface.[2] The sensitivity of C_{es} to sample purity can be understood on the basis of Anderson's theory of "dirty" superconductors,[8] and explains why the deviation from a simple exponential has not been observed in earlier measurements.[9] The coefficients of T_c/T in the exponential terms suggest that, at 0°K, the larger gap $\Delta_1(0)$ and the gap in the "dirty" sample are both close to the BCS value $3.52\ kT_c$, and that the smaller gap $\Delta_2(0)$ is an order of magnitude smaller. If $\Delta_2(T)/\Delta_2(0)$ has a temperature dependence similar to that given by the BCS theory, kT becomes equal to $\Delta_2(T)$ at a temperature for which $\Delta_2(T)$ is still approximately equal to $\Delta_2(0)$. This situation is very different from that which occurs in a single-gap superconductor, and perhaps accounts for the marked deviation of C_{es} from the sum of two exponential terms. Figure 2 shows that a Schottky anomaly--which, for $kT \lesssim \Delta_2(0)$, might be expected to approximate the contribution of the states just above the smaller gap to C_{es}--does represent $C_{es}-7.0\gamma T_c \exp(-1.42\ T_c/T)$ reasonably well. Another possibility, suggested by calculations for the case in which the interband-scattering contribution to the Hamiltonian is small,[2] is that the smaller gap (partially) collapses at a temperature well below T_c, producing a peak in C_{es}. We have not attempted a more detailed comparison with theory because it is quite possible that even NbI does not exhibit "clean-sample" behavior.

We have also made measurements on two Ta samples with purities similar to those of NbI and NbII. They each show behavior similar to the corresponding Nb sample (but the measurements extend only to $T = T_c/12$). The purest V sample we have been able to obtain is similar in purity to NbII, and also resembles that sample in the behavior of C_{es}.

* Work supported by the United States Atomic Energy Commission.

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** Alfred P. Sloan Research Fellow, 1962-64. We are grateful to the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation for this support during the period in which the experiments were initiated.

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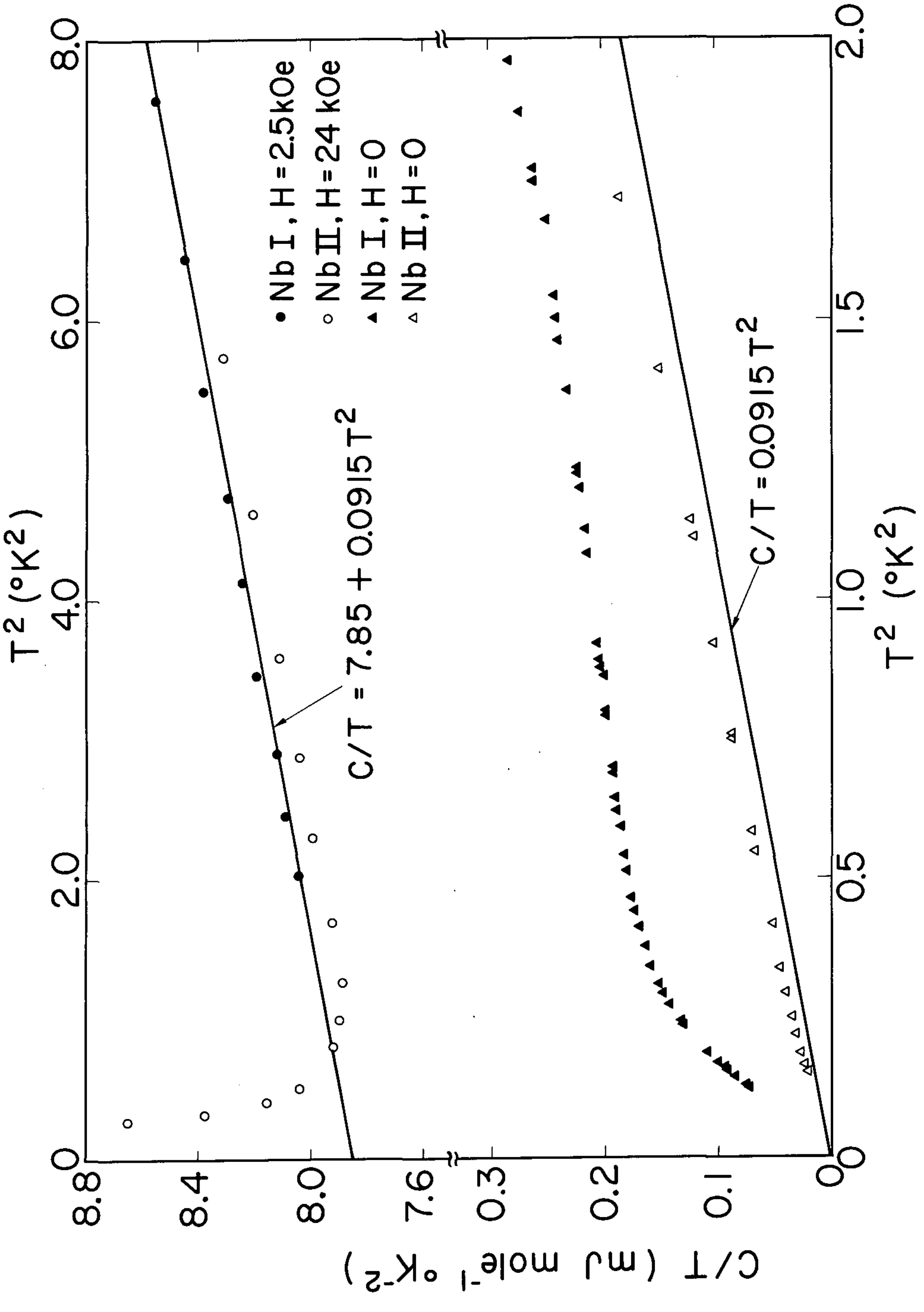

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Fig. 1

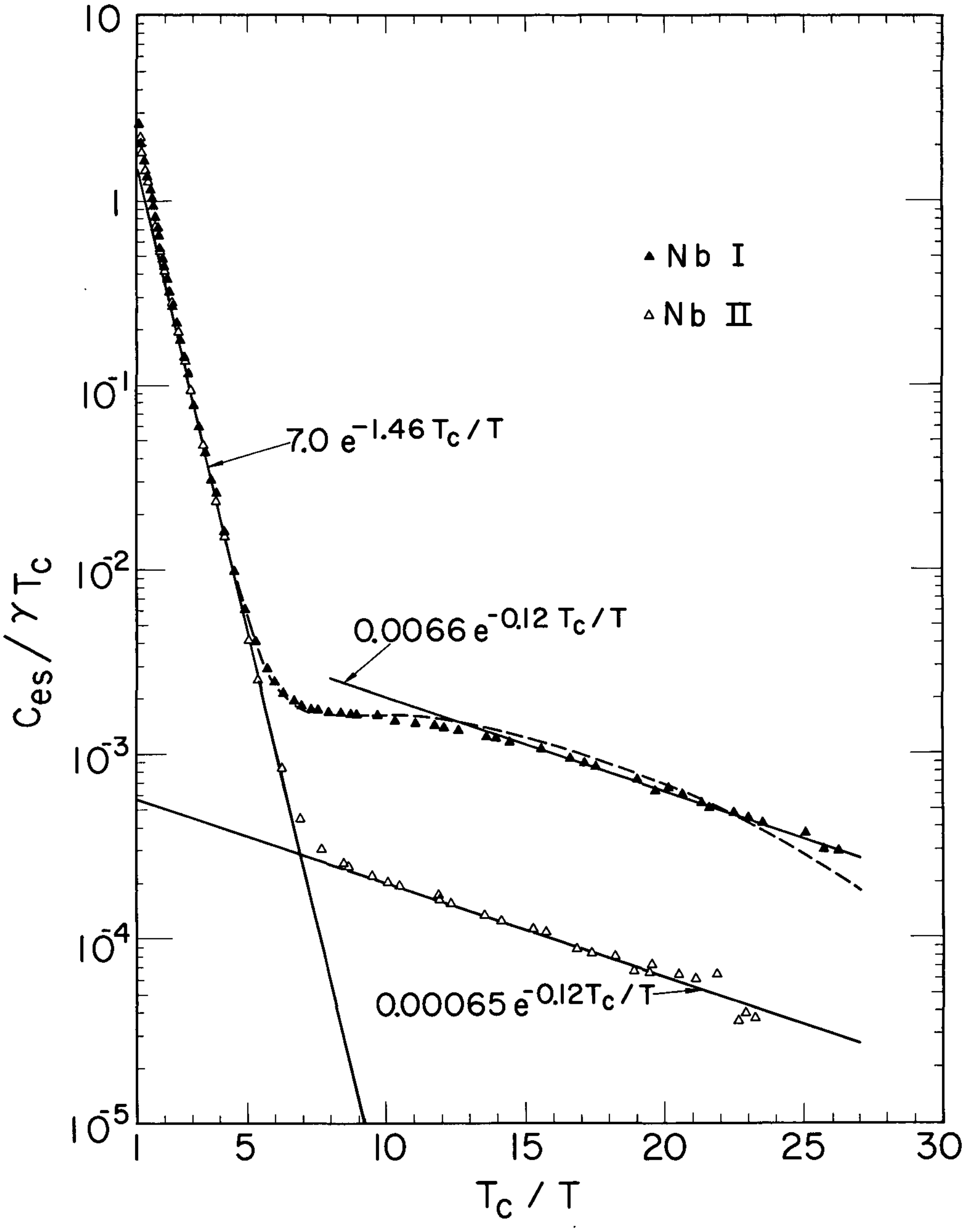

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Fig. 2