Experimental study of a solid-deuterium source of ultracold neutrons

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(Submitted 2 October 1995)
Pis'ma Zh. Éksp. Teor. Fiz. **62**, No. 10, 764–769 (25 November 1995)

The results of experimental studies of the emergence of ultracold neutrons (UCN) from solid deuterium, which were performed on a model source in the BBR-M reactor at the St. Petersburg Institute of Nuclear Physics, are reported. The temperature gain factor in the UCN yield at 13–14 K from solid deuterium relative to to the UCN yield at room temperature from a gaseous state is equal to 1230 and 550 at solid-deuterium temperature of 18.7 K (triple point). © *1995 American Institute of Physics.*

The possibility of increasing the density of ultracold neutrons (UCN) by using as a source solid deuterium at low temperatures was analyzed in Ref. 1 . In the present letter we report the results of an experimental study of the emergence of UCN from solid deuterium, performed on a model UCN source in the BBR–M reactor at the St. Petersburg Institute of Nuclear Physics.

A diagram showing the arrangement of the source is shown in Fig. 1. The 6-liter zirconium chamber of the source (cylinder $D=150$ mm, $l=350$ mm with elliptic bottoms) has a double wall (2×0.5 mm) where helium flows into the gap from a 150–W cryogenic refrigerator at a temperature of 4.5 K. As the chamber is cooled, the deuterium from a 6-m^3 receiver flows into the chamber, condenses, and solidifies as it cools.

To obtain deuterium temperatures below 10–12 K, a special construction of the source chamber is required. The problem is that as the temperature decreases, the thermal contact between the cooled wall of the chamber and deuterium breaks down. Cooling is possible as long as the saturated-vapor pressure does not fall below several Torr. For example, the saturated-vapor pressure is equal to only 0.75 Torr at a temperature of 12 K and 5×10^{-2} Torr at 10 K. A possible technical solution is to place an additional cooled spiral tube on the inner wall of the chamber. On cooling, the tube will be squeezed by the deuterium, which should solve the problem of thermal contact. Before making the design of the chamber more complicated, however, we decided at the first stage of the investi-

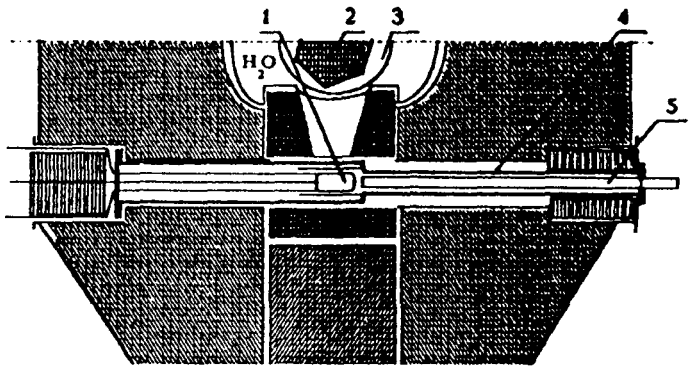

FIG. 1. Arrangement of the solid-deuterium source in the reactor. *1* — Chamber with solid deuterium; *2* — reactor core; *3* — beryllium reflector; *4* — vacuum container; *5* — UCN guide.

gation to use a simple design, and then to use the same design but with deuterium containing a small quantity of helium in order to ensure heat transfer, and finally to use a more sophisticated design of the source if necessary. In the present letter we report the results of the first stage of the study at temperatures above 13 K.

One of the most complex problems in this investigation is to determine the temperature profile of the solid-deuterium source. However, the temperature of the source could be easily determined with low accuracy — according to the residual deuterium pressure in the receiver, since the source, which is connected to the receiver by a pipeline, is a vapor-pressure thermometer in which the saturated–vapor pressure is determined by the source temperature. Unfortunately, because of the large volume of the receiver, the relaxation time of the process which establishes an equilibrium pressure is long, which results in a pronounced hysteresis of the experimental dependence of the UCN yield on the pressure in the receiver. The UCN gain factor as a function of the pressure in the receiver during the chilling and cooling of the source is shown in Fig. 2a.

Another, but not so trivial, uncertainty in the UCN yield that was observed in the experiment is apparently associated with a change in the ortho-para composition of deuterium under the influence of low temperatures and the radiation from the reactor. Curve *1* in Fig. 2b was obtained in the first experiment on cooling of the source. This experiment was conducted at a rapid rate and low reactor power (2 MW). The temperature gain factor in this experiment was equal to only 450. Subsequent cooling of the source (curve *2* in Fig. 2b) was conducted at a slow rate with a reactor power of 14 MW; the temperature gain factor was equal to 790. After the source was cooled, virtually all of the deuterium in the receiver was in the ortho phase ($95\pm5\%$) and remained in this phase without any visible changes in the composition. In subsequent cooling of the source, the temperature gain factor reached 1230 and stayed at this level. The curve *3* in Fig. 2b corresponds to the fourth cooling. The dependence of the UCN yield on the ortho-para composition of deuterium is the most probable explanation for this phenomenon, but repeated measurements are required in order to confirm it.

One obvious problem in obtaining a high UCN yield from a solid-deuterium source

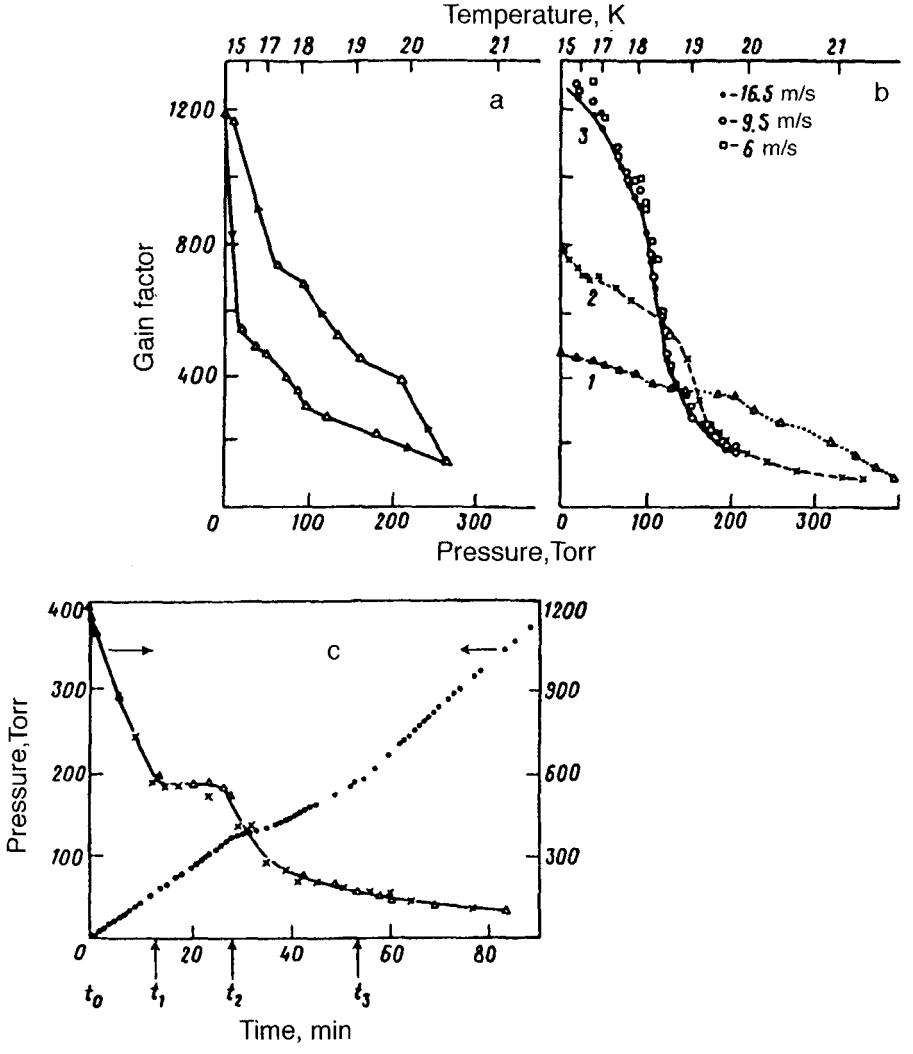

FIG. 2. a — Measurement of the UCN yield upon chilling and cooling down of the source; b — measurement of the UCN yield with the first chillings of the source; the neutron velocity is equal to 16.5 m/s (●), 9.5 m/s (○), and 6 m/s (□); c — time diagram of the heating of the source by radiation from the reactor.

is that the source must be transparent to UCN. Cracking of solid deuterium as a result of the high temperature stresses could cause the UCN to be scattered by nonuniformities (cracks). When the effective range between nonuniformities is less than the range determined by the inelastic scattering and capture cross sections for UCN, the gain factor no longer increases as the temperature decreases. To investigate this question, we measured the temperature factor of the gain simultaneously for UCN with an average velocity of 6 m/s and for very cold neutrons in two velocity ranges, so that the average velocities were

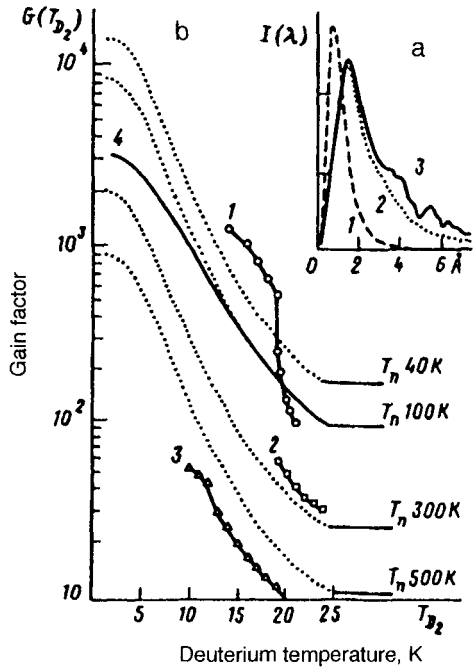

FIG. 3. a — Time-of-flight spectra of the source for different phase states of deuterium; b — analysis of the gain factor for deuterium sources with different volumes.

equal to 9.5 m/s and 16.5 m/s. Since the refraction index depends strongly on the neutron velocity, the effective turbidity of the solid deuterium due to cracking should be manifested primarily for UCN (the refractive indices for 6 m/s, 9.5 m/s, and 16.5 m/s are, respectively, 0.68, 0.886, and 0.964). Curve *3* in Fig. 2b is represented by measurements for all neutron velocities indicated above. No appreciable difference in the temperature dependence of the neutron yield for different velocities is observed. This shows that the turbidity of the medium is not yet manifested. The range at a deuterium temperature of 13 K is, according to the calculations, 4 cm, 8 cm, and 16 cm for velocities of 6 m/s, 9.5 m/s, and 16.5 m/s, respectively. Since there is no dependence in the gain factor, it can be concluded that the depth of transparency of solid deuterium in any case is not lower than the indicated values. A more detailed study of this question, requires lowering the temperature of the source to 5–6 K.

In addition to measuring the UCN yield during chilling and cooling down of the source with a refrigerator (Fig. 2a), we measured the dependence of the UCN yield with the source heated by radiation with the refrigerator switched off. These experiments made it possible to determine more accurately the gain factor at the triple-point temperature for solid and liquid deuterium, and also the power of the radiation load. Figure 3 shows the UCN yield and the pressure in the receiver during heating at a constant thermal load (radiative heating). During the first 28–30 minutes (t_0–t_2) the pressure in the receiver increases linearly and is determined mainly by the heat of sublimation. The absorption of

heat for heating of the solid deuterium is insignificant. Linear increase continues until an equilibrium sublimation pressure of 128 Torr at the triple point is established. During the next 25–30 minutes (t_2–t_3) the solid deuterium melts and the liquid evaporates and is heated at the same time. At this time, the flow of gas into the receiver slows down, since some power is expended on melting. The melting process is completed by the time t_3, after which the flow of gas into the receiver again becomes constant and is determined by the heat of evaporation of deuterium. The heating power, which is equal to 36 W when the reactor is running and 6 W when the reactor is shut down, is determined from the rate of influx of the gas.

A plateau is present in the time dependence of the UCN yield (curve 2 in Fig. 2c) between the times t_1 and t_2. This plateau corresponds to the triple-point temperature. Initially, at time t_0, the temperature gain factor is equal to 1230 at a temperature of 13–14 K. At the time t_1 the deuterium is heated to 18.7 K and because of sublimation, this temperature remains constant up to the time t_2, when the pressure in the receiver reaches the equilibrium sublimation pressure. The temperature gain factor for solid deuterium near the triple point is equal to 500–550. At the time t_3, when the deuterium is completely liquid and its temperature is 19.5–20 K, the gain factor is equal to 120. Further decrease of the gain factor is attributable to heating of the liquid.

Appreciable increase in the yield during the crystallization (by a factor of 4–4.5) is due to the improved thermalization of the neutron flux in the solid deuterium as compared to liquid deuterium, because of the increase in the total interaction cross section due to Bragg scattering. This effect was observed directly in the measurements of the total spectrum of neutrons from the source. Figure 3a shows the time-of-flight spectrum before condensation of deuterium (curve *1*), after condensation (deuterium in the liquid phase, curve 2), and after crystallization (deuterium in the solid phase, curve *3*). The effective temperature of the spectrum of the neutrons incident on the source is equal to 600 K. Thermalization in the deuterium substantially softens the spectrum, and a difference in the thermalization effect for the liquid and solid phases is observed in the region 4–6 Å. For the solid phase we observed in the neutron spectrum charcteristic irregularities associated with Bragg reflections. It is interesting to note that the structure of the reflections was found to be different for the first and second coolings, which could be attributed to the dependence on the ortho-para composition and on the cooling rate. The neutron spectrum from a solid-deuterium source can be represented as a sum of two spectra: 56% of the intensity with an effective temperature of 180 K and 44% of the intensity with effective temperature of 30 K. The calculation of the UCN yield with the indicated shape of the spectrum was found to be very close to the calculation with an effective temperature of 100 K. Neutrons with wavelength greater than 3 Å can become UCN through a one-phonon process. An increase in the fraction of long-wavelength neutrons therefore increases the UCN yield upon crystallization of the deuterium. As one can see, the solid-deuterium source is more efficient for production of cold and very cold neutrons.

The final analysis of the experimental results is illustrated in Fig. 3b, where the experimental temperature dependence (curve *1*) and the results of previous investigations[2] for a 1-liter liquid-deuterium source (curve 2) and for a 0.15-liter solid-deuterium source (curve *3*), are shown. The UCN yield is increased by decreasing the temperature of the source and by decreasing the effective temperature of the neutron flux

as a result of increasing the volume of the source. The computational results of Ref. 1 are for absolutely pure deuterium and for effective neutron flux temperatures of 40, 100, 300, and 500 K. The solid curve *4* was computed for an effective temperature of 100 K and trapping cross sections in deuterium taking into account the hydrogen impurity (0.2 vol.%) and nitrogen impurity (4.6×10^{-3} vol.%).

The next stage of the investigations presupposes that the temperature of the source is lowered to 6–7 K for the purpose of studying the possibility of increasing the UCN yield. It should be noted that the thermal conductivity of solid orthodeuterium is an order of magnitude higher at 6–7 K. This should improve the properties of the source with respect to the thermal load.

The experimental results can be used to develop designs for a solid-deuterium source of cold and ultracold neutrons in high-flux reactors with a heavy-water reflector, since the heavy water provides effective shielding from fast neutrons and γ-rays and gives a low level of heat transfer while preserving a high flux of thermal neutrons (the PIK reactor under construction in Gatchina and the ILL reactor in Grenoble). The other possibility is to use a solid-deuterium source based on neutron spallation sources, where the ratio of the heat transfer and the neutron flux is appreciably better than for reactors. For example, a solid-deuterium UCN source based on a 1-MW spallation source is being desinged at Los Alamos (USA).

The authors are grateful to A. V. Strelkov at the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research, N. G. Kolyvanova, V. V. Runov, and M. O. Khonina at the St. Petersburg Institute of Nuclear Physics, the staff at the Division of the Reactor Physics and Technology, R. G. Pikulik, Chief Reactor Engineer, and the staff of the Cryogenic Division of the Institute and the workshop for active participation in taking the measurements and the preparatory work.

This work was supported by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (USA), the Los Alamos National Laboratory (USA), the Russian Fund for Fundamental Research (Grant 93-02-14382), the International Science Foundation ISF (Grant R59300), and the European Science Foundation INTAS (Project 93-298).

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Translated by M. E. Alferieff