Evidence for unconventional superconductivity in half-Heusler YPdBi and TbPdBi compounds revealed by London penetration depth measurements


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(Received 4 September 2018; published 26 December 2018)

The half-Heusler compounds YPdBi and TbPdBi, while having a similar band structure, exhibit different magnetic properties. YPdBi is a diamagnet, while TbPdBi shows antiferromagnetic order below 5.5 K. Both are superconductors with \( T_c \approx 1 \) K for YPdBi and \( T_c \approx 1.75 \) K for TbPdBi. Such a contrast in properties between these two compounds opens a question about the effects of band structure or magnetic correlations on superconductivity. Using the combination of a tunnel diode oscillator and a commercial dilution refrigerator, we measured the temperature-dependent magnetic penetration depth \( \Delta \lambda(T) \) in single crystals of YPdBi and TbPdBi, down to temperatures as low as 0.1 K. We found that the penetration depths of both compounds do not show an exponential temperature dependence and saturation at low temperatures, as expected for conventional BCS superconductors. Instead, in both compounds, the penetration depth can be described by a power law \( \Delta \lambda(T) = A \times T^n \). The coefficient \( A \) was found to be about 50% smaller in TbPdBi, but the exponents are very similar, \( n = 2.76 \pm 0.04 \) in YPdBi and \( n = 2.6 \pm 0.3 \) in TbPdBi, respectively. Our results suggest unconventional superconductivity in both YPdBi and TbPdBi.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevB.98.241111

In addition to their previously explored interesting physical properties, such as giant, linear magnetoresistance or heavy fermion carriers, the half-Heusler compounds were predicted to have topological insulating states [1,2]. Furthermore, superconductivity has also been discovered in the \( R\text{PdBi} \) and \( R\text{PtBi} \) (\( R = \) rare earth) half-Heusler materials [3–5]. Strong spin-orbit coupling combined with the absence of inversion symmetry can give rise to unconventional superconductivity, and one of the most unique features is the possibility of superconducting pairing with the total angular momentum other than singlet (\( J = 0 \)) or triplet (\( J = 1 \)), which is in general allowed by the pairing of \( j = 1/2 \) fermions.

Through substitution of the rare earth \( R \), the band inversion \( \Delta E = \Gamma_6 - \Gamma_\delta \), between the energies of the s-like (\( j = 1/2 \)) \( \Gamma_\delta \) and the p-like (\( j = 3/2 \)) valence bands of Bi, can be tuned in \( R\text{PdBi} \) and \( R\text{PtBi} \) from negative (trivial) to positive (nontrivial). For a positive band inversion, when the chemical potential resides in the \( \Gamma_\delta \) band, the conduction carriers have an angular momentum \( j = 3/2 \). It is in particular this instance that allows for pairing with total angular momentum \( J = j_1 + j_2 > 1 \). Recent measurements of the temperature-dependent penetration depth \( [\Delta \lambda(T)] \) on the nontrivial YPtBi half-Heusler compound found a linear behavior, consistent with line nodes in the superconducting gap [6]. According to Ref. [6], the nodal gap is most likely indicative of pairing with a higher total angular momentum. The symmetry and the structure of the superconducting gap is far from being resolved in the \( R\text{PdBi} \) and \( R\text{PtBi} \) materials, and one way to gain insight is to investigate the superconductive gap for the case of a trivial band inversion.

Another related open question regarding the \( R\text{PdBi} \) and \( R\text{PtBi} \) half-Heusler superconductors is the pairing mechanism. By changing the rare earth \( R \), the magnetic properties can also be tuned, in addition to the effects on the band structure. A recent experimental study has found that in \( R\text{PdBi} \) (\( R = \) Y, Sm, Gd, Tb, Dy, Ho, Er, Tm, and Lu), with increasing antiferromagnetic (AF) coupling, superconductivity is suppressed [5]. Therefore, there seems to be a competition between the AF and superconducting ground states. Similar work, however, has shown evidence of superconductivity even in a compound with AF ordering and a higher Néel temperature, suggesting a possible coexistence of the two states [7]. It is important in such systems to investigate the potential role played by magnetic correlations on superconductivity.

In order to address the open questions above, we present here temperature-dependent penetration depth \( [\Delta \lambda(T)] \) studies on single crystals of two \( R\text{PdBi} \) half-Heusler superconductors with trivial band inversion: YPdBi, which is nonmagnetic, and TbPdBi, which orders antiferromagnetically below the Néel temperature \( T_N = 5.5 \) K and becomes superconducting at a critical temperature as high as \( T_c \approx 1.75 \) K. Through the study of these two compounds we can compare the behavior of the penetration depth between these two systems with different levels of magnetic correlations, and, furthermore, with previous findings on the nontrivial band inversion.

Single crystals of YPdBi and TbPdBi were grown using Bi as flux. One sample of TbPdBi, with dimensions...
The penetration depth of YPdBi was measured on three single crystals with the following dimensions: $0.250 \times 0.188 \times 0.125 \text{ mm}^3$ (sample 1), $0.188 \times 0.156 \times 0.125 \text{ mm}^3$ (sample 2), and $0.125 \times 0.125 \times 0.156 \text{ mm}^3$ (sample 3), respectively. In order to verify the superconducting transition of YPdBi, we measured separately the resistance of two additional samples selected from the same batch, with dimensions $0.180 \times 0.126 \times 0.040 \text{ mm}^3$ (sample 4) and $0.410 \times 0.370 \times 0.059 \text{ mm}^3$ (sample 5). Temperature-dependent penetration depth measurements were performed by placing the samples inside the inductor of an LC-tank resonator, biased by a tunnel diode, i.e., the tunnel diode oscillator (TDO) setup [8]. The TDO was mounted on a Janis Model JDry-500 cryogen-free $^3\text{He}^-^4\text{He}$ dilution refrigerator system. A special setup, where the sample is thermally linked to the mixing chamber and the TDO circuit is connected to the second (4 K) cooling stage of the dilution refrigerator, was employed [9]. This way, the circuit temperature is stabilized within better than 0.2 mK at 4 K, while the sample temperature is varied over several degrees. The resonant frequency of the empty resonator is 5.9 MHz, with a noise floor of about 0.5 Hz and no significant drifts over the duration of the experiment. The base temperature in our experiments was 70 mK.

The change of the TDO frequency is directly related to the change in penetration depth, $\Delta f (T) = (-G/R)\Delta \lambda(T)$. The parameter $G$ is a calibration constant that depends on the volume of the sample relative to the volume of the inductor (filling factor), and on the shape of the sample (demagnetization factor). More precisely, this calibration constant represents the difference between the frequencies of the empty resonator and that with the sample inside the solenoid, that was determined directly by cooling the system both with and without the sample. The parameter $R$ represents an effective dimension calculated from the actual dimensions of the sample according to Ref. [10].

Figure 1 shows the temperature dependence of resistance for two samples of YPdBi (samples 4 and 5). Clear superconducting transitions, but with slightly different critical temperatures, can be observed in both samples. The onset critical temperature is $T_c \approx 1.3$ K in sample 4 and 1.2 K in sample 5. The complete loss of resistance occurs at 1.04 and 0.97 K, respectively. Therefore, we can estimate a difference of about 0.07–0.1 K between their critical temperatures. The transition widths are very similar, averaging at 0.25 ± 0.02 K. Another important feature in Fig. 1 is the small, sharp drop of resistance at $T \approx 1.6$ K. This was observed in both samples, although more strongly in sample 5, displayed in the inset of Fig. 1. The temperature matches closely the critical temperature of the $\alpha$-Bi$_2$Pd phase, therefore this feature is indicative of the presence of a small amount of the impurity phase $\alpha$-Bi$_2$Pd, which was created in baking the contacts, as previously reported in Ref. [5]. We notice that the drop in resistance is about 0.7% in sample 4 and 8% in sample 5, suggesting a small amount of impurity concentration. Moreover, we checked one of our samples selected for the penetration depth study discussed below and did not observe a measurable diamagnetic screening at 1.6 K [see inset (b) of Fig. 2], ruling out the effect of the impurity $\alpha$-Bi$_2$Pd phase on our study of YPdBi.

Figure 2 shows the magnetic field penetration depth for three samples of YPdBi, measured between 0.07 and 1.4 K. As discussed above, to address the concerns related to the possible presence of the impurity phase, sample 1 has been measured to a higher temperature, and we display in inset (b) a zoom on the region around 1.6 K, marked with an arrow. Any possible feature at that temperature is within the noise level of our data, and is definitely negligible compared to the clear diamagnetic screening, with the onset around 1 K, that...
As it has been pointed out in a previous study on YPtBi, the large temperature dependence of the penetration depth may be explained in general by the low carrier concentration in these materials \(n \approx 10^{18} - 10^{19} \text{ cm}^{-3}\), and hence the large London penetration depth \(\lambda_L = \lambda(0) = \sqrt{m/(\mu_0e^2)}\) \cite{6}. Then, the possible difference in carrier concentration between samples from the same compound may explain the large variation observed in our samples.

It can be clearly observed in Fig. 3 that the penetration depth does not saturate toward zero temperature, and in consequence, the BCS exponential function did not correctly reproduce its low-temperature behavior. Instead, we found that a power-law fit \(\Delta\lambda(T) = A \times T^n\) is more accurate. The exponent was very similar for all three samples, \(n = 2.76 \pm 0.04\), despite the fact that the factor \(A\) was found to be more than 50% larger in sample 2 than in the other two.

Before discussing the potential implications of our findings on YPdBi, it is important to also look at the low-temperature penetration depth of a similar ternary half-Heusler compound TbPdBi. Figure 4 shows \(\Delta\lambda(T)\) (main panel) and its derivative \(d\Delta\lambda/dT(T)\) (inset), from the base temperature to 1.4 K. Because of an experimental issue, the base temperature for this experiment was 0.131 K. Similar to our discussion on YPdBi, we find that superconductivity in TbPdBi emerges around 1.25 K and the sample is fully superconducting below 0.85 K [position of the peak of \(d\Delta\lambda/dT(T)\)]. Therefore, both the critical temperature and the superconducting transition width are very similar between the two compounds. Also, our base temperature of 0.131 K is still well below 0.3Tc in TbPdBi, even by the most conservative estimate of \(T_c\).

As it can be seen from the main panel of Fig. 5, \(\Delta\lambda(T)\) in TbPdBi also shows a significant temperature dependence at low temperature, but the rate of change is smaller than in YPdBi. We found that up to 0.2 K, it changes by less than 300 nm, which is less than 50% of the values for YPdBi in Fig. 3. As discussed above, the precise determination of the zero-temperature penetration depth would help explain the difference. Just as for YPdBi, a power-law fit describes well our experimental data from Fig. 5. The exponent was...
found to be $n = 2.6 \pm 0.3$, showing a larger variation with the temperature range of the fit. Nevertheless, the average value of the exponent is similar to that determined above for YPdBi. Based on the data shown in Figs. 2–5, we can conclude that both YPdBi and TbPdBi have similar critical temperatures and a similar temperature dependence of the penetration depth. We believe that these findings have implications on the potential role played by magnetic correlations in mediating the superconductivity of the half-Heusler materials RPDBi ($R = \text{rare-earth element}$). As we mentioned in the Introduction, based on Ref. [5], YPdBi is considered to have the weakest magnetic correlations and the highest superconducting transition temperature. On the other hand, the magnetic correlations in TbPdBi are strong enough to result in AF ordering below 5.5 K, and, possibly, to suppress superconductivity. Similar work, however, has reported bulk superconductivity in TbPdBi, with $T_c$ up to 1.75 K, despite magnetic ordering [7]. The inset of Fig. 5 displays the change in resonant frequency of our TDO circuit from the base temperature up to 6 K when the TbPdBi sample is loaded, showing clearly both the superconducting (SC) and antiferromagnetic (AF) transitions. We note that similar data on YPdBi did not reveal any additional magnetic transition, other than superconductivity, up to 10 K. Based on the discussion in Ref. [7], despite the increase in magnetic correlations from YPdBi to TbPdBi, superconductivity remains robust in both systems, which is further confirmed by our present data. Moreover, we found that the penetration depth also has a similar power-law temperature dependence in both compounds. Therefore, we suggest indirectly that AF fluctuations do not play a leading role in the superconducting pairing mechanism, and further, more direct probes, such as neutron scattering, may elucidate this question. The relatively large variation between the rate of change of the penetration depth with temperature, i.e., the parameter $A$, can rather be explained by different values of the London penetration depth. One would expect that other factors that can affect $A$, such as impurity scattering, variation of the superconducting gap, or the gap anisotropy with the size of the Fermi surface, should also affect the exponent $n$, contrary to our finding.

Furthermore, we suggest that the power-law behavior of $\Delta \lambda (T)$ with very similar exponents observed in two compounds with different scales of AF fluctuations, as well as in different samples from the same compound, is intrinsically related to the symmetry of the superconducting gap, which is unconventional, rather than to other effects such as of impurity scattering, as it was found, for example, in the Fe-based superconductors. It is worth noticing otherwise that in some Fe-based superconductors, where the role of magnetic correlations on superconductivity was clearly established, the penetration depth was also found to have a power-law temperature dependence. The exponent, however, varied significantly between samples with different doping and/or impurity levels. The impurity scattering between bands with a sign changing superconducting gap was one of the factors often invoked to explain the behavior of $\Delta \lambda (T)$ [11]. Unlike Fe-based superconductors, YPdBi and TbPdBi are single-band superconductors, ruling out a similar explanation. Intraband scattering may rather play an important role, but if that were the case, one would have expected a larger variation of the exponent between our three samples of YPdBi. Most likely, the power-law temperature dependence of the penetration depth in our samples is determined by the symmetry of the gap, and the lack of saturation and a nonexponential temperature dependence rule out a conventional, isotropic $s$-wave gap.

It is also important to notice that the exponent $n > 2$ observed in all our samples is very different from the nearly linear temperature dependence of the penetration depth previously reported in YPtBi [6]. A linear behavior of $\Delta \lambda (T)$ implies the existence of line nodes in the superconducting gap, and Ref. [6] suggests that a nodal order parameter in the half-Heusler compounds represents evidence for unconventional Cooper pairs with high angular momentum. Strong impurity scattering in a superconductor with line nodes can create low-energy excitations and change the linear $T$ dependence into a quadratic $T^2$, below a characteristic temperature $T^*$ [12]. In order to verify such a hypothesis, we plot $\Delta \lambda$ vs $T^2$ in the inset of Fig. 3. In the limit $T \to 0$ the penetration depth does follow a quadratic temperature dependence, but in a narrow range. Moreover, the linear dependence is expected to recover above $T^*$, whereas our data from the inset of Fig. 3 show a stronger temperature variation than quadratic or linear at higher temperatures. In fact, the main panels of Figs. 3 and 5 clearly show that an exponent quite larger than 2 fits our data over a relatively broad temperature range, rather suggesting that nodes in the superconductive gap are unlikely, at least in YPdBi and TbPdBi.

Therefore, the nodal order parameter is not a universal feature of half-Heusler superconductors. To better understand the difference between our findings and those from Ref. [6], we look at the significant differences between YPdBi, TbPdBi, and YPtBi. The Hall effect and Shubnikov–de Haas (SdH) oscillation measurements have revealed very similar carrier concentrations and Fermi-surface sizes between YPdBi and YPtBi [6,13]. There is, however, a major difference between the band structures of these two compounds. In YPtBi, strong
spin-orbit scattering gives rise to a relatively large and positive (nontrivial) band inversion at the $\Gamma$ point, $\Delta E = \Gamma_8 - \Gamma_6 > 0$. Both SdH oscillations [6] and angle-resolved photoemission spectroscopy (ARPES) [14] data found that the chemical potential is situated in the $p$-like $\Gamma_8$ band, therefore the total angular momentum of conduction electrons is $j = 3/2$. In consequence, as explained in Ref. [6], pairing with total angular momentum beyond the singlet $s$ wave ($J = 0$) and triplet $p$ wave ($J = 1$) is possible. It was suggested that the larger angular momentum pairing channel in particular might be responsible for a superconducting gap with line nodes [15]. On the contrary, the band structure of YPdBi (and TbPdBi) is situated in the $s$-like band $\Gamma_6$ in the valence band is situated above $\Gamma_7$ at the spin-orbit scattering gives rise to a relatively large and positive (nontrivial) band inversion at the $\Gamma$ point, $\Delta E = \Gamma_8 - \Gamma_6 > 0$. Both SdH oscillations [6] and angle-resolved photoemission spectroscopy (ARPES) [14] data found that the chemical potential is situated in the $p$-like $\Gamma_8$ band, therefore the total angular momentum of conduction electrons is $j = 3/2$. In consequence, as explained in Ref. [6], pairing with total angular momentum beyond the singlet $s$ wave ($J = 0$) and triplet $p$ wave ($J = 1$) is possible. It was suggested that the larger angular momentum pairing channel in particular might be responsible for a superconducting gap with line nodes [15]. On the contrary, the band structure of YPdBi (and TbPdBi) is situated in the $s$-like band $\Gamma_6$ in the valence band is situated above $p$-like $\Gamma_8$ ($\Delta E < 0$), and is closer to the Fermi level. Therefore, the conduction band in YPdBi has an $s$ symmetry, allowing only singlet or triplet superconducting pairing. In this case, anisotropy in the superconducting gap, as suggested by the power-law dependence of the penetration depth, is more likely to be favored by the $p$-wave (triplet) pairing channel [16]. Therefore, although the penetration depth is not a directly spin-dependent measurement, our data support the existence of triplet pairing, most likely mixed with singlet pairing, superconductivity in YPdBi and TbPdBi.

Aside from the anisotropy of the superconducting gap, there is yet another possible reason for a power-law behavior of $\Delta\lambda(T)$, when mixed singlet-triplet pairing is considered. YPdBi and TbPdBi are single-band conductors, therefore within the same band, the Fermi surface of the condensate consists of regions of singlet and triplet pairing. Intraband impurity scattering between regions with different pairing symmetries is expected to manifest as a pair breaker, similar to the effect of interband impurity scattering in multiband superconductors with sign changing gap(s) [17]. As a consequence, it can increase the number of quasiparticles with increasing temperature, resulting in a stronger temperature dependence of the penetration depth than otherwise exponential. However, intraband impurity scattering is expected in this case to also affect the critical temperature $T_c$. We reemphasize that our three different YPdBi samples and one TbPdBi all had very similar $T_c$ and very similar exponents of $\Delta\lambda(T)$, apparently undercutting the role of intraband scattering. It is again possible that because the region of triplet pairing on the Fermi surface is very small compared to the singlet one, the effect of scattering between the two regions when summing the gap over the entire FS may be too small in order to affect the critical temperature. While it is more likely that the anisotropy of the superconducting gap is responsible for our observation of a power-law temperature dependence of the penetration depth in YPdBi and TbPdBi, we believe that future theoretical and experimental work on the role of impurity scattering is also worth pursuing. Nevertheless, our results provide strong support for an unconventional, possibly mixed, singlet-triplet superconductivity in half-Heusler semiconductors with a trivial band inversion.

The work at Tulane was supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation under Grant No. DMR-1707502. L.S. thanks the National Science Foundation for support through the Independent Research/Development (IR/D) Program. We would like to thank Peter Hirschfeld for stimulating discussions and suggestions.