
Metastability and Nucleation of ³He-⁴He Mixtures near the Tricritical Point

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Homogeneous nucleation of phase separation has been investigated in liquid ³He-⁴He mixtures. Near the tricritical point the maximum supercooling marking the boundary of the metastable region is strongly enhanced compared to ordinary critical fluids. Beyond the metastability limit, the observed growth of the new phase is in good accord with a theory of Lifshitz and Slyozov.

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The condensed phases of helium have for a long time been playing a rather important role for the understanding of phase transitions. Equilibrium properties of pure liquid ⁴He, but also of ³He-⁴He mixtures along the lambda line and near the

tricritical point, have been widely studied, and the agreement between theory and experiment in general is excellent.^{1,2} The same reasons which have favored liquid helium for these equilibrium investigations—like its extreme purity and the

exceptionally simple constituents—ought to make it well suited also for studying states far from equilibrium. In particular, mixtures of ^3He - ^4He because of their miscibility gap below the tricritical point offer the opportunity to investigate metastable states and nucleation in a phase-separating quantum system. Yet until recently experimental information about the behavior of helium mixtures in the miscibility gap was rather sparse. The only quantitative measurements in the vicinity of the tricritical point—an experiment by Brubaker and Moldover on the nucleation of phase separation in supercooled mixtures³—suggested a metastable region one order of magnitude smaller than anticipated on the basis of classical nucleation theory.⁴ Considering such a discrepancy in an otherwise well-understood system we have begun to study metastability and the early stage of decomposition of ^3He - ^4He quenched into the miscibility gap.

States inside the miscibility gap were prepared by the usual pressure quench technique,^{5,6} starting from an equilibrium state on the coexistence curve at a pressure p_i and a temperature $T_i = T_t(p_i) - \Delta T$, where $T_t(p)$ is the (pressure-dependent) tricritical temperature. The beginning of phase separation, characterized by the appearance of rapidly growing concentration fluctuations, was detected by measuring the attenuation of a laser beam passing through the sample. Since the polarizability of helium and therefore the scattering from the fluctuations is relatively small, not only the onset of decomposition⁷ as in previous experiments,⁸⁻¹¹ but also the subsequent droplet growth could be derived from the transmitted intensity. (In the systems studied previously multiple-scattering effects have prevented such a quantitative analysis.)

Figure 1 shows the transmitted intensity I_t and the effective quench depth $\delta T = T_t(p(t)) - T(t) - \Delta T$ as a function of time. The time dependence of δT is determined by the pressure relaxation through the sample chamber capillary. Several stages can be distinguished: Initially $I_t(t)$ agrees with I_0 , the transmitted intensity before the start of the quench, within the accuracy of our measurement; then, at some supercooling δT_m a sharp decrease in I_t is observed, followed by a slower variation and, at much later times, a further accelerated decrease in transmissivity.

When in the course of the pressure release the quench depth reaches the value δT_m the nucleation rate apparently increases rapidly so that the time for nucleation embryos¹⁰ to develop becomes very

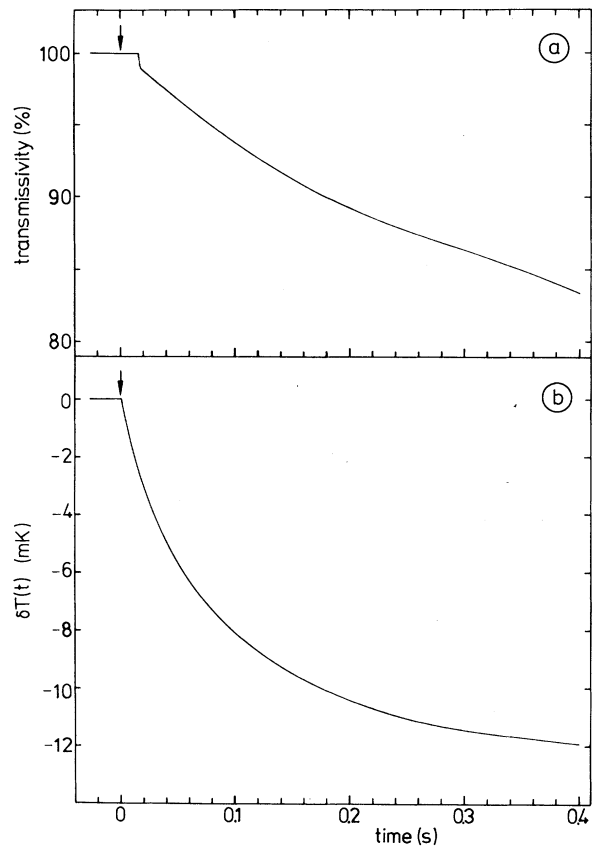


FIG. 1. (a) Transmissivity I_t and (b) effective quench depth δT of a ^3He - ^4He mixture during a pressure quench into the miscibility gap. The quench started from the superfluid branch of the coexistence curve at $\Delta T = 14$ mK. The pressure was released here from $p_i = 0.7$ bar to $p_f =$ saturated vapor pressure ~ 0 bar. The arrows mark the beginning of the quench.

small on the time scale given by the speed of our quench. We therefore identify δT_m with the cloud point known from other systems,⁸⁻¹¹ which implies that in the temperature interval $\delta T < \delta T_m$ the mixture is in a metastable state. Indeed, states prepared with a quench depth $\delta T < \delta T_m$ did not decay during the sampling interval of several seconds. The normalized maximum supercooling $\delta T_m/\Delta T$ where the experimental limit of metastability is reached depends on the reduced temperature as plotted in Fig. 2. According to the classical nucleation theory by Becker and Döring⁴ the maximum supercooling in the metastable state is $\delta T_m/\Delta T \sim 0.13$. Our measurements show that for $\epsilon = (T_t - T)/T_t > 0.03$ the metastable regime determined here is actually in very good agreement with this prediction, both for the superfluid and

We have compared our data with a theory of Lifshitz and Slyozov for the growth of droplets in a supersaturated mixture.¹⁵ According to these authors the variation of the radius R of a droplet is implicitly given by

$$\frac{dR}{dt} = \frac{D}{R} \left(\frac{\delta x}{\Delta x} - \frac{2d_0}{R} \right). \quad (1)$$

Here D is the diffusion coefficient, $\delta x(t)$ is the instantaneous supersaturation, Δx is the concentration difference of the two coexisting phases in equilibrium, and $d_0 = \frac{1}{6} \xi$,¹³ where ξ is the correlation length. From Eq. (1) we have calculated an average droplet radius $\bar{R}(t)$, assuming that in the range considered here the droplet distribution is sharply peaked at \bar{R} , and that the number density of the droplets has a constant value n_d , i.e., that nucleation occurs essentially in a very short time interval ($\Delta t \ll 2.5$ msec) at the beginning of the decomposition process. Both assumptions appear to be well fulfilled for other systems^{13,16} in the regime where the speed of the decomposition reaction, given by the change in supersaturation $d(\delta x)/dt$, is near its maximum value. The density n_d which enters the calculation was determined from the nearly constant light-scattering signal after the reaction has gone close to completion (see Fig. 3, $t \gtrsim 20$ msec). The resulting normalized scattered intensity $I_{\text{theor}}(t)$ is given by the solid line in Fig. 3. For the material parameters we have taken the values measured on the coexistence curve.^{1,2} The agreement with the data is quite remarkable, which suggests that in the metastable regime quantities like the diffusion coefficient have values comparable to those on the phase separation lines. Similar conformity has been found also for other quenches in the range $0.013 \leq \epsilon \leq 0.07$.

In summary, our measurements have established a metastable region in the phase diagram of ^3He - ^4He mixtures near the tricritical point, which expressed in $\delta T_m/\Delta T$ is symmetric for the superfluid and the normal phase. For quenches beyond the metastability limit droplets appear whose growth up to the microscopic completion of phase separation closely follows a Lifshitz-Slyozov behavior. We conclude that in the temperature interval investigated here the onset of phase separation occurs via a fast nucleation process; the competing mechanism for phase separation, spinodal decomposition as considered by Hohenberg and Nelson,¹⁸ thus appears to become relevant in ^3He - ^4He only for temperatures

extremely close to T_t .

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