

Einstein's Friend, Walther Rathenau: The Agapic Personality in Politics and Diplomacy

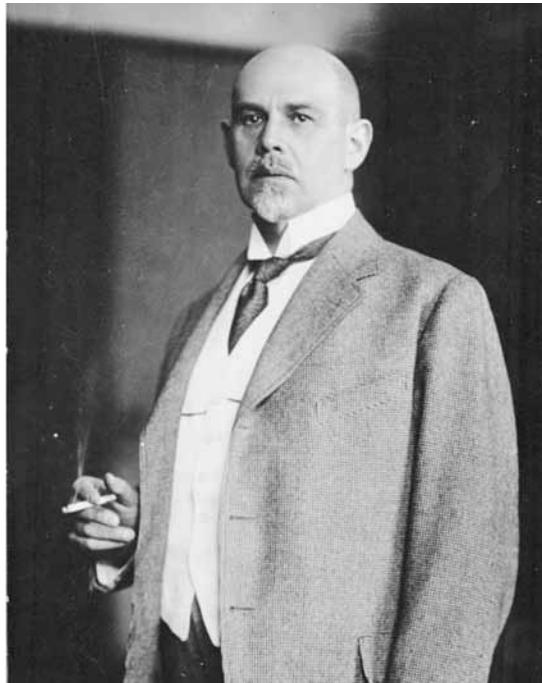
PART TWO OF TWO PARTS

by Judy Hodgkiss

June 2012—The following, excerpted from a two-part article in the German newspaper, *Neue Solidarität*, is intended as a case study of the unique personality type capable of calm, creative leadership, as demonstrated in the atmosphere of panic in 1920s in Weimar Germany, or, as will be needed, in the existential crisis of today. Part One was [reprinted](#) in *EIR* Vol. 47, No. 35, August 28, 2020, pp. 48-60.

On June 24, 2012 we commemorate the 90th anniversary of the assassination of the German Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau, a singular figure in the industrialization and the political leadership of the German nation at the beginning of the 20th Century. His was a personality perfectly suited for leadership in a time of crisis. A model for today.

We will speak here of Rathenau's accomplishments in industry, politics and diplomacy. But we cannot merely recount Rathenau's monumental list of achievements as an industrialist—he did not consider himself as primarily an industrialist. Neither can we merely list his achievements in politics and diplomacy—he did not consider himself as primarily a politician or a diplomat. He thought of himself foremost as a writer, a philosopher, a



Walther Rathenau, August 1, 1921.

poet, an artist, and a musician. Therefore, when he devised his various policies, his first consideration was never what others might consider to be “practical”; he saw his fight against the British Empire as primarily a cultural fight, a battle for the “soul” of the German nation.

Rathenau served as political advisor—officially and unofficially—to almost all of the turn-of-the-century German governments: from the pre-war reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II and his cabinet; through the wartime emergency governments and the chaotic coups and counter-coups of the demobilization; then in the post-war Weimar Republic, until his death in 1922.

He brought to the service of his country, in each of these cases, a personality uniquely distilled from, and expressive of, the best of the German classical tradition. Whether devising policy for the colonies in Africa, negotiating the Rapallo Treaty with the Russians, or building the various private industries and concerns of which he and his father were a part, he always described his actions as being guided by that “German spirit which has sung and thought for the world,” a spirit which was, after the war, threatened with obliteration by those “who are blinded by hate.”¹

Editor's Note: This article was first [published](#) in English on the Schiller Institute website in June 2012, and in German as a two-part series on June 27, 2012 in the German newspaper, *Neue Solidarität*.

1. “Open Letter to All Who Are Not Blinded by Hate,” December 1918, as printed in *Nach der Flut* (After the Flood), as quoted in *Rathenau: His Life and Work*, Count Harry Kessler, Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1930. (Original German version, 1928.)

‘And I Feel It Cruelly’

But perhaps a more difficult prospect for Rathenau, over the years, than even the thought of his early physical demise, was his suffering over his increasing isolation from friends and collaborators, due, first to the effects of the slander campaign run against him, and, only secondarily, by that later environment of threats of physical violence.

Even before the war, the attacks on his writings had brought him much anguish. He wrote to a friend, Hermann Kröpelin, in 1912:

You want to write about my book? My friend, I must warn you. If you depart an inch from the stereotyped judgment: “witty, cold, a dilettante in sixteen subjects, and a tolerable business man,” you will be laughed to scorn. This is what people will have me to be, and I am content to be tolerated as a harmless fool. They ask me: “How do you find time for such nonsense?” and if I told them that that is my life, they would send for the doctor. Be prudent, dear friend; it is not considered good form to treat me kindly.²

Even Lili Deutsch was affected by the accusations charging him with an unbridled egoism, and of having a split personality, i.e., that he was a hypocritical millionaire businessman who practiced “socialism” as a hobby. Rathenau answered her charges by developing a metaphor of how the human soul could be tuned to the music of the universe:

It is true that my nature is polyphonic. The melody rises like a treble above the other parts, but it is very seldom unaccompanied. And in the bass and tenor other sounds are heard, sometimes harmonizing, sometimes in utter discord with the song. I know incomparably better men, in fact great men, in whose every word and thought I detect the same phenomenon; in this I find I do not stand alone. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if it were this very strength or weakness which like a shell re-echoes, though faintly, the rush and roar of the whole world. Meanwhile the pure flute notes of more simple natures seem to me monotonous, charming and rather dull.

2. Rathenau to Herman Kröpelin, January 20, 1912, as quoted in Kessler.

Now, this is why people are mistaken in me, because in this medley of voices they fail to recognize a melody. But I recognize one, and know that it is there, and that it controls all the rest.

And the proof of it is this: Life itself does not deceive, even if all else does. Now, consider my life. Do you know of another more earnest, more self-denying? And this is not due to lack of sensibility, or dullness. Nor is it due to any wish of mine. For I wish nothing. Ruthlessly though I have questioned my inner self, I have never found anything of this world that I wish. I wish what I must, otherwise nothing. And what I must, I see, as a wanderer by night sees by the light of his lantern only a few steps in front of him. That this my life is an oblation, offered gladly and willingly to the powers above, not for reward, nor in hope, this I may say, and you yourself know it; that I forfeit the love of my fellow-men in the process I know, and feel it cruelly.

And, in another letter, he answered her more directly:

On two points you do me an injustice. Over-estimation of self, indeed! I realize my limitations very precisely and have always respected them. But you do not realize them, for one does not exhaust a man’s possibilities in conversation. And despite everything, you are bound by the established opinion: “witty, subtle and cold.” No matter....

God be thanked. You may squabble as much as you like. For in the long run I would rather be scolded by you than praised by anyone³

And then, with the initiation of his post-war politi-

3. Rathenau to Lili Deutsch, date unknown; Rathenau to Lili Deutsch, July 29, 1906, as quoted in Kessler. Rathenau’s most revealing statements are taken from his correspondence with his women friends, particularly Lili Deutsch, the wife of his business partner, Felix Deutsch, Chairman of AEG. Rathenau’s relationship with Lili was intense, but not adulterous; and, despite the sometimes-intimate tone of the letters, both correspondents wrote with an eye to future publication. In 1924, Lili turned the letters over to Count Harry Kessler for use in his account of Rathenau’s life, which, though hopelessly romanticized (with proto-fascist overtones, as his frequent references to Nietzsche reveal), yet has a particular usefulness, in that its English translation provides a wide selection of extensive quotes from Rathenau’s writings and correspondence, otherwise available only in the original German.

cal career, Rathenau found that, aside from Einstein, and Lili and her husband, Felix Deutsch, and a handful of his musician friends,⁴ very few of his old collaborators wished to be associated with him.

On May 17, 1922, he wrote to Lili, just before his departure from the Genoa Conference (April 10-May 19). He had triumphed there with a promise won from the Allies of a provisional debt moratorium, won despite—or perhaps because of—his separate economic agreement negotiated on the side with the Russian delegation, at a short distance from Genoa, in the small seaside town of Rapallo.

Rathenau had triumphed, but he knew that he would return to Germany, not as just that pernicious Jew who wanted to negotiate with the Allies rather than to prepare to fight them again; but, *now* he would be that Communist Jew, who preferred to negotiate, above all, with the Bolsheviks, even more than with the other enemies of the state. But, in spite of it all, Rathenau was able to write, with the remarkable calm of a Joan of Arc at her trial, or of a Martin Luther King giving his Mountaintop speech, in what would be his last letter to Lili:

Why trouble to ponder over it all? When we look back over these years, hasn't everything that happened and had to happen been for the best?

I often think, and it is my greatest comfort: What a wretched sort of life is that which merely



Gen. Paul von Hindenburg (later President) and Gen. Erich von Ludendorff, head of the Supreme Command. Rathenau advised both of them.

runs its even course untroubled! The wonderful thing is that all true sorrow is beautiful. Only the stupidly awry and the arbitrarily distorted is ugly. In our life everything has been Law; thus were the facts, and thus their predestined course. Nothing has been in vain; nothing can now be thought away or given up.

And if you honestly reflect you will find that even what seemed to be Chance was really Necessity. And is Chance going to have his own way now? My life has run too far along its course for that to be possible.

Now at last I am free of my fellow men. Not in the sense that I could ever be indifferent to them. On the contrary, the freer I am the nearer and dearer—despite all—they are to me; and I joyfully recognize that I exist for them, not they for me....

Certainly there is not much more that I can do. The flame burns low. But you know it is my destiny to be ready to lift from others the burden that oppresses them and to remain myself without desire....

Affectionately, W.⁵

‘Responsibility Exerted to the Utmost’

During the war, Rathenau had not only served with the War Raw Materials Department, but he had played a role as an unofficial advisor to Erich Ludendorff, the Head of the Supreme Command, and, also, in 1916, as a negotiator for peace.

In his diary, Rathenau described his negotiations with Colonel Edward House, who served, officially, as President Wilson’s personal representative in Europe, but was, in actuality, the top agent of London in Washington, D.C. In January of 1916, while the United States

4. Karl Klingler, first violinist of the Klingler Quartet, and formerly violinist for Joseph Joachim’s quartet, not only maintained his close friendship with Rathenau, but also remained a close friend of Einstein, until Einstein left Berlin in 1933; and, beyond that time, remained a dear friend of Max Planck’s, throughout the war, including through the time that Planck’s son, a German officer, was killed by Hitler for his involvement in the resistance. A two-disc CD by the Klingler Quartet, recorded in London in the 1930s, is available on Amazon.com. It is called, *Klingler Quartet: The Joachim Tradition*.

5. Rathenau to Lili Deutsch, May 17, 1922, as quoted in Kessler.

was not yet involved in the war, House was in Berlin, pretending to be an honest broker between the Germans and the British. Rathenau met with House at the home of U.S. Ambassador Gerard, the evening of January 30:

[After dinner] House kept me back in the dining room and the table was cleared. He had been in Paris for only one day, whereas he had spent several days in London ... He considers that [British Foreign Secretary] Grey is ready to conclude a peace, and, what is more, under the unchanged, original English conditions, namely: surrender of [German occupied] Belgium and northern France without compensation [to Germany].... There would be compensations to be gained (Belgian, Congo, etc.) He can see no fear of France being disappointed, but America would, above all, use all its power to guarantee the so-called freedom of the seas and to eliminate every future possibility of a blockade [of Germany].⁶

House then proceeded to London, where he and Grey issued a completely contrary memorandum, one that House knew would be totally unacceptable to the Germans. It not only excluded any compensation to Germany, but it also included the demand that Germany cede the Alsace-Lorraine to France.

Germany's response, against Rathenau's advice, was to escalate with a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. The British certainly rejoiced: they knew that this could be the provocation that would bring the U.S. into the war on the side of Britain. The U.S., in fact, declared war on Germany April 6, 1917.

Rathenau, unlike his more fantasy-ridden country-

men, knew that this was the end for Germany, that there was no longer any way to win the war: There had to be a halt to the submarine warfare, and an immediate negotiated peace. Rathenau described a dinner party debate, recorded in his diary of May 2, 1917:

At dinner I sat between the Chancellor [Bethmann] and Countess Zech and conversation, which [Secretary of the Interior] Helfferich kept steering towards political and business matters,

naturally turned to submarine warfare. I said jokingly to Helfferich, who was sitting diagonally opposite to me and who was bringing up the familiar arguments, that I believed his predictions would be completely borne out: by the New Year 120-150 percent of the English merchant fleet would be sunk, nevertheless England would still be feeding herself and shooting. The Chancellor remained very reserved; Helfferich repeated his arguments and I asked him whether he was aware of England's daily subsistence level, expressed in tons. This was not the case, and those present seemed rather surprised when I gave the

figure of 12,000 tons—that is to say, the contents of one big, two medium or three smaller ships.

After dinner the Chancellor took me into a side room, and our conversation regarding the submarine question was continued confidentially.

'A Question of World History'

But Bethmann, although in complete agreement with Rathenau's assessment, suffered a failure of nerve. Then, in July, Rathenau had a private, three-hour meeting with Ludendorff, where he again pursued the problem with the submarine warfare, and the need to sue for peace while it were still possible to have it on honorable terms. The diary of July 10, says:



Edward "Colonel" House leaves Versailles after the signing of the treaty, June 28, 1919.

6. Walther Rathenau: Industrialist, Banker, Intellectual, and Politician: Notes and Diaries, 1907-1922, Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985.

Ludendorff now explained that he was not at all opposed to a negotiated peace, and never had been; that he merely considered the mood in the country as important and that one had only to bring in the negotiator to him.... I answered that I did not consider mood as an applicable measurement....

[Ludendorff] repeatedly asserted that he himself neither maintained the annexationists' point of view, nor did he intend to interfere in political developments.... I said to him that whatever the future Government looked like, close co-operation between it and the Supreme Command, that is himself, was absolutely indispens-



Rejecting Rathenau's advice, Germany pursued the war, submarine warfare and all, to its disastrous conclusion. Here, The Return of Submarine U-9 to Wilhelmshaven, Germany, a painting by Willy Stöwer.

able for the good of the country. He underestimated his power, as I had already told him months before; he possessed an authority close on dictatorship and with it responsibility as well, and history would hold him to it.

He replied that I still overestimated his power, that he could not approach the Kaiser and that he was hemmed in on all sides.

I answered by emphasizing the incredibly confused leadership in our power structure: the Under-Secretaries of State are powerless because the Chancellor is above them. The Chancellor cannot do anything if he does not have the sanction of Headquarters. At Headquarters Ludendorff is hampered by [President] Hindenburg, who switches over to the Kaiser whenever

he taps him on the shoulder. The Kaiser himself thinks that he is obeying the constitution and thus the circle is complete. However, here it is a question not of 'uniform hierarchy' but rather of world history.

As we know, Ludendorff failed the test of history. Germany pursued the war, the submarine warfare and all, to its disastrous conclusion. On September 28, 1918—much too late—Ludendorff finally asked political leaders in Berlin to sue for peace. He would resign his office October 26.

But on October 7, Rathenau had swung into action. He wrote in the *Vossische Zeitung* against a precipitous armistice. Rathenau wanted, instead, a mobilization of all possible reserves, "a national defense, the rising up of the nation.... It is peace we want, not war. But not a peace of surrender."⁷

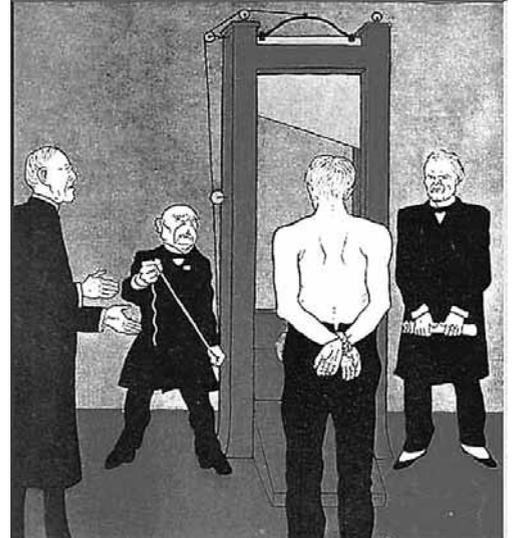
General Maximilian Hoffman supported Rathenau's idea of a *levee en masse*, of an additional one and one half million soldiers for a last stand against an invasion of Germany. This was to be done at the same time that all submarine warfare would be ended. Through this, Germany would regain the moral high ground; otherwise, the country would suffer more from its own internal divisions and recriminations of left vs. right, than it would from either a desperate war on its own territory or from a subsequent full occupation. The worse horror would be that of Germany losing its "soul."

That prescient thought would drive every action taken by Rathenau in the next four, short years left to him.

At the same time that Rathenau was organizing for a last-stand defense, he was also preparing for the possibility of the alternative. On October 15, he had a meeting with the War Minister to discuss a demobilization plan that would avoid civil disturbances and that would transition industry to peaceful production.

But soon everything began to unravel. With the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm, and the complete collapse and resignation of Ludendorff, the new Scheidemann government, in a panic, signed a "Pre-Armistice Agreement" on November 9, that pledged Germany to compensation for all damage done to the civilian population of the

7. As quoted in *Notes*.



Germany reacts to Versailles in political cartoons: The “Council of Four” force-feeding their peace terms to Germany, “like it or not”; and the “Big Three” (Wilson, Clemenceau, Lloyd George) preparing to execute the bound and shirtless German.

Allies. In January, the Paris Peace Conference began, with no representation from Germany even allowed until after the terms of the treaty would be agreed upon by the Allies—which did not happen until May. In the meanwhile, Germany was racked by chaotic violence and food shortages. While the negotiations were moved to Versailles, and dragged on through May, Rathenau wrote for the journal, *Zukunft* (*The Future*), May 31st:

What is to be done? At Versailles we must do our utmost to effect some radical improvement in the Treaty. If we succeed, well and good—then sign it. But if we do not, what then? In that case neither active nor passive resistance should be attempted. In that case the negotiator, Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, must deliver to the enemy governments the duly executed decree dissolving the National Assembly, and the resignation of the President and ministers, and invite them to take over without delay the sovereign rights of the German Reich and the whole machinery of government. Hereby the responsibility for the peace,



Bundesarchiv
Philipp Scheidemann, standing in a Chancellery window, proclaims Germany to be a republic, November 9, 1918.

for the administration, for all Germany’s actions, would fall to the enemy; and before the world, before history, and before their own peoples, they would be faced with the care of sixty millions. It would be a case without parallel, the unprecedented downfall of a nation, but at the same time a course compatible with honor and conscience. For the rest, we must trust to the inalienable right of mankind—and the clearly predictable march of events.⁸

Again, Rathenau went unheeded. In January of 1920, the Versailles Treaty went into effect and the Reparation Commission began operation. The unpayable debt was to be collected, at all costs.

From Technical Advisor to Foreign Minister

It was not until the July Spa Conference (Belgium), that Germany, after having weathered a series of attempted coups in Berlin and failed insurrections in other cities, was stable enough to offer a proposed pay-

8. As quoted in Kessler.

ment schedule for reparations, to be made in gold marks, and also a schedule for coal deliveries to France. Rathenau was part of the German delegation, having been designated “technical advisor” by the finance minister, Joseph Wirth, a former mathematics professor and a personal friend of Rathenau’s.

To no one’s surprise, Germany soon faltered in its payments of gold marks, and even struggled to produce the coal shipments. A conference of the Allies in Paris, in January, decided on a schedule of a series of payments, starting low, but rising astronomically over the next three years. A London Conference in March brought the German delegation back in to negotiate. Rathenau made a unique proposal: allow Germany to absorb the British and French war debts owed to the U.S.—The Germans of course would prefer to negotiate with the Americans. But this proposal, and all of the others from the Germans were rejected. The conference broke down and France occupied Düsseldorf, Duisburg and Ruhrort, threatening the entire Ruhr region.

A second London Conference was convened at the end of April with ultimata issued by London and Paris. On May 10, the Fehrenbach government collapsed, and Joseph Wirth headed up a new government coalition. Wirth accepted the London Ultimatum; but at the same time he named Rathenau to a newly created post, Minister for Reconstruction—reconstruction of northern France, that is, not of Germany. From that position, Rathenau entered into secret negotiations with the French Interior Minister Loucheur—a reasonable man—with the aim of replacing cash reparations with payment-in-kind, including free German labor to reconstruct northern France.

On October 6, the “Wiesbaden Agreement” was signed with Loucheur. On October 12, the British-controlled League of Nations announced the partition of Upper Silesia. The Wirth government had to go into emergency session.

Rathenau urged the government to resign. The Cabinet Minutes for the day, characterized Rathenau’s speech to the ministers:

[Rathenau said] No one would understand if the Cabinet stayed together after territory had been taken from us. There was a point where logic must cease to operate, and emotion take over. The Cabinet would no longer enjoy the respect of the nation. This was a question of character.

Logic would have to give way to character. Determination and emotion were decisive at a moment like this.... He recommended resigning today, while their hands were still free.⁹

Which is what they did. Here, finally, a seemingly outrageous proposal by Rathenau was implemented. And it worked. The right-wing was destabilized and unable to form a government. Wirth’s government reformed, but this time without Rathenau’s participation. This allowed Rathenau, who was the particular target of the right-wing, to keep his hands clean of the partition question; but, at the same time, Wirth continued to use him as his most valuable negotiator: this time as Private Citizen Rathenau.

By the end of November, Rathenau was back in London, this time alone, to negotiate a bridge loan, which, in actuality, would be a moratorium on German debt. Rathenau telegraphed back to Wirth, December 6, 1921: Prime Minister Lloyd George and Bank of England head Montagu Norman had made three demands of Germany, these to be in exchange for a combination of moratorium and the promise of further reparation conferences, a smaller one to be held at Cannes, then a larger one at Genoa. The three demands: “cessation of [government] subsidies, balancing the budget, closing down of the money printing presses.”¹⁰

Rathenau and Wirth agreed to present London with a deflationary program by January 28, that was to include mass layoffs of workers in national enterprises, such as the railroads. The hope was to achieve wiggle room at the upcoming conferences.

In his Cannes, January 11, 1922, speech, Rathenau argued against both the inflationary reparations program and the deflationary austerity program. He said that unemployment and doubling or trebling of taxes would equal the ruin of the German economy.

France’s Prime Minister Briand was receptive; but he was abruptly recalled to Paris, where he was forced to resign while the conference was still ongoing. But the Reparation Commission did grant the postponement of Germany’s debt payments that were to be due in January, February and April, and were replaced by payments-in-kind.

Rathenau was appointed Foreign Minister on January 31.

9. As quoted in *Notes*.

10. *Notes*.



The Soviet delegation is received at the Brest-Litovsk train station by the German negotiators, prior to negotiations for the treaty, February 1918.

The Russian Question

The trump card held by Rathenau was Russia. Rathenau had been engaged in a dialogue with the Russians since he had established a Commission for the Study of Russian Affairs, in February of 1920. On March 10, 1920, he wrote a letter to Professor Hoffmann at Wilhelmshaven, on the project:

I am in complete agreement with you as to the necessity of finding some common ground between Russia and ourselves. At the present time Bolshevism is only a facade; what we are really confronted with is a rigidly oligarchic agrarian republic, which in spite of all its difficulties is, I believe, destined to last. True, it will be a long time before Russia is strong enough to grant us economic compensations.... It is my hope that the labors of the Commission will bring about the first and decisive *rapprochement* in the economic sphere, to be followed, let us hope, by a corresponding *rapprochement* in the political sphere.¹¹

The Versailles Treaty's nullification of the German-Russian 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had left relations between the two countries in limbo. Bolshevik Russia had not been invited to the Paris Peace Conference,

11. As quoted in Kessler.

and, later, when the Allies established relations with the Russian government, the main item on the agenda was the question of Russia's pre-war debts to the West.

The British planned to use the Genoa Conference in April—the first conference to which Russia was invited—to disrupt the dialogue which Rathenau had been conducting with the Russian ambassador to Germany, Adolph Joffe. Joffe would be at the Genoa Conference, accompanying Russian Foreign Minister Georgi Chicherin.

Lloyd George had promised Rathenau open public discussions at Genoa of the Russian question; but (not for the first time) he lied. Several days into the conference, Rathenau was handed the Allies' proposal for a German-Russian treaty, negotiated with maximum pressure on Chicherin, and without German participation. Rathenau said to the chair of the Genoa Conference, the Italian politician, Gianni:

The agreement with Russia has been made without consulting us. You have arranged a nice dinner party to which we have not been invited, and now you ask us how we like the menu.¹²

On the morning of April 16, while the Genoa Conference was ongoing, Rathenau met with the Russian delegation at a seaside town outside of Genoa, called Rapallo, where they drew up a treaty of their own design, based on economic cooperation among equals. They presented the Rapallo Treaty as a *fait accompli* to the conference that afternoon. After a few days of hysteria, the delegates, and the international media gathered there, settled down, and Germany was even allowed to continue negotiations on its debt payment extensions. Rathenau was to return to Germany a success.

But Rathenau knew what that “success” meant for

12 As relayed by Kessler, himself, who was part of the German delegation to the conference.



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Rathenau and Alfredo Frassati, Italian Ambassador to Berlin, in Genoa, Italy, during the Rapallo Conference nearby, April 1922.



Bundesarchiv

Rathenau returns to the Genoa Conference on April 16, 1922, following his signing of the Rapallo Treaty with the Soviets.

categorically that the police protection be removed, saying that he forbade the molestation of his guests. By the time Roddie left, the police guard had disappeared.¹³

‘He Lived Wonderfully’

On June 24, Rathenau was shot multiple times, as he was driving just a few blocks from his house.

His home was turned into a museum, with everything left as it was that morning. On the second anniversary of his death, a journalist, Joseph Roth, reported on his visit to the house, in an article for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, June 24, 1924:

him, personally. We saw earlier he had soberly written to Lili from Genoa, soon after his Rapallo victory: “There is not much more that I can do. The flame burns low.”

In what was likely to have been a British Intelligence probe of his security, Rathenau was visited at his home, just a few days before his murder, by a Col. Stuart Roddie, who was a member of the British embassy in Berlin, and what Count Kessler called a “confidant” of Lloyd George. Kessler interviewed Roddie later and reported in his diary Roddie’s description of the evening. Whether or not events transpired as described by Roddie, the report is chilling:

He recalled how he visited Rathenau’s house in Grunewald three or four days before the assassination. As he drove up, he was stopped by two men in civilian clothes. Whom, they asked, did he want to see? He produced his papers and was allowed to pass. Going into the house, he heard music in a room to the right of the entrance, went in, and saw Rathenau seated at the piano, playing by candlelight. Rathenau jumped up and apologized. Roddie told him that he was glad to find that he was taking security precautions. This excited Rathenau immensely. He hurried to the telephone, rang up some office, and demanded

I’m sorry to say that the Rathenau Museum is not open to the general public. To inspect the house on Königsallee, you will need a pass from the keeper of paintings. Foreign visitors on the whole don’t want to put themselves to the trouble of visiting government premises in Berlin ... [and] for the most part it is foreigners who want to see where the man—who died so terribly—lived.

He lived wonderfully. Among great books and rare objects, amid beautiful paintings and colors, with useless, sublime, tiny, fragile, impressive, tenderness-eliciting, powerful, dreamy things; surrounded by evidence of the human past, of human wisdom, human beauty, human strength, and human suffering: by the breath of the eternal human. That is what makes outlandish things seem familiar and foreign things at home here. Even the downright “exotic” doesn’t dazzle, doesn’t overpower, confuse, or startle. Its surprise is gently administered. Distancing things extend an invitation. Intimate things are discreet.

13. *Berlin in Lights: The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937)*, Charles Kessler, trans. and ed., Grove Press, New York, 2002.



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Left: one million people rally in Berlin, in tribute to their fallen Foreign Minister, Walther Rathenau, June 25, 1922. Count Kessler: “The response which had been denied to Rathenau’s life and thought was now accorded to his death.” Right: A float bearing wreaths, before departing for Rathenau’s gravesite.

A loving hand has instinctively created order here. Following hidden inner laws, a prophetic eye has searched. A brilliantly imaginative pedantry has had its way here, classifying and bringing together. Everything here—the books, the cabinets, the tables—is lovingly and indulgently allowed the secret rhythm of its natural being.

The house is an organic whole, wisely divided into above and below: the upstairs with bedrooms and bathroom, guest room, and small private study and the more professional, more official downstairs, where there is also the main study, the desk of the man in public life (the one upstairs is that of the private citizen and writer—I almost said: poet). Everywhere there are the books, the symbols of this life.... There is almost no name in the great and unending history of literature that is not represented here.

There is a New Testament with the Greek text and Luther’s translation. Rathenau compared the translation with the original, noted points of difference, sprinkled astonished and quietly plangent question marks in the margin. Discrepancies are shot down with discreet little arrows, the texts are treated roughly as a military strategist would treat his field of operations on a General Staff map. He campaigned with thoughts, put errors to flight, surrounded them, conquered new worlds and distant works, allied himself with lasting powers. He was like a peaceful commander of the intellect; with love

for the little beauties of daily life, the ornamental culture of domesticity. Upstairs, on his own, his very own personal walls, he hung pictures that he’d painted himself, the works of a writer who liked to dabble in other arts....

On his desk upstairs I saw a book called: *German Youth and the Needs of the Hour*. Oh, he always overestimated that part of German youth whose victim he was to be. In one room, on one table, in peaceful and significant proximity I found the wise old *Shulchan Aruch* the religious rule book of Diaspora Orthodoxy, and the old *Weissenfelsische Songbook* [Lutheran Hymns]. Pervading the house and the being of this man was the spirit of conciliation. His life is characterized by its attempt to bring together antiquity, Judaism, and early Christianity. A strong chord of conciliation is sounded in the books he read and those he wrote. It was the effort to bring the various instruments of different cultural worlds within the ambit of a single orchestra. By day he read and studied the New Testament. It lay beside his bed to fill him with its love. He was a Christian; you won’t find a better one...

I walk past the place where he met his end. It is not true that a murder is just a murder. This one here was a thousandfold murder, not to be forgotten or avenged.¹⁴

14. *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin 1920-1933*, Joseph Roth, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2003.

‘The Unity of Spiritual Responsibility’

Many others in Germany felt the same grief, though more vague, less eloquent. Kessler reported:

Not since the assassination of Abraham Lincoln has the death of a statesman so shaken a whole nation. The trades unions had decreed a general holiday throughout the Reich from midday Tuesday to early Wednesday morning. Stupendous processions, such as Germany had never witnessed, marched in order under the Republican flag through all the cities of the land. Over a million took part in Berlin, a hundred and fifty thousand in Munich and Chemnitz, a hundred thousand in Hamburg, Breslau, Elberfeld, Essen. Never before had a German citizen been so honored. The response which had been denied to Rathenau’s life and thought was now accorded to his death.¹⁵

We end with a fitting eulogy, taken from the last section of John Finley’s article on Rathenau, written for the *New York Times* one week after the assassination. Finley lamented how brief his meeting with Rathenau had been. If only he had known the sure way to prolong the visit: ask Rathenau to play something on the piano for him. Rathenau likely would have obliged with the *Waldstein*, always his favorite.

As it was, the American was deeply affected by his visit with the industrialist/politician/poet/artist/musician. He ended his article with the following:

[Our meeting] was but a month before he came into office. And he did not forswear his views when entering the Cabinet. He was still convinced that the whole system of economic organization was to undergo a great change, under new capitalistic forms. But all this, he contended, must await popular support. He would

not “drill firemen during a fire”; he would not, to use Lincoln’s homely illustration, “swap horses while crossing a stream.” He was joining a cabinet “for doing things,” and would try to find a way to reconcile the German people with the rest of the world—a way of coming to an understanding with their neighbors.

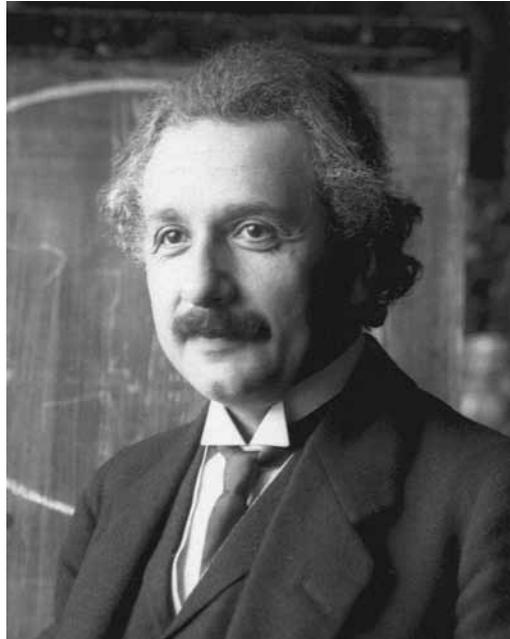
How fearlessly and effectively he began this reconciling task, his successful negotiations with Loucheur showed. Heavy as the burden of reparations was, he insisted that the confidence of

the world could be recovered only in the degree that the obligation was fulfilled, that the people of the earth were not 100 per cent chauvinists, that some people were fair-minded, that the only question was how great the sacrifice must be and that it was necessary to fulfill a duty which is a world duty.

It is difficult to believe that one who spoke these words could have signed the Rapallo Treaty with other than the honest purpose, which he states in his own apologia, as sent to me, or as Chancellor Wirth stated it, with his Minister of Foreign Affairs sitting near him in the attitude of the Penseur before the Reichstag. For Rathenau’s one possessing

desire was to see the planetary spirit “struggling as an integer” for the unity and solidarity of the human commonwealth and for the “unity of spiritual responsibility.”...

It would seem, he said, that the thing we seek, like the red glow of the sunset, could not spread across the skies and cover the earth “until the sun from which it radiates had set.” But of this certainty he died possessed: that “that which has been created becomes part of the consciousness of the planetary spirit,” and that it “matters nothing if the records on parchment, metal and stone have been destroyed.” He would doubtless have added that it matters nothing if individuals go.



Albert Einstein, like his friend Walther Rathenau, fought for the soul of Germany and for all of humanity. Here, Einstein lectures in Vienna in 1921.

15. Kessler.