
III. Walther Rathenau: Behind the Curtain of History

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

PART ONE OF TWO PARTS

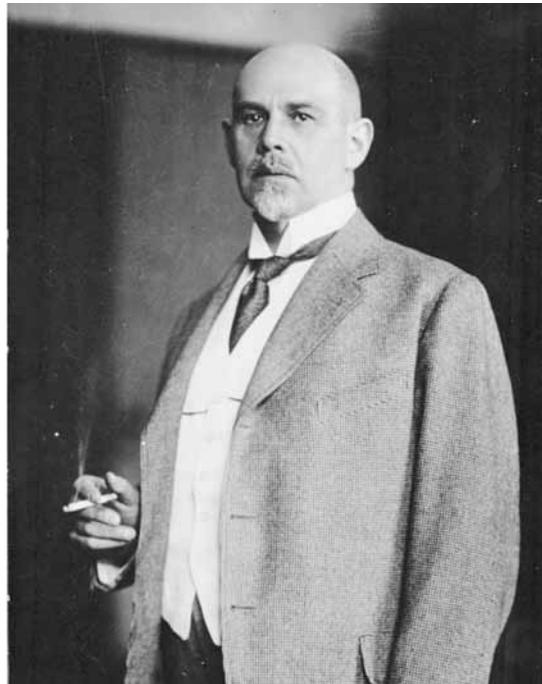
by Judy Hodgkiss

June 2012—The following, excerpted from a two-part article in the German newspaper, *Neue Solidarität*, is intended as a case study into the unique personality type capable of calm, creative leadership, as demonstrated in the atmosphere of panic in 1920's Weimar Germany, or, as will be needed, in the panic soon to come upon us, in the existential crisis of today.

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.

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*.



Walter Rathenau, August 1, 1921.

Bundesarchiv/Bild

He thought of himself foremost as a writer, a philosopher, a 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 war-time 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

1. "Open Letter to All Who Are Not Blinded by Hate," December 1918,

Rathenau's contemporary, the author, Emil Ludwig, marveled that "Walther Rathenau knew how to paint portraits, design a house, build turbines and factories, write poetry, draw up treaties, and play the *Waldstein Sonata*."

Just as the image of Einstein and his violin comes to mind when we think of the agapic personality in science, we should, similarly, imagine Walther Rathenau at his piano, when we think of such a personality active in the fields of politics and statecraft.

In fact, we can imagine Einstein and Rathenau playing a sonata, together, at one of their several dinner parties which they held, alternately at one, then the other's home in Berlin, between the years, 1917 to 1922. Or, another image would come to mind: the scene of Rathenau spending an evening at the large villa of his neighbor, a descendant of the Mendelssohn family. Robert Schumann's piano quintet was played, with Rathenau at the piano; joined by the Klingler brothers, Fridolin on viola, the instrument he played in the Klingler Quartet, and Karl, formerly the viola player with Joseph Joachim's quartet, 1906-7, played first violin, as he did in the quartet with Fridolin; on cello, was the banker, Robert Mendelssohn, great-great-grandson of Moses, distant cousin of Felix; and Robert's brother, Franz, President of the Berlin Chamber of Commerce, played the second violin.²



Walther Rathenau

The Agapic Personality Squared

In fact, like Einstein, when Rathenau was in school, he contemplated music as a possible profession, as his mother wished; but felt compelled toward a profession in science and engineering, as his father insisted upon. And, perhaps, not coincidentally, both fathers owned electro-technical businesses and hoped to see their sons succeed them at the company.

But Rathenau always asserted, as Einstein also understood, that scientific and technological progress was dependent not on the concerns of the "materially crass" world, but on the powers of the imagination, the

same powers that are a necessary foundation for great art, literature and music. Rathenau wrote in a 1907 essay, called, "Unwritten Works":

The intellect must lose itself sooner or later in the unessentially real; only the imagination can find the way which leads up to the essentially true. The materially enterprising world of today can carry on only if it turns from its crass admiration for the analytical intellect and bows to the ideal.³

One of Rathenau's first foreign policy missions, before the war, was to join a fact-finding tour of Germany's African colonies for the Kaiser and Chancellor von Bülow. We might assume it obvious that Rathenau would promote large infrastructure projects for the continent (details of which we will explore later,) not only because of his personal background, but also in the context of the tradition of the nation-building policies of Germany's former chancellor, Bismarck, and the influential German-American economist, Friedrich List. In fact, Rathenau's father, Emil, had attended the very exhibition in America, the centennial celebration of 1876, which had originally inspired the railroad building pro-

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.)

2. I am assuming that this musical evening, mentioned briefly in Rathenau's diary, would have had all the musicians playing their customary instruments. It is possible that Rathenau may have played in informal ensembles that included Joachim, himself—the diary entries do not begin until 1907, the year of Joachim's death. *Walther Rathenau: Industrialist, Banker, Intellectual, and Politician: Notes and Diaries, 1907-1922*, Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985.

In 1917, in a memorial on the death of Robert Mendelssohn, his friend, the violin dealer, Arthur Hill, wrote: "The death of Robert Mendelssohn removes a fine amateur violoncellist.... I remember [him] calling upon us with Piatti and noted that his execution, for an amateur, when he played, was quite exceptional." Mendelssohn's teacher, Carlo Alfredo Piatti, a professional cellist, played with Felix Mendelssohn, Joseph Joachim, and Johannes Brahms. For more on the Felix Mendels-

sohn, Joseph Joachim story, see: David Shavin's [article](#), "Rebecca Dirichlet's Development of the Complex Domain," in *EIR*, Vol. 37, No. 23, June 11, 2010, pp. 30-62.

For the story of Einstein and his Violin, see Shawna Halevy's [article](#) in *EIR*, Vol. 39, No. 9, May 11, 2012, pp. 58-66.

3. As quoted in Kessler.



Royal Academy of Music

Left to right: Carlos Alfredo Piatti, Carl Reinecke, and Joseph Joachim at the Beethoven-Haus in Bonn, in May 1890.

grams that Bismarck carried out in Prussia.

But in Rathenau's report for the fact-finding mission, he went even further, framing his proposals within a cultural context:

The evolution of Germany in the nineteenth century depended on the fact that the ideological and philosophical disposition of the German people, which had spent itself for centuries in metaphysical speculation, suddenly was recognized as having enormous real value, because it proved to be adequate to problems in science, technology, and organization. Thus we may hope that education for colonization will once more open to the German soul a field that corresponds to its earthly mission.⁴

Einstein and Rathenau first met at a Berlin dinner party at the beginning of March 1917. On March 8, Einstein wrote to Rathenau, "I saw with astonishment and joy how extensive a meeting of minds there is between our outlooks on life."

Einstein would write to his mother, Pauline, in 1918, "Rathenau is an eloquent and sparkling spirit."⁵

4. Walther Rathenau, "Report on Journey to the E. African Colony," 1907, in *Notes and Diaries*, Strandmann.

5. Einstein to Rathenau, March 8, 1917; Einstein to Pau-

After Rathenau's assassination, Einstein wrote a memorial to him for the *Neue Rundschau*, August 1922. He said:

My feelings for Rathenau were and are ones of joyful esteem and thanks for the hope and consolation he gave me during Europe's presently bleak situation as well as for the unforgettable hours this visionary and warm human being granted me...A delightful mixture of sobriety and genuine Berlin humor made it a unique pleasure to listen to him when he chatted with friends at the table. It takes no talent to be an idealist when one lives in cloud-cuckoo-land; but he was an idealist, even though he lived on this earth, whose smells he knew better than almost anyone.⁶

A Jew and a German Patriot

After the war, with the rise of anti-Semitism, and the increasingly violent atmosphere in Berlin, Rathenau had to fight with Einstein to convince him to remain in Germany. As part of that effort, Rathenau found himself in a contest with the Zionists for influence over Ein-

line, Oct. 8, 1918, In *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*, 2004. The second letter is translated in *Einstein in Berlin*, Thomas Levenson, 2003.

6. "In Memoriam," printed in *Neue Rundschau*, August 1922, as quoted in *Einstein on Politics: His Private Thoughts and Public Stands on Nationalism, Zionism, War, Peace, and the Bomb*, David E. Rowe and Robert J. Schulman, eds., Princeton University Press, 2007.



CC/Jochen Teufel, 2008

Walther Rathenau's home at Königsallee 65, Berlin-Grunewald, built in 1910. Architects: Walther Rathenau and Johannes Kraatz.



Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1931



Courtesy of Charlotte von Conta

Left: Albert Einstein playing his violin, Lina. Right: In a photo by Lieselotte Orgel-Löhne, Rathenau's loyal friend Karl Klingler (left), first violinist in the Klingler Quartet, shares a laugh with Max Planck, the eminent physicist and closest friend of Einstein, as they review musical scores. Like Rathenau, Planck was always ready with his piano, to accompany the violin of either Klingler or Einstein.

stein. The Zionist leader, Chaim Weizmann, visiting from Britain, recalled in his memoirs:

This visit has remained vividly in my memory. It was a conversation with Walther Rathenau, whom I met at Einstein's home one evening. In a gush of words he immediately launched an attack on Zionism... The quintessence of what he presented was: he was a Jew but felt like a German and devoted all his energy toward building up German industry and restoring Germany's reputation in the world.⁷

Although Rathenau had urged the full assimilation of Jews into German society, he was critical of those, like his and Einstein's mutual friend, the Nobel-prize winning chemist, Fritz Haber, who converted to Christianity as a way to mollify his persecutors. Rathenau's first book, *Hear O Israel*, was on the subject.⁸

Rathenau was able to win over Einstein to the fight to "restore Germany's reputation": Einstein remained in Berlin, and also agreed to be Rathenau's "goodwill ambassador," making several trips to other countries,

7. As quoted in *The Einstein Dossiers: Science and Politics*, Siegfried Grundmann, Springer-Verlag, Berlin, 2005.

8. Einstein much appreciated Rathenau's writings on the subject. In a letter to Paul Mammoth, Einstein wrote: "The Judaism-Christianity issue must be answered variously.... Rathenau himself wrote unofficially on the issue again, just a few weeks ago in eminently witty and fine style." From May 11, 1917, *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein, Vol. 8: The Berlin Years: Correspondence, 1914-1918*, No. 338. Robert Schulmann, et al., eds., Princeton University Press, 1999.

speaking before scientific associations and meeting with labor groups. He went to England and to Holland, and he planned a trip to Japan; but he hesitated to accept the invitation of his friend, Paul Langevin, to lecture in what he knew would be a semi-hostile environment, the Collège de France in Paris. He at first declined, then wrote to Langevin, March 1922:

Rathenau has told me that it is my duty to accept, and so I accept.⁹

Even after Rathenau's death, Einstein still felt the power of Rathenau's hand on his shoulder. When Einstein hesitated in joining the League of Nation's Commission for International Intellectual Cooperation, Marie Curie wrote to him, July 7, 1922:

I think your friend Rathenau, who I believe was an honest man, would have encouraged you to at least try to bring about peaceful international intellectual collaboration.¹⁰

Rathenau's murder came as a terrible shock for Einstein. In 1935, Einstein's biographer, William Hermanns, brought up the subject of the anti-Semitic gangs of Germany, in his interview with Einstein and his wife:

"Frau Einstein almost whispered, 'It was this kind of youth that murdered Rathenau'."

"I had so many talks with him about Germany and

9. As quoted in Grundmann.

10. As quoted in Grundmann.

peace,’ said Einstein. ‘He was the first victim of Nazi propaganda.’”¹¹

The Fatal Flaw in the Culture

Before the war, Rathenau never held an official government post, but he had functioned informally in a variety of capacities for the Kaiser and his Imperial Chancellor, the Prince von Bülow. Although this was a time of great enthusiasm and optimism on Rathenau’s part, he had intimations of the possible disastrous consequences of Germany’s adherence to its autocratic system. But he was blind-sided as to the depth of the problem that was inherent in the population’s slavish adulation of aristocratic titles or anyone decorated with military regalia.

As for Einstein, we see his view of the matter in his interview with Hermanns:

“[Germans] learned from their fathers to bow to any uniform, even a mailman’s. Look what Bismarck said: ‘The Germans lack civil courage.’”

When Rathenau moved back to his hometown, Berlin, in 1899, he bought a house in the fashionable Grunewald district, and began to associate with the city’s elite circles of artists, politicians, and members of the imperial court. He was introduced to the Kaiser, himself, in 1901. Rathenau described the experience in his essay, “The Kaiser,” published in 1919, after the Kaiser’s abdication and exile to Holland:

On the first occasion, I had to repeat before him a scientific lecture which I had already delivered before a larger audience, and which I thus had at my fingers’ ends. The Kaiser sat right in front of me so that I was able to observe him closely....

A friend asked me my impression of his bearings and conversation. I said, “He is an enchanter and a man marked by fate. A nature rent, yet not feeling the rent. He is on the road to disaster.”¹²



Bundesarchiv Bild

Prince Bernhard Fürst von Bülow, Imperial Chancellor under Kaiser Wilhelm II. Rathenau served as his unofficial “Super Secretary of State” during the pre-war years.

Einstein expressed it more simply. He said to Hermanns:

It is interesting that the two advisors the Kaiser most trusted were Jews: Rathenau and [Albert] Ballin. I met the Kaiser once. He made the impression of a good man who rattled his sword to please others.

For Rathenau, it was the experience of the collapse of his beloved country into, first, the insanity of the euphoric war fever, beginning in 1913, followed by the depravities he witnessed during the chaos and confusion period of the demobilization, that finally forced upon him the harsh lesson: that the foolishness and weakness demonstrated by the Kaiser and others in the ruling class was actually a predictable function of the popula-

tion’s own foolish attachment to the feudalist trappings of oligarchy, as a deeply embedded flaw in the culture itself.

In his 1918 appeal to U.S. President Wilson, Rathenau admits the problem, along with his fear that it might be too late for Germany to have a second chance.

Sent to President Wilson, via Colonel House, December 1918:

As a humble member of a people wounded to the heart, struggling simultaneously for its new-found freedom [the Kaiser had abdicated] and for its very existence, I appeal to you, the representative of the most progressive of all nations. Four years ago, we were apparently your equals; but only apparently, for in fact we lacked that element which gives a nation its real strength: internal freedom. Today we stand on the verge of annihilation: a fate which cannot be avoided if Germany is to be crippled as those who hate us wish. For this fact must be stated clearly and insistently, so that all may understand its terrible significance, all nations and their peoples, the present generation and those to come: what we are threatened with, what the policy of hate proposes, is our annihilation, the

11. *Einstein and the Poet: In Search of the Cosmic Man*, William Hermanns, 2011.

12. As quoted in Kessler.

annihilation of the life of Germany, now and for evermore.¹³

Observations by an American

One week after Rathenau's assassination, the American journalist, John Finley, wrote a feature on him for the *New York Times*, titled, "Rathenau's Vision of a New World." Finley had interviewed Rathenau in Berlin a few months before the murder, and his appreciation of the statesman's life is genuine and insightful. The following is the first section of his article:

It is significant of much, says Trevelyan, the English historian, that in the seventeenth century members of Parliament quoted from the Bible; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the classics; and in the twentieth century from nothing at all. Walther Rathenau, German Foreign Minister, assassinated a week ago, furnished a sharp contrast to his British contemporaries. In his first Parliamentary speech, a year ago this June, when taking his seat in the Cabinet, he quoted the opening and closing themes of a Beethoven fugue, referred to an apt incident in the story of the Holy Grail, invoked pertinent precepts of philosophy and drew upon the physical sciences for his metaphors.

This seemingly extempore and modestly brief speech, illuminated from his wide reading and study and out of his varied experience, was made in the middle of hostile heckling and baiting, in which Helfferich, who goaded him to the last day of his life, joined. It was the utterance of a thinker, who came, out of a sense of duty but fearlessly, near to what he called "a high-tension [i.e., AC current] political machine," whose construction and operation he confessed he did not understand beyond "knowing vaguely its perils."...

Rathenau was a thinker, but not brooding always in stooped and wondering inertia as Rodin has represented his "Penseur." ... He had thought profoundly, and he had seen an anguish of the world which was vastly more awful than Rodin had pictured at the gates of Hell, upon which his "Penseur" was made, in its original placing, to look down. Rathenau had thought profoundly and broadly and he had written voluminously on science, art, esthetics, morals, one

of his twenty books reaching a seventy-fifth edition. He had a "passion for theory," whether as a scientist, philosopher or sociologist.

He was first, last and always a man who approached all problems from the point of view of the spiritual values involved. In this, he seemed the very antinome of Stinnes [steel industrialist and previous Foreign Minister], who approaches everything, it would appear, with a purely materialistic purpose. In the early years of the war, Rathenau was writing a book which began with the warning sentence that "this book treats of material things but treats of them for the sake of the spirit" and which ended with this conclusion: "We are not here for the sake of possessions, nor for the sake of power, nor for the sake of happiness: we are here that we may elucidate the divine elements in the human spirit."

Rather surprising pronouncements, these, from the head of a tremendous [corporate] trust that embraced an empire with its horizontal combinations and latterly reached even into vertical co-operations; from one who was for a time the virtual dictator of the whole industrial and trade organization of Germany through his control of the raw material resources which he brought to the support of the armies in the field, fighting for an unholy end, as it seems to us. But these views permeate his whole philosophy of life and even his economic theory, for one of the high ends of economics he conceived to be to increase the flow of earthly goods to the "sacrificial places" where the "material is subtilized to become spiritual."

Has any tariff conceived such a motive for the "flow of earthly goods"? And "subsidizing" the material we know, but "subtilizing" it into the spiritual? It is a strange terminology. And yet one reading his books and looking, as I did for an hour, into the face of their author, cannot doubt the sincerity of his moral purpose.¹⁴

We will hear more from Mr. Finley later in this report. Now we will fill in more detail in Rathenau's biography.

13. As quoted in Kessler.

14. "Rathenau's Vision of a New World," John Finley, *New York Times*, July 2, 1922. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9F05E3DB1039E133A25751C0A9619C946395D6CF> or Search nytimes.com for "Rathenau's Vision of a New World."

A Meteoric Rise to Power

The elite circles of Berlin who welcomed Rathenau into their homes and into their confidence, had been impressed in the previous decade by the growth and nature of Rathenau's father's electrical conglomerate, the AEG, the *Allgemeine Elektrizitätsgesellschaft*. But the impression made on them by the son, was that of astonishment and awe. During the short segment of his career, from the time he moved back to Berlin in 1899, to when the Imperial Chancellor gave him his first semi-official assignment in the German Colonial Office in 1907, he went from being a complete unknown, to being categorized by the Berlin press as the "Super Secretary of State."

In his autobiographical essay, "Apology," Rathenau described his father's modest beginnings in the Berlin of the 1870s:

The house ... was not situated in what was then the quiet west end of Berlin, called the Privy Councillors' quarter, but in the *Chausseestrasse*, which was in the working-class North of the city. And behind the house, alongside the cemetery, lay the work-shop, surrounded by old trees—the little fitting-up room, the foundry, and the groaning brazier's forge. Those were the engineering works of my father and his friend; and the masters and men of that famous race of old Berlin engineers were kind to the little Jewish boy who toddled about among them, and many a tool and piece of machinery they used to explain to him.¹⁵

Rathenau studied physics and engineering at university; his dissertation topic was "Light Absorption by Metals."

From the beginning, Rathenau insisted that he not be brought into his father's business until he proved his capabilities on his own. Later, he would argue that this practice should be the general case for children of



Public domain

Walter Rathenau, as painted by Edvard Munch, 1907.

wealthy parents, enforced by a law requiring a 100% inheritance tax.

Rathenau developed a new process of electrolysis for the production of chlorine and alkalis, and convinced the AEG board to invest its capital to build an electro-chemical factory using his technique, in the small town of Bitterfeld. Rathenau describes his amazing progress from there:

In 1899, after I had spent seven years in the little manufacturing town of Bitterfeld, the undertakings began to prosper. I decided to retire from industry in order to devote myself to literature. The AEG, however, invited me to join their board of directors and take over the department for constructing power stations. I undertook the work for three years, and built a number of stations—e.g., in Manchester, Amsterdam, Buenos Aires and Baku. I re-

tained the directorship of the electro-chemical works, and became at the same time delegate of a great foreign electricity trust.... In 1902 I left the AEG in order to enter finance. I joined the management of one of our big banks, the Berliner Handelsgesellschaft, and reorganized a great part of its industrial undertakings. I gained an insight into German and foreign industry, and belonged at that time to nearly a hundred different concerns.

Africa

In 1907, Chancellor von Bülow selected Rathenau to accompany the Colonial Secretary, Dernburg, to do a fact-finding tour of the German colonies in Africa. The "Super Secretary of State" paid his own expenses, so that he could be as independent and truthful in his findings, as possible. He ended up, two years after his series of reports was issued, with the award of an Imperial Medal. But this was only after the controversy had been allowed to die down, and Dernburg had been demoted because of his resistance to some of Rathenau's proposals.

Rathenau was harshly critical of what he found on

15. As quoted in Kessler.

his first tour, which was to the colony of East Africa; he was even more critical in his report on his second tour the next year, of the colony of South-West Africa.

His first report began with the assertion,

[The colony's] most valuable product, its human population, is large but sparse; its population density is 12 to 15 times less than that of our own country. Population growth makes but slow progress, impeded as it is by endemic and epidemic disease.

Rathenau advocated shifting out of “plantation agriculture,” to “native agriculture,” where “investment opportunities for large-scale German capital can, however, be found: investment in the colonies themselves would possibly be more profitable if mercantile, mining, and industrial developments were later to emerge.”

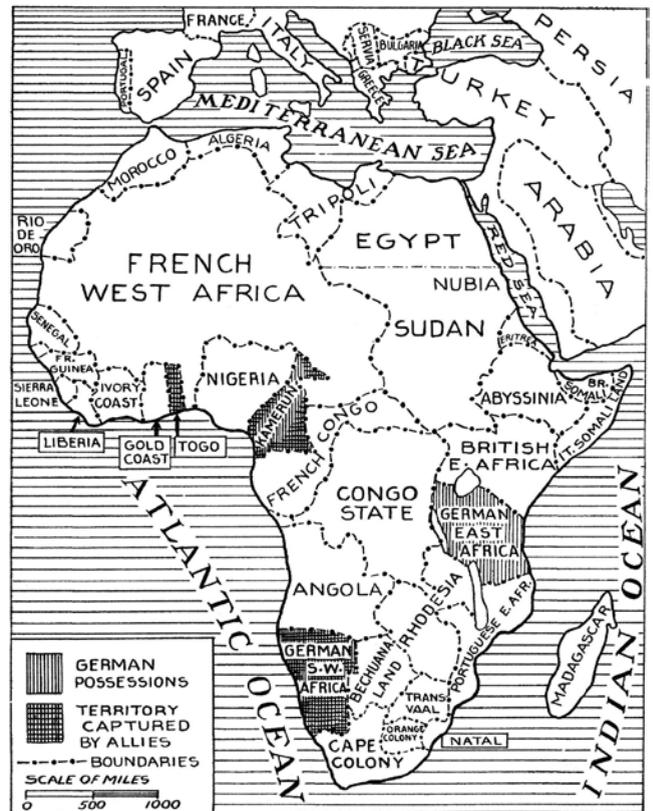
The notes in his African diary refer to “reflections on colonial psychosis.” He was more diplomatic in his official report:

It is worth noting the special interpretation on which the interested party bases his cultural task: he is called to train the Negro to work, and indeed this is clearly understood to be plantation work. The interpretation goes further—an argument which was put forward on an official occasion: just as the German child has to go to school, so too the black man has to undertake regular work in European enterprises.

These views, which former Governments [Bismarck] probably did not share, yet tolerated, have occasionally and sometimes continuously produced results reminiscent of kidnapping and serfdom.

He wrote up a 5-point proposal:

1. With regard to overall economic policy: shifting the emphasis in the direction of native agriculture.
2. With regard to the native question: different regulation of the power of Europeans to punish, and protection of the coloured man against maltreatment....
3. With regard to the agriculture of the country: an extensive afforestation programme; a search for new, and protection of existing sources of water....



Germany's pre-World War I African colonies.

4. With regard to the communications system: establishment of a railway-building programme....

5. With regard to the administration: reorganization of municipal finance; establishment of the colonial service as a career; an increase in the number of senior officers in administrative posts.¹⁶

One (hostile) biographer, David Felix, ridicules Rathenau's plan for railway construction, as a scheme, “costing 200 million marks for a colony with an annual trade of 24 million marks.”¹⁷

But the Kaiser and the Reichstag thought otherwise. On the basis of Rathenau's reports, the Reichstag voted in 1908 to build a total of 1,467 kilometers of new railways for the African colonies. This investment nearly matched the size of the Berlin-Baghdad railway project, begun in 1903, which would have extended 1,600 kilometers, total.

16. As quoted in *Notes*.

17. *Walther Rathenau and the Weimar Republic*, David Felix, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.

England

Before arriving in Africa, Rathenau stopped over in London, where he had meetings that were to arrange an international conference, needed to settle border disputes for African colonies. He wrote up a memorandum on the state of Britain for the Kaiser and von Bülow:

This pampered country has been doing bad business for years and lives, by our standards, beyond its means: new taxes are there the most disagreeable expense.... Doubtless England can strengthen its fleet, will strengthen it, and must strengthen it—but its present exorbitant position of superiority can not be maintained in the long run....

It is especially worth noticing that these anxieties, industrial and colonial, cause the nation to look across to Germany. Here is the competitor, the rival. It soon comes up in all conversations with informed Englishmen, sometimes as a compliment, sometimes as a reproach, sometimes ironically: you will outstrip us, you have outstripped us.... Add to this a third reason... From the outside one peers into the cauldron of nations that is the Continent, and becomes aware of a people, surrounded by stagnating nations, a people of restless activity and enormous powers of physical expansion. Eight hundred thousand new Germans every year!...

Thus all English discontent is substantiated and localized ... in the notion of Germany. And what appears among the educated as a motivated conviction is expressed among the people, among the youth, in the provinces, as prejudice, as hatred and wild fantasy to an extent that far exceeds the measure of our journalistic apperception.¹⁸

Five years later, Rathenau wrote a study of a possible scenario of British pre-emptive war. He is apparently unable at this time to foresee that Britain were capable of inducing Germany to destroy itself. Here he thinks he can reason with the British. From the *Neue*



Photo by T.H. Voigt, 1902

Kaiser Wilhelm II, of whom Einstein once said, "I met the Kaiser once. He made the impression of a good man who rattled his sword to please others."

Freie Presse, Vienna, April 6, 1912, "England and Ourselves: A Philip-pic":

[England] is under the impression she has been technically and industrially outstripped. Secondly, she feels obliged to intervene against every dominating continental power which emerges. Thirdly, her colonial structure would be shaken from within if supremacy at sea lost its value as a historic dogma. Fourthly, the armaments race is becoming too expensive and, given a constantly changing technology, success uncertain. The war which England would have to wage would thus be a preventive war....

England has, for two hundred years, been used to having all problems brought before her curial throne and to deciding them at leisure ... a policy of phantasy, adventure and desperation was alien to the Doge-like wisdom of this country.¹⁹

The war fever building up in Germany in 1913 caught Rathenau by surprise. He launched a barrage of articles attempting to cool it down. From the *Neue Freie Presse*, March 23, 1913, on the anniversary of the War of Liberation, 1813:

But it is misleading to compare the taxes proposed by the Bundesrat with the national sacrifice of 1813. The finest thing about that period was not the sacrifice nor the victory, but the heart-searching that preceded them.... Money and armament alone will not avert our doom. Material forces only call up material forces in reply.²⁰

And, on the verge of war, July 31, 1914, in the *Berliner Tageblatt*:

The government has left us no doubt of the fact that Germany is intent on remaining loyal to

18. *Notes*.

19. As quoted in *Notes*.

20. As quoted in Kessler.

her old ally. Without the protection of this loyalty Austria could not have ventured on the step she has taken.... Such a question as the participation of Austrian officials in investigating the Serbian plot is no reason for an international war!²¹

The war begins. A conflicted Rathenau writes to his friend, Fanny Künstler, authoress, in November:

Apart from this obvious pain, there is another, a duller pain, more mysterious, which benumbs everything within me. We must win, we must!... How different it was in 1870 with the ideal of unity before us! How different the demand for our very existence in 1813! A Serbian ultimatum and a mass of confused precipitate telegrams! Would that I had never seen behind the scenes of this stage!²²

In spite of his misgivings, Rathenau volunteered within days of the outbreak of the war to head up a War Raw Materials Department to deal with the blockade set up by the Allies. That he was enormously successful, is testified to by an article in the *London Times*, October 11, 1915, that quotes American journalist, Raymond G. Swing, reporting from Berlin (America was still neutral at the time):

It is an interesting story, this miracle of industry, this inventiveness, this genius of organization. It is a story which explains the fall of Warsaw and the great Eastern offensives and the impregnable Western line. And when the Falkenhayns, the Hindenburgs and the Mackensens, are thought of as great German soldiers, one person must be set beside them, the German business-man, Dr. Walther Rathenau.²³

The *Times* then adds, plaintively: where is our English Rathenau?

But, even while Rathenau was busy accomplishing miracles on behalf of the war effort, he was writing to the German Democratic Party deputy, Conrad Haussmann:

21. As quoted in Kessler.

22. Rathenau to Fanny Künstler, November 1, 1914, as quoted in Kessler.

23. As quoted in *Notes*

Do you know, Herr Haussmann, what we are fighting for? I do not and I should be glad if you could tell me. What will come of it? We have no strategists and no statesmen.²⁴

Rathenau, the Author

No matter how world events were sweeping him along, before the war, during the war, or after, Rathenau poured out a continuous stream of poetry, essays, pamphlets and books, on a variety of topics, all of varying quality. Instead of attempting to critique any or all of it at this point, let's look over the shoulder of our journalist friend, Mr. Finley, as he attempted to explain Rathenau's economic theory to a contemporary American audience:

In the late Winter of 1921, when the German reparation delegation ... was in London I picked up one day at a bookshop, in an interval between the tense conferences in St. James' Palace, a little volume entitled *The New Society*. It was by Walther Rathenau.

I read and re-read this treatise, which some anonymous editor had called a "landmark in the history of economic and social thought." It did indeed seem like a primitive landmark, a cairn of chapters thrown together without design. But each stone had either historical significance or a prophetic import. This author, then stranger to me, began by asking if there is a sign by which we can know whether human society has been "completely socialized," and answered immediately his own question: "It is when no one can have an income without working for it [i.e., no income from inheritance]." But is this the goal? No, it is only the sign. The final goal, the only full and final object of all endeavor upon earth is the "development of the human soul."...

A few weeks later reaching Berlin on a Sunday and eager to meet the author of *The New Society* that I might ask him how he proposed to get that theory instituted here upon earth, I found that he was out of town.... But passing through Berlin again a few weeks later, I made another effort, this time successfully, to see this man whom I wanted to see above all other Germans. I was (as he says, every one in America is today, and as every one will be when society is com-

24. As quoted in Kessler.

pletely socialized) determined to know the how and where and why of the thing. He welcomed me to his mother's home, where amid signs of material but unostentatious comfort, we talked for an hour. It was the one bright hour of the drab and depressing hours that I spent in Berlin.

This little giant, with the patient eyes of a student lodged in features that belonged to no race, but were like those of a primitive man upon whom the marks of softness had not come, was a gracious but inebriated man of affairs who seemed to have still the touch of youth upon him.... We did not talk of reparations nor of the political change in America (whose "sky-scratching" towers he remembered admiringly.) Our conversation was all concerning his proposals for social salvation, for the bringing of "mind into labor."...

This does not mean socialism. Dr. Rathenau was quick to say—that "hell of mechanical socialism." "What I propose," he said, "strikes dogmatic socialism to the very heart." "Socialism leads from earth to earth; its centre is the distribution of earthly goods; its goal is simply the right to bread. Nor is it a cheap Utopianism with "unproved parrot phrases," that he advocates, magically creating by technical improvements a "niggard Sunday out of the week-day existence." "No," he said, "no Soviet policy can go to the heart of the problem." "It is a world order that I am urging, whose principle is an interchange of Labor, by which it is required, within certain fixed limits of application, that every employee engaged in mechanical work can claim to do a portion of his day's work in intellectual employment and that every brain worker shall be obliged to devote a portion of his day to physical labor."...

My questions and criticisms had to do with the practical operation of such an industrial system, the obvious losses through shifting and want of concentration and continuity. His answers were all concerned with the social benefit, whatever the incidental economic losses, with the abolition of hereditary idleness (of which we know little in this country), with respect for physical labor and appreciation of the fact that mental work is not mere chattering and that "thinking hurts."...

Production would cease to be merely material and formal and would acquire spiritual value. As to the machinery for the realization of

all this, he insisted, that it would inevitably come if the idea willed it. The thing was to get the mind possessed of the idea.... "Let the idea but take hold of the minds of the people, the means will be found." I left his home that May day with a confident hope that if his idea could get into every factory and home, as his incandescent bulbs had, the new society would come.

More from Mr. Finley, later.

The 'Gifts'

In the end, Rathenau believed that all of his extraordinary achievements, industrial, political, or diplomatic, were inspired by the "gifts" he had inherited, as a legacy from a "German soul," a spirit, as he had described it in his *Africa Report*, that could guide human endeavor toward that which corresponds to "its earthly mission." In his writings after the war, he described his dedication to preserving, what he called, that "German spirit which has sung and thought for the world," and which was, at that moment, threatened with obliteration by those "who are blinded by hate."²⁵

Rathenau frequently wrote of the obligation that had fallen on him for having received such "gifts," from both the German culture, in particular, and from what he called, "nature," in general. These were obligations that he often described as the driving force of his existence. He wrote to his friend, Lili Deutsch, in 1911:

This winter it has become clear to me as never before that a man's life signifies nothing unless all his powers of mind and sense of responsibility are exerted to their utmost. There is something half-wrong in receiving gifts, even from Nature.

And, in another letter:

I must expend myself, not only on the things I love and dream of, but also on many others—things that make me hard and cold. I must do this, because men of my type are responsible for all that nature has given them to do and be; I have no right to live a life of imagination and contemplation without spiritual conflict and exertion. Nor must I ask the reason why. Nature

25. "Open Letter to All Who Are Not Blinded by Hate," December 1918, printed in *Nach der Flut*, as quoted in Kessler.

has united in me heterogeneous elements; and she must answer for it.²⁶

In his 1913 book, *The Mechanism of the Mind*, Rathenau wrote of the general case, where an individual is called by “divine forces” to a life of creative activity:

Ambition has never produced anything in this world but sharp practice, petty expedients and mere casual successes.... But if we consider the truly great, the creators in thought and deed, we find that they were men who served a cause.... Display, immediate results, and reward meant nothing to them; they were willing to give up property, power, and life itself for the sake of their cause. Such devotion is transcendental, for it is disinterested and intuitive; the spiritual forces which release it are the result of imagination and vision. Of such a kind were and are the men who have given to the world their form. The passion that moves them is the same which inspires the artist, the scientist, the craftsman and the builder; it is the joy of creation. And they must have yet another emotion in an unusual measure, the consciousness of being called by the will of spiritual or divine forces to an activity which absorbs their whole being, demanding a ceaseless struggle against their own imperfections, incapable of delegation and endowed therefore with the dignity of a personal burden and necessity. This consciousness we call “responsibility,” meaning thereby that the spirit must render its account to God and man.²⁷

Rathenau was strict and disciplined about what was to be defined as a true “transcendental passion.” He

26. Rathenau to Lili Deutsch, December 22, 1911; Rathenau to Lili Deutsch, date unknown, 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.

27. As quoted in Kessler.

condemned the fraudulent Tolstoy, for example, in *The Apology*:

Tolstoy’s mistake was that, instead of following the law which he divined in his own nature, he bowed to a theory which suppressed his creative spirit as artist and thinker, in order to give strength to the weak forces of his “enthusiasm.” ... But he who embraces the enthusiastic life, not from the beginning and from his own unconscious necessity, but strives for it consciously, or worse still, with a definite purpose—he does himself violence and sins against the light.

And, as we have seen, he condemned the misguided passion of Einstein’s Zionist friends. A few weeks before his murder, the Berlin Zionist leader, Kurt Blumenfeld, and Einstein came to visit him in Grunewald, in order to urge him to resign as Foreign Minister: Blumenfeld gave the reason that Rathenau was stirring up trouble not just for himself, but for all of Germany’s Jews; and Einstein, because he wanted to save the life of his friend.

Blumenfeld reported that Rathenau calmly argued his position. To Blumenfeld, he said, “I am [actually] breaking down the boundaries erected by anti-Semites to isolate the Jews”; and, to Einstein, “I am the right man for the position. I am fulfilling my duty for Germany.”²⁸

Into the Vortex

Rathenau’s self-assurance, as described above, astounded his friends; but that self-assurance was actually the result of a hard-won internal struggle. All during his career, Rathenau had his moments of doubts, times when he tried to resist the “divine force.” In an undated letter to Lili, he wrote:

I am in the grip of forces which ... determine my life. It seems to me as though I could do nothing of my own free will, as though I were led—gently, if I comply, roughly if I resist.²⁹

And resist, he did, when, before the war, he first received an offer of an official government position, which came to him, as a suggestion, through the wife of General (later President) Paul von Hindenburg.

28. *Erlebte Judenfrage: ein Vierteljahrhundert deutscher Zionismus*, by Kurt Blumenfeld, as quoted in *Einstein in Berlin*, Thomas Levenson.

29. Rathenau to Lili Deutsch, date unknown, as quoted in Kessler.

Rathenau replied to Frau Hindenburg:

My industrial activities give me satisfaction, my literary activities are a necessity of life to me, but to add to these a third form of activity, the political, would exceed not only my strength, but also my inclination. And even if I were inclined to take to politics, you know, dear lady, that external circumstances would prevent it. Even though my ancestors and I myself have served our country to the best of our abilities, yet, as you know, I am a Jew, and as such a citizen of the second class. I could not become a higher Civil Servant, nor even, in time of peace, a sub-lieutenant. By changing my faith I could have escaped these disabilities, but by acting thus I should feel I had countenanced the breach of justice committed by those in power.³⁰

The 1914 cascade of declarations of war was to soon change his mind. Rathenau threw all considerations aside, immediately offering his services to create a War Raw Materials Department to ensure that Germany could survive the economic blockade established against her ports. Within days of the start of the war, he was named by the Minister of War, General Falkenhayn, to head such a department.

At the end of the war, Rathenau wrote a small book, *An Deutschlands Jugend (To Germany's Youth)*. Einstein was delighted, especially recommending the last chapter, "Charakter," to his mother, Pauline, as "well worth the reading."³¹ Einstein, at the time, was giving informal classes to a group of Eastern European Jewish emigres that were otherwise blocked from attendance at Berlin's universities. Einstein would have encouraged Rathenau to apply himself in a similar direction; this was at the same time that Einstein was advising Rathenau to not accept any public office in a post-war government, and to keep a distance from the capital, where po-

litical violence was an everyday occurrence in the streets. He urged Rathenau, instead, to "guide the Germans from a desk with his brilliant mind."³²

But over the next two years, Rathenau spent more time in the political fray, than at his desk in Grunewald, functioning as best he could as an unofficial advisor to a shifting array of post-Kaiser political parties, factions, and movements, as they carried out their coups and counter-coups. He was finally offered an official appointment in May 1921, as Reconstruction Minister, i.e., for reconstructing France, a post, which, technically, placed him in the senior position for dealing with the reparations issue. His ever-shrinking group of friends was horrified at the prospect. He wrote, apologetically, to Lili:

Do you really believe that I wanted to drag you into this vortex, when I scarce know myself whether I shall be able to stand it?³³

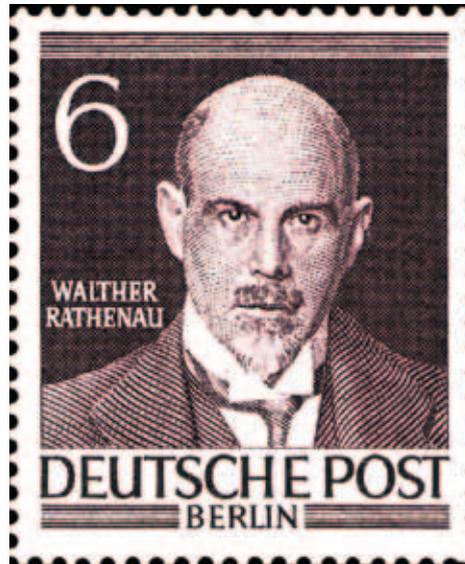
But the divine force had its grip on him. And we will not see him hesitate again, until January of 1922, when, in a decision that required much heart-searching, he accepted the even more publicly prominent position of Foreign Minister, making himself the ultimate target of all the dispossessed military and the right-wing corpo-

rate interests that the British and French could muster inside Germany.

His fellow diplomat, Count Kessler, described his condition:

When I entered his office in the Wilhelmstrasse for the first time after his appointment, and greeted him with the usual "Good-morning, how do you do?" he replied, pulling a pistol out of his trouser pocket: "This is how I do! Things have got to such a pitch that I cannot go about without this little instrument."³⁴

To be continued.



Wikimedia Commons

Walter Rathenau on a 1952 German postage stamp commemorating the 30th anniversary of his assassination.

30. Rathenau to Frau Hindenburg, date unknown, as quoted in Kessler.
31. Einstein to Pauline, October 8, 1918, *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein, Vol. 8*.

32. "In Memoriam."

33. Rathenau to Lili Deutsch, June 1921, as quoted in Kessler.

34. Kessler.