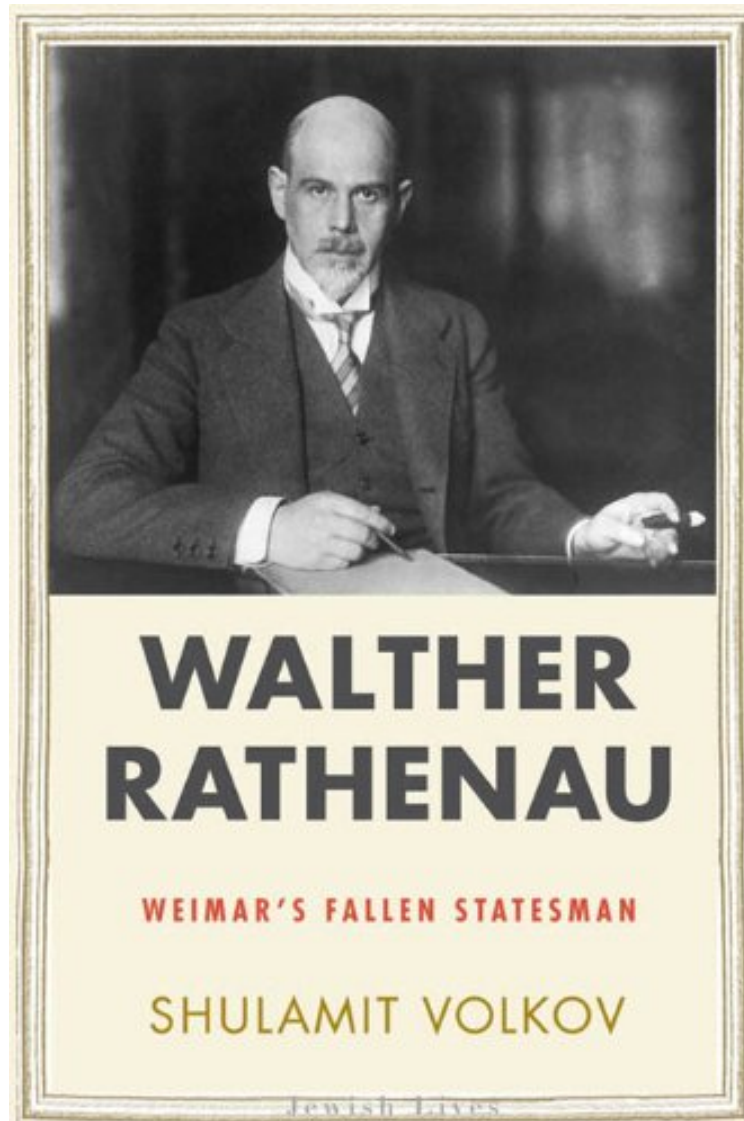


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Von Shulamit Volkov

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Von Shulamit Volkov : Walther Rathenau: Weimar's Fallen Statesman (Jewish Lives) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Walther Rathenau: Weimar's Fallen Statesman (Jewish Lives):

KundenrezensionenHilfreichste Kundenrezensionen1 von 1 Kunden fanden die folgende Rezension hilfreich. A Pan-Germanic oddball or something more?Von Michael AltenburgAre we in for a Walther Rathenau revival?Memories of this extraordinary man have somehow faded in recent years. He was many things: heir to the industrial empire of AEG, founded by his father Emil in 1887, author of numerous philosophical works with wooly titles like "On the

Mechanism of the Spirit or Concerning the Kingdom of the Soul" (1913), head of the War Procurement Division (KRA) in the Prussian War Ministry in 1917, advocate of a continuation of the German war effort even after General Ludendorff had requested a complete and immediate ceasefire in October 1918, mortally offended when, after the revolutionary regime change, he was not asked to join neither the "Soviet of Intellectual Workers" nor the "First Socialization Committee" in November 1918. But he was subsequently, at least, consistent enough not to back the reactionary Kapp putsch in March 1920, a feat which somewhat re-established his political credibility with the centrist-social-democratic cabinet led by Joseph Wirth. In March 1921, he became Minister of Economic Affairs and led the German delegation in the negotiations on war reparations with the Western Allies in London. Against fierce political opposition, he and chancellor Wirth defended a policy of "fulfillment" of the reparation demands by France and the UK. But when Rathenau, appointed to serve as German Foreign Minister since January 1922, started to apprehend that his "fulfillment" strategy would not cut ice with France and the UK and would not win Germany at least some concessions on their excessive reparation demands he changed course, one more time, and concluded a separate agreement with the Russian Bolshevik leaders in Rappallo in April 1922. An understanding with the Russians - directed against the Western Allies - was a pet project, not with the German Social Democrats, but with German big business, the Pan-Germanic reactionaries and the military. But this did not help Walther Rathenau. He was assassinated by two right-wing students on June 24, 1922, not even two years into the young Weimar Republic. Rathenau's assassination was not the last in a sequence of organized political killings by the extreme right. Previous prominent victims had been Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and Kurt Eisner in 1919 and Matthias Erzberger in 1921. Rosa Luxemburg and Kurt Eisner, like Walther Rathenau, had been Jews. Counterfactual conjectures on what might have happened to Weimar if these murders had not been perpetrated leave room for a number of probable hypotheses in the cases of Liebknecht, Luxemburg and Erzberger who, all three of them, had different, but clear cut political profiles. But both Eisner - Prime Minister of the revolutionary, soviet Free State of Bavaria for some 100 days from November 1918 until his assassination in February 1919 - and Rathenau were highly untypical politicians and unpredictable personalities, allowing only the wildest guesses what their further lives might have looked like. What they actually achieved during their lifetime was stunning, in both cases, but did not last. In Rathenau's case his assassination made both supporters and enemies of the Weimar Republic realize the extent of political polarization and acerbity reached by 1922. But matters would turn only worse by 1933. Rathenau's "sacrifice" therefore seems to have been largely in vain. It therefore is not too surprising that Rathenau is not much being discussed any more among historians. Christopher Clark's magisterial 700 pages work "Iron Kingdom/The Rise and downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947" of 2006 does not even mention him. To German language readers he is probably still most present and familiar from the caricature as one Paul Arnheim in Robert Musil's "Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften". Albert Einstein who had tried in early April 1922, in vain, together with the Zionist leader, Kurt Blumenfeld, to make Rathenau step down from the position as German Foreign Minister, after his murder remarked to Blumenfeld in ribald sarcasm: "Even if offered the job as Pope, Rathenau would have accepted - and would technically even have performed rather well probably." Shulamit Volkov's new concise book on Walther Rathenau contains all these references. She does not fully spell out all of them, but you find them in her footnotes. In this sense, hers is a superb reference work on Rathenau: as a private person, as a son, as a friend, as an author, as an industrialist, as a banker and as a politician. Given the myriad of personal contacts, correspondences, articles, essays, diary entries both by and on him, pulling this all together on 210 pages in a coherent, highly readable fashion is in itself no small achievement and well deserves the praise of this biography given by Saul Friedlaender on the back cover. Some question marks remain, however. How suitable is the subtitle "Weimar's Fallen Statesman" when Rathenau, for whatever reasons, achieved next to nothing in his capacity as a prominent Weimar politician? Is his life really "the stuff of which tragedy is made?" Yes, indeed, Shulamit Volkov argues, because Walther Rathenau was a Jew: he was hated and killed because he was a Jew. Looking back from today's perspective, the life and death of Walther Rathenau can, indeed, be presented as a prelude to the Holocaust. He was, as it were, one of its first martyrs and therefore he must not be forgotten. German anti-Semitism, dubbed by Shulamit Volkov "the cultural code of the German bourgeoisie" in another of her books, was the cause. And Rathenau's tragedy was, like that of many other German Jews, in fact, like that of million European Jews who later would be killed in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, that they were not aware of this code, did not understand, did not believe it. The Western Ashkenaz community throughout the 19th century lived under the erroneous illusion that full social emancipation might eventually be attainable by cultural assimilation to the Christian host society - which is, according to the logic of anti-Semitism as the German cultural code, why it had to perish. Rathenau did stand by his Jewish ancestry. He never hid it and publicly confessed to it whenever he felt it might make a difference. Likewise, he never converted to Christianity, neither out of conviction nor out of convenience. But he did not confess to the Jewish faith either, refusing to join the CV (Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith) and rejecting Zionism. Instead, he believed that he, the German Jew, could be Germanic more than even most of the Germans. On this favorite main theme of his thinking Rathenau remained so contradictory and befuddled throughout his life that one may indeed sympathize with calling his case tragic, but clearly more in a private, almost psychopathic than in a public or political dimension. The renowned Goethe biographer Nicolas Boyle offers on page 94

of his "German Literature/A Very Short Introduction" of 2008 a strikingly lucid interpretation for German anti-Semitism: "They (the Jews) came to represent in the collective psyche a pure form of the forces combining to challenge the dominance of officialdom in German political and cultural life: money, business, and laissez-faire. In the great 19th-century upheaval, hostility to Jews expressed the German bourgeoisie's fear of itself, of its power to destroy the autocratic and bureaucratic state which had given it its (subordinate) identity for over 300 years. Because the hostility was fundamentally an irrational self-hatred....it tended from the start to take on grotesque or nightmarish qualities..." One of these many anti-Semitic bourgeois Germans, struggling to shed that old subordinate identity of an "Untertan" and accept the civic responsibilities of secular emancipation, apparently was Thomas Mann. Rathenau's murder, as Boyle also notes (p. 130), "shocked him into whole-hearted commitment to the Republican cause, ...a system he now saw as fulfilling the promise of the German Enlightenment." Mrs. Volkov's book, unfortunately, does not reflect this liberal, emancipatory strand in the German collective psyche. To be sure, during Rathenau's lifetime, it was far from dominant and still on the losing side. Hitler's Germany would soon not only destroy almost all of European Jews, but herself with them nearly totally. In the mean time, however, post-Nazi Germany has had a Foreign Minister from 1998 to 2005 whose Hungarian-Jewish background was never much discussed, let alone controversial. In short, the concept of anti-Semitism as a cultural code would appear too narrow and too static regarding the past and, in spite of surviving pockets of die-hard anti-Semitism not only in Germany, definitely out of date regarding the present. It simply does not help the good cause. Regarding the presentation format, there are doubts about the suitability of Rathenau for the series "Jewish Lives" at Yale University Press and the Leon D. Black Foundation in which Shulamit Volkov's book has been published. One is reminded of Sir Ernst H. Gombrich's warning back in 1997 against construing for Western Jews a particular Jewish culture different from their religion. Any effort to do so will inevitably lead back to racist differentiations as we know them from the Nazi Nuremberg Laws or, before that, regrettably, from Walther Rathenau.

Kurzbeschreibung This deeply informed biography of Walther Rathenau (1867-1922) tells of a man who both thoroughly German and unabashedly Jewish rose to leadership in the German War-Ministry Department during the First World War, and later to the exalted position of foreign minister in the early days of the Weimar Republic. His achievement was unprecedented: no Jew in Germany had ever attained such high political rank. But Rathenau's success was marked by tragedy: within months he was assassinated by right-wing extremists seeking to destroy the newly formed Republic. Drawing on Rathenau's papers and on a depth of knowledge of both modern German and German-Jewish history, Shulamit Volkov creates a finely drawn portrait of this complex man who struggled with his Jewish identity yet treasured his otherness. Volkov also places Rathenau in the dual context of Imperial and Weimar Germany and of Berlin's financial and intellectual elite. Above all, she illuminates the complex social and psychological milieu of German Jewry in the period before Hitler's rise to power.

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