

Einstein and Germany

The native German physicist, unlike many of his colleagues, had an early antipathy to German nationalism, so that for him, Hitlerism was a confirmation of an earlier intuition.

Fritz Stern

There was nothing simple about Albert Einstein, ever. His apparent simplicity concealed an impenetrable complexity. Even the links to his native Germany were prematurely ambiguous. At a time when most Germans thought their country a hospitable home, a perfect training ground for their talents, Einstein was repelled: In 1894, as a 15-year-old, he left Germany and became a Swiss citizen. Twenty years later, a few weeks before the outbreak of the Great War, he returned to Germany and remained for 18 years of troubled renown, years in which he appreciated what was congenial and opposed what was antipathetic in Germany. Long before Hitler's rise, he felt unease.

Einstein's fame, his capacity for homelessness, and the degradation of his country made him a citizen of the world, seemingly detached from Germany. But I believe that his early encounters with Germany and his consequent hostility to its official culture shaped his public stance. The German experience haunted Einstein to the very end, as it haunted so many of his generation later. It was the text of his political-moral education, the back-

ground against which he came to mold his unorthodox views and play his controversial public role.

In Einstein's time, Germany was the promise and later the nemesis of the world, a country that had decisive bearing on world politics and where, for a moment that seemed a lifetime, the moral drama of our era was enacted. At certain critical moments, Einstein's responses differed radically even from those of his closest colleagues. Documenting this diversity will complicate our understanding of Germany, and this is desirable because Germany's past has often been treated with didactic simplicity. Einstein and Germany: They illuminate each other.

A rebel from the start

Einstein grew up in southern Germany. We know little of his early life. He was no child prodigy; rather, his reticence in speaking for the first three years, his difficulty with learning foreign languages and his mistakes in computation have been a source of endless comfort to the similarly afflicted and their parents—though affinity in failure may not suffice for later success. He went through a brief but

intense religious phase, the end of which, he said, left him suspicious of all authorities. His parents, secularized Jews, had little to do with his intellectual development; an uncle fed his mathematical curiosity. His father was an amiable failure, mildly inept at all the businesses he started. In 1894 his parents went to Italy to start yet another business, leaving the 15-year-old Albert behind in a well-known Munich *Gymnasium*. The authoritarian atmosphere and the mindless teaching appalled him. There was more than a hint of arrogance about the young Einstein, and hence it does not strain one's credulity that a teacher exclaimed, "Your mere presence spoils the respect of the class for me." He was a rebel from the start.

Encouraged by his teachers' hostility, he decided to quit school and leave Germany. His unsuccessful career facilitated his later fame in Germany: Erik Erikson has rightly referred to "the German habit of gilding school failure with the suspicion of hidden genius." It is often said that Einstein left school because he objected to its militarism. I find this unpersuasive: Bavarian militarism? I would suppose



KEYSTONE

Addressing a meeting. Einstein is at the podium delivering the principal address at a meeting sponsored by the Academic Assistance Council, a group formed to aid refugees. Seated at the right are Ernest Rutherford, Austin Chamberlain and the Bishop of Exeter. The October 1933 meeting was held in Royal Albert Hall, London.

that there might have been a stifling Catholicism; an insolent, thoughtless authoritarianism; a repulsive tone—any of which would have sufficed to discourage a youth like Einstein.

I suspect Einstein left Germany so precipitously to escape serving in the German army; by obtaining Swiss citizenship in time, he could do so without incurring the charge of desertion. His first adult decision, then, was to escape the clutches of compulsion—the image of Einstein as a recruit in a field-gray uniform does boggle the mind. He left Germany without regrets. His encounters with that country had not been happy.

There followed the obscure and difficult years in Switzerland, the failures, the marginal existence, the Zurich Polytechnic and, finally, the security of the patent office in Berne. From there in 1905 emerged the four papers destined to revolutionize modern physics and cosmology. They were published in the *Annalen der Physik*, and Max

Planck was the first man to recognize the genius of the unknown author. The international scientific community took note as well, and Einstein finally received his first academic appointments. In 1913, while he was a professor at the Zurich Polytechnic, two German scientists appeared, Walter Nernst and Planck, to offer him an unprecedented position: salaried membership in the Prussian Academy of Sciences and a professorship at the university, but without the obligation to teach. When Nernst and Planck left, Einstein turned to his assistant, Otto Stern, and said, "The two of them were like men looking for a rare postage stamp." The remark was perhaps an early instance of that self-deprecatory humor, that modesty of genius, that was to characterize Einstein.

Einstein began his new German life in April 1914. Berlin was the world's preeminent center of the natural sciences, and Planck, Fritz Haber and a dazzling array of talent rejoiced at

having this young genius at the head of their circle. Three months later the war shattered the idyllic community. Einstein had returned to Germany in time to see the country seized by the exaltation of August 1914, when almost all Germans were caught up in an orgy of nationalism, gripped by a joyful feeling that a common danger had at last united and ennobled the people.

The intoxication passed; the business of killing was too grim to sustain the

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unbridled enthusiasm of August 1914. The elite rallied to the nation, as it did elsewhere too. In the fall of 1914, 93 of Germany's best-known scientists and artists, including Planck, Haber and Richard Willstätter, signed a manifesto that was meant to repudiate Allied charges of German atrocities, but that by tone and perhaps unconscious intent argued Germany's complete innocence and blamed all misfortunes and wrongdoing on Germany's enemies. The manifesto of the 93 has often been seen as a warrant for aggression, a declaration of unrestrained chauvinism. I suspect it was as well the outcry of people to whom the outside world mattered and who intuitively sensed that the Allies would come to cast Germans as pariahs again. Some of the 93 probably hoped for continued respect across the trenches—and signed a document that had the opposite effect. It was not the last time that Germans confirmed the sentiments they set out to deny.

With but few exceptions, intellectuals everywhere joined in this chorus of hatred and in the cry for blood. So did the guardians of morality and the servants of God, the priests who sanctified the killing as an act of mythical purification. In time, some of the 93 turned moderate, or perhaps remained the patriots they had been, but others passed them on the right in the nation's wild leap to pan-German madness.

Politicized by the war

Einstein was alone and disbelieving. The war that was to politicize everyone as the cause of universal grief politicized him as well. Before 1914 Einstein had never concerned himself with politics; his very departure from Germany had been a youthful withdrawal from the claims of the state. Now, for the first time, he ventured forth from his study, convinced of the insanity of the war, shocked by the ease with which people had broken ties of international friendship and mutual respect. A pacifist asked him to sign a countermanifesto addressed to Europeans, demanding an immediate, just peace, a peace without annexations. It was the very first appeal he ever signed. It was published only in 1917 and then only

abroad, for want of sufficient signatures. Somewhat later he joined a tiny group of like-minded democrats and pacifists. In November 1915 the Berlin Goethebund asked for his opinion about the war, and he sent a message with this rather special ending: "But why many words when I can say everything in one sentence, and moreover in a sentence that is particularly fitting for me as a Jew: Honor your Master Jesus Christ not in words and hymns, but above all through your deeds."

Intermittently Einstein forsook his work—his central passion—to bear witness in an unpopular cause he took to be right. He had been a pacifist and a European of the first hour, never touched by the frenzy that ravaged nearly all. Convinced of Germany's special responsibility for the outbreak and the continuation of the war, he hoped for the nation's defeat.

To understand Einstein's isolation, one must look at the responses of his friends and colleagues to the war. Haber, for example, became the very antithesis of Einstein. Einstein's senior by 11 years, Haber was a chemist of genius, a born organizer and, in wartime, an ardent patriot. Without Haber's process for fixing nitrogen from the air, discovered just before the war, Germany would have run out of explosives and fertilizers in the first six months of the war. During the war he came to direct Germany's scientific effort; in 1915 he experimented with poison gas and supervised the introduction of the new weapon at the western front. To enable him to operate within a military machine that had no understanding of the need for a scientist, Haber received the effective rank of captain. He relished his new role; marshaling all one's talents and energies in a cause one believes in and under the shadow of danger is a heady experience. Einstein, the lonely pacifist who had come to feel his solidarity with Jews, and Haber, the restless organizer of wartime science and a convert from Judaism—the contrast is obvious. For all their antithetical responses, Haber and Einstein remained exceptionally close and, on Haber's side, loving friends. Haber's

life was a kind of foil to Einstein's, and it encompassed the triumphs and the tragedy of German Jewry. I shall return to him because his relations with Einstein were so important—and because he happened to have been my godfather and paternal friend of my parents.

Einstein had been horrified at the beginning of the war, but I doubt that even he could have imagined the full measure of disaster: the senseless killing and maiming of millions, the starving of children, the mortgaging of Europe's future, the rupture of a civilization that appeared ever more fragile. For what? Why? Einstein blamed it on an epidemic of madness and greed that had suddenly overwhelmed Europe—and Germany most especially. The old German dream of greatness had turned into a nightmare of blind and brutal greed. During the later phases of the war, Einstein was again totally absorbed in his work, but whiffs of hysteria would reach him—and always from the German side. I doubt that he knew of the excesses on the other side.

Einstein had been right about the war. At its end many felt as he had at the beginning. The war was a great radicalizing experience, pushing most people to the left and some to a new, frantic right. If there had been no war, Bolshevism and fascism would not have afflicted Europe. The war discredited the old order and the old rulers; antagonism to capitalism, imperialism and militarism appeared everywhere. Lenin's Bolsheviks offered themselves as the receivers of a bankrupt system; Bolshevism was a speculation in Europe's downfall. Liberal Europeans pinned their hopes on Woodrow Wilson, but those hopes faded in the vengeful spirit of Versailles. The logic of events had brought many Europeans to share Einstein's radical-liberal, faintly socialist, thoroughly internationalist views.

A public figure

For a short time Einstein had hopes for Germany. Defeat had brought the collapse of the old and the rise of a new, democratic regime, as he had expected. In November 1918, at the height of the



Fritz Haber and Einstein. The two men first met in 1911 and remained friends until Haber's death in 1934.

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P. Lenard

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Anti-relativity

pamphlet. This is the title page of Philipp Lenard's 1920 pamphlet "On the relativity principle, ether, gravitation," in which he argues that relativity theory is false. This eminent physics professor attacked Einstein not only as a publicity-seeking theorist but also as a Jew.

German Revolution, he cautioned radical students who had just deposed the university rector: "All true democrats must stand guard lest the old class tyranny of the right be replaced by a new class tyranny of the left." He warned¹ against force, which "breeds only bitterness, hatred and reaction," and he condemned the dictatorship of the proletariat in the first of his occasional bitter denunciations of the Soviet Union as the enemy of freedom. However, at other times and in different contexts, he would sign appeals of what we have come to call "front organizations."

We now come to a fateful coincidence in the rise of the public Einstein. In March 1919 a British expedition headed by Arthur Stanley Eddington had observed the solar eclipse. In November it was announced that the results confirmed the predictions of the general theory of relativity. In London the president of the Royal Society, Nobel laureate J. J. Thomson, hailed Einstein's work, now confirmed, as "one of the greatest—perhaps the greatest of achievements in the history of human thought." Almost overnight Einstein became a celebrated hero—the scientific genius, untainted by war, of dubious nationality, who had revolutionized man's conception of the universe, redefined the fundamentals of time and space, and done so in a fashion so recondite that only a handful of scientists could grasp the new, mysterious truth.

The new hero appeared, as if by divine design, at the very moment when the old heroes had been buried in the rubble of the war. Soldiers, monarchs, statesmen, priests, captains of industry—all had failed. The old superior class had been found inferior; *Disenchantment* was, appropriately, the title of one of the finest books written about the war. "Before 1914," Noel Annan has asserted,² "intellectuals counted for little." After the war, and in a sense in the wake of Einstein, they counted for more. Einstein now became a force, or at least a celebrity, in the world.

After 1919 Einstein appeared more and more often as a public figure. His views were continually solicited, and

Einstein and Zionism

During World War I, Einstein became a champion of Zionism, the effort to found a Jewish homeland in Palestine as a secular haven for the persecuted and as a means of moral regeneration. By the early 1920s he had become a public advocate of Zionism—to the surprise and likely dismay of many of his colleagues. Assimilated Jews must have found this reminder of Jewish apartness painful; internationalists must have boggled at the implied argument for a new national community. But Einstein had come to feel a sense of solidarity with other Jews, especially with Jewish victims of discrimination, and he appeared to believe in the existence of an ineradicable antagonism between gentiles and Jews, especially between Germans and Jews—with the fault by no means all on one side. Hence his view that Jews needed a spiritual home and a possible haven. He specifically cited the discrimination that talented Jews from Eastern Europe and from Germany suffered at German universities.

In 1921 Chaim Weizmann persuaded Einstein to join him on a trip to the United States to raise money for the projected Hebrew University in Jerusalem (see the photograph at right). For Weizmann, Einstein's support was critical; for Einstein, the visit to Jerusalem in 1923 was a deeply moving experience. Still, there were conflicts. Einstein railed against the mediocrity of the American head of the university; he saw him as a creature of the crass American-Jewish plutocrats for whom Einstein had contempt even as he helped to lighten their financial burden. He quarreled publicly with Weizmann over the policies of the Hebrew University and repeatedly threatened to withdraw his sponsorship. He urged a Jewish presence in Palestine that would promote, not injure, Arab interests. In 1929, at a time of major attacks on Jewish settlements, he again pleaded with Weizmann for Jewish-Arab cooperation and warned against a "nationalism à la prussienne," by which he meant a policy of toughness and a reliance on force:

If we do not find the path to honest cooperation and honest negotiations with the Arabs, then we have learned nothing from our 2000 years of suffering and we deserve the fate that will befall us. Above all, we should be careful not to rely too heavily on the English. For if we don't get to a real cooperation with the leading Arabs,



Chaim Weizmann (bearded) and Einstein at a reception at City Hall, New York, April 1921.

then the English will drop us, if not officially, then *de facto*. And they will lament our debacle with traditional, pious glances toward heaven, with assurances of their innocence, and without lifting a finger for us. [Letter to Chaim Weizmann, 29 November 1929, in the Weizmann Archives, Yad Chaim Weizmann, Rehovot, Israel]

Weizmann replied instantly, at the height of the violence in Palestine, with a four-page handwritten letter. He expounded his views, which were somewhere between those of Zionist extremists and those of the irenic Einstein—who, in the meantime, had criticized the Jewish stance publicly. Weizmann pointed to the recalcitrance of the Arab leaders, their fanaticism, their inability to understand anything but firmness. He pleaded with Einstein to cease his injurious attacks on the Zionists. Of course they would negotiate in time, Weizmann insisted, but "we do not want to negotiate with the murderers at the open grave of the Hebron and Safed victims." Einstein remained skeptical. Weizmann, desperate to retain his support, had written to Felix Warburg a year earlier, "There is really no length to which I would not go to bring back to our work the wonderful and lovable personality—perhaps the greatest genius the Jews have produced in recent

centuries and withal so fine and noble a character."

At the time of the greatest need for a Jewish home in Palestine, immediately after Hitler's seizure of power, Einstein formally broke with the Hebrew University and with Weizmann. The correspondence between the two men suggests all the intractable issues about Jewish-Arab relations, all the differences between the safe outsider and the practical statesman. In April 1938 Einstein resigned his position on the Governing Body of the Hebrew University and again warned against a "narrow nationalism." Once again Weizmann explained that at the moment when five million Jews faced, as he put it, "a war of extermination," they needed the support of the intellectual elite of Jewry, and not, by implication, public criticism.

Einstein was not an easy ally. To some he must have appeared as a man of conscience and of unshakable principle; to others, as an uncompromising fanatic impervious to practical exigencies. As Robert Oppenheimer put it in his memorial lecture on Einstein (*New York Review of Books*, 17 March 1966, page 4): "He was almost wholly without sophistication and wholly without worldliness. . . . There was always with him a wonderful purity at once childlike and profoundly stubborn."

he obliged with his ideas about life, education, politics and culture. He had a special kinship with other dissenters from the Great War. Like Bertrand Russell, Romain Rolland and John Dewey, he became what the French call *un homme de bonne volonté*. His views—rational, progressive, liberal, in favor of international cooperation, condemnatory of the evils of militarism, nationalism, tyranny and exploitation—described as well a cast of mind

characteristic of the Weimar intelligentsia.

The intellectuals of Weimar—and this needs to be said at a time when Weimar is often portrayed as some sort of Paradise Lost—were a shallow lot in their moralizing politics. Their views often were utopian and simplistic, pious and fiercely polemical by turns. They were cynical because, as Herbert Marcuse once said to me about himself, they knew how beautiful the world

could be. They lived in a world peopled by George Grosz caricatures and three-penny indictments of bourgeois falsehood. It is perhaps too simple to say that they lived off the bankruptcy of the old order, but they did rather revel in the crudity of their opponents. It is not good for the mind to have dumb, discredited enemies. The real strength of Weimar lay in clusters of talent: in Heidelberg around Max and later Alfred Weber; at Göttingen in mathemat-



Einstein in a motorcade on the occasion of his arrival in New York City, 1921.

ics; the Bauhaus and the Berlin circles.

Einstein stood above these progressive intellectuals, in consonance with them, but usually more complicated and less predictable and always more independent than they. But he too was a theorist without a touch of practical experience. Einstein offered his prescriptions the more readily because he had been so overwhelmingly right when the multitudes had been wrong. By 1919 he had not only overthrown the scientific canons of centuries; he had also defied conventional wisdom and mass hysteria in wartime. His views were often deceptively simple; they were not so naive as has often been alleged nor quite so profound as admirers think. There is no reason to think that a scientific genius will have special insights into other realms. He had reflected on some issues and felt strongly about others; as for the rest, his views showed clearly that genius is divisible and can be compartmentalized.

Einstein's views and prescriptions were unassailably, conventionally well intended, but they often lacked a certain *gravitas*, a certain reality—in part, I think, because he approached the problems of the world distantly, unhistorically, not overly impressed by the nature or intractability of the obstacles to ideal solutions. He was not a political thinker; he was a philosopher, moralist, prophet, and the travails of the world would prompt him to propose or support social remedies. Sometimes those remedies would be blueprints of utopia addressed to people who had lost their footing in a swamp and were sinking fast.

Much later, in fact at a moment when Einstein had attacked the Nazi government, Max von Laue questioned whether the scientist should deal with political issues. Einstein rejected such considerations:

...you see especially in the circumstances of Germany where

such self-restraint leads. It means leaving leadership to the blind and the irresponsible without resistance. Where would we be if Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Voltaire and Humboldt had thought and acted this way?

Laue pointed out in a letter to Einstein that Einstein's examples were not exact natural scientists and that physics was so remote as not to prepare its practitioners for politics in the same way that law or history did. On that letter Einstein simply scribbled, "Don't answer."

Like so many thinkers of the 1920s Einstein underestimated the force of the irrational, of what the Germans call the demonic, in public affairs. That is what left them so ill prepared for an understanding of fascism. In their innocence they thought that men were bribed to be fascists, that fascism was but frightened capitalism; in its essence it was something much more sinister and elemental.

A democratic rebuke to authority

What gave Einstein's views exceptional resonance was the magic of his person and his incomparable achievement. He was taken by many as a sage and a saint. In fact, as I have said before, he was an unfathomably complex person. In the complexity of nature he found simplicity; in the complexity of his own nature, the principle of simplicity ranked high. Indeed, it was his simplicity, his otherworldliness, that impressed people. His clothes were simple, his tastes were simple, his appearance was meticulously simple. His modesty was celebrated—and genuine, as was his unselfishness. He was a lonely man, indifferent to honors, homeless by his own admission, solicitous of humanity and diffident about his relations with those closest to him. At times he appeared like a latter-day St. Francis of Assisi: a solitary saint, innocently sailing, those

melancholy eyes gazing distractedly into the distance. At other times he played with the press, finding himself in the company of the famous and the powerful despite himself.

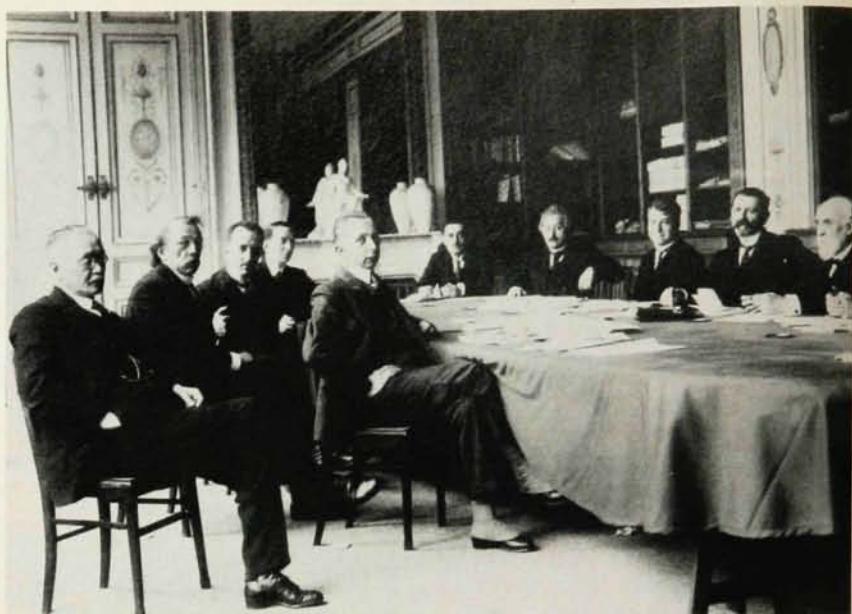
In some ways, I believe, he came to invest in his own fame, perhaps unconsciously to groom himself for his new public role. He lectured in distant lands, "a traveler in relativity." In 1921, after his first visit to the United States, he said:³

The cult of individuals is always, in my view, unjustified. . . . It strikes me as unfair, and even in bad taste, to select a few [individuals] for boundless admiration, attributing superhuman powers of mind and character to them. This has been my fate, and the contrast between the popular estimate of my powers and achievements and the reality is simply grotesque.

This admiration would have been unbearable except that "it is a welcome symptom in an age which is commonly denounced as materialistic that it makes heroes of men whose goals lie wholly in the intellectual and moral sphere. . . . My experience teaches me that this idealistic outlook is particularly prevalent in America." He knew that he had become a hero—and was endlessly surprised by it. In 1929 he described himself as a "saint of the Jews." He played many roles by turns, each, I think, completely genuinely; he was a simple man of complex roles.

In the simplicity and goodness that were his, I detect, perhaps wrongly, a distant echo of his encounters with German life. Could one imagine a greater contrast between the Germans surrounding him—people so formal in their bearing, so attentive to appearance, so solicitous of titles, honors and externals—and himself? Did the insolence of office, the arrogance of the uniform, push him into ever greater idiosyncratic informality? Was not his appearance a democratic rebuke to

League of Nations commission. Einstein is seated fourth from the right at this 1927 meeting of the International Commission on Intellectual Co-operation. Hendrik A. Lorentz is at the far right.



authority?

In the immediate postwar era, Einstein was friendly to the governments of Weimar and appalled by the vindictiveness of the Allies, who seemed to have caught what he had thought was a German disease. In all his public stands he had what Gerald Holton has called a "vulnerability to pity," and in the early 1920s he had a fleeting moment of pity for Germany. He refused to leave it in its time of trial. For years he was an uncertain member of the International Commission on Intellectual Co-operation of the League of Nations, intermittently resigning whenever he thought the commission too pro-French, too *Allied*. He hoped to restore an international community, Germans included. In the end he asked Haber to take his place. Successive German governments regarded him as a national asset, perhaps their sole asset in a morally and materially empty treasury. They saw in his travels and in his fame the promise of some reflected glory. But his own hopes gradually faded. He had warned Walter Rathenau against assuming the foreign ministry; Jews should not play so prominent a role, he felt. When right-wing assassins killed Rathenau and were widely hailed in Germany as true patriots, Einstein had reason to fear for his own life. The inborn servility of the Germans, he thought, had survived the successive shocks of 1918.

Immediately after the war and at the beginning of his popular fame, Einstein embraced several causes. Having embraced them, he would often embarrass and repudiate them as well. He was the antithesis of an organization man. Unstintingly he would help individuals and chosen causes, but I doubt that he

listened to them. He remained a detached theorist who thought the rational order of the world wantonly violated, but at times his commandments contained visionary practicality. A pacifist during the war, he now became Germany's most prominent champion of organized pacifism. He hated militarism—as blindly as its defenders loved it. He condemned "the worst outgrowth of herd life, the military system. . . . I feel only contempt for those who take pleasure marching in rank and file to the strains of a band. . . . Heroism on command, senseless violence and all the loathsome nonsense that goes by the name of patriotism—how passionately I despise them!" This, surely, is exemplary of the spirit of the 1920s, formed by the experience of the first war and soaked in the we-they antithesis that precludes understanding. It precluded the understanding that had led William James to plead for a moral equivalent of war, for something practical that would make peaceful use of the old martial virtues. Einstein insisted that "the advance of modern science has made the delivery of mankind from the menace of war . . . a matter of life and death for civilization as we know it." But Einstein did not grapple with the psychological issues, with people's desire for danger and comradeship. In his exchange with Freud about the nature of war he acknowledged⁵ that "the normal objective of my thought affords no insight into the dark places of human feeling and will." For Einstein war was a disease, a disorder planted by men of greed, to be abolished by men of good will through the creation of international sovereignty or through a revolutionary pacifism, that is, through the refusal of men to bear arms in peace or

war. He called for resistance to war, but in 1933, almost immediately after Hitler's assumption of power, he renounced pacifism altogether—to the fury of his doctrinaire followers. In fact he urged the Western powers to prepare themselves against another German onslaught.

Humane collegiality

Unlike many academics, Einstein took education with the utmost seriousness—and academics with magnificent irreverence. He had great faith in the possibilities of primary and secondary education; at one point he said that if the League of Nations improved primary education, it would have fulfilled its mission. His ironic contemplation of universities found expression in private letters. He once complimented⁶ his close friend Max Wertheimer, the Gestalt psychologist: "I really believe there are very few who have been so little harmed by learning as yourself." In 1924 he wrote:⁷ "In truth, the university is generally a machine of poor efficacy and still irreplaceable and not in any essential way improvable. Here the community must take the point of view that the biblical God took toward Sodom and Gomorrah. For the sake of very few, the great effort must be made—and it is worth it!"

Einstein's success—the enormous acclaim, especially abroad at a time when most German scientists were still banished from international meetings—caused much ill will at home. His opinions enraged the superpatriots. Some physicists condemned the fanfare surrounding the dubious theory of relativity; one fellow Nobel laureate, Philipp Lenard, attacked it as "a Jewish fraud." For anti-Semites, Einstein became a favorite and obvious target.



Meeting at Harnack House, Berlin, 1931. Left to right: Max Planck, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, Reichsminister Gottfried Treviranus (from behind), Einstein, Privy Counselor Hermann Schmitz (?) of I. G. Farben, Vice-Chancellor Hermann Dietrich and (partially obscured) Foreign Minister Julius Curtius (?).

The waves of hatred spilled from the streets into the lecture halls, and Einstein's occasional and sometimes ill-considered deprecations made things worse.

It would be hard to imagine three causes less pleasing to the bulk of the German professoriat than liberal internationalism, pacifism and Zionism (see the box on page 44).

Germany frightened Einstein again. His hopes for the Weimar Republic had dimmed. As early as 1922 his life was threatened. He traveled even more than before, but still he refused handsome offers from Leiden and Zurich, the universities with which he had the closest ties. He stayed in Germany despite his misgivings; he stayed because Berlin in the 1920s was the golden center of physics; he stayed because proximity to Planck, Laue, Haber and others was a unique professional gift, because, as he wrote Laue in 1928, "I see at every occasion how fortunate I can call myself for having you and Planck as my colleagues." In 1934 he wrote Laue that "the small circle of men that earlier was bound together harmoniously was really unique and in its human decency something I scarcely encountered again." In 1947 he wrote⁵ Planck's widow that his time with Planck "will remain among the happiest memories for the rest of my life."

The unpublished correspondence among these men suggests even more than a professional tie. The letters bespeak a degree of humane collegiality, a shared pleasure in work, as well as a delicacy of sentiment, a candid avowal of affection, that in turn allowed for confessions of anguish and self-doubt, of melancholy as well as high spirits. They spoke of joys and

torment, in close or distant friendship, in an enviable style. The letters also breathe a kind of innocence, as if science was their insulated realm, nature the great, enticing mystery and one's labors of understanding exclusively an intellectual pursuit, remote from social consequences. Such clusters of collaboration and of friendship have always existed, I suppose, and they have made life better and infinitely richer. Germany may have had a special knack for breeding them.

Einstein's Germany included gentiles and Jews working together in extraordinary harmony. Still, one can state categorically that none of the Jewish scientists escaped the ambiguity, the intermittent hostility, that being a Jew entailed in imperial and Weimar Germany. Neither fame nor achievement, neither the Nobel Prize nor baptism, offered immunity. Passions were fiercer in Weimar, that cauldron of resentments. Official barriers against Jews had been lowered, but new fears and hatreds came to supplement old prejudices.

Three incidents may illustrate the uncertain temper of the time. In 1921 Haber begged Einstein not to go to America with Chaim Weizmann on the ground that Germans would take amiss Einstein's traveling in Allied countries with Allied nationals at the very time when the Allies were once again tightening the screws on Germany. To persuade Einstein, Haber warned that German anti-Semites would capitalize on Einstein's seeming desertion and that innocent Jewish students would be made to suffer; anti-Semitism, rampant as it was, did not need to be goaded. Einstein's warning to Rathenau originated in a similar apprehension. Or take another incident. In 1920 a well-

known physicist opposed the university appointment of the later Nobel laureate Otto Stern: "I have high regard for Stern, but he has such a corrosive Jewish intellect."

Or consider this last example. In 1915 the king of Bavaria, confirming the Nobel laureate Willstätter's appointment to a professorship at Munich, admonished his minister, "This is the last time I will let you have a Jew." Ten years later, discussing with his colleagues a new academic appointment, Willstätter proposed a candidate. A murmur arose: "another Jew." Willstätter walked out, resigned his post and never entered the university again, the unanimous pleas of his students notwithstanding. For the next 14 years he had daily, hour-long telephone calls with his assistant so that she could conduct the experiments in a laboratory that he would no longer enter. A man of conscience and of courage, someone who did not blink at the reality of anti-Semitism. But his stand in 1924 was his undoing a decade later. A devoted German, but no longer a civil servant, he assumed that the Nazis would leave untouched a private scholar. He believed that some Jews had contributed to this new storm. He could not comprehend the radical newness of the phenomenon. In February 1938 he wrote my mother urging her not to leave Germany without the most careful reflection. He himself refused exile until the aftermath of the *Kristallnacht* forced him into it.

I cite Willstätter's example in particular precisely because of its contradictory nature: Awareness of anti-Semitism could cloud one's perception of Nazism. If anti-Semitism had always existed, then perhaps Nazism was but an intensification of it. It is not uncom-

mon these days to hear summary judgments about German Jewry, about their putative self-surrender, their cravenness or their opportunism. These judgments often have a polemical edge and they are likely to do violence to the past and to the future: The myth of yesterday's self-surrender could feed the delusion of tomorrow's intransigence. If our aim is to understand a past culture, we must note that German-Jewish scientists thought Germany their only and their best home, despite the anti-Semitism that crawled all around them. They may have loved not wisely but too well, and yet their sentiments are perhaps not so much an indictment of themselves as a tribute to the appeals of Germany. We owe that past no less than what we owe any past: a sense of its integrity.

The denouement

Let me hasten to the denouement. In 1932 Einstein left Germany provisionally, with the intention of returning to Berlin for one semester each year. Hitler's accession to power the next year changed all that. Einstein immediately denounced the new regime, and in response the Prussian Academy expelled him. His books were burned, his property seized. The first Nazi decrees on the purification of the universities would have allowed some Jews to maintain their positions. Einstein's non-Aryan friends spurned such sufferance and resigned. German physics was decimated, and a few remaining masters battled to defend some shreds of decency, some measure of autonomy. Laue once wrote Einstein that in teaching the theory of relativity he had sarcastically added that it had of course been translated from the

Hebrew. Even such jokes—to say nothing of Laue's eulogies of Jewish colleagues—aroused Nazi wrath. The Nazis proscribed the very mention of Einstein, even in scientific discussions. They wished him to be a nonperson.

For most, exile was hard; the habits of a lifetime are not easily shaken. For others, as the physicist Max Born put it,⁹ "a disaster turned out to be a blessing. For there is nothing more wholesome and refreshing for a man than to be uprooted and replanted in completely different surroundings." Resiliency was a function of age and temperament. For Haber exile was a crushing blow and led to a final irony in his relations with Einstein. In mid-1933 he wrote to Einstein that as soon as his health would allow it, he would go to Palestine, but in the meantime he begged Einstein to patch up the public quarrel Einstein had had with Chaim Weizmann (see box on page 44). Einstein replied¹⁰ at length: "pleased... that your former love for the blond beast has cooled off a bit. Who would have thought that my dear Haber would appear before me as defender of the Jewish, yes even the Palestinian, cause. The old fox [Weizmann] did not pick a bad defender." He then lashed out against Weizmann and concluded:

I hope you won't return to Germany. It's no bargain to work for an intellectual group that consists of men who lie on their bellies in front of common criminals and even sympathize to a degree with these criminals. They could not disappoint me, for I never had any respect or sympathy for them—aside from a few fine personalities (Planck 60% noble, and Laue 100%). I want nothing so much for you as a truly humane atmosphere in which you could regain your happy spirits (France or England). For me the most beautiful thing is to be in contact with a few fine Jews—a few millennia of civilized past do mean something after all.

The German patriot Haber died a few months later in Basel, en route to Palestine. And Einstein found a refuge at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton under conditions not dissimilar from what the Prussian Academy had offered him 20 years earlier. For as Erwin Panofsky has said¹¹ of the institute, it "owes its reputation to the fact that its members do their research work openly and their teaching surreptitiously, whereas the opposite is true of so many other institutions of learning."

Einstein's public life continued to be



Henry A. Wallace, Einstein, journalist Frank Kingdom and singer Paul Robeson during the 1948 Presidential campaign. Wallace was the Progressive party candidate.



Rudolf W. Ladenburg and Einstein, on the occasion of Ladenburg's retirement from Princeton University.

dominated by his fear of Germany. He warned the West against a new German onslaught. He abandoned the pacifism he had so fervently espoused and in 1939 signed the famous letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt urging the Administration to prepare the United States because Germany might develop nuclear fission for military purposes. In the winter of 1945, when Germany was desolate in defeat and when the Morgenthau spirit, if not the plan, had a considerable grip on American thinking, a fellow laureate and old friend, James Franck, asked Einstein to sign a manifesto of exiles that would appeal to the United States not to starve the German people. Einstein vowed that he would publicly attack such a plea. Franck pleaded with him that to give up all hope for a moral position in politics would be tantamount to a Nazi victory after all. But Einstein, who had signed so many appeals that he himself once said he was not a hero in no-saying, scathingly rejected Franck's plea. For him, genocide was Germany at its most demonic; after Auschwitz he could muster no magnanimity. Even the righteous could not redeem the "country of mass murderers," as he called Germany. He rebuffed Laue's plea to help a young German physicist. He knew that Planck, who lost one son in the first war, had now lost another, whom the Nazis murdered because of his participation in the plot against Hitler. The serene Einstein, always the champion of the rights of the individual against the collectivity, now proclaimed the principle of collective guilt. At that moment, of course, the world shared Einstein's horror at German inhumanity. But in him the violence of senti-

ment, the total absence of that vulnerability to pity, puzzles, for it shows how desperately deep and all-consuming his antipathy to Germany had become.

Even Einstein's postwar laments about America, his horror at McCarthyism, were shaped by his image of Germany. America, he believed, was somehow following the path of Germany. The world of politics he saw through German eyes—always.

But his deepest feelings also retained something of a German cast, echoed some very German themes. When Rudolf Ladenburg, a physicist and fellow exile, died in 1952, Einstein spoke¹² at the graveside:

Brief is this existence, as a fleeting visit in a strange house. The path to be pursued is poorly lit by a flickering consciousness, the center of which is the limiting and separating "I."

The limitation to the I is for the likes of our nature unthinkable considering both our naked existence and our deeper feeling for life. The I leads us to the Thou and to the We—a step which alone makes us what we are. And yet the bridge which leads from the I to the Thou is subtle and uncertain, as is life's entire adventure.

When a group of individuals becomes a We, a harmonious whole, then the highest is reached that humans as creatures can reach.

* * *

This essay is a revised version of a lecture I gave at the Einstein Centennial Symposium in Jerusalem in 1979. Papers from the symposium appear in *Albert Einstein, Historical and Cultural Perspectives*, G. Holton,

Y. Elkana, eds., Princeton U.P., Princeton, New Jersey (1982).

I benefited from conversations with Marshall Claggett, Felix Gilbert, Gerald Holton, Martin Klein, I. I. Rabi and Malvin Ruderman. It was in long and frequent talks with Otto Stern that I first sensed how extraordinary those early days in Zurich must have been.

References

- In writing this essay I found *Einstein on Peace and Ideas and Opinions*, references 1 and 3 below, particularly pertinent. I was also fortunate enough to be allowed to use the Albert Einstein Archives when they were still at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, a treasure made still more valuable by the always helpful advice and recollections of Helen Dukas, who was in charge of them. I also read the unpublished correspondence of James Franck and Albert Einstein, deposited at the University of Chicago Library. In addition to the books cited in the preceding notes, I found the following particularly useful: A. D. Beyerchen, *Scientists under Hitler: Politics and the Physics Community in the Third Reich*, Yale U.P., New Haven (1981); G. Holton, *The Scientific Imagination: Case Studies*, Cambridge U.P., New York (1978); R. Willstätter, *Aus Meinem Leben*, Verlag Chemie, Weinheim (1949); and H. Zuckerman, *Scientific Elites: Nobel Laureates in the United States*, Free Press, New York (1977).
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- 11. E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, U. of Chicago P., Chicago (1983), p. 322.
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