



Walther Rathenau. *Briefe, Band V, Teilband 1: 1871-1913, Teilband 2: 1914-1922.* 2 vols. Edited by Alexander Jaser, Clemens Picht, and Ernst Schulin. Rathenau Gesamtausgabe. Dusseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2006. 2829 pp. EUR 182.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7700-1620-4.

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The Personality of a Polymath

The publication of Walther Rathenau's letters marks the completion of Walther Rathenau's collected works, a project started in 1977. The fifth volume, divided into two parts covering the periods 1871-1913 and 1914-22, contains more than three thousand letters and thus offers the largest collection of Rathenau's letters published to date. This monumental collection was made possible by the fortuitous discovery in Soviet archives of the Rathenau *Nachlass*, archival materials previously believed destroyed during the Second World War. None of the letters printed here have been abridged, though a number of them, such as formal thank-you notes or items deemed "uninteresting and poor in content" (p. 35), have been left out of the collection. Nevertheless, the editors assure us that "no important testament by Rathenau is missing" (p. 11). In addition to the letters themselves, the editors provide a foreword that outlines the publication of Rathenau's letters prior to this volume, an interesting introduction to their content in relation to Rathenau's life, a chronology of his life, thorough notes on the letters themselves, and an extensive index.

Since many of Rathenau's most significant letters have been published already in other volumes of this edition, notably letters concerning industry, economics, politics, and the conduct of the First World War in volumes 1, 3, and 4, and the complete correspondence between Rathenau and Maximilian Harden in volume 6, little new

or surprising material appears in this collection. Nevertheless, Rathenau led a fascinating life as an engineer, economist, politician, and writer, and these letters offer an interesting perspective on social, cultural, technical, industrial, and political developments in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Germany. The letters from 1914-22 are particularly interesting, as they often deal with the conduct of the First World War and the founding of the Weimar Republic, when Rathenau played an important role in the Raw Materials Department of the War Ministry, as minister of reconstruction, in the founding of the German Democratic Party, and as foreign minister.

In addition, the editors have included extensive notes that provide a wealth of information, ranging from simple clarifications of persons mentioned to remarks on the difficulties in transcribing illegible words to extensive background information for the content of these missives. Frequently, the editors include relevant quotations from letters by Rathenau's correspondents or other works that explain Rathenau's comments. Indeed, several of the most significant letters to Rathenau are included in their entirety. These notes provide significant context and are a valuable resource for research.

The letters provide valuable insights into Rathenau's life. They establish Rathenau's remarkably multifaceted personality as an engineer, industrialist, economist, politician, writer, and as an intellectual overall. They

also clearly demonstrate the breadth of his intellect and his interests. Rathenau was capable of discussing a variety of topics, ranging from current social problems—such as the debate between supporters of Jewish assimilation and Zionists, in which he participated, as exemplified by his correspondence with Theodor Herzl—to science, such as his fascination with electrochemistry as a student or the letter to Albert Einstein, in which he raised several questions regarding relativity theory—to literature and art, such as his correspondence with Gerhart Hauptmann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Edvard Munch, among many others.

Perhaps most significantly, these letters provide remarkable insight into Rathenau's personality. As the editors note in their introduction: "letters bring the dead closer in more personal, intimate, and to an extent changed aspects" (p. 14). His early letters, for example, the first written when he was only four years old, provide a wonderful portrait of "Walter" as a young boy, complete with spelling errors, grammatical mistakes, and a heartfelt poem to his mother on her birthday. Later letters provide insight into Rathenau's life at school and his development as a young scientist. On November 3, 1887, for example, Rathenau described his experiments with the new alloy aluminum. Interestingly, in the same letter, Rathenau critiques a recent performance of Mozart's

Marriage of Figaro (1786) that he had attended. These letters also offer an interesting perspective on his development. For example, on November 2, 1886, Rathenau wrote to his father, describing his daily life and the courses he was pursuing. A little more than a year later (February 18, 1888), he appears bored and disappointed, his daily activities having become monotonous and his research having met with repeated failure. After reporting that two of his colleagues would complete their doctoral degrees at the end of the next semester, Rathenau notes how difficult it is for him to remain behind them. Rathenau's attitude toward war is revealed in a letter of July 30, 1918, in which he criticizes it because of the deaths of Germany's youth and of innocent women and children. In the same letter, he defends the patriotism of Jewish soldiers. These letters nicely demonstrate Rathenau's humanity.

Finally, Rathenau's letters reveal the character of the German culture of letters. The sheer number of letters and variety of topics are daunting and reveal the daily life and concerns of people who lived in an era before radio, television, and the Internet were commonplace. The publication of these letters is a boon to scholarship and offers much to researchers interested in the life of this polymath politician and the culture of Germany at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

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