



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a commemorative event marking the centenary of the
assassination of Walther Rathenau
on 24 June 2022
in Berlin**

On 27 June 1922, three days after the assassination of Walther Rathenau, members of Government and Parliament gathered together for a memorial service in the Reichstag, while hundreds of thousands of citizens demonstrated here in Berlin as well as in many other German towns and cities against the violence committed by enemies of the Republic.

It was President Friedrich Ebert who delivered the eulogy in the plenary chamber. Ebert paid tribute to Walther Rathenau the industrialist, writer, politician and foreign minister calling him a man of rare uniqueness. He praised his intellectual talents, his experiences that transcended borders as well as the "integrity of his character" and the "goodness of his heart".

And then Ebert said something which moved so many people at the time, "This wicked crime", he said, "was inflicted not only on Rathenau the man but also on Germany as a whole. This act of bloodshed was directed against the German Republic and against the idea of democracy, of which Dr Walther Rathenau was a passionate champion and advocate".

I would like to thank you most sincerely for coming together today, one hundred years later, to commemorate Walther Rathenau: an intelligent man, a great German and a martyr to German democracy!

Walther Rathenau was a multitalented and sometimes contradictory man. Part of the tragedy surrounding him is that he is also known to many Germans as a literary caricature. He appears barely disguised in the novelist Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. Musil reviled Rathenau as "this union between the soul and price of coal", as a superficial dilettante outside the confines of his own profession. That he was a captain of industry who did not limit himself to earning money,

who was also an intellectual and assumed responsibility for the common good, was beyond the imagination of some.

As the son of the founder of AEG, Rathenau was an industrialist and a member of the business elite. And yet he was often ostracised in society. In Wilhelmine Prussia, a leading role in government, the military or judiciary was not possible for him as a Jew. He was not even permitted to become a reserve officer. Embittered, he later wrote, "In the early years of every German Jew there is a painful moment that can never be forgotten: the moment he becomes aware for the first time that he entered the world as a second-class citizen and that no amount of talent and merit would free him of this status".

It is good to remember such testimonies. The antisemitism to which Rathenau ultimately fell victim was not a historical blip but rather had an evil and long tradition, although not only in Prussia.

As a writer and intellectual, Rathenau nevertheless made a name for himself and his ideas often ran contrary to the political mainstream in the German Empire:

He toured Africa with Germany's Colonial Minister and later denounced the genocide committed against the Herero people as "the greatest atrocity that has ever been brought about by German military policy". He advocated radical restrictions on inheritance law and was accused of socialist egalitarianism although he actually wanted to pave the way for the achievement principle. He became a pioneering thinker on economic globalisation and recognised its political potential early on, especially for Europe. In 1913 Rathenau wrote: "If Europe's economy melts into one common unity, and that is likely to happen sooner than we think, so will its politics. This means neither world peace nor disarmament nor general lassitude, but mitigation of conflicts, conservation of power and the solidarity of civilisation".

During the First World War, however, he brought discredit on himself: with his annexation plans, his thoughts on forced labour and the call he made as late as autumn 1918 for the war to be continued.

That he nevertheless declared his support for the Republic after the revolution and became a member of the German Democratic Party was hard for some to grasp and they resented it. However, the greatest shortcoming of the Weimar Republic was the fact that far too many members of the old elite rejected democracy and romanticised the past instead of helping to build the future. Walther Rathenau, in contrast, took on responsibility for Germany at a very difficult time and served the Republic: as Minister for Reconstruction and as Foreign Minister from 1922 onwards. For the enemies of the Republic, however, Rathenau was the ideal personification of the alleged international Jewish-capitalist conspiracy.

The treaty between Germany and the Soviet Union concluded in Rapallo, Italy, in spring 1922 also contributed to the hate directed against Rathenau. Historians have debated much about the motives and significance of Rapallo. Rathenau had hesitated for a long time as his actual intentions, to foster peaceful economic relations with the West, were irreconcilable with this treaty. He did not agree to it until he believed that he had to pre-empt an understanding between France and the Soviet Union. In fact, it was not least nationalist members of the military who sought the pact with the Soviet Union and dreamed of redrawing the borders in eastern Europe by force. Admittedly, that did not prevent right-wing extremists from then denigrating Rathenau, describing him as a prototype stock exchange and Soviet Jew.

Today we know that Rathenau's original intentions were right but that, from today's perspective, Rapallo set Germany on a different course, on the wrong course. Democratic Germany needed close ties with the Western democracies at that time. That was one of the lessons learned from the Weimar Republic after 1945. The second German democracy adopted the right approach when it opted for integration into the West. And since 1989 at the latest, this "West" should no longer be seen in geographical but in political terms, as an alliance of countries united in their commitment to freedom, democracy, the rule of law and peaceful, rules-based cooperation.

Rathenau was not the first victim of far-right assassins. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, Kurt Eisner and Gustav Landauer, Hugo Haase and Matthias Erzberger – these are only the well-known figures battered to death, drowned or shot dead by the radical right-wing Freikorps or the conspirators of the Organisation Consul.

Paul Löbe, the President of the Reichstag, stated after the crime that the blood of the murdered was not only on the hands of the perpetrators. He was referring to the intellectual instigator of the assassination. First, Rathenau was hit by the hate of the extremists and then by their bullets. Only the previous day, Karl Helfferich – former deputy Chancellor and a member of the board of the Deutsche Bank – attacked Rathenau again in Parliament, just as he had attacked Matthias Erzberger, who had been shot dead in August 1921. Helfferich and people like him created a – quite literally – murderous political climate. The terrorists spelled out very clearly what the intellectual instigators stopped short of saying: "Auch Rathenau, der Walther, erreicht kein hohes Alter" (Rathenau, Walther, will not live to old age either), they chanted. And that was not the worst verse of that infamous text familiar to many of you and too disgusting to quote here.

Among other things, Karl Helfferich attacked Rathenau for his efforts to pay reparations to France, whose northern regions had been devastated by German troops. Helfferich ranted on about Germany being the victim of foreign threats, dictates and humiliations; a political

class which was leading the fatherland into certain disaster; and a government which had betrayed and sold its own country and which should therefore be held accountable before the law.

This hate speech sounds strangely familiar to our ears today. For years now, we have seen political debate in our country becoming more brutal. This trend has been reinforced not least by social media and the anonymity on the internet. Crises fan the flames of apocalyptists: the financial crisis, displacement and migration, the COVID-19 pandemic and now the war in Ukraine. Just like a hundred years ago, doom scenarios, conspiracy theories and the myth that Germany is a victim are still part of the extremist repertoire today. The hate directed against democrats and the longing to bring political opponents behind bars is recognisable to us in the form of Pegida and COVID deniers. Some even hoard weapons and fantasise about a coup.

All of this shows us that even today democracy is being challenged and threatened. Even today many opponents of democracy are prepared to use force. The number of politically motivated crimes reached a new record high last year. Violent crimes alone increased by 16 percent. Right-wing extremism still poses the greatest threat to our liberal democracy.

When we remember Walther Rathenau today, we are therefore also thinking of today's victims of political murders. We are thinking of the murders committed by the National Socialist Underground (NSU). We are thinking of Regional Commissioner Walter Lübcke from Kassel, who was shot dead three years ago after defending the values of our Republic, respect for human dignity and the right to asylum, against those who did not want to take in refugees in their town. And we are thinking of the 20-year-old man who died at a petrol station in Idar-Oberstein last year. He was killed after asking his murderer to respect the COVID regulations which had been adopted democratically.

Without a doubt, every democracy needs debate, needs argument and conflict – however, the political debate ends whenever violence is involved, physical violence, not to mention hate speech and hate crime. Violence wants to stifle freedom, violence kills democracy!

Freedom and democracy are, however, not only at risk from political violence from within. It can also come from the outside. Russia's attack against Ukraine has been bringing that home to us on a daily basis and in a horrific manner for the last four months.

Just like political assassinations, the illegal war of aggression is aimed at seizing power brutally with cruel force. The war against Ukraine is a war against people's right to decide for themselves how they live. It is a war against their freedom and thus against our shared values.

Repression within and a war of aggression from the outside are two sides of the same shabby coin. One hundred years ago, Walther

Rathenau sacrificed his life for democracy. The brave defenders of democracy in Ukraine are doing the same today.

A resilient democracy capable of defending itself therefore means we need to arm ourselves to a greater extent than before against external attacks on our freedom, not least militarily. Above all, however, it means demonstrating far-reaching solidarity with Ukraine to ensure that violence does not triumph over freedom.

One hundred years ago, right-wing extremists assassinated Rathenau in the hope that it would provoke a left-wing uprising, thus providing them with a pretext for a military putsch. However, the majority of citizens reacted differently than the extremists had expected: with resolve but also with prudence. The planned start of the German counterrevolution – as Martin Sabrow once described the Rathenau assassination – failed. Nevertheless, the first German democracy was not able to survive in the long term. It succumbed to the attacks of its enemies eleven years later.

Kurt Tucholsky lamented after the assassination that Walther Rathenau had been murdered for the Republic which had never protected him. Even today, we have to ask ourselves how we can protect all those who are committed to upholding our democracy – professionally but, above all, the large number of people who do so on a voluntary basis.

More than two thirds of all mayors have been subjected to insults, threats or violence. And many of them have even been beaten up or spat at. Last year, crimes against public servants and those elected to office increased by 66 percent. We must not remain indifferent to this development!

When mayors resign today because they no longer want to expose themselves and their families to hate and hostility, when we no longer find enough candidates for offices and councils at local elections for the very same reason, this sounds an alarm bell for our democracy.

For that is one of the great lessons to be learned from the death of Rathenau and the others, far too many in number, who shared his fate: our democracy must be capable of defending itself against its enemies, both at home and abroad. A democracy which does not protect those seeking to uphold democracy is betraying itself!

State and society must therefore address hate and hate speech at an early stage to ensure that words do not become actions. The internet must not be a space outside the law for insults and threats. Our justice system therefore has to be able to investigate and prosecute crimes committed online.

Nor should we leave those who are especially affected by hate and violence to fend for themselves. That is why I became the patron of the initiative launched by the municipal umbrella organisations

– “Stark im Amt” which translates as “Strong in office”. It supports the many volunteers in local politics, for they in particular are the backbone of our democracy.

However, the best protection for our Republic are self-confident citizens; people who know that every vilification of democracy, its institutions and active members is also an attack against their own freedom – and who therefore stand up and raise their voices against populists and extremists of any kind. Far too often during the Weimar Republic, there were unfortunately not enough such people.

I have heard that in many towns and cities around our country today, people are coming together to send a message on streets and squares named after Walther Rathenau: a message in support of democracy and against hate and violence. I would like to thank everyone taking part! They stand for public spirit and democratic patriotism, for virtues which our country needs right now!

On 11 August 1922, just a few weeks after the assassination of Walther Rathenau, Friedrich Ebert proclaimed that the “Lied der Deutschen”, or “Song of the Germans” would be the national anthem. Following the assassination, the Republic also abandoned the forms and symbols of the pre-democratic regime in an effort to lend new expression to the republican identity. The insignia of patriotism were no longer to be left to the opponents of the Republic.

Friedrich Ebert did this by singling out the third verse of the national anthem and declared at the same time that the anthem should not become the battle song of those against whom it was directed.

We know today that this hope was not fulfilled back then. Instead of “Unity and justice and freedom”, the first verse was bawled out far too often. However, that does not mean that Ebert was wrong. On the contrary. I firmly believe that a liberal democracy cannot be founded solely *ex negativo*. It also needs what Ebert had in mind: democratic patriotism.

The symbols of our Republic today are the same as those of the Weimar Republic. Black-red-gold, unity-and-justice-and-freedom. They are deeply rooted in the history of Germany’s freedom and democracy. I believe we should not leave the symbols of our Republic, of our democracy, to those who misuse them for a new form of nationalism and authoritarian ideas. On the contrary. Democrats in particular should show their commitment to them: to our colours, our anthem and also the historical figures of our democracy.

It is true that a democracy knows no sacrosanct heroes. No one is devoid of flaws or mistakes. Nor was Walther Rathenau. However, we should keep alive the memory of those men and women who did the right thing at the right time. For democracy and for our country. Walther Rathenau is one of them. Despite all the hostility and ostracisation he

suffered, he assumed a heavy responsibility for our democracy at a difficult time – and he paid the greatest, the ultimate sacrifice for that. Walther Rathenau deserves to be remembered with gratitude.