

Fritz Haber at 150: The unfolding views of and on a German Jewish Patriot

Fritz Haber (1868-1934) ranks among the most significant and, at the same time, most controversial 20th century scientists. Haber's scientific merits are beyond dispute -- alone the pathway to catalytic synthesis of ammonia from its elements ("bread from air"), discovered during his seventeen-year stint at the Technische Hochschule Karlsruhe, embodies an exemplary service to humankind, recognised by the 1918 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. During the First World War, Haber applied himself in extraordinary ways to aid the German war effort and promptly converted his Berlin Kaiser Wilhelm Institute into a center of war-related research. The 1915 chlorine cloud attack at Ypres that Haber orchestrated ("poison instead of air") amounts to the first use of a weapon of mass destruction and as such marks a tragic turning point in world history. After the first world war, Haber developed his institute into a center for pace-setting research at the intersection of chemistry and physics. In the process, he created an ideal scientific environment, whose workings entered the annals of the sociology of science. Equally exemplary was Haber's leadership in establishing what is today the German Research Association (DFG), as well as his embrace of the Weimar Republic and his open support for its democratic institutions. Haber's Jewish origins along with his democratic attitudes were a thorn in the flesh of the Nazis, who treated him as a *persona non grata*. Forced by Nazi legislation to dismiss his Jewish coworkers, Haber resigned in protest instead. He died in exile shortly thereafter.

The talk will examine Haber's scientific and organisational pursuits as well as reflect on their moral aspects.