For a long time, the Weimar Republic has been judged by its end. Recently, new attempts have been made to reveal long forgotten elements of democratic thinking and to find out if there were more people from different social backgrounds and political contexts than originally thought who were, as historian Friedrich Meinecke put it, Vernunftrepublikaner—“republicans by reason” who originally were not supporters of parliamentary democracy but sided with the Republic after the revolution of 1918/19. This line of investigation goes on to ask whether there were perhaps many such republicans who remained isolated and unnoticed due to the political and social fragmentation of Weimar society.¹

Against this general background, I wish to take a closer look at three of the most famous scientists of the time—Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and Fritz Haber—and explore their democratic practices: the three protagonists’ perceptions of democracy, their commitment to political parties, and their other activities that could be deemed contributions towards the stabilization of the Weimar Republic. One should underline that, like most of their German contemporaries, these three scientists did not possess clear-cut concepts of democracy, be it social, parliamentary, presidential, or direct democracy. How could they? That is why I will also look at daily democratic practices in a broader sense, investigating whether these scientists applied or pushed for core democratic values such as pluralism, representation, and participation in everyday practice, that is, in academic committees, governing bodies, and institutions. Finally, I will address the limits of democratic practice that all three scientists manifested.

I. Politics and Science
Let me begin by reflecting more generally on the relationship between politics and science. The topic becomes even more complex when contemplating the meaning of political turning points for the development of science. I base my reflections on a definition of that relationship developed by Mitchell Ash first for the National Socialist

takeover of power, and later for other political caesurae in recent German history. In order to make scientists visible as autonomous actors, Ash suggested treating science and politics as complementary, interacting sets of resources. He applied a broad definition of the term “resources,” which, in his view, can be financial, but also cognitive, institutional, or rhetorical, in the form of equipment, staffing, or increasing prestige. Understanding politics and science as interacting sets of resources means that they can mobilize each other. For example, scientists can mobilize resources for their own benefit from the political domain, and politicians, on the other hand, can legitimize their goals with reference to the sciences. So both politicians and scientists should be viewed as closely related, interacting actors.

This perspective means two things. First, sets of resources in science and research are politically multivalent, meaning that alliances can be formed with very different types of government. Second, in principle, political breaks imply major or minor restructurings of resource constellations. A change in the political system means that the research system becomes detached from the former political context and merges into the current context.

Ash’s concept draws particular attention to three levels of analysis during the Weimar period: changes in the human resource constellation, institutional changes, and finally, the ideological realignment. Institutionally, there were many changes during and after the revolution. To mention just a few, prewar trends, such as the continued outsourcing of research from the universities to industry and non-university research institutes, accelerated after 1918. As a result of benefactors’ capital being destroyed by inflation, new funding agencies such as the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) came into being. However, these institutional changes were not linked to changes in political thinking, staffing, or shifts in the distribution of power. There were no dismissals and almost no newcomers in this field. During the restructuring of resources between politics and science after 1918, the negotiations were conducted by the same people as in the past, the protagonists were the same, and the same people were given the top positions in the newly established funding networks. As the money for science and research was distributed indirectly via private or semi-private organizations like the German Research Foundation, it became very relevant that they were run by the same people.
who had been in charge before 1914. They used the terms “autonomy” and “academic freedom” as a method of shielding themselves systematically from democratic transparency.3

The final result was the same old distribution of corporate power and the same forms of organization. From an actively involved scientist’s point of view, there was no great need to adapt to the new political system. This continuity of the top men in charge also meant that the leading figures did not need to use any particularly democratic rhetoric in order to act efficiently in the new resource network. Another reason this was not necessary was that science and research enjoyed a remarkably unchallenged special status. Instead of representing only one factor among many contributing to the power of the German Reich, as had been the case before 1914, the sciences were perceived as the sole substitute for lost power in Weimar Germany. The natural sciences, especially, experienced a considerable increase in prestige, both within and outside the university system, on the political left and right alike.

II. Three Scientists and Their Politics

Of course, Einstein, Haber, and Planck were in no way “typical.” On the contrary, all three were exceptional—they were Nobel Prize winners. But they share some major similarities beyond that. All three received their awards shortly after the First World War: Planck and Haber were awarded Nobel Prizes for the year 1918, Einstein for the year 1921. The Nobel Prize not only strengthened their reputation, but also affected how they themselves handled the “symbolic capital” that the Nobel Prize conveyed. There are further common denominators. All three came from the physical sciences: Planck and Einstein from theoretical physics and Haber from physical chemistry. All three lived and worked in Berlin and were closely connected scientifically and also through friendship and mutual esteem. All three held important positions in the most distinguished academic institutions of their time: in the Kaiser Wilhelm Society (Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft), the German Research Foundation, and the Berlin Academy of Sciences (Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin). In short, they were powerful figures in a network that was once described by Mitchell Ash as “academic internal affairs.” Finally, unlike other well-known scientists of the time, they were all considered supporters of the Weimar Republic.

Despite so many similarities, there are also significant differences. First of all, their ages: Planck, born in 1858, was the oldest. If one wanted to put him into a generational category, he would belong in the so-called Wilhelmine generation that included the Kaiser himself. Haber was ten years younger. Born in 1868, he grew up in the so-called Gründerzeit, the flourishing founding years of the German Reich, as did Einstein, who, however, was younger still. Einstein was born in 1879 and around the same age as the Republic’s later foreign minister Gustav Stresemann. At the beginning of the Weimar Republic, then, Planck was 60 years old, Haber was 50, and Einstein was 40—all three were of mature age. Everything indicates that the older generation—those born between 1860 and 1885—could more easily accept the Republic than the younger one.

Within the small group of scientists who were relatively sympathetic to the Republic, the three Nobel Prize winners covered a fairly wide political spectrum from left to right. Einstein was the exceptional case. Whereas Planck and Haber had signed the ominous “Call to the Cultured World” in 1914 (Aufruf an die Kulturwelt), thus totally dedicating themselves to the German war effort, Einstein was an avowed pacifist. He advocated international dialogue and was continually under police observation. In the Weimar period, he committed himself openly to the Republic with the words: “My political ideal is the democratic one.” In his view, any autocratic system attracted the morally inferior and therefore had to degenerate. He despised anything having to do with the military top establishment and the Obrigkeitstaat, the authoritarian state, as “the worst product of the herd instinct,” and, he continued: “If someone enjoys marching to music in a military line up, then he was given his brain by mistake—the spinal fluid would have been more than enough already.”

Planck was at the other end of the political scale. For him, adherence to the German People’s Party (Deutsche Volkspartei, DVP) was the maximum political concession he was prepared to make to the new system. His


5 On Planck, see Dieter Hoffmann, “Das Verhältnis der Akademie zu Republik und Diktatur: Max Planck als Sekretär,” in Die Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin 1914-1945.
basic political conviction was national-conservative, but he always endeavored to act correctly toward the Republic. In his manuscripts, there are only few explicitly political statements. His comments were always quiet and reserved, and he cultivated the image of being a withdrawn scholar. He did, however, clearly understand the importance of institutions, boards, and committees for the functioning of the academic system and held a large number of official posts. In other words, one should not underestimate Planck’s sense of political power. Perhaps Planck is the natural scientist who could best be described as the prototype of the Vernunftfreibürger, a republican by reason who, in line with Friedrich Meinecke’s definition, basically remained a monarchist at heart. Certainly the question of loyalty to State and Crown occupied him constantly. Even in 1934, after the National Socialist takeover, Planck still associated the November of 1918 with “the most disgraceful peace treaty, the even more shameful constitutional revolution and economic bankruptcy.”

Despite his formal allegiance to the Republic, Planck was noticeably tolerant of aggressive nationalist and revanchist tones in academic commissions. The ideal of pure science without politics that he otherwise strongly defended suddenly did not seem to count here. Like many of his colleagues, Planck distanced himself from the Weimar Republic and withdrew into the republic of science free from politics. He was guided by the values of the Wilhelmine state: duty, order, loyalty, neutrality of state officials, and a self-portrait of the scientist as a nonpolitical upholder of culture above the abyss of daily politics. Planck bore the introduction of universal suffrage only with great reluctance. Even in 1943, in the middle of the most horrible war of destruction and annihilation, he still felt universal suffrage had been a “huge mistake.” He rejected the majority principle, comparing politics to science, and stated that, after all, non-experts should not decide on the validity of Einstein’s and Newton’s theories.

Planck’s elitist rejection of the masses was shared by Einstein, whose commitment to democracy contrasted with his differentiation between the common riff raff and the intellectual elite. In fact, there is a certain ambivalence in Einstein’s political thinking. An evaluation of his works and correspondence shows that his perception of his political role was closely connected to his self-conception as a natural scientist, which he elevated to a universal concept. In Einstein’s view, the true value of a person was determined by how far one had progressed towards “liberation from oneself,” that is, overcoming one’s instincts and
egoism. In his view, a democratic society consisted of two groups. On the one hand, a small group of selfless individuals with the moral duty of leadership—conflicts of interest no longer exist, nor is it necessary to negotiate political compromise. On the other hand, the “raw masses,” that is, a large number of impulsive and manipulable figures in urgent need of leadership, among them also people whom he called “worthless” and “detrimental.” With this elitist contrast between “raw masses” and a small number of high-ranking intellectuals in leading political roles, Einstein was basically no different from the Bildungsburger, the educated middle-class citizens, of his time, except that they supported and legitimized the authoritarian state, whereas Einstein attacked it. To have to bow to a majority decision that went against his universal values was unacceptable to him, a view which clearly resembled Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s volonté générale.

The ambiguities in Einstein’s perception of democracy were of practical significance. On numerous occasions, he approved of a strong parliament and accepted parties as bodies of political decision-making. However, he also criticized the political parties for representing particular interests and adamantly refused to become a party member himself. Einstein joined a large number of associations with humanitarian, pacifist, and international ambitions, but only if their nonpartisan orientation was undisputed. Only once did he relinquish his abstinence from party politics—that was for the Reichstag elections in July 1932, when, after much hesitation, he signed a proposal for a joint list of Social-Democratic and Communist candidates in order to counteract the fascist danger.

If Planck’s and Einstein’s stances were ambiguous, what about Fritz Haber?10 Because of his leading role in German gas warfare in World War I, Haber was long considered a fervent nationalist who was
entirely fixated on the Kaiser. The German defeat did in fact make Haber ill, but he had seen it coming since the beginning of 1918 and still continued to work up to the final moment—the strongest proof of his sense of duty, which he fulfilled, however, more for the sake of the nation than for the Kaiser. Through his involvement in gas warfare, Haber had close connections with high-ranking officers, and through them, to right-wing political circles. But he always clearly rejected their political plans and coups attempts, and openly signaled his backing of Walter Rathenau, whom he personally disliked.

Haber was convinced—and in this he was similar to Planck—that Germany should return to international politics as a great power. Nevertheless, Haber differed remarkably from Planck, just as he differed from his friend Einstein. Politically, Haber belonged to the camp of the German Democratic Party (Deutsche Demokratische Partei, DDP), that is, the left-wing liberals. He was presumably a party member and thus belonged to a party of the Weimar coalition. His political friends stretched from the right wing of the Social Democrats to the left wing of the German People’s Party. Entering into party politics cannot have been entirely new to him, as we see from the Reichstag election campaign of 1928, when the German Democratic Party leaders offered him the second seat in the Berlin electoral district. Haber felt deeply honored but declined the offer due to his very poor health. He did not feel he would be able to hold the sixty-two planned election speeches and then ten speeches in the Reichstag each year. However, he donated a considerable amount of money to the party and was shocked when the election results revealed the erosion of the politically moderate parties in the middle of the political spectrum.

Unlike Planck, who presented himself as an introverted, withdrawn scholar, Haber held a large number of lectures in which he covered topics at the intersection of politics, economics, and science. In these lectures, he always refrained from remarks about current political matters, but he was not afraid to make general political statements; he subsequently published his lectures in two collections. He supported the Republic unconditionally and used his prestige as a Nobel Prize winner to work for its stabilization. He did so at two levels: backing Gustav Stresemann’s foreign policy, and pushing for democratic practice within the committees of various research organizations. Haber not only supported Stresemann’s general course and strongly favored good relations with France, but also committed himself actively to foreign cultural

policy. In agreement with the Foreign Office, he consultated closely with the French mathematician and long-serving Minister of War Paul Painlevé. The explicit goal of these contacts was to achieve a Franco-German rapprochement by bringing across the German viewpoint on behalf of the Foreign Office and, in return, informing political and military circles in Germany of French intentions.

III. International Engagement

Einstein, Planck, and Haber all played active roles in the reintegration of German science into the international academic community. From this perspective, it is worth taking a closer look at the travel activities of all three. Between 1920 and 1925, Einstein traveled abroad unusually often and for unusually long periods, in total for one and a half years: first to the Netherlands and Denmark, then to Prague, Vienna, the United States, and Great Britain; in 1922 for the first time to France, in 1925 to South America. The numerous reports and extensive information compiled by the German diplomatic missions prove the German Foreign Office’s great interest in Einstein’s activities abroad. In 1920, he was already considered a “first-class cultural factor” and ideal for promoting German interests since he had a clean political record and was ranked as a German but by no means a notorious chauvinist. For Einstein himself, the main aim of his journeys was to strengthen his reputation and promote his theories. But he understood the symbolic capital of the Nobel Prize and was ready to serve the Republic as a “big name and lure” (“als Renommierbonze und Lockvogel”). In short, he agreed to travel on behalf of Germany in order to break the boycotts against German academia. But Einstein had an additional, hidden motive for traveling. His trips abroad were also a type of emigration allowing him to avoid his opponents in Germany and to become increasingly involved in Zionism.12

Max Planck was quite a different case. Instead of traveling abroad, he campaigned intensively for the revival of international scientific networks in his role at the Berlin Academy, which traditionally was one of the main agents of international academic cooperation. For Planck, maintaining scientific contacts in neutral countries was of utmost importance. With this in mind, he deliberately focused the Academy’s elections of corresponding members on Scandinavian and Dutch scientists. In addition, he pursued a kind of personal “Rapallo policy” with the young Soviet Union.13 He visited Moscow and Leningrad and established close contacts with the Russian

12 See Siegfried Grundmann, Einstein’s Akt. Einsteins Jahre in Deutschland aus der Sicht der deutschen Politik (Berlin, 1998), quotations from 170-180.

Academy of Science. Needless to say, Planck had no sympathy for Soviet communism. Contacts with Soviet scientists simply served as a political opportunity to counterbalance the boycott policy of the former allied powers. In strong contrast to Haber, Planck intended to overcome the Western boycott by establishing scientific relations with the East—not with France and Western Europe. Planck was thus absolutely capable of abandoning his self-proclaimed nonpolitical concept of science and conducting hard politics via academic networking. The final result, however, was ambiguous: To be sure, his patriotism and dutiful loyalty to the state, as well as his emphasis on the autonomy and international nature of the sciences, made Planck “a loyal servant of the Republic.” But this very attitude also led Planck to a policy of cautious waiting and adaptation during the Third Reich and even to limited cooperation with the Nazi rulers.

Haber’s commitment to reintegrating German science into the international community was extraordinary. Through his services to the Republic’s foreign policy, he was far more involved in the cause than Einstein or Planck. He was one of the few leading scientists who had no anti-republican resentments, so that Stresemann’s Foreign Office had no difficulty in using his services. At the same time, his well-known commitment during the war protected him from accusations that he lacked patriotism. Haber traveled much less than Einstein, but in 1924 his trips to London, the United States, and Japan received a great deal of attention and had a considerable impact on scientific and industrial networking. Most of all, Haber worked to have Germany admitted into the International Research Council and the corresponding international unions. These commitments placed Haber in a precarious situation: facing the boycotters abroad and the counter-boycotters in his own country. In his own words, he had the explicit task of “keeping any potential hotheads in Germany calm for as long as possible.” The hotheads he was alluding to were mostly found in the scientific academies. He therefore reproached the cartel of German academies for “fatally tending to act on the
power of illusions rather than common sense and facts.” With varying
degrees of success, Haber negotiated for months with the hardliners on
both sides. He was most annoyed with the “ruthless Germanic circles
in the Munich Academy,” and, by 1927, felt used by the Foreign Office
“like a training team’s football.” In 1929/1930, he finally achieved a
breakthrough when Germany joined the International Union for Pure
and Applied Chemistry and other unions shortly thereafter.14

IV. Democratic Practices

The biggest differences between Haber, Planck, and Einstein
emerge when we examine their everyday democratic practices.15
Haber personally led the battle against authoritarian structures in
science, to be more specific, in the Kaiser Wilhelm Society and the
German Research Foundation. In both cases, he wanted to expand
representation and participation and break down authoritarian
constellations and power structures. Neither Einstein nor Planck
did anything similar. Einstein hated administrative work. He even
left his work as the director of his Kaiser Wilhelm Institute to his
deputy, Max von Laue, and shied away from official posts and com-
mittees. Planck, on the other hand, consciously used posts and
committees to reestablish conservative positions.

Haber was without doubt one of the most powerful institute direc-
tors within the Kaiser Wilhelm Society. He was the only scientist
who had a detailed overview of the needs of the other institutes and
the course of the society as a whole. Within the Kaiser Wilhelm
Society’s key steering committees, the scientists were at a major
disadvantage vis-à-vis the industrialists and the representatives of
the state and the society’s chief administration (Generalverwaltung)
that served on those committees. Haber himself greatly disapproved
of the domination of big industry and high finance in the Kaiser
Wilhelm Society’s decision-making bodies. He criticized the struc-
tural inflexibility of what he called the “bearers of tradition”
(Traditionsträger) at the top and deeply distrusted the chief admin-
istration. Instead, he sought to secure the participation of scien-
tists in the decision-making. This put him in clear opposition to
Adolf von Harnack, President of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society, who
quite explicitly feared “a loss of power through the formation of a
kind of faculty by [his] directors.” Harnack’s reference to a “faculty”
commands our attention. German universities were by no means a
stronghold of democracy but operated by means of authoritarianism

14 Szöllösi-Janze, Fritz Haber, 583-591.

15 For this entire section, see quotations and details in
Szöllösi-Janze, Fritz Haber, 616-642.
and a strict hierarchy. A faculty, on the other hand, is based on the principle of radical equality and consensual deliberation and decision-making. Especially during the Republic’s last years of crisis, the practice of institutionalized equality and participation in the academic system sent out a political signal.

Haber worked toward the formation of a lobby to represent the interests of the scientists employed at the institutes. His plans called for the corporate representation of directors and academic members in a so-called Scientific Board (Wissenschaftlicher Rat) that would be newly set up. He spent two years preparing his initiative and gathering supporters on his side before he approached Harnack in 1928 with a request—as he said—to replace the old “patriarchal attitude” in the Kaiser Wilhelm Society with new structures of democratic participation. Harnack’s attempt simply to shelve the proposal failed, and the growing pressure was further increased by politics. The Scientific Board was in fact set up that same year as a body for democratic joint responsibility of the scientists within the Kaiser Wilhelm Society and as a counterweight to the president’s authoritarian rule and the gradually expanding power of the chief administration. However, Haber made no friends among the Kaiser Wilhelm Society’s executives. They very soon systematically thwarted any opportunities he might have had to become president.

In the German Research Foundation, established in 1920 thanks mainly to Haber, the conflicts ran even deeper. There, Haber had insisted from the start on the establishment of democratic principles and ensured that the Foundation’s grant selection panels were elected by scientists and scholars. In 1927, as second deputy of the president, Haber continued his campaign against authoritarian

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16 See also Ulrich Marsch, Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft: Gründung und frühe Geschichte (Frankfurt, 1994); Notker Hammerstein, Die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in der Weimarer Republik und im Dritten Reich: Wissenschaftspolitik in Republik und Diktatur 1920-1945 (Munich, 1999), esp. 76-82.
structures by criticizing the foundation’s Annual Report, which only the president had seen before it was published. Among a whole list of criticisms, Haber emphasized the fact that the report contained no financial figures and, in particular, no accounting for the use of public funds. Unlike Haber, Research Foundation President Friedrich Schmidt-Ott interpreted the principle of academic autonomy in a decidedly anti-democratic sense. He systematically undermined democratic state control and refused to allow public scrutiny of grant allocation proceedings.

A short time later, in 1928/29, in the Foundation’s so-called existential crisis, Haber once again sided with those who wanted to phase out fossilized authoritarianism. This episode began with an article in the left-wing journal *Die Weltbühne* that criticized the foundation as a “den of evil clique mentality.” The article coincided with the political scandal surrounding the National Socialist mathematician Theodor Vahlen, to whom Schmidt-Ott had demonstratively granted a foundation fellowship after Vahlen’s removal from office for political reasons. This action and the resulting *Weltbühne* article triggered a political avalanche that first reached the foundation’s numerous, but hitherto non-active, governing bodies, then the Prussian Ministry of Education, and finally the Reichstag. In the public realm, Haber was by no means the main campaigner, but he was all the more active and influential behind the scenes. His main objective, which was eventually accepted and put into practice, was to reform the foundation by strengthening its representative bodies and, specifically, to transform the Steering Committee (*Hauptausschuss*) into a powerful body that would make the decisions on the distribution of funds. Haber worked hard on the implementation of the reform measures and finally triumphed over Schmidt-Ott’s fierce resistance. An amendment to the statutes curbed the president’s power and decisively strengthened the rights of the Steering Committee (*Hauptausschuss*). Scholars and scientists in the universities, however, made very little use of their newly established rights, and the elections for the granting bodies confirmed the old “traditionalists” whom Haber distrusted. Haber’s bold initiative resulted in deadlock, and Brüning’s presidential regime soon neutralized the political pressure to democratize the German Research Foundation.

This brings us to the last part of my essay on the intrinsic limitations of democratic practices in science and beyond. In the cases of Planck and Einstein, these limitations have already become clear, and Haber’s endeavor to revive or implement practices of participation
in research institutions and foundations were not appreciated by his fellow scientists—he remained isolated. Then, in 1930, in view of the escalating economic and political crises, Haber saw the necessity of deliberating fundamentally on the future of the Republic. In July 1930, the German Democratic Party joined forces with some smaller right-wing parties and merged into the so-called German State Party (Deutsche Staatspartei) in order to counteract the erosion of left-wing liberalism. Among a who’s who of German liberalism, the new party’s founding document also included Haber’s name. In view of extremist threats from left and right, the founding document redefined the role of political parties, claiming that parties as bodies representing only particular interests were not capable of creating the required “national solidarity.” Like millions of other Germans, Haber was convinced that things could not continue as they were and sought the strength to master the crisis not in party democracy, but in an authoritarian system of government.

The boundaries of Haber’s concept become clear in a detailed letter of May 1931 that he addressed to the Reich Minister of Finance, Hermann Dietrich, who was also a cofounder of the German State Party. Haber was well aware of the breach with his previous views when he suggested that the government itself should now move towards dictatorship. As had been the case with Einstein and Planck, now the “raw masses” constituted the turning point in Haber’s political thinking. Haber considered the masses a “new race” that pushed the old parties aside and demanded a new form of political leadership. This new race, he argued, was searching for a German version of what had already been realized in various ways in Russia and Italy. It no longer believed in grandfatherly liberalism or the slow pace of trade unionist Social Democracy. Haber saw the only feasible solution in the so-called German socialism that he viewed as having been pioneered during the First World War: “detach state power and authority from the parliamentary system and the power over the economy from private enterprise and declare dictatorship and planned economy as central claims of one’s own manifesto.” As was the case with other details in his proposal, it was explicitly the First World War which served Haber as an example. Haber attributed huge destructive power to the selfishness of particular groups such as business leaders, lobbies, and parties and felt that it was now high time to eliminate them all.

Haber’s fixation on the experiences of the First World War brings the blind spots of his political thinking into focus. In the end, his
thinking remained elitist, just like Planck’s and Einstein’s. Haber also overlooked decisive factors such as the obscure maneuvering of the army and the political intrigues of big industry and the conservatives—all of which were, of course, mostly unknown to contemporaries. Moreover, he lacked intuition for the meaning of politically mobilized masses—in fact, for political power in itself. Haber recognized political danger, but his intellectual encounter with National Socialism remained vague. Above all, he misjudged the political ambition of his State Party colleague Hermann Dietrich, who, Haber hoped, would pass on his ideas to eager and determined politicians so that—as he said—a leading personality would take the initiative. But who was that supposed to be? Haber’s political concept lacked a recipient who could implement it and was rooted in an overestimation of the state and its constitutive power. This shows, perhaps surprisingly, that Haber ultimately personified the dilemma of German liberalism.

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