

Fritz Haber (1868-1934): Life, Work, and Legacy

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Fritz Haber's discovery of the catalytic synthesis of ammonia from its elements may serve as an apt reminder of the Janus-face of modern science: On one side, "bread from air," on the other, "gunpowder from air." Moreover, in his patriotic zeal during World War One, Haber introduced chemical warfare to the battle field, "poison instead of air," which cast a long shadow over his legacy.

The breadth of Haber's intellectual interests was astounding – ranging from fundamental physics to physical chemistry to physiology. This was reflected in what had become during the Weimar era of Haber's Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physical Chemistry and Electrochemistry, whose exemplary workings entered the annals of the sociology of science.

Likewise, the scope of Haber's organizational activities was immense and included the co-founding of the forerunner of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

Haber's Jewishness as well as his democratic attitudes were a thorn in the flesh of the Nazis. After their rise to power, Haber took a principled stand against their racial policies and resigned from all his positions in protest. He died in exile shortly thereafter.

The talk will examine the life, work, and legacy of this German Jewish patriot and 1918 Chemistry Nobel laureate.