

## Heidegger and the Third Reich

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There has been much said about the German philosopher Martin Heidegger and his connection to the National Socialist movement since the end of World War II. Many question the validity and intellectual integrity of his philosophical writings. The question of course is: to what extent was Martin Heidegger a Nazi<sup>1</sup> and how much did this influence his philosophy? Further, many have also wondered how Heidegger was able to keep a Jewish girlfriend, both before and after the war. It is my aim to answer these questions, and perhaps to raise a few new ones.

Richard Wolin's The Politics of Being provides a good picture of Heidegger (and his activities) during the Nazi era.<sup>2</sup> Wolin believes that Heidegger never ended his belief in the value of Nazi ideology. He finds that Heidegger, in his post-war works, gave no repudiation of his Nazi past.<sup>3</sup> To Wolin, and others, Heidegger's acceptance of a University rectorship shows that he fully agreed with, and believed in, the ideology and actions of the National Socialists.<sup>4</sup> Heidegger fully supported ordinances and laws that barred Jews from "civil service

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<sup>1</sup> Many, including Robert Krieg, have characterized Martin Heidegger as being politically naïve. Robert A. Krieg, Catholic Theologians in Nazi Germany (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2004), 131. Most, other than those who wish to defend Heidegger to the last, seem contented to concede that Heidegger was well aware of his actions in the political world and their impact.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wolin, The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Wolin, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Wolin, 85.

professions.”<sup>5</sup> Wolin believes that the best evidence that Heidegger never truly renounced his belief in Nazism can be found in his statement ascribing equal reprehensibility to the “mechanized agriculture” industry and the murder, gassing, and extermination of Jews. To Wolin, it shows in Heidegger, “a fundamental incapacity for both moral and theoretical discernment.”<sup>6</sup>

In the end, Richard Wolin finds “the philosophy of Martin Heidegger [to] be... profoundly wanting.”<sup>7</sup> Strong as it is, one can hardly disagree with Wolin’s assessment. Whatever conception Heidegger had as to the true nature of the Nazi philosophy, its *authenticity* if you will, Wolin further points out that it is difficult to pin down what exactly Nazi ideology is/was, and as such it is impossible to tell to what extent Heidegger truly believed in all the actions of the Third Reich.<sup>8</sup> However, due to his affiliation and activities within the party he was “banned from university life” in Germany from 1945 to 1951.<sup>9</sup> Until his death, Heidegger believed that National Socialism, as promoted by Hitler and Mussolini, contained inherently within itself the ability to overcome Western nihilism.<sup>10</sup> Others, including Hans-Christian Lucas, believe that the philosopher was a Nazi to the core: “there is no question that Heidegger identified himself with the political aims of the National Socialists.”<sup>11</sup> There can be little doubt

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<sup>5</sup> Wolin, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Wolin, 168.

<sup>7</sup> Wolin, 169.

<sup>8</sup> Wolin, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Wolin, 6-8.

<sup>10</sup> Wolin, 98.

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Christian Lucas, “Philosophy, Politics—and the ‘New’ Questions for Hegel, for Heidegger, and for Phantasy,” in The Heidegger Case: On Philosophy and Politics edited by Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), 237.

that Heidegger was a Nazi<sup>12</sup> and that he died a fascist<sup>13</sup>, so the real question is: How did Heidegger adopt the Nazi worldview and what impact did it have upon his philosophy?<sup>14</sup>

It was Heidegger's philosophical orientation and academic surroundings that allowed for or enabled him to turn to Nazism in the first place.<sup>15</sup> He inhabited a world of intellectual Germans, many of whom believed that Germany deserved a greater place in the world, and that this place should not be restricted by the systems of outsiders (i.e. Western-style democracy, which was seen as lowering the value of society.)<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, and many of his contemporaries in Germany, hoped for a renewed emphasis on "the intuitive grasp of reality."<sup>17</sup> This was the first step that allowed Heidegger to move toward embracing a fascist ideology. This fascism emphasized realizing an attitude that valued 'what the case is/was' and not 'what the case is supposed to/should be'.

Another factor that allowed Heidegger to move closer to Nazism was his break from the Catholic Church. Devoid of the stability that the religion of his childhood provided, Heidegger surely found comfort in the new belief system and nationalistic ideology the National Socialists provided. As Ettinger puts it, "Once he made the decision he never turned back, even though the break remained a disturbing, unresolved conflict throughout his life. It was to surface in a peculiar way under the Nazis and, later, when the Catholic Church tried to reclaim him after the

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<sup>12</sup> Heidegger continued to be a "dues-paying" Nazi until the cessation of the party's existence. Lucas, 246.

<sup>13</sup> Lucas sees the post-war silence of Heidegger to be merely another manifestation of a common occurrence: "He followed a common trend of silence during the Adenauer era of the Federal Republic of Germany." Lucas, 247. In other words, Heidegger kept quiet, not because he had to, but because it was the easiest thing to do.

<sup>14</sup> Wolin believes that as a result of his National Socialist involvement, Heidegger's philosophical endeavors underwent a transformation, from philosophy to worldview. Wolin, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Wolin, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Wolin, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Krieg, 86.

Second World War.”<sup>18</sup> Further, during the Nazi period, Heidegger believed that those with Jewish associations or Catholic allegiances were enemies of the Reich.<sup>19</sup>

Heidegger believed that Germany’s turn toward National Socialism was his country’s attempt to realize its “ownmost potentiality-for-Being a nation or Volk.” It, for Heidegger, allowed his people to break free from the restraints that prior Western philosophies, from Plato to Kant to Hegel, had placed upon them.<sup>20</sup> Heidegger reasoned that Germany, by way of its cultural superiority, was poised to bring Europe out of its “perpetual spiritual decline.”<sup>21</sup> To Heidegger, the Nazis were a means by which the German people could escape what he perceived to be a general decline in the West that had been taking place since the medieval period.<sup>22</sup> Ettinger refers to Heidegger as “a true believer in the spiritual mission of the superior German Aryan race.”<sup>23</sup>

To Heidegger, Christianity and Marxism were the ills of the world, the natural enemies of the Nazi regime (and the German people.)<sup>24</sup> Heidegger ascribed value to the Nazi movement, not because of what it promoted, but because of what it denied legitimacy to: “intellectualism, bourgeois egalitarianism, aesthetic modernism, and cosmopolitanism.” He was also drawn to the notion of a strong leader (Hitler as Führer) as being a manifestation of “an individual, historically existent Dasein.” He thought of Hitler and his actions as Germany’s guiding principle, something that Carl Schmitt believed signaled the death of Hegel’s conception

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<sup>18</sup> Elżbieta Ettinger, Hannah Arendt/ Martin Heidegger (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Ettinger, 56.

<sup>20</sup> Wolin, 107.

<sup>21</sup> Wolin, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Krieg, 151.

<sup>23</sup> Ettinger, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Wolin, 97.

of a Rechtsstaat “based on universal principles and norms.”<sup>25</sup> Krieg posits that Heidegger thought “Hitler was leading the German people beyond the individualism of the West, and also beyond the collectivism of the Soviet Union.”<sup>26</sup> Heidegger believed that National Socialism was Germany’s ultimate destiny, and he told Karl Löwith as much when he visited him in Rome during 1936.<sup>27</sup> At this time, Heidegger was still sporting the party badge on his lapel, furthering Löwith’s belief that he was fully behind the Nazi cause at that time.<sup>28</sup>

According to Lucas, Heidegger “wanted to lead the leader (Führer) philosophically... to lead him in thinking.”<sup>29</sup> It is not hard to see a link between Heidegger’s early works and his Nazi-era activities. Lucas points to Winfried Franzen’s opinion that there is a clear continuation of thought from Being and Time to Heidegger’s 1934 rectoral address (his most public exhortation of Nazi ideology and its worth.)<sup>30</sup> Heidegger believed it was the job of the university to lead and inform the political leaders. He thought that the Führer and National Socialism were what was needed to bring about a change in the German ‘spirit’.<sup>31</sup> As rector of the University of Freiburg, Heidegger saw himself as in a position to influence the philosophy of the party and, perhaps, even Hitler.

In May and June of 1933, Heidegger gave two public lectures after his election as rector. According to Krieg, these lectures “indicated [his] total support of the regime.” Soon after his election, Heidegger was ridding the University of faculty and students opposed to National

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<sup>25</sup> Wolin, 106.

<sup>26</sup> Krieg, 92.

<sup>27</sup> Wolin, 97.

<sup>28</sup> Lucas, 243.

<sup>29</sup> Lucas, 238.

<sup>30</sup> Lucas, 239.

<sup>31</sup> Lucas, 241-242.

Socialism and those of Jewish heritage.<sup>32</sup> As Ettinger points out, “he effectively put an end to Max Mueller’s scholarly career when accused Mueller of having a negative attitude toward the Third Reich merely because Mueller was a Catholic.”<sup>33</sup>

Heidegger’s anti-Semitic tendencies and feeling are well expressed in a letter, composed in 1929, and found some seventy years later. In the letter, which is addressed to a German Ministry of Education official Heidegger explains:

The matter concerns no less than an urgent recognition that we are confronted with a choice— either we will replenish our German spiritual life with genuine native forces and educators or we will once and for all surrender it to the growing Judaisation in a broader and narrower sense.<sup>34</sup>

The anti-Semitism is further attested to in conversations Heidegger had with Karl Jaspers. These conversations were recollected by Jaspers in his Philosophische Autobiographie. In the conversations, Heidegger is presented as believing in the existence of a “dangerous international alliance of Jews” and he is also presented as having little concern with Hitler’s lack of culture (a concern of Jaspers’), instead he merely comments on the Führer’s “marvelous hands.”<sup>35</sup>

After the war, in 1946, Heidegger was in dire straits mentally and physically. It was at this time that Archbishop Conrad Groeber came into contact with him. The Archbishop had hoped to somehow cultivate a “spiritual transformation” within Heidegger.<sup>36</sup> This proved to be unsuccessful, and there is no proof that Heidegger ever returned to the Roman Catholic Church,

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<sup>32</sup> Krieg, 143.

<sup>33</sup> Ettinger, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ettinger, 36-37.

<sup>35</sup> Ettinger, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Ettinger, 64-65.

the religion of his youth— the religion that provided the impetus and material for many of his philosophical endeavors and treatises.

Much of the defense of Heidegger's war time activities and associations come from his former associates and pupils (including his former lover Hannah Arendt.) They believed that Heidegger was naïve and politically unmotivated, that much of the political maneuvering was due to the influence of Heidegger's wife. His former pupils and friends, while many times his staunchest critics, also turn out to be his most reliable allies. Karl Jaspers, when asked to testify before a 1945 commission regarding Heidegger's wartime activities, told that he believed that Heidegger was not anti-Semitic during the 1920s, but rather, that he developed a situational tendency toward the prejudice by 1933.<sup>37</sup> Though this does sound bad, it could have been much worse. In effect, Jaspers downplayed the anti-Semitism of Heidegger of which he was aware.

Jaspers also believed that early 20<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy (especially that of Heidegger) allowed National Socialism, the anti-Semitic Nazi regime, and Hitler to gain a foothold in the mind of the German people.<sup>38</sup> By lumping Heidegger in with other German philosophers, Jaspers creates a rationalization that allows him to see Heidegger as part of something bigger than himself, and thus releases Heidegger from much of the personal culpability he should be forced to face due to his involvement with National Socialism. Furthermore, Jaspers believed that Heidegger never truly renounced Nazism, at least not intellectually.<sup>39</sup> In this also, I believe that Jaspers never truly confronts Heidegger and his

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<sup>37</sup> Ettinger, 53.

<sup>38</sup> Ettinger, 111.

<sup>39</sup> Ettinger, 112.

inability to end his affinity and affiliation to the ideals of Nazism. Though their relations were icy for many years during and after the war, and although they remained rather strained, I don't feel as though Jaspers adequately confronts Heidegger about this. Surely, Heidegger had the mental capacity and faculty to deal with the ramifications of his mistakes.<sup>40</sup>

The strangest occurrence in my mind is the ability of Hannah Arendt (Heidegger's Jewish, former-lover) to 'forgive and forget' Heidegger in regard to his Nazism.<sup>41</sup> She defended him to the last and never seemed to blame him for his actions and wrongdoings. She is primarily responsible for promoting Heidegger and getting his work published in the United States. Arendt believed, as she wrote to Karl Jaspers, that the many attacks on Heidegger, specifically one in a February 1966 article in Der Spiegel, emerged from the Frankfurt Schools students— from disciples of Horkheimer and Adorno. She believed that they had the ability to "[destroy] Heidegger" if they so chose.<sup>42</sup> Conspiracy theories aside, her devotion to Heidegger is remarkable and one has to wonder how she could ignore his anti-Semitism and still defend him.

Heidegger's case is an interesting and intriguing one. Many questions will be left unanswered for some time to come. How could someone so seemingly intelligent be swayed by something so despicable and grotesque? How is it that Heidegger's students ignored (or chose to ignore) much of the evidence of their former-teachers wartime activities and still defended him? It is clear that one's personal actions cannot be separated from their

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<sup>40</sup> One is left to wonder, though, if Heidegger saw adopting Nazism as a mistake, or if, to him, the victory of the Allies and their Western-style democracy and egalitarianism was the mistake.

<sup>41</sup> The couples love affair is well documented in Ettinger, Hannah Arendt/ Martin Heidegger.

<sup>42</sup> Ettinger, 117-119.

philosophical works and systems— but how does one allow oneself to become caught up in National Socialism to begin with?

Martin Heidegger was always searching for the meaning of Being. In doing so, he spent much time exploring abstract language and concepts. Perhaps, he got lost in his abstractions, and in doing so was unable to find his way home to reality. That is what I have to tell myself in order to reconcile the antagonism of Heidegger, the insightful philosopher, and Heidegger, the fascist/ Nazi. By doing so, though, I wonder if I am not simply repeating the generalizing, rationalization process to which Jaspers and Arendt seem to have gotten themselves caught up in. The real trick will be for others in the future, as more evidence will inevitably become available, to attempt a better reconciliation between the two Heideggers.

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