

# The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi

## Part 1: The Record

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*We begin today a three-part series on the life and work of twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Part 2 will be posted on Tuesday, April 4 and Part 3 will appear on Wednesday, April 5.*

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) has been considered by many to be one of the titans of twentieth century philosophy. His international reputation was assured with the publication in 1927 of *Being and Time*, a book that was characterized by the young Jurgen Habermas as “the most significant philosophical event since Hegel’s *Phänomenologie ...*”[1]

The success of *Being and Time* was immediate and its influence pervasive. Many currents of contemporary thought over the past 70 years have been inspired by and in some cases directly derived from the work of Heidegger. Among these we can mention existentialism, hermeneutics, postmodernism, eco-feminism, and various trends in psychology, theology and literature. His writings have influenced thinkers as diverse as Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, Paul Tillich and countless others. Heidegger’s distinguished career as professor of philosophy at the University of Freiburg was marred by a singular event in his life. After Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 Heidegger the world-renowned philosopher became Heidegger the Nazi, holding membership card number 312589.

The topic of Heidegger’s Nazism has recently stepped out of the pages of scholarly journals and become an issue in the popular press and mass media. Last year, the BBC aired a television series about three philosophers who have strongly influenced our epoch, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. The episode on Heidegger could not help but discuss his Nazism. Late last year, the *New York Review of Books* published an article covering the relationship between Heidegger and his colleagues Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt.

All this publicity to what was previously an obscure chapter in the life of a well-known philosopher has caused a ripple of shock and dismay. For example, a viewer of the BBC series recently wrote of his consternation that “the depth of his [Heidegger’s] collaboration with the Nazis has only recently ... been brought out.” The long-standing myopia in the case of Heidegger can be directly ascribed to a systematic cover-up that was perpetrated by Heidegger himself during and after his Nazi period, and carried on by his students and apologists to this day. Before we explore the story of the cover-up, itself a long and fascinating page in the annals of historical falsification, let us first establish the facts of Heidegger’s relationship with the Nazis.

The facts can no longer be seriously contested since the publication of Victor Farias’ book, *Heidegger and Nazism* in 1987.[2] Farias is a Chilean-born student of Heidegger’s who spent a decade locating virtually all the relevant documents relating to Heidegger’s activities in the years from 1933 to 1945. Many of these documents were found in the archives of the former state of East Germany and in the Documentation Center of

the former West Berlin. Since the publication of Farias’ landmark book, a number of other books and articles have been published that explore the issue of Heidegger’s Nazism. An excellent summary of the historical material can be found in an article written in 1988, *Heidegger and the Nazis*. [3] Much of the material presented in this section is borrowed from this article.

Heidegger was born and raised in the Swabian town of Messkirch in the south of modern Germany. The region was economically backward, dominated by peasant-based agriculture and small scale manufacturing. The politics of the region was infused by a populist Catholicism that was deeply implicated in German nationalism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Modern culture and with it the ideals of liberalism as well as socialism were viewed as mortal threats. The growing influence throughout Germany of the Social Democratic Party was commonly identified as the main “internal enemy” in this region. In the ensuing decades this area would become one of the bastions of support for Nazism.

Heidegger’s family was of lower middle class origin. His mother came from a peasant background and his father was an artisan. He was a promising student and won a scholarship to attend secondary school in Konstanz. There he attended a preparatory school for the novitiate. The school was established by the Catholic Church hierarchy as a bastion of conservatism against the growing influence of liberalism and Protestantism in the region. Nevertheless some of the secular faculty of the school held decisively democratic and progressive ideals. Their lectures were among the most popular at the school. We do not know exactly how these progressive ideas were received by the young Heidegger. We do know that at an early and formative period he was already confronted by the interplay of ideas that were battling for supremacy in his part of Germany. We also know that by the time Heidegger received his baccalaureate degree, he had rejected the vocation of priest in favor of that of scholar. He also became heavily involved in the partisan and cultural struggles of his time. By the time he was in his early twenties, he was a leader in a student movement that embraced the ideals of right-wing Catholic populism.

The reactionary and xenophobic forces in the region were strengthened following the First World War and the Russian Revolution. The outcome of the war, enshrined in the Versailles treaty, was not only a humiliating defeat for the nationalists, but also resulted in the loss of territory to France. The lost territories became a cause celebre among right-wing nationalist circles after the war. The Russian Revolution on the other hand, while inspiring the working class in Germany, spread fear and horror among the largely Catholic peasants in the rural south. A sense of crisis of world historic dimensions dominated the ideology of the right-wing nationalist movements of the period. The *zeitgeist* of crisis was given voice by the philosopher Oswald Spengler, who in turn was

inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche. We know that Heidegger early on in his career expressed sympathies for the nationalist viewpoint. It is also a fact that the sense of crisis that emerged in this historical confluence would be a theme that Heidegger the philosopher would retain his entire career.

Documentary evidence exists that Heidegger expressed sympathy for the Nazis as early as 1932. Given his previous history, this should not come as a shock. Immediately following Hitler's seizure of power, Heidegger joined the Nazis. Heidegger was a dues-paying member of the NSDAP (the Nazi party) from 1933 to 1945. He became the rector of Freiburg University in April of 1933, three months after Hitler came to power. His infamous inaugural address was delivered on May 27, 1933. Heidegger apologists have claimed that this address represented an attempt to assert the autonomy of the university against the Nazis' effort to subordinate the sciences to their reactionary doctrines.

In fact, the address was a call to arms for the student body and the faculty to serve the new Nazi regime. It celebrates the Nazi ascendancy as "the march our people has begun into its future history." Heidegger identifies the German nation with the Nazi state in prose that speaks of "the historical mission of the German *Volk*, a *Volk* that knows itself in its state." There is even a reference to the fascist ideology of zoological determinism when Heidegger invokes "the power to preserve, in the deepest way, the strengths [of the *Volk*] which are rooted in soil and blood."

On June 30, 1933 Heidegger gave a speech to the Heidelberg Student Association in which he gave his views on the role of the university in the new Nazi order. The following excerpt speaks for itself. It provides a glimpse of Heidegger's commitment to the Nazi ideals of blood, race and absolute subservience to the *Führer*.

"It [the university] must be integrated into the *Volksgemeinschaft* and be joined together with the state ...

"Up to now, research and teaching have been carried on at the universities as they were carried out for decades.... Research got out of hand and concealed its uncertainty behind the idea of international scientific and scholarly progress. Teaching that had become aimless hid behind examination requirements.

"A fierce battle must be fought against this situation in the National Socialist spirit, and this spirit cannot be allowed to be suffocated by humanizing, Christian ideas that suppress its unconditionality ...

"Danger comes not from work for the State. It comes only from indifference and resistance. For that reason, only true strength should have access to the right path, but not halfheartedness ...

"University study must again become a risk, not a refuge for the cowardly. Whoever does not survive the battle, lies where he falls. The new courage must accustom itself to steadfastness, for the battle for the institutions where our leaders are educated will continue for a long time. It will be fought out of the strengths of the new Reich that Chancellor Hitler will bring to reality. A hard race with no thought of self must fight this battle, a race that lives from constant testing and that remains directed toward the goal to which it has committed itself. It is a battle to determine who shall be the teachers and leaders at the university."[4]

After the war Heidegger tried to paint an exculpatory picture of his term as rector, claiming that he was defending the integrity of the university against the Nazis' attempts to politicize it. Unfortunately for him the documentary evidence provided by this speech and others like it blow up his attempted alibi.

Existing documentary evidence from Heidegger's period as rector traces the following events:

On August 21, 1933 Heidegger established the *Führer* -principle at Freiburg. This meant that the rector would not be elected by the faculty as had been the custom, but would henceforth be appointed by the Nazi Minister of Education. In that capacity, the *Führer* -rector would have absolute authority over the life of the university. On October 1, 1933 his

goal was realized when he was *officially* appointed University. For Heidegger this was a milestone on the way to fulfilling his ultimate ambition, which was to become the leading philosopher of the Nazi regime. He envisioned a relationship in which he would become the philosopher-consul to Hitler.

On September 4, 1933, in declining an appointment to the University of Munich, he wrote, "When I put personal reasons aside for the moment, I know I ought to decide to work at the task that lets me best serve the work of Adolf Hitler."[5]

On November 3, 1933, in his role as *Führer* -rector, Heidegger issued a decree applying the Nazi laws on racial cleansing to the student body of the university. The substance of the decree awarded economic aid to students belonging to the SS, the SA and other military groups. "Jewish or Marxist students" or anyone considered non-Aryan according to Nazi law would be denied financial aid.[6]

On December 13, 1933, Heidegger solicited financial support from German academics for a book of pro-Hitler speeches that was to be distributed around the world. He added on the bottom of the letter that "Needless to say, non-Aryans shall not appear on the signature page."[7]

On December 22, 1933, Heidegger wrote to the Baden minister of education urging that in choosing among applicants for a professorship one should question "which of the candidates ... offers the greatest assurance of carrying out the National Socialist will for education."[8]

The documentary evidence also shows that while Heidegger was publicly extolling the Nazi cause, he was privately working to destroy the careers of students and colleagues who were either Jewish or whose politics was suspect. Among the damning evidence that has been revealed:

Hermann Staudinger, a chemistry professor at Freiburg who would go on to win the Nobel prize in 1953, was secretly denounced by Heidegger as a former pacifist during World War I. This information was conveyed to the local minister of education on February 10, 1934. Staudinger was faced with the loss of his job and his pension. Some weeks later Heidegger interceded with the minister to recommend a milder punishment. The motivation for this action had nothing to do with pangs of conscience or compassion, but was simply an expedient response to what Heidegger feared would be adverse international publicity to the dismissal of a well-known scholar. He wrote the minister, "I hardly need to remark that as regards the issue nothing of course can change. It's simply a question of avoiding as much as possible, any new strain on foreign policy."[9] The ministry forced Staudinger to submit his resignation and then kept him in suspense for six months before tearing it up and reinstating him.

The case of Eduard Baumgarten provides another example of the crass opportunism and vindictiveness exhibited by Heidegger. Baumgarten was a student of American philosophy who had lectured at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920s. He returned to Germany to study under Heidegger and the two men struck up a close friendship. In 1931, however, a personal falling out ensued after Heidegger opposed Baumgarten's work in American pragmatism. Baumgarten left Freiburg to teach American philosophy at the University of Gottingen. On December 16, 1933, Heidegger, once more in his role as stool pigeon, wrote a letter to the head of the Nazi professors at Gottingen that read, "By family background and intellectual orientation Dr. Baumgarten comes from the Heidelberg circle of liberal democratic intellectuals around Max Weber. During his stay here [at Freiburg] he was anything but a National Socialist. I am surprised to hear that he is lecturing at Gottingen: I cannot imagine on the basis of what scientific works he got the license to teach. After failing with me, he frequented, very actively, the Jew Frankel, who used to teach at Gottingen and just recently was fired from here [under Nazi racial laws]."[10]

Dr. Vogel, the recipient of this letter, thought that it was "charged with

hatred” and refused to use it. His successor, however, sent it to the minister of education in Berlin who suspended Baumgarten and recommended that he leave the country. Fortunately for Baumgarten he was able to get a copy of the Heidegger letter through the intercession of a sympathetic secretary. It is only due to this circumstance that this piece of documentary evidence still exists. It is impossible to guess how many other poisoned letters were penned by Heidegger in this period. Baumgarten was fortunate enough to win back his job after appealing to the Nazi authorities. These facts were brought to light during de-Nazification hearings in 1946.

Mention might be made of an incident with Max Müller. Müller, who became a prominent Catholic intellectual after the war, was one of Heidegger's best students from 1928 to 1933. He was also an opponent of Nazism. He stopped attending Heidegger's lectures after the latter joined the Nazi party on May 1, 1933. Several months later, Heidegger used his authority as *Führer*-rector to fire Müller from his position as student leader on the grounds that Müller was “not politically appropriate.”[11] That was not the end of the story. In 1938 Heidegger, although no longer rector, once again intervened with the authorities to block Müller from getting an appointment as a lecturer at Freiburg. He wrote the university administration that Müller was “unfavorably disposed” toward the regime.[12] This single sentence effectively meant the end of Müller's academic career. Müller, learning of this, paid a personal call on Heidegger asking him to strike the incriminating sentence from his recommendation. Heidegger, playing the role of Pilate, refused to do so, lecturing Müller by invoking his Catholicism. “As a Catholic you must know that everyone has to tell the truth.”[13]

Finally, there is the matter of Heidegger's treatment of his former teacher, Edmund Husserl. Husserl founded the philosophical school of phenomenology and had an international reputation equal to that of Heidegger. Husserl was also a Jew. He fell under the edict of the racial cleansing laws and was denied the use of the University library at Freiburg. In carrying out the Nazi edicts, Heidegger was not simply doing his duty as a Nazi *Führer*-rector. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Heidegger enthused in accomplishing a mission with which he closely identified. According to the testimony of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer's widow, Heidegger was personally an anti-Semite. In the past few years other evidence has come to light to suggest that Heidegger's anti-Semitism did not disappear after the war. One eyewitness, Rainer Marten, recounted a conversation with Heidegger in the late 1950s in which the distinguished professor expressed alarm at the renewal of Jewish influence in the philosophy departments of German universities.[14]

Apologists for Heidegger, most recently Rüdiger Safranski, have sought to exonerate him from any personal responsibility for the fate of Husserl. They point out that Heidegger never signed any edicts specifically limiting Husserl's access to the university facilities.[15] Yet this narrowly construed defense hardly absolves Heidegger of his complicity as an agent in carrying out Nazi anti-Jewish edicts, edicts that he knew would have a devastating impact on former friends and colleagues. Nor is any explanation possible that would redeem Heidegger from the shameful act of removing his dedication to his mentor Husserl from *Being and Time* when that work was reissued in 1941.

After the war Heidegger would make much of the fact that he resigned his post as rector after June 30, 1934. This coincided with the infamous “Night of the Long Knives,” which saw forces loyal to Hitler stage a three-day carnage resulting in the assassination of Ernst Röhm and over one hundred of his Storm Troopers. Heidegger was later to maintain that after this date he broke definitively with Nazism. Yet in a lecture on metaphysics given a year after this event Heidegger publicly refers to “the inner truth and greatness of National Socialism.”

“The stuff which is now being bandied about as the philosophy of

National Socialism—but which has not the least to do with the inner truth and greatness of this movement (namely the encounter between global technology and modern man)—is casting its net in these troubled waters of ‘values’ and ‘totalities.’”[16]

It is also true that Heidegger began to distance himself from certain aspects of National Socialism. Farias' book convincingly argues that after 1934 Heidegger counterposed to the existing Nazi regime an idealized vision of a National Socialism that might have been. According to Farias, this utopian Nazism was identified in Heidegger's mind with the defeated faction of Röhm. The thesis of Heidegger's relationship with Röhm has generated a great deal of controversy and has never been satisfactorily resolved. It is however an incontrovertible fact that Heidegger did believe in a form of Nazism, “the inner truth of this great movement,” till the day he died.

There is another biographical fact that the Heidegger apologists cannot pass over. Heidegger was a life-long friend of a man named Eugen Fischer. Fischer was active in the early years of Nazi rule as a leading proponent of racial legislation. He was the head of the Institute of Racial Hygiene in Berlin which propagated Nazi racial theories. One of the “researchers” at his institute was the infamous Dr. Joseph Mengele. Fischer was one of the intellectual authors of the Nazi “final solution.” Heidegger maintained cordial relations with Fischer at least until 1960 when he sent Fischer a Christmas gift with greetings. It would not be stretching credibility too far to suppose that as a result of his personal relationship with Fischer, Heidegger may have had knowledge at a very early period of Nazi plans for genocide.[17]

The record shows that after the war Heidegger never made a public or private repudiation of his support for Nazism. This was despite the fact that former friends, including Karl Jaspers and Herbert Marcuse, urged him to speak out, after the fact to be sure, against the many crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime. Heidegger never did. He did however make a fleeting reference to the Holocaust in a lecture delivered on Dec. 1, 1949. Speaking about technology, he said:

“Agriculture is now a motorized food-industry—in essence, the same as the manufacturing of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same as the blockade and starvation of the countryside, the same as the production of the hydrogen bombs.”[18]

In equating the problems of mechanized agriculture with the Holocaust, thereby trivializing the latter, Heidegger demonstrated his contempt for the Jewish victims of the Nazis. We will return to this theme when we examine Heidegger's philosophy.

For the most part Heidegger chose to remain silent after the war about his activities on behalf of the Nazis. The few occasions in which Heidegger did venture a public statement were notable. The first instance in which he makes any assessment of this period was a self-serving document that was written for the de-Nazification commission. We will comment on that in the next section. The most important postwar statement Heidegger made about his prewar political activity was in a 1966 interview with the magazine *Der Spiegel*. This interview was first published, at Heidegger's insistence, after his death in 1976. A great deal of the discussion centers on the question of technology and the threat that unconstrained technology poses to man. Heidegger says at one point:

“A decisive question for me today is: how can a political system accommodate itself to the technological age, and which political system would this be? I have no answer to this question. I am not convinced that it is democracy.”[19]

Having set up an ahistorical notion of technology as an absolute bane to the existence of mankind, Heidegger then explains how he conceived of the Nazi solution to this problem:

“... I see the task in thought to consist in general, within the limits allotted to thought, to achieve an adequate relationship to the essence of technology. National Socialism, to be sure, moved in this direction. But

those people were far too limited in their thinking to acquire an explicit relationship to what is really happening today and has been underway for three centuries.”[20]

It is thus beyond dispute that at the time of his death Heidegger thought of Nazism as a political movement that was moving in the right direction. If it failed then this was because its leaders did not think radically enough about the essence of technology.

**Notes:**

1. Jurgen Habermas, “On the Publication of the Lectures of 1935,” trans. Richard Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998, p. 191
2. Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism*, Temple University Press, 1989
3. Thomas Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis,” *New York Review of Books*, June 16, 1988
4. Martin Heidegger, “The University in the New Reich” Wolin, pp. 44-45
5. Farias, 164
6. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
7. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
8. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
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10. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
11. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
12. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
13. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
14. George Leaman, “Strategies of Deception: The Composition of Heidegger’s Silence,” *Martin Heidegger and the Holocaust*, ed. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, Humanities Press, 1996, p. 64
15. Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, t rans. Ewald Osers, Cambridge: Harvard University Pressm 1998, p. 257
16. Sheehan
17. Richard Wolin, “French Heidegger Wars,” Wolin, p. 282
18. Farias, 287.
19. Martin Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us”: *Der Spiegel* interview, Wolin, p. 104
20. Martin Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us”: *Der Spiegel* interview, Wolin, p. 111

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