The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi

Part 1: The Record

By Alex Steiner
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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 currents 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 acclustom 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

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[4] 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

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hatred” and refused to use it. His successor, however, sent it to the minster 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 he makes any assessment of this period was a self-serving document that was written for the de-Nazification commission. We will 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:

“... 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:
5. Farias, 164
7. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
8. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
10. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
11. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
12. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
13. Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis”
16. Sheehan
18. Farias, 287.

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