



Part 8. Conclusion: Nazi and Anti-Nazi Philosophies

40. Hindsight and future resolve

We know from historical hindsight that it took a world war to defeat the Nazis. Tens of millions of human beings died in that war. Actual human beings who lived, loved, cried, had dreams—and then were killed. Millions of others had their lives damaged and disrupted seriously. Over and above all that, the economic and cultural costs—the wrecking of people’s homes and possessions, the destruction of works of art, the obliteration of historical artifacts, and so on—those costs are incalculable.

The Nazis lost that war, but it was a close call, and there is no guarantee that it will not happen again.

And this is why it is important that we understand what really motivated National Socialism. By the 1930s, the Nazis had the entire political and economic muscle of Germany at their disposal—but more important than that, they had intellectual muscle behind them and they had a set of philosophical ideals that motivated and energized millions of people. That intellectual and idealistic power more than anything made the Nazis an awesome force to be reckoned with.

History has taught us that the philosophy and ideals the Nazis stood for were and are false and terribly destructive,

but we do not do ourselves any favors by writing the Nazis off as madmen or as an historical oddity that will never happen again. The Nazis stood for philosophical and political principles that appealed to millions—that attracted some of the best minds of their generation—and that still command the minds and hearts of people in all parts of the world.

And that means we must face the National Socialists' philosophical and political ideals for what they actually are—we must understand them, know where they came from, and what intellectual and emotional power they have. Then and only then are we in a position to defeat them. We will be able to defeat them because we will understand their power and we will have more powerful arguments with which to fight back.

Arguing over philosophical and political ideals is often unpleasant. And the issues involved are often abstract, complicated, and emotionally difficult. But there are no shortcuts. Perhaps the best motivation for doing the hard work comes from reminding ourselves regularly and often how much *more* it costs to settle disputes by war.

We may not like that the Nazis had arguments and positions that many people find attractive. We might find it repulsive to take their arguments seriously. We might find it difficult to get inside their heads to see where they are coming from.

But we have a choice: We either fight those ideas in *theory* or we fight them in *practice*. We either fight them in the intellectual realm or we fight them on the battlefield. It might still come to fighting them on the battlefield—but that is always the most terrible option, the most expensive in every possible way, and the one we should avoid if there is any other way to defeat them.

So that means that defeating National Socialism *intellectually* is the strategy we should follow first. Defeating them

intellectually means taking their positions seriously, understanding them, and knowing how to argue against them.

The second rule of politics is: *Know your enemy*. The first rule of politics is: *Know yourself*. Know what you stand for and why. Know what matters to you fundamentally and what you are willing to do to achieve it—and, when necessary, to fight to defend it.

That is a very large project, and that is why a culture's philosophers and other intellectuals do important work—or, if they get it wrong, great damage.

As a beginning to that project, let me indicate a clear direction to start in.

41. Principled anti-Nazism

Philosophically and politically, the Nazis stood for five major principles: They stood for collectivism, for instinct and passion, for war and conflict, for authoritarianism, and for socialism.

National Socialist Principles:

- Collectivism
- Instinct, passion, “blood”
- War and zero-sum conflict
- Authoritarianism
- Socialism

That means we can identify the principles that, in each case, are the direct opposite of what the Nazis stood for:

National Socialist Principles:

- Collectivism
- Instinct, passion, “blood”
- War and zero-sum conflict
- Authoritarianism
- Socialism

Anti-Nazi Principles:

- Individualism
 - Reason
 - Production and win/win trade
 - Liberalism
 - Capitalism
-
- The Nazis stood for collectivism. The opposite of that is a philosophy of *individualism* that recognizes each individual’s right to live for his or her own sake.
 - The Nazis stood for instinct and passion as one’s basic guides in life. The opposite of that is a philosophy of *reason* that has a healthy confidence in the power of evidence, logic, and judgment to guide one’s life.
 - The Nazis stood for war and conflict as the best way to achieve one’s goals. The opposite of that is a philosophy that encourages *productiveness and trade* and the best way to achieve one’s goals in life.
 - The Nazis stood for political authoritarianism and top-down leadership. The opposite of that is a philosophy that leaves individuals maximum *freedom* to live their lives by their own choice and direction, respecting the equal right of other individuals to do the same.
 - The Nazis stood for socialism and the principle of central direction of the economy for the common good. The op-

posite of that is the system of *free market capitalism*, with individual producers and consumers deciding for themselves what they will produce and what they will spend their money on.

As a start, the principles in the right-hand column are the best antidote to National Socialism we have going. Each of those principles is controversial in our time, and I expect they will continue to be so for generations to come. But they represent the starkest philosophical contrast to National Socialism possible, and they form the first line of defense against future incarnations of Nazism. There is no better place to start than understanding them thoroughly.

I will end on a provocative note: The Nazis knew what they stood for. Do we?

