

Minister of Culture, would express it most bluntly and clearly: “Certainly the Jew is also a Man, but the Flea is also an Animal.”⁴²

So I return to our early question: How could Nazism happen?

20. The question of Nazism’s philosophical roots

We do not do ourselves any favors by not understanding Nazism thoroughly or by being satisfied with superficial explanations. It took a world war to stop National Socialism in the twentieth century. War is brute force. Brute force rarely changes anyone’s minds about anything, and it alone does not destroy the underlying causes that motivate conflict. To use a crude analogy: If two neighbors are having an ongoing argument about a series of issues, and one neighbor hits the other and knocks him unconscious—that ends the argument but it does not solve their problems. The source of their argument is still there and it will re-surface.

The same holds for the underlying causes of National Socialism and its differences with the liberal democracies. The liberal democracies were able to knock out the Nazis in World War II, though it was a close call—but the underlying arguments are still with us.

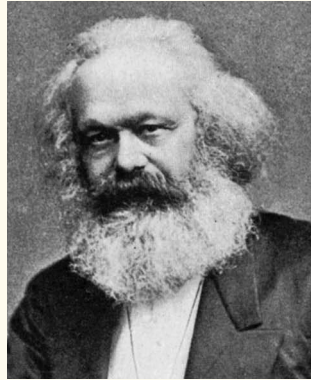
The differences between National Socialism and liberal democracies are profound and involve entirely different philosophies of life. National Socialism was the product of a well-thought-out philosophy of life, the main elements of which were originated, crafted, and argued by philosophers and other intellectuals across many generations.

The Nazi intellectuals were not lightweights, and we run the risk of underestimating our enemy if we dismiss their ideology

⁴² “Sicher ist der Jude auch ein Mann, aber der Floh ist auch ein Tier.”

as attractive only to a few cranky weirdos.⁴³ If your enemy has a machine gun but you believe he only has a pea shooter, then you are setting yourself up for failure. And if we remind ourselves of the list of very heavyweight intellectuals who supported Nazism—Nobel Prize winners, outstanding philosophers and brilliant legal thinkers—then it is clear that these were no pea-shooters and that we need heavyweight intellectual ammunition to defend ourselves.

In the case of other major historical revolutions, we are more familiar with seeing the significance of philosophy. When we think for example of the causes of the Communist Revolutions in Russia and China, we naturally think back to the philosopher Karl Marx. When we think of the causes of the French Revolution, we think back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. When we think of the causes of the American Revolution, we naturally think back to the philosopher John Locke. The same holds the causes of National Socialism—although since the Nazi regime went so horribly wrong, there is perhaps some reluctance to name names. Yet naming names is sometimes crucial if we are going to get to the historical heart of the matter. What philosophers can we cite in the case of the Nazis? Several names are candidates: Georg Hegel, Johann Fichte, even elements from Karl Marx.



Karl Marx

But in connection with the Nazis, perhaps the biggest and the most controversial name regularly mentioned is that of Friedrich Nietzsche. The Nazis often cited Nietzsche as one of their philosophical precursors, and even though Nietzsche died thirty-three years before the Nazis came to power, references to Nietzsche crop up regularly in Nazi writings and activities.

⁴³Recall Albert Speer on “the event that led me to [Hitler]”—a speech Hitler gave to the College of Engineering in Berlin: Speer expected it to be “a bombastic harangue” but it turned out to be a “reasoned lecture” (quoted in Orlow 1969, p. 199).

In philosopher Heidegger's lectures, for example, "Nietzsche was presented as *the* Nazi philosopher."⁴⁴

In his study, Adolf Hitler had a bust of Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1935, Hitler attended and participated in the funeral of Nietzsche's sister Elisabeth. In 1938, the Nazis built a monument to Nietzsche. In 1943, Hitler gave a set of Nietzsche's writings as a gift to fellow dictator Benito Mussolini.⁴⁵

Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, was also a great admirer of Friedrich Nietzsche. In his semi-autobiographical novel, Goebbels has the title character Michael die in a mining accident—afterward three books are found among his belongings: the Bible, Goethe's *Faust*, and Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

So who was Friedrich Nietzsche?

⁴⁴Rohkrämer 2005, p. 181.

⁴⁵During WWI, the German government printed 150,000 copies of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and gave them to soldiers along with a copy of the Bible.