

the course of the twentieth century. Ask professional philosophers of today to name the five most significant philosophers of the twentieth century and, whether they love him or loathe him, most will include Heidegger on the list.

These seven men are among the most intelligent and powerful minds in Germany in the decade before the Nazis came to power. They are leading figures in German intellectual culture, spanning the arts, science, history, law, politics, and philosophy.³ All of them, to one degree or another, supported National Socialism. Was Hitler smart enough to fool all of these highly intelligent men? Or is it more likely that they knew what they believed and supported National Socialism because they thought it was true?⁴

5. Explaining Nazism philosophically

I want to suggest a better explanation: The primary cause of

³Weinreich 1999 (pp. 13-16) gives a wide-ranging list of professors and intellectuals who supported Hitler prior to 1933. See also Rohkrämer 2005 for a clear discussion of the role of Heidegger and the many other philosophers who gave enthusiastic support to the Nazis. Earl Shorris (2007) describes Germany of the time as “a society richer in the knowledge of the humanities than perhaps any other in modern times. Among those people who rose to the top of the Nazi government were students of humanities, former scholars. Joseph Goebbels had studied history and literature at the University of Heidelberg. Reinhard (Hangman) Heydrich was the child of a pianist and an opera singer who founded a conservatory. Ernst Kaltenbrunner studied law at the University of Prague. More than a third of the members of the Vienna Philharmonic belonged to the Nazi Party. Albert Speer, who ran the business side of the Nazi war machine, was an architect.” Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), the great logician and philosopher of mathematics, can be added to this list. Frege was an anti-Semite and later in life named Adolf Hitler as one of his heroes; see Reuben Hersh, *What Is Mathematics, Really?* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 241.

⁴Albert Speer described “the event that led me to [Hitler],” which was a speech Hitler gave to the College of Engineering in Berlin. Speer expected the talk to be “a bombastic harangue” but it turned out to be a “reasoned lecture” (quoted in Orlow 1969, p. 199).

Nazism lies in *philosophy*. Not economics, not psychology, and not even politics.

National Socialism was first a philosophy of life believed and advocated by highly intelligent men and women. Professors, public intellectuals, Nobel Prize-winners—all powerful minds working at the cutting edges of their disciplines. It was they who shaped the intellectual culture of Germany in the 1920s and who convinced millions of Germans that National Socialism was the best hope for Germany's future.

That is not to say that there were no other contributing factors. The legacy of World War I, persistent economic troubles, modern communication technologies, and the personal psychologies of the Nazi leadership did play a role. But the *most* significant factor was the power of a set of abstract, philosophical ideas. National Socialism was a philosophy-intensive movement.

I will up the ante further.

I also want to suggest that the Nazi intellectuals and their followers thought of themselves as *idealists* and as *crusaders for a noble cause*. This may be even harder to accept. The National Socialists in the 1920s were passionate men and women who thought that the world was in a crisis and that a moral revolution was called for. They believed their ideas to be true, beautiful, noble, and the only hope for the world.⁵ Yes, Nazi ideology contained major elements of harshness, even brutality—but what if an important truth about the world is that it is harsh and brutal?



⁵ As did many foreign observers, e.g., the Anglican clergymen who expressed “boundless admiration for the moral and ethical side of the National Social programme, its clear-cut stand for religion and Christianity, and its ethical principles, such as its fight against cruelty to animals, vivisections, sexual offenses, etc.” (quoted in Manchester 1989, p. 82).

It may be hard to believe that the Nazis thought of themselves as noble idealists, especially with our after-the-fact knowledge of the horrible destructiveness of Nazism. It may be especially hard for those of us raised in Western liberal democracies to believe it—since from the cradle we’ve been raised to believe that freedom, equality, and peace are almost self-evidently good.

But what if they are not self-evidently good? Let me play the Devil’s advocate.

How long have human beings existed? Most anthropologists say *homo sapiens* has existed for well over 100,000 years, perhaps as long as 200,000 years. For how much of that time have freedom, equality, and peace been the norm? Democratic experiments were tried in ancient Greece for a few centuries. A little later, republican experiments were tried in ancient Rome—again for a few centuries. But Greece and Rome both failed: the Greeks were conquered by the Romans, and the Romans descended into authoritarian decadence before themselves being conquered. And there have been a few smaller and relatively brief republican city states—Renaissance Venice, Florence, and in the Baltic. That is a few short-lived experiments in over 100,000 years—not very impressive.

So now we imagine ourselves in Europe in the earliest decades of the twentieth century: democratic republicanism has been resurrected and is being tried again, for example in the United States of America. How successful have the modern experiments been? Come the 1920s, the United States is only about 150 years old. That means that it has survived for less time than the Greek democracies or the Roman republic. The U.S. lasted only 90 years before it plunged into a brutal Civil War, the reverberations of which are still being felt early in the twentieth century. In the 1920s the U.S. is itself experiencing economic uncertainty and is shortly to plunge into its Great Depression. Even in the United States, many intellectu-

als are suggesting that capitalism and liberalism are finished and that some form of centralized authority led by a strong man is the future. So in the 1920s, just how strong is the case for liberty, democracy, republicanism, and capitalism?⁶

What if a culture's brightest thinkers believe that democracy is a historical blip? What if they come to believe that the lesson of history is that what people need is structure and strong leadership? What if they believe that history shows that some cultures are obviously superior—superior in their arts, their science and technology, and their religion? What if they believe that history teaches that we live in a harsh world of conflict and that in such a world strength and assertiveness against one's enemies are essential to survive? Or even more strongly than that—that peace makes people soft and that it is conflict and war that brings out the best in people, making them tough, vigorous, and willing to fight for their ideals and if necessary *die* for them?⁷

I am suggesting that a set of ideals was primarily responsible for the rise of Nazism.⁸ I think those ideals are extraordinarily false and terribly destructive—but that is not how millions of intelligent, educated, even in many cases well-meaning Germans saw them.

But why do I call them a set of ideals? Why not just say the Nazis had some ideas—of course they had some ideas with which to bewitch the masses—but basically they just wanted power and were effective at using those ideas to get power?

Well, of course the Nazis wanted power. What politician doesn't want power? But if you are only out for power,

⁶ "Few of the supporters of Weimar understood that for many Germans the fundamental political issue in 1930 was the pluralistic system of politics itself, not substantive issues within the system" (Orlow 1969, p. 186).

⁷ E.g., Immanuel Kant: "a prolonged peace favours the predominance of a mere commercial spirit, and with it a debasing self-interest, cowardice, and effeminacy, and tends to degrade the character of the nation" (1951 [1790], p. 28). See Appendix 4 for quotations on German militarism.

⁸ Contra, e.g., Helmut Kuhn (1963, p. 310), who asserts that the Nazis *perverted* German philosophy.

think about how you go about getting it in a democracy. The best way is to identify the established political parties, join one of the powerful ones, and work your way up the ranks to the top.

Here is an analogy: In the United States, the two major parties are the Democratic and Republican parties. So if you are young and ambitious and you want a realistic chance at becoming a Senator or even President in your lifetime, you join one of those two parties. What you do *not* do is join a fringe party. What you do *not* do is start your own party—say, the Midwestern Farmer’s Union Party, out in the middle of nowhere. The only reason you would start the Midwestern Farmer’s Union Party is that you are a true believer in the ideals of Midwestern Farming and think you cannot achieve your ideals by joining the established parties.

But that describes the Nazis exactly. They did *not* join the Social Democrats or any of the established political parties. They set up their own fringe party, initially based in the south of Germany and away from the center of power in Berlin. They were true believers in a cause. They did not want power if it meant compromising their ideals by joining with an established party. They wanted power—but power to achieve what they took to be high ideals.

So what was this obscure political party formed in Munich in 1920, and what did it stand for?