

## **Heidegger : The Man Nazism and Existentialism**

Heidegger (1889-1976) is an eminent contemporary philosopher. His influence ranges widely over philosophers, theologians as well as certain psychotherapists. There is a lot of respect for him in Japan, Italy, Latin-America and the Continent. The greatest impact of Heidegger's thought, however, has been in France where it decisively moulded the thought of the generation of Sartre, and Merleau Ponty. He, on his part, is greatly indebted to Husserl for his phenomenology, one of the main concerns of existential philosophy. The two philosophers, though, eventually parted company and developed critical differences in the fields of philosophy and politics both.

Martin Heidegger was born in Meskirch (Baden), in Southern Germany, close to the great hills of the Black Forest and only a few miles from the city of Freiburg-im-Breisgau. Born and bred as a devout Catholic, Heidegger, after showing signs, early in his youth, of interest in a religious vocation, left the Church while still very young. This does not signify, though, a break with religion: he continued to attend theology courses as a student and was contributing papers on theological issues even in his Seventies. He was fascinated by both Kierkegaard and Luther and regarded himself as a religious man though not in an orthodox sense of the term.

It was at Freiburg that Heidegger had his elementary education in the art of meditation. His formal philosophical training began under Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert of the Neo-Kantian school. These influences along with that of Husserl's phenomenology, are

visible in his mature works like *Being and Time* and *An Introduction to Metaphysics*.

In 1923, Heidegger was appointed Professor of Philosophy in the University of Marburg. Five years later he was named as Husserl's successor to the chair of Philosophy in Freiburg. He continued to author works of great philosophical significance, among these *Kant and the Problems of Metaphysics* and *What is Metaphysics*.

In 1933, under Hitler's Nazi Nationalist regime, Heidegger became Rector of the prestigious Freiburg University, in which capacity he delivered the famous Address on *the Position of German Universities*, expressing his desire for 'a complete revolution of German existence.' In 1934 he resigned this post and in 1936, refused Hitler's invitation to become the Rector of Berlin University. After the fall of the German Empire and the occupation of Southern Baden by the French, Heidegger was, for political reasons, barred from teaching. Throughout the turbulent period of 1930s he was comparatively less vocal, though he continued to write creatively. The ban was, however, lifted in 1951 and as Professor Emeritus he continued to teach at Freiburg as well as to give lectures and talks throughout Germany. He went to France in 1955 to lecture and was applauded by Marcel and Ricoeur. He died in 1976,

#### *Heidegger's Personality.*

Heidegger, sometimes dubbed as 'Underground man', was a true nationalist and ardently loved the place of his birth. One of his former pupils, Stefan Schimanski, calls him "a peasant by birth and tradition." Even during his Rectorship at Freiburg University, he used to wear the costume of a Swabian peasant. Schimanski describes his teacher as "stocky, sturdy, and stubborn, rooted in the maternal earth of his Homeland, wrapped up in his search for truth and scarcely interested in enticing others to follow him on his lonely path." He first met Heidegger in June 1946, and then in October 1947. He had to experience considerable difficulty in

reaching Heidegger's residence in the remote Black Forest mountains. "His living conditions were primitive, his books were few, and his only relationship to the world was a stack of writing papers. His whole life revolved within those white sheets and it seemed to me that he wanted nothing else but to be left in peace to cover those white sheets with his writings." Schimanski compares the living conditions of Heidegger with those of Jaspers and Berdyaev but the "spirit of overwhelming solitude" was peculiar to Heidegger.<sup>1</sup>

Heidegger continued to live in the remote, hilly corner of Freiburg till his death—an idyllic place for a primitive man, sick of age, inclined to pass his last days away from every activity. The last few years of his life were spent in complete obscurity and he refused even to receive visitors,<sup>2</sup> while his wife Elfride dealt with the correspondence on his behalf. There was seldom, if ever, any mention of Heidegger in the contemporary periodicals. This point is further strengthened by his complete absence from the celebrations marking 850th anniversary of the city of Freiburg in June 1970,

### *Nazism and Existentialism*

One of the distinguishing marks of Heidegger's personality has always been his solitude, and to an outsider it remains an enigma how any one who espouses the independence and freedom of the individual as Heidegger does, could ever have looked with the slightest degree of favour upon Nazism. Yet, Heidegger is accused of having actively sided with Hitler and his Nazi Party. He is alleged to have identified himself with Nazi cause, "burned bodies at Buchenwald," and operated as a Stalinist official, herding thousands of Europeans to their death."<sup>3</sup> As Rector of Freiburg University, he is accused of having a hand in the persecution of the Jews.

It is, now, a well documented fact that Heidegger idealized the

Fuhrer and admired and praised his National Socialist Regime. There are quite a few published addresses and talks by him which substantiate my point. Heidegger's inaugural address (May, 1933), on his accession to the Rectorate of Freiburg University, entitled "*Die Selbst behauptung der deutschen Universitat*", amply proves his association with the Nazis. Friedman has done well to give a selection of Heidegger's speeches and statements during his Nazi period, collected for him by the Swiss scholar Guido Schneeberger.<sup>4</sup>

Heidegger's addresses, speeches and even his official letters of that period are replete with slogans such as "Heil Hitler"! In his address on "*German Students*" (1933), he asserts: "The Nazi revolution carries with it the complete transformation of our German existence ....The rules of your being are not doctrines and 'ideas'. The Fuhrer himself and he alone is German reality and its law, today and henceforth." In a letter of acknowledgment of Professors at the Universities and institutions of higher learning to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi State (1933) and submitted by the Nazi Teachers Union, Heidegger propounds a Nazi theory of 'will to knowledge'. "The people win back the truth of its will to *Dasein*, for truth is the revelation of that which a people in its actions and knowing makes sure, clear, and strong. Out of such truth arises the will to knowledge. And this will to knowledge circumscribes the demand of knowledge ..From such an origin knowledge arises for us. It is bound to the necessity of the self-responsible people's *Dasein*. Knowledge is, therefore, the educative passion, bound in such necessity, to will to know in order to make known. Being known, however, means to us: the things are powerful in clarity and determined to deed..." This theory purports to replace the traditional view because, as Heidegger puts it, "this (Nazi) revolution brings with it the complete transformation of German existence. From now on each thing demands decision and every action accountability."

In an earlier address on the *University in the New Germany* (1933), Heidegger presents a thoroughly unconventional view of teaching and research. He dismisses the traditional view that teaching emerges from the research as outmoded. He argues: "It was only the point of view of the teacher which spoke out of this conception: no one concerned himself with the University as a community. Research became limitless and concealed its uncertainties behind the idea of the international progress of knowledge; teaching, deprived of goals, hid itself behind the rules of the examination schedule..... One must wage a sharp combat against this view in the Nazi spirit...." True research, according to Heidegger, grows out of teaching.....teaching which does not mean the amassing of insights. "It means letting oneself be oppressed by the unknown and then becoming master over it....." "Research and teaching must be rooted in the people and tied to the state. "Study must again mean taking a risk not a shelter for cowards. "Heidegger anticipates a hard struggle to achieve this type of a teacher and the leader at the University and asserts: "It will be fought with the energies of the new state which the people's Hitler will bring to reality. It must be fought without thought for one's own by a hardy generation which exists by constant testing and for the good which it prescribes for itself."

Many writers have ruthlessly assailed the 'Nazi aspect' of Heidegger's personality; Werner Rings under caption, "The Misery of German Intellectual," calls attention to his own dismissal from German universities by Heidegger's orders. He was charged with "un-German" behaviour. It is also alleged that Heidegger, "a partisan of the Third Reich"<sup>6</sup> refused Husserl, his former teacher, access to the library of his university. Croce terms Heidegger's speeches during the Nazi era as "servile and stupid", and believes that he will hardly be able to have any sort of influence on politics. But he is dishonouring philosophy, and that also represents a damaging blow to politics, at least two future politics.<sup>7</sup>

Heidegger, on his part, gave no public account of his involvement with the Nazi Party until 1966 when he talked to the magazine *Der Spiegel* on condition that the interview would not be published until after death. Also, when the author of this article (in 1969) sent a direct query to Heidegger inquiring whether he now regards his association with the Nazis as an unfortunate episode in his career."<sup>8</sup> his reply was evasive and he did not commit himself.<sup>9</sup> In 1970, Kaufman opined in a personal letter to the present author :

"I have no doubt that Heidegger came to feel embarrassed by his abominable lecture on *Die Selbst Behauptung* .. After all, so many people felt that his speech had been disgraceful that he could hardly help considering it an "unfortunate episode." But to my knowledge he has refused steadfastly to disown what he said or to apologize in any way for his behaviour when Hitler came to power or to recant in any form or fashion. In the early years after the War some friends asked him to say something about these matters, and so far as I know he always refused."<sup>10</sup>

The claim that Heidegger felt embarrassed by his conduct during Nazi regime is still open to debate. His interview with *Der Spiegel* has since been made public after his death. By his own account he certainly saw in the Nazi accession to power the possibility of a 'new dawn'. He justified his decision to accept the Rectorship of Freiburg University on the ground that he wanted to forestall take over by a 'party functionary'. He also wanted to introduce reforms in the University. He claimed to have opposed the racial policies of the Nazis and prevented the burning of books. He resigned when he became convinced that the Nazi party would not adopt his views on University reform. and particularly when his own efforts in that direction were thwarted. The immediate cause of his resignation, as claimed by him, was his refusal to comply with party demand that he replace the deans of two faculties.<sup>11</sup>

Though *Der Spiegel* Interview by Heidegger has taken some of the sting out of criticism levelled against him, it nevertheless remains an attempt to justify one's conduct after the event has taken place. There is, in fact, no tangible evidence to suggest that he regretted saying what he said during Nazi regime. Even long after the War, certain though he was that Nazism has failed to realize its promise, he still felt that it had been 'moving in the right direction.'<sup>12</sup>

So, it remains a fact that during a certain period in time Heidegger was an active functionary of the Nazi Government, and that he never renounced this position. But this raises a question, a significant one for us here: What bearing if any, does Heidegger's political activity have on his philosophy? This question is a natural outcome of an existential philosopher, concerned about authenticating his philosophy in his existence, lending his life, thought and work to such a movement as Nazism.

There is, however, nothing astonishing about it. There is sufficient resemblance between Heidegger's existential philosophy and his Nazi terminology to indicate an integral relationship between the two. Moreover, Heidegger's central thesis in *Being and Time* is that one's ownmost possibilities must be realized as against the anonymity of 'They'. Now, there is no reason to suppose that Heidegger could not have "lent his thought to the totalitarianism that swallowed up and destroyed the unique individual in a way more terrible than any other in history."<sup>13</sup> Gunther Anders rightly points out that though Heidegger's thought "represents a technique of self-manipulation" while Hitler's represents one of mass-manipulation, both converge, in the first instance, in the anti-democratic attitude.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, Heidegger had little faith in democracy as a political system,<sup>15</sup> He downgraded the 'unrestricted organisation of the average man' and eulogised the 'patrimony of the leadership elite in the folk vocations of the state'. When he realized that his philosophy could be a political force, he quite openly began to make

claims for the political relevance of philosophy. His thesis about the connection between metaphysics and politics is summed up by him in a typical sentence: "the word 'Being' holds within it the historical destiny of the West."<sup>16</sup> The idea is that the West has declined because its spirit has been perverted by scientific 'rationality', materialism and the fruits of technology. This has led to the forgetting of Being, which takes the form of an escape into the public world of 'average man', in other words the flight into inauthenticity. To face the inevitability of death, to pass beyond anxiety, makes me once again to experience the wonder of Being. Only the German nation can lead this spiritual rebirth because the language and culture of Germany are peculiarly philosophical. The truth can be realized only in the development of a German elite.<sup>17</sup> To Heidegger, such a spiritual rebirth could be possible only through a Nazi take-over and to this way of thinking Hitler could appear as a spiritual hero.<sup>18</sup>

Yet it is hard to reconcile Heidegger, an individualist and a humanist, and Heidegger, the Nazi. There must be some tangible cause for this apparent contradiction. Personally I feel that there were at least four causes, emanating from the over-all development of his personality and character, which may have propelled him to lean towards Nazism. First, his profound sense of nearness to the soil, particularly his native Swabianland. Second, a mystical tendency which associated itself with his feeling about the homeland. Third, a stress upon courage and resoluteness which could easily be channeled in the direction of political decision and martial traits. Fourth, the influence of Nietzsche and his view that Western civilization had become spiritually bankrupt and decadent and his slogan: 'transvalue your values or perish.' But these remain mere conjectures and should not detract us from his not-very-philosopher-like role from 1933-1936.



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*Reference Notes*

1. Heidegger, M. *Existence and Being*, Chicago, 1949, "Foreword" by Stefan Schimansky, p. 10.
2. Heidegger's reply to author's letter with its English version :

Martin Heidegger      78 Freiburgi,  
Br.-Zahringen Rotebuck 47

Ich bedaure, wegen meines hohen Alters  
undeiner Erkrankung weder Besucher empfangen,  
noch zugesandte Texte lesen und beurteilen zu können.

Freiburg im Breisgau 1970

Sd/  
*Heidegger*

Mit freundlichem Gruß im Auftrag meines Mannes.

Sd/  
*Elfride Heidegger*

(I regret, because of my old age and illness I can neither receive visitors nor read texts nor am I able to give my opinion.

On behalf of my husband,

Sincerely

3. Barrett, W. *What is Existentialism*, New York, 1964, p. 108.
4. Friedman, M. Ed. *The Worlds of Existentialism*, New York, 1964, pp. 527-533.
5. Ibid. 532.
6. Ibid. 433.
7. Ibid. 530.
8. Alston, W.P. & Nakhnikian, G. (Eds.) *Readings in Twentieth Century Philosophy* New York, pp. 679 680.

9. See above, Heidegger's reply to my letter, Ref. No. 2.
10. Walter Kaufmann's reply to my letter (Dated 21,9. 1970).
11. "Only a God can save us" : Heidegger's Interview with *Der Spiegel, Philosophy Today*, Vol. 20,4/4 ? Winter 1976, pp. 267-284.
12. Ibid. p. 280.
13. Friedman, M. *The Worlds of Existentialism*, op. cit. p. 526.
14. Ibid., 533.
15. *Der Spiegel Interview*, op. cit. p. 276.
16. Heidegger, M. *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Doubleday Anchor, 1961, p. 35.
17. Ibid. pp. 37-38,
18. Waterhouse, R. *A Heidegger Critique*, New Jersey, 1981, pp. 127-128.