

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Historical Context**

Heidegger's ambition to articulate the historical relation between humanity and truth, expressed in his central theme of the existential analytic of Dasein understood as finite transcendence, makes it impossible to assess his thought in isolation from his relation to the political and intellectual currents of his time. Indeed, as he said in Being and Time, "the proposition, 'Dasein is historical', is confirmed as a fundamental existential ontological assertion".<sup>1</sup> It is worthwhile now to look at how his historical context shaped his thought, because the influence of the historical situation in which he wrote is a factor which must be addressed in the effort to explain his approach.

Being and Time, Heidegger's best known work, struck a chord with the mood of Europe in the 1920's, and must be ranked as one of the most significant philosophical texts to have appeared in modern times. Described by its translators as "perhaps the most celebrated philosophical work Germany has produced this century",<sup>2</sup> all the passion, turmoil and anxiety of the 1920's find their reflection in it, despite the austere precision of the language. By the time Heidegger came to write Being and Time, the naive enthusiasm which had surrounded science and the evolution of civilization in the nineteenth century had been disrupted by the First World War and was no longer intellectually credible. The applications of the mechanistic worldview to the science of death, via machine gun and poison gas, had severely traumatised European society, and the confidence of earlier times had been thrown into radical doubt.<sup>3</sup>

Heidegger's argument for an explicit effort to disclose the meaning of Being as a whole was therefore designed to restore some sense of meaning and direction out of the bleak void of destruction into which Europe had crashed, and to re-establish a sense of ground or foundation for thought in the analysis of existence, since the previous ground provided by reason and logic appeared to have failed. Being and Time expressly sought to make the real historical situation<sup>4</sup> the only possible horizon for philosophy, and in Germany of the 1920s this context gave several definite characteristics to thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Sein und Zeit: 332

<sup>2</sup> Sein und Zeit: 13

<sup>3</sup> At the same time, art, which for Heidegger was later, in *The Origin of the Work of Art* and his writings on Nietzsche, to become the grounding theme of his thought, had undergone fantastic change in the move to abstraction, a move some people (especially Hitler) thought mirrored the decadence and dissolution of the times. J.J. Goux presents a useful discussion of this topic in his essay 'Politics and Modern Art - Heidegger's Dilemma', *Diacritics* 19.3-4 (1989): 10-24. The archetype of the twentieth century is for Goux a series of paintings by De Chirico, which show "a fathomless melancholy . . . the staging . . . of the funeral of classical art, and they deeply etch the metaphysical distress this burial provokes."

<sup>4</sup> Sein und Zeit: 232

The prewar Prussian culture was "a made state, a triumph of art over nature"<sup>5</sup>, in more ways than one. Heidegger's whole analysis was a rebellion against the failed rules and standards of that alienated and artificial society: he mocked the spiritual and ethical power of the fin-de-siecle West as a "worn-out make believe culture", which "expends all its powers in confusion and smothers in its own lunacy".<sup>6</sup> There is a bleakness about Being and Time; a sense that all meaning has been shattered and must be recreated afresh on the basis of authentic openness to Being. In the new existential environment of twentieth century Europe, constituted largely by people's efforts to come to terms with the horror of the First World War, God appeared dead because human significance alone had to create the world. Resolute anticipation of death had become the only freedom,<sup>7</sup> conscience issued a summons to guilt but had nothing to say,<sup>8</sup> anxiety was the pervasive mood, and any attempt to construct a social morality was branded the inauthentic work of the 'they'. Heidegger's recognition of the thematic primacy of the historical 'happening'<sup>9</sup> of Dasein, in its temporal 'stretch' along from birth to death, led, together with his statement of the need for thrown resoluteness to take over its heritage,<sup>10</sup> to one of the most concise and clear summaries of his whole philosophy:

"ONLY IF DEATH GUILT, CONSCIENCE, FREEDOM AND FINITUDE RESIDE TOGETHER EQUIPRIMORDIALLY IN the BEING OF AN ENTITY AS THEY DO IN CARE, CAN THAT ENTITY EXIST IN THE MODE OF FATE; THAT IS TO SAY, ONLY THEN CAN IT BE HISTORICAL IN THE VERY DEPTHS OF ITS EXISTENCE".<sup>11</sup>

Historical Dasein must "pull itself together from the dispersion and disconnectedness"<sup>12</sup> of its forfeiture to the public world, and resolutely seek out the authentic unity of its finite temporality, a unity defined as care. As Heidegger's reading of Karl Jaspers' Psychology of World Views<sup>13</sup> convinced him, it is not enough for philosophy to ground itself in abstract consciousness; what is needed is for philosophy to recognise the primacy of its existence in the world. In the context of tranquillised alienation, of the uncanny anxiety out of which Dasein comes "face to face with the 'nothing' of the world",<sup>14</sup> Heidegger contended that "what Marx recognised as the alienation of man has its roots in homelessness", a pervasive

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<sup>5</sup>A.J.P. Taylor, The Course of German History, p.101

<sup>6</sup> Farias p.108

<sup>7</sup> Sein und Zeit:266

<sup>8</sup> Sein und Zeit:273

<sup>9</sup> Sein und Zeit: 375 - geschehen - translated in BT as 'historizing', see also Introduction to Metaphysics : 45

<sup>10</sup> Sein und Zeit: 383

<sup>11</sup> Sein und Zeit: 385

<sup>12</sup> Sein und Zeit: 390

<sup>13</sup> cf. Waterhouse: A Heidegger Critique p.46

<sup>14</sup> Sein und Zeit: 276: "unheimlichkeit" translated as 'uncanniness' is based on the root 'heim' (home), and has the connotation of something weird or strange. In Heidegger's usage it refers to the rootlessness of modern life caused by forgetfulness of Being.

modern situation which "through metaphysics has been simultaneously entrenched and covered up as such".<sup>15</sup> We see here a key to the historical dimension of Heidegger's ontology, in his contention that alienation has become entrenched in the modern world as a result of the domination exercised by metaphysics. This situation has its roots both in Christian theology and in the scientific enlightenment. Heidegger considered the task of philosophy to be the destruction of these alienating traditions in favour of an engaged existential openness.

The clear political dimension to these ideas is shown in his description of the scientific revolution as "a world-creating event" whose consequences have been

"man who grasps himself as a nation, wills himself as a people, fosters himself as a race, and finally empowers himself as lord of the earth. . . In the planetary imperialism of technologically organised man, the subjectivism of man attains its peak, from which point it will descend to the level of organised uniformity".<sup>16</sup> "To such a willing, everything turns irresistibly into material for self assertive production. The earth and its atmosphere become raw material".<sup>17</sup>

This bleak prediction of a totalitarian blindness in rationalism, which despite its belief in reason is able to close itself off from the consequences of its actions, arose from his observation of historical developments in twentieth century Europe. The carnage of the First World War and the appropriation of the dialectic by the communist revolution had battered the standing of the enlightenment tradition of the ascendancy of reason over faith. These events were important elements of the historical context in which Being and Time was written, and the importance of the work lay partly in its efforts to shed light on how Western thought could recognise their impact while retaining a distinct identity. Given that his thought emerged out of such a historical engagement in the life of his times, even if this involvement is rarely if ever made explicit in the text, but only treated in the general context of analysis of "the 'they'", of "death" or of "fear", it should not be surprising that Heidegger has been the subject of the most extreme controversy possible for a philosopher of his repute, having been called among other things a fascist, an irrationalist, an idealist and an archaic mystic. In the eyes of critical interpreters, Heidegger's call for resolute opposition to the 'they' was just a front for Nazi opposition to liberal democracy, his critique of rationalism was a capitulation before tyranny, and the linkage he drew between the modern German and ancient Greek languages was simply racist chauvinism.

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<sup>15</sup> Basic Writings: 219

<sup>16</sup> Age of the World Picture: 152

<sup>17</sup> Poetry, Language, Thought: 111

Heidegger's unfortunate association with the Nazis, the subject of a controversial recent book,<sup>18</sup> must be seen as seriously detracting from the positive value of his philosophy. Not only was he actually complicit with the greatest evil of history, but his philosophy betrays a hostility to modern technology and institutions which found common cause, even if only indirectly, with the 'blood and soil' doctrines of Nazism, even while he rejected their racist 'biological' ideas. Heidegger's naive support for Hitler was based on the mistaken belief that the Nazis would save the values of old Germany from the modern tide of mass politics represented by the USSR and the USA.<sup>19</sup> His argument, written in 1935 and published in 1953, that the "inner truth and greatness of the National Socialist movement is to be found in the encounter between global technology and modern man",<sup>20</sup> shows that Heidegger erroneously believed fascism offered an answer to the problems of rootlessness and alienation brought by modern technology. Although his support for Nazism was qualified by the description of so-called national socialist philosophies as "laborious fabrications producing nothing but confusion",<sup>21</sup> Heidegger's original peasant outlook, able to find more meaning in a pair of clogs than in the theories of theoretical physics,<sup>22</sup> remained unfortunately close to fascism.

There is undeniably this dark side to Heidegger which must be considered in the effort to make a balanced appraisal of his work, because his support for fascism was rooted in his chauvinism about the German language and his metaphysical ideas about the destiny of the West and as a result is integral to his identity. It is inevitable in beginning to discuss the thought of such a man that the skeletons in his closet will emerge, and some would say that these skeletons are so damning as to warrant the dismissal of the very possibility that anything of worth could be found in his writings. I do not share this assessment, because it would be wrong to discount the entire positive contribution of a thinker because of one obvious flaw, but given that fascism remains a danger to the political stability of the world even today, this is an important problem to be considered. In the effort to develop a broad understanding of our human condition it is a real question why such an intelligent, civilized and sophisticated thinker as Heidegger should have given his support to what may well have been the most inhumane political movement in history.

Farias' work demonstrates by historical evidence that the widely believed claim that Heidegger dissociated himself from the fascists in 1934 is false. The foreword to the book

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<sup>18</sup> Victor Farias, Heidegger and Nazism, 1987, Temple University Press, trans. 1989

<sup>19</sup> Introduction to *Metaphysics*: 38, 199

<sup>20</sup> Introduction to *Metaphysics*: 199

<sup>21</sup> *Age of the World Picture*: 140

<sup>22</sup> Farias discusses the provincial context of Heidegger's work at some length. Heidegger's description, in the *Origin of the Work of Art*, of the meaning to be found in Van Gogh's painting of peasant clogs is one indication of the level of meaning he bestowed on peasant life. Another anecdote related by Farias quotes Heidegger as listening to the silent head movement of a peasant elder in order to decide whether to accept an academic posting.

observes that “against the prevailing temper of nearly half a century of discussion, Farias utterly deflates the myth of Heidegger the good Samaritan, Heidegger the conceptual resistance fighter against Nazism, Heidegger the kindly scholar, by showing that, in the final analysis, this brilliant philosopher was and must be seen to be what he always was: a convinced Nazi, a philosopher whose genuine interest in Nazism survived his apparent disillusionment with Hitler’s particular form of National Socialism.”<sup>23</sup>

Heidegger joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and remained a member until 1945, in good standing with all sections of the party except the Science Department of Alfred Rosenberg. In his opening speech as Rector of Freiburg University in 1933,<sup>24</sup> he welcomed the rise of Hitler to power, condemning academic freedom in favour of obligation to work service, military service and the “spiritual mission of the German nation.”<sup>25</sup> The speech was a big occasion for the Nazi movement of Freiburg and Swabia, broadcast as a cultural celebration by Freiburg Radio, and accompanied by Nazi choir, orchestra, state ministers and SA. Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce called the speech “the abyss of the falsest historicism, which negates history, which it crudely and materialistically conceives as the assertion of ethnocentrism and racism.”<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile Heidegger’s Rector’s Address became an approved text of the Nazi censor.

Farias argues that this speech, and his subsequent activities, are indicative of Heidegger’s advocacy of the position of the Rohm faction within the NSDAP, the Sturmabteilung (SA), which saw Hitler’s ascendancy as the occasion for cultural revolution against liberalism, internationalism and Judaism. Heidegger’s warm relationship with the Nazi regime cooled after Rohm’s purge, but till the end of the war Heidegger continued to begin and end every lecture with the ‘Heil Hitler’ salute, and in 1943 his essay Plato’s Doctrine of Truth relied on the intervention of Goebbels and Mussolini to overrule Rosenberg’s denial of permission to publish.<sup>27</sup>

So what are we to make of this apparently damning critique? The ‘pastiche’ method used by Farias, relying more on innuendo and guilt by association than any real evidence, must be judged an unfair picture of Heidegger. For example there is no evidence that the circumstances of publication of Heidegger’s Plato essay are at all related to any possible Nazi content in the essay itself, and reading the essay contradicts the suspicion completely. Indeed, the Nazis claimed a continuity, at least in propaganda terms, with Platonic idealism as a part of the classical heritage of Western civilisation, but Heidegger’s Plato essay argued that Plato was at the source of a fundamentally erroneous doctrine of truth as ideal representation. There is no real evidence that Heidegger’s relation to the Party, at least after

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<sup>23</sup> Farias. Foreword by Rockmore and Margolis, p.xv

<sup>24</sup> The Self Determination of the German University. Available in Radical Philosophy

<sup>25</sup> Farias p.104

<sup>26</sup> Farias p.111

<sup>27</sup> Farias pp.260-8

1933, was more than that of any German nationalist. Farias does not discuss why Heidegger's relations cooled so markedly after this date, perhaps because he is unwilling to admit that Heidegger's efforts to change the policy of the Government (der Fuhrer zu fuhren) had failed to divert them from their disastrous direction. The speculation about the linkage of Heidegger's fate to that of Ernst Rohm, based only on Heidegger's sympathy with certain Nazi students, lacks a documentary basis. The insinuation of anti-Semitism, which again suffers from a lack of evidence, is contradicted by Heidegger's dedication of *Sein und Zeit* to his teacher Husserl "in friendship and admiration" and by the absence from his writings of any prejudicial judgements. Nor does his love of the German language and its supposed Greek resonances imply prejudice, let alone hatred, against any other cultures. Certainly he thought European civilization more advanced than primitive tribes, but this is hardly evidence of some evil racist complicity.

Nevertheless there are reasons for Farias' thesis. Heidegger erased the dedication to Husserl in order to have *Sein und Zeit* republished, an erasure which Derrida called "mediocre and hideous".<sup>28</sup> Also, as Paul Ricoer observed, "he appears to have systematically escaped confrontation with the great block of Hebraic thought"<sup>29</sup> with all its ethical dimension. Even in the absence of an explicit anti-Semitism on Heidegger's part, a heavy doubt must encircle the effort to discover an ethical dimension in his work. As J.F. Lyotard observes:

"Here lies the paradox and even the scandal: how could Heidegger's thought, a thought so devoted to remembering that a forgetting (of Being) takes place in all thought, . . . how could it possibly have ignored the thought of "the jews", which . . . tries to think nothing but that very fact?"<sup>30</sup>

The charge of irrationalism is connected to these allegations of fascism. Heidegger was perceived to have rejected critical scientific rationalism in favour of historical immersion in the everyday context of ordinary experience, and this appeared to some thinkers to open the way to a denigration of the achievements of science in which fascist ideas found a basis. So for example Adorno's Jargon of Authenticity describes how German ideologues used Heidegger's ideas to promote a fascist orientation in culture that helped the Nazis gain their ideological ascendancy over the German people. Popper's Poverty of Historicism saw any assertion of privileged access to an understanding of historical destiny as inherently suspicious and the root of totalitarianism, and it was widely felt that Heidegger's intermingling of the notions of science and German fate in his Rector's Address had just this intention. On this

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<sup>28</sup> J. Derrida - *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*. Quoted by Jocelyn Dunphy : 'French Heidegger: the Question of Radicality'. p. 150, Heidegger Centenary Papers, The University of Sydney 1989.

<sup>29</sup> Dunphy: 151

<sup>30</sup> J.F. Lyotard: *Heidegger and "the jews"*, University of Minnesota Press, 1990. Lyotard employs the term "the jews" to refer to all those who are excluded from the dominant culture.

basis Walter Kaufmann accused Heidegger of engaging in “rhapsody, not analysis”: “his disparagement of logical scrutiny opens the floodgates to fanaticism, superstition, and stupidity”.<sup>31</sup> Yet it must be asked if a “disparagement of logical scrutiny” is a real implication of Heidegger’s critique of rationalism. It would seem instead that logical scrutiny is precisely what he applies to the idea of logic, in order to establish a rigorous grounding for it in existence. Perhaps what Kaufmann feared in Heidegger was his perceptive demonstration that what lies beneath our logical security is too often an abyss of meaninglessness and nothingness rather than any benevolent purposive ground.

Marxists have criticised Heidegger as a reactionary idealist and obscurantist who sought to sow confusion by divorcing philosophy from science. This criticism is interesting not so much for its intellectual value, but as an example of how political agendas demand that thought be ignored in the rush to affirm ideological dogmas. It is true that Heidegger was fearful of communism, but he had a more balanced attitude towards Marxism than one-sided polemics would suggest. His criticism of Husserl and Sartre, that they both “fail to recognise the importance of the historical in Being, so neither phenomenology or existentialism enters the dimension where productive dialogue with Marxism becomes possible”,<sup>32</sup> exhibits his willingness to open dialogue and engagement. Heidegger wrote that “the Marxist view of history is superior to that of other historical accounts”,<sup>33</sup> and despite his fascist sympathies, he was an objective enough student of humanity to recognise the element of truth in Marxist historical class analysis. He was never blinded by dogma into ignoring the truth in other people’s ideas, even where he disagreed with implications they drew. For example there is considerable depth in his statement that Marxism fell short of a complete openness towards truth because of its “metaphysical determination according to which every being appears as the product of labour”.<sup>34</sup>

One prominent Marxist, Herbert Marcuse, had welcomed Being and Time as a radical critique of the problem of alienation. However in 1948, Marcuse described Heidegger as “today still identified with the Nazi regime”, writing to him that

“I myself - and very many others - have revered you as a philosopher and have learned an immeasurable amount from you. But we cannot make the separation between Heidegger the philosopher and Heidegger the man; this even conflicts with your own philosophy. A philosopher can go astray politically, but then he ought to expose his mistakes. But he cannot go astray regarding a regime that has killed millions of Jews merely because they were Jews, a regime where terror was made the norm and everything that was

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<sup>31</sup> p. 356, “Heidegger’s Castle” in From Shakespeare to Existentialism, 1959

<sup>32</sup> Basic Writings:220

<sup>33</sup> Basic Writings: 219

<sup>34</sup> Basic Writings:220

connected with spirit, freedom and truth was transformed into its bloody opposite.”<sup>35</sup>

Heidegger's reply to Marcuse merely equated Stalin and Hitler, by saying that equally bad things had happened since the war to the Germans under the communist bloc, and pointedly avoided any word of renunciation of the Nazi genocide policy, a position he was to maintain until his death. Another colleague, Rudolf Bultmann, says that when he asked Heidegger to retract his errors, as Augustine had done, “Heidegger's face became a stony mask. He left without saying anything further.”<sup>36</sup> His refusal to ever disavow Nazi horror is an astonishing truth about Heidegger. Rockmore and Margolis<sup>37</sup> say “Heidegger stands before us as a singular case, philosophically *sui generis*, the source of one of the most influential currents of philosophical thought in our century, the only major thinker to opt for Nazism, the main example of absolute evil in our time - possibly of any time. The combination is without any known precedent.”

It must be accepted that this aspect of his life indicates real deficiencies in his thought. If it true that Heidegger effectively allowed Hitler to represent his own conscience, a monstrous thing in sheerly human terms, his position on this issue of total consequence was an inauthentic betrayal of his own central ideas about authentic selfhood. Certainly his answer to Marcuse displayed an element of cowardice and hypocrisy, an unwillingness to courageously come to terms with the evils of the war. The argument that Nazism and Stalinism presented an either/or question of the lesser (or easier) of two evils, painfully necessary as it may have been in some circumstances, can only arise from philosophical dishonesty, and in Heidegger's case, hypocrisy. How can Heidegger speak of 'openness to Being' as the ground of thought and then approach the political questions of war and peace, the clash of intractable positions, in such a closed and remorseless way? The brooding flaw of chauvinism beneath the surface of his thought, and also his inconsistency with respect to basic themes of Being and Time, comes to light in his astonishing failure on this point.

These political aspects of his thought and character obviously detract from Heidegger's stature as a philosopher, given that we may conclude from Marcuse's observation above that to make the existential analytic of Dasein the basis for a doctrine of truth is the grossest hypocrisy when the author's own existence is an accomplice to evil. Even so, before accepting this flaw as grounds for rejecting the positive content of Heidegger's work we should give proper consideration to his ideas. It would be wrong to think such faults mean the positive contribution in the ontological achievement of Being and Time deserves to be dismissed, because the positive aspects of his philosophy are a significant achievement in modern thought and deserve sympathetic study. This thesis will continue to strike up against the

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<sup>35</sup> Farias p.283

<sup>36</sup> Farias p.282

<sup>37</sup> Farias, foreword, p. ix

problematic status of ethics in Heidegger's thought, not only morally and historically in terms of his association with Nazism, but also intellectually in terms of his system. His Nazi period is an unfortunate and diminishing factor in Heidegger's life, especially because he himself emphasised the indivisibility of life and thought, but his agreement with fascist ideas did not extend to any of their repugnant aspects such as support for racism or war. His naive support remained merely at the philosophical level of the spiritual renewal which Hitler deviously promised and then failed to deliver.

If Heidegger's ideas were an apology for fascism he would not have had the profound influence he has had, standing as one of the main theoretical antecedents of modern Continental philosophy. Jacques Derrida's comment<sup>38</sup> that while the truth of Farias' case must be conceded, his argument cannot be used as a way to measure the true significance of Heidegger's work, is a more balanced appraisal than the simplistic rejection Farias calls for. Recognising Heidegger's guilt, Derrida writes "the vigilant but open reading of Heidegger remains . . . one of the indispensable conditions . . . to tell better why, with so many others, I have always condemned Nazism".<sup>39</sup>

Further than this, I will argue that despite the facts of his political involvement, there remains a clear and valid ethic within Heidegger's philosophy. Heidegger himself indirectly recognised his mistake when he said that it is an error to venture too far in one's essential attitudes and decisions.<sup>40</sup> Good thinkers have wrongly placed faith in all sorts of political movements, from communism to Catholicism to capitalism, so of itself Heidegger's political involvement is not, as Farias suggests, enough to warrant his neglect. Heidegger's efforts to restore the links between existence and truth through the development of the ontology of Dasein have a significant positive ethical potential, despite his personal dereliction of this potential in his failure to criticise fascism, a movement which drove as wide a wedge between existence and truth as any metaphysics. Despite his personal failings to follow this through with consistency and wisdom, it is on the point of its requirement that philosophy recognise its historical context, in both the immediate sense of our involvement in the world and the ultimate sense of our relation to Being, that the ethics of his philosophy transcend his political limitations.

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<sup>38</sup> Farias, foreword, p. x

<sup>39</sup> p.8, *Diacritics*: Fall/winter 1989

<sup>40</sup> *Basic Writings*: 136. The critique of Heidegger's ethic of involvement is taken further in the subsection with that title in the final chapter