

How Do the Humanities Respond to Authoritarian Regimes? The Case of Nazi Germany

By: Adam Knowles



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One central question drives my scholarship: how do the humanities respond to authoritarian regimes? There is no shortage of scholars who aligned themselves with Fascist movements and contributed to them through teaching and scholarship. While much of the logistical and technical support for the Holocaust came from the fields of medicine and the natural sciences, many of the most prominent professors who lent support to National Socialism came from the fields of Philosophy, History, and German Studies. As a philosopher trained in 19th and 20th-century German philosophy, it continually strikes me how little the discipline of philosophy has sought to engage with this past or to denazify the discipline in a meaningful way.

My journey to the field of Holocaust studies came through a winding path. I trained in philosophy and intellectual history at the University of Texas at Austin and the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg before completing a PhD at the New School for Social Research. While completing a PhD on philosophy of language, something always bothered me about the fundamental assumptions of how philosophers dealt with the works of thinkers like Martin Heidegger who supported National Socialism. The typical approach among philosophers was to acknowledge Heidegger's Nazi fidelities, yet discount the philosophical importance of these purportedly "biographical" details. The historian in me was always disturbed by reading texts produced under the conditions of Fascism—as many of Heidegger's most influential texts

were—while discounting the importance of Fascism in the interpretation of those texts. The 2013 publication of Heidegger's notorious anti-Semitic diaries known as the *Black Notebooks* led me to make a full break with this form of philosophy and motivated me to acquire a new set of skills in the study of Fascism, the intellectual history of National Socialism, and Holocaust studies.

The Holocaust Educational Foundation has been pivotal in helping me to acquire a new set of interdisciplinary skills. The 2015 two-week Summer Institute on the Holocaust and Jewish Civilization provided me with a solid grounding in Holocaust studies. The lessons I learned from the luminary scholars who taught the intensive study sessions provided an invaluable foundation for my course "Holocaust and Philosophy," which I teach regularly at Drexel University. In 2015 the Holocaust Educational Foundation awarded me the Sharon Abramson Research Grant for the Study of the Holocaust, providing me the opportunity to add a dimension of archival research to my work. I visited several federal, state, and university archives in Germany to reconstruct Heidegger's activities as a university administrator during the Nazi period. What I discovered changed the course of my work and set me on a scholarly agenda which has resulted in a published book, multiple grants, and two additional books in progress dealing with philosophy in Nazi Germany.

In April 1933, months into Nazi rule, Heidegger maneuvered to be elected the Rector of Freiburg University. In the ensuing months, Heidegger ruthlessly and effectively enacted anti-Jewish measures, personally overseeing the removal of 69 Jewish faculty members. In Berlin, the Ministry of Culture declared Freiburg University to be an exemplary case for how to Nazify the university. In contrast to Heidegger's narrative of being coerced and out of depth with administrative work, the archives revealed Heidegger to be a highly effective and fastidious administrator. The results of this research are presented in part in my book *Heidegger's Fascist Affinities: A Politics of Silence*, published in 2019 with Stanford University Press.

Researching Heidegger's administrative activities made me curious about the archival record on other philosophers active at German universities. How did philosophers contribute to the racial, pedagogical, and imperial projects of National Socialism in their research, teaching, and public outreach projects? I am exploring that question in another book in progress entitled *Categories of Complicity: Philosophy under National Socialism*. In 2019-2020 I have been (with an interruption by the global COVID pandemic) researching this question in various German archives with a 12-month fellowship supported by the Andrew W. Mellon and Volkswagen Foundations.

The germ of all of these projects began at the 2015 HEF Summer School, gathered together with a wonderful group of dedicated scholars on Northwestern University's campus. What I discovered in the field of Holocaust Studies was an open, highly interdisciplinary world of scholarship ready to explore questions collaboratively and across different methodologies. What is so rewarding about working in this field is that it is clear to all involved that, when dealing with something as overwhelming as the Holocaust, collaborative work is necessary, along with flexibility in genres, sources and methodologies. I have brought these commitments

back to the discipline of philosophy, but have also found a new home in a robust and dedicated scholarly community.

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