

Nietzsche and Nazism

Übermensch, der Wille zur Macht und Umstürzung aller Werte

Friedrich Nietzsche – the Philosopher of the Third Reich?

displayed by

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“Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, daß er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein.”¹

The German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was born on October 15, 1844 in Röcken bei Lützen near Leipzig. His father was a Lutheran church minister. After his secondary schooling he went to the University of Bonn to study Theology and Philosophy. But he was not really interested in these subjects so he changed to Philology. Nietzsche was also very interested in music. In his early years he read the German romantic writer Friedrich Hölderlin and later on Schopenhauer. Friedrich Nietzsche began very early with his writings, mostly commentaries about ancient Greek philosophers. In January 1871 he started with one of his own big works, *Geburt der Tragödie*. Until his physical collapse, Nietzsche wrote a lot of books and gave us a huge body of philosophical work. In his writings he proclaimed the death of god and a new kind of human super being; he wanted to establish a new moral understanding without a Christian background. When we read his books we often hear about *Übermensch*, *Wille zur Macht und Umstürzung aller Werte*. Hitler used these and other early writings about Jewish people to justify his ideology and his genocide. We do not know if Hitler ever read Nietzsche but there is a similarity between his writings and the writings of Nietzsche. Nazi philosophers and anti-Nazi philosophers have argued over Nietzsche. Who was right? Throughout history a lot of people have wanted to establish whether Nietzsche can be blamed for Nazism or not.

In this essay, I want to compare the two essays by Kurt Rudolf Fischer and Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich. I will also try to give my own opinion. I do not want to talk about all the Semitic anti-Semitic topics in Nietzsche's writings. Kurt Rudolf Fischer writes in his essay, that we must go deeper to explain Nazism. To me, Anti-Semitism does not necessarily mean Nazism. Rather, I believe that someone can be an anti-Semite without being a Nazi and the

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 4.Hauptstück 146

other way round. Throughout European history, hate against the Jewish people was always alive. There were a lot of people they hated Jewish people but they did not know about Nazi ideology. This ideology is more than anti-Semitism; the roots are deeper. Anti-Semitism was 'only' a terrible result of this Ideology of creating a supreme human race. And, it is important to remember, not only the Jewish people were affected by the Nazis. Sinti, Rumanians, gays, disabled people, faithful Christians and priests like *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* were all affected. All because they did not fit the image of the new Arian race, which should be strong, tough and pure. "*Der Stärkere hat zu herrschen und sich nicht mit dem Schwächeren zu verschmelzen, um so die eigene Größe zu opfern.*"² The strongest, the toughest should rule the country; this was the view of Adolf Hitler. The weak must die so that the strong can be stronger. Out of this we can hear Zarathustra, who taught about the *Supreme Being*: "*der Mensch ist etwas, das überwunden werden soll.*"³

When we go through the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche we find a lot of similarities between his thoughts and the thoughts of the Nazi-Ideology but, it is important to remember, Nietzsche was already dead 33 years before the Hitler-regime came into power. Nietzsche did not know anything about this horrible ideology. Therefore is it fair to judge his philosophy in the light of Nazism or even to blame Nietzsche for it?

In his essay: *A Godfather too: Nazism as a Nietzschean "Experiments*, Fischer writes how important it is to realise that the "'real' Nietzsche was not the historically effective Nietzsche"⁴. Fischer wants to look at the Nietzsche before Giorgio Colli and Montinari wrote their critical edition. Fischer always has in mind, that the "historically effective Nietzsche can be read from two opposite perspectives with two opposite results, both as a proponent and as an opponent of National Socialism."⁵ But for him, the real Nietzsche was not too different from the effective one. Golomb/Wistrich has a different view. Nietzsche can not be reduced to

² Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p.312

³ Friedrich Nietzsche; *Also sprach Zarathustra, Die Reden Zarathustras, Vom Krieg und Kriegsvolk*

⁴ Kurt Rudolf Fischer, *A Godfather Too: Nazism as a Nietzschean "Experiment"*, p.291

⁵ Kurt Rudolf Fischer, *A Godfather Too: Nazism as a Nietzschean "Experiment"*, p.292

one single ideology. His philosophical work is much more complicated. “The ambiguities and contradictions in his work as well as his elusive, aphoristic style lend themselves to a wide range of meanings and a multiplicity of interpretations.”⁶ It is not easy to give a correct view of Nietzsche’s writing. Like Golomb/Wistrich comment, there can be a lot of different interpretations of his view, but it is also important to have in mind, the historically effective Nietzsche. There are anti-Nazis that proclaim a connection between Nietzsche and the Nazis and also Nazis that see him as their forerunner. But it is interesting that there were a few Nazis-scholars, who denied such a connection between their ideology and Nietzsche. And in the end Anti-Nazis have denied that there is a connection between Nazism and Nietzsche’s thoughts.

Fischer mentions that Nietzsche was not so unrelated to Nazism, contrary to what Walter Kaufmann has implied. “The situation is not dissimilar to defining the relationship between Nietzsche and twentieth-century philosophical trends such as existentialism or logical positivism.”⁷ If we see Nietzsche as a ‘founder’ or forerunner of this philosophy, and he was very influential with this writings, then Nietzsche appears as a precursor of much we find in the twentieth-century, even fascism. “Nazism can be understood as a phenomenon of post-Nietzschean culture, more specifically as a Nietzschean ‘experiment’.”⁸

Fischer says: “Nietzsche can in fact be seen as a precursor or indeed a godfather in various ways.”⁹ What is Fischer thinking about, when he sees Nietzsche as a godfather? For Fischer the main problem is the proclaiming of the death of God. With the death of God, Fischer sees the Jewish-Christian moral issues dead. “If God is dead and if there are no accepted values, all possibilities are open and must consequently be explored whether as an antidote to, or as an attack on, nihilism.”¹⁰ Interesting in this citation from Fischer, is that with the death of God he

⁶ Golomb/Wistrich, Nietzsche’s Politics, Fascism and the Jews, p.306

⁷ Kurt Rudolf Fischer, A Godfather Too: Nazism as a Nietzschean “Experiment“, p.294

⁸ *ibid.*, p.294

⁹ *ibid.*, p.295

¹⁰ Kurt Rudolf Fischer, A Godfather Too: Nazism as a Nietzschean “Experiment“, p.295

sees also the death of values. Fischer goes on to say that now the path of all possibilities is open there are no accepted values. Now it is the time for experiments, for testing to find out what to do. "Nietzsche recommends all kinds of new historical investigations for the 'study of moral matters', histories of love, of avarice, of envy, of conscience, of pious respect for tradition, or of cruelty."¹¹ Without God, Nazism could stretch moral boundaries. If all moral values are allowed, then we can just as well go one way as the other. This overthrowing of the old moral values in Nietzsche's writings make Nietzsche, in the eyes of Fischer, a forerunner of Nazism. Fischer writes: "Nietzsche prepared a consciousness that excluded nothing that anyone might think, feel or do, including unimaginable atrocities carried out on a gigantic scale. Nor is a reading of Nietzsche as a godfather precursor of Nazism confined to interpretations of academic scholars who have been particularly perverse or corrupt."¹² And indeed, the Nazi scholars did see it in the same way. With the death of God, there are no moral boundaries anymore.

But, does Nietzsche really want to kill God and with God all moral issues? In the *Gay science* Nietzsche writes: "*Gott ist tot! Gott bleibt tot! Und wir haben ihn getötet! Wie trösten wir uns, die Mörder aller Mörder? Das Heiligste und Mächtigste, was die Welt bisher besaß, es ist unter unsern Messern verblutet...*"¹³ Under the knives of the bourgeois-Christian faith of the 19th century, the most Powerful, the most Sacred died. The people, the society of the 19th century, as Nietzsche has experienced it, have killed God. This does not mean that with the death of this kind of God Nietzsche wants the death of morality per se, rather he wants another morality. Golomb/Wistrich says that Nietzsche does not want a world without morality; he wants only a morality which does not have its roots in the Jewish/Christian moral teaching. Nietzsche wants to escape the nihilistic thinking of his age. He "was convinced that there was no escape from the 'nihilism' of the age, except to go forward into a more 'perfect

¹¹ *ibid.*, A Godfather Too: Nazism as a Nietzschean "Experiment", p.296

¹² Kurt Rudolf Fischer, A Godfather Too: Nazism as a Nietzschean "Experiment", p.297

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 3.Buch, §125 Der tolle Mensch

nihilism”¹⁴ Only with a total, perfect nihilism, are our minds liberated and we can start to think about new values. “Thus Nietzsche was more a herald and prophet of the crisis of values out of which Nazism emerged, rather than a godfather of the century’s fascist movements per se.”¹⁵ Nietzsche wants to detach us from Jewish-Christians values, he wants to transform these old values, we have to look for: “...*neue (...) Philosophen, es bleibt keine Wahl; nach Geistern, stark und ursprünglich genug, um die Anstöße zu entgegengesetzten Wertschätzungen zu geben und »ewige Werte« umzuwerten, umzukehren; nach Vorausgesandten, nach Menschen der Zukunft, welche in der Gegenwart den Zwang und Knoten anknüpfen, der den Willen von Jahrtausenden auf neue Bahnen zwingt.*“¹⁶

We must look for philosophers who transform the old values. But what should these philosophers do? Nietzsche writes that there is now the time where we must: “*Aufgaben von einer Großartigkeit ins Auge fassen, welche früheren Zeiten als Wahnsinn und Spiel mit Himmel und Hölle erschienen sein würden. Wir dürfen mit uns selber experimentieren! Ja die Menschheit darf es mit sich!*“¹⁷. Nietzsche himself says that we have to look for big jobs; we have to experiment with ourselves. For Fischer it means an attack on moral values, on democracy and liberalism.

Let us have a look ‘into’ Nietzsche’s writings. What does he really want? Is it as easy as Fischer is saying that we must see Nietzsche as a forerunner of Nazism, because of his attacks on democracy, liberalism and Christian values?

What does Nietzsche mean by experimenting?

“*Ich lehre euch den Übermenschen. Der Mensch ist etwas, das überwunden werden soll. Was habt ihr getan, ihn zu überwinden?*”¹⁸ First of all, there is the so-called super human.

Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is all about how to become this new type of human.

¹⁴ Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich, Nietzsche’s Politics, Fascism and the Jews, p.307

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.308

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Fünftes Hauptstück. Zur Naturgeschichte der Moral

¹⁷ *ibid.*, *Morgenröte*, Viertes Buch, 501: Sterbliche Seelen!

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, Vorrede 3

This teaching was very often misunderstood. Hitler identified himself and the whole Arian race with this *Übermensch*, as a perfect and pure race. And it becomes clear for Hitler, that when the Germans are the super humans then the rest must be humans who are less worthy and these humans have no right to live, because: “*Der Mensch ist [...] eine zu unvollkommene Sache.*”¹⁹ The problem here is that Hitler only saw half of Nietzsche’s super human. He only picked out the phrases which were useful for him. For Nietzsche, the super human means spiritual freedom of the individual without control of the masses. “The central ideal of Nietzsche’s philosophy was the individual and his freedom to shape his own character and destiny. He was frequently described as ‘radical aristocrat’ of the spirit because he abhorred mass culture and strove to cultivate a special kind of human being, the *Übermensch*, endowed with exceptional spiritual and mental qualities.”²⁰

And I think it is important to go further on in Zarathustra. We should not only look upon these few phrases as Hitler did. A few phrases later Nietzsche writes: “*Ich will die Menschen den Sinn ihres Seins lehren: welcher ist der Übermensch, der Blitz aus der dunklen Wolke Mensch.*”²¹ Nietzsche wants to give us a sense, a sense of our being, a sense of our life. After his preference Nietzsche writes in the first chapter about three transformations of the human spirit. “*Drei Verwandlungen nenne ich euch des Geistes: wie der Geist zum Kamele wird, und zum Löwen das Kamel, und zum Kinde zuletzt der Löwe*”²². At the end, there is the child, the child who is innocent and forgetful, a holy yes. We need them so we can have a new beginning. And this is what Nietzsche wants with his new kind of human, the *Übermensch*. It should be a new start. After we start again we need *Wille zur Macht* to enforce the new values.

Very often we can read in Nietzsche’s writings about the will to power. Nazis have seen in power something like *Macht*. They interpreted Nietzsche’s claim as a claim to have power

¹⁹ *ibid.*, Vorrede 2

²⁰ Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich, *Nietzsche’s Politics, Fascism and the Jews*, p.305

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, Vorrede 7

²² *ibid.*, Von den drei Verwandlungen

over others, to control others with political force. Colomb/Wistrich are seeing Nietzsche's will to power in a different way: "What Nietzsche prized above all was spiritual power (Macht) not the brute political force (Kraft) which he denounced with all the sarcasm in his power."²³ But when one reads such sentences as: "*Die Zeit für kleine Politik ist vorbei: schon das nächste Jahrhundert bringt den Kampf um die Erd-Herrschaft - den Zwang zur großen Politik*"²⁴ or "*Der Krieg unentbehrlich. - Es ist eitel Schwärmerei und Schönseelentum, von der Menschheit noch viel (oder gar: erst recht viel) zu erwarten, wenn sie verlernt hat, Kriege zu führen*"²⁵ I am not so sure about the theory that Nietzsche only wanted to have a spiritual force.

But even when we see power as a spiritual force, it can nevertheless become a problem. Anastasia Poushkareva says, "[t]his will is the desire to be oneself, to seek an individual definition of Good, which is the highlighted argument against religion."²⁶

Since Nietzsche rejects religion he also refuses democracy because "*die demokratische Bewegung macht die Erbschaft der christlichen*"²⁷. Nietzsche sees in the democratic movement an evil. He tells us, that democracy is only a decay, a reducing of human beings and of values. And here, he refers to his will. There must be philosophers who are teaching people that democracy is a form of decay; to teach us a future of our will which is dependent on human will, to end "*jene[...] schauerliche[...] Herrschaft des Unsinn und Zufalls, die bisher »Geschichte« hieß, [...]*"²⁸. For Nietzsche an aristocratic society is the best one. It was a big mistake that the Jewish people began the so called "*Sklavenaufstand der Moral*". They have overthrown the aristocratic value formula and since this the weak, the ugly and the poor are the ones who have a say. In the period of the Renaissance, Nietzsche sees the old aristocratic, classical ideals (Rome) alive again for a short time. And in Napoleon, the

²³ Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich, Nietzsche's Politics, Fascism and the Jews, p.311

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 6.Hauptstück 208

²⁵ ibid. , *Menschlich, Allzumenschliches*, 1.Band, 8.Hauptstück 477

²⁶ Anastasia Pushkareva, *Genealogy of the Third Reich: The Connection between Nietzschean and Nazi Ideas*, p.6

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 5. Hauptstück 202

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 203

emperor of Europe who brought a lot of pain over Europe Nietzsche discovers a “*Synthesis von Unmensch und Übermensch...*”²⁹.

Hitler and his fellows were glad about these words. They also rejected democracy to establish an aristocratic system with a *Führer*. “*Eine Weltanschauung, die sich bestrebt, unter Ablehnung des demokratischen Massengedankens, dem besten Volk, also den höchsten Menschen, diese Erde zu geben, muß logischerweise auch innerhalb dieses Volkes wieder dem gleichen aristokratischen Prinzip gehorchen und den besten Köpfen die Führung und den höchsten Einfluß im betreffenden Volk sichern. Damit baut sie nicht auf dem Gedanken der Majorität, sondern auf dem der Persönlichkeit auf.*”³⁰ Only the best, the brightest should rule a country. We need a strong personality to lead the country. Is this understanding of Nietzsche’s view really the right one or is it only the half truth? With his claim against democracy Nietzsche does not want to smoothen the way for a dictatorship like the Nazis. In the same way that he proclaimed the death of God because he wanted to show us the disproportions of Christianity of the 19th century in Germany, his attacks on democracy is a criticism of the democracy in Germany of his times “Nietzsche thereby admits to belonging to the German nation but clearly distances himself (at least in his main compositions during the middle period of his career) from the German *Reich* of Bismarck.”³¹

Oftentimes Nietzsche refers to the second German *Reich* in an unfriendly way. Brinton Crane once said Nietzsche “wrote many passages which they [the Nazis] cannot bear to hear at all. It would be possible to list numerous specific passages from Nietzsche’s works which, if written in Germany today, would probably send the author straight to a concentration camp.”³²

It is clear, Nietzsche is not proud about his Germany and at the end, he writes in a letter to a friend, that it should be “*Wilhelm Bismarck und alle Antisemiten abgeschafft.*”³³

²⁹ *ibid.*, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, erste Abhandlung 16

³⁰ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p.493

³¹ Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich, *Nietzsche’s Politics, Fascism and the Jews*, p.315

³² Crane Brinton, *The National Socialists’ Use of Nietzsche*, p.140

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *An Jacob Burkhard*, 1889

How can we explain his claim for “*Große Politik*” and his aristocratic view?

Golomb/Wistrich say that “This ‘great politics’ is fundamentally a politics of culture.”³⁴

Nietzsche wants to have culture back in public. He claims that in Europe the culture is in last place. For him, the ancient culture was a noble, great and strong culture. We have to look for Philosophers who bring back great values. It sounds a little bit like Plato’s Philosopher who should be in charge of a state. Nietzsche does not want a brutal, unsophisticated and violent *Führer*; he is looking for a Philosopher.

And here, I think, we can also see why Nietzsche rejects Christianity. He believes that this decay of high sophisticated culture in Europe comes out of Christianity and its moral values and all evil for him, like nihilism, has its roots in Christianity.

The question at the beginning was, if we can see Nietzsche as a forerunner of Nazism or even if we can accuse him of this most terrible regime ever in Germany. To answer this question I looked into topics like the death of God, the super human, the will to power and his rejection of democracy. The Nazis saw in these themes, in their understanding, a justification of what they did.

Many scholars tried to show whether there is a connection between Nietzsche and the Nazis or not. Out of this I picked two essays and tried to compare them. Fischer comes to the conclusion that Nietzsche can be seen as a “kind of precursor to at least some of the ideas of Nazism – perhaps even a sponsor or a part-time godfather.”³⁵ Is it fair, to see Nietzsche in this light? Nietzsche was not alive anymore when Hitler came into power. So he could not defend himself against possible abuse. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche writes: “*Nochmals gesagt, es ist wenig in meinem Leben nachweisbar von »bösem Willen«; auch von literarischem »bösen Willen« wüßte ich kaum einen Fall zu erzählen.*”³⁶ Nietzsche has no evil in mind in his writings. Later on he seems to be like a prophet when he writes: “*Durch eine kleine Tücke*

³⁴ Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich, *Nietzsche’s Politics, Fascism and the Jews*, p.315f

³⁵ Kurt Rudolf Fischer, *A Godfather Too: Nazism as a Nietzschean “Experiment“*, p.297

³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo, Warum ich so gute Bücher schreibe*, 1

von Zufall war hier jeder Satz, mit einer Folgerichtigkeit, die ich bewundert habe, eine auf den Kopf gestellte Wahrheit: man hatte im Grunde nichts zu tun, als alle »Werte umzuwerten«, um, auf eine sogar bemerkenswerte Weise, über mich den Nagel auf den Kopf zu treffen - statt meinen Kopf mit einem Nagel zu treffen...“³⁷ Maybe Nietzsche saw the abuse of his writings coming, because he knew that this could happen. The fact that Nazis and Anti-Nazis see Nietzsche as their philosopher; the fact that we can see Nietzsche as a forerunner and not; should not be overlooked. The question is why is there no clear position possible? My answer to this is: When we read Nietzsche’s philosophy we are reading our philosophy. When we think we have understood Nietzsche, then we only have understood ourselves and this is what Nietzsche wanted. In Zarathustra, Nietzsche’s main figure, we can always discover our interior. Nietzsche presents Zarathustra as we want to see him, different from everyone! If one wants to see in Zarathustra a new religious founder, then he is one. If one wants to see in Zarathustra Jesus, then he is Jesus.

Hitler and his fellows wanted to justify their ideology with Nietzsche and so Nietzsche came out as their philosopher. But it also happened the other way around, Lenin and Stalin wanted to see a kind of communism in Nietzsche’ writings and so they found it.

Fischer wanted to see Nietzsche as a forerunner or “part-time” sponsor for Nazism and indeed, he can put him in this kind of basket. For Golomb and Wistrich Nietzsche was a kind of prophet, who saw the problems of his times. But in the end, “Nietzsche was a disturbing thinker whose ideas will always remain open to a diversity of interpretations.”³⁸

“Wer etwas von mir verstanden zu haben glaubte, hatte sich etwas aus mir zurechtgemacht, nach seinem Bilde - nicht selten einen Gegensatz von mir, zum Beispiel einen »Idealisten«; wer nichts von mir verstanden hatte, leugnete, daß ich überhaupt in Betracht käme.“³⁹

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich, *Nietzsche’s Politics, Fascism and the Jews*, p.320

³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo, Warum ich so gute Bücher, 1*

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