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NIETZSCHE  
*& Jewish Culture*

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# NIETZSCHE AND JEWISH CULTURE

Friedrich Nietzsche occupies a contradictory position in the history of ideas: he came up with the concept of a master race, yet an eminent Jewish scholar like Martin Buber translated his *Also Sprach Zarathustra* into Polish and remained in a lifelong intellectual dialogue with Nietzsche. Sigmund Freud admired his intellectual courage and was not at all reluctant to admit that Nietzsche had anticipated many of his basic ideas.

This unique collection of essays explores the reciprocal relationship between Nietzsche and Jewish culture. It is organized in two parts: the first examines Nietzsche's attitudes towards Jews and Judaism; the second Nietzsche's influence on Jewish intellectuals as diverse and as famous as Franz Kafka, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig and Sigmund Freud. Each carefully selected essay explores one aspect of Nietzsche's relation to Judaism and German intellectual history, from Heinrich Heine to Nazism.

**Jacob Golomb** teaches philosophy at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and acts as Philosophical Editor of the Hebrew University Magnes Press. His books include *Nietzsche's Enticing Psychology of Power* (1989) and *In Search of Authenticity from Kierkegaard to Camus* (1995).



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London and New York

First published 1997  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
Nietzsche and Jewish culture / edited by Jacob Colomb.  
p.      cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 1844–1900—Views on Judaism.
2. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 1844–1900—Influence.
3. Jews—Germany—Intellectual life.
4. Germany—Intellectual life—20th century

I. Golomb, Jacob.

B3318.J83N54      1996  
193—dc20      9542115

ISBN 0-415-09512-3 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-09513-1 (pbk)

ISBN 0-203-02813-9 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-17428-3 (Glassbook Format)

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# INTRODUCTION

Celebrating the hundreth anniversary of the birth of Friedrich Nietzsche in Weimar on 15 October 1944, Alfred Rosenberg, the *Reichsleiter*, declared in an official speech: “In a truly historical sense, the National Socialist movement eclipses the rest of the world, much as Nietzsche, the individual, eclipsed the powers of his times.”<sup>1</sup> Most of the essays in this volume, which was originally scheduled to appear on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Nietzsche’s birth in 1994, disapprove of such a baseless comparison. By clarifying, among others matters, Nietzsche’s attitude towards Jews, and the warm reception of Nietzsche by contemporary Jews, the authors unmask the criminal falsification and manipulation of the Nietzschean corpus by the Nazis. However, fifty years after this notorious speech, there are still “powers”, at least in Germany, who subscribe to Rosenberg’s view. I witnessed this first-hand when invited to deliver a lecture on behalf of *Die Stiftung Weimarer Klassik*, which organized a conference in Weimar, in October 1994 on “*Jüdischer Nietzscheanismus seit 1888*”. Another invitee was Ernst Nolte, the renowned German historian who was to speak on “Nietzsche and fascism”. One week before the conference was to open, he gave some interviews to Germany’s leading newspaper<sup>2</sup> in which he made some remarks with nasty anti-Semitic connotations. In response, some Israeli and German Jewish scholars, myself among them, declined to participate in the conference if Nolte would be there. In the end, the conference was cancelled. However, its subject is far too important to let people such as Nolte have the last word. Fortunately, some of the present contributors were to participate in that conference. It is therefore our sincere hope that by explicating Nietzsche’s views on Jews and presenting his Jewish legacy this volume might discourage

## INTRODUCTION

in the future any manipulations of his writings by “movements” to which he was diametrically opposed.

Nietzsche, as is well known, encouraged his readers to shift their intellectual viewpoints and experience different, even radically incompatible perspectives. Thus by dealing with the subject matter of this collection from two different perspectives - that of Nietzsche and that of his Jewish followers or critics - we hope that the Nietzschean spirit of intellectual tolerance will be reflected in this volume. This is particularly true since no one definitive unanimous conclusion about Nietzsche's relations to Jews and Judaism is pointed to by the contributors that addressed these topics.

This volume is far from an exhaustive treatment of the reception accorded to Nietzsche by Jews. The voluminous endnotes appended to my essay and the extensive bibliography that concludes this volume highlight the fact that with regard to his reception by eminent Jewish intellectuals and writers, this collection, and indeed the literature as a whole, gives only a fraction of the possibilities for exploring Nietzsche's impact on these Jews. Thus, for example, Nietzsche's influence on Stefan Zweig, Ernst Toller, Alfred Döblin, Walter Benjamin, Karl Kraus, Jacob Wassermann, Gustav Landauer, Hermann Broch and so forth, has not as yet been adequately addressed in the literature. Consequently we believe that the appearance of this volume will contribute to promoting further investigation of this immense but little explored area.

Not only the subject matter of this collection but also its birth, has been somewhat stormy. The initial response of some of the potential contributors to the volume was quite enthusiastic, and they expressed great eagerness to help in shaping it. However, after deciding upon their subjects, some of those who had promised to write seem to have had second thoughts, for they simply disappeared. No fax, e-mail or courier mail could persuade them to react and respond and finally they withdrew from the project by default. One of the more honest, however, wrote to me that when it came to matters concerning Judaism he often experienced “an unexplained block”. I am referring to both scholars of Jewish and non-Jewish origin who, as I said, initially went out of their way to help me in this project, but when it came to the delivery date - and afterwards - refrained from submitting the promised contributions. The experience

## INTRODUCTION

was enlightening, though, of course, I do not intend to psychoanalyse these scholars' ambivalence to the project. I address the matter indirectly in my contribution below. Thus, I am afraid that some reasons for their peculiar behaviour had to do with their reluctance to come out of the closet and to be identified as Jewish scholars or as German scholars appearing in a collection on predominantly Jewish issues. The first group, perhaps, is still suffering from the phenomenon of "Jewish self-hatred" which, as I tried to show, Nietzsche's psychological teaching helped such scholars as Theodor Lessing to articulate and elucidate. Briefly, many of the human-all-too-human aspects of our psyche and behaviour which were so masterfully exposed in Nietzsche's writings, are also poignantly reflected in the various reactions the subject evoked among ambivalent scholars, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. This in turn reflects very positively upon the present contributors, especially those from Germany, who did not fall prey to these emotional barriers, but courageously dared to express their own original perspectives.

To repeat, this volume does not intend to provide a definitive solution to the complicated and emotion-laden topics covered here. My main intention is only to present this complexity as comprehensively and honestly as possible. As in other matters concerning Nietzsche's thought, and especially that pertaining to his views on the Jews, there is no final, definitive exposition. Indeed, a number of the essays in this volume clash on how we are to interpret his views on these matters. The interpretations vacillate from regarding him as a racist to seeing in him a great thinker with a profound sympathy for the Jewish people, who opposed any anti-Semitic or Nazi sentiment in his thought and life. This broad range seems, I believe, to attest once more to the unfathomed richness of Nietzsche's thought and to the vital importance of his legacy for our times.

Credit for this collection must go to Routledge's Richard Stoneman and his staff, in particular: Ruth Schafer and Patricia Stankiewicz. Their unwavering support, generous assistance and boundless patience made the rather taxing job of editing into a pleasurable assignment.

J.G.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in the *Marbacher Kataloge*: “*Das 20. Jahrhundert: Von Nietzsche bis zur Gruppe 47*”, ed. B. Zeller (Marbach a. N.: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1980), p. 20 (my translation). Cf. A. Rosenberg, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Ansprache bei einer Gedenkstunde anlässlich des 100. Geburtstages Nietzsches am 15. Oktober 1944* (Weimar, Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP).
2. One appeared, for example, in *Der Spiegel* 40 (1994): 83-103.

Part I

NIETZSCHE'S  
RELATIONS TO  
JEWS, JUDAISM  
AND JEWISH  
CULTURE



# NIETZSCHE, ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE HOLOCAUST

*Steven E. Aschheim*

Each generation, I suggest, constructs its own, most appropriate Nietzsche – or Nietzsches. During the years of the Third Reich (and immediately after) Nietzsche appeared to be paradigmatically Nazi (while National Socialism seemed best understood as a kind of Nietzschean project).<sup>1</sup> Both National Socialists and their opponents tended to agree that Nietzsche was the movement’s *most* formative and influential thinker, visionary of a biologized *Lebensphilosophie* society, fuelled by regenerationist, post-democratic, post-Christian impulses in which the weak, decrepit and useless were to be legislated out of existence. For those interested in making the case any number of prophetic themes and uncannily appropriate quotes were available. “From now on”, Nietzsche wrote in *The Will to Power*,

there will be more favourable preconditions for more comprehensive forms of dominion, whose like has never yet existed. And even this is not the most important thing; the possibility has been established for the production of international racial union whose task it will be to rear a master-race, the future “masters of the earth.” The time is coming when politics will have a different meaning.<sup>2</sup>

The paradigmatic Nietzsche of the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s was then the Nietzsche who was regarded as the thinker most crucially and intimately definitive of the Nazi order. To be sure there were always dissenting voices (both within and without the Nazi camp) but the prevailing wisdom held that Nietzsche was proto-Nazi, that he uncannily prefigured and, indeed, in some way even “caused” National Socialism and that in fundamental



ways the movement itself had to be regarded as “Nietzschen”.<sup>3</sup> This perception began to shift in about the mid-1950s and, although there have always been counterchallenges, it has so proceeded apace that, for many younger people educated from about the 1970s on, the identification seems virtually incomprehensible. Nietzsche’s de-Nazification – and the de-Nietzscheanism of Nazism, I would argue, has become close to a *fait accompli* within western culture (at least in English-speaking countries and France). This, in the main, has been the product of two, quite different, intellectual forces that – in consonance with wider political changes – have rendered the only other early major competitor and counterinterpretation, Georg Lukács’s *Destruction of Reason* with its guiding thesis that “Hitler . . . was the executor of Nietzsche’s spiritual testament and of the philosophical development coming after Nietzsche and from him”,<sup>4</sup> if not downright quaint, then certainly a little anachronistic.

I am not sure if it is an exaggeration to claim that the basic aim of Nietzsche’s most insistent and influential post-war expositor, translator and popularizer, Walter Kaufmann, was casuistically to rid Nietzsche of these sullied associations and to provide him with the kind of liberal-humanist face consistent with American academic values of the time. His 1950 masterwork portrayed the Nazified Nietzsche as a pure, virtually inexplicable distortion. Essentially a good European, he was a thinker who had to be grasped in terms of his emphases on creativity, culture and critical individualism and whose dismissal of nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism could not have been more apparent.<sup>5</sup>

Kaufmann was, of course, a more or less systematic philosopher who insisted upon pressing Nietzsche’s thought into a comprehensible and comprehensive system. Such systematization is, of course, anathema to those who since, in a different, less liberally certain and determinate age, have most dominantly colonized Nietzsche (and at the same time been crucially shaped by him!) – those various exponents of what, for lack of a better name, we call post-modernism and deconstructionism (Foucault, Deleuze, de Man, Derrida and so on). For them – as distinct from Kaufmann – the issue by and large goes quite unmentioned, unnoticed; the very need to refute the putative Nietzsche–Nazi link has been obliterated! Theirs is a Nietzsche that is quite dissimilar to Kaufmann’s. Here he is the radically sceptical perspectivist, the anti-totalizing prophet of heterogeneity, *différance*, fragmentation and discontinuity.<sup>6</sup> But like Kaufmann, they have also fashioned a rather sterilized Nietzsche<sup>7</sup> whose project appears as the diametrical opposite, even therapeutic answer to,

National Socialism. With one exception (to be dealt with a little later) they usually elide the more compromising aspects of his thought, those that sit less comfortably with their hero of ironic indeterminacy.

It may not be at all surprising that the post-war de-Nazification of Nietzsche occurred above all in France and the USA, where, given not only the brilliance but the remarkable elasticity of Nietzsche's *oeuvre*, he could be harnessed to new cultural and political agendas. In Germany, of course, loosening him from these moorings was a different matter. In the land where Nazism had arisen and flourished and where Nietzsche had become so identified with the regime, it should perhaps not surprise us that, for upholders of the new liberal-democratic regime, resistance to his renewed influence was perhaps the greatest. It is no coincidence therefore that the most vociferous contemporary critic of Nietzsche – as well as post-modernism and what he considers to be its parallel irrationalist, anti-Enlightenment thrust – is Jürgen Habermas.<sup>8</sup> There are signs, I believe, that – perhaps with the slow demise of deconstructionist thinking – not only in Germany but elsewhere there has begun to occur another shift, or a rethinking, that, on a more sophisticated, qualified basis, will be able seriously to grapple with this question. The present chapter is an attempt to contribute to this renewed conversation.

Of course, particular readings and judgements of Nietzsche will determine whether we believe him to be implicated in Nazism. And, on the other hand, particular interpretations of National Socialism will influence our readiness to include him within its contours. But the very range and complexity of opinion is also related to the exceedingly charged nature of the issue. After all, both Nietzsche and National Socialism remain central to the twentieth-century experience and our own defining cultural and ideological landscape and sense of self.<sup>9</sup> And this chapter, of course, deals with the entwinement in its most explosive dimension: not the general question of the interrelationship of Nietzsche and the Third Reich (this I have done in detail elsewhere<sup>10</sup>) but the connections between the philosopher and radical Jew-hatred as well as the possible connections between his thought and the genocidal project (and the other major mass murderers) that stood at the dark heart of the Third Reich.

How may the historian deal with such vexed questions and what are the assumptions and materials that must be brought to bear? Anyone even vaguely acquainted with the history of Nietzsche's political and cultural influence and reception will know how manifold, pervasive and contradictory it has been. It is clear that no "unmediated", causally direct relationship can be inferred or demonstrated. It would be an error to

reduce Nietzsche's – exceedingly ambiguous, protean, elastic – work to an essence possessed of a single, clear and authoritative meaning and operating in a linearly determined historical direction. There should be no set portrait of the “authentic” Nietzsche, nor dogmatic certainty as to his original intent. Clearly the essentialist representations of both Kaufmann and Lukács – Nietzsche's thought as either *inherently antithetical to or the prototypical reflection, the ideational incarnation, of the Nazi project* – prejudice precisely the question at hand. What needs to be sifted out, and analysed as precisely as possible, are the concrete mediating links, the transmission belts that demonstrate conscious appropriation, explicit acknowledgments of affiliation and influence, the recognized thematic parallels and (more speculatively) the preconditions, the creations of states of mind and sensibility that render such events conceivable in the first place.

Let us first turn to the question of Nietzsche and anti-Semitism and, most importantly, his annexation – or, perhaps, rejection – by German anti-Semites from the Second Reich on. As always, Nietzsche's texts themselves provide a positive goldmine of varied possibilities, filled with ambiguities that his followers – and critics – could scavenge and turn in numerous, very often quite contradictory, directions (this was typical of Nietzsche's reception in virtually every area). What is clear is that Jews and Judaism are complexly central to Nietzsche's work; in both his hostile and friendly deliberations, he insisted upon their absolutely fateful historical role within European civilization. Who else could have written in such a simultaneously affirmative and ominous tone: “Among the spectacles to which the coming century invites us is the decision as to the destiny of the Jews of Europe. That their die is cast, that they have crossed their Rubicon, is now palpably obvious: all that is left for them is either to become the masters of Europe or to lose Europe.”<sup>11</sup> From our point of view it does not really matter whether Nietzsche's views on Jews and Judaism are to be regarded as a unified and coherent element of a larger systematic outlook or as disparate and self-contradictory.<sup>12</sup> For the historian of culture what is important are the interpretive spaces open to those who selectively read and receive the texts. There are clearly sufficient allusions, hints and themes to satisfy virtually all comers. Jew and anti-Semites alike were aware that both could find Nietzsche's work useful (and spent much of their time in casuistically explaining away those passages that were not compatible with their own particular outlook).

*Völkisch* anti-Semites interested in annexing Nietzsche had to contend with the knowledge that he was no nationalist, indeed was perhaps the most pronounced critic of his contemporary Germans, and above all the most outspoken opponent of the anti-Semitic “swindle”. Turning around the very basis of his notion of *ressentiment* he even branded the herd, mass movement of anti-Semitism as itself a kind of slave revolt.<sup>13</sup> To make matters worse, more than any other European thinker he lavished extravagant praise on “The *Old* Testament – all honour to [it]! I find in it great human beings, a heroic landscape, and something of the very rarest quality in the world, the incomparable naïveté of the *strong heart*; what is more I find a people. In the New one, on the other hand, I find nothing but petty sectarianism, mere rococo of the soul, mere involutions, nooks, queer things”<sup>14</sup> – and the comparative virtues of the European Jews of his own time: “Jews among Germans are always the higher race”, he wrote, – “more refined, spiritual, kind. *L’adorable* Heine, they say in Paris.”<sup>15</sup>

Those inclined to pick up and disseminate these positive Nietzschean Jewish messages could easily do so (this is precisely what many in the Jewish community consistently did<sup>16</sup>) and this, indeed, was the reason that many anti-Semites from the Second Reich through the Nazi period either rejected Nietzsche entirely (Theodor Fritsch, Dietrich Eckart and Ernst Krieck are only the best-known of many examples) or, if they did so, appropriated him in qualified, selectively harnessed fashion (for instance Adolf Bartels, Wilhelm Schallmeyer, Heinrich Härtle).<sup>17</sup> Even those many anti-Semites and Nazis who were wholeheartedly Nietzschean (Franz Hauser, Ernst Wachler, Alfred Schuler, Ludwig Klages, Alfred Bäumler among others) were aware that casuistic explanation of Nietzsche’s pro-Jewish comments and his biting contempt for political anti-Semitism was needed. Variations on this theme were offered in abundance: the true “Germanic”, indeed, racist, Nietzsche had been consistently hidden by his Jewish mediators who had maliciously transformed him into a libertarian, nihilist internationalist.<sup>18</sup> Anyone familiar with Nietzsche, wrote Alfred Bäumler, knew how opposed to the Jews he actually was. His philo-Semitic comments were simply an attention-getting device – playing the Jews against the Germans was part of his strategy to get the Germans to listen to him!<sup>19</sup> But the most important claim argued that in recasting the terms of the debate, by infinitely radicalizing the question and going beyond all its conventional forms, Nietzsche was in fact “the most acute anti-Semite that ever was”.<sup>20</sup> He had, so the argument went, only opposed its traditional

nineteenth-century varieties and its Christian versions because he stood for a newer and more radical form, one whose anti-Christian and biological sources pushed it far beyond the limited confessional, economic and social domains.<sup>21</sup>

No matter how selective an exercise this was, these anti-Semites were basing themselves upon, and finding inspiration in, particular readings of some of Nietzsche's most powerful – and extreme – texts. (Their reading, incidentally, was shared by Nietzsche's close friend and confidant, Franz Overbeck, who remarked that although "Nietzsche has been a convinced enemy of anti-Semitism as he had experienced it. . . . That does not exclude that his opinions about the Jews, when he spoke frankly, had a sharpness which surpassed by far every anti-Semitism. His position against Christianity is primarily founded in anti-Semitism."<sup>22</sup>) The philosopher had, after all, endowed the Jews with a world-historical stain, the stain that his entire philosophy sought to uncover, diagnose and overcome. It was *On the Genealogy of Morals* that held the "priestly people" responsible for nothing less than beginning "the slave revolt in morality: that revolt which has a history of two thousand years behind it and which we no longer see because it has been victorious".<sup>23</sup> And as Nietzsche put it in *The Antichrist*, the Jews, with their desire to survive at any price, were nothing less than "the *most catastrophic* people of world history". Their sin was inconceivably heinous for they had radically falsified.

all nature, all naturalness, all reality, of the whole inner-world as well as the outer . . . out of themselves they created a counterconcept to *natural* conditions: they turned religion, cult, morality, history, psychology, one after the other, into an *incurable contradiction to their natural values* . . . by their aftereffect they have made mankind so thoroughly false that even today the Christian can feel anti-Jewish without realizing that he himself *is the ultimate Jewish consequence*.<sup>24</sup>

It is true that Nietzsche was in the main referring to the priestly period but the force of the texts themselves submerged this somewhat and interested appropriators were certainly not going to bother themselves with such scholastic qualifications! (It may also be that Nietzsche's distinction between the Hebrews and – priestly – Judaism matched the same opposition between vitality and decadence that he posited between pre and post-Socratic Greece. That may or may not have been the case

but in terms of reception, history and political consequences, Greeks in late nineteenth-century Europe did not constitute a politically vulnerable and threatened minority nor did Athens possess the same negative emotional valence that surrounded the question of Jews and Judaism in the Germany of that time. No comparable Nietzschean ethnic anti-Alexandrian movement can be identified.)

It was these radical themes that were picked by extreme anti-Semites and certain Nazi supporters and that informed their everyday rhetoric. Nazism, wrote Heinrich Römer in 1940, was indebted to Nietzsche's pivotal insight that Israel had de-naturalized natural values. The clear implication was that National Socialism had to be regarded as the countermovement leading to renaturalization.<sup>25</sup> For such commentators the significance of Nietzsche's anti-Christian posture consisted in its anti-Jewish basis. His demonstration that Christianity was the ultimate Jewish consequence and that it engendered the spread of Jewish blood poisoning (Nietzsche's words)<sup>26</sup> made the Jews the most fateful people of world history. As one acolyte, Hans Eggert Schröder, put it, Judaized Christianity represented racial decline and decadence, "the antiracial principle applied against the racial".<sup>27</sup> It was in this way, according to these Nietzschean Nazis, that Nietzsche found his way to the race problem and then toward the solution of racial hygiene in an attempt "to break the degeneration of a thousand years".<sup>28</sup>

This kind of rhetoric was awash at every level of Nazi discourse and if it was not the only source it certainly served to canalize, reinforce and significantly radicalize already pre-existent anti-Semitic impulses. To be sure, it is almost certain that Hitler either never read Nietzsche directly or read very little.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless his thought, sayings and speeches clearly espoused a popularized Nietzscheanism as it had percolated down to him during and after World War I – after all, a certain brutalized Nietzschean coin had become the basic currency of the radical right during that period. It was this that he selectively applied and melded into the *mélange* that constituted his own peculiar mode of thinking.<sup>30</sup>

Historical transmission belts – the ways in which thought, ideas, moods and sensibility become translated into policy – are complex indeed and all this is not meant to draw a causally straight line between Nietzsche, his epigones and the destruction of European Jewry. As we have already point out, Nietzsche's influence was like his writings, always multivalent and never simplistically reducible to any single political or cultural current

or direction.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, I would argue that these texts and the mediated sensibility they could embody possess a relevance to the problem at hand. They formed an explicit ingredient of – and particularly radical way of canalizing – this kind of anti-Semitic consciousness, an influence that (for many, though obviously not for all) was openly acknowledged, and which constituted a crucial element of a radicalized mind-set that was a kind of precondition for what was to come.

This at any rate is how some recent historians have viewed the matter. Thus, as Conor Cruise O'Brien has argued, it was Nietzsche who was the decisive force in the fateful switch from a "limited" Christian theological Jew-hatred to an unlimited, secular brand and who thus concretely paved the way to the Holocaust. Hitler, he writes, learned from Nietzsche "that the traditional Christian *limit* on anti-Semitism was itself part of a Jewish trick. When the values that the Jews had reversed were restored, there would be no limits and no Jews."<sup>32</sup> (We do not know if Hitler knew of the following Nietzschean passage but his utterances certainly echoed such sentiments: "Decadence is only a *means* for the type of man who demands power in Judaism and Christianity, the *priestly* type: this type of man has a life interest in making mankind *sick* and in so twisting the concepts of good and evil, true and false, as to imperil life and slander the world."<sup>33</sup>) And, as George Lichtheim would have it, only when Nietzschean ideas antithetical to the Judeo-Christian inheritance and its humanist offshoots had slowly percolated through and successfully gripped certain German minds did Auschwitz become possible:

It is not too much to say that but for Nietzsche the SS – Hitler's shock troops and the core of the whole movement – would have lacked the inspiration which enabled them to carry out their programme of mass murder in Eastern Europe.<sup>34</sup>

Before going on with the argument and trying to clarify some particular historical distinctions some general remarks would be in order. While here, and elsewhere, I insist that for the cultural historian interested in grasping the role, dynamics and effects of ideas within a political culture, the question of "valid" or "invalid" interpretations and applications must be set aside, this does not, of course render irrelevant the role of the text – and here the Nietzschean text – within this process. Even if, for a moment, we retain the language of "distortion" or "misinterpretation",

approaches such as Kaufmann's leave us oblivious to the possibility that, as Martin Jay has put it,

the potential for the specific distortions that do occur can be understood as latent in the original text. Thus, while it may be questionable to saddle Marx with responsibility for the Gulag Archipelago or blame Nietzsche for Auschwitz, it is nevertheless true that their writings could be misread as justifications for these horrors in a way that, say, those of John Stuart Mill or Alexis de Tocqueville could not.<sup>35</sup>

Jacques Derrida, so much a part of the "new" Nietzsche that we discussed at the beginning of the chapter, has nevertheless similarly argued for a certain complicated complicity – "one can't falsify just anything . . ." – and notes the need

to account for the possibility of this mimetic inversion and perversion. If one refuses the distinction between unconscious and deliberate programs as an absolute criterion, if one no longer considers only intent – whether conscious or not – when reading a text, then the law that makes the perverting simplification possible must lie in the structure of the text "remaining". . . . There is nothing absolutely contingent about the fact that the only political regimen to have *effectively* brandished his name as a major and official banner was Nazi.

I do not say this in order to suggest that this kind of "Nietzschean" politics is the only one conceivable for all eternity, nor that it corresponds to the best reading of the legacy, nor even that those who have not picked up this reference have produced a better reading of it. No. The future of the Nietzsche text is not closed. But if, within the still-open contours of an era, the only politics calling itself – proclaiming itself – Nietzschean will have been a Nazi one, then is necessarily significant and must be questioned in all of its consequences.

I am also not suggesting that we ought to reread "Nietzsche" and his great politics on the basis of what we know or think we know Nazism to be. I do not believe that we as yet know how to think what Nazism is. The task remains before us, and the political reading of the Nietzschean body or corpus is part of it.<sup>36</sup>



To be sure, other historians and thinkers – Berel Lang is the most recent example – have claimed the very opposite, arguing that while ideas *are* central in grasping the genocidal impulse of Nazism,

for Nietzsche's historical aftermath, what is at issue is an instance of misappropriation, not of deduction and not even . . . of affiliation. Far from being entailed by the premises underlying Nietzsche's position, the conclusions drawn are inconsistent with them. To reconstruct in the imagination the events leading up to the Nazi genocide against the Jews without the name or presence of Nietzsche is to be compelled to change almost nothing in that pattern.<sup>37</sup>

This, it seems to me, is entirely unpersuasive. Of course, Nietzsche's influence permeated many – contradictory – political and cultural tendencies but an exceptionally wide range of historical actors themselves (many Nazis and their adversaries) as well as any number of later critics have, at different levels of complexity, identified a profound affinity and a thematic complicity of Nietzschean impulses (always selectively mediated) in Nazism's definitive taboo-defying, transgressive core and its programmatic, murderous drives. To be sure, distinctions and not just commonalities need to be noted. It is remarkable that numerous victims of National Socialism have similarly intuited such a relationship and that a survivor of Auschwitz, Primo Levi, sought (whether successfully or not) to identify the commonalities as well as the defining differences. It is worth quoting him in full. "Neither Nietzsche nor Hitler nor Rosenberg", he wrote, as if the connections between them were entirely obvious,

were mad when they intoxicated themselves and their followers by preaching the myth of the Superman, to whom everything is permitted in recognition of his dogmatic and congenital superiority; but worthy of meditation is the fact that all of them, teacher and pupils, became progressively removed from reality as little by little their morality came unglued from the morality common to all times and civilisations, which is an integral part of our human heritage and which in the end must be acknowledged.

Rationality ceases, and the disciples have amply surpassed (and betrayed) the teacher, precisely in the practice of useless cruelty. Nietzsche's message is profoundly repugnant to me; I find it difficult to discover an affirmation in it which is not contrary to what I like

to think; his oracular tone irritates me; yet it seems that a desire for the sufferings of others cannot be found in it. Indifference, yes, almost on every page, but never *Schadenfreude*, the joy in your neighbour's misfortune and even less the joy of deliberately inflicting suffering. The pain of *hoi polloi*, of the *Ungestalten*, the shapeless, the not-born-noble, is a price that must be paid for the advent of the reign of the elect; it is a minor evil, but still an evil; it is not in itself desirable. Hitlerian doctrine and practice were much different.<sup>38</sup>

(Other intellectual survivors did not necessarily agree with this view. Thus another Auschwitz survivor, Jean Amery, viewed the philosopher quite differently to Levi. Nietzsche, he wrote, was “the man who dreamed of the synthesis of the brute with the superman. He must be answered by those who witnessed the union of the brute with the subhuman; they were present as victims when a certain humankind joyously celebrated a festival of cruelty, as Nietzsche himself expressed it . . . .”<sup>39</sup>)

At any rate, what I am proposing here is that both in its overall bioeugenic political and medical vision, its programmatic obsession with degeneration and regeneration, whether in parodistic form or not, there are clear informing parallels with key Nietzschean categories and goals. From one perspective, as Robert Jay Lifton has recently persuasively argued, Nazism is about the “medicalisation of killing”. Its genocidal impulses were implicit within a bio-medical vision and its vast, self-proclaimed programmatic task of racial and eugenic hygiene. On an unprecedented scale it would assume control of the human biological future, assuring health to positive racial stock and purging humanity of its sick, degenerative elements. Its vision of “violent cure”, of murder and genocide as a “therapeutic imperative”, Lifton argues, resonates with such Nietzschean themes.<sup>40</sup>

While every generation may emphasize their particular Nietzsche, there can be little doubt that in the first half of this century various European political circles came to regard him as *the* deepest diagnostician of sickness and degeneration and its most thoroughgoing regenerative therapist. “The sick”, he wrote, “are man’s greatest danger; not the evil, not the ‘beasts of prey’.”<sup>41</sup> To be sure, as was his wont, he employed these notions in multiple, shifting ways, as metaphor and irony (he even has a section on “ennoblement through degeneration”<sup>42</sup>) but most often, most crucially, it was represented (and understood) as a substantial literal danger whose overcoming through drastic measures was the precondition for the urgent re-creation of a

“naturalized”, non-decadent humankind. Although he was not alone in the wider nineteenth-century quasi-bio-medical, moral, discourse of “degeneration”<sup>43</sup> – that highly flexible, politically adjustable tool that cut across the ideological spectrum, able simultaneously to locate, diagnose and resolve a prevalent, though inchoate, sense of social and cultural crisis through an exercise of eugenic labelling and a language of bio-social pathology and potential renewal<sup>44</sup> – he formed an integral part in defining and radicalizing it. He certainly constituted its most important conduit into the emerging radical right. What else was Nietzsche’s *Lebensphilosophie*, his reassertion of instinct and his proposed transvaluation whereby the healthy naturalistic ethic replaced the sickly moral one (a central theme conveniently ignored or elided by the current poststructuralist champions of Nietzsche). “Tell me, my brothers”, Zarathustra asks, “what do we consider bad and worst of all? Is it not *degeneration*?”<sup>45</sup> In this world, the reassertion of all that is natural and healthy is dependent upon the ruthless extirpation of those anti-natural *ressentiment* sources of degeneration who have thoroughly weakened and falsified the natural and aristocratic bases of life. Over and over again, and in different ways, Nietzsche declared that “The species requires that the ill-constituted, weak, degenerate, perish”.<sup>46</sup>

The Nazi bio-political understanding of, and solution to “degeneration”, as I have tried to show here and elsewhere, was in multilayered ways explicitly Nietzsche-inspired. From the World War I through its Nazi implementation, Nietzschean exhortations to prevent procreation of “anti-life” elements and his advocacy of euthanasia, of what he called “holy cruelty” – “The Biblical prohibition ‘thou shalt not kill’”, he noted in *The Will to Power*, “is a piece of naïveté compared with the seriousness of the prohibition of life to decadents: ‘thou shalt not procreate!’ . . . Sympathy for decadents, equal rights for the ill-constituted – that would be the profoundest immorality, that would be antinature itself as morality!”<sup>47</sup> – both inspired and provided a “higher” rationale for theorists and practitioners of such measures.<sup>48</sup>

The translation of traditional anti-Jewish impulses into genocide and the murderous policies adopted in different degrees to other labelled outsiders (Gypsies, physically and mentally handicapped, homosexuals, criminals, inferior Eastern peoples and Communist political enemies) occurred within the distinct context of this medico-bio-eugenic vision. There were, to be sure, many building-blocks that went into conceiving and implementing genocide and mass murder but I would argue that

this Nietzschean framework of thinking provided a crucial conceptual precondition and his radical sensibility a partial trigger for its implementation.

Related to but also going beyond these programmatic parallels and links we must raise another highly speculative, though necessary, issue: the vexed question of enabling preconditions and psychological motivations. Clearly, for events as thick and complex as these no single theoretical or methodological approach or methodology will suffice. Yet, given the extraordinary nature of the events, more conventional modes of historical analysis soon reach their limits and demand novel answers (the study of Nazism has provided them in abundance, some more, some less convincing<sup>49</sup>). I am not thus claiming exclusiveness for the Nietzschean element at this level of explanation, but rather arguing for his continued and important relevance. To be sure, of late, many accounts of the ideas behind, and the psychological wellsprings enabling, mass murder have been, if anything, anti-Nietzschean in content. For Christopher Browning it was hardly Nietzschean intoxication, the nihilistic belief that “all is permitted”, that motivated the “ordinary killers” – but rather prosaic inuring psychological mechanisms such as group conformity, deference to authority, the dulling powers of alcohol and simple (but powerful) processes of routinization.<sup>50</sup> For George L. Mosse, far from indicating a dynamic anti-bourgeois Nietzschean revolt, the mass murders represented a *defence* of bourgeois morality, the attempt to preserve a clean, orderly middle-class world against all those outsider and deviant groups that threatened it.<sup>51</sup>

These contain important insights but, in my view, leave out crucial experiential ingredients, closely related to the Nietzschean dimension, which must form at least part of the picture. At some point or another, the realization must have dawned on the conceivers and perpetrators of this event that something quite extraordinary, unprecedented, was occurring and that ordinary and middle-class men were committing radically transgressive, taboo-breaking, quite “un-bourgeois” acts.<sup>52</sup> Even if we grant the problematic proposition that such acts were done in order to defend bourgeois interests and values, we would want to know about the galvanizing, radicalizing trigger that allowed decision-makers and perpetrators alike to set out in this direction and do the deed. To argue that it was “racism” merely pushes the argument a step backward, for “racism” on its own – while always pernicious – has to be made genocidal.

We are left with the issue of the radicalizing, triggering forces. These may be many in number but it seems to me that Nietzsche's determined anti-humanism (an atheism that, as George Lichtheim has noted, differs from the Feuerbachian attempt to replace theism with humanism<sup>53</sup>), apocalyptic imaginings and exhortatory visions, rendered *such a possibility, such an act, conceivable in the first place* (or, at the very least, once thought of and given the correct selective readings easily able to provide the appropriate ideological cover). This Nietzschean kind of thought, vocabulary and sensibility constitutes an important (if not the only) long-term enabling precondition of such radical elements in Nazism. With all its affinities to an older conservatism, it was the radically experimental, morality-challenging, tradition-shattering Nietzschean sensibility that made the vast transformative scale of the Nazi project thinkable. Nietzsche, as one contemporary commentator has pointed out, "prepared a consciousness that excluded nothing that anyone might think, feel, or do, including unimaginable atrocities carried out on a gigantic order".<sup>54</sup>

Of course, Nazism was a manifold historical phenomenon and its revolutionary thrust sat side by side with *petit-bourgeois*, provincial, traditional and conservative impulses.<sup>55</sup> But surely, beyond its doctrinal emphases on destruction and violent regeneration, health and disease, the moral and historical significance of Nazism lies precisely in its unprecedented transvaluations and boundary-breaking extremities, its transgressive acts and shattering of previously intact taboos. It is here – however parodistic, selectively mediated or debased – that the sense of Nazism, its informing project and experiential dynamic, as a kind of Nietzschean Great Politics continues to haunt us.

## NOTES

1. I have discussed all this in great detail in my *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
2. *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 960 (1885–6), p. 504.
3. There are no end of supporting contemporary examples of this. At the "higher" levels of discourse this was best illustrated by Heidegger, who initially viewed Nazism (and facism) as essentially Nietzschean projects, the most radical attempts to overcome western nihilism. "The two men", he proclaimed in his 1936 lectures on Schelling,

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who each in his own way, have introduced a counter-movement to nihilism – Mussolini and Hitler – have learned from Nietzsche, each in an essentially different way. But even with that, Nietzsche's authentic metaphysical domain has not yet come into its own.

(quoted in Thomas Sheehan, "Heidegger and the Nazis", *New York Review of Books*, 16 June 1988.)

4. *The Destruction of Reason*, tr. Peter Palmer (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1981), p. 341. The work was completed in 1952 but based on essays written in the 1930s and 1940s.
5. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950).
6. Our culture is awash with this Nietzsche. All the above-named authors' works should be consulted. For typical examples of this genre amongst many see Clayton Koelb (ed.), *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Con* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990); and David B. Allison (ed.), *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).
7. On Kaufmann's denaturing of Nietzsche's power-political dimensions see Walter Sokel, "Political uses and abuses of Nietzsche in Walter Kaufmann's image of Nietzsche", *Nietzsche-Studien* 12 (1983).
8. The most relevant text in this regard is Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, tr. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987). Habermas declared prematurely in 1968 that Nietzsche was "no longer contagious" but subsequently spent a considerable amount of time combating the epidemic! For his mistimed proclamation see his "Zur Nietzsches Erkenntnistheorie", in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Erkenntnistheoretische Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main, 1968).
9. "Nietzsche and National Socialism", *Michael* XIII (1993): Steven E. Aschheim, 11–27. See esp. p. 11.
10. See Aschheim, *Nietzsche Legacy*, esp. chs 8–10 and the Afterword.
11. The full passage is filled with ambiguities, combining awe, and fear. See *Daybreak: Thoughts on the prejudices of Morality*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 205, pp. 124–5.
12. For some recent attempts to examine Nietzsche's views on Jews and Judaism in the relation to his whole philosophy see Arnold M. Eisen, "Nietzsche and the Jews reconsidered", *Jewish Social Studies* 48(1) (Winter 1986); M.F. Duffy and Willard Mittlemen, "Nietzsche's attitude toward the Jews", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49(2) (April–June 1988); Jacob Golomb, "Nietzsche's Judaism of power", *Revue des études juives* 147 (July–December 1988).
13. See for example, *On the Genealogy of Morals, Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969), III 14, pp. 123–4. See too Yirmiyahu Yovel, "Nietzsche, the Jews and *ressentiment*", in Richard Schacht (ed.), *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals* (Berkeley: 1994), pp. 214–36. See esp. p. 224.
14. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals, Ecce Homo* 22, p. 144.
15. Prior to this quote the paragraph – a discarded draft for a passage from *Ecce Homo* – reads: "Whoever reads me in Germany, has first de-Germanized himself