

Volume 40, Number 7 · April 8, 1993

In response to “A Normal Nazi” Volume 40, Number 7 · April 8, 1993

By Ernst Nolte, Reply by Thomas Sheehan

To the Editors:

For paradoxical reasons Professor Sheehan credits me with great merits in the field of Heidegger scholarship [NYR, January 14]: He maintains that a wicked revisionist, against his own will, has unmasked an even more wicked “normal Nazi,” thereby exposing himself to the avenging morals, because he gives to understand that in 1933 the German people took a “correct decision” and that Heidegger comes out as “justified.” Another admission is that Heidegger was “possibly a Fascist” and a “mere nationalist.” Moreover Professor Sheehan even insinuates that the revisionist Ernst Nolte possibly considers Auschwitz as a kind of preventive war, all the more since already years ago he spoke of Chaim Weizmann’s “Declaration of War” against Hitler in August 1939.

This picture fits too well into the prejudices of a “normal progressist” as to be adequate.

It was other authors who described Heidegger as a “normal Nazi,” and on page 142 of my book I quote their views. I maintain that the decision made by the Germans in 1933 was “understandable” and in no way “correct.” I do not say about Heidegger that he must be considered as “justified,” but I say that only on the basis of a historical theory of the Liberal System a point of view can be gained “from which Heidegger appears to have failed as well as to be justified” (p. 152). The phrase that Heidegger was “possibly a Fascist” is to be found in a long sequence which could be formulated in short as follows: Heidegger was a “national Socialist” and in so far “possibly a Fascist,” but he was neither a Social Nationalist nor a Radical Fascist and therefore no genuine Nazi whatsoever. I am indeed convinced that Heidegger’s decision in 1933 was so much based on philosophical assumptions and hopes that even at that time he was no “normal Nazi.” It is true that a good deal of these assumptions and hopes originated from Heidegger’s youth and that, partly, he preserved them until his death. Therefore Professor Sheehan is certainly right when he brings them together with “Germany,” and he may even be right when he calls them “reactionary” as every “normal progressist” would do to whom the idea is unfamiliar that cognate religions could be imbued with reciprocal enmity as long as their self-confidence is strong enough—Abraham a Sancta Clara may serve as an example.
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But also progressists should read carefully. Professor Sheehan often cites pages 151–152 of my book. Exactly there those sentences should have caught his eye which make very clear what may be called the “appellative character” of the book. They read: “But it should nevertheless appear more and more paradoxical that G. Lukács, without causing much offense, may mention in his autobiography that, while acting as a political

commissar in the Hungarian communist army in 1919, he gave orders to shoot eight deserters and that about E. Bloch it can be said, without causing much offense, that during the Moscow trials he charged the defendants with ‘compassion with the kulaks,’ “whereas Heidegger is heavily blamed because of rather theoretical statements made in 1933–1934 when things were still very much in flux. My appeal to the progressive intellectuals can be summarized in this way: Please show at least a bit of that understanding for Heidegger that you have shown amply for Lukács and Bloch despite their very objectionable words and acts.

Such an appeal would, however, be meaningless from the start, if I allowed myself the assumption that Professor Sheehan considered the Bolshevnik appeals for “ruthless class war” or the “great purge” of 1937–1939 as “justified.” I concede that he would be right to call such a suggestion or allusion “infamous.” Therefore Mr. Sheehan should not deny me the same right regarding what he calls “Auschwitz as a preventive war.”

Professor Sheehan has read a great deal of my publications, and he succeeds in drawing the picture of a wicked revisionist by making paraphrases of the opinions of other authors appear as my own opinions (e.g. in the case of Weizmann’s “Declaration of War”), by changing questions into statements, by putting the subjunctive form into the indicative form. Had he only read, with some attention, my article on “Bourgeois society and the postulate of annihilation” in *Was ist bürgerlich?*, he would know that I oppose negatively the older and more original annihilation postulate of Bolshevism and the younger and derived annihilation postulate of Nazism to the essence of “Bourgeois society” or, better, the “Liberal System.” Had he taken notice of *Geschichtsdenken im 20. Jahrhundert* he would probably concede that I applied the basic postulate of historiography, namely, to understand, to the extreme Left in the same way as to the extreme Right and that thereby the limits between “progressives” and “reactionaries,” which Professor Sheehan seems to know so well, lose a bit of their apparent distinctiveness.

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Thomas Sheehan replies:

No, I do not think Mr. Nolte is a “wicked revisionist,” but I do think he is a bad historian. I gave my reasons for that when I reviewed his *Martin Heidegger*, and there is nothing in his present letter to change my mind.

Readers may recall that Mr. Nolte offers a new strategy for defending Heidegger’s support for Hitler: He explains and justifies it by offering a positive reevaluation of Nazism as a reaction to, and a bulwark against, communism. In so doing Nolte has, I

argued, written a bad book—disingenuous, tendentious, and based on a selective use of historical sources—in which virtually everything about Heidegger’s Nazi past is excused or explained away.

I can understand, therefore, why Mr. Nolte is not pleased with my review. But he shouldn’t think he can get away with denying in his letter what he wrote in his book. To take his points in order:

(1) Concerning Heidegger the “normal Nazi”: It is Mr. Nolte, and no one else, who offers on pages 142–146 of his book not just descriptions (as Farías and Ott had done) but justifications of Heidegger’s Nazi activities, including his anti-Semitism and his secret denunciations of colleagues, in one case to the German police. These justifications are Nolte’s own, not “quotations” of the views of others.

(2) Mr. Nolte now claims that supporting Hitler in 1933 was “understandable” but not “correct.” But in his book he wrote that “Heidegger, like countless others, was historically right” in his political choice and indeed that “all those who at that time aspired to a ‘German socialism’ should be considered rehabilitated.”[1]

(3) Mr. Nolte tries to fudge his earlier claim that Heidegger was “justified” in supporting Nazism. The dodge consists in saying that such support is justified “only on the basis of a historical theory of the Liberal System.” But what Nolte doesn’t tell the reader is that the “historical theory of the Liberal System” is Nolte’s own theory, namely, that Nazism was the right political system for Germany in the Thirties. Once the dodge is exposed, we see that Nolte justifies Heidegger’s support of Hitler on the basis of Nolte’s own historical theory. Of course, Nolte admits Nazism failed, but so have other “historically correct” political systems. Therefore, Nolte maintains that in supporting Nazism Heidegger failed but was justified, and in equal measure (“sowohl als Scheiternder wie als Gerechtfertigter erscheint,” p. 152).

(4) In hedging his statement about Heidegger as a fascist, Mr. Nolte gets it wrong. It is true that Heidegger wasn’t a “Radical Fascist” (someone who blames everything on the Jews and seeks to annihilate them, in Nolte’s definition). But it is wrong to assume that Heidegger’s brand of Nazism excluded the nationalism and imperialism of what Nolte calls “Social Nationalism,” as I showed in an earlier article (NYR, June 14, 1988).

(5) Mr. Nolte’s passing reference to the “reciprocal enmity” of Jews and Christians earns him the dubious distinction of being at least consistent: He continues to stand by his claim that Christianity of necessity is “anti-Semitic,” however Nolte chooses to define that term.[2]

(6) The so-called “appellative” character of Nolte’s book is, at best, another name for his method of “comparative trivialization,” as Peter Gay put it, and, at worst, another example of the red-baiting that typifies his book. (See his a priori disqualification of any criticism of Heidegger by “Communists” or “liberals,” pp. 151–152.) Yes, we can all

perhaps “understand” the words or deeds of a Lukács, a Bloch, or even a Hitler; but it is quite another thing to justify them, as Mr. Nolte does with Heidegger.

(7) His present objections notwithstanding, Mr. Nolte does in fact intimate that “the so-called annihilation of the Jews” (as he termed the Holocaust) could be justified in Hitler’s eyes as a “preventative war.” For one thing, Nolte claims that “the slide from ‘Communists threaten us’ to ‘Jews threaten us’ that occurred in Hitler’s mind and some of his entourage is not entirely irrational.” For another, he thinks Chaim Weizmann’s 1939 declaration that Palestinian Jews would support Britain gave Hitler “good reasons to be convinced of the determination of his enemies [world Jewry as well as the Bolsheviks] to annihilate him.”

By the way, neither here nor elsewhere have I misused Nolte’s grammar and syntax, as he alleges, nor am I “making paraphrases of the opinions of other authors appear as [Nolte’s] own opinions.” Nolte himself made the above claims (and not “years ago,” as he says: the Weizmann remark is as recent as 1985, the others were made in 1987). He has never seen fit to disown these statements.

One last thing: As bad as I think Nolte’s work is both as history and as political theory, my remarks should not be construed as warning people away from his book. The best antidote to Mr. Nolte is to read him.

Notes

[1] “...war Heidegger—wie zahllose andere—im historischen Recht”; and “sollten alle...als rehabilitiert gelten”: Martin Heidegger, pp. 296 and 150 respectively.

[2] “...to require that Christianity should not be ‘anti-Semitic’ is the same as demanding that Christianity should not have come into existence.... [Abraham a Sancta Clara] was above all a Christian, and therefore, it goes without saying, he was also an ‘anti-Semite’ “: *Martin Heidegger*, p. 30, my translation.