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The Philosophy of Life and Death

Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics

Nitzan Lebovic
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Preface

This book would not have been possible without the help of a few dear friends, colleagues, and my close family. Their encouragement and support also gave me, the grandson of Jewish refugees from central Europe, the courage to research the origins of much of the Nazi rhetoric without adopting a series of assumptions about how this rhetoric took hold and advanced.

The key to this book is a plea for openness, especially about topics we find abhorrent or would prefer to keep hidden. For decades, Walter Benjamin’s interest in reactionaries such as Ludwig Klages and life-philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*) caused even Benjamin’s closest friends to doubt his political judgment and philosophical reason. It is only in the last two decades that an independent and a somewhat marginal philosophy, leading from Michel Foucault to Giorgio Agamben, made an attempt to step outside the normative, linear history of ideas that divided the world into pro-Nazis and anti-Nazis, reactionaries and progressives, and enabled a richer and more sophisticated look at the unintentional shift that spurred this process.

The philosophical interest in radical and reactionary movements such as *Lebensphilosophie* followed a broader historical research of this movement, mostly affiliating it with Nazi ideology. This book represents another attempt to bring the philosophical and the historical worlds together, on their own terms, and in the service of all past, present, and future introspection. During the many months of research for this book I discovered documents—letters, manuscripts, pamphlets—that were never published or even read before. Many of them are quoted here. I owe the kindness and warmth of Thomas Kemme, at the Klages Nachlass, a great debt. He and his colleagues at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach supplied me with material and advice that were badly needed for a young scholar who was taking his first steps into an unfamiliar world. Dr. Ulrich von Bülow and Prof. Dr. Heinrich Raulff, the general archivist and the director of the archive, enabled the use of many historical documents and gave me the authorization to quote from many of them, for the first time. A few families gave me
a similar authorization to quote from private letters. I would like to thank Erika Seesemann who opened her father’s archive for me, herself reading those letters for the first time, one table behind me. I am grateful also to Peter and Sigrid Deussen, Christa Gauss, and Ulrich Bode for the permission to quote from their family’s archives. I found their commitment to historical factuality and fairness very touching and honest, even where it shed some problematic light on the history of their families. Those private archives testify to the great importance of Lebensphilosophie to the lives of many thinkers, writers, politicians, and artists in Germany, since the early 1900s and up to the present. The permission to quote freely from those archives allowed me to shape a well-balanced narrative. Nevertheless, as the archive requires, I should state that in spite of all the trouble I have taken to locate the owners of rights, I might have an owner who was not listed anywhere. If so, I alone am responsible for whatever use has been done with the material according to the customary law of fair use and copy rights.

The good advice of my advisers at UCLA—Saul Friedländer, David Myers, Peter Reill, Andrew Hewitt, and Samuel Weber—encouraged me to develop this freedom of opinion and intellectual sophistication. The remarkable generosity of Anson Rabinbach helped me greatly along the way and assisted me in giving this manuscript its final shape. This group of scholars, first and foremost my two advisors, taught me not only the secrets of academic life and erudite study, but also the personal ethics of caring as a teacher and an open, boundless love of ideas. I was lucky enough to get the advice of some of the leading scholars in contemporary intellectual history; I greatly profited from the introspective comments I received from John McCole, Benjamin Lazier, Samuel Moyn, and Ethan Kleinberg, and the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript. Good friends such as Zvi Ben-Dor, Avner Ben-Zaken, Hillel Eyal, Igal Halfin, Shaul Katzir, Thomas Meyer, Ofer Nur, Gilli Shahar, and Eugene Sheppard accompanied the process of writing this book with a good word during hard times. My colleagues and friends at Lehigh University—Edurne Portela, John Savage, and Laurence Silberstein—read parts of this manuscript and encouraged me to complete its revision. Stephen Cutcliffe and my colleagues at the history department at Lehigh University supported me with the means and time to complete the task. Sam Gilbert helped me with this text at different stages along the way and invested much time in improving its style. His friendship and advice became so dear to me that I could not imagine myself writing this book without him. Joanne Hindman helped me in the final stages of preparation and was efficient and smart in correcting and refining the text.
Finally, this book owes its very existence to my parents, Raphael, Ilana, and Chava. It owes its soul to my loving wife, Avigail, and my two children, Asaf and Yael. Parts of the book were written when my loving and supporting parents-in-law were dying of terminal cancer, and my family was going through a hard time. It is with the irrevocable memory of the past and with the endless hope for and love of the future that such projects come to be. Seeing my family coping with our new situation was an important life lesson.

Finally, it is with the painful memory of my grandmother, Gertrud Lebovic née Fleischer, who died shortly after I finished my dissertation, that I end this preface. The sole survivor of a family murdered by the Nazis, but quoting Schiller to her very last days, she taught me a lesson about endless kindness and open-mindedness that I vowed to emulate.