Of value and values

"Hitler's Philosophers" is notable less for presenting new information about or a fresh interpretation of the intellectual roots of Nazism, than for its passionate reminder of the callousness, cravenness and cruelty of Germany's academic elite

GLENN C. ALTSCHELER

Asked in 1941 how his fellow philosophers were receiving the war, Dr. August Faust, a professor at the University of Breslau, wrote that "In German thought there were always ready powers which we National Socialists today feel to be in particular conformity with our species and timeliness, though they previously never could function completely because in previous history the pooling of all powers of Greater Germany, which we owe to the Führer, was absent."

As Faust signed his letter, the last surviving Jews of Breslau were on their way to Auschwitz.

The philosophers with whom Nazis felt themselves to be in "conformity" included Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche. In Hitler's Philosophers, Yvonne Sherrat, who has recently taught at New College, Oxford University, examines the use Hitler made of their ideas: the collaborators who provided a patina of respectability to the Third Reich; and several intellectuals, Jewish and non-Jewish, who were its victims.

The book is notable less for presenting new information about or a fresh interpretation of the intellectual roots of Nazism, than for its passionate reminder, directed, perhaps at younger generations, of the callousness, cravenness and cruelty of Germany's academic elite in the 1930s and '40s. When university administrators fired Jews, Sherrat writes, Aryan professors moved in "like vultures."

"Trying to alter the mindset of a whole nation," she indicates, was "not any less heinous a crime than actually using a gun."

The author is disturbed as well by the ability of Hitler's philosophers to evade justice and "worn their way back" to academia. And she provides a poignant narrative about the plight of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt and Kurt Huber (a member of the resistance group known as The White Rose).

In gauging the influence of Germany's Enlightenment, Romantic, and post-Romantic philosophers on the Führer, Sherrat appears to agree with Hitler's friend Ernst Hanfstaengl, that he was "not so much a distiller as a bartender" who mixed their ideas "through his private alchemy into a cocktail" the German people were willing to drink. She is right to suggest, of course, that the philosophers "supplied" Hitler "with ideas to re-enforce and enact his dream." She doesn't make clear, however, whether he used them for support or illumination — and whether anything would have been different if he had never read their work.

Intent on making sure that the philosophers who collaborated with the Nazis do not escape personal responsibility for their deeds, Sherrat often exaggerates their impact. Alfred Bäumer, she claims, "was the principal architect behind the Nazi infiltration of the universities." In her account, however, he seems less an architect than a hack, all too eager to obey (and go beyond) orders. In melodramatic prose that is her signature style, the author concludes her review of Carl Schmitt's important role in crafting a Nazi jurisprudence with the claim that "he relegated democracy to a burnt memory, and like a dark phoenix from its ashes he allowed tyranny to rise."

In the decades following World War II, she points out, Nazi collaborators were not only reappointed to prestigious professorships, they were acclaimed for their intellectual achievements. The Carl Schmitt "renaissance" includes use of his work in college courses in Western Europe and the United States, a 2007 profile in Harper's magazine, and a periodical entitled Schmittiana. A complete edition of Martin Heidegger's work was published thanks in no small measure to Arendt, his former lover, and Jean-Paul Sartre, who began writing again, this time about poetry and language, and was appointed professor at Freiburg University. Allowed to play the "role of innocent, abstract philosopher," Heidegger was praised perhaps the greatest philosopher of the 20th century. As a film, The End, and a BBC documentary remind us, his reach extended into literature, psychology and cinema. And Gottlob Frege gets accolades as the founder of modern logic and father of analytic philosophy.

It is hard not to share Sherrat's outrage. But in this case, outrage is not enough. Sherrat, it seems to me, must more adequately address the important question she poses at the end of her book: "Should we teach their ideas, blithely encourage students to read Being and Time, the works of Schmitt or the logician Frege, oblivious to the context of their words?" She does not tell us what philosophers find admirable about Schmitt's legal theories. She does not interrogate the assertions that Schmitt allowed individualization “only for the purpose of heroism in warfare” in Being and Time and that his "entire oeuvre" is founded on Nazi beliefs.

Can there be any value she asks, to the thoughts of men who did not "think critically upon the most brutal of regimes?" We ought to consider the possibility, sad and appalling as it may be, that the answer could be yes.

The writer is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin professor of American studies at Cornell University.