

NIETZSCHE

BY

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To
L. J. HENDERSON

EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE present biographical series, initiated by the volume on Nietzsche by Crane Brinton, has no intention of offering to the public once again the biographies of men which appear with almost monotonous regularity — Napoleon, Cavour, Gladstone, Marx. It proposes instead to present the lives of men for whom there is no biography, or no adequate biography in English. At the same time these biographies will deal with men who left a significant impress on their age, men who may properly be considered as "Makers of Modern Europe."

Contributors will be invited to keep steadily before them the view that serious historical biography involves constantly the relation of its subject to his historical context. They will expose in adequate detail the problems with which the statesman dealt, the significant contributions which the thinker made. They will address themselves constantly to the question: "What was the significance of this man for his epoch?"

The conception and development of the present series owes much to the counsel of others and especially of those here mentioned. I have consulted repeatedly various ones of my colleagues at Harvard, and have had the helpful advice of Professor Charles K. Webster of the University of London, Professors Carl L. Becker and Philip E. Mosely of Cornell, Professors Arthur M. Wilson of Dartmouth and Chester W. Clark of the University of Iowa, and Drs. Edgar P. Dean and Robert G. Woolbert of the Council on Foreign Relations. In this, as in

my other projects, I have enjoyed the stimulating interest of my wife and have been saved from many errors by her detached and candid criticism.

DONALD C. MCKAY

JOHN WINTHROP HOUSE

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

January 16, 1941

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I WISH to make quite clear that this study of Nietzsche does not attempt to analyze his work from the point of view of a professional philosopher, nor to estimate his place in the long line of such philosophers. That is a task for which I am not prepared. This study is rather an attempt to place Nietzsche's work in the more general currents of "opinion" in our time. It is a study of Nietzsche as *politique et moraliste*. Begun before Munich, finished after the defeat of France, it must bear some marks of contemporary events. Nazi commentators on Nietzsche are not agreeable and conciliating writers. There is, at least to an American brought up before the Four Years' War, something very unpleasant about the Nazis, and especially about Nazi intellectuals. Abusive epithets like "barbarous," "uncivilized," "insane," "arrogant," "brutal," all carry many of the right overtones: you cannot fairly use nice words, nor even neutral words dear to semanticists, about the group that has made contemporary Germany. Yet I confess I have not been able to find what seems to me just the right word for the Nazis: the nearest I can come is the metaphor with which I close Chapter VIII. I have not, then, written *sine ira et studio*. On the other hand, I hope that I have not indulged in the now once more popular sport of Hun-baiting. This book is not meant to indict the German nation.

I owe much to odds and ends of conversations with many of my friends, whom I cannot in these pages do more than thank as a group. I should like, however, to acknowledge more

specifically numerous debts. To the Macmillan Company I am grateful for their generous permission to quote liberally from the authorized English translation of Nietzsche's works, edited by Dr. Oscar Levy. Dr. Fritz Epstein, Professor Seelye Bixler, and Professor S. B. Fay have drawn my attention to specific phases of Nietzsche's life and influence which might otherwise have escaped me. My editors, Donald McKay and Dumas Malone, have been most helpful. Mrs. Ruth Harris has been kind enough to read the whole manuscript, and make suggestions from which I have profited greatly. Mrs. Harriet Dorman has prepared the manuscript, read the proof, and made valuable suggestions. Professor A. O. Lovejoy has consented to my using in Chapter VIII large parts of my article on "The National Socialists' Use of Nietzsche," which appeared in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in April, 1940; he has also helped me greatly in shaping the mass of material on Nietzsche to be found in Nazi writings. To all these I am especially grateful.

CRANE BRINTON

DUNSTER HOUSE
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November 7, 1940

INTRODUCTION

MIGHT, even in this world, must not be allowed to make right. Ever since Socrates so readily refuted the unsubtle arguments of Thrasymachus, the best people, and certainly the best philosophers, have in general agreed that Truth is great even though it does not prevail. Yet successful might forces itself on the serious, and indeed indignant, attention of the firmest believers in the ultimate victory of Truth and Right. Successful might, perhaps unfortunately, is never comic. Hitler's mustache, which looked funny on the crank who failed in the Beer-hall *Putsch*, now looks menacing on the victorious Fuehrer. Similarly with Hitler's ideas. *Mein Kampf*, that hash of racial superstitions, contorted history, odds and ends of a soap-box orator's culture, crude and cunning rhetorical violence, and several sorts of neuroses, seemed to most educated people only a few years ago hardly worthy of serious criticism. Today, if *Mein Kampf* still seems to the unconverted no masterpiece of literature or of philosophy, even the unconverted must admit that Hitler's book is an important part of a National Socialist canon now established as the faith of millions.

Not all of that canon is derived from culturally disreputable sources. *Mein Kampf* itself, if it owes much to bad ethnologists like Gobineau and to fakers like the anti-Semites, could hardly have been written without the aid of two of the great names in the cultural heritage of the West—Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche. About both men there has always been controversy: neither is a serene and Olympian figure like

Goethe, forever safe in any list of the Hundred Best. But both are respectable in a way that most of the other contributors to Nazi holy writings are not respectable. Both have followings outside Germany. The Nietzscheans, if not so numerous nor so noisy as the Wagnerites, have been quite as worshipful.¹

That a subtle and most literate philosopher and an earth-shaking composer, both of them enshrined among the beautiful — and therefore — good, should help make the faith professed by Dr. Goebbels is not the only bit of irony to stare at the skeptical student of National Socialism. It is a fact, perhaps too obvious and too often remarked to be worth much as irony, that a striking proportion of the names of those who have built up the canon of the National Socialist faith in the German race are not German. The Comte de Gobineau, Paul de Lagarde, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Treitschke, Nietzsche do not sound very German. Indeed, these French, English, and Slavic names must ring discordantly through Valhalla. The men who bore them make a strange band, as disparate as any that ever made a faith; and if they have come in death to that most Germanic heaven, they must add appreciably to the pleasurable confusion of its traditional *mêlée*. Nietzsche, whose memory on German earth — and not only German — is now among the most honored of them all, has certainly fought his share, if not rather more than his share; but one doubts whether he is happy among his fellow Supermen. Indeed, since in Valhalla words presumably kill no more finally than do swords, he must be

¹ Mr. Peter Viereck first brought to the attention of Americans the Nazi canonization of Wagner *as a thinker and prophet*. His articles in *Common Sense* for November and December, 1939, are being expanded into a book to be published shortly.

most unhappy — unless there is in Valhalla also a Sils-Maria.

For Nietzsche, living, got on very badly with flesh-and-blood Germans. He loved to badger them, to attack their most assured superiorities.

I shall never admit that a German *can* understand what music is. Those musicians who are called German, the greatest and most famous foremost, are all foreigners, either Slavs, Croats, Italians, Dutchmen — or Jews: or else, like Heinrich Schütz, Bach and Händel, they are Germans of a strong race which is now extinct.²

He had no use whatever for theories of race superiority, which he regarded as mere swindles. He wrote of himself as a “good European,” and he lived most of his adult life in Switzerland and Italy.

And yet the writings of this man are in high honor in National Socialist Germany. They do not burn his books there: they print them by the thousands in popular editions. Their reasons on the whole are consistent with their doctrines, and worth investigating. Nietzsche’s career, in life and in death, is one of the most curious in modern intellectual history. It is a career which may help us understand better what goes on in the minds of the intellectual leaders of National Socialism. For these revolutionary preachers of the deed, these lovers of blood and soil, these anti-intellectuals, are in a sense as much intellectuals as those other revolutionaries, the children of the Enlightenment, the *philosophes* who made the articles of faith of 1776 and 1789. But the Nazi intellectuals are followers, not of Locke and Voltaire, but of Nietzsche; and Nietzsche, wherever he led, did not lead towards the Rights of Man.

² Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Why I am so clever,” § 7.

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NIETZSCHE

CHAPTER I

THE STUDENT

ON OCTOBER 15, 1844, a son was born to the young wife of the Lutheran pastor of the little village of Röcken in a part of Saxony which had fallen to Prussia after the War of Liberation. It was the birthday of the reigning king of Prussia, Frederick William IV, towards whom pastor Nietzsche felt as a clergyman of the Church of Luther should feel towards his sovereign. Some of these feelings he managed to express at the christening of his son:

O blissful moment! O exquisite festival! O unspeakable holy duty! In the name of the Lord I bless thee! From the bottom of my heart do I utter these words; Bring me, then, this my beloved child, that I may consecrate him unto the Lord! My son, Friedrich Wilhelm, thus shalt thou be named on earth, in honor of my royal benefactor on whose birthday thou wast born.¹

The boy grew up as Fritz to his family and friends; and since, as a grown man and a philosopher, he came to feel an ordinary king of Prussia rather far beneath him, he did not customarily use the royal name, but signed himself simply Friedrich Nietzsche.

About Nietzsche's heredity biographers have indulged themselves in the fine free speculation customary in such matters. Nietzsche himself set them an example. The Slavic family

¹ E. Förster-Nietzsche, *The Life of Nietzsche*, English translation (1912), I, 12.

name, and some tales of his grandmother, gave his imagination a few facts to work on, out of which, perhaps with the help of his always admiring young sister Elizabeth, he spun out a romantic tale of descent from a family of refugee Polish nobles named Nicki or Nietzky.

My ancestors were Polish noblemen: it is owing to them that I have so much race instinct in my blood — who knows? perhaps even the *liberum veto*. When I think of the number of times in my travels that I have been accosted as a Pole, even by Poles themselves, and how seldom I have been taken for a German, it seems to me as if I belonged to those only who have a sprinkling of German in them.²

The tremendous mustache, of the kind once known in the America of bicycle days as a "handle-bar mustache," which Nietzsche grew with such care and pride, may well have been worn to accentuate his Polish, and presumably also his noble, appearance.

There is nothing in the story. There was no Polish blood in Nietzsche, and no very recent or certain noble blood. Five generations back of Friedrich in the paternal line, patient research has found a Christoph Nietzsche in Burkau in Upper Lusatia some time about the year 1600. There is further evidence to push the family back across the border into Slavic

² *Ecce Homo*, "Why I am so wise," § 3. Except for his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's books are not systematically put together into long chapters, but are collections of aphorisms, verses, or parables (as in *Zarathustra*). References to Nietzsche's works are therefore usually given in the following form: title of the book, section name or number, and aphorism number. This is a very convenient form of reference, and will be used in this study of Nietzsche. Unlike reference to page numbers, it permits the reader to refer to any edition in the original or in translation. Wherever possible, I have quoted the English translation in the authorized edition of Nietzsche's works edited by Dr. Oscar Levy, published in the United States by the Macmillan Company, who have kindly granted me permission to quote from this edition.

Bohemia. The name Nietzsche is probably a variant German spelling of the diminutive form of a saint's name very popular among Slavs — Nicholas. Some Czech blood, then, flowed in Nietzsche's veins — or, since modern genetics repudiates the metaphor of common blood, some Czech chromosomes went into the making of the man Nietzsche. But not many, at least no more than is usual among Germans in the middle Elbe basin. The other names in his ancestry, Oehler, Krause, and the like, sound German enough.³

Nietzsche's mental collapse has set many of his biographers the task of finding an hereditary taint of insanity in his family. They can find one case of mental illness readily enough. In August, 1848, his father fell on a flight of stone steps and suffered a severe concussion. After a year of illness, during which he never recovered mental or physical health, Pastor Nietzsche died. Apart from the fact that we have no satisfactory clinical reports of his illness, there remains the difficulty that in such cases it is impossible to assign any precise part to an hereditary disposition to insanity. There are no known similar cases in the family history, but beyond the maternal and paternal grandparents we have no certain information whatever. Pastor Nietzsche came later to stand in the minds of his son and daughter, who could not really remember him in the flesh, as a sensitive, imaginative, scholarly man, held by fragile health to a country pastorate unworthy of his endowments of mind and character. His emotions, to judge from his words at the christening of his son, were of the kind that frequently required exclamation points to do them justice; this, however, is no

³ M. Oehler, "Nietzsche's angebliche polnische Herkunft," *Ostdeutsche Monatshefte* (February, 1938), XVIII, 679.

more than good German taste in the romantic 1840's, and is not in itself evidence even of a mild neurosis.

Nietzsche's ancestors, so far as they can be traced, were apparently substantial middle-class folk, with solid roots in the soil of Germany where it meets the westernmost bastion of the Slavs — Saxony, Lusatia, Bohemia. Many of them were Lutheran clergymen. In Germany, as in England, pastorates in an established protestant church tend to be preserved in the family, and to give it a kind of distinction well short of that enjoyed by a landed nobility. Nietzsche's family background was one of which in his writings he seems now proud, now ashamed: sturdy, industrious, middle-class, respectable, undistinguished, a Germanic stock mixed with Slavic elements — in brief, something *echt deutsch*.

After the death of her husband Frau Nietzsche retired with her mother-in-law, two sisters-in-law, and her two children to the quiet market-town of Naumburg on the river Saale. There is no evidence that the family were ever in pinched circumstances. Frau Nietzsche had a small pension as a pastor's widow, and in Naumburg she was in the midst of her own family, the Oehlers, who were prosperous, well-established people. Fritz grew up in a household carefully and economically run in the traditions common to European bourgeois. The Nietzsches were never allowed to be extravagant. But of the poverty and uncertainty in which fatherless boys so often grow up there was none at all. Indeed, the boy's childhood was comfortable and sheltered beyond that of most boys, even in the safe, domestic Germany of the mid-nineteenth century.

Too sheltered, perhaps, for his future stability, Fritz grew up wholly surrounded by the determined love of five women,