

**“With All Winds Straight Ahead:”  
The Influence of the World Wars on the Understanding of Friedrich Nietzsche**

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**Abstract**

Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the *ubermensch* was interpreted by America and Germany in two notably different ways during the early 20th century, bringing about the question of which understanding is more faithful to Nietzsche’s meaning. The advent of World War I in 1914 presented America with a depiction of Nietzsche as “the apostle of German ruthlessness and barbarism,” which offered a negative view of Nietzsche and the German people as narcissistic warmongers. This outbreak of war led to these warped interpretations of Nietzsche and his philosophy, prompting the world to see only the facade of his aphorisms, not their truer meanings, for many years. Between the world wars, Germany’s reading of Nietzsche focused on the notion that the government knows what the *ubermensch* is: a selfless person ready to give his life for a “greater good” of the state, which was believed to be endowed with divine mandate. The American interpretation of Nietzsche is similar but believes the philosophy of the *ubermensch* to be one of atheism and unadulterated power, positing man as the new god, a rugged state-defined individualism that brings out the worst in man. George Santayana argued that Nietzsche’s philosophy failed to acknowledge “immense forces beyond ourselves” which endow man with will and power. This led to the American understanding that Nietzsche wrote of a German people that believed themselves to be *ubermenschen* and gods among men; my research leads me to believe that this is only one possible interpretation of Nietzsche. Germany’s concept of the *ubermensch* was remarkably close to that of Nietzsche’s philosophy except that the true *ubermensch* is not a god among men underneath the omnipotent state, but rather god of his own life. World War II only worsened matters as Nietzsche’s *ubermenschen* were often associated with the Nazi conception of an Aryan superiority. The Nazi party viewed the *ubermenschen* as this Aryan race: a perfect race of men who must give their all to the state. However, there were more qualities to their *ubermenschen* than race, as it also incorporated a loyalty to Germany – total sacrifice of self to the state, though Nietzsche expressed his anti-nationalism in “Why I am So Wise” when he describes himself as “the last anti-political German.” The Americans then saw this Aryan *Überrnensch* and decried Nietzsche as a proto-Nazi, despite his distaste for anti-Semites and nationalism. In this paper, I will analyze the two interpretations of Nietzsche’s philosophy through his works “The Gay Science” and “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen’s “American Nietzsche,” and writings from German thinkers during the wars, such as Heidegger, to support my argument that the Germans were closer to understanding Nietzsche’s *ubermensch* than Americans at the time.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, World War II, Nazi

## **1. Introduction**

Fueling the flame that grew into the philosophy that became known as Existentialism, Friedrich Nietzsche introduced into the world a new form of thought outside of the realm of logic and reason. However, unlike his

Existentialist predecessor Søren Kierkegaard, Nietzsche did not believe that Christian values should define human existence. Instead, Nietzsche focused on man himself and his own individual will. One of the first times that Nietzsche's ideas captured the international spotlight was during World War I – though not in the way that he would have hoped for. The chaos and destruction of World War I in 1914 presented America with a view of Germans as immoral and power-hungry, and a depiction of Nietzsche as “the apostle of German ruthlessness and barbarism.”<sup>1</sup> In Germany itself, however, the growing nationalistic and anti-Semitic crowds found inspiration from his works, taking many of his most radical ideas to heart. These two interpretations of Nietzsche's works are remarkably similar, yet they yield completely different applications of his philosophy. Germany's National Socialists, commonly known as the Nazis, used Nietzsche's most radical ideas to justify their views on war, the extermination of non-Aryan peoples, and the conquest of Europe and, eventually, the world. The Americans did not believe that Nietzsche could justify the Nazis' behavior, but they perceived him as an inspiration and his works as a foundation of Nazi ideology. Although some would argue that Nietzsche's belief in perspectivism could bolster the claim that either of these interpretations might be viable, neither the Nazi Germans nor the Americans were correct. Nietzsche's philosophy is not applicable on a large scale, such as that of the nation-state; rather, it is a personal philosophy, which no government can dictate. This leads both interpretations to be incorrect; while Nietzsche's works were used as a justification of Nazi behavior and likely even a foundation for early Nazism, this understanding of his work is an invalid misconception, purposefully misconstrued by Nazis and Americans as propaganda to be used for their own philosophies.

Much of Nietzsche's philosophy revolves around the idea of the aphorism, which forces the reader to attempt to decipher his work. However, there was reasoning behind this elaborate façade of aphorism: Nietzsche also believes that each individual person must interpret his work with their own mind and not be given answers. More specifically, these answers cannot be so rigid that they can only contain a single solution; these answers must not be made so that people must conform to the philosophy. This comes from his belief in perspectivism, which dictates that every person's reality is their own and from their own perception. This allows Nietzsche's philosophy to be particularly flexible and adaptable to different times and places, which is pointedly different from the strict laws of religion and the unwavering logic of some previous philosophies, such as those of the Enlightenment.

Perspectivism and Nietzsche's use of aphorisms, both of which make his philosophy flexible and applicable to all who read his works, are also what makes his works particularly dense and unapproachable. The use of complicated aphorisms and Nietzsche's insistence that his works require thought that man is not ready for leads his work to be exceptionally egotistical. His egotistic and elitist way of writing became one of the greatest criticisms against him, even to this very day. The opening of Nietzsche's *Why I Am So Wise*, a chapter of his work *Ecce Homo*, is his telling of the “good fortune of my existence” unto the world.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche saw himself as a teacher and a messenger for the world who's purpose was to teach the world to move on from draconian ideas of an over-arching morality being the guiding purpose of a man's life, whether it be that of a religion or of a state.

Eventually, the Nazis came to accept and claim Nietzsche's philosophy as part of their own ideology. With the onset of World War I, many Europeans found themselves lost and wandering in the ruins of their former glory. The total destruction throughout Europe had broken the foundations that the Europeans had firmly grounded themselves in. Germany found itself suffering the highest consequences after the war, having to pay off the damages that it had caused. With this, the populist *Völkisch* ideology, with its romantic and irrational beliefs, came back to the forefront. George Mosse, author of *The Crisis of German Ideology*, claimed that “*Völkisch* ideas showed a distinct tendency toward the irrational and emotional, and were focused primarily on man and the world,” and that “[r]ationalism had been discredited.”<sup>3</sup> The *Völkisch* ideology, which had “been disseminated before the war,” began gaining followers as it “was suddenly transformed into a politically effective system of thought.”<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, who coincidentally broke off from his friendship with Wagner in part due to Wagner's embrace of *Völkisch* ideology, was viewed positively by the growing ranks of supporters of *Völkisch* thought, including by the National Socialist party. The two opposing viewpoints of observers during World War I were of those who “argued that Nietzsche's *Übermensch* represented the German quest for dominance on the European continent and those who insisted the Kaiser and his armies signified a departure from Nietzsche's vision of a master morality.”<sup>5</sup> Though Nietzsche's connection to *Völkisch* ideology was weak, at best, his ideas of an *Übermensch* and of a will to power found their way into the burgeoning movement.

It was not through strict misinterpretation that the Nazis found a foundation in the works of Nietzsche. For the Nazis, these inspirational concepts included many of Nietzsche's passages on war, power, and the *übermensch*. Nietzsche himself claimed that “I am warlike by nature. Attacking is one of my instincts. Being *able* to be an enemy, *being* an enemy – perhaps that presupposes a strong nature.”<sup>6</sup> And if any group throughout history had a strong nature, it was the National Socialists. The Nazis, having spent hundreds of billions of US dollars at 1945 prices, did not spare any cost to prove their power and devotion to war. However, Nietzsche's definition of “warlike” was

primarily philosophical – he believed that a warlike philosopher must challenge problems to single combat.<sup>7</sup> In an unpublished draft of *Why I am So Clever*, Nietzsche ended his work with the notion that “[i]f we could dispense with wars, so much the better... there are other means of winning respect for physiology than field hospitals.”<sup>8</sup> The idea of the *übermenschen* as a race of men greater than humanity can be found throughout ideas of the Aryan race. Nietzsche himself wrote of “the splendid *blond beast* prowling about avidly in search of spoil and victory.”<sup>9</sup> However, Walter Kaufmann, one of Nietzsche’s most prominent translator and philosophical interpreters, warned that this was specifically not a racial concept and alluded to the lion, which Nietzsche praised in his a number of his works, including *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche even went as far as to call attention to the fact that those who “demand that all should become ‘good human beings,’ herd animals, blue-eyed, benevolent, ‘beautiful souls’...would deprive existence of its *great* character.”<sup>11</sup> The Nazis and the Americans saw Nietzsche as a philosopher of war; however, Kaufmann set out to prove that Nietzsche’s war “is classed with the altruism of the weak who find in it an escape from their hard task of self-perfection.”<sup>12</sup> Despite Nietzsche’s true intentions, both the Nazis and Americans found ways to purposefully misinterpret Nietzsche as a legitimate foundation of Nazism.

A prevailing idea from Book One of Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* is that of “the poison from which the weaker perishes strengthens the strong man – and he does not call it poison.”<sup>13</sup> For the Nazis to grow strong and overcome those around them, they had to view their enemies as having weaknesses that they could conquer. Along with this is the idea that Germany’s weaknesses could become strengths, such as the overcoming of the financial crisis of the Weimar Republic. Hitler viewed the Nazis’ eugenic ideals as one of their strengths; while other countries ignored the growing blend of bloodlines and races, the Nazis held firm ideas that races and ethnicities should not be mixed.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the Nazi commitment to Aryan bloodlines brought them to believe that lesser ethnicities should be controlled and restricted. This was not an issue that Nietzsche addressed in his philosophy; this is because Nietzsche was not interested in the obsession with ethnicity and race outside of his views on religious groups. Even with his belief in religion as a form of social control, his views of Judaism were never more negative than his of Christianity. In fact, in a letter to composer Friedrich Overbeck, Nietzsche claimed that he was having all anti-Semites shot, though in a metaphorical sense.<sup>15</sup>

Even during the turbulent years prior to World War II, an anonymous writer noted that “[Nietzsche] loathed nationalism and declared that the victory of Germany over France in 1871 was a defeat for German civilization.”<sup>16</sup> There were scholars of the time who understood Nietzsche as warning against the looming Nazi threat, though they were outnumbered by critics of Nietzsche. Eighty years ago, it was understood that “all this does not prevent the Nazis from claiming Nietzsche as one of their own. He was born ninety years ago, and throughout the Nazi press this anniversary is acclaimed as though Nietzsche had been the principal precursor of the Third Realm.”<sup>17</sup> Those who understood Nietzsche’s meanings and saw his distaste for the newly-forming Nazi ideology stood little chance against both the Nazis claiming Nietzsche and the Americans who labelled Nietzsche as a proto-Nazi.

One point that makes the Nazis’ attachment to Nietzsche interesting is his idea that evil is necessary in the world for there to be good. Nietzsche often speaks of the good in the world only being able to strive due to the existence and constant bombardment of evil surrounding the good. In *They Gay Science*, Nietzsche asks his readers “whether a tree which is supposed to grow to a proud height could do without bad weather and storms.”<sup>18</sup> He then relates this question to the idea that misfortune and external resistance only exist in favorable conditions to strengthen the growth of virtue.<sup>19</sup> These storms and evils within the world actually strengthen the good tree. For the Nazis, it is not unlikely that they viewed themselves as the good and those who were of a lesser eugenics and ideology were an evil trying to uproot their movement – though from a modern viewpoint, this was obviously not the case.

Many reasons for the misinterpretation of Nietzsche’s works were in his own writing. In *Why I Am So Wise*, he claimed that “I am perhaps more German than present-day Germans, mere citizens of the German *Reich*, could possibly be – I, the last *anti-political* German.”<sup>20</sup> To the average American scholar in the early-to-mid 1900’s, this was Nietzsche’s way of blatantly proclaiming his Nazi roots. This led to the view of “Nietzsche as a spokesperson for a national mindset and his ideas of power as an endorsement of brute force.”<sup>21</sup> This could not be farther from Nietzsche’s intentions. He condemned the idea within society that a person’s virtues are based solely off of their presumed effect on society, not the self, and even went as far as to note that these virtues often end up being most harmful to their possessors.<sup>22</sup> In an example of selflessness in society where a youth sacrifices his own self-preservation and ambition to benefit the common good, Nietzsche claimed that “one feels sorry for this youth, not for his own sake but because a devoted *tool*, ruthless toward itself – a so-called ‘good man’ – has been lost to society though his death.”<sup>23</sup> Those who devote their lives, well-being, and growth to the society are needlessly sacrificing their lives in a way that only causes harm to themselves. Nietzsche believed that selflessness, which society claims to be the truest of virtues, is inherently flawed. The consequences are that the individual loses themselves to the society, never gaining the chance to better themselves and become who they are. Nietzsche saw no possible reason for the individual to sacrifice livelihood or power to the society.

The American understanding of Nietzsche was much more fluid than the Nazi interpretation – it changed over time as different issues came up throughout the world. The American interpretation of Nietzsche in the early 1900's contrasted starkly with that of America's understanding of him during World War II. The first American encounters with Nietzsche occurred during the late 1800's and early 1900's, when American students studying in Germany encountered German students reading his work. An interesting aspect of Nietzsche's growing popularity in America is that one of Nietzsche's greatest influences was Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American Transcendentalist who focused on ideas of the self and of personal growth. Emerson's influence on Nietzsche started while Nietzsche was a student of theology and philology at Schulpforta. Nietzsche's readings of Emerson transformed his interpretation of Christianity and the individual into a more Hegelian idea of a master-slave dialectic. Nietzsche began to focus on a new fundamental question of philosophy: the question of, "as Emerson put it, 'How shall I live?'"<sup>24</sup> Emerson fortified Nietzsche's idea that philosophy is teaching; as Alexander Nehamas, a student of Kaufmann, once put it, though Nietzsche "was undoubtedly eager to shock, he never considered shocking incompatible with teaching, which he was equally willing to do."<sup>25</sup> Initially, Nietzsche was well-received by the American academia and attracted the attention of many diverse groups; socialists, anarchists, feminists, individualists, and, of course, fascists, grappled with his ideas and put their own interpretations to his works.

However, even early on, there were misconceptions of Nietzsche's true meaning. One of the first writers to exemplify this was the editor and publisher of the later 1800's and early 1900's Boston periodical *Liberty*, Benjamin Tucker, an avid individualist anarchist. Tucker, one of the first Americans to translate Nietzsche, found a firm foundation in Nietzsche's perspectivism. However, he disliked Nietzsche's egoism, a common trait in the German philosophers of the time. Tucker assumed that the *Übermensch* that Nietzsche spoke so proudly of required an *untermensch*, or an underman, for the *Übermensch* to conquer. This assumption is largely incorrect, as Nietzsche's goal was ideally for humanity to pass beyond its current state and become a race of *übermenschen*, though he believed that man was not ready for this step. A lesser point for Tucker was Nietzsche's obsession with Dionysus, whom Tucker saw as a pagan and immoral character.

George Santayana, the American professor of philosophy at Harvard University, was another early influential figure on the American interpretation of Nietzsche and his philosophy in the early-to-mid 1900's. Unlike other Americans of the time, though, Santayana did not have a positive interpretation of Nietzsche. Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and author of *American Nietzsche*, affirmed that "[w]hile Santayana shared [Nietzsche's] desire for a 'nobler race of men,' he argued that such a model for humanity already existed in the Christian saints and the ancient Greeks."<sup>26</sup> Santayana believed that Nietzsche ignored "immense forces beyond ourselves."<sup>27</sup> In this specific case, Santayana was referring to the Judeo-Christian God. Santayana agreed with Tucker both about Nietzsche's immoral paganism and of his obvious German arrogance, claiming that "it was Nietzsche's inherited German egotism reflected in his 'wayward imagination,' Santayana concluded, that rendered him unable to properly esteem the models of the past."<sup>28</sup>

Working within his field of intellectual history, Crane Brinton wrote *Nietzsche*, a scathing review of Nietzsche and his work, in 1941. Brinton, who was a professor at Harvard University at the time, did not appreciate Nietzsche or his "followers." He described those who studied Nietzsche as either "gentle" or "tough" Nietzscheans.<sup>29</sup> The gentle Nietzscheans, who held the idea that Nietzsche was a "wholesome moralist who simply wanted to hold 19<sup>th</sup> century Western society to higher standards of beauty, truth, and goodness," were degraded by Brinton as having whitewashed Nietzsche's philosophy; however, he believed that the tough Nietzscheans were correct in calling Nietzsche "the Dionysian rebel, the unashamed pagan, the joyous fighter."<sup>30</sup> These labels, which were very negative to Brinton and his supporters, went on to support Brinton's claim that "were Nietzsche alive today... he would be a good Nazi."<sup>31</sup> Brinton, and most of America during World War II, did not support Nietzsche or his earth-shattering rejection of conventional morality.

There were men of the time who approached Nietzsche's works with a more open mind and, therefore, had a firmer grasp of Nietzsche's actual intentions. William Archer, a British literary critic, claimed that "Nietzsche's thought was easily misconstrued," and viewed "Nietzsche's philosophy as a justification rather than a cause of the war."<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche's rugged and individualistic philosophy was one that took little difficulty to twist and contort as a justification for evil acts. The loudest and most pronounced voice in the movement to celebrate Nietzsche was Walter Kaufmann. Converting to Judaism in the years leading up to World War II, Kaufmann escaped his native Germany to America, where he fought in World War II and went on to become a professor of philosophy at Princeton University. Kaufmann wanted to prove that Nietzsche was not preaching for an army of *übermenschen* to overtake the weaker of will – in the case of World War II, the Jews – but that he preached for an overcoming of the self and the inhibitions that keep man from progressing himself in life, such as strict religious morality and loyalty to the state or a god. It was important to Kaufmann that Nietzsche was not seen as a proponent of war; Kaufmann often quoted Nietzsche's own words to prove this point, as when he made the previously-mentioned quote that "war is

classified with the altruism of the weak who find in it an escape from their hard task of self-perception.”<sup>33</sup> Rosenhagen defined Kaufmann’s Nietzsche as one that knew that “warfare is not an expression of true power but rather an admission of its absence.”<sup>34</sup> By 1951, Kaufmann’s works had even convinced Brinton that his criticism of Nietzsche was unfounded, confessing that “I myself brought out a brief and, I admit, rather ill-tempered analysis of Nietzsche in which I found some of his ideas congruous with those of the Nazis, and Nietzsche himself a somewhat unpleasantly pathetic intellectual.”<sup>35</sup> Even if Brinton’s confession came six years after the end of World War II, it was still progress for those who wanted to understand Nietzsche’s truest intentions.

“One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous,” Nietzsche wrote – “a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up *against* everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far.”<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche penned this in *Why I Am Destiny*, the last section of *Ecce Homo*, and also the last of his original works before he slipped into insanity. He was undoubtedly correct. Nietzsche told the world of himself that “I am no man, I am dynamite.”<sup>37</sup> Even with this intuition of the future’s perception of his work, Nietzsche warned the world that “I *want* no ‘believers’... I have a terrible fear that one day I will be pronounced *holy*: you will guess why I publish this book *before*; it shall prevent people from doing mischief with me.”<sup>38</sup> But *Ecce Homo* was not released until 1908, eight years after his death: the damage had been done, and his words had not been heeded. In his work *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Kaufmann quoted Nietzsche: “Man is something that should be overcome, and the man who has overcome himself has become an overman.”<sup>39</sup>

Nietzsche told the world to become who you are, and this lesson passed by many who considered themselves his most ardent disciples. The Nazis, who used a Nietzsche twisted to fit a nationalistic and racist ideology, presented the world with Nietzsche’s works misconstrued beyond much hope. His preaching of will to power and the *Übermensch* had been taken into account more fervently than anyone could have expected. Whether it was his use of phrases such as the “blond beast” or his fiery German egotism, Nietzsche eventually became viewed as a proto-Nazi by most of the world, including both the Germans and Americans. Though this view of his work took many years to grow, the Americans had all but completely rejected Nietzsche and his philosophy by the onset of World War II. Both the Americans and the Nazis wanted to blame Nietzsche’s radical philosophy for the tragedies of both of the World Wars. To them, the only way to conceptualize and rationalize the atrocities of the wars was to blame the controversial philosopher who dared to go against traditional morality. Nietzsche’s true meanings lie in the interpretations of the individual reading his works, not in those imposed by the state, general morality, or even a classroom. While it is true that there are incorrect interpretations of his work, Nietzsche’s philosophy is only truly understood when his radical individualism comes to light through the struggle of the individual reading his works. As much as the Nazis wanted to use his *Übermensch* and will to power as justification to throw out morality to further their power, Nietzsche’s wars do not belong on the front lines of battle, but within ourselves. To overcome the societal moralities and ideologies set upon us – to overcome the self – is to cross into the realm of the *übermensch*. Walter Kaufmann, whose German background possibly helped him look past Nietzsche’s unashamed egoism, brought to America and to the world the true meanings of Nietzsche for the first time since Nietzsche himself penned them over fifty years before. Despite two world wars that threatened to force Nietzsche’s philosophy into a strictly fascist ideology, Friedrich Nietzsche’s works have sustained in the hopes that one day, people will learn to philosophize with a hammer, not with a gun or under a nationalist banner.

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