

# Review of **The Philosophy of Life and Death**

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*The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics.* By Nitzan Lebovic. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 316. Cloth \$95.00. ISBN 978-1137342058.

Lebovic's book studies the "philosophy of life" (*Lebensphilosophie*) in Germany through the prism of one of its most notorious proponents, Ludwig Klages (1872-1956), one of the most successful, but largely forgotten, right-wing intellectuals of the twentieth century. Originating in the crisis of rationality around the turn of the century, the philosophy of life gained popularity during the 1920s "and was later integrated into Nazi rhetoric as biopolitics" (1), Lebovic argues. The starting point for the author's interest in Klages was "an intense reading in the work of Walter Benjamin" (1), who showed an ongoing fascination with the works of Klages that puzzled many of his followers. Not least because of Giorgio Agamben's readings of Benjamin, elements of the philosophy of life have found their way into contemporary political theory, but the historical context in which this peculiar set of ideas thrived and mattered has been forgotten. Lebovic thus proposes to trace "the origins of this discourse of life, its politicization, Nazification, and later transformation" (1). He stresses the "critical potential" (5) of *Lebensphilosophie* and argues against a linear understanding of the history of ideas that traces a direct course from "the early 1900s to the rise of national socialism" (5).

The book is divided into five main chapters that present aspects of Klages's "life and works" in a roughly chronological order. Lebovic does not provide a full biography of Klages, but important aspects of his interpretation of Klages's works rely on biographical information. He does a good job of contextualizing his subject's idiosyncratic philosophy and its reception. Klages was an antisemite whose best friends were Jews, as were some of his admirers. Among his childhood friends in Hanover was Theodor Lessing, who went on to become a popular philosopher in his own right and was killed by Nazi thugs in 1933 while in exile in Czechoslovakia. Klages had ended his friendship with Lessing abruptly in 1899, probably due to entrenched antisemitism. In fin-de-siecle Munich, Klages formed the esoteric "cosmic circle" together with Alfred Schuler and Karl Wolfskehl, before he fell out with Wolfskehl in dramatic fashion over their views on Zionism. In the 1920s, with the help of some of his devoted disciples, including Hans Eggert Schroder and Hans Prinzhorn, Klages started a crusade against Freudian psychoanalysis. This attack on Freud relied heavily on Johann Jakob Bachofen's theory of an ancient matriarchy.

Instead of Freud's "psychology without a soul" (121), Klages advertised his "characterology" and "graphology" as the appropriate methods to understand the human mind. These "empirical" parts of Klages's work fascinated Benjamin and were supported by the philosopher of art Emil Utitz, whose own study on *Charakterologie* owed much to Klages and "became a landmark in the field and a constant reference for later works" (150). Shortly before power was handed over to the National Socialists, Klages published the third volume of his magnum opus, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, a

relentless attack on utilitarianism and rationalism that, despite its length, cemented his reputation among the enemies of liberalism.

Lebovic's chapter on Klages's *Lebensphilosophie* under Nazism is of central importance to his argument. The account depends on the assumption that the "philosophy of life" formed an integral part of Nazi ideology, despite the fact that Klages was criticized by committed Nazis such as Alfred Baumler and Alfred Rosenberg. The Nazi Party, Lebovic claims, gradually accepted Klages's specific philosophical vocabulary, and "Klages's philosophy of life" was slowly implemented into "Nazi political education during the 1930s and 1940s" (191). To prove this point, Lebovic refers to a close follower of Klages since the early 1920s, Rudolf Bode, who made a career under the Nazis as a teacher of gymnastics and "body culture" (even though he was certainly not "appointed" [194] as *Gymnastikpabst* in 1941). Lebovic also mentions the founding, in 1933, of a Working Group for Biocentric Research (*Arbeitskreis für biozentrische Forschung*) by students of Klages. This group tried to establish contacts with the state and party but was shut down in 1936. Based on this evidence, Lebovic's argument that Klages and his *Lebensphilosophie* were central to the ideology and policies of the Nazis is not fully convincing. While there were certainly attempts to make biology, via racial studies, the center of Nazi thinking and pedagogy, and while multiple references to the term "life" and its composita can be found in Nazi "rhetoric," the Nazis did not rely on or depend on Klages's *Lebensphilosophie*.

Regardless of these critical comments, Lebovic has produced a stimulating book. Even if he does not always provide convincing answers, he often poses the right questions. The main flaw of the study lies in its attempt to address too many audiences at once: the book oscillates between an intellectual biography of Klages, a study of the reception and wider importance of his works during and after his lifetime, the "Nazification" of his thought, and present-day debates about "biopolitics," which can be traced back to the history of the "philosophy of life." The many different perspectives that Lebovic's study opens up underline the importance of the history of *Lebensphilosophie* and of Ludwig Klages, and call for further studies into these fascinating topics.

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A critique of his ideas & actions.



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