While the terms ‘nihilism’ (Nihilismus) and ‘nihilist’ (nihilistisch) are deployed in the majority of Nietzsche’s works from *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) to *Ecce Homo* (written in 1888), the privilege accorded to the concept of nihilism by the editors of *The Will to Power* (1901; expanded edition, 1906) is undoubtedly the principal reason for its being taken to lie at the heart of Nietzsche’s later thought in the reception of his work in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. It was, however, above all the politico-philosophical status of the concept of nihilism within the field of cultural critique that led to its centrality in the appropriation of Nietzsche’s thought by the ideologues of National Socialism, principally through the stewardship of Alfred Baeumler, professor of philosophy in Berlin from 1933 to 1945 and author of *Nietzsche the Philosopher and Politician* (1931). It is precisely as a countering of this National Socialist appropriation of Nietzsche – and, in particular, his thinking of nihilism – that Martin Heidegger characterizes his own major engagement with Nietzsche’s thought from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s; that is, in the series of four lecture courses on Nietzsche delivered at Freiburg University between 1936 and 1940, and first published in the two-volume *Nietzsche* in 1961, and the various short treatises on Nietzsche, especially ‘The Word of Nietzsche: “God Is Dead”’ (written 1943), ‘Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being’ (written 1944–6), and ‘The Essence of Nihilism’ (written 1946–8). In a letter of 4 November 1945 to the rector of Freiburg University, for instance, Heidegger not only presents himself as having engaged in a ‘spiritual resistance’ of National Socialism in the lecture courses, but claims to have done so above all in the form of a
debate or confrontation (Auseinandersetzung) with Nietzsche’s thinking of nihilism:

Beginning in 1936 I embarked on a series of courses and lectures on Nietzsche, which lasted until 1945 and which represented in even clearer fashion a declaration of spiritual resistance. In truth, it is unjust to assimilate Nietzsche to National Socialism, an assimilation which – apart from what is essential – ignores his hostility to anti-Semitism and his positive attitude to Russia. But on a higher plane, the debate with Nietzsche’s metaphysics is a debate with nihilism as it manifests itself with increased clarity under the political form of fascism. (Heidegger in Wolin 1993: 65; Heidegger’s emphasis)

While it is indeed the case that the 1936–40 lectures on Nietzsche to which Heidegger refers in this letter constitute an attempt to counter the biologistic and racialist interpretation of Nietzsche, these lectures are in fact neither Heidegger’s first public engagement with Nietzsche’s thought, nor the first occasion on which he deploys the term ‘nihilism’. And, at the time of that first deployment, Heidegger presents National Socialism not as a clearer manifestation of nihilism, but precisely as the privileged form of ‘spiritual resistance’ to it.

Although there are very few references to Nietzsche in Being and Time (1927) and none at all in the 1929 inaugural lecture What Is Metaphysics?, in his 27 May 1933 Rectoral Address, The Self-Assertion of the German University, Heidegger refers to what he will later term Nietzsche’s ‘word’ (Wort) – ‘God is dead’ – and anticipates his own later thinking of nihilism by setting this ‘word’ alongside the thought of ‘the forsakenness [Verlassenheit] of modern man in the midst of what is [inmitten des Seienden]’ (Heidegger 2003b: 5). Neither in the Rectoral Address, nor in the various political speeches delivered during his rectorship of 1933–4, however, does Heidegger deploy the term ‘nihilism’. Indeed, his first public deployment of the term occurs only after the charge of nihilism has been levelled against his own thought. Although The Self-Assertion of the German University certainly exhibits Heidegger’s commitment to the National Socialist revolution, to the leader principle (Führerprinzip), and to the political alignment of the university with the Nazi Party (Gleichschaltung), it is nonetheless the case that the Rectoral Address was denounced in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung as ‘the expression of an abysmal and destructive nihilism’ (quoted in Fariás 1989: 110), while, in an article published in the National Socialist periodical Volk im Werden in 1934, Ernst Krieck, professor of philosophy and education studies