

Scheler, Max Ferdinand

By [Peter Hoeres](#)

Scheler, Max Ferdinand

German philosopher

Born 22 August 1874 in Munich, Germany

Died 19 May 1928 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Summary

Max Scheler was a German philosopher and sociologist. The author of the widely known *Der Genius des Kriegs und der Deutsche Krieg* (The Spirit of War and the German War) is best known as an important phenomenologist and intellectual supporter of the German war effort. After the war, he supported a moderate pacifism.

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Early Life and Academic Career

Max Scheler (1874-1928) was the son of a Catholic administrator of a demesne, [Gottlieb Scheler \(1831-1900\)](#), who had converted to Judaism in order to marry the Jewish-Orthodox [Sophie Meyer Fürther \(1844-1915\)](#). Scheler studied medicine first in Munich, then in Berlin. Mainly, however, he attended classes in philosophy and sociology taught by [Theodor Lipps \(1851-1914\)](#), [Wilhelm Dilthey \(1833-1911\)](#), and [Georg Simmel \(1858-1918\)](#). In 1896, he switched formally to studying philosophy in Jena, where he received his PhD as a student of the neo-Idealist [Rudolf Eucken \(1846-1926\)](#) in 1897. Two years later, he finished his habilitation with a study on epistemology and converted to Christianity.

Scheler married [Amélie von Dewitz-Krebs \(1868-1924\)](#) in 1900. In 1905-1906, Shortly after the birth of his son [Wolfgang Heinrich \(1905-1940\)](#), he had to leave Jena because Amélie accused him publicly of having an affair. After he moved to the University of Munich, Scheler was again twice subject to a public scandal about his private life and money matters, eventually losing his right to teach at the [university](#). After his divorce from Amélie, he

married [Märit Furtwängler \(1891-1971\)](#) in 1912 and lived off his lecturing and publishing activities. Under the influence of [Edmund Husserl \(1859-1938\)](#), he had moved philosophically towards phenomenology publishing the first volume of his magnum opus *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik (Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values)* in 1913, the second in 1916.

Role during the First World War

Scheler had voluntarily enrolled to serve in the war for the airship battalion of the reserve in Cologne, but was not accepted due to his astigmatism. In 1917-1918, the State Department (*Auswärtiges Amt*) sent him to [Switzerland](#), [Austria](#) and the [Netherlands](#), to influence Catholic circles. Scheler was to give lectures to sick and wounded German soldiers, interned in the [neutral Netherlands](#).

This phase of his war philosophy coincided with the period in which the philosopher developed his theory of value. This theory proceeds on the assumption of the existence of an objective hierarchy of values, which can be accessed through intentional feeling of values. Next to his book on formalism, Scheler also composed several articles, was accepted into the Catholic Church, and worked on the prominent Catholic magazine *Hochland*.

Much like his doctoral adviser, the second German Nobel Laureate in literature, Rudolf Eucken, as well as indeed most of the philosophers at the time (not only those in the [Germany](#)), Scheler attempted to contribute journalistically to the war and, in doing so, find sense in a world that seemed to be going up in flames. Scheler's war publications are – compared to those of his colleagues – most philosophical; they are closely connected to his phenomenology and therefore significant. Initially, one can observe a politicization of his phenomenology. It became characterized by a friend-foe dichotomy that developed in all belligerent cultures during the war. This politicization was defused in the second half of the war and omitted at the end.

In his famous 1914-1915 essay “The Genius of War and the German War”, Scheler conceptualizes the nation as an intellectual collective entity, which discovers and recognizes itself through war. The German nation, purified through the war, had the political mission of pushing [Russia](#) back into Asia and unifying Europe. By analysing music, language, religion, gender roles, and thought, Scheler tries to demonstrate a fundamental difference between Europe and Asia.

Scheler's tendency toward national self-criticism increased during the course of the war. In a lecture in Frankfurt in 1916, Scheler attempted to explain this phenomenon of an all-pervading hate towards Germany. This prompted his essay “The Causes of Hatred Against

Germans", which was first published in 1917 and again in 1919. The strongest motivation of the hate lay, according to Scheler, in the newly established unique German work ethic, which was intensified by political, economic and social requirements. The ancient, characteristic German pursuit of the infinite, which expressed itself in German idealism, coalesced with the German work ethic.

In his lecture "On Europe's Cultural Reconstruction" in 1917-1918, Scheler finally took a strong position against nationalism entirely and committed himself to Europeanism. Even though his Europeanism primarily encompassed continental Europe, Scheler suggests that [England](#) should also be included and that this new Europe should be open towards Asia – at least culturally. Scheler now defines Europe as a "community of intellect and love", which corresponds with his definition of nation. For Scheler, the unity of Europe was the reference point for a post-war order. He used the term "Europeanism" in an affirmative manner, to show a third possibility of forming unity beyond nationalism and internationalism. According to Scheler, Europe is not defined by its geography, but rather is a concept that connotes a unified, spiritual structure. For Scheler, the collective enemy is the capitalistic, liberal, bourgeois, [nationalistic](#) and imperialistic ethos.

Over the course of the war, the success of his war philosophy, which initially celebrated the war as a creative force, became uncanny for Scheler. He had changed his assessment of the war, viewing it as a moral disaster in terms of blame, remorse, penitence, and repentance. The war emerged as a consequence of moral decadence in Europe, its break with its heritage, as well as with Christianity and a European culture. In the second half of the war, Scheler similarly intensified his criticism of his own nation and the "ideas of 1914". However, Europeanism and anti-capitalistic criticism can be identified as constants in his war philosophy.

Postwar Career

At the end of 1918, Scheler was awarded the title of Honorary Professor in Berlin. A year later, at the insistence of [Konrad Adenauer \(1876-1967\)](#), he was promoted to director of the new Research Institute for Social Sciences in Cologne. He was appointed as a Catholic philosopher, along with socialist [Hugo Lindemann \(1867-1949\)](#) and liberal [Leopold von Wiese \(1876-1969\)](#). At the same time, he became a professor of philosophy at the University of Cologne. Yet Scheler had already begun distancing himself from Catholicism and working on a seemingly pantheistic theory.

In the 1920s, Scheler abandoned his Europeanism in favour of an "age of compensation". The anti-Russian component in his work, which continued for some time as anti-bolshevism, was substituted by a perspective of kinship between Germany and Russia. Eventually Scheler

advocated the idea of everlasting peace as a secular perspective. However, until this peace could be realized, instrumental militarism, which he criticized during the war, would have to be preserved.

In 1927, he assumed a professorship at Frankfurt am Main. Shortly before his second son [Max Georg \(1928-2003\)](#), by his third wife and former student [Maria Scheu \(1892-1969\)](#), was born, Scheler died of a heart attack. In the years after the war, his writings focused on philosophical anthropology, sociology of knowledge, and questions of pacifism.

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