

# Hitler's Monsters: The Occult Roots of Nazism and the Emergence of the Nazi 'Supernatural Imaginary'\*

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I

The success of National Socialism, the unique appearance of the Führer, has no precedent in German History ... The consequence of these historic and unprecedented political occurrences is that many Germans, due to their proclivity for the romantic and the mystical, indeed the occult, came to understand the success of National Socialism in this fashion.

Alfred Rosenberg, 1941<sup>1</sup>

Near the end of the First World War a twenty-six year old veteran and art student, discharged from the German army due to wounds received on the Western Front, proceeded to Munich to seek his fortune. Neither born nor raised in the Reich proper, the ambitious young artist had developed a passion for Pan-Germanic ideology, spending most of his time consuming any literature he could find on the history of the Teutonic people. Shortly after arriving in Bavaria's capital city, he joined a working group of like-minded nationalists dedicated to forging a Greater Germany devoid of Jews and Communists. Profoundly influenced by the right-wing, occult milieu of prewar Vienna, the working group adopted an elaborate array of folkish (*völkisch*) ideas, including pseudo-scientific racism and esoteric symbols such as the swastika.<sup>2</sup> Within two years, the young artist had helped transform this discussion circle of a few dozen radical racists into the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP).<sup>3</sup>

These biographical details describe almost perfectly the political and ideological trajectory of the future Führer of the Nazi movement, Adolf Hitler. Except that the young artist in question was not Hitler, but Walter Nauhaus, leader of the Germanic Order

\* I would like to thank the two anonymous readers for *German History*, as well as Benita Blessing, Anthony Steinhoff and George Williamson, for making helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. I would also like to thank Stetson University for a 2009 Summer Research Grant supporting a trip to the German Federal Archives and State Library in Berlin, where much of the research for this article was conducted.

<sup>1</sup> 'Die Erfolge des Nationalsozialismus, die einmalige Erscheinung des Führers haben kein Beispiel in der deutschen Geschichte. Ein Volk, das wie das deutsche in den Jahren 1918 bis 1919 vor dem völligen Zusammenbruch stand und in der Systemzeit noch tiefer hineingetrieben wurde, findet sich in der nationalsozialistischen Bewegung unter ihrem Führer wieder und vollbringt im Laufe weniger Jahre so gewaltige Taten und Leistungen, dass der Menschenverstand dieses kaum zu fassen vermag. Die Folge dieser geschichtlichen und politischen Erscheinungen ist, dass sich viele Deutsche auf Grund ihrer Neigung zur Romantik und zur Mystik, ja zum Okkulten, mit der Auslegung der Erfolge des Nationalsozialismus auf ihre Weise befassen'. Alfred Rosenberg, as quoted in BAB (Bundesarchiv Berlin): NS 8/185, pp. 49–50.

<sup>2</sup> Hermann Gilbard, *Die Thule-Gesellschaft: Vom okkulten Mummenschanz zum Hakenkreuz* (Munich, 1994), pp. 15–18.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (London, 2004), pp. 143–4; Peter Levenda, *Unholy Alliance* (London, 2002). pp. 75–7.

of the Holy Grail, and co-founder, with Rudolf von Sebottendorff, of the proto-Nazi Thule Society.<sup>4</sup> Nauhaus was a follower of the Wilhelmine-era esoteric philosophy known as 'Ariosophy', developed somewhat independently by two Austrian occultists, Guido von List and Lanz von Liebenfels. Ariosophy prophesied the resurgence of the ancient Indo-European Aryan race, now embodied by the Germanic people, through adherence to a series of arcane pagan religious practices and strict racial purity. In Liebenfels's case, these ideas were supplemented by his own occult doctrine of theozoology, which suggested the extraterrestrial origins of the original Aryan 'God Men' and recommended the forced sterilization of the biologically inferior.<sup>5</sup> We now know that Hitler himself, like Nauhaus, read Lanz von Liebenfels' semi-pornographic, occult magazine *Ostara*.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the early political and ideological trajectories of the prominent occultist Nauhaus and Adolf Hitler overlap so closely raises an old question: what were the links between the Wilhelmine occult movement and the incipient Nazi Party?<sup>7</sup> The preeminent authority on the 'occult roots of Nazism', Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, acknowledges the genuine influence of Ariosophic doctrines on National Socialism, which fuelled a complex of 'apocalyptic beliefs and fantasies' culminating in the 'chilistic promise of a Third Reich'.<sup>8</sup> Corinna Treitel, on the other hand, denies any special affinities between occultism and Nazism, a relationship she characterizes as one of 'escalating hostility'.<sup>9</sup>

Both scholars are to some extent correct.<sup>10</sup> While occult figures undoubtedly played an important role in the early days of the NSDAP, it is equally clear that leading Nazis criticized and persecuted occult organizations thereafter. Hitler's concerted attempt to distance his movement from the Thule Society also gives one pause. After all, the Nazis were never averse to honouring the ideas of marginal figures with esoteric proclivities, including the convicted murderer and former inmate of an insane asylum, Karl Maria Willigut, or the proponent of 'World Ice Theory', Hans Hörbinger. So when Hitler in *Mein Kampf* dismisses 'racist German wandering scholars ... [who] rave about old Germanic heroism, about dim prehistory, stone axes, spear and shield', a clear reference to Thulists such as Nauhaus and Sebottendorff, one is compelled to take him at his word.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Gilbhard, *Thule-Gesellschaft*, pp. 10–15.

<sup>5</sup> Lanz von Liebenfels, *Ostara*, 39 (1915); Wilfried Daim, *Der Mann, der Hitler die Ideen gab* (Munich, 1958), pp. 16–55.

<sup>6</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 195–7.

<sup>7</sup> To take only a few prominent examples, see Trevor Ravenscroft, *The Spear of Destiny* (New York, 1982); Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, *Le Matin des Magiciens* (Paris, 1960); Peter Orzechowski, *Schwarze Magie – Braune Macht* (Ravensburg, 1987); Jean-Michel Angebert, *The Occult and the Third Reich: The Mystical Origins of Nazism and the Search for the Holy Grail* (New York, 1974); Michael Fitzgerald, *Stormtroopers of Satan: An Occult History of the Second World War* (New York, 1990); James Webb, *Flight from Reason* (London, 1971); James Webb, *The Occult Underground* (London, 1974); Levenda, *Alliance*; Dusty Sklar, *Gods and Beasts: The Nazis and the Occult* (New York, 1977); Stephen Flowers and Michael Moynihan, *The Secret King* (London, 2007), pp. 18–19.

<sup>8</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 196–204.

<sup>9</sup> Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul* (Baltimore, 2004), pp. 210–42.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Staudenmaier, 'Occultism, Race and Politics in Germany, 1880–940: A Survey of the Historical Literature', *European History Quarterly*, 39, 1 (2009), pp. 47–70.

<sup>11</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Boston, 1943), pp. 326–7; Bernard Mees, 'Hitler and Germanentum', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39, 2 (2004), pp. 255–70.

Nevertheless, the sociopolitical and intellectual networks between the early Nazi Party and the Thule Society—not to mention the later occult and pseudo-scientific movement—were richer and more complex than much recent scholarship would suggest. The NSDAP retained closer ties to the Wilhelmine occultist milieu than any mass party of the Weimar era. More importantly, the NSDAP went far beyond the obscure theories of ‘*völkisch* wandering scholars’ to craft a broader, more populist message of imagined *völkisch* community and supernatural fantasy. Indeed, after breaking with occult figures such as Nauhaus and Sebottendorf, the NSDAP developed a malleable discourse that drew on elements of prewar occultism but was also more ideologically eclectic and politically accessible; what I call the ‘supernatural imaginary’.

Although scholars have frequently employed the ‘notion of imaginary identification’ to explain the allure of fascism, the idea of a ‘supernatural imaginary’ is most similar to the philosopher Charles Taylor’s definition of a ‘social imaginary’.<sup>12</sup> For Taylor, the social imaginary ‘is how people imagine their social existence, how they integrate with others, and the deeper normative ideas that influence these expectations’. While political ideology ‘is often the acquisition of a small minority’ the social imaginary

is shared by a whole society or large group; theory is expressed in theoretical terms while imaginary is described by images and legends; the imaginary is the common understanding that creates possible commonplace actions and a sense of legitimacy that is shared among all.<sup>13</sup>

The social imaginary, according to Taylor, ‘can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature. That is another reason for speaking here of an imaginary and not a theory’.<sup>14</sup>

There are of course important distinctions between Taylor’s ‘social imaginary’ and the Nazi ‘supernatural imaginary’. Taylor links the ‘social imaginary’ explicitly to a post-Enlightenment disenchantment of the world, representing ‘the end of a certain kind of presence of religion or the divine in public space’. Far from ‘expel[ling] the world of supernatural forces’, however, National Socialism recast the symbolic order through recourse to popular occultism, folklore and pseudo-science, creating a space in which existing views could be overturned, displaced and modified to fit a Nazi world view.<sup>15</sup> An alternative to more rational and deterministic ideologies such as ‘materialistic Marxism’ and liberal ‘finance capitalism’, the Nazi ‘supernatural imaginary’ also challenged traditional Catholic and Protestant worldviews, substituting an array of occult ideas, mythological tropes and pseudo-religious affinities in place of political or ideological coherence.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The notion of imaginary identification can also be connected to the overarching psychoanalytic conception of fantasy, which has been used to great avail by theorists of nationalism, communism, totalitarianism, and postfascism. Fantasy scenarios express a conscious or unconscious wish. Imaginary identification is one site for such wishful scenarios’. George Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, 2008), p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, pp. 23–4. Whereas Taylor’s concept of an ‘imaginary’ has some important affinities with Jacques Lacan’s, it is far broader in its implications and obviously transcends the ‘mirror stage’ of early childhood development. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Psychoses* (Book III) (New York, 1997), pp. 143–60.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185–7.

<sup>16</sup> George L. Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (New York, 1987), p. 164.

As the German journalist and unofficial Hitler biographer Konrad Heiden observed as early as the 1930s, Nazi ideology included elements of 'Every kind of political theory, from the most reactionary monarchism to pure anarchy, from unrestricted individualism to the most impersonal and rigid Socialism'.<sup>17</sup> Instead of seeking ideological consistency, fascism sought social and political consensus through the conscious and subconscious use of collective practices, rites and symbols, a 'network of relationships' that helped create a 'relativization of classical dichotomies: of rational and irrational, Left and right, revolutionary and reactionary, modern and anti-modern'.<sup>18</sup> Hence, in contrast to the esoteric 'secret doctrines', elitist social composition and obscure practices of Wilhelmine occultism, the Nazi 'supernatural imaginary' incorporated an eclectic array of popular mythologies and contradictory attitudes towards modernity that helped define the party's appeal as a dynamic, mass movement. It was precisely this fungibility, this lack of a clear 'political religion', whether Left or right, Christian or pagan, *völkisch* or cosmopolitan, that made the 'supernatural imaginary' so useful in articulating and justifying National Socialism.<sup>19</sup>

## II

It was Thule people to whom Hitler came in the very beginning; it was Thule people who first joined forces with Hitler.

Rudolf von Sebottendorff, 1933<sup>20</sup>

The early Thule Society membership list remains a contentious topic among historians. While some scholars claim that virtually every early Nazi leader was at some point a member, others argue that only a few leading Nazis attended Thule meetings at Sebottendorff's rooms in the Four Seasons Hotel and then only as guests. The fact remains that Rudolf Hess, Hans Frank, Alfred Rosenberg, Dietrich Eckart, and the co-founder and first chairman of the German Workers' Party (*Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* or DAP), Karl Harrer, were either frequent guests or outright Thule members.<sup>21</sup> So too was Sebottendorff, who organized the purchase in 1918 of the 'Munich Observer' (*Münchener Beobachter*) as a vehicle for promoting the German Order's political programme.<sup>22</sup>

Sebottendorff would always insist that the group was apolitical, focusing primarily on occult activities typical of Theodor Fritsch's prewar German Order.<sup>23</sup> But this insistence on the apolitical nature of the Thule Society was undoubtedly tactical. The Imperial German and early Weimar governments were primarily interested in extremist political organizations, not esoteric discussion circles. This relative freedom from surveillance probably explains why the Thule Society was able to meet openly at the Four

<sup>17</sup>Konrad A. Heiden, *A History of National Socialism* (New York, 1935), pp. 42, 66.

<sup>18</sup>See Martin Baumeister, 'Auf dem Weg in die Diktatur: Faschistische Bewegungen und die Krise der europäischen Demokratien', in Dietmar Süß and Winfried Süß (eds), *Das 'Dritte Reich': Eine Einführung* (Munich, 2008), p. 31. Also see Joachim Fest, *The Face of the Third Reich: Portraits of the Nazi Leadership* (New York, 1999), pp. 188–9.

<sup>19</sup>See Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (Wheaton, Ill., 1993).

<sup>20</sup>Ellic Howe, *Rudolf Freiherr von Sebottendorff*, unpublished typescript (1968), p. 67.

<sup>21</sup>Thomas Weber, *Hitler's First War* (Oxford, 2010), p. 251.

<sup>22</sup>Gilbhard, *Die Thule-Gesellschaft*, pp. 55–66; Wolf Rüdiger Hess (ed.), *Rudolf Hess: Briefe* (Munich, 1987), pp. 17–18; Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (New York, 1961), pp. 40–1; Sklar, *Gods and Beasts*, pp. 2–5.

<sup>23</sup>Reginald H. Phelps, "'Before Hitler Came": Thule Society and Germanen Orden', *Journal of Modern History*, 35, 3 (1963), pp. 245–61.

Seasons and draw such an eclectic crowd of Pan-Germans, conservative intellectuals and future Nazis, even as other radical right-wing groups were persecuted.

True to form, the new society mixed esoteric lectures by Sebottendorff on subjects such as ancient German divining rods with open talk of a coup d'état against the civilian government. At the first joint meeting of the Thule Society and German Order, which happened to be 9 November 1918, the day that Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed Germany a Republic, Sebottendorff urged his colleagues to take up arms against 'Juda'. A few weeks later, in December 1918, Sebottendorff devised a plan to kidnap Kurt Eisner, the Jewish Socialist prime minister of the newly declared Bavarian Republic, but it failed miserably. So did a scheme to infiltrate the civilian militia for counterrevolutionary aims, which resulted in the arrest of multiple Thule members and public denunciation in the regional parliament.<sup>24</sup>

The most sensational of these plots was an attempt to stage a coup against the Bavarian Soviet Republic in April 1919. Despite having participated in multiple right-wing putsch attempts over the previous four months, Sebottendorff somehow obtained permission from Weimar's centre-left government to found his own paramilitary Free Corps, with which he planned to take power in Munich. Before Sebottendorff's putsch against the Communist authorities could be initiated, however, the Bavarian 'Red Army' uncovered the plot and arrested seven conspirators, including Walter Nauhaus, who were summarily executed. The 'murder' of these seven 'hostages' raised the Thule Society's profile in radical nationalist circles across Germany, but it also discredited Sebottendorff, who was blamed for leaking the names of the conspirators.<sup>25</sup>

All these blunders and lost opportunities made obvious the need for a party political counterpart to the secretive, conspiratorial Thule Society, just as Fritsch's Reich Hammer League (*Hammerbund*) acted as a political complement to the occult-oriented German Order.<sup>26</sup> For while Sebottendorff preferred to maintain the primarily bourgeois, occultist character of the Thule Society, his colleague Karl Harrer recognized the necessity to extend the group's influence beyond the wealthier middle classes. As early as November 1918 Harrer had co-founded a 'political workers' circle' with the railway locksmith, Anton Drexler, to attract nationalist members of the labouring classes. Two months later, on 5 January 1919, Drexler, also a member of the ultra-nationalist Fatherland Party, joined with Harrer, the economist Gottfried Feder, and the right-wing writer and poet Dietrich Eckart to form the German Workers' Party (DAP).<sup>27</sup>

Unlike the Thule Society, the DAP did have some working class members—mostly railway workers invited by Drexler—and met not in the upscale Four Seasons, but a local tavern. The DAP was nonetheless spearheaded by a number of dedicated Thulists, including Karl Harrer and Friedrich Krohn, who designed the swastika flag for Hitler.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the German Order and the Thule Society played a central role in creating the future Nazi Party's preeminent paper, *The Munich (later Racial) Observer*. Purchased by Sebottendorff before the end of the First World War, the *Munich Observer* was first

<sup>24</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 143–6; Phelps, 'Before', pp. 245–61; Gilbhard, *Thule-Gesellschaft*, pp. 60–6.

<sup>25</sup> Gilbhard, *Thule-Gesellschaft*, pp. 76–87, 136–47.

<sup>26</sup> Reginald Phelps, 'Theodor Fritsch und der Antisemitismus', in *Deutsche Rundschau*, 87 (1961), pp. 442–9.

<sup>27</sup> Rudolf von Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler Kam: Eine historische Studie* (Munich, 1933; rev. edn ed. Dietrich Bronder, Hanover, 1964), pp. 81–4; Gilbhard, *Die Thule-Gesellschaft*, pp. 148–51; Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 149–50.

<sup>28</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 151–2; Levenda, *Alliance*, pp. 77–9.

used as a political vehicle for Sebottendorff's short-lived German Socialist Party (*Deutsch Sozialistische Partei*). Remarkably, Sebottendorff was able to keep the paper afloat during the tumultuous postwar years, including the Bavarian Soviet Republic, even advertising meetings of the Thule Society, German Order, and later both the German Socialist and the German Workers' parties.<sup>29</sup>

The paper was initially more sympathetic to the right-wing German Socialists who, despite the name, enjoyed a more solidly bourgeois pedigree than Drexler's upstart German Workers' Party. Still, as the historian Reginald Phelps observes, however, the twelve-point political programme published by Sebottendorff on 31 May 1919 is remarkably similar to the twenty-five-point programme composed by Adolf Hitler and Anton Drexler nine months later. Meanwhile, in August 1919, the paper changed its name to the *Racial Observer* (*Völkischer Beobachter* or *VB*) and moved its publishing offices to Franz Eher Verlag, soon to become the official Nazi press. In October the *VB* reported on a meeting of the DAP for the first time, including a speech by one 'Herr Hitler'—who had joined the party a month earlier—attacking the Jews. By early 1920 it became clear that the *VB* was paying increasing attention to the now renamed National Socialist German Workers' Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* or NSDAP) and its new star, Adolf Hitler. It was at this point that Hitler began to push for a break with the Thule Society.<sup>30</sup>

Given Hitler's dismissive comments about 'racist wandering scholars', it is tempting to presume that Sebottendorff's occultism was chiefly responsible for the tensions between Hitler and the DAP's Thule contingent. But Hitler was clearly more frustrated with the Thule Society's lack of political savvy, loose organization, and elitist tendencies. It was equally problematic for Hitler that many Thule members maintained ties to rival nationalist organizations, including Sebottendorff's German Socialist Party. These tensions between the DAP, the Thule Society and other *völkisch* groups played out in the pages and editorial meetings of the *Racial Observer*, which had so far tried to avoid endorsing any one particular racist party.<sup>31</sup> In July 1920, Hitler finally insisted that the paper devote its attention to the NSDAP and cease providing a venue for conservative splinter parties. By the end of the year Sebottendorff and Harrer were out; Hitler's mentor Dietrich Eckart and the ideological czar of the party, Arthur Rosenberg, were in, and the paper was purchased for the NSDAP thanks to a sizeable loan from Ritter von Epp. Suffice it to say that the main complaint of Hitler, Hess and other Nazi leaders about the Thule Society was its bourgeois mentality and lack of feeling for mass politics, not the occultist ideals that informed its worldview.<sup>32</sup>

Although the NSDAP cut its ties with Sebottendorff and company in 1920, the Thule Society—and Fritsch's occult German Order that preceded it—played an integral role in the formation of the Nazi Party.<sup>33</sup> From Anton Drexler, Dietrich Eckart and Alfred Rosenberg, to Rudolf Hess and Hans Frank, 'almost all Hitler's early collaborators were

<sup>29</sup> See Sebottendorff, *Bevor*, pp. 191–6; Phelps, 'Before', pp. 245–61; George Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (Detroit, 1987), pp. 204–5.

<sup>30</sup> Phelps, 'Before', pp. 245–61; Weber, *Hitler's First War*, pp. 257–9.

<sup>31</sup> Sebottendorff, *Bevor*, pp. 189–90; Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 150–1.

<sup>32</sup> See Phelps, 'Before', pp. 245–61; Gilbard, *Die Thule-Gesellschaft*, pp. 152–66; Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 150–4; Howe, *Sebottendorff* (unpub. MS, 1968), pp. 66–8.

<sup>33</sup> Phelps, 'Before', pp. 245–61.

connected with the Thule, even if they were not themselves members'.<sup>34</sup> And despite the Nazi Party's later persecution of many esoteric organizations and occult practitioners, the early DAP, its *völkisch* allies and its major press organ were dominated by individuals with an abiding interest in elements of occultism. In fact, by the mid-1920s, Hitler's NSDAP had managed to attract a number of former rivals, including 'völkisch wandering scholars' such as Dinter, Fritsch and Wiligut. Hitler's NSDAP was a very different animal from Nauhaus and Sebottendorff's Thule Society. But there is little question that the party had its organizational roots in the Wilhelmine occult milieu.

### III

He who does not carry demonic seeds within him will never give birth to a new world.<sup>35</sup>

Passage in Ernst Schertel's *Magic*, as underlined by Hitler.

If the NSDAP was a direct offshoot of the Thule Society, how much truth is there to the claim that Hitler and other leading Nazis were themselves students of the occult? One of the co-founders of Ariosophy, Lanz von Liebenfels, his postwar publisher, Herbert Reichstein, and Sebottendorff himself all insisted that Nazi ideology was a clear expression of their Austro-German Ariosophist views.<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke also finds a number of ideological affinities between Ariosophists such as Liebenfels, List and Hitler, although he describes Ariosophy as 'more a symptom than a cause in the way that it anticipated Nazism'.<sup>37</sup>

After all, many young Germans and Austrians raised in the wake of German unification were preoccupied with ancient and medieval history, enamoured of Pan-German and pseudo-scientific race theories, and fascinated by the work of the Grimm Brothers or Richard Wagner.<sup>38</sup> It is also easy to forget how profoundly Hitler's prewar Vienna and Munich were immersed in occult and esoteric doctrines, from Theosophy, Anthroposophy and Ariosophy, and World Ice Theory to astrology, clairvoyance, paganism, witchcraft, alternative medicine, eastern esotericism, and pendulum dowsing.<sup>39</sup> In his unsystematic but insatiable appetite for reading, Hitler certainly came across

<sup>34</sup>As Sebottendorff recalled in his 1933 memoir, *Bevor Hitler kam*, with only slight embellishment, 'Apart from the Thule itself, the future Führer's armory consisted of the Deutsche Arbeiter Verein [precursor to the DAP], which was founded in the Thule Society by Brother Karl Harrer, also the Deutsch[sic]-Sozialistische Partei, which was led by Hans George Grassinger, and whose official organ was the *Völkischer Beobachter*'. Howe, *Sebottendorff* (unpub. MS, 1968), pp. 66–8.

<sup>35</sup>Timothy Ryback, *Hitler's Private Library* (New York, 2010), pp. 159–62.

<sup>36</sup>Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, p. 192; Daim, *Mann*, pp. 17–48; Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler Kam*, pp. 188–90.

<sup>37</sup>Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 194–203.

<sup>38</sup>Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (Detroit, 1987), pp. 66; Brigitte Hamann, *Hitlers Wien: Lehrjahre eines Diktators* (Munich, 1996), pp. 39–45; Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, p. 193; August Kubizek, *The Young Hitler I Knew*, trans. E.V. Anderson (London, 1954), pp. 117, 179–83, 190–8; Eduard Gugenberger and Roman Schweidlenka, *Die Faden der Nornen: Zur Macht der Mythen in politischen Bewegungen* (Vienna, 1993), pp. 113–15; Henry Picker, *Hitlers Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier* (Munich, 2003), p. 95.

<sup>39</sup>Hamann, *Wien*, pp. 7–9, 285–323; Ellic Howe, *Urania's Children: The Strange World of the Astrologers* (London, 1967), p. 4; Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*; Treitel, *Science*. Also see, for example, research on divining, pendulum dowsing, 'scientific' astrology, and anthroposophic 'biodynamic' farming methods in the Third Reich. BAB: N 21/815, R56V 924; Uwe Werner, *Anthroposophen in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich, 1999); Schellinger, et al., 'Zwischen Szientismus und Okkultismus: Grenzwissenschaftliche Experimente der deutschen Marine im Zweiten Weltkrieg', in *Zeitschrift für Anomalistik*, 10 (2010), pp. 287–321.



works of Ariosophy, including the 'manichean comic-book dualism of blonds and darks, heroes and sub-men, Aryans and *Tschandalen*, described in the *Ostara* of Lanz von Liebenfels'.<sup>40</sup>

Still, most evidence suggests that the supernatural dimensions of Hitler's ideology were popular and eclectic, dismissing anything as obscure as List's rune readings, Liebenfels's heraldry, or Sebottendorff's astrological predictions.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Hitler referred to Christianity at least as often as he cited German mythology or the occult. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler makes hundreds of references to the Old and New Testaments, occasionally complimenting Jesus and early Christianity.<sup>42</sup> Hitler also had a tendency to invoke 'providence' and divine intervention in his speeches and conversations, which is why some historians have argued for the profoundly Christian (or at least pseudo-Christian) elements that suffused Hitler and other Nazis' ideology.<sup>43</sup> Yet Hitler evinced a clear hostility towards organized religion, discussing ways of marginalizing the Catholic and Protestant Churches even while he applauded the 'authentically' German aspects of popular Christianity. This ambivalent, apparently contradictory relationship with Christianity mirrors Hitler's complicated relationship with the occult in general.<sup>44</sup>

There are numerous instances where Hitler considers Judaism, Christianity and a host of other world religions, esoteric practices and superstitions as part of his emerging 'supernatural imaginary'. In terms of early sources, we have Dietrich Eckart's extensive (if undoubtedly embellished) reconstruction of conversations with Hitler, as well as the frequent references to the devil, monsters, vampires and other unsavory supernatural characters in *Mein Kampf*.<sup>45</sup> Also useful because it was ostensibly off the record and has the added benefit of hindsight is the extensive commentary that Hitler made in regard to religion and the occult in his so-called table talks, recorded by two of Martin Bormann's secretaries, Heinrich Heim and Henry Picker, and edited by Bormann himself between 1941 and 1944. The well-known English translation by Hugh Trevor-Roper has numerous weaknesses, including passages that were later shown to be inaccurate. But when qualified by comparison to the German edition, published by Picker himself, it provides an excellent window into Hitler's mature views on the supernatural.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 194–200.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197–201.

<sup>42</sup> Adolf Hitler, 12 April 1922, in Norman H. Baynes (ed.), *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April 1922–August 1939*, Vol. 1, pp. 19–20 (Oxford, 1942). See Werner Jochmann (ed.), *Adolf Hitler: Monologe im Führerhauptquartier* (Munich, 2000); Picker, *Tischgespräche*; Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 29–31.

<sup>43</sup> See Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (Cambridge, 2003); Derek Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism* (Oxford, 2010); Kevin Spicer, *Hitler's Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (Dekalb, 2008); Manfred Ach and Clemens Pentrop, *Hitlers 'Religion': Pseudoreligiöse Elemente im nationalsozialistische Sprachgebrauch* (Munich, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Ach and Pentrop, *Hitlers 'Religion'*, pp. 57–69; Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*; Kubizek, *Young Hitler*, pp. 79–81; George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany, from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich* (New York, 2001), pp. 189–90.

<sup>45</sup> See Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York, 1943); Dietrich Eckart, *Der Bolschewismus: von Moses bis Lenin* (Munich, 1924).

<sup>46</sup> In employing Trevor-Roper's English translation of Hitler's table talk, Martin Bormann (ed.) (trans. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Hitler's Secret Conversations 1941–1944*, New York, 1953), I am only including passages that are corroborated by the German originals from Picker's text: Picker, *Tischgespräche*.



What first becomes clear in these sources is Hitler's distaste for the Christian Church's exploitation of ordinary Germans' authentic desire for spiritual fulfillment in order to propagate its own interests. By introducing 'that mad conception of life that continues into the alleged Beyond' and which 'regard[s] life [as] negligible here below', Christianity had 'crippled' humanity's natural search for meaning. 'Under cover of a religion', Hitler continued, 'the Jew has introduced intolerance in a sphere in which tolerance formerly prevails'.<sup>47</sup> For this reason, the Third Reich needed 'to protect for all time any further sections of the German people from the danger of mental deformity, regardless of whether it be religious mania or any other type of cerebral derangement'.<sup>48</sup> 'Priests of both confessions represented the greatest public danger', Hitler added, looking forward to the time when he could settle accounts with these priests without worrying about 'juridical niceties'.<sup>49</sup> Eventually, Hitler opined, modern science and 'free scientific inquiry' would render Christianity and all other religious dogmas obsolete.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time—and this is crucial to our understanding Nazism's relationship with the supernatural—Hitler insisted that organized religion must continue until it 'can die a natural death' and '[t]he dogma of Christianity gets worn away before the advances of science'.<sup>51</sup> Until this happened, which could take another century, the Nazi Party had to be careful in its public attitude towards Christianity or any other deeply felt spiritual creed. Mixing politics and religion, Hitler observed, had never been productive. This attitude also meant rejecting, as Rosenberg suggests above, any implications that Hitler was some kind of messiah. Rather, 'the Party should hold itself aloof from religion' and 'never organize religious services for our supporters'.<sup>52</sup>

Recourse to the supernatural was still necessary, Hitler noted, in order for people to explain

unexpected events which they cannot possibly foresee and with which they cannot cope. Superstition I think, is a factor one must take into consideration when assessing human conduct, even though one may rise superior to it oneself—and laugh at it.

Astrology and other aspects of religion and the occult were obviously a 'swindle', Hitler conceded. But in dealing with 'questions, that have to do with superstition, one has to accept that these things could be wrong one hundred times ... if it however is right ... a single time', then that superstition would be passed down another two generations.<sup>53</sup> In rejecting religion and 'mystical knowledge' outright, liberals and Marxists had clearly misread the German people. Attacking Christianity merely alienated the well-meaning peasants 'behind whose Christianity hides an authentic faith that is rooted in nature and the blood'.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Trevor-Roper, *Conversations*, p. 255; cf. Picker, *Tischgespräche*, pp. 106, 305.

<sup>48</sup>Trevor-Roper, *Conversations*, p. 416; cf. Picker, *Tischgespräche*, p. 356.

<sup>49</sup>Picker, *Tischgespräche*, p. 104; Hitler derides hypocritical Christians, for example, who would make a deal with 'the Marxist mortal enemies of all religions' for a parliamentary seat while, 'for a minister's chair they would even enter into marriage with the devil, unless the devil were deterred by a remnant of decency'. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 268.

<sup>50</sup>Picker, *Tischgespräche*, pp. 73, 267.

<sup>51</sup>Trevor-Roper, *Conversations*, p. 49.

<sup>52</sup>Hitler, as quoted in Ach and Pentrop, *Hitlers 'Religion'*, p. 59; Trevor-Roper (ed.), *Conversations*, pp. 100, 277–9; cf. Picker, *Tischgespräche*, p. 76.

<sup>53</sup>Trevor-Roper, *Conversations*, p. 473; Picker, *Tischgespräche*, pp. 444–5.

<sup>54</sup>Hitler, as quoted in Ach and Pentrop, *Hitlers 'Religion'*, p. 68.

Thus, according to Hitler, people needed both science and religion, natural and supernatural explanations, in order to understand the world. Hitler himself defended fantastical 'world ice' theories suggesting that the events in the Bible were caused by giant blocks of ice colliding with earth.<sup>55</sup> He also pointed out that 'fasting and many teachings of natural healing are useful ... It is no accident that the Egyptian priesthood was simultaneously the medical profession'. While it would be 'intolerable' if religion were to employ its doctrine 'in order to strangle human progress', Hitler concluded, 'if modern science does nothing more than to eliminate [these ancient teachings] then it causes damage' as well.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, Hitler praised Islam and Japan's Shinto religion,

which is one of the essential reasons for [Japan's] success ... Just as in Islam, there is no kind of terrorism in the Japanese State religion, but, on the contrary, a promise of happiness. This terrorism in religion is the product, to put it briefly, of a Jewish dogma, which Christianity has universalized and whose effect is to sow trouble and confusion in men's minds.<sup>57</sup>

Mocking British and American insistence on the superiority of Christianity, Hitler suggested that 'God' actually reserved 'His mercies for the heroes of Japan ... for the religion of Japanese is above all a cult of heroism, and its heroes are those who do not hesitate to sacrifice their lives for the glory and safety of their country'. 'The Christian faith, as it is taught by the Catholic Church', Hitler continued,

is a school of pessimism rather than of optimism. The Japanese religion, on the contrary, rouses men to enthusiasm by the promise it holds of the rewards in the Hereafter, while the unfortunate Christian has no prospect before him but the torments of Hell.<sup>58</sup>

These private comments suggest that the public message Hitler promoted towards Arabs in Nazi propaganda—namely that National Socialism had much in common with Islamic culture and religion—was more than pragmatic anti-British diplomacy. It was a reflection of Hitler's genuine if nonetheless superficial admiration for Islam.<sup>59</sup>

One can see similar elements of Hitler's malleable and eclectic supernatural imagery when he discusses the enemies of National Socialism. In criticizing Communism in *Mein Kampf* for example, Hitler declares that 'the original founders of this plague of nations must have been veritable devils; for only in the brain of a monster—not that of man—could the plan of an organization assume form and meaning'.<sup>60</sup> Since one 'cannot drive out the Devil with Beelzebub', fighting Jews and Communists meant developing a hostile attitude towards the Soviet Union, while avoiding bourgeois political meetings 'as the devil [avoids] holy water'.<sup>61</sup> In other sections, echoing Liebenfels' *Ostara*, Hitler states that racial miscegenation leads to 'monstrosities halfway between man and ape', and that 'the personification of the devil as the symbol of all

<sup>55</sup> Picker, *Tischgespräche*, p. 94.

<sup>56</sup> Picker, *Tischgespräche*, p. 74.

<sup>57</sup> Trevor-Roper, *Conversations*, 319; Picker, *Tischgespräche*, p. 184.

<sup>58</sup> Trevor-Roper, *Conversations*, pp. 339–40; Picker, *Tischgespräche*, pp. 209–11, 267, 355.

<sup>59</sup> See Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (Yale, 2009), pp. 3–8, 51–9, 154–62, 194–204; also see Jeffrey Herf, 'Nazi Germany's Propaganda Aimed at Arabs and Muslims During World War II and the Holocaust: Old Themes, New Archival Findings', *Central European History* (2009), pp. 709–36, here p. 42.

<sup>60</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 63.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 662, 480.

evil assumes the living shape of the Jew'.<sup>62</sup> Hitler also repeatedly compares Jews to vampires and bloodsuckers, a common trop among Nazi leaders, while describing the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a 'mummy of a state'.<sup>63</sup> This frequent use of 'monstrous' supernatural imagery was atypical of mainstream Weimar parties, but quite common in Nazi political discourse.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, we should not ignore the selectively cosmopolitan, orientalist elements that characterized Hitler's emerging supernatural imaginary. Reading widely in literature, history and religion, Hitler insisted, 'had opened his eyes to the world'. In addition to his fascination with Native American culture as articulated in Karl May's Westerns, Hitler also claimed to have enjoyed E. Marlitt's *The Heathen Princess*, because she was critical of Christian intolerance towards pagan religions. Hitler even posited that one might exhibit tolerance towards non-Aryan peoples (although never Jews) after the existential battles for living space had been won.<sup>65</sup> Hitler's claims to have expanded his mental horizons through consuming 'world' literature are in many ways dubious, George Mosse suggests, because 'Hitler's manichaeic universe was fundamentally opposed to virtue as these novels defined it'. Yet Hitler's 'National Socialism found it easy to enter into an alliance with the world which popular literature advocated; indeed, the overall popularity of Nazi leaders was partly based upon the annexation of this tradition'.<sup>66</sup>

That Hitler's 'supernatural imaginary' was invested with a selective cosmopolitanism is hardly surprising given the orientalist elements that defined popular Wilhelmine esotericism and pseudo-science. Though radical antisemites and proponents of Nordic racial superiority, both List and Liebenfels studied the origins of Korean, Japanese and Polynesian symbols, believed in Hindu reincarnation and karma, and dabbled in the Kabbalah (oddly, a common theme among otherwise radical antisemites).<sup>67</sup> Liebenfels, Sebottendorff, Nauhaus and other Ariosophists were also affiliated with the Masonic Templar Order of the Orient (OTO), which drew explicitly on the Hindu, Chinese, Islamic and Kabbalistic practices in their initiations and liturgy. In fact Sebottendorff had moved to Istanbul before the First World War, obtained Turkish citizenship, and immersed himself in Islamic studies, eastern astrological practices and the Kabbalah, which he studied with a Turkish Jew.<sup>68</sup>

Hitler and his colleagues were always calculating in applying the lens of cultural relativism or post-colonial antipathy in order to criticize 'western' imperialism.<sup>69</sup> The Nazi

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 402, 324.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 327, 544, 665, 141; see also, for example, H. Schneider, *Der jüdische Vampyr chaotisiert die Welt (Der Jude als Weltparasit)* (Lüneberg, 1943); Fred Karsten, *Vampyre des Aberglaubens* (Berlin, 1935); Ernst Graf von Reventlow, *The Vampire of the Continent* (New York, 1916).

<sup>64</sup> This observation is based on my extensive reading of liberal, conservative, and socialist newspapers and private papers in conducting research on my first two books, *The Price of Exclusion: Ethnicity, National Identity, and the Decline of German Liberalism, 1898–1933* (New York, 2006) and *Living With Hitler: Liberal Democrats in the Third Reich, 1933–1945* (New Haven, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> Mosse, *Masses and Man*, pp. 54–7, 71–3; also see E. Marlitt, *The Little Moorland Princess* (Philadelphia, 1872).

<sup>66</sup> Mosse, *Masses and Man*, pp. 65–7.

<sup>67</sup> Ach and Pentrop, *Hitlers 'Religion'*, pp. 8–21, 38–9; Hans-Jürgen Glowka, *Deutsche Okkultgruppen, 1875–1937* (Munich, 1981), pp. 14–24.

<sup>68</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 35–48, 90–176; Glowka, *Okkultgruppen*, pp. 28–72, 80–108; H.A. Weishaar, *Rote Erde* (Ludwigshafen, 1969), pp. 53–140.

fascination with Asian, even 'Semitic' cultures and philosophies was nonetheless authentic and certainly belies the apparently uncompromising, biologically based racism and fanatical anti-Semitism that we associate with the Third Reich. This contradictory attitude toward the ethno-religious other, and the selective affinity for a host of alternative spiritual and esoteric beliefs, is precisely what made the supernatural imaginary so effective in providing a space in which cosmopolitan and orientalist elements of contemporary popular culture might be appropriated in the process of building ideological consensus across a diverse Nazi Party and even more eclectic German population.<sup>70</sup> If the Third Reich 'pledged to transform the dreams of Marliitt ... and May into existing reality', Mosse observes, the 'morality, the dream, had become detached from its actual setting'. Nazism henceforth perverted this 'liberal literature', whose 'relationship with reality was so tenuous ... by infus[ing] them with *völkisch* [*sic*] substance'.<sup>71</sup> In other words, the richness of National Socialism's 'supernatural imaginary' permitted Hitler to draw the *völkisch* lessons he wanted while exploiting the post-colonial, anti-western underpinnings of interwar occultism whenever they were convenient.

#### IV

Unclear mythical concepts ... must disappear from the German press where they are used in conjunction with the essence and idea of National Socialism ... Concepts such as *Thing* [folk gathering] and cult simply remind us of those pure German prophets about whom the Führer says in his book *Mein Kampf* that most of all they would like to clothe themselves in bearskins, and who maintain further that they created National Socialism some forty years before he did. The National Socialist movement is too close to reality and life to deem it necessary to drag forth outmoded and dead concepts from the dark past, concepts which in no way are able to support the difficult political battle of today, but just weigh it down.

Joseph Goebbels, 1935<sup>72</sup>

It is all the same to me whether this or some other one is the real truth about the prehistory of the Germanic tribes. Scholarship advances from one hypothesis to the next, which change every few years ... The only fact that is of importance, and for this these people are being paid, is to have the kinds of thoughts about history that will strengthen our people in their much needed national pride.

Heinrich Himmler<sup>73</sup>

Nazi leaders were clearly ambivalent about the degree to which they should appeal to specific occult doctrines, folklore and mythology, or eastern and pagan religions, in fashioning their Third Reich. Nevertheless, as Himmler suggests, it was the very malleability, the pragmatic avoidance of a particular political or religious worldview, that made the 'supernatural imaginary' so useful in propagating Nazi ideology. 'It was not a matter of reactivating mythical-magical thinking', writes Wolfgang Emmerich,

<sup>69</sup> Howe, *Urania's Children*, p. 4; Hamann, *Hitlers Wien*, pp. 7–9, 285–323; Weber, *Hitler's First War*, pp. 255–60.

<sup>70</sup> On the post-colonial, even multicultural elements that defined German scholarship on the East, see Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Washington, D.C., 2009); also see Perry Myers, 'Leopold von Schroeder's Imagined India: Buddhist Spirituality and Christian Politics During the Wilhelmine Era', *German Studies Review*, 22, 3 (2009), pp. 619–36; Herf, *Propaganda*.

<sup>71</sup> Mosse, *Masses and Man*, pp. 66–7.

<sup>72</sup> Heinrich Himmler, as quoted in Wolfgang Emmerich, 'The Mythos of Germanic Continuity', in James R. Dow and Hannjost Lixfeld, *The Nazification of an Academic Discipline: Folklore in the Third Reich* (Bloomington, 1994), p. 43.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

and even less so the various contents of myths, it was rather a refunctionalizing of the mythical in the sense of fascist rule. In order to be useful, the mythical presentation had to choose a middle road between vagueness and specificity, for either the intent of the mythos is too dark to be useful or it is too clear to be believed.<sup>74</sup>

National Socialism's inherently contradictory social and political message—attacking the forces of capital yet vilifying the Left; nationalizing industry and protecting private property; encouraging religious freedom and denouncing the Jews; advocating social welfare and universal health care while eliminating the biologically inferior—was only possible through the widespread inculcation of a supernatural, quasi-mythical vision of the world that accused Jews, Communists, freemasons, foreigners and any other scapegoats of monstrous powers and intentions.<sup>75</sup>

Hitler had already espoused basic elements of the Nazi supernatural imaginary when he joined the DAP in September 1919.<sup>76</sup> But Dietrich Eckart, Alfred Rosenberg, Rudolf Hess and other Nazi associates of the Thule Society subsequently helped 'transform [Hitler's] somewhat naïve ideas into more truly intellectual concepts and to find an outlet for his bourgeois feelings in setting before him a programme to be realized'.<sup>77</sup> A serious poet and playwright with a considerable following in Munich's right-wing milieu, Dietrich Eckart was undoubtedly the most important influence on Hitler in the early days of the Nazi Party (he is supposed to have said on his deathbed in 1923, 'Hitler will dance, but it is I who play the tune'). Despite his keen intellect and Machiavellian approach to politics, Eckart was a connoisseur of interwar esotericism and embraced, like Hitler and Himmler, pseudo-scientific doctrines such as World Ice Theory. Fascinated by Buddhism as well as Christianity, Eckart was also a strong believer in the power of mythology as a motivational tool and impressed these ideas on Hitler.<sup>78</sup>

Another frequent guest of the Thule Society, the NSDAP's chief ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, was an expatriate with eastern connections, having studied architecture in Riga and engineering in Moscow before immigrating to Germany to escape the Bolsheviks in 1917.<sup>79</sup> In his famous essay, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, Rosenberg emphasizes the 'Germanic' foundations of all great empires, including the Indian, Persian and Palestinian among them. Like other early Nazi 'intellectuals', Rosenberg was fascinated by Buddhism and Hinduism and extolled the universal meaning of the swastika across Asia and the Middle East.<sup>80</sup> Still, we need to be careful about accepting the accusation of some contemporaries that Rosenberg wished to replace Christianity

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>75</sup> See Hitler and Drexler, 'Party Programme', in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (eds), *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts* (New York, 1984), pp. 14–16; also see Heiden, *National Socialism*, pp. 42, 66. For more on the continuities between mainstream liberalism and National Socialist ideas and practices, see Eric Kurlander, *Living With Hitler: Liberal Democrats in the Third Reich, 1933–1945* (New Haven and London, 2009); Eric Kurlander, 'Between Detroit and Moscow: A Left Liberal Third Way in the Third Reich', *Central European History*, 44 (2011), pp. 279–307.

<sup>76</sup> Weber, *Hitler's First War*, pp. 255–60.

<sup>77</sup> Heiden, *National Socialism*, pp. 66–9; Ernst Piper, *Alfred Rosenberg: Hitlers Chefideologe* (Munich 2005), pp. 15–17.

<sup>78</sup> Dietrich Eckart, *Der Bolschewismus: Von Moses bis Lenin* (Munich, 1924), pp. 18–25; Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, pp. 17–22, 142–3; Levenda, *Alliance*, pp. 92–4; Picker, *Tischgespräche*, pp. 94–5.

<sup>79</sup> Piper, *Rosenberg*, pp. 19–42.

with a Germanic religion based on Nordic mythology.<sup>81</sup> Like Hitler, Rosenberg had an ambivalent attitude towards superstition and repeatedly denied any interest in creating a political religion.<sup>82</sup> Following Georges Sorel, Rosenberg viewed faith and spirituality in largely instrumental terms, as a means of forging a national solidarity behind the National Socialist movement. The point of appealing to Germanic virtues, *völkisch* mythology and the supernatural was to facilitate political consensus, not create a 'political religion'.<sup>83</sup> In *Myth*, for example,

Rosenberg [adopted] the two million German dead, who had entered into the Valhalla of the race-soul. By posing as their heirs, the Nazis were able to exploit recollections of the feelings of comradeship and solidarity that had animated the outsiders they had a greater appeal to ... than more staid ... organizations.<sup>84</sup>

Hitler also referred to those who had fallen during the time of struggle as 'my apostles' and said that, 'with the Third Reich you have risen from the dead'. In the Nazi movement, added the Nazi Labour leader Robert Ley, these men 'have found the road to eternity'.<sup>85</sup> The living dead could also be used negatively, of course. The NSDAP's economic expert Gottfried Feder, whose speeches attacking 'Jewish finance capital' are what initially attracted Hitler to the Party, frequently railed against 'the ferment of decomposition is at work ... Wassermann, Warburg, or Levy ... charge punitive interest to exploit the German people and turn them into zombies'.<sup>86</sup> Not many economists in a major party would explain the vagaries of capitalism by alluding to the undead. But Nazi leaders, as we have seen, drew upon an array of supernatural tropes in evaluating friends and foes alike.<sup>87</sup>

If Goebbels found authentic expressions of occultism and folklorism unhelpful—as he indicates above—he too understood the political utility of drawing on the supernatural imaginary. Unlike Bormann, Rosenberg or Reinhard Heydrich, who actively sought to 'enlighten' the German population by debunking esoteric practices they deemed incompatible with National Socialism, Goebbels was a populist who understood the importance of drawing upon—or at least tolerating—interwar occultism and

<sup>80</sup>Lewis Spence, *The Occult Causes of the Present War* (London, 1940), pp. 132–46; also see Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1934), pp. 21–144; Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler Kam* (Bronder edn), pp. 219–25.

<sup>81</sup>Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, pp. 17–22, 142–3; Levenda, *Alliance*, pp. 92–4; Picker, *Tischgespräche*, pp. 94–5; Dietrich Eckart, *Der Bolschewismus: von Moses bis Lenin* (Munich, 1924), pp. 18–25; Heiden, *National Socialism*, pp. 66–9; Piper, *Rosenberg*, pp. 15–17.

<sup>82</sup>I have explained expressly in the introduction and also throughout the work itself that a power political movement that embraces many religious confessions could not solve questions of religious or philosophical nature'. Rosenberg, *Mythus*, pp. 6–15.

<sup>83</sup>Piper, *Rosenberg*, 179–230; Gugenberger and Schweidlenka, *Die Faden der Nornen*, pp. 106–10; George Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany* (Chicago, 2004), pp. 290–2; Mosse, *Masses and Man*, p. 75.

<sup>84</sup>Robert Cecil, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology* (New York, 1972), pp. 36–41, 95–6, 111, 119, 163; Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, p. 263.

<sup>85</sup>Mosse, *Masses and Man*, pp. 71–3.

<sup>86</sup>Roger Griffin (ed.), *Fascism* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 121–2.

<sup>87</sup>Gugenberger and Schweidlenka, *Die Faden der Nornen*, pp. 112–13; By transforming Hitler's 'somewhat naïve ideas into more truly intellectual concepts', Eckart and Rosenberg helped create 'A form of antisemitism that attacks not merely the world conspiracy of a few dozen Rabbis but the destruction of civilization and prosperity by the "Jewish spirit", will naturally meet with more sympathy from better intellects and even possibly from opponents'. Heiden, *National Socialism*, pp. 66–70; also see Spence, *Occult Causes*, pp. 124–5, 164–5, 180.



popular spirituality as a means of mollifying the German people.<sup>88</sup> Instead of merely reviving obscure religious and mythological elements from the past, Goebbels argued, National Socialism had to tap into the romantic nationalist and Christian feelings that pervaded German society.<sup>89</sup> Thus, while Goebbels privately vilified occultists for their bad scholarship and lack of scientific thinking, he was willing to support the careful exploitation of supernatural tropes in order, in Himmler's words, to 'strengthen our people in their much needed national pride'. At times his Reich Propaganda Ministry even soft-pedalled or blatantly ignored popular folk, occult or alternative religious practices that Bormann, Rosenberg and Heydrich were working to eradicate.<sup>90</sup>

National Socialism's invocation of the supernatural was never merely pragmatic. Hitler's Deputy Führer and early amanuensis, Rudolf Hess, was a lifelong devotee of the occult sciences. Born in Alexandria, Egypt, he had thought of becoming an astronomer before volunteering in the First World War and then going off to study history and geopolitics under the Munich Japanologist and possible Thule Society associate, Karl Haushofer.<sup>91</sup> Unlike his more bourgeois colleagues in the Thule Society, whose esoteric proclivities he shared, Hess had reservations about the [group's] relative conservatism and elitism. Indeed, after hearing Hitler speak for the first time in early 1920, he withdrew from the Thule Society and shifted his loyalty to the NSDAP.<sup>92</sup> Inspired by Sebottendorff and Haushofer, however, Hess remained a devoted student of Ariosophy, eastern spirituality and astrology until his ill-advised flight to England in May 1941.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the cynical nature of his comments above, Himmler's investment in the supernatural imaginary was also more than instrumental. Himmler's Institute for Ancestral Heritage (*Ahnenerbe*) spent millions of Reichsmarks researching the origins of the Aryan race in Tibet, India and Europe, and promoting the supernaturally-inspired World Ice Theory as an alternative to 'Jewish physics'. The Reichsführer also sent expeditions to Africa and the Middle East in search of lost religious relics he believed would enhance the power and prestige of the Third Reich.<sup>94</sup> Possessing an abiding interest in world

<sup>88</sup> See Goebbels directive, 5.15.41, in BAB: NS 15/399; Bormann to Goebbels, 6.30.41, in BAB: NS 18/211; Goebbels to Bormann, 7.03.41, in BAB: NS 18/211.

<sup>89</sup> Griffin, *Fascism*, pp. 120–1.

<sup>90</sup> Irkowsky to Reichsringleiter Tießler, 12.03.41, 12.13.41; Letter to Witt in NSDAP Parteikanzlei, 2.02.42, in BAB: NS 18/497; Tießler to Rosenberg, 12.06.41, in BAB: NS 18/497; Tießler to Irkowsky, 12.05.41, in BAB: NS 18/497.

<sup>91</sup> Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, "'Kampf um Lebensraum": Zur Rolle des Geopolitikers Karl Haushofer im Dritten Reich', *German Studies Review*, 4, 1 (1981), pp. 79–104.

<sup>92</sup> Fest, *Face*, pp. 190–1.

<sup>93</sup> Woodruff Smith, *Politics and the Sciences of Culture in Germany, 1840–1920* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 229–32; Ach and Pentrop, *Hitlers 'Religion'*, pp. 31–49; Gilbhard, *Die Thule-Gesellschaft*, pp. 55–66; Hess, *Rudolf Hess: Briefe*, pp. 17–18; Bullock, *Hitler*, pp. 40–1; Sklar, *Gods and Beasts*, pp. 2–5; Glowka, *Okkultgruppen*, pp. 25–6. Treitel, *Science*, pp. 213–16; Also see Bormann to Gauleiter, 5.07.41, in BAB: NS 6/334; Goebbels directive, 5.15.41, in BAB: NS 15/399; Bormann copy, 6.03.41, in BAB: NS 6/334; Bormann to Goebbels, 6.30.41, in BAB: NS 18/211; Goebbels to Bormann, 7.03.41, in BAB: NS 18/211.

<sup>94</sup> See extensive research and correspondence on Welteislehre in the SS Ahnenerbe and Himmler's personal staff, in BAB: NS 21/458, 465, 676, 682, 683, 699, 702, 214-716, 769, 770; Mosse, *Nationalization of the Masses*, pp. 199–202; Orzechowski, *Schwarze Magie*, pp. 108–11; Dow and Lixfeld, *Nazification*; Hannjost Lixfeld, *Folklore and Fascism: The Reich Institute for German Volkskunde* (Bloomington, 1994), pp. 21–2; Reinhard Greve, 'Tibetforschung im SS Ahnenerbe', in Thomas Hauschild (ed.), *Lebenslust durch Fremdenfurcht* (Frankfurt/Main, 1995), pp. 168–209; Glowka, *Okkultgruppen*, pp. 111–15.

religions and the occult, Himmler walked around with his own copy of the Bhagavad Gita, praised the Indo-Germanic belief in reincarnation, and sincerely accepted the idea of good and bad karma.<sup>95</sup> In terms of defining one's racial enemies in the East, Himmler likewise vacillated between (pseudo) biological theories drawn from western science and mystical conceptions of history drawn both from Ariosophy and from Iranian, Indian and Norse mythology.<sup>96</sup> As Jeffrey Herf has recently noted, Himmler possessed a more than superficial appreciation of Islamic religion and culture.<sup>97</sup>

This conscious (and subconscious) appropriation of shared supernatural symbols and beliefs are not the same thing as a Nazi 'political religion' or even 'forging a national religiosity'.<sup>98</sup> The haphazard introduction of numerous pagan and National Socialist holidays indicates less the desire to create a political religion or 'sacralization of politics' and more a pragmatic attempt to exploit existing supernatural tropes without worrying about the internal theological consistency of the proceedings.<sup>99</sup> Certainly some Nazis, notably Himmler and Rosenberg, speculated privately about creating a new Germanic religion. Even they remained sceptical of the practicality of such a project, however; hardly surprising given their eclectic religious and esoteric proclivities.<sup>100</sup> The only consistent ideological elements at the heart of the supernatural imaginary were a positive belief in Ario-Germanic

<sup>95</sup>Michael Kater, *Das 'Ahnenerbe' der SS 1935–1945* (Munich, 2006), pp. 11–91, 191–264; Felix Kersten, *The Kersten Memoirs* (New York, 1994), pp. 148–54; Roger Manvell and Heinrich Frankel, *Heinrich Himmler* (New York, 1968), pp. 181–2; Wilhelm Wulff, *Zodiac and Swastika* (New York, 1973), pp. 73–108; also see Wolfgang Behringer and Jürgen Michael Schmidt (eds), *Himmlers Hexenkarthotek: Das Interesse des Nationalsozialismus an der Hexenverfolgung* (Bielefeld, 1999).

<sup>96</sup>Himmler believed one could 'bring the knowledge and the methods of traditional astrology into line with the Natural Sciences'. Wulff, *Zodiac*, 92–4; Kersten, *Memoirs*, pp. 149–52; Gugenberger and Schweidlenka, *Die Faden der Nornen*, 116–27, 137–9.

<sup>97</sup>In a speech to Islamic troops recruited under the SS purview, Himmler declared that Germans 'were friends of Islam on the basis of convictions ... we Germans and ... you Muslims share the feeling of thankfulness to destiny that almighty God—you say Allah, it is of course the same thing—sent the Führer to the tortured and suffering people of Europe'. Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (Yale, 2009), pp. 199–202.

<sup>98</sup>See Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich* (London, 2001), pp. 252–5, Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*, pp. 291–6. For the debate on whether National Socialism is a 'political religion', see Jürgen Schreiber, *Politische Religion: Geschichtswissenschaftliche Perspektiven und Kritik eines interdisziplinären Konzepts zur Erforschung des Nationalsozialismus* (Marburg, 2009); Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics from the Great War to the War on Terror* (New York, 2007); Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton, 2006); Michael Ley and Julius Schoeps, *Der Nationalsozialismus als politische Religion* (Bodenheim b. Mainz, 1997); Claus-Ekkehard Bärsch, *Die Politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich, 1998); Hans Maier, *Politische Religionen: Die totalitären Regime und das Christentum* (Freiburg, 1995); Werner Reichelt, *Das braune Evangelium: Hitler und die NS-Liturgie* (Wuppertal, 1990); Klaus Vondung, *Magie und Manipulation: Ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen, 1971); Hans-Jochen Gamm, *Der braune Kult: Das Dritte Reich und seine Ersatzreligion. Ein Beitrag zur politischen Bildung* (Hamburg, 1962); Erich Voegelin, *Political Religions* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1986).

<sup>99</sup>Mosse, *Nationalization*, pp. 202–5; Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich* (London, 2001), pp. 261–5; Trevor-Roper, *Conversations*, p. 173; also see series of work on 'mythological' aspects of Nazi religion, for example Anton Grabner-Haider and Peter Strasser, *Hitlers mythische Religion: Theologische Denklinien und NS-Ideologie* (Vienna, 2007).

<sup>100</sup>'We're struggling towards a final form of belief. You can expect mature men to take part in this struggle and to share the dangers of having no fixed creed. But it's not right to root children up from their familiar world and make them face the problems of faith before they've fully grown. Let them keep the old ways so long as the old order survives; they'll come across it everyday when they're playing with their friends. Faith has to grow of its own accord; you can only clear the way for it, not dictate it'. Himmler, as quoted in Kersten, *Memoirs*, p. 149

superiority and a deep-seated, irrational conviction that the Jews were at the root of all evil.<sup>101</sup> Nothing else was persistent enough or enjoyed sufficient consensus to constitute a religion—civil, political or otherwise.<sup>102</sup>

For the most part, Nazi leaders studiously avoided working out the detailed liturgy, eschatology, or articles of faith that a new religion might have required. Instead, the Nazi Party found itself having to negotiate between true believers such as Hess and Himmler, who experimented with occult beliefs, and more instrumentalist Nazis such as Rosenberg and Goebbels, who merely saw the marketing value in meeting Germany's 'longing for myth' through affective religio-mystical politics.<sup>103</sup> If Hitler stood somewhere between those two groups, other Nazis such as Heydrich and Bormann worked actively, in the name of 'enlightenment', to eradicate occultism and Christianity alike.<sup>104</sup> Given these ideological discrepancies within the party leadership, it is no wonder that the 'supernatural imaginary' never constituted a 'political religion', much less a coherent political programme. Instead, it drew on a diverse array of supernatural elements in an attempt to counter the German bourgeoisie's political, psychological and spiritual demoralization in the wake of the First World War.<sup>105</sup>

## V

The power of occultism, as of Fascism, to which it is connected by thought patterns of the ilk of anti-semitism, is not only pathic. Rather it lies in the fact that in the lesser panaceas, as in superimposed pictures, consciousness famished for truth imagines it is grasping a dimly present knowledge ... Occultists rightly feel drawn towards childishly monstrous scientific fantasies ... Superstition is knowledge,

<sup>101</sup>Ohne die weiter unten näher spezifizierte Verbindung von Politik und Religion vorwegnehmen zu wollen, sei schon vorangeschickt, daß die hier aufgeführten Begriffe Volk, Reich und Führer dann einen religiösen Gehalt haben, wenn an eine besondere Relation zwischen Volk, Rasse, dem kommenden 'Dritten Reich', dem Führer und Gott einerseits und dem 'Juden' und dem 'Bösen' andererseits geglaubt wird. Dabei ist der Glaube—und nicht z.B. die Frömmigkeit—das wesentliche Merkmal von Religion, vor allem der Glaube an eine überirdisch in die menschlichen Verhältnisse eingreifende Macht'. Bärsch, *Politische Religion*, p. 12; Gilbhard, *Die Thule-Gesellschaft*, pp. 168–78.

<sup>102</sup>As the historian Joachim Fest has put it, 'The attempt to detach the masses' desire to believe from existing creeds in favour of a political ideology brought its own dogmas, places of sacrifice and liturgy; there was a God and a vision of the Devil that led to the bloodiest exorcisms in history'. As 'an ideology National Socialism never had the scholastic rigidity of Communist theory ... It was vague, imprecise, and deliberately left the greatest possible scope for irrational needs. Its followers owed allegiance less to the orthodoxy of a doctrine than to the person of the Führer. But the lack of clarity in the ideological reference-points has no bearing on the intensity of the emotions called for or aroused'. Fest, *Face*, p. 188.

<sup>103</sup>Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*, pp. 290–6.

<sup>104</sup>The detailed directive, issued to all state police, criminal police and secret police across Greater Germany, indicated that it was essential in the midst of a war for survival—in this case the pending invasion of the Soviet Union—that the Third Reich preserve the population's mental as well as physical powers. Occult teachings that pretend that human activities 'are dependent on magical, esoteric forces' can never be allowed to persist and must be combated with the 'sharpest immediate measures'. These measures would be directed especially at 'astologers, occultists, spiritualists, supporters of occult radiation theories, soothsayers (regardless of what kind), faith healers, supporters of Christian Science, supporters of Anthroposophy, Theosophy, and Ariosophy'. Heydrich directive, 6.04.41, in BAB: R58/1029; also see Bormann to Goebbels, 6.30.41, in BAB: NS 18/211.

<sup>105</sup>All these elements were 'well suited to describe the dilemmas of the Weimar Republic, but they were also taken over by National Socialism's utopia: the dialectic of the necessity of suffering, struggle, and overcoming, the concept of death as make-believe, part of a transparent, negative reality against the steady movement towards paradise—all these connect the Nazi experience with a deep European tradition'. Mosse, *Masses and Man*, p. 73; Burleigh, *Sacred Causes*, pp. 14–15.

because it sees together the ciphers of destruction scattered on the social surface; it is folly, because in all its death-wish it still clings to illusions: expecting from the transfigured shape of society misplaced in the skies an answer that only a study of real society can give ... Facts which differ from what is the case only by not being facts are trumped up as a fourth dimension ... With their blunt, drastic answers to every question, the astrologists and spiritualists do not so much solve problems as remove them by crude premises from all possibility of solution. Their sublime realm ... thus reinforces conformism.

Theodor Adorno, *Theses Against Occultism*<sup>106</sup>

In her important book on early twentieth-century German esotericism Corinna Treitel argues that the occult roots of Nazism are much exaggerated. What we might now call occult or pseudo-scientific practices, she contends, were highly modern, malleable and intrinsic to the way educated middle class Europeans negotiated the onrush of modernity after 1880. Faced with the putative disenchantment of the world and the decline in organized religious devotion, many Germans sought relief through alternative forms of spirituality, from astrology, clairvoyance, Theosophy and Ariosophy to various kinds of pseudo-scientific psychical and medical practices. 'Germans turned to occult beliefs', Treitel argues, 'not just to challenge but also to utilize the forces of modernity shaping their mental universe and very experience of life'.<sup>107</sup>

In rehabilitating occultism, Treitel joins a growing number of historians intent on dismantling an earlier orthodoxy that blamed the German bourgeoisie's irrationalism and anti-modernism for the rise of National Socialism.<sup>108</sup> More specifically, her work counters the arguments of George Mosse, Fritz Stern and others who locate the cultural and intellectual preconditions of National Socialism in the late-nineteenth-century resurgence of occultism and *völkisch* pseudo-science.<sup>109</sup> Certainly many Nazis, like the liberals who preceded them, embraced aspects of Enlightenment tradition, from criticizing occultism and confessional politics to supporting the welfare state, universal public education, and the application of science and technology to contemporary socio-economic problems.<sup>110</sup> Yet this underlying scepticism, even hostility, towards specific occult philosophies and uneven persecution of esoteric groups did nothing to deter the Third Reich from invoking a range of supernatural ideas and practices in perpetuating their domestic and foreign policy agenda.

That is why neither of the existing interpretations of Nazi relationship with the supernatural is entirely satisfying. The *Sonderweg* clearly overemphasizes the fascist

<sup>106</sup>Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London, 2005), pp. 238–44.

<sup>107</sup>Treitel, *Science*, pp. 50–2.

<sup>108</sup>Kevin Repp, *Reformers, Critics, and the Paths of German Modernity: Anti-Politics and the Search for Alternatives, 1890–1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Jennifer Jenkins, *Provincial Modernity: Local Culture and Liberal Politics in fin-de-siècle Hamburg* (Ithaca, 2003); Jan Palmowski, *Urban Liberalism in Imperial Germany: Frankfurt am Main, 1866–1914* (Oxford, 1999); see George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York, 1999); Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (Berkeley, 1974); Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (Cambridge, 1986); Thomas Laqueur, 'Why the Margins Matter: Occultism and the Making of Modernity', *Modern Intellectual History*, 3 (2006), pp. 111–35; Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 2001); Frederick Gregory, *Nature Lost: Natural Science and the German Theological Traditions of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton, 1999); Heather Wolffram, *The Stepchildren of Science: Psychological Research and Parapsychology in Germany, c. 1870–1939* (New York, 2009).

<sup>109</sup>See again, Mosse, *Crisis*; Stern, *Politics*; Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*; Herf, *Modernism*; Burleigh, *Sacred Causes*; Daim, *Mann*.

<sup>110</sup>See Kurlander, *Living*.

proclivities inherent in prewar esotericism.<sup>111</sup> But those interpretations that characterize Nazi attitudes as largely hostile to an eminently 'modern', pluralist occultism make two important elisions. First, following Thomas Laqueur, I do not think we can say that occultism was either as epistemologically 'modern' or as closely interwoven with science as Treitel, Alex Owen, and other historians of the European occult have argued.<sup>112</sup> Second, both interpretations tend to overlook the reality that National Socialism was neither ideologically monolithic nor politically consistent in its attitudes towards science or the supernatural.<sup>113</sup> Rather than dismiss the occult roots of Nazism on the one hand or view them as elements of 'reactionary modernism' on the other, we should take them seriously as part of a sociopolitical complex of ideas and practices that both reflected and refracted popular elements of the supernatural in order to appeal to a generation of ideologically uncertain and spiritually hungry German middle classes.

The Nazi 'supernatural imaginary' first of all operated to define the enemies of National Socialism by ascribing fantastical influence and altogether 'monstrous' qualities to its opponents. By binding Jews, Communists and freemasons to images of vampires, zombies, demons, devils, spectres, alien parasites and all sorts of other paranormal phenomena, the 'supernatural imaginary' helped justify otherwise exaggerated responses to eliminating 'an enemy who did not seem to adhere to the same cultural code'.<sup>114</sup> In this way, as Adorno suggests above, the supernatural imaginary provided a sociocultural space in which National Socialist enemies could be dehumanized, marginalized and figuratively transformed into monsters that required elimination.

The supernatural imaginary likewise created a discourse in which fantasies of emulation and 'illegal identification' could take place.<sup>115</sup> Nowhere was this 'illegal identification' more obvious than in the supernatural imaginary's ability to incorporate and exploit selectively cosmopolitan ideas. As we have seen, while denigrating Judaism and

<sup>111</sup>For examples of this revisionist work, see again Treitel, *Science*; Harrington, *Reenchanted Science*; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, 2004); Rabinbach, *Catastrophe*; Gregory, *Nature Lost*; Paul J. Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, vol. 1: *Eclipse of Certainty* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

<sup>112</sup>Laqueur, 'Margins'.

<sup>113</sup>Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, 2002), p. 19; Michael Saler, 'Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review', *American Historical Review*, 11, 3 (2006), pp. 692–716; Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. 1 (New York, 1998), p. 87; also see Martin Baumeister, 'Auf dem Weg in die Diktatur: Faschistische Bewegungen und die Krise der europäischen Demokratien', in Dietmar Süß and Winfried Süß (eds), *Das 'Dritte Reich': Eine Einführung* (Munich, 2008), p. 31.

<sup>114</sup>Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting*, pp. 62, 66; Hitler himself employs the 'bloodsucker' trope repeatedly in his writing to represent the dangerous influence of the Jew. This 'demonization' of the Jews (e.g., as servants of Satan, cast out of Israel/Heaven) and the ethnic other is also apparent, sometimes quite literally, in Nazi/völkisch discourse. Hubert Cancik and Uwe Puschner (eds), *Anti-Semitism, Paganism, völkisch Religion* (Munich, 2004); Christina von Braun and Ludwig Heid (eds), *Der ewige Judenhass* (Berlin and Vienna, 2000); Olaf Blaschke, *Katholizismus und Antisemitismus im deutschem Kaiserreich* (Göttingen, 1997); Adolf Leschnitzer, *The Magical Background of Modern Antisemitism* (New York, 1956); Wolfgang Heinrichs, *Das Judenbild im Protestantismus des deutschen Kaiserreichs* (Brauweiler, 2000); Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago, 2003); Daniel Pick, *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (New Haven, 2000); Gugenberger and Schweidlenka, *Die Faden der Norne*, pp. 112–13.

<sup>115</sup>Lacan recognized that the contents of imaginary identifications later in life are provided by suggestions coming from the symbolic order. Similarly, colonizers' choices for imaginary identifications make sense only in terms of the broader repertoire of ethnographic discourses ... This points to the way in which imaginary identifications are organized at the level of the body and body images ... the peculiarities of overseas colonialism encouraged

Christianity as 'terrorist' confessions, Hitler praised the Shinto, Buddhist and Islamic religions for their more sophisticated view of the world. Rudolf Hess, Walther Darré and Martin Bormann's correspondence reveals a similar fascination with world religions, eastern esotericism and non-European cultures. And Heinrich Himmler shows remarkable respect for Asian, Middle Eastern and (neo-)pagan religions, lamenting the Germans' adherence to a 'primitive' theology like Christianity.<sup>116</sup> Simultaneous expressions of sympathy for Asian peoples suffering under Britain's colonial rule cannot be dismissed as pure propaganda. Nor should they be understood as a Nazi 'colonial fantasies' presaging imperial designs on the 'Orient'.<sup>117</sup> Rather, these enthusiastic references to Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, philosophies and religions, typical of early twentieth-century-occultism and pseudo-science, reflect the capacity of the 'supernatural imaginary' for appropriating non-Western ideas, practices and philosophies as an alternative to liberal, bourgeois, Judeo-Christian culture.<sup>118</sup>

These complex and contradictory attitudes towards the supernatural make perfect sense when one considers the diversity of the Nazi movement. Incorporating virtually all elements of the German middle classes (and a significant minority of the working classes), Catholics as well as Protestants, former liberals and conservatives, Nazism can hardly be viewed as monolithic in its intellectual antecedents and political praxis. Many Germans embraced aspects of the occult, from astrology and clairvoyance to the lost city of Atlantis, without accepting the more systematic, fanciful or obscure aspects of the manifold 'secret doctrines' that pervaded prewar Central Europe. The Nazis were not immune to these influences, just as they were hardly unique trafficking in them.<sup>119</sup>

In tracing the evolution of the 'supernatural imaginary' we need to keep in mind the difference between conviction and appropriation, faith and exploitation. Hitler was not the first politician to exploit people's faith—whether in conventional religion, magic, folklore or astrology—for demagogic purposes. Much of what Hitler, Himmler, Hess, Bormann and other Nazi leaders filtered through the 'supernatural imaginary' was

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the proliferation of imaginary identifications by colonizers. The subjugated status of the colonized made them appear to be particularly available for mobilization as props in colonizers' fantasy scenarios ... And anything the colonial official did that involved the colonized became de facto part of native policy. Interactions with colonized people were viewed by many Europeans as lying outside the rules of behaviour that held sway in the metropole'. Steinmeitz, *Handwriting*, p. 61.

<sup>116</sup>In their preoccupation with witchcraft trials, for example, Himmler and other SS researches repeatedly lamented the medieval church's barbaric murder of women for expressing an alternative worldview, grounded in nature and folk traditions. Behringer and Schmidt, *Himmlers Hexenkarthotek*; see again, Trevor-Roper, *Conversations*; Kersten, *Memoirs*; Trevor Roper (ed.), *The Bormann Letters* (London, 1954); Wulff, *Zodiac*; Werner, *Anthroposophen*; Darré to Hotz, 4.18.39, in BAK: N 1094II, 25; Darré letters and research on Steiner and Anthroposophy, in BAK: N 1094I, 33.

<sup>117</sup>See Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870* (Durham, N.C., 1997).

<sup>118</sup>See again, Marchand, *German Orientalism*; Myers, 'Imagined India'; Russell Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (Lincoln, 1998); Jared Poley, *Decolonization in Germany* (Bern, 2005); Suzanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies* (Durham, N.C., 1997); Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago, 2001); Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox and Susanne Zantop (eds), *The Imperialist Imagination* (Ann Arbor, 1998); Matthew Gibson, *Dracula and the Eastern Question* (London, 2006).

<sup>119</sup>Goodrick-Clarke, *Roots*, pp. 202–4.



irrational and opportunistic. Many Nazis likewise invoked a generally hostile response to those who stood on the ‘unenlightened’ side of history: traditional conservatives, Catholics, magicians, freemasons and other esoteric groups. That is, Nazi reactions to the supernatural suggest that their antipathy to occult organizations and organized Christianity was not *merely* a function of an increasingly totalitarian state attempting to stamp out political rivals. National Socialism also employed a discourse of ‘enlightenment’ in the liberal sense of Voltaire’s *écrasez l’infame*.

This battle between enlightenment and supernatural elements played out within the Nazi Party from the early days of the DAP through the Second World War.<sup>120</sup> One might go so far to argue that the alternatively mystical, irrational and scientific, technocratic approach to defining one’s enemies—in particular the Jews—was a byproduct of this persistent interplay between scientific rationality and the supernatural imaginary. The Holocaust was only possible because the Jews were viewed simultaneously as supernatural enemies, with all the irrational, eschatological (‘redemptive’) elements that entails, and as a biological disease that needed to be eradicated in order to heal the German body politic. Without the largely supernatural figuring of the all-powerful Jew, the latter, ‘enlightenment’ approach would never have been applied as widely or vociferously.<sup>121</sup>

As the Nazi Party grew in stature and influence after 1920, the occultist ‘true believers’ in the party ranks were often marginalized and persecuted. However, even sceptics recognized the political utility of exploiting a ‘supernatural imaginary’ that might appeal to a larger bourgeois social milieu that viewed popular aspects of the occult as fundamental to negotiating the complexities of modern life. This selective tolerance of occultism might have waxed and waned due to the omnipresent fear that esoteric doctrines could, like Christianity, be manipulated to the detriment of the regime. But this paranoia regarding the *potential* emergence of alternative ideological loyalties, whether occultist or Christian, does nothing to diminish the actual influence these ideas had on cultural and intellectual life in the Third Reich.<sup>122</sup>

Taking the supernatural elements of National Socialism seriously hardly means reconstructing the *Sonderweg*. There was no inherent ‘special path’ between Wilhelmine

<sup>120</sup>For the scientific temper, any deviation of thought from the business of manipulating the actual ... is no less senseless and self-destructive than it would be for the magician to step outside the magic circle drawn for his incantation; and in both cases violation of the taboo carries a heavy price for the offender. The mastery of nature draws the circle in which the critique of pure reason holds thought spellbound’. Adorno and Horkheimer, as quoted in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, 2002), p. 19; ‘These can be called the binary, dialectical, and antinomial approaches, although those are somewhat rough-and-ready heuristic labels intended to highlight key features of particular interpretations, rather than being all-inclusive models. The binary and the dialectical approaches to the topic, with their ‘either/or’ logic, have been common since the late nineteenth century, but the antinomial approach, with its ‘both/and’ logic, seems to have become the prevailing one in recent years’. Michael Saler, ‘Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review’, *American Historical Review*, 11, 3 (2006), pp. 692–716.

<sup>121</sup>Here I’m referring to Saul Friedländer’s concept of ‘redemptive antisemitism’, in which, ‘the struggle against the Jews is the dominant aspect of a worldview in which other racist themes are but secondary appendages’. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. 1 (New York, 1998), p. 87.

<sup>122</sup>Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 3–11, 261–2; Robert Cecil, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology* (New York, 1972), pp. 36–41, 111–19, 163.

occultism and interwar National Socialism. Astrology, clairvoyance, divining, and pendulum dowsing; Germanic mythology, folklore, and fairy tales; pagan religion, witchcraft, and eastern philosophies; alternative healing, 'bio-dynamic' agricultural techniques and 'life reform' practices; all these cultural discourses and social phenomena were remarkably widespread across interwar Germany, compatible with many aspects of modernity, and certainly never confined to the radically racist, proto-fascist right.<sup>123</sup>

That does not mean, however, that all Weimar parties were equally susceptible to occultism. Nor were liberals, Socialists or even the Catholics equally capable of exploiting the 'supernatural imaginary' for political gain. In the end, the Nazi movement retained closer ties to the occult milieu than any other mass party of the Weimar Era. If the Nazis often appeared uncertain of how to proceed toward supernatural belief and practices, it was because they, for all their invocations of 'enlightenment' (*Aufklärung*), attacks on 'superstition' (*Aberglaube*) and internecine squabbling over the proper role of science and religion in the Third Reich, still recognized the utility, indeed, the necessity, of appealing to postwar Germany's desperate 'longing for myth' and desire for transcendence in making their amorphous racial and imperial visions a reality.<sup>124</sup>

### Abstract

While occult figures undoubtedly played an important role in the early days of the NSDAP, it is equally clear that leading Nazis criticized and persecuted occult organizations thereafter. Nevertheless, the sociopolitical and intellectual networks between the early Nazi Party and the Thule Society were richer and more complex than much recent scholarship would suggest. The NSDAP retained closer ties to the Wilhelmine occultist milieu than any mass party of the Weimar era. More importantly, the NSDAP went far beyond the obscure theories of 'völkisch wandering scholars' to craft a broader, more populist message that drew on elements of prewar occultism but was also more ideologically eclectic and politically accessible; what I call the 'supernatural imaginary'. As the Nazi Party grew in stature and influence after 1919, the occultist 'true believers' in the party ranks were often marginalized and persecuted. However, even skeptics recognized the utility of exploiting a supernatural imaginary that might appeal to a larger bourgeois social milieu that viewed popular aspects of the occult as fundamental to negotiating the complexities of modern life. If the Nazis appeared uncertain of how to proceed toward supernatural belief and practices, it was because they, for all their invocations of 'enlightenment' (*Aufklärung*), attacks on 'superstition' (*Aberglaube*), and internecine squabbling over the proper role of science and religion in the Third Reich, still recognized the utility, indeed, the necessity, of appealing to postwar Germany's desperate 'longing for myth' and desire for transcendence in making their amorphous racial and imperial visions a reality.

**Keywords:** supernatural, imaginary, occultism, superstition, myth, ideology

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<sup>123</sup>Treitel, *Science*, pp. 24–6, 243–8.

<sup>124</sup>See again Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*; Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting*; also see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (Oxford, 1970); David Redles, *Hitlers Millennial Reich* (New York, 2005); Anton Grabner-Haider, *Hitlers mythische Religion: Theologische Denklinien und NS-Ideologie* (Vienna, 2007).