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Nazism and the Occult

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ASSOCIATION OF NAZISM AND 'THE OCCULT'

This article will summarize the discursive networks (Bergunder 2010, pp.26-27) that associated National Socialism and "the occult" before examining their possible historical foundations in a diachronic analysis. In the post-war period, especially since the 1960s, ideas of an "esoteric National Socialism" were widely disseminated by best-selling books, movies, and other media (Goodrick-Clarke 2002, pp.107-127). The National Socialists were depicted as black magicians or occultists, and associated with "magic," "irrationalism," "occultism," or "superstition," vaguely summarized by the term "the occult." In the vast majority of those publications, "the occult" is used as a waste-basket category (Hanegraaff 2012, p.221) including a diffuse mass of negative "otherness." When it was not done because of sheer money-making and sensation-seeking, this "othering" resulted from an attempt to understand the often incomprehensible atrocities of the National Socialists, and to exclude them from "normal" people by depicting them as "irrational" or "evil."

An opposite "esoteric" interpretation was developed by far-right and neo-Nazi authors since the 1950s (Sünner 1999, pp.141-170; Goodrick Clarke 2002, pp.128-192). Those authors attempted to cut out the crimes committed by the National Socialists by placing their actions in the revisionist context of a dualistic battle of good and against evil. According to their writings, an "esoteric SS" took up the ancient tradition of defending "light and truth." After the war had been lost, those esoteric troops retreated to secret bases and continued their fight until today, giving hope and confidence to the admirers of the lost "Third Reich." Such ideas have been widely spread since the 1970s, and gained considerable importance since the 1990s.

Both discursive networks, which will be labeled "popular reception" and "esoteric neo-Nazism," are usually far detached from reliable historical sources. It will be shown that those networks were interdependent and created credibility through countless cross-references. A comprehensive study of that process of sedimentation (Bergunder 2012, pp.38-39) remains a desideratum. The following article will only be able to point out several key topoi. It will become clear, however, that the most commonly discussed "esoteric" influences on National Socialism were either marginal or entirely invented.

Before and During World War II

The process of associating National Socialism and signifiers like “magic” and “occult” already started after 1933 (Hakl, 2004). As early as 1934, the French author René Kopp published an article in the journal *Le Chariot*, stating that Bonaparte, Mussolini, and Hitler were “masters” sent to earth by higher powers. In 1939, Kopp asserted that pictures of Hitler proved his possession by “a ghost of unknown origin.” In his *Le tyran nazi et les forces occultes* (1939), Edouard Saby identified Hitler as a medium, a magician, and an initiate of a secret “Rosicrucian society” with links to Tibet, the *Vehm*. In the most influential of such publications, *Hitler speaks* (1939) by Hermann Rauschning, the reader was informed about Hitler’s practice of black magic and his possession by evil forces. Rauschning’s accounts, which were based on entirely fictitious conversations with Hitler, were spread in English, French, and German. They lastingly coined the “occult” image of Hitler and served as sources for later authors. The year 1940 saw the publication of Lewis Spence’s *Occult Causes of the Present War*, the book that established a still flourishing genre that links Nazism to Satanism. The common basis of the success of those various publications was an explanation for the incredible triumph of National Socialist Germany, so shortly after its defeat in World War I. The shocking fall of France in 1940 contributed to the effect of that new literary genre.

Popular Post-War Reception

In the 1960s, a wave of enormously successful publications continued the earlier “occultization” of National Socialism and its leaders. The most influential was *The Morning of the Magicians* (1960) by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, translated into several languages and selling millions of copies. The French authors presented the National Socialist elite as an order of black magicians initiated and controlled by secret societies such as the Thule Society or the fictitious Vril Society (for the latter, see Strube, 2013). Especially the SS and its “research institution,” the *Ahnenerbe*, were described as “a religious order” whose “monks” received their occult initiation on SS castles, performing dark magical rituals. Pauwels and Bergier were the most influential authors to coin the idea of an “esoteric National Socialism,” or “magical Socialism.” They included esoteric organizations like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or the Theosophical Society in their narrative. Through their occult connections, the initiated German elites were supposedly maintaining connections to Tibetan Lamas and the Eastern esoteric realms of Agartha and Shamballah (changing spellings, cf. Godwin 1996/2007, pp.94-173). Pauwels and Bergier also laid an emphasis on the subject of “Nazi science,” a mix of irrational magic and futuristic technology that developed into a major topos in popular culture.

Such ideas were widely spread by authors like Robert Charroux, in his bestseller *Le Livre des secrets trahis* (1965). The even more successful *The Spear of Destiny* (1973) by Trevor Ravenscroft elaborated the alleged magical operations of Hitler and his apprentices, adding their hunt for the Holy Lance and its “occult powers.” Those bestsellers stirred a vast amount of further successful books, like J. H. Brennan’s *Occult Reich* (1974) or Francis King’s *Satan and Swastika. The Occult and the Nazi Party* (1976). The perception of National Socialism in popular culture was heavily influenced by those publications. The idea of “occult Nazis” can be found in Hollywood movies like Steven Spielberg’s *Indiana Jones* series (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 1981; *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, 1989) as well as in more recent productions such as *Hellboy* (2004), *Captain America* (2011), or *Iron Sky* (2012). Similar topoi are reproduced in countless comic books, music records, or successful video games like *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (2001) and its successor *Wolfenstein* (2009). Despite its mix of half-truths and entirely fictitious accounts, the popular invention of “esoteric National Socialism” remains highly influential. It is backed up by a great variety of pseudo-scientific books and documentaries that decisively outnumber serious approaches to the subject.

Esoteric Neo-Nazism

Notions of an “esoteric National Socialism” were not only discussed in popular literature, but also in far-right and neo-Nazi circles. In the early 1950s, a group of men gathered in Vienna, consisting of the former Austrian SS members Wilhelm Landig (1909-1997) and Rudolf Mund (1920-1985), as well as the Swiss engineer Erich Halik. This “Vienna Circle” laid down the foundations for an “esoteric neo-Nazism” (see esp. Goodrick-Clarke, 2002; cf. Sünner, 1999). The first publications from the Vienna Circle sphere date from the 1950s when Halik published a series of articles in the Austrian journal *Mensch und Schicksal*. Halik maintained that the UFO sightings that caused a sensation since 1947 were not to be regarded as extraterrestrial space ships but as “cultic devices” used by “the highest hierarchy of Gnostic Christianity and accordingly of earlier Gnostic Paganism” to influence society. In order to back up his claims, Halik referred to the “research” of Otto Rahn (1904-1939), who had identified the medieval Cathars as the inheritors of a suppressed pagan tradition reaching back to the Gnostics, and whom he saw as the keepers of the Holy Grail. Later, Halik revealed that the supposed UFOs were nothing but secret German aircraft used by “esoteric forces” in the SS. Those “SS-Cathars” had retreated to subterranean bases under the poles after the defeat of Germany and were still operating under their emblem, the “Black Sun.”

Wilhelm Landig extended those topoi to his influential *Thule* trilogy, published in 1971 (*Götzen gegen Thule*), 1980 (*Wolfszeit um Thule*), and 1991 (*Rebellen für Thule*), respectively. The novels

transported a trivial but still complex narrative that reinterpreted the SS as successor of an ancient “heretical” tradition fighting a perennial battle against the “forces of evil,” the adherents of the “false god Jahwe.” On the “good side,” the reader would not only find Germans but also Arabs, Indians, Japanese, Chinese, South Americans, Mongolians, and, especially, Tibetan Lamas. The latter enabled extensive elaborations of the Shamballah/Agartha topos that was already familiar in the writings of authors like Pauwels and Bergier. It becomes evident that the Vienna Circle had been influenced by the popular writings about “esoteric National Socialism” and blended them with their positive reception of earlier authors like Otto Rahn and the “Aryan Atlantis” writer Herman Wirth (1885-1981).

A younger generation of authors continued the work of Landig and his companions in the late 1980s (Strube 2012, pp.239-253). At that time, the so-called *Tempelhofgesellschaft* (Temple Court Society) took up its publishing activities and organized various meetings. The THG was then led by the former policeman Hans-Günter Fröhlich and had close ties to the German-speaking far-right network. There was a vivid exchange between the older generation of the Vienna Circle and the THG, revolving around the “Black Sun” symbol and the supposed “Babylonian/Assyrian/Sumerian” origins of “the Germans.” Like Landig, they referred to earlier discourses from the 19th and early 20th century to back up those claims. In 1991, the THG authors Norbert Jürgen-Ratthofer and Ralf Ettl published *Das Vril-Projekt*, another brochure that wildly elaborated the popular narratives of the Thule and Vril Societies, putting a great emphasis on the UFO aspect and maintaining the extraterrestrial origin of “the Germans” who descended from a civilization in the star system Aldebaran, where they reigned over inferior races in an empire of “National Socialism on a theocratic basis.”

Besides the vast distribution of photos, drawings, and blueprints of “Nazi UFOs” (*Flugscheiben*), the main success of the THG writings remains the reinterpretation of the “Black Sun” symbol. While the “Black Sun” had been a central motif of esoteric neo-Nazism since the 1950s, it has only been related to an ornament in the floor of the Wewelsburg castle in the novel *The Black Sun of Tashi-Lhunpo* (1991), by the pseudonymous author Russell McCloud. The THG authors accordingly identified the ornament with the “Black Sun” and reinterpreted it as an ancient Babylonian, Assyrian, and thus German or Aldebaranian symbol expressing the “bright power of the true divinity.” This description also resurfaced in Landig’s *Rebellen für Thule* (1991), making the exchange of the THG authors with their mentor evident. After the THG had split up, Ralf Ettl founded the *Freundeskreis Causa Nostra* in 2005. It remains active until today and maintains relations to far-right publishers and networks.

HISTORICAL SOURCES

It has been indicated that the discursive networks of popular and neo-Nazi ideas about “esoteric National Socialism” are not independent. Popular stories like those about the Thule and Vril Societies clearly have influenced the construct of esoteric neo-Nazism. On the other hand, stories about *Flugscheiben* or the Black Sun were widely disseminated in popular culture. While most of the mentioned topoi evidently are post-war inventions, the question remains if there is a diachronic dimension to the association of National Socialism and esotericism. Various pre-NS groups and individuals, for example in the heterogeneous *völkisch* milieu, have evidently been influenced by esoteric ideas. This might lead to the assumption that esoteric ideas have also found their way to the core of National Socialist ideology. Indeed, the personal convictions of a few high-ranking individuals as well as the symbolism developed by organizations such as the SS seem to confirm that assumption. The following chapter will approach that complex question by shedding some light on key aspects that dominate post-war discourses on the relationship between esotericism and National Socialism.

The SS, the Wewelsburg, and the Ahnenerbe

No historical organization is as central to discourses about esotericism and National Socialism as the SS. It has already been indicated what image of the SS has been created in popular publications. In academic literature, the idea of a monolithic “SS state” (Kogon, 1946) consisting of elite warriors has long been predominant. In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars have begun to put this image into perspective. It has been demonstrated that the SS was a disunited body of sub-organizations and individuals struggling for power, representative for the National Socialist *polycracy* (Hüttenberger, 1976; cf. Schulte, 2009). The image of an “elite force in black uniforms” is more indebted to SS propaganda than to serious scholarship. The organizational chaos within the SS is one of the main reasons why its history was subject to various speculations in the post-war period, mostly focusing on the obscure projects of the *Ahnenerbe* and the megalomaniac plans of Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945). Usually, the head of the SS is the main example for the esoteric affinities of leading National Socialists. It has been shown, however, that his interests in subjects like astrology and Ariosophy were restricted to his private sphere (Longerich 2008, pp.289-296). Moreover, Himmler’s esoteric interests were exaggerated in such an abundant variety of publications that the few serious studies are easily overseen. A comprehensive, reliable study of Himmler’s relationship with esotericism has yet to be written.

An actual link to Ariosophy is Himmler’s patronage of Karl Maria Wiligut (1866-1946) who was known in the SS as “Weisthor.” Little is known about Wiligut’s actual thought, and it remains unclear to

which degree his ideas had a real effect on SS symbolism (such as the SS ring) and on the future plans for the extension of the Wewelsburg castle. The accounts of the astrologer Wilhelm Wulff and Karl Wolff, the head of Himmler's personal staff, are of questionable credibility (cf. Howe, 1967; Wulff, 1968; Hüser, 1987; von Lang, 1989; Schulte, 2009). It is certain that Wiligut exerted a direct influence on Himmler's personal thought, and that Himmler continued the relations to his advisor even after he had to officially drop him in 1939, when his stay in a mental asylum in the 1920s had become public. In the *Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt* (RuSHA) Wiligut was responsible for the archive and exerted significant influence on the department of *Vor- und Frühgeschichte*. There is no comprehensive, serious study about the life of Wiligut and his role in the SS, where he was generally detested (see Lange, 1998 for sources). The Vienna circle author Rudolf Mund has written a kind of hagiography; it is thoroughly unreliable (Mund, 1982 and 2002; cf. Mund, 2004; Goodrick-Clarke 1985/2004, pp.155-166 has adopted much of Mund's book).

Another curious case is Otto Rahn (1904-1939), one of the idols of post-war esoteric neo-Nazis. Rahn's quest for the Holy Grail and their supposed guardians, the Cathars, made a great impression on Himmler. Rahn became a co-worker of Wiligut and officially joined the SS in 1936. A special edition of Rahn's book *Luzifer's Hofgesind* (1937) was given to Hitler by Himmler. Rahn's background is little known and deserves further attention (cf. Lange, 1995 and 1999). It should be noted that he had written his main work, *Kreuzzug gegen den Gral* (1933), before he had had any contacts to the SS. Despite Himmler's interest, Rahn's studies of the Cathars remained his private matter and exerted no influence on SS ideology. After leaving the SS in 1939, most likely because of his homosexual leanings, Rahn committed suicide.

It has been shown how the Wewelsburg castle has been depicted as the center of black magical rituals performed by the SS, or as the safe place for the Holy Grail and the Holy Lance. For a long time, serious scholars at least suggested the possibility of "cults" performed at the castle (cf. Hüser, 1987; cf. Höhne, 1967). Popular narratives about SS "rituals" have found their way into the studies of esteemed experts (Fest 1963, pp.159-160; cf. Hüser 1987, p.68). Recent scholarship has shown that no "cults" or "rituals" of any kind have ever been performed at the Wewelsburg (see the excellent volume edited by Schulte, 2009). Himmler's plans for turning the castle into a *weltanschauliches Zentrum* and an organizational basis for the SS have never been realized. Contrary to existing plans, no courses were ever taught there. The castle received its status because of a post-war mystification that has best been summarized by Daniela Siepe (2009).

In popular literature, the supposed occult machinations of the SS are closely linked to the *Ahnenerbe*. This "research society" was founded in July 1935 by Himmler, Walther Darré (1895-1953, the head of the RuSHA), and Herman Wirth (Kater, 1974; Kroll, 1998). The latter's attempt to prove the existence

of an ancient Aryan empire that had disappeared with the destruction of Atlantis was one of the driving forces when the society was established (Kater 1974, pp.41-46; cf. Wiwjorra, 1995; Halle, 2002; Löw, 2009). The “research” of the Ahnenerbe was conducted for ideological and propaganda means, in order to establish an SS influence on the German academic landscape (Kater 1974; cf. Kroll 1998, esp. pp.230-234; Halle, 2002). The output of the Ahnenerbe, however, was never acknowledged by the German academia. When Wirth cofounded the Ahnenerbe, his reputation as a scholar had already been demolished and ridiculed. Additionally, one of the main critics of Wirth had been Alfred Rosenberg, which contributed to the continuous power struggles between the Ahnenerbe and Rosenberg’s *Amt* (office). Eventually, Wirth was pushed out of the Ahnenerbe in 1937. From early on, the Ahnenerbe spawned several sub-divisions and offices to conduct research on various fields. Those included Hanns Hörbiger’s (1860-1931) *Welteislehre* (World Ice Theory) that was widely discussed in popular science in the 1920s. The *Welteislehre*, which was also held in high esteem by Himmler, was another example of a failed attempt to establish an obviously pseudo-scientific theory amongst German scholars (Wessely, 2006 and 2008; cf. Nagel, 1991, with caution). Another famous project, Ernst Schäfer’s expedition to Tibet, was not carried out for any “occult” reasons but in order to explore the Caucasian terrain, learn about alternative ways to produce vegetable and animal materials, and to confirm racial theories (Mierau, 2006). When the war began in 1939, the Ahnenerbe’s “research” increasingly focused on “practical” projects, including human experiments. The Ahnenerbe largely failed in establishing its ideological SS science. This failure was mostly due to the organizational chaos within the SS and the Ahnenerbe itself. It was no “occult bureau” as suggested by authors like Trevor Ravenscroft who greatly exaggerated the importance and influence of this fragmented organization.

No historical evidence suggests that there has been anything like a powerful “esoteric circle” within the SS. Himmler always had to hide his esoteric interests from the public and other party elites like Hitler and Goebbels. His future plans for the SS, including the Wewelsburg or the Externsteine, never left the planning stage (Halle, 2002; Schulte, 2009). Those individuals within the SS who were following an esoteric agenda, i.e. Wiligut and Rahn, were pushed out of the organization and met tragic ends. Certainly, the esoterically interested individuals in the SS did not have the power to develop secret weapons or to build subterranean bases and world-wide networks. Apart from that, more serious research is needed to fully comprehend the complexity of the relationship between esotericism, Himmler, and the SS.

The Thule Society

The Thule Society was the successor of the *Germanenorden*, a secret branch of the nationalist-*völkisch* society *Reichshammerbund*. Both societies, founded in 1912, were radically anti-Semitic. They propagated a Germanic racism that was based on the *völkisch* biological re-interpretation of "Aryanism," and was evidently influenced by the Ariosophy of Guido von List and Lanz von Liebenfels (Goodrick-Clarke 1985/2004, pp.112-120; cf. Bönisch, 1999). When the Thule Society was founded in 1918, Rudolf von Sebottendorff (i.e. Adam Alfred Rudolf Glauer, 1875-1945) became its leading force. During extensive travels, Sebottendorff had developed a vivid interest in esotericism that was increasingly coined by ariosophical ideas. Officially, the Thule Society was founded for "the research of German history and the promotion of German nature (*Art*)" as well as the research of the *Edda*, the *Sagas*, and similar subjects. The choice of the name "Thule" was probably inspired by writings that had combined the Thule myth as the origin of the "Aryan" race with the topos of Atlantis. The society played an active role in the opposition to the Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1918/19, and quickly dissolved after its fall in May 1919. Sebottendorff did not participate on the activities of the society after June 1919. Sebottendorff tried to re-establish the Thule Society in 1933, but he fell in disgrace because he claimed a pioneering role for the NSDAP. He returned to his former country of choice, Turkey, where he committed suicide in 1945 (Goodrick-Clarke 1985/2004, pp.121-135).

The Thule Society was no esoteric or "occult" order (Rose, 1994; Gilbhard, 1994). Its importance for the nationalist-*völkisch* struggle against the Bavarian Soviet Republic made the Thule Society a focal point for heterogeneous individuals and ideas. Its quick end after May 1919 shows that its influence was short and intended for a specific purpose. The society's emblem showed a swastika, a symbol that was also used by the *Germanenorden* and ariosophers like Guido von List. That symbolism, however, was common in *völkisch* and nationalist currents at that time. It does not indicate an esoteric orientation of the society. Sebottendorff sometimes propagated ariosophical and other esoteric ideas, but those were met with suspiciousness. Furthermore, the Thule Society cannot be seen as a direct predecessor of the NSDAP. In 1933, Sebottendorff intended to exaggerate his former society's role for the emergence of National Socialism. The claims he made in his book *Bevor Hitler kam* (1933) are unreliable and even incurred the wrath of the NSDAP. As a consequence, he was briefly interned in 1934.

Hitler, who uttered contempt for the "*völkisch* wandering scholars" (cf. Schirmacher 2007, vol. 1, pp.318-337 and vol. 2, pp.585-600), has never been a member of the Society. Neither was Himmler. Later NSDAP functionaries like Dietrich Eckart and Alfred Rosenberg had a "guest" status; Rudolf Heß and Hans Frank were members for a brief period, and for political reasons. This, however, does not make the Thule Society a pre-NS elite school. Later authors like Pauwels and Bergier have distorted the image of the Thule Society and turned it into a black magical order initiating and controlling the

National Socialist elites. Their completely fictitious accounts include Karl Haushofer (1869-1946), who was neither a member of the Thule Society nor the “initiator” of Hitler. His teachings of geo-politics had nothing to do with occult masters from the East or Tibetan Lamas (Jacobsen, 1979).

Ariosophy

Ariosophy is primarily a combination of *völkisch* nationalism, eugenic racism, anti-Semitism, and esoteric currents, especially Blavatsky’s Theosophy. The term was coined by Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (i.e. Adolf Joseph Lanz, 1874-1954). Lanz was a Cistercian monk who had entered the novitiate in Vienna in 1893 and left the order in 1899 (Goodrick Clarke, 1985/2004; Hieronimus, 1991). He developed the idea of an “Aryan” Christianity that was rooted in *völkisch*-Christian discourses, propagating the biological superiority of the “Aryans” over inferior races that were seen as the offspring of sexual intercourse with beasts. Lanz dubbed his teachings *Theozoologie*, expressing the importance of both theological and biological aspects. From 1905-1918, he spread his ideas in his journal *Ostara*. In 1907, he founded the *Ordo Novi Templi* in Vienna. In this year, he was increasingly influenced by the writings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891). Lanz also adopted esoteric currents like Kabbalah and Rosicrucianism in his ariosophical worldview. From 1925 to 1933, he collaborated with the publisher Herbert Reichstein (1892-1944) and succeeded in spreading Ariosophy amongst German-speaking esotericists. Initially enthusiastic about the rise of National Socialism, Lanz soon distanced himself from the “boorish” movement. After restrictions beginning in 1937, the ONT was forbidden. Lanz revived the order in 1947 and remained his prior until 1954. In 1979, Rudolf Mund became the prior of the ONT.

Next to Lanz, the most important ariosopher was Guido von List (i.e. Guido Karl Anton List, 1848-1919). List’s thought was formed in the Austrian Pan-German, nationalist-*völkisch* milieu of the late 19th century. After a modest success with nationalist-romantic novels in the 1880s and 90s, List was “illuminated” in 1902 while temporarily blind. At that time, he developed the first synthesis of German nationalism and Theosophy, assimilating the writings of Blavatsky. A List Society was founded in 1908. In 1911, he created the *Hoher Armanen-Orden*, propagating his ideas of an ancient Germanic elite of initiated called the *Armanen*. In his books *Die Rita der Ario-Germanen* (1908) and *Die Bilderschrift der Ario-Germanen* (1910), List lastingly coined the esoteric interpretation of runes that remains influential until today, even in circles that are hostile to Ariosophy.

Members of the List Society disseminated his ideas in the *Reichshammerbund* and *Germanenorden*, thus exerting an influence on the milieu that later contributed to the emergence of National Socialism. Ariosophy is a key aspect for the comprehension of the environment that produced

National Socialism. However, it must not be seen as a direct predecessor, as Nicholas Goodrick Clarke (1985) has shown in his ground-breaking study. Post-war publications exaggerated the influence of Ariosophy, especially of Lanz, on Hitler and National Socialism (esp. Daim, 1958). Those elements of Ariosophy that later resurfaced in National Socialist ideology, e.g. eugenics or “Aryan” supremacy, were not particular to Ariosophy. It should also be noted that the ariosophical interpretation of Theosophy decidedly differentiated from the various teachings of the Theosophical Society (or Societies). Additional research is necessary to comprehend the relationship between the “esoteric milieu” in German-speaking countries and the emergence of Ariosophy. Also, the apparent differences between the “Christians” lines following Lanz and the “Germanic” lines following List deserve further attention (cf. Goodrick-Clarke, 1985/2004; von Schnurbein, 1992 and 1993).

Official Attitude towards Esoteric Groups

The official stance of the state towards esoteric individuals and organizations became increasingly hostile after 1933. While there have been evident affinities between esoterically influenced currents like Ariosophy and National Socialism, those affinities never resulted in “occult” influences on a state level. Esoteric groups like those adhering to Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Rosicrucianism, Ariosophy, Mazdaznan, or New Thought, were classified as “sects” who were “hostile to the state.” In the view of state officials, their unwillingness to adapt to the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* encouraged disunity amongst the *Volksgemeinschaft*. As Corinna Treitel (2004) suggests in her study of German occultism, two specific transgressions earned esoteric groups the persecution by the authorities: The first was the denial of rigid racial hierarchies that, for example, became evident in the Theosophical proclamation of a “brotherhood of humanity.” The second one was the accusation of “superstition” that would poison the minds of the people. In July 1937, all Freemasonic lodges, Theosophical circles, and related groups were dissolved. *Okkultistische* as well as *spiritistische* publications and activities were forbidden.

After the famous flight of Rudolph Heß, who had parachuted over England in 1941 to personally end the war, the state’s actions intensified. The influence of astrologers and other “charlatans” in the surroundings of Heß was made responsible for his “insanity.” Hitler and, especially, Goebbels had always railed against “superstition” and “mysticism,” which now had to be finally eradicated. A crackdown that went into effect in June 1941 resulted in the brutal suppression of esoteric activity in Germany, leading to the interning of esotericists and forcing many to go underground. It is meaningful that this crackdown occurred under the aegis of police chief Himmler. Like other “sects,”

esoteric groups were perceived as a superstitious threat to the unity of the German people, and were persecuted with increasing brutality (cf. Dierker, Staudenmaier, and Meyer in Puschner, 2012).

OUTLOOK

An examination of the most discussed “esoteric” elements of National Socialism shows that they were either marginal or fictional. Historical evidence confirms the esoteric interests of certain individuals like Himmler and Heß that, after all, did not translate into official politics. Additionally, it is problematic to classify several of those interests as “esoteric.” For instance, Himmler’s enthusiasm for natural healing was also common in the *Lebensreform* movement whose adherents did not necessarily have any esoteric concerns (Buchholz et al., 2001). The fascination for everything “Germanic” was shared by many Germans, including those *völkisch* currents that, like the Ludendorffs, were declared enemies of *Okkultismus* (Treitel 2004, pp.218-220). This illustrates general theoretical and methodological problems. What exactly includes “esotericism”? Can it be equated with *Lebensphilosophie*, Idealism, anti-modernism, anti-materialism, or even a tradition of irrationalism that ultimately led to National Socialism (Lukács, 1954)? To which degree does it coincide with the *völkisch* milieu?

It should be noted that the discursive network that we use to refer to as “esotericism” was immensely heterogeneous. It is very problematic to equate the various contemporary esoteric currents, which is further complicated by the fact that their self-designations varied constantly. After all, “esotericism” was no unified ontological entity that could be exclusively linked to right- or left-wing politics. An identification of “irrationalism” with esotericism is certainly oversimplifying, yet still common even in academic discourse where “irrationalism” is often suggested as a common basis for National Socialism and esotericism. That problematic assumption gains additional complexity by the fact that esotericists were persecuted by the NS authorities because of their “irrationality” and “superstition.” It seems to be a fundamental problem that many essential areas of the subject have not yet been sufficiently researched. This includes the esoteric aspects of the heterogeneous *völkisch* milieu that partly prepared National Socialism but had a complicated relationship with the new “movement” (Puschner 2001 and 2012; Breuer, 2008; cf. Mohler 1972, esp. p.214-215). Ariosophy, for example, was a product of *völkisch* and esoteric ideas, but how exactly was it perceived in those sometimes distinct, sometimes overlapping, fragmented milieus? How was its relationship with other esoteric currents? Further studies will have to be undertaken in order to explain those questions.

The relationship between esotericism and National Socialism is not only relevant for the comprehension of the past. As it has been shown in the first chapter, the subject has become an

essential element of post-war culture. An esoteric neo-Nazism has taken up the teachings of Wiligut and Rahn, developing them into motifs like the “Black Sun” and a further elaboration of the Aryan “Thule” topos. This becomes most evident in the Vienna circle author Rudolf Mund who rose to the highest rank in the post-war Ordo Novi Templi. Herman Wirth published in Wilhelm Landig’s *Volkstum Verlag*. This shows how specific discourses have evidently been continued. However, they were reinterpreted into a monolithic teaching that had not existed before; and that, most importantly, had not exerted an influence on National Socialism. Wirth’s failure in the Ahnenerbe and in the academia, as well as the opposition of Alfred Rosenberg, has been indicated as an example. For that reason, it is necessary to differentiate between post-war esoteric neo-Nazism and historical National Socialism. Additional research is needed to understand the complex relationship between the *völkisch*, esoteric, and National Socialist networks, as well as their reception in the post-war period. That research should focus on a careful historical contextualization and avoid the adoption of popular and oversimplifying approaches that still exert a considerable influence.

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