

Shadows Behind the Neon: The Occult in Weimar Germany

There is a particular quality to the desperation that follows catastrophe. Not the clean, acute desperation of a single loss or disaster, but the slow, corrosive despair settles into a society like groundwater, finding every crack, every weakness, every unlit corner of the human spirit. Weimar Germany was saturated with that kind of desperation, and it produced, among its many strange fruits, one of the most intense flowerings of occultism in modern European history.

To understand why, you must begin with the dead.

Between 1914 and 1918, roughly two million German men were killed in the war. Another six million came home wounded, in body or in mind. Then came the great influenza pandemic, which killed between a hundred and fifty and two hundred and fifty thousand more. Then the street violence of the revolution, the misery of the blockade, and, finally, the grinding humiliation of Versailles. By 1920, a generation of Germans had been stripped of sons, husbands, brothers, fathers, certainties, savings, and, for many of them, the very framework of meaning through which they had made sense of the world. The Kaiser was gone. The Empire was gone. The Church had blessed the bayonets and delivered nothing. Science had produced poison gas and industrial slaughter. Where, in God's name, did one turn?

Inward. Backward. Into the darkness.

Spiritualism, the practice of communicating with the dead through mediums, séances, and automatic writing, had been a feature of respectable European drawing rooms since the 1850s. It had enjoyed a particular revival across the Allied countries during the war, most famously in Britain, where figures such as Arthur Conan Doyle pursued it with evangelical fervour. But in Germany after 1918, it took on a quality that went beyond fashionable grief-management. It became, for hundreds of thousands of people, a genuine theological necessity.

The séance rooms of Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, and Leipzig were, in the early Weimar years, places of visceral need. The literature of the period is full of accounts of women who sat night after night in darkened rooms, their hands flat on the table, waiting for a son lost at Verdun to speak again. Mediums were in extraordinary demand, and the better known among them commanded fees that placed them in the stratosphere of popular entertainers, even during the parlous state of the German economy. That so many people paid, even through the worst years of hyperinflation, tells us something about the depth of this hunger.

The German spiritualist movement was intellectually serious in ways that may surprise the modern reader. Figures in the scientific establishment approached it with genuine attention. Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, a Munich physician of considerable reputation, spent years photographing mediums in the act of producing ectoplasm, publishing his results in weighty volumes complete with technical apparatus and laboratory protocols. He was not a crank. He was a man of his time, shaped by a materialist scientific culture that had, ironically, made the spiritual question more urgent rather than less: if the universe was merely matter, what had those two million men died for? And what were they now?

Beyond spiritualism proper, the Weimar years saw a vast expansion of interest in the broader occult tradition. Theosophy, the syncretic spiritual philosophy founded by Helena Blavatsky in the nineteenth century, had been putting down German roots since before the war, and its German offshoot, the Anthroposophical Society of Rudolf Steiner, became one of the most culturally influential organisations of the Weimar period. Far from being a grief-driven seeker, Steiner himself was a figure of genuine intellectual range, a Goethe scholar and philosopher who built out of the Theosophical tradition an elaborate system he called Anthroposophy: a spiritual science, he insisted, as rigorous in its own domain as physics was in its. His lectures drew enormous crowds. His ideas about education, agriculture, architecture, and medicine reshaped whole fields. The Waldorf School, the biodynamic farming movement, Weleda pharmaceuticals: all are his legacy.

Steiner's appeal was not simple to categorise, yet it grew in large part from the same crisis of meaning that drove the séance rooms. He offered his audiences something that neither the Church nor the materialist sciences could provide: a universe that was spiritual to its core and made sense, in which human beings had a real and significant role, in which the dead did not simply vanish but continued in a greater life, and in which the catastrophe of the war could be placed within a vast evolutionary narrative of human spiritual development. It was not comfort, exactly. It was a framework. And a framework, in the rubble of Weimar, was perhaps more precious.

The true occult societies were a different matter, at once more secretive and more lurid in the popular imagination. The Ordo Templi Orientis, founded in Germany in the early years of the century and associated, through the controversial figure of Aleister Crowley, with ritualised sexual magic and the deliberate transgression of moral norms, maintained a discreet but active presence in Weimar Germany. Its membership lists, where they survive, read as a particular cross-section of the Weimar intelligentsia: writers, artists, musicians, physicians, and a sprinkling of aristocrats.

More politically significant, and more directly relevant to what was to come, were the Ariosophical and Völkisch occult societies that had been proliferating in German-speaking Europe since the late nineteenth century. The Thule-Gesellschaft, founded in Munich in 1918 and nominally a literary and historical study group, was in practice a hotbed of racial mysticism, Germanic neo-paganism, and extreme nationalism. Its meetings combined readings from Norse mythology with conspiratorial politics and a pervasive sense of Germany as a spiritually elect nation destined for redemption and renewal. The Thule Society is relevant to any history of Weimar occultism partly for what it was in itself, and partly for what it helped to generate: several of its members were founders or early supporters of the Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the tiny radical nationalist party that would eventually become the NSDAP.

That connection has sometimes led sensationalist historians and popular writers to over-determine the relationship between occultism and Nazism, to present the Third Reich as essentially the political expression of an occult conspiracy. This is a gross distortion, and an unhelpful one. The Nazis were not, at their core, occultists. Hitler, far from promoting such ideas, regarded most occult speculation with contempt, and the SS had many of the Thule Society's successor organisations shut down in the 1930s. Whilst the regime tolerated some forms of 'broader science' the policy of the Nazi regime was consistently antagonistic to popular and sectarian occultism. But

the cultural soil out of which National Socialism grew was nevertheless saturated with occult and pseudo-mystical thinking, and that remains important. The racial theories, the mythology of Aryan origins, the cult of blood and soil, the idea of the German Volk as a metaphysical as well as a political entity: these things drew on a reservoir of occult and esoteric thinking that had been filling up for decades.

Astrology deserves its own note, because its Weimar expansion was remarkable by any measure. Before 1914, serious astrological publishing in Germany was the preserve of a small specialist readership. By the mid-1920s, horoscope columns were a fixture in the popular press, astrological almanacs sold in the millions, and a network of professional astrologers operated in every German city of any size. The astrologer Elsbeth Ebertin produced bestselling annual forecasts that were read by a public spanning the class spectrum. In 1923, she published a warning about a man in the German political landscape whose natal chart suggested he would expose himself to unnecessary personal danger in an act of political recklessness. Soon after Adolf Hitler led the Beer Hall Putsch. For a moment, Ebertin's reputation became extraordinary.

What the astrology boom tells us, beyond the obvious appetite for guidance in uncertain times, is that the Weimar engagement with the occult was not purely a matter of grief and metaphysical crisis. It was also, and substantially, a matter of anxiety about the future. Inflation, unemployment, political violence, the sense that the world had become unpredictable in ways that human reason could not manage: these pressures drove people toward any system that promised to restore pattern and predictability to experience. If the stars could tell you what was coming, then what was coming had a logic. And if it had a logic, it could, perhaps, be survived.

Hypnotism stands slightly apart from the rest of the Weimar occult tradition, in that it sat at the intersection of the occult, the medical, and the theatrical in ways that made it uniquely visible and credible. Stage hypnotists performed in cabarets and variety theatres across the country, and the more accomplished among them became genuine celebrities. The most famous of all, Erik Jan Hanussen, was a figure of extraordinary and ultimately sinister interest. An Austrian Jew born Hermann Steinschneider, Hanussen built a career as a clairvoyant and hypnotist of seemingly preternatural gifts, performing before sold-out audiences across central Europe and eventually in Berlin itself, where he occupied a prominent position in the cultural life of the late Weimar years.

Hanussen's relationship with the emerging Nazi movement was one of the stranger sub-plots of the period. He gave financial support to the NSDAP in its Berlin operations. He is said, on evidence that is circumstantial but persistent, to have coached Hitler in techniques of public speaking and the mesmerising use of pause and gesture. He allegedly predicted the Reichstag fire, with a specificity that raised questions that were never satisfactorily answered. In March 1933, weeks after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, Hanussen was murdered, almost certainly by the SA. The question of what he knew, and how he knew it, is one of those apertures in the historical record through which you can glimpse something about the deeper strangeness of the period.

The Hanussen story points to something important about Weimar occultism that is easy to miss if you approach it purely as intellectual or social history: it was dangerous. Not in any abstract sense, but concretely, personally dangerous. The occult underground was a place where very different kinds of people moved in

proximity: artists and aristocrats, confidence men and genuine seekers, idealists and predators. The political polarisation of the late Weimar years ran through the occult world as it ran through everything else, and the choice of which mystical tradition you aligned yourself with, which secret society you joined, which theory of Germany's spiritual destiny you endorsed, could have consequences that extended far beyond the ritual room.

What does all of this tell us? At least this: that the secular, rational, progress-oriented framework that nineteenth-century liberalism had built was never as solid as it appeared. When that social framework was destroyed by the war, and the peace that followed it, one of the things that came through the gaps was ancient, persistent, and not easily managed by appeals to reason. There were people who wanted contact with the dead. Those who wanted to know the future. Those who wanted to belong to something that carried a fundamental significance beyond the merely political. People who wanted to believe that the universe had a structure, that human life had a meaning, that suffering was not simply random and the dead were not simply gone.

Weimar Germany was an extreme case, formed under extreme pressures. But the human needs it exposed were not, and are not, unusual at all. That is the thing about the occult revival of the nineteen-twenties: it was not a departure from human nature. It was a very naked expression of it. When people suffer, they become desperate, and desperate people turn to the extremes, not only in politics, but in ideas, beliefs, and ultimately, their activities.

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