Book Reviews

Stéphane François, *L'occultisme nazi : Entre la SS et l'ésotérisme* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2020). – 230 pages. – ISBN 9782271131355.

With its barbaric irrationalism tinged with morbid rationalism, it is difficult not to make the Third Reich the most confusing political experience of the twentieth century, or even be tempted to see in its ideology the ultimate embodiment of evil. While historical research has attempted to draw the cultural contours of this regime in the aftermath of the war, a series of phantasmagorical speculations appeared as early as 1960 in the wake of the conspiracy theory classic *The Morning of the Magicians*, written by the French journalists and popular science writers Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier. Far removed from any scientific demonstration aimed at lifting the veil on the rise and fall of National Socialism and its specificities, these authors lent themselves to dreaming of a 'hidden meaning' of history that escapes any attempt at rational understanding. For them, Hitler was merely the avatar of invisible forces lurking in the depths of the Himalayas. The SS, the elite paramilitary dimension of Nazism and its racial policy, was in reality a pagan religious order engaged, like a chivalric brotherhood, in the ultimate quest for weapons and magical artefacts such as the Grail or the Spear of Destiny. Successful with a Western public eager for alternative theories, such 'Nazi occultism' gradually imposed itself within the extreme right as a kind of reference to popularize some of its ideas and thus maintain the legend of its defeated ideology.

Forged from the irrational in order to give legitimacy to the unthinkable, this 'mysterious history' has become a fruitful field of analysis for the political scientist Stéphane François. He has specialized in occultist and esoteric counter-cultures and was the author of an initial essay on the topic entitled *Le nazisme revisité* in 2008.

François's work proceeds from an original and audacious approach: understanding and studying a political-cultural phenomenon that is both complex and underground. Indeed, since it is more akin – as the author identifies it – to

a 'mythology' *a posteriori* reconstructed on the basis of pseudo-scientific writings, 'Nazi occultism' requires a long-term deconstruction, which can come up against a range of obstacles. In addition to the ultra-contemporaneity of the sources, which makes the historical interpretation of the themes raised difficult, the subject itself is also problematic.

Unlike the Anglo-Saxon world, which is much more flexible and open to the question, the preface by Johann Chapoutot reminds us that in France there is a real taboo on 'rejected knowledge' like esoteric or grey literature. Despite their significant potential for the study of radical political phenomena such as Nazism, these materials have often not yet found legitimacy in academia. This rejection, which is specific to the preponderance of Durkheimian and Cartesian theses in humanities, goes hand in hand in France with a certain desire to conceal from Western history the role of irrational thought in the intentionality of the most central actors of these ideologies.¹ Contrary to the preconceived ideas implied by the title of the book, François, like Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, does not attempt to demonstrate that certain esoteric and *Völkisch* themes that developed in Germany and Austria at the beginning of the twentieth century may have been the basis of a minority fringe of National Socialism. Thus, there is no question of considering the book as a mere exhaustive description of the many occult tendencies and their myths, but rather it seeks to understand precisely how they were able to colonize the collective imagination of the Third Reich after its defeat.

In spite of the demonstrations of his supporters and detractors, it is only natural for François to point out that Nazism was not an occult movement. Taking into account the studies of specialist researchers such as Hans Thomas Hakl on the Nazi myth, the author first of all identifies 'Nazi occultism' as a 'process of exclusion from historical rationality' in the service of the analysis of a phenomenon that aroused unease and indignation. Thus, the question is asked: how did learned individuals from the upper echelons of German society abandon themselves to violence?² The occult reading of nazism paradoxically attempts to answer this question by invoking 'higher intentions' that are beyond the scope of any attempt at interpretation by the common intelligence.

The constituent elements of the occultist myth of Nazism are to be found first of all in historical facts largely over-interpreted by the Catholic opposition at the time of the rise of the Third Reich. Indeed, the first two chapters explore

1 Jean-Louis Vuillierme, *Le nazisme dans la civilisation: Le miroir de l'occident* (Paris: L'artilleur, 2018).

2 Christian Ingrao, *Believe and Destroy: Intellectuals in the SS War Machine* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

how the beginnings of the Weimar Republic saw a resurgence of *Völkisch* movements steeped in esoteric and pagan cultures, seeking to revive the German spirit and tradition in a country torn apart after the Great War. Although marginal, the third chapter examines how they were gradually trying, like General Ludendorff and his wife, to obtain recognition from the new Nazi state – a real outcry for many Christians. While the attempt to inscribe the neo-Pagan element in a ‘positive’ Christian faith devoid of any Jewish tradition may have aroused keen interest within the ruling apparatus of the Reich – especially Himmler and his SS – Adolf Hitler sought only to subjugate the Christian churches to the state rather than to replace them. In contempt of the *Völkisch* current and its pseudo-scientific whims, he went so far as to have all such religious movements banned in 1942.

This central question of religion within National Socialism is the major force of François’s work. Questioning, in the manner of George Mosse and Robert A. Pois, the totalitarian and ‘millenarianist’ nature of National Socialism through its relationship to religion, the author highlights the profoundly ‘civic’ character of this movement tending towards a religious messianism centered on race and the *Führer*. Beyond concluding that occultist speculations about Nazism are merely a translation of the dead ends encountered by historians in characterizing it, François shows in his chapters devoted to ideologues and SS leaders that the occult was deliberately used for propaganda purposes. By endowing itself with a racial-occultist mysticism symbolized by the runic alphabet, the swastika or the Aryan myth of Atlantis, Heinrich Himmler’s organization aspired from its inception to present itself as an autonomous elite capable of forging its own legends.

If the ‘religious’ and ‘irrational’ components of Nazism hold a fundamental place in the construction of its occult interpretations, François skillfully demonstrates that its popularization is only the product of a chance encounter between the mythological thought of the twentieth century and the rise of fantasy literature in the 1960s. Initially marginal and developed in an editorial context where it could only be limited to a few peripheral works, ‘fantastic realism’ became – in the same way as the hippies and spiritualist movements of this time – the new vector of alternative imaginations and truths made up of deformations and fantasies. Sharing the idea of a re-enchantment of the world through myth, Pauwels and Bergier’s *The Morning of the Magicians* relayed a universal desire for emancipation from bourgeois intellectualism and frenetic consumerism.

However, Nazi occultism is not only an innocent provocative literary genre against emerging mass culture and Cold War ideological bipolarization. By concentrating in the second part of his work on various extremist personalities with heterogeneous backgrounds and world views, chapter four demonstrates

not only that this genre discredits academic research on Nazism, but also that it participates fully in the dissemination of extremist themes similar to those developed in collections of works such as 'L'Aventure mystérieuse' published by J'ai lu and 'Les Énigmes de l'Univers' by Les Éditions Robert Laffont. Whether it is the perpetuation of the *Ahnenerbe's* quest for the Grail by the former French SS figure Saint-Loup (real name Marc Augier) after the war in chapter 4, the Nordicism postulate of the Primordial Tradition by Savitri Devi and Julius Evola in chapter 5, or the hypothesis of 'Hollow Earth' as the last refuge of the 'ultimate avatar' by the Chilean diplomat Miguel Serrano in chapter 7, all these mythological constructions are to be placed in a single undertaking of domination that substitutes political combat for the battle of the imaginary. For François this is a 'euphemism by the occult'. The extreme right-wing neo-Nazi movement wants to use 'Nazi occultism' and its legends to give new meaning to National Socialism and to 're-enchant' it. This revisionist process 'folklorizes' history to better decontextualize it. From then on, genocidal madness takes on the features of a magical ritual of purification, while the executioners become paragons of a mystical order that is thousands of years old. A heritage reconstructed against time and reason, Nazi occultism thus gives back to the small groups of this movement a tradition on which to build and proliferate.

A densely sourced work, *L'occultisme nazi* is an excellent update of a subject that is often ignored. Far from proposing only an exercise in the study of existing representations concerning the relationship between Nazism and occultism and their channels of diffusion, François's work ultimately encourages us to extend his approach as far as possible to contemporary extremist phenomena and their cultural components. The current resurgence of New Age and conspiracy currents found within the contemporary extreme right in online spaces carries within it the seeds of a fascination for this mystified period. It therefore seems urgent to consider these naïve utopias as a (meta)political tool used for the radicalization and mobilization of individuals today.

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