An Holistic Science:
Philosophical Renewal and Official Response

Introduction
At the International Congress for Parapsychology held in Athens in 1930, a significant shift in focus was apparent among the German representatives. The death of Schrenck-Notzing, whose virtual monopoly of the German parapsychological scene had ensured an emphasis on experimentation, allowed those with an interest in the analysis and interpretation of paranormal phenomena to come to the fore. On the opening day of proceedings, three of the German participants gave papers on philosophical and theoretical themes. The biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch, for example, spoke about the person and supraperson from both a spiritualist and biological perspective, the philosopher T.K. Oesterreich considered the psycho-physical problem in terms of mediumistic phenomena while K.C. Schneider looked at the relationship between physics, empiricism and Gestalt psychology on the one hand, and parapsychology on the other. This retreat from experimentalism – a result of the methodological and financial difficulties posed by research with mediums – saw a concentration on the aetiology and mechanism of physical mediumship and an attempt to reconcile these phenomena with new developments in fields such as biology, physics and psychology. Speculation as to the meaning of materialisation and telekinesis also led these researchers to contemplate parapsychology’s potential as the basis for both scientific advance and philosophical renewal.

The Athens congress was a watershed for German parapsychology from another perspective also, as it was the last that German parapsychologists were permitted to attend. In 1935, the National Socialist government denied German parapsychologists permission to travel, preventing them from participating in the International Congress for Parapsychology held in Oslo. In 1938, as preparations were being made for the sixth International Congress for Parapsychology in Budapest, the Auswärtiges Amt [Foreign Office] informed the Unterrichtsministerium [Ministry for Education] that the possibility of Germans attending this gathering was ruled out until normal circumstances once again prevailed in Europe. While these
restrictions suggested that the Nazis harboured a negative or at least suspicious attitude towards parapsychology, a number of other initiatives, including the attempt of an official within the Propaganda-Ministerium [Propaganda Ministry] to establish a parapsychological research group, indicated a more complex relationship between National Socialism and parapsychology.5

Shifting the focus away from the laboratory, where the emphasis remained almost exclusively on the observation and verification of the physical phenomena during this period, this chapter considers contemporary attempts to explain and theorise the phenomena of mediumship. The first section briefly describes the manner in which a number of German researchers who were deeply affected by the social, political and economic crises wrought by the First World War, most notably the philosopher and psychologist T.K. Oesterreich, used epistemological tensions within biology, physics and psychology to portray their discipline as a complete science, capable of expanding scientific and philosophical horizons. This attempt to create an holistic science, a project similar to that advocated by du Prel and his followers, and to use it as the basis for scientific reform and social and spiritual renewal, was nowhere more evident than in the work of Hans Driesch; a man who, along with Oesterreich, was regarded as one of the leaders of German parapsychology following the death of Schrenck-Notzing in 1929. The second section is thus an exploration of Driesch’s contribution to parapsychology in the German and international contexts, tracing his development from biologist to philosopher and outlining his problematic relationship with the National Socialists. Using the Nazis’ ambivalence towards Hans Driesch as a starting point, the third section attempts to cast light on their attitude towards parapsychology. It asks how the Nazi stance on this nascent science coincided with or differed from their stance on occultism; and to what extent their position was a continuation of the policies of Weimar governments, whose legislation reflected the concerns of interest groups, including the medical community and the churches?

Materialism, parapsychology and philosophical renewal

The sense of existential crisis that had characterised the writings of men like Carl du Prel and Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden during the late nineteenth century was renewed by the events of 1914 to 1918. While most representatives of psychical research had abandoned their pursuit of a transcendental psychology during the late 1880s in favour of an experimental psychology based on mediumistic research, the First World War saw a revival among German parapsychologists of passionate antimaterialism and the renewal of that stream of thought that regarded research with mediums as an antidote to the philosophical problems posed by