

SECRET GERMANY

Claus von Stauffenberg
and the Mystical Crusade Against Hitler

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This can best be understood through an essay, published in 1936, by Thomas Mann, who described what he called 'mythic consciousness', a particular kind of mentality whereby certain individuals defined themselves.

"The ego of antiquity and its consciousness of itself were different from our own, less exclusive, less sharply defined. It was, as it were, open behind; it received much from the past and by repeating it gave it presentness again."

When confronted by a crisis, the leader of antiquity 'searched the past for a pattern into which he might slip'. Once mantled with such a precedent, tested and validated by history, tradition and his own ancestry, he might confront the present situation, not nakedly, so to speak, or alone, but from within a time-hallowed context. Thus his life was in a sense a reanimation, an archaizing attitude. But it is just this life as reanimation that is the life as myth.

Alexander Mann saw himself as walking, quite consciously, 'in the footsteps of Miltiades', the Greek commander against the Persians at the Battle of Marathon. Caesar identified himself similarly with Alexander. 'But such "imitation" meant far more than we mean by that word today. It was a mythical identification ...' And while it was characteristic of antiquity, '...it is operative far into modern times, and at all times psychically possible. Mann cites Napoleon, whose charismatic leadership again stemmed in large part from his conscious identification with the great

commanders of the past. How often have we not been told that the figure of Napoleon was cast in the antique mould!

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Life then - at any rate, significant life - was in ancient times the reconstitution of the myth in flesh and blood; it referred to and appealed to the myth; only through it, through reference to the past, could it approve itself as genuine and significant. The myth is the legitimization of life; only through and in it does life find self-awareness, sanction, consecration.'

For a figure like Claus Von Stauffenberg, 'mythic consciousness' temporary manifestation, or embodiment, of an age-old and ongoing continuity. Individual life is part of a greater continuum: the transient incarnation of a sequence of ghostlike selves, antecedents and descendants, extending back into the past and forward into the future. One is part of a process, or procession; and it is to this, not to its particular ephemeral form at any given moment, that one's obligation lies. And from such a perspective, death is almost incidental. Indeed, death - and especially death through noble self-sacrifice - is less an end than an integral phase of the process.

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In Doctor Faustus, perhaps the most profound and penetrating examination of Nazi Germany so far to have been written, Thomas Mann proposes an alternative model for understanding the problem. Mann maintains that rationality and irrationality need not be seen as opposite poles of a continuum, nor even as existing on a linear continuum at all. The continuum between rationality and irrationality can just as readily be seen as circular - in which case, rationality and irrationality flow into one another. Indeed, it is precisely the most extreme hyper-rationality that lies closest to the irrational.

Above and beyond all schematic models, there lies the phenomenon of the Third Reich itself, which reflects a disquieting melange, unique in modern history, of rational and irrational. It is precisely this melange that renders the Third Reich so terrifying and so apparently inexplicable in 'reasonable' terms. At Nazi Party rallies - in the mass hysteria, the ecstatic rapture, the mindless chanting, the torchlight processions, the hypnotic ritualistic pageantry and ceremonial, the rhythmic incantatory rhetoric as mesmerising as a drumbeat - the irrational holds triumphant sway. Rationality attains a monstrous apotheosis in the death camps, where mass murder and genocide are transformed into a mechanical bureaucratic process, a drearily routine matter of engineering, accountancy and book-keeping.

Often, too, rationality mantles itself with the irrational fervour, energy and power of a religious appeal, as in Goebbels' cunningly constructed propaganda, the machiavellian manipulation of popular yearning for a messiah figure. And irrationality masks itself with a semblance of rational scientific respectability in Nazi racial theories, in dogma about Aryan superiority, in crack-brained concepts of purity of blood, in an infatuation with 'hollow earth' concepts and Hoerbiger's doctrines of 'fire and ice'.

Few institutions in the course of human history have equalled the SS in the smooth-working precision and efficiency of its murderousness. Yet the SS, that epitome of rational methodology and competence, encouraged its personnel to procreate on the gravestones of illustrious Germans of the past, in order that the children thus spawned might somehow 'absorb' something of a dead hero's qualities. So 'rationally' was this bizarre premise spread that the official SS newspaper published lists of gravestones on which copulation was recommended.

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Again, Jung was echoing Heine:

"No, memories of the old German religion have not been extinguished. They say there are greybeards in Westphalia who still know where the old images of the gods lie hidden; on their death-beds they tell their youngest grandchild, who carries the secret ... In Westphalia, the former Saxony, not everything that lies buried is dead."

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During the second half of the nineteenth century, Germany, like most other European countries, sent successive waves of emigrants across the Atlantic. Since the explorations of Alexander von Humboldt in the early years of the century, Germany had felt a particular affinity with Latin America, which had, after all, first been colonised by the conquistadores of the Habsburg emperor Charles V. In consequence, many German settlers found their way not to the United States, but to Mexico and points south. Many of them, too, formed themselves into tightly knit sects, cults and religious communities there. It was not the 'hippies' of the 1960s who 'discovered' mescaline and promoted the active ingredient of the peyote cactus around the world. It was, in fact, the German settlers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the end of the First World War, mescaline was readily available in Europe, and especially in Germany. Among the best-known experimenters with the drug was Hermann Hesse. It is now generally recognised that *Steppenwolf* reflects, fairly explicitly, his experience with mescaline. In the novel, the drug experience converges with a kind of spiritual or religious experience, and as a result *Steppenwolf* became as much a 'manual' for Germany's alienated youth between the wars as it did for America's alienated youth of the 1960s.

As in the United States of the 1960s, drugs were used between the wars in Germany to induce an 'altered state of consciousness' with a distinctly religious tinge. It was in precisely this domain that National Socialism manipulatively trafficked.

In *The Magic Mountain* Thomas Mann repeatedly stresses the ease with which the mystical sensibility and so-called 'esoteric' thought can be exploited by totalitarian interests and, indeed, can themselves become totalitarian. Once again, Mann was far-sighted. The mystical sensibility and esoteric thought were very influential in Germany between the wars. Like so much else, they were skillfully redirected and channelled into the swelling mainstream of National Socialism, and imparted to National Socialism something of their own character, energy, and orientation. They played, in fact, a significant role in establishing Nazism as an ersatz or surrogate religion.

During the post-war trials of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, material relating to the influence of esoteric thought on National Socialism and the Nazi hierarchy was deliberately suppressed, and has been lost to the record. According to one of the British prosecutors, the late Airey Neave, large bodies of existing evidence were too bizarre to be admitted: **they would have permitted too many high-ranking Nazi Party members to plead insanity and thereby escape retribution on grounds of diminished responsibility.**

There was also a general recoil, by the Western democracies and the Soviet Union, from the very nature of the evidence itself. The Western democracies, after all, and even more so the Soviet Union, could at least claim to represent the principle of reason, the supremacy of rationality. So flagrant an eruption of the irrational as the Third Reich represented was uncomfortable, disturbing and potentially dangerous. For the world to be made aware of the sheer potency of the irrational, on so awesome a collective level, would have been to open a Pandora's box of incipient ills for the future. And it would have been profoundly unsettling, for citizens of both the Western democracies and the Soviet Union, to confront too blatantly what precisely they had been up against. After all, its latent power resided within themselves, within all humanity, as much as it did within the German people. It may perhaps have been more difficult to tap, to mobilise and channel, but it was none the less there.

In consequence, for a generation of post-war historians and commentators, the role of esotericism in the rise of Nazi Germany was never accorded the attention it deserved. Instead of being assessed and explored as what it was, the religious dimension of National Socialism was nervously dismissed by such facile formulations as 'mass madness', 'mass hysteria' and 'mass hypnosis', and then subordinated to theories of economics, sociology and so-called political science. A few novelists attempted to address the matter honestly. Thomas Mann and Hermann Broch, both of whom had been among the first to warn against the religious principle at work in Nazi Germany, performed the most

comprehensive autopsies of it in such works as *Doctor Faustus* and *The Guiltless*. They were later followed by Michel Tournier in *The Erl-King*, by some of the Latin American novelists and by George Steiner in *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* But historians chose deliberately to ignore the entire issue for more than twenty years. When it was finally acknowledged, it was acknowledged by 'fringe' historians, who, with dubious 'facts' and luridly spurious theories, swung the pendulum wildly in the opposite direction.

In 1960 there appeared in France *Le matin des mages* by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier. This book, published three years later in Britain as *The Dawn of Magic* and in the States as *The Morning of the Magicians*, became an international bestseller and one of the most influential works of its time, especially for the youth of the era. Hitching a ride on the prevailing Zeitgeist, Pauwels and Bergier posited an elaborate conspiracy theory of history, which rested ultimately on 'occult' or esoteric principles. In the course of their exegesis, they depicted National Socialism and the Third Reich as essentially 'occult' or esoteric phenomena.

During the decade and a half that followed, the tantalising hints and snippets of evidence assembled by Pauwels and Bergier were woven into elaborate cosmic dramas, the most famous of which perhaps was *The Spear of Destiny* by Trevor Ravenscroft. But Ravenscroft's book was only one in a chain reaction of exegeses, which still continues today. Thus Nazi Germany has been interpreted in terms of alchemy, astrology, satanism, ritual magic, theosophy, anthroposophy and virtually every other such system that might come to hand.

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It is not uncommon today to speak of the French 'occult revival' of the nineteenth century. The term is accurate enough, because the phenomenon it designated comprised a reaction to the so-called (and, some would argue, misnamed) 'Enlightenment' of the century before. **In Germany, however, there was no need to 'revive' the 'occult', because it had never really died out, never even gone so very deeply underground.** On the contrary, it had remained an ongoing theme, a recurring leitmotif, in Germanic culture. Esotericism had reached one climax in Germany during the first half of the seventeenth century. This was the era of the famous 'Rosicrucian Manifestos' and what the late Danle Frances Yates has called the 'Rosicrucian Enlightenment'. By the end of the seventeenth century, while rationalism was taking authoritative hold elsewhere, an updated version of 'Rosicrucian' thought was being propagated by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz. During the eighteenth century, Germany was a hotbed for the more mystically and esoterically oriented forms of Freemasonry. Under Frederick the Great's successor, Friedrich Wilhelm II, the entire Prussian administration and government bureaucracy was the most notoriously 'Rosicrucian' in Europe.

German romanticism - as *Faust* most clearly demonstrates - was steeped in 'occult' or esoteric thought. It also yoked 'occult' or esoteric thought to other influences that were to play key roles in subsequent German history. Through philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the tradition of German mysticism - now labelled 'Idealism' - was made philosophically respectable and integrated with romantic attitudes. Gothic medievalism and a more empirical mysticism were introduced by Novalis; classical mythology was integrated by Holderlin; the corpus of Germany's legend, fairy tale and folklore was integrated by the brothers Grimm; and a distinctive kind of pantheistic nationalism was integrated by 'Volkische' ideology. By the mid-nineteenth century, these elements had fused and comprised the single most identifiable strand in Germanic culture. The symbolic figure who embodied them all, the tutelary genius presiding over the German collective psyche, was Faust.

The Ariosophists combined German *Volkish* nationalism and racism with occult notions borrowed from the theosophy of Blavatsky, in order to prophesy and vindicate a coming era of German world rule.

In order to disseminate their skewed vision, the Ariosophists founded secret religious orders dedicated to the revival of the lost esoteric knowledge and racial virtue of the ancient Germans, and the corresponding creation of a new pan-German empire.'

In 1905, a renegade Cistercian monk, **Adolf Josef Lanz**, assumed the spuriously noble title of Jorg Lanz von Liebenfels and began publishing, in Vienna, a fervently anti-Semitic journal called *Ostara*. Two years later, in 1907,

Liebenfels founded a cranky racist secret society dubbed 'Ordo Novo Templi', the **Order of the New Templars**. On Christmas Day of that year, having purchased a small castle overlooking the Danube, he raised his order's flag - bearing a **swastika** - above the tower.

Among Ostara's most assiduous readers and avid devotees was the young and then destitute would-be painter, Adolf Hitler, who is known to have met with Liebenfels at the journal's offices in 1909. The New Templars also exerted an influence on Heinrich Himmler and, through him, on the SS. Many SS rites and ceremonies, and much of the pseudo-archaic 'runic lore' with which SS personnel were indoctrinated, derived directly or otherwise, from Liebenfels's loathsome organisation. Among his beliefs was that of a universal psychic energy animating the cosmos, which had as 'its most perfect manifestation [the] blond-haired blue-eyed Aryan'. Among the programs he advocated was a ritualistic immolation of 'racial inferiors' as sacrificial offerings to pagan gods.