Eric Kurlander. *Hitler's Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780300189452.

Among the steady stream of publications devoted to the relationship between esotericism and National Socialism, Eric Kurlander's study is one of the rare examples of a serious contribution to an old debate. It offers a most welcome critical perspective that sets it apart from the scholarship of recent decades, most significantly Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (1985) and Corinna Treitel's *A Science for the Soul* (2004). In contrast to these studies, which were highly cautious about claiming actual links between esotericism and National Socialism, Kurlander establishes the central argument that "National Socialism, even when critical of occultism, was more preoccupied by and indebted to a wide array of supernatural doctrines and esoteric practices than any mass political movement of the interwar period." (xiv) By covering a vast spectrum of topics and sources, and by taking into consideration an impressive amount of secondary literature, the ambitions of *Hitler's Monsters* are high: In the three chapters of Part One, Kurlander investigates the emergence of National Socialism since the late 1880s and its relationship to what is termed "the supernatural"; Part Two, again consisting of three chapters, discusses the relationship between the National Socialist state and the supernatural; while the last three chapters of Part Three deal with the period of the Second World War until 1945.

Despite a range of important arguments and inspiring thoughts, *Hitler's Monsters* is at times a highly problematic book that leaves an ambivalent impression. Kurlander does address a pressing issue by pointing out lacunae and shortcomings within previous scholarship. It is correct that Goodrick-Clarke's classic study of Ariosophy did not dwell on the Third Reich itself, thus making it an incomplete source for an understanding of the actual relationship between Ariosophy and the NSDAP. Kurlander is also right to point out the sometimes one-dimensional conclusions of what he calls the "revisionist" genre of literature, which is especially represented by Treitel. As Kurlander explains, it "has provided a welcome corrective to the 'special path' (*Sonderweg*) literature typified by earlier accounts," which overemphasized not only the anti-modern and illiberal tendencies inherent within German culture, but also the influence of esotericism on National Socialism (xiii). However, the revisionist reaction to sensationalist and simplifying accounts has sometimes led to opposite over-simplifications that

have downplayed the links between esotericism and National Socialism. This criticism is reasonable and overdue. *Hitler's Monsters* makes an important and overall constructive case for having a closer look at the topic, making it clear that we need to take into account the many contradictions and ambiguities related to it.

Unfortunately, there are problems with respect to Kurlander's approach that might already be suspected after encountering the book's title. These problems regard, most notably, his engagement with scholarship, his approach to primary sources, his methodology, and the style of argumentation essentially resulting from it. To begin with, Kurlander comes close to building a straw man in his criticism of "revisionist" scholarship. Treitel's discussion of the relationship between the National Socialist state and occultists is much more complex than Kurlander wants the reader to believe, and his own counterproposal is ultimately far from offering a more nuanced explanation. One also keeps wondering who the "many revisionist scholars" that Kurlander speaks about are (xiii), since, besides extensively quoting Treitel throughout the book, he only superficially addresses two articles by Marco Pasi and Thomas Laqueur in the introduction (one of them a review of Treitel): When it comes to occultism, Kurlander's thesis arguably represents less a valiant struggle against a revisionist hegemony than an attempt to reinforce perceptions that are predominant among the public at large but were long ago dismissed by specialists. At the same time, he has a habit of affirmatively citing authors who contradict him, for instance when he argues that recent scholarship states that "[e]vidence indicating an important link between Nazism and the supernatural has never been greater" (x) or that scholarship "has begun once again to take seriously the supernatural roots of Nazism." (xiv, followed by a reference providing a long list of his own publications and Peter Staudenmaier's *Between Occultism and Nazism*, which, as will be seen, draws quite different conclusionsA)

Most important, however, is Kurlander's failure to take a nuanced middle position between what he calls "classical" and "revisionist" scholarship. Instead, *Hitler's Monsters* is too often marked by a sweeping treatment of sources and contexts, as well as by a remarkable methodical vagueness. This becomes most evident in Kurlander's central category, "the supernatural," the definition of which is as vague as it could possibly be:

> I argue that no mass political movement drew as consciously or consistently as the Nazis on what I call the 'supernatural imaginary' — occultism and 'border science', pagan, New Age [sic!], and Eastern religions, folklore, mythology, and many other supernatural doctrines — in order to attract a generation of German men and women seeking new forms of spirituality and novel explanations of the

> world that stood somewhere between scientific verifiability and the shopworn truths of traditional religion. (xi)

As Kurlander goes on to explain, he chose "supernatural" instead of "occult" because, firstly,

> 'the occult' tends to connote, by definition, something secret, elitist, and generally obscure. But much of what attracted ordinary Germans and Nazis to the ideas and practices discussed in this book — as the revisionist scholarship has convincingly shown — was eminently public and widely popular. [...]
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> Second, early twentieth-century occultism, diverse as it is, constitutes only one cluster of beliefs and practices within the broader German supernatural imaginary. To be sure, under the rubric of occultism we might include a broad range of practices (astrology, clairvoyance, divining, parapsychology, etc.), beliefs (witchcraft, demonology), and syncretic doctrines that share elements of both (Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Ariosophy). Nevertheless, studies of occultism still tend to exclude important 'border sciences' such as World Ice Theory, the Nazi search for 'miracle' technologies, folklore and mythology, and aspects of *völkisch* religion. (xiv–xv)

Kurlander states that "there is extensive scholarly literature about Nazi religiosity on the one hand, and folklore and ethnology on the other, that has developed independently of the historiography on the occult." Of course, this is so because previous authors were, thankfully, aware of the significant differences between these aspects and their histories and contexts. It is, in principle, legitimate and potentially reasonable to include such an array of aspects into a study like this — but this would require a solid, precise theoretical and methodological foundation in order to avoid vagueness and randomness. Unfortunately, *Hitler's Monsters* does not offer a corrective to the general tendency to neglect such a foundation.

Quite the contrary, Kurlander makes generous use of his option to include "many other supernatural doctrines" into his discussion, without really explaining what exactly we should understand as such. This is aggravated by the fact that Kurlander frames his study with very general questions about the "longing for myth" or the use of folklore, which are arguably relevant to the identity formations of any community, and certainly every nation. Linking such a broad selection of diverse source material to these questions would require much clearer theoretical and methodological substance, and at least a much more cautious style of argumentation. However, Kurlander is anything but restrained

in his argument for "the supernatural roots, character, and legacies of the Third Reich." (xv) In establishing this thesis, the category of "the supernatural" enables him to include vastly different contexts and examples that are, somehow, linked by their "supernatural" character. Sometimes, this results in strikingly superficial arguments, such as Kurlander's proof of "supernatural thinking" within the NSDAP on the basis that "early Nazi leaders refer[red] frequently to monsters — demons, devils, vampires, mummies, and other supernatural tropes — in articulating their views." (52) His suggestion that this rhetoric set "early Nazi leaders" apart from other political currents is demonstratively false — one only needs to think of the omnipresence of the vampire topos in socialist discourse, especially after it was picked up by Marxists. Generally, Kurlander's implication throughout the book that vampires, monsters, and similar tropes played a unique role in German culture reveals a remarkable ignorance of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European literature and art.

These critical points serve to illustrate some of the methodological issues of the book. Kurlander does discuss methodology in the introduction, but this basically consists of mentioning what sources he used, rather than how he used them. Most problematic is his justification of the extensive use of sensationalist, biased and spurious sources from the years before and after 1945 on the basis that they could contain a kernel of truth or reflect a general atmosphere (xix–xx). These sources include famous examples such as Hermann Rauschning, Konrad Heiden, Lewis Spence or Rudolf von Sebottendorff. While it is understandable that such sources are not simply dismissed, their use is not made transparent, sometimes not even explicit, in the text and in the references — at times, this gives the impression that Kurlander cites from them only because it suits his narrative. Usually, Kurlander does not explain on what basis he has decided whether the information is trustworthy or not, or he provides long, affirmative quotes from a sensationalist source after simply using a word like "ostensibly." Any kind of deeper reflection or problematization is noticeable by its absence. Instead, sensationalist sources are labeled, for instance, as coming from "an important reservoir of evidence for Nazi supernatural thinking" (xx) or as "an example of Germany's frame of mind." (63)

Kurlander relies heavily on such sources in every chapter, for instance when he stresses that Hitler's reading of Ernst Schertel's book on the history of magic from 1923 expressed a genuine belief and engagement with the practice of magic on a political level. We read sentences by Kurlander such as: "Like any shaman or magician, the spoken word was essential to Hitler's magic." Or quotes by contemporary observers, here Heiden: "Hitler's speeches were probably the

greatest example of mass sorcery that the world has heard in modern times." (71) This use of sensationalist sources — particularly the adoption of their interpretations — marks a significant shift away from more nuanced and less "demonical" attempts to deal with the person of Hitler, or National Socialism as a whole. The bottom line is that it is nothing more than circumstantial evidence, supplemented with a range of spurious or at least problematic sources, that leads Kurlander to the very bold statement that Hitler was actively employing the means of a "shaman or magician" to control the masses with occult powers.

Not all of Kurlander's arguments are as colorful at this. There is much in *Hitler's Monster* that is highly instructive. But it is the strong claims that make the book stand out among other serious publications on the topic, since most of the material is not new. Most of the time, Kurlander concisely summarizes recent scholarship and gives it a twist by his own reading. Experts will thus not learn much new about central aspects such as Ariosophy, the Thule Society, Anthroposophy, individuals like Otto Rahn and Karl Maria Wiligut, or bizarre doctrines like the World Ice Theory. Instead, Kurlander's innovation lies in the way that he connects these different aspects. As has been stressed above, their treatment is sometimes very problematic, and it is to be expected that the different topics will find their respective expert critics in other reviews. Here, only some examples representative of fundamental issues within the volume shall be discussed.

Chapter Two, for instance, criticizes previous scholarship on the *völkisch* Thule Society and argues for more substantial and richer connections between the Wilhelmine *völkisch*-esoteric milieu, the Thule Society, and the early DAP (Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the predecessor of the NSDAP). This chapter is entirely based on secondary literature, with one stunning exception: the accounts of one of the founders of the Thule Society, Rudolf von Sebottendorff, whose depictions are reproduced by Kurlander despite their obvious bias and unreliability. While the Thule and other radical *völkisch* circles were definitely part of the emergence of the DAP and National Socialism, Kurlander uncritically adopts Sebottendorff's narrative of a paramount influence and direct continuation, ignoring broader historical contexts and providing no further evidence except Sebottendorff's own account. Apart from this deeply problematic choice, Kurlander's discussion is marked by the omission of important nuances: for example, Dietrich Eckart and Alfred Rosenberg were not members of the Thule Society but guests, while Rudolf Heß and Hans Frank were only members for a short period. The Thule Society was, as the scholarship cited by Kurlander explicitly states, not an "occult order" but a combat group against Communists, which occasionally included public talks

about topics like dowsing. Kurlander does not engage with the argument of the scholarship he cites that these elements were superficial attempts to veil the political character of the society, and he does not present any evidence to challenge this conclusion. To be clear, the point is not that the Thule Society's historical role has been sufficiently elucidated — it has not. But a new critical inquiry should be based on more than circumstantial evidence from second- or third-hand accounts, a selective focus on or neglect of details, and the allegations of someone like Sebottendorff. This is further aggravated by the fact that, throughout the book, Kurlander refers to the Thule Society as *the* "proto-Nazi" organization that exerted a predominant influence on an ideological and personal level until the end of World War Two.

At this point, it must be stressed that the importance of *völkisch*, including esoteric, influences on National Socialism, especially in its early phase, is well known and not contested by anyone familiar with the historical context. However, Kurlander does exactly what he claims to avoid in the introduction: he overemphasizes the esoteric elements while paying little attention to the fact that the NSDAP's transition from a radical fringe group to a mass movement went hand in hand with a marginalization of such extravagant elements. The problem here is not that Kurlander identifies the necessity to scrutinize these elements with new vigor — it is his exaggerated argument that the party had not only "supernatural" *roots*, but also a predominantly "supernatural" *character*. With these claims, Kurlander widely overshoots the mark in his attempt to question the revisionist neglect of *völkisch*-esoteric influences on the early NSDAP and the period after its ascension to power. This is especially regrettable because Kurlander does offer some interesting thoughts about the political use of *völkisch*-esoteric and other aspects of the emergent mass politics of the early NSDAP, and he does provide a well-informed summary of a large part of the intellectual landscape that served as its breeding ground. He is correct in stating that the Nazis were probably the most sophisticated movement in exploiting emotional and religious aspects to win the people for their political cause, but his analysis is inaccurate due to the shotgun approach of his "supernatural imaginary" and his overstated conclusions.

These problems also become evident in Kurlander's adamant statement that "[t]here was no such relationship between politics and occultism on the left." (88) This is factually wrong, and Kurlander does indeed not provide anything to back up this claim. The very emergence of spiritualism and occultism was inherently intertwined with socialism since the 1840s and flourished in far-left contexts in the period around 1900. The developments in the early 1900s are richly docu-

mented for other national contexts, while they are largely obscure in Germany, especially in the interwar period where radical differences are to be expected for obvious reasons. Here, the point is that Kurlander is neither aware of the history of these contexts, nor of their complexities. Relevant scholarship is absent from his study.[1] This, like much else in *Hitler's Monsters*, suggests a limited familiarity with esotericism and the field of study dedicated to it, which is another major reason for the somewhat simplistic character of Kurlander's narrative.

Despite the many flaws, the book has real merit, which becomes especially evident in Chapter Four, arguably the strongest. It is substantially based on archival material and thus provides the most original and well-founded insights. "The Third Reich's War on the Occult" explores the ambiguous relationship between occultism and the state, focusing on the period between 1933 and 1941 that ended with a crackdown on esoteric societies, individuals, and publications. Kurlander provides an overall convincing corrective to Corinna Treitel's conclusion that the relationship between occultism and the state was one of "escalating hostility." Why, Kurlander asks, was it only after eight years in power that measures against occultism were taken? Why were these measures so modest? Why were officials bothering to make distinctions between commercial and popular occultism on the one hand and "scientific

[1] Ranging from "classics" such as Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits. Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) and Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: Universtiy of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) to more recent works such as Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France* (Paris: Michel, 1995) Ulrich Linse, *Geisterseher und Wunderwirker: Heilssuche im Industriezeitalter* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996) Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1998), Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), Lynn L. Sharp, *Secular Spirituality. Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth Century France* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit. A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), or John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France. Ithaca* (Cornell University Press, 2008). Kurlander could have learned about this kind of scholarship from Marco Pasi, "The Modernity of Occultism: Reflections on Some Crucial Aspects," in *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg, 59–74 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009) which is, as has been mentioned above, only superficially cited. For scholarship published after Kurlander's research, see e.g. Daniel Cyranka, "Religious Revolutionaries and Spiritualism in Germany Around 1848," *Aries* 16, no. 1 (2016): 13–48 and my own work, such as Julian Strube, "Socialist Religion and the Emergence of Occultism: A Genealogical Approach to Socialism and Secularization in 19th-Century France," *Religion* 46, no. 3 (2016): 359–88 or Julian Strube, "Socialism and Esotericism in July Monarchy France," *History of Religions* 57, no. 2 (2017): 197–221.

occultism" on the other? Kurlander argues that these inconsistencies were due to "the fact that the Nazis embraced many elements of occult and border scientific thinking," (100) and provides sufficient evidence to make clear that Nazi officials adopted the services of some occultists, or ideas that could be regarded as occultist, when it suited them for ideological or propagandistic reasons. Kurlander demonstrates how the measures taken against occultism were not determined by wishes to eradicate it, but to control it. He also shows how easily *völkisch*-esoteric groups and individuals were assimilated into the party structure, in contrast to other alternative groups and their members.

Unfortunately, Kurlander once again overstates his case when he stresses the paramount importance of occultism within the party, while not only alleging the marginality of anti-occultists therein but also claiming that they were not really anti-occultists after all. (130) Instead of disentangling what other scholars have termed the blatant contradictions and ambiguities of the state's stance towards occultism, Kurlander claims that there were no contradiction and ambiguities at all. In developing these arguments, he is willing to form far-reaching interpretations of his sources, as, for instance, when he reads the Gestapo's suppression of public shows that were debunking the tricks of stage magicians in recreational *Kraft durch Freude* programs as a kind of state protectionism of "scientific occultism." (110–18; Kurlander refers to these tolerated "occultists" as "Hitler's magicians") One of Kurlander's most convincing criticisms of Treitel is her treatment of "the state" as a monolithic block, but in the end he does not provide a multi-faceted alternative, rather another set of over-generalizations that marks a return to old stereotypes. These issues notwithstanding, Kurlander raises questions and points out ambiguities that make this part of *Hitler's Monsters* a relevant contribution to this old debate.

Regarding future research, a question may be raised here that is not considered by Kurlander: What if the unsteady character of official measures against occultism and the lack of interest in eradicating all occultists simply result from the fact that they were not regarded as particularly important? Is it not simply due to the sensationalist overemphasis on links between occultism and National Socialism, especially since the postwar period, that we direct our attention to these aspects and expect something "extraordinary," something spectacular? There is much that indicates the ordinary and quite unspectacular character of the relationship between state officials and occultism. Perhaps the clearest indicator for this is the "zigzag course," (100) the lack of interest, the moderateness that is documented by Kurlander himself.

Despite containing numerous valuable observations, the following chapters are riddled with significant shortcomings that deserve a more detailed analysis than this review can provide. The treatment of topics like border science and Anthroposophy in Chapter Five, for example, is superficial. Recent research, such as that by Uwe Schellinger, Andreas Anton, Michael Schetsche or Peter Staudenmaier, allows for much more nuanced, detailed and instructive insights that stand in stark contrast to Kurlander's more superficial discussion.[2] In Chapter Six, Kurlander sincerely argues for the prominence of "Luciferianism" in the Nazi party by highlighting the role of individuals such as Otto Rahn ("the Third Reich's 'real Indiana Jones'") and Karl Maria Wiligut, who are regarded by most scholars as ultimately marginal figures. On the one hand, the chapter offers reasonable, if sometimes very selective, observations about Nazi attempts to construct alternative forms of religion. On the other, Kurlander heavily relies on sensationalist accounts such as Lewis Spence's *Occult Causes of the Present War* (e.g. 173), mixing up contemporary sources with post-war sensationalist literature,[3] half-truths, and fictitious accounts. These problems resurface in the chapters of Part Three, for instance when Kurlander cites from the reservoir of post-war conspiracy theories: his jaw dropping discussion of a topic like the alleged super weapon, *die Glocke*, only serves, again, to suggest that the large amount of such tales hints at some obscure kernel of truth. (273)[4] The reading of these chapters can be particularly frustrating, because Kurlander's more constructive and challenging insights are mixed up with a genre of literature that experts of Nazi border science, secret technology, and alternative religions are all too familiar with.

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[2] Uwe Schellinger, Andreas Anton and Michael Schetsche, "Pragmatic Occultism in the Military History of the Third Reich," in *Revisiting the "Nazi Occult": Histories, Realities, Legacies*, eds. Eric Kurlander and Monica Black, 157–80 (Rochester: Camden House, 2015), Peter Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), and Peter Staudenmaier, "Esoteric Alternatives in Imperial Germany: Science, Spirit, and the Modern Occult Revival," in *Revisiting the "Nazi Occult,"* 23–41.

[3] For instance, *Hitler, Buddha, Krishna* by Victor and Victoria Trimondi. In his introduction, Kurlander maintains that, despite the sensationalist character of the book, its authors have done valuable archival research. We do not learn, however, on what basis Kurlander has decided whether the information or argument is trustworthy or not. At no point does he critically engage with this study, from which he only appears to quote when it suits his narrative.

[4] For a brief summary of similar conspiracy theories and their sources, see Julian Strube, Strube, Julian. "Nazism and the Occult," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge, 336–47 (London: Routledge, 2015) and the more detailed Julian Strube, "Die Erfindung des esoterischen Nationalsozialismus im Zeichen der Schwarzen Sonne," *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 20, no. 2 (2012): 223–68.

When we look for historical explanations for the links between esotericism and National Socialism, other recent studies can offer us much more differentiated, informed, and informative insights, perhaps most importantly Peter Staudenmaier's case study of Anthroposophy, *Between Occultism and Nazism* (2014).[5] Among the many nuanced arguments in this book, the most concise might be that the links between "National Socialism and the occult" were "ordinary, not esoteric. They can be explained not through the deviance of occultism but through its familiarity, its participation in and influence by central cultural currents of the era." (327) We find similar remarks throughout Kurlander's volume, sometimes with reference to Staudenmaier, but interwoven with and eclipsed by the problematic aspects discussed above. What Kurlander presents us with is not a nuanced approach that confronts the reader with the "irreducible ambiguities of modernity," (Staudenmaier, 6) but an updated version of the old "irrationality vs. rationality" narrative that has merely been replaced by "the supernatural" and supplemented with some nuances.

Certainly, Kurlander offers a gripping, excellently written narrative that touches upon a range of fascinating cases. He makes a range of valuable arguments, especially in Chapter Four, and I wholeheartedly subscribe to his plea to take seriously the events between the late nineteenth century and 1945 in the light of present-day developments in Europe and the USA. (299) However, it is exactly these strengths that make this study especially ambiguous, as the lines between solid research and the full spectrum of sensationalist, biased, and spurious literature are frequently blurred. These sources may be distinguishable for experts, but not necessarily for others, which makes their appearances at the core of a serious academic study particularly misleading. As has been indicated above, Kurlander's justification for relying on these sources amounts to little more than "if so many people were talking about it, there must be something to it." This comes dangerously close to the kind of reasoning that Kurlander rightfully criticizes throughout the book. An approach to this kind of material should be based on a clear methodology that results in a carefully differentiated investigation and interpretation. It should seek to establish a historical contextualization that reflects the complexities and ambiguities of the period. In short, it should put nuance over narrative. In this regard, for all its merits, *Hitler's Monsters* is a missed chance.

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[5] See my extensive review in *Aries* 17, no. 2.