

Hitler's Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich. Eric Kurlander. Yale University Press, 2017. 422 pp. Hardcover \$35.00 / ISBN: 97803300189452.

Eric Kurlander's book on the relationship between Nazi culture and popular German esoteric culture tells the story of an art student discharged from the army due to wounds sustained in WWI. The student dreamed of creating a third pan-German Reich and accordingly surrounded himself with people keen on founding a National Socialist party and obsessed with quasi-religious racism and ariosophic symbols like the swastika (33). *Hitler's Monsters* also tells the story of Hitler, but the fact that the young man just described was not Adolf Hitler but rather Walter Nauhaus (the founder of the Thule Society) highlights the value of Kurlander's impressively researched and detailed contextual study. Time and again, *Hitler's Monsters* demystifies and illuminates the Nazi movement by examining its many esoteric cultural tributaries and fellow travellers. With a nod to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's "social imaginary" (i.e., the pervasive set of fundamental world views according to which a given society's members understand and comport themselves), Kurlander situates the evolution of Nazi mythology and ideology within the "supernatural imaginary" of their time and place. This approach makes *Hitler's Monsters* a welcome intervention into a cultural conversation that is dominated by lurid pop culture fantasy (from the Blue Ribbon Mystery comics of the '40s to the *Achtung Chthulu!* series of recent years) and sensationalistic para-scholarly books like Miguel Serrano's *The Golden Thread: Esoteric Hitlerism*—all of which can keep more sober treatments like Goodrick-Clarke's *The Occult Roots of Nazism* too busy debunking outrageous claims to be able to fully explore the real historical links between Nazism and supernaturalism that are, if anything, even more sinister by virtue of being more subtle and culturally banal. This less sensationalistic but more unsettling historiographical and psychological territory is exactly where Kurlander takes his readers. "National Socialism," he explains, "even when critical of occultism, was more preoccupied by and indebted to a wide array of supernatural doctrines and esoteric practices than any other mass political movement" (xiv).

Hitler's Monsters is adroitly organized into three sections, each divided into three chapters. In his introduction, Kurlander does an excellent job of summarizing the progression of the analysis laid out in these sections and their constituent chapters: "Part One traces the role of supernatural thinking in the Nazi Party from its intellectual antecedents in the late nineteenth century," by reviewing "the occult, mythological, and 'border scientific' ideas that permeated Vienna's cafés and Munich's beer halls before the First World War . . . the

organizational and ideological connections between [occult organizations] and the early Nazi Party, [and finally the ways in which early Nazis] appropriated supernatural ideas in order to appeal to ordinary Germans, enlisting the help of occultists and horror writers” (xxi). The first chapter of Part One, “The Supernatural Roots of Nazism,” shows how the “re-enchanted sciences” (i.e., pseudo-sciences or “border sciences”) of the “dowsers, World Ice theorists, theosophists and ariosophists, astrologers and parapsychologists” flowered among Germans fearful of “sub-Aryan” and “soulless” materialistic science, “and created a vision that transcended traditional [dividing lines like] left and right, religious and scientific, racist and cosmopolitan” (32). Kurlander shows how the idealism, racism, and populism of these *völkisch* ideals inspired Hitler and his circle, and eventually lent the Nazi Party more popular appeal.

“Part Two focuses on the role of supernatural thinking during the first six years of the Third Reich,” by describing “the regime’s policies toward occultists [examining] the ‘border sciences’ promoted by many Nazis, [and tracing] the Nazis’ interest in Germanic paganism, witchcraft, Luciferianism, and Eastern spirituality” (xxi). Kurlander sets the Nazi regime’s famous crackdown on crackpot occultists in the context of all the occultists who managed to market their systems as “legitimate border sciences” sympathetic to the “proper” scientific and spiritual program of the Third Reich and were accordingly tolerated, and sometimes even sponsored, by Nazi authorities.

“Part Three examines the role of supernatural thinking during the Second World War,” by describing “the influence of the supernatural imaginary on the Third Reich . . . in prosecuting the war, [as well as] the ways in which science and the supernatural intersected in the Third Reich” and the eventual descent of the Nazi Party into a desperate apocalyptic fever of “‘miracle weapons,’ partisan warfare, and cataclysmic ‘twilight’ imagery during the final years of the war” (xxi–xxii).

In terms of readability and accuracy in English and editing, the book is simply excellent throughout, although when Kurlander refers on page 7 to werewolves and witches as “monsters in Christian liturgy” I am forced to wonder which much more interesting church services he has been sitting through. In terms of general accessibility and popular appeal, aside from the service rendered in simply setting the disconcerting record straight on Nazism and the occult, *Hitler’s Monsters* has the dubious fortune of being disconcertingly timely and relevant today. The baleful German pop culture web Kurlander traces, linking magical thinking, pseudo-science, conspiracy theories, bigotry, and reactionary populism, looks uncomfortably familiar in the light of the World Wide Web.

For readers interested in researching and/or teaching on intersections of religion and violence, this last point leads to a final important thing offered by *Hitler's Monsters*: a gap. Kurlander's book could have benefited from the revealing and growing body of scholarship on what "religion" is (from J. Z. Smith to Russell McCutcheon). As it stands, *Hitler's Monsters* merely leaves a door open for this discussion. Kurlander notes in closing his study an ominous popular vogue against "empirically grounded" opinions and policies in our own (European/American) society. He specifies that he sees "traditional religion" as less malleable and therefore less dangerous than outright magical thinking in describing the danger posed to Western democratic societies by this noticeable recent surge of popular enthusiasm for anti-scientific, pseudo-scientific, and magical thinking. As his own historical review in *Hitler's Monsters* shows, though, in acknowledging the interpenetration of cultural dimensions of the "religious," "occult" and "border science" in the evolution of the German supernatural imaginary exploited by the Nazis, distinctions between "religious thinking" and "magical thinking" are situated judgement calls, and the theoretical membranes they posit are dependably, dangerously permeable in practice.

Aaron Ricker
McGill University