In the Weimar Republic, popular culture was the scene of heated controversies that tested the limits of national cohesion. How could marginal figures like a stigmatized villager, a grub street writer, or an advocate for nudism become flashpoints of political conflict?

Peter S. Fisher draws on Siegfried Kracauer’s trenchant observations on Weimar’s contradictions to knit these exemplary stories together. Following his methodology, society’s underdogs take center stage, pushing the headline makers into the background.

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Siegfried Kracauer lauded film director Fritz Lang for the masterful build-up of suspense in the opening scene of his crime thriller *M* (1931). A mother, busy with household chores, shows increasing concern as she notices that her daughter Elsi has not returned from school at the regular time. A door-to-door salesman slowly climbs up the staircase and distracts Elsi’s mother from her worries. He is a colporteur delivering the next installment of a subscription novel. For many lower class housewives, the colporteur was a welcome visitor who interrupted the monotonous routine of cooking, cleaning, and mending. The ten-penny subscription stories that he sold transported the reader into a world of innocent Cinderellas, dashing Prince Charmings, and evil villains with enough energy to pursue and terrify heroines over the course of one hundred installments or more than two thousand pages. Colportage’s cheap thrills served to break momentarily the pattern of daily *tristesse*. So, too, did crime films like Lang’s drama. Was the appearance of the colporteur in *M* merely a device to heighten suspense, or did his presence pay homage to the penny dreadfuls that were the forerunners of moving picture thrillers?

Kracauer did not mention the brief appearance of the colporteur in *M*. He often, however, liked to focus exactly on these minor, overlooked figures. He was attracted to them and they became an important part of his analysis of Weimar culture. One such figure was the *Nummernmädchen* or “number girl” at a Berlin variety theater: “In the *Scala*, a girl appears every evening who, as far as I know, has never been the subject of an article.” Kracauer described the job of the “the number girl” as simply crossing the stage between acts with a large numbered card to signal the next act. Admitting that her job was minute, he, nevertheless, was enchanted by her smooth pirouette from one end of the stage to the other: “And then the smile – this beaming smile... that accompanies her numerical message. It is as if she is fulfilling a delicate mission that ought not to be trumpeted out loud. This smile is so flirtatious and personal. In a word, I mean that this triviality deserves mention merely on account of her evocative presence.” This apparently insignificant girl captured Kracauer’s fancy and led him to philosophize: “A number girl, why the big deal? Yet, some so-called historical events have only left behind the numerals of a date, and the marginal not rarely turns out to be the...
main thing.” Kracauer’s interest in the marginal was not simply an idiosyncrasy: it was the core of his method of social analysis. A seemingly insignificant figure, an obscure, anonymous place, or a popular fad might be the means for discovering something important about a social process that normally was difficult to detect. Taking a cue from Kracauer, I will explore what seemed at the time to be three marginal phenomena of Weimar culture. The subjects broadly described are occultism, nudism, and colportage. Each of these three components of Weimar’s popular culture were subjects of controversy and heated debate. Here and there, in his Frankfurter Zeitung articles of the 1920s and early 1930s, he would discuss them.

Weimar occultism, nudism, and colportage had their roots in the Wilhelmine period and were tied in one way or another to Weimar’s most dynamic form of popular culture: the movies. It was no accident that Kracauer, as a film reviewer, was exposed to and interested in these facets of Weimar culture. Nudism he first discussed in a film review of the propagandistic Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit (Paths to Strength and Beauty, 1925). 6 1920s society, he observed, wanted a healthy body through physical education, dance, and sport. He wrote about occultism in a review of Somnambul (1929), a film that featured the famous medium and psychic detective Elsbeth Günther-Geffers. 7 The film tried to illustrate telepathy’s usefulness in fighting crime. Kracauer expressed his opinions about colportage and detective thrillers in various reviews of action films, like those of Harry Piel (whose screen popularity led to the publication of a pulp adventure series). As a sociologist Kracauer focused on the formation of a rapidly growing white-collar class and explored its habits and proclivities, including its reading tastes. The myriad subjects covered in his articles and reviews shed light on many aspects of Weimar culture, not only on the behavior of the new white-collar class. Kracauer’s writing explored a dynamic society that he himself found more intriguing than the distant, exotic worlds which, he complained, received far too much coverage in Weimar’s flashy magazines and illustrated journals.

Kracauer’s generally liberal and open-minded analysis of Weimar culture contrasted sharply with that of a host of conservative cultural critics who derided the Republic and expressed contempt for Germany’s dizzying postwar culture of diversion and pleasure. They detested Weimar’s pluralism and tolerance and regretted the passing of the patriarchal Wilhelmine order. Wherever possible, they called for state controls and sanctions against what they considered the egregious manifestations of popular culture. They wanted to forge a conservative, nationalist hegemony to restore a moral order that would oversee the country’s cultural activities and decide what was and was not suitable for public consumption. The conservative critics saw themselves as defenders of a civic code that had been severely shaken and needed to be restored. Their efforts were flanked and supported by the Catholic and Protestant Churches which felt threatened by such popular
phenomena as occultism, nudism, and the reading of colportage. Colportage was often called “trashy and filthy literature” [Schund und Schmutzschriften]. The word Schund originally referred to the wood pealings left from a craftsman's carvings. During the Industrial Age it began to mean any mass-produced article of poor quality intended to reap profits at the customer's expense. Church organizations in the 1920s were among the most actively involved in the Schundkampf [the battle against trashy literature], which reached a climax in 1926 as parliament debated and finally passed a law restricting the proliferation of this literature. 8

The Catholic Church took a consistent position in opposing all three forms of popular culture discussed in this study. Weimar's political parties had more varied, ambiguous positions and sometimes even suffered internal splits over questions regarding popular culture. Calls for control by conservative cultural critics showed an intolerance and a deep suspicion of popular culture, accompanied by a willingness to sacrifice individual freedom for an enforced system of national ethics. Conservative and church demands clashed with the liberal spirit of Weimar democracy. Generally, Social Democrats and liberals opposed censorship and restrictive legislation.

Concerns about suitable degrees of governmental control and curtailment of individual freedom sparked lively debates in parliament and the press. When exactly did governmental control impinge on vital individual freedoms? When was it needed to protect citizens? To what extent should official authorities act to prevent the public's exposure to the supposed dangers emanating from occultism, nudism, or the distribution of “trashy or filthy literature?” Differences of opinion on how to deal with these issues revealed deep rifts within German society and helped widen them. Kracauer did not completely oppose state intervention, but generally he felt that government tutelage and an unsolicited protection of the citizenry were inappropriate.

The Weimar Republic was, in this case, no different from other modern democracies that debated when and where it was appropriate for the state to intervene or to restrict cultural activities. What kind of media should be denied to youth? When did soothsayers, clairvoyants, stigmatics, or natural healers cross the border into fraudulence and possible exploitation of the public? What sorts of behavior undermined or upset the customs that a society shared and that helped glue it together? General questions of this nature played a part in the cultural conflicts that polarized Weimar society and eventually helped break it apart. In the end, the Weimar Constitution itself would become an object of political debate and cultural conflict.

This study takes into account that Weimar's cultural discourse was largely shaped by elites and often left out the people most affected by government intervention. Rarely, if ever, can one hear the voice of a youthful reader of detective pulps, or the retired couple devoted to occultism, or the proletarian family en-
joying a lakeside nudist retreat on the outskirts of Berlin. Many of the people engaged in these contested activities were members of disempowered subcultures. They were either undereducated, poor, young, or female. William Christian in his study of 1920s Spanish visionaries referred to such people as cultural underdogs.\textsuperscript{9} Antonio Gramsci would have included them in what he defined as a mute subaltern class. The views and aims of these people, largely hidden from history, must be teased out of the actions and the political and moral discourse that was often carried on over their heads and against their will.

In chapter one, I will examine how state and church authorities confronted the supporters of two types of occultism. The first type was called “criminal telepathy” \textit{[Kriminaltelepathie]}. Its advocates thought crimes could be investigated and solved by supersensory methods. The second type involved the stigmata or bearing of wounds, similar to those of Christ, supernaturally imposed on certain exceptional individuals. In “criminal telepathy,” people claiming special psychic abilities, gained widespread attention in the 1920s by uncovering crimes and sparked numerous controversies about truth and fraudulence, and whether or not supersensory experience was a hoax or a reality. Two trials in the provincial towns of Bernburg and Insterburg tried to determine whether psychic detectives were guilty of fraud. Should these “supernatural criminologists” be incarcerated as charlatans or were they to be applauded as auxiliary policemen? The trial verdicts left an air of unsatisfying ambiguity, while the press misinterpreted them as occultist victories.

In Weimar's main experience with stigmatic occultism, institutional religious authority was called into question by a supernatural event in rural Bavaria. In a remote village near the Czech border, a young woman relived the Passion of Christ and suffered stigmata in weekly interludes. A horde of pilgrims descended on the holy place, much to the consternation of church and state. Should they stand by and condone the fervid, gory display?

Chapter two focuses on the battle over popular “trashy literature.” Self-proclaimed guardians of German culture as well as parliamentary delegates scrutinized installment novels and detective pulps in an endeavor to protect German youth from the nefarious pens of hack writers and the profits of greedy, assembly-line publishers. Supposedly, this popular literature undermined young people’s morals and even threatened their sanity. Should the state intervene with censorship?

The works of one of Weimar's most prolific colportage or installment novel writers are used to illustrate the complexities of this conflict. The parliamentary debate over the Schund law, its passage, and the fight over its application are discussed in chapter three. This chapter also elaborates an interpretation of a particular subgenre of the colportage novel: the story of the highwayman and how he paradoxically restores law and order.
The controversy about new pulp detective series (viewed as particularly dangerous for youth) is discussed in chapter four. The “German detective” Harald Harst’s popularity extended over the entire period of the Weimar Republic. Tolerated by the Republic, he met his demise at the hands of “trashy literature” censors in 1934. A hardening intolerance towards some types of popular culture manifested itself with the Nazis in power.

Chapter five examines the debate over nudism. If the founding coalition of Weimar democracy had great difficulty overseeing the thorny issue of popular literature, how could Social Democracy and the Catholic Center Party compromise on the divisive subject of nudism? In the Rhine Valley, weekend urban bathers enjoyed nude swimming sometimes in the immediate proximity of religious processions. The questions of Scham [shame] and Schund ["trashy literature"] vexed and plagued the embattled Republic. The book’s epilogue draws the cultural conflicts together within the context of the final political attack on the Republic. Siegfried Kracauer’s essays about Berlin’s modern avenue of splendor, the Kurfürstendamm, emblemize the deadly finale of Weimar culture.

Endnotes

1 Siegfried Kracauer, “Neue Filme,” in Kleine Schriften zum Film 1928-1931 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 509.
3 Ibid., 349.
4 Ibid.
5 For an interesting, critical view of Kracauer’s methodology during Weimar, see Michael Ermarth, “Girls Gone Wild in Weimar: Siegfried Kracauer on Girlkultur and the Un-Kultur of Americanism,” in Modernism/modernity (Vol.19, No.1, Jan.2012), pages 1-18. Ermarth relates that new phenomena like Kino, Konsum Kosmetik and Körper were viewed by Kracauer “as surface ciphers or cryptograms of an inverted, inhuman ‘brave new world’ of reifying rationalization.” (p.7) Kracauer’s goal was “to observe and correlate surface manifestations in order to attain an ulterior understanding... The ultimate aim was to move beyond them and their own blinkered viewpoint to something better, more progressive, more wholesome, more humane: their ultimate redemption would follow upon their ulterior understanding...” (p.14).
6 Kracauer, “Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit,” in Kleine Schriften zum Film 1921-1927 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 143-147.
Chapter One. Occultism: Empowerment or Menace?

On a cold, overcast November afternoon, Siegfried Kracauer left his apartment in the Sternstrasse, just a couple blocks north of Frankfurt’s downtown and made his way to the edge of the city, where the Sarrasani Circus had set up its beckoning, illuminated tent. An expectant crowd waited for admission. Kracauer observed: “Rows of light bulbs trickle down the façades and shine like stars on the massive canvas dome.” What brought an intellectual like Kracauer to visit the circus? In the decade prior to Hitler’s takeover, Kracauer worked as editor for the Frankfurter Zeitung, first in Frankfurt and then, from 1930 to 1933, in Berlin. He wrote hundreds of articles for the paper in which he both diagnosed modern society’s malaise and found signs of its possible redemption. He had a particular penchant for observing the crowd in its fleeting moments of entertainment and leisure activity. His expert eyes uncovered patterns of interaction and social or cultural trends that otherwise remained invisible.

The opening parade of performers and animals in the Sarrasani show was led by Mr. Sarrasani himself and the circus band played a military march, much to the audience’s delight. The ensuing acts of racing Japanese stilt men, Moroccan daredevil acrobats, and Cossack horse-back riders followed one another with such precise timing that the crowd could hardly gasp. Kracauer noted that the technical skills of the individual acts were subsumed in the circus’s own organizational perfection. Rationalization permeated the circus experience from the manipulated audience to the performing animals that acted “according to the idea which they did not think.” Kracauer asked, “is there more rationalization in the factory or in the circus?” Within seconds the bulky circus carpet was rolled up and stowed away. The changing show seemed to be timed by stopwatch. The density of exciting acts bedazzled the crowd. There was not a free moment.

So much perfection could, however, also be stifling. The critical visitor noted the absence of a genuine clown routine, “There is no time for the clowns, we must rationalize too much. Soon improvisation won’t be granted any place to unfold.” For Kracauer, the clown represented more than a breath of fresh air. In an article about the acclaimed clown Grock, Kracauer noted that the master clown’s act was a product of improvisation, born from a creative tension between audience and
performer. Clowns were not just society's escape artists, potentially they could provide a glimpse of freedom, an indication to a richer alternative life.

In a 1932 performance of the Andreu-Rivel clowns at the Scala Variety Theater in Berlin, Kracauer witnessed a clown routine that opposed and transcended the ubiquitous grid of rationalization. Remarkably, the Andreu-Rivels did not “produce individual acts [Einfälle] wedged between a wild animal number and a rodeo performance,” but, instead, built a whole structure, a complete piece with a beginning, a climax, and an end. “Doesn't such a construction contradict the usually imposed need for the clown to improvise,” Kracauer asked. “What distinguishes the Andreu-Rivel's composition is that it actually consists of a sequence of accidents that miraculously transform themselves into a single entity.” The clowns first decide, on a lark, that they should become acrobats. Next they get caught up in the idea of building a bridge. “The trick is that the bridge will be built only by taking all sorts of detours, and these are of more importance than the end-product itself.” Kracauer was awed by the clowns' scintillating, seemingly scurrilous performance, and what he detected as its underlying meaning. “The clowns could not fulfill their mission in a more conscious and dialectical manner. What is this mission? Proving that the thing we normally consider to be most important is, in reality, of minor consequence. There is no genuine clowning which does not take it upon itself to turn the world's normal relations upside down.”

The Andreu-Rivel's way to build a bridge reveals a logic that is not normal but rather pertains to the realm of fairy tales. Their clowning goes beyond breaking apart the false seriousness and individual isolation [Verschlossenheit] that typifies modern society. Kracauer viewed these clowns as metaphorically creating “a dizzying bridge bolder than the one they actually build” and across which, with “a little acrobatic practice,” men could find their way to freedom. The Andreu-Rivel performance hints at the possibility of an alternative life. Kracauer claimed it evokes a reality not identical with ours, a world that stands in “the same relation to our quotidian reality as that of fairy tales or some dreams.”

This taste of utopia that Kracauer discovered in the Andreu-Rivel act contrasts with the repeated observations of the leisure crowd's attraction to militaristic music, parades, and activities offered up by an entertainment industry that was itself ever more subjected to rationalization. Kracauer's Frankfurter Zeitung articles were meant to be more than individual snapshots of Weimar society; they were an ongoing project to illuminate a modern society's oscillations between poles of emancipation and enslavement, between self-discovery and regimented, external control. In the snapshots one senses that either development was possible: this
was a society in flux and it was Kracauer's achievement to pick out neglected moments and to analyze experiences that cast a light on problems and qualities that shaped the Weimar period.

Kracauer preferred to view his essays as mosaic pieces that, if fitted together, revealed a larger composition of society's potentials and predicaments. We can use single stones and motifs in this mosaic to investigate particularly revealing features of Weimar society. Thus we can follow a path that might have tempted Kracauer himself if he had had time to leave his newspaper office and daily duties to indulge in a more sustained form of "rag picking," as his friend Walter Benjamin endearingly called his ventures into the realm of cultural detritus.

In one such area of popular culture, Weimar crowds were magnetically drawn to performances by psychics claiming powers of clairvoyance and telepathy. The clairvoyant Kara-Iki boasted many years of occult studies in India and other Asian countries. In a Berlin appearance witnessed by Kracauer, Kara-Iki collected scraps of paper upon which members of the audience jotted down the time and place of some significant event in their lives. After focusing on a pendulum to reach a heightened level of consciousness, Kara-Iki took each scrap and correctly related what the given person experienced on that date. To this he added some vague, consolatory comment about the person's future. "More interesting than the prophesying is the audience which eagerly absorbs each proclamation. It consists largely of members of those strata that today passionately hope for a miracle." Kracauer described the audience as men and women of the middle class: with a bit of irony, he called them people of independent means. "They flee from a state of desperation to one of delirium, pushing reason aside because it only pains them. They would rather place their trust in a clairvoyant so that they themselves do not need to see clearly."

At the Scala, Kracauer observed a 1932 performance by Hanussen, Weimar's most celebrated clairvoyant. Skillfully building suspense, Hanussen won the crowd's confidence with some lesser tricks before he blindfolded himself and demonstrated his seeing abilities. "I have rarely seen such an expectant audience... one can practically hear it listening while Hanussen silently concentrates and it begins to rumble with delight as Hanussen delivers his answers. A sultry excitement that indicates how the waiting for a miracle has been amplified by the crisis. As if the crisis could be overcome by a miracle! But holding out in the shadows seems, for many, more comfortable than the planned improvement of conditions which would be the only legitimate miracle."

Kracauer's varieté reports of Kara-Iki and Hanussen performances showed a society crumbling away toward dictatorship. The articles appeared as the lights went out for the Republic. The fascination with the occult had gripped German society even before the turn of the century, but had garnered ever more interest and support after the war and defeat. The occult arts included astrology, graphology,
telepathy, clairvoyance, spirit encounters, hypnosis, magnetic healings (to name only a few popular subtypes) and offered a seemingly endless array of new experiences, insights, and seductive possibilities to a population hungry for amusement, but also for escape, hope, and a new sense of empowerment. Occultists claimed remedies for all sorts of private and public ills. While such popular stars, as Kara-Iki and Hanussen were known chiefly as multitalented occultist entertainers, others offered more specific, practical services.

1.1 Psychic detective August Drost and medium Marie Neumann

1.1 Psychic detective August Drost working with his favorite medium Marie Neumann. Prosecuted in Bernburg for fraud and for falsely accusing innocent people of crimes, Drost was found "not guilty." Occultists used the trial to vindicate their movement. Albert Hellwig, *Okkultismus und Verbrechen* (Berlin: Hanseatischer Rechts und Wirtschaftsverlag, 1929), illus. 8.

The new field of criminal telepathy [Kriminaltelepathie] promised to harness occult forces in the battle against crime. The years after the war had seen an explosive growth in both petty and serious forms of crime. Clairvoyant mediums and
psychic detectives were the occult's answer to this social malaise that the state seemed incapable of addressing adequately. Erosion of the public's confidence in the police was part of a larger disillusionment in a state whose once rock-solid authority during the Kaiserreich had been severely tested by war, defeat, and Weimar's unstable political and economic aftermath.

From 1919 to 1924, the Bernburg schoolteacher and occultist August Drost had hypnotized a number of mediums. While in a trance state, they provided clues and information about various crimes ranging from theft to homicide. Drost acquired notoriety after ostensibly solving a local case of homicide in 1921. From then on, victims of crime in the Bernburg area sought his assistance. Marie Neumann, a young woman in her twenties, eventually became his favorite medium. Together they helped retrieve not only pilfered money, but stolen keys, watches, clocks, silverware, clothing, furs, sausages, a stamp collection, missing animals, and bags of grain.15

Through her clairvoyant powers, Neumann described suspects who had been involved in serious crimes, such as firing a gun at a police officer, murdering a Magdeburg railway man, or setting fire to a castle in the town of Biendorf.16 In the last case, Drost had been contacted by the police commissioner of Dessau for assistance. This increased his reputation as a serious crime fighter.

For their services, Drost and Neumann were paid either in currency or in kind. Remuneration for hunting criminals got them in trouble with the law. They were charged with fraud and creating a public nuisance (grober Unfug.) State prosecutors argued that fraud applied because the para-police's clients expected and paid for a service which in all likelihood could not be delivered. The legal challenge to the state authorities lay in proving that the psychic detectives either did not themselves believe in their supernatural abilities or used trickery to mislead clients into believing that they possessed extrasensory capacities applicable to the field of crime.17 The second charge could be initiated whenever the psychic detectives mistakenly identified “perpetrators” with alibis that proved their innocence. These could in turn hire lawyers to initiate charges of libel. An earlier conviction of two other Bernburg psychic detectives established a precedent that would lead to the widely followed Drost and Neumann trial.

On December 18, 1924, the two former variety artists Paul Hildebrecht and Erich Möckel, who had briefly worked as psychic detectives, were found guilty of fraud in the Bernburg court. Möckel had confessed to the police that Hildebrecht pretended to hypnotise him and then, in a simulated state of hypnosis, proferred all kinds of information pertinent to the examined cases. Möckel admitted that he either simply invented names and activities or if Hildebrecht had garnered and conveyed some actual information about the crime, Möckel would use it to confabulate a plausible unrolling of events.18 Unusual about the Hildebrecht-Möckel trial was that both men admitted to having deceived their clients and were thus
easily convicted for fraud. The Drost case proved more complicated because he and his mediums confidently insisted that they were capable of harnessing extrasensory powers to help solve cases of burglary, arson, and homicide. In contrast to Hildebrecht and Möckel, whose shady social background as variety artists, cast them in an unfavorable light, Drost was a school teacher with an impeccable reputation vouchsafed by the local superintendent. Although Drost lacked academic credentials, he had read a considerable amount of occultist literature and showed a genuine interest in parapsychology. In addition, the court could not ignore a large number of Drost followers and victims of crime who were convinced that he had helped them retrieve stolen goods or provided the police with essential clues.

The trial took place from October 12 to October 17, 1925, in the provincial town of Bernburg (Saxony-Anhalt). Prominent legal reporter Paul Schlesinger, who signed off as “Sling” in the Vossische Zeitung, arrived from Berlin and entitled his first article “the Clairvoyant of Bernburg: Hypnotiser or Swindler?” He noted great popular interest and every seat in the visitor's gallery was occupied when the trial began. Sling explained that the prosecution's goal was to prove Drost guilty of profiting from his medium's clairvoyant utterances, even though he did not believe in her extrasensory powers. But Sling quickly added, “There are people in Bernburg who think the trial is not so much about Drost, but rather about whether or not there really are clairvoyant phenomena. It is – so they say – occultism itself that wants to fight this battle....” What Sling did not realize as the trial opened was that he himself would become enmeshed in the wider cultural conflict that framed the Bernburg trial.

Each day, witnesses paraded in, giving testimony as to how the psychic detective and his medium had offered their unusual services. Sausages, geese, goats, pigs, bicycles, clocks, jewelry, clothes, blankets, shoes were among the many stolen items that the hypnotist and his clairvoyant partner attempted to retrieve. In many instances, neither stolen goods, nor culprits were found. Yet, there were also successes that, Sling felt, showed the uncanny perceptions of the medium. In November, 1922, a Dr. Danziger had asked Drost and Neumann to shed light on a burglary in his Ballenstedt home. Neumann, in trance, described the break-in and mentioned that a checkbook had been taken from Danziger's desk. Until that point, Danziger had not even been aware that his checkbook was gone. To Sling, who noted that two policemen corroborated the story, this seemed pretty solid proof of clairvoyance. Two of the three experts hired by the court as consultants, agreed that in this instance there was a high probability of clairvoyance. The third expert, however, disagreed. Albert Hellwig skeptically maintained that the medium had probably seen a list of stolen items which included a missing checkbook.

In Dingelstedt, in the summer of 1922, jewelry had been pilfered from a closet of the Kunkel family's apartment. The medium first named a maid of the Kunkel
household and then a local gold merchant as the robbers. Sling reported that Neumann, in trance, had envisioned a sick boy and that, strikingly, the jewels were recovered four months later in a drawer under the child's clothing. Mrs. Kunkel declared she had opened the drawer daily without noticing anything but clothes until she unexpectedly found the jewelry. This case further convinced Sling of Neumann's special parapsychological gift. Another corroborating case concerned laundry stolen from the Rockmann family in Kalbe an der Saale. Drost's medium offered a detailed account of the burglary and listed the missing goods, including a red-striped tablecloth that the Rockmanns had not yet noticed as lost. In her vision, Neumann also located where the laundry was hidden and identified "Edde" and "Äfer" as the thieves. Although the laundry was later found in another place, two men named Ende and Schäfer were eventually accused and convicted of the crime. Sling was impressed by the fact that farmer Rockmann explicitly said the tablecloth had not been taken, yet it was among the recovered laundry. By the third day of the trial, Sling was convinced that Marie Neumann possessed supernatural powers and Drost knew how to tap them.

Sling not only felt increasing sympathy for "the little schoolmaster," as he condescendingly called Drost, but also anger at the state prosecutors. They, he pointed out, had first asked for Drost's collaboration in solving criminal cases, then, when they realized possible legal complications, had turned against him and called for prosecution. Sling was also dismayed by Albert Hellwig, the Potsdam judge and expert who, Sling insisted, simply wanted to help the prosecution frame Drost for fraud so as to score a victory in his own personal crusade against occultism. Furthermore, was it appropriate for a Prussian judge to be serving as an expert witness at a trial? "Does Prussia's judicial administration prefer to have him occupied with occultism rather than things relevant to his position," Sling angrily asked.

In his next article, published on October 16, Sling resumed the attack on Hellwig. A defense lawyer asked Hellwig how he would explain some of the curious findings presented to the court. Sling quoted the Potsdam judge as saying, "I have no explanation. But these cases all lack the required precautions of scientific experiments." In fact, Hellwig repeatedly discussed how subjective and misleading witness observations could be, how long ago the events had taken place, how incomplete the written reports were, how previous knowledge might have influenced the medium, and how Drost might have willfully elicited self-serving responses. In other words, Hellwig rejected any testimony that failed a strict empirical test. Sling propounded that Hellwig applied a double standard. He credited his consultant colleagues as sincere in their beliefs in the existence of clairvoyance and supersensory phenomena. He respected them because of their academic credentials, but what he allowed them, he denied the humble Drost. "Or should one maintain that only the scientific conviction of the expert has validity, but the
same conviction in the mouth of a son of the people [Volkskind] is equivalent to fraud?\textsuperscript{28}

At first it may appear surprising that the prestigious Vossische Zeitung’s reporter was taking the part of the accused psychic detective and attacking the skeptical Potsdam judge. But the quarrel revealed a deep fissure in Weimar culture and society. On the one side, vox popoli proposed a radically altered perception and experience of reality, a discovery of new, hitherto unknown truths, and on the other side, an establishment maintained the status quo and determined to draw a clear line between fact and fiction, proven data and wild speculation. As many observers of the Bernburg trial had sensed, the agitation in the provincial courtroom had a significance that transcended the fate of the “little schoolmaster” and his medium. Who would win this battle? The occultists and their “son of the people,” or the state prosecutor assisted by an anti-occultist, academic mandarin? The battle also revealed tears in Weimar’s frayed social fabric: the lesser educated versus those with university diplomas; the lower middle class versus the Bildungsbürgertum; the Republic’s disenchanted, anxious outsiders versus those with secure, high-paying jobs, prestige, and power.

Perhaps Sling sympathized with the outsiders because he himself was not an academic. He had somehow stumbled into his career without formal training in either journalism or law. Art interested him more than science and he liked presenting his court reports as subjective, literary dramas. He was interested in “the psychological motivation” [seelische Beweggründe] of the accused and the witnesses; he wanted, as he put it, “to peer into the hearts of the prosecutors and judges.” For Sling, there was “no such thing as objectivity. Neither in science, nor in the court.”\textsuperscript{29} In venting his anger at Hellwig, Sling revealed a growing popular desire to embrace a supersensory realm in which the hitherto unexplainable was entwined with previously unreachable divine forms of power. Sling was elated when the Bernburg trial ended on October 17, 1925, and the court found Drost not guilty of either of the two charges of fraud or creating a condition of public nuisance. “The main thing: the would-be Grand Inquisitor has been brought down,” crowed Sling.\textsuperscript{30} For the Berlin reporter, when a free Drost walked out of the court to the cheers of the crowd, it was a triumph of David over Goliath.

All the Potsdam judge’s efforts to steer the court’s attention to fraudulent remuneration, all his doubts about the supernatural talents of the psychic detective and his mediums, all his allegations that Drost himself did not believe in what he was doing had left Sling furious. For him, Hellwig was a “humorless bureaucrat who imagined that occultism would be dead if he could get Mr. Drost of Bernburg convicted.”\textsuperscript{31} Sling wondered why all strange phenomena required an explanation.

Why could Hellwig not allow for the existence of the supernatural? “There is nothing more beautiful on earth than a miracle,” Sling remarked. But, according to the reporter, Hellwig hated miracles. “A miracle is disorderly [unordentlich].
Miracles contradict an orderly administration of justice, or should a village witch really know more about a set of circumstances than someone who has passed a whole battery of legal exams? Hellwig won’t stand for it.32

Three weeks later Hellwig struck back with a public letter and a statement signed by himself and the other two court experts hired for the Bernburg trial. The Vossische Zeitung published them on November 6, 1925, along with a rebuttal by Sling. Hellwig claimed he had been attacked in a most exaggerated, despicable manner. While the personal attacks left him cold, he was not indifferent to these attacks if they hurt the cause for which he stood. He implied that Sling’s reports had been colored by a pro-occultist hysteria [Massensuggestion] that gripped the town of Bernburg during the trial. In the statement signed by the three consultants (they were, besides the Potsdam judge, the director of the Bernburg insane asylum and a local ophthalmologist), the psychiatrist and the medical specialist parted ways with Hellwig in reiterating their belief in the existence of clairvoyance. Important for Hellwig’s argument, however, was their unanimous agreement that “not in a single one of the cases presented at the hearings could it be scientifically proven that Drost’s mediums were capable of clairvoyance.”33 The experts underlined the damaging effects of some of the psychic detective’s allegations. The statement continued, “we also agree that in many cases the mediums provided false information. Innocent people were accused of theft. On account of information given by the mediums, home searches and arrestsof innocent people were made.”34

In his rebuttal Sling noted that he “did not arrive in Bernburg as an occultist, nor did he drive home as an occultist.”35 He had anticipated a trial in which the prosecution would present concrete evidence that Drost had manipulated information to make himself seem omniscient and had presented his customers with extravagant bills. Instead the trial revealed a complete lack of hard evidence against the psychic detective. If anyone was at fault, it was the police and prosecutors who helped Drost get his original clientele and perhaps contributed to making him feel unnecessarily sure of himself. Sling accused Hellwig of doing whatever he could to coach and assist the prosecution in its efforts to find Drost guilty, regardless of the evidence. The reporter for the Vossische Zeitung thought Hellwig merited the media’s harsh attacks because, as he put it in a self-congratulatory manner, “the press has a sensitive feeling for what is appropriate in the courtroom.”36

Sling addressed Hellwig’s concern that “the cause” for which he stood ought not to be damaged. “Was the cause anti-occultism?” Sling asked, “No, you fight against superstition, or as I once already expressed it, against the miraculous. But why? A lawyer, who is a friend of mine, told me that indeed ‘the miracle’ is not so harmless as I thought. If its existence could be proven, it would mean turning the world upside down: we would all have to change our ideas and start from scratch.
Right. Is that so bad? Have we not experienced in an extreme form the disgrace of everything that had been taught and learned? Should we not welcome a chance to start fresh again? Would it not be fitting and nice? Could there be, in a time like this, anything more exhilarating than a ‘miracle?’" In this passage, Sling revealed that same longing that Kracauer detected in the expectant Berlin audience of the clairvoyant entertainer Kara-Iki. Was this a society prepared to throw overboard all previously acquired rational norms of knowledge and scientific laws so as to ride an irrational wave into a magically imbued future? The “disgrace” that Sling felt burdening the country was the war and its humiliating Versailles aftermath. His words and his reactions to the Bernburg trial indicate that, indeed, there was more at stake here than the fate of a wayward Catholic school teacher practicing dark sciences. The trial was a minor earthquake that momentarily revealed a crack in the crust, a potential civilizational shift that was not yet clearly discernible to contemporary eyes. At the very end of his response to Hellwig’s complaints, Sling seemed to catch himself in the middle of his reverie and partly to deny it. “And if -unfortunately- I did not believe it [the miracle], should I fight it? No, Mr. Court Superintendent, we all have more important things to do. I, and you too!” Hellwig disagreed. For him, the struggle against occultism, psychic detectives, or “the miracle,” as Sling summed it up, deserved highest urgency. “It is a tragedy that a large part of public opinion carelessly passes over the dangerous consequences of an uncritical addiction to miracles and, itself addicted, begins to search everywhere for new miracles.” Hellwig called on the press to discharge its duties and to have an enlightening effect, to “exercise objective and sober criticism.” The Prussian judge saw it as his duty to resist the occult storm which had engulfed Germany after the lost war. He observed that one needed strong nerves to stand up to “the unscrupulous methods used by a part of the occultists against their irksome opponents.” “I, luckily, have such good nerves,” he declared and notified his adversaries that “nothing will stop me from…resisting this unholy, mass hysteria [Massensuggestion] that threatens our nation [Volk].”

There were no shades of gray in Hellwig’s position. By the late twenties, the Potsdam judge had evolved into the nemesis of Weimar’s psychic detectives. His meticulously researched volume Okkultismus und Verbrechen (Occultism and Crime) was published in 1929 and became the standard reference in the field, a study that would make any police inspector or prosecutor think twice about turning to mediums or parapsychology for help in solving criminal cases. Reaffirming the position taken at the Bernburg trial, Hellwig determined to reveal all psychic detectives’ claims as either outright fraud or, at least, as not worthy of scientific approval. He discussed the Drost case at length and caustically mentioned that Marie Neumann had previously served as a medium for Hildebrecht and Möckel, the psychic detectives who admitted they had rigged their investigations.
In his book, Hellwig repeated his claim that Drost originally believed in his ability to “lead” and channel the clairvoyant powers of his mediums, but, over time, recognized the absence of such forces in the light of repeated failures. Instead of giving up his enterprise, he had decided to take advantage of a vulnerable, easily exploited population and proceeded to fill his pockets. For Hellwig, Drost was a con artist not lacking “a certain natural slyness. Even newspapers that passionately supported him in the trial spoke of a ‘fox face’ and one reporter at the trial, a good judge of character, told me already on the first day that Drost was the ‘slyest’ one in the whole court room.” Although the court agreed with Hellwig that Drost was a skilled businessman (especially during the Inflation when he requested payments in kind rather than devalued money), they did not think he unduly profited from his customers. Like Sling, the court placed blame on public authorities who either requested Drost’s investigative help or recommended him to the victims of crime.

1.2 Lachen Links lampoons August Drost

1.2 August Drost was lampooned on the cover of SPD satire journal Lachen Links (January 1, 1926). For Weimar’s left, occultism was a dangerous form of brainwashing.
The tribunal further reasoned that, when in doubt, it should favor the innocence of the accused, especially in light of the praise he received from the local school superintendent. The court also believed that the trial would have a salubrious effect in discouraging people from seeking further assistance from psychic detectives.

Hellwig considered the court’s views naïve. He knew Drost’s acquittal would be trumpeted in the press as a great victory for occultism and that a large part of the public would misinterpret the trial’s outcome as giving an official stamp of approval on the veracity of parapsychological phenomena. Hellwig heard reports after the trial that Drost received so many requests from Germany and abroad that he could not answer them all. Police offices informed Hellwig that when they failed to solve a burglary case, the victims would often request Drost’s address. When serious crimes were not resolved in a short time, people and press suggested that the famed psychic detective from Bernburg should be summoned. A major publishing house purchased the rights to Drost’s future publications and a film company planned to make a documentary of the psychic detective at work.

The world of politics could also not fail to show interest. A cover of a Social Democratic publication showed a goggle-eyed Drost hypnotizing a comic figure symbolizing the socialist humor magazine Lachen Links. Cartoons inside illustrated questions posed to “the medium” and the answers. In one, the question “where is Germany’s savior?” showed a table of beer-drinking patriots seated below a portrait of Hindenburg. The accompanying answer showed an idealized worker in a heroic pose clenching a hammer, implying that only the sober proletariat, not inebriated nationalists, could save Germany. Right-wing newspapers launched a false story telling that Drost had been introduced to Berlin high society after giving a parapsychological performance in the home of Gustav Stresemann, Germany’s Foreign Minister. Hellwig received a letter from Stresemann explaining that the story was a fabrication and part of a smear campaign meant to undermine his foreign policy.

Hellwig’s hunch that the outcome of the Bernburg trial would be grossly distorted by the press proved accurate. Two months after the court experts had denied any evidence of verified clairvoyance on the part of Drost’s mediums in the Vossische Zeitung, the popular magazine Uhu introduced an article by Drost stating that “the legal proceedings revealed that, in fact, Drost managed to unmask numerous criminals and, through his mediums, described events that lay far back in the past, unknown to anyone.” While the introduction admitted that the question of clairvoyance was not “fully scientifically resolved,” it erroneously informed the reader that two of the three court experts agreed that Drost delivered enough evidence to prove his mediums were clairvoyant.

What infuriated Hellwig about the article was that Drost distortedly quoted him at length, and did so in a manner that completely cancelled his demolition of Drost’s claims to having solved a murder case in 1921. Hellwig made an anal-
ogy to World War I propaganda in which the enemy used snippets of carefully edited texts to turn events and observations upside down. Indeed, it is unlikely that many readers referred to Hellwig’s meticulous research and point-by-point refutation of each criminal case involving Drost and his mediums. The public, more likely accepted Sling’s views and Uhu’s appealingly simple endorsement of the psychic detective.

In the Uhu article, Drost told of his family’s sufferings and his personal martyrdom. The police had arrested him in his classroom in April, 1924. He had spent months in jail and lost his job. Once the trial began, Drost recounted, he had the feeling that “I and my personal destiny were only side issues in what was a larger event – a battle between world views [Weltanschauungen].” Interestingly, he framed this battle as one between idealism and realism. The restoration of his honor, Drost argued, would also mean the rehabilitation of a new branch of science whose value had been underestimated. This linkage of personal honor with the procurement of a heightened status for occultism revealed how a social stake was being claimed, in proxy, for the hard-pressed lower middle class. This new field was to a considerable degree their knowledge, their experience, their new means of empowerment; they were not going to let the university-educated Bürgertum deny them what they had explored and deservedly acquired. Whenever the academic community stubbornly rejected occultism as a science, its defenders would claim a higher, divine status for it.

At the end of the Uhu article, Drost suggested that the other-worldliness of occultism made it impervious to scientific investigation, leaving him in a paradoxical and contradictory position that characterized other occultists too: science should verify parapsychic phenomena whenever possible; when not, science ought to recognize its limitations and agree that these phenomena lay in a region beyond its reach. “I have no explanation for what powers bring about the clairvoyance of my mediums,” Drost ventured. “I also can’t say if this mysterious power slumbers in me or if it is only through my gift that it is triggered in my mediums. Still less will I venture a judgment whether this power can ever be explained or measured by the rational means and formulas of science.”

These heady gyrations typified another aspect of Weimar culture: the trope of the common man picked by destiny unexpectedly and miraculously to deliver the German people from its Fall. Drost tied the knot between humble stature and the quest for something exceptional at the beginning of the Uhu article: “I am merely a simple teacher in a little provincial town – but maybe it was meant to be me who would contribute to the progress of human knowledge and make it possible for the so-called occult sciences to be viewed with less mistrust and more objectivity.”

Drost’s self-aggrandizement continued in his reflections on how he had been chosen for a divine mission. Each one of his criminal inquiries, he humbly maintained, had been preceded with a quiet prayer and handled with great seriousness.
“That’s why I don’t feel guilty of transgressing into God’s omniscience. After all, I’m a victim of destiny and my innate powers I steadfastly sought to apply only for pure purposes.”

Another “victim of destiny,” psychic detective Elsbeth Günther-Geffers, faced similar charges of fraud in the town of Insterburg (East Prussia). While Drost needed a medium to penetrate the supersensory world, Günther-Geffers was both medium and psychic detective. In her defense plea Günther-Geffers told the court about her life. She recounted that already in childhood her clairvoyant abilities had been recognized by family and friends, who nicknamed her “strange Else.” A Gypsy fortune teller told her, “You are a white Gypsy. You see the same things I can see.”

Günther-Geffers claimed to have accurately predicted that Germany would lose the war once America intervened. She had prophesied that crowned heads would fall, and she had even foreseen the fate of individual soldiers, naming those who would survive the carnage and return from the front.

1.3 Psychic detective Elsbeth Günther-Geffers at work

It was at the beginning of the Great Inflation that she first used her supernatural abilities to earn an income to support her unemployed husband and their three children. At first, she read palms, then she began answering customer questions about their future while she was in a self-induced state of trance. She earned be-
tween 200 and 400 marks a month. In 1922 she expanded her activities into the field of criminal investigations. Similar to Drost’s story, sometimes it was the authorities themselves who had requested Günther-Geffers’ help and who designated her a “detective with special aptitude.” Whoever called her to the scene of a crime, was picked to act as a “guide” and asked questions while she was in a self-induced trance state. After she awoke from the trance, she said she had no consciousness of what had just transpired. In her estimation, success depended heavily on the skills of the “guide” and on the quality of the questions directed at her.

When asked to describe the trance state, she said, “I feel as if clairvoyance is an inner spiritual process. You are a completely different person then, you seem to lose your earthliness.” She blamed failures in her investigations on the lack of a good “guide” or on the disturbing presence of skeptics. A gentle calling of her name or simply having cigarette smoke blown in her face would end the trance state.

The East Prussian judge confronted Günther-Geffers by noting that several witnesses declared she left a trance state whenever things “got too hot.” He elaborated how people accused her of intentionally giving vague information so she could not be pinned down and that they felt it was all a charade. But, as in the Drost case, the psychic detective could rely on numerous witnesses who testified that she had helped them identify culprits and resolved crimes. As in Bernburg, the psychic detective had usually been summoned to help regain all kinds of stolen property: sheep, cows, horses, eels, laundry, shoes, beets, straw, lard, wine, watches, jewelry, and a photo camera were among the long list of belongings missing in largely rural East Prussia.

She was also asked to resolve cases of arson and murder. Like Drost’s medium, Günther-Geffers astonished victims of crime by identifying lost items that they had not yet noticed as missing. Thus she explained to a teacher in Pissaniten that the burglar had taken a desk clock in addition to his missing briefcase. The jeweler and clockmaker Wilhelm Preugschat of Königsberg related how Günther-Geffers went directly from the scene of the crime to the home of the thief who had stolen laundry and shoes from him. At first the accused woman denied that she was guilty but later confessed to the police. In return for Günther-Geffers’ help, Preugschat repaired several broken clocks in her home.

The case of a missing farmhand generated a lot of positive publicity for the psychic detective. Farmer Migge of Woymans reported that one of his laborers, a team driver named Kaschnitzki, had disappeared one evening after attending a local veterans’ celebration. The police assumed that the inebriated man had fallen into a nearby lake and drowned. Migge wanted to know more and asked the psychic detective for help. She came and quickly made her way to the lake. She conjectured that Kaschnitzki had been fatally injured by a passing automobile and that
the driver had thrown his body into the lake. Migge said she described the position of the corpse, adding that a hat still covered the victim's head, and she declared that the body would soon be found. According to the farmer, a few months later, as reeds were being cut along the lake's shore, the corpse was recovered in exactly the position described by Günther-Geffers, and most remarkably, the skull was crowned with the remains of a hat.

In 1928 East Prussian police detective Carl Pelz published a booklet in which he reviewed the case of the missing farmhand and other supposedly successful interventions of the acclaimed psychic detective. Pelz took apart her theory of the car accident and speculated that when the corpse was discovered, someone had probably remarked that it lay just like Günther-Geffers had foreseen, but he noted there was no written record of her original hypothesis. Instead, Pelz argued, the idea that she had correctly identified the body's posture and referred to the hat simply galvanized the popular imagination and confirmed her prophetic acumen. Pelz felt that his rebuttal was particularly pertinent because he had once acted as “guide” for the psychic detective.

Rudolf Lambert, a high school teacher and author of numerous scholarly articles on the occult, agreed with the policeman that practically nothing of Günther-Geffers' version of the story remained intact once one carefully reviewed the facts. The corpse revealed no injuries and the stiffened hands still grasped clumps of grass, making Günther-Geffers' theory of an automotive accident untenable.

Also, one local inhabitant said he thought he had heard cries for help coming from the lake on the night of Kaschnitzki's disappearance. “Yet the Migge family immediately believed Günther-Geffers' explanation of his fate. When the body was found still wearing the hat, it was nothing but a miracle,” Lambert reported. For him it was clear that Günther-Geffers had concocted her story from whatever she had read in the newspapers and embellished it with a few details from her own imagination.

In May 1922, Günther-Geffers was invited to investigate the murder of a retired man in Schmalleningken. When asked to help identify a killer, she gave all sorts of information, but first tried to evade a specific answer and finally named a man who was suspected in another homicide. According to Pelz, the information she provided was useless. He mentioned that he had peered through the keyhole of Günther-Geffers' hotel room and had seen her leafing through a notebook which, he believed, contained her notes on the case. Pelz implied that, in contrast to her requests not to be given any information beforehand, she actually studied each case thoroughly before visiting the scene of a crime. Like a professional detective, she had developed a trained eye for significant clues and small, incriminating details.
After the case of the retired man, she was asked to help resolve a burglary in which a valuable fur had been stolen among other things. Moments after leaving the car at the crime scene Günther-Geffers pointed to a window explaining, “The criminal climbed through this window.” The homeowner confirmed the point of break-in much to the astonishment of everyone present. Eyewitness Pelz, however, observed that if one looked carefully, one could see that only this window’s glass had been resealed with new putty. The owner had immediately replaced the glass after the burglary. Lambert reported another case of theft of 2,000 marks where Günther-Geffers sent her assistant Radtke to gather information prior to her arrival. On the next day she took a stroll with Radtke. To Lambert this seemed “suspicious since he probably discussed the results of his investigation and she proceeded to use these facts once in trance.” Lambert also noted that her Königsberg office kept her informed on current crimes and suspects. In addition to her assistant Radtke, her husband and one of her sons helped manage the office and collected information. When farmer Hartmann’s barn burned down in Walterkehren, suspicion was cast on Communists because Hartmann was a member of the anti-Communist Heimatwehr (Homeland Guards). The village constable called Günther-Geffers and told her whom he suspected. In trance, Günther-Geffers proclaimed “Kroll was sent by Communist headquarters in Insterburg to start the fire...he came by bicycle.” But Kroll, who lived in a nearby village, had a solid alibi. The other suspect proved that he was away in Königsberg. Lambert thought it was pretty obvious that Günther-Geffers simply used suggested suspicions, found out where the few local Communists resided and then used this information to elaborate her charges while in a faked trance state.

Pelz admitted that he and his police colleagues in the Memel region had originally been amazed by Günther-Geffers. But their initial endorsement of her work changed to disapproval when they observed her more closely. She eventually considered Pelz to be her “greatest adversary.” And it was the Nemesis of occultism, Albert Hellwig (the Prussian Minister of Justice did not give him permission to attend the Insterburg trial) who recommended Pelz to the prosecution.

They chose him as their primary witness. When it was his turn to speak at the trial, a reporter for the Königsberger Allgemeine Zeitung wrote: “the accused, who until then had remained calm, became very agitated during his remarks and repeatedly sought to interrupt Pelz.” Pelz may not have had Hellwig’s academic credentials, but as an experienced police detective who had acted as Günther-Geffers’ “guide” and had seen her in action several times, he proved to be a tough witness against the defense. Like Hellwig, he sought to deflate the psychic detective’s reputation by explaining how she could have deduced information that later proved to be accurate and he also cataloged her many deliveries of false information. He argued that her presence at an investigation caused more confusion than clarity.
In his book *Die Hellseherin: Betrachtungen eines ihrer ‘geistigen Führer’ zum Insterburger Hellseherprozess* (The Clairvoyant: Observations by One of Her ‘Spiritual Guides’ on Occasion of the Insterburg Trial, 1928), Pelz noted how Günther-Geffers usually let several weeks pass before she appeared on the scene of a crime. He then listed ways that the psychic detective could acquire information that prepared her for an investigation. She received reports from assistants who visited the crime site. She read newspaper articles and official police bulletins. Names of possible perpetrators might be familiar to her from previous cases or might be mentioned by people around her. The skillful sounding out of clients could produce useful bits of information as could a talkative, curious crowd of onlookers who Günther-Geffers always welcomed to gather around her. Pelz noticed a key part of her trance method. If she uttered a syllable in an attempt to identify a perpetrator’s name, a bystander inclined to believe in her might complete the sound of the name and thus suggest a possible suspect. “One has to have experienced and observed, as I have, the curious and expectant people (especially the unenlightened rural population) follow the seer as she wanders about in her trance state. They have never seen a clairvoyant and imagine in her a supernatural being much more readily than one would normally think possible. They stare at her as if transfixed. Through the strange sight of the medium in trance, with closed eyes, contorted face, the outstretched arms and groping hands, all these people find themselves as if under a spell in which they, largely unconsciously, take over the actual role of ‘guide.’ They look at or nod to each other, or they shake their heads, and so serve as a means to an end.”

In a March, 1923, case of stolen sugar and flour in Tilsit, Lambert described how Günther-Geffers visited a neighborhood, followed by a host of curious onlookers. The crowd named three men who, on the following day, confessed to the crime. The court felt that this case showed in exemplary fashion “the unconscious reactions of an unrestrained audience.” Yet such cases only magnified Günther-Geffers’ reputation and made her ever more believable, especially when the newspapers focused attention on her and announced in bold print that the famed psychic detective from Königsberg had solved another crime.

While rural East Prussia was considered a particularly backward part of Germany whose inhabitants were easily inclined to believe in the supernatural, their credulity was also conditioned by the unusually hard times according to Pelz. He felt that occultists thrived in these anxious times: “Before the Great War, one actually heard little about such people. In contrast, after the war, in this age of misery and increasing nervousness, we see them on the scene. Like mushrooms they grow on the ground. They know how to gain the admiration and astonishment of society through amazing achievements of all kinds. And so they manage, to an incredible extent, to spread the ancient belief of the occult in all its variations,
further and further.” Yet not all of Günther-Geffers’ followers were uneducated, rural folk.

Physician and court consultant Walter Kröner thought that Günther-Geffers possessed the sixth sense and found it remarkable that she could speak in foreign languages when in trance. Witnesses reported that Günther-Geffers sometimes talked in Polish, Yiddish, or Lithuanian but could not speak these languages in a normal state of consciousness. Pelz pointed out that saying a few phrases in languages that were commonly spoken in Eastern Prussia was hardly sensational. But Günther-Geffers’ supporters insisted that her foreign utterances were a further sign of supersensory abilities and compared her to Therese Neumann, the stigmatized seer of Konnersreuth, who supposedly spoke ancient Aramaic when in trance.

Kröner expounded at length on what he believed were Günther-Geffers’ special gifts stemming from a transcendent, unconscious power. Like all genuine mediums, he concluded, she could not be held legally responsible for what she said while in a trance. Another consultant Max Dessoir took issue with Kröner’s views and, in a book published in 1931, wrote that Kröner’s “arguments could only convince those who already were convinced.” Dessoir, who created the term “parapsychology,” had been invited by the court to attend as expert, but arrived only on the ninth day of the trial because he was busy examining his philosophy students at the University of Berlin. Dessoir had been investigating parapsychology for over thirty years and kept an open mind about the subject without abandoning an empirical, scientific approach. At Insterburg, he experienced firsthand the heated atmosphere of a clairvoyant trial. As in Bernburg, agitated occultists compared the trial to a witch hunt. Dessoir, unlike Hellwig and Pelz, thought of himself as a neutral observer inclined neither to attack nor to defend Günther-Geffers. He soon learned that in this conflict there was no neutral ground.

Upon entering the court hall, he noticed that the defense made sure that everyone was given a pamphlet espousing the successful activities of Günther-Geffers. Dessoir judged these press references as highly prejudiced for Günther-Geffers; they described at length anything that seemed to favor her case while giving short notice to anything contrary. When Dessoir failed to agree with a portion of chief defense lawyer Richard Winterberg’s arguments, he found himself being pushed involuntarily into an adversarial position. Winterberg wanted Dessoir to agree with him on the value of certain parapsychological experiments and definitions.

Refusing and replying that the supposed evidence presented by Winterberg amounted only to unconfirmed reports and not facts, the defense lashed out and paired Dessoir with the anti-occultist doyen Albert Hellwig. Contemptuously, Winterberg berated the philosopher: “Professor Dessoir has been committed to the same position for forty years, just as Dr. Moll and Dr. Hellwig have become
rigidified in their views." Dessoir countered, “For forty years it has been my position to test the truth.”

Winterberg angrily contended that Dessoir's knowledge was out of date and his position not objective. When Winterberg's attack became more personal and acrimonious, the judge issued a reprimand and silenced him. In the meantime, the accused Königsberg psychic detective became agitated and hardly able to contain herself. When Dessoir contradicted a statement she made, she broke out in sobs, “All you want is to take from me the way I earn my daily bread!” The astonished Berlin professor sought to mollify the crying suspect. The judge closed the day's proceedings, but the outraged audience lingered and refused to leave the courtroom. The writer for the Königsberger Allgemeine Zeitung reported: “Many of the ladies have tears in their eyes. After several minutes, in which the excited audience releases angry outbursts, the judge has the court cleared.” In traveling from Berlin to Insterburg, the professor had exchanged his ivory tower for the lion's den.

Outside the court, the bristling crowd discussed the day's proceedings. With their heroine in tears and her defense attorney receiving a reprimand from the judge, occultist outrage was reaching a boiling point. The trial in this remote town in the provincial backwater of East Prussia evolved into a challenge for the Republic and its values. An usually invisible part of Weimar society was crystallizing around a clairvoyant martyr and her cause for occultism. They were what Antonio Gramsci would have termed a subaltern group. These assembled, angry people wanted to contest and challenge the hegemonic culture represented in the trial by a university professor, a retired police detective, and a state prosecutor. When defense attorney Winterberg attacked Dessoir for clinging to antiquated views, he was articulating the occultist belief that they had overcome the tightly defined, scientific world practiced by a stultified academia and an old, brittle establishment. In Insterburg, the occultists challenged the guardians of reason, science, and Western civilization. The Republic was very much a part of this Western heritage. In the time after the Treaty of Versailles, when many Germans felt mistreated and victimized by the Allies, this tie to Western democracy would be one of the Republic's predicaments and a source of ongoing hostility for those subaltern groups that espoused anti-establishment, anti-republican views.

The Insterburg court found plenty of evidence that Günther-Geffers was not dealing in good faith and that her investigations were a charade. Whatever relevant information she gave, the court believed, came from prior knowledge, not extrasensory contact with a spirit world. Even the friendly occultist researcher Rudolf Lambert was only willing to classify one fifth of the cases under examination as showing proof of extrasensory ability by Günther-Geffers (he contrasted this figure with Dr. Kröner's estimate of two thirds). But all this empiricism meant little to the occultists. They believed in her and nothing could rock their
faith. Those rallying around Günther-Geffers wanted to be rid of the old rationalist truths embodied by professors and judges. Those truths, that view of reality, had failed them, and they wanted something radically new and different.

When Sling, in his articles on the Bernburg trial, peremptorily asked why one could not acquiesce and allow oneself to be pulled into the realm of “the miraculous,” he was echoing a widely felt Weimar sentiment that anything was better than muddling along in a dreary and depressing status quo. When August Drost hypnotically glared into the eyes of his favorite medium, when Elsbeth Günther-Geffers slipped into trance and began her somnambulant peregrinations, or when, at about the same time, the young Bavarian stigmatic Therese Neumann rhapsodized about encounters with Christ in her hometown of Konnersreuth, a seemingly alternative world was opening itself for exploration – a world that canceled out the uninspiring, cold reality of the Weimar Republic.

Beyond the Bernburg and Insterburg courts’ questions of whether or not Drost and Günther-Geffers were guilty of fraud, loomed the larger question of whether or not Hellsehen or clairvoyance was real. When both psychic detectives were found not guilty, a large part of the popular press misleadingly reported the court decisions as official verifications of the reality of clairvoyance. The occultists proclaimed victory for their cause, despite the fact that the more sober and accurate news reports showed the cases had not given ultimate proof either way concerning the reality of clairvoyance. The courts themselves declared that they were not the appropriate venues to confirm or refute the existence of parapsychological phenomena. Their job was simply to determine whether or not the psychic detectives had handled their cases in bad faith.

Academics like Hellwig and Dessoir repeatedly called on mediums and parapsychological “guides” to subject themselves to lengthy laboratory tests where usable results could be produced. Rarely would they be able to find volunteers. Most occultists could not understand the need for such rigor; they felt that intuition and spiritual experience taught them what a laboratory could only confirm after a tedious battery of experiments. In Vom Jenseits der Seele (From Beyond the Soul, 1931) Dessoir explained how the occultists considered themselves less prejudiced than the “official” exponents of science: “They see us as limited. On the one hand, so they say, we have become overly refined through our studies. On the other, we are ill-disposed toward anything new because we are committed to accepted doctrine and because we belong to the academic clique. True enlightenment consists of having an open mind, and openly registering, undistracted by official opinion [Schulmeinung], the facts of spiritualism. I would not deny that we too, sometimes, lapse into one-sidedness. Yet, in the essence of science there lies no restriction to abide by certain facts or laws. If that were the case, then the Republic of Letters would be nothing more than a sect. In truth, science is not a sum of dogmas, but an approach and a method of analysis. If we are expected to
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acknowledge things that fly in the face of all human experience and all heretofore accepted scientific knowledge, all we ask for is the compelling evidence.97

In a curious analogy, occultist teacher Otto Seeling viewed the struggle against the anti-occultists as similar to arguing with antisemites, “Just like when an anti-Semite drops one ground of his principally anti-Jewish approach and immediately has two new ones at hand, so the enemy of parapsychology, who lacks the gift of parapsychological research, will always raise new grounds for rejection. The methods of the battle have become all too familiar: disparaging the opponent, suspicions, insults...98 What Seeling failed to realize was that occultism, like antisemitism, turned its back on accepted scientific methods and knowledge, and took a leap of faith into a supposedly higher realm than the modern material one. The antisemites were, in fact, another subaltern group challenging the western, rationalist tradition embodied in the Weimar Republic and supporting supposedly new forms of science.

The occultists acted as an inadvertent ally in the process of breaking the Weimar state and the connected principles of reason, empiricism, and scientific proof. Beneath the battle of mentalities, one can also see, in Seeling’s frustrated comments, a social component of conflict. He and other occultists felt belittled and slighted by those who had attained the diplomas and titles bequeathed by the state and its institutions. Günther-Geffers liked embellishing her name with fraudulent titles and wanted to be addressed as Frau Doktor or Frau Direktorin.99 Drost’s defenders were outraged and hurt when he was referred to as “the little schoolmaster.”

The fact that Drost’s supernatural detective services were paid for in kind during the Inflation caused court advisor Hellwig to raise his eyebrows. He interpreted this behavior as part of a criminal pattern of sly business acumen and fraudulent exploitation of his clients. But maybe the Potsdam judge was a little unkind and insensitive in taking this position. He failed to see how difficult it was for lower middle class families to make ends meet during the Inflation. Max Dessoir was also stunned by Günther-Geffers’ tearful, melodramatic outburst in which she claimed that he was simply seeking to deny her her “daily bread.” What for him was an interesting epistemological debate, for her was a battle of survival. In the Bernburg and Insterburg courts two worlds were colliding that normally had little contact with one another. The clash of mentalities, beliefs, or “world views” was also a social clash and a conflict over power.

As a common enemy of established science and religion, occultism drew these two previously contrary forces together in an alliance that sought to secure their own custody over questions concerning the material and the theological worlds. Corinna Treitel in A Science for the Soul has shown how this unanticipated constellation already developed in the period preceding the war.100 Occultism questioned these boundaries and mocked both religion and science as having a limited
and inadequate understanding of holistic reality. After the war, a weakening Protestant church faced an additional challenge from a host of self-styled saviors and prophets who managed to attract sizeable numbers of disgruntled, mainly Protestant adherents. Friedrich Muck-Lamberty the “messiah of Thuringia,” Ludwig Christian Hauesser, “the spiritual monarch,” and Joseph Weissenberg, founder of the “Evangelisch-Johannische Kirche nach der Offenbarung St. Johannes” were among a throng of religious rebels. Weissenberg tapped into the spirit world during sermons by placing selected converts into a trance state and using them as mediums. But it was not only the Protestant establishment that faced occultist challenges in the interwar period.

In 1926 the Catholic Church was compelled to examine the visionary claims of a young stigmatic peasant woman from the northern Bavarian hamlet of Konnersreuth. She was attracting many followers. More and more were joining the pilgrimage to her home in the hope of witnessing one of her trance state experiences of the Passion of Christ. During these visions, it was said, she shed tears of blood.

Word soon spread that sick pilgrims had returned from Konnersreuth miraculous cured of their illnesses. In addition to her healing abilities, the faithful believed that Therese Neumann had clairvoyant and prophetic powers. News reports asserted that she subsisted on one communion host per day. Michael O’Sullivan in his study of Therese Neumann notes that “in a cultural landscape that increasingly gravitated towards miraculous explanations,” Neumann’s prophesy “helped pilgrims process a seemingly senseless world....” He also explains: “Many Germans sought non-conventional and sometimes occult avenues for comfort in frightening historic times, but Catholics felt most at home with Neumann forging a new and more personal spirituality from within the confines of their religious tradition.” Her physically dramatic form of unmediated popular religion would be hotly contested by Catholic institutions and medical doctors in particular.

Her fame spread beyond the borders of Germany and drew international visitors to the remote village. One of these was Paramhansa Yognanda, a Hindu founder of yoga teaching in the United States. Touring Europe in the summer of 1935 he gave high priority to a Konnersreuth visit. In his autobiography, he summarized Therese Neumann’s story: “The stigmata, or sacred wounds of Christ appeared in 1926 on Therese’s head, breasts, hands, and feet. On Friday of every week thereafter, she has passed through the Passion of Christ, suffering in her own body all his historic agonies.” Authorized by the Church to meet the stigmatic, he expressed to her his amazement that she could survive by eating only one “paper thin wafer.” Therese replied, “I live by God’s light.” The Hindu visitor became an immediate believer, “How simple her reply, how Einsteinian!” Yogananda felt honored to receive official Church permission to witness one of her Friday ordeals and recorded the shocking sight: “Blood flowed thinly and continuously in
an inch-wide stream from Therese's lower eyelids...the cloth wrapped around her head was drenched in blood from the stigmata wounds of the crown of thorns... Therese's hands were extended in a gesture maternal, pleading....

1.4 Crowds of faithful wait for admission in Konnersreuth

1.4 Crowds assemble in the village of Konnersreuth waiting to see the stigmatic Therese Neumann. The Catholic Church skeptically observed the uncontrolled outpouring of faith in the remote Bavarian countryside. (1920s postcards)

These extraordinary happenings raised the same question that had been central to media interest in the Bernburg and Insterburg trials: was modern science being disproved by the unexplainable experiences and supersensory insights of select extraordinary people who lived far away from German cities? Would science open itself and expand its horizons to include what the occultists and the pilgrims to Konnersreuth believed to be a new, more truly encompassing, deeper version of reality? Or would church and state act together to crush those who dared to
claim access to a special knowledge that by-passed sanctioned and accepted forms of institutional approval and control? Could the courts, the universities, and the churches tolerate an alternate reality? “As a subaltern cultural force,” observes O’Sullivan, “...Konnersreuth supporters understood this sacramental mission differently from their formal religious leaders, seeking public affirmation of other-worldly occurrences, God’s comfort from personal hardship, and direct access to their higher power.”

Catholic newspapers were warned to report about Konnersreuth carefully and to avoid labeling the seer as holy or miraculous. Some papers diplomatically referred to the events as “the riddle of Konnersreuth,” but others could not resist the temptation to speak of miracles. A reporter for the Düsseldorfer Tagesblatt prefaced a series of articles by reassuring his readers that he was skeptical and not predisposed towards mystical or miraculous explanations. He asked if “volatile souls” might see miracles where things did not exist or could be explained by science? Like the journalist Sling at Bernburg, who also described himself as a sober, objective reporter, the anonymous reporter for the Düsseldorfer Tagesblatt quickly drifted into the orbit of the believers once he reached the scene of events. Like his colleague from the Vossische Zeitung, he found himself disagreeing with the skeptical experts who were determined to stake out the boundaries of what was real and what was not, and who wished to subject clairvoyants and mystic visionaries to controlled tests.

The respected Munich newspaper editor and historian Fritz Gerlich published Die Stigmatisierte von Konnersreuth (The Stigmatic of Konnersreuth, 1929), a two volume study professing the truth of the miracle at Konnersreuth and denying the skeptics’ views, particularly those regarding Therese Neumann’s astonishing medical history. His work immediately aroused the ire of Catholic medical doctors and university professors who condemned it as highly flawed and misleading. Josef Deutsch, surgeon, gynecologist, and head doctor of Lippstadt’s Trinity Hospital, recognized Gerlich’s efforts as serious but strongly disagreed with his study and felt that it had sown much confusion among the faithful. He explained that his criticism of Gerlich was meant to protect the Church’s stature from damaging external attacks as well as from internal strife. In Konnersreuth in Ärztlicher Beleuchtung (Konnersreuth Seen From the Perspective of a Medical Investigation, 1932), he took apart Gerlich’s account of Neumann’s illnesses arguing that the historian lacked the necessary professional knowledge to explain, in a convincing, scientific manner, the many extraordinary rebounds and medical developments that Neumann’s body had undergone: these included unexplained recoveries from paralysis and blindness and a long term absence of food intake. Deutsch found it strange that Gerlich gave no thought to the possibility that he lacked the medical qualifications to examine the stigmatic’s complex medical history. The Catholic surgeon discounted Gerlich’s claim that he had proven Therese did not suffer
from hysteria. The hysteria thesis remained popular both among the stigmatic's non-Catholic detractors as well as the more scientifically inclined Catholic skeptics. They saw it as a possible way to bring her many symptoms together into one whole explanation based on natural laws.

Deutsch let it be known that doctors were made particularly suspicious when they learned that Neumann had received a disability pension for hysteria for a number of years. Gerlich had slighted and reinterpreted some of Neumann's medically diagnosed hysterical attacks as mere fainting spells. For Deutsch, it was highly plausible that the seer's paralysis was caused by hysteria. Gerlich's argument that all her ills were of an organic nature and not psychic in origin seemed extremely unlikely to the medical professional. For him, Gerlich was "naïve," "uncritical," and lacking the necessary "objectivity" to present an accurate picture of Neumann. "He is only satisfied when he finds something that speaks on her behalf. This is not the standpoint of a doctor who with cool level-headedness must weigh the pros and cons as he judges the possible reasons for an illness. His [Gerlich's] standpoint is more that of an advocate who, help what may, is defending his charge." Deutsch asserted that Neumann's claim to have abstained completely from eating was unbelievable and impossible to explain in a natural way. He thought if this assertion could be medically proven, it would revolutionize the way people looked at the world and the beyond. "Without much effort one could break through natural law in a manner that the world has not seen before. God's omnipotence could be shown incontestably to millions of people. And why does it not happen? Because Therese Neumann and her parents don't want to and because they deem such a test as too burdensome." Here Deutsch almost seemed disappointed, as if he too would have welcomed a chance to join Neumann's believers. Instead he reminded the reader that practically all Catholic medical practitioners viewed "the riddle of Konnersreuth" with grave doubt. They wondered why Neumann's family and supporters blocked every effort to subject her to thorough medical tests. "Does not the Catholic have reason to push for a fitting clarification? If they refuse, well, then the Catholic Church can set this straight. At any rate, the Church can prevent the Konnersreuth apostles from trying to associate their cause with that of Catholicism." By the end of his proposed invalidation of Gerlich's theses, Deutsch drew together religion and science into, what for him and the majority of his Catholic medical colleagues, was the only acceptable synthesis: "Aren't natural laws God's work? Isn't the fact that through natural laws we recognize that the world is not a confusing chaos, but a well-ordered whole, one of the strongest pillars of our belief in God?" Deutsch continued that, to some extent, we could penetrate these laws but never completely comprehend them. In a concluding rejection of Konnersreuth and all it stood for, he rhetorically asked if the Almighty "would find it necessary to change his laws at every moment?"
Reality would not be bent at Konnersreuth, no matter how hard Neumann and her supporters mistakenly believed in miracles.

Gerlich and his circle of supporters, who were called the Konnersreuther Kreis, responded aggressively to the attacks issuing forth from Catholic hospitals and universities. One of their targets was Georg Wunderle, Professor of Religious Psychology at the University of Würzburg and the first academic teacher to take a serious interest in Konnersreuth. He had visited Konnersreuth in July, 1926, and like most witnesses had been amazed by Neumann's blood-letting and visionary revelations. Wunderle was convinced that what he saw was neither act nor fraudulent display. But this did not mean he was immediately willing to accept the stigmatic's physical wounds and visions as a miracle. He found it peculiar that some overzealous clergymen opposed any scientific attempts at clarification, thereby prematurely taking a stand when the Church itself had not yet reached its own binding opinion on the matter. Wunderle declared approvingly that the Church did not jump to conclusions but built its own case thoroughly, carefully including the essential scientific component. He noted that he would neither take the position of a dogmatic materialist who denied any possibility of a miracle, nor slip into the role of a credulous, uncritical believer who rejected any need for a scientific explanation.

In Der Kampf um die Glaubwürdigkeit der Therese Neumann (The Battle for the Credibility of Konnersreuth, 1931), Gerlich contrasted the positions of the Konnersreuther Kreis with those of Wunderle and Alois Mager, a skeptical Catholic philosopher, as if the two sides had confronted each other in a trial. Wunderle's and Mager's criticism implied, according to Gerlich, that the Konnersreuther Kreis was falsifying facts in order to bolster their preconceived beliefs that Therese's stigmas were God-given. The credibility and trustworthiness of the Konnersreuther Kreis was at stake. Gerlich wanted to show that his opponents' arguments were riddled with holes. Their claims that they had been denied access to Neumann were false, as were their innuendos that the Konnersreuther Kreis tried to cover up any evidence that might indicate that Therese did indeed suffer from hysteria. Marshaling together quotations from numerous letters and newspaper articles, many written by Wunderle and Mager themselves, he sought to reveal contradictions and statements that undermined their positions. But what seemed especially to exasperate Gerlich was that these two Catholic academics had at first gravitated to the position of the Konnersreuther Kreis and then drifted away toward an increasingly skeptical standpoint. Thus the proponents of the miracle theory had lost two important academic allies who could have proved essential in advancing their cause.

As with the pro- and anti-occultist polemics manifested at the Bernburg and Insterburg trials, the fight within Catholicism deteriorated to the level of personal attacks and insults. The anti-Konnersreuth investigators were portrayed as ar-
rogant academics with very inflated views of themselves: they seemed to think everything depended on their imprimatur. Their behavior, Gerlich argued, disagreed with the humility that Neumann prized and believed Jesus himself embodied and wished his faithful to imitate. Instead of approaching the seer with respect, they treated her like some sort of odd specimen requiring inspection in a laboratory setting. Neumann said she felt uncomfortable around them; she sensed they had dishonest intentions.

1.5 Parish priest exploits Therese Neumann and affluent tourists


She distrusted Wunderle who “looked at her in such a strange way, she did not know how.” Even intimate parts of her body were subject to their investigations. Was such conduct necessary or appropriate, Gerlich asked? He also felt that it was understandable that Neumann and her father had become increasingly unwilling to allow intrusive examinations or clinical tests, which the skeptics insist-
ed were essential to uphold claims of a supernatural status. And so there would be no satisfactory resolution to the problems posed by the seer at Konnersreuth. The believers continued to believe, though the river of pilgrims trickled down as the church instituted controls and stymied the flow by requiring permits for visitors. The skeptics continued to advance vague, not particularly convincing theories of hysteria to explain Neumann’s intriguing condition.

Weimar’s leftist forces had no qualms about voicing their opinions on Konnersreuth: it was a clear case of mass brainwashing (Volksverdummung). The socialist freethinkers published a series of three pamphlets ironically titled Das “Wunder” von Konnersreuth (The “Miracle” of Konnersreuth, 1928). The cover illustration showed a crowd of wealthy miracle tourists goggling a bandaged and bleeding Neumann, while a chubby priest happily walks off with a loaded pot containing the day’s charitable offerings. The pseudonymous writer AST saw it all through the spectacles of class conflict: “Last summer it was considered good form in Karlsbad, Marienbad, and Franzensbad [popular thermal springs in nearby Czechoslovakia] to pass by Konnersreuth along with other places of interest. The ‘stigmatic’ Therese Neumann could be neatly scheduled between a five o’clock tea with a famous jazz band and a visit to a pastry shop.” When AST himself visited Konnersreuth and dared to suggest to the inhabitants that Neumann was victim of a serious illness, he faced angry disapproval from the villagers. For them, Konnersreuth was home to a miracle, not a charade.

AST witnessed the weekly transformation from sleepy backcountry hamlet to center of excitement that took place weekly between Thursday and Friday. He counted fifty parked automobiles on Friday morning. Buses and even trucks transported eager visitors to the tiny market crossroad. Approximately eight hundred people lined up to catch a brief glimpse of the seer reliving the Friday Passion. AST was convinced that behind the official pronouncements of cautious reserve, the Church was already planning to build a second Lourdes here. To bolster his thesis he explained that in similar cases, the Church proceeded step by step to embrace “the miracle” and make the most out of it for its own selfish purposes. Such chicanery is what infuriated him the most: a sick person was being exploited for a religion’s sake and thousands were misled. He had sympathy for the hysteric stigmatic, but none for her Church or for the voyeurs who streamed past her, gawking at her agony. After a one and a half hour wait, each person was granted a few seconds to see the transfixed martyr until the local constable told them to move on.

Afterwards, curiosity satisfied, the visitors found themselves at the market place and discussed what they had seen. Their perceptions, according to AST, were shaped by the lies spread in the books about Konnersreuth and the Catholic newspapers. Everywhere the same talk of a miracle. AST saw himself as a lone exponent of enlightenment in a backwater of darkness. He watched as the cars got cranked up and readied for departure. It reminded him of the commotion that
took place after a horse race or a circus performance. Talking away and sharing
their thoughts, those who came on foot slowly marched off in long lines. The free-
thinker AST’s articles were intended to make sure that his readers would them-
selves not fall victims to the spell cast by the Catholic pilgrims returning home
from Konnersreuth. Whether he was successful or not remained uncertain. The
simple dichotomy that he proposed – here the light of marxism, there the dark-
ness of Christianity – would hardly have helped him reach out to those whom he
considered as the brainwashed crowd manipulated by a conniving Church and
misled by a poor, hysterical peasant.

Lacking the ideological blinders of AST, Rudolf Olden went to Konnersreuth
in 1927 on assignment for the Berliner Tageblatt. Olden’s series of articles were
among the best on the delicate subject because he approached the stigmatic and
her flock with a questioning but open and unprejudiced mind. Olden felt nei-
ther compelled to join the forces advocating a supernatural interpretation or
those expounding a medical or psychiatric explanation. To him, those writers who
subsumed the bleeding wounds, the trance states, and the fasting all under the
weepingly imprecise term of hysteria seemed to beg the question as much as the
other side’s attribution of everything to a miracle. What interested Olden more
was the cultural setting, the peculiar theatrical framework in which the stigmatic’s
weekly drama unfolded. It all reminded him of crude scenes he had seen de-
picted on old devotional paintings.

Like other visitors, Olden was moved by the dramatic physical display of holy
suffering. Tracks of dried, dark blood ran down from Neumann’s eyes across her
cheeks. She looked like “a wax figure” or seemed to have been “painted over like
a wood carving.” Yet, Olden exclaimed, as if surprised, she was alive. Her face
tightened in anguish, or relaxed, depending on what part of the Passion she ex-
perienced. He was fascinated by the brutal drama and the manner in which it was
staged: “I would like to take a moment to say a word about the picture from an
aesthetic viewpoint. Everyone has seen in a traditional farmhouse room or a shop
filled with religious relics or keepsakes, one of those unartistic oil prints that illus-
strate some biblical scene in brown, white, and red, and that is intended to impress
primitive eyes. This is the style of this living picture. The style... has grown out
of the surroundings. It is an old-fashioned farmer’s style: raw, bloody, gruesome,
and horrible.” Olden described the sacred presentation’s audience: the lower
middle class predominated with women outnumbering men. This social profile
resembled that of the vocal supporters of the psychic detectives at Bernburg and
Insterburg. Olden patronizingly labeled the Konnersreuth pilgrims as travelers of
the third class, though he, like AST, also noticed a contingent of bourgeois and
upper class spa tourists from Karlsbad, Marienbad, and Franzensbad.

A sizeable number of visiting priests were present too. Olden studied the faces
of these people trying to find the effects of the ghastly, other-worldly event. “There
is little more to see than shock, a thirst to satisfy curiosity, even some fear. I can
tell that the rapture has not been contagious; there are no signs of it among the
onlookers. No one is crying or screaming, no one sinks to his or her knees on this
Friday."137 Olden was puzzled, even perturbed by the contrast between the bleed-
ing visionary, curling in pain, supplicating the Lord, and a silent stream of seem-
ingly detached guests: “A priest admonishes to keep going, a constable makes sure
the procession moves along... The twitching, grimacing face, the twisting body of
the pale, waxen, holy image – and the prosaic marching past of the colorful crowd,
chatting before and after, munching pretzels, unmoved, at least outwardly.”138

These were not the kind of emotional faithful who, roughly at the same time,
were reporting multiple sightings of the Virgin Mary in northern Spain and par-
taking in what William Christian calls “a subculture of religious excitement.”139
But in Spain, as in Germany, society was divided about mystic phenomena and the
Catholic Church too was split into skeptics and mystic enthusiasts. Konnersreuth
resembled Ezquioga in that a cooperative allegiance developed between an edu-
cated few who could publicly articulate and defend the seer's insights, and the nu-
merous underprivileged seers and their supporters, who Christian aptly describes
as “cultural underdogs.”140 He notes, too, that the Spanish seers were mainly
women, youths, and children – people who lacked power in a society run by adult
men.141 In transporting and publicizing their visions, these cultural underdogs
seized what Christian calls “the power of divine privilege.”142

Therese Neumann fits with the Spanish pattern even if her mass following did
not demonstrate the signs of contagious excitement displayed by the pilgrims
crisscrossing the visionary landscape of Spain. As one of ten surviving children
of a country tailor who also did some farming, she was part of Germany's rural
underclass. Yet this uneducated woman, inhabitant of a remote Fichtelgebirge
village, was able to attract thousands of onlookers and pilgrims and to draw the
attention of educated men as well. Some of these she was even able to convert
thanks to her dual gift for delivering an authentic experience of revelation and
for being able to understand intuitively the deepest needs of disenchanted people
struggling to find meaning in a modern society that Siegfried Kracauer described
as quintessentially “empty.”

When Olden edited a collection of essays about Weimar’s “prophets of the Ger-
man crisis,” he picked Benno Karpeles to write about Konnersreuth.143 A Jew and
disaffected Social Democrat, Karpeles was one of those visitors who instantly fell
under the spell of Neumann. Chaplain Helmut Fahsel accompanied Karpeles on
his visit to Konnersreuth. During a conversation with Neumann, Fahsel noticed
his Jewish companion's hand trembling. She motioned toward Karpeles and an-
nounced, in Bavarian dialect, “Do you know, there stands someone who doesn’t
have the Savior yet. But he is good, he wants to go to the Savior. And the Savior
wants him too.”144 When the two men left the room, they descended a staircase.
Karpeles, shaking, gripped the railing. They returned to see Neumann after she underwent the weekly Passion. When the Jewish guest touched her hands, she said, “You search and search and brood, but you are not satisfied. If you want the Savior, then you will find great joy. Then you have everything.” Karpeles, much agitated, asked her how he could find faith. She replied, “Don’t worry. The Savior will take care of it. I have taken on suffering for you…….” On the next day, the new convert told his chaplain friend that never in his life had he felt such certainty: “A miracle has happened.”

Karpeles, inspired by his wondrous conversion, would seek to find a way to reconcile Catholicism with Social Democracy. Fritz Gerlich’s conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism provided a second example of how an educated man could be transformed by an encounter with the seer of Konnersreuth. Before the war, Gerlich had been a supporter of the militant right Pan-German League. After 1918, he saw Germany’s greatest enemy in Communism and believed that Hitler might be Germany’s anti-Bolshevik savior; but since he witnessed Hitler’s politics close-up in his hometown Munich, he turned from friend to foe and became one of Hitler’s most ardent and vocal opponents. Gerlich published hundreds of anti-Nazi articles in the Munich press. He founded the newspaper Der gerade Weg (1932-1933) that consisted mainly of biting articles condemning Hitler and warning Germans of what disasters lay ahead if the Nazis ever gained power. Gerlich was arrested after the Reichstag fire in 1933 and murdered on Hitler’s orders in a concentration camp the following year. That two highly educated men as different in political and religious backgrounds as Gerlich and Karpeles found lasting inspiration and redirected their lives after visiting Konnersreuth, bears testimony to the power of the stigmatic peasant woman.

Writing the preface to Propheten in deutscher Krise: das Wunderbare oder die Verzauberten (Prophets in the German Crisis: the Miraculous or the Enchanted, 1932), Rudolf Olden struggled to explain the irrational wave sweeping across Germany. The ascendancy of what he called das Wunderbare (the miraculous) in politics was having a dramatic impact on the country: “In the short history of the German Republic, there has been such an incredible swing from the rational to the irrational that even a blind person can see it.” Instead of focusing on the obvious case of Hitler and his followers, he wanted to show how the drift away from reason was also taking effect in a multitude of smaller movements. By examining them, he thought one might illuminate and help make more comprehensible the larger movement. Olden’s book included chapters on the followers of occultism, anthroposophy, the spiritualist philosopher Krishnamurti, Therese of Konnersreuth, and “the godly master” Joseph Weissenberg. He also showed how charlatans like Franz Tausend, who claimed to have discovered a chemical process for making gold (whose adherents included General Erich Ludendorff), and how a quack doctor like Valentin Zeileis, who treated all illnesses with electrotherapy, gained thou-
sands of followers. The manifold topics covered were meant to illustrate the scope of the mass attraction to the world of wonders and miracles. A distinct weakness of Olden’s pioneering work was that it was heavy in description but light in explanation.

The opposite could be said of Carl Christian Bry’s Verkappte Religionen (Disguised Religions, 1925). Bry also embraced a dizzying number of movements in his critical interpretation of what he loosely called “disguised religions.” Everywhere he saw new ideas fermenting and attracting fanatical believers who were bent on “world conquest.” He examined everything from communism to antisemitism, occultism, psychoanalysis, and the temperance and youth movements. All of these espoused messianic visions of change. All claimed to have uncovered a previously hidden truth that if applied socially and politically, would transform and shape an unequivocally better world. Bry believed that true religion expanded an individual’s horizons and enriched one’s life. It defined the individual as an incomplete project. In contrast, the proliferating verkappte Religionen tended to blind and diminish experience. They saw everything from one angle only, and from this unique vantage point, they claimed, everything could be understood and explained. Such reductionism created compelling monomaniacal views of reality from which believers could only escape with difficulty.

Occultist practitioners of phrenology, chiromancy, and graphology claimed that they could understand an individual completely by either examining the shape of the head, interpreting lines on the palm, or studying the idiosyncrasies of writing styles. Sarcastically, Bry predicted that such exaggerations would eventually lead to claims that the essential qualities of a man were revealed in the way he held his cigar. Bry was willing to concede that close observation of a special characteristic might lead to an insight, but “the disguised religions” did not content themselves with modest claims. In their method of understanding, they believed they possessed a key to man’s hidden mysteries. Bry wrote, “They must bring light to what he wants to hide or does not himself know. One does not just formulate impressions, like we all do every day, and just lift them into consciousness. No, here details are interpreted. The secret, the most secret quality must be revealed, man must be deciphered entirely. This is the expectation one wants to fulfill by getting into these practices: one wants to know something special, something hidden and not something normal.”

The monomaniacal method and its absurd outcomes characterized such diverse “disguised religions” as psychoanalysis, the youth movement, and antisemitism. By dissecting their exaggerated claims, Bry uncovered their intellectual narrowness and danger. Instead of limiting itself to those therapeutic situations where psychoanalysis appeared successful, it was proceeding to claim that it could unravel the workings of all human development, individual as well as collective. Instead of enjoying the self-evident rewards of hiking and camping in nature,
the youth movement claimed that mankind’s redemption depended on its success. The antisemite, Bry scoffed, could not look at a salt shaker without launching into a diatribe about how, in ancient times, Jews cheated Phoenicians in the salt trade and how far too many Jewish merchants were still involved in the salt business.153

Bry also pointed to glaring contradictions made in the “disguised religions.” For example, the antisemite’s charged that Jews tried to accommodate themselves to all different surroundings, while also objecting that Jews held on tenaciously to their traditional, separate ways.154 Bry’s main point, however, was to show that the many examined “systems of thought” were self-defeating in the end: “The method of the ‘disguised religion’ is more important than what it pretends to achieve. It destroys what it seeks to accomplish through the broad arbitrariness of its attempts at explanation. The para-world swallows up the world, the interpretation of dreams swallows the dream.”155 The proliferation of these “disguised religions” took place in a general climate of wild exaggeration, inflated ideas, and intellectual pretentiousness.

“Our time suffers from a sickness,” Bry complained, “that even the most modest thought promptly is transformed into a world view.”156 Siegfried Kracauer similarly lamented that in Germany one could not even buy a toothbrush without receiving, as a bonus, an accompanying world view.157 All of this bombast covered a profound insecurity, a spiritual emptiness, a desperate search for new bearings.

Bry pointed out that the followers of “disguised religions” defined themselves to a large extent by what they opposed. Animosity for an opponent helped crystallize a new identity and with it a sense of meaning. The socialist hated the bourgeois, the vegetarian hated the meat-eater, the Nazi hated the Jew, the occultist hated the proponent of empirical science, the Konnersreuth faithful despised those who denied miracles or argued that Therese Neumann suffered from hysteria. Bry felt they were all dangerous and deserved condemnation: “…..the wish to be a scientific pioneer can just as easily lead one astray as the wish to conjure spirits…”158 The occultists, Bry declared, had “not achieved a breakthrough to a great world” but had merely opened “a rather laughable cabinet of horrors.”159 They had failed miserably in their goal to overturn natural laws.160

Bry maintained that neither the occultists nor the believers in other “disguised religions” could be talked out of their views through rational discourse. They would stubbornly defend a belief that gave them a feeling of superiority over others.161 Why give up a secret knowledge with which one could decipher everything, the visible as well as the invisible? “In a thousand forms that continually change,” Bry explained, “they put one idea in the middle and seek to form man from it and through it.”162 Just gaining a few adherents would not satisfy their messianic ambitions: “They do not just want their part of the world, however small it may be. They want, with all their might, to give the entire world and the universe too a new sense of meaning.”163
Through a plethora of their own publications and much popular attention, the occultists had succeeded in spreading their ideas in the postwar years. Like a worsening fever, occultism became more and more evident as the Republic neared collapse. Popular journals and magazines highlighted occultism as a theme worthy of special attention in the waning months of the Republic in 1932. The Süd-deutsche Monatshefte, in August, 1932, printed two editions of an issue entitled Weissagungen (prophecies). The September, 1932, issue of Die Woche carried the title “Wunderglaube der Gegenwart” (“Contemporary Miracle Beliefs”). It included the report “Are There Spirits?” by Walter Kröner, who had helped defend Elsbeth Günther-Geffers at Insterburg. There were articles discussing the power of divining rods, magical stones, and heretofore unknown earth rays. The miracle healers Joseph Weissenberg and Valentin Zeileis were presented along with photographs of Weimar’s leading clairvoyants: Erik Jan Hanussen, Max Moecke, Raphael Schermann, and Elsbeth Günther-Geffers. Foreign mediums such as “the Persian messiah” Shri Meher Baba and the famed Indian spiritualist Krishnamurti added exotic and international stature to the occultist cause. The December, 1932, issue of Der Querschnitt was entitled “Querschnitt durch den Okkultismus” (“Highlights of Occultism”) and discussed topics like “teleplasma, a mysterious substance,” “visits to the fourth dimension,” and “a view into the year 1933.”

While occultist prophets, clairvoyants, and esoteric healers garnered much interest from Weimar society, they faced increasing difficulty once the Republic was overthrown and a competing “disguised religion” began reshaping the German world according to its ideas. By hammering away at long-accepted notions of reality, at the laws of cause and effect, at the standards of proof set by the scientific method, at normally acknowledged conceptions of time and space, of life and death, the occultists unintentionally helped bring down a Republic whose laws, values, and ideas were based on Western civilization. What Bry had feared now happened: one “disguised religion” ushered victorious. In the form of National Socialism, Germany was revolutionized and a new hegemony established. Although there were certain underlying affinities between National Socialism and occultism, their versions of reality were fundamentally incompatible and bound to collide. The new hegemony of the Nazi state would prove far less tolerant for the occultists than the old “system,” as the Nazis disparagingly referred to the Republic.

The occultists’ penchant for making political forecasts drew a harsh response. Even favorable predictions were unwelcome. The Nazis rejected occultist elaborations as to when and where political decisions were in harmony with the stars or the forces of destiny. Astrologist Elsbeth Ebertin was one of many who liked mixing politics and occultism. Her catalogs of annual predictions were bestsellers. She prided herself on having accurately foreseen Hitler as Germany’s savior already in 1923. Ebertin also claimed to have warned Hitler that he was undertaking the Munich Putsch at an astrologically inopportune moment. Ostensibly, at that
time, the Nazi leader had impertinently quipped, “What do I care about women and stars!”

This expression of double contempt surely did not sit well with Ebertin. As an experienced occultist though, she had heard it all before, usually from the lecture halls of the academic mandarins. She admonished skeptics “not to pass judgment too quickly on things they did not understand or had not examined.” The occultist belief system deserved respect and not the censure it all too often received from the unknowing and uninitiated. “Those gentlemen,” Ebertin shot back, “who perhaps lack the time to orient themselves as to the essence of astrology, don’t understand that the truly learned reader, the spiritually more developed person, as well as the simple man of the people, are shocked deeply into their souls when their belief in the stars is profaned by some smart alecks.”

With the onset of the Depression, Ebertin’s popularity grew and she found herself assailed by more and more people worried about the future. An article entitled “Meeting with Elsbeth Ebertin” in a Munich daily created a record flood of requests and unmanageable quantities of mail. While many of Weimar’s citizens lost their jobs, Weimar’s astrologists could hardly meet their professional obligations.

On weekends the automobiles came to Heilbronn from Munich and Augsburg and parked in front of Ebertin’s house. All wanted a chance to discover what the near future had in store for them. Seeking to protect her privacy, she traveled to Munich to meet her clients. Large crowds lining up at her hotel from morning until night. Later, she proudly recalled, “They all waited in the hotel lobby: the high and the low, young people hoping for some particular good fortune, and others with intentions to commit suicide, the employed and the unemployed, private businessmen and civil servants, mediums, dancers, milkmaids, occultists, and homeless people. But sometimes it happened that an elegant automobile snatched Elsbeth Ebertin away from them and took her to a private audience.”

Her more affluent clients were chiefly interested in the nation’s fate. One group wished to know “if a world war would break out in 1932.” Ebertin’s occultist colleague Günther-Geffers, a few years earlier, had also been asked to outline future events for a curious and nervous crowd. She had prophesied an imminent Lithuanian invasion of East Prussia in 1925 and when asked about Germany’s fortune, she said she anticipated the making of a large and mighty empire. A medical doctor who witnessed these predictions considered her outlook for East Prussia an example of telepathic sensitivity and insight. The local population, he recalled, was in a state of heightened excitement because, shortly before, the Memel area had been occupied by Lithuanian forces and many people feared another invasion. “In my view,” reported the doctor, “it was a case of telepathic relaying of the population’s fears.”

Günther-Geffers’ pronouncements reflected popular sentiments as well as her own narrow political views and prejudices. In uncovering crimes of property she
commonly envisioned minorities such as Gypsies, Jews, and Poles as the perpetrators. When asked to investigate some crimes of arson, she repeatedly construed local Communists as the culprits. These accusations mirrored a widespread belief illustrated in many of Weimar’s anti-Communist political posters. On these posters a stereotyped proletarian, wearing a puffy baker’s hat, was shown torching a farmer’s barn or setting fire to the country as a whole.

Some social characteristics and mental dispositions of occultists and Nazis bore resemblance or were even identical: the lower middle class environment in which both flourished; the feeling of anxiety and damaged self-esteem brought about by defeat and postwar turmoil; the quest for a new orientation and sense of meaning and purpose; the monomaniacal belief system that Bry described; and the hopes placed in a special German destiny and a miraculous turn for the nation. Although occultist ideas could be spread in a myriad of popular or specialized publishing houses and newspapers, occultism, unlike antisemitism, lacked a political organization. It had no direct access to or influence on politics. The seemingly endless number of clairvoyants, astrologists, psychic detectives, palm readers, mystic visionaries, and cult leaders could not equal the power that converged in the single antisemitic prophet. Once in control of the government, the Nazis clamped down on occultist programs that clashed with their own views.

As Bry noted in his *Verkappte Religionen*, one common quality of the ‘disguised religions’ was their extreme intolerance. For Hitler, Germany’s destiny lay in the struggle of races, not in the movement of stars.

The kind of near-future predictions that two Querschnitt political astrologists offered the magazine’s readers in December, 1932, were, in the last days of the Republic, a risky business. One of the writers, Harald Keun von Hoogerwoerd, projected a positive period for Germany as the zodiacal constellation shifted from Capricorn to Aquarius. Germany’s domestic and foreign position was bound to strengthen. This was a promising moment to reform the country. The opportunities offered early in 1933, he advised, should not be squandered because the planetary position of Jupiter, later in the year, would have an inhibiting effect. The political astrologer proceeded to examine individual horoscopes of Weimar’s leaders to show how they and their programs would fare in the coming months. Chancellor Franz von Papen and General Kurt von Schleicher faced constellations blocking their efforts, but former chancellor Heinrich Brüning and Otto Braun, Governor of Prussia, would be helped by planetary movements. Hoogerwoerd warned Hitler to stop acting in crass opposition to the constellations. Instead of using favorable planetary conditions in August, 1932, Hitler had foolishly rejected the acting government’s offer of the vice-chancellorship and two cabinet posts for the Nazi Party. With vague optimism, the astrologist ended his forecast suggesting that whoever led the next regime would utilize the more propitious heav-
enly alignments coming about in 1933. Overall, he painted the prospect for a new and lasting national ascendance.

1.6 Gregor Strasser on the cover of Die Zukunft

The second writer, Artur Schumacher, admitted that political astrology required much more research and study to become an established field. He cautioned readers that his prognosis only worked within certain limits of probability. For 1933, he saw astrological signs of economic improvement on the world market. On the other hand, politically, the new year would bring one of the worst crises for the German Republic. The tensions would reach their zenith by May and June and could include “eruptive turmoil of the radical masses.” Such predictions of civil war contributed to growing fears in Weimar society that increased the citizenry’s willingness to replace an ever more unstable, explosive democracy with a dictatorship that promised national unity and domestic peace.

But Schumacher foresaw 1933 as a gloomy year for Hitler because the constellations were positioned against him. He would face tough situations that he simply
was unable to master. The Nazis would be severely weakened and the year was singularly unsuitable for a Hitler chancellorship. Like the other Querschnitt political astrologer, Schumacher suggested that Hitler’s widely known failure to listen to astrological advice predestined him to political defeat. The writer echoed Ebertin’s criticism that in 1923 Hitler had staged a rebellion when his horoscope indicated probable failure. In 1932 he demanded the position of chancellor at a moment that was completely mismatched for such a step. In May and June, Schumacher ominously asserted, a battle for power would take place that would decide the Republic’s fate. The Querschnitt’s unfriendly anti-Nazi forecasts revealed the kinds of tension and conflict that could pit occultists against Nazis. Each espoused a secret knowledge that construed different and contrary forces as the true movers of history and shapers of reality. While both moved in murky, unreal worlds of pseudo-scientific notions, they moved in worlds that were not concordant.

Even more off the mark then Querschnitt’s political astrologers, were the predictions made in the June, 1932, issue of the occult magazine Die Zukunft: Monatsschrift für moderne Astrologie, Graphologie, Charakterologie und neue Lebensgestaltung (The Future: Monthly for modern Astrology, Graphology, Characterology and new Lifestyle). The magazine featured several articles about the rising Nazi star Gregor Strasser who was portrayed on the cover with the premonitory caption “Hitler’s Ministerpräsident” (Hitler’s Governor). The author of one article entitled “Physiognomic Judgment of the Picture” viewed Strasser’s striking forehead as evidence of an ability for “realistic thinking, a constant dealing with facts and thus excellent observation of given relations unperturbed by gray theory.” A second graphological article discussed how Strasser’s handwriting revealed that he was “true to himself.” Detailed horoscopes studied by the magazine’s editor indicated that despite some conflicts, Strasser’s career as a political leader would achieve major successes in the months that lay ahead. According to the magazine’s editor, Strasser possessed a “strong political gift,” “a deep identification with socialism,” and “a rare sense of foresight which allows him to detect approaching developments with a single-minded instinct.”

Were such sycophantic descriptions and forecasts meant to position the magazine in a favored spot should the Nazi takeover be imminent? If so, the horoscopic and political calculations of these astrologists failed miserably. At the peak of his political career in December, 1932, Gregor Strasser came close to becoming German Vice-chancellor and Prussian governor in a plan arranged by Chancellor Kurt von Schleicher. When Hitler rejected the deal, Strasser angrily resigned his party functions and began a precipitous fall that would end with his execution in 1934. Inaccurate, unflattering political forecasts placed Die Zukunft astrologers, like their Querschnitt colleagues, in a vulnerable position once their Nazi subjects gained power.
Within the Nazi leadership, opinions about occultism were not uniform. Some Nazis, like Rudolf Hess and Heinrich Himmler, flirted with occultist ideas. On the other hand, Joseph Goebbels associated occultism with superstition, with popular brainwashing (Volksverdummung), and with the fraudulent exploitation of the uneducated and the poor. Alfred Rosenberg, a rival of Goebbels in the realm of the new state's cultural policies and a more radical advocate of ideological transformation, influenced Nazi cultural policies through the publishing house Deutsche Kultur-Wacht. This publisher sponsored a sustained attack against occultism in its book Vampyre des Aberglaubens (Vampires of Superstition, 1935).

The book's author, writing under the pseudonym Fred Karsten, was Carl Pelz, chief witness against psychic detective Günther-Geффers in the Insterburg Trial. The book's cover displayed a well-known photographic portrait of Erik Jan Hanussen in an eerie pose as hypnotist. In a sinister way the cover and title claimed that this clairvoyant (most people knew he was of Jewish origins and had been killed, in mysterious circumstances, in 1933) had been a dangerous vampire taking advantage of a superstitious population. Inside, the publisher declared it was not enough to fight occultism with ordinances and laws. This book was meant to be part of a Nazi campaign to educate and enlighten the public. The publisher announced that the new state intended to protect society from the occultist abuses it had suffered in the profligate Weimar Republic: “The system regimes of the Jewish Weimar Republic [Weimarer Judenrepublik] allowed no limits to be set on the con artists who profited from clairvoyance, telepathy and other supernatural powers. There was a method to the brainwashing: the more confused people's views and opinions became, the more fully the Republic's ruling class could fill its pockets.”

Detective Pelz began his diatribe by lamenting the corruption that, like “a creeping poison,” trickled down from Weimar's ruling class to the people. He asked, “What did concepts like decency, honor, and cleanliness count for? Nothing!” Crime and fraud characterized the day. Poverty and spiritual decline together set the stage for the innocent public’s victimization. A society living in fear of its future, Pelz continued, naively hoped for salvation in the world of superstition: “Everywhere in the German lands appeared miracle-makers, fortune tellers, palm readers, faith healers, and other charlatans…. Most of all it was clairvoyants and telepathists who appeared everywhere and enjoyed popular success.” All these occultists smartly took advantage of a disoriented, gullible population. Pelz blamed Weimar democracy's constitutional right to freedom of speech for shielding the nefarious activities of the occultists. Newspapers, Pelz implied, used freedom of press laws to increase their sales by inundating the public with misleading, catchy headlines. Thus the Weimar Constitution, according to this crude Nazi argument, promoted an occult conspiracy against the people. Variety halls were part of the problem as they took advantage of the troubled audi-
ence’s penchant for the mystical and occult. To increase attendance and “purely for business interests,” Pelz scolded, variety directors included more and more occultist tricksters in their programs: “No, my dear variety hall and cabaret directors, it won’t continue this way in the new dawn that is breaking.” Pelz’s shrill attacks corresponded with the Ministry of Propaganda’s measures to purify popular entertainment according to Nazi tenets.

Fitting in with Pelz’s theory was the fact that Hanussen had been one of the entertainment world’s biggest drawing cards. The Nazi writer cited a newspaper that called Hanussen a “Czech Jew” and “a swindler of greatest proportions.” Hanussen, Pelz contended, was a man without scruples bent only on making as much money as possible through his cunning shows in Berlin and the provinces. His performances elicited many spectators (Kracauer had described them as “the expectant audience”) to request an expensive, personal visit with the clairvoyant. After a show, Hanussen’s fans ran to his hotel, where they formed long lines, and, to Pelz’s outrage, “could hardly wait to throw away their hard-earned money.” All this swindling and profiteering, Pelz reported with barely disguised envy, allowed Hanussen to employ private secretaries, own a grand apartment, rent office space on the Kurfürstendamm, drive a luxury limousine, and sail about the Baltic Sea in a yacht. To complete his harangue, Pelz described how Hanussen, aided by “superstitious fools,” rose up to occupy the position of chief prophet in the capital city. He was even able to start a newspaper, the Hellseherzeitung, in which, Pelz mockingly related, Hanussen wrote “along the lines of National Socialism, probably thereby hoping to rescue himself into the Third Reich.” For Pelz, Hanussen was a striking emblem of the hated Weimar Republic. In him, he contemplated “a single rascal and national double-dealer” who “revealed an entire epoch.”

The “bleeding miner Diebel” was a popular performer who Hanussen included in his shows, much to Pelz’s chagrin. The media proclaimed Paul Diebel the secular counterpart to Therese Neumann of Konnersreuth. Supposedly, he could produce stigmata through autosuggestion and, for a while, succeeded in fooling the public. One newspaper announced, “He Outdoes Konnersreuth.” Diebel performed his thrilling, bloody act in cafés on the Friedrichstrasse and even in Berlin’s renowned Wintergarten. For a substantial fee, offered by a wealthy admirer, he finally revealed his tricks, showing how, in a deftly concealed manner, he cut himself with a needle or put red chalk around his eyes so that he could cry bloody tears like those of the Catholic stigmatic. Pelz declared that the new state would show no tolerance for such skullduggery. In sharp contrast to the Republic, which not only endured charlatans, but gave them support, “today’s state of order, authority, and discipline” was set on “eradicating professional criminals by root and branch.”
Weimar Controversies

1.7 Jan Erik Hanussen on the cover of a Nazi book

Pelz complained that in 1930 he had been denied air time on Berlin radio when he proposed a program to criticize the clairvoyant menace. Instead, the famed radio reporter Alfred Braun was given plenty of time to conduct a live interview with Hanussen during a show at the Scala Variety Hall. Times had changed, however, and Pelz thanked Hitler for having done away with the conditions that promoted mass fraud and brainwashing. He applauded recent police ordinances, like the one issued August 13, 1934, in Berlin. It effectively clamped down on fortune telling, clairvoyance, and telepathy. New laws were putting an end to the making of horoscopes, the reading of cards, and the interpretation of dreams. Referring to a report in the Völkischer Beobachter of April 14, 1934, Pelz showed how the police had requested and been granted authority to eradicate an ever-increasing amount of harmful occult activity in Berlin.

In a grandiloquent conclusion, Pelz contrasted the National Socialist community of honest, hard-working Germans with Weimar’s crooked society that sanctioned the exploitation of the weak, the superstitious, and the unenlightened.
The deceivers were about to discover that they had lost their right to belong to the German nation. Sneeringly, Pelz referred “to the time of ‘freedom’” as one in which men of foreign nationalities and races had played havoc with the German people. All these “so-called miracle-makers and charlatans” were nothing more than “freeloaders and parasites” on the German national organism [Volkskörper]. In typical Nazi fashion, the book ended with a bellicose flourish announcing all-out war on the “exploiters of superstition” and promising the annihilation of “the false teachings of superstition.”

Eradicating the occult proved more difficult than Pelz anticipated. Its roots had grown deeply into the fertile soil of superstition, anxiety, and disorientation that had been the seedbed for National Socialism too. Corinna Treitel has analyzed the Nazi government’s campaign against occultism, using such sources as the SS weekly Das Schwarze Korps. In 1937, the journal published a series of articles called Gefahrenzone Aberglaube (“Danger Zone Superstition”). Repeating many of the connections Pelz made between vile money-making, fraud, Jewry, and the occult, the SS weekly widened the attack by accusing Catholicism of also purposely mystifying the Volk. The series scoffed at the occultists’ inability to understand fundamental forces at work in history. For Nazis, Treitel explains, “Astrologers who took no note of racial differences clearly had no business calling themselves scientific.”

The commencement of hostilities in 1939 gave a renewed impetus to fortune tellers and prophets. Unlike 1914, the German population did not welcome this war: worry prevailed over a desire for revenge. According to an anonymously published article in the SPD’s exile newspaper Der neue Vorwärts on April 28, 1940, an increase of astrological activity in Germany reflected widespread uneasiness and pessimism. The SPD writer commented that Germans knew better than to talk openly about a setback like the recent English sinking of a German navy vessel. An alternative way to vent anxious feelings was to whisper veiled information about how Hitler’s horoscope resembled Wallenstein’s. Those in the know would understand this to mean a military disaster was imminent. Secret occult allusions minimized personal risk, but reckless public forecasting about the war exposed soothsayers to reprisal and persecution.

In Munich astrologist Margarete Luft’s war prognostications resulted in her arrest and a sentence of six weeks imprisonment, followed by time in a women’s labor camp. Luft’s harsh punishment served to warn other prospective visionaries. The Munich police report, quoted in Der neue Vorwärts article, announced further reprisals against any fortune tellers, declaring that there was no room in the national community for “crooks and charlatans.” (The SPD writer commented acerbically that while “crooks and charlatans” would not be tolerated among the German people, they were allowed to run the government.)
The anonymous SPD writer then recalled how astrological newspapers had multiplied like mushrooms in Weimar’s end stage and, according to him, had enthusiastically supported Hitler. Among their followers, astrologers had promoted the ideas of “a strong hand” and the hope in a national savior. At this point in the article, the SPD writer made a curious turn away from a typical socialist ridiculing of the astrologers. Instead he accepted an occultist premise and admitted that “among us” there are some who are equipped with “especially finely tuned receivers” who can detect oncoming “historical earthquakes” before they happen: “Geniuses belong to this species, as do hysterical and insane people – and clairvoyants. Most of these miracle men take themselves and their craft very seriously. They believe in their mission with the same steadfastness as the – spiritually related – Führer Adolf Hitler believes in his.”

The SPD writer, having observed what Bry and Olden noticed fifteen years earlier, continued by twisting the current precarious situation around and interpreted the alleged subterranean occultist challenge with a renewed optimism. If astrologers in Germany risked making dark prophecies, then the journalist reasoned, there truly were impending disasters about to take place in the Third Reich. The journalist’s references to Germany’s first military setbacks revealed wishful delusions as German forces routed the Anglo-French armies. This writer probably joined the refugee exodus from Paris only two weeks later when victorious German troops approached the French capital (where the exile edition of Der neue Vorwärts was published until France’s defeat).

The occultists were not a serious menace to the Nazis. Some were even allowed to continue their activities and publications, especially if the Nazis deemed them scientific rather than commercial. The underlying affinities between occultism and Nazism help explain why Nazi policies were ambivalent. Occultists too, oscillated between criticism and adulation of Hitler. Elsbeth Ebertin criticized the Führer for ignoring her astrological advice on the eve of the Beerhall Putsch. But in April, 1935, she sent him a birthday gift: a dedicated copy of her anthology of German poems about flowers. In the Third Reich, she was allowed to continue publishing her popular annual “view into the future.”
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