




Introduction: Studying the Complex Histories of the Occult and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

The occult was a significant factor in developing the culture and politics in Central and Eastern Europe. Researching local occult groups contributes to a deeper understanding of East-Central European national movements, our understanding race and ethnicity, and socialist regimes existing in the region, thus shedding light on the complex and complicated histories within the region. This is an introduction to the special issue of PJAC.NS, which concisely summarizes recent scholarship, presents the activities of the Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism (CEENASWE), the regional network of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, and introduces the ideas behind the special issue.

KEYWORDS: *esotericism, occultism, Central and Eastern Europe, nationalism, politics, nineteenth century, twentieth century, socialism*

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *ezoteryzm, okultyzm, Europa Środkowa i Wschodnia, nacjonalizm, polityka, XIX wiek, XX wiek, socjalizm*

Since the nineteenth century, East-Central Europe has experienced rapid social, political, and economic changes, which have transformed local societies. Rising nationalism, culminating in the revolutionary year 1848, echoes of the Romantic movement, ongoing industrialisation, the First World War, the emergence of national states and disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, later followed by World War Two, along with the establishment of the socialist regimes, represent some of the key milestones the region went through. New sciences emerged, and local intellectuals also tried to cope with the cultural and religious impetuses and discoveries in the Orient. Changes and transformations reflecting the rise of modern society also occurred within the domain of religion. A peculiar reaction to this is to be found in various esoteric groups labelled as occult.

Occult groups emerged across the world. Enthusiasts for the occult strove to resolve conflicts between religion and new scientific discoveries by portraying the ‘occult sciences’ as the middle ground, where the two could meet, unite, and perhaps create the eagerly awaited merger of religion and science (e.g., Wolfram 2009; Kurlander 2017). Hence, practitioners of the occult experimented with magical rituals and alchemy, enthusiastically studied astrology and esoteric texts and practices from both ancient times and the Orient, and strove to augment human abilities and potential (Pasi 2006). The occult groups and movements of the time grew and spread throughout the globe (Pokorny and Winter 2021).

The most well-known occult group – colossal (in terms of its impact and international presence) – was the Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875, which exists to this day. Leading occult groups with an international impact emerged in France (e.g., Monroe 2008; Strube 2016) and in the Great Britain (Butler 2011; Pasi 2014) and many other countries and areas, including East-Central Europe.

This special issue contributes to the scholarship of the occult in East-Central Europe and thus follows the trend in recent scholarship focusing on not-yet internationally well-known local groups and actors (e.g., Menzel et al. 2012; Radulović 2018; Hess and Radulović 2019; most recently, György E. Szönyi and Rafał Prinke edited *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* special issue on this subject; for a comprehensive overview of the local scholarship, see Szönyi 2023). However, our focus here is on the ties between the local occult groups and movements and politics. Researching these ties contributes to a better and deeper understanding of both the occultism in general and the complex and complicated histories of the local nations, states, areas, peoples, and communities. Politics played a significant role in



shaping local occult groups and movements – from speculation about Slavic ethnicity and glorified national histories to socialist experiments with the occult and repressions against its practitioners. Alternatively, researching the occult also offers a new perspective on how to understand local nationalist movements and, for some countries, their socialist period.

This special issue is a follow-up to the conference *Occultism and Politics in East-Central Europe*, which we organised in Prague, 27–29 September 2021. The conference was already the fourth in a row organised by the CEENASWE, Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism, a regional network of the ESSWE, the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism.¹ Our future plans for the CEENASWE involve, among others, publishing a dictionary or encyclopaedia of the local occult groups and movements, researching the political domain of local occultism, focusing more on the socialist period of our countries, and exploring the ambiguous relationship between the socialist regimes and esotericism.

We are delighted that some of our research goals have already materialised in this special issue, because several articles focus on the socialist period. A selection of the research articles in this special issue reflects the overlap between occultism and politics throughout the region, from nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism till today.

An important figure in the romantic fervour of the nineteenth century was the heterodox Polish religious leader Andrzej Towiański, the main subject of the article by Giulio Dalla Grana. Towiański's esoteric teaching spread through Europe, and its followers strove to influence the politics of the time, including taking part in the revolutions of 1848. Dalla Grana demonstrates how social and political changes were subjected to religious interpretation and narratives about a new, yet-to-come, spiritual age.

The next article by György E. Szönyi, maps the development of occultism in Hungary, studying three key figures of the local milieu: Ervin Baktay, Béla Hamvas, and Mária Szepes. Szönyi traces the transformations of occult movements in Hungary from the late nineteenth century to the end of the socialist regime and thus provides an important overview for future research. Márton Veszprémy provides one of the first overviews of the history of astrology in Hungary in the twentieth century, focusing especially on astrology's fate in the socialist period. He shows how Hungarian astrologists and their disciples embodied both true esotericism and oppositions to the state regime, and how the regime tried to suppress them.

¹ For an overview of the CEENASWE activities, visit <https://ceenaswe.wordpress.com>.



Nemanja Radulović draws attention to the Messianic ideas about Yugoslav state, developed among the intellectual movement of Panhumanism, spanning both Great Britain and Serbia. Radulović shows how Panhumanist ideas were linked to the occult teaching and networks founded by Serbian esotericist Dimitrij Mitirnović. Victoria Vitanova-Kerber studies the activities of Lyudmila Zhivkova, the Cultural Minister of 1970s Bulgaria. Vitanova-Kerber shows how socialist ideals merged with the occult movement popularised by Zhivkova and produces a concept of esoteric nationalism as a new way of understanding the ties between the occult and politics in socialist Bulgaria. Her contribution provides an alternative perspective to the general understanding of socialism as an anti-occult or anti-religious belief.

Occult ideas and practices were also reflected in art. Nadežda Elezović offers a reassessment of the ties between art and occultism and thus provides a broader framework for understanding hidden, esoteric dimensions in various artistic projects. This is followed by Tomasz Krok's study of the Polish painter Marian Gruzewski, founder of an occult group and teaching called homocracy. Krok shows how the local regime labelled Gruzewski as an enemy of the state and charged him with an attempt to overthrow socialist ideals.

The last two articles bring us to a more recent history. Anna Ozhiganova and Anna Tessmann focus on the Russian occult milieu of the first decade after the fall of the Soviet Union. They propose two concepts, esoteric citizenship and metaphysical politics, as heuristic tools for understanding the ties between the occult and politics in post-Soviet Russian society and argue that boundaries between the two are flexible and blurred. The last article of our selection focuses on the attitudes towards the occult and esotericism within the last thirty years in Serbia. Noel Putnik studies the interactions between the state, the church, and the public, focusing on the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church. He shows how the local Church has attempted to influence the public image of esotericism in Serbia by portraying the esoteric ideas and practices as harmful and potentially dangerous to the people and society.

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