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Occult Use of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism

Slavic and German Occultism in Comparison

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Abstract

Occultism significantly shaped European society, culture, and politics during the fin de siècle and interwar periods. While scholarship has extensively examined Western European and global occult movements, Eastern Europe—particularly Slavic countries—has only recently gained attention. This article compares Czech and Austrian occultism to analyze how race, ethnicity, and nationalism were integrated into occult discourses. It argues that occultism reinforced nationalist narratives by providing a sense of primordial continuity that was ideologically compelling, whether framed in terms of nation, ethnicity, or race—each serving as an occult discursive strategy to assert historical and spiritual legitimacy. Additionally, the article examines similar patterns in other Slavic countries, highlighting the adaptability of occult nationalism. By situating Slavic occultism within broader esoteric and political contexts, the article sheds new light on Central European nationalisms, their connections to esotericism, and occultism's transnational dimensions.

Keywords

occultism – race – nationalism – ethnicity – Czechoslovakia – Austria

1 Introduction

The emergence of occultism in the mid-nineteenth century represented an important cultural and religious innovation in the global religious landscape. As occult ideas and practices travelled throughout the world and new occult groups and societies mushroomed, they were shaped by local conditions, concerns, and political and societal issues.¹ For example, French occultism, especially the circles surrounding the famous occultist, Gérard Encausse, known under his occult nickname Papus, emerged as a reaction to Madame Blavatsky's attack on Christianity, her scolding of the West, and her inclination toward Oriental wisdom.² Despite her disavowal of the West and Christianity, Blavatsky's thought significantly shaped the European late nineteenth-century occult milieu. Her Theosophical, racially underscored ideas of humankind's spiritual and physical development inspired the key figure of Austrian and later German occultism, Guido von List (1848–1919), to use occult explanations to aid his political concerns.³ It was not only von List but also a whole range of others in German-speaking countries who utilized racial speculations in their occult theories; Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, was one of them.⁴ Theosophy, along with Herderian philosophy and orientalist imaginations of India, were important sources of inspiration that the occultists shared across European countries.⁵ However, there were also noticeable regional differences in respective occult milieus. Radulović argued that occult groups based in the Slavic countries esoterically interpreted mainstream cultural narratives of Slavic identity and ethnicity, along with national sentiments.⁶ That was clearly visible in the cases, for instance, of the impact of Theosophical ideas promoting a messianic role for the Polish nation after World War I, nationally oriented sentiments among some representatives of the Czechoslovak interwar occult milieu, and esoteric influences on Yugoslav messianism and the foundation of the Yugoslav state.⁷ In this article, I explore the overlaps of occultism and

1 Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, 669.

2 Strube, 'Occultist Identity Formations Between Theosophy and Socialism in Fin-de-Siècle France', 568–595.

3 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*.

4 Zander, 'Rudolf Steiner's Rassenlehre'; Staudenmeier, *Between Occultism and Nazism*; Koren, 'Between Racism and Universalism', 58–89.

5 Radulović, 'Slavia Esoterica between East and West', 73–102; Pokorný and Winter, *Occult Nineteenth Century*; Strube, *Global Tantra*.

6 Radulović, 'Slavia Esoterica ...', 94.

7 Hess, 'Romanticism and National Messianism in Theosophical Milieus in Poland Before World War II—an Overview', 109–128; Horák, 'Universalism, the Society of Czechoslovak Her-

politics to uncover similarities and differences in the occultism of Slavic- and German-speaking countries. In this regard, I was inspired by Radulović's idea of "Slavia esoterica,"⁸ which I use as a heuristic for researching occultism and politics rather than as an intrinsic quality of occultism in Slavic countries.

Modern concepts of race, ethnicity, and nation each played distinct yet overlapping roles in shaping occult milieus in Europe. Some German and Austrian occult groups explicitly drew on racial theories rooted in pseudoscientific hierarchies, while occultists in Slavic countries more often framed their discourses around national identity or (pan-)Slavic ethnic solidarity—occasionally intertwining these with cultural notions of a Slavic or Aryan "race"/culture. While older scholarship by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Peter Staudenmaier, and Helmut Zander explored the racial dimensions of Austrian-German occult groups (referenced above), a very recent impetus suggests accounting for and reconsidering race within the study of both esotericism and global religious history.⁹ However, comparatively less attention has been paid to the intersections of nationalism and occultism in Europe.¹⁰ Hence, this article primarily focuses on the occult utilizations of ethnicity, nationalism, and race with a principal focus on nationalism by comparing two Central European occult milieus: Bohemian/Czech and Austrian/German.¹¹ While the article aims to explore the relations between occultism and politics through the utilization of these three concepts, the comparison also sheds further light on 1) the debate on Slavic occultism started by Radulović, 2) the region's history, and 3) reveals new insights about the broader European occult landscape. Examining the overlaps between ethnicity, racism, nationalism, and occultism is particularly

meticists', 55–83; Radulović, 'Slavia Esoterica between East and West', 73–102; Radulović, 'The Esoteric Background of Yugoslav Messianism', 69–84.

8 Radulović, 'Slavia Esoterica', 73–102.

9 Bakker, 'Hidden Presence'; Bakker, 'Race and (the Study of) Esotericism', 147–167; Strube, 'Theosophy, Race, and the Study of Esotericism', 1180–1189; Villalba, 'The Occult among the Aborigines of South America?', 88–108.

10 Notable exceptions are Nally, *Envisioning Ireland*; Radulović, 'Slavia Esoterica'; Hess, 'Romanticism and National Messianism'; Giudice, *Occult Imperium*.

11 Bohemia is the western part of today's Czechia. Until 1918, along with other Czech lands, it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its population was mixed; mostly German-speaking people inhabited borderland areas, and important cultural centers like Prague and Brno had parallel Czech and German cultures. In this article, I use both Bohemian and Czech designations: when referring to Czech and German-speaking occultists, I use the land's name, Bohemia, while leaving the Czech-speaking ones their language-derived designation. Referring to "Austro-German" or "Austrian/German" occultism might seem misleading; however, many of Guido List's ideas and groups derived from them found fertile soil in Germany, hence my use of this term.

crucial for understanding the transnational development of esoteric currents in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe—regions deeply shaped by the rise of national movements since the late eighteenth century. Bringing to light the under-researched Bohemian occult milieu not only refines our perspective on Central European esotericism but also broadens our understanding of the political dimensions of Slavic occult groups.

My main argument is that the modern concepts of nation and ethnicity played a crucial role in shaping both occult milieus, serving a similar function as race, despite being in different sociopolitical contexts. This is because both concepts employed similar discursive strategies that connected them to a perceived pure and unchanging essence. Therefore, there is no deep difference in whether an occultist calls for an ethnic or nationalist justification for their agenda. The occult nationalism of some Slavic groups is, therefore, very akin to the occult blending of ethnicity and racism of some Austrian or German occult groups. Yet, there are also differences relating to the very subjects they refer to—race, ethnicity, and nationalism—and, more importantly, to the desired goals of the Czech and Austrian comparands. While the Czech representatives strived to promote their own nation against a pan-Slavic¹² or even pan-human backdrop, many Austrian occult nationalists emphasized the German nation's bloodline in the Aryan race.

I use a comparative method in the study of religion, applying Oliver Freiberger's approach.¹³ The comparative method has been extensively debated in the field since the discipline's emergence.¹⁴ Freiberger distinguishes between illuminative and taxonomic modes of comparison—the former sheds new light on historical cases, while the latter contributes to broader cross-religious analysis. My study applies both: it illuminates the occult milieu in Bohemia and provides insights relevant to other Slavic-speaking countries. My main question is: What are the similarities and differences in the use of race, ethnicity, and nation in German and Czech occult milieus? To answer this, I selected the most illustrative occultists and groups from Bohemia and Austria/Germany (1890–1945). This microscale comparison is justified as it examines the same phenomenon within the same period and region. The only difference is language

12 Pan-Slavism, emerging in the early nineteenth century among Czech and Slovak intellectuals, advocated for unity and cooperation among Slavic peoples across Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe based on shared ethnic backgrounds and cultural-political aspirations. This ideology also spurred interest in the common pagan heritage of Slavic peoples, influencing folklore research and politics. See, Horák, 'Discovering Slavic Mythology between East and West', 463–486.

13 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*.

14 E.g., Kripal, *Comparing Religions*; Hughes, *Comparison*; Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges*.

and cultural background, though the two milieus shared much in common, including political and cultural history and personal relations. My aim is to compare the social, cultural, political, and occult meta-structures behind them. The *tertium comparationis* in my study is the political dimension of occultism, particularly its use of race, ethnicity, and nation. Theosophy serves as my starting point, as it played a crucial role in spreading occultism and shaping the political agenda of some Austrian occultists. The most well-known pioneer of this occult-nationalist synthesis was Guido (von) List, who heavily incorporated occult racism into his ideas. In contrast, I selected Emanuel Lešetický z Lešehradu, founder of the Czech occult-nationalist group The Silver Circle (Stříbrný kruh). Choosing a case from the Czech lands was challenging, as few groups significantly intertwined the occult with politics, particularly regarding nation or ethnicity. Race was often addressed only indirectly through orientализing discourses on Indian yoga and magic.¹⁵ However, in the Austrian and later German occult milieu, racial theories were prominent, as seen in the work of Guido von List, whose texts are often grounded in occult racism. I chose List over Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels because, as a pioneering figure, he had a greater intellectual and sociopolitical influence on the merger of *völkisch* ideology and occultism.¹⁶ Thus, my selection of List and Lešetický reflects their contrasting approaches to occultism, nationalism, ethnicity, and race, which mirrored existing political discourses in Austro-Hungary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Theoretically, race, ethnicity, and nation are all social constructs.¹⁷ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, race was widely conceptualized through various scientific and pseudoscientific theories as a biologically fixed hierarchy, used to classify human populations according to alleged evolutionary development and the then science sought evidence to support this conviction. However, further research has shown that race ‘as a biological category does not exist’ since the genetic variation is ‘far greater within than between [the alleged] racial groups’; therefore, race remains an imagined category.¹⁸ Researching ethnicity has not been straightforward either, and there have been several opposing theories of ethnicity.¹⁹ Older research argued there are dependency links between nationalism and ethnicity driven by co-created

15 Fujda, *Akultura hinduismu*, 236–240.

16 Paape, *Im Wahn des Auserwähltseins*.

17 Matthew and Denis, ‘Racism, sociology of’, 857; Mylonas and Tudor, *Varieties of Nationalism*, 6, 22; Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, 2–5.

18 Matthew and Denis, ‘Racism, sociology of’, 857.

19 Hale, ‘Explaining Ethnicity’, 459–463.

narratives about common “ethnic” ancestry.²⁰ However, more recent scholarship proposes that ethnicity serves as a crucial identity marker, not because ethnic groups are inherently permanent or ancient, but because humans possess deep-seated psychological mechanisms for social categorization or that ‘descent-based attributes’ are important social identity drivers.²¹ Race, like ethnicity, language, culture, or religion, was historically treated as a core building block of national identity. However, recent scholarship has demonstrated that none of these categories are either necessary or sufficient for the formation of a nation.²² Therefore, the recent scholarship in political science calls for detaching previously mutually bounded categories of ethnicity and nation and defines the latter as a ‘type of social identity that aspires to some degree of political self-rule over a distinct territory’.²³ Nationalism entails three parts: ‘1) the intersubjective recognition of an imagined community of people as a locus of loyalty and solidarity; 2) the desire for some degree of self-rule over a distinct territory, and 3) a repertoire of symbols and practices that embody and celebrate that imagined community, ranging from monuments and museums to festivals and holidays’.²⁴ Mylonas and Tudor suggest that nationalism studies shall organize future research along five perceived dimensions of nationalism and indicate the research focus for nationalism varies in response to its three parts and five following dimensions: 1) elite and 2) popular fragmentation, 3) ascriptiveness, 4) thickness, and 5) salience of the national narrative.²⁵ As this study primarily spotlights religious/esoteric phenomena and their overlaps with nationalism, it focuses mainly on the ascriptiveness of nationalist narratives, which emphasizes ‘fixed or ascriptive, forms of social identity such as race, religion, or ethnicity—identities that are socially assigned and passed through birth (hereditary) rather than chosen’.²⁶ Occultism is an important source of inspiration for strengthening such narratives in both progressive and traditionalist, anti-modern ways.²⁷ Therefore, occultism contributes to the ascriptiveness of national narratives by reinforcing racialized and ethnic imaginaries that portray identity as inherited and primordial. This is also the reason why I pay particular attention to various imaginations of what is perceived

20 Smith, *Nationalism*, 13.

21 Hale, ‘Explaining Ethnicity’, 481; Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, 51–53.

22 Mylonas and Tudor, *Varieties of Nationalism*, 22–23.

23 Mylonas and Tudor, *Varieties of Nationalism*, 21.

24 Mylonas and Tudor, *Varieties of Nationalism*, 23.

25 Mylonas and Tudor, *Varieties of Nationalism*, 11.

26 Mylonas and Tudor, *Varieties of Nationalism*, 42.

27 Nally, *Envisioning Ireland*, 4; Giudice, *Occult Imperium*, 189–190.

as “natural” in the juxtaposition part of the comparison for these imaginations were often embedded within hierarchical conceptions of ethnicity and race, frequently shaped by esoteric interpretations of historical and spiritual descent. In the final part of the comparison, I consider the overlaps between the comparative method and the theory of nationalism.

2 Austro-German and Bohemian Occult Milieus

There are many commonalities between the two occult milieus. The Czech lands have been an integral part of the Habsburg Empire since the seventeenth century. That provided shared cultural and political space as well as personal connections at the early stages of the spread of occultism. The key impetus of the spread was the arrival of Theosophy to Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It provided a foundation for new currents like Anthroposophy and Ariosophy. Hence, I pay close attention to it and trace its early influences and mergers with politics. The end of World War I brought an end to the old political world order. The new national states initiated a legislative transformation that allowed occult societies to spread more freely (especially the “secret” ones, since they were no longer under direct supervision from state authorities as they used to be under the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Situated on the periphery and emerging within a smaller nation-state, the Czech occult milieu initially evolved in close dialogue with its German, Austrian, and later French counterparts.

2.1 *Occultism in Germany and Austria*

Theosophy arrived in Germany in 1884 when nationalist Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden founded the first group in Erberfeld and published one of the first occult periodicals, *Die Sphinx: Monatsschrift für Seelen- und Geistesleben*.²⁸ The early Theosophical movement in Germany and Austria was small but grew. The German Theosophical Society was founded in 1896, and Rudolf Steiner became its secretary in 1902.²⁹ The early Viennese occult movement, emerging around 1880, was tied to the life reform movement, particularly vegetarianism and the Pernerstorfer Circle. This group of young intellectuals sought alternatives to bourgeois liberalism, exploring new values like nature and art. Their occult pursuits were intertwined with broader social and political reforms, reflecting a

28 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, 23; Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 17.

29 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, 26.

transnational and transclass effort that shaped the Austrian Empire's cultural landscape.³⁰ Franz Hartmann was an important figure within the German-speaking Theosophical movement and founded the first Austrian Theosophical Society in 1887. Its Viennese headquarters was led by Jewish occultist and "life reformer" Friedrich Eckstein.³¹ As Kurlander noted, an interest in German and Nordic mythology and folklore blossomed all over Germany and Austria in the late nineteenth century, stimulated by the works of Wagner, Rilke, Brothers Grimm, and many others.³² This national and cultural development coincided with nationalist, pan-German ideology fostered by the *völkisch* movement, whose followers, especially Guido von List and Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, adopted Theosophical teachings to support their pan-Germanist dreams. The two developed a merger of occultism and *völkisch* ideology known as Ariosophy and Armanism. Their ideological, occult, and political mission was supported by a foundation of various groups and societies: the Order of the New Templars (Ordo Novi Templi) in 1900, the Society of Guido von List in 1908, the Germanenorden in 1912, the Thule Society in 1918, and the Edda Society in 1925.³³ Although *völkisch* ideas gained traction within segments of the Austrian and German occult milieu, not all German-speaking occultists adhered to racial ideologies, far-right *völkisch* politics, or antimodernist worldviews.³⁴

Another important current was the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, which emerged as an offshoot from the German-speaking Theosophical Society in 1913.³⁵ Anthroposophy spread quickly across the German-speaking countries thanks to the older milieu of the Life Reform Movement (Lebensreform).³⁶ The movement's supporters lived in self-sustained communes in nature, rejecting recent scientific discoveries, experimenting with self-education, vegetarianism, and so forth.³⁷ Apart from Anthroposophy and Theosophy, there were also umbrella occult groups and associations uniting people interested in occultism: the Association for Occultism (1907), or the Sphinx Reading Club that provided library services.³⁸ The German-speaking occult milieu of the fin-de-siècle period favored various irregular or fringe-masonic orders. The most famous

30 Baier, 'Occult Vienna', 1–76.

31 Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 18; Baier, 'Occult Vienna', 9, 28–29.

32 Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 7.

33 See a comprehensive overview in Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun; The Occult Roots of Nazism*; Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 14–22.

34 Wolfram, *The Stepchildren of Science*, 40–55.

35 Staudenmeier, *Between Occultism and Nazism*, 64.

36 On Lebensreform, see, Bigalke, *Lebensreform Und Esoterik Um 1900*.

37 Staudenmeier, *Between Occultism and Nazism*, 6.

38 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, 28.

one is the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) founded in 1912 by the Tantric and ex-theosophist Theodor Reuß (who was influenced by Hartmann).³⁹ Gradually occultism became a 'mass phenomenon in Weimar Germany, with a plethora of groups, publications, and charismatic spokespeople'.⁴⁰ That evinced a steady rise of interest in astrology by the public. The first Viennese astrological society was founded in 1907.⁴¹ Later, Munich hosted the first European Astrologers' Congress in 1922, and 'preoccupation with astrology at that time was unparalleled in any other European country or the U.S.A'.⁴² An idealized icing on the cake of the occult landscape of the German-speaking world of the interwar period was the emergence of Fraternitas Saturni in 1926, which remains one of the most significant occult groups in Germany.

2.1 *Occultism in Bohemia*

It is estimated that more than two hundred various occult groups existed in Bohemia from the 1890s to the end of World War II.⁴³ The early occult history represents an adoption of blooming occult currents from other countries, especially Martinism, Theosophy, and illuminism. The founding figure who brought these currents to Bohemia was Baron Franz Leonhardi (1856–1908), a nobleman from southern Bohemia, a politician for the conservative party (Konservativer Großgrundbesitz), and a deputy in both the Bohemian Diet (1887–1893) and the Austrian House of Deputies (1891–1897). It should be noted that he was 'no Czech nationalist, but a [typical] representative of a local Bohemian patriotism'.⁴⁴ Yet, fellow deputies considered him a pan-Slavist.⁴⁵ The leading French occultist Papus initiated Leonhardi into Martinism in Paris. In 1891, Leonhardi founded a Martinist circle in České Budějovice and a Theosophical Lodge in Prague in the flat of Gustav Meyrink, where the lodge met. Both groups were called At the Blue Star (Zum Blauen Stern). The Budějovice circle became a lodge in 1895.⁴⁶ Prague's Theosophical Lodge was founded on the remnants of an older spiritist group led by Gustav Meyrink, and its foundation supervised Viennese theosophists Count Karel Leiningen-Billigstein and

39 Pasi, 'Ordo Templi Orientis', 281–287.

40 Staudenmeier, *Between Occultism and Nazism*, 11.

41 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, 29.

42 Howe, *Astrology and the Third Reich*, 7.

43 Jůna, *České tajné společnosti IV*.

44 Velek, 'Ein Konservativer Aristokrat Mit Radikaler Unterstützung', 146. The author of the article did all translations from Czech and German to English.

45 Velek, 'Ein Konservativer Aristokrat', 148.

46 Sanitrák, *Dějiny české mystiky I*, 65–67; Nakonečný, *Novodový český hermetismus*, 166–167.

Friedrich Eckstein.⁴⁷ Later, Leonhardi introduced Eckstein to future Czechoslovak president Tomáš Masaryk, then a leader of the Czech Realist Party. Leonhardi thought that Freemasons from Russia and France supported Masaryk's party. Yet, he introduced the theosophist Eckstein to Masaryk, to whom (i.e., to his Realist Party and the nationalist liberal Young Czech Party) Eckstein offered 'a service of a part of the European freemasonry'.⁴⁸ Eckstein even discussed the Czechs' religiousness with Masaryk and published a book on Comenius, highlighting the peaceful and pan-European, transnational character of his thought.⁴⁹

The history of Theosophy in the Czech lands reveals that the early Bohemian occult milieu was transnational but gradually transformed into two separate milieus: the Czech- and German-speaking groups. The secretary of the Theosophical Lodge, Karel Weinfurter, recollected its transnational character: 'It was a secret lodge, yet we reported its foundation to the police and were therefore not disturbed in our activities. Perhaps it was primarily because most of the members were Germans. Despite this, there were no nationalist conflicts, even when Prague experienced uprisings and frictions at that time caused by the Burschenschaft'.⁵⁰ Weinfurter became an influential figure in the Czechoslovak occult milieu from the 1920s. He strictly rejected any merger of politics and the occult, since 'all politics is a pursuit that misleads a seeker into treacherous grounds'.⁵¹ When a famous Czech poet Julius Zeyer joined the lodge, he was 'accepted with deep respect, even though our members were mostly Germans. I explained to them his impact on our literature'. When Weinfurter noted that the lodge was primarily German-speaking, Zeyer replied, 'I have no problem with that—science and arts are cosmopolitan'.⁵² Besides Prague's lodge, there were eight Theosophical circles with links to Hartmann's Internationale theosophische Verbrüderung (in Munich), located mostly in the German-speaking Bohemian borderlands. The original transnational character of the lodge later diminished, not for political reasons, but because most of the original members lost faith in Theosophy and shifted to mysticism. Thus, the lodge's membership fluctuated, and it was inactive from 1895 to 1897, later revived by 29 people as the Theosophical Society (Theosofický spolek), which

47 Klíma, 'Videň: Různé Duchovní Směry a Jejich Průkopníci', 157–161.

48 Ševčík, *Okultismus a politika*, 70–71; quote and details in Velek, 'Ein Konservativer Aristokrat', 148.

49 Eckstein, *Comenius und die Böhmisches Brüder*.

50 Weinfurter, *Paměti okultisty*, 69.

51 Weinfurter, *Paměti okultisty*, 71.

52 Weinfurter, *Paměti okultisty*, 71.

was transformed into the Czech Theosophical Society in 1904 with the help of Rudolf Steiner. In 1905, the society became part of the International Theosophical Society in Adyar and had 74 members. In 1911, Berta Fanta (1866–1918), a German woman who organized her “Fantakreis,” a weekly meeting of Prague’s German intellectual and cultural elite, founded a German branch of the Czech Theosophical Society called Bolzano.⁵³ After World War I, the Czech Society canceled its activities due to the rising difficulties associated with considering Krishnamurti a messiah. The original Theosophical organization became the Society for Mystical Studies (*Společnost pro mystická studia*) led by Weinfurter. Anthroposophy’s spread among Prague’s Czech and German-speaking elites also happened separately. Two different German groups, Bolzano and Studium, later adjusted their names due to the higher presence of Czech-speaking people.⁵⁴

A plethora of occult groups emerged during the interwar period. The two most important and largest were Universalia and Psyche. Universalia became influential during the 1930s, running a publishing house and organizing the Hermetic University with lectures for members and the public.⁵⁵ Psyche was established by Karel Weinfurter, one of the most prolific occultists, who turned from Theosophy to Christian and oriental mysticism and yoga. Several Theosophical and Anthroposophical groups in Prague and other Czech towns restarted their activities after World War I. Sexual mysteries (Eulis Club) and Egyptian magic (the Paragawa occult group and the Martinist Lodge) were propagated by Universalia’s founder Petr Kohout (Pierre de Lasenic) and count Felix Achilles de la Cámara, a novelist and a theatre businessman. Leaderships of many societies and groups were in touch with foreign colleagues from Germany, France, Austria, and the United Kingdom.⁵⁶

3 Comparison: Occultism and Politics in Central Europe

‘One of the greatest challenges for a comparativist is to deal with decontextualization,’ warns Freiburger.⁵⁷ This comparison of occultism (*tertium comparationis*) in Central Europe does not suffer from decontextualization because the

53 Szymeczek, ‘Activities of the Theosophical Society and the Order of the Star in the East in the Czech Lands until 1939’, 52–53.

54 Zdražil, *Počátky teosofie a anthroposofie v Čechách*, 72–75.

55 Horák, ‘Universalia’, 68.

56 For details, see Nakonečný, *Novodobý český hermetismus*; Horák, ‘Universalia’, 60–67.

57 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 167.

local occult milieus shared a common cultural background and the same belief system. What was different was the sociopolitical background. And that is what Freiburger suggests looking at and comparing. He works with a concept of discourse in more general, non-Foucauldian terms. He proposes that discourse is a body of statements, analyses, and opinions on religion characterized by recurring themes and concepts that are present, missing, or contested.⁵⁸ Freiburger's method consists of five consequential steps. The first, selection, is addressed in the introduction of this article, while the remaining four—description, juxtaposition, redescription, and theory formation—are addressed in this section with their criteria applied concurrently to both milieus. Due to space constraints, I first outline the essential context before providing a concise summary of the main tenets of both comparands.

3.1 *Description and Analysis*

3.1.1 Austria

The connections between the völkisch agenda and Theosophy in Guido List's and his followers' works are well known, especially due to the pioneering work of Goodrick-Clarke.⁵⁹ As Goodrick-Clarke pointed out, List was a pan-German nationalist who was first inspired by the imaginations of noble pagan Germans and later enhanced his ideas with Theosophical speculations. Similarly oriented was the founder of German Theosophy, Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden, who was a staunch proponent of imperialist and racist ideology rooted in pseudoscientific notions of hierarchy. Theosophical ideas helped him root his political agenda on an esoteric level.⁶⁰ However, overlaps between the völkisch movement and occultism were not limited to these two figures, since 'many presses sat at the interface between the occult and völkisch strains of German modernism'.⁶¹ That situation was not comparable to other European countries of that time, like the UK or France.⁶² Originally a Viennese journalist and writer, List became a prolific author of occult pamphlets, books, novels, poems, and theatre plays, and was later supported by wealthy entrepreneurs and völkisch movement elites. Occultism provided the needed ideological framework, while references to paganism and the ancient German past provided the foundation.

58 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 170.

59 Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots of Nazism*.

60 Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 17.

61 Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 14.

62 Pasi, 'The Modernity of Occultism', 62–68.

Supposing a dual structure, List deemed ancient German religion to have had esoteric and exoteric dimensions. The latter was called Wotanism, a nature-worshipping religion for the masses, while the former, Armanism, was reserved for the elite priesthood of Wotan.⁶³ Theosophy reinforced List's racial speculations, allowing him to reimagine his ancestral lineage as "Ario-Germanic" and thus spiritually and biologically elevated; similarly, the Wotanist priesthood became the "Armanenschaft" in line with Blavatsky's arguments in *The Secret Doctrine*.⁶⁴ According to the Theosophical vision of racial progress, 'the survival of the fittest races and nations was secured' while 'the unfit ones—the failures—were disposed of by being swept off the earth' so that 'the extinction of "inferior races" was a "Karmic necessity"'.⁶⁵ A 'marriage between Aryans and "colored races" or Jews', as Steiner or List would put it, endangered 'Germany's world mission to sponsor positive biological and spiritual evolution'.⁶⁶ Bearing in mind the racial dimension, List vehemently rejected both Jews and Slavs—particularly Czechs—whom he viewed as racially inferior.⁶⁷ Hence, he demanded contemporary aristocracy to 'resist the pro-Slav interests and democratic tendencies of the contemporary Austrian state'.⁶⁸ As a keen supporter of the Habsburg Empire and the imperial dynasty, he tried to persuade the old Austrian and German aristocracy of their ancient, Armanist origin in the priestly class of the ancient German tribal society. In his vision of the past, the Armanen priests were founders of the aristocratic lineages that survived his days.⁶⁹ (He also wanted to present himself as being of noble origin, hence addressing himself as Guido von List.) That was a clear move to win the nobility's favor toward his ideology, as its status was 'threatened by the growth of non-German political influence in Austria'.⁷⁰ Clearly, the link to the pagan past was indispensable for creating his blend of occultism and völkisch ideology. One of the essential bridges between the past and present was runes, which he esoterically interpreted.⁷¹ The pagan past was also echoed in various landmarks he and his fellow supporters visited: from the ancient ruins of the Roman city and military camp Carnuntum to the Viennese St. Stephan's

63 List, *Die Armanenschaft Der Ario-Germanen*.

64 Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots of Nazism*, 52.

65 Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 35.

66 Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 19.

67 List, *Die Bilderschrift Der Ario-Germanen*.

68 Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots of Nazism*, 65.

69 List, *Die Armanenschaft Der Ario-Germanen*.

70 Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots of Nazism*, 65.

71 List, *Das Geheimnis der Runen*, 1–6, 34–64.

cathedral, to the nearby abbey at Klosterneuburg Hill. Perhaps one of the best summaries of his tenets is provided in one of his earlier works, *The Invincible*:⁷²

- Restoring and preserving national and racial identity is necessary for maintaining one's own culture, identity, and strength.
- The differences between races and nations are natural and should not be diluted by mixing.
- National education should aim to strengthen the characteristic features and virtues of one's nation.
- The mixing of races leads to a weakening of social structure and cultural integrity.
- Christianity is anti-German or at least not natural for Germans.

3.1.2 Bohemia

Josef M.E. Lešetický z Lešehradu (1877–1955) was a poet, author, dramatist, freemason, and an agile collector of literary and occult works. His father, a military officer in the Austrian army, was elevated to the nobility with the title *z Lešehradu* (von Lešehrad) in 1889. Lešetický was a very prolific author, although apparently not very talented, and is rather forgotten now. He was a great friend to all the cultural, intellectual, and occult elite in the Czech lands and a member of all possible lodges and groups. For most of his professional career, he worked as an archivist at the Royal Bank of Bohemia (Zemská banka v Praze). His national feelings led him into Maffia (1914–1918), a secret anti-royalist organization founded by a later Czechoslovak president, Eduard Beneš, which aimed to disintegrate the Austrian Empire and found a Czechoslovak state.

In the morning of the 5 April 1918, Lešetický noted that a white being with six wings revealed herself to him in a dream and told him to found a 'conscious, invisible circle', a brotherhood, that would nurture 'goodness, beauty, and wisdom' through exercising 'moral integrity, self-control, and a will to understand'. The brotherhood was to be called The Silver Circle.⁷³ The Circle had about twenty members. Four comprised an 'inner circle', and two had a special membership status: the famous poet Otokar Březina and Jiří V. Figulus, the last male descendant of John Amos Comenius.⁷⁴ The idea of the Circle was inspired by an occult group, The Slavic Brethren, a pseudo-masonic group gathered around

⁷² List, *Der Unbesiegbare*.

⁷³ PNP 392/54, SK, 'Zjevila se mi ...', 1a.

⁷⁴ PNP 392/54, SK, 'Společnost', [no pagination]. Vast majority of files in PNP 392/54, SK, have no pagination.

Czech patriot and teacher Karel Slavoj Amerling in 1839.⁷⁵ Another source of inspiration was The Brotherhood of the Chalice (Bratrstvo Kalicha), a group allegedly founded by Czech political activist Josef Václav Frič (1829–1890). The Silver Circle emerged in 1918 and remained active until 1923.⁷⁶ There is no direct explanation as to why the Circle cancelled its activities, but I assume it happened due to the emergence of the Czechoslovak Freemasonic Grand Lodge on 28 October 1923.⁷⁷ The Circle was secret but maintained some public activities, like publishing a book series and supporting its members' activities. The Circle also accepted women, but only Lešetický's wife took part as a secretary. On the contrary, members were encouraged to influence women to raise children in a 'strong national and healthy spirit'.⁷⁸ In the minutes from the early meetings, Lešetický noted that brethren shall 'work toward the national and social goals'.⁷⁹ In 1934, Lešetický attempted to revive Silver Circle under the name Triglav.⁸⁰ It was probably unsuccessful, as no archival material confirms any activity.

Lešetický is the sole author of the Silver Circle's materials, rituals, symbolism, and legend, which is recognizable by his handwriting in the archival documents. The group was based on a pseudo-masonic structure of three degrees with special signs and tokens: for instance, the lodge password was "Come-nius".⁸¹ The Silver Circle's tenets and degree rituals drew inspiration from Czech history and legends. The organization of the three initiatory degrees was akin to freemasonry, with each degree devoted to a particular ritual, symbol, and a

75 In July 1839 the Czech physician and scholar Karel Slavoj Amerling (1807–1884) founded the secret society Fellows of the New Slavic Religion (Věrníci nového náboženství slávkého) in Prague. Following ideas of early modern Czech philosopher Jan Amos Comenius, the society's purpose was to unite 'similarly-minded patriots', Lešehrad, *Tajné společnosti v Čechách*, 54–55. Members of this group included artists, authors, and famous scholars like Josef Kajetán Tyl and Pavel Josef Šafařík. After a single year, authorities found the group suspicious and its pan-Slavic mission dangerous for the Austrian empire, and banned its activities.

76 PNP 392/54, SK 'Listina', [no pagination].

77 The Czechoslovak National Grand Lodge was established in February 1923 and was consecrated on 27 October 1923. The Silver Circle ended its activities on 28 October 1923, on the fifth anniversary of the founding of the new Czechoslovak Republic. PNP 392/54, SK, 'Instrukce'. The then-Czechoslovak Freemasonry brought forth a republican- and national-building ethos. Lešetický and some Circle members later became freemasons. Hence, they closed the Circle and supported the new Grand Lodge as its and the Circle's aims and values converged.

78 PNP 392/54, SK, 'Instrukce', 4.

79 PNP 392/54, SK, 'Zápisy', [no pagination].

80 Lešehrad, *Po stopách tajemných společností*, 213.

81 PNP 392/54, SK, 'Varia—symboly a znaky', [no pagination].

hill in Bohemia. The first one concerned the mythical origins of “the Czechs” coming to a national “mountain” of the Czech people, Mount Říp, and worship of the Slavic god Svantovít, ‘the Sun, the good, the light’. The second degree was devoted to the national patron and medieval duke St. Wenceslaus and Mount Blaník, wherein Wenceslaus dwells with his knights, ready to save the country in the greatest danger.⁸² The third degree focused on Comenius and Mount Tábor, symbolizing the legacy of Bohemian reformation.⁸³ Lešetický wanted to conjoin pre-Christian and Christian history. Three degrees, three epochs of Czech history, shaped the ‘spiritual lineage’ of the ‘national identity and consciousness’ toward an ‘inward mysticism and spiritual resilience’. The former emphasized that ‘Slavic spirituality’ was inward-looking and introspective, since it does not build ‘external temples, but a mystical temple within the human soul’. The latter, the ‘spiritual resilience’, emerged as a by-product of both inner mystical orientation and of a foreign ‘oppression’, since the nation ‘subjugated for centuries was forced to retreat into itself and [to] create a faith that could not or was not allowed to be outwardly manifested’.⁸⁴ Based on the archival material, the essential tenets of the Circle and of Emanuel Lešetický can be summarized as follows:

- Open the sources of mindful spiritual enlightenment of the nation.
- Work toward national and social goals to revive the national spirit and its health.
- Reclaim the Czech Lands from the hands of others and unite them.
- Work for the benefit of all Czechoslovaks and Slavs in general.
- Prepare for the forthcoming Slavic Age.
- Be “apostles of humanity” and promote egalitarian and humanitarian values.
- Connect national life with overall humanity.

3.2 *Juxtaposition*

I now leave Theosophy and the wider development of the occult milieu for the next steps, focusing here on juxtaposing only the essential tenets of Lešetický and List. I summarize the similarities (Table 1) and differences (Table 2) between Lešetický and Slavic Circle ideology and von List and Armanism and Ariosophy into two tables:

82 The Irish poet and occultist W.B. Yeats shared the same imaginings; see Nally, *Envisioning Ireland*, 25–28.

83 PNP 392/54, SK ‘Instrukce’, 17.

84 Lešehrad, *Hledači skrytých pramenů*, 12–13.

TABLE 1 Similarities between Lešetický and List

connection to the “pagan” past
educate and edify one’s own nation
established secret, esoteric society with exoteric outcomes
nation and its traditions are ancient
connection to the country’s landmarks
attempt to unite the land/country
strong national spirit
coming of Slavic Age / German-Aryan Age

TABLE 2 Differences between Lešetický and List

Topos	Bohemian (Lešetický)	Austro-German (List)
Christianity	accepting	rejecting
nation’s link to	ethnicity ~ Slavic	Race + ethnicity ~ Aryan-German
people	Czech nation; overall humanity ~ universal brotherhood	Aryans; German nation
race	not mentioned	of crucial importance
imaginations of “natural”	ethnic and spiritual	racial and spiritual
main inspiration	freemasonry	Theosophy

3.3 *Redescription*

List’s Ariosophy merged the nationalist and racial ideologies with the occult provided from Theosophical thought. Ariosophy propagated the concept of an Aryan-Germanic superiority rooted in a mythical past through a connection to the specific German-speaking cultural and geographic landscape. That landscape, along with language and the imagination of race, provided a system of symbols glorifying and constructing a noble, pre-Christian pagan past of an Aryan society. The occult/*völkisch* milieu around List pioneered this openly political racial interpretation of occultism and considered racial purity a crucial condition of spiritual and cultural evolution. Occultism was to substitute for Christianity as a form of national religiousness. Notably, List’s pan-German political dreams were not fulfilled until 1938 with the Anschluss of Austria.

Conversely, the Bohemian occult milieu developed distinct characteristics. Most representatives of the early Theosophy in Bohemia were Czech Germans.

Leonhardi, as a founding father, was politically active and supported territorially oriented Bohemian nobility in their political cause. Meyrink was an Austrian cosmopolitan who did not express his political ideas openly and left Bohemia in 1903 due to bankruptcy and fraud allegations. Despite the complicated political situation in the Empire and Bohemia around 1890–1900, connected with the declaration of martial law under Prague and fights over language decrees adjusting the role of Czech in formal communication, Theosophy in Bohemia leaned toward universal brotherhood. The Silver Circle that emerged two decades later did not prioritize racial ideologies. It nurtured national consciousness and spiritual enlightenment through a culturally oriented mysticism that nevertheless resembled List's activities. It drew upon Czech history, mythology, and national identity based on ancient Slavs and their gods, the Hussite Reform movement, and Comenius' pan-humanism to foster a sense of cultural revival and unity. Similarly to the *völkisch* occult milieu in Austria, nation and ethnicity were tightly interlinked. The Circle's foundational document highlighted the importance of influencing the cultural life of the Czech nation. The Circle aimed to provide a strong occult and cultural root to build a strong nation among other nations in the modern world. However, it did not condemn other nations, races, or ethnicities. Unlike von List's pan-German vision, the Silver Circle members experienced the foundation of their own Czechoslovak (national) state.

Both milieus shared an interest in relating to the pre-Christian religion and past that provided the imagined ethnic/racial link and a means of identity construction, even though the Bohemian occultists did not refer to race. One's particular ethnicity (Slavic) or nation (Czech) conditioned one's ability to connect to the mythical past. In this regard, it is akin to the utilization of the concept of race that also served as the condition *sine qua non*. Moreover, both milieus shared the goal of uniting Czech or German (imagined) territory as well as the nationalist argument that particular people shall govern over themselves.⁸⁵ Each also portrayed their ethnic group as a successive cultural force in Europe and the world, whether it was a Slavic culture or an Aryan race.

3.4 *Theory Formation*

Imaginations of race, ethnicity, and nation were vital parts of occult discourses. Each concept functions similarly in the occult discourses by providing a link to 1) the mythical, imagined, pre-Christian past of a certain people/community, 2) historical or mythical events, and 3) local landscape/imagined bor-

85 Mylonas and Tudor, *Varieties of Nationalism*, 23.

ders to enhance the spirit of a particular entity.⁸⁶ Further, occult discourses enabled their proponents to connect to a 4) timeless essence or spirit of a nation, ethnicity, or race. The timeless essence, proliferated by List or Lešetický, is primordial. Its primordial character strengthens the ascriptiveness of the nationalist narrative. Put otherwise, the comparison evinces that esoteric ideologies can strengthen nationalist narratives by referring to various timeless essences. Referring to a timeless essence supports various imaginations of “natural”. For instance, Victorian racial science emphasized race as a natural hierarchical system (in the sense of a biological condition). In contrast, the concepts of nation and ethnicity were not typically framed in rigid biological hierarchies but were instead associated with cultural, linguistic, or historical classifications. No matter this difference, when connected to a timeless essence sanctified by occult arguments, all three concepts work in the same way—linking the present to one or more of the four attributes (mythical events, landscape, people, racial/ethnic/national essence). The comparison evinced that race served the same dividing role among Austrians and Czechs, Germans and Slavs, in the very similar and orientalizing way it worked between Westerners and Asians.⁸⁷ While Victorian imaginations of race involved hierarchical ranking, nation or ethnicity also involved classification/hierarchies but rather horizontally defined—i.e., a topic of who belongs to a nation, a topic of identifying “insiders” and “the other”. This refers to the salience of the national narrative, which is high in both our cases since the salience is cemented by referring to various primordial essences/qualities (in this regard, the ascriptiveness of the narrative also boosts its salience).⁸⁸ Another example of the imagination of the “natural” involved Czech/Slavic ‘spiritual resilience’ and its ‘panhuman and mystical character’. To paraphrase the definition of nationalism and consider occult influences, the mergers of occultism and nationalism entail 1) celebrating an imagined community of peoples described through spiritual and esoteric characteristics that are primordial in nature and that shall nurture feelings and desires of solidarity, 2) self-rule over a territory, which is marked out by mythical, past events, and 3) occult discourses that provide timeless symbols, practices, and narrative structures linking to a primordial, occult essence of not only national but also imagined racial or ethnic character.

86 The same could be found, for instance, in the Irish context; Nally, *Envisioning Ireland*, 22–28.

87 Strube, ‘Theosophy, Race, and the Study of Esotericism’, 1181.

88 Mylonas and Tudor, *Varieties of Nationalism*, 49–51.

4 Slavic and German Occultism

How can this comparison shed new light on the similarities and differences between Slavic and German occultism? And how did the occultists in other Slavic countries employ those concepts in their agendas? Like early occultism in Austria and Bohemia, Theosophy provided the necessary background for merging occult and political agendas in most Southern and Eastern European countries, sometimes acquiring messianic undertones.⁸⁹

One such case was the occult milieu in Yugoslavia centered around the art critic, political activist, and later UK-based occultist Dimitrije Mitrinović (1887–1953). His thought was influenced by Blavatsky, Steiner, Indian philosophy, and Solov'ev's concept of Panhumanism, which posited that Europe was in 'spiritual crisis' and required rejuvenation.⁹⁰ Mitrinović and his followers believed that this rejuvenation would come from the East, with the Slavs uniting humankind under the banner of a new humanity, mirroring the unification of Slavic peoples into the Yugoslav state. They envisioned that, once this mission was accomplished, 'peace would occur among nations', nationalisms would fade and 'imperialism disappear'.⁹¹ However, Mitrinović's writings also demonstrate how nationalist ideology could be combined with speculative interpretations of Aryan racial identity, imbued with strong messianic overtones. He linked Theosophical notions of Aryan racial superiority with Slavic ethnic identity while drawing heavily on Indian philosophical traditions, particularly Tantrism, Vedanta, and Neo-Vedanta. This synthesis illustrates how occult philosophies could simultaneously transcend and reinforce racial and national ideologies.⁹² In contrast to Guido von List's rigidly racialized and nationalist framing of Aryanism, Mitrinović linked Slavic ethnic identity to broader humanistic ideals grounded in mystical Christian Universalism. Such examples demonstrate the malleability of occult discourses in adapting Theosophically-laden concepts of race and ethnicity to nationalist purposes.

A similar blend of Eastern influences, namely India and the Orient, appeared in the work of Nikolai Roerich (1874–1947), a Russian archaeologist, theosophist, and famous painter. Nevertheless, unlike Mitrinović, Roerich saw the fulfillment of Slavic messianism in Russia and its people.⁹³ It should be noted that both conceived Slavdom and Russia as interchangeable terms.

89 Radulović, 'Slavia Esoterica', 89.

90 Radulović, 'Slavia Esoterica', 74–77.

91 Radulović, 'The Esoteric Background ...', 70.

92 Radulović, 'Mitrinović and India', 224–239.

93 Radulović, 'Slavia Esoterica', 87–88.

In Bulgaria, Theosophical ideas were taken over by Petăr Dănov (1864–1944), a founder and leader of the occult group *The White Brotherhood*. Drawing on the Theosophical doctrine of root races, along with Rudolf Steiner's view of Slavs as a sub-race within the sixth Aryan root race, Dănov thought the Slavs, Bulgarians in particular, were on a mission to forge a new world-leading culture.⁹⁴ He did not intend to found a political party. However, his thought was embedded within the then-Bulgarian debate on whether that country was a part of Europe or, rather, of Russia, whether it belonged to the East or the West, what was its ethnicity, and with whom the Bulgarians should adhere.⁹⁵ Merging Theosophy and nationalism, Dănov was no admirer of Russia and its pan-Slavic ideas. He proposed focusing on national Bulgarian Slavic culture and society instead of seeking inspiration from or links to either East (Russia) or West (Europe).

In Poland, Theosophical ideas helped legitimize and establish the Polish nation and discourse about its messianic role after World War I.⁹⁶ Polish theosophists utilized the concept of national suffering as a path to spiritual evolution, viewing Poland's historical struggles and partitions as part of a divine plan. They believed that Poland, like a messiah, had a unique spiritual role to redeem humanity through its own trials and sacrifices. They deemed the Polish nation's experience to be part of a cosmic cycle of death and rebirth, mirroring the individual soul's journey in Theosophical doctrine. This was linked to peculiar interpretations of landscape and national geography. Rather than emphasizing broader Slavic unity, Polish theosophists focused on their own nation's spiritual mission within the framework of universal brotherhood.⁹⁷ Polish theosophists' reluctance to embrace pan-Slavism or merge it with Theosophy stemmed from historically rooted tensions. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, intellectuals and politicians from Slavic countries widely recognized the problematic nature of the Russification of the Poles as a major obstacle to pan-Slavism. They saw it as a paradox that Slavs were fighting among themselves, a sentiment that was further reinforced by the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–1921, which underscored the incoherence of the Russian pan-Slavic agenda.

Returning to my analysis of the Czech occult milieu, it is not surprising that Theosophy did not involve Czech nationalist sentiments, as it was pioneered by the Bohemian Germans. Later, the local Czech branch of the Theosophical Society distanced itself from Annie Besant's vision of Krishnamurti's messianic

94 Heinzl, 'Slavic Messianism in Bulgaria', 56–70.

95 Heinzl, 'Slavic Messianism in Bulgaria', 71.

96 Hess, 'Romanticism and National Messianism'.

97 Hess, 'Romanticism and National Messianism'; 'From the Universal Brotherhood to the Lodge of Soldiers'.

role, leading to the branch's dissolution in the early 1920s. At the same time, The Silver Circle dissolved itself. While the Circle had no direct links to India or the Indo-Aryan narrative, its agenda aligned with Radulović's observation that occultism in Slavic countries often reflected identity politics, echoing the then-mainstream cultural politics.⁹⁸ The Silver Circle combined Panhumanist ideals with a nation-building agenda rooted in a primordial conception of nation and ethnicity.

The question that remains to be answered is why the Bohemian occult milieu of both the fin-de-siècle and interwar periods did not embrace racist speculations akin to *völkisch* groups in Austria and Germany or a racist/ethno-nationalist agenda like in Eastern or Southern Europe. There are three reasons. First, unlike nineteenth-century German-speaking countries, the Czech lands were not a center of comparative mythology that gave rise to racist science.⁹⁹ Hence, though used in archaeology and related disciplines until the 1920s as a part of a debate about the Aryan origin of the Slavs, Aryan racist ideology never became a strong player in the cultural and scientific milieu in Bohemia.¹⁰⁰ This is likely why race was rarely used in Bohemian occultism, and if it was, it referred to non-European phenomena. Secondly, Pan-Slavism was unpopular among Czech intellectuals of the time. Czech and Slovak pan-Slavism peaked in the 1830s with the writings and poems of Pavel J. Šafařík and Ludovít Štúr, who admired Russia. Subsequently, Prague's Slavonic Congress of 1848 propagated Austroslavism, a concept proposing political unity among Slavic nations within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Key representatives of the Czech political and cultural elite of the time, like František Palacký or Karel Havlíček Borovský, disavowed Russia. Later, this cautious stance was maintained at the turn of the twentieth century by future Czechoslovak president T.G. Masaryk.¹⁰¹ As Pan-Slavism declined, it was gradually replaced by the concept of Slavic mutuality, which advocated solidarity among Slavic peoples based on shared ethnic, linguistic, and cultural heritage. Unlike pan-Slavism, Slavic mutuality did not put Russia above other Slavic nations but positioned Russians as equals. Due to Pan-Slavism's unpopularity among Czech intellectuals, it did not find its way to occultism. After World War I, Pan-Slavism in Central Europe 'seemed even more dead than pan-Germanism'.¹⁰² A neo-Slavic movement in the Czech lands, which sought to revive pan-Slavic ties to Russia, was weak and

98 Radulović, 'Slavia Esoterica', 94–95.

99 Olender, *Languages of Paradise*.

100 Fajda, *Akultura hinduismu*, 163.

101 Kohn, 'The Impact of Pan-Slavism on Central Europe', 329.

102 Kohn, 'The Impact of Pan-Slavism on Central Europe', 330.

had only few supporters.¹⁰³ Finally, Czechs gradually negotiated their position in the Empire during the nineteenth century. Their early national movement established its own national culture within the German one.¹⁰⁴ Despite political clashes between Czech, Austrian, and Hungarian politicians toward the end of the century, Czechs secured their own cultural and educational institutions, including part of the University. This may explain why there was little to no overlap between occultism and nationalism at the time, except for the Amerling and Frič groups. However, Czech representatives failed to secure self-governance within the Bohemian Kingdom and under the Austrian Emperor, nor did they achieve a status akin to Hungary's partial "independence" in the dual monarchy after 1867. From the perspective of nationalism theory, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Czech nation exhibited low elite and popular fragmentation, high ascriptiveness, moderate narrative thickness, and strong symbolic salience.

5 Conclusion

I have compared the early Theosophical movement and representatives of Bohemian/Czech and Austrian/German occultism in this article. I have argued that modern concepts of race, ethnicity, and nation significantly influenced local occult milieus during the fin-de-siècle and interwar periods, and these milieus, in turn, impacted broader societal, scholarly, and political discourses—and vice versa. The primary aim of the article was to examine how esoteric actors employed the categories of ethnicity, nationalism, and race within their discourses by comparing two Central European occult milieus with a principal focus on nationalism. A secondary aim that emerged as a by-product of this comparison was to address three related questions: What does the comparison reveal about the category of Slavic occultism? What insights does the comparison provide on the broader European occult landscape? What does the comparison tell us about the region's history?

The concepts of race, ethnicity, and nation were integral to occult discourses as each, in various ways, provided links to 1) a mythical, imagined, pre-Christian past of a particular community; 2) historical or mythical events shaping the community; 3) the local landscape or imagined borders enhancing the community spirit; and, most importantly, 4) a timeless, primordial essence of the

¹⁰³ Vyšný, *Neo-Slavism and the Czechs*.

¹⁰⁴ Macura, *Znamení zrodu a české sny*.

community, explained through one or more of these concepts. Focusing on nationalist narratives, occult discourses enabled the celebration of an imagined community through esoteric means and described it primarily in primordial terms. This, in turn, fostered feelings of solidarity and a desire for self-rule over a defined territory. By invoking mythical past events, peoples, and timeless symbols, occult discourses played a crucial role in sustaining nationalist narratives. This leads me to an interim conclusion: occult discourses that supported nationalist narratives offered a sense of primordial continuity, which proved ideologically powerful regardless of whether they invoked race, ethnicity, or nation—each operating as a discursive strategy for asserting historical depth and spiritual legitimacy.

Coming back to the three related questions, first, I employed the notion of Slavic occultism as a heuristic tool. Radulović argued that Slavic occultists dealt with identity politics issues. My exploration of the Czech occult milieu aligns with Radulović's observation. However, it should be added that this category does not apply to all occult groups in all Slavic-speaking countries but only to those that directly refer to any Slavic elements in their discourses, which was not always the case. The Silver Circle of Bohemia aptly exemplified this restraint as it was one of the very few groups somehow blending occultism and nationalism in Bohemia. Second, comparing the representatives and broader categories of Slavic and German occultism provided important insights into the employment of race, ethnicity, and nation concepts in the occult discourses. On the micro-scale comparison, Bohemian occultists rarely engaged racial categories in their esoteric discourses, and when they did, such references were typically indirect links to India or Asia. In contrast, Austrian occultists relied heavily on racial ideas. However, on a macro-scale, German and Slavic occultism shared similarities. Slavic occultists in Yugoslavia and Russia also employed the concept of the Aryan race—while Germans and Austrians used it to distinguish themselves from Slavs, some Slavs invoked Aryan heritage to connect with their past, access Aryan wisdom, or envision a future where Aryan Slavs would guide humanity's spiritual evolution. Another shared feature was the blending of race, ethnicity, and nation, even while retaining distinctions among their conceptual layers. Finally, the comparison underscores that occultism was not a marginal esoteric pursuit but deeply embedded in the region's social and political fabric. Early Theosophical history reveals that occultism in the Austrian Empire was a transnational and transclass (initially upper-class) phenomenon, simultaneously fostering connections across nations and reinforcing ethnic and national boundaries. Czech and German speakers could sit at the same table advocating universal brotherhood, yet the same setting could serve as a platform for *völkisch* ideologues promoting

exclusion. Both Czechs and Austrians employed occultism as a means of cultural synthesis and resistance, particularly against the Austrian Empire and in struggles for national autonomy. After World War I, changing political landscapes spurred occult groups to refine and radicalize their ideologies. While Czechoslovak occult nationalism slowly declined in the 1920s, segments of the pan-Germanic *völkisch* movement continued integrating occult ideas, contributing to the ideological and symbolic underpinnings of National Socialism.

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