



EVERTJAN
VAN ROEKEL

Wewelsburg

DE OCCULTE KANT
VAN HIMMLERS SS

Spectrum

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1. Nazi fiction

Wolfenstein 3D, the 1992 video game, is commonly seen as the beginning of first-person shooter computer games. A first-person shooter is a type of action game played on a PC or game console from the player's perspective. In this type of game, the player holds a weapon or other utensil that can be used to fight against enemy characters or perform a certain action. What current thirty-something or forty-something game lover is not familiar with *Wolfenstein*? At least if your parents allowed you to play it, because it was pretty gory and intense after all, even in the pixel quality of the 1990s. For those who don't know it, I'll take you through it briefly.

In the game, you are the allied spy B.J. Blazkowitz whose mission is to steal important, secret documents from the enemy. Your main activities are constantly running, shooting at blocky evil Nazi soldiers (who constantly shout terms like "Achtung!" and "Halten Sie!") and their German shepherd dogs, and running into walls for hours in those endless corridors decorated with swastikas, eagles and portraits of Hitler that seem to come out of the standard handbook for Nazi interior decoration, if it ever existed. In any case, the rooms are recognisable in everything as what one would envisage in the rooms of a typical Nazi castle. You had to constantly press the enter button or spacebar along those walls in the hope that a secret door would open to a room with hidden, looted Nazi treasures. But fair's fair: this game is mostly about shooting everything and everyone to smithereens anyway. And finally the highlight of the game: a battle with Hitler in a kind of futuristic robot suit with huge machine guns that have to be fired endlessly to bring down the Führer and finally escape from the Nazi stronghold *Wolfenstein Castle*. Hitler does not always utter linguistically logical and correct texts, such as "Die, Allied Schweinehund!" or "Scheisse!" when his suit of armour is blown off and "Eva auf Wiedersehen!" when he finally dies. After which, bizarrely, his 'ghost' also has to be eliminated. It's all pretty hilarious, yet also satisfying when you manage to complete the game with that. One might call it surprising for a 30-year-old computer game, but despite its primitive graphics, the game is still being played today and has a thriving fan culture on the internet.

Almost a decade later, in 2001, the successor *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* appeared, albeit with greatly improved, more 'serious' graphics but with the same concept: you are now again the American captured spy who must escape from a Nazi horror castle with sadistic scientists and mutant soldiers. And more spin-offs on this apparently very appealing concept to gamers followed over the past two decades.

But it is not only in games that Nazi occultism seems to be in demand: for decades, the subject has featured as a theme in post-war fiction, as well as in more objectively intended media such as documentaries. And even in the era of the Third Reich, there were some authors who argued that Hitler and the Nazis were in fact black magicians who used supernatural powers. Already immediately after 1933, the process of linking National Socialism and its figureheads with occultism began. In 1934, French author René Kopp published an article arguing that Napoleon, Mussolini and Hitler were rulers sent to earth by higher powers. In 1939, Kopp even claimed that photographs of Hitler would prove he was possessed by "a spirit of unknown origin". In his 1939 book *Le tyran Nazi et les forces occultes*, the also French author Edouard Saby described Hitler as a medium and magician. Hermann Rauschning wrote the most influential publication in that line, *Hitler Speaks*, also published in 1939. Rauschning was a German conservative politician and writer who was briefly a member of the NSDAP, as well as head of the government of the free city of Danzig. He left Germany for his native Poland (Torun, formerly Thorn in West Prussia) in 1936, then for Switzerland in 1937, France in 1938, the United Kingdom in 1939 and the United States in 1941. Rauschning published several critical books on the Nazi regime and even became a US citizen in 1942. In the book *Hitler Speaks*, which was published in English, French, German and even Dutch, readers are told that Hitler practised dark magic and that he was allegedly possessed by evil forces. Rauschning has Hitler outline his plans for Germany and Europe in private conversations. The combination of sensation and political topicality made the book an instant bestseller. It has since been revealed later that those conversations were totally fictional, but the book did ensure that the 'occult' image of Hitler was established at the time, and it inspired authors who would later build on that theme. In 1940, for example, Scottish journalist, folklorist, poet and researcher of the occult Lewis Spence published the book *Occult Causes of the Present War*, which explored the relationship between Nazism and Satanism. The common reason for the success of such publications was to find in them an explanation for the gigantic success of National Socialist Germany so soon after its disastrous defeat in the First World War. The shocking French defeat in 1940, a great triumph for Germany, contributed significantly to the persuasiveness of that message. If Germany suddenly seemed so incredibly powerful, almost invincible, it had to have something to do with supernatural forces. Perhaps Hitler had even made a deal with the devil.

Cryptohistory

From this would emerge a genre best described as 'cryptohistory', strongly linked to conspiracy theories in which authors claim to uncover secrets of Nazi Germany. And so publications emerged that were mainly characterised by inaccuracies and far-fetched assumptions, as well as by completely ignoring primary sources. After the war, especially from the 1960s onwards, the idea of 'esoteric national socialism' was widely cultivated with a flood of mostly highly successful (pseudo-scientific) books, documentaries, films and other media that built further on the 'occultisation' of national socialism and its leaders. Indeed, the idea of specifically the Wewelsburg as a place of cultic worship for the SS, an SS monastery or Grail Castle, was established as early as 1953 with the book *Himmler: The Evil Genius of the Third Reich* by Austrian journalist Willi Frischauer, which was long regarded as a standard work. In it, the National Socialists were portrayed as dark occultists, associated with magic, superstition and other irrational thought, brought together in the occult bin under which all sorts of inexplicably negative behaviour could be subsumed. And insofar as this was not simply with commercial or sensationalist intent, it was mainly an attempt to clearly separate the mostly incomprehensible crimes of the Nazi regime from the behaviour of 'normal' people, by characterising the Nazis primarily as irrational and evil.

The sensational appeal of the genre led to its successful exploitation with several titles becoming international bestsellers. The two most influential works were Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier's 1960 *The Morning of the Magicians* and Trevor Ravenscroft's 1973 *The Spear of Destiny*, which was translated into several languages and sold millions of copies. In Pauwels and Bergier's book, the Nazi elite is presented as an order of black magicians controlled by secret societies. In particular, the SS, and its yet-to-be-discussed 'research institute' the Ahnenerbe, is described as a religious order whose 'monks' underwent their occult initiation in SS castles where dark, magical rituals were performed. It also highlighted 'Nazi science', a mix of unexplained magic and futuristic technology that would become a very important theme in popular culture. But above all, *The Spear of Destiny* inspired a host of others to write a wave of speculative literature. This book by Ravenscroft, which elaborates on the magical operations of Hitler and his followers, also adds the hunt for the Holy Lance, an object with unprecedented 'occult powers'. The perception of National Socialism among a large group of people has undoubtedly been heavily influenced by these publications and their corollaries.

Most cryptohistorians build on two pillars: Nazi occultism and Nazi science (science based on National Socialist ideology), and then mainly get into the area where the two come together and intertwine. This concept was firmly established in popular culture by Steven Spielberg

with his Indiana Jones films. In both 1981's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and 1989's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (starring Sean Connery in his unforgettable role as the protagonist's father), Nazi scientists are the major enemies in the hunt for the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail, respectively, which could give the Nazis supernatural powers to use to rule the world. And from there, the genre made the transition to video games with the aforementioned *Wolfenstein* series as probably the most influential example. *Wolfenstein*, especially the first game in the series, is also immediately the example of what appeals to the general public in this genre: the recognisable 'Naziness' that is created. This may be a somewhat strange expression, but it is fitting for the portrayal that immediately evokes the same associations for a large audience and creates a typical Nazi atmosphere. Firstly, with all those symbols recognisable to the Nazi regime constantly fired at the user audio visually, especially swastikas and eagles. But also all those other symbols that totally contribute to that atmosphere in the game, but would be neutral or evoke a different connotation in another context. For example German shepherd dogs, medieval carpets, Roman laurel wreaths, treasure chests, Grail-like goblets and mountains of skulls. These recognisable symbols thus nazify the more 'innocent' ones. Moreover, it plays on the users themselves, who are most likely already interested in Nazi Germany and already know, for example, that Hitler's favourite breed of dog was the German shepherd, that the Nazis looted treasures and that harking back to the (alleged) past was important for Nazi thinking. Perhaps the user has even heard something about Himmler's fascination with the occult and his ideas about the SS as an order like that of the Knights of the Round Table. In that case, the symbols become even more characteristic for the person who knows how to interpret them, enhancing the experience. In terms of characters, this also then often includes the Nazi stereotypes: the deranged doctor-scientist (based on the example of Josef Mengele, who carried out gruesome medical experiments in extermination camp Auschwitz), the fat, decadent, lazy, incompetent general (with Hermann Göring as the original example) and the creepy female camp guard (based on, for example, the infamous Irma Grese, who mistreated and murdered prisoners in several camps).

Building on the tried and tested recipe and the success of combining the occult and Nazi science, numerous more (B and C) game and film titles appeared that resulted in Nazi zombies, among other things, becoming a very familiar image in entertainment. For instance, there are plenty of films with the concept of a group of youngsters getting lost in the woods today and finding an abandoned bunker complex. And voilà, it is not long before the first monsters/zombies/mutated super soldiers in SS uniforms roll out of the dark caverns. In the

computer game versions, you can then usually shoot at them with a variety of (futuristic) weapons. Of course, the move towards colouring the theme with the SS is a nice and easy one in this case anyway: after all, the criminal, macabre organisation under the skull lends itself perfectly for horror. The common denominator always remains that clear black and white, mostly 'caricatured' dichotomy between good and evil. And in different ways, this makes World War II the framework for fantasy. History and myth become intertwined, which is not unusual in shaping collective memory, but here it is done explicitly with entertainment in mind.

More recent examples of well-known films using the Nazi occult image include *Hellboy* (2004), *Captain America* (2011) and *Iron Sky* (2012). Incidentally, even today, the film world is still nicely building on the Nazi ideology and the link to artefacts allegedly possessing mystical powers. In 2021's *Red Notice*, at the time of writing the most expensive Netflix production ever, starring Ryan Reynolds and The Rock as two modern-day Indiana Jones-esque antiquities raiders, the third of three fictional golden eggs that would have been a gift from Mark Antony to Cleopatra for their wedding, ends up being hidden in a giant warehouse of Nazi artifacts in the jungle of South America. That storage facility is a huge mining complex, filled with large quantities of the familiar wooden boxes bearing Third Reich stamps. From that underground complex, a spectacular chase is then launched through kilometres of mine shafts, in a 1931 black Mercedes and a number of wartime Kübelwagens (a Volkswagen-manufactured passenger vehicle with a task similar to the more famous jeep among the Allies), which remarkably started immediately after having been stationary for 75 years. Apparently an example of German solidity.

But fact and fiction also became intertwined in (seriously intended) documentaries. A good example is the 1998 Discovery Channel-produced TV documentary *Nazis: The Occult Conspiracy*, in which even renowned historians like George Mosse are interviewed as experts, yet the content remains highly speculative and sensationalist.

In the Dutch-speaking world, we see it in *De Opvolger*, author Alex van Galen's first thriller from 2007. This story, more or less like the then highly popular book *The Da Vinci Code*, revolves around the Holy Lance (also an important object in Nazi occultism and reportedly an obsession of both Hitler and Himmler) with which Jesus was supposedly pierced. The Lance links to the Holy Grail and the Holy Blood, which brings the Wewelsburg's crypt into the picture as the location where the book's grande finale takes place. The crypt also plays a prominent role in *Black Order*, a 2006 thriller by James Rollins. This volume of his Sigma Force series brings together everything from Himmler,

post-war secret societies and Nordic runes to using Nazi science and an evolution machine to create Übermenschen in a hidden castle in the Himalayas. In the book, the main characters are even almost gassed in that same macabre burial vault (trapped, incidentally, by the director of the Historisches Museum des Hochstifts Paderborn, by the way). Which, of course, is entirely a golden, very appealing fictional combination in relation to the gas chambers as the most horrific element of the Nazi regime. And so we have come full circle to Castle Wewelsburg where it comes to the entertainment that is based on the occult side of the Nazis. It is fiction, but as we will discover in this book, the theme certainly did not come entirely out of the blue. The occult side of the Nazis and, more specifically, the SS had all sorts of curious aspects in which reality may sometimes prove stranger than fiction.

From Nostradamus to Mussolini (p. 52)

Joseph Goebbels employed the well-known astrologer and dowsing expert Hans Hermann Kritzinger to lead a unit within the Reich propaganda ministry which had to produce pamphlets for the fight against the anti-German Nostradamus-predictions which were spread by the Allies. In the 20th century, Nostradamus was still as popular as ever. When Goebbels, Hitler-Germany's spin doctor, found out, according to his own words, that this French soothsayer had predicted the prosperity of the Third Reich, he immediately had a propaganda booklet printed in which he proclaimed that the final victory of the Nazis was written in the stars. The booklet was distributed across Europe, and an English response soon appeared. The British made up prophecies which would show that Nostradamus had foreseen a German defeat. As often happened, Nostradamus' original quatrains were twisted, faked and interpreted very widely, so that everyone could read exactly what he wanted. Kritzinger was used to counter this as best as possible and, as always, the German propaganda machine ran at full speed.

In the summer of 1943, astrologer Wilhelm Wulff and his colleagues were brought together by Himmler as part of the famous rescue operation Unternehmen Eiche, freely translated as Operation Oak, also known as the Gran Sasso raid, organised by the head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA) Ernst Kaltenbrunner and renowned Waffen-SS officer Otto Skorzeny. The Gran Sasso raid on 12 September 1943 was a successful operation by German paratroopers and Waffen-SS commandos to rescue deposed fascist dictator Benito Mussolini from captivity in the Gran Sasso d'Italia massif. Occult insights should help find Mussolini. RSHA employee and later staff member of Himmler Walter Schellenberg was mostly sceptical of the use of border science than many other SS officers. Initially, therefore, he taunted the idea of locating Mussolini through "representatives of occult science", who, it seemed, were only in a castle chosen by Himmler and exclusively feasting on large quantities of expensive food, alcohol and cigarettes there. But the normally cynical Schellenberg describes in his memoirs that this motley group of astrologers and soothsayers somehow managed to help find Il Duce in a secret hideout south of Rome anyway, where 'in all honesty, it must be said that these diviners had no contact whatsoever with the outside world'. So, according to Schellenberg, these 'occultists' would have played an actually important role in eventually freeing Mussolini. To what extent this was really the case remains unclear. After the success of the rescue operation, however, Wulff and his entourage were appointed to other 'scientific' and military tasks that went further, for example to investigate further whether

there was an astrological way to predict the weather. A question, incidentally, that Himmler also had theorists of the *Welteislehre*, to be discussed later, investigate.

National Socialism thus had a complex relationship with the occult. It was a strange contradiction that, on the one hand, there was interest in astrology and related disciplines at high levels within the Nazi regime - within the SS, the Nazi party and also the army - but that, on the other hand, many who practised it were also persecuted because their practices were seen as "irrational" and based on superstition. This was because the Nazis, including Himmler and his advisers, agreed that most occultists were charlatans seeking to exploit gullible people for personal financial gain. Moreover, some doctrines and groups would be hostile to the state and would fuel divisions within the *Volksgemeinschaft*. In particular, the rejection of rigid racial hierarchy was not appreciated by the regime, which had absolutely no interest in a 'brotherhood of mankind'. Also, superstition would poison the minds of the German people. To make occult ideas and practices still acceptable, the guideline seemed to be that it had to be 'scientifically' professionalised as much as possible. That is, it had to be agreed that there was sufficient reason to call it scientific by Nazi standards. In doing so, it had to be especially easy to bring under political control.

Indeed, ultimately, much more than in eradicating them, the Third Reich as such was only interested in exploiting occult ideas and practices for its own purposes. Typical of a totalitarian state, its chosen 'legitimised' doctrines were propagated and alternative non appropriate ideas were marginalised and suppressed. Nazi leaders underlined the 'scientific' basis of esoteric ideas they found useful and dismissed rival ideas as occult and non-scientific. It is very unlikely that occult influence actually heavily shaped politics at the state level. But it is a fact that the Nazis used a variety of supernatural science in decision-making and policy, based on ideas that were not very fascist at their core, but which facilitated the monstrous projects of the Third Reich.

Meeting of SS generals (p. 115)

Himmler had indicated in a speech to SS generals in Munich on 8 November 1938 that he intended to organise a meeting every spring at Wewelsburg Castle. But the only such meeting that took place at the castle was the one held in mid-June 1941. This meeting would later become known as the 'SS Gruppenführerbesprechung at Wewelsburg'. In the two surviving photos, we see architect Bartels enthusiastically facing the photographer, and the most notable guest is particularly visible: Reinhard Heydrich. Former naval officer Heydrich was by far Himmler's most important collaborator when it came to implementing the ideological and political goals of the SS. He embodied a mix of efficiency, ambition and loyalty, making him virtually indispensable to Himmler's goals. Moreover, Heydrich shared Himmler's deep seated distrust of society. He founded the Sicherheitsdienst, promoted the merger of SS and police, and played a crucial role in defining the guidelines and structure of the entire prosecution apparatus of the Sicherheitspolizei, which he himself headed. It was also Heydrich who spearheaded the systematic murder of the Jews of Europe. At the time of the 'Wewelsburg Conference', Heydrich was in charge of four Einsatzgruppen of the Sicherheitspolizei and the SS-Sicherheitsdienst, which were ready for the campaign against the Soviet Union. These Einsatzgruppen followed the advancing front, to rid the area behind it of political enemies and dangers to the German army. In practice, they soon began killing civilians and prisoners of war on a large scale, and in an increasingly systematic manner, the Jewish population in the western Soviet Union as well. Initially under the cover of 'anti-partisan warfare', the campaign escalated into an operation of ruthless brutality on a gigantic scale. The ideologically inspired terror in the newly conquered areas led to execution squads killing hundreds of thousands of people in a relatively short period of time. Heydrich can be seen as the practical figurehead of what defines National Socialism: racial selection under the banner of state security, to achieve a 'pure community'. In many ways, Heydrich was practically responsible for who was and was not allowed to exist within that community. Under Himmler's leadership, a mass murder of population groups considered inferior was organised in Europe. Those who were not murdered were expelled or fell prey to new forms of institutionalised slavery.

From 12 to 15 June 1941, the SS chiefs and Himmler's leading generals who in any way had something to do with the impending Soviet invasion, met with each other at Wewelsburg castle. Himmler had arrived in Wewelsburg on the evening of 11 June 1941, and on 15 June he flew to Berlin from Paderborn. Just seven days later, Nazi Germany began the campaign

against the Soviet Union under the code name Operation Barbarossa, unleashing the bloodiest battlefield in world history. Little is known about what exactly was discussed at this meeting, as the limited sources available on the gathering actually say little about its content. It is likely that no specific, practical orders were issued regarding the upcoming war, as preparations for the campaign were largely complete by then. Moreover, SS general Hans Jüttner, Himmler's important right-hand man in the leadership of the Waffen-SS, was not present, indicating that military matters in all likelihood, had a secondary role. Evidently, this meeting had much more the angle of self-assertion of the participants in mythologising the upcoming battle against the Soviet Union, which was seen as decisive in the fight against the great demonised enemy: 'Judeobolshevism'. This was therefore a role that Himmler envisaged for Wewelsburg, reinforcing the political myth that gave the SS its purpose and future, reinforcing the self-image that ultimately had terror and destruction as its goal, with Wewelsburg as the centre for ideological preparation for war. The castle provided Himmler with a certain political and ideological self-assurance at this stage from planning to action. And besides, the meeting had an overtly symbolic significance; if the great, all-decisive battle between the West and East would not take place at the gates of Wewelsburg Castle itself, at least the final encounter before the start of the battle would take place at this spot before the invasion elsewhere. Interestingly, Hanns Albin Rauter was also present at this meeting. Rauter was the highest ranking SS officer in the Netherlands and in that position was responsible, among other things, for the deportation of more than a hundred thousand Jewish inhabitants of the Netherlands. The reason for his presence at Wewelsburg Castle is unclear and is only documented in a statement by SS general Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, who was also present. Bach's post-war statements are also the only sources that say anything concrete about the content of what was allegedly discussed here. For instance, Himmler is said to have presented the upcoming war as an "Existenzfrage", a question of existence, as a "Volkstumskampf von unerbittlicher Härte", a ruthless struggle for the German people, and more practically that this war would lead to a decimation of the population of the East with a number of 20 to 30 million people to be killed. While it can no longer be ascertained whether this was really the thrust of Himmler's story, it is certainly plausible in the light of subsequent events. And we also do not know to what extent this meeting directly influenced those present in their actions, but we can say with certainty that, for example, the measures taken by Heydrich to carry out mass murder took on increasing proportions after that moment.

The Obergruppenführersaal (p. 148)

Directly above the crypt is the Obergruppenführersaal, also known as the marble hall or the pillar room. This was the chapel of the castle until the early 19th century, when it served as the secondary residence of the Prince Bishops of Paderborn. The sanctum sanctorum of Wewelsburg Castle in Himmler's vision. He created a knights' hall for SS leaders here, with a marble floor, 12 pillars and 12 niches on a medieval model with Romanesque-style elements. A prestigious meeting place for SS generals. A huge round oak table would also have been placed centrally. Here, Himmler seems to have been heavily influenced by the King Arthur legends, who gathered his twelve best knights at a round table in a marvellous hall. He created his own black, dark Camelot here. However, it is highly questionable whether that post-war image of Himmler and the SS as the Nazi version of the King Arthur legends, with the Wewelsburg as their Grail Castle, had that specific background for Himmler himself. His ideas are likely to be based much more on the Teutonic Order of Knights, but for a post-war Anglo-Saxon audience, the Arthurian theme had a much more recognisable connotation, and as such, this image thus had a major impact on the collective understanding of the Wewelsburg as a location. Nevertheless, the similarities are such that it would be strange if Himmler did not have the Arthurian legends in mind at all.

In the centre of the marble floor, above the swastika in the crypt, was the floor mosaic with a pattern of the sun wheel (or black sun) with twelve spokes, resembling a sun with 12 lightning bolts in the shape of inverted sig runes, each pointing in the direction of a pillar or niche. Actually also a concoction of Himmler's 'shaman' Wiligut, who had spoken of a 'banished sun' called 'Santur' that was said to be the true source of power of ancient Thule or Atlantis. The pattern contained symbols from the ancient Norse alphabet. This symbol of the black sun in the north tower has become an esoteric sign of Nazi occultism in recent decades (from the 1950s onwards), both in popular culture and in parts of western esoteric circles and among modern Nazi sympathisers. It was traditionally a symbol found in many legends. It was also said to have been used by a Germanic tribe around 400 B.C. In Nazi religion, however, the symbol stood for the land from which the Allfather came. This land was known by several names including Thule, Hyperborea and Agartha. The black sun represents the sun under which the Aryan race will be reborn. The ultimate goal was thus a return to the Allfather. The German people would return to their divine status. For Himmler evidently a logical choice as a symbol for his own Black Order. Despite that background, however, the black sun as seen in Wewelsburg was not actually a symbol of any practical value within the SS; it had no special

significance for any occult use. There is no indication that the dark connotation given to the black sun post-war also already had such a symbolic function when it was placed in Wewelsburg. The very situation that people actually know little about (the use of) the black sun at Wewelsburg has only encouraged the creation of all sorts of related legends and concoctions.

In the hall, Himmler also wanted to display the coats of arms of (deceased) SS generals, so that 'when the Wewelsburg castle is ready, the Gruppenführer meetings can be held there and we will be assured that deliberations will be held under our coats of arms with the thought that those who come after us will have to account for their actions in the light of how we did things'. However, there are no detailed descriptions as to how this hall was to be used, nor is there any evidence that it was ever used at all.

According to the original building plan, a domed Gruppenführersaal was also to be built in the north tower above the Obergruppenführersaal. A large dome with windows that provided as much light as possible to the interior of an impressive space. Although the walls of the interior of the upper floor did get removed to make the dome a reality, construction never started. Neither Himmler nor architect Bartels had concrete plans to fill this space. The intended acoustics and pompous presentation give reason to believe that it was for the most solemn rites for SS generals.

So Himmler would have wanted to build a kind of replica of the Grail Chapel from the Arthurian legends, where rituals could be performed. There was a large banquet hall, with a round oak table surrounded by 13 chairs made of oak and pigskin, with the owner's name engraved on a silver plate. Furniture for the Wewelsburg was made with an ideological meaning. The significance of the castle and the ideological interpretation it conveyed had to be visible in the chairs, for example. This had to be immediately obvious to all guests. The SS generals in particular had to see themselves as the chosen representatives of the Aryan, Nordic race destined for eternity to fight, create culture and rule. The choice of sturdy classic oak with rough leather, finished with the SS runes and swastikas, was to convey, in terms of material, shape and presentation, above all, not modernity and individuality, but pragmatism, constancy, strength and the Nazi commitment to Germanic culture and the Middle Ages. In the castle, especially in the north tower, Himmler and his 'knights' would then carry out more or less occult practices. In a speech to SS generals in Munich on 8 November 1938, Himmler had expressed his intention to conduct oath-taking ceremonies for new SS generals in the future. Also, those already promoted to general would be invited who had been 'appointed by their alliance as generals and were always dedicated with their lives to

upholding the laws of race and blood'. Deceased knights/SS officers and/or their coats of arms would be burnt and their ashes kept in urns on pedestals in the crypt. At least, that, in summary, is the general assumption of Himmler's occult idea of the Wewelsburg. True or not, besides the fact that the intention was indeed to create a meeting place for SS generals, we don't actually know exactly what activities and ceremonies Himmler had in mind in the north tower, and none of it really came to pass in the end. The only major meeting of SS generals took place in June 1941, when work on the North Tower's halls was far from complete.

End time (p. 167)

'Endzeitkämpfer' had now been added to the name of the exhibition 'Ideologie und Terror der SS', at least as far as the hardcopy version of the exhibition in book form was concerned. A choice that I found highly curious at first anyway, since that designation as 'apocalyptic warriors' nevertheless harks back to the more mythical connotations of the SS organisation, which is precisely what the museum seems to want to avoid. However, the idea behind this would be that the description would lead to a better understanding of the self-image of the SS as an organisation, and thus not from the post-war perception. In the preface, the editors write that the idea of an 'end time' is found in many religions and is usually seen as something positive. A time when the world as we know it ceases to exist and there is a transition to a new, peaceful, divine world. In Christianity, it is also a battle against evil when the Judge of the World comes and the new paradise is established. Apart from Christianity, someone who believes in the end times can also be seen as a person who had found his destiny in fighting against (perceived) evil and who thus had the expectation of a better world. And in that respect, this parallel does apply to the quasi-religious and ideological basis of the SS. Indeed, many SS men, at least the prototype of the SS man, firmly believed that they were surrounded by evil and that victory in battle would lead to a glorious, new National Socialist world. After all, the SS positioned itself as the champion of good against evil. And for the SS, and certainly for Himmler, it was abundantly clear that this battle had to be fought beyond the boundaries of ethics and morality, and thus with terror and mass murder. Everything was permissible to fight the perceived evil. As he himself expressed, SS men could kill but at the same time remain 'pure'. After all, this was not a normal war, but a destiny that could not be mediated and could only result in total victory or total defeat. And as we all know by now, it became the latter.

In any case, it is extremely nice and above all practical that the comprehensive exhibition turned out to be available in book form. This is actually necessary, because in terms of information, the exhibition is quite on the comprehensive side, making it challenging for the average and less interested visitor. For the more than average interested visitor, it is necessary to work pretty compulsively to absorb all the information in one afternoon, which is actually unfeasible. Incidentally, the exhibition is also characterised by its striking objects. These range from the more common SS uniforms with ceremonial daggers to leather chairs with SS runes, SS cutlery, specific Wewelsburg service with Nordic runes and Totenkopf rings.

The crypt had remained more or less the same in ten years, but in the knights' hall the seat cushions had since been replaced. Notable difference from my earlier visit in the Obergruppenführersaal was the prominent, eye-catching sign that had now been placed in the hall. The text 'die würde des menschen ist unantastbar. grundgesetz für die bundesrepublik deutschland, artikel 1' (The dignity of man is inviolable. Constitution for the Federal Republic of Germany, Article 1) is now the absolute focal point in the space, meant to be the starting point for any conversation held in that space. It shows that it is still very necessary to underline that. And at present day Wewelsburg, everything is geared towards conveying that important message, with understated thoughtfulness, quiet anxiety and remembrance of a time when a human's worth was not untouchable.

When the castle was opened as a museum, concerns were already being voiced by German academia and others, that opening the Wewelsburg to the public could potentially turn out wrong. A look into Heinrich Himmler's pagan-mythological kitchen would reduce the SS's hideous war crimes to the actions of a group of unworldly idiots. And that was precisely not the case. After all, the regime was able to become so powerful and all-encompassing because 'ordinary' people mostly blindly supported it. And even most of the SS were basically 'ordinary' people, despite the inhumane actions they participated in. The message that the exhibition overwhelmingly wants to emphasise is that killing starts small with words, then with bullets and gas. Visitors are given the message to learn to recognise the snowball that can cause an avalanche.

A very good educational message, that impresses the visitor with normal tourist intentions or the lover of old castles, who discovers above all a beautiful castle, though clearly overshadowed by the Nazi era. And where the very charge of the castle is a deterrent to many, for modern sympathisers of National Socialism, neo-Nazis or otherwise, the unwanted visitors, it still has a dark attraction. So too for esoteric believers and Satanists, for instance, who see Wewelsburg as a mysterious 'place of power' that gives rituals a stronger charge or where alleged spiritual forces become perceptible. The 'spirit' of the SS is said to live on here. But the reality is that the north tower was actually constantly under construction and an occult centre for SS ideology never actually existed here.

Fears that the Wewelsburg might become a pilgrimage site for (neo)Nazis prevail at the public tours the current museum gives. Guides therefore pull out all the stops to (rightly) expressing and underlining their disgust for Nazism. That fear, by the way, is not unfounded. Indeed, it is based on past experience. Neo-Nazis even broke into the burial vault several times to perform their own rituals. In the guestbook, where visitors often leave fiercely

emotional texts, among the outpourings there are regularly much less attractive remarks such as "Another 6 million Jews!" and "The Holocaust never existed". There was even an incident in the 1990s in which a group of youths arrived with cars and parked right in front of the driveway to the castle and then played a speech by Himmler loudly over the car radio. The police appeared on the spot, but knew nothing to do but stand at a distance and watch. In 2002, the right-wing extremist group 'Initiative der weissen Art' had planned a demonstration in Wewelsburg in honour of "the glory and honour of the Waffen-SS". The charged location was used as oil on the fire to gain as much public attention as possible. However, the march was banned by the local authorities. Later, the German Supreme Court also ruled that such a demonstration was clearly illegal, considering that allowing such a thing would be a violation of the human dignity of the victims.

Even during my own three visits (spread over a period of more than 15 years), there were always groups strolling around in which it was abundantly clear, as evidenced by outward symbols, among other things, that they had Nazi-like sympathies. Shaven-headed youths in semi-military gaiters and sturdy boots. On my last visit, in December 2021, this was again the case, this time incidentally also in combination with a larger group of people who seemed decked out as if they were on the opposite side of the political spectrum in terms of sympathies. They cast steely glances at each other, creating a certain tension, which then fortunately did not lead to conflict. And this then mixed with families with young children having a day out from nearby Sauerland. It was also quite crowded that twenty-ninth of December 2021, which certainly did not qualify as a cosy crowd, but more like a strange, uncomfortable crowd given the composition of it.

In terms of the far-right crowd, it is unlikely that those three times were coincidences. And if there are already often outwardly recognisable Nazi sympathisers hanging around, there are probably many more enthusiasts who are less recognisable. Wewelsburg inevitably acts as a magnet to neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists. For them, it is a relic from a time they idealised, used for their own purposes. Although the German authorities of the Büren municipality are clearly troubled by this, and do everything they can to counteract this operation, Wewelsburg seems to be a place of pilgrimage for Nazi sympathisers. For them, the castle still appears to be the holy grail for Nazi purification from which an occult power emanates.

Incidentally, this is not unique to Wewelsburg; it is part of issues that Germany is still quite struggling with. The relatively short time that has passed since the Second World War has certainly by no means healed all the wounds. Overall, the shadow of the war still hangs over

Germany and it still affects the country's actions in many facets. It is the world's fourth largest economy and the richest and most powerful country in the European Union. Although the French don't like to hear it, Germany is indisputably the indispensable, driving force behind Europe. In handling economic matters, Germany has no equal, it speaks calmly and reasonably, but with a big stick in the form of the euro in its hand, and Europe listens. But at a more general global political level, it speaks very softly, and sometimes not at all, and has a great aversion to any stick. Although, in light of the Cold War the Americans accepted that Germany rearmed, the country itself did so only hesitantly, abhorring the use of its military might. In conflicts after World War II, Germany kept its distance as much as possible. Germany unmistakably wants to be as much as possible a "good global citizen" that has learned from the mistakes of the past. And the country generally succeeds very well in this. But with the new threat from the east, the question is how long Germany can maintain its non-military course.

However, the Germans of the time are and remain the grandfathers and great-grandfathers of today, and thus that past remains as relevant as ever. Exhibits in museums are under a strong magnifying glass, under which one cannot easily get it right. This is especially true of Nazi objects. If expositionists show too much of it, it is glorification; if they show too little, there is criticism that things are hidden away.

The dilemma in which the Germans found themselves in the post-war years is aptly reflected in the minutes of the debate of the Kreistag (regional council, one level above the municipalities) of Paderborn in 1976 on the establishment of a memorial to the victims of camp Niederhagen:

Delegate Roth presented his arguments regarding the need for a memorial with reference to a threefold task: that of remembering the victims, the duty of all German citizens to distance themselves "clearly and concretely" from the horrors and crimes of the SS, and finally, warning future generations against totalitarianism, intolerance, cruelty and fascism.

The majority group spokesman's reply included the following words: 'It would be a shame for us Germans, if we, the German nation [...] forgot the Nazi period and its crimes. [...] But is it not also a form of grace that this period is fading into the consciousness of the younger generations and especially of other countries? If we continue to accuse ourselves time and again, the trust that other countries now place in us will certainly not increase. We must not forget the victims of the Nazis [...], but for the sake of the younger generations, we must not place an unnecessary burden on the new beginnings our nation has made.'

The memorial did not come at that time.

Some notes from the guest book at the exhibition on the Wewelsburg's Nazi past do show how the situation lived among the younger generation in the 1980s:

Germans are people too, and our generation is different in many ways! I did not live through these horrors and I can only judge the past from the present. But I am a German, a European and I am a human being. And I cannot share responsibility for the mistakes our fathers made, nor do I want to! Germany's new generation needs a future and must believe in itself; none of the 30-year-olds living today has ever killed anyone or must burden themselves with guilt! I am a young German and a young European and I am proud of that. I want to live not only with Germany's past, but with all people for the future and for peace.

We think we need to be confronted with our history, or rather the history of our ancestors. And when we do, it is incredibly important that we engage not only with the positive aspects of our past, of which many Germans are proud (poetry, philosophy and art), but that we also explore the darker sides of German history, which we must confront as part of our history and we must do everything possible to ensure that such a thing can never happen again.

And so Wewelsburg is still an important place of remembrance, not in the least for the still-living former prisoners of Camp Niederhagen. Every year a memorial ceremony is held on 2 April, the day of the camp's liberation. But national and international media attention that the site receives is still mainly focused on the continuing interest in SS ideology and the occult and esoteric elements floating around Wewelsburg Castle. Nonetheless, the castle has meanwhile firmly established itself in German remembrance culture, and is also gaining increasing international recognition as a historical monument.

This culture of remembrance seems to be something static but is actually very dynamic, a process in which fact and fiction inevitably merge. In conclusion, it can be said that Nazi occultism as a phenomenon that was institutionalised and practised in the Third Reich, is fully embedded in our contemporary popular culture. And in fact the myth is used and exploited in all sorts of ways: commercial, ideological, artistic, in the context of fantasy and science fiction, educational and even in 'magical' ways. Speculation and post-war fiction have turned Wewelsburg into something dark and mysterious, which is harshly opposed on the site itself

with an institutional, objective approach that shows the 'occult Wewelsburg' for what it is at its core: an outgrowth of a corrupted, megalomaniacal, criminal regime.

Mythology, legends and sagas have played an important role for centuries and in all kinds of cultures. For better and for worse. And within 'Nazi religion' and also Himmler's own vision, elements from the lore of different cultures were misused to arrive at a distorted ideal image. Romantic sentiments of an idealised Germanic history at play with the völkisch movement well before World War I, were mixed with the frustration and pride of a young nation broken by that lost war. Artificial scientific research served to substantiate the self-esteem of the German people as superior to all others. In Nazi Germany, this corrupted mythology was linked to political objectives, leading to to an unprecedented evil.

For Himmler, mass murder was simply necessary to realise the Nazis' ideological worldview. Wewelsburg was to be an occult-charged, radiant centre becoming everything he envisaged after the final victory of the Nazi regime and thus the SS. A Germanic order of purebred Aryans on a place steeped in Germanic blood that was destined by its history to house a glorious SS Vatican. As a surviving symbol of this horrific idea, the Wewelsburg constitutes an intriguing object and also, above all, a poignant warning from the past.