

English Witches and SS Academics: Evaluating Sources for the English

Witch Trials in Himmler's Hexenkartothek

Abstract:

Prior to WWII, Himmler organised a team of SS researchers to collate records of historical witchcraft trials that had taken place in lands of the expanding Reich. The ideological pretext for this undertaking was the collection of evidence demonstrating an anti-German crusade by the Church. While this was a figment of historical imagination, the SS pursued it doggedly against the backdrop of the Holocaust. Whereas trials that had taken place on historically German lands were often sourced from primary documents to which the researchers had access within Reich libraries, trials further afield were less rigorously sourced. Little was done to differentiate between primary and secondary or even tertiary sources. One SS source for English witch trials was a text by a German-Jewish literary scholar about witchcraft in Renaissance drama. Such critical indifference on the part of the SS is thought by some to render the archive of little interest, but examining the ideological underpinnings of Nazi reception of these materials can help situate these researchers among the turbulent social and political structures of the Third Reich and its uneven privileging of the intellectual fringe. This also constitutes the first critical/biographical analysis in any language of the sources for the English trial cards in the catalogue.

Keywords: witchcraft; Nazism and the occult; Hexenkartothek; Himmler; witch trials; witch-cult in Europe

On 14 September 1936, an SS researcher now known only by the abbreviation with which he signed his work, 'Bi', filled out an A-4 card with the details of a witch trial that had taken place in England over three hundred years before. The card was a form comprising fifty-seven numbered sections for completion; Bi filled blanks one and three with the accused witch's surname and forename, respectively: Sawyer, Elizabeth. Unlike cards referring to trials that had taken place on the territory of the Reich, many of which were closely written and even continued onto subsequent pages, there was not much else that Bi could add to the Sawyer card. In blank thirty-five, '*Ort*' (Place), he entered 'England'. He completed the longest entry at number thirty-one, '*Lit. u. Qu. angb.*', short

for ‘*Literatur- und Quellenangaben*’, (Literature and Source Information). The citation Bi entered there read: ‘*Aron: Die Hexen im englischen Renaissancedrama*’ (*Aron: Witches in English Renaissance Drama*), together with a volume and page number. A year prior, the author of the cited text, noted German-Jewish philologist Philipp Aronstein, had undergone the final of a series of expulsions from his professional and academic affiliations in accordance with the Nuremburg Laws. On 28 September 1942, Aronstein would perish at Theresienstadt.¹

Bi’s citation of Aronstein is only one example – though perhaps the most perversely circular – of the academically dubious and often paradoxical use made of sources by a team of SS researchers belonging to a secretive unit variously termed the Hexen-Sonderauftrag (Special Assignment – Witches), H-Sonderauftrag, or simply H-Sonderkommando. The organisation’s purpose within Heinrich Himmler’s SS shadow state was two-fold: 1) to recover remains of a posited Germanic past; and 2) to produce anti-Christian – really anti-Judeo-Christian (a fraught term used advisedly) – propaganda.²

This article will examine the sources cited by H-Sonderkommando’s researchers in relation to witchcraft trials in England. In taking exclusively the English trials as its remit, this article will demonstrate that these constitute a limit case for H-Sonderkommando methodologies within their massive research project: unlike the access they enjoyed to trial records in German lands, the SS had neither direct archival access to

¹ Reiner Lehberger, *Philipp Aronstein, 1862-1942* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1988), esp. p. 33; p. 41.

² See, for example, Gerhard Schormann, *Hexenprozesse in Deutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), pp. 8-9. For more on the goals and organisational aims of the Sonderkommando, see section 3, below.

English trial documents nor any broad access to secondary sources in English. The ideological underpinnings of the H-Sonderkommando's broader project are most immediately visible in such instances where few sources were available to them, when the researchers were forced to wrest those sources that did exist into rough compatibility with their aims. This amounted in some cases to a sort of ideological essentialism: data from sources socially or politically distasteful to the SS were brought forward while the sources themselves were suppressed, and ideologically preferable sources were highlighted even when their data proved less consistent with the aims of the H-Sonderkommando.

These aims ranged from the personal to the politically expedient. As will be shown, certain leading Nazis were steeped in a milieu of German mythologism and the occult. The fact that finding or forging 'historical' and genealogical connections to a magical past tended to be rewarded in the Third Reich, however, had less to do with the general sway of that milieu than with the outsize power of these personalities. This is because, in the Nazi state, the personal was never far from the political. With no checks and balances on centralised and proliferating power structures following the subversion of the Weimar Constitution, Himmler's views and those of other leading Nazis could and did result in policies, programmes, and pogroms which impacted upon millions.³

This article explores such impacts in microcosm: while the Hexenkartothek archive leaves much wanting in terms of the methodology with which it was compiled, it has eminent value as an illustration of the interplay between academic

³ Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 88.

enterprise and power in the Third Reich. It reveals the almost algorithmic flow from Germanic mythologism, through personality-cult leadership, to a propagandistic research complex totalling thousands of man-hours and untold resources.

The first section of the article examines the intellectual origins of the Nazi idea of witchcraft, before discussing the establishment of the H-Sonderkommando and the foundation of the Hexenkartothek. The following section comprises an analysis of the English cards and their sources, the first such study of the English cards undertaken in any language. It is hoped that the bibliographic description of the cards and relevant marginal annotations will be of use to future scholars. Close reading of these cards and their apposite sources also functions as a sort of limit case for the overall catalogue, illustrating the essentialist aims of the project as a whole by exploring how SS academics behaved when they had fewer sources with which to work. The subsequent section exemplifies this approach in its examination of the use made by the SS of the work of Jewish philologist Philipp Aronstein. Next the article considers the purposes, both implicit and explicit, for which the archive was intended. Finally, the article's conclusion suggests the implications of the English trial cards for the broader project and for Nazi intellectual culture. This was a society driven both by ideological prejudice and institutional overreach. The researchers who worked on the Hexenkartothek continuously juggled an impulse to disqualify sources on the grounds of ideology and an appetite for comprehensiveness. The Hexenkartothek is the product of these competing aims, and the English trial cards demonstrate this clearly.

Heinrich Himmler called the H-Sonderkommando into being in 1935, establishing it as a component of the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) of the SS and giving it responsibility for the collection and evaluation of documents relating to historical witch trials not only within the Reich but worldwide.⁴ Within this scope the H-Sonderkommando researchers compiled masses of data, filtering it into card-stock forms like that of Elizabeth Sawyer, and collected the forms together by locality – eventually the card catalogue and associated materials amounted to tens of thousands of discrete documents. These the researchers organised into folders by region and jurisdiction, among which could be found trial information from places as widely dispersed as India and Mexico.⁵ In the case of England, the archive stretched to around a hundred cards representing accused individuals, or groups of accused when no more specific data were available to the SS researchers, in nearly fifty English towns and cities.⁶ Unlike German trials, where the researchers often had unrestricted access to libraries and archives, for English trials the SS researchers relied on the work of German and Anglo-American historians (this latter group in German translation), and in the case of Aronstein, of a philologist and critic.

What lay behind this outbreak of unreasoned scholarly activity? And what made Himmler and his associates see witchcraft persecution in particular as fundamental to German identity? For Hans Sebald in his germinal article of 1989, the Nazi interest in

⁴ Schormann, *Hexenprozesse*, pp. 8-9.

⁵ Krystyna Górka-Gońska, Inwentarz, *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu.

⁶ Precise numbers of cards within a specific geographic category are difficult to fix due not only to record loss, but to discrepancies in the filing system at the Polish National Archives. Just one example: Kirkcaly [sic] trial cards refer to trials centred on the village of Kirkcaldy in Fife, Scotland, but are filed within the English records.

witches redefined them as ‘remnant groups still adhering to Celto-Germanic nature religion’.⁷ Acknowledging that this definition was not original to Himmler, Sebald mentions only two sources: one is an oblique comment in the *Deutsche Mythologie*, and the other Margaret Murray’s 1921 work *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. Sebald does not discuss the origins of Murray’s theories, but other scholars have shown that Murray was part of an entire scholarly tradition that sought to explain and rationalise the witch beliefs surrounding the trials by turning them into actual events. Jacqueline writes that

At one extreme stood the eccentric and bigoted Catholic writer Montague Summers, maintaining that they [the witches] really had worshipped Satan, and that by his help they really had been able to fly, change shape, do magic and so forth. His attitude can be judged by his passionate admiration for the *Malleus Maleficarum*, in which he found “inexhaustible wells of wisdom” (Summers 1951, xvi). In the other camp, and far more numerous at least among academics, were sceptics who said that all so-called witches were totally innocent victims of hysterical panics whipped up by the Churches for devious political or financial reasons.⁸

Murray, therefore, presented a third term that drew on older scholarship. For Simpson, what Murray eventually did was to fold the latter anticlericalism – long a sword in the hands of Protestant rationalism – into an older notion of witchcraft that ultimately derived

⁷ Hans Sebald, ‘Nazi Ideology Redefining Deviants: Witches, Himmler’s Witch-Trial Survey, and the Case of the Bishopric of Bamberg’, *Deviant Behavior* 10 (1989), pp. 253-70, reprinted in *Witchcraft in the Modern World*, ed. Brian P. Levack, London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 113-30, p. 113.

⁸ Jacqueline Simpson, ‘Margaret Murray: who believed her, and why?’, *Folklore*, 105 (1994), 89-96, p. 90. See also Caroline Oates and Juliette Wood, *A Coven of Scholars: Margaret Murray and her working methods* (London: Folklore Society, 1998).

from the work of Jules Michelet. For Michelet, the witches were healers, retaining the ancient world's knowledge of medicine. This idea strongly attracted German racialists such as Alfred Rosenberg, while Otto Höfler portrayed witches as Germanic warriors, fighting against demonic forces by supernatural means. In *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (Secret Cultic Societies of the Germanic Peoples) (1934), which became a favourite with Heinrich Himmler, Höfler argued that authentic Germanness in the past lay in true wildness, drug-crazed berserkers who raged when young in fierce defence of their lands. This image of witches and warriors may have made emotional and mythical sense in a context saturated in Richard Wagner's vision of the German warrior as Wild Man (Siegfried) or as warrior in the service of a feminine and pagan German enchantress (Telramund in *Lohengrin*.) However, Wagner's operas do not approve such characters; Telramund, in particular, is the helpless gull of his wife Ortrud's effort to bring Wotan and German paganism back to the tenth century, from which both have noticeably vanished. However, the operas do create a sense of the likelihood of a Germanness divided between Christian magics and pagan ones, and in particular implies a link between paganism and masculinity.

This idea appealed powerfully to Himmler personally through its stress on the masculinity of the German peoples.⁹ For Himmler, part of the task of the SS in restoring the German people to itself culturally was the defeat of the urban gay subculture which had grown up in the cities during the Weimar Republic. In 1937, he claimed that 'for

⁹ Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, eds., *The Third Reich Sourcebook* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), p. 108; and see also Olaf Bockhorn, 'The Battle for the "Ostmark": Nazi Folklore in Austria', in *The Nazification of an Academic Discipline: Folklore in the Third Reich*, edited and translated by James R. Dow and Hannjost Lixfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 135-55, p. 148.

thousands of years the Teutonic peoples and in particular the German people have been ruled by men; but as a result of homosexuality the male state is in the process of destroying itself.’ He spoke nostalgically of the good old days when ‘the Teutons used to drown their Urnings [homosexuals] in bogs.’ In contrast to his vision of Teutonic masculinity, he saw Christianity as homosexual. These views are intertwined in his statement on homosexuality:

The greatest sacrifices in the witch and heretic trials were made by German women and not by men. The clerics knew very well why they burnt 5000-6000 women because they were emotionally loyal to the old knowledge and the old doctrine and emotionally and instinctively were not prepared to abandon it, whereas the men, on the basis of logical thinking, had already come to terms with the fact; there’s no point any more. We’ve been politically defeated. I give in... I’ll let myself be baptised.¹⁰

While Himmler’s biographer Peter Longerich calls this a digression, it is also possible to read it as a sign that for Himmler the figure of the witch was connected in his mind with his homophobia and difficulties with masculinity. This position is entirely explicable in view of Himmler’s reading of the work of Höfler.

This ‘old doctrine’ and ‘old knowledge’ was of course paganism – or at least Himmler’s fantasy of that. Without any necessarily direct influence, Himmler’s words are in keeping with the enthusiastically pro-pagan witchcraft theory of Margaret Murray:

¹⁰ Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, trans Jeremy Noakes and Lesley Sharp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 232-7, especially pp. 233 and 235.

For centuries both before and after the Christian era, the witch was both honoured and loved. Whether man or woman, the witch was consulted by all, for relief in sickness, for counsel in trouble, or for foreknowledge of forthcoming events. They were at home in the courts of Kings ... their mystical powers gave them the authority for discovering culprits, who then received the appropriate punishment.¹¹

In this book, Murray was also proleptic of Himmler and SS academic projects in being strongly anti-Christian, painting a glowing picture of witches' devotion towards their god, and strongly emphasising the ritual sacrifice in fire of the coven leader, whose ashes could refertilise the fields. Efficaciously masculinising the sacrificed witch while also stressing the nature-loving aspects of the faith, Murray's work was both influential upon and also influenced by the ethnic ideologies drawn on by Nazi thinkers. To be sure, Murray's theory was not as overtly anti-Semitic as the Nazi attack on the persecuting Catholics became, but her stalwart Protestant notion that it was Catholics who were responsible for the witch hunt helped to ground their myth of the witch trials in racialist ideology.

What unites Murray, the H-Sonderkommando project, and German Romanticism, with anthropological work by thinkers like James George Frazer and Carl Jung is the notion of syncretism based on an underlying principle of continuity, even ahistoricity. The witch trials are no longer aberrant, but typify the endless struggle between

¹¹ Margaret A. Murray, *The God of the Witches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 145-46, first published 1931.

Romanticism and corrupt religion.¹² Himmler's guru Höfler's work was also influenced by that of Rudolf Much, and he adopted Much's Germanic Continuity Theory, which argued for the continuity of ancient Germanic culture into present-day German folklore. In his research, Höfler was especially interested in such Murraysque ideas as Germanic paganism, the continuation of Germanic cultural strata, sacral kingship and Männerbünde (men's secret societies) in a Germanic context.

This anti-Enlightenment Romanticism and primitivism does bring the thinking of Himmler and his followers troublingly close to the modern pagan mindset in some respects, but in other respects the distance is sharply oppositional. Modern paganism is matriarchal, focusing on a goddess figure; for Himmler and his H-Sonderkommando, paganism was a node of unaltered masculinity, tended and presided over by a feminine principle of unlettered nature. Did Himmler know of Murray? Did Höfler? One might argue more fruitfully that all were in the same broad stream of folklore studies. If witchcraft historiography can today be very roughly divided into William Monter's three categories of rationalist, Romantic, and social scientific, then the H-Sonderkommando project and Murray both fit the Romantic.

Romantic versions of witchcraft spring from Romanticism in general, which is one reason the *Deutsche Mythologie* is so central to them. Huge, syncretist, and imbued with a Rousseauian valuation of man in a state of (rural) nature, the Grimm text

¹² Frazer in fact fitted better with Höfler's idea of a masculine and virile culture of sacrifice than he did with the modern Dianic Neopaganism which has become more familiar; he did not agree that there had ever been an original matriarchy, a theory originally proposed by J. J. Bachofen in *Das Mutterrecht*, 1861; for a recent robust discussion of the issue, see Cynthia Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons: The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, 1861–1900* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011). Influenced by Bachofen, Jane Ellen Harrison managed to retrieve and promulgate ideas of matriarchy from *The Golden Bough*, even though Frazer himself had not endorsed the notion.

exemplifies the general sense of trying to unearth a pre-Christian and pre-Roman truth veiled or even extirpated by Romanness, understood both as empire and as church.

Because of the Romantic valuation of ancientness, such tales had to have a tradition; there had to be a logic of uncovering, of the revelation of things hidden or unknown or long lost within the seemingly known, followed by an anagnorisis, a recognition.

Bizarrely, this meant that both Murray and the H-Sonderkommando shared a wish to give the witch stories corporeal form, reality. In this sense, both Murray and the H-Sonderkommando were rationalists at heart, as diligent as any historian to make *sense* of the material. It is also evident that both groups were animated – as were all those who came to invest in the Romantic view of witchcraft – by nationalist and even sectarian agendas. (Murray was a child of the Raj, and had implicit in her work a mixed, colonial identity, both English and Anglo-Indian. It is also relevant that her mother was a missionary).¹³

In this sense, dividing historians into rationalists and Romanticists is itself a caricature of the field. Active among witchcraft historians were also scholars like C. L'Estrange Ewen, George Kittredge, and Henry Charles Lea. The last of these was consulted by the H-Sonderkommando compilers. Lea fitted their bill because of his two-volume history of the Inquisition, staunchly critical of that institution and of the role of the church in political affairs of his own day, and because his work was a collection of primary sources. Kittredge's folkloric and language-based work, appearing in 1929, was far less terrified than Summers and less dismissive than the rationalists, while not falling

¹³ Oates and Wood, *A Coven of Scholars*, p. 9.

into the Romantic reveries of Michelet or Murray. More importantly the work of C. L'Estrange Ewen, first published also in 1929, dispensed with the 'invention of tradition' which had characterised much work in the field. Actually delivering what the H-Sonderkommando and its Kartothek promised, though only for the Home Office assize records from 1560 to 1700, he repeated the feat in 1933 with a nationwide survey, establishing for England a narrative of *what had actually happened in the courts*. The H-Sonderkommando managed not to notice these works and their variance from its own presumption that the witch trials represented a war between ferocious German pagans and effete churchmen.

Of course, the H-Sonderkommando proved the very opposite of their posited medieval and early modern crusade against residual Germanic paganism. Of the 30,000 or so witchcraft cases recorded by the end of 1943, it turned out that victims were far fewer than had been expected, and the evidence disappointingly suggested that the persecutions had been enthusiastically backed by the German people, telling Himmler that Christianity had been more important to them than he had realised. There was little trace of German paganism on trial, just as there had never been as much trace of insular paganism as Murray had hoped.¹⁴ However likely it had seemed that the witch trials were a perfect illustration of the oppression of German pagans, this turned out not to be the case.

¹⁴ For a summary, see 'Nazi interest in witchcraft persecution', in *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition*, ed. Richard M. Golden, 4 vols (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 806-8, and Sönke Lorenz, Dieter R. Bauer, Wolfgang Behringer, and Jürgen Michael Schmidt, *Himmlers Hexenkartothek: Das Interesse des Nationalsozialismus an der Hexenverfolgung* (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2000).

And yet it still seemed imaginatively appealing. The plot of Leni Riefenstahl's 1932 film *Das Blaue Licht* is simple: set in a village in the mountains bordering both Germany and Italy, the film centres on a mountain that contains a cave of crystals which are illuminated by the light of the full moon. The light mystically attracts the young men of the village, who fall to their deaths in their pursuit of it. It is also sacred to a girl called Junta, who because she is 'different' is called witch (Hexe) by little boys. Junta is referred to by the villagers as a 'Teufelhex' (devil witch) while others call her *maladetta*. The villagers pursue Junta as a witch, in a mob, carrying clubs, and only the visitor's intervention saves her:

Children: Junta, Junta, the witch, Junta the witch.

Man: Tonio! Tonio!

Vigo: Why are you so against that girl?

Man: She is not normal. How can she climb towards the blue light on this steep side of the mountain while the young boys fall down every time? This Junta, she is the damned devil's witch.

[Later a woman cries out:] There she is, the devil's witch.

But the term *Hexe* also becomes an endearment, a risky part of Junta's seduction: Vigo says: 'Junta, little witch, you make me behave like a fool. If only we could speak with each other, it would be perfect. I have been here for many weeks now and I'm afraid, I'm afraid I'll not go back, ever, back to the people.' It is significant that Vigo is not a German-speaker, but an Italian-speaker as his name implies; there is a deeper allegory of Himmler's adored Tacitus's *Germania* at work, as Roman maleness witnesses a primitive

strength it envies but therefore also destroys. Like the Romans, Vigo represents enlightened rationality, the rejection of superstition that would protect Junta, but he is also therefore crucial in the betrayal and destruction of all she represents. Riefenstahl was at pains to claim that the story of Junta was a folktale; while it is true that the title at least comes from the Grimms' story 'Das Blaue Licht', the plot is entirely different. This kind of syncretist faux-scholarship was to be characteristic of SS academic undertakings because it was the only way to tell the story of the witch trials in the manner Himmler and his associates wanted.

The H-Sonderkommando itself fitted into a constellation of scientific and social-scientific research organizations conceived by Himmler as the ideological arm of the SS and of the Reich.¹⁵ Among the other groups under the SS umbrella was the *Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt* (Race and Settlement Main Office), or RuSHA, the organisation with ultimate oversight of the Auschwitz and Natzweiler human medical experiments, later prosecuted as war crimes at Nuremberg. Perhaps the best known of the SS research organisations was *Das Ahnenerbe* – roughly renderable as 'cultural traditions and customs passed on from the ancestors'¹⁶ – whose remit was the 'scientific' recovery of a putative, ur-Germanic past stretching back as far as the Palaeolithic Period, as well as the publication of any discoveries via articles, monographs, films, and exhibitions.¹⁷ Another SS research group, Special Command K, had a similar composition to H-

¹⁵ For a consideration of the intellectual networks of the nascent SS, see Christian Ingrao, *Believe and Destroy: Intellectuals in the SS War Machine* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Cornelia Schmitz-Berning, *Vokabular des Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Walther de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 17-18.

¹⁷ Heather Pringle, *The Master Plan: Himmler's Scholars and the Holocaust* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), pp. 1-5.

Sonderkommando, though it fell under the Ahnenerbe organisational structure. Special Command K was intended to conduct racial research on the tribes of the Caucasus, but the changing fortunes of war after Stalingrad meant that the detachment was diverted to racial classification of Soviet and partisan POWs.¹⁸ All of these groups rotated around Himmler, but competition for resources and preferment could be brutal and deadly – a lesson learned early by Nazi party members who had survived the Night of the Long Knives, when Himmler's rising SS organisation settled once for all with Sturmabteilung (SA) brownshirts, murdering hundreds of the old guard paramilitary members in their beds.¹⁹

Portfolios and areas of operation between SS offices and sub-departments were poorly demarcated and always fluid, and the fortunes of individual research groups rose and fell with the ability of their head men to curry favour with Himmler.²⁰ On more than one occasion, the director of the H-Sonderkommando, Dr Rudolf Levin, staved off a power play by the larger and better-funded Ahnenerbe, fighting successfully to maintain primary responsibility for witchcraft-related research.²¹ Such battles reveal much about the Nazi research establishment: beyond considerations of mere organisational inertia,

¹⁸ Pringle, *Master*, pp. 251, 255-6; Peter Mierau, *Nationalsozialistische Expeditionsolitik: deutsche Asien-Expeditionen 1933-1945* (Munich: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2006), p. 500.

¹⁹ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1960), pp. 221-24.

²⁰ For example, for embarrassing Himmler in a public lecture by his failure to answer some pointed questions, Yrjö von Grönhagen, a bright, young Finnish scholar, was demoted overnight from his position as department head in the Ahnenerbe (see Pringle, *Master*, pp. 97-8).

²¹ The Hexenkartothek contains a letter from the office of Himmler's personal staff to Hauptsturmführer Sievers of the Ahnenerbe. The letter instructs Sievers to take note of the fact that Himmler is ordering the Ahnenerbe to abstain from involvement with 'Hexen-Angelegenheiten' (witchcraft matters), because this is the exclusive assignment of the SD (the Sicherheitsdienst of the SS, of which the Sonderkommando was a part). Letter from Hauptsturmführer Brandt to Hauptsturmführer Sievers, 13 June 1938, in *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu.

research groups and individual academics needed to stand out to thrive, and that meant to stand out in terms of politically useful ideological activity.

In 1936 H-Sonderkommando researchers revealed to Himmler that Margareth Himbler, a woman accused and burnt as a witch in Markelsheim, Baden-Württemberg, in 1629, was probably a direct ancestor of the Reichsführer SS.²² This presentation to Himmler of his very own witch ancestor was not particularly unusual in that hermetic world. From as early as 1933, Himmler had been directly influenced by occultist Karl-Maria Wiligut, who went for a time by the moniker Weisthor and believed himself to be the oracular descendant of ten thousand years of Germanic priest-kings. Although Wiligut had once been certified as insane and involuntarily committed, he was an active member of the SS from 1933 until 1939, serving as a sort of personal sage for Himmler. He was ultimately promoted to the rank of SS-Brigadeführer (Brigadier) on Himmler's personal staff.²³ Once, while conversing with Himmler during a drive in Himmler's private automobile, Wiligut lurched from the vehicle and careened into a nearby field, foaming at the mouth. When his fit had passed, Wiligut indicated the place as one important to the sacred Germanic past; subsequent excavation uncovered a forgotten Teutonic village on the spot.²⁴

Against such occult performances, the impulse to identify for Himmler a putative witch ancestor seems hardly out of place. It was another attempt to harness an unknown past to the Nazi present. Though he had little patience for Himmler's occult social-

²² Piotr Bojarski, 'Tajne kommando Hitler na tropie czarownic', 23 June 2008, in *Gazeta.pl* <www.gazeta.pl> [accessed 30 July 2012].

²³ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1985; repr. London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2004), pp. 177-191.

²⁴ Rüdiger Sünner, *Schwarze Sonne* (Freiburg: Herder, 1999), p. 234, note 152.

engineering, Hitler, too, could be subject to the impulse to impress a ‘Germanic’ form on history. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler considers the Aryan race to be the sole founder of world culture, engaged with other peoples in a cyclical struggle for the survival and refinement of humanity.²⁵ Finding for Himmler a witch ancestor was a way to connect him, and by extension the Nazi establishment, with an ancient, occult line of power. Careers literally rose and fell based on the success of presenting leading Nazis – and specifically Himmler – with such fabulous, but ideologically sound, genealogies. Such enterprises accorded well with Himmler’s desire to restore a bucolic, heroic German past. In the cult of personality of the Third Reich, the allocation of funds and the continuation of projects depended on currying favour in such ways. And such currying did not terminate with Himmler. The Reichsführer SS also knew that for his pet projects to survive, they would require the personal support of Hitler.²⁶ Thus, in 1939, Himmler celebrated Hitler’s fiftieth birthday by giving the Führer a handcrafted set of leather-bound volumes filled with narrative recountings of discoveries made by the Ahnenerbe.²⁷ No doubt Himmler hoped the books would please Hitler, but such an aspiration had more than an aesthetic ground; if Hitler was pleased, Himmler knew, both Himmler’s fortunes and those of the SS would continue to prosper.

The English Trial Cards

²⁵ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 290.

²⁶ Pringle, *Master*, p. 92.

²⁷ Michael Kater, *Das ‘Ahnenerbe’ der SS 1935-1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1974), p. 110.

The earliest extant cards in the Hexenkartothek which refer to English witchcraft trials bear the date of 4 October 1935. There are three of these, filled out by H-Sonderkommando member Rudolf Richter, who signed with the signum ‘Ri’.²⁸ One mentions the trial in Cambridge in 1569 of an unnamed ‘Mutter und Tochter’.²⁹ Another refers to a trial held in Essex in 1576, wherein ‘17 Personen’ were ultimately convicted.³⁰ The final card of the three refers to a 1576 Warboys trial – here ‘Warbois’ – of ‘3 Personen’.³¹

The source cited on all of these cards is the same: a text whose title had yet to be identified when this article went to press. Only the writer’s surname, Roshoff, and a page number are given in the citation field. From the fact that all three cards cite the self-same source page, it is clear that Roshoff’s work treats these trials only in summary.

It is possible that Richter prepared at least two other cards from the Roshoff source text. Two cards dated 25 January 1936 mention Roshoff in the citation block as a secondary source alongside Wilhelm Soldan and Ludwig Heppe’s *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse*.³² In parentheses following the Roshoff citation appears Richter’s signum and the date he prepared the Roshoff cards, ‘4.10.35’. Unlike other cards in the archive’s English trials, where emendations are made on the original cards and countersigned with the signa of the emenders, on these cards Richter is mentioned only in the citation field with the

²⁸ For a list of known Sonderkommando members and their signa, see Schormann, *Hexenprozesse*, p. 9.

²⁹ Folder 3125, *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu.

³⁰ Folder 3131, *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu.

³¹ Folder 3162, *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu.

³² Wilhelm Gottlieb Soldan and Heinrich Heppe, *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse*, ed. by Max Bauer (Munich, 1911).

reference entered in the hand of the cards' compiler, whose signum is 'ße'. It is likely that these two cards replaced earlier cards compiled by Richter.

These additional cards which cite Roshoff (and Richter's work from months prior), contain nothing in the 'Ort' field, indicating that the specific locations of the trials were either not known or unimportant to the compiler. One of the cards refers to the trial in 1541 of Lord Hungerford, a political ally of Thomas Cromwell's who was executed for homosexuality and witchcraft when Cromwell fell from grace.³³ The other card contains 'Herzogin von Gloucester' in the 'Accused' block. No trial date is given on this latter card, but certainly it refers to Eleanor Cobham, wife of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, who was brother to Henry V and Lord Protector for the young King Henry VI. In *2 Henry VI*, Shakespeare offers audiences a version of Duke Humphrey's overthrow, sped by his wife's participation in witchcraft.³⁴

As the Richter cards demonstrate, from the earliest days of the H-Sonderkommando's activity, the cards they compiled preserve for us the paradox coded into the catalogue and its component citations. No attempt is made to differentiate between a witchcraft case known from extant court documents and those derived only from medieval chronicles and the Renaissance stage – regardless of their original ground,

³³ Folder 3116, *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu. The Hexenkartothek card indicates that the reason for Hungerford's execution was conjuring to know the length of Henry VIII's life. This is borne out by Bernard Burke, who writes that Hungerford was accused of "procuring certain persons to ascertain, by conjuration, how long the king should live; – and having been guilty of unnatural offences" (*A Genealogical History of the Dormant, Abeyant, Forfeited and Extinct Peerages of the British Empire* (London: Harrison, 1866), p. 292).

³⁴ William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, Part 2*, ed. by Ronald Knowles (London: Arden, 1999). Among other charges, the Duchess of Gloucester is accused of the same crime as Lord Hungerford, namely conjuring to know the length of the king's life. In Shakespeare's play, the wizard Roger Bolingbroke (Bolingbrook) puts this question to the spirit Asnath and receives in answer the famous amphibology: 'The duke yet lives that Henry shall depose;' (I. 4. 30).

the trials are filtered through tertiary sources like Roshoff. Nothing apparently differs in the compilers' approach to a card detailing a trial of anonymous victims and one which nominates a specific defendant. Again and again such clues indicate that the ateleological process of compiling the archive is the vital part of the research endeavour – almost to the point of ritual.

Subsequent cards have a similar frequency to the Richter cards citing Roshoff; they are created in bunches, compiled by specific researchers on certain dates, with many cards citing single sources. It appears that the H-Sonderkommando researchers mined a source text as they encountered it for whatever references it contained, however ill defined. Thus, from 18 January 1936, we have twenty-one cards signed with the signum 'Mer' – almost certainly Dr Ernst Merkel – each of which cites the source 'Baissac', and most of which share a single referent page number in the source. Some cards are quite specific, giving the names of the accused; others could not be more vague, merely offering the banal description 'Mehrere Hexen', or 'Several Witches'.³⁵ The curt citation 'Baissac' almost certainly refers to *Les grands jours de la sorcellerie* by French hermeticist and theologian Jules Baissac.³⁶

For the SS researchers, Baissac must have seemed a solid source to consult. His work is consistent with many post-Enlightenment writers on witchcraft in its slightly condescending tone of moral consternation at the actions of Renaissance witch

³⁵ See, for example, the card for Stafford 1597, in Folder 3154, *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu.

³⁶ Jules Baissac, *Les grands jours de la sorcellerie* (Paris, Klincksieck, 1890).

persecutors. For Baissac, these are actors in a more gullible generation before the rise of science challenged the hegemony of the Church.³⁷

But the H-Sonderkommando archivists must also have found Baissac's ethnological preoccupations ideologically sound. Baissac is also the author of *De l'origine des dénominations ethniques dans la race aryane*, a work of comparative philology and mythology within an ethnological framework. In fact, Baissac's work joins serious scholarship, racial and hermetic interests, and a gently iconoclastic view of earlier state and religious structures in a mélange that must have been very nearly unexceptionable to the SS researchers.

Of the eighty-nine extant cards dealing with English witchcraft trials, Baissac is cited either exclusively or alongside other sources on fifty-seven of them, or more than sixty-four per cent. A close examination of Baissac's work shows why it appealed to the H-Sonderkommando: in *Les Grands Jours de la Sorcellerie*, he writes

La sorcellerie anglaise avait en assez généralement un caractère proper, comme la sorcellerie ecossaise; la familiarité avec les esprits, reste de vieilles croyances nationales, en faisait le fond.

[English witchcraft has in general its own character, like Scottish witchcraft; familiarity with spirits, the remnant of old national beliefs {vieilles croyances nationales}, was at its basis.]³⁸

³⁷ Baissac, *Sorcellerie*, p. 246.

³⁸ Jules Baissac, *De l'origine des dénominations ethniques dans la race aryane: étude de philologie et de mythologie compares* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1867), p. 246.

This sentence occurs in his first paragraph on the Lancashire witches. In that chapter (XI), his principal source appears to be Harrison Ainsworth's novel *The Lancashire Witches*, serialised in *The Sunday Times* in 1848, though he sometimes refers to Thomas Potts's pamphlet *The Wonderful Discovery of Witches* – which constitutes the only contemporary source for the trial.³⁹ As well as supporting SS thinking, Baissac's casual use of fictional sources may also have inspired the H-Sonderkommando's rather cavalier use of secondary sources as quarries of information. Here, Baissac is clearly saying something that the SS would find believable, that there is a national idea of witchcraft based on 'old national beliefs'; he probably means pre-Christian beliefs by this, drawing loosely on Michelet.

Another very telling passage is an attack on Jennet Device, the nine-year-old child witness in the Lancashire trial of 1613. Baissac calls her a 'brat' ('garnement') and says she has an evil nature, and then embarks on a fierce denunciation of the Bible's insistence on children as truth-tellers, which contains considerable emphasis on Jesus as son of David, and also a denunciation of the psalms. This vehement anticlericalism would have appealed to the SS, seeing witchcraft accusations as buttressed by the malevolent Judaeophile church. This second point might sit well with a discussion of Lea's notorious anti-Catholic bias and specific denunciation of the Inquisition at every turn. We can see

³⁹ On Ainsworth, see Jeffrey Richards, 'The "Lancashire Novelist" and the Lancashire witches', in *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories*, ed. Robert Poole (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 166–87; **Thomas Potts**, *The wonderfull discoverie of witches in the countie of Lancaster (London, 1613)*, in *Early English Books Online* <eebo.chadwyck.com> [accessed 20 April 2016].

the research team selecting sources that confirm what they want to find, ignoring sources that offer alternative perspectives.⁴⁰

After Baissac, in distant second place is Bruno Emil König – cited by the H-Sonderkommando as ‘König’ with accompanying page numbers – whose 1930 work on the witch panic and persecutions is cited on fifteen cards.⁴¹ The tenor of König’s massive tome can be glimpsed from the author’s remarks in the forward:

Niemand begreift heute mehr die scheußlichen Grausamkeiten, mit denen ein Volk, von seinen Priestern in die Irre geführt, mit den Machtmitteln seines Staates und mit der Gerechtsame über Leben und Tod sich selbst zerfleischte.⁴²

More contextually unsettling is the positivism (and cosmic irony) on display in the closing lines of the forward, published as it was only three years prior to Hitler’s appointment as Reich Chancellor – and five years before Kristallnacht:

Der Mensch unserer Tage ringt nach einem höheren, reineren Glauben, als es noch der seiner Väter sein konnte. Ihn für alle

⁴⁰ Baissac, *De l’origine*, pp. 257-58. Baissac’s other works also suggest the way his interests coincided with those of the SS: *De l’Armée fédérale allemande, par Léon Deluzy* (Paris: Tanera, 1860); *Satan ou le Diable, étude de philosophie religieuse* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1876); *Les Femmes dans les temps modernes* (Bruxelles: Office de Publicité, 1857); *Les Origines de la religion* (Paris: Decaux, 1877); *Histoire de la diablerie chrétienne. I. Le Diable, la personne du Diable, le personnel du Diable* (Paris: Dreyfous, 1882); *Le Centaure Chiron, Faust et les Daktyles* (Orléans: Jacob, 1875).

⁴¹ Bruno Emil König, *Ausgeburten des Menschenwahns im Spiegel der Hexenprozesse und der Autodafés* (Berlin: A. Bock Verlag, 1930). Alone among the citations in the English trial cards, König’s name is entered by stamp (in red ink) rather than by hand. There is no indication as to the reason for this.

⁴² König, *Ausgeburten*, p. 5. ‘No one comprehends any longer the hideous cruelties with which a Volk can mangle itself when led astray by its priests, backed by all the power and resources of the state, and granted power over life and death’ (unless otherwise indicated, all translations are those of the article’s authors).

Zeiten vor ihrem Irren bewahren zu helfen, sei Zweck und Verdienst dieses Volksbuches!⁴³

[Man today is struggling for a higher, purer belief than his forefathers ever could. The purpose and service of this chapbook is to help protect him forever from their errors.]

While the sentiments König expresses here might with difficulty be pressed as a Heine-esque warning about ideological excess, not only the reception of König's text by H-Sonderkommando researchers but also its anti-Church, völkisch, near-triumphalist stance make such a reading difficult. In both Baissac and König, H-Sonderkommando researchers would have found not just data for the English trial cards, but sources which paralleled the ideological aims of their organisation.

If we now return to the H-Sonderkommando's operations, the emphasis on process may cause the researchers' work to seem merely sequential, mining one source and then moving on to the next. While there is no evidence in the catalogue of higher-order analysis, there are examples of seemingly conscientious archival practices, with H-Sonderkommando researchers returning to a source months or even years later to glean additional information from it. However, this is probably a function of the trust in which certain sources were held, and the overall dearth of information about English witch trials, rather than one of scholarly care. In the end, these examples serve to underscore the sublimation of scholarship to data compilation among the H-Sonderkommando, as the archivists' punctiliousness stretches only to the annotation of additional sources (plus

⁴³ König, *Augeburten*, p. 5. 'The man of our days struggles for a higher, purer faith than that of his fathers. Protecting him from lunacy for all time is the purpose and merit of this folk-book'!

dates and compilers' signa) to previously created cards. This may help to explain why the SS researchers went most often to sources which were so opaque as to the identity and fortunes of actual accused English witches. True, as has been noted, the SS researchers apparently grappled with a general dearth of source materials about English trials, but the ones they cite oftenest – Baissac, König – are particularly cursory, resulting in multiple cards featuring 'A Witch', 'Some Witches', in the 'Accused' blank.

Another frequently cited source is the Soldan-Heppe *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse*, which appears as sole citation on five cards and as an additional source on fifteen others. As with the above-mentioned emendations to Richter's 'Roshoff' cards, the Soldan-Heppe additions also occur in groups. On 25 January 1936, the same day he added the Soldan-Heppe citations to the Roshoff cards, ße created the cards which cite Soldan-Heppe alone (as 'SH') and also added the 'SH' citations to most (but not all) of the Baissac cards on which they appear. It is noteworthy that a couple of 'SH' citation annotations occur later, because it demonstrates that there was a degree of overlap – not to say oversight – in the archival work of the H-Sonderkommando team; they returned more than once to certain sources, Soldan-Heppe among them. For example, as late as February 1936, a month after ße had gone through Soldan-Heppe, someone with the signum 'Le' – probably Dr Rudolf Levin, the project leader himself – added an 'SH' citation to Richter's Essex 1576 trial card.

Individual cards can betray an intensity and interest that overflows the strict architecture of the catalogue blanks. For example, the otherwise blank reverse of one of the cards for the 1612 Read (Lancaster) trials contains a family tree for 'die alte

Demdike', the Old Demdike, a matriarch whose family were among the accused.⁴⁴ Done in ße's neat hand, the tree gives three generations of the family, as well as ages where known. Set off to the side is the legend 'nach SH I s. 559/60 u. ff.', indicating that the source is once again Soldan-Heppe. However, such moments of fascination disappear into the broader matrix of blanks, entries, and citations. Data – desultory, incomplete, often apparently arbitrary – supersede scholarship here and throughout.

The question of how Soldan-Heppe's work fitted with underlying H-Sonderkommando ideological obligations can be answered with recourse to a remarkable letter prepared by Levin in March 1940. Levin wrote the letter in response to a telephonic enquiry from a fellow (non-Sonderkommando) academic seeking advice about sources to consult regarding population loss as a result of medieval and Renaissance witch trials. After indicating that specialised works about the topic did not exist in the witch trial literature, Levin recommends some works as 'general sources'. He lists six of these non-alphabetically, with Soldan and Heppe's text heading the list. The others include two books by German archivist Joseph Hansen, the 'great source-compiler' responsible for the *Kollektivbegriff* theory of the origins of the early modern witch idea.⁴⁵ As with

⁴⁴ Folder 3150, *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu.

⁴⁵ Richard Kiekhefer, 'Mythologies of Witchcraft in the Fifteenth Century', in *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 1:1 (2006), 79-108, (pp. 79-80). As Kiekhefer notes, the *Kollektivbegriff* theory is the long-unchallenged idea that discrete folk ideas and religious ritual elements were syncretistically fused in the fifteenth century into a unified concept of the witches' Sabbath and its malign portents. For a related consideration of the witches' Sabbath as fungible concept, and its successive application to various subaltern groups (lepers, witches, Jews, Muslims) as an exemplification of the human confrontation with death, see Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

numerous others among the H-Sonderkommando's privileged sources, Hansen had an anti-clerical bent.⁴⁶

Alongside Hansen's research works, Levin also lists a translation by Hansen (into German) of Henry Charles Lea's *Geschichte der Inquisition im Mittelalter*.⁴⁷ Probably unsurprisingly, Lea (mentioned on pp. 11-12, above) is in the mode of the other prodigious nineteenth-century historiographers whose work the SS researchers favoured. Many contemporaries saw Lea as suffering from anti-Catholic bias, despite his reputation as an even-handed scholar.⁴⁸ In addition to works on the Inquisition, he published widely on legal theory; his *Superstition and Force* highlights the role of 'Aryan' peoples in inaugurating the ordeal and a culture of justice, and so could be taken as a type of the socio-anthropological, ethnological research favoured by Himmler and his Ahnenerbe Society. Lea himself describes the work as 'a brief investigation into the group of laws and customs through which our forefathers sought to uncover hidden truth when disputed between man and man'.⁴⁹ Lea's gargantuan *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft* was left unfinished at his death and was edited and published in three volumes by Arthur Howland in 1939.⁵⁰ Such projects and attachments could only have burnished his reputation among the H-Sonderkommando, whose catalogue work laconically mimics the

⁴⁶ See, for example, 'Vorwort' (and passim): Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter* (Bonn: C. Georgi, 1901).

⁴⁷ Henry Charles Lea, *Geschichte der Inquisition im Mittelalter*, trans. by Joseph Hansen, 3 vols (Bonn, 1905-13).

⁴⁸ R.S. Dewey, 'The Latest Historian of the Inquisition', in *The American Catholic Quarterly Review*, 13:51 (1888), 385-404.

⁴⁹ Henry Charles Lea, *Superstition and Force: Essays on the Wager of Law – The Wager of Battle – The Ordeal – Torture*, 3rd edn (Philadelphia, 1878), p. iii.

⁵⁰ Henry Charles Lea, *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft*, ed. by Arthur C. Howland, 3 vols (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1939).

massive witchcraft compilations of the historiographer-titans in its preferment of breadth over depth of analysis.⁵¹

Alongside Lea, the remaining recommended works in Levin's letter are Fritz Byloff's *Hexenglaube und Hexenverfolgung in den österreichischen Alpenländern* (1934), and Sigmund Riezler's *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse in Bayern* (1896).⁵² After listing the six works, Levin glosses them as follows: 'Dies sind die Hauptwerke, die wissenschaftlich absolut zuverlässig sind. Von einer weltanschaulichen Sicht in unserem Sinne kann dabei bei Ihnen keine Rede sein'.⁵³ He closes the letter 'Heil Hitler'!⁵⁴ It is clear that for Levin, despite what may be seen today as ethnological and anti-clerical biases, these works represent a collective and impartial centre from which the research of the H-Sonderkommando departs in the direction of ideology.

After Soldan-Heppe, the other sources cited in the English trial cards occur with less frequency. Harvard philologist George Lyman Kittredge, author of *Notes on Witchcraft*, and *Witchcraft in Old and New England* – and famous along with his predecessor, Francis James Child, for the 'anthropological turn' in criticism – is cited on

⁵¹ Joseph Klaitz notes that for the 'indefatigable writers' of the nineteenth century and up until the First World War, there was little controversy surrounding historical witchcraft. 'Marshaling mountains of sources...[they] concluded that witchcraft trials were the sad result of medieval superstitious fears and the copious use of torture to elicit confessions. From wide reading in the surviving trial records and demonological handbooks, these scholars became convinced that the authorities, particularly those in the Catholic church, were hypocritically manipulating a gullible public to enhance their own power' (*Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 8.

⁵² Fritz Byloff, *Hexenglaube und Hexenverfolgung in den österreichischen Alpenländern* (Berlin: Walther de Gruyter & Co., 1934); Sigmund Riezler, *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse in Bayern* (Stuttgart, 1896).

⁵³ Letter from Rudolf Levin to unknown recipient, 14 March 1940. Kartoteka Procesów o Czary, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu. 'These are the central works which are absolutely scientifically reliable. No question in them of an ideological perspective in our sense'.

⁵⁴ Letter from Rudolf Levin.

a single card.⁵⁵ Among the more unusual citations is to be found on a card referencing the trial of a married couple in Tring, Hertfordshire in 1751.⁵⁶ Its source is a journal article, ‘Von Hexen und Viehverzauberung’ (‘On Witches and Animal Bewitchment’), by veterinarian R. Froehner.⁵⁷ Five other sources (four of which appear once each and the fifth which appears on two cards) have yet to be definitively identified.

Philipp Aronstein, SS Source

As the preceding section has shown, a preponderance of citations in the English trial cards is derived from a handful of central sources. Also, despite the prevailing H-Sonderkommando workflow of mining a source for its trials before moving on to the next, the SS researchers were willing to return to these central sources, sometimes years later, to cull additional trial mentions from them. Against this backdrop, the Aronstein citation mentioned at the head of this article is a particular outlier. Only one of the English trial cards cites the essay by Aronstein, ‘Die Hexen im englischen Renaissancedrama’. This is the card of ‘Mother’ Elizabeth Sawyer, the subject of the Dekker, Ford, and Rowley play *The Witch of Edmonton*.⁵⁸ It is not clear why this single

⁵⁵ Folder 3132, *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu; George Lyman Kittredge, *Notes on Witchcraft* (Worcester, Mass.: Davies Press, 1907); *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929).

⁵⁶ Folder 3153, *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu; Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley, *The Witch of Edmonton*, ed. by Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: The Revels Plays, 1986).

⁵⁷ R. Froehner, ‘Von Hexen und Viehverzauberung’, *Abhandlungen aus der Geschichte der Veterinärmedizin*, 7 (1925).

⁵⁸ Philipp Aronstein, ‘Die Hexen im englischen Renaissancedrama’, in *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 4 (1912), 536-49 and 582-597. SS researcher Bi cites this (1912) article in 1936, although Aronstein had been barred from print as early as 1933.

reference was plucked from the Aronstein article and preserved in the catalogue. Given the ideological biases outlined above, the article and its author seem odd choices as sources. Having once been selected, however, it seems doubly odd that other witch trial information was not gleaned from the article. Many of the witches and witch dramas mentioned in the Aronstein essay are fantastical; examples include the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* and Hecate from Middleton's *The Witch*.⁵⁹ But Aronstein mentions other historical witches and wizards besides Mother Sawyer. He mentions Mother Chattox and Mother Demdike of the 1612 Lancaster trials on page 584, the fifteenth page of the article; Alice Nutter receives mention (including the date 1612) on page 594, the twenty-fifth. Aronstein also mentions the wizard Simon Forman, and during a discussion of Heywood and Brome's *The Late Lancashire Witches*, he discusses some of the defendants of the 1634 Lancashire trials, including 'Siebzehn Hexen', or 'seventeen witches'.⁶⁰

It may be impossible now to determine why H-Sonderkommando member Bi, mentioned in the introduction above, read the Aronstein article deeply enough to cull from it the Mother Sawyer reference while electing not to record the other witches mentioned therein. What is obvious from the Aronstein reference is the paradox of the H-Sonderkommando's methods. Even when sources might conflict ideologically with the aims of the H-Sonderkommando, the sources can be pressed into service, participating in the rote activity of an always-receding completionism. This does not challenge the idea that the SS archivists were subordinating research endeavours to ideology but rather

⁵⁹ Aronstein, 'Die Hexen', p. 538; p. 548.

⁶⁰ Aronstein, 'Die Hexen', p. 548; p. 593.

reinforces it. The presence in the sources of Aronstein – a Jewish scholar whose life work had previously been declared invalid by the SS regime – changes nothing, apparently, in its reception; neither the way the card is handled, nor its annotations. The Aronstein card becomes subsumed into the broader project of the production of the Hexenkartothek, its irony muted by the crisp architecture of its fifty-seven blanks.

On the Uses of the Witchcraft Catalogue

Gerhard Schormann, one of the first to study the H-Sonderkommando in depth, believed that the organisation should be taken at its word with regards to its ideological aims.⁶¹

The SS researchers themselves understood the purpose of the Hexenkartothek to be twofold: ‘die Suche nach Resten altgermanischen Volksglaubens und die Verwertung der Prozesse als antichristliche Propaganda’.⁶² This evaluation, which has become the scholarly consensus, arises not only from a consideration of the ideological sifting of the card catalogue – its inclusions and omissions – but also from the H-Sonderkommando letters and research materials collected therewith.⁶³

Rudolf Levin, the project director, approached his task with academic brio. Presumably he began by reviewing the extant literature and by outlining the main questions and research goals of the nascent research group – this was his way and part of

⁶¹ Schormann, *Hexenprozesse*, p. 9.

⁶² Schormann, *Hexenprozesse*, pp. 8-9. ‘The search for remnants of Old Germanic folk beliefs, and the exploitation of the trials as anti-Christian propaganda’.

⁶³ See, for example, Lorenz et al., *Himmlers Hexenkartothek*; Katarzyna Leszczyńska, *Hexen und Germanen: Das Interesse des Nationalsozialismus an der Geschichte der Hexenverfolgung* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009).

his assiduous approach to any project. As we have seen, the literature review would have included Jacob Grimm's monumental *Deutsche Mythologie* and other texts on Germanic folklore and traditions alongside specialised witchcraft materials, for Levin did not view research into historical witchcraft as separable from the broader SS responsibility for safeguarding the cultural purity and future of the Aryan race.⁶⁴ He believed that the magical practices for which male and female witchcraft defendants had stood accused, reflected vestiges of earlier Germanic spiritual and ritual life, and that precisely these elements had been assailed by the medieval and Renaissance Church. In Levin's view, the main project of the H-Sonderkommando – as well as of the entire archival section (Amt VII) of the SS Main State Security Office, of which the H-Sonderkommando constituted a small part – was to conduct research on ideological enemies of the regime and the German race.⁶⁵

In late 1941, perhaps perceiving that the Hexenkartothek project was coming to a close, Levin prepared an internal SS document meant to chart the course of future H-Sonderkommando undertakings. Topping the list was the need for a 'scientific reworking of the relevant central works [of witchcraft scholarship] in accordance with leading edge of research'.⁶⁶ Levin explicitly noted that Soldan-Heppe's *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse* was in need of such treatment:

⁶⁴ For the place of the *Deutsche Mythologie* in the National Socialist milieu, see Leszczyńska, *Hexen*, pp. 130-38; Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, ed. by Edwin Redslob (Berlin: Max Schröder, 1934).

⁶⁵ Krystyna Górka-Gońska, Inwentarz, *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu, p. iv; see also Rudolf Levin, 'Geisteswissenschaftliche Methodik der Gegnerforschung', in *Grundprobleme der Gegnerforschung* (Reichssicherheitshauptamt, 1943), 1-23.

⁶⁶ Rudolf Levin, 'Vorschläge zur wissenschaftlichen Weiterarbeit auf dem Gebiet der Hexenprozesse', 16 September 1941, in *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu.

Das Werk muss geistesgeschichtlich wie tatsächlich vollkommen neu umgearbeitet werden. Es müssen vor allem grössere Abschnitte über die volkskundlichen und vorgeschichtlichen Probleme des Hexenwahns engearbeitet werden.⁶⁷

Though, as has been demonstrated, the general tenor of the Soldan-Heppe compilation did not sharply contrast with the SS view of a malevolent Church persecuting vestiges of ‘traditional’ German religion, Levin nevertheless wanted more: explicit support for what he referred to in an earlier letter, mentioned above, as ‘an ideological perspective in *our* sense’.⁶⁸ This does not mean that Soldan-Heppe – one of the preferred sources for the English trial cards – is far afield from the H-Sonderkommando worldview, but the contrary: if Soldan-Heppe were considered unsound, the work would not constitute the base upon which Levin hoped to build. Besides the Soldan-Heppe, Levin projected a future edition of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in a new German translation. He also imagined an annotated edition of the original witchcraft trial documents consulted by the H-Sonderkommando during the course of their research.

The following year, Levin wrote to Professor Franz Six, then an SS Oberführer and department head of Amt VII in the SS Main State Security Office. He offered Six an assessment of the work which the H-Sonderkommando had carried out during the first

⁶⁷ Levin, ‘Vorschläge’: ‘The work must be completely refashioned with regards to its intellectual history. In particular it requires larger sections dealing with the problems of the witch panic in ethnographic and prehistoric terms’.

⁶⁸ Letter from Rudolf Levin, 14 March 1940. *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu (emphasis added).

seven years of its existence, as well as his suggestions for future projects.⁶⁹ In the course of his letter, Levin inventories for Six the H-Sonderkommando's research library and other holdings; some of the books in the library, long believed lost, may have ended up in the so-called Himmler Witch Library, a collection of over 13,000 volumes discovered in a depot of the National Library of the Czech Republic as this article went to press.⁷⁰

Levin also lists the archives the H-Sonderkommando has consulted and the number of archival cards which resulted from each. He makes an assessment of the findings resulting from their years of labour: namely, that the witch panic and persecution had been notably more intense in Germany than in surrounding lands, because 'die alten germanischen Glaubensformen noch sehr stark weiterlebten und von der Kirche verteufelt wurden'.⁷¹ Levin concludes that the problems of the historical witch panic arose from direct conflict between the 'Germanic religious consciousness and Christian dogma'.⁷²

Levin completes his research assessment with a list of current and future projects (built partially upon the internal memorandum he had prepared the previous year), as well as a list of recommended propaganda applications of the H-Sonderkommando's work. These include brochures, documentary films (in one case with a specific screenwriter

⁶⁹ Letter from Rudolf Levin to Franz Six, 29 July 1942, 'Bericht über Arbeitsstand und Arbeitsplanung auf dem Gebiete des H-Sonderauftrags des Reichsführers SS', in *Kartoteka Procesów o Czary*, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu. Six, a political scientist, had a diverse SS portfolio; among other notorious involvements, he organised the theft of Krakow's art treasures following the invasion of Poland, and he was tipped by Heydrich to head the future Nazi regime in post-invasion Britain (see Pringle, *Master*, p. 197; Shirer, *Rise*, pp. 1027-8; David Lampe and Gary Sheffield, *The Last Ditch: Britain's Secret Resistance and the Nazi Invasion Plan* (London: MBI Publishing, 2007), p. 21.

⁷⁰ Allan Hall, 'Heinrich Himmler's stash of books on witchcraft is discovered in Czech library after being hidden for 50 years', in *The Daily Mail Online* <dailymail.co.uk> [accessed 14 April 2016].

⁷¹ Levin-Six Letter, p. 11. 'The Old Germanic forms of belief still strongly persisted and were demonised by the Church'.

⁷² Levin-Six Letter, p. 11.

attached), radio programs, university organisations, and journalist outreach platforms. The various genres of propaganda were intended to open the eyes of the German public to historical atrocities committed against Germans and Germanic ‘religion’ by the Church, and hence to excite public opinion against Christian and Judeo-Christian influence and traditions. Levin recommends that the witchcraft brochures be prepared ‘somewhat in the style of the Freemason brochures’.⁷³

Levin also suggests publishing essays in national, as well as in the local papers of all the areas in which witch trials occurred, thereby exposing the enormity of the panics and the resulting loss of life.⁷⁴ Though by 1942 plans to invade Britain had been placed on indefinite hold, such exploitation might have awaited the English trial cards also had Germany’s war fortunes revived.

In these views (and the propagandistic capital he hoped to fashion from them), Levin distanced himself not a whit from the publicly expressed sentiments of Himmler. In a lecture delivered in Sonthofen in May 1944, Himmler declared: ‘Die Ketzer- und Hexenverfolgung habe das deutsche Volk Hunderttausende von Müttern und Frauen deutschen Blutes durch grausame Verfolgung und Hinrichtung gekostet’.⁷⁵ However, such ideas do not originate with Himmler. Klaus Graf has demonstrated the intellectual influence that Alfred Ruges’s ‘fantastic hate for Jews, liberalism, socialism, and women’s liberation’ exerted on Himmler, and Katarzyna Leszczyńska has situated Himmler’s – and the H-Sonderkommando’s – ideological stance among the wider currents of anti-

⁷³ Levin-Six Letter, p. 15-16.

⁷⁴ Levin-Six Letter, p. 15.

⁷⁵ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, NS 19, Nr. 324 (cited in Joseph Ackermann, *Heinrich Himmler als Ideologe* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1970), p. 62). ‘The heretic and witch persecutions have cost the German Volk hundreds of thousands of mothers and women of German blood through cruel torture and execution’.

Catholicism and anti-(Judeo)-Christianity prevalent in Germany in the years prior to the Third Reich.⁷⁶

Indeed, the anti-Church stance of the H-Sonderkommando and the SS was the realisation of an organisational ideology fashioned from strains of German occult thought prior to the rise of the Nazi party. This ideology contributed to certain early victories for the Nazis in the realm of Realpolitik also. By agreeing the Reichskonkordat in 1933, Hitler allowed the Catholic Church short-term autonomies in certain areas in exchange for the voluntary withdrawal from political activity of its political parties, associations, and newspapers.⁷⁷ This acquiescence of one ideological opponent offered the regime a freer hand against other perceived threats. In 1933 Hitler boasted that the Reichskonkordat ‘gave Germany an opportunity and created an area of trust that was particularly significant in the developing struggle against international Jewry’.⁷⁸ Though the H-Sonderkommando would not come into being until several years after the agreement of the Reichskonkordat, the treaty is an apt example of the type of political manoeuvring that the research of the H-Sonderkommando (and cognate organisations) was designed to undergird. If, as Richard Steigmann-Gall suggests, anti-Christianity within the Nazi party is a matter of received wisdom rather than historical fact, then the anti-Christianity of figures such as Himmler becomes even more historically important,

⁷⁶ Klaus Graf, ‘Eine von Himmler angeregte antikirchliche Kampfschrift Arnold Ruges (1881-1945) über die Hexenprozesse (1936)’, in Lorenz et al., *Himmlers Hexenkartothek*, 35-45 (p. 36); Leszczyńska, *Hexen*, esp. 231-92.

⁷⁷ John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999), pp. 6-7; see also Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964).

⁷⁸ Walter Hofer, *Der Nationalsozialismus: Dokumente 1933-1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Bücherei, 1957), p. 130 (cited in Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Vol. I: The Years of Persecution, 1933-39* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. 49).

precisely because of his ability to wield influence and direct public opinion – or what mattered more, cultivate zealotry among his SS followers.⁷⁹

Another example of National Socialist ideology anticipating political activity is a speech given by Himmler in 1937 at the SS officer-training facility at Bad Tölz. Himmler, whose witchcraft-inflected homophobia has been discussed above, railed against homosexuals as a social and sexual threat to the Reich. His remarks were at least partially based on dubious anthropological research by Ahnenerbe archaeologist Herbert Jankuhn, who posited that a group of prehistoric Germans recently found preserved in peat with their throats slashed, had been so punished due to their homosexuality. The speech was an early sign that Himmler and the SS were willing to use the violence of history in multiple (and often contradictory ways). Himmler's speech at Bad Tölz led directly to SS widespread persecution of homosexuals, who were subsequently systematically stripped of their rights; many died at Auschwitz and other death camps. As Heather Pringle writes, 'Himmler cloaked his own hatred of others under a respectable mantle of science. He...disguised the Nazis' brutal agenda of mass murder as a venerable tradition of the German people, worthy of modern emulation. In Himmler's hands, the distant past had become a lethal weapon against the living.'⁸⁰

This was emblematic of the perverted *fides quarens intellectum* ethos which Himmler conferred on the SS research bodies he founded, including the H-Sonderkommando. Faith in the superiority of the German 'race' and the greatness of the

⁷⁹ Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 3.

⁸⁰ Pringle, *Master*, p. 6-7.

German past were givens; it was the role of the SS researcher to find evidence to support their supremacy.

Conclusion

How might considering the English trial cards apart from thousands of others of varied provenance help further to uncover the overriding ideologies in whose service the H-Sonderkommando functioned? As has been argued, it is precisely the paucity of sources in the case of the English witchcraft trials that helps to make plain what Joachim Fest called the ‘institutionalisation of idiocy’.⁸¹ After all, Himmler and other leading SS members made little secret of the aims of the various SS research organisations.

However, where H-Sonderkommando researchers enjoyed unrestricted archival access, avalanches of data may partly obscure how those data are employed in support of these (at least internally) explicit aims. Where sources were less readily available, as in the case of the English witchcraft trials, H-Sonderkommando efforts to wrest the data – to exploit any partially relevant source and press it to preconceived ends – become starkly apparent. These paradoxical and tortured approaches become objects of study in themselves – pieces of the larger puzzle of SS organisational behaviour.

Studying such modes of reception may partly recuperate the Hexenkartothek from the charges of futility laid against it by historians over the past thirty years. Schormann initially pointed out the problems of relying upon the Hexenkartothek for insights into

⁸¹ Joachim C. Fest, *Das Gesicht des Dritten Reiches* (Munich: R. Piper, 1963), p. 165.

early modern witchcraft. More than once, he repeated the dictum ‘Der Weg ins soziale Umfeld führt über die Prozeßakten hinaus’.⁸² He offered numerous examples of cases in which the SS researchers had access to documents that could have presented a fuller picture of the trials they recorded, but these additional sources and data were either overlooked or ignored.⁸³ In one such example, Barbara Jung, a woman of the town of Donsbach in the early seventeenth century, is recorded on a H-Sonderkommando card as having had no children. This despite her confession that she murdered two of her sons with ‘devilish poison’, and despite a petition signed on her behalf by her other children – a document still extant in the archive from which the SS researchers compiled the information on her card.⁸⁴ In spite of these omissions, Barbara’s card and others like it are replete with dates, personalities, annotations – these data stretch even to the reverse of some cards, overflowing their neat demarcations – leading to a superficial appearance of completeness.

More recently, Leszczyńska has corroborated Schormann’s misgivings about the archive as a resource for enquiry about historical witch trials; she is more specifically interested in the historiography of the archive itself as an object of study.⁸⁵ Lyndal Roper, while calling the Hexenkartothek ‘an amazing story’, notes that there are ‘many problems’ with it as source and object of research.⁸⁶ Of course, when viewed historiographically and with an eye towards reception, the catalogue’s shortcomings

⁸² Schormann, *Hexenprozesse*, p. 15. ‘The path into the social context [of the trials] leads from the trials outwards’.

⁸³ See, for example, Schormann, *Hexenprozesse*, pp. 14-21.

⁸⁴ This is the Staatsarchiv Wiesbaden (see Schormann, *Hexenprozesse*, p. 14).

⁸⁵ Leszczyńska, *Hexen* p. 10 and passim.

⁸⁶ Authors’ email correspondence, 15 June 2012.

become illuminative of the circularities and paradoxes inherent in the H-Sonderkommando project.

None of these circularities is more damning to the H-Sonderkommando research complex than the Aronstein citation. While the texts to which the H-Sonderkommando turned first and most frequently demonstrate their preference for ideologically consistent (or at least tolerable) sources, Aronstein's presence among the Hexenkartothek's English trial cards indicates that the SS researchers were willing on occasion to subordinate other considerations to a superficial completionist stance towards the project itself. No surviving records indicate that the SS researchers were aware of the irony of their position.⁸⁷

Even in a culture encoded with similar moral inconsistency, the example of Aronstein within the English trial cards (and the Hexenkartothek generally) remains a site of special absurdity and ruthlessness. In their efforts to compile evidence of a posited anti-pagan, anti-Germanic holocaust, SS academics cynically made use of the drama text of a Jewish academic who himself had already become the victim of their mass-persecution. To paraphrase Bruno Emil König: We are faced (yet again) with the fact of the hideous cruelties with which a people can mangle themselves when led astray by their priests and backed by the power of the state over life and death.

⁸⁷ There are similar examples within the broader Nazi intellectual culture. The term 'Aryan' was coined by philosopher Friedrich Schlegel in 1819 and applied to a tribal group which Schlegel believed had pushed west and north from the Himalayas, and whose language Schlegel understood to be the antecedent of the tongues of Europe. Within a single generation the term was swept up by social scientists and nationalist cranks alike, and it would become central to the racial segregation and persecution practiced by the Nazis. Of course Schlegel had intended nothing of the sort; his own wife, Dorothea, was Jewish, and he was a tireless campaigner for Jewish rights (see Léon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 192).

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The authors would like to acknowledge generous research support from the Batya Lyons Memorial Fund; the Clarendon Fund; Keble College and Pembroke College, Oxford University; as well as archival assistance from Danielle Yardy of Keble College, Oxford, and Mariusz Jankowski of the Polish National Archives in Poznan. The authors would also like to thank Agnieszka Badger and Iwonna and Andrzej Sękowscy for warmly hosting them Warsaw.

