



A History of Secret Societies

Arkon Daraul

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Almost every social system throughout history has produced its secret societies. Here is a unique study of such societies from earliest recorded times to the present, along with an analysis of their forms, rituals, and beliefs. The author has traveled extensively to gather documentation. The Charcoal Burners of Italy, the Castrators of Russia, the Old Man of the Mountains, and the Gnostics are but a few of the many described.

A History of Secret Societies Details

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From Reader Review A History of Secret Societies for online ebook

Annette says

it seems a bit cursory, but does include a wide range of societies. who knew russians were so into castration? it's kind of like summer/beach reading i think. i'm zipping right through. i can't really understand the organization. i thought it might be chronological, but the more recent ones don't seem to be in order perhaps? i think a better approach to the book might have been to show how gnosticism is the basis for all the secret societies that have shaped modern history. i really wish there was more in depth info. maybe i'm too harsh a judge but i've just found that non-fiction writers seem to be very loose about quality writing and coherent, logical organization of ideas. i always think "needs and editor!" blah blah blah. and i had to return it while only about half way through. darn

RB says

If you can track this down, this has a whole range of whacky material and is one of the best of its ilk I've come across.

Lesley Prince says

Very interesting book, but a bit of a curate's egg (good in parts and not others). Nevertheless I learned a great deal from it, not least where Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson got some of their material for Illuminatus! Fascinating that he traces almost all secret societies back to the Assassins and the Old Man of the Mountains, Haasan I Sabbah.

Michael T. says

Enjoyed reading this and felt that I actually learned some stuff

Timm says

Interesting high-level overview of various societies. Look elsewhere for depth.

Kristi Thompson says

More a study of religion than societies, I think; most were really more what I would call mystery cults. And not terribly secret, most of them I found the Sufi and the followers of the Peacock Angel the most interesting. I could imagine joining them.

In the chapter on witchcraft I started wondering, though. He complained that other researchers of the phenomenon picked and chose what evidence to base their conclusions on, then went ahead and did the same thing. "Disregarding, this, this and this, we can see that what really happened was in accordance with my own pet theory..."

Why do so few scholars properly cite their material?

Taddow says

I thought that this was a simple easy to read snapshot of several secret societies from history. It does not go too in-depth (its a short book) but I would recommend it.

Bryan says

I have to admit that I skimmed the last 50 or so pages of this. It isn't that the information is bad, or the writing, but that it became so very repetitive as the author cataloged the initiation information and goals of these societies that he examined. And there is a wide selection: Assassins, Knights Templar, Sufis, Rosicrucians, Witches and Tongs, among others. While I did pick up some information that I didn't have before, the book as a whole was only partly 'a history', and as much or more about the details for joining and the structure of the cult/society/brotherhood...what have you.

In the end, the book feels too cursory, and the repetition makes me doubt much of it will stick with me. Probably better to look for books that deal with each subject alone, if that is an area of interest, although, if all one was looking for was an introduction to secret associations, this might be all one needs.

Walt says

A light and cursory reading that mixes scholarship with sensationalism. When considering a topic as broad as secret societies, it is seemingly impossible to adequately cover all of them. The selected societies in this text are an odd mixture of religious groups, criminal bands, and social phenomena. Some readers may raise an eye brow that Sufis and Buddhists are included alongside the Illuminati and Rosicrucians.

The study of each group also takes unusual paths. The author focuses a lot on ceremony and degrees of initiation rather than the historical account of the societies. A chapter entitled "The High Priesthood of Thebes" is entirely devoted to initiation rites. This would be much more fascinating to the reader if they had some background as to this group. In a few places the author does better at balancing the orders of the societies with actual history. His chapters on the Tongs and Charcoal Burners of Italy show these groups to be more focused on crime than socio-political-religious leanings.

Overall, the chapters are too cursory, even with just examining just 24 societies. There are no references or further readings. This can be maddening when wanting to know more about the Charcoal Burners and their Medieval Sicilian counterparts, the Avengers; or even more information about the Guardian Angel or Peacock Angel devotees. This book does little more than spread a vague awareness of the topic.

David says

Thorough, engaging and well planned out. Though not exhaustive, "A History of Secret Societies" provides a nice introduction to various teachings and spiritual expressions.

Erik Graff says

I found this while cleaning out an old garage and loft. Having some interest in obscure cults I took it home and, despite its failings, finished it in a couple of hours.

Author Shah assembles a hodgepodge of 'secret societies', most of them 'religious', a few political. There is no method discernable, though a few accounts include reference to his personal experiences with some groups.

If there's any merit to this book it may be in its being oriented to the East, many of the groups discussed being referred back to Islamic sects and even older pre-Islamic sects. These supposed transmissions through the centuries are often, in my opinion, quite dubious and Shah's evidences, being usually unfootnoted, are suspect.

Roland Volz says

This is a "classic" from the field of Conspiratorial studies, which I've started many times over the last twelve or so years but never finished until now. Written by author Idries Shah under a pen name ("Arkon Daraul"), this is an old book with some interesting bits to it. Shah plays a little fast and loose with many of his allegations, but he has something of value to add. He claims to have had contact with several of the societies he writes about, but is vague with details. He also fails to cite many references, and there's no bibliography, which would have made this a five-star book for me -- if he's wrong, at least with his sources handy you can check for yourself.

Shah's main thesis seems to be that most secret societies contain at their core some ecstatic ritualized experience which is what transforms the member into someone new. That's basically the definition of an esoteric society, so it's nothing new, but it's interesting how many societies he claims this for. He also lists the Sufi (Islamic cabbalists) and Tibetan Buddhism as secret societies, which is actually pretty funny. An entertaining read, if a little difficult to slog through sometimes. Definitely recommended as a starting point, as long as your willing to check your facts.

It covers the Assassins, the Knights Templar, and the Rosicrucians in quite some detail; the Sufi, the Mithraists, the Skoptsi, the Carbonari, the Garduna, ancient Mystery cults, the Decided, the Yezidi, the Tibetan Buddhists, the Thuggee, the medieval witches, and the Vehm are given shorter investigations.

Tucker says

The material is very interesting. The writing is unfortunately a little difficult to follow. Histories are not always arranged chronologically, so suddenly the reader will be yanked into a different century without warning or explanation. Theological beliefs are sometimes described as if they are historical fact; sometimes this is clarified later in the chapter, and sometimes not. There is not much solid theoretical analysis, either, but, if you can sort out the information, there's many intriguing stories.

Information about the Skoptsi sect in Russia was posted to Disruptive Dissertation.

Andrew says

A series of essays on various secret societies throughout time. Too cursory to be very interesting unfortunately.

Leo . says

This is a good book if one has a good knowledge of history to start. However I did enjoy the read. Some good knowledge.??
