

## The Nazi Protectorate of Mount Athos. Between Illusion and Reality

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**ABSTRACT.** This study presents the situation of the monastic communities of Mount Athos in the context of the Second World War and their relations with the Nazi power. The conquest of Greece in 1941 by the Axis powers created confusion among the monks of the Holy Mountain, who tried to preserve the monastic tradition and the Orthodox Christian faith in the new political context. The lack of information of the Athos monks, as well as the opportunism characteristic of the Nazis, led to a blurred situation regarding the political authority to which the Holy Mountain had to report. This gave rise to the idea of a Nazi protectorate, but also to the illusion that this protectorate could improve the life and status of the monks in the Athos monasteries. The historical reality of those years is very difficult to unravel because of the war, but it is necessary to discover it to understand what really happened then.

**Keywords:** Athos, Nazi Party, Greece, Protectorate, Adolf Hitler, World War II, illusion, reality

### Introduction

On 28<sup>th</sup> October 1940, as part of the Axis Powers, Italy, led by Benito Mussolini, attacked the Kingdom of Greece from the territory of Albania, attempting a rapid offensive of conquest. Unfortunately for the Italian army, Greek forces managed to counter the Italian attacks, pushing the front line all the way to the Albanian border. Bulgaria's non-involvement in Fascist Italy's attack on Greece forced Mussolini to ask Nazi Germany for help. Although Hitler had no plans to wage war in the Balkans, in the spring of 1941 he attacked both

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Yugoslavia and Greece from Bulgarian territory, succeeding in forcing the Greek armed forces to surrender in just two months. The conflict ended with the offensive on the island of Crete, which the Nazis occupied with the help of the Luftwaffe and thanks to the weak defence of the British air force in the area.<sup>1</sup>

After King George II's escape to Egypt on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1941, a pro-Nazi government was installed in Athens, led by General Georgios Tsalakoglou, who was succeeded by two other prime ministers loyal to the Axis powers until 1943, and who merely accepted Germany and Italy's decisions.<sup>2</sup>

On 9<sup>th</sup> June 1941, Adolf Hitler, as the victor, issued a directive that established Germany's zones of influence and control in Greece. Two thirds of the Island of Crete, along with the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Lemnos, and Melos, the port of Piraeus, and the Thessaloniki region fell under direct German military authority. Part of Macedonia was administered in collaboration with Bulgarian forces in the eastern part of Thrace. Although most of the Greek territory was under Italian authority, Hitler retained key strategic points and major ports, successfully enforcing his occupation policy.<sup>3</sup>

As part of the Greek state since 1923, following the treaty of Lausanne, Mount Athos came under the authority of the Nazi army in 1941. The legal and administrative situation in the eastern part of the Chalkidiki Peninsula was established through a *constitutional Charter*<sup>4</sup> promulgated on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1924, and ratified by Greece in the 1927 Constitution.<sup>5</sup>

According to this 1924 constitutional charter, Mount Athos received the status of *Monastic Republic*, with the right to self-governance within the Greek state and under the canonical jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.<sup>6</sup> The number of monasteries was fixed at 20, with no possibility of change.<sup>7</sup> Access was allowed only with the approval of the monastery leaders, and permission to reside in one of these monasteries was granted only to Orthodox men, who automatically became Greek citizens.<sup>8</sup> All major decisions regarding the economic and administrative organisation were made within the representative

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1 David Thomas, *Nazi Victory: Crete 1941* (New York: Stein and Day Publisher, 1972), 58-72; 137-142; 204.

2 Richard Clogg, *A Short History of Modern Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 145-152.

3 "Adolf Hitler's Directive no. 31 of 9<sup>th</sup> June 1941," in *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, series D, vol. XIII (Washington, 1962), doc. 609, 988-990.

4 Emanuel Amand De Mendieta, *Mount Athos – The Garden of Panaghia*, Trans. English by Michael R. Bruce (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1972), 142-143.

5 SINTAGMA THS ELLHNIKHS DHMOKRATIAS, 1927 (Greek Constitution, 1927), art. 109-112.

6 *Greek Constitution 1927*, art. 109; *The Constitutional Chart of Mount Athos, 1924*, art. 1; 2; 5 in DE MENDIETA, *Mount Athos*, 163-164.

7 *Constitutional Chart of Mount Athos, 1924*, art. 2; 3.

8 *Constitutional Chart of Mount Athos, 1924*, art. 5; 6.

assembly of the 20 monasteries, known as *Ieros Kinonhita* (Holy Kinot). Each monastery had the freedom to manage material assets as they saw fit and organise their liturgical and ascetic life according to tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Although the Kingdom of Greece guaranteed Mount Athos the autonomy it had enjoyed since the Byzantine Empire, and which was maintained largely under Ottoman rule, not all monasteries accepted the sovereignty of the Greek state with an open heart. The most dissatisfied with the new political situation after 1927 were the Russian monks of the monastery of St. Panteleimon (Rusicon) and the Bulgarian monks of Zografu, together with the Romanian monks of the Podromu hermitage, which belonged to the Greek monastery of Great Lavra. Their main problem was that all the monks living on the Holy Mountain automatically became Greek citizens, which was seen as diminishing the universal spiritual role of Mount Athos and a cause of the decreasing number of non-Greek monks choosing to retire to the monasteries of the Holy Mountain.<sup>10</sup> If until 1941, these grievances of the non-Greek monks were expressed only sporadically and without any real impact on Greek nationalist politics, they gained traction during the Nazi occupation of the region of Thessaloniki, which included the Holy Mountain.

### **Hitler – a possible saviour of the Holy Mountain**

On 20<sup>th</sup> April 1941, almost all of mainland Greece succumbed to the offensive of the Axis powers, led by Nazi Germany, and on 27<sup>th</sup> April the last bastion, Athens, also fell to the attackers. The war continued until 1<sup>st</sup> June, but was concentrated in the Aegean Sea, specifically around the island of Crete, where King George II had taken refuge with some members of the Greek executive.<sup>11</sup>

Between 20<sup>th</sup> April, when German troops occupied the Thessaloniki region, and 27<sup>th</sup> April, when Athens signed the surrender, Hitler's chancellery in Berlin received an official letter from the Holy Monastery of Mount Athos, in which the 20 representatives of the monasteries asked the Führer to become Protector of the Holy Mountain:

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9 *Constitutional Chart of Mount Athos*, art. 11-13.

10 De Mendieta, *Mount Athos...*, 148-150.

11 Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece: the experience of occupation, 1941-44* (Yale University Press, 2001), 11-15.

“Your Excellency,

We, the undersigned pious representatives of the Twenty Holy, Princely and Patriarchal Monasteries of the Holy Mountain ‘Athos’, in our capacity as abbots and representatives of the Holy Place, have the great honour to address Your Excellencies and to ask you most earnestly (and insistently n.n.) to take this Holy Place under your personal protection and patronage as successor of the founders and benefactors of this Holy Place, the Byzantine Emperors and their descendants.”<sup>12</sup>

The letter continues with a plea for the importance and status that monastic establishments in the Holy Mountain have had throughout history and the fact that several international treaties, among which the Berlin Treaty of 1878 is highlighted, guarantee the right to continue the exceptional spiritual mission of the monks, which throughout history “has given rise to ecclesiastical and classical culture, literature and art, as well as to a life of piety and constant prayer for the protection of the whole world.”<sup>13</sup>

The end of this letter is written in the form of a prayer to the authorities, containing, in a somewhat stylised form, the Nazi doctrine of the *volk* (people):

“Praying to the King of kings and Lord of lords, with all our hearts and souls, that He may shower Your Excellency with health and long life for the good of the glorious German people, We sign,

With esteem, the Plenipotentiary Representatives of the Extraordinary, Full and Holy Assembly of the 20 Holy Monasteries of Holy Mount Athos...”<sup>14</sup>

On the last page of the document, found in the archives of the Reich Security Office (RSHA) in SD Belgrade, the 20 monasteries of the Holy Mountain that formed the government are listed, without mentioning the names of those who participated or their holograph signatures.

The speed with which the Athos monks reacted to the imminent surrender of Greece to ensure their continued autonomy, as well as the fact that only the German translation of the letter is preserved in the Nazi archives, without the original attached, may raise questions about the authenticity of this document.

However, in June 1941, the Monasteries of St. Panteleimon and Zografu, on behalf of the Russian and Bulgarian monks of the Holy Mountain, submitted a petition<sup>15</sup> to the Reich Security Office (RSHA) in which, in 8 pages, they told

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12 BArch, R 58/5565b, unnumbered, (f.1), April 13/26, 1941.

13 BArch, R 58/5565b, unnumbered, (f.2).

14 BArch, R 58/5565b, unnumbered, (f.2-3).

15 BArch, NS 8/259, ff. 93-101.

the millennial history of these monastic settlements, the vicissitudes of history, as well as the injustices to which the non-Greek monastic communities of Mount Athos were subjected with the passage in the 1920s under the suzerainty of the Kingdom of Greece. Drafted in the same style, using the same arguments invoked in the previous petition of all the monasteries in April 1941, in particular Article 62 of the Treaty of Berlin of 1878, the letter of the monks of the monasteries of St. Panteleimon and Zografu, asked Germany to appoint a representative of the Axis Powers, instead of the one subordinated to Greece, to redress the injustices to which the non-Greek monks had been subjected over the past 20 years:

“At present, in view of the fact that the Greek administrative authorities have been reinstated on Athos after the end of the Balkan struggles and that under these conditions the oppressive regime to which we are subjected will continue to exist, we would like to appeal to the Axis powers, as protectors of the weak and the disenfranchised by the creators of the Versailles system, to order that a representative of the military occupation administration of the Axis powers be appointed on Athos, so that this representative would not only be given the duties of the Greek imposed as political governor, whose subsequent activities were only harmful and terrorist, but rather be given the task of restoring the centuries-old rights and privileges of the non-Greek monasteries on Athos, which the Greek government violated with flagrant disregard to the international treaties”.<sup>16</sup>

The petition is signed on behalf of “*the brotherhood of Bulgarian monks of the Zografu Monastery*” and “*on behalf of the Russian brotherhood of St. Panteleimon Monastery*” and is dated June 1941, and the place of its submission is Sofia.<sup>17</sup>

The attempt of the Russian and Bulgarian monastic communities of the Holy Mountain to attract the support of the Nazi authorities for the restoration of the authority that their monasteries had enjoyed before 1924 was also followed by the community of Romanian monks, represented by the hermitages Podromu and Lacu, which were under the jurisdiction of the Greek monastery of Great Lavra. On 20<sup>th</sup> April 1943, the Reich Security Office in Belgrade received a letter<sup>18</sup> from the two Romanian hermitages, asking for redress of the injustice imposed by the *Constitutional Charter* of 1924, whereby the number of monasteries on the Holy Mountain was limited to 20, with no possibility of change:

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16 BArch, NS 8/259, f. 100.

17 BArch, NS 8/259, f. 101.

18 BArch, R 58/5565b, unnumbered, report RSHA of August 13, 1943 of the SD commander of Belgrade.

“All the illegal measures were later legalized by the Greek parliament through the so-called Charter of the Holy Mountain Constitutions, which aims to totally eliminate minority elements. This Charter also abolished the independence of minority hermitages, cells and hovels [...] In 1926 the Greek government expropriated all monastic properties outside the borders of Athos. This measure was applied to Romanians, Bulgarians and Russians but not to Serbs because the property of the Serbian monastery Hilandar was not touched. [...] All the international agreements that were also signed by the Greeks, starting with the Treaty of Berlin of 1878, Article 62, and the Treaty of Sevres of 1922, have been disregarded by the Greek government, which has consistently and unscrupulously violated these international treaties. The Greek people have therefore shown themselves to be untrustworthy, which is why it would be necessary for the Holy Mountain to be legally subordinated to another regime, so that it would no longer be exposed to political arbitration, denationalisation and Greek chauvinism. It is a flagrant injustice that we, the Romanians, who have been founders and keepers of the entire Holy Church for 5 centuries, when we built the “Great Monastery of Romania, Koutlounousiou (Cutlumuş) back then, today the only thing that is regretted is that we do not have a single monastery and that we do not have the right to vote in the Holy Chinonite leadership, and that our few Romanian hermitages and cells are doomed to complete destruction.”<sup>19</sup>

The complaints of the Romanian monks are also supported by the preliminary report accompanying this letter, prepared by the SD Commander in Belgrade. He reported to the RSHA Berlin that the Romanians living in Athos suffered from Greek chauvinism, and that they indeed did not have a monastery in the Holy Mountain although “Podromu Hermitage exceeds many historical monasteries in size.” The same report also mentions that at that time, June 1943, there were around 70 Romanian cells and “hovels” on Athos, along with the two hermitages, which housed around 260 monks.<sup>20</sup>

The three petitions show a pattern that cannot be the product of mere coincidence. On the one hand, one can identify the dissatisfaction of monks belonging to nationalities other than Greek with the policy of the Greek government and most monasteries belonging to Greeks. On the other hand, there is the hope of restoring the authority of the Holy Mountain, as it was in the time of the Byzantine emperors, through the intervention of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, which was the most powerful European state at the time. This is the reason why all three petitions invoke as the first argument for the demands made, the Treaty of Berlin of 1878 and the “injustices” of Versailles, often invoked by the Nazi ideology, even though the complaints of the Russian,

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19 BArch, R 58/5565b, unnumbered, *Placing the Romanian element of the Holy Mountain*.

20 BArch, R 58/5565b, unnumbered, Report 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1943.

Bulgarian and Romanian monks had as the source of their grievances the *Constitutional Charter* drawn up by the Holy Chinonite in 1924, which the Greek government only ratified in the Constitution of 1927, without imposing new regulations. Indeed, many of the properties belonging to the monasteries outside the Holy Mountain were nationalized by the Greek Kingdom, which in return paid reparations, not always at their true value, but the Greek monasteries were also affected by this measure<sup>21</sup>. The decline of the Russian and Bulgarian monasteries was caused primarily by the Bolshevik revolution and the establishment of the Stalinist regime, which stopped the flow of pilgrims and aid they received from Russia and the Slavic Orthodox countries. The sovereignty of the Greek state did not make life easier for these non-Greek monks, but it did not trigger the crisis of the said settlements.

In October 1941, the matter of the monasteries of Mount Athos came to the attention of the Führer's cabinet, who rejected any intervention in the already existing status of this region, ordering that from that moment on all petitions of that kind be directed through the Foreign Ministry and the internal bodies of the Greek government, headed at that time by the pro-Nazi Greek general Tsalakoglou, who finally refused any discussion on the subject, claiming that this violated the status of the monastic republic.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that Adolf Hitler did not respond favourably to the monks' petitions of 1941 proves that the request sent by the *Holy Chinonite* in April 1941 was not fabricated by the Nazi propaganda. Nevertheless, as early as 1943, many of the Holy Mountain residents believed that the Führer had accepted the status of protector, and that the Holy Mountain was under his protection. In a report which the RSHA officer of SD Belgrade, Dr Paul Dittel, wrote on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1943, during a visit to Athos, he concluded that:

“After the end of the Balkan campaign in 1941, the Holy Chinonite of Karyes addressed a petition to the Führer, asking the leader to assume the patronage and protection of Mount Athos. However, the Führer had decided at that time, as was discovered by asking the OB [Obersturmbannführer n.n] in Thessaloniki, that he could not change anything for the time being regarding the situation. However, most monks believe that the Führer has in fact taken over the protection of the republic.”<sup>23</sup>

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21 De Mendieta, *Mount Athos*, 149-151.

22 Andreas Müller, "Eine Stille Märcheninsel Frommer Beschaulichkeit Mitten in Dem Alles Mitreißenden Und Alles Wandelnden Strome Der Geschichte?", in: Christian Albrecht und Christoph Marksches (Herausgegeben von), *Orthodoxie im Dialog* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 337-70.

23 BArch, R 58/5565b, unnumbered, Report 27 April 1943, Belgrade, p. 8.

The confusion of the monks in this matter cannot be condemned, as the information available to them from outside the Holy Mountain was limited and carefully controlled by the German and Bulgarian armies. Moreover, as early as 1941 there was a Luftwaffe weather observation station in Athos and the gendarmerie detachment providing security in the Holy Mountain consisted of Greek gendarmes and German officers. In the guest books of several monasteries between 1941 and 1944 there are many records of German soldiers visiting the Holy Mountain, mostly for recreational or tourist purposes, and they were generally well received by the monks.<sup>24</sup>

Although officially the Nazi regime did not take over the protection of the Holy Mountain, the requests and wishes of the monks were discussed and resolved as far as the state of war allowed. On February 4, 1943, Russian monks from St. Panteleimon Monastery asked Orthodox Metropolitan Seraphim of Berlin and Germany for help in getting more food since many of the monks were in danger of dying from starvation.<sup>25</sup> The request was signed by Archimandrite Eugene and Priest Gabriel, and was submitted to the Metropolitan after they had repeatedly asked for help from the Bulgarian authorities and were completely ignored.<sup>26</sup> Metropolitan Seraphim referred the monks' request to the Reich Ministry for Church Affairs,<sup>27</sup> which asked for help from the authorities in Athens through the Foreign Ministry. The whole situation developed into an exchange of accusations between the German military administration in northern Greece and representatives of the Reich in Athens, as the Thessalonians claimed that sufficient food and materials had been delivered to the monasteries so that none of the monks would suffer from hunger or cold, and that the lack of food claimed by the Russian monks of St. Panteleimon was due to the fact that the monasteries had not shared the resources generously provided by the German Army in a fairly manner.<sup>28</sup> In February 1944, the Nazi archive documents mention that sufficient food and provisions were delivered to Mount Athos through the Red Cross in Bulgaria to ensure the livelihood of all the inhabitants of the Holy Mountain.<sup>29</sup>

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24 Andreas Müller, "Eine Stille Märcheninsel", 338-343.

25 BArch, R 5101/23175, ff. 75-77.

26 BArch, R 5101/23175, ff. 80-86.

27 BArch, R 5101/23175, ff. 70-71.

28 BArch, R 5101/23175, ff. 86-88.

29 BArch, R 5101/23175, f. 90.

## Nazi Expedition to the Holy Mountain – 1941

Within the bureaucratic apparatus of the Nazi Party, there was, from 1940 onwards, a special division called *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* (*Reichsleiter Rosenberg* Taskforce), acronymed ERR, whose main purpose was to appropriate cultural goods from countries occupied by the German Army.<sup>30</sup> More specifically, this Nazi organisation, which operated within the NSDAP, was dedicated to the theft and confiscation of cultural goods, especially those belonging to Jews, with the aim of taking them to Germany. The most significant activities of this Nazi office took place in France, Eastern Europe and Greece. The Operations Detachment in Greece was established on 25 February 1941, on the orders of Alfred Rosenberg, under the name *Soderkommando Rosenberg in Griechenland* (Rosenberg Special Command Force in Greece), and was led by Lieutenant Hermann von Ingram, assisted by two delegates, one for the Athens region and one for the northern part of Greece based in Thessaloniki.<sup>31</sup> Within this Special Command Force there were also several special working groups, specialising in the profile of the Greek territory, such as religious studies, Greek antiquity, prehistory, library research and Athos.<sup>32</sup>

The “Athos” working group was coordinated by Professor Dr. Franz Dögler,<sup>33</sup> a Byzantinologist at the University of Munich, with the mission of “scientific development of the source material available in the monasteries of Mount Athos (manuscripts, privileges and other unique documents and art treasures) from the 11th-13th centuries; study of monasticism.”<sup>34</sup>

To carry out this mission, an expedition team was organized to the Holy Mountain consisting of Professor Franz Dögler; Dr. Anton Deindl, coordinating officer of Religious Studies of the ERR Thessaloniki; Dr. Otto Treitinger, Byzantinologist and assistant to Professor Dögler; Sergeant Major Karl Kress as photographer; Dr. Siotis, theologian at the University of Athens and the Greek Tsingiritis acting as interpreter and translator.<sup>35</sup>

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30 Donald E. Collins, Herbert P. Rothfeder, "The Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg and the Looting of Jewish and Masonic Libraries during World War II", *The Journal of Library History* (1974-1987) 18/1 (1983): 21–36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25541351>.

31 BArch, NS 30/75, ff. 0474670-0474671.

32 BArch, NS 30/75, f. 0474672.

33 For more details on Professor Franz Dögler's academic and political work in the NSDAP we recommend the study: Panagiotis A. Agapitos, "Franz Dölger and the Hieratic Model of Byzantine Literature," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 112/3 (2019): 707–780, <https://doi.org/10.1515/bz-2019-0031>.

34 BArch, NS 30/75, ff. 0474694-0474696.

35 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 61; BArch, NS 30/75, f. 0474696.

We have generous details of this expedition thanks to Professor Dögler's travel diary<sup>36</sup>, dictated by him to his assistant Otto Treitinger, as well as from the volume published in 1943, which we will discuss later in our study.

The Dögler Group expedition took place between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> July 1941. Due to unfavourable weather conditions, it was not possible to land on the Holy Mountain until around 1 p.m. on 4<sup>th</sup> July. In Karyes the documents were checked, especially the Diamonitron<sup>37</sup>, the group headed for the first night to the monastery of Iviron, from where they visited almost all the monasteries, taking photographs of documents, icons, relics and places. From the report of the ERR coordinator in Greece, Lieutenant von Ingram, we learn that 1,800 detail photographs were taken with a Leica camera and 100 wide-angle photographs,<sup>38</sup> while the report submitted by the ERR officer in Greece, Anton Deindl, speaks of 3,000 photographs.<sup>39</sup> The members of the expedition stated that they were generally well received by the monks, who endeavoured to provide them with the most suitable accommodation and meals. Dögler's diary points out that in most monasteries they had only two meals a day, and that they were rather meagre,<sup>40</sup> the exception being Hilandar Monastery, where they were served two kinds of meat.<sup>41</sup> A meticulous detail of no scientific significance is highlighted, namely, which monastery provided the group with wine, with Xiropotamu Monastery being singled out, which was generous with food but where there was "*no coffee or brandy, only tea with honey at breakfast*".<sup>42</sup>

The group occasionally attended the liturgical service of the monasteries, pointing out that the services started very early in the morning, around 5am, and lasted until midday. Professor Dögler, who was not on his first visit to the Holy Mountain, highlights the monks' devotion to relics, especially miracle-working icons and holy relics, and mentions that they received myrrh from the gifts of the Magi at St. Paul's Monastery.<sup>43</sup>

Special attention is paid to the libraries and archives of the monasteries visited. It is noted that they were generally very disorganised and lacked an adequate inventory. Professor Dögler made recommendations to the abbots to send monks to Germany for training in the organisation and preservation of documentary and museum collections. There is also mention of monasteries in

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36 BArch, NS 15/693, ff. 67-82.

37 Diamonitron - document sealed with the logo of Mount Athos, the bicephalous eagle, certifying permission to enter and stay in the Holy Mountain.

38 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 63.

39 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 43.

40 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 66.

41 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 73.

42 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 77.

43 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 78.

which the documentary collection was well preserved, such as the one in the monastery of Esfigmenu. One moment recounted in detail was the removal of the *Tragos*<sup>44</sup>, which was carried out in a solemn atmosphere:

“July 15, 1941 (Tuesday). At 8 a.m. we went to Iera Kinotis (Protaton). The famous box is ready. The 20 representatives of the monasteries gather around. Solemn speeches. The search for the right key takes half an hour. We take photos until around 11 a.m. The holy fathers slowly and discreetly disappear after previously rushing to see the “Tragos”. The Governor and other representatives of the secular world attend the solemn state ceremony. I photographed here for the first time very important pieces. Dögler discovers a decisive feature for the authenticity of “Tragos”, which is controversial in this respect. Around 11 a.m. the box was resealed with a written record (last opened in 1938).”<sup>45</sup>

The political interests of the monks in the context of the war are not overlooked. The author points out several times that the monasteries asked for Hitler’s portrait. At Koutloumousiou, the delegation was greeted with the greeting “Heil Hitler!”<sup>46</sup> In the Serbian monastery of Hilandar, the swastika flag was flown<sup>47</sup>, as well as in the monastery of Konstamonitou, where in the reception hall there was a charcoal portrait of the Führer made from a small photograph.<sup>48</sup> At the Vatopedi monastery, where the group spent a whole evening talking to the monks’ “*epitropes*”, the phrase “*our protector Hitler*” was mentioned, and upon leaving the Dionysiou monastery the abbot led the boat carrying the expedition members in waving the swastika. The diary also records the visit and discussion with a hermit at the cave of St. John Koukouzelis who, when asked about the fate of the war, is reported to have said, “Germany or Russia, the meeting of all belligerents at the end of the war in Constantinople.”<sup>49</sup>

The strange behaviour of some of the inhabitants of the Holy Mountain is not overlooked either. The abbot of Koutloumousiou monastery “approved” the opening of a bottle of brandy from the expedition group’s provisions, and at Docheiariou monastery, the monks behave rudely, after being offered an envelope of money on their departure as a thank you for their hospitality: “The monks of Docheiariou behave indifferently when they say goodbye. As soon as

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44 *Tragos* - the oldest surviving canon book from Mount Athos, dating from 972, written on the skin of an unborn goat, hence the name *Tragos*. It is about 3 metres long and is the oldest document with the signature of a Byzantine emperor, John I Tsimiski. The document is preserved today in the library of the Protaton in the monastery of Vatopedi.

45 BArch, NS 15/693, ff. 70-71.

46 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 70.

47 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 73.

48 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 75.

49 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 70.

one receives the envelope with the gift of money, the other snatches it from his hand and both quickly look behind the door at its contents.”<sup>50</sup>

The Nazi delegation left the Holy Mountain on 31 July 1941, landing in Thessaloniki at around 14:00. The expedition was disseminated in a book entitled *Mönchsland Athos*, published in 1943 with the financial support of the NSDAP treasury, with Professor Franz Dögler, Professor E. Weigand from Prague and ERR officer Anton Deindl as authors. Compared to the expedition diary, the book does not provide any additional information, but it presents 184 black and white photographs taken during the expedition, including documents as well as frescoes, icons, pictures of monasteries and aspects of the monks’ lives. The foreword is signed by ERR Berlin’s chief of staff, Gerhard Utikal, who gives credit for the volume not to Professor Dögler but to Lieutenant Hermann Ritter von Ingram, head of ERR Command in Greece. In his preface, Dögler integrates the expedition and its success into the cultural policy of Nazi Germany:

“It is to the credit of the ERR’s operational staff that in the spring of 1941 they recognized the advantage that the occupation of Greece by German troops gave to another successful visit by German scientists. The many difficulties which had hitherto stood in the way of a visit to the Holy Mountain were now removed and there was the prospect of overcoming the traditional mistrust of the monks by conducting the expedition in a peaceful manner.”<sup>51</sup>

The fact that, in addition to academic prestige, the Nazi ideology was also pursued through the printing of this volume, which is not without scientific importance, is also evident from the last chapter of the book, which shows a photograph of a pencil portrait of Hitler from the Konstamonitou monastery together with the text:

“In the Konstamonitou monastery, the picture of our leader takes pride of place in the reception hall. A monk found the picture in an illustrated newspaper and drew a pencil sketch based on it. We were also able to see in other ways how strongly the personality of the leader and the Great German Reich impressed the imagination of the people of Athos.”<sup>52</sup>

The work concludes in a propagandistic style, anecdotally recounting a moment from the expedition, which does not appear in any of Dögler’s diary entries, and which was most likely written by ERR officer Anton Deindl, who on several occasions showed a hyperbolized view of what happened during the expedition:

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50 BArch, NS 15/693, f. 76.

51 Franz Dögler, *Mönchsland Athos* (München: F. Bruckmann Verlag, 1943), 11-12.

52 Franz Dögler, *Mönchsland Athos*, 290.

“The experience of photographing a miraculous image was delightful. Looking at it from Athos’ point of view, it was an extraordinary concession that we were given permission to photograph the holy icon without any hesitation, and the monks even helped with the preparatory work for the photography. An elderly monk, who came and looked at these preparations, shook his head and said: <<If you want to photograph Panagia, you won’t have much luck, because Panagia has never allowed itself to be photographed before. But it may be>> he added with sincerity and goodwill <<that Panagia will make an exception with you Germans, and allow itself to be photographed, because the Germans stand, indeed, against the enemies of God, Bolshevism>>.”<sup>53</sup>

The veracity of this account is questioned for several reasons. Firstly, the name of the monastery where the photograph was taken is not given, contrary to the academic style in which the rest of the work is written. Secondly, as mentioned above, Dögler does not capture the event in the expedition diary, although he had a penchant for reporting the peculiar and strange events found in the Holy Mountain. Thirdly, among the 184 photographs published, not one of them shows an icon of the Virgin Mary bearing the name Panagia, which would be contrary to the methodology of trying to publish representative and unpublished images of the cultural values of Mount Athos, and a photograph of an icon that never allows itself to be photographed would have been something truly unique. Leaving aside the propagandistic interventions, which were inevitable in a publication financed by the NSDAP to increase Germany’s cultural prestige, *Mönchsland Athos* remains an emblematic book for the historical, cultural and religious study of the Holy Mountain, being at that time the most extensive catalogue of the Orthodox “treasures” of Athos.

## Conclusions

For today’s public opinion, any association with the Nazi regime and the person of Adolf Hitler is rightly condemnable, knowing the horrors committed in the name of National Socialist ideology. However, the issue of the Nazi Protectorate of the Holy Mountain must be seen in context to formulate opinions as close as possible to the historical truth. For anyone familiar with the traditional affinity of Athonite monasticism for imperial protection, it is not surprising that the Holy Mountain’s monastics turned their attention in 1941 to the undisputed military leader of Europe. The instinct of self-preservation, coupled with the

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53 Franz Dögler, *Mönchsland Athos*, 290.

monks' poor information and precarious view of the dynamics of the world at the time, may have been quite truthful premises that led the monks to seek Hitler's protection. The way in which the Führer and the German military administration exploited this sensitivity or need of the Holy Mountain fits perfectly with Nazi cynicism. It is clearly proven that the monks' request was a real one, just as it is equally clearly proven that Hitler knew of it, refused it, but exploited it, using it to maintain the illusion of grandeur and superiority of Nazi Germany on all levels.

The permanent presence of the German army during the occupation of the Holy Mountain, as well as the dependence of the monks on food delivered through them, maintained the illusion of a protectorate that did not actually exist. Legally, Mount Athos was under the same regulations during World War II as before the war. Greece, even under Axis occupation, was governed by the Constitution of 1927, which placed the monastic Republic of Athos under Greek sovereignty. If there was anything to reproach the monks of Athos at that time with regard to the illusion of Nazi protectorate, it would be the naivety and lack of unity of the monasteries together with the opportunism of some monastic communities and the fact that they still lived with the nostalgia of Byzantium, not understanding *the signs of the times*. Out of all this confusion we can say that some good things have resulted. The work *Mönchsland Athos* remains very useful material from an academic point of view, and the fact that the German military administration in Greece was attentive to the material needs of the monks, as far as the state of the war allowed, made it possible to keep the Holy Mountain very little affected by the destruction and horrors of the War. The Nazi Protectorate of the Holy Mountain was technically an illusion, but an illusion very well-orchestrated by the Nazi ideology and comfortably accepted by some of the Holy Mountain's inhabitants.

### Abbreviations

BArch – *Bundesarchiv Berlin* – the German Federal Archives

NSDAP - *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterparte* – the National Socialist German Workers' Party

ERR - *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg - Reichsleiter Rosenberg* Taskforce

BUNDESARCHIV – THE GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVES

Kanzlei Rosenberg. NS 8/259

Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg. NS 30/75

Der Beauftragte des Führers für die Überwachung. NS 15/693

Reichsministerium für die kirchlichen Angelegenheiten. R 5101/23175

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