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Claims on the Past: Cave Excavations by the SS Research and Teaching Community “Ahnenerbe” (1935–1945)

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Founded in 1935 by a group of fascistic scholars and politicians around Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, the “Ahnenerbe” proposed to research the cultural history of the Aryan race and to legitimate the SS ideology and Himmler’s personal interest in occultism scientifically. Originally organized as a private society affiliated to Himmler’s staff, the “Ahnenerbe” became one of the most powerful institutions in the Third Reich engaged with questions of archaeology, cultural heritage and politics. Its staff were SS members, consisting of scientific amateurs, occultists as well as established scholars who obtained the rank of an officer.



Figure 1: Prehistorian and SS-Hauptsturmführer Gustav Riek in front of the cave “Vogelherd”, Lonetal, Germany

Competing against the “Amt Rosenberg”, an official agency for cultural policy and surveillance in Nazi Germany, the research community “Ahnenerbe” had already become interested in caves and karst as excellent sites for fossil man investigations before 1937/38, when Himmler founded his own Department of Karst- and Cave Research within the “Ahnenerbe”. Extensive excavations in several German caves near Lonetal (G. Riek, R. Wetzel, O. Völzing), Mauern (R.R. Schmidt, A. Bohmer), Scharzfeld (K. Schwirtz) and Leutzdorf (J.R. Erl) were followed by research travels to caves in France, Spain, Ukraine and Iceland. After the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in 1939, the “Ahnenerbe” even planned the appropriation of all Moravian caves to prohibit the excavations of local prehistorians and archaeologists from the “Amt Rosenberg”, who had to switch for their excavations to caves in Thessaly (Greece). Similarly, independent scholars like O. Körber, who was able to identify the cave “Salzofen” near Bad Aussee as the highest Palaeolithic settlement in the Third Reich, were attacked and banned from publishing their papers. For the rivalling Nazi research institutes, the exclusive access to caves as potential excavation sites ensured the interpretative predominance over the findings and the historical narratives related to them.

In contrast to other studies of the SS “Ahnenerbe” institution and its close relationship to German archaeology [1, 2], this paper examines cave excavation sites as places of politics and their specific role for the scientific administration in the Third Reich. Further, special attention will be dedicated to the ideological narratives that are linked to these excavation sites, their influence on the construction of nationalist history and the way how they were chosen for archaeological

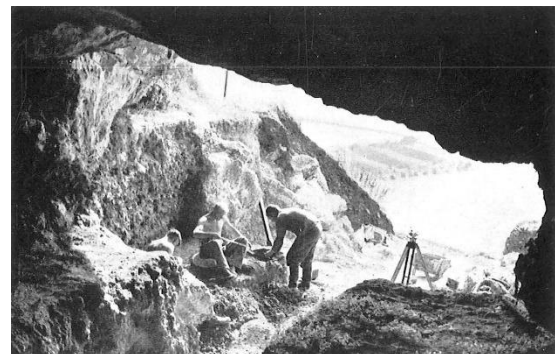


Figure 2: Excavations by the “Ahnenerbe” in caves near Mauern around 1937/38, Germany

examinations. Sources for this research comprised historical scientific papers and previously unsighted archive material from the Natural History Museum in Vienna and the German Federal Archives in Berlin.

References:

[1] Kater M (2006) *Das "Ahnenerbe" der SS*: Oldenbourg

[2] Leube A (2010) *Prähistorie und Nationalsozialismus*: Synchron Publishers

