



Εθνικό και Καποδιστριακό Πανεπιστήμιο Αθηνών
Τμήμα Πολιτικής Επιστήμης και Δημόσιας Διοίκησης

Εργαστήριο Μελέτης Ελληνογερμανικών Σχέσεων

‘Unsterbliches Hellas’ - a desirable past between Germany
and Greece

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Κείμενο Εργασίας
Μάιος 2023

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Key words: Legacy of Ancient Greece; Greek-German relations; Metaxas; cultural-racial continuity; photography.

Abstract

In this paper, I will briefly explore the legacy of ancient Greece and the continuity of Hellenism as a desirable past for the Greek and German states during the interwar years. I will do so by looking at an underexplored Nazi German-Metaxas Greek state publication from 1938, 'Unsterbliches Hellas'. In Greece's case I will look at the continuity of Hellenism as a cultural-racial continuity, and how it was used as an exportable good, visualized through photography.

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A desired past

The claims to the ancient Greek past are recurring in German and Greek cultural and political life. Germany's enchantment with ancient Greece is long-standing and well-documented (Butler 1935; Marchand 1996; see also Roche 2018). Johann Joachim Winckelmann's elegiac descriptions of ancient Greek art paved the way for future generations of German scholars', poets' and artists' deep love for ancient Greece (cf Sünderhauf 2004). In the interwar years, this love of Greece culminated into a Nazi appropriation of ancient Greece based on race (Chapoutot 2016).

Concurrently in Metaxas' Greece, the ancient Greek past was also appropriated by the authoritarian state's cultural nationalism. However, this appropriation was neither radical nor new, following a long line of Greek politicians and intellectuals who had looked to Greek antiquity as a source of national rebirth (Carabott 2003, 27). Crucially, the exultation of ancient Greece was important for the Metaxas regime's relationship with the outside world—either in the book discussed in this paper or in the regime's tourism promotion.

While classical Greece was one of two historical *topoi* of Metaxist thought—the other being Byzantium—it was not wholeheartedly embraced either. Metaxas, speaking to students in 1937 extolled the flourishing of art and culture of ancient Greece but decried its lack of religion and Athenian democracy. On the other hand, Metaxas praised Byzantium's religious fervour but perceived it as lacking in cultural achievements (Hamilakis 2007, 176). Notably, ancient Sparta's martial spirit and culture was seen as a desired societal model for Metaxas, who envisioned a society based on 'disciplined freedom' (*peitharhoumeni eleftheria*) (Carabott 2003, 30–31; Ploumidis 2016, 64).

The past might have been central to Metaxas' *Weltanschauung* (Carabott 2003, 33), yet it was treated selectively and opportunistically. Antiquity was appropriated but it struggled to meaningfully engage with it and develop it into a new direction. Instead, a historical constructionism was used that selectively remembered the past to serve and legitimate the present needs of the Metaxas' state. Indeed, this nebulous ideological structure was acknowledged by figures such as Georgios Mantzoufas, regime theoretician and Metaxas' son-in-law (Spiros Linardatos 1975, 113–15). Writing in the *Neon Kratos* magazine, Mantzoufas argued that the shape of the Third Hellenic Civilization was not truly known—if it was known then there would be no need to create it, but only manage it (Machaira 1987, 35).

The continuity of Hellenism was greatly important to the Metaxas' regime, as evidenced by its self-styled Third Hellenic Civilization. Thus, it formed an integral part of its cultural nationalism as well as its diplomatic relationship. This is clearly evidenced by the first manifestation of Metaxas' cultural nationalism, the centenary of the University of Athens in 1937 (18-24 April). The centenary offered the regime an opportunity to share its ideology to the general public as well as to the Greek intelligentsia, wherein it stressed the importance of Hellenism for the Neon Kratos (cf Petrakis 2011).

At the same time, the celebration became a platform for the Metaxas regime's diplomatic relations. The French, German, Italian and British used the centenary as an opportunity to bolster their relations with the Metaxas regime, solidifying economic and political interests in Greece. Britain announced the establishment of the Byron Chair of English Institutions and Literature at the University of Athens, perhaps hinting at a reciprocal gesture to the establishment of the Koraes Chair of Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature at King's College London in 1918. Germany feted the University of Athens in Berlin as well, where it renamed the Rathausstrasse to Griechische Allee (Petrakis 2011, 128–29, 132–33).¹ Most notably, the German and Greek states co-produced a *Festschrift* to the University of Athens centring around the shared desirable past of Hellenism and its continuity.

Unsterbliches Hellas

In 1938 *Unsterbliches Hellas* was published as a joint German-Greek propaganda project that highlighted 'the supposed Graeco-German racial relationship' (Roche 2018, 559). The book was presented as a celebration of the University of Athens, which is clearly visible on the jacket cover of the book that shows an image of the Academy of Athens set against a light blue background and adorned at the lower edge of the cover with a Greek meander. The two editors of the book were Charilaos Kriekoukis and Karl Bömer. Kriekoukis was the press attaché at the Greek Embassy in Berlin while Bömer was the head of the Foreign Press section at the German Propaganda Ministry and chief officer of the foreign policy section of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party).

¹ The Nazi state had renamed other Berlin streets such as Spanischen Allee and Bulgarischen Strasse as part of its foreign diplomacy.

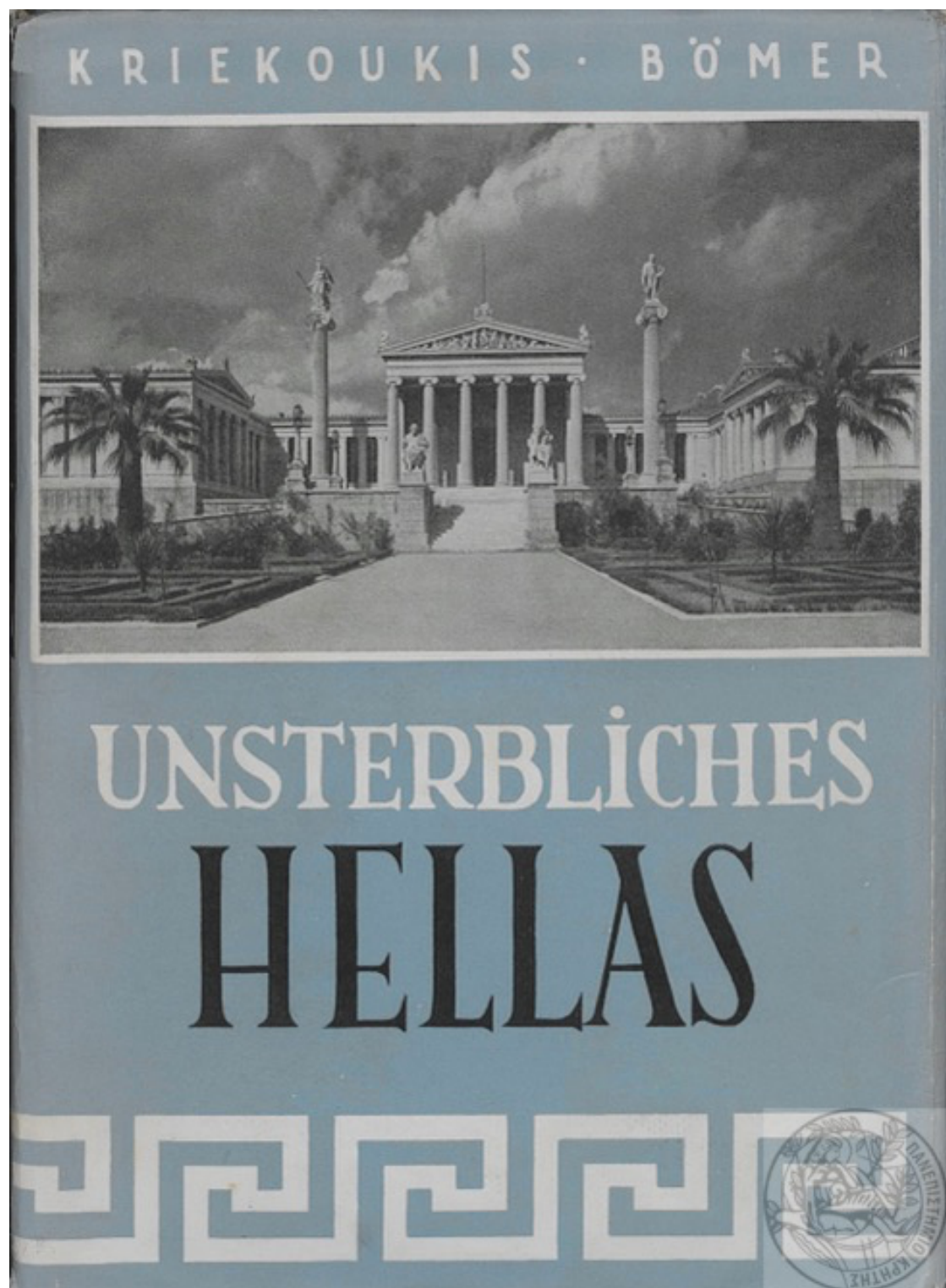


Figure 1. Cover of 'Unsterbliches Hellas'. 1938. Source: Digital Library of Modern Greek Studies, Anemi.

The book's own description stresses that this book is about today's Greece, yet the emphasis is clearly on Greece's continuity 'since the days of a Pericles and Themistocles'

(jacket cover). Crucially, Greece is framed as the 'south-eastern outpost and defender of the Occident (Abendland)' (ibid) aligning with Metaxist rhetoric that Greece was the last bastion of civilization before the East. The volume's contributions aim to give an overview of Greek society, culture, the arts, and the sciences. *Foreign Affairs* reviewed the book as '[a]n enthusiastic picture by various German writers of life in the Greece of Metaxas' (Woolbert 1939, 639). While the volume is enthusiastic about life in Metaxas' Greece, the majority of the authors are Greek, including prominent Greeks such as Alexandros Filadelfeas, Konstantinos Kotzias, Aimilios Chourmouzos and Theofilos Voreas. Furthermore, the ancient past is as or more important than the present. There are four German contributions in the book, by Alfred Bäumler, Gerhard Rodenwaldt, Hedwig Lüdeke and Johann Crome.

The two texts by Bäumler and Rodenwaldt are worth dwelling on, as they lay out how the ancient Greek past was appropriated by Nazi Germany and why it was a desirable past. In Rodenwaldt's text 'Germany's path to Olympia' [Deutschland's Weg nach Olympia], the archaeologist presents a history of Germans finding their way to the ancient sanctuary. Throughout the text, Germany's special relationship to ancient Greece and Olympia in particular is driven home. While Rodenwaldt stresses that the legacy of ancient Olympia belongs to the whole world, he points out that 'the Olympic idea has captured new Germany with an unbeatable intensity' and that German scholarship has put all its energy into this site (1938, 109). Furthermore, Germany's excavations are not only reclaiming the material past but also 'its spiritual conquest and incorporation into German Bildung/education' (ibid).

Using Johann Winckelmann's intent to dig at Olympia in the late eighteenth century (Rodenwaldt 1938, 109) as a starting point, Rodenwaldt structures the narrative of a ceaseless German presence in Olympia since the early 1830s. 'What have we gained with the excavation of Olympia?' Rodenwaldt asks. Principally, the excavations returned a site to "us" that was long forgotten and that is considered sacred by the whole world. The answer is further shot through with a mysticism that extolls the landscape of Olympia—'[t]he sanctuary stands on its own in the middle of a landscape that has not changed much since antiquity'. The Kronos hill, the Alpheios river and the Greek light are all placed in a timeless landscape that unites antiquity with the present.

This mysticism is ultimately what binds Germany to (ancient) Greece and it reaches great heights in Rodenwaldt's florid description of the sacred Altis grove. In the archaeologist's description, the sunlight casts its playful rays on the ancient ruins, while the

daytime brings flowers and butterflies, and during the night the sound of crickets blankets the valley. Rodenwaldt ends by saying that whoever takes the time to absorb the atmosphere/mood (*Stimmung*) of the Altis grove 'experiences at its deepest the ancestral kinship (*Urverwandtschaft*) of Greek and German religion' (1938, 114).

Further along in the text, Rodenwaldt ponders the meaning of Olympia in his current moment and in light of new German excavations there. Yet again, the unique German relationship to Greece and Olympia comes to the fore. German scholarship has since the beginning of the twentieth century zealously sought out to uncover the essence (*Wesen*) of the unearthed art works, something that other nations find incomprehensible according to Rodenwaldt. Crucially, the gradual discovery of the greatness of Greek art has taken place in parallel with the changing relationship to German art. Rodenwaldt likens the Apollo from Olympia with the thirteenth century Horseman of the Bamberg cathedral, calling them 'creations of a kindred spirit' (1938, 115).

In the concluding paragraphs of his text, Rodenwaldt looks towards the future of the German excavations and what they might bring. However, the future for Rodenwaldt lies in the distant, unknown past. The age of the sanctuary and the age of the Olympic games are important questions for the author. Most importantly he asks when did the waves of Greek migrants from the North arrive, and whether the settlements and cults at Olympia stretch back to 'pre Indo-Germanic times'. These are in my view clear hints at a belief by Rodenwaldt in an Indo-Germanic origin of ancient Greek civilization. Rodenwaldt's interest in the waves of Greek migration from the North might also suggest a belief in a Nordicism origin myth, i.e. that all ancient (read Western) civilization originated in a Nordic and/or Germanic setting (cf Chapoutot 2016, chap. 1).

In the book's other text by a German author, the Nazi-aligned philosopher Alfred Bäumler lays out an enthusiastic appropriation of ancient Greece as genuinely German and connected to Germany. German Hellenism is presented as superior to any other Hellenism as it recovered Greece for the West (*Abendland*). More specifically, the recovery of Greece for the West was the way in which the German racial soul (*Rassenseele*) found its way back to itself (Bäumler 1938, 17). Bäumler makes very clear that the 'reconquest of the Hellenic world' is not complete and that we should not shut our eyes to Hölderlin's or Nietzsche's visions of Hellenism (*ibid*). In Bäumler's reading, the true understanding of Greece is traced back to Winckelmann and then onwards to Goethe, Hölderlin and Nietzsche. In his discussion

of Winckelmann's discovery of Greece, Bäumler homes in on the young, athletic male body, aligning with his pedagogical ideas around male friendship and the *Männerbund* (Oosterhuis 1991, 36). Nietzsche however is seen as particularly important too, as Bäumler states that from Nietzsche onwards the Germanness (Germanentum) and Hellenism (Hellenentum) stand opposite each other (1938, 18). The Greece that Bäumler describes and appropriates has more to do with Germany than with any real Greece, ancient or present. It is the desirable past of ancient Greece Bäumler is appropriating for his and by extension Nazi ideological ends.

Most of the book's chapters however are authored by Greek writers. The foreword written by the Greek ambassador to Berlin, Alexandros Rizos-Rangkavis, sets the tone for the volume by centring the historical continuity of Hellenism. While Hellenism had survived through the Greek language, the Greek Orthodox Church nurtured 'the holy flame of the "Grand Idea" through four centuries of enslavement' (Rizos-Rangkavis 1938, 6). Quoting Metaxas, Rangkavis states that the Greek soul is where the essence of the Third Greek Civilization was to be found, the same soul which had preserved the 'Undying Greece' (1938, 7). Within the first few lines of the foreword, the ambassador also puts forward an explicit racial discourse, portraying Greece as the place where since prehistoric times, members of the white race belonged. Crucially, Rangkavis makes this racist chauvinist claim by quoting Sophocles' *Electra* (1938, 5), appropriating ancient Greece for a modern racism that spoke fluently with the National-Socialism of the German regime.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on Stylpon Kyriakidis' chapter in *Unsterbliches Hellas*. Kyriakidis, professor of ethnography at the University of Thessaloniki, presents an overview of Greek ethnography (*laografia*) and its effort to show the historical continuity of Hellenism, accentuating *laografia's* importance for the modern Greek state's nation-building process. Kyriakidis perceived ethnography as a national science and was firmly within an anti-Jacob Fallmerayer tradition that denied the possibility that Greeks were intermixed with Slavs and as such were not Greek anymore. However, Kyriakidis was not greatly concerned with racial origins, instead interpreting Hellenism's historical staying power as a function of Hellenism's capacity to Hellenise foreign subjects and cultures (Papataxiarchis 2017, 72–73).

The photographs used to illustrate Kyriakidis' text provide an interesting contrast to the content of his text. On page 137 of the book, a suite of four images is followed by the text.

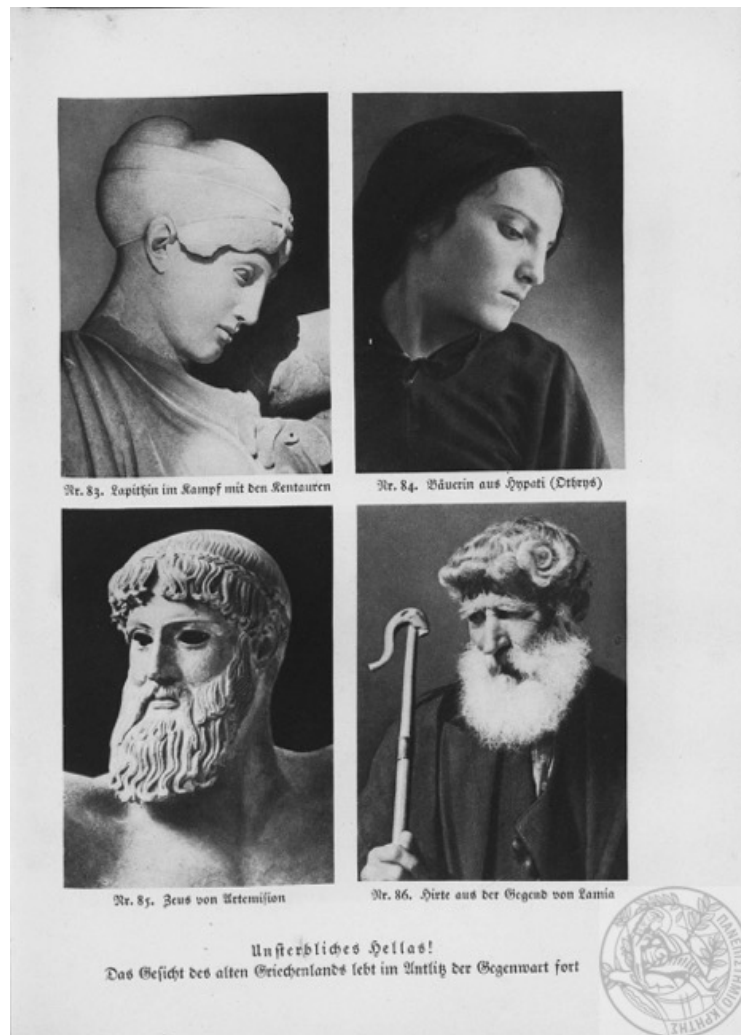


Figure 2. Nelly's parallelisms in 'Unsterbliches Hellas'. 1938. Source: Digital Library of Modern Greek Studies, Anemi.

'Undying Hellas!

The face of ancient Greece lives on in the visage of the present'

(Unsterbliches Hellas! Das Gesicht des alten Griechenlands lebt im Antlitz der Gegenwart fort)

The images are taken by Nelly's, Elli Souyioultzoglou-Seraidari, who is often considered to be Greece's unofficial national photographer. During the 1920s and 1930s Nelly's was a much sought-after studio photographer who also worked for many of the interwar governments. She collaborated closely with the Metaxas' regime, mostly on tourism promotion and the photographic decoration of the 1939 Greek Pavilion at the World's Fair in NYC. Nelly's image suite is part of her well-known parallelism project, where she juxtaposed ancient Greek statues with modern rural Greeks in an effort to illustrate the unbroken racial lineage of Hellenism. The images show the statue of a Lapith woman from the west pediment of the

temple of Zeus at Olympia, placed next to a peasant woman from Hypati. Underneath, we see the Artemision bronze likened to an older Greek shepherd holding his staff.

The juxtaposition intends to show the physical similarities of ancient Greece in modern rural Greeks. As such it speaks directly to the theme of the book, that of an immortal Greece that has retained its essence throughout the millennia. Yet, it does not align very well with Kyriakidis' own historicist approach which does not delve into a racial, physiognomic investigation of Hellenism's continuity. Indeed, Kyriakidis' text does not mention these images or any other illustrations. Hence there is no dialogue between text and image apart from them being included in the same book. Nelly's images appeal more directly to the book's theme, of a racial and historical continuity of Greece that undergirded Metaxism and Greek nationalist ideology writ large. At the same time, it also converses seamlessly with a National-Socialist discourse. More than any of the other images in *Unsterbliches Hellas* Nelly's parallelism condenses the chauvinist and often racist message of an immortal and continuous Hellenism. Photography excels at the compression of time, aesthetics and social conditions that is observed in this suite of images. As such it is an ideal medium for the effective visualization of the questionable linkages between rural Greeks and ancient art, made as an argument in favor of an unbroken Hellenism. Such ahistoricity was a feature and not a bug of Metaxist ideology (Machaira 1987, 177–78), compressing the desirable past into an exploitable format.

Nelly's parallelism is also interesting for the other settings in which it was used. Principally, it was used in tourism publications such as the Metaxas regime's trilingual *In Greece* and as part of the gigantic collages that adorned the Greek Pavilion at the 1939 NYC World's Fair. Katerina Zacharia has noted how Metaxas' tourism magazine were key platforms for the regime's 'biological or geoclimatic determinism' (2014, 205). Nelly's, a key contributor to both these efforts was crucial for visualizing the idea of Greece as essentially unchanged and pure since antiquity. Most importantly, these images were not intended for domestic consumption. As mentioned, they were all addressed to foreign audiences that were familiar with the legacy of ancient Greece. Particularly in the case of Germany and *Unsterbliches Hellas*, Hellenism and its continuity were particularly important. Nelly's parallelism with the Lapith woman from Olympia hints at Germany's particular fondness for that site, as laid out in Rodenwaldt's text.

In conclusion, this paper has provided a look at the overlapping appropriation of the ancient Greek past by the Nazi German and Metaxas Greek states within the pages of *Unsterbliches Hellas*. While both appropriations of ancient Greece serve nationalist needs and discourses, the German authors draw much clearer on a supposed racial relationship between Germans and ancient Greeks. Kyriakidis' text hews close to a historicist approach that is nevertheless suffused with an anxiety over modern Greek's origins and their intermixing with other ethnic groups. Nelly's images however act as an effective bridge between the German and Greek appropriations of the ancient Greek past. The aestheticized 'parallelisms' provide a useful portable past for both countries' nationalist needs.

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