

Philip Coppens

Feature Articles

Otto Rahn: author, poet, Grail seeker, SS officer

The German author Otto Rahn wrote a series of books on the Grail, which he believed was physically real, and not merely the figment of medieval authors' imagination. His quest took him to the South of France, where his excavations have since fuelled speculation that he and the Nazi regime of his time "might" have uncovered the Grail.

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In February 2007, Montserrat Rico Góngora published "The Desecrated Abbey", in which he claimed that Heinrich Himmler, Hitler's second-in-command and head of the Nazi SS, had made a secret wartime mission to an abbey in Spain, in search of the Holy Grail. Góngora even interviewed Andreu Ripol Noble, a former monk and the only person that spoke German, who was ordered by his superiors to guide Himmler during the visit in 1940. Ripol related that Himmler came to Montserrat inspired by Richard Wagner's opera "Parsifal", which mentions that the Holy Grail could be kept in "the marvellous castle of Montsalvat in the Pyrenees" – the mountain range that marks the border between France and Spain. What is less known, is that Himmler visited other castles in the area, including that of Quermanco, north of Girona. A photograph exists of Himmler in front of the castle. The photo shows Himmler is holding a book in his hand by Otto Rahn, a German SS officer who had lived in Southern France and who was convinced that the Grail was not simply the figment of medieval authors' imagination, but a real, physical artefact, hidden somewhere in or near the Pyrenees. It was Rahn that set Himmler on his Grail Quest.



Nigel Graddon, author of "Otto Rahn and the Quest for the Grail", describes his subject as "an academic, historian, author, mediaevalist, philologist, Grail hunter, sleuth, explorer, genealogist, screenwriter, philosopher, metaphysician and mystic and, despite the foregoing, indecipherable and indefinable."

Rahn should be seen in the same category as Ernest Schäfer, an ambitious zoologist who specialised in ornithology and big-game hunting. Together with Bruno Beger, Schäfer went on an expedition to Tibet in 1938-1939; other expeditions included Heinrich Harrer's trip, immortalised as "Seven Years in Tibet". Harrer's expedition, nevertheless, did not have the official stamp of approval of the Schäfer Expedition, both from Himmler and the Ahnenerbe, the research bureau in charge of proving that the old Germany myths were historical fact.

Schäfer's mission was to reach Lhasa, a daring task in those days. Some speculate Hitler was trying to find out whether Tibet would be willing to wage war with India, while others argue that making contact with Tibetan mystics was the main ambition. Either way, Schäfer succeeded, largely using the Nazi Party as a financier for his private ambitions.

While Schäfer was trying to reach Lhasa and the Tibetan mystics, Rahn was trying to find the Holy Grail and had embedded himself into a group of French experts on Catharism, a heretical movement that the Church tried to stamp out in the 13th century by organising a most vicious crusade, which resulted in a months' long siege of the last Cathar stronghold, Montségur, a castle on a 3000 foot mountain.

Rahn was born in 1904 in Michelstadt, a small town not far from Frankfurt. It was his father Karl who introduced him to the great German legends of Parzival, Lohengrin, and the Nibelungenlied. After obtaining his bachelor in 1922, and further studies at the Universities of Heidelberg, Giessen, and Freiburg, he travelled abroad. When a French family invited him to visit Geneva in 1931, the travel bug soon led him to France, and then onwards to the Pyrenees.

In the Pyrenees, Rahn became part of the revival of Catharism, largely by befriending Antonin Gadal, one of its leading researchers. Gadal grew up in the house next to the Tarasconian historian Adolphe Garrigou, who should be seen as the real spark that ignited interest in Catharism. Rather than just an aberration of Christianity, these Gadal and Garrigou began to define Catharism as unique religion, coming from the East, that taught a doctrine of love, respect, gender equality and so much more, which had to be destroyed by the Catholic Church, which realised that without action, it would lose its support and power, with Catharism becoming the new religion that could easily conquer Europe.



The end result of all of Rahn's acquired knowledge was "Crusade Against the Grail" [Kreuzzug gegen den Gral], which was published in 1933 and which made him into a relatively well-known author in Germany. In the book, Rahn argued that the Grail Castle was physically real, was Montségur, and that the Cathars were the guardians of this sacred relic. These conclusions echoed what Gadal and others were writing in France, and Rahn should largely be seen as the promoter of the "Cathar Pyrenean cause" within Germany.

Alas, the Germany of the 1930s saw the escalation of Hitler and Himmler's search for an "Aryan past", in which the Grail was a treasured myth. And though at first sight it might seem more French than German, Wagner himself was inspired by the writings of Wolfram von Eschenbach, one of the principle authors on the Grail – and a fellow German.

There has been endless speculation whether Rahn came to France as part of a Nazi plot – or spy – or whether it was only after the publication of his book that he was enrolled as a valuable Nazi propaganda asset. The evidence suggests the latter scenario was more likely, if only because Rahn is known to have had serious financial problems, often having to borrow money to make his trips – and often unable to pay people back. If the Nazis wanted him in the south of France, it is likely they would have guaranteed his presence, simply by paying him to get there – and be able to stay there. But a quick survey of his travels makes it immediately apparent Rahn was never "their man" on the ground.

The link between Rahn and the SS was especially promoted by Col. Howard Buechner in his 1991 book "Emerald Cup – Ark of Gold. The Quest of SS Lt. Otto Rahn of the Third Reich". The book was clearly inspired by "Holy Blood, Holy Grail", and focused on the Treasure of Solomon and the role of Rahn in finding the treasure of Montségur, and the Nazis subsequently recovering it. Buechner argued that the Wewelsburg, the "Grail Castle" of the SS, was intended to become its final resting place, though in the same book, Buechner argues that it is more likely that the castle would welcome the Holy Lance, whereby the Cup of Christ would only be recovered by Otto Skorzeny in 1944 from Montségur and taken a secret location. Buechner's claims are, in some circles, gospel. But Buechner is in truth a very controversial figure. In 1986, he wrote "The Hour of the Avenger", in which he claimed that 520 Prisoners of War had been intentionally killed by American soldiers after the Dachau concentration camp had surrendered to the American troops. The man Buechner held responsible for this massacre was 1st Lt. Jack Bushyhead, a "full-blooded Cherokee Indian". Buechner claimed that Bushyhead avenged the horrors inflicted on the Native Americans and acted out of kinship with the Jews.