

Attic Chronicle by Phocion

'Holy Mountain' is stirring

Dare the Greek government challenge the sovereignty of the Byzantine-chartered Mount Athos?

The 321-square-kilometer peninsula of Mount Athos in Greece, a unique and paradoxical theocratic state over 1,000 years old, is threatening to become a major focus of international tension.

Shortly before Christmas of 1985, the religious government of this self-administered theocratic state convoked an emergency session of its "Double Synaxis," the Orthodox monks' equivalent of a "parliament," and voted an extraordinary resolution of dire warning to the Socialist government of Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu.

In that resolution, the theocratic government of this anachronistic "Sacred Community," generally known as the "Holy Mountain," warned the Greek government that it should give up its intentions to interfere in the affairs of the "Holy Mountain," or face the international consequences.

The government of the "Holy Mountain," known as the Protaton, or "The Primacy," and its little parliament, the "Double Synaxis," derive their legal standing and authority from legislative acts of the long defunct Byzantine Empire. However, its Byzantine legal standing and its sovereignty have been recognized by modern international law, and especially by the 1878 Treaty of Berlin and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne.

According to these international

treaties, the peculiar theocratic Byzantine government of the "Holy Mountain" is recognized as sovereign on all matters pertaining to the internal administration of the Mount Athos peninsula, and the Greek state is accorded a right of suzerainty, on condition that it does not challenge the internal sovereignty of the little theocratic state.

Matters have now been brought to a crisis because the Papandreu government is about to enact a bill of law according to which all real estate and other property of the Greek Orthodox Church is to be nationalized and become property of the State.

The argument presented by the 7,000 plus monks of the "Holy Mountain" is that their peculiar community is not part of the autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church, nor part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but a religious authority with its own sovereignty whose legal title derives directly from Byzantine legality and is, as such, protected by international law.

Their resolution, in part, reads: "... The opinion that monastic property, and properties of the Church in general, belong to the State, is ahistorical and arbitrary.

"The characterization of our Holy Monasteries as trespassers of public land is unacceptable. Both the Church and the Holy Mountain are much more ancient than the Greek State and the

founders of the Monasteries endowed them with properties not for the comfort of monks, but as means of carrying out their mission. . . . We shall never accept this Law and we shall strive with all our strength for its abolition. This is demanded by the millennial history of the Holy Mountain whose inheritors we are."

Knowledgeable observers from Athens report that the Protaton, or government of the "Holy Mountain" has already made broad hints that they are ready to challenge the Greek government's legal claims over their peninsula in the forums of international legal bodies, and that numerous nations, especially the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Rumania, are interested in posing as champions of the little theocratic state—as well as challenging Greek suzerainty over the peninsula.

There are, in the "Holy Mountain," numerous monasteries belonging, by ancient legal title, to Russia, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Rumania, co-existing side-by-side with Greek monasteries.

If the Greek government moves to forcibly expropriate the properties of its own monasteries, then, it will either be forced to abandon its legal claims as "protector" of the "Holy Mountain," or, it will have to permit the Soviet, Bulgarian, etc., governments to expropriate the properties of their own monasteries.

It should be noted that of the 20 large abbeys operating on the Mount Athos peninsula, the largest is the Russian Monastery of Saint Spyridon, which, since 1975, has been receiving large numbers of Russian monks from the Soviet Union, many of them believed to be KGB operatives.

Saint Spyridon, up to the 1920s, had over 2,000 Russian monks, and has its own port facilities, small factories, and a rail line.