
Book Reviews

AMSTAEDTER, RAINER. *Der Alpinismus: Kultur—Organisation—Politik*. Wien: WUV-Universitätsverlag, 1996. Pp. 666. Illustrated. Notes, bibliography, index. EUR 35.95 cb.

Mountaineering has never been at the core of scholarly historical inquiry, yet there is a huge body of literature that derives from the sport itself. Probably no other sport has left behind such an expanse of texts and narratives that record and reflect upon every single step of its own development. Due to the close relationship with the cognitive framework of exploration, whether grounded in science, politics, or adventure, both the consciousness of making history and the urge of recording this history have been interwoven with the grammar of this sport since its earliest days. The first anthologies and histories on mountaineering were written well before World War I. Since then, club anniversaries and centennials, memorial days, and good business sense repeatedly led to the compilation of updates gradually enlarging this genre of alpine literature.

The book under review, however, is not just another climbing history, its author not just another “armchair mountaineer.” As the subtitle suggests, the story Rainer Amstaedter has to tell in his voluminous study is less concerned with the arcana of climbing than with the place mountaineering holds in the broader historical perspective of “culture, organization, and politics.” Thus the book presents an overview of the alpine history along chronological lines, just as conventional histories would. Beginning with the rarely documented mountain encounters of early modern times, Amstaedter records people, places, and practices within the developmental process of mountaineering from scientific exploration, territorial conquest, peak hunting, and variation climbing to the more-elaborate styles of difficult and technical climbing. On the other hand, Amstaedter also analyzes the internal dynamics of the sport in the context of the specific cultural background of its protagonists. The main title is slightly misleading, as this book certainly is not about “alpinism” as a global sport or intercontinental movement. Its main concern is the development of mountaineering—its ideas, images and ideologies, within the confined organizational boundaries of middle-class club culture in Austria and, to a lesser degree, in Germany. A publisher’s note introduces the book as “the first comprehensive social history of Austrian and German alpinism from its beginnings in the 18th century up to the present.” To be sure, the present is somewhat underrepresented: the years after 1945 are dealt with in only 50 pages, while more than 300 (roughly 60 per cent of the text) concern the period between 1918 and 1945.

What this book really does is demonstrate that almost the entire Austrian and German alpine movement, numbering 250,000 members, was a breeding ground for aggres-

sive anti-Semitism and a national socialist hotbed well before the 1930s (14). Amstaedter claims that the bourgeois alpine clubs of Vienna, Austria, and Germany have always been part of the German experience, leading into the disaster of the Third Reich and the Holocaust (16). His analysis, which asserts culturally unique features in German anti-Semitism, is heavily indebted to the *Sonderweg* thesis. Amstaedter asserts that the alpine organizations subjugated themselves to, and transformed the idea of, their sport according to the world view and moral norms of German idealism.

The formation of the first alpine clubs in Austria (*Österreichischer Alpenverein*, 1886) and Germany (*Deutscher Alpenverein*, 1867) occurred during a period of turbulent change. Members, mainly recruited from the educated middle class, adopted alpinism to create a loosely cohesive, culturally defined group. Politically impotent due to the failure of the bourgeois revolution in midcentury and the delayed reformation of civil society in the modern nation-states after the end of the neoabsolutist period, substantial parts of the middle class developed distinctively apolitical habits that compensated for their lack of political power. The romanticist idealization of nature was one among other responses to their disappointment; climbing mountains presented an opportunity to retreat from urban civilization.

Despite their openly expressed apolitical stance, the self-image of the alpine clubs was characterized by undercurrents of a conservative, ambivalent nationalism, based on the principles of the *Kulturgemeinschaft*. The DAV's early aspiration of "uniting all German tribes, whether settled in Germany or Austria" (43), was partly realized by the merger of the Austrian and German Alpine Clubs in 1872. The economic crisis of the mid-1870s stirred up doubts of liberalism, social order, and the emancipated standing of the Jews in society. Anti-Semitism, which would not have been tolerated in most Austrian liberal clubs during the 1870s and early 1880s, had become accepted in liberal associations by 1900 (147).

Amstaedter interprets the openly declared belief in German nationalism of mountaineers and their organizations as the ideological foundation of the clubs' *Binnenimperialismus* (domestic imperialism) within the ethnically mixed empires (176). Although the German national community was usually defined in terms of common German cultural legacy and deference to wealth and education, biological concepts of nationality began to challenge that view. In 1907 the ski club of the Academic Section Vienna was the first alpine organization with statutes that required Aryan descent for its members (168). Two decades later, other clubs boasted about having restricted membership to Aryan Germans since the early twentieth century. The historical experience of the lost war intensified the anti-Semitic climate in Austria and Germany. Racist and nationalist interest groups succeeded in enlarging their influence within the alpine organizations, excluding Jewish members who flocked into the liberal Donauland section. The German-Austrian *Alpenverein* proved increasingly incapable of negotiating among its various factions. So as to avoid the separation of the right wing, the general meeting of the German-Austrian *Alpenverein* decided in 1924 to expel the Donauland section (300). Another target of hostility was *Naturfreunde*, the leftist workers' alpine club, founded in 1895.

Through national socialist agitation, military drills, terror bombing, and the fight against leftist social movements, the bourgeois alpine organizations contributed to the advance of the Third Reich. After the *Anschluss* in 1938, the *Alpenverein* actively supported

the politics of the Third Reich. The club was bestowed with the sole responsibility for the alpine education of the *Hitlerjugend*. Similar to the experience of the first World War, alpinists formed the most important source of mountain soldiers. Until the defeat of Nazi Germany, the *Alpenverein* continued to perform its duties to the utmost satisfaction of the oppressive regime.

Amstaedter argues that the infusion of German idealist thought prepared the ground for the spread of the irrational ideology of German national socialism. Alpinists and their social organizations were especially receptive because they tended to interpret their sport in terms of national/cultural practice. In addition, the internal grammar of the sport, including jeopardy and the quest for unknown heights and territories among its basic elements, opened doors for the infiltration of consequential ideas. Intellectual and aesthetic currents such as social Darwinism, Nietzschean antisocialism, Wagnerian longing for redemption, and Chamberlain's racial philosophy paved the way for a Germanic *Kampfalpinismus* overemphasizing heroic stoicism, unreasonable risktaking, and the romantic glorification of dying in the mountains. Increasingly difficult and hazardous climbs reinforced the mountaineers' elitist self-esteem and deliberate seclusion from the rest of society. Guido Lammer, Paul Preuss, Willi Welzenbach, and other "superhuman" mountaineers who successfully achieved objectives their contemporaries perceived as impossible paid tribute to the mountains. Nonetheless, the alpine movement celebrated them as icons and idols of the youth.

Amstaedter's daring project, which inevitably debunks the core myth of the self-professedly "apolitical" sport movement and criticizes two or three entire generations of Germanic alpine heroes, definitely deserves to be called a dangerous venture. Not surprisingly, the book received severe criticism from representatives of the German and Austrian Alpine Clubs when it was first published in late 1996. However, the critics could not challenge Amstaedter's work on grounds of either ignorance of the context of alpinism or lack of evidence. On the contrary, Amstaedter, a lecturer at the Institute for Sport Sciences at Vienna University, certified mountain guide, climbing trainer, and member of the Austrian Alpine Club, is a practitioner of the sport himself. As a mountaineer he is familiar with values, traditions, and self-images of the alpine community. As a historian, Amstaedter's position remains vague. Theory and methodological framework is remarkably underdeveloped for a book derived from a doctoral dissertation.

How, then, is the field of research defined? Although Amstaedter refers to primary sources located in Austrian archives (*Österreichisches Staatsarchiv* and *Tagblattarchiv*), the vast majority of his evidence is based on periodicals, bulletins, and other publications by the major alpine organizations. This strategy creates certain problems if one intends to furnish proof of an all-encompassing spread of anti-Semitism among the hundreds of clubs and sections, as it primarily relies on the public voices of some core elites and their senior representatives. If one assumes that the elite discourse reflects the general mood and that anti-Semitism spread from the top to the bottom, the choice of sources is convincing. However, this hypothesis is debatable, and does not necessarily require us to ignore the historical reality of strong anti-Semitism within Austrian and German societies. But it is a very different thing to claim that anti-Semitism was endemic to the whole spectrum of bourgeois mountaineering.

Amstaedter's tendency towards generalization derives from the design of his study. If the spread of national chauvinism and racist anti-Semitism among the alpine clubs is causally related to the common *Weltanschauung* of members of an internally amorphous social group and the economic and political conditions that partly determined their self-awareness, then it is difficult to explain differing degrees of receptiveness. There must have been dissent from the official line, but did liberal-minded voices have a real opportunity to be heard? At least in Amstaedter's account, such voices are hardly mentioned, probably because of the overwhelming evidence supporting his critical position. Unfortunately, he gives no hints at the criteria that determined the selection of sources; thus it also remains an open question as to what else has been written about in the periodicals.

A further methodological problem stems from the Marxist assumption that language transparently expresses some anterior social and economic reality. But this approach does not take into account the role of language, intellectual thought, and popular discourse in providing discursive frameworks that influence responses to social, economic, or political phenomena. For example, it is possible to read the alpine narratives as part of a discourse that works according to its own distinct rhetoric, a descriptive formula suggestive of the mysticism that arose from the Nazi glorification of the *Volk*. There is a strong rationale for analyzing the relationship of alpine literature to the "war as a spiritual experience" school of writing that developed in Germany after World War I.

Two more examples will help to illustrate the problem of authenticity. Heinrich Harrer's account of the conquest of the Eiger North Face ends with the ominous line "We climbed the wall beyond the summit to our Führer" (468). This apparently frank expression of personal devotion to Hitler, however, sprang forth from the mind of his ghost writer, Harrer said in a recent interview. The warning to read very carefully between the lines is quite evident in the second example. Historians have tended to understand Petrarch's account of the ascent of Mt. Verdoux in a very literal sense as a first-hand travel report. However, recent findings suggest that it is more appropriate to understand the greater part of the text including the vivid landscape depiction viewed from the summit in allegorical terms. For Petrarch, the previously unheard-of enterprise of climbing a mountain was nothing but a stylistic means to ruminate over Christian belief and nature in a language familiar to his contemporaries.

Despite the stated intent to compare the Austrian and German development of sport and mountaineering with their counterparts in other European states, this objective remains unfulfilled, apart from short digressions. The self-claimed apolitical stance is characteristic of the self-imposed discourse on mountaineering in Victorian Britain, North America, even Japan. Striking similarities to the Germanic exclusiveness are especially well documented in the attitudes of British mountaineers, who adopted a common identity sufficient to segregate themselves from the lower social strata. Amstaedter barely mentions international relationships and cross-cultural influences within the alpine community in his study. He justifies this shortcoming by noting the official self-isolation of the *Alpenverein*. Yet individuals maintained close contacts to the non-German community, climbed together with British or American mountaineers, and wrote for their club journals. Looking at what German mountaineers published in English during the 1930s, the sense of nationalism is rather mute, especially in comparison to the overt Aryan chauvinism depicted in Amstaedter's selection of quotes.

Amstaedter is most convincing where he uses evidence based on more than the alpinists' periodicals. His rendering of the contextual background constitutes an informative introduction to the political history of the modern nation-states of Austria and Germany. His description of the Viennese middle classes before and after the turn of the century provides a fascinating account of the intellectual climate and the vast spread of anti-Semitism in that part of Austria. The author succeeds in his project of outlining the intellectual basis of anti-Semitism, and how this played out in the organizational history of alpinism. His anti-fascist commitment as well as his courage to explore the dark shadows of the history of mountaineering deserve unrestricted acknowledgement. For these aspects alone, the book certainly is worth reading.

Unfortunately, the historian lacks what is of crucial importance to the mountaineer: a sense of balance. Apart from the underdeveloped theoretical framework and the unbalanced treatment of the various periods—the short post war chapter chiefly deals with the way the alpine clubs cope with their heritage—I think it is most striking that a social history of mountaineering, written by a practitioner, does not pay any attention to the joyful, exciting, and enriching aspects of the climbing experience. This study clearly lacks a sense of proportion that justifies the promises of the book title. The historian Amstaedter should have consulted the mountaineer Amstaedter. More reasoning and less commitment would have helped to improve the sometimes awkward writing style and the overall quality of the study.

—WOLFRAM MANZENREITER
Universität Wien

BURSTYN, VARDA. *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Pp. 276. Notes, bibliography, index. US\$24.95 cb.

Varda Burstyn's work on sport and manhood is subversive in intent and effect. I witnessed the books impact after assigning it last year in a graduate reading seminar on modern American masculinity. Even though the students had already encountered and, to some degree, accepted feminist and poststructuralist critiques of gender, a near majority of the seminar quickly and heatedly dismissed *Rites of Men* as a politically-driven tract committed to dissolving competitive sport.

They were half right. As a feminist political scientist and health reformer, Burstyn does approach sport as a political matter: she sees it as an institutionally complex and unusually powerful paradigm of "hypermasculinity"—a destructive warrior ideology promoting, among other things, unnecessary violence, sexual and racial hierarchies, and capitalist and imperialist interests of the state. She argues that, on balance, competitive athletics in North America and Great Britain do more harm than good, and therefore her last chapter examines ways in which public education and recreation systems can "disestablish" sport in favor of more-productive forms of physical culture.

But despite the polemic nature of the book my seminar students were wrong not to give Burstyn's argument its due. One doesn't have to agree completely with her project to