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The Dark Side of the Himalayas German High-Altitude Mountaineering and the Road to War

In his groundbreaking socio-historical study of German and Austrian alpinism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Austrian sports historian Rainer Amstadter identified several alpine clubs and organizations as fertile breeding grounds for revisionist nationalist tendencies and ideologies in the aftermath of World War I; tendencies culminating in the official "recruitment of alpinist "male virtues" for the purpose of war and the "elevation" of the German national character" by the National Socialists in 1933. By analyzing the incendiary role of alpine organizations such as the Deutscher und Osterreichischer Alpenverein (German and Austrian Alpine Club; DOAV), the Osterreichischer Alpenklub (Austrian Alpine Club; OAK), the Osterreichischer Touristenklub (Austrian Tourist Club; OTK) and the Osterreichischer Gebirgsverein (Austrian Mountain Club; OGV) at the onset of World War I, the extreme nationalist tendencies and paramilitary activities of these organizations during the interwar years, and their unwavering support of the National Socialist leadership and their goals during World War II, Amstadter is able to document a consistent belligerent undercurrent in some of the largest, and thereby influential, German and Austrian alpine organizations during the first half of the twentieth century.

According to Amstadter, this undercurrent can be observed in some of the most ambitious and prestigious mountaineering projects of German and Austrian alpinism in the period between 1919 and 1939: the German/Austrian overseas expeditions to some of the tallest mountains in the world. Reacting primarily to the dominance of British mountaineering at the time, these German/Austrian expeditions were considered a powerful tool in terms of re-establishing German national identity after the humiliating military defeat suffered in World War I, an "...impressive step towards returning the German nation to its previous greatness, its previous status; since the secret of German power was and is German action!" With the adoption of the repeat (and often disastrous) German/Austrian efforts on Nanga Parbat

for propagandistic purposes by the National Socialist regime after 1933, this persistent undercurrent was finally allowed to surface and subsequently revealed one of the true purposes of German alpinism at the time: alpinism as a preparation for war. While Amstadter's study does an excellent job both in terms of documenting these tendencies and locating them in the larger context of German history, its sweeping nature keeps the author from exploring some key manifestations of the link between German alpinism and war in more detail. This paper attempts to rectify this situation by providing insight into two, heretofore unexplored aspects of this phenomenon: high-altitude documentary films and high-altitude physiology research.
