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Himmler's Crusade

Christopher Hale

About the Book

In 1938, on the eve of war, a Nazi expedition set out through British India on a mission sponsored by SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler himself. Led by two complex individuals – Ernst Schäfer, a swashbuckling naturalist for whom Nazism promised a short-cut to personal glory, and Bruno Beger, an anthropologist who would take his racial theories to their logical conclusion at Auschwitz – its aim was to establish the origins of the Aryan race, high in the sacred mountains of Tibet.

Despite abundant documentation – diaries, letters, secret reports, photographs and a remarkable film – the full story of Schäfer's ill-fated expedition has, until now, never been told. In a true adventure reminiscent at times of Indiana Jones, Himmler's Crusade is an enthralling account of this extraordinary quest and explores the ideological roots of the Nazis' obsession with racial theory and the occult. Drawing on this wealth of primary material as well as his own interviews with Bruno Beger, Christopher Hale has written a fascinating, thought-provoking book that brilliantly evokes this little-known prelude to the unimaginable horror that came out of the Second World War.

CONTENTS

HIMMLER'S CRUSADE

THE TRUE STORY OF THE 1938
NAZI EXPEDITION INTO TIBET

CHRISTOPHER HALE

To Alice and Felix

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any book, and especially a first one, arrives loaded with a tremendous cargo of debt. Here is a brief summary of the main ones. I must begin by thanking Deborah West Denno who convinced me that I could write the book you hold in your hands and provided consistent and stimulating encouragement throughout its gestation. Professor Steve Jones generously introduced me to his – and now my – literary agent Peter Robinson who provided expert guidance and support. Adam Sisman was also a font of writing wisdom. Doug Young in London and Hana Lane in New York were attentive editors and enthusiastic publishers.

I also owe much to my former colleagues at the BBC, John Lynch and Bettina Lerner, despite some differences over the years. They commissioned a film about the 'myth of Atlantis' for the BBC's flagship *Horizon* programme and, in the course of researching this now notorious film with terrific colleagues Jacquelines Smith and Laughton and Julian Hudson, I first learnt about the SS Expedition to Tibet. At SOAS in London, Alex McKay was consistently generous with ideas and leads – and set me right on many points. Roger Croston, an exceptionally erudite enthusiast about all things Tibetan, had been corresponding with Bruno Beger, the last surviving European member of the Schäfer Expedition. Beger had been convicted by a Frankfurt court as an 'accomplice to murder' in 1971 for reasons that are explained in detail in the last part of this book. While I was researching the films for *Horizon*, I was unable to obtain an interview with Beger – but Mr Croston was able to secure a number of meetings on my behalf in the autumn of 2001. Dr

Isrun Engelhardt, the foremost authority on Ernst Schäfer, the zoologist who led the expedition, provided me with extracts from her heroic decipherment of Schäfer's barely readable expedition Diaries. Peter Longerich discussed his current work on Heinrich Himmler. In Germany, Dr Helmut Starrach and Dr Heinz-Georg Klös talked to me about Ernst Schäfer as a friend and colleague – but chose not to discuss his experiences during the war.

In the United States, Andrew Zimmerman provided authoritative guidance on the history of German anthropology and answered my very frequent queries. In Philadelphia the staff in the library of the Academy of Natural Sciences was consistently supportive. In New York, Hope Cook, the former wife of the late Chogyal of Sikkim, provided wisdom and all kinds of contacts. Jacqueline Hiltz shared her knowledge of Sikkim and its history, pointed me towards the Sikkim National Archives in Gangtok and sent me her notes on the material held in the Archives concerning Schäfer's friend Kaiser Thapa. In Sikkim itself, I have to thank Anna Balikci, 'German' Akeh Bhutia, Taj Thapa, T. W. Barphungpa, Jigme Dorje Denjongpa, Keshab and Sailesh Pradhan, Kelsang Gyatso and the many others who guided me as I tried to follow Schäfer's route beyond Gangtok. Jai Shree Pradham assisted me in the Archives in Gangtok. In Tibet I am indebted above all to Gyurme Dorje while in London a number of people assisted me with different puzzles and conundrums including Thierry Dodin at the Tibet Information Network.

Anyone researching in this field will inevitably come to rely on the following authors: Karl Meyer and Shareen Brysac who provided advice and assistance, and whose book *Tournament of Shadows* is an enthralling account of the Great Game and has a chapter on Schäfer. Peter Hopkirk's several books on the same subject were essential reading as were Nicholas Goodrick-Clark's *The Occult Roots of Nazism* and *Black Sun*. Melvyn Goldstein answered some

of my most obscure questions and no account of Tibet in the twentieth century can afford to ignore his *A History of Modern Tibet*. Alex McKay's *Tibet and the British Raj* and Patrick French's book about Sir Francis Younghusband were both equally important as reservoirs of ideas and information. Simon Winchester's book about the Yangtze *The River at the End of the World* allowed me to 'see' and better understand a part of the world I could not visit. Other important sources were Ian Kershaw's two-volume biography of Hitler and the magisterial books by Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan Van Pelt on the Holocaust. My debt to all these authors is considerable and I hope they will forgive me for not footnoting every reference.

The bibliography on Nazism, the Second World War and the Holocaust is, of course, vast in English and German. The Schäfer Expedition itself left behind a tremendous quantity of documentation which few had examined let alone translated. To tell the story that follows, I needed to work across a Himalaya of German documents – and I would like to thank, especially, Diana Jasmin Böhmer, who waded through Ernst Schäfer's rather turgid narratives and answered endless questions about the precise interpretation of numerous other documents with an unquenchable supply of good humour, intelligence and commitment. Sabine Pusch, Ingrid Büchner, Michael Kolodziej and, in particular, Ruth Mulandi provided invaluable help and advice with other materials.

In Germany, Wolf Gebhardt guided me through the labyrinth of the Bundesarchiv in Berlin and the dedicated and courteous staff of the extraordinary Instit für Zeitgesichte in Munich gave me access to parts of Bruno Beger's trial record. In Koblenz, Berit Pistora made the task of examining the many thousands of prints and negatives taken by expedition members a pleasure. The staff of the National Archives in Washington, DC introduced me to their remarkable collections of captured German documents. In

the same city, academic staff at the Holocaust Museum provided me with important and disturbing information about the transports from Berlin to Auschwitz in the spring of 1943 and Madelaine Matz in the Library of Congress showed me the rushes of Schäfer's film *Geheimnis Tibet* which had been taken to Washington at the end of the Second World War. Lawrence Fleischer was an enthusiastic source of even the most obscure of references and sources.

I must acknowledge a special debt to the staff at the Oriental and India Office in the British Library – and the London Library was as ever inspirational. The Public Record Office in Kew provided superbly transparent access to its collections. The New York Public Library proved to be a magnificent – and free – resource. John Lundquist in the Oriental Division was exceptionally helpful. In London, the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies has one of the world's great collections of which I made frequent use.

Dan Balado struggled with a very long text, and some last minute alterations, with tremendous skill and tolerance. Sheila Lee used the expedition photographs to help create a beautiful book.

I am grateful to all those cited above but I take full responsibility for my interpretation of the records and information they so generously shared. Any errors are mine and mine alone.

Finally, my children Felix and Alice saw very little of me during the time I was writing the book, and I dedicate it to both of them.

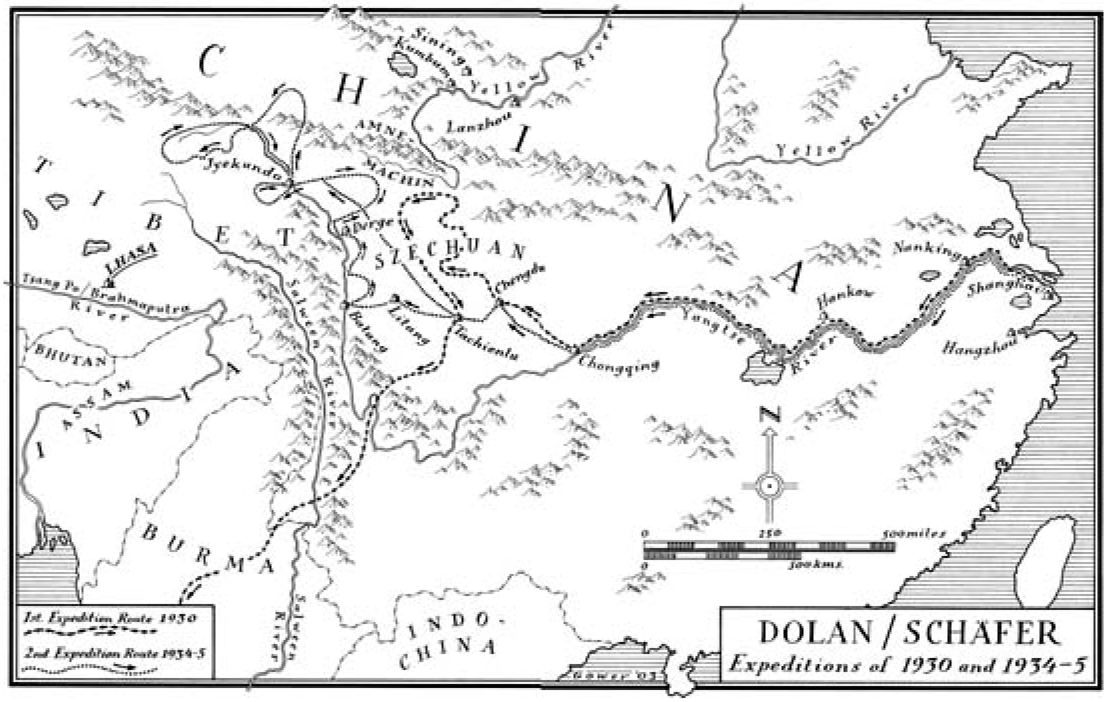
Christopher Hale
London, March 2003

Deeds white and black, for minds are clean and foul.
Is the mind clean? Then earth and sky are clean.
Is the mind foul? Then earth and sky are foul.
For it is upon the mind that all depends.

– Tibetan proverb, quoted by Charles Bell

'German science must become fighting science.'

– Gerd Tellenbach in *Der Führer*, 1936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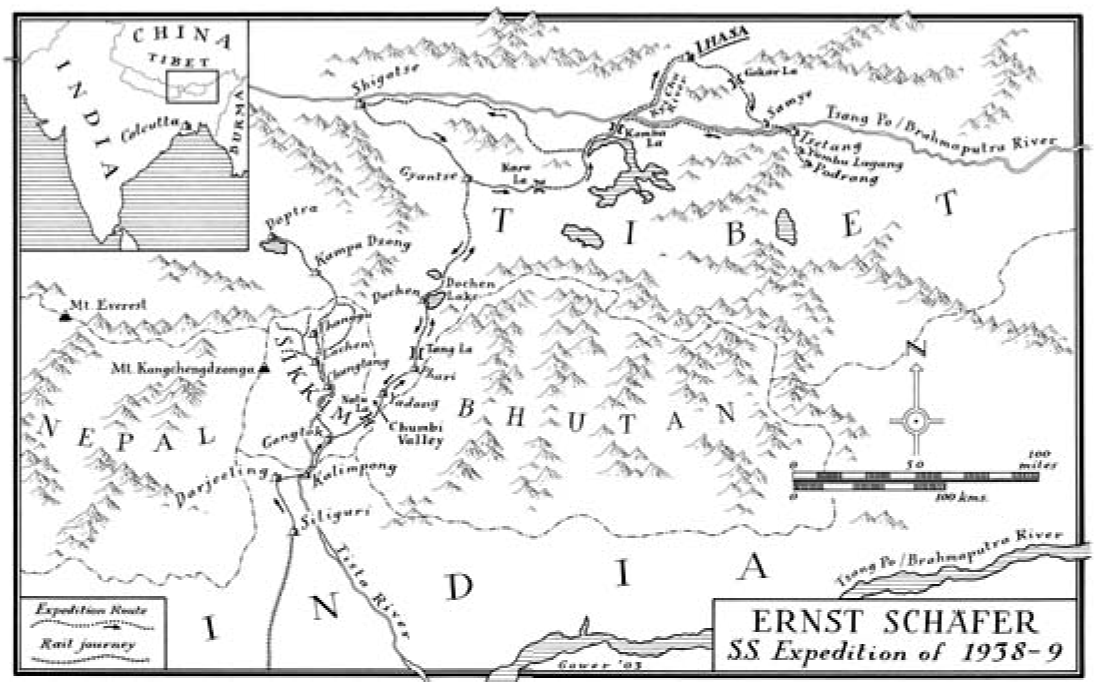
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PRELUDE

APPOINTMENT IN BERLIN

‘If the fate [of the Nazis] lay in my hands . . . I would have all the intellectuals strung up, and the professors three feet higher than the rest; they would be left hanging from the lamp-posts for as long as was compatible with hygiene.’

– German-Jewish diarist Victor Klemperer, writing in August 1936

At the beginning of 1939, Adolf Hitler unveiled his new Reichs Chancellery building in Berlin. It had been designed and built by the Führer’s protégé Albert Speer with ruthless speed, and completed, as Hitler had demanded, in less than a year. Speer promised that the new building would last a millennium, at least. Hitler was very clear about what the Chancellery had to achieve. Anyone who stepped through its soaring marble portals and gazed along its gleaming, interminable marble corridors would understand instantly that they were in the presence of a Master Race destined to rule for a thousand years. Knowing that, Hitler said, they would ‘shiver and shake’. A mere six years later, the Chancellery lay in ruins; Hitler’s own charred remains smouldered nearby. Just as its millions of victims had, in Paul Celan’s words, ‘risen to the air as smoke’, the Third Reich

was rubble and ashes. The *Tausend-Jahr-Reich* had lasted a mere twelve years and three months.

At the beginning of another century, the leaden sky over Berlin is backdrop to a steel forest of cranes. Beneath their restlessly signalling arms, a new German capital is being conjured from concrete, marble, glass and steel. Glittering new façades ripple down Friedrichstrasse and Unter den Linden. Cherished monuments from better times before Hitler are lovingly restored, even rebuilt. The old, divided Berlin of the Cold War with its fractured topography is slowly and surely being smoothed and soothed away.

There are places in Berlin that stubbornly resist this crossing out, where memory still clings to walls and burrows beneath rubble or lurks in forgotten cellars. There is, for example, Tiergartenstrasse 4 where Hitler's *Schreibtischtäter* – 'desk-bound criminals' – deliberated on the killing of mental patients and other 'lives not worthy of life'. And hidden in trees behind Berlin's thronging lakeside pleasure beaches is Am Grossen Wannsee 56–58, the gracious villa where Adolf Eichmann and his SS bureaucrats discussed the practical details of how to murder six million people.

Another such place exists in the old heart of Berlin. It is a great slab of real estate ringed by wire fences. Inside is a pyramid of broken rubble and weeds. Acres of yellowing and ragged grass spread from its base. On the edge are trees, survivors from an old garden. Behind frayed trunks and dusty leaves are broken walls and cairns of charred masonry. This obstinate urban desert occupies an entire city block on Niederkirchnerstrasse, close to the looming granite hulk of Hermann Göring's old Luftwaffe headquarters. Berliners know this unlovely place as the 'Topography of Terror'. Before 1945, and the destruction of Hitler's Reich, Niederkirchnerstrasse had another name. Then it was called Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, and number 8 was the most feared address in Nazi Germany.

Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8 was a magnificent baroque palace. Prussia's greatest architect, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, who believed that architecture should serve the cause of human reason, had designed its elegant interiors and sweeping cast-iron stairs. After 1933, Schinkel's resplendent palace had been appropriated for new purposes. In its offices and corridors, bureaucrats in perfectly tailored black uniforms adorned with silver death's-head insignia scurried from office to meeting and back again to do the bidding of the second most powerful man in the Nazi elite: the Reichsführer, Heinrich Himmler. All of these bright, well-turned-out young men were in the business of terror.

Himmler wanted his SS to be 'an aristocracy that never [grew] old'. They had to be 'the best physically, the most dependable, the most faithful men in the movement'. They were the new Teutonic Knights dedicated to *Herrenbewusstsein* (master consciousness) and *Elitebewusstsein* (elite consciousness). Every one of Himmler's Black Knights had been stringently vetted by white-coated laboratory technicians wielding callipers and measuring tape – and now they could work and act, above the law, to serve and protect the Aryan Master Race and crush its enemies.

One morning in the summer of 1936, a young SS Untersturmführer, Ernst Schäfer, emerged from the entrance of Hohenzollerndam 36 in Berlin's fashionable Wilmersdorf district, crossed the street and caught the S-Bahn to Potsdamerplatz. Outside the station he pushed his way through the surging crowds to the street. Here he waited impatiently for the famous traffic light to change, then strode across dodging the honking cars and swiftly moving through the knots of people clustered around the teeming intersection. Then Ernst Schäfer headed off past the Ethnological Museum towards Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse where he had an appointment with the Reichsführer.

Schäfer had been away from Germany a long time and Berlin still surprised him with its prosperity and optimism. Shops were full of most imaginable luxuries, and every night Berliners flocked in their thousands to cinemas, dance halls and theatres. Once feared and despised, Germany's dictator Adolf Hitler was riding a wave of adulation. In March, he had ordered his troops to reclaim the Rhineland for Germany, and many admired his daring. After the long-drawn-out humiliation of Versailles, Germans were rediscovering the thrill of national pride. Unemployment had fallen and there were abundant signs of prosperity. New organizations like 'Strength through Joy' sponsored holidays and cruises for the loyal and hard-working. Even liberal Germans had somehow been persuaded that vicious attacks on Jews and political opponents were becoming less ferocious. In an election held that year, the Nazis had won 98.9 per cent of the vote – which was not especially surprising since they were the only party permitted to stand.

It was all a sham, a mask to hide tyranny and murder. In the summer of 1936, as Ernst Schäfer marched towards Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8, it was very important that Germany looked its best. In August, Berlin would host the Olympic Games, and many thousands of visitors would be here – and taking a tough look at Hitler's New Order. All over the city there was a frenzy of building work and renovation. A new stadium had been thrown up in record time. Hemlines were higher. More than seven thousand prostitutes had been permitted to return to the streets. New lime trees were being planted in Unter den Linden. And with stunning cynicism, signs forbidding Jews to enter cities or public spaces had been hurriedly torn down and prisoners released from Himmler's concentration camps. It was a whitewash of monumental proportions, but it worked. It would have impressed an ambitious young man who had not seen the Fatherland for more than two years.

Although he was only twenty-six, Schäfer had already enjoyed a most unusual and plucky career. He was a fanatical hunter and naturalist and had taken part in two ambitious American-led expeditions to China and the perilous eastern borders of Tibet. He was a crack shot and had, in the name of science, cut a swathe of destruction through the fauna of these remote and hazardous regions. On his return to Germany, soon after the Nazi victory in 1933, Schäfer had eagerly joined Himmler's elite SS and had been rapidly promoted. Then he had left Germany again, this time for an even longer period. Despite – perhaps because of – his globetrotting, Schäfer had yet to complete his academic studies. He was now hard at work cataloguing his collection of Tibetan birds so that he could acquire his all-important *Doktortitel* (the equivalent of a Ph.D.). Hundreds of their skins littered his desk. Fiercely ambitious and energetic, Schäfer had, however, already started publishing. His first book, *Mountains, Buddhas and Bears*, was brewed from light science mixed with hunting yarns and wordy descriptions of a mysterious faraway world. Its success had already given him a taste of modest celebrity. Schäfer had certainly attracted the attention of the Nazi elite: he shared a passion for hunting with the Reichsmarschall, Hermann Göring. And now, he hoped, Heinrich Himmler was about to add more lustre to his career.

Schäfer paused for a moment to admire the baroque splendour of Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8. There were not many pedestrians lingering there, and it is unlikely that the few who passed quickly by would have recognized this dapper young man as the grizzled author of *Mountains, Buddhas and Bears*. In the wilds of the Tibetan badlands, Schäfer had looked every inch the fearless hunter – a German Teddy Roosevelt, his youth masked by a full beard, clasping the stock of his Mauser rifle with its lethal telescopic sight and proudly cradling beneath his arm a trophy culled from the

thick bamboo forests of Kham: a dead panda, only the second to be shot in the wild. As he stood on the steps of the SS headquarters, Schäfer, bereft of beard and gun, seemed just another callow, eager youth. His features, under a shorn crop of dark hair, were not especially distinguished and his build not quite that of an Aryan warrior. More perceptive observers would have noted the obstinate gleam in his eyes and the pugnacity of his stance: Ernst Schäfer was very definitely used to getting his own way and knew what the *Führer prinzip* meant in practice. After a few moments' hesitation, he entered the SS headquarters and was escorted up Schinkel's elegant iron staircase. For Schäfer, what followed would be transforming.

Accounts of meetings with the Reichsführer have an unusual consistency. After passing the cordon of tall, blue-eyed, black-clad SS bodyguards, privileged visitors were ushered into Himmler's unexpectedly drab and poky offices. Few would be unaware that in cells excavated deep beneath them enemies of the Reich were being tortured on the orders of the modest, professorial man they were about to meet and few failed to comment on Himmler's unassuming physical attributes. 'To outward appearance', said one, he was 'a grotesque caricature of his own laws, norms and ideals'; to another he seemed 'mild-looking, mild-mannered, rather self effacing . . . His very indefinite features and his glasses make him look rather insignificant . . .' According to some he was the acme of charm and modesty; for others he radiated a warm, paternalist care.

It was an illusion, of course, a triumph of the will. Behind the pince-nez, usually held askance so that a gleaming reflection hid what lay behind, were eyes without mercy that could patiently examine, for hour after hour, lists of names or photographs of SS applicants, searching for any indication of racial inferiority. Henrich Himmler was fixated by secrets and plots, imagined and real, and would become

the most implacable and lethal ‘desk criminal’ in the Third Reich.

The Reichsführer had by 1936 acquired colossal power. He was Hitler’s ‘*treuer Heinrich*’, the loyal and devoted chief of the German police, with complete mastery of every police department in the Reich. He and his loyal officers were rulers of a new empire of concentration camps which they ruthlessly filled and exploited. Himmler was also using his new powers to indulge some decidedly odd passions. He had recently founded the Ahnenerbe, meaning ‘Ancestral Heritage’, to promote the glory of the Aryan race. He shared at least one passion with Ernst Schäfer. Himmler had modelled the SS on a Hindu warrior caste and was fascinated by the East and its religions. He hated Christianity and carried a pocket book in which he had collected homilies from the Hindu *Bhagavadgītā* (‘Song of the Lord’). To the unimpressive little man who sat inside the poisonous spider’s web of the SS, Ernst Schäfer was an emissary from another mysterious and thrilling world.

The Reichsführer looked up as the man he had summoned to his lair was announced. He leant across his orderly, paper-strewn desk to shake his visitor’s hand, and asked his adjutant to close the door.

There is no record of the conversation that took place between Heinrich Himmler and Ernst Schäfer that day in the Olympic summer of 1936, but what was said changed Schäfer’s life for ever. We do know that this meeting began a close, frequently tense and sometimes argumentative friendship. There are other clues about what took place and what was discussed in documents held by the United States National Archives in Washington. In the summer of 1945, Schäfer was captured in Munich by the Allies as they swept through Bavaria, the old Nazi stronghold. Because he was an officer in a ‘criminal organization’, the SS, he, like more than ten thousand other Germans, would now endure ‘de-

nazification’. Schäfer was interned for three long, uncomfortable years in Camp Moosburg (formerly POW Camp Stalag VII). He had to fight hard to get his *Persilschein*, the much-coveted certificate of exoneration. Now, for the benefit of his American interrogators, he had nothing but contempt for Himmler. When they met, Schäfer recalled, Himmler had disclosed a few of his more original convictions. The Aryan race, he believed, had descended directly and fully formed ‘from heaven’. Races of giants had once roamed the earth. The universe had been formed from a cosmic battle between fire and ice. Schäfer told his interrogators that he had thought such ideas were absurd, laughable. It would have been impossible, he implied, for a hard-headed scientist such as himself to have admired a man like that.

Schäfer was, naturally, being disingenuous. For him, intellectual fastidiousness never hardened into rebellion. And there was a good reason. At some point during their conversation, Himmler must have asked Schäfer about his plans for the future. It must have been the opportunity Schäfer had hoped for. This, after all, was why he had come to the Reichsführer’s sett. It is certain that Schäfer revealed his plan for a new expedition to Tibet, this time under the German flag with men of his own blood. He would have explained that, at this stage, there were a number of exciting possibilities. There was Amne Machin, the mysterious mountain in eastern Tibet that Schäfer had glimpsed on his last expedition which some said was as high as Everest and so far unconquered. Further south, Assam was largely unexplored, its wild and dangerous tribes unknown to science. And he is very likely to have reminded Himmler that Sven Hedin, the celebrated Swedish explorer who was a frequent and admiring visitor to Nazi Germany, had failed to reach Lhasa, the ‘Forbidden City’ of Tibet. Hedin had called it the city of his dreams. Lhasa, surely, could become much more than a dream – indeed, the jewel

in the crown of German exploration. Schäfer was always persuasive, whether he was talking to a Chinese warlord, the Panchen Lama or the Reichsführer, and that morning in 1936 he must have thrilled Himmler with his stories about the icy world of the Himalayas and the secrets that lay beyond its frozen ramparts. It was an expert seduction, and Himmler eagerly proposed that Schäfer join forces with the Ahnenerbe, which was also planning expeditions to Afghanistan and Iceland. To be sure, a 'German Tibet Expedition' would have his blessing.

There is a photograph of Ernst Schäfer taken not long before he died in 1992. His eyes are withdrawn and hurt; his jaw juts defensively. To his persistent and well-informed interrogators at Camp Moosburg, Schäfer did his best to present himself as an unwilling recruit to the SS. He had even seriously considered exile in the United States. Like many others drawn into the world of the Reichsführer, Schäfer might indeed have experienced some moral discomfort. But by becoming one of Himmler's favourites – even if, as it would turn out, an unruly one – he had taken a decisive step. It was one that would make him a hero of the Reich – and then, when it was destroyed, an outcast.

In the wild, Schäfer had a favourite book. He read it night after night, under hissing kerosene lamps, in the freezing wilderness of Tibet. The book was Goethe's *Faust*. It is presumptuous to try to imagine Schäfer's thoughts as he walked away from Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8 and back into the sunlight and crowds to return to the dead birds strewn across his desk. But we can be certain that, like so many other scientists, doctors, lawyers and artists, Schäfer understood that Himmler had offered him something rare and precious. He could become part of an elite – and it promised him a great deal. He might have remembered the words Mephistopheles says to Faust: 'Sublime good fortune greets you now . . . The whole world lies in your embrace.' It

is rather less likely that he would have reflected on the implications of Faust's speech a few pages later:

How logical and clear the daylight seems
Till the night weaves us in its web of dreams!
As we return from dewy fields, dusk falls
And birds of mischief croak their ominous calls.
All round us lurks this superstition's snare;
Some haunting, half-seen thing cries out Beware.[1]

INTRODUCTION

SECRET TIBET

‘. . . it looked to Conway a delightfully favoured place, though if it were inhabited its community must be completely isolated by the lofty and sheerly unscalable ranges on the further side.’

– James Hilton, *Lost Horizon*, 1933

At the beginning of January 1939, five Europeans with a caravan of servants and muleteers approached Lhasa, the Holy City of Tibet. They had travelled across the Himalayas from Sikkim, a tiny kingdom in northern India, and would spend the next eight months in Tibet. They did research which mystified the Tibetans, and occasionally hunted. They took more than 60,000 photographs and exposed more than 120,000 feet of movie film. At a time when Tibet awaited the arrival of a new Dalai Lama, the five Europeans formed close, sometimes intimate friendships with Tibetan nobles and religious leaders, including the Regent. They clashed frequently with the British Mission officer stationed in Lhasa who had tried to prevent their journey and bitterly resented their presence in the ‘Forbidden City’. In August 1939, the five men fled south to Calcutta taking with them 120 volumes of the Tibetan ‘Bible’, the *Kangyur*, hundreds of precious artefacts and assorted rare animals. At the mouth

of the Hoogli River, they boarded a seaplane and began the long journey home – first to Baghdad, then to Berlin. Home for the five Europeans was Nazi Germany. When their aircraft touched down at Tempelhof Airport an ecstatic Heinrich Himmler was waiting on the runway. For the Reichsführer, the ‘German Tibet Expedition’ had been a triumph.

At the end of August, the SS stage-managed a series of provocations on the Polish border. On 1 September, Hitler ordered his generals to attack. Fifty German divisions smashed the Polish defences from three sides: the Second World War had begun. The five men who had returned in triumph from Tibet now became combatants in an imperialist and genocidal war. What could link an expedition to central Asia with the global catastrophe unleashed by Adolf Hitler in 1939? Few historians have even troubled to ask the question.[1] But the true story of this little expedition, told for the first time in this book, reveals that it was a summit of German imperial and racial fantasy.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, Tibet and its Holy City of Lhasa were closed to foreigners. Both the Tibetans and their powerful neighbour China feared, with good cause, imperial incursions. Despite this, an intrepid handful of explorers succeeded in penetrating the high, icy realm and even its mysterious capital – often in disguise and usually at considerable risk. They returned with astonishing tales which quickly transformed Tibet into the quintessence of the forbidden and exotic. By the 1930s, Tibet had become more accessible but the Himalayan passes remained strictly controlled by both the Tibetan government and the British – nervous masters of the Indian Raj to the south of the Himalayas.

The five Germans who arrived in Lhasa at the beginning of 1939 were rather different from the adventurers and diplomats who had embarked on pilgrimages over the Himalayas before. This would not have been evident, quite

deliberately on their part, as they rode through the Barkokali Gate and looked up at the empty palace of the Dalai Lamas, but two days earlier, when the expedition was being ferried across the Tsang Po River, an observer might have glimpsed two rather unusual flags strapped to poles. One was a swastika, an ancient symbol of good fortune which represented the Wheel of Life in Tibet but since 1933 had been the national flag of Nazi Germany. The other showed double 'Sieg' runes: the pagan Germanic letter for victory, the unmistakable and chilling insignia of Heinrich Himmler's SS (from *Schutzstaffeln*, meaning 'protective squads'). Every one of the five German scientists was also an officer in the SS. They had journeyed from Hitler's Germany to the 'roof of the world' under the command of SS Hauptsturmführer Ernst Schäfer. They were the first official German expedition to enter Tibet and reach Lhasa, its holy city.

What were SS scientists sponsored by Heinrich Himmler doing in Tibet as Europe edged towards the precipice of war? Many different explanations have been offered and scores of conflicting stories told. Here are some of them: 'The German expedition to Tibet had as its mission the discovery of a connection between lost Atlantis and the first civilization of Central Asia'; 'Schäfer believed that Tibet was the cradle of mankind, the refuge of an "Aryan root race", where a caste of priests had created a mysterious empire of knowledge, called Shambhala, adorned with the Buddhist wheel of life, the swastika'; 'This small troop delivered to the Dalai Lama a radio transceiver to establish contacts between Lhasa and Berlin'; 'The SS men were magicians, who had forged alliances with the mystic Tibetan cities of Agarthi and Shambhala and had mastered the forces of the living universe'; 'They had mined a secret substance to prolong life and to be used as a superconductor for higher states of conscience'; 'In the ruins of Berlin, a thousand

bodies with no identity papers were discovered by the Red Army. They were all Tibetans.'[2]

Every one of these statements is false; some are transparently foolish. In 1939, for instance, the 14th Dalai Lama had yet to be enthroned and Tibet was ruled by a regent. But like a clouded and broken mirror, these fantasies both mask and reflect the true story, which is altogether more remarkable. Its roots are buried deep in the nineteenth century but it unfolded in central Asia on the eve of a world war that was to consume the nations of Europe and the Far East. The final act was played out thousands of miles from the snow-shrouded peaks and plateaus of Tibet in the death camps ruled by the SS. It is, at its core, a story of vaunting ambition and ambivalent retribution.

Although Reichsführer Himmler made only a modest financial donation to its costs, the German Tibet Expedition was a pet project. Himmler has been called the 'Ignatius Loyola of the SS' and 'the architect of the Final Solution', the Nazi plan to make Germany 'Jew free'. His passionately held and deadly 'theories' about race were, in part, corrupted Darwin. As Himmler began a spectacular ascent through the ranks of the Nazi Party, he had tried to earn a living as a breeder of chickens. When in 1933 he and the Nazis took power, he began to apply the lessons of the hutch to the Fatherland itself. The *Herrenvolk*, or Master Race, he believed, must be protected from *minderwertigen*, inferior peoples who could contaminate their pure blood and its qualities: 'The German people, especially German youth, have learned once again to value people racially . . . to look at bodily forms and according to the value or non value of this our God-given body and our God-given blood . . .'[3] 'Bodily forms' were a preoccupation for one member of the German Tibet Expedition, its anthropologist Bruno Beger.

Himmler's racial fantasies were nourished by many malign currents of thought which he promoted through the SS. By 1937, he had become master of a security empire that

reached into every part of the Third Reich. He had turned the SS into a national police force, an avaricious business empire and finally a murder machine. Himmler wanted even more. The SS would also be a university for Hitler's New Order. As he refined the instruments of terror and control, the Reichsführer was ever more in thrall to a bewildering multitude of peculiar intellectual hobbies and scientific fads. Himmler sent archaeologists to search for the remains of an ancient Germanic super race. He was fascinated by the lost kingdom of Atlantis and a cranky idea called the 'World Ice Theory'. (In one letter, written in 1940, he requested an urgent investigation: what might be the connections between the lineage of the biblical House of David and the 'records of the kings of Atlantis'? Could the biblical scribes have been mere plagiarists?[4] There is no record of a reply.) He used his empire of concentration camps to pursue experiments with homoeopathy and herbal medicine. He revered the ancient cultures of India and the East, or at least his own weird vision of them.

These were not private enthusiasms, and they were certainly not harmless. Cranky pseudoscience nourished Himmler's own murderous convictions about race and inspired ways of convincing others. At his SS stronghold, Wewelsburg Castle in Westphalia, refurbished by slave labourers procured from a concentration camp that had been specially built nearby, Himmler used ritual and myth to inculcate *Herrenbewusstsein* (master consciousness) in elite members of the SS. Some of these men were aristocrats; many more were academics, lawyers and doctors, the cream of Germany's professional classes. Like Ernst Schäfer, they were young, impatient, pushy, cutting edge. When they had proved themselves, the Reichsführer sent them forth to do battle with the race enemies of the Reich and rob them of their wealth. The most ruthless would become the CEOs of the death camps. In this strange and terrible world, myths were the building blocks of genocide. They had this

power because Himmler's passions were myths that masqueraded as science.

Himmler regarded himself not as the fantasist he was but as a patron of science. He believed that most conventional wisdom was bogus and that his power gave him a unique opportunity to promulgate new thinking. He founded the Ahnenerbe specifically to advance the study of the Aryan (or Nordic or Indo-German) race and its origins.[5] From the Ahnenerbe headquarters in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem, archaeologists were sent hither and yon to unearth the glories of Aryan prehistory. And woe betide them if they failed to uncover the potsherds and trinkets of the *Herrenvolk*. Scientists were set to work to prove that a cosmic battle between fire and ice had brought forth a race of supermen in the distant past. Anthropologists collected the skulls and skeletons of Aryans and made meticulous measurements in search of far-flung ancestors or cousins, and scientific expeditions were despatched to unearth the remnants of long-lost Aryan races, from whom all pure Germans descended. The German Tibet Exhibition was the most ambitious of these quests.

There was a logic behind the fantasy. One German cultural historian put it like this: 'the work of our ancestors . . . represents the great legal brief for territory'.[6] The activities of the Ahnenerbe, as well as legions of art historians, prepared the ground for conquest. With ancestors could come territory and the *Lebensraum* ('living space') that obsessed Hitler. If it could be proved that German blood had contributed to an apparently foreign culture or people, the Wehrmacht could follow. This is perhaps what Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring meant when he said, 'When I hear the word "culture", I cock my Browning' – in other words, culture justified conquest. Himmler's ancestor cult was the mainspring of aggression and scientific expeditions were one way of asserting future territorial rights. This was not a Nazi invention. During the First World

War, such expeditions were frequently used as a cover for espionage by Germany.

Ernst Schäfer, who led the German Tibet Expedition, was described by one British diplomat as ‘first and foremost always a Nazi and a politician – and almost a priest of Nazism’.[7] The British diplomat Hugh Richardson, who was in Lhasa in 1939, remembered Schäfer as ‘an out and out Nazi’. But whatever his political convictions, Schäfer was no crank. He was a fastidious zoologist with a passion for Tibetan birds. The men he selected as fellow expeditionists were just as painstaking, their work equally as rooted in empirical observation. Ernst Krause was a botanist and entomologist; Karl Wienert was a geographer whose task was to measure variations in the earth’s magnetic field in the Himalayas; and Bruno Beger was an anthropologist who would spend his time in Tibet measuring the heads and bodies of its people.

Here, then, is the first big puzzle: what did Himmler want from a zoologist, a geographer and an anthropologist? This leads to another, even more troubling mystery: what did *they* want from him? What was the function and value of these very diverse sciences in the Third Reich? I have used the story of Ernst Schäfer’s expedition to try to answer these questions. But the journey should not be a blind one; we will need some working hypotheses.

First of all, the history of the SS shows that Himmler collected men like Schäfer to add prestige and glamour to the SS. Some – and Schäfer is a good example – were genuine, even rather workaday scientists, but many were frauds and cranks. All of them, though, were opportunists who fluttered eagerly around the SS flame. From the point of view of Schäfer, who was highly driven, securing the admiration of Heinrich Himmler was, in the words of Shakespeare’s Brutus, ‘young ambition’s ladder’ to attain ‘the upmost round’.[8] Hindsight judges men like these harshly, and with good reason. But simple disgust fails to

come to grips with *why* intellectuals and scientists flocked to serve the Reich.

Imagine you are young and ambitious and waiting one foggy morning on a platform at Zoo Station in Berlin. When you think about the academic or professional world you work in, you see dead wood everywhere, old stick-in-the-mud professors or ambitious Jews blocking your way. Then, with a triumphant roar, a train pulls alongside. It is new, gleaming, powerful, and gives a definite impression it is going places. On the destination board you can see 'Professorships, Institutes, Laboratories – Last Stop: Glory'. Inside you can see sleek, well-nourished passengers who have boarded at other stops. They are, to be sure, a mixed bunch, perhaps even a little sinister. They wear black uniforms emblazoned with lightning bolts and death's heads. Stepping down from a carriage to greet you is a plump, smiling, rather professorial man. He wants to know if pure German blood runs in your veins, and you are certain that it does. It appears to be an innocuous enquiry. Satisfied with your *bona fides*, he invites you on board – and by now the train whistle is blowing insistently. Do you, as Ernst Schäfer did in the Olympic summer of 1936, get on board?

Sheer ambition will probably provide one answer, but perplexing ambiguities still attach to Schäfer's motivations and his response to the regime he served. Was he the 'priest of Nazism' described in the British records or an ambitious scientist, blind to everything but his work, who was handed irresistible research opportunities by a mass murderer? Was he both at once? How much did he know about what went on outside his laboratory? Frustratingly, while page after page of his diaries describe, at tedious length, birds and beasts, mountains and clouds, they give almost nothing away about his inner life. That was not his intention. We do have the record provided by his 'Interrogation Reports', but Schäfer, like many who served Himmler, was a complex, inscrutable man. He was both