

„Mankind & Power“: World War II

Part 5: Summiteers and Fennecs – Adventurers and Explorers serving Adolf Hitler

The expeditions of Heinrich Harrer, Ladislaus Almasy, and others into the Himalaya and the Sahara are legendary still today. In the beginning these adventurers and explorers used the NS-regime for their ambitious plans, and later on they were used themselves by the NS-regime: First of all as propagandist ambassadors to carry this ideology of "mankind of mastering" into far off continents, and later on as soldiers with special commands and as spies on far off battle lines in Africa and central Asia. For the fifth and last part of the 5-part-series "Mankind & Power" about World War II Tom Matzek (ORF-documentation), the Himalaya mountaineer Bruno Baumann, and the Sahara-expert Raoul Schrott started off on a tracking which demonstrated for the first time how famous adventurers and explorers were deployed in World War II. ORF 2 shows "Summiteers and Fennecs – Adventurers and Explorers serving Adolf Hitler" on Thursday, 24th of September at 9:05 p.m.

Exotic expeditions between the two world wars did not only fascinate people who could not travel themselves but also the progressive ideological thinkers of the National Socialism. Thus, the mountains of the Himalaya were used as an ideal stage for demonstrating with summiteers the superiority of the "Aryan race" (especially as the Himalaya was supposed to be the primeval native country of the "Aryans"). The best national mountaineers like Heinrich Harrer – the first to climb the North Wall of the Eiger – or the Caucasus-pioneer Rudolf Schwarzgruber were sent to this battle of propaganda in the mountains.

A few years later the alpine abilities of these Himalaya-stars were needed in the war – for the breakneck-command in the mountains of the Caucasus: The exoneration attack for Stalingrad. And also for the Himalaya there existed military plans. The plan was to win the Tibetans as allies to lead a guerrilla war against British India.

This plan à la Lawrence of Arabia did not work out in Tibet, but in the Sahara such a raid worked out even better. The so called Operation Salam is known as a coup de main in the history of the German African-campaign. This was only possible because it was executed by an Austrian of the old Austria who was one of the best connoisseurs of the Sahara: Ladislaus Almasy - known from the film "The English Patient" – who brought the Nazi-agents through the desert on far off routes past the British battle lines into the Nil-valley.

These stories have been kept secret for decades. The documentation analyzes for the first time detailed the complexity between expeditions, politics, and war. Tom Matzek, Bruno Baumann, Raoul Schrott, and the Canadian NS-expert Heather Pringle undertook expeditions themselves to the original locations of this film; tracing the historic adventures the film was made in the central Sahara, in the Bolivian Andes, and in the Gharwal-

Himalaya. It was obvious that the signs of war are still visible today: there are still buildings of the internment camp in which Heinrich Harrer was kept as a prisoner by the British from 1939 to 1944, described in the bestseller "Seven Years in Tibet".

A special discovery was made by the ORF-expedition team in the Egyptian Sahara on the tracks of the "Operation Salam". With help of the logbook of Ladislaus Almasy, satellite photos, and English military maps a secret supply-depot was searched for - and found. A Wehrmacht-canister, car tyres, parts of a canvas cover for a lorry, and a uniform jacket outlasted 60 years in the desert sand as remains of one of the most spectacular secret service operations in World War II.