In 1929 Germany launched its first post-war Himalayan mountain-climbing expedition to Kanchenjunga under the leadership of Paul Bauer. Its goals were explicitly nationalistic, motivated by a desire to rebuild a faith in German manhood and to firmly leave behind the defeat and humiliation experienced in the First World War. Bauer’s various accounts of the Kanchenjunga expeditions in 1929 and 1931 are shot through with the language of struggle and military metaphors, the celebration of mountaineering comradeship harking back to the camaraderie of the trenches. Underpinning it all was a sense of German national destiny expressed in the language of national ideology and ‘struggle’ (Kampf). Mountains as sites of struggle, resilience and death were increasingly a feature of German culture in the floodlit 1920s and early 1930s, and this nation’s fortunes increasingly seen as embedded in mountaineering achievement.

In 1924 the German film director Arnold Fanck premiered his hugely popular film Mountain Destiny (Berger des Schicksals), a phrase that subsequently became associated with German mountaineering attempts on Nanga Parbat after 1932.

Writing in 1934, Bauer noted that the German participation in the struggle for the world’s highest mountains had been decisively influenced by the experience of war:

“The German … soldier has learned to accept everything without hope of any payment other than the awareness of having fulfilled his duty. To do something for its own sake, even when it was hard and filled, was not foreign to him … for them, the struggle for struggle’s sake was nothing new, the loyalty towards the greater objectives a matter of course. Out of this attitude the first German Himalayan expeditions of the postwar era were conceived.”

H. Höber, Mountain of Destiny: Nanga Parbat and Its Path into the German Imagination (2014), 3

Starting in the post-imperial era, the 1929 expedition approached Kanchenjunga from the east via Sikkim. Establishing camps on the Zemu Glacier as they went, the Germans were still under the impression that Kanchenjunga was the second highest mountain in the world, that its ultimate conquest would re-establish German standing on the world stage. On the Upper Zemu Glacier they established Camp VI at 5200m and contemplated their objectives, the North East Face, a daunting series of precipices that they hoped would lead to the North Ridge at about 8000m. All throughout September 1929, the Germans moved their way up, some of the most difficult terrain that had ever been tackled at these altitudes.

But before the deadly focus on Nanga Parbat, two German expeditions attempted to forge their way to the summit of Kanchenjunga and establish it as the German nation’s 1st Himalayan ‘Mountain of Destiny’.

Bauer’s 1929 expedition report was published in 1931 as Im Kampf um den Himalaja: Der erste Deutche Angriff auf den Kamchenzanga (1929) (Struggle for the Himalayas: The First German Attack on Kanchenjunga 1929), a book winning a gold medal for literature at the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. With Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, Bauer became head (1934–1938) of the newly formed Fachkommission für Bergsteigen und Wandern in der Deutschen Reichsleitung für Leistungssport (Specialist Office for mountain climbing and hiking in the German Reich Federation for Physical Education), an organisation that centralized all of Germany’s and Austria’s pre-war mountaineering bodies under the ultimate control of Reichssportführer Hans von Tschammer und Osten. Bauer enthusiastically propagated the notion that high-altitude mountaineering could contribute to German national renewal under National Socialism, arguing that mountaineering was the equal of armed conflict in terms of its power to forge the national character.

Kanchenjunga remained the focus of intense mountaineering activity over the next few years. In 1933 Ernst O. Dytham led an international expedition to the mountain and in 1931 Bauer returned for another German assault on the North East Spur.Establishing Camp IX they were again turned back just below the North Ridge at an altitude of 7940m. Kanchenjunga, it seemed, had nothing to offer but hard and bitter struggle with little hope of reward. The focus of German Himalayan ambition shifted to Nanga Parbat in 1932 and over the next seven years a further four German expeditions were to attempt Nanga Parbat. Kanchenjunga was finally climbed in 1938 by a British expedition, led by John Brown and George Band leaving the last few metres of this mountain untrodden out of respect for indigenous religious beliefs in Nepal and Sikkim.

Patmos

By Friedrich Hölderlin
Translated by Tony Braddock

God is near. And difficult to hold. But blessings grow Where danger is – A hand of white. While mountain children walk From edge to edge on fragile bridges Time bears mountains – There we are. We are near But far. Worn down on isolated summits Give us Water. Give us sight and faithful Thoughts to seek and to return.