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 a double thunderbolt – 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 driven and tormented – and, as this story will show, he took moral as well as physical risks in pursuit of the treasures he hoped to find inside the 'Snowy Fortress' of Tibet.

The foremost authority on Schäfer's life and work, Dr Isrun Engelhardt, has concluded that the Schäfer Expedition was 'purely scientific'. It is only because of the historical context of Germany in the 1930s, she argues, that we view its goals as somehow sinister. Engelhardt's conclusions are based on meticulous and original scholarship. But while the idea of 'Nazi botany' or 'Nazi ornithology' is probably absurd, other sciences are not so innocent – and Schäfer's small expedition represented a cross-section of German science in the 1930s. And this has considerable significance.

It is now conclusively established that under the Third Reich anthropology and medicine were cold-bloodedly exploited to support and enact a murderous creed. One of Schäfer's colleagues demonstrates this all too well. Bruno Beger, the expedition's anthropologist, was a highly educated man who had studied at some of Germany's most prestigious universities. In the course of his lengthy education, he had absorbed from his professors ideas about race and the origin of the Germans that he hoped to prove in Tibet. Somewhere in central Asia, he was convinced, were the distant relations of the Aryan race itself.[9] Beger had seen photographs of the Tibetan nobility and suspected that their fine, elongated features provided evidence of a link to an older, founding race that came from northern Europe.

In June 1943 Beger undertook another journey in pursuit of Aryan ancestors who had proved to be rather elusive in Tibet. His destination was the Auschwitz concentration camp. Here he made a selection of more than a hundred Jews and prisoners from central Asia. He measured their skulls and bodies and had face masks made. When Beger left Auschwitz and returned to Berlin, every one of the men and women he had worked on were gassed. Their corpses were delivered to SS Dr August Hirt, an old friend of Beger, to become part of a university anatomical collection. By this time, Schäfer was the proud head of his own 'Institute for Central Asian Research', named after Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, headquartered in a castle near Strasbourg. He was pleased when Beger, as instructed, sent him the

data and face masks he had acquired in Auschwitz. One individual, Beger was pleased to report, had 'perfect Tibetan features'.

The five men who rode into Lhasa in January 1939 were not prophets. Like millions of other Germans they hoped, indeed expected, that a European war would be averted. It is unlikely that in 1939 they could have foreseen that their patron would promote the worst genocide in human history. But they were, by choice, SS officers and, in Schäfer's case, intimate with the man who would order millions to be annihilated. They had all boarded the train and could not alter its destination. It would take them to the Forbidden City of Tibet, but it did not stop there. It had other destinations, other purposes, as this book will show.

The German Tibet Expedition is also a story of Tibet. When Schäfer and his companions arrived in Lhasa this unique nation was at a crossroads. The 14th Dalai Lama, a three-year-old child, had recently been 'discovered' in a remote village close to the border with China and was about to be brought to Lhasa for his enthronement. Since the death of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1933, Tibet had been consumed by bitter rivalries and had seen violence that emulated any Jacobean tragedy. Its government, the Kashag, regarded both the Chinese and the British warily. They were vulnerable and divided. When he arrived in Lhasa, Schäfer learnt all he could about these tensions and fears – and exploited them.

In 1940 a secret warning was issued to German newspapers by Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. It blocked any further reports about expeditions to Tibet: 'The Reich's Leader of the SS requests there be no further reports on his expedition to Tibet, until he himself gives the go-sign. The chief task of the Tibet expedition is of a political and military nature, and hasn't so much to do with the solution of scientific questions. Details may not be revealed.'[10] Records in the Bundesarchiv in Berlin show that, just months after his return to Germany, Schäfer hatched up a plot to return to Tibet, this time through the Soviet Union, which had become an ally of Nazi Germany. Schäfer would train bands of nomads and turn them into a fighting guerrilla army before unleashing them against the British. This is a matter of record. But did Schäfer begin laying plans for this hare-brained insurrection *before* his return to Germany and Hitler's invasion of Poland? I find it exceedingly odd that Schäfer, a passionate zoologist and hunter, should spend *close to three months* in Lhasa hobnobbing with Tibetan nobles and the Regent. Was Schäfer a scientist or a spy, or both at once?

These are some of the puzzles that attach to the German Tibet Expedition. There are others that will emerge in the course of the story that follows. The solutions, some of which must be conjectural, will link Beger's anthropology and even Schäfer's birds and beasts with Himmler's fantasies about the origins of race. Above all, they reflect the strange and highly potent bond between European minds and central Asian peoples which, over the course of at least three centuries, alchemized Tibet into a realm of the imagination somewhere beyond the horizon.[11]

BETWEEN MYTH AND HISTORY

' "The gates are mine to open,
As the gates are mine to close,
And I set my house in order,"
Said our Lady of the Snows.'

– Rudyard Kipling, 'The Feet of Young Men', 1897[12]

Schäfer returned to Germany with many hundreds of reels of film shot by his cameraman and botanist, Ernst Krause. Over the next three years, with nagging interventions from the Reichsführer, they cut and re-cut, moulded and re-moulded the footage. In 1942, Schäfer eventually released a documentary entitled *Geheimnis Tibet*. It means 'Secret Tibet', although on the surface it shows little that had not been photographed by other travellers to Lhasa including the British: there are extended eulogies on the grandeur of the Himalayas – 'the icy peaks of savage mountain ranges'[13] – and seemingly interminable scenes of traditional dancing, 'the frenzied whirl of the folk dance'. Himmler had argued bitterly with Schäfer about the content. He insisted that the film attack the British as aggressively as possible. And, with breathtaking irony, Himmler ordered Schäfer to remove comments about Indians and Tibetans that he considered to be condescending. These dark-skinned people, Himmler admonished, might one day be subjects of the Reich.

Geheimnis Tibet, when it was finally completed, was no mere travelogue. It is, viewed today, a dark and troubling work, a product of its time. Schäfer, as ordered, takes a few swipes at the British, who had 'forced alien forms of government and economy on India's ancient civilization', whereas Tibet remained 'the last retreat of traditional life'

whose people live in 'strict isolation . . . in a forbidden land'. Just as egregious is that the British had used 'propaganda' and 'vicious calumnies' to tarnish Schäfer and his well-meaning German scientists and prevent their expedition reaching Lhasa. In other ways, *Geheimnis Tibet* is quite conventional and has many scenes in common with other films that were made about Tibet in the 1930s. To be sure, Schäfer and Krause were very fortunate to be able to film the New Year ceremonies and 'Great Prayer': here their film is rather special as an ethnographic record.

Much of *Geheimnis Tibet* was shot in northern Sikkim in the long frustrating period before Schäfer had been given permission to cross the border into Tibet. The tone changes when the expedition reaches Lhasa. Now the full intent of Schäfer, and presumably Himmler, stands out very clearly. Schäfer uses the film to tell his German audience about the history of Tibet, and he makes one point over and over again: Tibet, once a warrior nation, allowed itself to be corrupted and weakened by a religion, and that religion is, of course, Buddhism. But Schäfer uses a very particular word to describe this imported faith: he consistently refers not to Buddhism but to Lamaism, and he strongly implies that Lamaism was brought to Tibet by outsiders: 'Mongol lords defeated the worldly rulers of Tibet and so made way for the church state at the heart of Asia.'

Schäfer's choice of word was very significant. To describe Tibetan Buddhism as Lamaism, a word hated by Tibetans, is rather like referring to Roman Catholicism as Papism.[14] It is not complimentary: Lamaism implies superstition, fanaticism, something 'framed in imitation of the pontifical court'[15] – in brief, degenerate Buddhism. Disparaging Lamaism was a distinctly German prejudice. The word appears first in the writings of the German naturalist Peter Simon Pallas (1741–1811); Hegel dismissed Lamaism as 'revolting' and 'preposterous'; Johann Gottfried Herder called it 'monstrous and inconsistent'.[16] For Schäfer, it had an even more malevolent significance, just as it had had for the Nazi propagandist Joseph Strunk. Strunk published a book in 1938, the year Schäfer left for Asia, that linked Jews, Catholics and Tibetans in a conspiracy seeking world domination.[17] In *Geheimnis Tibet* Schäfer appears to agree with Strunk: 'the almighty Dalai Lamas still dream of *making their religion the universal religion* [my italics]'. *Geheimnis Tibet* was nothing less than a warning from history, and it was addressed to citizens of the Third Reich in 1942 just as the military fortunes of the Wehrmarcht were experiencing catastrophic reversals in the east.

According to Schäfer's film, Tibet had, centuries before, been a nation of warriors whose kings had founded and ruled an empire. When he shows the Yumbu Lagang, believed to be the oldest building in Tibet, he calls it 'the house of the first Tibetan'. 'Great kings', he tells us, 'ruled here over a brave warrior people.' At the end of the film, a 'medieval cavalcade' of horsemen 'in splendid array' and 'armed with glorious weapons, armour and the helmets of their victorious ancestors' provides a tantalizing glimpse of a long-vanished world: 'irresistible and sharp are its weapons . . . tenacious and swift the horses . . . brave and battle-scarred the warriors . . .' It is as if the old Teutonic Knights had ridden out of Germany and crossed the Himalayas, and these scenes at the end of Schäfer's film are made to resemble those phoney medieval pageants staged by the Nazis.

For Schäfer, the Lhasa cavalcade is mere theatre. The truth was that Lamaism had extinguished Tibet's glorious and imperial past. The narrator continues: 'Forgotten are the days of the kings. Triumphant Lamaism gives the land its character.' Schäfer bangs the drum against Lamaism in scene after scene. He shows a world ruled by lamas who fraudulently claim to have magical powers. Tibet's hardy, courageous people who have been tempered by their tough mountain world are cowed by sinister, freakish rituals and terrified by 'thousands upon thousands of gods and demons'. Schäfer shows 'gigantic monasteries the size of cities' crammed with 'filthy and degenerate monks'. All-powerful abbots 'oppress the people and grab what little wealth the country possesses'. Even worse, 'more than a third of the male population is lost to the nation and the workforce'. This would have been anathema to the rulers of Nazi Germany: Hitler and his cronies claimed that 'Work sets free'. By 1942, the Reich was dependent on the labour of tens of thousands of slaves procured by Himmler's SS.

Far from being a Shangri-La, Schäfer's Tibet had been sapped and ruined by religion. It had forgotten and neglected its warrior traditions. Its monasteries frittered away valuable labour power. It was at the mercy of imperialist powers like Britain and Russia – who were also Germany's bitter foes. Only at the New Year did the last representatives of Tibet's warrior past emerge 'like a vision from Asian history, like a scene from the age of heroes . . .' The 'age of heroes' was Himmler's fantasy, and with astonishing sleight of hand *Geheimnis Tibet* becomes a film about Germany. Tibet is the weakened, corrupted nation Germany could become if it too prostrated itself before the idols of religion and allowed its armour to rust. These were

'Iron Times' that needed 'Iron Brooms'. It was a message the Reichsführer must enthusiastically have endorsed, even insisted upon.[18] Himmler denounced the Church as 'an erotic, homosexual league', 'a plague' tainted by its Jewish roots. He revered the old pagan gods and a savage version of Hinduism. Besides, Nazism was a religion itself – a 'rape of the soul', as one Italian anti-fascist put it. The Nazi leaders aspired to be *Gottmenschen*.

It is true that Tibetan history bears some resemblance to Schäfer's account. Although its origins are veiled by myth, a Tibetan kingdom emerged in the sixth century in the Yarlung Valley east of Lhasa. As its kings became more powerful they united the clans and tribes and began to push the borders of their kingdom outwards. By the mid seventh century Tibet was a fierce and powerful empire whose soldiers were sent as far as Persia in the west and China in the east. Its kings practised a religion called Bön, which was, as far as historians can tell, founded on the burial cult of the Tibetan kings. According to Buddhist history, these early kings began to turn away from Bön. King Srongtsan Gampo married Buddhist princesses from China and Nepal, who began to build temples and shrines in Lhasa. He imported a written language from northern India, where Buddhism had its origins, and his successors commissioned translations of sacred Sanskrit texts. King Trisong Detsen sealed the religious future of Tibet by founding the Samye Monastery in AD 767 and making Buddhism the official state religion. Far from eroding Tibet's imperial ambitions, Buddhism became an important ingredient in statecraft. Bön continued to play a shadowy role, however, and even today some Tibetan nationalists refer to it as the 'true' religion of their country. Like Schäfer, they claim that the rise of Buddhism and the disappearance of Bön led to the decline of Tibet's military powers and eventually its destruction by China.

This was the secret Schäfer brought back from Tibet. But like so many others he had merely found what he and his patron already thought they knew. Schäfer's was just one more myth about Tibet, albeit a most unusual one. *Geheimnis Tibet* stands at the end of a long tradition.

THE GREAT MYSTIFIERS

'I have been in Tibet . . .'

– the mystic Madame Helena Blavatsky, who almost certainly had not

*'I travelled for two years in Tibet . . . and amused myself by visiting Lhassa [*sic*] and spending some days with the head lama . . .'*

– Sherlock Holmes in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Empty House*, describing his activities after an apparently fatal encounter with Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls

The ground for these leaps of imagination[19] had been well prepared. For Indians, the Himalayas, the immense mountain barrier to the north, was the abode of the gods and of the Vidyadhara, a race of supermen blessed with occult knowledge and magical powers.

It was the Tibetans who first imagined Shambhala,[20] a land beyond the Himalayas shaped like a giant lotus, filled with sandalwood forests and white lotus lakes and ringed by mountains. Within the borders of Shambhala, it was said, were 960 million villages and a palace made of gold and silver, encrusted with mirrors. In the centre was the mandala of the Buddha. The kings of Shambhala ruled for a hundred years and were called the Holders of the Caste. The people of Shambhala were beautiful, rich and virtuous, but inside the giant lotus of Shambhala were some thirty-five million Brahmans all devoted to the ancient Hindu scriptures, the Veda, of India. Only when they converted and became Buddhist was Shambhala made completely perfect.

Shambhala fascinated the few Western travellers who managed to penetrate the closed Himalayan passes. The Hungarian scholar Alexander Csoma de Köros, writing in 1833, provided the first account of 'a fabulous country in the north . . . situated between 45° and 50° north latitude'. The Panchen Lamas, spiritual advisers to the Dalai Lamas, were believed to be incarnations of the rulers of Shambhala, and in 1915 the 9th Panchen Lama produced a guidebook, the *Shambhala Lamyig*, that contained precise directions for hopeful travellers and was widely translated.

Shambhala was quickly absorbed into Western mythologies. As with the myth of Atlantis, revived by the nineteenth-century fraudster Ignatius Donnelly, finding where Shambhala 'really was' became an obsession. Shambhalitis reached its feverish climax in 1926 when a party led by the Russian mystic and painter Nicholas Roerich attempted to enter Tibet. His expedition did not get very far; he and his party were detained and turned back by the British. Shambhala was left in peace.[21]

The idea of a hidden kingdom in the Himalayas, ruled by

enlightened masters, has been remarkably pervasive and doggedly persistent.[22] Although it might seem to be merely romantic fantasy, the myth of Shambhala was not at all benign. It fed new and eventually dangerous notions, and it shaped the ideas Ernst Schäfer and Bruno Beger brought with them to Tibet in 1938, and to Auschwitz five years later. How could a rather attractive tale have any connection with the Nazi genocide? The suggestion appears downright outlandish, but there is a chain of connections whose first link is a most unusual nineteenth-century mystic, Madame Helena Blavatsky. How this 'hippopotamus of an old woman' (her description), this 'most interesting and unscrupulous impostor' (Kipling's), became the architect of Mysterious Tibet is one of the oddest of all stories of this period, but its impact cannot be overstated.[23]

Helena Andreyevna Blavatsky was born during the night, sick and premature, at the end of July in 1831. Her parents, Peter Alexeyeivich von Hahn and Helena Andreyevna, had the fragile infant hastily baptized but the newborn survived to grow into a highly strung and frequently ill child. Peter von Hahn was a professional soldier who made little time for his family. Bored by her husband and the drudgery of a military life, Helena's mother fled to pursue a writing career – an act of some daring in pre-Revolution Russia. She took her children to Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea at the mouth of the Volga. Hot and infested with gnats, Astrakhan was not a comfortable place to live. While its salons and theatres were full of the usual Russians and Germans, its rough streets teemed with people from all over the Orient. Here the young Helena saw Persians, Armenians and Indians. Most fascinating were a nomadic Tibetan people called the Kalmyck. Her grandfather had been appointed their trustee and Helena would always claim that the Kalmycks were her first vivid contact with the East. 'I was myself brought up with Buddhist Kalmycks,' she often said; she even suggested she might have inherited some Kalmyck blood.

Her grandfather maintained close relations with Kalmyck leaders, and one in particular. Prince Tumene had fought for the Tsar and lived in a fabulous palace on an island in the Volga. Inside the Tulene Palace was a Buddhist temple staffed by lamas, and its rituals and atmosphere permeated with incense and yak butter made an indelible impression on the young Helena. There were other influences, too. Her great grandfather had been a Rosicrucian Mason and had accumulated a large library of occult works. He had belonged to the Rite of Strict Observance, a German society which claimed to be in

contact with 'Unknown Superiors'. Helena spent many hours studying in her grandfather's library and would later invent her own 'Superiors'. According to a childhood friend, she had a passion for 'everything unknown and mysterious, weird and fantastical' and a 'craving for independence and freedom of action'.[24]

That craving led Blavatsky to Paris, and then to New York in 1873, where she threw herself into the Spiritualist Movement. She quickly made a name for herself by manifesting more wondrous spirit guides than the usual clumps of congealed ectoplasm favoured by competitors. Her guides spoke French and Russian, and Blavatsky drew on her childhood memories of Astrakhan to add an exotic authenticity. Her unusual antics caught the eye of Henry Steel Olcott, a Civil War colonel who had turned to law then become a New York hack. Olcott specialized in sensational reports about East Coast séances. Madame Blavatsky fascinated him, and his articles for a New York rag called the *Daily Graphic* made her reputation. Soon they were the oddest, and to some the most fascinating, couple in New York. He was patriarchal, extravagantly bearded and austerely forbidding; she was unashamedly large, fond of extravagant gesture and with a razor-sharp, sometimes self-deprecating wit.

The 'two chums' had high ambitions. Olcott helped H.P.B., as Blavatsky now called herself, found an occult salon where she began to do much more than the usual tricks of ectoplasmic manifestation, table rapping and trumpet blowing. With Olcott's canny assistance, H.P.B. conjured up instead one of the great inventions of the nineteenth century – the guru. The elite of America's East Coast soon flocked to hear words of wisdom from this exotic female magus. Olcott and Blavatsky shrewdly issued shrill attacks on lesser mediums and eventually repudiated the movement altogether. At H.P.B.'s salons, there was little trickery. The mysteries of Egypt and Asia were fervently discussed and H.P.B. turned her spirit guides into Spiritual Masters who were teachers, sages, adepts and brothers rather than mere ghosts. Her home became known as the Lamasery.

Thus was born the Theosophical Movement. H.P.B. began writing and a turgid flood of mystical speculation gushed unceasingly from her pen. The first product of her industry was *Isis Unveiled* (1877). It was long, wordy and derivative but somehow managed to bolt together most of the occult fantasies of its time. It borrowed heavily from now forgotten authors. One was Edward Bulwer-Lytton, a writer of 'Rosicrucian fiction' who had described a secret fraternity, a brotherhood hidden behind 'the veil of Isis', where its members were

introduced to Oriental rites by an Indian sage. Another was Louis Jacolliot who had been the French consul in Calcutta and had written a series of books about Indian occult sciences. He too proposed the existence of a secret brotherhood. He lived in a watchtower located somewhere in India, and for millennia had observed the rise and fall of civilizations. From sources like these, Blavatsky invented a 'Great White Brotherhood' whose founders had originally been pupils of the Tibetan religious reformer Tsonkhapa. She spiced her recipe by claiming that *Isis Unveiled* had been dictated to her by a tall Hindu who came every day as she sat down to write. H.P.B. did not suffer from writer's block.

Like many charlatans, Blavatsky craved recognition as a scholar and her book was larded with gobbets of science. Science and spiritualism flirted throughout the nineteenth century. Phenomena were investigated and tested, and converts to the spirit world appeared among the scientific elite, men like William Crookes and even Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-discoverer of natural selection. Darwin himself, who had no interest in the occult, had a powerful impact on its development and was revered by Madame Blavatsky who claimed to have translated his works into Russian while in Africa. Not true, but Darwin's ideas, which had so dismayed the Church when they first appeared, were rapidly absorbed by occult thinkers.

By the time she had completed *Isis Unveiled*, H.P.B. – who had barely moved during the time she'd spent writing and now weighed 245 pounds – had become interested in India. She talked of 'going to Northeastern India, where the head of the order is and where I shall obey whatever orders they [her Masters] may give . . .'[25] At the end of 1878, H.P.B. and Olcott sailed for Bombay. Although she had flirted with 'Egyptian Mysteries', India was for her the source, and to the north were the Himalayas which, she believed, formed the 'veil of Isis' itself concealing the world of the Masters which lay in Tibet. In Bombay, the odd couple found supporters among the Anglo-Indian community as well as among Indian princes and nationalists. After all, the theosophists held Indian civilization in the highest regard, revering it even as they dissolved its reality in clouds of rhetorical incense. Her mahatmas, first dreamt up in New York, reached full maturity in India. She could now imagine their complete history – a history that began in Tibet, or at least the imaginary Tibet of her childhood. Now she called her Masters the 'Brotherhood of the Snowy Range', and Blavatsky always insisted that she had crossed the Himalayas to the Tashilunpo Monastery, near Shigatse, where she

received instruction from one of her mahatmas called 'Koot Hoomi'.

Most historians have assumed Blavatsky was telling fibs, but the story may be rather more complicated. In an account written in 1881, she referred to a 'silly red cheeked Englishman' who pursued her across India until she was able to take leave of him 'with a thumb to my nose' and head off alone 'to the monastery of my lama friends'. The British certainly suspected H.P.B. was a Russian spy and she was frequently shadowed by one Major Philip Henderson, chief of the Simla Police.[26] Recent research in Russian archives suggests that the British had cause to be concerned. In 1872, H.P.B. despatched a letter to the Russian secret service offering to use her gifts as a clairvoyant to 'discover people's hopes, plans and secrets'. In the same letter, perhaps to advertise her guile, she confessed that 'the spirits spoke and answered in my own words'. It was the closest H.P.B. ever came to a confession, and she must have been confident that Russian secret agents would not disclose her secret.

The truth may never be known. But a full year *after* she had made that claim, she took a well-documented journey as far as Darjeeling, the British hill station. This part of India had once been part of the kingdom of Sikkim, which had many ties to Tibet. She could at least see the Himalayas, and it is quite likely that, as she claimed, H.P.B. visited the Ghum Monastery and talked with an incarnate lama. She could not, of course, resist gilding the lotus and described spending 'hours in their library where no woman is allowed to enter – touching testimony to my beauty and my perfect innocence – and the Superior publicly recognized in me one of the feminine incarnations of the Bodhisattva, of which I am very proud'.[27]

It is really neither here nor there whether H.P.B. went to Tibet or not; it was important for *her* to give her disciples that impression and important for *them* that she claimed such an experience. There is firm evidence, however, that Olcott and Blavatsky had indirect access to Tibet through Sarat Chandra Das,[28] one of the 'pundits' trained by the British to travel secretly into Tibet, gather intelligence and make maps and surveys. Das visited the Tashilunpo Monastery where he met the Panchen Lama's prime minister Sengchen Tulku. In later writings, H.P.B. referred to one of her Masters as the 'Chohan Lama of Rinch-Cha-Tze the Chief of the Archive Registrars of the Secret libraries of the Dalai Lama and Ta-shu-hlumpo Lamas Rimboche'. Olcott said that the Tashi (Panchen) Lama's master of ceremonies 'one of our own revered Mahatmas is'. This must be Das's Sengchen Tulku, the Panchen Lama's prime minister. He was fascinated by

Western science, and in return for smallpox vaccine and a printing press had permitted Das to examine books in the library at Tashilunpo. It is likely that some of what Das reported was purloined for H.P.B.'s new books *The Stanzas of Dzyan* and *The Secret Doctrine*, and some scholars of her work have recognized in one of her citations allusions to the Tibetan *Kangyur*, a copy of which was presented to Schäfer's expedition in 1939. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky refers to a Book of Secret Wisdom 'in the charge of the Teshu Lama' – in other words, the Panchen Lama.

There was no direct contact between Blavatsky and Sengchen Tulku, but he inadvertently fed Blavatsky's cult. It did him no good. For assisting Das, and, without knowing it, Madame Blavatsky, Tulku was arrested by the Tibetan government, beaten, flogged and thrown into the Tsang Po River with his hands tied behind his back. When his reincarnation duly appeared in a small boy, this innocent child was abandoned.[29]

All this shows very clearly that Blavatsky, like so many fantasists, spiced her stews with a seasoning of veracity. What came out the other side was pernicious drivel. While *Isis Unveiled* had drawn on Egyptian mystery and was a tirade against materialism, *The Secret Doctrine*, with its swastika-decorated cover, was a fifteen-hundred-page, two-volume account of human origin and destiny. It was a turbid cocktail of bogus Tibetan wisdom and evolutionary science, but its grand scheme of seven rounds, seven root races and seven sub-races had an enormous impact.

This, in brief, is the message Blavatsky brought back from her Great White Brotherhood. Humans had evolved through a series of evolutionary stages each of which had fashioned different races.[30] Several hundred million years ago, the first of these races inhabited the Imperishable Sacred Land. They were boneless, formless, spiritual essences called the Self-born – and were extinguished when their imperishable kingdom sank beneath the ocean. Next up were the Hyperboreans who, like their predecessors, had no bodily form and resided at the North Pole. Reproduction was a matter of spiritual rebirth. True sexual reproduction came much later with the appearance, eighteen million years ago, of the Third Race on a vast Pacific continent called Lemuria. The Lemurians are the villains in Blavatsky's yarn because they mated with lesser breeds, so Blavatsky has them destroyed in a cataclysm of fire and flood. Lemuria, too, sank beneath the waves. Eight hundred and fifty thousand years ago, the Fourth Race appeared on an island continent in the Atlantic Ocean.

This was the fabled lost continent of Atlantis first described by Plato. The Atlanteans were, literally, giants. They were highly developed spiritually but also invented electrical power and powered flight. They built enormous temples and pyramids. Over time, however, they became immoral and misused their great size and skills. The Atlantic began to rise, submerging their kingdom. And so Atlantis joined the other lost continents on the now rather crowded ocean floor. All was not lost, however. An elite priesthood escaped the destruction of Atlantis, fled to the Gobi Desert and then into the Himalayas. Here they took refuge in the lost Tibetan kingdom of Shambhala. By now a new race had emerged in northern Asia – the Aryans. From their stronghold in Shambhala, the surviving Atlanteans passed on their wisdom to the Aryans, who began to spread south and west across the globe producing a Sixth Sub Race of Anglo-Saxon stock.

HERE COMES THE MASTER RACE

The Secret Doctrine made an especially powerful impression in Germany and Austria.[31] Olcott had even considered moving the Theosophical Society headquarters from India to Germany after the English Society for Psychical Research had exposed Madame Blavatsky as a fraud (she was caught out writing the letters which she claimed were 'precipitated' by her mahatmas). Some fifty years later, after 1933, theosophy would become even more popular as Germans were encouraged to turn away from Christianity and embrace faiths that were considered to be more Aryan. For many, *The Secret Doctrine* appeared to reconcile science and belief, nature and myth, and in Germany it catalysed a much older intellectual tradition.[32]

More than a century before Heinrich Himmler told Ernst Schäfer that the 'Aryans had come from heaven', German intellectuals and scientists had made race the cornerstone of their thinking. Quite deliberately, they set out to undermine the authority of the Bible and the status of its original language, Hebrew. Medieval and Renaissance philosophers by and large accepted the biblical story of the origins of man. The first humans were Adam and Eve, and the different races were simply descendants of the three sons of Noah. The first language was Hebrew, the father tongue. When European traders and explorers began to send back reports about a rich diversity of native peoples in the Americas and Africa, the biblical account began to look stretched.

Shem, Ham and Japheth would surely not claim credit for native Americans, or native Australians. This Noachian or Jewish genealogy of mankind was quickly toppled from its pedestal. Human origins were now sought outside the Garden of Eden and Noah's family tree.

In France, Voltaire speculated about China; the Germans looked towards India. Johann Gottfried Herder, a Lutheran pastor, exhorted, 'Let us abandon these regions where our predecessors . . . sought the beginning of the world . . . The primitive mountains of Asia prepared the first abode of the human race', and the philosopher Immanuel Kant nominated Tibet: 'This is the highest country. No doubt it was inhabited before any other and could even have been the site of all creation and all science. The culture of the Indians, as is known, came from Tibet, just as all our arts like agriculture, numbers, the game of chess, etc., seem to have come from India.'

This German cult can be traced to the birth of comparative linguistics, and, ironically, to the insights of an English lawyer, Sir William Jones.[33] A precocious scholar, Jones came to India to take up a post as an assistant judge in the High Court of Bengal. Here he developed a passion for the cultures of India and, with some difficulty, began to study Sanskrit. He quickly recognized its close affinities with Latin and Greek, and came to a now celebrated conclusion: 'The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists . . .' Jones made this pronouncement in Calcutta in 1786 at the Royal Asiatic Society, which he had founded, and it set off an intellectual forest fire in Germany. Hebrew and the entire story of the Bible could at last be filed under myth. Real history started in Asia and used the language of India. This, however, was just the beginning.

At Jena University, where Bruno Beger would study anthropology a century later, Friedrich Schlegel was elated when he discovered Jones' insight. He too had studied Sanskrit and was convinced that India had produced the first civilizations. But Schlegel went much further than Jones. In *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Inder* ('On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians'), published in 1808, Schlegel argued that Sanskrit was the language of elites and had first been

spoken by a race of cultured warriors in northern India. Driven by the noblest of motives, these masterful northerners had conquered and civilized the world. They had founded colonies from Egypt, where they seeded the civilization of the Pharaohs, all the way to Scandinavia. The proof was in their words: Indian and European tongues had all 'sprung from some common source'. Schlegel gave a name to his masterful northerners: Aryans. Because of their association with the north, either in India or Europe they also came to be called Nordics. In Sanskrit the word means 'aristocrat' or 'noble', and Schlegel made a connection between Aryan and the German word *Ehre*, meaning honour.

The Aryan version of history blitzkrieged through German culture. In philosophy, folklore, geography and philology the Aryans made a triumphant entry, stomping down from the Himalayas and civilizing the world. They were the common ancestor of Indians, Persians, Greeks, Italians, Slavs, Scandinavians, Anglo-Saxons, and especially Germans. Aryans were soon being called Indo-Germans and given the status of Wagnerian heroes: they were youthful, tall, blond, generous, brave and creative.

The unstoppable march of the Aryans was powered by frustrated nationalism. Until 1871, Germany was a fragmented patchwork of states of different kinds and sizes, from kingdoms to duchies, which fluttered around the bigger national entities of Prussia and Austria. Prussians, Saxons, Bavarians and other semi-tribal groupings had their own centres of power; the Prussians had their stronghold in Berlin, the Bavarians in Munich. The hopes and aspirations of nationalists – Pan Germans, as they were called – were continuously thwarted. Even Otto von Bismarck's 'Second German Reich', founded with blood and iron in 1871, was a disappointment since it excluded Austrians. But if nationhood could not be achieved in the real world then it could at least be imagined. Germans became a nation in their heads, and the world they saw there was aggressively exclusive. Jews, it seemed, were not part of the Aryan family tree. They were a rootless desert people who were only at home in the fluid, exploitative world of the city. The emancipation of Jews in the eighteenth century had, paradoxically, led to an intensification of anti-Semitism. As Jews sought to become Germans, breaking free from the ghetto and centuries of bondage, age-old hostilities were re-ignited. In Germany, as such enmities deepened, relations of blood took on mythic significance, and the idea of a German 'race' supplied the kind of blood unities politics could not.

In the 1870s, the tide of Aryanism was full. Richard Wagner had added the glamour of high art and had almost single-handedly sanctified German hatred of Jews. Then yet more ingredients had been added to the festering stew. In France, Count Arthur de Gobineau published a seminal work, *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1853–4), which was widely read in Germany; it spawned Houston Stewart Chamberlain's massive *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* ('The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century'). Both men made race the foundation of culture. Great civilizations were inherited like a blood line. From England came Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, filtered through the cult of Indo-German race theory and transformed by German biologists like Ernst Haeckel into a scientific justification of Indo-German superiority. Scientists denounced the horror of miscegenation. If civilization was the gift of blood, then it followed that it could be poisoned by the blood of lesser races. The mingling of unequal blood lines was to be prevented at all costs. Haeckel, a respected scientist, founded the Monist League to campaign against mixed marriages.

Science had one other ingredient to add to the Aryan pot, and it is the one that will most concern us in this book. With the rise of imperialism and the conquest of Africa and the East, a new science emerged. Anthropology, the study of man, was from the beginning the science of 'other men', and the anthropologists followed the flags of imperial conquest. The diverse races they encountered in Africa and Asia became objects of exploitation, then subjects for study. German imperialism was late in coming, but it was founded on envy of other empires, and as a consequence was more ruthless. Its anthropologists acted with fervid aggression. Just as biologists believed they were defending the purity of their Indo-German blood line, so anthropologists would go out into the world to clarify and secure behind the ramparts of science the story of the Aryan conquest. And they would move steadily closer to the origins of that civilization – to the Himalayas and the Snowy Fortress of Tibet.

Madame Blavatsky, who had lied about trekking across the Himalayas to Tashilunpo, whose pathetic communications with mahatmas were so easily exposed, had nevertheless drawn together all these threads in *The Secret Doctrine*. All over Europe, and in India itself, theosophy became a cult. Its disciples were not the hungry masses who poured into spiritualist meetings and séances desperately seeking solace; they were intellectuals, diplomats, philosophers and even scientists. United under the Tibetan symbol of the swastika, they

infested the salons and laboratories of Europe. As in *The Secret Doctrine* itself, science and occultism lay happily side by side in a fetid embrace. The German Theosophical Society had been founded in 1896 and soon had thriving centres in Leipzig and Berlin. Its success helped invigorate a rash of occultist societies that were fascinated by runes and swastikas, hated Jews and sought a new Pan German culture. Heinrich Himmler read their publications avidly and joined one of them, the Artamanen. According to these fantasists, the origin of Aryan man was somewhere in northern India, perhaps behind the icy bastions of the Himalayas. In 1933, Germany was overwhelmed by a political despotism whose leaders had absorbed many of the pseudo-scientific ideas planted by their nineteenth-century forebears. Now they had the power to find the source of their culture and blood.

LHASA LO!

A final word about the origins of this book. In 1999, I made two films for the BBC's *Horizon* series testing claims made in favour of the existence of Atlantis or some comparable but nameless 'lost civilization'. These films were prompted by the popularity, on a global scale, of books and television series claiming that the emergence of civilization in ancient history could be explained by the alleged existence of a lost super-civilization that had flourished some twelve thousand years ago. The programmes concluded that such claims were pseudoscientific, bogus history.

I was also intrigued to learn about the birth and growth of such notions. It seemed that this new movement was fashioned from recycled flotsam and jetsam dredged up by the marginal and occult movements that had emerged in the nineteenth century. Lost civilizations, Atlantis, pyramids, the precession of the equinoxes, the Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant – such arcane ingredients, it seemed, were now being reformed and regurgitated. In the 1970s, an Austrian hotelier became a millionaire by adding spaceships to the brew. At the turn of the twenty-first century, 'theories' about a lost civilization in Antarctica and a travelling caste of white-skinned bringers of civilization have generated massive book sales.

These were the same 'theories' that had preoccupied leading figures in the Third Reich like Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Hess. Both men had been involved in occult societies in the early 1920s and their memberships overlapped with those of the embryonic Nazi Party.

Their interest in Social Darwinism and pseudoscientific ideas about lost polar civilizations seemed, at first sight, to be marginal to the realities of the Third Reich and the annihilation of European Jewry and gypsies. It became clear, however, that this bogus history of an Aryan Master Race had both energized and apparently ennobled the racial thinking that led to what historians have called the 'Racial State' of Nazi Germany.

Myth is never harmless.

PART ONE

FOOTHILLS

CHAPTER ONE

CALL OF THE WILD

'Do you know the long day's patience, belly down on frozen drift,
While the head of heads is feeding out of range?
It is there that I am going, where the boulders and the snow lie,
With a trusty, nimble tracker that I know . . .'

– Rudyard Kipling, '*The Feet of Young Men*', 1897

IT WAS AN IDEAL PLACE FOR AN AMBUSH. THE EXPEDITION CARAVAN had crossed the Chungtang Pass in eastern Tibet at 15,500 feet and arrived on a plateau hemmed in by mountains. Ahead of them lay another pass, and they needed to reach it before nightfall. Despite this, expedition leader Brooke Dolan blithely galloped off alone in pursuit of three gazelles he had spotted on a ridge to the south-east. He left his German companion Ernst Schäfer with their guide, the missionary Marion Duncan, to continue north. Both men were quite used to Dolan's mercurial changes of mind.

The caravan of yaks, horses and men proceeded noisily along a small river whose banks were littered with huge boulders, all of them at least as high as a man. This was bandit country, and Duncan was nervous – as it turned out, rightly so. Just after noon bandits appeared, on the other side of the river, jumping with 'diabolical yells' from behind boulders and vaulting onto horses hidden behind some scrub. Then they galloped towards the caravan, whipping their mounts. When they reached the river, the bandits reined in their horses and stared fiercely at the intruders.

At the head of the caravan, Schäfer and Duncan sat high and tense in their saddles. Duncan had spent many years in this remote and lawless part of the world. It was border country, bitterly contested among fierce nomadic tribes like the Ngoloks. There was fighting, too, between a rag-tag Tibetan Army and the forces of Chiang Kai-shek, the Chinese nationalist leader. And Mao Tse-tung's Red Army was moving in from the south. The Tibetan border was not a relaxing place to go exploring.

Duncan had faced bandit tribes like this one scores of times. Staying cool was essential. One of his sherpas, a wiry old man called Tringleh, told him that the tribe were Lingkharshee and that he recognized one of them. The best plan was to parley or they could lose everything. After a brief discussion, Duncan sent Tringleh and two others to meet the bandits.

Duncan's companion fretted impatiently. Ernst Schäfer was twenty-four and, in Germany, a minor hero. He was also an officer in the SS, and there was little love lost between him and Duncan. The bandits surrounded the three sherpas, waving their swords and emitting high-pitched battle cries. Schäfer said, 'They will kill our men – I can pick them off.' Before Duncan could stop him, he had dismounted and knelt on the river's edge, bringing his Mauser up to his shoulder and aiming across the river. Duncan knew Schäfer was unlikely to miss and that a dead Chinese bandit would be a catastrophe. And besides, there would be others further up the river. So he spoke sharply: 'No, you must not. I know what I am doing.' He ordered Schäfer to back away before he was spotted. Duncan recalled later that something in the 'calm and confident' tone of his voice did the trick and Schäfer did as he was told. But the glance he shot Duncan showed that he felt scolded and humiliated. By now, Tringleh had won over the bandits, who rode towards the caravan laughing and chattering. At the same time Dolan returned with two dead gazelles thrown over his saddle, disappointed that he had missed the drama.

For the rest of the day the bandits acted as guides, and by nightfall the caravan of men, yaks and horses had successfully crossed the pass and made camp. Beyond lay Tibet, the roof of the world. Duncan knew they had been lucky. Just ten years before he had lost an entire caravan in an ambush.

Schäfer brooded by the fire and read *Faust*, his favourite book in the wild. Through the flames he watched the two Americans Dolan and Duncan chatting and smoking. He had already made a decision to

return to Tibet, but his new expedition would be a German one, led by himself and with men of his own blood.

From the beginning of his career as a naturalist and explorer, Schäfer had written voluminously about his adventures. In the 1930s, his books made him a celebrated, even glamorous figure in Germany. After 1945, he used his books to shake off the stigma of his past. In that, he never really succeeded, and he often complained bitterly about fellow Nazi travellers who had escaped the same reproach. Throughout his life, and it was a long one, Schäfer was always much more than those behind-the-scenes types who enjoy 'counting the hairs on the back legs of fleas'. His books make very clear that he lived to shoot. He was addicted to the hunt much more than to the science it yielded. Yet despite all the books and their flood of words, the man is elusive.

The same English diplomat who called him a 'priest of Nazism' added an astonishing list of traits: Schäfer was, he reported, 'forceful, volatile, scholarly, vain to the point of childishness, disregardful of social convention or the feelings or the conveniences of others'. Schäfer was a divided and contrary man. A servant of the Reich, he also saw himself as a free spirit. He was, in short, a man who sought to realize vaunting ambitions under a murderous dictatorship. At first sight he appeared rather ordinary, even nondescript. But as his colleague Bruno Beger recalled, he 'commanded a room' with little effort. Beger also remembered Schäfer's volatile temper and prolonged sulks. But Schäfer was also a highly persuasive diplomat who more often than not got what he wanted. In an interview for German television filmed in the 1980s, he sits surrounded by animal skins. Rather daunting antlers protrude from the wall behind him. His energy is undimmed. He seems to push out of the screen as he describes a moment of crisis in Lhasa when his party was attacked by monks. His enthusiasm seems barely contained, even hysterical – another trait noted by that British diplomat. To the end of his life, inner peace was elusive.

In his books, Schäfer never discussed his experiences inside Himmler's SS. During his interrogations[1] he was at pains to present himself as a rebel. He was, he claimed, an unwilling recruit to the SS; he'd even been disciplined, on at least two occasions, by Himmler himself for insubordination. Schäfer's answers are self-serving and frequently deceitful, but there is other evidence that he *was* telling the truth. In the Bundesarchiv in Berlin I unearthed a telling letter to

Schäfer from Himmler himself: 'I am convinced that you will *now* behave according to my orders – and that you proceed with the requested task and last but not least accomplish your task: *with the unruly will that lies within you* [my italics].'[2] Schäfer instinctively resented anyone telling him what to do, even the Reichsführer. But he was never able to open the trap that Himmler had set for him.

For his part, it is clear that Himmler was fascinated by this forceful young adventurer who had risked his life in some of the most dangerous regions of central Asia. He saw the ambitious young scientist as a glorious youth who seemed to have burst, guns blazing, from the pages of a novel by Karl May, the bestselling German author of Westerns and Oriental adventures. In other ways, the two men had little in common. There is some fragmentary evidence that Schäfer was interested in the race theories that obsessed his colleague Bruno Beger, but his deepest passions were reserved for species of wild animal, not the races of man. Was Schäfer genuinely a 'priest of Nazism'?

Albert Speer was another young, impatient and driven 'expert', and a comparison between the two men is instructive. Schäfer's passion was animals, dead and stuffed; Speer's was architecture, building big. Hitler appealed to Speer's vanity; the Führer passed on small-scale projects, testing him, then gave him Berlin to rebuild on a colossal scale. Likewise, Himmler indulged Schäfer's passion for wild places, wild things, for killing the animals he loved and bringing his trophies back to the Fatherland. After his triumphant return from Tibet, Himmler flattered Schäfer's academic ambitions by giving him his own 'Institute for Central Asian Research'. Then he promised him another expedition, this time to the Caucasus and on a much bigger scale. The temptations became ever more alluring. The trap closed tighter.

Speer became much more than an architect. By the end of the war he was Hitler's Minister for Armaments and War Production. He wielded enormous power. In comparison, Schäfer was much smaller fry. He designed new winter clothing for the Waffen-SS and chased after a mythical 'Red Horse' that obsessed Himmler. But for both Speer and Schäfer, complicity was morally corrosive. As Hitler's Reich collapsed, both men sought salvation through confession: Speer in front of the world at Nuremberg, Schäfer at a de-nazification tribunal. Both were interned, Schäfer for three years, Speer for twenty years in Spandau Prison. In exile in Venezuela, Schäfer rarely discussed the war and seemed to find peace by conjuring up innocent escapades in the high mountains of Tibet. Speer, however, never

stopped confessing; the struggle to shed his guilt never ended. Schäfer got on with his life, until his former colleague Bruno Beger walked into a Frankfurt courtroom in 1971 accused of murder.

The son of a wealthy businessman, Schäfer was born in Cologne in March 1910. The family was wealthy, and his father Hans was an imperious man with a passion for horses. In his books, Schäfer took pains to show he was a born hunter. At the age of three, he spent hours in a potato cellar with a catapult, picking off rats as they emerged from a hole in the wall. Years later in Tibet he would get round a ban on hunting by using a catapult fashioned from rubber insulation. The Schäfers moved to Hamburg where his father had become president of the local board of trade and industry. Young Ernst would disappear for much of the day on long expeditions out of the city. 'Of course I wasn't any good at school,' he wrote years later in Venezuela, 'my thoughts were in the woods where I would seek adventures every day. I had no need to read Karl May . . .' Schäfer turned his bedroom into a menagerie and experimented, cropping the tails of older mice to find out whether their offspring would inherit cropped tails. They didn't. His father, angered by poor school reports and by the tree frogs colonizing his study, tried to rein in his son: he was excluded from family Sunday walks, and when this proved insufficiently draconian he was sent – 'for taming' – to a boarding school in Heidelberg.

Here Schäfer was introduced to the occult power of the hunt. It would obsess him all his life. It would bring him glory, but heart-breaking tragedy as well. This is how, years later, Schäfer told the story of his induction. One May morning in 1922, the headmaster of his up-scale boot camp told him, 'Schäfer, get ready – we are going to hunt in the Odenwald.' It was warm when they drove deep into the dark green and brown forest, the very place where Siegfried had slain the dragon in Wagner's *Siegfried*. The headmaster, to whom Schäfer gave no name, stopped the car and retrieved his rifle from the boot. 'You will wait here,' he commanded. German schoolmasters were notoriously imperious and cruel. The boy waited; the minutes turned into hours and the forest darkened. Schäfer climbed into the car to sleep and the following morning, tortured by hunger, feasted voraciously on clover leaves. And then he waited all day until the evening, when the headmaster returned at last.

'Schäfer,' he asked, 'were you afraid?'

'No,' came the stout-hearted reply.

'Are you hungry?'

'Yes, Herr Direktor.'

Young Schäfer had answered appropriately and was rewarded with bacon, bread and Apfelwein. After his night in the woods, Herr Direktor would take him back to the forest every week. He was just twelve.

Two years later, a representative from IG Farben visited the Schäfer household and over dinner regaled them with stories about Wilhelm Filchner's expedition to Tibet. 'From this moment on I knew that I wanted to become a Tibet explorer,' Schäfer remembered. Filchner had explored the Antarctic as well as Asia and was rivalled in fame and prestige only by Sven Hedin, who would become another hero of Schäfer's. Filchner, a Bavarian, was more than a scientist and explorer; he was also a spy, as his book *Storm Over Asia* disclosed.[3]

After gaining his *Abitur* at a school in Mannheim, where he claimed in his SS application to have had difficulties with a communist teacher, Schäfer won a place at Göttingen University to study zoology and geology. But he was restless, as many Germans were in the late 1920s, Heinrich Himmler and Bruno Beger included. The Schäfer family weathered the crash of 1929, but millions of others were ruined. They devoured the romantic adventure fiction churned out by writers like Karl May and dreamt of escape. On the streets of German cities, there was violence, tension and despair.

Many now turned to the increasingly powerful and vociferous Nazi Party. The Weimar Republic was battered and decaying, and for many democracy itself was spent and discredited. Hitler's NSDAP had been banned in 1927, but two years later the crash and fears of communist violence reversed Hitler's fortunes. In October 1929 the NSDAP candidates began to win bigger percentages of votes cast in local elections, and Hitler was able to demand two ministries in Thuringia. He prophesied that he would be able to seize power in Germany 'within two and a half to three years', and it would prove to be a precise calculation.[4] Schäfer claimed that his family were 'of the broadest democratic and international convictions'[5] and had little interest in Hitler and his party. He was probably telling the truth. Germany's upper middle classes despised – for now, at any rate – the 'little corporal' and could not imagine that this absurd demagogue would ever acquire power.

But at German universities like Göttingen, radicalized students flocked to the right in huge numbers. Student fraternities were virulently anti-Semitic and many openly supported Hitler. Violence against Jewish professors and students increased. Ernst Schäfer,

unlike his future colleague Bruno Beger, was spared a prolonged exposure to this poisonous world. He joined a fraternity at Göttingen but disliked its activities and left very quickly. Then a chance encounter with an American explorer allowed him to escape Germany altogether.

Schäfer had much in common with Brooke Dolan, who would be his companion on two expeditions into the unknown. It was his adventures with this odd American that would make him famous, a German hero at the age of twenty-one. Dolan, too, was the indulged son of wealthy parents. His grandfather was a tycoon who had literally electrified Philadelphia and made a fortune. It meant that his grandson Brooke could be expensively educated, just as Schäfer had been. Dolan attended St Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, then Princeton, where he began studying zoology. But he quickly grew bored and dropped out. At Princeton, Dolan was already well on his way towards an alcohol dependency he would never shake off. He would die, perhaps a suicide, certainly mysteriously, in Chungking in 1945. At the beginning of the 1930s neither man could have imagined that they would be fighting on opposing sides in a world war ten years later, or that they would both enter the Forbidden City of Lhasa in very different circumstances, five years apart.

The two young, aspiring buccaneers met in Hanover in 1930.[6] Backed by the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, Dolan was organizing an international expedition to Asia with American anthropologist Gordon Bowles and German zoologists and filmmakers.[7] He'd come to Germany because he wanted to recruit the veteran explorer and panda hunter Hugo Weigold, who was director of the natural history department at the Hanover Museum. Weigold agreed to accompany the expedition, and he enthusiastically told Dolan about a remarkable young hunter and student naturalist called Ernst Schäfer.

According to the account of Schäfer's exploits in the SS journal *Das Schwarze Korps*,[8] Dolan began to hunt down the precocious young man – '*Wer ist Schäfer?*' The future explorer was still living at home in a room chock-full of birdcages and wild squirrels. The two men quickly hit it off, even though Dolan's uncouth manners appalled the Schäfer family. At dinner, he drained their wine cellar, put his muddy boots on their table linen, and when he finally went to bed he slept soundly with the boots still on.

The brassy, moneyed American lost no time in asking Schäfer to join him on an ambitious jaunt to the headwaters of the Yangtze where

it crossed the Chinese border into the disputed Tibet provinces of Kham and Amdo. By 1930, explorers were beginning to experience difficulties when it came to finding the virginal 'white spaces' Sven Hedin and others had so brilliantly mapped. Western China on the borders of Tibet was the personal fiefdom of the Austrian-born American Joseph Rock, who travelled back and forth in style courtesy of the deep pockets of *National Geographic*. But this borderland between China and Tibet remained unstable and dangerous, its rugged, folded landscapes were perilous, and besides, Rock was a botanist. The fauna of Kham was not well known, and Philadelphia's Academy of Natural Sciences was enthusiastic about Dolan's plans to acquire specimens. Science was not the only motivation, though. Although Dolan had inherited money, he knew that a decent fortune could be made from rare animal skins.

Only just twenty, Schäfer was about to embark on a very big adventure indeed. He was over a year younger than the tough, hard-drinking American. 'Brooky' called his new German friend 'Junge', and there was no doubt that Dolan was in charge. Schäfer's accounts of these remarkable expeditions have never been translated into English, and Dolan's diaries gather dust in a vault in Philadelphia. Schäfer rarely discussed either his feelings for or his relationships with the men who accompanied him. Dolan is a shadowy figure who is only occasionally illuminated as if by a literary flashgun. But taken together, the books and diaries reveal an exotic and daunting world that would have been a revelation to Schäfer's readers. And they show, too, what made a young naturalist and explorer with apparently little interest in politics a favourite of one of the most powerful men in the Nazi regime.

According to myth, there is a long-haired wild yak of immense size living in the snowy recesses of Tibet. From its open mouth and long protruding red tongue comes a never-ending stream of water which, Tibetans say, is the source of the Dri Chu or Wild Yak River. To the rest of the world the Dri Chu is the Yangtze. This great four-thousand-mile-long river would be Dolan and Schäfer's road to glory.

Until the twentieth century Asia, rather than Africa, was believed to be the place of origin for numerous human and animal species. It was an idea that had led Eugene Dubois to search for the fossil remains of early man in Indonesia, where he triumphantly unearthed the skull of 'Java Man', and it was the lure for ambitious naturalists like Dolan and Schäfer who sought the founding, original species of the animal world on the desolate plains and in the high mountains of

the Asian heartland, just as anthropologists would seek the origin of the Master Race. Tibet, the roof of the world, had a unique significance. Remote and inaccessible behind its mountain walls, this twelve-thousand-foot-high plateau was believed to be the lost refuge of scores of barely known animal species just waiting to be shot, named and collected. Dolan and Schäfer, like other naturalists of the early twentieth century, would use their rifles to harvest this cornucopia and bring their trophies back to the museums of Europe and the Unites States. Here they would be resurrected in spectacular dioramas which offered a pre-television age a simulacrum of an exotic natural world.

As a cub explorer, Schäfer had already found a model in Sven Hedin, whose achievements in the dangerous and unexplored regions straddling the Silk Road and in Tibet (he never got to Lhasa) made him famous, and an idol in Germany. Hedin was vainglorious and selfish. When he made unfounded claims about his discoveries at the Royal Geographical Society in London he was humiliated by other explorers who knew better and had the maps to prove he was mistaken.[9] Hedin came to loathe the British empire and revere Germany, and his passion grew even more fervent after 1933. He became a persistent and unrepentant apologist for the Third Reich – he opened the Berlin Olympic Games alongside Hitler in 1936 – even though his German great grandfather had been a rabbi.[10]

Hedin's many wordy books were very popular in Germany. He conjured up the romantic figure of a lone adventurer striding into the unknown, usually at tremendous personal risk. He was supremely arrogant. When he arrived at the source of the Indus, he wrote, 'Here I stood and wondered whether the Macedonian Alexander . . . had any notion where its source lay, and I revelled in the consciousness that, except for the Tibetans themselves, no human being but myself had penetrated to this spot.'[11] Hedin was also ruthless in his treatment of his native servants. Two unfortunates were left to die in the waterless dunes of the Takla Makan Desert in the course of one expedition. Hedin was Schäfer's model from the start, and he was determined to act the part.

For Dolan's expedition was an international one. His colleague Gordon Bowles would investigate different strains of the 'Mongoloid Race' by taking skull and other body measurements and collecting cultural artefacts. Callipers, eye-colour charts and hair samples were standard equipment for many anthropologists in this period, but only American and German anthropologists relied so completely on

anthropometric data. Both nations were preoccupied with race and with theories about race difference. Both shared a pseudoscientific language based on Aryan or Nordic superiority.[12] As a result, Bowles' work shared common ground with Bruno Beger's, as we shall see.

Bowles's doctoral thesis, written after the Dolan Expedition, can still be obtained, and it is revealing. In his introduction, he expresses 'sincerest thanks' to his tutor, Dr Ernest A. Hooton, who was a fervent eugenicist and disciple of the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso. Like his Italian mentor, Hooton believed that criminals had distinctive and measurable physical characteristics and were atavistic throwbacks to a 'ferocious and primitive' stage in human evolution. He disliked blacks and Jews and was fond of seedy jokes about Jewish colleagues. Hooton taught most American physical anthropologists in the 1920s and 1930s and his impact on Bowles' work in Asia is quite clear. I discovered one very striking example: Bowles claimed to have discovered 'an individual who harks back far into the past' with 'beetling brows . . . low cranial vault, [and] deep indented nasal depression'[13] – a clear echo of both Lombroso and Hooton.

Preparations began in the summer of 1930. Much of the equipment, as well as guns and ammunition, was acquired in Germany, 'only the tents, mountain saddles and some food' being provided by the Americans, according to Schäfer. Accompanying Dolan, Bowles, Schäfer and Weigold was a German cameraman and photographer, Otto Gneiser. The two Americans returned to Germany after Christmas, and the Dolan–Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences Zoological Expedition to West China was ready to depart by mid January 1931. On the 18th they set off from Berlin, travelling through Poland to Moscow. 'I remember the day we spent in Moscow', Schäfer wrote, 'as repelling and almost disgusting. Dirt and decay, ugly poor people, who all look the same. No laughter, but only dead-serious, pale Russian faces. In contrast to that those high-rise modern palatial industrial buildings, which appear to stand empty.' From Moscow they took the Trans Siberian Railway to the Far East. 'We were', Schäfer continued, 'a "Young Man's Expedition" since it consisted, apart from Dr Weigold, only of young people. Bowles and Gneiser were in their mid 20s, Dolan was 22 and I was 20 years old. I explicitly mention this because I am deeply convinced that an expedition like ours, which made heavy demands on the physical toughness of each participant, can only be carried out with young people within such a short period of time. With little rest, we led the free and unattached life of nomads, full of vigour and enthusiasm . . .'

This was a message to Germany, and to German youth in particular.

For many Germans, lands to the east had a powerful, even romantic appeal. Some had become convinced that Germany needed space for expansion. The Versailles Treaty had deprived Germany of her colonies in the Pacific and Africa, and after 1918 the demand for *Lebensraum* became ever more strident. The topic occupies many pages in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*; 'living space' was an answer to the psychological and economic plight of a nation still smarting from defeat. Schäfer made a quite deliberate appeal to this spirit. *Mountains, Buddhas and Bears* has a declamatory dedication to 'every real German "Junge" in whom *wanderlust* and energy are still alive . . . May they spread their wings to secure us colonies, a position in the world and a place in the sun again.' In his book, Schäfer flavours his call to arms with an apparently innocent romanticism. Although he was taking part in an international expedition led by an American, he frequently luxuriates in solitude and demonstrates lonely heroism in wild and challenging places. Many young men and women in Germany aspired to experiences like this at the beginning of the 1930s and the Nazi youth leaders did their utmost to exploit popular 'back to nature' movements like the 'Wandervogel'. In his diaries, Albert Speer wrote, 'We were always dreaming of solitude, of drives through quiet river valleys, of hiking to some high mountain pasture; we never felt the lure of Paris, London or Vienna . . .'[14]

After leaving the train in Teintsin, the expedition took a Japanese steamer across the South China Sea to Shanghai. A city of thirty-six nationalities, Shanghai was fractured by competing European powers who had arrogantly divided the city between them, and by stark barriers between the rich and the near destitute. Shanghai's other power brokers were gambling racketeers like the vicious 'Green Gang' who bribed Chinese and foreign police and beat up communists on behalf of the nationalists. Shanghai was wealthy and cosmopolitan, and it relished its talents for dissolution and sleaze. Its clubs, opium dens and brothels were infamous and promised to satisfy any vice. The white Russian girls who had been turfed out of Russia by the puritanical Bolsheviks were especially prized. While the poor died like flies – thirty thousand bodies were collected yearly from the streets[15] – the wealthier Europeans and Chinese made money and partied. Schäfer had little interest, it would seem, in the temptations of Shanghai. He visited the German Concordia Club, which was a rather tame affair compared to the Shanghai with its forty-seven-yard-long bar, and he went duck shooting with some gung-ho Americans.

Dolan was facing enormous difficulties. His destination was the 'Balkans of Central Asia', and in 1931 the border was in turmoil. Outside Shanghai, Chinese warlords were still a force to be reckoned with and were persistent thorns in the side of the Chinese nationalists, Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang. The Generalissimo himself, assisted by a German military expert, was more preoccupied with exterminating Chinese communists than with bringing order to his vast domains. The reality on the ground, as Dolan and Schäfer would discover, was that nationalist control of China did not extend very far outside the big cities. There was an ominous and growing threat from Japan, too, and posters began to appear in Shanghai, where there was a large Japanese community, declaring 'Kill all Japanese.'[16]

The situation on China's western borders was no better; it would cause Dolan no end of problems. The previous year, as he had been preparing to leave the United States, a local chief had seized the estates of a Tibetan monastery at Nyarong. The action had been supported by both the local warlord, General Liu Wen-hui, and officials of the Panchen Lama, who was in exile in China and stirring up trouble with Tibet's theocratic ruler, the 13th Dalai Lama. Monks from another monastery retook Nyarong, provoking the Chinese to seize control of the entire region. The monks appealed to Lhasa for assistance, and Tibetan troops marched east from the border town of Derge. The Dalai Lama, already furious with the Panchen Lama, asked Chiang Kai-shek to mediate even as his own ill-equipped troops were attacking the Generalissimo's army. Not surprisingly, his gesture failed to calm the situation, and by the spring of 1931 the Tibetan forces had pushed west as far as Tachienlu – Dolan's destination in Kham. The situation became even more hazardous when yet another Chinese warlord, the Muslim General Ma Pu-fang, opened a new front north-west of Chamdo. The situation was complicated and frequently baffling, and a recipe for trouble. Dolan would need all his powers and charm to persuade the Chinese authorities to issue permits for such a dangerous border.

Negotiations were tough and frustrating, and it was too long a wait for the impatient young Schäfer. He persuaded Dolan to let him push on ahead so long as he did not incur the wrath of the Chinese. By going ahead Schäfer would hire and train local taxidermists to join the expedition; they would be essential if the animal specimens were to get back safely to Philadelphia and Göttingen. Schäfer and Dolan arranged to meet again in Szechuan, and the young German travelled on alone heading for Chongqing, China's innermost treaty

port, more than a thousand miles and twelve days' steaming away.

Schäfer soon found a steamer heading upriver, an armour-plated tub the SS *Ichang* whose captain was a somewhat decayed Englishman called Nichols. At dawn on a foggy morning, Captain Nichols weighed anchor and headed upstream across the Whangpo towards the wide, flat waters of the Yangtze. The river is ten to fifty miles wide at its mouth and has a sluggish, silt-surfeited current that builds treacherous mud banks just beneath the surface. Schäfer watched intently as they passed enormous junks with huge ragged and ribbed sails, heavy with wood-oil, tea and rice and steered, it seemed, by two intent eyes at the bow. Though Schäfer's writings rarely disclose details of an unmanly inner life, this journey up the Yangtze must have been an alarming experience for a young man who had never travelled far from a bedroom full of squirrels or the hills around Hamburg. He was now discovering that outside Germany there was chaos and the clashing of races and creeds.

Nichols travelled by day and anchored at night. The first stop was Zhenjiang, where the world's longest man-made waterway, the Grand Canal, joins the river. As they set off again, Nichols pointed out to the German zoologist the Yangtze dolphins riding the wake of the *Ichang*. As they steamed on past Nanking, Wuhu, Kiukiang and Kuling a savage world opened before Schäfer's eyes. At a stop downstream, he watched as 'seven wretches' were executed by sword in the open street. He saw 'screaming insane cripples, and mutilated beggars who slowly fade away in the excrement and dirt'. On board ship, he made friends with a Russian radio operator who took the prim explorer to cabarets in Hankow, an important junction on the Yangtze and often called China's Chicago. The British, French and Russians all had concessions here. There was even a small German *Bund*, or trade concession, but the Germans were latecomers and envied the power of their rivals. Hankow was the centre of the opium trade which had ensnared millions of Chinese in a prison of poverty and addiction. Brick tea, made from the dust of the tea factories, was sent from Hankow to Tibet, where it was mixed with yak butter and consumed in enormous quantities. Hankow had also been the condenser for nationalist passions that had overturned the Manchu emperors in 1912. Further downstream was Nanjing. Here, a century earlier, the English diplomat Sir Henry Pottinger had used his formidable negotiating powers to force the fading Manchu dynasty to allow their empire to be opened up for commerce and trade. Pottinger had also acquired the island of Hong Kong 'in perpetuity'. The Barbarians humiliated

the Celestials, and the Yangtze became a pulsing artery for foreign commerce. Europeans and Americans steamed their way up and down the river building their *Bunds* and consulates and draining the wealth from one of the oldest empires on earth. There were fascinating lessons here for a German who envied the imperial triumphs of other nations.

Travelling on the Yangtze could be extremely hazardous, even though the foreign powers policed the river as best they could. After Hankow, Schäfer and the other passengers were provided with rifles, and American soldiers, bristling with machine guns, clambered on board. As the boat pushed back, it was almost immediately attacked by bandits – communists, according to Schäfer's account. As Captain Nichols called for full steam, there was a deafening roar of gunfire from the deck and cabin windows. Its ferocity took their attackers by surprise. They beat a hasty retreat and vanished upriver. The young German was exhilarated. The rest of the journey was tense; only Schäfer and the marines were brave or reckless enough to stay on deck at night, smoking and sipping beer. As the *Ichang* steamed up the great dark river, Schäfer watched, mesmerized, burning villages with frantic human silhouettes criss-crossing the flames, and women and children huddled under the river bank. Miles away, on the hills above the river, other unexplained fires flickered menacingly. The *Ichang* steamed on through a great defile ripped out by the Yangtze known as the Three Gorges. At night, there were blood-curdling cries and the crackle of rifle fire.

After a nerve-racking journey, Schäfer arrived at Chongqing in Szechuan ('Four Rivers'). Here he stayed with a German family, the Dohrs, who were working for IG Farben and knew Schäfer's father. He found and hired a cook, who called himself August and had a smattering of German which he'd picked up as a galley hand on a German warship. With the Dohrs' help, he hired men he could train to work with the animals he and Dolan would acquire over the coming months.

Weeks later, the rest of the expedition caught up. Dolan and Weigold now had to spend several days organizing a caravan: finding horses and pack animals and hiring more than a hundred sherpas. They were delayed again by fighting between local warlords, much to Dolan's disgust. When the morning of departure finally arrived, Dolan and Bowles handed out Stars and Stripes flags to their sherpas. Unprepared for this, Schäfer dashed back and got the Dohrs to improvise a German flag. August held it proudly aloft. National

differences were always just below the surface, and would emerge even more fiercely on Dolan's second expedition a few years later.

Schäfer and Dolan were about to embark on a journey deep into the Chinese and Tibetan past. From its headwaters in Tibet to its mouth in the East China Sea, where it dumps three hundred million tons of alluvium each year, the Yangtze travels nearly four thousand miles. In its lower reaches it is wide and flat, but travel higher and it becomes fast, turbulent and dangerous. On its long journey from a mountain pool in Tibet, at 18,750 feet, to its delta, the river falls nearly four miles. That's eight feet every mile, on average. To travel up the Yangtze means to ascend dizzyingly higher – and deeper into China's geological and human past.[17] Dolan and Schäfer were heading for that great crumple zone that was twisted and thrown up millions of years ago when India smashed into Asia. This stunning collision created an immense tangle of gnarled and craggy rock that buttresses the Tibetan plateau on all sides. This mass of rock and ancient ocean sediment is daily eviscerated by the relentless waters that cascade from Tibet's snow- and glacier-encrusted peaks. As well as the Yangtze, the Yellow, the Mekong and the Salween Rivers all drain from the great plateau that lay ahead of them.

Despite Joseph Rock's reports to *National Geographic*, west China and the Tibetan borders remained perplexing and mysterious to geographers. In old Chinese maps the headwaters of the river were always shown occluded by cloud and mist and the convention remained a valid metaphor even in 1931. Here, on the edge of Tibet, the Yangtze was the Dri Chu or 'Wild Yak River'. It is hard to imagine a more appropriate name, for at higher altitudes the yak is ubiquitous. These animals, which produce tamer breeds lower down towards China where they have mated with local cattle, are the mainstay of the nomads who still roam these high prairies. Yak-hair tents provide shelter and food; yak hair clothes the poor; yak-hair ropes tie yak-hair bags onto yaks; yak bones make glue; yak shoulder blades are used as surfaces on which to write prayers; yak horns make snuff boxes or whisky flasks; yak skin is used to make thongs, thimbles, snow goggles, sacks and slings; yak tails decorate horses; a yak's glands are used to cure many kinds of ailment. Boiled and roasted yak steaks are usually washed down with yak butter tea; hardened yak cheese and dried yak provided sustenance on the road. Schäfer and Dolan would need to like yak a great deal.

From Szechuan, Dolan led the expedition across the 'Red Basin', heading north-west towards Chengdu. As they rode or walked the

hard, red ground, temperatures grew fearsomely hot as they approached the notorious 'Yangtze Furnaces'. Despite the roasting heat, they made good progress – as much as forty miles a day. At the furthest edge of the Red Basin, the land began to rise as they approached the foothills of faraway Tibetan ranges. Schäfer described the villages they passed through rather fastidiously: 'In one village, Dolan tries to clean excrement, which covers the street, from his shoes and steps onto a pile of straw by the side of the street. Immediately the straw comes to life and a leper beggar, who wanted to die in peace, looks at us from under the straw.' In Chengdu, which they reached after ten gruelling days travelling more than three hundred miles, the presence of Europeans had brought, Schäfer wrote, something resembling civilization. They found a university, parks, even a few cars. 'It is', Schäfer wrote, 'an oasis of higher civilization.'

Schäfer's attitudes to race are often contradictory. He appears to have absorbed the theories of his time and nation when, for example, he writes, 'The Tibetan women are very fertile and often give birth to about a dozen children. But due to a lack of hygiene the mortality rate of children is immense. As well as that, weak elements are eliminated [*ausmerzen*] by the harshness of the climate and they struggle for survival from an early stage so that the Tibetan people appear to be vigorous and healthy.' Struggle makes us strong. Such ideas were shared by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, but they were also the mainstay of most German biologists and anthropologists. As he travelled deeper into Tibet he would come to see Buddhism, which he called Lamaism, as a force that weakened and corrupted this hardy people. But on other occasions Schäfer describes native peoples as 'children of nature'. They were less developed and lacked civilization but were more admirable. He liked to refer to himself as a kind of primitive, in harmony with the beasts he hunted. Many anthropolgists viewed native peoples in the same way and were convinced that they were destined to vanish as more developed peoples swept the world.

The expedition members now had very different needs. Bowles wanted to pursue his anthropological work in a place where he could find willing subjects in sufficiently large numbers; Dolan and Schäfer were itching to get into the mountains to hunt, shoot and collect. So Dolan, Schäfer and Weigold decided to part company with Bowles and Gneiser and travel north into the wilderness to hunt for the legendary 'Bambus-bear' – that is, the panda – then travel up the Min River into Tibet.

For the first leg of the journey, everyone took the narrow, paved

path that led out of Chengdu and followed the tea caravans towards the city of Tachienlu – Dartsendo to the Tibetans – often called the doorway to Tibet. Tachienlu, whose name means 'horse tongue junction', is squeezed into a narrow gorge and appears set against sheer precipices. From a distance, its pagodas and temples seemed to float in the thin mountain air. It was a small place, just one or two dirty streets and a lamasery called Dorjedra ('Lightning Bolt Rock'), but it was a centre for the tea trade and for Bowles an ideal laboratory in which to study the peoples who teemed through its streets and thronged its markets. There were wild-looking Tibetans from Derge who bartered their musk and yak hides for silver with which they bought *tsampa* (barley flour), silk and sugar. Keeping their distance from these ragged multitudes were the Chinese, who despised the sun-blackened Tibetans, and Muslims. The few Europeans were usually missionaries. Bowles and Gneiser stayed on in Tachienlu with a missionary family, the Cunninghams.

Dolan, Schäfer and Weigold pushed on with the rest of the caravan steadily upwards through the densely forested slopes of the Wuyaoling Mountains. Beyond they could see immense snowy peaks that glowed gold and pink and mauve in the setting sun. It was their first sight of Tibet. But progress was often slow. The Tibetan muleteers would not move on without consulting a local lama and the Europeans complained bitterly about the laziness of their men and their temperamental animals.

As they approached the border, they began to pass Tibetan peasants, their faces daubed black, Mongolians carrying salt from the Tsaidam Desert, merchants and elaborately attired nobles. Sometimes the entourage of an incarnate lama or rimpoche came clattering past. There were still numerous Chinese and Muslims on the road as well as nomadic Khamdos and even Lolos, whose isolated kingdom had recently been explored by Joseph Rock. They passed women with elaborately bejewelled head-dresses which rocked back and forth as they walked or rode. Small Buddhist monasteries clung to the sides of deep rocky valleys which amplified the throaty roar of the prayer horns and the tintinnabulation of bells. Many of the Chinese travellers, they discovered, were hopelessly addicted to opium. When the expedition halted at wayside inns they could always hear the incessant night-long sucking of opium pipes from adjoining rooms and smell its sweet resinous perfume. There were many elderly, emaciated addicts who simply lay down by the side of the road to die, their bodies drawing the attention only of vultures and other scavengers.

Schäfer was increasingly exhilarated by these experiences, but he had, at first, mixed success with his hunting. On 18 April he spotted his first golden pheasant but was unable to bring one down. He managed to shoot a goral, a kind of goat-antelope, but then lost the corpse. Leopards failed to be tempted by a goat with a lamp strung around its neck, and everywhere Schäfer was persecuted by dogs whose favourite delicacy was human excrement; 'it's funny how these dogs always seem to know what you are about to do: they keep their eyes on you and follow you silently'.

The expedition set off again the following morning, now accompanied by a Chinese orphan boy called Bauze (or 'leopard') who had taken a fancy to Dolan, as well as five servants, eight hunters and many dogs. Despite his youth, Schäfer proved a hard taskmaster – the Hedin model – and tended to compensate by indulging a favourite. In Schäfer's case, it was a young Chinese man called Wang.

Here on the Tibetan borders, in the mountains of the Wassu, Schäfer and Dolan had one consuming obsession: the giant panda, *Aeluropus melanolueca*, known to local people as a *beishung*, or 'white bear'. Exquisitely adapted to the bamboo forests, the panda had until the twentieth century few enemies in the wild so they reproduced and matured slowly – and were unprepared for the arrival of Western hunters. The first panda to be shot in the wild was killed by two of the Roosevelt dynasty, its body returned in triumph to the Field Museum in Chicago. For Dolan and Schäfer, the panda was a holy grail and both men believed it was their sacred duty to hunt one down. But it had to be, or to seem to be, a solitary quest. Schäfer, impulsive as ever, headed alone with no water or food high into the mountains. He climbed higher and higher through often impenetrable fog, and at last entered the dense bamboo forests that covered the higher slopes. This at last was the realm of the giant panda. It was dark between the trees and Schäfer made slow progress. Every so often he stopped to listen, awed by the silence. No living creature stirred in the deep forest. Was he reminded of his ordeal in the Odenwald with Herr Direktor? The panda was, for now, elusive.

Schäfer took frightening risks with his porters and servants, just as Hedin had. At the beginning of May, he, Weigold and Dolan decided to explore and hunt separately, dividing up the landscape between them. Schäfer, Wang, young Bauze and an old Tsau Po hunter who had mysteriously appeared at the camp one evening struck up a steep rocky valley. Bauze was carrying seventy pounds of provisions and was quickly exhausted. After nine hours of fruitless marching – they

saw few tracks and no animals worth a shot – the party made camp. As a chill, grey dawn broke the next day, Schäfer saw that he and his party faced a 'horrible descent'. Enormous boulders were strewn across the path down and the going proved to be exceptionally tough. It was hardest and most frightening for young Bauze, who had to negotiate a near vertical trail carrying his heavy load. Every step was perilous, and his eyes were wide with terror. Instead of relieving him of the packs he was carrying, Schäfer ordered him to follow as best he could. As the main party struggled over the tangled boulders, Bauze fell further and further behind. Soon they had lost him altogether, and with him all their supplies. As the light went, the rain came in torrents. Everyone was stumbling helplessly around in the dark when Dolan appeared out of nowhere with food to spare. There was still no sign of Bauze, but Schäfer recorded little anxiety. The next day, the exhausted lad eventually turned up with the food supplies still strapped to his back. For Schäfer this was good news: it meant he could stay away from the main camp another day and shoot.

His determination and ruthless tactics paid off. On 13 May 1931 he became the second white man to shoot a panda. In his book *Tibet ruft*, Schäfer had himself photographed after the hunt with a bird hanging from one hand and the dead panda nestled under his arm.

By the middle of June, Schäfer and Dolan were edging across the troubled border into Tibet itself. To be precise, they had entered 'Inner Tibet', so called because of its proximity to China and because here the Dalai Lama exercised little power. For centuries, the rulers of the Chinese empire had fretted over this murky border, their power waxing and waning, but always asserting their rights over the fragile nationhood of Tibet. Tibet is ringed by mountain ranges, but here in the east the rugged peaks and valleys are more vulnerable to human penetration than the mighty Himalayas or the Kunlun. This was Tibet's geographical Achilles heel. In 1904, the Ch'ing Empress sent a Manchurian magistrate, Chao Er-fang, and a Szechuan general, Ma Wei-ch'i, to terrorize the region, annihilate the Buddhist clergy and try to replace Tibetans with Chinese peasants. In 1910, the general marched on to Lhasa and forced the Dalai Lama to flee into exile. The roads Schäfer and Dolan now marched along would be used in 1951 by the armies of Mao Tse-tung to crush Tibetan independence. The world Schäfer observed twenty years before that catastrophe had been unstable and troubled for many centuries and was now a battlefield. In one village he found Tibetan prisoners, a hundred of them locked up in a shabby compound. Over the next weeks they passed through one

smouldering Tibetan village after another, all razed by Chinese warlords or the forces of Chiang Kai-shek.

Despite this, signs of the Buddhist faith were everywhere Schäfer looked; at the summit of high passes were piles of prayer stones and wildly fluttering prayer flags. Pilgrims travelling to the sacred Lake Kokonor or the Kumbum Monastery prostrated themselves in the road on their infinitely slow progress to enlightenment. Almost everyone they encountered held prayer beads and incessantly turned prayer wheels. Everywhere they could hear the rhythmic chant of the Tibetan Buddhist prayer:

Om Mani Padme Hum,
Om Mani Padme Hum,
Om Mani Padme Hum.

By the time he had returned to Germany and written about his experiences, Schäfer appears to have begun to distrust 'Lamaism'. The Tibetans he viewed as 'hard and cruel like the land itself', but 'their whole life and work is dominated by their fanatical Lamaist religion. I know the Tibetans as a powerful, healthy people – but they suffer under the yoke of their religion, depriving them of any chance of development.' In 1939, Schäfer would tell the Regent that he was a devoted student of Buddhism, but the idea of a Lamaist dictatorship became ingrained.

As they travelled north and west, Schäfer described one very curious episode. After the moon had set one night, he and Wang slipped into a deserted cemetery and stole a skull from a grave. 'Tibetan skulls are almost unknown to science,' he wrote. The incident is an odd one. Most Tibetans are disposed of by sky burial: their bodily remains are dismembered and fed to vultures. Schäfer gives very few details. The grave might have been that of a Tibetan who had died in a Chinese village, been buried by villagers and the site marked by prayer stones or flags. Tibetan priests use human skulls in some rituals, but it is impossible to know this one's origins with any certainty. What the curious little story tells us, though, is that Schäfer was aware of the needs of anthropologists. Skulls were highly prized: his own university at Göttingen had its own fine collection. Perhaps this one ended up back there.

At dawn, Schäfer spotted an eagle riding the thermals above the camp, and shot it down. 'Should I scream for joy? Should I be sad?' he wrote disingenuously. A photograph shows the magnificent bird, its

wings stretched wide by Schäfer's servants. Not content with that, he then joined Dolan on a gazelle hunt, although they were quickly separated. The pattern is characteristic: as a storyteller, Schäfer never shared out the derring-do, certainly not with an American. The following day Schäfer arrogantly shot a vulture – an especially holy bird in Tibet – and not for the last time had to placate a crowd of indignant Tibetans.

They passed through shabby 'degenerate' villages where people looked sick and begged the Europeans for medicines. Even the animals were in a poor condition. 'The women are ugly and small,' noted Schäfer. He observed that the swastika was a symbol of good fortune. The weather turned against the expedition again: it rained for two days and there were terrifying thunderstorms.

By now Dolan and Schäfer had cut a swathe through the fauna of west China and Tibet and their packs groaned under the weight of skins and other trophies. They began to head south and east back towards Tachienlu. After a difficult trek through a region of lush, tangled trees, they sheltered in a monastery which had been plundered by Chinese troops. There was still a forlorn group of 'Yellow Hat' monks in residence, 'sad and lonely in this Chinese environment'. The next day, the caravan set off again and descended further into China. There were feelings of regret: 'the romanticism of the unknown will lie far behind in the mountains, which no white man has stepped on before . . .' It was an exaggerated but, for his readers, a necessary claim.

Schäfer's mood changed quickly. In Tachienlu there would be mail waiting, and news from the Fatherland: 'I feel as if I have become a real human being again, because all my thoughts focus on this far away country called Germany.' It was 19 June 1931. They stayed at the mission Bowles and Gneiser had been using for anthropological and filming work. Schäfer and Dolan opened their mail, then took a bath, changed their clothes and soon 'looked like real gentlemen'. Plans now had to be made to return home. Dolan, Bowles and Gneiser would leave for Shanghai, where their collections would be sent on to Philadelphia and Hanover; Weigold and Schäfer decided to head south towards Burma. It would turn out to be an 'incomparable experience'. As they were about to part, Dolan commented to Schäfer, 'You know, Junge, I hate civilization and it might be true that I behave like a domestic dog . . .' It would turn out to be a precient self-analysis.

Schäfer and Weigold, homeward bound, entered a long-vanished

world of tiny isolated kingdoms and despotic rulers. The 'king' of Muli had once even tried to conquer the Tibetan capital Lhasa, and his defeat had turned him into an even greater autocrat at home, where he had absolute power over his subjects. He was also an incarnate lama and used religious superstition, spells and magical invocations to reinforce his power, spiced with a diet of frequent public executions. Schäfer had, naturally, begun to impose his own kind of power on the local wildlife, but hunting was forbidden in Muli and the king's guard accosted him and made him stop. 'Not being allowed to hunt in this wonderful stag country is hard for me . . .' he wrote in his diary.

By mid December Schäfer and Weigold had recrossed the Yangtze. Through stormy weather they headed towards the Likiang Mountains. On the 14th they stumbled on the camp of Joseph Rock himself, the great explorer.[18] The bedraggled Germans were amazed by what they found. Rock made sure he lived high on the hog. He had his favourite Austrian dishes prepared by his personal chef and served with the best wines from his homeland. He bathed in a folding tub from Abercrombie and Fitch. Porters carried him everywhere. The Germans were hairy, unkempt – and smelly. Rock witheringly told them, 'When someone is travelling like you in great haste and with little time, you have to do without hygiene and civilization if you want any success at all.' Schäfer would vigorously apply this lesson when he sailed for Tibet on behalf of the SS seven years later.

By 13 January 1932 it was all over. After a rapid journey through India, Schäfer realized he was back in civilization. He arranged for a car to take them to Calcutta. 'I have rarely hated – but I hate this car more than anything in the world,' he wrote. 'Nirvana [*sic*] is over – the jungle which only knows fighting but no hatred. The last thing I hear is the loud, happy screaming of the monkeys, the farewell song of the gibbons.'

Such were Ernst Schäfer's first youthful adventures, the serendipitous gift of an American friend. As he describes them in *Mountains, Buddhas and Bears*, his experiences have a freshness and simplicity, even an innocence, that must have appealed to men who had experienced the last bitter years of Weimar. Here in the thin, cold air of the Tibetan borderlands it was possible to forget the crushed hopes, the violence and fear that had begun to overwhelm Germany. But Schäfer's experience expressed much more than the pure bloom of innocence and high adventure. There is an insouciant brutality in his attention to the details of killing. He lived for the squeeze of the

trigger, the dropping animal and the mastery of death. It was a ruthless passion that he shared with Hermann Göring and Heinrich Himmler, keen huntsmen both. Nature was not there to be experienced or enjoyed; it offered riches to be plundered and brought back to the treasure houses of Europe's museums. Here the proud representatives of nature would be stuffed and mounted. To collect was to control. Schäfer had also learnt that expeditions need ruthless leaders, and that he chafed at being led. He had discovered the *Führer prinzip* for himself.

Adventure was not enough, and he knew it. Although Schäfer's books contain little science – they are about collecting, not analysing – he knew that he faced a dead end if he did not return to university and finish his *Doktorarbeit*. So he returned to university.

Göttingen was a small German town in Lower Saxony famous chiefly for its university and its mathematicians. It had been founded in 1737 by George II, Elector of Hanover and King of England, and its elegant buildings were scattered throughout the town's narrow medieval streets and squares. In the Botanical Gardens statues commemorated illustrious scientists such as Carl Friedrich Gauss; Goethe and the Grimm Brothers had lived there, and the anthropologist J. F. Blumenbach had assembled a famous collection of skulls in the Anatomie. But for Schäfer, academic life proved to be as tedious as he had feared. He began to work towards his dissertation, and for month after dreary month 'counted and measured the hairs of deers'.

Outside the laboratory there was seismic change, and its impact would very soon be felt in Göttingen's tranquil streets and lecture halls. In May 1932, the German president von Hindenburg appointed a new chancellor – Franz von Papen, an aristocratic equestrian with a dubious record whom he hoped would fix the dizzying crisis. By now Nazi violence was impossible to avoid and SA stormtroopers fought daily pitched battles with communists on the streets of many German cities. The Nazi gangs sang '*Blut musst fliessen, Blut musst fliessen!*' ('Blood must flow, blood must flow!') and embarked on a campaign of brutal intimidation and murder. In the election that July, the Nazis dealt another blow to German democracy by winning 13.7 million votes and acquiring 230 seats in the Reichstag, making them the biggest party.

But then Hitler faltered. Many Germans who had voted for the Nazis were disgusted when Hermann Göring, Hitler's deputy, unleashed chaos in the Reichstag, and the murder of a young communist in front of his family in Upper Silesia repelled many more. New

elections confirmed that the support for the NSDAP was indeed falling, but the party still had the upper hand in the Reichstag. But soon the stampede to disaster resumed.

On 4 January 1933, a right-wing banker called Kurt von Schröder invited the Nazi elite – Hitler, Himmler and Hess – to his villa and sent out signals that he and the former chancellor Franz von Papen would be prepared to support a Hitler chancellorship. At a series of meetings, many of them in the Dahlem home of Joachim von Ribbentrop, secret negotiations were opened between Hitler, President von Hindenburg and his ineffectual and opportunist son Oskar. On 30 January Hitler was made Chancellor of Germany. That year the rotten planks of Germany's broken democracy were swept away – the Nazi Revolution had begun. Hitler thanked one constituency in particular: the students and intellectuals who had voted for the NSDAP in their hundreds of thousands.

The brightest and the best were soon clamouring to join the ranks of Heinrich Himmler's elite SS. There is no record of Schäfer's thoughts and motivations in 1933, so he can be judged only by his actions. Urged by the Mayor of Göttingen, a friend of his father, he applied to join the SS. This might contradict Schäfer's claim that his family was a liberal and democratic one, but it was Ernst alone among his siblings who applied and underwent the obligatory ancestral investigations. The Reichsführer insisted on a clean Aryan record all the way back to the eighteenth century.

Walter Schellenberg, who became a leading SS officer, remembered that the SS 'was already considered an elite organization. The black clad uniform of the Führer's special guard was dashing and elegant. In the SS one found "the better class of people" and membership of it brought considerable prestige and social advantages.'[19] Many of the young men, like Schäfer, who joined in 1933 hoped for brighter chances in the universities, which they viewed as moribund and decayed, offering minimal opportunity for promotion.

Himmler soon began to assault Germany's academia. After 1933, more than two thousand academics and intellectuals left Germany. Many were Jews or social democrats or communists sacked by thuggish former colleagues; others saw that mortal danger lay ahead and fled. For those who stayed there were new opportunities, and SS membership often ensured a glittering future. These young Turks might disdain the crass former corporal who had seized power, but a new world was taking shape. It needed doctors, lawyers and scientists, especially biologists. Join now or lose out for ever. And, quite

suddenly, in the universities there were vacant chairs and fewer competitors. Change was happening quickly. Academic institutions have always been nests of vipers; who among the snakes would not have seized the new opportunities offered by simply filling in a form and checking who your great-great-great grandfather was?

The intellectuals who joined the SS were radicals. They believed in new ideas and new solutions. They valued expertise and professionalism. Many were lawyers, men like Dr Werner Best, Otto Ohlendorf, Reinhard Höhn and Franz Six who realized that they had much to gain if they were involved from the start in the legal revolution the Nazis had begun. Gunter d'Alquen was a journalist who became the chief editor of the slick SS journal *Das Schwarze Korps*. Himmler made sure that a doctor joining the SS would receive favourable treatment from funding bodies, and some at least were fascinated by the power over life and death implied by the 'death's-head' insignia.[20]

In that first year, the SS made little difference to Ernst Schäfer. He toiled away in Göttingen, then at Hanover University, and made the occasional trip to the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. Then Brooke Dolan re-entered his life.

CHAPTER TWO

EDGE OF THE WORLD

'On my earlier expeditions, which I conducted with Anglo-Saxons, I found a number of mistakes and shortcomings . . .'

– Ernst Schäfer, *Geheimnis Tibet*, 1943

ON HIS RETURN TO THE UNITED STATES, DOLAN HAD GONE TO Harvard intending to complete his zoological studies. But, once again, he was restless. He had to escape. So Brooky telegraphed 'Junge', cryptically: 'A quite large Tibet Expedition, do you want to come?' Schäfer responded to his friend 'with the blond tuft and blue eyes' with an unconditional 'yes'. Schäfer was not the only person Dolan had been wooing. In the spring of 1934, after a stormy engagement, he had married Emilie Gerhard and persuaded her to accompany his 'quite large' new expedition as far as Shanghai. But still Dolan was not happy.

Less than a week later, Schäfer spotted an American newspaper. Splashed across its front page was an astonishing headline: BOY EXPLORER GOES BERSERK! Seizing the paper, Schäfer read on with swelling dismay. 'Brooky', wildly drunk, had broken into a friend's house, demolished the furniture and hurled Ming dynasty ornaments to the floor. He had been pursued and quickly arrested. His orgy of destruction was estimated to have cost $50,000 and only the Dolan name and their expensive attorney saved him from a prison sentence. The Boy Dolan, with his 'wild Irish blood', was, as Schäfer knew, already a chronic drinker; he needed 'to take a long leave from high

society in the wilderness to let grass grow over the thing . . .' Looking back from 1951 when Dolan had been dead for six years, Schäfer wrote with tut-tutting sanctimony: 'the second expedition wasn't the result of careful planning and calm scientific reflection but was the result of the crazy pranks of a young American who had too much money and was fed up with ordinary life and did not know how to use his surplus energy'. So Dolan escaped to Shanghai, leaving who knew what demons behind him in Philadelphia.

Dolan's 'quite large' expedition turned out to be somewhat small. He had asked Schäfer at the outset, 'Can I trust you?' and, not satisfied with the answer, had enlisted another and much more experienced American, Marion Duncan. So the new expedition comprised just three men. Duncan was a Christian missionary, a 'Disciple of Christ in Tibet and China' of twelve years' standing who described himself, with good reason, as a 'walking dictionary about [China]'. His correspondence reveals his practical expertise and knowledge. He was punctilious in all he did. In February 1934 he added a list of essential presents for the expedition: 'safety pins large sizes, pocket knives, mirrors, bottles about three or four ounce ones especially coloured ones useful for snuff, with corks to fit . . .'

The second expedition would turn out to be tougher than the first, and by the end friendships would be soured or broken. Schäfer is mentioned just three times in Duncan's account of the expedition[1] and always to his disadvantage. He is portrayed as impulsive and inexperienced, and Schäfer was by now enough of an *SS Mann* to anger the missionary with his beliefs – as Duncan's letters, sent to the Academy after the expedition returned, reveal.[2] Dolan appears to have enjoyed mayhem too much to select as companions people who would find each other agreeable.

By the time Dolan (with his new wife Emilie in tow) and Schäfer returned to Shanghai in 1934, Japanese aggression against China had entered a new and expansionist phase. In 1931, when Schäfer and Dolan were on their way home after their first expedition, a bomb had exploded under a Japanese train in Mukden (now Shen Yang) in Manchuria. The damage was minimal but the 'Mukden Incident' – organized, as it turned out, by Manchurian agents of the Japanese – was an engineered excuse to invade Manchuria, which the Japanese had long coveted. Because the armies of Chiang Kai-shek were tied down fighting the communists, Chinese forces were swiftly overwhelmed.

China, already broken by a bloody civil war, now plunged further

into chaos. The communists were holed up in the Jiangxi 'Soviet' in the east. The nationalist armies – now commanded by a German, General Hans von Seekt, who had been sent to assist the Generalissimo by Hitler – repeatedly battered Mao's stronghold, squeezing the communists' territory by more than half and killing tens of thousands of Red Army soldiers and civilians. While Chiang Kai-shek routed the communists, the Japanese marched unopposed as far as the Great Wall and launched an assault on Shanghai itself. For the communists there was only one workable strategy – to retreat to the north and recoup. And so began, in the autumn of 1934, the Long March. The route the Red Army followed would take them west first of all, then north along the Tibet–China border, where Schäfer, Dolan and Duncan would shortly arrive.

When Schäfer disembarked in Shanghai he discovered Dolan at the quay wearing a uniform and waving a big revolver. It turned out he had joined what Schäfer calls a '*Hilfskorps*' – an aid organization set up to assist citizens of Shanghai after the Japanese attack on the city in 1932. Dolan used the revolver to shoot up glasses in Shanghai bars.

The expedition was stuck in Shanghai for two months negotiating permits, and Dolan and Schäfer used the time to practise what they called a 'Ngolok Cry'. 'We didn't care about civilization at all.' What Emilie Dolan made of all this is impossible to know since Schäfer and Dolan (in his diaries) very rarely refer to her presence. 'Sometimes Brooky's state of mind was really scary,' Schäfer remembered. 'He used to say, "I'm only going to Tibet to find the truth; if you help me with a scientific collection as well, even better."'

For his part, faced with the chaos to which Dolan seemed addicted, Schäfer probably began thinking ahead to his own German expedition. He decided to track down the Panchen Lama, and he had no intention of involving Dolan. He must have assumed that since the 'Great' 13th Dalai Lama had recently died and his incarnation was still being sought, the Panchen Lama would be able to open the door to Tibet and even Lhasa, the Forbidden City. But Schäfer was mistaken. The Panchen Lama had been a thorn in the side of the late Dalai Lama and was regarded with deep suspicion by the Kashag, the government in Lhasa, who suspected that he was being used by the Chinese. In this, they were correct. The Chinese were urging the timid, retiring Panchen Lama to return to Tibet accompanied by an 'escort' of ten thousand soldiers.

In June, still waiting for permissions to travel and with temperatures soaring in Shanghai, Schäfer decided to travel south to

Hangzhou where he had heard that the Panchen Lama was staying in a mountain temple. He turned out to be a middle-aged man 'with a good-natured, but forceful facial expression and beautiful dark eyes'. In Schäfer's words, 'As he hears that I am German, his eyes become very lively. He asks how far away Germany is, if I have been attacked by robbers on that long journey and if my animals are well looked after. The Living Buddha asks me all these astonishing questions in a touchingly sympathetic manner, as he seems to believe that there are many travelling nomads in Germany and big robber bands that besiege the high passes, just like in the "land of eternal glaciers".' Although the Panchen Lama gave Schäfer letters of recommendation, they would prove to be completely worthless.

Marion Duncan joined them in July, and on a hot, torpid evening Schäfer and the Americans boarded the SS *Ichang* and began their journey. On board, Schäfer was delighted to discover the Russian radio operator who had been his companion during his solitary first voyage up the Yangtze in 1931, although there was no sign of Captain Nichols. The Russian did not return the compliment of recognition until Schäfer reminded him of 'the experiences we had together, the cabarets in Hankow, the shooting with the communists'. A melancholy smile then spread across the radio operator's face and he ponderously declared, 'I am pleased to meet you.' 'We shake hands. We don't have much to say to each other and so we gaze across the armour plates on to the wide, vast river . . .'

Nine days out of Shanghai, the temperatures grew searingly hot, the nights close and humid. 'Emmie acquired an atrocious sunburn on her legs,' Dolan wrote in his diary, 'simply by sitting at the rail and absorbing the glare from the water . . . but Schäfer and I spent a certain time each day on the sundeck roof. Most of the day we put in reading or writing or drinking beer.' The next day, they steamed into thick fog through which they could glimpse the conical and pyramidal peaks of the Tiger's Tooth Gorge. On either side were precipices of gleaming yellow limestone. In the afternoon they reached the Ox-liver Horse-tongue Gorge where the *Ichang* stopped to view the 'Clown of the Yangtze' – a bizarre mass of twisted rocks resembling a cartoon-like human face. The following day the *Ichang* plunged into the ferocious Hsintan Rapids. From the deck, a steel cable was thrown out across the water and lashed to rocks by Chinese 'coolies' who inhabited squalid, moveable huts by the temperamental river and made a living guiding steamers through the seething torrent. The boat was then hauled through the rapids, 'squeaking in every plank',

Duncan remembered, and 'seeming to stand still for awful moments'.

When they reached Chongqing, Emilie Dolan had had enough – of the heat and of her unpredictable husband and his *Boy's Own* adventures. And if she heard Schäfer and Dolan practising their 'Ngolok Cry' just one more time . . . So Emilie flew back to Shanghai. As her little plane shuddered into the thick air, Dolan could see rolling banks of cloud. The monsoon was coming.

For Schäfer, Dolan and Duncan – the odd trio of adventurer, missionary and SS officer – this marked the start of the expedition. Duncan hired a caravan from a 'coolie-jobber', and for 1,100 Mexican dollars they acquired the services of 110 barrel-chested porters who would carry their equipment the three hundred or so miles to Chengdu.[3] Schäfer and the two Americans followed behind, stopping at night in inns, whose tiny rooms were fragrant with opium. Dope sapped the strength of the coolies and Dolan seized the chance to replace them with two passenger lorries and a small touring car when they were just over halfway. By now the monsoon had arrived and the roads were 'in a shocking condition'. They crashed and jolted through deep, oozing trenches that threatened to shake them and the vehicle to pieces. Inside the car, everyone struggled to protect their rifles and a nautical chronometer. By the time they arrived in Chengdu two days later, tempers were frayed and they were 'bickering like infants'.

In Chengdu they had their first encounter with a Chinese warlord, Liu Hsiang, the 'General of Szechuan', who demanded to know if there were still 'wild people with long hair' in Tibet and if they would bring back some of them alive for him. Armed with his letters of introduction, the expedition left soon after, driving another car that was held together by wire, its depleted suspension bolstered with straw sandals. They set off at six in the morning and drove until noon, all the time passing an endless column of Kuomintang troops.

Now they were faced with long treks through sucking mud. Tensions between the three men, or rather between the two Americans and Schäfer, worsened: 'Our caravan looks like a stretched funeral procession,' Schäfer noted. 'The rickshaws crawl through the mud, the dogs are lame, we have got blisters on our feet, which burn like fire on the hot ground. I have to walk 40km today through the range of hills, while Dolan and Duncan are at least able to hire sedans. When I tried my luck with a bamboo sedan chair the coolies gave up after five minutes. "Master, you are so heavy," they say.' But he forced them to carry him, not wanting to be outdone by his colleagues. The weather reflected the dark moods of the three men. During the night

the rain fell in torrents. Duncan described the thinly clad Chinese servants sheltering under rocks in their sodden clothing, their bodies quivering. The next morning, when they awoke after a sleepless night, the mists cleared to reveal a scene of liquid devastation. The Ya River had risen more than fifteen metres during the night and there was flooding for hundreds of square metres. Dolan and his companions retreated to higher ground as the waters rapidly continued to rise. The water was waist deep in the cornfields, and waterfront villages were ripped away by the flood. Dolan watched an enormous tree trunk float past with a man calling from its twisting branches.

Duncan, in particular, knew what the endless downpour would do to the mountain paths, but there was no choice and they turned the caravan towards the mountains, which lay under a foggy blanket ahead. The rain had weakened the thin layers of soil and the path, which ran through deep forest, was frequently blocked by mudslides that cascaded, many feet deep, off the hills in torrents sweeping away everything that lay in their path. Dolan's horse became trapped in a viscous lake of mud and was only released after many hours of effort.

Six months after they had left Shanghai – it was now early 1935 – the expedition was on the brink of even more arduous months that would put enormous strain on the fragile relationship between Schäfer and the two Americans. They had arrived in a region near Batang which was racked by unrest and internecine conflict. Their goal was to get to Sining in the far north via Jyekundo. All along their intended route, robber bands harassed yak caravans and foreign expeditions alike; Tibetan and Chinese troops skirmished in the cities and mountain passes. Duncan had been through all this before, but he was now receiving reports of the 'red menace' sweeping up from the south. The Long March of the Red Army had reached the Tibetan border itself. It was a volatile, unsettled world that they were about to enter, and Dolan and Schäfer were quite unprepared for what lay ahead.

Their first encounter with 'real' Tibet was the sky burial of a high lama. Schäfer and Dolan watched fascinated as the dead man was wrapped in linen and laid out on a platform of stones. Prayer flags fluttered all around and priests burnt juniper wood. Men in white aprons, the *tomden* or *yogin*-butchers – members of Tibet's outcasts the *ragyapa* – wielding big whetted cleavers, approached and unwrapped the corpse, which they quickly and expertly sliced from head to toe, exposing flesh and bone. All the while, big restless vultures were gathering, their wings rattling as they flew down. They

were kept at bay by men with long poles – but not for long, because they were important participants in the ritual. After the *tomden* had removed the corpse's viscera, he shouted, 'Shey! Shey!' ('Eat! Eat!') and the formidable birds, with their two-metre wing spans, descended on the corpse, covering it in a threshing mass of feathers. The *tomden* assisted their feasting by wading in to dismember the legs and arms. After just fifteen minutes, the vultures had completed their frenzied meal – or at least the main course. For the final dish, the *tomden* crushed the skull with a stone mallet, mixed the brain matter with *tsampa* flour and urged the huge birds to feast again. 'The ceremony would have been impressive', Dolan noted, 'but for the odour of the body which had evidently been buried for some time and exhumed on the appropriate day.'

They travelled as far as Litang. The fighting between different tribes, between the Tibetans and the Chinese, and between different combinations of all three had closed the roads to Batang and to the west. The northern route was also impassable. 'Now everything is over! Yes!' moaned Schäfer. Unwilling to give up, Dolan came up with a plan. They would send all their specimens back to Tachienlu and announce that they were retreating, but they would secretly break out northwards. Soon they were joined by anyone in Litang who wanted to leave town; altogether there were now some six hundred yaks, fifty horses and fifty armed men. One morning before dawn, Schäfer, Dolan and Duncan led the great procession out of Litang. It took until early afternoon for the last of the yaks to pass through the city gates onto the Batang Road.

After three days, they ran into a tribe called the Washi. There were ten thousand yaks and five hundred tents spread out on the grasslands, but everyone was in mourning for the Washi prince who had been killed in a raid. The tribe was now led by his princess, a beautiful forty-year-old woman of aristocratic appearance, Schäfer recalled. Although she was in mourning and thus prevented from having contact with any men including her sons – they were all at another encampment six hours away – she invited Schäfer and Dolan into her tent and tried to persuade them to stay. Schäfer took this as a rather demeaning insinuation that this *Vollblutweib* ('thoroughbred woman') did not view the bearded Europeans as men enough to compromise the laws of mourning!

The Tibetans in the caravan also offered their condolences to the Washi widows, but they had a more profane reason for doing so. Visitors were permitted to sleep with the tribe's women, and they took

full advantage of this when they entered the tents of the 'suffering heroines'. On their last evening in the camp, the Washi princess prepared a lavish meal. Schäfer reciprocated by offering her a tin of sardines, but she recoiled in horror. Fish eat the corpses thrown into rivers, so to eat fish is to become a cannibal. The news of his *faux pas* spread and, when they travelled on, another Washi prince forbade him to fire a single shot in his territory. 'I could have blown up their whole camp!' said Schäfer.

The sardines were a turning point. Schäfer is unusually candid about the atmosphere in the camp the following evening. He had made a mistake, the expedition was increasingly stressful, and he was in a black mood. 'We have eaten our dinner silently. I didn't like it. Everybody is withdrawn and lost in thought. The few words that have been spoken sound hoarse and bitter. We are all sick and tired of each other . . . Such moods can easily degenerate into some kind of wilderness madness, an unproductive hatred against one's comrades.' In camp that night, Schäfer eventually withdrew from the camaraderie of the camp fire and nursed his dark thoughts alone.

In the archives of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia are letters written by Marion Duncan in the late 1930s and 1940s to various staff members. They reveal exactly what Duncan thought of his fellow German expeditionist. 'Do you ever hear from Ernst Schafer [*sic*]?' reads one of them. 'Is he pushing up daisies on English soil or working up cases for the Gestapo in some foreign land? He had enough life to be an aviator or to do some daring work. Ernst had less conscience than I had or you would have more credit for this last expedition. I was always afraid he would take the bird skins back to Germany and get all the glory and possibly keep the birds besides.' Those bird skins bothered Duncan for many years: 'Sometimes I suspect that Ernst Schaffer [*sic*], one of Hitler's captains . . . Hitlerized Brooke and did not send back his report of the birds and his report of the new species . . .'[4]

The remainder of the journey to Batang was uneventful. Their arrival in the city at the head of such a big caravan turned into a triumphal progress. But more bad news awaited them, and although they did not realize it the expedition was approaching its bitter and divided climax. The road north from Batang to Dêgê led into the territory of the Seven Tribes (the Deshohdunpa), and like many of the scores of tribal peoples in the area they were on the warpath. The situation worsened when a party of Chinese soldiers – in fact Tibetans paid by the Chinese – captured a Seven Tribes raiding party and

brought three of them back to Batang. The Chinese commander, General Ma Pu-fang, immediately signed their death warrant. Although Duncan ran to the general's compound to plead for their lives, he was too late. The young men, shaking violently, were stripped and their hands bound. They were then pushed onto their knees, 'their faces ashen grey', and beheaded. Duncan knew the Seven Tribes would seek vengeance as soon as the news reached their yak-hair tents and that it would be foolish to take the road north. So they travelled east and then north, away from the Seven Tribes through the territory of the Lingkharshee. That night astrologers consulted the stars and hundreds of monks prayed for their safe departure.

The day of departure, 20 January 1935, dawned gloomy and depressing. The people of Batang bid farewell with wine and yak milk and some of the Tibetans drank so much that they could hardly stay upright on their horses. Schäfer called a halt after just two kilometres to let them sober up. As they rode through Batang's east gate they passed the grotesque, naked bodies of the Seven Tribes men, their heads lying beside them, their blood spattering the road. All for a crime 'bred in the hatred of their conquerors'.[5]

The caravan followed the little Batang River and then threaded through a limestone canyon. To the east they could see the glinting peaks of Nehmdah and the Deer Mountain Pass they needed to cross. Temperatures plummeted as they climbed higher, and the canyon floor was slippery with ice.

The following days were spent fording the swift ice-cold rivers which tumble from the Nehmdah peaks, and crossing a frozen, deep-bluish lake in whose glassy depths were trapped shoals of carp and catfish. They camped on the lake's further shore, pitching their tents on a spongy carpet of dried yak dung left by many years of nomadic encampments. The next day they were taken by surprise when a raiding party of Lingkharshee galloped between their tents, German Mausers strapped to their backs, deftly picking up any loose object, including Schäfer's notebook (to him 'the sine qua non of any serious researcher'), which was soon lost 'within the cloak of a burly nomad'.[6] They had to send the wiry old Tringleh to retrieve it – for five rupees, the equivalent of five days' wages for a nomad.

The next day they rode down a barren, red, sandy valley and across a wooden bridge over a blue glacier to enter Dêgê. In 1935, more than half the people of Dêgê were monks who worshipped Padmasambhava, Guru Rimpoche, who had once exorcized the demons of Tibet. At the centre of the city was the palace of the Dêgê

prince, which was shabby after long years of punitive Chinese taxation. The prince was a 'sad-faced young man of twenty-two' dressed in a dirty cloak, a costume he shared with his courtiers. Schäfer thought the city just as filthy, with dead horses rotting in the main street, dirty drinking water and women who entertained his men with, as he rather oddly put it, the morals of a 'dogs' nest'. No-one liked Dêgê, and Schäfer's mood seems to have become even darker. In a letter home to his father, he wrote, 'In order to endure a two-year stay in the wilderness without developing some mental defect, you have to be either a one-dimensional scientist or a phlegmatic. Without European "make up", the human is an ugly, stinking, obnoxious predator.'

Everyone was glad to leave the city behind. Their goal now was Jyekundo, 198 miles away, so they turned north, the caravan heaving up and down snub-nosed peaks. Icicles formed on the yaks and tinkled like glass rods. They were less than a hundred miles from the 'mountain of mountains', Amne Machin, meaning the 'old man of the plain' and called by Tibetans 'the gathering place of the world's gods'. The mountain had special significance for the Ngoloks, whose 'cry' Schäfer and Dolan had so assiduously practised in Shanghai and on their voyage up the Yangtze. The Ngoloks were reputed to be the most bloodthirsty of the nomadic tribes with a nasty habit of sewing their victims into yak coats and leaving them to roast in the midday sun. But if the expedition wanted to see Amne Machin, they needed to cross Ngolok country.

As they nervously rode north, Amne Machin remained hidden by thick roiling cloud. Then one morning Schäfer awoke early. Opening his tent flap, he saw the mountain clearly for the first time: he felt 'close to Nirvana, the eternal nothing'. Duncan and Dolan joined him to gaze on the stupendous mass of ice and rock. That experience seemed to be enough for them. Duncan was increasingly fearful of Ngolok raiding parties so a decision was made to head straight for Jyekundo. Schäfer, however, made a resolution: he would return and conquer the Mountain of the Gods at the head of a *German* expedition: 'I want to conquer it for science with comrades of my own blood, with German men! That was like a vision.'

In 1935, Jyekundo, another city of tea, was a straggling line of houses on an onion-shaped bulge of land. It was plagued by sand-storms whipped up from the yellow clay of the region and swept through its narrow streets. The expedition, both men and animals, was exhausted and in poor physical shape. Schäfer exchanged his lame

horse for a packet of cigarettes. But he was disgusted when his men turned to opium, wine and 'orgies with women' – 'and do everything to increase our debt'.

Everything now conspired to ratchet up the tension between the three men. Both Schäfer and Dolan wanted to push on towards Sining across the unexplored wilderness north of Jyekundo, but the local Chinese governor refused to let the expedition travel any further. Duncan was in an increasingly nervous state of mind and was getting reports of communist brigades approaching Tachienlu, which could block their escape to the south. Their Tibetan porters chose this moment to refuse to go any further into the land of the dreaded Ngoloks. There were unpleasant and heated arguments between the Europeans and running battles with the Tibetans. It seems as if the expedition was running low on money, too, and their porters could not be bought off, as they usually were in such situations.

After nineteen very tense days, the governor finally relented and Dolan persuaded Duncan and the Tibetans to agree to leave Jyekundo and head north. This hard-won agreement did not mean their troubles were over. Now they had to wait again until the Tibetans received approval from an astrologer. When that finally came, Dolan's caravan left Jyekundo. As it meandered out through the city gates it was watched, Duncan recalled, by cold and sullen eyes. The Dolan expedition now comprised thirteen yaks carrying *tsampa*, rice and flour, and horses and mules. It was not an impressive spectacle and everyone's spirits were low.

A mere three days after they departed, the governor changed his mind and sent a small armed detachment in pursuit. They caught up with the expedition and surrounded them. It was a menacing situation, and by now Dolan had had enough. He had always taken the brunt of negotiations with warlords and bureaucrats, was 'in a nervous strain' according to Schäfer and had obviously reached the final strands of his internal tether. Now he took drastic action – alone. They were camped in a smooth, grassy valley near Trindo when Dolan took Duncan and Schäfer to one side and outlined an escape plan. He would take two men and some mules and head for Sining alone and in disguise; in Sining he planned to enlist the support of the powerful Chinese warlord Ma Pu-fang, who would soon play a peculiar role in the discovery of the 14th Dalai Lama, and return as soon as possible for the others. 'He cannot be dissuaded from going on,' Schäfer wrote. 'Two hours later the tall American stands in front of us, evenly shaved and dressed as a Tibetan trader.' Dolan left that night, promising

Schäfer, 'We'll meet in two months or in hell!' He hoped it would take just twelve days to travel more than four hundred miles, but it was a back-of-an-envelope calculation and hopelessly optimistic. Dolan and Schäfer would not meet again for eight months, and then in very bitter circumstances.

After Dolan had slipped away, Duncan and Schäfer made a 'dummy' that was placed in Dolan's tent and told the Chinese and Tibetans that the American was very sick and could not be disturbed. The missionary and the SS officer were now alone together. They turned back the way they had come and set up camp at the Drijyuh Monastery, a 'forlorn and dirty place'[7] on the banks of the Yalung. They spent a few days hunting, bagged very little and returned disconsolately to Jyekundo. On 1 May Schäfer wrote, 'Yes, these are miserable hours which make me realize that this life in the wilderness is only an intoxication – a delusion. In a melancholy way I am thinking of the *Heimat* [homeland] where people are celebrating today, where the trees are green and spring has already started. Here the blizzard is shaking our tent all night, and cold seeps through its gaps and cracks – somewhere Dolan is fighting for his life by himself.'

Dolan was indeed enduring the trek from hell. It took him thirty-five days to reach Sining across a terrain whose difficulties he had grossly underestimated. The weather conditions were often extreme, and supplies of *tsampa* ran out after a week. When they could, he and his companions lived on the raw meat of kiangs (wild Tibetan asses), gazelles and bears. The rest of the time they starved. Dolan's mules collapsed and were left for the wolves. He waded across rivers, the water up to his neck, with his cartridges in his mouth. When he got to Sining, he was barefoot, emaciated and very sick. And, after his month-long pilgrimage, Dolan could find no-one to help. His mission had failed. His journey had been heroic, remarkable – and finally ridiculous. After some days spent recovering he was able to hitch a lift on an aircraft – and flew out of the wilderness back to Shanghai. Here he rejoined his wife, recovered fully from his ordeal and lived it up as only he knew how. The memory of his companions slowly faded from his mind.

Schäfer, meanwhile, had set out on a series of hunting forays around Jyekundo, while Duncan headed south, with considerable trepidation, towards Tachienlu. He found the city more or less empty with the Red Army camped not far away across the river. In his telling of the story, Duncan repaid the expedition's debts and arranged to have the precious animal- and bird-skin collections – forty loads in all,

including ten he had brought from Jyekundo – taken to Yaan and then floated down the Yangtze to Chongqing. Duncan then began the long journey back towards Jyekundo. This, at least, is what he claims in his book.

Schäfer had received a letter from Dolan explaining that his mission had failed in Sining, but it said nothing about returning to Shanghai. The German had every reason to believe that he would be seeing his friend within weeks. And unknown to him, as he stalked the wilderness north of Jyekundo, Duncan had come back then gone again. He'd had no idea where Schäfer was and, no doubt concerned about the communists, had not waited, taking everyone back to Tachienlu. There, 'in a scene never rivalled for heart-rending grief and controlled tears [*sic*], I bid goodbye, perhaps forever to the brave men who have followed me for almost a year . . .'[8] Duncan left Tachienlu and took a steamer down the Yangtze to Shanghai, then travelled north for a ten-day vacation in Beijing. He never saw Ernst Schäfer again.

Schäfer had added more rare beasts to his collection. Returning to Jyekundo, he found more letters from both Dolan and Duncan, many months old. He tore them open, eager for news of his companions, but – in his words – the 'earth moved under him'. Schäfer had been puzzled, troubled and angered by Dolan's silence; now he knew he had been betrayed. He took the road south from Jyekundo in the bitterest of moods. According to Schäfer's account, when he reached Tachienlu he discovered that Duncan had left behind a trail of debts and annoyance. Schäfer paid off what he could, retrieved the collections that still remained in Tachienlu and headed back down the Yangtze, avoiding the route of Mao Tse-tung's Long March as best he could.

As he steamed down the Yangtze, Schäfer steeled himself for a showdown.

Hearing that Junge was on his way home, Dolan flew up from Shanghai and met Schäfer at a mission in Jachow on the edge of Szechuan. They had not seen each other for eight months. Schäfer prepared to punish his old friend. He bought several canisters of gasoline and had them delivered to the mission where Dolan was staying. As Dolan came to greet him, Schäfer stood his ground. His American friend looked well and rested, an ironic gleam in those disconcerting blue eyes which implied that there would be no apology, just an acceptance of fate.

As Dolan watched, puzzled, Schäfer silently made a pile of all the most precious skins the two adventurers had harvested from the ends

of the earth. They included some of the most beautiful animals in the Himalayas, white stags, kiangs, and gazelles among them, destined for pride of place in German and American museums. Then he picked up a canister of gasoline and began pouring its contents slowly on the pyre. When he'd finished, he asked Dolan directly for an apology or he would burn every single thing. Dolan embraced his friend. 'In Sining I was an ill man,' he said. 'If I had come back I would have been another burden for you. When I knew I had failed, retreating was the best action I could take. I know it seemed like an ignominious betrayal – but I knew, Junge, that you could make it alone.' Schäfer was disarmed. The two men shook hands. But, Schäfer said, writing after Dolan's death, 'I admit frankly that I never understood Dolan's behaviour even though I tried hard afterwards.'

This second expedition under Dolan radicalized Schäfer. In the book he wrote about his experiences between 1934 and 1936 he made his new thinking very clear. Although the trip had been sponsored by the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, the book has the following dedication:

> It is true, the era of great geographical discoveries is over, and scientific expeditions have replaced adventurous journeys of discovery. But all those who are willing to be pioneers, who have the idealism to bear deprivations and who are proud to work for the Fatherland abroad and in the wilderness – all those will still be attracted to impetuously go to the 'white spaces on the map' for science and for Germany . . . it is essential now that our task is to make science a new vehicle for robust German manhood. Thus we do not only want to proclaim objective science, but be self-confident soldiers of the German spirit. For the German boy this book might be an incentive. I owe special thanks to: Reichsführer SS-Himmler, Berlin . . .

In Berlin, the Reichsführer had been reading with great interest about Ernst Schäfer's exploits in the East. He decided to meet this intriguing young man as soon as he returned to Germany.

CHAPTER THREE

GRAND INQUISITOR

'[Hitler] has set us the goal for our generation to be a new beginning – he wants us to return to the source of the blood, to root us again in the soil – he seeks again for strength from sources which have been buried for 2,000 years . . .'

– Heinrich Himmler, 1935[1]

'The Supreme Lord said: You grieve for those who are not worthy of grief, and yet speak the words of wisdom. The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead.'

– the *Bhagavadgītā*, 2.11

'HIS EYES', RECALLED HIS SCANDINAVIAN MASSEUR FELIX KERSTEN, 'were extraordinarily small, and the distance between them narrow, rodent like. If you spoke to him, those eyes would never leave your face; they would rove over your countenance, fix your eyes; and in them would be an expression of waiting, watching, stealth . . . His ways were the orphidian ways of the coward, weak, insincere and immeasurably cruel . . . Himmler's mind was not a twentieth-century mind. His character was medieval, feudalistic, machiavellian, evil.'[2]

Heinrich Himmler was the patron of Ernst Schäfer's third mission to Tibet, and Schäfer would be a troublesome favourite until 1945. Some German scholars have attempted to downgrade Himmler's involvement in the expedition,[3] but Schäfer's exploit would have been unimaginable without his patronage and support. After September

1939, all the men who had travelled with Schäfer to Tibet would be pulled deeper into Himmler's empire.

Himmler was the second most powerful man in the Nazi hierarchy. The historian Richard Breitman called him 'the architect of the Final Solution' – that is to say, he was the man who built, piece by piece and with a numbing attention to detail, the bureaucracy of genocide. By far the best educated of the Nazi leaders, Himmler became a virulent 'scientific racist' and used his power to sponsor pseudoscientific ideas about the purity of German blood. In his lifetime he attracted baffled contempt, even from his fellow Nazis. He was variously described as 'Hitler's evil spirit, cold, calculating and ambitious'; 'like a man from another planet'; 'he had a touch of the robot'; 'he was half crank, half schoolmaster'; 'What made him sinister was his capacity to concentrate on little things, his pettifogging conscientiousness . . .'[4] Himmler was a hobbyist. He dabbled in prehistoric Venus figures, telepathy, vegetables, trousers worn by Japanese peasants, reincarnation, fertilizers, sexual customs in Tibet, homoeopathy, 'Germanic astronomy', Hindu castes, runes, heraldry, the *Bhagavadgītā*, the 'World Ice Theory' and the lost kingdom of Atlantis. Always zealous and punctilious, he explained to his Gruppenführer in 1943, 'What about the women and children? I have decided to find an entirely clear solution here too. The fact is I did not feel entitled to exterminate the men . . . and to allow the avengers in the shape of their children to grow up for our sons and grandsons. It was carried out, without – as I believe I am able to say – our men and our leaders suffering injury to spirit and soul.'[5]

I began my search for Heinrich Himmler in the small German town of Wewelsburg in Westphalia. Perched above the lush valley of the Oder is the 'Order Castle' Himmler bought in the autumn of 1933. The 'SS School Haus Wewelsburg' was for the Reichsführer both monastery and fortress – an SS Vatican, the centre of the world. What really took place here remains a puzzle, but what can be deciphered from its strange history reveals much about this odd, prim and lethal little man.

The castle was built in the early seventeenth century for the Prince-Bishops of Paderborn. Sited on a tapering ridge overlooking the river, it is a narrow triangle in plan whose apex points due north. In 1933, Himmler had been immediately struck by this geometry and believed that it depicted the 'Spear of Destiny', an occult symbol. An immense round tower was built at the apex of the triangle, and inside it was Himmler's dark Camelot.

Today, there is little to be seen. Behind a locked iron door in the North Tower is a stone-lined room ringed by Romanesque arches. This was the *Gruppenführersaal* where, according to SS Brigadeführer Walter Schellenberg, higher-ranked SS officers assembled to 'practise spiritual training and meditation exercises'.[6] Embedded in the marble floor is a twelve-spoke *Sonnenrad*, a sun wheel which was once lined with gold and represented for Himmler the 'Centre of the New World'. Below this is an equally mysterious chamber. Its walls are exposed brick, making it resemble a torture chamber, and they bend upwards to a rounded dome. At its centre, Himmler's architect placed an elaborate swastika design set inside a concrete ring directly below the *Sonnenrad* in the chamber above. Beneath that was a sunken stone circle. It was approached by sweeping ceremonial steps and locked in place by three flat keystone blocks. Twelve stone pedestals ringed the walls. This was a place of the dead, a Valhalla where 'knights' of the SS were ceremonially honoured after death. The walls were once lined with the heraldic emblems of senior SS officers and decorated with runes, but today they are bare. Both chambers are reticent if not mute, as secretive as their designer.

Himmler had first stumbled on Wewelsburg when he was campaigning in Westphalia just weeks before the momentous election of January 1933. The castle was in a *Landberg* called the Land of Lipp, where the Nazis had achieved breakthrough results. Himmler was exhilarated. He was already fascinated by this region of Germany, where he felt close to some of the great figures of German prehistory. It had been the heart of the pagan empire of the Saxons and it was the ancestral home of Hermann, or Arminius, of the Cherusci, who had defeated the Roman legions in the Teutoberger Forest. According to Teutonic legend, the 'Battle of the Birch Tree' would be fought here some time in the future between an 'army from the West' and the forces of 'the East'. Just thirty miles away was Germany's 'Stonehenge', the mysterious Exsternsteine, a great cluster of misshapen rocks allegedly sculpted in antiquity which is still a place of pilgrimage for both New Agers and neo-Nazis. Himmler would send legions of archaeologists to the Exsternsteine and demand from them proof of its Aryan pedigree.

As he was driven through the fog-shrouded Teutoberger Forest in 1932, Himmler was in high spirits. After the Nazi electoral success, he looked forward to real power and he was incubating a vision of the SS. He would make it a noble order of warriors 'sworn to the Führer' and modelled on the Jesuits – with himself as Ignatius Loyola – and the

Knights Templar. When he saw the North Tower of Wewelsburg Castle, Himmler knew he had found the perfect fortress for the SS, a Camelot where he could mould the hearts and minds of his officers.

In 1935, Himmler set about realizing his vision. Architectural plans were drawn up and models constructed. They reveal a vaunting, paranoiac ambition, intent on transforming not only the old castle but also the village of Wewelsburg, turning it into an SS city – according to Himmler, the centre of the world. Local villagers would be moved to a new 'model village' several kilometres away. The projected cost was 250 million Reichsmarks. Wewelsburg would be a pagan Vatican City where the SS elite would receive spiritual and *weltanschauliches* ('world view') training. Libraries would be assembled, astronomical observatories constructed, appropriate works of art acquired, special furniture made and decorated with arcane symbols and runes. Archaeological artefacts would be given pride of place.

To achieve this, prisoners were brought from Sachsenhausen, the concentration camp near Berlin, and a new camp was built in the Niederhagen Forest near Wewelsburg. The prisoners were forced to cut stone blocks from a local quarry and drag them to the castle. More than a thousand were worked to death. Wewelsburg was torn down and put back together again, then sumptuously decorated. Himmler called it an 'ancient Germanic cult centre' and brought in scientists and researchers who lived in cell-like rooms while investigating the 'foundations of Germanic culture'. These 'Reich Leaders' had to be 'free of any inclination to see science as an end in itself'; 'We need neither a fossilized scientist nor a dreamer.'

At Wewelsburg, pagan festivals were celebrated at the summer and winter solstices, and SS wives were admitted to the *Sippengemeinschaft* ('kinship') of Himmler's order. These ceremonies dispensed with the 'false altar trappings' of Christianity. The bride was forbidden to wear a veil and myrtle crown since these were 'oriental' customs. Instead, there were 'Sig runes' and swastikas, fir sprigs, holly and ivy. Ordination rites like these bound Himmler's officers and their families into a community dedicated to obedience and 'hardness'. According to Himmler, 'these inner feelings of the heart, of honour and of a feeling for the most real and profound world view are ultimately the things that give us strength . . .'[7]

Historians have, inevitably, looked to Himmler's childhood to find explanations for his deadly and puzzling use of power.[8] He was born on 7 October 1900 into an outwardly normal Bavarian middle-class

family at 2 Hildegardstrasse in Munich. His father Gebhard could call himself a professor but was, by profession, a secondary school teacher and later deputy principal. According to the historian Klaus Fischer, he was 'an extremely rigid, pedantic and compulsively legalistic school teacher who exemplified the much dreaded authoritarian type that was so common in the German school system . . .'[9] Such a monster of a father might be sufficient explanation for the son, but other reports give a different picture: 'We felt that the refined aura which emanated from [Gebhard Himmler] was beneficent. He was supple, of medium build and kept his class's attention without a word of rebuke by the strict, but kind look in his eyes, behind his gold pince-nez. Stroking his small reddish beard, he was prepared to wait quietly until a pupil had found an answer.'[10] Whether or not Gebhard was a benign teacher, the German school system was authoritarian. Many teachers aggressively promoted German race values and the glories of war.[11]

We do know that the Himmlers revered the noble houses of Germany. Before taking up his school post, Gebhard had tutored Prince Heinrich of Wittelsbach, the youngest member of the royal family of Bavaria. This was a prestigious post, even at the turn of the century. In the years before the First World War, all the German states and principalities had a ruling family and the Bavarian royal household was especially renowned for its independence. The future Reichsführer was named after the prince, and Gebhard successfully petitioned that the prince be godfather to his new son. The Himmlers were just a generation away from the peasantry, and Heinrich's father worked hard to raise his social status. The family developed a finely tuned sense of rank, and Gebhard senior was described as 'laughably pushing and fawning towards the upper classes'.[12] Himmler would call the SS an aristocracy, but it was 'a nobility of privilege' he created himself.

Being named after a Bavarian prince must have given Heinrich, the middle son, some ascendancy inside the Himmler household. There were two brothers, and although Gebhard was older, Heinrich was always the family counsellor. To his younger brother, Ernst, he once wrote, 'Do not become unbalanced. Be a good, brave boy and do not vex Daddy and Mummy.' Years later, in 1923, when Gebhard became engaged to Paula Stölzle, a banker's daughter, Heinrich did not approve, suspecting her of immorality. He wrote to Paula, 'you will have to be ridden on a tight rein and with utmost severity'. He even paid a Munich detective agency to investigate and humiliate the hapless girl. Gebhard broke off the engagement.

As in many German families of the time, the Himmler children were strictly supervised; they had to be scrupulously clean, orderly and obedient. Both parents insisted on devout religious observance, including regular confession, and the young Heinrich developed a passion for the Jesuits. Gebhard closely supervised his sons' educational progress. At home, Heinrich and his brothers were required to keep diaries which their father checked daily, and corrected. Just after he became Reichsführer, Himmler travelled by train with the Hamburg Gauleiter Albert Krebs, who left an intriguing account of the six-hour journey: 'What concerned him were the "secret" conditions. Did the former Kapitänleutnant X really have a Jewish or half-Jewish wife? How did SA-leader Conn come by his remarkable name? Was it perhaps a camouflage for Cohn?'[13] Such meticulously enquiring habits of mind were laid down in childhood.

Another Himmler family passion was the past – at any rate, the German past. Gebhard junior recalled a room in the family home being transformed into a shrine 'for the ancestors'; it was known as an *Ahnenzimmer* and contained artefacts from prehistoric digs. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Munich had been the home of the Society for the Study of Early German History and its daunting *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, an ambitious publishing enterprise devoted to revealing the full history of German-*speaking* peoples. The italicization is the key: German history enfolded the Visigothic kings of Spain, the Lombard kings of northern Italy and the Merovingian and Carolingian rulers of what is now much of France, Belgium and the Netherlands. When this enormous history was published, 'Germany' was a mosaic of princely kingdoms (such as Prussia and Bavaria) which were unified only in 1871, and then in a way that disappointed nationalist aspirations by excluding Austria. Beyond the frontiers of Germany lay an archipelago of ethnic German communities allegedly left behind as a much older German empire shrank and decayed. Gebhard Himmler passed on to his son dreams of a German super nation, a shadow realm that extended from the Urals to the Atlantic.

Heinrich's father was also fascinated by the lands that lay far to the east of Germany's borders. Gebhard senior had once been taken on an expedition across Russia by Prince Heinrich. It gave him a glimpse of an exotic, far-away world and he was forever retelling the story to his pupils and his sons. Like many nineteenth-century German intellectuals, Gebhard believed that his deepest ancestral origins might lie in Asia. Such ideas, of course, came to fascinate his son. Germany

had to be protected from Slavic *Untermenschen*, and had rights of conquest above all in the east.

As a youth, Heinrich's dreams of manly conquest were thwarted ones. According to a childhood friend, quoted by Peter Padfield in his biography of Himmler, he was 'downright podgy' with an 'uncommonly milk white complexion', and short-sighted. When he was Reichsführer, one of his personal staff commented, 'If I looked like Himmler I would not talk about race.' Heinrich Himmler was not a Nordic god, and it hurt him. In many ways a model pupil, his performance in gymnastics was pitiable. The same friend, Padfield tells us, recalled a humiliated Himmler looking at his mocking classmates 'with a strange expression of mixed anger and disdain'. In later life, Himmler would always admire fine Aryan specimens like his second-in-command Reinhard Heydrich or adventurers like Ernst Schäfer. He encouraged scientists to measure the physical attributes of lesser races and believed the results showed that they were 'life not worthy of life'. It was revenge for the gymnasium.

When the war began in 1914, Heinrich longed, too, for military glory – acutely so after his godfather, Prince Heinrich, was killed on the front. By 1917, his elder brother and a close school friend had left for training with the 2nd Bavarian Infantry. Heinrich pressured his father to let him join in this 'Holy War'. Gebhard realized that his son was not likely to be in much demand so he began a campaign on Heinrich's behalf by badgering the grieving royal family. When that failed, he applied to every regiment in Bavaria where he had contacts. Henrich was eventually accepted by the 11th Bavarian Infantry in January 1918. Then, for month after demeaning month, the podgy youth drilled and trained, hoping daily to get news of a posting to the front line. But, suddenly, the war was over. Overnight, Himmler became a *Fahnenjunker a.D.* – that is to say, a retired soldier. It was another personal humiliation. He had been denied the heroic struggle he had dreamt about for so long, which his decorated brother and friends had experienced, and now Germany itself, despite its proud history, had simply caved in and sued for peace. The Bavarian princely house collapsed; the Kaiser abdicated. A new social democrat government signed the Treaty of Versailles. Everything Himmler admired was brought low; those he despised had seized power.

National catastrophe wrought changes in the young Heinrich Himmler, churning over and recasting what had been laid down in childhood. An obsession with secrecy and order and with rank and hierarchy; a reverence for German history; a zealous devotion to

pedagogic values; a sense of shame about his body and appearance – all these infantile traits moulded the adult Heinrich. It seems at first that there were few outward signs of change, for Himmler finished his education and began to cast around for a career. Sex repelled him, at least for now. It had too much to do with 'hot human beings' 'catching fire' and was 'a frightfully powerful natural drive'. Then, in 1919 he joined the Freikorps Landshut, to the dismay of his father. The Freikorps were private armies formed from the hordes of disgruntled ex-soldiers who now turned their weapons and training on communists and revolutionaries. In Munich, a force of thirty thousand Freikorps overturned the revolutionary government of Bavaria, killing at least six hundred people, but Himmler's brigade was never called into action and once more he missed the battle. Then came another break with his father when Heinrich opted to work on a farm for a year. It seems a surprising decision, but by turning to the land he was rejecting the academic values of his father and making a decisive shift towards *Völkisch* race politics.

Race was, to be sure, already part of the Himmlers' world view. The superior values of German history had been beaten into him from an early age, and there were few devout Catholics, as the Himmlers were, who did not espouse some distrust of Jews. Although German Jews were the most assimilated in Europe, anti-Semitism remained a powerful ingredient of nationalist thought – and a hatred of Jews, scapegoats for wartime privations, intensified after 1916.[14] Jews were blamed for the calamity of 1918, and the violent unrest that followed.

Himmler, like many radical conservatives after the war, turned to occultist groups like the Thule Society. There were many such sects and some had experienced a baleful renaissance fuelled by disillusionment and uncertainty. Inspired by Madame Blavatsky and other occult magi such as the Austrian Guido von List, these proliferating cults had emerged at the turn of the century. They celebrated a mythic German past and revived pagan ceremonies. They turned the swastika into a potent symbol of frustrated national pride and were all, without exception, anti-Semitic. Jews were, in the eyes of these occult nationalists, rootless predators who thrived only in the chaotic world of the modern city. Only the German peasants seemed free of the Jewish taint, and many saw them as blood banks of Nordic purity.

Getting back to the land would be Himmler's new crusade. In August 1919 he mounted his new motorbike and sped out of Landshut's medieval Altstadt and down the Munich road to a farming estate near Ingolstadt. Here he would turn himself into a peasant.

It was a disaster. Within a month he had come down with typhus and his farming idyll was over. He spent more than a month recuperating, then decided to forge a less arduous bond with the land at Munich's Technical High School, where he began to study agronomy. As Reichsführer, Himmler was fond of comparing politics to gardening. Gardens needed weeding, and Himmler became self-appointed gardener to the Reich, wrenching anyone unworthy of life from the soil and then throwing them into the flames.

Himmler now entered the city's student world. His letters and diaries reveal an immature youth anguished by sex and still obsessed with military glory. Academically, though, he did well. Like many German students, he joined a fraternity – the Apollo – and took up duelling, the supreme test of manhood. Scars were *de rigueur*, and Himmler made sure he acquired a manly quota of five. He was still consumed by fantasy, still something of a solitary drifter. In November 1921 he wrote in his diary, 'Today I cut an article about emigration to Peru out of the paper. Where will I be driven to go –Spain, Turkey, the Baltic, Russia, Peru? I often think about it. In two years I will no longer be in Germany, if God wills it, unless there is conflict and war again and I am a soldier.'[15]

By this time he was well on the way to absorbing the whole shebang of occultist thought and 'scientific racism', and had become involved in another cult, the Artamanen League.[16] Many future Nazis, like the man who coined the phrase '*Blut und Boden*' ('blood and soil') Walther Darré and the future commandant of Auschwitz Rudolf Höss, were members, and most of the League flocked to join the party in the late 1920s. Darré and his fellow Artamanens were utopians. Above all, they demanded that the German peasantry be sent to colonize the lands of the east and sweep away the lesser Asiatic and Jewish races. Out of blood and soil would spring a new German empire.

For Himmler there was a pantheon of new prophets to admire. He diligently waded through the race theories of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the British-born admirer of Wagner, and the early work of anthropologist Hans F. K. Günther. In 1931, Günther was appointed a professor at Jena University, where he inspired his student Bruno Beger to become an anthropologist. Günther's first book, *Ritter, Tod and Teufel* ('The Knight, the Death and the Devil'), was inspirational for many of the men who would become leading figures in the Nazi movement.

As he read the work of the man universally known as 'Rassen Günther' and other authors of the same ilk (all documented in his

reading lists), Himmler's anti-Semitism became more rooted and more potent. Like many others, he was taken in by that faked blueprint for Jewish world conquest *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Himmler added Freemasons and Jesuits to his growing list of villains, and astrology, hypnotism, spiritualism and telepathy to his enthusiasms. After discovering the novels of Herman Hesse, especially *Demian* and *Siddhartha*, he also became an enthusiast for Eastern philosophy, or at least his own Aryanized version of it.[17] Hesse led him to read the *Bhagavadgītā*, and he embraced its message of rebirth and karma. According to the memoirs of his Scandinavian masseur Felix Kersten, Himmler often quoted epigrams from the *Bhagavadgītā* and was fascinated by the caste system of elite Brahmans and warrior Kshatriyas.

Even more decisive was his reading of *Der Bolschewismus von Moses bis Lenin* by Dietrich Eckart. The book persuaded him to join the NSDAP – the Nazi Party. Eckart was a former law student who had become an enthusiast for pan-nationalism. He was a member of the Thule Society and editor of the anti-Semitic newspaper *Auf gut Deutsch*. *Der Bolschewismus* was a record of conversations between Eckart and a then little-known agitator called Adolf Hitler. The book was a long rant about the Jewish roots of Communism, and Himmler urged his *Völkisch* friends to read it. He had lost his religious faith. He now spoke of Christianity as merely another manifestation of Jewish superstition. Germany must rediscover the old pagan gods and rites that the Church had forced underground.

Politics now became the ideal arena for the battles he had craved for so long. He got a job researching manures in Schleissheim, a small town which happened to be a stronghold of extreme right-wing paramilitaries. Himmler enrolled in Ernst Rohm's Reichskriegsflagge ('National War Flag'), and then joined the Nazi Party itself. As the unit's standard bearer, he took part in Hitler's putsch in 1923: a photograph shows him behind a street barricade, earnest and bespectacled, proudly holding aloft the imperial war flag. Its defeat embittered him, filling him with new hatreds and fears. For months he believed he was being followed. He got a job campaigning for the anti-Semite Gregor Strasser, and while Hitler dictated *Mein Kampf* in his prison cell, Himmler proved himself to be an able and meticulous, if not pettifogging, propagandist. He was appointed, in rapid succession, Deputy Reichspropagandaminister then Deputy Reichsführer-SS in March 1927. Heinrich Himmler, half crank, half school teacher, was at last on the nursery slopes of power.

He had also married. His bride was Margarete Boden, a landowner's daughter and a nurse with a clinic in Berlin which was subsidized by her father and which specialized in natural remedies. She was seven years older than Himmler and already stout. All this was very appealing and he succumbed to Marga's charms. He was twenty-seven – 'about time', said a friend. Although the NSDAP paid Himmler a poverty wage, he resented his new wife's independence. Marga gave up the clinic and the couple bought a chicken farm in a Munich suburb. It proved to be a dreary hand-to-mouth existence and Himmler soon left the running of the farm, which would never be successful, to his wife. By now, politics was everything. Marga produced a daughter, Gudrun, but in every other way she was abandoned with the chickens.

As he sped off on his motorbike and the clucking of the hens faded away behind him, Himmler knew that he was ready for power.

The SS had started existence as a personal bodyguard for Nazi Party leader Adolf Hitler. Although Hitler had honoured the first SS Reichsführer, Joseph Berchtold, by presenting him with the famous 'Blood Banner', a hallowed souvenir from the beer-hall putsch, the SS had for some time performed somewhat menial duties. For the most part they had formed a black-uniformed screen around Hitler in order to fend off assailants and hecklers, and were overshadowed by the SA, the brown-shirted Nazi paramilitary organization led by Ernst Röhm.

Heinrich Himmler changed all that. In 1929, Hitler appointed him SS Reichsführer and he set about transforming an insignificant cadre into a new Aryan aristocracy. He enlisted Artamanen veteran Walther Darré to help him make the SS the vanguard of a new racial aristocracy, a blood carrier that would make history. Himmler abandoned his father's fawning to royal princes and their court; in the SS newspaper *Der Schwarze Korps*, one of his acolytes wrote, 'We have new standards, a new way of appraising. The little word "von" no longer means to us the same thing it once did . . . The best from all classes, that is the nobility of the Reich.'[18]

On the political front, too, Himmler began to make spectacular gains. Throughout 1933, as Hitler twisted and smashed the institutions of German democracy, Himmler expanded the boundaries of his empire until the SS became a 'state within a state'. In March 1933 he became police president of Munich, in April the political police commander of Bavaria. In 1934, it was SS forces that

destroyed Röhm's SA in the 'Night of the Long Knives'. Himmler organized for Hitler a coldly efficient coup against the brownshirts, and for this he was rewarded with complete control of the Gestapo. Just months later, Hitler handed all police powers to Himmler, including responsibility for the new concentration camps. Now this 'pudgy, short, unathletic, myopic and balding Bavarian'[19] stood at the pinnacle of a triangle of control and terror.

Himmler could now indulge his hobbyist passions and fantasies. Power liberated the newly appointed Reichsführer. He became convinced that he was the reincarnation of a revered German king, Heinrich I, also known as Henry the Fowler. When he remembered those tedious hours trapped in Himmler's company on a train in 1929, Albert Krebs, the Hamburg Gauleiter, felt he had to assume that Himmler 'lived among these conceptions, that they represented his world view, in face of which the real practical world, with its problems and tasks, fell into the background'.[20] SS Captain Dieter Wisleceny observed, 'The usual view of Himmler is that he was an ice-cold, cynical politician. This view is almost certainly wrong . . . Himmler was a mystic.'[21]

But unlike most enthusiasts for the occult, Himmler now had the power to do much more than bore his colleagues and friends. The SS would become an academy. A special rank, SS Ehrenführer ('honorary SS commander'), was created so that Himmler could admit scientists and diplomats – even Signora Ciana, the wife of the Italian foreign minister – into his elite corps, and in the summer of 1935 he created the Ahnenerbe.

To manage his new office, Himmler appointed the operatically bearded and saturnine Wolfram Sievers. Sievers had been a Nazi fellow traveller since the early 1930s; in 1945 he would try to escape the gallows at Nuremberg by making the preposterous claim that he was a leading secret agent in the Nazi opposition. He would play a malevolent role in the lives of both Ernst Schäfer and Bruno Beger. Under Sievers' despotic rule, archaeologists, prehistorians, philologists and anthropologists would devote their minds to the past and future of the Aryan race. Its motto was deceptively benign: 'A people live happily in the present and the future so long as they are conscious of their past and the greatness of their ancestors.' They would find the facts, the 'thousands of mosaic pieces' as Himmler called them, that could prove his crackpot ideas. In the next few years, the Ahnenerbe would spread across fifty-one different areas of research. The costs were soon crippling, rising to nearly a million

Reichsmarks a year. Money would, as Schäfer would soon discover, always be a problem for the Ahnenerbe.

To keep his enterprise afloat, Himmler hatched up a novel scheme to fund his pet department. SS Hauptsturmführer Anton Loibl had patented an illuminated disc which could be fixed to the wheels of bicycles to make them more visible at night. As the chief of police, Himmler could decree that all bicycles sold in Germany must be equipped with one of Loibl's discs. Loibl became a rich man as a result, but half of all his profits went into Himmler's coffers. Millions of ordinary Germans funded Himmler's fantasies with their feet. Himmler also set up – and again the language is a deception – a 'Circle of Friends', the Freundeskreis RFSS. Ernst Schäfer would soon become one of Himmler's *Freundes*.

Staffing the Ahnenerbe was a motley bunch of cranks and ambitious academics. Hermann Wirth, one of the earliest members, for example, was the author of an immense book called *The Rise of Mankind* published in 1928. In it, Wirth offered his readers a close examination of thousands of runic symbols from different northern European cultures. Inspired by the geological work of Alfred Wegener, who was the first to suggest the theory of continental drift, Wirth proposed a theory of 'polar shift' which implied that the icy north had once been the original homeland of the northern Aryan peoples. Shifting poles and wandering continents had done for Wirth's 'Arctic Race', although they had survived in isolated settlements like Atlantis. Wirth cited the findings of Knud Rasmussen, a Dane who had led an expedition to Greenland in 1906–7 and had claimed to have found 'mysterious' blond and bearded Eskimos. (Other explanations for this phenomenon did not, it seems, occur to Rasmussen.)

Himmler most admired a deranged former army officer called Karl Maria Wiligut, whose very odd biography Nicholas Goodrick-Clark has reconstructed. After the First World War, Wiligut became a celebrated magus-like figure for the *Völkisch* sects. He claimed to possess unique powers and to be the last descendant of a long line of German sages – the Uiligotis of the Asa-Uana-Sippe, no less – whose ancestry was allegedly rooted in prehistory. More than that, Wiligut was thought – or claimed – to have clairvoyant powers which gave him access to an ancestral memory enabling him to recall at will the experiences of his tribe over some three hundred thousand years, to a time when there were three suns in the sky and the earth was populated by giants, dwarves and other mythical beings. Wiligut's memory

dredged up a remarkable tale involving millennia of tribal conflicts, lost cities, and a final reconciliation instigated by his own ancestors the Adler-Wiligoten. In 9600 BC – a favourite period for all alternative histories – a struggle began between the Irminist religion and the Wotanists (don't ask) which resulted in a long period of exile for the Irminists in Asia, where Wiligut believed they were persecuted by Jews and Freemasons. He founded his own anti-Semitic league and published a newspaper called *The Iron Broom* which viciously excoriated his ancestral enemies.

But in 1924, Wiligut was involuntarily committed to the Salzburg insane asylum. There he stayed until 1927. In the report on his condition held by the hospital Wiligut was described as having 'a history of megalomania and schizophrenia'; he was violent to his family (his wife had failed to bear him a son) and had a 'history of grandiosity and eccentricity'. In 1932, he fled to Munich where an old friend, now an SS officer, introduced Wiligut to his chief, Heinrich Himmler. For Himmler, Wiligut's 'ancestral memory' promised to open a door into German prehistory. Wiligut joined the SS under the pseudonym Karl Maria Weisthor and was appointed head of the Department for Pre- and Early History within Darré's Race and Settlement Main Office. Relations between the Reichsführer and the old mystic were warm. It was Wiligut who designed the death's-head ring worn by members of the SS. He also worked on developing Wewelsburg as the SS Order Castle, and stage-managed the ceremonies and rituals which sustained the SS as an Order, bestowing on it an aura of fake tradition on elitism, racial purity and territorial conquest.

Historians have often viewed Himmler's occult obsessions as exotic marginalia in a life otherwise dedicated to efficient policing and ruthless genocide. The truth is that Himmler's enthusiasms about lost civilizations, prehistoric archaeology, the Holy Grail and, especially, the origins of the 'Indo-Germanic' races were intricately interwoven with the racial 'theories' that demanded the elimination of the unfit.

This was the man who watched Ernst Schäfer's career as an explorer and zoologist with such interest. He could, he believed, offer Schäfer a great deal. In return, he would expect Schäfer to bestow any glory he earned on the SS. He would need to be a loyal knight to sit at the round table. And slaving away in an SS office in Berlin was a keen young anthropology student who had studied with Rassen Günther, who was so much admired by Himmler. His name was Bruno Beger.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PEOPLE HUNTER

'It is a rare and special good fortune for a theoretical science to flourish at a time when the prevailing ideology welcomes it, and its findings can immediately serve the policy of the state . . .'

– Professor Eugen Fischer, March 1943[1]

'To Reich Security Headquarters IVB4.
Attention: SS-Obersturmführer Eichmann.
Re: Skeleton collection.
With reference to your letter of September 25, 1942, and the consultations held since then regarding the above-mentioned matter, we wish to inform you that Dr. Bruno Beger, our staff member charged with the above-mentioned special mission, terminated his work in the Auschwitz concentration camp on June 15, 1943, because of the danger of an epidemic. In all, 115 persons, 79 male Jews, 2 Poles, 4 Central Asians, and 30 Jewesses, were processed.'

IT IS JUST TWO MINUTES BEFORE 12.45, OUR APPOINTED ARRIVAL TIME, and Bruno Beger, the last European survivor of the German Tibet Expedition, is already waiting on his balcony, watching us approach and shielding his eyes from the sun. He lives in a modest block of flats in a small town outside Frankfurt. Clearly, he is a stickler for punctuality. Satisfied we will be on time, Beger waves and disappears behind a curtain.

It is a remarkable and in some ways chilling moment. For years, I have heard only that Beger is inaccessible and fiercely hostile to any

discussion of his past. 'You won't get him to talk to you' is a warning I had heard many times, and I was to hear it again, ironically, just a day after this first meeting. At the beginning of the 1960s, German courts belatedly began to prosecute individuals who had been involved with the Nazi genocide. One of them was Bruno Beger, who had been living quietly near Frankfurt. After that his family had built an impenetrable wall around him. Yet there he was, waving from the balcony of a bland, apartment block in a bland, affluent German town. I had not met a man before who had participated in the Nazi Final Solution and I had divided feelings about doing so now. By agreement, questions at this first meeting could be asked only about the Schäfer Expedition. It would take another meeting and many letters to persuade Beger to discuss 'other matters'.

As he opens the door, Bruno Beger is immediately recognizable. At ninety-two he is still the tall, aquiline-featured man who invariably rises above everyone else in the photographs taken by expedition members. He visits a gym once a week. Today he is dressed in dapper grey trousers, a crisp white shirt and rather elegant braces. His two daughters take up positions like sentinels on either side of their father. Beger's gaze is frank and challenging. He has strikingly large hands.

On the wall outside his apartment there are rather touristy photographs of purple-clad Tibetan lamas, but above his desk there are black-and-white pictures of the Schäfer party in Tibet. There is also a portrait of Sven Hedin, the Swedish explorer who inspired Schäfer and was an admirer of Hitler. There are many books about Tibet, too. On a shelf above the door I can see his most remarkable treasure: a collection of face masks made on the cold, high plateau of Tibet. One of them, which his daughter lifts down for us, is of Ernst Schäfer's Sikkimese assistant 'German' Akeh Bhutia who, unknown to me at the time of this first meeting with Beger, was still alive. The room, I realize, is a kind of memorial; these frozen Tibetan heads from long ago and very far away speak of a different life. Tibet is Beger's Shangri-la, a land of lost content, a place he was privileged to experience before he chose to become involved with other plans of Heinrich Himmler's and took a train to Auschwitz one morning in June 1943.

I interviewed Beger on two occasions. Because he had published his Tibet diaries, I concentrated at first on his upbringing and education. I wanted to find out why he had devoted his science to the SS. I hoped that he might disclose how the noble quest for knowledge could become so profoundly contaminated. Beger, quite naturally, was not

going to tell me that story directly and he was often canny about why I was asking particular questions. But when I listened to the tapes afterwards, I was surprised by how much he *had* revealed about the making of an SS anthropologist.

It is Beger's work that connects Schäfer's expedition with the occult science of race and the quest for the origins of the Aryan Master Race, the people Beger called 'Europids'. By the time he was born, in 1911, many of the ideas that would become excuses for murder had been laid down, layer after layer, at the highest levels of German academia, in universities, laboratories and museums. Here they simmered and fermented, warmed by nationalist passion and the frustration of military defeat. Himmler's SS did not originate ideas about the superiority of the Nordic race, but they acted upon what the science appeared to imply.

In the nineteenth century, science followed the flag. As the European nations conquered the world, it was realized that the new colonies offered a unique scientific opportunity. They would be transformed into vast laboratories of human types, and of different races. Indigenous peoples could be measured, photographed, even collected. Out from the homeland would go colonists, farmers, administrators, and behind them came anthropologists, the people hunters. They brought with them their callipers and cameras to measure and record. And while the colonists sent back the material bounty of their new kingdoms, the scientists returned to their museums bearing cases packed with trophy animals and sometimes trophy people. Between them, the markets and museums of Europe reaped a wealthy harvest from the colonial world.

No one nation had a monopoly on such scientific brutality. American anthropologists like Samuel Morton acquired skulls of Native Americans in their thousands, and usually by the most unscrupulous means. It is frequently pointed out that British anthropologists preyed on Australian aborigines both living and dead; but this was more akin to grave robbing and was never sanctioned by any scientific or government body. Francis Galton, the British inventor of eugenics, on the other hand, was without a doubt a pioneer of anthropometry. He had a passion for numbers and statistical comparisons. In the 1850s, Galton joined a scientific expedition to south-west Africa where he met an extraordinary woman, a striking African he called the 'Hottentot Venus'. Galton wooed her with mathematics. He made her stand against a tree and, as he put it, lacking the standard equipment, used a sextant to make precise measurements of her proportions. 'I

took a series of observations upon her figure in every direction, up and down, crossways, diagonally and so forth,' he wrote. 'I worked out the results by trigonometry and logarithms.' But Galton was exceptional and, apart from the 'Hottentot Venus', there is no evidence at all that he exploited anyone or stole their bodies.

The measuring mania soon withered among English anthropologists, but it was a very different story in Germany. Germany came late to the imperial scramble for colonies and was a jealous and belligerent participant.[2] The German nationalist movements were fervent advocates of expansion overseas, to the east and into Africa. Bismarck, the architect of national unification, embraced the colonial movement after 1871: a new nation needed an empire. The search for a 'German India' became a consuming passion at every level of German society. Impoverished farmers dreamt of a new life under African skies, while soldiers, diplomats and businessmen greedily pursued the riches of colonial conquest. German academics, too, played a significant part in stoking the fires of expansion. *Lebensraum*, the notion that Germany was overcrowded and needed to expand to survive, had been coined and expounded by a geography professor in Munich called Karl Haushofer. In his highly influential books and lectures Haushofer did not simply argue that Germans needed more space; he believed that the health of the Indo-German peoples depended on territorial expansion. Thus, race theory became fused with that seemingly most mundane of sciences, geography. Among Haushofer's students was a wild-eyed new convert to Nazism called Rudolf Hess, who infected his friend Adolf Hitler with this new enthusiasm when they were both imprisoned after the beer-hall putsch. After 1933, Haushofer became a special adviser to the Nazi elite. 'Germany will either be a world power or there will be no Germany,' Hitler wrote, 'and for world power she needs that magnitude which will give her the position she needs in the present period, and life to her citizens . . . We [National Socialists] turn our gaze towards the land in the east . . .'

Long before Hitler, anthropology was enriched by Germany's colonial empire.[3] The career of Felix von Luschan (1854–1924) shows this clearly. Von Luschan was educated in Paris and Vienna and became the most powerful and influential curator at the Ethnology Museum in Berlin. Here, in the wake of German colonial acquisition, he built up two new sections devoted to Africa and Oceania. He assiduously cultivated the colonial administrators and military officers who controlled the new territories so that he could do research or

acquire artefacts, including human skeletal material. For their part, the administrators found their ideas reflected in anthropology. Both assumed the superiority of the German male animal.

In his books, Schäfer often referred to Tibetans as *Naturvölker* – 'natural people', or even 'children of nature'. It was an idea with a long ancestry. From the beginning of the nineteenth century German philosophers and historians had founded their thinking on a distinction between *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker*, people of nature and people of culture. Germans were the progressive bearers of culture, at the zenith of a long historical development; Africans and Pacific Islanders, the people now administered by German colonists, had neither culture nor history. They were part of nature, but as *Naturvölker* had no history, the historical sciences were not appropriate for their study. An entirely new science was demanded, and a new kind of scholar. So anthropology emerged as a science devoted to the study of the colonized, the *Naturvölker* now ruled by German colonists. Although they had no history, Africans and Polynesians had the distinction of being pristine: humans in the raw, untrammelled by civilization. For the anthropologists, *Naturvölker* offered a unique chance to study an authentic human nature.

To do this, anthropologists looked for ways to rid their new science of any kind of subjectivity. They viewed history as an impossibly soft science contaminated by interpretation. The proper study of *Naturvölker*, according to anthropologists like Adolf Bastian, demanded that they put aside the tricks of the historians which could 'never escape subjectivity, neither in its subject matter, nor in relation to the historian himself . . .'[4] Anthropologists had to adopt a position of 'pure objective observation, sharply distinguished from history. German anthropologists would seek out only the 'physical properties of humans'. Like Galton with his sextant and his logarithms, they would measure the bodies and above all the skulls of *Naturvölker*.

So, as anthropologists began to exploit the new German colonies in Africa and the Pacific for science, they were faced with a daunting task. A new technology of observation and measurement needed to be developed to turn these people, apparently without history, into objects fit for scientific scrutiny. Anthropologists turned to the camera, the calliper and the face mask. They photographed, measured and sculpted.

These techniques – and Bruno Beger would use them all in Tibet – led to discomforting encounters between scientists and their subjects. Being measured was not comfortable, and the arrival of

anthropologists brandishing callipers came to be feared. Flesh is a problem for the anthropologist. He is interested in the bone beneath the skin, the pure objectivity of the skeleton; what lies on top – whether his subject is fat or thin – is the result of individual habit and experience. So the callipers needed to be wielded without mercy. Flesh had to be squeezed and pinched to get down to the bone. Being measured became a kind of torture. Rumours of approaching scientific visitors could empty a village in Africa or Polynesia.

In the 1870s the German explorer and amateur student anthropologist Hermann von Schlagintweit added a new technique to the anthropologists' armoury. This was the face mask, made from gypsum plaster and cast on the spot from the subject. Anthropologists like von Luschan seized on the new technique, and it became a vital part of an anthropologist's education. Making masks from visiting 'natives' became an entertaining ritual in German classrooms.

The anthropological face mask – and there are rows of them in collections all over the world – is often an object of great beauty, but it dehumanized. It turned its subject into an object – a clay cast. Beger's Tibetan face masks, the ones proudly displayed in his living room, are strikingly beautiful but they also resemble death masks or even decapitated heads. This was intentional. Von Schlagintweit's invention offered the facility of detachment. Once the cast had been made, it could be taken back to the museum and studied at leisure. The face mask is mute; it cannot protest. But like those fearsome callipers, the face mask could be a form of torture. Imagine, if you can, the experience of having your face covered in slowly hardening clay with only tiny vents or lengths of straw jammed into the nostrils to breathe through. The process lasted a minimum of forty minutes. Even pure gypsum plaster can cause unpleasant skin irritation; if contaminated, it can burn the skin. When Beger made his first mask of a Tibetan, his subject had convulsions.

Anthropologists could also use the dead, and it was often more convenient to do so. Corpses did not argue, fight back or run away. They did not feel pain. Rudolf Virchow, who became one of Germany's most high-profile anthropologists, also cultivated colonial administrators and knowledgeable travellers, persuading them to send back, in alcohol-filled zinc containers, fresh severed heads acquired from native burials. Like a collector of fine art, Virchow indicated that he would be interested in any skin samples, hands and feet that might be acquired at executions or from battlefields and hospitals.

There was worse to come. When German colonists arrived in

Namibia in south-west Africa, the dominant tribal society was the Herero who had for many centuries been cattle herders. The new arrivals were farmers, however, and they rapidly came to regard the Herero as an obstacle. In 1897, plague swept through native herds. Many Herero lost everything. The catastrophe offered the German colonists an opportunity they were quick to seize. Thousands of starving Herero were offered jobs on the ever-expanding European farms and many, close to starvation, accepted. With their cattle herds decimated and wage labour replacing traditional ways of life, Herero society began to collapse. These once proud herders were now virtual slaves. By 1904, the Herero had had enough and began to fight back. At first they had some success, so the colonists appealed to Berlin. The Kaiser called in General Lothar von Trotha, who had a reputation for ruthlessness, and ordered him to crush the uprising by 'any means necessary'. 'It was and is my policy', von Trotha said, 'to use force with terrorism and even brutality.'

He was true to his word, and launched a war without mercy against the Herero. Their ill-equipped forces were smashed. Then thousands were driven into the desert and corralled miles from any water source. Anyone who tried to escape was shot. By the end of the conflict in 1907, more than sixty thousand Herero had been exterminated. Von Trotha then attacked another tribe, called the Nama – usually referred to as 'Hottentots' – and killed more than half of them. Survivors were rounded up and incarcerated in camps, where thousands more died from typhus and other diseases. One German soldier recalled 'the death rattle of the dying and the shrieks of the mad . . . they echo in the sublime stillness of infinity.'[5]

Anthropologists back in Berlin followed these events with keen interest. War meant bodies; bodies meant bigger collections; collections led to knowledge, academic papers and prestige. Felix von Luschan had a contact in one of the German camps in Namibia and he was able to make appropriate arrangements. Whenever a Herero died, the women were ordered to strip the flesh from the corpse using shards of glass, then the skeletons and skulls were shipped to Berlin. Military doctors, too, were especially active when it came to collecting Herero body parts and 'fresh native corpses' then despatching them, expertly preserved, to the Fatherland. Even though its methods were brutal and anti-humanist, German anthropology was meticulous.

Bruno Beger was born not long after these grisly events, in April 1911. His first memory is of being taken by his father to the

Nuerupinner See, a lake near Heidelberg. Friedrich Beger left his son alone for a few moments, reappeared in a bathing suit and walked to the end of a diving board. He was a tall, athletic man – the perfect German. He waved at his son, then turned towards the water and dived in a perfect arc. He was underwater for a long time. The boy stifled tears. Perhaps 'Vati' had gone for ever. Then, more than fifty metres from the lake edge, his father's glistening head burst above the water. He lifted his arm and waved slowly. The boy waved back. Beger also recalls a photograph of his father performing handstands on the edge of the kitchen table. Sports, the perfect body – Bruno Beger would become an ardent admirer of both.

The Begers were, before the catastrophe of war and defeat, moneyed and educated. After receiving his *Doktorarbeit*, Friedrich had become a forestry scientist. Bruno's mother Gertrud was an accomplished singer of concert *Lieder*. Friedrich was also a staunch nationalist, and at the turn of the century he left his trees behind and joined the Wehrmacht. After 1871, warrior myths had proliferated in Germany. Otto von Bismarck's Second Reich was heralded as a new incarnation of the First founded in the twelfth century by Friedrich Barbarossa who, according to legend, was still slumbering beneath Kyffhauser Castle in Thuringia awaiting the rebirth of the Reich. In the same region of Germany where Beger grew up, a gigantic monument commemorating Arminius, the Cherusci leader who smashed the legions of Quintilius Varus in AD 9, was erected in the Teutoberger Forest. The new Reich wanted living heroes, and Friedrich (like Himmler) must have been desperate to become one of the elect. At home, the atmosphere was fervently nationalist, but scholastic too. Bruno's uncles were practical scientists: Karl was a chemistry professor and Max an engineer. The Begers valued academic achievement and admired tough, empirical science dedicated to the service of the Fatherland.

Friedrich Beger was offered a chance for glory just months after the family celebrated Bruno's third birthday in 1914. According to *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler felt 'constant anxiety' in the early months of that year and sensed an 'aura that lay on the chests of men like a heavy nightmare, sultry as feverish tropical heat'.[6] In June, Archduke Ferdinand travelled to Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which had been annexed by Austria, and was assassinated by the nationalist Gavrilo Princip, who feared that Austria had plans to grab Serbia. When the Austrians delivered an ultimatum to the Serbian government, Russia mobilized in support of Serbia. Germany

pledged its support to Austria and began planning a strike against Russia's ally France. The first consequence of this catastrophic cascade of allegiances and aggression came on 1 August when Germany declared war on Russia and invaded France. Britain was an ally of France and soon made its own declaration of war against Germany. The world conflict that followed has been described as 'frightful and unnatural', an 'endless monotony of misery, broken by poignant tragedies'.

In the first months of war, many Germans were ecstatic. Hitler fell onto his knees and 'thanked heaven from an overflowing heart'. Friedrich Beger's brothers soon joined in the frenzied outburst of nationalist aggression and volunteered. Even Stefan Zweig, a cultured Austrian Jew, gloried in the fact that he had been called up to 'cast his infinitesimal self into the glowing mass'. There was an exultant confidence, too, among Germany's High Command. Years before 1914, Feldmarschall Alfred von Schlieffen had hatched a plan for a military campaign that he believed would secure a quick victory for Germany in the event of a European war. It's been called 'the most important official document of the last hundred years'.[7] In its final form, known as the 'Great Memorandum', produced after years of obsessive tinkering by a man without a hobby, von Schlieffen's plan proposed a fast and brutal onslaught against the French. Seven-eighths of the Wehrmacht would attack through Belgium, riding roughshod over that country's neutrality. In just forty-two days, von Schlieffen calculated, the French armies would have surrendered and the Wehrmacht would be free to turn around and attack Russia with equally brutal force. Von Schlieffen died in 1912, but his plan lay in a drawer at Army headquarters like a time bomb.

The Schlieffen Plan was unleashed as soon as the European powers declared war in 1914. It was brutal enough, but it failed. The German Army, in whose ranks marched the Begers, fought its way to within a few kilometres of Paris but was unexpectedly driven back by the French and the British Expeditionary Force. Von Schlieffen had not anticipated this reversal of fortune, and he was not around to come up with a solution. The Wehrmacht was forced to retreat and then consolidate. Trenches were slashed across the fields of Flanders. A new kind of war had begun that would kill in enormous numbers. It would be protracted and unimaginably bloody. Neither Beger's father nor his two uncles would survive for very long. Friedrich was killed, shot in the heart, on 6 March 1915. Max fell six months later. Karl was a victim of one of those strange ironies of war and suffered an ignominious end. Strolling past a tavern one evening, he was

mistaken for someone else and beaten to death by a vengeful stranger.

Beger's mother Gertrud, like so many other German women, was now without a husband. She had five children and a meagre war widow's pension and Germany itself was fast approaching a crisis. By 1917 there were severe food and fuel shortages which led to bitter hardships. Food prices rocketed, and in the 'Turnip Winter' of 1916–17 there was mass malnutrition. A chronic shortage of coal meant few could keep warm. The Begers were, for a short time, better off than many, but social tensions were rising. Some began to look for scapegoats to blame and there were rumours that 'Jewish speculators' had been profiteering by holding back supplies and inflating prices. Soldiers returning from the front spread rumours that few Jews served on the front line itself and most were officers. An inquiry was launched; when its results showed that these rumours were false it was suppressed. There was a spasm of anti-Semitic feeling, and the genuine fact that many patriotic Jews had been killed on the front did nothing to dampen a *Völkisch* backlash. Jews were soon being blamed for the Russian Revolution in 1917. Some of the leaders were indeed Jews, and Lenin led an assault on anti-Jewish legislation as soon as he seized power. After all, Karl Marx had been a Jew, even though he was a convert, and an anti-Semitic one at that.

It would be scurrilous to imply that Bruno Beger, aged six in 1917, absorbed such ideas so early, but for many Germans a link between Jews and Bolshevism was made during the First World War. In the final part of this book, we will see that the phrase 'Jewish-Bolshevik Commissars' possessed a fearful significance for an adult Bruno Beger. At times during our conversation, Beger came very close to implying that Hitler's war had been a just one because it had been fought against Bolshevism.

After 1917, social chaos and its ugly spawn were quickly followed by military collapse. It had begun in March. General Ludendorff had suffered a nervous breakdown, then mutinies spread through the German Navy and Army. Two million had died; now the rest simply dropped their rifles, picked up their kit bags and walked home. In the Reichstag the politicians finally understood that the war was lost. The Bavarian monarchy was overthrown and the Kaiser forced to abdicate. He fled into exile in the Netherlands where he vented his feelings by felling trees on the aristocratic estates that offered him refuge. The new German Republic sued for peace and signed an armistice on 11 November 1918. Germans of many political persuasions felt betrayed – 'stabbed in the back', according to Feldmarschall Hindenburg.

Thomas Mann felt that his people had suffered a mental and physical collapse, 'an unparalleled fall'. The demoralization, he wrote, 'had no limits'.

It was those on the nationalist right in whom feelings of betrayal ran highest and most bitter. Adolf Hitler ranted, 'Did all this happen only so that a gang of wretched criminals could lay hands on the Fatherland?' Germany was convulsed by revolution. In 1919, there were leftist uprisings in Berlin and Bavaria. Troops of mercenaries – the Freikorps Himmler had joined – were used to restore order with the connivance of the government. They killed more than a thousand supporters of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, which the Freikorps leaders called a 'Jewish Republic'. In September 1919 Adolf Hitler joined the German Workers Party, which he soon began to remould as the National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) Party, the NSDAP.

The victorious allies convened in Paris to settle the fate of defeated Germany. They faced a formidable challenge. Europe had been wrecked by war and desperately needed suturing. Four great multi-national empires had fallen: the German, the Russian, the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian. The destiny of literally hundreds of millions of people had to be resolved. What emerged from the lengthy and acrimonious wrangling in Paris was the Versailles Treaty. It was bitterly resented by just about every German faction and citizen. There were losses of territory and punitive reparations to be paid. Germany was stripped of its colonies. But what was especially resented was the way in which Germany had been made to accept 'war guilt', and there was fierce and bitter reaction when the victors demanded that the Kaiser should be extradited and tried as a war criminal. The treaty was highly divisive inside Germany. Most conservatives and the far right blamed the new republic for the armistice and its aftermath. The 'Gentlemen of the Swastika' began to seek radical solutions to Germany's problems, and there were many of them, for with military and diplomatic defeat had come economic catastrophe.

Beger's childhood and adolescence were dominated by never-ending financial anxieties which intensified as Germany rode the roller-coaster of defeat. Although the Begers valued academic success, money to afford it would never be easy to find. In their home town of Heidelberg, Frau Beger had, at first, some success with a *Tochterschule* – an upmarket means of educating young girls – on the Hauptstrasse. The school prospered, and she decided to sell the Heidelberg property and build her own, grander school in Neckargemünd. She selected and hired an architect. Then in 1921 the last reparation payment of

132,000 million gold marks was demanded and the German economy went into freefall. The value of the mark plunged. In 1923, Germany was declared in default and the French invaded the Ruhr. Inflation turned into hyperinflation and the value of the mark was slashed again and again. At its lowest, one American dollar was worth 130,000 million marks. This was the year Hitler staged his putsch, and ended up in prison.

The demon of hyperinflation gobbled away at the money Frau Beger had made from the sale of her *Tochterschule*. Confused and distressed, with no income and her money hourly dropping in value, she turned for help to her sister in Gotha. With her help, Frau Beger managed to extricate herself from the purchase of the new school and buy a much cheaper property in Gotha. All this was accomplished in the nick of time as the mark plunged downwards on the currency exchanges. The Begers moved to Gotha, where his mother survived on a small rental income from the new house.

Times were very hard. Meat was rare, and there was little fuel during the winter. Beger remembers walking to school gnawed by hunger – a memory shared with millions of Germans of that generation. Even so, the family was lucky to have a large garden in which they could grow vegetables. Beger's aunt even taught the children how to hunt for edible plants in the fields on the outskirts of the city. Despite the hardships, the Beger children did well. Bruno won a place at quite a prestigious *Gymnasium* where he excelled in mathematics. To assist his mother, he gave mathematics lessons to his fellow pupils for one mark an hour. As well as numbers, like his dead father, Bruno had a passion for sports.

It is understandable that as he approached adulthood Beger would begin to look for substitutes for his martyred father. By now the young Beger had matured into a striking young man, the perfect Aryan who would always draw the eyes of men and women. He was exceptionally tall, passionate about sports, and his features were highly sculpted, with a powerful aquiline nose. In a nation that measured identity and status in the shape of the skull and skeleton, Beger was a natural aristocrat. When he was still at school, he caught the eye of a sculptor called Hans Lichtenecker who would have a decisive impact on his emerging ideas. At the turn of the century, Lichtenecker had left Germany and built a farm in Namibia. He had fought in von Trotha's savage campaign against the Herero that had proved so valuable for German anthropologists. Lichtenecker's tales of adventure and conquest stirred young Beger's imagination. He began to dream of

leaving Germany and becoming, like his hero, a farmer in Namibia – the killing fields of the Second Reich. The dream became even more consuming when, laid up with a sports injury, Beger discovered Hans Grimm's novel *Volk ohne Raum* ('People without Space'). It took him just two feverish days to devour all 1,500 pages of it. As he closed the book, he recalled, he 'wept with joy'.

This episode, with its mysterious passions, brings Bruno Beger's state of mind and his evolving world view into sharp focus. Weimar Germany was an unstable, agitated and fractured landscape inhabited by belligerent interest groups and political movements, all highly vocal and competitively grasping any means at hand to propagate their ideologies. The nationalist right had a powerful supporter in the media and publishing tycoon Alfred Hugenberg, a former director of Krupp. Hans Grimm (1875–1959) was one of his star authors, and *Volk ohne Raum* was a stunning success, selling 315,000 copies – some sources say half a million – between its publication in 1926 and 1935. But it is not by any stretch of the imagination a literary masterpiece. Grimm is dull and repetitive, his prose carved from the hardest mahogany. But then Grimm did not set out to create a piece of fine literature. He wanted to show Germans their true destiny as a people. For Grimm, as for Hitler as he dictated *Mein Kampf* in his prison cell, that destiny involved finding *Lebensraum*. Germans were people without room, and the world would soon have to make room for them.[8]

Grimm makes the point in brutal, simple language: 'The cleanest, most decent, most honest, most efficient and most industrious white nation on earth lives within too narrow frontiers.' The book's hero is Cornelius Freibott, whose experiences Beger closely identified with. In his youth, Grimm makes him the embodiment of true German manhood – a product of the soil but with a deep appreciation of learning. Financial disaster frustrates his desire to become a teacher and, after some convoluted plotting, he ends up in Africa where he joins the Boers in their war against the British – the dastardly villains in the story. Freibott is captured and imprisoned. At the end of the Boer War, he discovers that his former lover has fared even worse and died in a British concentration camp. Freibott then sets off for German South-west Africa, where, in an odd literary touch, he encounters his author in the shape of a trader called Hans Grimm. The Grimm character is able to make sense of Freibott's experience. He is a true German whose destiny awaits him in the new colonies, and he sends him on his way just in time to participate in the bloody suppression of the Herero. Free at last, Freibott buys a farm, but before he can

occupy it the colony is overwhelmed by unscrupulous diamond speculators who are, of course, Jews. Diamonds and wealth corrupt the colonists and a dejected Freibott travels on, this time back to Europe and a world war which is ignominiously lost shortly after he arrives. He briefly takes up a career as a political agitator – no guesses as to what he is agitating for – but is murdered by a social democrat. A good editor might have suggested that Grimm turn his novel, with its absurd reversals of fortune, into a comedy. But as propaganda, the odd twists and turns of Cornelius Freibott's life were in 1926 an inspiration for thousands of Germans, both a romantic call to arms overseas and a vision of a new expanded Germany.

Like his hero, Beger experienced his own reversals of fortune. He simply could not raise the six thousand marks he would need to buy a farm. Any other dreams he might have had of an African farm were abruptly extinguished by a decidedly odd chain of events. One of his school friends, and his worst private maths pupil, had developed a consuming passion for the beautiful Frau Lichtenecker, the sculptor's wife. Rather than cultivate his flame of adolescent passion privately, the ardent and apparently simple-minded young man opted to reveal everything to his beloved. It was a disastrous decision. He was rebuffed in no uncertain terms and tried to commit suicide, but he botched the job and ended up mutilated and blinded in one eye. Both Beger and his friend were about to enter the university at Jena, and Frau Beger insisted that her son abandon any further thought of becoming a farmer and look after his damaged friend.

For now, Beger's dreams of staking a German flag in a faraway place had to be put aside. From the winter of 1931, at Jena and then Heidelberg, Beger studied his beloved mathematics and a clutch of natural sciences. He remained devoted to athletics and took a course in sports medicine. He could have had no idea just how valuable his medical skills would prove to be when he travelled to Tibet later that decade.

When I ask him about his time at university, Beger tells me he thought that many of his professors were dull and reactionary; they were poor teachers who sat in cafés day after day talking about 'restoring the Kaiser'. His feelings were typical of many students. They believed that their universities had become moribund, but the transformation they demanded was of a *Völkisch* and frequently anti-Semitic kind. Academic jobs were scarce, advancement sluggish, and many graduates found themselves trapped teaching in schools rather than universities. They vented their frustration, like so many others

did, on Jews who were perceived to hold more academic positions than was proper. From 1920 onwards well-organized student bodies demanded quotas for Jews and disrupted lectures by Jewish professors. They restricted the number of Jews joining the *Turnerschaften* (gymnastic clubs) and *Burschenschaften* (fraternities) and stopped them taking part in duels – an essential part of any self-respecting student's time at university. Himmler was proud of his duelling scars, and during our second interview Beger leant forward to show us his own.

In the pretty little town of Jena in Thuringia, the ancient university was especially prone to such sentiments. It had been the academic fiefdom of Ernst Haeckel, who had transformed Darwinian evolution into the science of race. As it now was for Beger, Haeckel viewed 'lovely, small old Jena' as the centre of the world. It embodied all the qualities of German culture; it was a 'fortress of reason'. Haeckel hated cities with their noise and bustle; he associated them with Jews, whom he hated. He loved instead the deep, green valley of the Saale with its picturesque limestone mountains, its villages and brimming orchards. Haeckel's contribution to German scientific culture was to make respectable a racist celebration of the German *Volk* long before Hitler came to power. Hitler himself appropriated Haeckel's thinking in *Mein Kampf* and made him a hero of the Third Reich.

As Beger and his fellow students strolled along the leafy Furstengraben or gathered at the fraternity house, conversation would have turned admiringly to the increasingly successful Nazi Party. Beger, to be sure, did not join the NSDAP until the mid 1930s and says that on the one occasion he saw Hitler before 1933, making a speech from a balcony, he found him rather ridiculous. So did many others. But the stew of *Völkisch* and Judeophobic ideas that seethed and bubbled under the surface of the Weimar Republic had no need of Hitler to keep it piping hot. Germany's academic and scientific community could do that on its own.

Germany's catastrophic defeat and humiliation after 1918 had completely transformed nationalist passions. The state itself seemed defiled by the incompetence of politicians and their abject capitulation, and this conviction prompted the secret crystallization of a new kind of Reich, an inner national soul separate from the normal workings of the state.[9] The Nazis called their cultural magazine *Das Innere Reich*, and its first issue spoke of 'this eternal Inner Germany, the "Holy Heart of Nations" . . .' This 'Inner Reich' was quite distinct from the 'external Fatherland' which had sacrificed so many and then

betrayed their memory so shamefully. It was the secret soul of a defeated but resilient *Volk*.

This very odd consequence of war and defeat had an impact on science, too, at least among anthropologists. Whereas before 1914 they had studied and measured native peoples like the Solomon Islanders or the Herero, now they became increasingly preoccupied with their own Indo-German or Aryan race, even with the 'eternal Inner Germany'. Races, according to one anthropologist already known to Beger at school, had souls. Like Madame Blavatsky and the German occult thinkers she had inspired, some German scientists began to investigate the origins of the Aryan race. Crushed by war, Germans could at least celebrate their ancestors and their own uniquely special blood line and inner soul. Furthermore, they could mark out a future *Lebensraum* for Germany by seeking out Aryan cousins in different parts of the world. Once again, Blavatsky and her spawn defined the realm of enquiry. Bismarck's hastily acquired colonies had been in Africa and the Pacific. Now that these had been lost Germans turned instead to central Asia, the land of Blavatsky's Great White Brotherhood. They looked east just as Hitler's geographer Karl Haushofer had demanded. This was a critical turning point in German thinking about the science of race, and one of its most important advocates now became Bruno Beger's teacher at Jena University.

In 1930, a new chair was created at the university, and its first occupant was Professor Hans F. K. 'Rassen' Günther. For the nineteen-year-old Beger, the blunt-headed Günther changed everything. He was much younger than most professors and had, it seemed, bright new ideas. He was perhaps a new, more mature father who could replace Hans Lichtenecker, the mentor of his schooldays. Günther taught an enthralling new science and for Beger it had tremendous glamour. Anthropology relied on the mathematics he loved, but it also conjured up the heady scents of faraway places and the dreams Beger had been forced to abandon. This intriguing science would also, he soon discovered, satisfy the nationalist pride he had inherited from his father. And it would draw him into the dark world of Heinrich Himmler.

Rassen Günther was no scientist, he was a fraud; the chair at Jena University was the gift of Hitler and the 'Gentlemen of the Swastika'. In December 1929, the NSDAP had trebled its vote in the Thuringian state election. What happened next would turn out to be a blueprint for the Nazi seizure of power. Hitler cannily demanded that the

NSDAP be given two ministries in the Thuringian government, Interior and Education. This would give him the universities as well as the police, and Hitler said that he would use this power 'ruthlessly and persistently'.[10] He further insisted that one of his old cronies from the failed beer-hall putsch, Wilhelm Frick, take on both ministries. Frick was a notorious thug and his appointment had to be steam-rollered through over local protests. As soon as he was appointed, Frick began a purge of schools and universities. He threw out as many Jews and communists as he could find and created a chair of *Rassenfragen und Rassenkunde* ('Racial Questions and Racial Knowledge') for Günther at Jena University.

Günther's rise to power had begun in 1922 when he was invited to take a stroll in the Alps by Julius Lehmann, the publisher and right-wing activist who would play a leading roll in Hitler's 1923 putsch.[11] Lehmann had built his reputation before and during the First World War by producing expensively illustrated medical atlases and texts and he was a vitriolic anti-Semite and *Völkisch* nationalist. In 1917, at the height of anti-Semitic riots in Germany, he had begun to use the pages of one of his widely distributed journals to popularize his ideas about race and 'racial hygiene'. In 1922, inspired by *The Passing of the Great Race* by the American racist Madison Grant, Lehmann was planning a series of books celebrating the superiority of the Nordic or Aryan race. So far, Lehmann had failed to find any reputable academic who was willing to take on the task. Hans Günther was the last name on his list, and his qualifications were not especially impressive.

Günther was a philologist educated in Freiburg, and in 1922 a frustrated school teacher who desperately wanted a university post. He had already published, three years earlier, his eccentric *Ritter, Tod und Teufel*, an 'Account of the Nordic Man' inspired by the famous engraving by Albrecht Dürer 'Knight, Death and the Devil' (1513). Günther had fashioned an unconventional tract that transformed the Knight into a model German. He had all the Nordic qualities: 'talented and beautiful . . . slim, broad shouldered, narrow hipped', but ruthless too, with 'chiselled features . . . shining skin flushed with blood . . . a royal species among men'.[12] The Knight was the superior, pure-blooded leader of the people.[13] One of Günther's most enthusiastic readers was Heinrich Himmler.

Lehmann was certain that he could shape Günther's romantic racism and turn him into a hard-headed advocate of Nordic superiority. He knew that Günther had led a vicious political campaign against the deployment of black French troops in the

Rhineland in 1919; he had called them 'the Black Curse on the Rhine'. So as they stopped to take in the view from a high ridge, Lehmann made Günther a tantalizing offer. He wanted him to abandon the romantic nationalism of *Ritter* and turn himself into a committed race scientist. Once he had absorbed the appropriate expertise, Günther would be contracted to churn out a series of lucrative articles and books.

Beger's future professor proved an apt pupil. His first article for Lehmann was 'The Nordic Race and Blood Mixture of our Eastern Neighbours', which was enthusiastically reviewed by the anthropologist Eugen Fischer who was best known for his study of 'bastards' in Namibia. It was followed by his second book, *Racial Lore of the German Volk*, which was an instant popular success. Now Lehmann flooded Germany with racial literature masquerading as science, and Günther became his most prominent and successful author. He produced a torrent of books – eight between 1924 and 1929[14] – and it made him wealthy. He was the darling of the extreme right. Hitler himself attended his first lecture.

Günther turned Beger into an anthropologist. And it is by understanding Günther that we can discover why Himmler sent Beger to Tibet.

Imagine the young Beger in his cramped student digs in Jena. He is a hard-working student when he is not running or jumping, and there are scores of books open on his desk and stacked on shelves and chairs. One is open in front of him. It is Günther's *The Racial Elements of European History*. Physical anthropology, Günther tells his students and readers, concerns itself with the 'calculable details of bodily structure'. From a study of bodily structures, Günther concludes that there are five European races: the Nordic, the Mediterranean, the Dinaric, and so on. But – and this is the fundamental point – 'true breeding human groups' are very rare. Most Europeans, including Germans, are a mixture of blood lines, and the physical anthropologist has the task of calculating the proportion of each race embodied in an individual. This can be determined only by intricately measuring bodies and skulls, recording hair types and eye colour, and then meticulously crunching the numbers. Günther believed that the evidence was worrying; German stock was increasingly mixed. And only the pure in blood could sustain a high civilization.

A great deal of Günther's evidence is subjective. He depends, like most racists, on appearance, and the book contains page after page of mug shots that stand for the different racial types or mixtures of types. Many are anonymous, but others show history's great and good.

There is Macchiavelli, 'predominantly Dinaric', alongside Leonardo, who was 'Nordic'; Tennyson was Nordic too, as were Byron and the Duke of Wellington, but Dickens is merely 'predominantly Nordic' since the crinkly texture of his hair betrays the presence of a different strain. Generic American professors (from Yale) and most statesmen are Nordic; marble statues, portraits and antique busts show that Greeks, Romans and Germans too were of the Nordic type. Günther has a rogue's gallery as well. Socialist leader Ferdinand Lasalle is representative of a 'Jew from Germany' and is 'Predominantly Hither Asiatic with Nordic Strain? Texture of hair Negro?' Camille Saint-Saëns is simply a 'Jew from France'.

Günther's conclusion is simple and dangerous. The message of science is that the Nordic or Aryan race embodies all that is great and good. Aryans alone are endowed with a sense of competitive achievement, leadership, highly developed senses of reality, prudence, duty, calm judgement, angelic creativity and 'roguish humour'. What a piece of work is Nordic man! But if the weaker elements betray their inheritance by contaminating its purity, these attributes begin to wither; 'an age of unlimited racial mixture has left the men of the present day physically and mentally rudderless'.

Günther now brings on the villains in the drama of race history. One racial type above all posed the most insidious threat to Nordic culture. The Jews 'give an example of the physical and mental hereditary endowment, for their inherited characteristics are the source of that strangeness which they themselves feel within the racially different European peoples and which these people feel with regard to the Jews . . .'[15] Jews exhibit, according to Günther, particular gestures and traits which, thankfully, make them easy to identify. They are, for example, preoccupied by materialism and have a tendency to obesity and 'lustfully sensual lips'. In his chapter 'Jewish Nation', Günther recommends that a 'worthy and evident solution of the Jewish question lies in that separation of the Jews from the Gentiles . . . which Zionism seeks to bring about'.[16] Thus the scientist became a propagandist.

At the end of the book, Günther tells his readers and students, 'The question is not so much whether we men now living are more or less Nordic; but the question put to us is whether we have the courage enough to make ready for future generations a world cleansing itself racially and eugenically . . . Race theory and investigations on heredity call forth and give strength to a New Nobility: the youth that is, with lofty aims in all ranks which, urged on like Faust, seeks to set its will

towards a goal which calls to it beyond the individual life.'[17] Anthropological science, forged in the factories of colonial violence, thus became a rallying call to German youth to purify the race.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, many had come to believe that the Aryan races had expanded from a central Asian homeland, perhaps in Tibet. Günther turned the idea on its head. According to him, north-west Europe was the original home of the Nordic people, and Günther laboriously followed their trail eastwards to Persia, through the Caucasus and into India. In an echo of the Atlantis myth, Günther's Nords brought with them the art of building and sophisticated social systems. In some regions of the world, they left behind dolmens and stone circles; in India, they created the Hindu *Veda*. But as they spread across Asia, the weaker kind of Aryan began to lust after lesser races and to poison their inheritance. The great Nordic empire collapsed and its people retreated back to their ancestral heartland in the north.

Günther found evidence for this in the *Veda*, which lament the mingling of races. Its proscriptions, he suspected, led to the emergence of the Hindu *varna* system of hierarchical castes that both Günther and Himmler admired. On the other hand, he blamed Buddhism for encouraging mixed marriage. The teachings of the Buddha 'wholly and irretrievably broke down the racial discipline and forethought of this wonderfully gifted people'. This is all strikingly similar to Ernst Schäfer's lament for the tough old Tibet corrupted by Lamaism. According to Günther, the original Aryans had no priests and it was the emergence of a priestly caste that signalled the 'weakening' of their blood. Indian peoples, Günther believed, now contained barely a trace of their original Nordic blood, but he believed that some residual evidence might be found in remote areas of the North-West frontier.[18] This is the key that unlocks Beger's intentions in Tibet.

Beger still has his copy of Günther's *Die Nordische Rasse bei den Indogermanene Aliens*, published in 1933. The maps show dark arrows plunging south then east from the Nordic heartland in northern Europe. They push through ancient Persia and deep into central Asia and the icy peaks of Tibet. In Jena, as he studied these maps, Beger became fascinated by a tantalizing possibility. When he had studied photographs of Tibetan nobles he had become fascinated by their slim, perhaps even Nordic appearance. He later described them as follows: 'tall, with long head, thin face, drawn back cheek bones, springing out straight or slightly bent nose with high nose ridge,

straight hair and imperious, self-confident behaviour'. Beger, and his professor, now became intrigued by the possibility that the last Aryans might be discovered on what Kipling had called 'the world's white roof tree' – in Tibet.

But in 1931, Beger had no idea how he might prove his idea. In contrast to his future colleague Ernst Schäfer, who was at that moment striding across the wilds of Kham, Beger was more concerned about how to make ends meet. For him, education was one way to memorialize his slain father, but his mother still needed her sons to pay their way without assistance. And a proper German education took a long time: a typical graduate was at least twenty-seven. After four semesters at Jena, Beger moved back to his home town of Heidelberg for a while, and then followed Günther to Berlin. He found himself a small apartment in Grunewald in a house that had once been the home of a Jewish family. Günther was now head of the Institute for Race Lore, Ethnic Biology and Regional Sociology. As Schäfer had a year earlier, Beger began to see Himmler's SS as a way forward.

In 1935, Beger applied to join Himmler's elite. Like Schäfer, but for different reasons, Beger would have been an attractive recruit. He was an anthropologist and a student of Hans Günther whose work was highly valued by the new rulers of Germany. He was a textbook 'Nordic' specimen, as photographs and the film of Schäfer's expedition demonstrate: tall and blond with chiselled aquiline features. 'A typical Slav-face would scarcely be taken into the SS by an SS-Führer,' Himmler wrote. 'The photographs which have to accompany the application form serve the purpose of allowing the faces of the candidates to be seen at headquarters . . . in general we want only good fellows, not louts.'[19] By 1935 his application had been approved, and Beger was an *SS Mann*. In the same year, he joined the Nazi Party, neither an early recruit nor a 'March Violet' – referring to those Germans who rushed to join the party when Hitler had seized power. More significant was the fact that he now made the acquaintance of Dr August Hirt, a doctor devoted to the Nazi cause. Hirt and Beger would together become involved in one of the darkest episodes of German 'science'.

In the same year that he was accepted into the SS, Beger married and moved from his modest student quarters to a cramped apartment in Marie Curie Strasse near the Zoological Gardens. His first daughter was born there in 1936; two more would rapidly follow. Beger was still a student, and the pressing demands of a young family meant he

needed a job, one he could combine with the demands of his dissertation. And he found it inside the SS, in the Race and Settlement Office, the RuSHA. From now on his time would be split between the Anthropology Department on Lentze Allee and the RuSHA on Heidemannstrasse, where he began work on some of the archaeological projects that so fascinated Himmler.

To a remarkable degree, Himmler's ideas had been formed not by politicians but by anthropologists and biologists. Men like Günther had shown, using apparently objective measurements, that certain individuals and only one race was destined for mastery, but that if the blood of the Master Race was mixed with lesser races, it would be weakened and eventually destroyed. Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, called Nazism 'applied racial science'. After 1933, scientists at the prestigious Kaiser Wilhelm Institute found that their ideas were highly valued by Germany's new leaders. Many prestigious scientists became part of the Nazi crusade, even if they despised Hitler in private and were not party members. Among them were well-known biologists and anthropologists like Eugen Fischer, whose work on genetics was highly regarded by Himmler. These scientists fostered, knowingly, the vision of a future where scientific methods of selection would ensure that higher races prospered and lesser ones were weeded out. By pursuing their science, anthropologists nourished the fantasies of others who sought not knowledge but power. Hitler sometimes described himself as a 'physician' whose task was to remove the sickness of modern Germany. In return for scientifically endorsing his metaphor, doctors and anthropologists were offered dazzling opportunities by men who in 1933 seized so much power that they could contemplate what might have been an impossible dream: a purely Nordic future cleansed of impurity. It was a dream of power so radical that it could envision transforming the biological nature of the German people themselves.

So here is Bruno Beger in 1936. He is a fully fledged *SS Mann* and has a new membership card from the NSDAP. He lives and works in Berlin, dashing between the RuSHA and the university, where Günther has given him his dissertation topic. It is his first chance to use in the field the anthropometric techniques he has been taught, and it concerns an historical enigma. The Altmärkische Wische is a small farming region near the Elbe, until 1989 part of the GDR. In the twelfth century, the Altmärkische was plagued by flooding. The local prince, 'Albrecht the Bear', had the inspired idea of drafting in engineers from the Netherlands to build dykes to control the floods.

Albrecht's scheme was a great success and the Altmärkische was soon safe, dry and prosperous. The Dutch dyke builders and the families they had brought with them were offered generous legal rights and lucrative tax concessions if they decided to stay on, and many did. Over the centuries, the Dutch community, the Lange Strasse, maintained a semi-aristocratic distance from local German people even after their privileges were eventually taken away from them in the nineteenth century. Beger's task was to take his callipers and gypsum to the Altmärkische and see if he could detect, using anthropological science, whether or not there was any difference between the two groups hundreds of years after Albrecht's clever idea had brought them together. He spent a happy summer cycling around the Altmärkische measuring local farmers, making masks (he must have had considerable charm) and processing the data with a clumsy 'Brunswick calculator'. The question was, who was most German? Could two European 'races' still be detected? And if so, what did that imply?

Beger would never finish his dissertation. One morning in 1937 a postcard was slipped beneath his door in Berlin – it was signed by Ernst Schäfer, the famous explorer.

CHAPTER FIVE

RETURN TO THE FATHERLAND

'How can the peasant in his village, the labourer in his workshop or factory, the employee in his office – how can they all grasp the extent of the total result of their innumerable personal sacrifices and their struggle? . . . All of them . . . will be able to come to the same conclusion: we are truly the witnesses of a transformation more tremendous than any the German nation has ever experienced.'

– Adolf Hitler, September 1937

SHANGHAI IN JANUARY 1936 WAS STILL A CITY OF BRUTAL CONTRASTS, a deafening tower of Babel, a perpetual motion machine, and, for Ernst Schäfer, crushing after the privations and raptures of the wilderness. Exquisitely attired Europeans, Russians and Americans thronged the *Bund*, the thousand shops of the Nanking Road, the racecourse – the season had begun in November – and the enormous Hongkew Market where you could buy just about whatever you needed or desired. Glittering-eyed traders and dealers were whisked from deal to deal by the city's seventy thousand barefoot rickshaw drivers, although few of them took time to notice any Chinese person unless they could do them a favour or had something to sell. In the narrow side streets, bicycles proliferated and honking American cars competed with overladen carts, wheelbarrows and teams of panting Chinese boys staggering beneath weighty pieces of ivory or lacquer furniture destined for homes on the sedate, tree-lined avenues of one of the European Concessions. At night, any pleasure could be indulged,

from dancing to opium to sex (of most kinds and in any combination) – and Brooke Dolan, Schäfer knew, had explored most of them.

While the foreign barbarians made money at Jardine Matheson or Sassoon & Co. and enjoyed leisurely two-hour lunches and nights of doped sensuality, hordes of Chinese refugees, each of whom owned little more than a rice bowl, crowded every day and night across Garden Bridge. They were fleeing unending wars and rapacious armies, and the crippling poverty of the countryside. These bone-thin men, women and children would join hundreds of thousands of others huddled in Shanghai's shanty towns a long way from the *Bund* and the racecourse. The foreign barbarians rarely thought about these glum-faced, starving losers. The wealth of Shanghai's foreigners depended on the weakness of the Chinese, their poverty and their wars with each other and with Japan. A year later, when Schäfer and Dolan were long gone, Japanese bombers would end Shanghai's glory days for ever.

One morning, very early, Schäfer took a stroll along the fog-shrouded *Bund* by the Whangpo. Foghorns sounded across the water, reminding him of conch shells blown mournfully in Tibetan temples – usually a good omen. Schäfer needed to make some hard decisions. He was twenty-five and was already being proclaimed as a new Sven Hedin, thanks to his first book. Now he had completed another dramatic foray into the wilderness and was returning with a rich harvest of zoological spoils. Like his Swedish hero, he knew that his recent adventures could be mined to yield an exotic drama of exploration and derring-do.

But Schäfer was divided and uncertain. Should he return to Germany? Did he want to? Might the United States offer him more? As the fog cleared on the river, a vista of ceaseless and restless movement unfurled. The viscous brown river was dotted with jostling small craft, junks with spread sails, rusty coasters and steamers, and poised cruisers blithely crossing the sea lanes. Schäfer watched the ships as they sailed or steamed down to the confluence with the Yangtze then upriver into China or out to the Hangzhou Wan and the East China Sea. After the war, Schäfer would claim that he had tried to escape Hitler's Germany, but the evidence implies a more complicated tale.

One of the people who had wanted to meet him in Shanghai was the German consul, General Walther Greibel. Schäfer later told his American interrogators, '[Greibel] was very friendly. I said: "I'm going to America." He said: "That is impossible. You have to go back to Germany. I'll smooth the way for you. I'll write to Germany and

recommend you."' It is true that Schäfer had already been awarded a life membership of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia for collecting 'scientific data and specimens of [central Asian] birds and mammals that have never been equalled in size and importance', but back home, he explained to Greibel, it was a different story. His professor, Alfred Kühn, had kicked up a fuss when Schäfer had put his doctoral work to one side to join Dolan and had taken a great deal of persuading before he let Schäfer postpone the completion of his studies. His experiences in Asia were begrudged.

Greibel was so impressed with Schäfer and so alarmed that he might not return to Germany that he immediately sent a letter to the German Research Association (DFG). He told them he had just met a young man who 'could one day become the ornament of our long line of German scientists'.[1] The consul made two suggestions. The first was to award Schäfer an 'honorary doctorate' or to 'bureaucratically facilitate' his doctoral exam. This would prove to be unnecessary: Schäfer was perfectly capable of completing his dissertation without favours. It was Greiber's second proposal that would have the most far-reaching impact. Schäfer had told him that he wanted to lead another, German expedition to Tibet. If the DFG would support this ambitious plan then there was no doubt that Schäfer's loyalty would be guaranteed. The consul's letter came to the attention of Heinrich Himmler who was intrigued by this young SS officer's accomplishments. The Reichsführer would certainly not tolerate Schäfer staying on in America.

Dolan and Schäfer sailed for the United States at the end of the month. In March, Charles Cadwallader at the Academy in Philadelphia wrote to Duncan that 'Brooke Dolan and Ernst Schäfer are now in Philadelphia and all hands are busily engaged in unpacking, cataloguing and caring for the magnificent collections made by the expedition.'[2] Their task must have been immense. They had been on the road for fifteen months, had travelled five thousand miles by caravan and the best part of two thousand by river and had shot and collected every day. Some of the collection was destined for the museum's popular dioramas, which soon boasted a splendid yak 'shot by Ernst Schäfer'. The thousands of other specimens would be meticulously catalogued and 'typed'. Schäfer also spent some time at the Field Museum in Chicago, where he would have seen the panda shot by Roosevelt.

Now a stream of telegrams started to arrive from Berlin. Himmler's assault had begun. The first one congratulated Schäfer on his success

and strongly recommended that he return to Germany as soon as possible. Another arrived soon afterwards. This time it was sent from the office of the Reichsführer himself and it informed Schäfer that he had been awarded a flattering honorary promotion to 'SS Untersturmführer *honoris causa*'. Himmler knew his fellow Germans well. Marking academic success with a higher military rank was perfectly harmonized with the national psyche. Militarism, it was said in Germany, 'is the state of mind of the civilian'. The Nazis had simply pushed to its logical conclusion Bismarck's ideal of a *Machtstaat*, or military power state.

After the war, at the de-nazification tribunal, Schäfer took pains to show that his decision to return was not voluntary, yet his reply to Himmler's telegram, written from Dolan's home address in Villanova, Pennsylvania, to the SS headquarters is effusive: 'I am so proud and happy I am not able to express it. I hope I will be able to show my gratitude through my actions. All my expectations were in each and every respect exceeded though the greatest honour for me is to have been promoted . . .'[3]

Even if this is honorific or simply prudent, Germany must have begun to seem more attractive. In the United States, Schäfer would have been a small fish in a big, highly competitive pond. Although he was now widely travelled he was still academically underqualified, and the prospect of starting afresh at an American university would have been daunting. His relationship with Dolan was friendly but the betrayal at Sining would never be forgotten. Schäfer might also have suspected that he would never stop being 'Junge'; the unpredictable but charismatic Dolan would always be in charge. Back home in Germany, if Greibel could be trusted, he would soon have his Ph.D. and could begin preparing his own German expedition. At the very least, Schäfer was a patriot, and he cannot have forgotten Marion Duncan's searing hostility. There was probably a more subtle calculation, too. His books were addressed to a *German* audience. Their deft blend of science and adventure, of natural history and the ecstasy of the hunt, had been knowingly wrought for a readership only just emerging from the humiliation of Versailles and the turmoil of the Weimar years.

If Schäfer had any doubts, his mind was made up by the Academy of Natural Sciences itself. It had no funds to give Schäfer a job, so in June he said goodbye to the Dolans and boarded the SS *Bremen* bound for Hamburg. Hans Schäfer was waiting for him at the quay when the boat docked. As they drove away, his father

warned Ernst, 'Be as clever as a snake. It is extremely dangerous.'

Schäfer settled in Berlin and returned energetically to his neglected studies, knuckling down to a doctoral dissertation on Tibetan ornithology. He resumed his popular writing at the same time. *Berge, Buddhas und Bären* ('Mountains, Buddhas and Bears') had been a success in 1933 following the first Dolan expedition; now he started work on a two-volume account of the second: *Dach der Erde* ('Roof of the World') and *Unbekanntes Tibet* ('Unknown Tibet'). And he began to enjoy Germany again. It seemed a good time to be back.

By the 'Olympic' summer of 1936, the Nazis had swept away the last relics of Weimar democracy, and Hitler's brutal New Order seemed to have brought about prosperity and optimism. The Reinhardt Plan had kickstarted the economy with heavy investment in roads, building and industry. Hitler's pet *autobahn* project employed two hundred thousand people and created a dazzling symbol of renewal. New factories sprang up in a golden ring around Berlin, and cafés, restaurants and beer halls boomed. It was said that Hitler was 'the symbol of the indestructible life force of the nation'. However much its prehistoric past might have been revered, the New Germany embraced modernity. Motor cars, sound films and wireless were proclaimed as the gifts of National Socialism. Germans thrilled to Hitler's bold attacks on the hated Versailles settlement. In October 1933 he had withdrawn from the League of Nations. In 1935 an overwhelming majority of Saarlanders voted for integration into the Reich, and on 7 March 1936 German troops marched into the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland. Speer said that Hitler was the leader who 'made a reality of their deeply rooted longings for a powerful, proud, united Germany. Very few were mistrustful at this time . . .'

The Berlin Olympics brought more than a million visitors to the city, including Schäfer's hero Sven Hedin as a guest of honour, and many of them left convinced that the dark stories they had heard about Hitler were untrue. But for those brave enough to look behind Joseph Goebbels' polished screen of propaganda a different kind of world became apparent, one that was dark, chaotic and violent. Hitler ruled through antagonistic rivalry. The dictator spent most of his time, according to Speer, inspecting new buildings, relaxing in cafés, haranguing his colleagues or sleeping. Among his cronies, there was intense infighting between different agencies and power brokers. Nazi leaders were greedy, venal and corrupt. Despite this, repressive measures against Jews and dissidents were brutally effective. In the universities and research institutes, students and academics had

welcomed the dismissal of Jewish colleagues and embraced a comprehensive policy of *Gleichschaltung* ('unification') which allowed the Nazi dictatorship to oversee appointments, teaching and research. Doctors and lawyers rushed to serve the dictatorship in overwhelming numbers.

Schäfer was feeling increasingly secure and settled in this environment, so he married. Hertha Volz was, Bruno Beger remembers, '*eine schöne, blonde, groß gewachsene Frau*' – 'a beautiful, blonde, tall woman' – the perfect Aryan match for the stocky young adventurer. She was 'delectable and adorable', Beger adds, full of laughter. Her family presided over the prestigious Volz'sche Pädagogikum in Heidelberg, which Beger had attended briefly before his family had moved to Gotha, and they had known the Schäfers for many years. After the wedding, the couple found a large apartment at Hohenzollerndam 36 in the smart Wilmersdorf district of Berlin near Nollendorfplatz. Together, the Schäfers enjoyed Berlin's 700th anniversary, which like so much in Nazi Germany was a fiction: there was no certainty at all that Berlin had been founded in 1237. But Berliners revelled in the clubs, dance halls, cinemas and theatres and the elite were fêted by embassy gatherings, dinners and parties thrown by Nazi potentates. For intellectuals who could be of service to the Reich there were other, even more powerful enticements. Soon after his return to Germany, Schäfer was summoned to Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8 to meet the Reichsführer himself, Henrich Himmler.

As he faced Himmler in his poky office, Schäfer revealed his plans for a new expedition to Tibet, this time under a German flag with men of his own blood. Himmler responded enthusiastically and ordered that Schäfer work with the Ahnenerbe, the SS agency dedicated to investigating the ancestral origins of the Aryan race. Schäfer must have shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Although he had spent little time in Germany since 1933, he knew that the Ahnenerbe was a club for crackpots and failures. No-one took its activities seriously and the price of accepting Himmler as a patron could be humiliation. Schäfer appears to have kept his misgivings private. When he drafted a lecture for the British Himalayan Club in 1938, he described his relationship with the Reichsführer in glowing terms: 'Having been a member of the Black Guard since a long time, I was only too glad that the highest SS leader, himself a very keen amateur scientist, was interested in my work of exploration. There was no need of convincing the Reichsführer SS, as he himself had the same ideas; he simply promised to give me all the help necessary . . .'[4] Schäfer addressing an

audience of British mountaineers – hardly an occasion at which to exaggerate his loyalty to Heinrich Himmler.

Himmler was indeed interested; a new Schäfer expedition could confer tremendous prestige on the SS, and on the Ahnenerbe itself, which had its own 'expeditions department'. Schäfer himself desperately wanted his own triumph. What must have followed was an elaborate *pas de deux* in which both men sought to extract the maximum advantage and to suffer the least damage. For Himmler, Schäfer's plans had irresistible allure. He was fascinated by Asia and believed, like Hans Günther, that there might be Aryan refugees somewhere in the Himalayas. He was determined to extract from Schäfer's success a propaganda triumph that would seal the reputation of the SS and the Ahnenerbe. Himmler had rivals for political power, but he also resented the cultural status of Alfred Rosenberg, the German Balt who had fled to Germany in 1918 and translated the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the phoney document that implied there was a Jewish conspiracy to seize global power. He called himself a 'Fighter against Jerusalem'; he was called in turn 'a profoundly half-educated man'. He began to churn out voluminous and turgid books such as *Immorality in the Talmud* and *The Myth of the 20th Century*. Like Himmler, he was obsessed with Aryan origins, the fate of Atlantis as well as a clutch of pseudoscientific meta-theories about history. He was also chief editor of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi newspaper. By 1936, Reichsleiter Rosenberg had his own rival organization to the Ahnenerbe, known as the Amt Rosenberg, and was a bitter rival of Himmler. A celebrated expedition would give Himmler a powerful advantage.

As Schäfer's plan took shape, Himmler began to pressure him to recruit from Ahnenerbe staff. Schäfer was determined to resist. His reasons had little to do with wanting to occupy any moral high ground. Isrun Engelhardt tells us that 'Schäfer from childhood on hated to yield to authority and resisted being used in any way, be it political or ideological.' And she points out that 'His refusal to oblige the Nazis was not so much grounded in a genuine dislike of Nazi ideology but rather in his own disposition.'[5] Schäfer could never claim, of course, that he had merely followed orders. Over the course of the next year he would wage a guerrilla war with Himmler to protect the identity of *his* Tibet expedition. The Reichsführer was equally determined to mould and influence events. He wanted his own pet theories investigated in the Himalayas. Looking for the Aryan homeland was only one item on his oddball list.

As well as Aryan prehistory, Himmler was also an enthusiast of a bizarre cosmological fantasy called the *Welteislehre* or *GlazialKosmogonie*, the World Ice Theory. The *Welteislehre* had been hatched at the turn of the century by the Austrian engineer, amateur astronomer and inventor Hanns Hörbiger. It was a complete cosmological and historical package. According to Hörbiger, the prime matter of the universe was ice. Cosmic ice threaded its way through the cosmos; the Milky Way and every planetary body, with the exception of the Earth, was sheathed in ice. But this cosmic frost waged perpetual war with gigantic, fiery suns. Every body in the universe was drawn into the perpetual struggle between fire and ice and new planets were formed from the debris of catastrophe and collision. Bigger, more powerful bodies like the Earth ensnared smaller moons in ever-decreasing orbital cycles and the eventual collisions generated floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. According to Hörbiger, *Mondniederbrüche* ('moon breakdown') explained the extinction of the dinosaurs, the biblical flood *and* the destruction of Atlantis. The few survivors fled to form 'asylum' or 'refuge' cultures in Mexico and South America.

When it was published in 1913, Hörbiger's theory was widely dismissed as pseudoscience, but it soon began to attract a cult following in Germany's *Völkisch* community. In this shadowy world, the *Welteislehre* had an alluring eschatological magnetism. The Nordic Master Race had, supposedly, originated in a realm of ice and had been scattered across the globe by catastrophic eruptions, floods and earthquakes. There was a deeper seduction, too: according to Hörbiger, the universe was created from unceasing struggle and destruction, ideas which had a powerful appeal for Himmler.

The *Welteislehre* provided an Aryan alternative to the 'dreadful and mistaken' 'Jewish theories' of scientists like Einstein. Even the usually sceptical Hitler embraced glacial cosmogony. In *Table Talk*, Hitler said he was 'quite well inclined to accept the cosmic theories of Hörbiger' and planned to build an observatory in Linz dedicated to 'the three great cosmological conceptions of history – those of Ptolemy, Copernicus and Hörbiger'.[6] But it was Himmler who most zealously promoted glacial cosmogony, and when he could he silenced opponents of the idea. The German Ministry of Education and Science denounced the idea, and one of Himmler's staff called Polte had actively solicited hostile comments. So when Himmler discovered what he had been up to, Polte was sent 'on leave'. Himmler was a devout believer, and the *Welteislehre* refined his ideas about the origins of the Master Race.

At their first meeting, he had earnestly told Schäfer that the supernatural ancestors of the Aryans had once been sheathed in ice and had been released from their frozen bondage by divine thunderbolts. Many departments of the Ahnenerbe were devoted to 'proving' Hörbiger right – posthumously, since he had died in 1931. It was natural that Himmler would view an expedition to the icy Himalayas as the perfect opportunity for a proper investigation of the *Welteislehre*. His first demand was that Schäfer take an SS officer called Edmund Kiss, an enthusiastic believer in glacial cosmogony.

Schäfer had no idea who Kiss was and began to investigate. What he discovered was dismaying. Kiss had lived in Bolivia in the late 1920s and had become friendly with an Austrian adventurer and rubber maker called Arthur Posnansky. Posnansky had spent more than a decade surveying the ancient city of Tiwanaku in the Altiplano, which was, like Tibet, a plateau surrounded by icy peaks. At Tiwanaku, immense stone blocks lay scattered just as if they had been smashed in some ancient geological catastrophe. The stupendous size of these blocks and their exquisite carving implied that they had been created by some mysterious lost civilization. This possibility intrigued Edmund Kiss, who was well versed in *Völkisch* fantasies. Posnansky was plain wrong, but his peculiar fantasy had been stewed in the poisonous broth of racism and this appealed to Kiss and to his masters in Berlin.

Posnansky violently despised the local Aymara people, who believed – correctly – that their ancestors had built Tiwanaku just two thousand years earlier. Kiss encouraged his friend to rationalize his virulent prejudices and introduced him to German race anthropology. Posnansky began measuring and photographing the Aymara and concluded that they did not have the capacity to conceive and build such an astounding monument. So who had? And when? Although Tiwanaku is less than two thousand years old, Kiss and Posnansky proposed on the basis of some flimsy astronomical calculations that it was a South American Atlantis built by an elite refugee race, abandoned fifteen thousand years ago after calamitous volcanic eruptions and floods. Up on the Altiplano, according to Kiss, everything fitted together. Tiwanaku provided evidence for a lost Master Race and the violent upheavals predicted by Hörbiger's theory. High in the Andes, Kiss claimed to have discovered a monumental 'Nordic Head' which was more evidence of an Atlantean flight from an inundated world into the Andes. Kiss's head has never been seen by anyone else.

When he returned to Germany, Kiss worked as a town surveyor in Kassel and began to churn out scientific tracts and turgid fiction about Atlantis.[7] For Schäfer they made dire reading. *Frühling in Atlantis* (*Spring in Atlantis*, 1931) is a story about the golden age of Atlantis. In Kiss's fevered imagination, a ruling elite of fair Nordic types called 'Asen' confront a threatening, dark-skinned, Slavic underclass. The Asen leader Baldur Wieborg of Thule, who had been promoting eugenic breeding plans, is eventually murdered. *Die letze Königin von Atlantis* (*The Last Queen of Atlantis*, 1931) is set fourteen thousand years ago and tells the story of the Atlanteans' trek to the Andes, where they practise stringent eugenics and enslave the local people. In his final bestseller, *Die Singschwäne aus Thule* (*The Singing Swans from Thule*, 1939), the Asen embark on a journey back to their Arctic homeland, Thule, under their blue and silver swastika banners. When their ancestors had lived there long ago, Thule had basked in an endless spring, but the Third Moon had made Thule into an icy desert. So the Asen turned south again and founded the ancient Hellenic cultures of the Mediterranean.

Himmler was passionate about Kiss's novels and invited him to contribute 'scientific' works on the *Welteislehre* to Ahnenerbe-sponsored journals. In 1936 Kiss signed the 'Pyrmont Protocol' which bound the Ahnenerbe to support glacial cosmogony, and began to lobby Himmler to allow him to organize expeditions to find evidence.

Schäfer was dismayed by what he had discovered about his future colleague. The suggestion that he collaborate with a fantasist like Kiss, whose work confirmed all his worst fears about the Ahnenerbe, was repellent. But he had to proceed, as his father had advised, with caution. He agreed to meet Kiss, and as soon as he had he realized that there was a way out of his dilemma. He called Himmler and informed him that it would be quite impossible to work with a man who was so much older than he was. His experience in the wilds of Asia had made it clear that the key to success was youth. Nor, he said, did he want his authority questioned by an older man. It was a clever move. Himmler backed down; there would be no Kiss.[8]

Soon afterwards, the balance of power began to tip even further in Schäfer's favour. Shaken by the Kiss experience, Schäfer courageously made a list of twelve conditions that would guarantee his scientific freedom and presented them to the Ahnenerbe head, Wolfram Sievers. Schäfer and Sievers already distrusted each other and Sievers concluded, having read Schäfer's list, that 'The task of the expedition . . . had diverged too far from the targets of the Reichsführer SS . . .'

There was another reason for Sievers' capitulation. His official title was 'business manager' of the Ahnenerbe and he was now embarrassed to discover that the coffers of the SS were much depleted (Schäfer was demanding more than sixty thousand Reichsmarks, and presumably not enough of Loibl's illuminated bicycle discs had been sold that quarter). Himmler was furious but there was nothing he could do. So Schäfer's bullishness and the empty Ahnenerbe coffers meant that he could detach his plans from Sievers' grip but still retain the support of Himmler himself.

Schäfer was now faced with a formidable task: he would have to raise the funds himself. But with his father's assistance and his own well-oiled connections he rapidly – 'in no time', he said – accumulated the money he needed. The process snowballed when the Werberat der Deutschen Wirtschaft (Public Relations and Advertising Council of German Business) pledged 80 per cent of the budget. The *Völkischer Beobachter* quickly saw the propaganda potential of Schäfer's expedition and reached into its coffers. The balance was made up by big German companies like IG Farben and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Reich Research Council). Brooke Dolan, perhaps still smarting after Schäfer's threatened bonfire, put in $4,000.[9] Other companies donated otherwise unaffordable scientific equipment, and even a new typewriter, which they hoped Schäfer would be photographed with in the wild.

Schäfer cannily had a letterhead printed. It read DEUTSCHE TIBET EXPEDITION ERNST SCHÄFER in large letters, then 'under the patronage of the Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler and in connection with the Ahnenerbe' (in small letters!). He was careful to remove that second line when he arrived in Gangtok in British India, as his Sikkimese assistant 'German' Akeh Bhutia proved when I met him in 2002. Akeh still possessed the letters that authenticated his involvement with Schäfer; they are simply headed DEUTSCHE TIBET EXPEDITION ERNST SCHÄFER. Some German historians have concluded from this that Schäfer was independent of the SS and was thus able to do 'pure science'. This was not the case. Himmler remained the expedition's patron and Schäfer clearly had no interest in losing his support. Although Sievers had denounced Schäfer's proposal, it is highly likely that Himmler would have approved and released Ahnenerbe funds had they been available. Both men had what they wanted. It would remain an SS expedition, 'in connection with the Ahnenerbe', but Schäfer had made sure that in most respects he would shape its goals. At the very least, the German Tibet Exhibition could enhance the

international reputation of Nazi Germany. In many other ways, too, Schäfer's plans remained intertwined with Hitler's New Order.

At a very practical level, Schäfer needed Himmler's support even if he acknowledged this only in small type. The Reichsführer would provide the expedition with foreign currency, which was extremely difficult to obtain during the Nazi period, and, more importantly, he would grant Schäfer and his colleagues permission to leave Germany.[10] Schäfer would turn to Himmler again, in desperation, at the end of his time in Tibet in August 1939. It is also true that Schäfer's funding, while it did not come from the Ahnenerbe, did come from organizations with very close links to the Nazi state: the Werberat der Deutschen Wirtschaft was part of Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry, and the *Völkischer Beobachter* was the official Nazi Party newspaper. This was not a free society. All this suggests that we need a more subtle account of the ways in which Schäfer's activities were ensnared in the ideologies of the Reich.

To begin with, there was no innate contradiction between a vicious totalitarian regime and science – assuming, in Robert Proctor's phrase, that 'Science is what scientists do.' In Hitler's *Table Talk*, one of the most frequently used words is *Wissenschaft* – science. Although Himmler was fascinated by what can only be characterized as phoney science, and some German scientists like Johannes Stark talked about developing an 'Aryan Physics' to oppose 'Jewish relativity', many different kinds of science were successfully promoted after 1933. Proctor has demonstrated, to take just one example, that the 'Nazi war on cancer' led to outstanding research based on rigorous epidemiological standards.[11] Driving the work on cancer was, of course, the ideal of race health, but bad ideas do not necessarily produce bad science. The chemical and biotechnology industries thrived in the 1930s. No-one develops jet engines, V2 rockets or Zyklon B gas by believing in Atlantis. It is an uncomfortable comment on the amorality of science that the Third Reich was *not* by any means a scientific wasteland. In 1946 the German Physics Society claimed that it had always protected '*die Sache einer sauberen und anständigen wissenschaftlichen Physik*' – pure and decent scientific physics.[12] They were right. Dictators cannot change the laws of nature.

So there really is no contradiction between Dr Ernst Schäfer, zoologist and ornithologist, and Untersturmführer Ernst Schäfer, SS officer and German nationalist. As he developed his plans, Schäfer formulated scientific objectives, chose his small team from the scientific community, and avoided Ahnenerbe cranks. He briefly

considered, for example, the archaeologist Dr Erwin Schirmer, who had worked at the Ahnenerbe's Kyffhauser Castle dig looking for '*Indogermanische Volksgruppen*' and the sacred remains of the German ruler who provided the code name for Hitler's invasion of Russia, Barbarossa. Archaeological digs in search of Aryan remains and cult objects obsessed Himmler to such a degree that it provoked even Hitler's scorn. But when Schäfer found out Schirmer's work was considered '*durftig*', that is, miserable or wretched, he simply rejected him.

He chose instead the anthropologist Bruno Beger, the entomologist and photographer Ernst Krause, who would also be the official expedition cameraman, and the geophysicist Karl Wienert. In Schäfer's team only Krause needed to be inducted into the SS, which was a condition of Himmler's patronage; all the others had been SS officers since the early or mid 1930s. Schäfer's right-hand man, organizer and technical expert Edmund Geer was a longstanding member of the Nazi Party and SS. He had served with a Freikorps regiment in the 1920s and Schäfer valued his skills and energy. But despite his faith in Hitler, Geer was often harassed by SS bureaucrats because he could not identify his paternal grandfather. The RuSHA regarded a gap in the family tree as highly suspicious. Could Geer's grandfather have been a Jew? Geer had been born the wrong side of the blanket and was never able to satisfy the SS, who refused to let the matter drop. He was denied a *Sippenbuch*, the precious kin or clan book that every SS member carried at all times, which meant he had a second-class status, even after his return from Tibet.

Wienert's career emphasizes that it was possible to practise conventional science in Nazi Germany, and to have your work rewarded simply for excellence. He was a protégé of the celebrated scientist and explorer Wilhelm Filchner, who had travelled to remote mountain regions to measure and plot the earth's magnetic fields.[13] In the 1930s Germany led the world in geomagnetic research,[14] and Wienert's presence added real lustre to Schäfer's expedition. It is not hard to see why Schäfer would have valued Wienert's involvement very highly. Filchner was as much an inspiration to Schäfer as Sven Hedin was, and his career, which Schäfer followed with intense interest, has much to reveal about a scientific career during the Third Reich.

In 1935, Filchner had embarked on an ambitious 3,500-kilometre expedition across northern Tibet, and in 1937, at a time when Schäfer was making his own plans in Berlin, was reported to be lost somewhere on the southern edge of the Takla Makan Desert. Schäfer and

Wienert came very close to changing their own plans and setting off to find their lost hero, but Filchner was rescued instead by the plucky British vice consul in Kashgar, Mr M. C. Gillet, resulting in much German mortification. Once he had recovered from his ordeal, Filchner opened congratulatory telegrams sent to him by Goebbels and the Führer himself. Back in Germany, he was rewarded with the newly created *Nationalpreis für Kunst und Wissenschaft,* which Hitler presented to him at a grand ceremony in the Reichs Chancellery in January 1938. The *Nationalpreis* had been created because Hitler had forbidden any German scientist to accept the Nobel Prize after it was awarded to the German pacifist and 'traitor' Carl von Ossietzky in 1936. Filchner was supposedly in two minds about accepting, but a refusal would have been dangerous, and besides, the award included a cash prize of a hundred thousand marks. Filchner had never been wealthy. He was a genuine and celebrated scientist, and his achievements counted for a great deal in Nazi Germany – and to his student Karl Wienert, who was about to set off for Tibet with Ernst Schäfer.

Science under the Nazis was not just a playground for cranks, then, but that does not mean it enjoyed Olympian independence. Quite the reverse was true: science in Nazi Germany had to serve the state. And there was no disagreement between Himmler and the academics about the importance of the biological sciences and anthropology. No-one in Germany in the 1930s believed that these were in any sense bogus or questioned the precise mathematical study of races.

Schäfer, of course, was a zoologist. His passion was animals. But his apparently innocuous exploration of the animal world had a special value in Hitler's Germany. In *Geheimnis Tibet*, the book he published in 1943, a year after the film, following long wrangles with Himmler, Schäfer explained his scientific objectives. 'On my earlier expeditions, which I had to undertake with Anglo-Saxons,' he wrote with barely repressed contempt, 'I realized a series of mistakes and shortcomings in the one-sided methodology and organization of the expedition.'[15] These mistakes boiled down to excessive specialization: there was no attempt to relate his or Dolan's work as naturalists to the scientific work of other members of the expedition to create a wider panorama of the ecologies they were exploring. Schäfer was determined to yoke together different areas of study: 'The primary objective of my third expedition [*sic*] was to put together a biological picture in the broadest sense creating an overall picture of this mysterious country.' Schäfer is somewhat unfair here to his friend and benefactor Brooke Dolan, who was clearly aiming for some kind of syncretic approach to his first

foray into central Asia and had come to Germany to widen the expertise of his team. To be sure, though, the second expedition was much more a *Boy's Own* adventure with the sole purpose of amassing biological specimens, and Schäfer's experience with wild-boy adventurer Dolan still rankled with him. As a German he could do much better – *and* take revenge for that traumatic desertion.

There was much more involved in this than merely on the personal level. In Nazi Germany, the official policy of *Gleichschaltung*, or 'unity' was an imperative.[16] It was the means by which the 'German spirit' could infuse and control every part of the scientific world. If science was to serve the *Volk*, then it had to reject what some called the 'west-European-American path' which had led to a catastrophic fragmentation of science into specialities. Under Hitler, the 'German path' would suture these fragments to spawn a truly Aryan science. Specialization was 'Jewish' thinking and led to a stunting and smothering of the scientific ideal. According to the historian of the Ahnenerbe Michael Kater, syncretic science was a 'romantic-organic ideology', and was most fully realized among the fifty-one departments of the Ahnenerbe. Schäfer reflected this in his plans for his new Tibet expedition, and in his obsessive control of the work done by his colleagues.

The quest for a Nordic empire in central Asia was not, on the surface at least, Schäfer's own obsession. But he had a grand ambition, and it was one he shared with Dolan and other American natural scientists.[17] They were convinced that all species of mammals must have evolved somewhere in between the Americas and Europe – in other words, in central Asia. 'The fact', wrote one influential American scientist at New York's powerful Museum of Natural History, 'that the same kind of animals appear simultaneously in Europe and the Rocky Mountains region has long been considered strong evidence for the hypothesis that the dispersal centre is halfway between. In this dispersal centre, during the close of the Age of the Reptiles and the beginning of the Age of the Mammals, there evolved the most remote ancestors of all the higher kinds of mammalian life which exist today . . .'[18] The idea of an Asian origin was quickly taken up by anthropologists. Our own species had evolved 'probably in or about the grand plateau of Central Asia', which had become an immense dispersal centre. 'From this region came the successive invasions which overflowed Europe . . . The whole history of India is similar – of successive invasions pouring down from the north. In the Chinese Empire, the invasions came from the West . . .' The Tibetan

plateau was a pump, pushing new mammal species, including early men, over the brim of the Himalayas and across the globe. Although Darwin himself had intuited that Africa was the 'cradle of mankind', Asia suited the prejudices of scientists in America and Germany. For many, on both sides of the Atlantic, the possibility that humans had evolved first in the 'Dark Continent' was a repellent nightmare. Both German and American scientists shared a passion for eugenics and race science. Both nations believed they struggled with a race problem.

This idea of a central Asian dispersal centre was embraced by Schäfer. Although it is unlikely that either he or his American colleagues would have admitted to reading Madame Blavatsky and her followers, both *The Secret Doctrine* and the science of human origins sprang from a common source. For both, the key was the Tibetan plateau. Since Schäfer insisted that his new expedition was syncretic and dedicated to *Gleichschaltung*, it followed that he would look for an anthropologist who would endorse the idea of a central Asian origin. There was one outstanding German anthropologist and SS officer with a unique interest in central Asia, and that was Bruno Beger.

Schäfer had another objective that would closely link his scientific ambitions with Germany's war economy. In a letter to the DFG, the German Research Association, Schäfer had argued that Tibet was a region that 'owing to its wealth in original useful plants has been seen as a gene centre and promises a rich yield of new discoveries'. That term 'gene centre' had a precise meaning. It is an ironic fact that German science was powerfully influenced by the experimental work of the Soviet geneticist and plant breeder Nikolai Ivanovic Vavilov (1887–1943). On his travels through the vast expanses of the USSR, Vavilov had become fascinated by regions with an unusually high level of variation among cultivated plants. To him it suggested that they were also 'regions of origin'. These privileged places were natural laboratories which dispersed their botanical gifts to distant parts. Wild ancestral seeds were, he believed, especially fertile and resilient to disease and climate. To prove his theory, Vavilov set off to collect cultivated plant seeds from the Near East, the Caucasus and South America, returning eventually with more than two hundred thousand specimens. In 1927, he presented his findings and theories at the Fifth International Congress of Geneticists in Berlin and inspired an international collecting frenzy that sought regions of origin. Vavilov's work, along with genetics research in the USSR, was purged in 1935 when Stalin swung Soviet science behind the pseudoscientific work of

Trofim Lysenko. Vavilov died in a Siberian prison in 1943, but the spirit of his work was most fruitfully cultivated in Nazi Germany.

In *A Rum Affair*, Karl Sabbagh wryly observes: 'Physicists, chemists, biologists, even mathematicians represent in the public mind the potential to do good – or great evil. But you don't expect botanists to win the Nobel Prize and . . . you don't expect them to destroy the world one day.'[19] In Nazi Germany, seeds were a serious matter. As Hitler rearmed with 'blood and iron', many strategists began to think about Germany's ability to feed itself as more resources were diverted into armaments. The news was not good: Germany was already much too dependent on imported foodstuffs. Its agricultural industry, notwithstanding Himmler's reverence for the German farmer, was backward. The Nazi state demanded that German science come up with a solution and, inspired by Vavilov, the search was on for wonder seeds with their miraculous promise of resistance and fecundity. Botany suddenly had a role in the rearmament of the Reich. And there was another, implicit attraction for German scientists and their masters. Seeds, like people, had progenitors; at the root lay a pure ancestral stock. An Aryan Master Seed! Hitler's New Order could create pure seeds as well as pure human stock.

Schäfer himself was very clear that his expedition and his science were politically motivated. In his SS files, which I found in the National Archives in Washington, there is an undated clipping from *Der Schwarze Korps*, the SS in-house magazine. It is a profile of Untersturmführer Ernst Schäfer in which he outlines his views about the role of science in the Third Reich. The interviewer begins rather obsequiously by giving his readers a glimpse of the explorer's world: 'So this is the home of the young German scientist Ernst Schäfer . . . On the floor there are a few preserved animal skins, among them the giant coat of a brown bear. A picture on the wall shows a small herd of wild Tibetan asses. On the desk pile up papers and books . . ' The author then asks Schäfer about science. 'See,' Schäfer replies, 'the same essential ideas motivate me as an SS man and as an explorer and scientist. The ideas of the SS and the ideas of research are identical. Both depend on pioneers, both use selection, both are in their representation and their work based on the values of character and soul that are given to us by our Germanic heritage . . .' His next point is very revealing indeed: 'I also have to say that my close connection to the National Socialist ideas has evoked loud criticism. What are they accusing me of? They say: You are doing biased science [*Tendenz-wissenschaft*]! . . . Nothing is easier than to destroy such accusations.

They say science is international. We don't deny that great achievements of research have to be a gift to the world, but we argue even as passionately that science only grows on a racial basis and that scientists are representatives of a national historical essence [*Substanz*] . . . International science in a liberal sense is out of the question.'

Even when he wasn't being interviewed by SS propagandists, Schäfer was consistent in this identification of science with SS values. He said in another context, for example, that the 'SS-idea and research-idea are one' ('*SS-Gedanke und Forschungsgedanke sind eins*'). He described science as a 'carrier of vigorous German manhood' ('*Trägerin kernigen Deutschen Mannestums*').[20] He then spoke about his expedition: 'We could accomplish more as SS men and do much more for the lack of understanding for the new Germany by being open about who we are, than by travelling under the disguise of an obscure, if neutral scientific academy; after all, we have a clear conscience.'[21] Schäfer might have pushed away the Ahnenerbe cranks like Kiss and relied on his own funding but he was, in 1937, perfectly happy to make himself a spokesman for the SS.

Schäfer had chosen most of his team by 1937, but at that time he was still lacking an anthropologist. His introduction to Bruno Beger came about by chance through a mutual friend, the geologist and hydrologist Rolf Höhne, who had been drawn into the circle of academics and cranks that hovered around Himmler. He was a serious scientist who had, with little enthusiasm, become involved in verifying that a skull unearthed beneath the crypt of Quedlinburg Cathedral was 'Henry the Fowler', who had supposedly been reincarnated as Heinrich Himmler. Höhne had done his duty and confirmed the identity of the skull, and his work had impressed the Reichsführer. When Höhne heard about Schäfer's plans to lead a new expedition to Tibet, he recommended that he meet his friend Beger who was also very interested in Tibet.

Schäfer urgently sent a postcard to Beger's address in Berlin requesting that he telephone him immediately. But Schäfer had atrocious handwriting, and as Beger pored over his brusque note he misread '*Tibetreise*' ('Tibet journey') as '*Fibelreihe*', a word which in Germany in 1937 had a precise meaning. The National Socialist Association of Teachers was publishing a *Fibelreihe* (series) of educational textbooks about race and racial purity. Beger thought he was being asked to write one of these on race and was mystified as to why the German hero of two celebrated expeditions should undertake to make such a request. Beger ignored the postcard. Three days later,

an exasperated Schäfer, his feathers ruffled by Beger's silence, telephoned demanding an answer. Did he want to go to Tibet or not? Beger immediately took the U-bahn to Schäfer's Wilmersdorf apartment.

When he arrived at Hohenzollerndam 36, the door was opened by Germany's most famous explorer. With him in the luxurious apartment, a far cry from Beger's, were Schäfer's right-hand man Geer and his cameraman Krause. For Beger it was a shock. The real Ernst Schäfer was a short, stocky man, not a Teutonic god, but he 'commanded the room' and radiated self-confidence. Beger was almost immediately drawn into the frantic preparations for the expedition, and Schäfer asked him to write a proposal describing what he could achieve. Beger was well prepared. Following Hans Günther, he said that his intention would be 'to study the current racial-anthropological situation through measurements, trait research, photography and moulds [i.e. making face masks] and especially to collect material about the proportion, origins, significance, and development of the Nordic race in this region'.[22] In an uncanny anticipation of later events, he also proposed to search for human fossils and for skeletal remains that could prove a former Nordic presence on the Tibetan plateau. Bruno Beger would turn Schäfer's expedition into a quest for the Master Race.

Beger was by now head of the RuSHA's Race Division (*Abteilungsleiter für Rassenkunde*). In order to be able to accompany Schäfer he joined Himmler's personal staff as a *Referentstelle*, or consultant. On his desk in Marie Curie Strasse, his dissertation lay forgotten.

Then came a macabre and tragic turn of events.

Living in a great cosmopolitan city was not going to stop Schäfer indulging his passion for hunting. Beger, when I interviewed him, seemed to have powerful recall of the events: on 8 November 1937, in the midst of his Tibet plans, Schäfer took his new wife Hertha, the '*geliebten Frau*' of his book *Dach der Erde*, to Schorfheide, a wilderness of forests, lakes and moors a hundred miles north of Berlin. In the history of the Third Reich, Schorfheide has a special significance, for it was the private fiefdom of the Reichsmarschall, Hermann Göring. It was here, among lakes, forests and moorland, that Göring had built Carinhall, an extravagant hunting lodge that commemorated his late first wife, Carin von Fock. On the lake shore opposite his lodge, Göring had constructed a luxurious mausoleum for her. Carin lay inside a massive pewter coffin that her husband imagined would be his

last resting place too when the time came. Schäfer must have cultivated Göring as well as Himmler, his bitter rival. Both men, after all, shared a passion for hunting. The Reichsmarschall adored titles, and after the Nazi victory he'd appointed himself the *Reichsjägermeister* (Reich Hunting Master); a year later he'd promoted himself to *Reichsforstmeister* (Reich Forest Master). In 1936, Schäfer had shrewdly presented Göring with a pair of Tibetan mastiffs (*Mastiffruden*). It looked like a valuable investment, but on this occasion Hertha would not come back from Schorfheide alive.

Carinhall was surrounded by a game reserve where only Göring, local villagers and privileged guests like Ernst Schäfer were allowed to hunt. Here, the Reich Master of the Hunt and the Forest indulged his passion, decked out in fantastic costumes, with hunting horn and knife and a Scandinavian spear. He once developed a plan to exhibit caged Jews at Schorfheide because 'they were damnably like [the animals] – the elk too has a hooked nose'.[23]

On that cold autumn day, their breath misting the air, the Schäfers took a boat out on the Werbellinsee, one of Schorfheide's two lakes. They would spend the day hunting ducks. It was a far cry from Schäfer's adventures in Asia, but it was better than nothing. Schäfer and Hertha took the boat out into the middle of the lake and waited. In the boat with them was a forest warden. It was a quiet, chilly day with a light breeze that occasionally dimpled the grey surface of the lake. At the stern, Hertha shivered and sipped from her husband's flask of schnapps. There were two shotguns. Schäfer, sitting in the bow, had one; the other rested in the bottom of the boat. Both were loaded.

Just after noon, there was a clatter of wings as a honking flock ascended into the air then turned towards the boat. Schäfer stood up with the urgency he had learnt in childhood and honed on his travels, all his attention focused on the prey as they swung across the sky. Once again he was flooded with a thrilling expectation as he began to squeeze the trigger, imagining the blast, the recoil against his shoulder, the body in motion arrested, falling. He levelled his sights on the leader, relaxing and following, caressing the shape in the air. All his attention was on this moment. There was just Ernst Schäfer and the duck. Then he sensed that the moment had come. But the flock suddenly turned, surprising him. As he swung the barrel, his foot caught the second shotgun, pointing its muzzle towards the rear of the boat. The gun exploded. His young bride caught the full force of the blast and died instantly.

According to Beger, an inquiry was held to determine who was

responsible for the tragedy. Schäfer was an heroic figure, at least in SS and party circles, and there was intense interest in the horrifying events at Schorfheide. He was perhaps over-relaxed with guns; he clearly should have known better than to neglect a loaded gun in the close quarters of a boat. After all, he had been a practised hunter since adolescence. But he was visibly racked with guilt and had taken refuge with Hertha's family, so the inquiry exonerated him and blamed the warden instead for negligence. Still, Ernst Schäfer had changed, changed utterly.

Schorfheide is still a wilderness. There are still wolves there, antelopes and many species of duck and bird life. It is a flat green and brown place of silence and calm. Schäfer's feelings that November day are irrecoverable and unimaginable, but on this still lake in the autumn of 1937 a grotesque misfortune seems to have shattered and deformed a 'scientific expedition' and turned it into something quite different. Schäfer emerged a bitter, unpredictable man, haunted by pain and prone to tantrums and rages. The callow youth had become a curmudgeon. From now on he would be feared by his SS comrades, and even more so by his native servants.

As the book was going to press, I received a startling and unexpected piece of information. Isrun Engelhardt had discovered a report by one Wulf Dietrich Graf (=earl) zu Kastell-Rüdenhausen – who had witnessed the death of Hertha Schäfer. It was immediately apparent that Beger had got a crucial part of the story wrong. Schäfer had been invited to hunt ducks *not* at Schorfheide but at a remote estate in the Schweibus district, on the German–Polish border, owned by the Kastell-Rüdenhausens, who had distant connections to Queen Victoria. The report contains chilling new details. The party was, as Beger correctly recalled, duck hunting on a lake. But there were at least five other boats as well as the Schäfers'. Also present was the local Chief of Police. In the 'famous Tibet explorer's' boat were an oarsman and a *Büchsenspanne* (who prepared the guns), Reinhold Graf. But there was no second gun lying in the bottom of the boat. Fifteen minutes after the hunt began, Schäfer was about to fire when he stumbled. His rifle fell against the oarsman's seat, the stock broke and the left barrel fired. Hertha, who was sitting behind her husband, was hit in the head. She died an hour later 'from her severe injuries'. The Chief of Police interviewed all the witnesses immediately, and since what had happened was unequivocally an accident Hertha's corpse was released the same day.

The location of a tragedy might not seem to matter very much. But

why should Beger make such a mistake? The reason must be that Schäfer did indeed occasionally hunt at Schorfheide and no doubt regaled his colleagues with stories about his connections to Reichsmarschall Göring. Schorfheide, so close to Berlin, would have been much easier to recall than an obscure estate far to the east. Thus Schweibus became Schorfheide. It was a trick of memory but a revealing one, saying much about Schäfer's connections with the Nazi elite.