

THE THIRD REICH IN ANTARCTICA

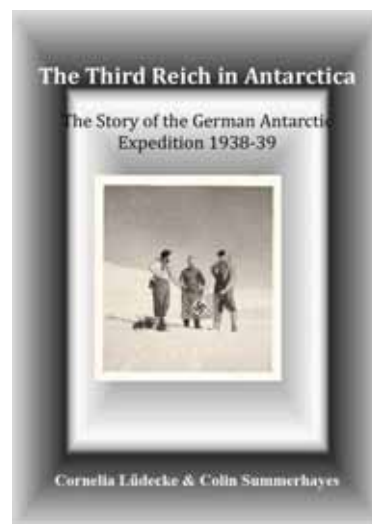
The Story of the Third German Antarctic Expedition 1938-39

Cornelia Lüdecke and Colin Summerhayes

The origins of the Third German Antarctic Expedition lie in a unique combination of the aspirations of German scientists to contribute to exploring and understanding the Antarctic environment, and the Nazi Party's drive for self-sufficiency on the road to war. In 1936/37 Germany had joined the whaling nations in the South Atlantic, keen to obtain whale oil without having to use valuable foreign currency reserves needed for rearmament. Considering that it needed a local whaling base, Germany decided to explore the possibility of setting up a supply base on the coast of Dronning Maud Land. The man in charge of German whaling was Councillor of State Helmut Wohlthat who, in 1938, put this idea of unclaimed Antarctic territory as a territorial basis for German whaling to his superior, Hermann Göring, the Commissioner for the Four Year Plan for economic development. Following consultation with other ministries, Göring approved the concept, and on 9 May 1938 assigned resources for a reconnaissance expedition, including a ship and two seaplanes for aerial survey and photographic mapping. The Third German Antarctic Expedition was born.



The expedition was led by Alfred Ritscher, a captain in the merchant marine. On 19 January 1939 *Schwabenland* arrived off Dronning Maud Land and began charting the region. Nazi German flags were placed on the sea ice along the coast and the area was named *Neu Schwabenland* after the ship.



Photographic survey flights were made by the ship's two Dornier-Wal seaplanes which altogether flew over hundreds of thousands of square kilometres and took more than 16,000 aerial photographs. On its return trip to Germany the expedition made oceanographic studies near Bouvet Island and investigated Trinidad Island off the coast of Brazil, arriving back in Hamburg on 11 April 1939.

This is the story of an ambitious and little-known expedition, which set out to map a large piece of Antarctica from the air, and in the process discovered an 800 km long mountain range and previously unsuspected freshwater lakes.



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