

ILLIMANI AND THE NAZIS

BY E. S. G. DE LA MOTTE

THE traveller to Bolivia from Buenos Aires spends three and a half weary days in the train with no interesting scenery to relieve the monotony of his existence. He leaves the dead flat Argentine pampas, where the horizon is like the horizon at sea, and passes almost imperceptibly to the equally flat, but much more barren, high tableland of Bolivia situated at 12,000 ft. above sea-level. There is a difference, however. This tableland runs as a relatively narrow belt for hundreds of miles between the two main Andine ranges, and therefore has the advantage over the dreary expanses of Argentina that mountains of some sort are visible from most parts of it. Nevertheless, it is with relief that towards the end of the journey the immense ice-draped mass of Illimani is seen close at hand.

The height of Illimani is still uncertain, as no triangulation has yet been made of it. All those who have climbed it, however, have taken aneroid readings and these give results varying between 20,700 ft. and 22,400 ft. The probability is that the lower limit is nearer the truth, so 21,000 ft. may reasonably be taken as a fair approximation.

In any case, whatever the exact height may be, the mountain is a singularly striking one on account of its isolation, its massive form, and its position of domination over La Paz, which is the seat of the Bolivian Government, and from many of whose houses and streets the three heavily iced summits can be seen.

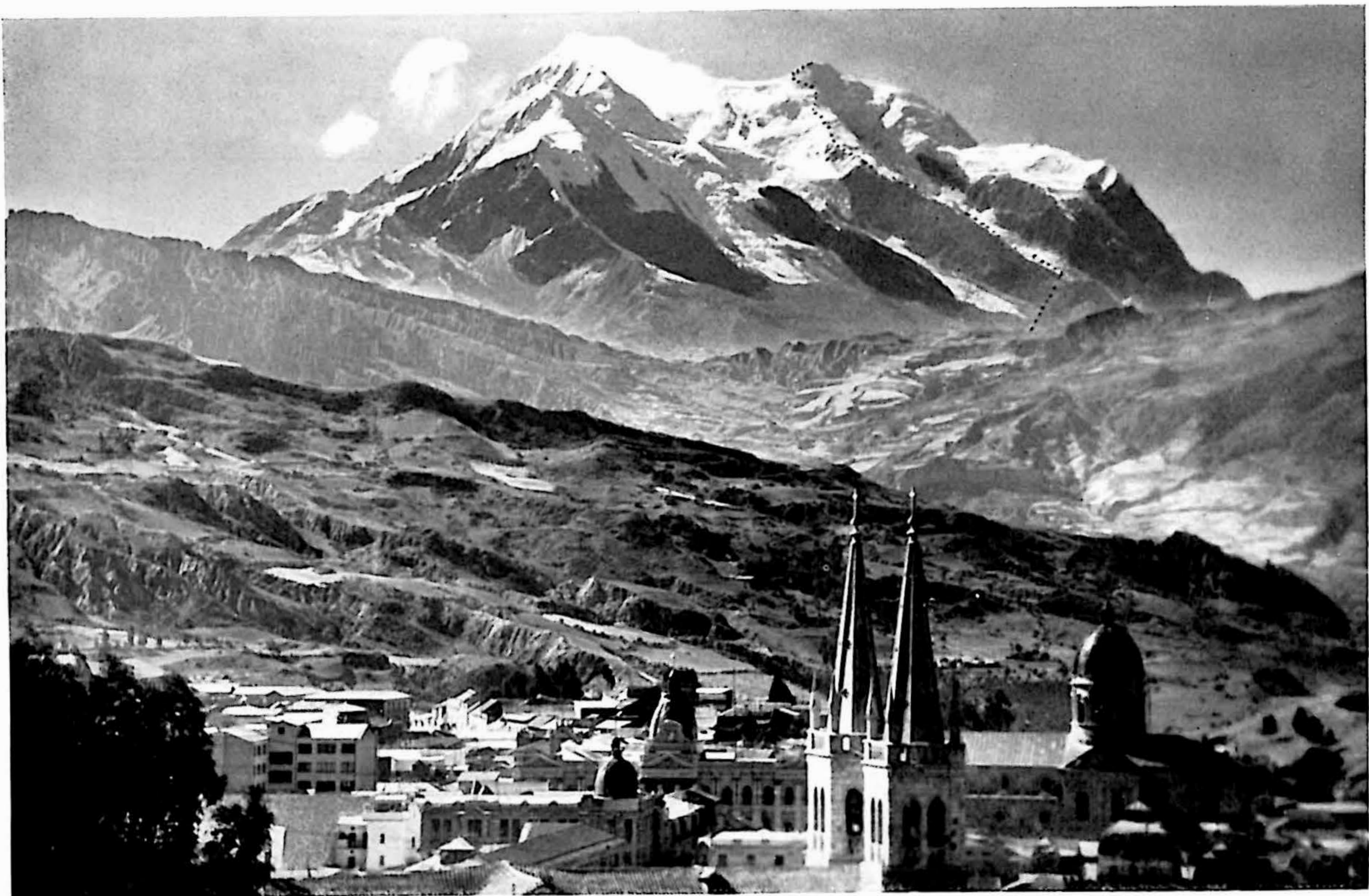
The permanent snow line in this latitude (17° S.) is about 16,000 ft., so that even here in the tropics the faithful can spend their weekends

‘ Together on the ice-glazed wall
Numbed by the slow snow breath.’

The Cordillera Real, for the exploration of which La Paz is so admirably placed, can be said to start with the 22,000-ft. peaks of Illampu and Ancohuma—sometimes misnamed Sorata—some 75 miles to the north of the city, and to finish with Illimani 30 miles to the south of it. This range contains many peaks over 19,000 ft., all of which except Condoriri and Calzada have been already climbed. To the Germans goes the credit for most of the mountaineering and exploration done, but W. Martin Conway was the first to reach the S. (and highest) summit of Illimani.¹ This he conquered in 1898 with the Italian guides Antoine Maquignaz and Louis Pellissier.

The S. peak being the highest was the scene of the undignified events of last Easter, events so contrary to the spirit of mountaineering that

¹ *A.J.* 19. 241, 509 *sqq.*



Photo, E. S. G. de la Motte.]

LA PAZ AND WEST FACE OF ILLIMANI. SOUTH PEAK IS THE SUMMIT ON RIGHT.
Route shown dotted.

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I have hesitated before recounting them for such an august journal as this.

On March 21, 1940, a party of three young Germans, led by Wilfred Kuhm, established a base camp at about 15,000 ft. at the foot of the rocky ridge which runs W. from the S. peak, and which is such a prominent feature of the W. side of the mountain seen from La Paz. The following day—Good Friday—saw them within 300 ft. of the top, but here, after ten hours' climbing, they were surprised by a storm which forced them to spend the night in a cave hastily hewn out of the ice. The next morning they soon reached the summit—the third party on record to do so. Here they produced their masterpiece, a Swastika flag machine-sewn above the three Bolivian stripes, red, gold and green. After planting this firmly on a stout pole and taking a photograph showing the party saluting it with outstretched hands (which they were subsequently so incredibly foolish as to publish in a La Paz newspaper) they descended.

Although, in the accounts of their climb which were published, it was stated that both the Bolivian and German flags were planted on the top, some of the members of the Andine Club were fairly certain of the true state of affairs, and a look through the large Observatory telescope confirmed that only one flag existed. That settled it: I applied at once for six days' leave. There remained the problem of a party, mountaineering being a cult in Bolivia with few worshippers. The Andine Club, with its twelve months of existence,² has many first-class skiers but few climbers. At length a young Bolivian skier said he was keen to try, though he had never worn a rope nor seen crampons, and two others volunteered for the thankless task of watching the climb through glasses from the base and helping with the carry to 18,000 ft., where it was intended to establish a high camp. It remained to teach this Bolivian skier—Torres by name—the elements of the game, and this was done throughout one long Sunday on crampons, endlessly up and down the steepest ice to be found near the Club hut,³ which stands at 16,300 ft., the highest Club hut—we are hoping the verdict will be—in the world.

On April 3 our party set out down the La Paz River and camped at about 8000 ft., or some 13,000 ft. below the top, which appeared from time to time up side valleys, unbelievably high and aloof. On the 4th, one of these side valleys was ascended, and a base established at the foot of the mountain at 14,000 ft., inconveniently far S. of the foot of the proposed W. ridge, which was still an unknown quantity owing to the low cloud which had persisted all day and prevented the detailed examination on which we had counted.

That night, the rain started in the small hours and the twelve-year-old Edginton tent of aero silk dutifully groaned before finally letting in the unwelcome guest. The morning of the 5th showed fresh snow down to 14,500 ft., and more to come. Midday passed without improvement and it was decided to move base to a more favourable site

² *A.J.* 52. 142.

³ *A.J.* 52. 142.

at the foot of the ridge, though there now appeared to be little chance of accomplishing anything in the short time remaining of leave. Even a reconnaissance of the ridge was out of the question, as visibility even in the clear spells had never exceeded a few hundred feet.

The general depression communicated itself to the pack mules, which stood unnaturally spiritless with hanging heads and steaming sides as the loads were piled on their backs. The sorry procession wound its way N. round the base of the peak until an excellent camp site was reached immediately to the N. of the W. ridge and some 500 ft. higher than 'Duck's Delight,' as the camp of the preceding night had been named. At 6 P.M. the miracle happened, the weather began to improve and the clouds to lift; glimpses of shattered icefall and rock buttress were displayed only to be tantalisingly obliterated a few seconds later. Optimism returned and preparations were made for the carry to 18,000 ft. next day. The weather evidently decided that it had been unduly hard on us and proceeded then to treat us to the two most perfect days of the year. There was no moon, so the start was necessarily late and it was 6.30 A.M. before the party got finally under way. Half an hour later the Germans' camp site was passed. The ridge in its lower snow-free portion proved, in general, to be easy, with occasional steep towers requiring care chiefly owing to their looseness—the curse of the Andes. At 11 A.M. the ice started and crampons were put on. Goodbyes were said to the support party, and the loads they had so cheerfully carried were transferred to our own unwilling shoulders. We were now at about 17,000 ft., and a camp site could be seen 1000 ft. higher, a rock shoulder protruding from the ice and forming the cap of a steep rock buttress which dropped at an angle of about 70° to the great Central Glacier some 1200 ft. below. This site was reached at 3.30 P.M.—slow progress, but a vertical sun at 18,000 ft. is not conducive to record-breaking.

The little shoulder proved to be smaller than it had appeared from below and was at once christened 'Horse Guards Parade.' As it stood, it was not feasible for tent-pitching. Its rounded top of loose material was soon levelled off, however, and with low walls built up on either side to retain the stones, a platform sufficiently big for our tent was at last obtained. On either side, the drop of 1200 ft. to the glacier was as uncompromisingly sudden as anyone cares to survey from a sleeping bag, but at the end of the tent a friendly knob interposed its protecting bulk and formed at the same time a useful kitchen. In the event a kitchen was not so essential as is usually the case, as the spirit for the heater had been foolishly carried in a glass bottle which was found to be broken on arrival. However, when it came to cooking, Torres' ingenuity provided a way out: shredding a candle and mixing the proceeds with half a spare sock pulled meticulously to pieces, he made a tolerable if smelly stove which gave us a cup of warm chocolate and some tepid sausages before turning in at 6.30 P.M.

Leaving camp next morning at 6.30 A.M., wearing rope and crampons, we were soon at 19,000 ft. where the W. ridge finally peters out into the



Photo, E. S. G. de la Motte.]

SUMMIT OF ILLIMANI BEFORE REMOVAL OF FLAG.



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SUMMIT OF ILLIMANI AFTER REMOVAL OF FLAG.

W. face of the mountain. Here the crevasses start. After the exceptionally snowless season experienced this year, some of these were unusually open and various deviations in search of suitable crossings had to be made, but even so, nothing more difficult than is met with on an average Swiss glacier expedition had to be tackled, contrary to all we had been led to expect from the highly coloured accounts given by the Germans to the local press.

The chief obstacle was the altitude combined with an almost vertical sun. Torres, born and bred in La Paz at over 12,000 ft., felt this less than I did, and arrived at the summit quite fresh except for his knees, which were beginning to protest against so much unaccustomed and sustained crampon work.

The top consists of a fairly level ridge about 50 yards long, and was reached at 12.55 P.M. To the north, across the deep gash of the Central or Pinaya Glacier, the N. peak crowning stark precipices stood out forcibly ; to the south—the Swastika. Neither of us had eyes for anything else. On burrowing into the snow a tin was found containing the three cards of our predecessors. To these we added a fourth, giving our names and the reason for our ascent.

A nip of brandy, biscuits spread thick with meat essence, and so back to the base and its fleshpots, with the flag carefully folded and stowed in the rucksack. The following day, April 8, saw the party back in La Paz, ready to lay a damper on virile, Nordic ardour.