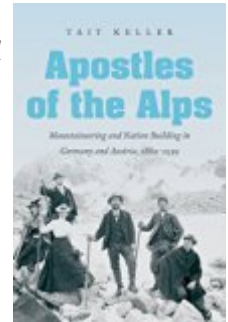


**Tait Keller.** *Apostles of the Alps: Mountaineering and Nation Building in Germany and Austria, 1860-1939.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 304 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-2503-4.



**Reviewed by** Jim Harris

**Published on** H-War (July, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In *Apostles of the Alps: Mountaineering and Nation Building in Germany and Austria, 1860-1939*, Tait Keller draws on archival sources from four Alpine countries (Austria, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland) to provide a history of an “ecoregion” that transcends national borders. Keller seeks to challenge the traditional historical approach that too often focuses on the nation-state, by examining the Alps as a site of natural and political connection between Germany and Austria in order to present a new perspective on the international relations between the two German-speaking nations.

Keller’s central actors are the “apostles of the Alps,” mostly middle-class mountaineers from urban centers, who presented the high mountains as a sacred space when they returned from their excursions. These first-wave Alpineers perceived the mountains as a space where “an inclusive pluralistic *Grossdeutschland*” could be formed (p. 2). Hiking and mountaineering became a means of transcending religious, ethnic, class, or regional difference. Yet, as Keller argues, as climbers invit-

ed a broader public to the heights in hopes that this would further “patriotic loyalties to a landscape that united Germany and Austria,” this ultimately resulted in “political fights, social conflicts, culture wars and environmental crusades” that soiled their sacred space—both politically and environmentally (pp. 2-3).

*Apostles of the Alps* is divided into two parts bridged by the First World War, but united by tracing the long history of the German and Austrian Alpine Association. In the first half of the book, “Opening the Alps, 1860-1918,” Keller examines what drew the rugged Alpineers to the high mountains. Most were middle-class men who sought a respite from urban life. The Alps came to be seen as antithetical to urban society, as they remained an “unfiltered” and “pristine” space (p. 21). For the early mountaineers the struggle to climb the Alps had a palliative quality, but this was a fantasy of the middle classes who “faced such low physical demands in their daily lives” (p. 50). Working-class narratives described mountain-climbing as an escape as well, but as an es-

cape from a strict and regulatory state or factory management.

Keller examines how the “apostles” preaching the tranquility of the mountains ultimately contributed to the desecration of their sacred Alps. In his third chapter, “Young People and Old Mountains,” Keller highlights how the building of roads and highways into the Alps came to be seen as the city encroaching on the sacred mountains. For the members of the Alpine Association, the key to the palliative nature of the Alps was the struggle to reach the peaks—a struggle under one’s own power—that roads and cable cars eliminated. Further, Keller explains that as more and more people began to visit the high mountains they brought with them the social conflicts that the mountains had been a refuge from: the religious *Kulturkampf*, generational struggles, and perhaps most significantly, anti-Semitic thought.

Keller’s chapter “The High Alps during the Great War” bridges his argument into its second half. During the Great War, German and Austrian soldiers fighting Italians in the mountains fought as a seamless military unit. The Alpine Association aided this by opening its huts and supplying guides to the military, as “martial and mountaineering ethos became one” (p. 90). However, as war turned the Alps into an industrial battleground, complete with roads and railroads, it ruined the Alps as a place of peace and solitude and of adventure and danger.

The second half of the book, “Dominating the Alps, 1919-1939,” presents the Alps as a contested space rather than a space of unity. Keller examines how Germans and Austrians, who sought to preserve the cultural connection to the region, subverted Italian political control over the southern Alps. Alpineers increasingly used the language of the *Volk*, exclusive of Jewish participation, in their efforts to cement a unified Germanic culture in the high mountains. Some Alpineers went as far as to suggest that an *Anschluss* “was

the only natural solution to maintain stability in central Europe” in the mid-1920s (p. 128).

One of Keller’s stated objectives in writing *Apostles of the Alps* is to challenge the idea of an Alpine *Sonderweg*. Keller very convincingly demonstrates that while many Alpineers did support Hitler’s ideological position, this sentiment did not emerge until the interwar years. Before the First World War liberty, autonomy, and individual accomplishments were the values that the Alpineers held most dear. Only after the Great War, when the Alps came to be a barrier rather than a connection between Germany and Austria, did the rhetoric of struggle and conquest in order to restore a Greater Germany fully resonate with the Alpineers. For many Alpineers, Hitler’s *Anschluss* was crucial, because it would restore the Alps as a point of linkage between Austria and Germany, rather than the forcibly imposed division.

*Apostles of the Alps* is a useful read for German and central Europeanist historians, but will be of great value to environmental historians as well. Keller suggests, and demonstrates convincingly, that we must rethink the concept of “borderlands.” Keller demonstrates that studying environments as borderlands can just as useful as studying the edges of empires. As a military history, the book’s utility remains a bit more obscure. Keller’s chapter “The High Alps during the Great War” effectively discusses the environmental aspects of the First World War, especially the hazardous nature of the terrain and how Austrian local knowledge and mastery of the mountains gave them the advantage despite fewer divisions. Beyond this, however, there is very little traditional military history in this monograph. However, if we broaden our perspective on military history to consider the relationship between war and the natural world (as we should), Tait Keller provides an excellent example of how to study the “conquest of nature” in *Apostles of the Alps*. Keller very convincingly demonstrates how the ecoregion of the Alps was transformed from a “sacred”

and “pristine” space into a conquered and industrialized space, and how this was in no small part a function of the First World War.

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**Citation:** Jim Harris. Review of Keller, Tait. *Apostles of the Alps: Mountaineering and Nation Building in Germany and Austria, 1860-1939*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2016.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46594>



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