

On December 17, 1938, the German government launched a large-scale expedition to Antarctica “to secure for Germany her share in the approaching division of the Antarctic among world powers.”<sup>1</sup> At Washington’s request, American diplomatic posts in Germany produced numerous reports describing in detail how “German swastika flags were scattered over the snow fields by airplanes, while flags were hoisted on staffs at approximately 25-kilometer intervals” to serve as “bases of a German claim to sovereignty.”<sup>2</sup> These dispatches also relayed official pronouncements that spoke glowingly about imminent formal claims. The *Hamburg Fremdenblatt*, which often served as the mouthpiece of the German Foreign Office, declared “It is a matter of course for the Germany of today that the permanent result of this expedition be safeguarded for the German people in every respect, scientifically, economically and politically.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, American diplomatic reports strongly suggested that the threat of German encroachment into territory only explored by Norwegians encouraged Oslo to claim Queen Maud Land on January 14, 1939.<sup>4</sup>

According to an article appearing in *The New York Times* in July 1939, the decision to send the first U.S. government-sponsored expedition to Antarctica at the earliest possible date was made at a White House conference held soon after the German expedition had returned from the Antarctic and was motivated by German activities there. Those in attendance included the President and representatives of the State, Navy, Interior, Treasury, and Agriculture Departments. Officials present later said that

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<sup>1</sup> Joyner, *Eagle Over the Ice* (Hanover, 1997). p. 146

<sup>2</sup> NARA: 800.014 Antarctic/186 Letter from the Berlin Embassy to the Secretary of State, May 12, 1939

<sup>3</sup> ‘Reich to Defend Antarctic Colony’, *The New York Times*, April 13, 1939

<sup>4</sup> See NARA: 800.014 Antarctic/168, Letter from Hamburg Consulate General to the Secretary of State, April 3, 1939 and NARA: 800.014 Antarctic/143, Letter from the Oslo Embassy to the Secretary of State, January 17, 1939.

Germany's plans to send another party during the summer into the Antarctic sector already claimed for the United States led to the decision to immediately validate American claims. These officials indicated that the U.S. government was prepared to take the position that any attempts by foreign powers to establish bases in the American sector of Antarctica would be considered an "unfriendly act." The article also reported one official as saying that Germany had already laid claim to 250,000 square miles adjoining the American-claimed sector and that a part of this area extended into Marie Byrd Land.<sup>5</sup> The account appearing in *The Times* was corroborated by articles appearing in *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*.<sup>6</sup>

Given Washington's political objectives in Antarctica, it is not surprising that the Roosevelt administration authorized Admiral Byrd to deposit written claims on the continent in order to "assist in supporting a sovereignty claim by the United States Government."<sup>7</sup> Byrd was aided in this effort by six specially-fitted Army tanks, a number of military aircraft, and a mammoth 75-ton "snow-cruiser" vehicle equipped with a plane on its roof.<sup>8</sup> The Americans were also furnished with several pre-fabricated buildings that were used in the construction of the permanent Antarctic bases set up by the expedition.

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<sup>5</sup> 'President Directs Speed on Byrd Trip', *The New York Times*, July 8, 1939

<sup>6</sup> See 'Plan Chicago Snow Cruiser for Byrd Trek', *The Chicago Tribune*, July 8, 1939, 'United States Prepares to Get Her Share of the Antarctic Polar Pie', *The Washington Post*, August 20, 1939, and 'The Expedition to Antarctica', *The Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1939

<sup>7</sup> NARA: 800.014 Antarctic/303A, Letter Containing Instructions from Roosevelt to Admiral Byrd, November 24, 1939

<sup>8</sup> 'President Directs Speed on Byrd Trip', *The New York Times*, July 8, 1939