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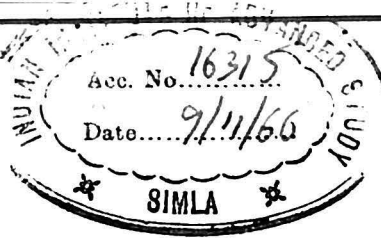


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CLIMBING IN THE CAUCASUS

By SIR JOHN HUNT, C.B.E., D.S.O., D.C.L., LL.D.

Report of a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, January 14th, 1959, Sir Hugh Dow, G.C.I.E., K.C.S.I., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: Ladies and Gentlemen,—You would have just cause for complaint if I were to waste your time in introducing our speaker. The word “historic” is perhaps rather overworked nowadays by journalists, but certainly we can justly apply the word “historic” to the conquest of Everest, and Sir John Hunt’s name and fame will be known to our remote descendants when most of us have been entirely forgotten. Sir John is now going to talk to us, not about the Himalayas, but about “Climbing in the Caucasus.”

I SHOULD like, first, to say what a great pleasure it is to have the second opportunity to address this Society. I well remember the last occasion and enjoyed it very much. In all sincerity, however, I am doubtful of the relevance of this subject to your learned Society. When I was in Russia, there were many occasions when we met groups of Russians and discussed Everest and mountaineering with them. At the first meeting I addressed, one of the first questions they put to me was to ask which mountain I considered to be highest in Europe. It was on the tip of my tongue to say Mont Blanc, but I remembered the need for diplomacy and I replied “Elbruz.” That caused great satisfaction to the Russians, who undoubtedly think of the Caucasus as being in Europe. However, in talking to this Society, I will treat it as being part of Asia.

This talk is not really one of true exploration, because most of the exploration which was done in the range of the Caucasus had been done in the last quarter of the last century and it was done very largely by British explorers and mountaineers, pre-eminently and in the first instance by the great Douglas Freshfield, who went there in 1868 and who first climbed Elbruz and Kazbek at the extreme ends of the central massif in the Caucasus range. A great many other climbs were done and explorations were completed before the turn of the century.

I shall not take you through the whole history but will say a word about why we went, as it was not virgin soil that we were treading. We went primarily to climb mountains. There is great satisfaction to be had from, if not treading virgin soil, at least climbing again, reaching the tops of peaks or covering country which was first pioneered by one’s own compatriots. That undoubtedly was a source of great satisfaction to us, because we were the first group of British mountaineers to go there for over twenty years and to reach some of these high and difficult mountains, which had first been climbed by British climbers, was very satisfying.

Secondly, and much more important, we went there quite simply to make friends with the Soviet mountaineers. I well remember, about four

years ago, when I first went to Moscow to talk about Everest, being surrounded by a crowd of eager, fit, friendly and very sincere Russian climbers. It struck me then what a wonderful link we could have if we really got together on the mountains and got to know each other better. The outcome of that first meeting was undoubtedly our trip of last summer.

I will now show some slides.

The following is Sir John's commentary while showing slides.

Elbruz is the highest mountain in the Caucasus, with a height of 18,550 ft. It is not really a climbing proposition. For that reason, we did not set out to climb Elbruz. The mountains that interested us more were, first and foremost, the great Ushba, which is the Caucasian Matterhorn but higher; it has a double summit.

The party were nine in number. They included George Band, a member of the Everest expedition, who first set foot on the third highest mountain in the world, the Kangchenjunga, two years after Everest. There was also Christopher Brasher, who brought back a gold medal after winning the 3,000 metres steeplechase at Melbourne in 1956. The person we have to thank for bringing the expedition into being at all was a young man, Eugene Gippenreiter, whom I first met in 1954. Eugene and some of the other Russians whom we met were splendid throughout.

We started our journey from London. Rather than fly to Moscow, we thought it would be more interesting to take cars and motor across. There were in the party three well-known rally drivers. This enabled us to get three nice motor cars free of charge. We followed the usual route to the Polish/Russian frontier at Brest and we hoped to motor on to Moscow and then get an aeroplane, but it did not work out as we had hoped.

We found ourselves in the great city of Düsseldorf, having caused a traffic jam, when one of our motor cars collided with a tram. We camped the first night, after driving 600 or 700 miles across Germany, at the little frontier town of Helmstedt. Next day we set off for Warsaw, another journey of 600-700 miles. There is nothing much to tell about the drive, particularly across East Germany, the great empty road being devoid of any motor transport and having only a few carts.

When we got into Poland, however, it was a great relief after the frigid and unfriendly attitude accorded to us by the East German officials to discover that we were among people who were able to show what they felt under the Gomulka regime. All the people, the children and even the geese by the roadside seemed equally pleased to see us and pleased that we were coming through their country, even though it was only a brief stay.

When we got to Brest, our troubles started. We were travelling at an unfavourable time from the political point of view, just after the murder of Nagy, and we were warned that there might be difficulties in driving through Russia.

At the frontier, we were given the alternative of going back as we had come or of going on by train. Despite many appeals, we failed to change

the situation and decided that we must go on in the Russian train. Somehow, our baggage had to be crammed into two and a half railway compartments.

For those of you who have not travelled by rail in Russia, it is a very comfortable and quite efficient system. It is not democratic to have first and second class, but one can travel "hard" or "soft"! One pays more to travel soft. We travelled hard on the all-sleeper train which moves between Brest and the Russian capital. The train has a very nice kind of sugar-puff engine which goes along at a steady speed not exceeding 30 m.p.h. for the whole distance between Brest and Moscow. On the journey, the compartment is visited by the coach attendant, who uses a vacuum cleaner on it twice a day and serves refreshment. The hazards of the journey, however, were provided by the drunks. One is liable to be visited in one's compartment by somebody who is very much the worse for wear. The country, however, is very dull, mostly forest.

On arrival at Moscow, the first object one sees is the university. We crossed the river, entered the capital and found ourselves in very friendly hands as soon as we got out at the station. We were greeted by representatives of the Mountaineering Section of the U.S.S.R. and taken to a very comfortable hotel. Some of the buildings are of skyscraper type, all very much to pattern. It is curious to see the extraordinary contrast in the city in the style and ages between the very modern buildings and the old, wooden chalet type of buildings of the old Moscow.

In Gorki Street, we noticed the 7-ft. wide lane marked by dots through the centre of the street. It is an interesting device for enabling the Khrushchev level of people to travel without hindrance right up the street and across the crossings without being stopped. If any other transport uses these lanes, it is an offence for which the driver is whistled up and fined. We were there after the second Sputnik had gone into outer space and drawings of it were displayed in the streets.

We did our shopping in the department stores. In Red Square, some of us went in the huge crowds which assemble as the hour of midday approaches to enter the mausoleum containing the remains of "Uncle Joe" Stalin and Lenin. At the head of the queue are usually school-children or foreign delegations. I was very interested, after an absence of four years from Moscow, to see what difference there might be in the appearance and dress style of the citizens of the capital. There were rather interesting differences. We noticed a number of women who now dress themselves up attractively, using nail varnish and lipstick, and carrying a handbag.

Most of the churches in Moscow and elsewhere are not existing now as churches. Some of them, in the capital at least, are on display as museums. Something like 40 churches are actually used for services. St. Basil's is a museum standing at one end of the Red Square. From the roof of the British Embassy, there is a stupendous view of the Kremlin, with its churches and the big Palace of the Tsars, which is now the Parliament of the Supreme Soviet. The churches are very nicely kept up. A good many of the people passing through, most of them Soviet citizens, show reverence as they go round the churches.

We were kindly entertained by the British Ambassador. Although we were an entirely private party, unsponsored by any society, we were very kindly helped by the Embassy. We went on to a reception given by the Mountaineering Section and the Ministry of Physical Culture and Sport. There we met some of the outstanding people in mountaineering circles in Russia. It was a delightful occasion.

We had a very rushed two days sorting out our kit. We sent some down by Russian friends to the Caucasus and we took the rest with us. We travelled by air but did not go in one of the fine Tu. 104 aircraft. Flying down over the green fields and rich black earth of the Ukraine was a very pleasant experience until we got to Rostov-on-Don, where we ran into a storm. Because the internal airlines fly low without air control, it was decided that we must make a stop for the night and continue next day.

A rough mountain track led us up to our camp where we were to spend our first fortnight. It was a rough journey up the valley of the Baksan River, flowing from the foot of Elbruz at the western end of the Caucasus. We had a short halt on the way at the little mining town of Tirnaus. On our way, we met a crowd of Russian climbers on their way down from the mountains and we had a good time making friends.

It was a wet afternoon when we got out of the bus and we found ourselves received in a most genuine and delightful way by the camp at which we were to stay for the first half of our stay. Mostly, the accommodation was huted or tented. This camp is run by the Union of Co-operative Workers; it exists to provide training courses in basic mountaineering for young men and women during their summer holidays. It is rather like an Outward Bound school, with a definite training programme which leads up to recognized standards of achievement. That, I believe, is the only way in which one can enjoy this particular sport in Russia. Anyone who wants to be interested in climbing or mountain walking must first attend a course.

At seven o'clock every morning at the camp there is a call on the loudspeaker system wishing everybody good morning. That is followed by music to wake everybody up. Ten minutes after the call, the whole of the camp is turned out in P.T. clothes to do physical jerks—that is to say, all except us “decadent” Westerners, who got up sleepily in pyjamas and stayed taking pictures of what was going on. It is not only physical culture that is taught in these places. There was a sketching class, at which I joined two charming lasses who were doing some sketching.

During the first day before we went out to climb, we were interested to see something of the system of training. A large group of students came back during that morning from a three-day outing which was the last but one of their training items during the programme they were carrying out. They march back all in step and draw up on the basket-ball pitch. Everybody turns out to welcome them. The Chief of the camp then calls on the leader of the party to give an account of what they have achieved, followed by the camp Chiefs call for three cheers for the conqueror of this or that mountain. The party is then garlanded and em-

braced by the other inmates of the camp. One member of a group of typical Russian mountaineers was the son of the former Russian Ambassador, Litvinov.

Our first need was to get fit and accustomed to the rather greater altitude of the Caucasus, so we chose a comparatively easy mountain of about 13,000 ft. There are no huts or amenities and we had to carry our kit and have one bivouac on the way. On the journey, we passed a group of 40 or 50 Czech climbers under Russian supervision. With us were three Russians, our own Eugene Gippenreiter and two Georgians.

Next morning the weather was perfect. It was the only fine day in the first ten or eleven days of our stay and we were lucky that it came during this training trip, because we were able for the first time to get an idea of the country and of the mountains.

When we got on to steeper ground, climbing became more difficult. The climb does not call for much comment except that the rock was abominably loose and it was probably a mistake to attempt the mountain in question with such a large party. At the end of the day there were three casualties, with three people having been hit by rocks on their arms or chest. Brasher had a nasty cut on his head.

At the top, we were all somewhat out of breath and unfit, but we had a wonderful opportunity to look around. Forty or fifty miles to the east we could see the main peaks in the Caucasus. Much closer was a great rock and its face some 3,000 ft. high, up which the Soviet climbers have made a number of routes. This indicates the standard of climbing now achieved by the Russians. Climbing was in its infancy in the pre-war years and it has made great strides since.

Ushba was our next objective. We intended to camp up on the shoulder of Ushba at 14,000 ft.; some of us would then traverse the peak from north to south while others would go round the mountain and traverse it in the opposite direction.

On the way down, I rejoiced in the flowers. At that time of year, the Caucasus flowers are beautiful. The azaleas were still in bloom. Down in the meadows was a wonderful array of sub-Alpine plants.

Back in the camp, we started to get ready for the expedition to climb Ushba. It was a big undertaking because it meant being away from civilization for about eight days, carrying everything we needed for that period. So, heavily laden, each with about 70 lb. on our backs, we set off.

Before actually climbing the mountain, we wanted to make one or two lesser climbs to get ourselves completely in trim. The first peak was Peak Sehherovski, about 14,500 ft. On the second day, we had to make our way up a very steep ice-fall. Unfortunately, at that stage, the weather started to get bad. We went up into the mist and falling snow, groping our way up the ice-fall. When we were only about 1,500 ft. from the top of the mountain, there could be no question of going any higher because we were completely surrounded by thick cloud and falling snow, but we had reached the plateau, so we set up our camp on Ushba according to plan. There we were besieged on the mountain for another three days and nights while snow fell incessantly. Apart from ourselves, some eight Russians came up to join us to do some climbs from the plateau and

we got to know each other well. In fact, we reckon that the "summit" discussions we held on Ushba were a great deal better than any others which have taken place to date!

During this enforced stop high up on the mountain, we dug down beneath the surface of the snow and produced a big cavern beneath the glacier in which about twelve of us could get. By the end of the third evening, we had to consider what to do in the continuing bad weather. We met there on the evening of the third day with the Russians for a conference, the outcome of which was that we should all go down again. On the fourth morning, we groped our way down through dense mist and snow, with avalanches thundering all around us. It was a relief to descend the icefall without mishap.

We moved back to our camp before preparing to set off for our main objective, the mountain group surrounding the Bazingi glacier. In a little farewell ceremony, I handed over a pair of British mountaineering boots. The Russians had not seen rubber-soled boots before and were very intrigued to have them. The Russian system is that they do not own their equipment. They draw it from the quarter-master's store and have to hand it back afterwards.

We had arranged to meet another group of Russians on the way up to the glacier, who had carried part of our provisions. We got to the higher regions and reached the village of Bezingi, the chief settlement of the tribe of the Balkharis. It has remained a ruin for the last fourteen years since the time when the Balkhari and other tribes were evicted from the Caucasus by Stalin, who had them transported to Kazakstan. It was particularly interesting to see the return of these people, who had been given permission to return by Khrushchev, he had referred to their brutal eviction in his famous anti-Stalin speech of two years ago. These people are Muslims, they speak a quite different language from the Russians and are a very independent-minded people.

We awoke to a lovely morning at the end of our journey. Donkeys were fetched to carry our loads up to the glacier. We went up the valley. It was one of the most pleasant mountain walks I can remember, through meadows which were a riot of flowers. For fourteen years there has been no grazing in the valley and very few of the flocks have come back. We were making for the great barrier of mountains at the head of the Bezingi Glacier. We reached the glacier snout and had to cross the torrent by wire ropes suspended from either side and duly reached the place where the Russians were already camped.

One of the people we were particularly glad to see again was Alex Baldin, we met in this country last year when he was an exchange student in Birmingham. He is a physicist and we took him climbing in North Wales. We were impressed by his standard of climbing on some of our British rocks. The Russians explained to us details of the local mountains and the routes to them and generally put us in the picture. We had no maps, because none are available of this part of the world in Russia.

Next morning we made our own plans, intending to divide into three parties, in order to make as many climbs as possible in the remaining fortnight. We wanted to make three separate ascent attempts on the 7,000-ft.

Bezingi Wall. But before setting off we had to show our Russian friends our equipment. We held a kit inspection and they all crowded round to look at the special packed food and the climbing clothes and equipment we had brought with us. Their clothing is more simple and quite rudimentary, but effective. We admired in particular their ice-axe hammer.

The great Bezingi Wall is about four miles long, and exceptionally steep. The group of which I was a member chose a particularly spectacular line up the centre of this Wall, leading by a narrow rib of rock and ice to the summit of Jangi Tau (17,000 ft.). It had been climbed only once previously, by a German group in 1935, and is known as the Schwarzgruber Rib. The other two groups were attempting routes on the left and the right of ours, leading to the summit of Shkara. We surprised ourselves by climbing 6,000 ft. up this difficult route. On the third day we set out for the summit, only 1,000 ft. above. It should have been straightforward, but we discovered as a result of all the heavy snow which had fallen in the Ushba area that there was a lot of unstable snow ready to peel off in avalanches. Within 600 ft. of the top, we deemed the conditions too dangerous to continue, and after I had had a lucky escape when falling into a big crevasse, we reluctantly decided to descend. On the fourth day, we again ran into bad weather. Growing exhaustion on this critical terrain added to our difficulties. With tremendous precipices below us, it was difficult to find the way and the snow was in a rotting state on the ice, so we had to take very great care as we came down. We got down on to the glacier at about half-past ten at night on the evening of the fourth day.

The Russians like to do things more thoroughly and more slowly. On return we were delighted to meet the other members of our party, who had succeeded in climbing both Shkara and Bestola by the North Face.

... We came down and had a pleasant two days in the valley. On our way down we had looked over to the great peak of Dych Tau, which is the third highest mountain, first ascended by Mummery in 1888, and decided to make this our next objective. Some of us wanted to repeat the Mummery route: moreover, the Russians had told us of an unclimbed buttress on the south face of this peak. During the severe climbing of the past week we had a number of minor casualties, and only two groups, one of four climbers which included myself, the other of two climbers, set off at the end of the rest period. Band and Harris, our best climbers, were to attempt the unclimbed South Buttress. When my group had reached a point some 1,500 ft. below the top of Dych Tau, on the second day of our climb, Brasher unfortunately fell sick. We had to leave him in a little hollow scraped out in the snow while we went on to the summit. But it proved impossible to get there and to get back to him again in the day, so we had to turn round and get off the mountain as quickly as possible.

But Band and Harris continued. During the next five days they climbed their extremely difficult route, descending by the north ridge.

As we flew back to Moscow, I thought over the trip and wondered whether it had been worth while. It was not very original exploration, apart from the 3,000 ft. of virgin rock on Dych Tau. Apart from the

Russian sketch maps, there was not much of interest to this Society. We did, however, succeed in making a good many real friends from among the Russian climbers.

While we were away, the Americans entered the Lebanon and British troops entered Jordan. In Moscow, posters were put up, pillorying the American Sixth and Seventh Fleet, and about the British and American invading forces, in front of Western Embassies. Demonstrations were organized among workers coming off shift. Down in the Caucasus, however, we remained friends. It was not at that time our quarrel. We were just enjoying each other's company and the experience of being in the mountains together. Far from having the situation altered when we heard the news on the radio, our Russian friends assured us that they would see us safely through the mountains into Turkey or, if we could not do that, that we would enjoy some very good climbing for the next 25 years in Siberia!

That brings me to the end of a rapid talk about this very pleasant six weeks we spent in the Caucasus.

The CHAIRMAN: Our time is up. I can only, speaking for myself at least, say how very much indebted I feel to Sir John Hunt for his fascinating lecture and some of the loveliest and most impressive pictures I have ever seen. I know you will show your appreciation in the usual way.



