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## Cold War, 'Thaw' and 'Everlasting Friendship': Soviet Mountaineers and Mount Everest, 1953–1960

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*In 1953, two events affected the community of Soviet mountaineers each in their own way. Stalin died and the world's highest summit, Mount Everest, was climbed for the first time. This article traces how the story of Everest's conquest was transmitted to the Soviet public: a slow process reflecting the transition from Stalinist isolation to Khrushchev's 'Thaw'. Between 1954 and 1960, the first personal contacts with Everest expedition leader John Hunt then opened up a window to the world (not only) for Soviet mountaineers, while at the same time the blossoming Sino-Soviet friendship of the mid-1950s enabled Soviet mountaineers to prepare for their own, however unsuccessful, Sino-Soviet Everest Expedition. Everest acted as a catalyst for increasing contacts between East and West, capitalist and communist climbers, which provided new chances for comparison and self-reflection and thus contributed to the emergence of new discourses of identity and community within Soviet mountaineering.*

On 5 March 1953, Stalin died. Not even two months later, on 29 May, Mount Everest was climbed for the first time. While those events were unrelated and obviously of a very different nature, they both had a strong effect on one small group of Soviet citizens: the Soviet mountaineers or *al'pinisty* as they were referred to in Russian. Within a short time, their two most important systems of reference were challenged: the monolithic Stalinist civilization, which had extended even to the fields of leisure and sports, suddenly ended and the conquest of the world's highest summit refocused the attention of Soviet mountaineers to the transnational mountaineering community in which their own place was now to be retaken and redefined. Stalin's death can be considered a historical event in the sense that its impact was to change structures profoundly. For Soviet *al'pinisty* it eventually opened up new possibilities for communication and finally, interaction, with mountaineers abroad. The processes of

de-Stalinization also facilitated the rehabilitation of Soviet mountaineers persecuted during the Great Terror of the 1930s and thereby a reconstruction of a group memory. All these changes did not occur immediately but evolved slowly, over a period of insecurity and search for reactions, new solutions, new discourses of identity and community. [1]

Everest can be regarded as a catalyst for these processes, and its analysis provides us with a prism through which we can trace efforts of reorientation after Stalin's death in Soviet society. While the conquest of the world's highest summit put an end to the ambitions of many other high-altitude teams, for the Soviet mountaineers it really meant the beginning of a new phase of activity – to the extent of making their own plans for an Everest ascent together with Chinese colleagues in the context of Sino-Soviet friendship. The discourse about Everest thus gave Soviet mountaineers, and to a certain extent other Soviet citizens, a chance of talking about socialism and capitalism, about their community and their visions for the future.

This article will focus on the years from the British ascent of Everest in 1953 to the Chinese ascent of the same summit in 1960. After a short overview of the development of Soviet mountaineering during the Stalin era, it will first demonstrate how the conquest of Everest was communicated to the Soviet people – both to mountaineers and the general public – and what reactions resulted from this during the years 1953–4. The article will address the evolution of contacts between Soviet and British mountaineers, which ranged from an increasing use of foreign literature to personal encounters, before moving on to a discussion of the subsequent Soviet attempt on Everest. Finally, it will examine how the changing discourses of Soviet mountaineering can be read as a metaphor for the changes in Soviet society during the years of the 'Thaw'.

### **The Importance of Difference: 'Soviet' Mountaineering Under Stalinism**

Modern mountaineering had been introduced to pre-Revolutionary Russia from Western Europe only at the end of the nineteenth century but never gained the popularity it enjoyed in countries such as Germany, France or Switzerland. The reasons for this were manifold: not only was transportation and infrastructure in the mountain regions of the Tsarist empire still lacking or in a bad state; long distances between the urban regions and the climbing areas also hindered regular trips. Russia also lacked that specific and substantial European middle class or *(Bildungs)bürgertum*, which made up the bulk of membership in Europe's climbing clubs. [2] Thus, *alpinism* remained at first a pastime of a rather narrow circle of urban elite and intelligentsia in Moscow and a few other cities. When in the 1920s a few enthusiasts rallied and gained state support for 'proletarian' mountaineering, it was necessary to shed all associations with a once bourgeois activity and its former practitioners, who were now denounced by the new regime.

For many years to come, Soviet mountaineering was therefore constructed in opposition to Russia's pre-Revolutionary past as well as to Western climbing: Not only was Soviet mountaineering required to be accessible to the masses, especially to young Soviet workers, it should also be collective (as opposed to

individualist) in form as well as in spirit. Last but not least, it was to be an integral part of the all-encompassing socialist project in the Soviet Union. Skilfully latching onto broader trends in discourse, iconography and public culture, mountaineers presented themselves as cultural ambassadors to the periphery, helping to build socialism during the first Five-Year-Plan (1928–32), then switched to a more heroic iconography during the mid-1930s and depicted the mountains as another theatre where Soviet men successfully fought against natural obstacles. Finally the slogan ‘A mountaineer has to be a soldier!’ was adopted during the high tide of military patriotism as the war approached. [3] After the Second World War, however, militarization subsided quickly, and continued political engagement on the part of Soviet citizens was neither required nor encouraged by the regime. However, even as a more ‘private’ activity, leisure continued to be politicized in order to strengthen the image of the Soviet Union as a welfare state, providing its citizens with the ‘good life’ their capitalist fellow workers reputedly could only dream of. [4]

In addition, the arena of sports rapidly became a focus of official interest as an alternative symbolic battlefield of the systems during the Cold War. In order to profit from this trend, mountaineering after 1945 underwent a process of self-‘sportization’ (*sportizatsia*), and Soviet mountaineers went to great lengths to make their own pastime resemble other competitive sports. They introduced nationwide championships in rock-climbing and subsequently national prizes in different categories such as traverses or high-altitude expeditions. [5] Unlike other sports, mountaineering remained physically confined within the limits of the Soviet Union. Soviet mountaineers could not climb abroad nor could foreigners come to visit the Caucasus or Pamir mountains. Direct or informal contacts with Western mountaineers in the Caucasus had taken place regularly until the mid-1930s, but after the Second World War, foreign climbers were no longer allowed to visit and the flow of information between Soviet and foreign climbers had run dry. [6] A Swiss mountaineering yearbook aptly titled its sketchy overview on Soviet mountaineering in 1948 ‘Behind the Russian Curtain’; indeed, Western mountaineers had almost no knowledge of the achievements of their Soviet colleagues. [7] To re-establish communication and to compete with the international mountaineering community became possible only after 1953.

### **From Ignoring the Fact to Denouncing its Importance: Soviet Reactions to the Everest Expedition, 1953–4**

The success of the Everest expedition was made public on the coronation day of Queen Elizabeth II in London, on 2 June 1953. Led by the Briton John Hunt, the team’s composition seemed to celebrate the successful transition from British Empire to Commonwealth in that one of the first two men setting foot on Everest, Edmund Hillary, was from the now sovereign state of New Zealand, while the citizenship of Sherpa Tenzing Norgay was claimed by both India and Nepal. The symbolic value of man’s victory over nature was turned into hard cash by extensive media coverage and books, films and interviews [8] to the extent that ‘Everest’ eventually became a brand name for Italian wine and double-glazing for windows, as Hunt later recalled. [9] Today, Everest is remembered most of all through its extensive photographic (and film) coverage and in many ways, this

ascent was one of the first Western media events. The images popularized here have entered the collective visual memory of the Western world in a way that would be echoed by Armstrong's first step on the moon in 1969.

However, these images of Everest did not reach the Soviet people. On 3 June 1953, a very short notice in *Izvestia* informed its readers that 'According to information from the . . . camp, a member of the British Expedition, the New Zealander Hillary and the local guide Tenzing had reached the summit of Everest on 29 May'. [10] There were no pictures in any major newspaper or magazine in the Soviet Union, nor did those media provide any further information on the conquest. *Sovetski Sport*, the most widely read sports newspaper in the Soviet Union, did not even mention Everest at any time during that year. [11] Instead, it featured articles on the 30th anniversary of Soviet *alpinizm* as a system for the mass production of the new 'Soviet man' whose will was 'steeled' on the mountain slopes, and where mountaineering was presented as a unique and distinctly Soviet activity, taking place in the mountains at the periphery of the Soviet Union: from the 'wooded Carpathians to the fire-spewing volcanoes of Kamtchatka, from the rocky cliffs of Crimea to the snows of Altai'. [12]

It is doubtful whether the Soviet regime thought it could remain forever silent on the conquest of Everest. The initial refusal to react to the event must be attributed to the overwhelming sense of insecurity of how to deal with the expected, anticipated or slowly discernible changes after Stalin's death; changes the extent and direction of which nobody could really foresee in the summer of 1953. Officials certainly underestimated the strong interest of the Soviet public in the expedition. When, at the insistence of his readers, the sports journalist Evgeni Simonov finally dealt with the topic in the pages of *Sovetski Sport* in May 1954, almost one year after the event, he still relied on Stalinist rhetoric and presented it as a victory of British 'imperialists'. The true fame, Simonov said, belonged to the Sherpa, the 'nameless coolies' who had carried everything for their masters, 'sunk in the deep snow, suffering from cold and high-altitude sickness. Innocent and honest, enduring and fulfilling their deed to the last! Such are these sons of the mountains. . . . And who knows how this expedition would have ended without Tenzing,' Simonov asked. Tenzing Norgay had shown 'what new powers are maturing among the peoples of rising Asia. It is but fair . . . that one of their sons was among the first to reach the highest spot of his homeland and the whole world.' [13] Tenzing's part in the expedition allowed Simonov to combine the classic Stalinist 'transformation narrative' with a contemporary political message: 'The Soviet Union would support and accompany "rising Asia" on its way into a bright future.' Typically, although 'Everest' had been the commonly used name in Soviet mountaineering literature all through the 1930s, official post-war discourses used the mountain's indigenous name 'Chomolungma' to clearly take side with the nation on whose territory it stood. [14] Simonov's description of the 'innocent and honest' 'coolies', however, shows a rather traditional Stalinist-paternalist orientalism in its slightly condescending treatment of the Asian participants, notwithstanding the updated Cold War rhetoric. [15]

The conquest of Everest was thus publicly acknowledged, but its importance played down. In 1949, the chairman of the official body of representation for all Soviet mountaineers, the 'All-Union Section for Mountaineering' (*Vsesoiuznaia*

*seksia alpinizma*, or VSA) had still boasted that 'comparing the ascents of Soviet sportsmen in 1948 with what was done in foreign countries throughout the whole pre-war period, we can with due pride point to the achievements of our masters which undoubtedly trump the best ascents of foreign climbers.' [16]

After 1953, such statements were obviously no longer appropriate. The new discourse thus turned away from achievements and results and focused on an allegedly better Soviet practice; thereby upholding the notion that Soviet climbing was fundamentally different. Several articles even more explicitly denounced foreign mountaineers' use of porters and support teams to achieve their goals. In Soviet mountaineering, for example in the 1954 ascent of Peak Revolution (*Pik Revoliutsii*) in the Pamir (6987m), there were 'no leaders and no led ones':

Let us remember that in 1953 two people climbed Everest: the Englishman [sic] Hillary and the Sherpa Tenzing. They were supported by approximately 400 'support troops', most of all by porters. The Soviet mountaineers – the 20 participants of the main expedition – had only a few direct helpers. . . . All the major baggage the climbers bore on their shoulders. [17]

In fact, this heroic deed was partly due to the refusal of the local *kolkhoz* 'Red Border Guard' to provide the expedition with as many packing animals as they had promised. Thus the climbers had simply no other choice than to carry everything themselves. [18] Soviet expedition mountaineering during the 1930s had relied on local support probably just as much as Himalayan mountaineering did [19] but emphasizing the (ideologically charged) renunciation of local porters stressed not only the 'progressive' attitude towards non-European nationalities and the supposedly collective and egalitarian nature of Soviet mountaineering; it also made the sportive effort of Soviet mountaineers seem greater.

Again, Soviet mountaineering was constructed as different and (at least morally) superior while foreign achievements were belittled. Mountaineering thus appears as a Cold War sports substitute for official policy, where any victory was to be primarily judged on the basis of the political allegiance of the climbers. However, the fact that the Soviet media had found it necessary to deal with a major foreign media event, even though it had no direct political or economic impact on the Soviet Union, was to open the door for further interpretation. At the same time, advertising Soviet mountaineering as a sport of equal partners with 'no leaders' broke with the focus on strict military-style discipline within climbers' teams that had dominated through the later Stalin years. This rhetoric was to develop a life of its own, a point to which we will return.

## **Communication and Community Building: Contacts with Western Mountaineers, 1954–8**

While the broad public discourse was still busy denouncing Western climbing achievements, the Soviet mountaineering yearbooks – written mostly by climbers for climbers – offered a more variegated approach. While one author in 1954 still accused the Vatican of financing imperialism under the cover of mountaineering in the Himalaya and everyone else of spying on the Soviet borders in Asia, [20] there were also some very sober discussions of the Everest expeditions of 1952 and 1953, which limited their critique to tactical errors and technical flaws. [21] This turned to a more technical description – very much obsessed with the equipment used by the ‘West’ – and may have stemmed partly from the ideological vacuum left by Stalin’s death, but its outcome was to change Soviet alpine literature in content, form and style. Authors slowly retreated from an ideological interpretation of the Himalayan expeditions to an assessment based on the criteria of failure or success and then to a seemingly more ‘neutral’ arena of sport, emphasizing the significance of the material and tactical preparation of any expedition.

Mountaineers also had access to privileged and additional information and were thus earlier and better informed than ordinary Soviet citizens. In the autumn of 1953, climbers in Tiflis had already been given a detailed talk on the conquest of Everest by Simonov, the above-mentioned sports journalist and editor of the mountaineering yearbook. At the beginning of 1954 the British embassy in Moscow organized a viewing of the official Everest film to which it invited Soviet mountaineers, [22] and in June 1954 John Hunt himself came to Moscow and gave a lecture on the expedition. The British embassy had tried to obtain permission to make this a public event, but without success. Not even Hunt’s presence in Moscow was made public.

[23] Only ten carefully selected Soviet mountaineers were allowed as guests, some of whom had come all the way from Georgia to hear the talk. [24] Nevertheless, Hunt’s presentation not only initiated personal contacts that were to evolve into cultural exchange and lasting friendships, it also helped to instigate a more open and uncensored flow of information to the broader Soviet public in which mountaineers acted as mediators.

In 1956, a Russian translation of John Hunt’s book *The Ascent of Everest* (1954) was published in Moscow in a first run of 30,000 copies, an exceptionally high figure which shows that the Soviet publishing house could count on great interest in anything ‘foreign’. It was the first foreign book on Everest to appear in the Soviet Union since 1930 and was quickly followed by several other foreign books on Himalayan expeditions, including Tenzing’s ‘autobiography’ and the Italian Desio’s account of the first ascent of K2. [25] All of these had been translated and edited by Soviet mountaineers, generally a very educated stratum of society, some of whom also wrote overviews on what was now called ‘mountaineering abroad’ rather than ‘bourgeois’ or ‘capitalist’ climbing. [26]

Mountaineers had thus become cultural intermediaries between foreign mountaineering and a broader Soviet public, opening a window to the world's events. Reviews of foreign books such as Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna* could amount to 15-page synopses for those Soviet citizens who did not have direct access to the original. [27] As cultural exchanges between Great Britain and the USSR bloomed towards the end of the 1950s, Soviet authorities allowed more citizens access to the original voices of foreigners. When in 1958 the British climber Robert Charles Evans came to the Soviet Union, he could hold his lectures in the Soviet space of Moscow State University – a striking difference to Hunt's visit only four years earlier, which had taken place in the British Embassy. [28] Mountaineering had developed into one of the ostensibly depoliticized areas for cultural contact between Soviet and foreign citizens and this was due mostly to the effort of mountaineers themselves.

The personal meeting with Hunt in 1954 also served as a starting-point for an increasingly close exchange between British and Soviet mountaineers. [29] At first, they stemmed from personal efforts of individual Soviet mountaineers such as the young Moscow doctor and mountaineer Evgeni Gippenreiter (born 1927) who became a central figure in future British-Soviet mountaineering relations. The VSA as the official body of representation remained reluctant at first and did not officially congratulate the Everest climbers. [30] This breach of mountaineering etiquette enraged one senior Soviet mountaineer, Sandro Gvalia from Georgia, and made him pen his own personal greetings to the British Alpine club, thereby openly defying the Soviet representational organ he had once served. Like many others, he compared the first ascent to such 'heroic deeds' as the conquest of the North or South Poles. Hillary and Tenzing, he said, were like Peary and Scott, Nansen and Amundsen, Alesha Dzhaparidze and Evgeni Abalakov. By including these two well-known Soviet mountaineers, one a Georgian and the other a Siberian, he presented their achievements as equally outstanding in a virtual community of mountaineers which encompassed countries with different political regimes. [31]

On an official level, Soviet mountaineering representatives received an invitation to lecture at the Alpine Club in London in 1956. Their acceptance was part of a new campaign to propagate Soviet mountaineering achievements internationally. In 1957, the first comprehensive book on Soviet climbing achievements, written by a Soviet mountaineer, was published in France; during the same year the Soviet Union took an active part in the mountain film festival in Trento, Italy. [32] For the visit to the Alpine Club, the well-known senior mountaineer Evgeni Beletski, a skilled metalworker from the famous Kirov works in Leningrad, was chosen as the official Soviet representative, probably also because of his exemplary biography which seemed to demonstrate the social accessibility of mountaineering in the Soviet Union. Gippenreiter, whose academic background was in fact much more typical for a Soviet climber, accompanied him. In his lecture, Beletski never questioned the basic precepts of Soviet climbing as it had evolved during the Stalinist 1930s – its integration into state structures, collective practice or usefulness for building socialism. [33] However, here as in other publications, the image of Soviet mountaineering was adapted to the changing discourses of the 'Thaw' period. While during the 1930s the emphasis had rested on *massovost* or the importance of quantity, attention was now directed on the efforts and achievements of the Khrushchev regime to

provide its citizens with a higher standard of living in an emerging 'Socialist consumer society'. When Beletski declared that mountaineering in the USSR often united 'miners and scientists, steelworkers and engineers', he emphasized the country's status as a modern industrial society, where class struggle had been overcome and all social groups were united in a common cause. [34]

In Beletski's London lecture, this integrative community was extended to embrace those mountaineers who had substantially contributed to the birth and growth of Soviet climbing in the 1930s – before they had become victims of the Stalinist terror in 1937–8. For the first time in almost 20 years, their names and services were publicly remembered and the records they had achieved were (re)claimed as part of the history of Soviet mountaineering. The transnational dimension of Soviet mountaineering was remembered as well. Past cooperations such as the Soviet-German Pamir expedition in 1928 had long been a taboo topic, but now even the fact that the Germans had climbed Peak Lenin during that expedition was acknowledged.

[35] Parallel to this new emphasis on the shared and interlinked history of Soviet and foreign mountaineering, the pre-Revolutionary roots of Soviet mountaineering were also given more attention. [36] Differences were still spelled out, but in the spirit of cultural contact they seemed of secondary importance when compared to mutual interests, common goals and even a partly shared history. Rituals surrounding the Soviet visit to London were to solidify this feeling. Among the gifts exchanged was a nylon rope – the material itself was a symbol of modernity – which was presented to the Soviet mountaineers for their planned first ascent on foreign ground. It was to serve the expedition and to symbolize the connection between mountaineers from different countries. [37] Finally, after almost 20 years the Soviet Union reopened its borders to foreign climbers: One year after the lecture, in 1957, the British mountaineer Joyce Dunsheath visited the Soviet Union and climbed with Soviet mountaineers in the Caucasus; followed in 1958 by a British party led by John Hunt. [38]

The emphasis on a friendly transnational community was fuelled by the enormous interest of mountaineers and ordinary Soviet citizens in the ascent of Everest, as both foreign and Soviet sources testify. Many readers requested more information from their newspapers; Tenzing Norgay received numerous letters from Soviet citizens; and the first foreign mountaineers in the Soviet Union were inevitably questioned about details. [39] Joyce Dunsheath found her English edition of Tenzing's autobiography an instant source of interest even to those who could not understand English because the photographic illustrations provided not only a way of communicating without a common language; they also served as a visible proof of another, different reality outside the Soviet borders. [40]

John Hunt later compared the 'unifying influence' of Everest and its global appeal to the impact of Gagarin's first flight into space a few years later, [41] and indeed the atmosphere described in 1957, when British and Soviet mountaineers discussed the launching of Sputnik, mankind's first satellite, on the slopes of Elbrus, caught this spirit of a common and shared vision of modernity that united and provided a meeting ground, a mutual basis for talk and exchange for Soviet and Western mountaineers. [42] What was first voiced privately became the publicly sanctioned 'general line' on mountaineering abroad during the heyday of cultural exchange in 1958–9. The official discourse then changed faster than



books could be printed: When Simonov reviewed the translation of Hunt's book in 1959, he still emphasized the effort of the many native support teams that were necessary to climb Everest. But he also insisted that 'one should not belittle the heroic efforts of the British mountaineers' as some other authors (former Stalinist mountaineering officials) had done, since the expedition leaders had managed a great feat: creating a strong collective, a community of diversity, 'from the noble [svetskiĭ] gentleman Hunt to the almost illiterate but loyal inhabitants of the far-off mountain villages of Nepal'. [43]

### **Covert Competition: Sino-Soviet Plans for Everest**

In a complete reversal of the earlier Stalinist discourse on *alpinizm*, mountaineering's private aspect was now publicly staged, emphasizing a sense of community and friendship among individuals and downplaying political connotations. This does not mean that the competitive aspects and symbolic functions of climbing to boost national prestige were disregarded, but they were pursued rather covertly. By the early 1950s, Soviet climbers were quite frustrated about lagging behind in high altitude mountaineering. [44] Since 1945 they had been trying to gain permission to cross the border and participate in the international race for the highest summits which had been re-opened after the Second World War. Conquering Nanga Parbat and K2 by 1950 were among the targets first stated as internal goals in 1946. [45] Such goals were ambitious, but not completely illusionary, given the experience of Soviet climbers in altitudes up to almost 7500m. However, climbing had to compete with other, more prestigious, competitive sports where the Soviet Union could score highly in international competitions, and it attracted neither much attention nor substantial resources from the Soviet sports bureaucracy. [46] Mountaineers had thus resorted to Cold War rhetoric, [47] as when they asked for money and permission to stage their first ever expedition to a foreign mountain, Mustag-Ata in China, pointing out that 'the fame of this summit in all countries of the world, and the failed attempt on it by the well-known English high altitude climbers Shipton and Tilman would make [our] victory . . . an event of international importance'. [48]

Only in the mid-1950s, when blooming Sino-Soviet friendship led to massive Soviet support for Chinese sports development, did the doors suddenly open. [49] To fulfil their long-harboured plans to climb abroad, mountaineers suggested 'inviting the Chinese comrades'. [50] Soviet and Chinese climbers trained together in the Pamir in 1955 and in 1956 they successfully climbed Mustag-Ata and Kungur in China, celebrating their first victory on foreign soil. But most of all, China's annexation of Tibet in 1951 had also placed Mount Everest's northern approaches within the Communist realm of Sino-Soviet 'eternal friendship'.

In the autumn of 1958, the Chinese formally invited their Soviet colleagues on a joint Everest ascent from the north side. [51] With the help of 'a phone call from the [Soviet] Central committee' a yet unknown level of state support was mobilized. New equipment was constructed (including even oxygen apparatus, a novelty in the USSR), and qualified mountaineers were given leave of absence from work at short notice to train and to undertake reconnaissance missions. [52] The Chinese authorities organized a special support committee, ordered military units to protect their reconnaissance and built a road to the proposed base camp at Rongbuk in Tibet.

[53] During the autumn of 1958, Russian and Chinese mountaineers were already training together in the Pamir. In November, a joint reconnaissance party of Soviet and Chinese climbers examined the area around Rongbuk glacier, and in the early spring of 1959 the participants met again in the Caucasus to train in conditions of severe cold and snow. However, when the Soviet participants met on 18 March 1959 in Moscow, a few days before they were to fly to Beijing, they were told that the expedition had been cancelled at the last minute, due to the uprising in Tibet that had begun on 10 March and made an expedition in the area impossible. It was to be an early harbinger of the final Sino-Soviet split.

A year later, the Chinese extended their invitation again but this time it was the Soviet side that turned down the offer due to the increasing political tension. [54] In May 1960, Chinese mountaineers reached the summit alone, and their Soviet colleagues could only congratulate, however grudgingly: 'One is always glad about the success of a friend.' [55]

### **Conclusion: Sports as a Metaphor for Life**

Accounts by Soviet climbers of Soviet-Chinese climbing meetings are highly ambivalent and prove an insightful comparison with the cultural contacts with the West. Unlike the latter, which were staged as meetings between individuals, Soviet-Chinese climbing expeditions were a state affair, organized to prove the supremacy of the Communist system. [56] The 1958 reconnaissance was organized through the Chinese party apparatus from Beijing and kept secret not only from the world public: neither the local Tibetan government nor the lamas were to be informed about their presence and their goals. Whilst the amount of state effort put into the undertaking in some ways impressed the Soviets (who were used to being neglected by the state), many aspects made them doubt the timing and adequacy of their organization.

The acute tension and fear of rebellion in Tibet showed the limits of the Communist state project. Even the local party administrator openly admitted to the Soviet participants that 'the [Tibetan] people do not understand us'. [57] How would the monks at Rongbuk monastery, who were helpful and friendly towards Chinese and Soviet alpinists, react when the government built a road directly to the foot of their holy mountain, a Soviet mountaineer wondered? [58] Neither were Soviet climbers enthusiastic about the prospect of climbing in the uniforms of the People's Liberation Army nor carrying pistols with them, but they were constantly surrounded by party officials from Beijing and military escorts, with officialdom much more pronounced than in the expeditions Soviet climbers were used to. The Chinese expedition plans were formidable but not flexible enough to meet the actual needs of the task. It was the three Soviet mountaineers who convinced the others that a small, mobile reconnaissance unit made up primarily of climbers would do better than the large-scale expedition assault the Chinese had in mind. [59]

Since Soviet-Chinese relations rested almost exclusively on allegedly identical political systems, unexpected differences between the two versions of 'socialism' were all the more striking. They brought Soviet climbers to reflect on the nature of their own society at least as much (or even more) as during and after their contacts with climbers from Western countries. Among Soviet mountaineers, the Sino-Soviet cooperation had been a marriage of convenience from the start.

They found themselves not only in the role of the 'elder brother' commonly attributed to all Soviet 'experts' during the phase of cultural exchange between China and the Soviet Union, but in a very literal sense as well. While the Chinese climbers were mostly in their 20s, the Soviet delegation leader Beletski was already 50 and his fellow-climber Lev Filimonov was 39 years old. Soviet mountaineering was also built on decades of tradition and experience, while in China the sport had been introduced only a few years earlier under Soviet guidance. [60] In a way the Soviet climbers thus stood for another more mature approach, not only to climbing but also to life, because they had already experienced the phase of enthusiastic, large-scale building of socialism with all its consequences. Among other documents, the recently-published conversations between Mao and Khrushchev have made the cultural frictions in the Sino-Soviet relationship in the late 1950s evident. With the Chinese regime about to embark on economic and social experiments from which the Soviet Union was just about to dissociate itself, the two systems seemed to be moving in different time zones. [61]

This feeling is also discernible, if not always consciously articulated, in mountaineers' accounts. Filimonov felt as if he was travelling in time, alienated not only by the 'medieval' aspects of life in Lhasa, but also by the modestly and uniformly dressed people on China's streets. This was a stark contrast to the emerging Soviet consumer society advocated by Khrushchev in those years. [62] Writing about the Chinese mountaineers they trained, another Soviet climber later remembered:

When I looked at them more closely, I understood that our brothers were not only no mountaineers, but no sportsmen at all. The party had directed them to this work front, strength and mountain experience had been replaced by political conviction and literacy, by devotion to the party. . . . It would be a sin to mock at them; we have lived under the iron yoke for many years, too. [63]

Typically, a Soviet mountaineer described the Chinese in 1956 as 'good friends, modest, hard-working, enduring', [64] and another in 1958 credited them with 'outstanding love of work, the will to succeed, high sense of duty'. [65] While these were the standard attributes of a Stakhanovite of the 1930s, they were not specifically qualities appropriate for mountaineers but rather described the 'New Man' of the Stalin era. The Chinese 'brothers' depicted here were good socialists but they did not have any individual features – which were, in Soviet eyes, what made a mountaineer and a sportsman. This becomes especially obvious if we compare it to an account of two Soviet members of an all-Soviet expedition to Peak Stalin in 1959. They wrote about the reason for their success: '25 people – that is 25 characters . . . [every one] already had his habits, his style in mountaineering. . . . The [team leader's] great merit was that he was able to find a "key" to each character to form a strong . . . collective.' [66]

What Simonov had praised in Hunt's expedition – that very different participants had joined forces for a collective success – was taken one step further here. These authors were convinced that success was only possible if leaders took into account and allowed for the individuality of all participants. It

seems obvious that this model was not just applicable to mountaineering expeditions. The need and the wish to incorporate different and potentially conflicting sub-groups by allowing for more individual deviation from the strict Stalinist stereotypes went much further. The search for a new form of socialism was accentuated even more when its 'old' forms seemed suddenly and visibly revived in the contact with the Chinese 'brothers' who represented in many ways a Stalinist past from which many wanted to break free. Thus the Soviet verdict that the Chinese were no 'sportsmen' also shows the significance of sports as a metaphor for modern life. [67] This modernity contained not only the possibility of contacts and competition with the West but also a plea for more participation from 'below'; for less pronounced hierarchies and most of all for more tolerance towards individual differences and approaches. Talking about China was talking about the past of socialism: talking about Western mountaineering was about its present and its future.

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### Notes

- [1] As Sewell argues, 'historical events are never instantaneous happenings: they always have a duration. . . . During this period, the usual articulations between different structures become profoundly dislocated. Actors, consequently, are beset with insecurity: they are unsure about how to get on with life.' Sewell, *Logics of History*, 229. On the incoherent, 'diffuse processes of revision and reform' that de-Stalinization denotes see Jones, 'Introduction: The Dilemmas', 3.
- [2] Recent historical analyses of mountaineering as a cultural and social phenomenon include, among others, Günther, *Alpine Quergänge*; Hoibian, *Les alpinistes en France*; Ambrosi and Wedekind, *L'invenzione di un cosmo borghese*; Hansen, 'Albert Smith' (and other articles by the same author).
- [3] V. Kudinov, 'Al'pinist dolzhen byt' boitsom', *Sovetski turizm i al'pinizm*, 4 Aug. 1940, 2.
- [4] These developments are discussed in detail in my dissertation on Soviet mountaineering during the Stalin era; Maurer, 'Wege zum Pik Stalin', *passim*, for an overview see Maurer, 'Al'pinizm as Mass Sport'.
- [5] Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi federatsii [State archive of the Russian Federation; hereafter GARF], f. 7576, op. 14, d. 40, ll. 27-28 (1948); Rototaev, *K veršinam*, 134.
- [6] For an overview of foreign climbers' visits to the Caucasus see Salkeld and Bermúdez, *On the Edge of Europe*, 219–42.
- [7] 'Hinter dem Russischen Vorhang'. This may have led to rumours that a Russian party in 1952 had attempted to take Everest from the north. While these rumours in fact accelerated British planning for the expedition of 1953, recent research shows no trace of such an expedition. However, it is revealing that some Soviet mountaineers were actually willing to believe them at first – demonstrating not only their confidence in the Western press, but also a deep distrust towards their own sports system which they held thoroughly capable of organizing a secret expedition without involving mountaineers' official organs of representation: Gippenreiter, 'Mount Everest', 109–11.
- [8] For an extensive discussion see Hansen, 'Confetti of Empire', *passim*.
- [9] Hunt, *Life Is Meeting*, 123.
- [10] *Izvestia*, 3 June 1953, 4.
- [11] The information appeared in a few other Soviet papers, but always well hidden among the short news. For *Krasnaia Zvezda* on 4 June 1953, see Hansen, 'Confetti of Empire', 331 n.93. Most major newspapers and sports/tourism journals did not publish any information at

all.

- [12] E. Simonov, 'Al'pinisty vyshli v gory', *Sovetski Sport*, 27 June 1953, 2. (All translations by the author).
- [13] E. Simonov, 'Shturm vysochaishchei vershiny zemli', *Sovetski Sport*, 8 May 1954, 3.
- [14] The same was true for K2 which was now popularly known as 'Chog-Ori'. However, Soviet mountaineers on their reconnaissance in 1958 would still use the name 'Everest': Filimonov, 'Doroga na Everest', 92.
- [15] Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, 93f.
- [16] Zatulovskii, 'Itogi', 16.
- [17] 'Odinnadtsat' na vershine', *Sovetski Sport*, 25 Sept. 1954, 4. No author is given, but style and rhetoric point to Simonov once again.
- [18] Expedition report, 9 Sept. 1954, GARF f. 5451, op. 32, d. 470, l. 25.
- [19] When in 1933 Soviet climbers had scaled the highest Soviet summit, Peak Stalin (now Pik Ismoil Somoni, 7495m), for the first time, they also had made use of local porters: Romm, *The Ascent of Mount Stalin*, passim.
- [20] 'The time of legal mountaineering espionage trips to China has irrevocably passed. . . . The Himalaya now belongs to the peoples living there who want to live in peace and friendship with the peoples of India, Pakistan and the all adjoining countries.' Ermashev, 'V gimalaiakh', 483f.
- [21] Dorofeev and Bashmachnikov, 'Na Chomolungmu'; Losev and Suslov, 'Voskhozhdenie na Chomolungmu v 1953 godu'.
- [22] Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 371/111761, National Archives, Kew, London.
- [23] There was no mention of Hunt's visit in the press, although *Izvestia* paid due attention to the expanding Soviet-British contacts, see *Izvestia*, 12 March, 4 April and 2 Dec. 1954, 4; see also FO 371/111761.
- [24] John Hunt at a press conference after his return: *The Times*, 15 June 1954, 5; see also Gippenreiter, 'Mount Everest', 109.
- [25] Simonov, 'Na vysshei tochke', 362 fn. 3. These books included Tigr snegov: Avtobiografiia Tenzinga, zapisannaia s ego slov Dzh. R. Ul'manom, per. s. angl. (Moscow 1957); Dezio, A. 'K2' – vtoraiia vershina mira. Per. s. nem./Vved. F. Kropfa i B. Upeneka (Moscow 1959); Tikhi, G. Choi-Oiiu – milost' bogov: Alpinistiskii pokhod v Gimalai, 1954 g. Per. s. nem.; predislovie B. Upeneka (Moscow 1960). Their first editions ran to between 10,000 and 27,000 copies.
- [26] Garf and Kropf, Al'pinizm za rubezhom. One year later, the VSA's long-time president presented another volume: Rototaev, Pokorenie gigantov. Other Himalayan-related publications included 'revelations' on the Yeti, see Simonov, 'Na vysshei tochke', 363 fn. 1.
- [27] Kropf and Rototaev, 'Kak byl pobezhden', 361–76. Over a quarter of all pages was devoted to foreign mountaineering.
- [28] E. Simonov, 'Druzhba smelykh', *Kultura i zhizn'* 7 (1958), 47.
- [29] Hunt, *Life is Meeting*, 144f. See also FO 371/111761 (quoted in Gippenreiter, 'Mount Everest').
- [30] They did so only in 1954: FO 371/111825; see online catalogue ('Congratulations from the Soviet Union to the UK Alpine Club on the conquest of Everest', 1954).
- [31] Correspondence in: *Alpine Journal* 59 (1953–4), 366–7. The name of the author given is 'Paliya', but he can be easily identified by his listing of titles and functions. Both Dzhaparidze (d. 1945) and Abalakov (d. 1948) died prematurely under tragic circumstances for which some have blamed the Soviet authorities, and have subsequently achieved a certain martyr status within the Soviet mountaineering community. This adds another dimension to mentioning these two which cannot be explored further here.
- [32] Tchérépov, *Alpinisme soviétique*; M. Anufrikov, 'Festival v Trento', *Fizkul'tura i sport* 2 (1958), 20–1. The lecture at the Alpine Club took place only a few weeks after Khrushchev's first visit to England: Talbott and Crankshaw, *Chruschtschow erinnert sich*, 404–16. For one of the first private visits during the cultural exchange between Great Britain and the USSR see Gilburd, 'Books and Borders'.
- [33] I refer to the published version: Beletsky, 'Mountaineering in the USSR'; the text can also be found in GARF f. 7576, op. 30, d. 152.
- [34] Beletsky, 'Mountaineering in the USSR', 316. Beletskii's exemplary Soviet vita was highlighted in a review of his books: *Ogonek*, 17 April 1952, 11.
- [35] Beletsky, 'Mountaineering in the USSR', 323, 326.
- [36] See Dorofeev, 'S N.V. Krylenko' and 'Russkoe Gornoe Obschestvo'.

- [37] Zamiatin, *Pik Beletskogo*, ch. 10.
- [38] See Hunt and Brasher, *The Red Snows*.
- [39] B. Dorofeev and E. Basmachnikov, 'Chto kroetsia za shturmom Dzhomolungmy': *Fizkul'tura i sport* 4 (1953), 30–1; B.S. Bugaev, 'Druzha voskhoditelei', 352; Dunsheath, *Guest of the Soviets*, 107–8, 115.
- [40] Dunsheath, *Guest of the Soviets*, 97. For the great interest Soviet citizens showed in reports from abroad and especially the significance of photographs see the reception of Sergei Obrastsov's travelogue described in Gilburd, 'Books and Borders', 242–7.
- [41] Hunt, *Life is Meeting*, 121.
- [42] Dunsheath, *Guest of the Soviets*, 126. On the significance of the space project to boost Soviet citizens' confidence see Magnúsdóttir, "'Be careful'", 117f.
- [43] Simonov, 'Na vysshei tochke', 360f. Simonov explicitly criticized the writer Pavel Luknitski and the former president of the mountaineering section David Zatulovski, who had both evidently been overtaken by the rapid shift in public discourse.
- [44] D. Zatulovski, 'Na Pik Korzhenevskoi': *Sovetski Sport*, 3 Nov. 1953, 3; K. Kuz'min and A. Suslov 'Pochemu ne razvivaetsia vysotnyi al'pinizm?': *Sovetski Sport*, 4 Feb. 1954, 6.
- [45] Plenary session VSA, 1946: GARF f. 7576, op. 14, d. 38, l. 22
- [46] This was a common complaint of mountaineers; see for example GARF f. 7576, op. 14, d. 36, ll. 146–7, 153 (Plenary session VSA, 1950); d. 48, l. 7–8. (1953).
- [47] Correspondence, 1952: GARF f. 5451, op. 32, d. 437, l. 6.
- [48] GARF f. 5451, op. 32, d. 437, l. 7.
- [49] Prozumenshchikov, *Bol'shoi sport*, 273–8.
- [50] Meeting of the VSA, 17 Dec. 1954: GARF f. 7576, op. 30, d. 150, l. 4.
- [51] An anonymous account of a former interpreter in these Soviet-Chinese preparation talks insists that it was the Soviet mountaineers who brought up the idea of a joint expedition. Published on a pro-Chinese website on Tibet, this source certainly needs to be used with care, but many hitherto unknown details from the Chinese side seem plausible and add to our knowledge: see 'Inside Story Behind Conquest of Qomolangmo', available online at <http://www.tibetinfor.com/en/services/peakzone/mountaineer/e/e.htm>, accessed 27 Dec. 2007.
- [52] Filimonov, 'Doroga na Everest', 58–9.
- [53] *Ibid.*, 87.
- [54] Gippenreiter, 'Mount Everest', 113. On the uprising and deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations, see Jian, 'Tibetan Rebellion', esp. 71–101.
- [55] Troianov, 'Svershilos', 23. On the 1960 expedition whose success was long doubted see also 'Inside Story Behind Conquest of Qomolangmo' (as in note 51).
- [56] Other Soviet advisers and 'experts' to China were also ambivalent about their experience: see Kaple, 'Soviet Advisors', 128–32.
- [57] Filimonov, 'Doroga na Everest', 71 (quote), 72, 88, 94, 145. For the situation in 1958 see Jian, 'Tibetan Rebellion', 68–70.
- [58] The Soviet climbers had the impression that the Panchen Lama knew exactly what they were up to: Filimonov, 'Doroga na Everest', 60, 71–71, 151.
- [59] *Ibid.*, 60, 69, 79, 84–6.
- [60] When in 1955, Soviet mountaineers had first trained their Chinese colleagues, none of them had any previous mountaineering experience: Arkin, 'S pobedoi', 7. See also Filimonov, 'Doroga na Everest', 165.
- [61] Zubok, 'The Mao-Krushchev Conversations'; Kramer, 'The USSR Foreign Ministry's Appraisal of Sino-Soviet Relations', Kaple, 'Soviet Advisors', 130–6.
- [62] Filimonov, 'Doroga na Everest', 63, 91f.
- [63] Belopukhov, *Ia – spinal'nik*, 82. Political allegiance was certainly a criterion – even the Tibetan porters were chosen from among party or Communist youth league members: Filimonov, 'Doroga na Everest', 78.
- [64] Beletsky, 'Mountaineering', 329. Beletski and Kuzmin, 'V gorakh', 71.
- [65] Beletski and Kuzmin, 'V gorakh', 71. Interaction with Chinese mountaineers was hardly mentioned, but it was underlined that a rock from the summit of Mustag-Ata was now on display in the Alpine Club: Bugaev, 'Druzha voskhoditelei', 348–50.
- [66] Bogachev and Buianov, 'Na Pik Stalina', 100f.
- [67] In the words of Mike O'Mahony, 'the representation of fizkultura practices [...] provided a useful prism through which complex sociological and political concerns could be articulated

effectively': O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 171. For a sketch of the sportsman during the Thaw see Vail and Genis, 60-e, 206–13; Makoveeva, 'Soviet Sports', 18–25.

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