
YEVGENIY B GIPPENREITER

Mount Everest and the Russians 1952 and 1958

(Plates 32–38)

In 1952 there were rumours circulating in the press and published in *The Times* that the Swiss team, led by G Chevalley, which was making a second attempt to climb Mount Everest in the autumn of 1952, were not the only climbers hoping to 'win' the highest mountain in the world from the British. While the Britons were conducting a training expedition to Cho Oyu, a third force had appeared in the Mount Everest arena – the Russians.¹ The press reports stated that on 16 October 1952, after a training meet in the Caucasus, a big Soviet expedition consisting of 35 climbers hurried to the Himalaya. Led by Pavel Datschnolian, the rival team included five experts: Anatoli Jindomnov, a geologist, Joseph Dengumarov, a physician specialising in high-altitude physiology, together with Vladimir Kashinski, Alexei Metzdarov and Ivan Lentsov.

The climbers and their equipment were transported from Moscow to Lhasa, via Novosibirsk and Irkutsk, in five military aircraft, but it took them longer than they had anticipated to cross Tibet and reach the foot of Mount Everest. At Base Camp all the Tibetan porters were paid off, and the Russians started climbing without a period of acclimatisation. They followed the pre-war British route from the north. From Camp VIII at 8200m the leader radioed that the assault party, being in good condition, expected to reach the top within the next two days, weather permitting. This was their last message. On 27 December a search lasting 18 days had to be abandoned because of the onset of winter and the last search party returned to Base Camp. No traces of the six missing men, including the leader Pavel Datschnolian, were found and it was assumed that they had all been swept away by an avalanche above Camp VIII. The following spring, while the British were climbing on the southern side of the mountain, the Russians resumed their search. However, the attempt did not produce any new information.

In the summer of 1954 Sir John Hunt (as he then was) visited Moscow to give a lecture on the successful ascent of Mount Everest. When he made diffident enquiries about the 1952 Russian expedition he was informed, unofficially, that it had never taken place. Even today, I recall with shame how some top Soviet and Party dignitaries deemed it 'undesirable' on political grounds for Sir John to be given a big Russian audience for his lecture on 'the achievement of British imperialists'. Sir John had to deliver his talk with slides at the British Embassy before only ten carefully vetted Soviet climbers. Owing to my knowledge of English I was one of them and

Sir John presented me with a copy of his book *The Ascent of Everest*. I was very happy to have the opportunity to return this kindness two years later when I sent him my Russian translation of it issued by the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Moscow.²

Later that summer, 1954, I paid my first ever visit to Britain, as interpreter to our national rowing team at the Henley Royal Regatta. I was pleased to accept an invitation from Sir John and Basil Goodfellow to visit the Alpine Club – the first visit by a Russian climber. Afterwards the three of us had dinner at the Reform Club – an unforgettable experience for a Soviet citizen accustomed to a quite different political and economic system. Those first contacts have since developed into a warm friendship of many years' standing.

On a number of occasions we were questioned about the Russian attempt to climb Everest in 1952. Some of us climbers suspected that such an expedition, inadequately planned and rashly implemented, might well have taken place in an attempt to gain political prestige and glory from this outstanding mountaineering achievement. But when the undertaking suffered such an abject defeat, all the information about it would have been hushed up and buried in the best tradition of Communist secrecy.

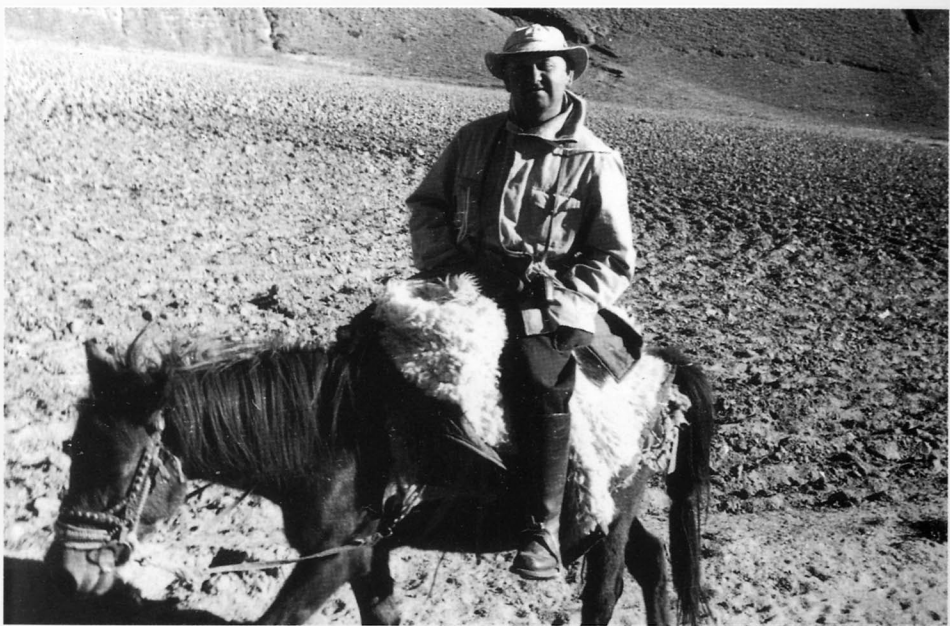
Some of us tried to find out the truth by making enquiries through the national mountaineering federations and personal channels. All other possible sources were investigated including government departments, sports associations and trade unions. We carefully examined the archives, studied mountaineering journals of the forties and fifties, checked every single name mentioned in foreign press reports – and discovered nothing. None of us knew or had even heard of the climbers and scientists mentioned in the reports. Finally we reached the conclusion that the whole story was nothing but a 'high-altitude duck', as we say in Russian – in other words a *canard*.

Nevertheless, we continued our efforts to clarify the picture whenever and wherever possible. In January 1962 I visited Tenzing Norgay in Darjeeling. One of his other guests, Captain H P S Ahluwalia, raised the question. Tenzing replied that his uncle, at that time Head Lama of the Rongbuk monastery, had told him that he himself had seen some Russians there. But no concrete data was mentioned and I think he was probably referring to the three Russian members of the joint Sino-Russian reconnaissance expedition to Mount Everest in autumn 1958. More recently, in autumn 1991 when I happened to be in Lhasa, I met Mr Konbu (or 'Gong Bu' as it is written on his visiting card) who climbed Everest in May 1960 with the Chinese expedition and who is now Deputy Director of the Physical Culture and Sports Commission of Tibet Autonomous Region and also Deputy President of China and Tibet Mountaineering Associations. I asked him if he had ever heard anything about the ill-fated Russian expedition of 1952. His answer was firmly negative.

In a personal letter to Walt Unsworth, dated 24 November 1974 and quoted in Unsworth's *Everest*, Kiril Kuzmin, then President of the Mountaineering Federation of the USSR, wrote that neither that organisation nor



32. The 1958 Sino-Soviet Reconnaissance Expedition: the North Face of Mount Everest seen from Camp III at 5575m, according to altimeter measurements, or 5830m according to the map produced by E O Wheeler, surveyor on the 1921 British Everest Expedition, which was used by the group. (*Lev Filimonov*) (p109)



33. Yevgeniy A Beletski, Honoured Master of Sport of the USSR in mountaineering, leader of the Russian party, riding a saddled Tibetan horse covered with a sheepskin coat issued by the Chinese. (*Lev Filimonov*) (p109)

any other sports bodies of his country had ever sent expeditions of Soviet mountaineers with the aim of climbing Jomolungma (Everest) in 1952. He pointed out that at that time Soviet mountaineers lacked the opportunity to organise expeditions either to Everest or to any other eight-thousander. I would add that, even if we had been given such a chance, we would have been ill-prepared. At the beginning of the fifties, Soviet climbers did not have the necessary experience to tackle such formidable objectives and lacked suitable equipment such as oxygen apparatus. It was only in 1958 that our experts started developing modern climbing gear in connection with preparations for the Sino-Soviet expedition to Everest scheduled for 1959.⁴

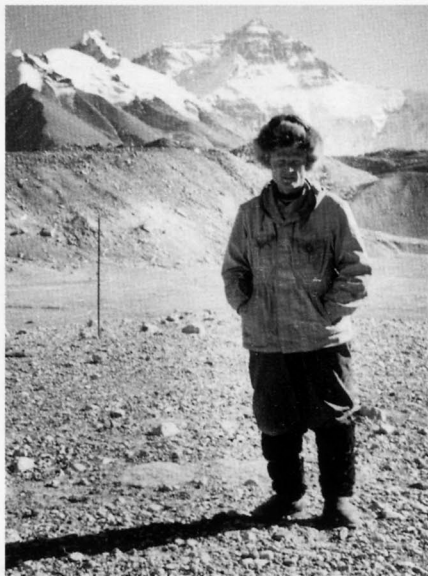
The following brief account of the 1958 Sino-Soviet reconnaissance expedition tells the story as it was narrated to me by its Russian participants, together with my comments. In May 1958 the All-Chinese Committee of Physical Culture and Sport officially invited Soviet alpinists to take part in a joint expedition to Mount Jomolungma (Everest) from Tibet.⁵ At a meeting in Beijing attended by a Soviet representative, decisions were taken on the planning and organisation of the future venture. The ascent was to take place in the pre-monsoon period of 1959. However, the Soviet representative tactfully suggested a preliminary reconnaissance of the northern approaches to Jomolungma, in particular the state of the Rongbuk glacier, the eastern slopes of Chang La (North Col), and those above the main Rongbuk glacier. The last major expedition to visit the area was that of the British in 1938 and after 20 years conditions there could have changed considerably.

In August-September 1958 a joint Sino-Russian training meet took place in the Soviet Pamir during which successful ascents were made of Peak Lenin (7134m) and other summits. There had already been good co-operation in the Caucasus and Pamir in 1955, and in 1956 the highest mountains of Xinjiang – Muztagh Ata (7546m) and Kongur Tiube Tagh (7595m) – were climbed by joint parties from the USSR and China.⁶ But it was not until the beginning of October 1958 that the Chinese informed us that a reconnaissance of Jomolungma would indeed take place and Soviet mountaineers were invited to join the expedition. On 15 October three Russian climbers – Yevgeniy Beletski, Lev Filimonov and Anatoli Kovyrvkov – flew to Beijing to discuss with their Chinese colleagues detailed plans for the forthcoming reconnaissance. It was to be led by Chuj Din, a distinguished Chinese climber, aged 30, whom we had already met on the joint climbs of 1955 and 1956.

On 19 October Chuj Din flew to Tibet with an advance party and was joined there by the rest of the expedition members on 23 October. It was planned to proceed by trucks to Zhigatse and then move 350km with a caravan of riding horses and pack animals via Shekhar Dzong and Tingri to Rongbuk. On 29 October the reconnaissance party left Lhasa in eleven lorries and escorted by soldiers and officers armed with pistols, automatic rifles and machine guns. One group was even guarded by a mortar platoon, for Tibetans are particularly afraid of mortars, mines and grenades.



34. Anatoli Kovyrvkov, aged 30



35. Lev Filimonov, aged 39

Members of the Russian party were dressed in high fur-lined boots, down clothing with windproof anorak and trousers over it. The huge three-cornered fox fur hat was issued by the Chinese as part of the officers' winter uniform of the People's Liberation Army. (*Lev Filimonov*) (p109)



36. Two soldiers from Sichuan province who carried their sacks and automatic guns to the highest point reached. They are seen near Camp II, c 5300m, on 18.11.1958. (*Lev Filimonov*) (p109)

According to their religious beliefs a soul will not find peace if the body is torn to pieces. The Chinese made use of this circumstance to economise on guards for the march-in.

The Chinese insisted that the entire party should be clad in the officers' winter uniform of the People's Liberation Army. Our Russian black sheepskin coats were rejected and the climbers were issued with long uniform sheepskin coats with a green fabric cover, huge fluffy three-cornered fox fur hats and high fur-lined boots. The Chinese also required the expedition to be called a 'Visiting delegation of the Committee of Physical Culture of the People's Republic of China with the participation of three Soviet experts'. Moreover, all the correspondence between the sports bodies of China and the USSR on these matters was 'classified' and we were asked not to make public any information about it.

On 30 October the party reached Zhigatse. In order to take full advantage of any periods of good weather near Everest, the mountaineers went on ahead with a minimum number of porters, using riding horses, two *árabas* (two-wheel bullock carts) and donkeys. The soldiers followed on foot. The mountaineers covered 25-30km daily, and the group reached Shekhar Dzong on 10 November, Tingri on the 13th and Rongbuk on the 16th. They visited the Rongbuk monastery where they found about 70 monks in residence. Base Camp was established about 500m below the snout of the main Rongbuk glacier. Here, on 17 November, it was decided to divide the party into two groups of eight persons each (five climbers plus three porters) in order to reconnoitre both slopes of the North Col. Lev Filimonov was assigned to the group led by Chuj Din and on 18 November they went up the right bank of the Rongbuk glacier. The group was accompanied by two soldiers armed with automatic guns who also helped with load carrying. The group used a map which had been produced by E O Wheeler (surveyor on the 1921 British expedition) and they went to the head of the main glacier to an altitude of about 5900m. They saw that a route to the North Col was accessible from here but that the approach up a steep 400m snow slope might become dangerous after fresh snowfalls. The group bivouacked at 5300m and at 5575m (or 5830m according to Wheeler's map). At the end of the moraine two hollow aluminium poles were found sticking out of the stones. On 21 November the group returned to Base Camp.

The second group, led by Yevgeniy Beletski, carried out their reconnaissance from 18 to 24 November. They followed the route of the previous expeditions up the East Rongbuk glacier, encountering tins, pieces of rope, packing materials and other remnants. They bivouacked at 5950m and at 6300m-6400m, a little below the site of the pre-war British Camp III, where rotten oxygen bottles were found. On 21 November an altitude of 6500m was reached. From here all the key pitches of the climb to the North Col could be seen. Having taken photos and filmed the route, Beletski started the descent. About 100m from Camp III the body of a porter from a previous expedition was found. When both groups met at Base Camp they reached the conclusion that the route via the East Rongbuk glacier and the North Col should be the one chosen for the 1959 expedition.



37. The Rongbuk monastery, reached by the party on 16.11.1958, and the North Face of Mount Everest, with Changtse, 7550m, in front of it and Peak 6882m on the left. (*Lev Filimonov*) (p109)



38. The Rongbuk monastery was later destroyed in the so-called 'cultural revolution'. It was possible to ride a horse through the main entrance on the left. At the top of the picture are the premises where the party stayed overnight on their way back from the reconnaissance. (*Lev Filimonov*) (p109)

On 28 November the entire party left Base Camp, staying the night at the Rongbuk monastery. Beyond Tsoola La the party continued by trucks to Zhigatse, using the new road still under construction, which took them just a few hours instead of four days as formerly. They reached Lhasa on 9 December and from 10 to 15 December they worked on the results of the reconnaissance and on plans for the main enterprise the following year. On 16 December the party left Lhasa and returned to Beijing where they finalised their report of the expedition.

To sum up: the reconnaissance party worked for 46 days at altitudes above 4000m, 14 days above 5000m. It included 10 Chinese and 3 Russian mountaineers, 3 meteorologists, 4 topographers, 10 Tibetan porters, 4 radio operators, a considerable number of teamsters and accompanying persons, about 50 horses and 350 pack animals. The expedition successfully fulfilled its aim. Yet it received no coverage either in the world press nor even in the Soviet press of the time. Why? Because the Chinese requested that there should be no publicity. Why again? Because of the political situation in Tibet which was unstable and unclear. From time to time there were clashes between groups of Tibetans and the regular Chinese army. When the deputy chairman of the Party Committee of Tibet received the participants of the reconnaissance, he told them frankly: 'The people here do not understand us.'

In February 1959 all the Soviet candidates for the joint expedition went to the Caucasus for a training meet at Shkhelda Mountaineering Camp. This provided an opportunity to test people and equipment, including oxygen sets, in severe conditions during climbs to both summits of Mt Elbrus. Strong winds, snowstorms and temperatures down to -40°C were encountered. In the middle of March the Soviet team for the forthcoming expedition came to Moscow and were invited, on 18 March, to the All-Union Committee of Physical Culture for a final meeting and instructions. The plan was to reach Base Camp at the snout of the East Rongbuk glacier by 1 April 1959 in order to have ample time to make three acclimatisation ascents.

I was present there, sitting happily with Mikhail Khergiani and Joseph Khakhiani, my close Svanetian friends from Georgia who were also in the team. I well remember the atmosphere of elation and expectation which swept the entire audience. No wonder: the long cherished dream of Soviet mountaineers to try to tackle the highest summit in the world was about to come true. We were waiting for some senior official to come and say farewell words of encouragement and good wishes, among them an appeal to hoist the Soviet flag at the highest level possible on Earth for the glory of the Socialist Motherland. After a long delay two men entered the hall: Dmitri Postnikov, 1st Deputy Chairman of the USSR Committee of Physical Culture, and Kiril Kuzmin, prospective leader of the Soviet part of the expedition. Kuzmin's head was bent and his eyes were brimming with tears. Postnikov ascended the rostrum: 'Comrades,' he declared, 'I have a grave mission to report unexpected and very unpleasant news. We have just received an official notification from Beijing: the 1959 Jomolungma expedition cannot take place.' And without giving any reasons he left the astounded audience.

Later we were able to ascertain that the Chinese authorities had cancelled the joint expedition because of a big revolt in Tibet which had started on 10 March 1959. In 1960, when the situation in Tibet had become more stable, the Chinese again invited us to undertake a joint ascent of Mount Jomolungma. This time, however, it was the Soviet side that rejected the proposal and again politics was at the bottom of it – a growing ideological difference between China and its ‘elder brother’. So the Chinese, making use of some of our equipment sent to Beijing for the 1959 expedition, had to carry it out by themselves in spring 1960. But that is another story ...⁷

As for the 1958 Sino-Soviet reconnaissance expedition,⁸ the two sole publications about it in Russian appeared only in 1963. A brief report, entitled ‘Through Tibet to the foot of Jomolungma’ by Y A Beletski, appeared in the *Transactions of the National Geographical Society* of which he was a member.^{9,10} Another participant of the reconnaissance, Lev Filimonov, told me that he tried many times to write about the expedition but his manuscript was always rejected without explanation. Unofficially, he was told that ‘it was deemed undesirable’ to publish it, but never by whom or why.

The situation remained unchanged until Mr Gorbachev’s visit to China in May 1989, the first Sino-Soviet ‘summit’ in 30 years, after which at last Lev Filimonov’s diary notes, ‘A Road to Everest’, were published in a monthly youth journal in 1991.¹¹ It had taken 33 years for his story to reach the climbing world.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 The first ever attempt of that kind was made by A de Naranovich, a Russian consul in Milan, who sent an application to the Everest Committee asking to be included in the 1921 expedition but his request was rejected since, from the very inception, it was intended to be a purely British undertaking. See Walt Unsworth, *Everest*, 2nd edition. The Oxford Illustrated Press, 35, 1989.
- 2 The last foreign book on Mount Everest translated into Russian was Sir Francis Younghusband’s *The Epic of Mount Everest*, Arnold, 1926, which was published in the Soviet Union in 1930.
- 3 Y B Gippenreiter, ‘Chronicle of Everest’ in *Everest 82, the ascent of Soviet mountaineers to the highest summit of the world*, composed by P P Zakharov. Physical Culture and Sport Publishing House, Moscow, 353-363, 1984.
- 4 *John Hunt writes*: ‘On leaving Spartak Camp beneath Elbrus on Sunday 13 July 1958 to continue our climbing programme in the Central Caucasus, I presented a pair of British-made mountaineering boots to Josef Khakhiani, Master of Sport and one of the Soviet members chosen for the joint Sino-Soviet expedition to Everest. Other gifts included air mattresses and a watch.’

- 5 The expedition was to take place between March and October 1959 and would be given unrestricted funds in accordance with a special resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. It was evidently timed to be one of the events celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Chinese People's Republic.
- 6 K K Kuzmin, 'To Jomolungma from the North' in *Conquered Summits 1958-1961*. Geographical Literature State Publishing House, Moscow, 239-244, 1963.
- 7 *John Hunt writes*: 'A group of Soviet alpinists visited Britain in 1960, and were climbing with some of their hosts, including myself, in Snowdonia in June of that year. They expressed disbelief when the news reached us that a Chinese expedition, including their intended colleagues for the joint Sino-Soviet expedition, had been successful. Their opinion was that the Chinese lacked the experience and equipment which could have been supplied by the Russians.'
- 8 The participants of the 1958 Sino-Russian reconnaissance expedition, together with all the members of the successful Chinese 1960 expedition, were awarded a special memorial medal in the form of a gilded star with contours of Jomolungma. This was the only official recognition on the part of the Chinese authorities of our participation and contribution to their final success. Lev Filimonov has shown me this medal which he treasures as a very memorable insignia.
- 9 Y A Beletski, 'Through Tibet to the Foot of Jomolungma' in *Transactions of the National Geographical Society No 3*. Leningrad, 203-212, 1963.
- 10 *John Hunt writes*: 'Yevgeniy Beletski came to lecture before the Alpine Club in 1956, and was one of our hosts at Spartak Camp in July 1958. Yevgeniy Gippenreiter came as his interpreter.'
- 11 L N Filimonov, 'A Road to Everest' in *Young Guard No 12*, Moscow, 65-96 and 129-176, 1991.