

A LIGHT EXPEDITION TO THE CENTRAL CAUCASUS, 1937

By J. R. JENKINS

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THIS expedition was initiated by the Oxford University Mountaineering Club, and after tentative inquiries had established the fact that no insuperable difficulties lay in its way, Taylor and I were invited to join. At the last moment a number of Oxford men were forced to stand down, but Hodgkin and Beaumont were able to make up the party of four. Beaumont could speak Russian, and we later appreciated what an invaluable asset this was.

No British party had visited the Central Caucasus since Mr. Raeburn's pre-Revolution expedition¹ to the Adai Kokh in 1914. The reason for this was not hard to find; articles in the *ALPINE JOURNAL* by post-war mountaineers in the Caucasus indicated the barriers and obstacles caused by political difficulties which had stood in their way; but recent expeditions had met with little or no hindrance, and we had reasonable hope of being able to get some good climbing.

The information available in this country on travel in the Caucasus was meagre and out of date, and we had largely to depend on the advice and assistance of our Continental friends, Herren Schwarzgruber, Heybrock, and Rickmers, supplemented by the invaluable help of Herr Carl Egger. Thanks are also due to Mr. Douglas Busk, who at the last moment produced a detailed and monumental work of his own on the whole range, which was a great help in crystallizing our plans.

Intourist of London proved a tower of strength. They had never been called upon to make arrangements for a mountaineering expedition before, but by continually referring doubtful points to Moscow, they managed to get everything cut and dried for us. They arranged to conduct us across the Ukraine and deliver us complete with food and equipment at the Intourist hotel at Tegenekli in the Baksan valley. For the ensuing five weeks we would be free to travel in the mountains as we chose, and they

¹ *A.J.* 29. 142-58.

promised to collect us at Bezingi on our return from Suanetia. In this they proved absolutely dependable, and it was largely due to their efficient organization that everything went so smoothly in Russia. When I had my ticket stolen in the last Suanetian village, they provided me with an important-looking letter from Moscow, which entitled me to a free passage to the Polish border. We shall always remember the charming lady guides who took charge of us at each town.

Our Continental friends warned us about Russian food. It was impossible to buy suitable light and concentrated foods at Nalchik, the only kinds obtainable being sugar, dried bread and dried fruit. Consequently we arranged to take six weeks' supplies with us, a quantity which luckily just fell within the permitted quota. Taylor was in charge of the commissariat and fed us on an arctic ration of Plasmon porridge, pemmican, biscuits, chocolate, and rice; the monotony being broken by occasional delicacies such as jam, tinned meat, treacle, barley sugar, etc. Although the transport of our food cost £25, we found that it would have been almost impossible to 'live on the land' in the mountains. Even in Suanetia, reputed to be a land flowing with milk and honey, we only managed to extract food from the natives with the utmost difficulty, and then at the most exorbitant prices. Holder (*A.J.* 15. 531) gives a list of prices of his purchases in this district, and it is interesting to compare those of 1890 with those of 1937. (There are 100 kopeks to the rouble, and 25 roubles to the pound.) A youthful cheese cost us 10 roubles to Holder's 15 kopeks; a pullet, 10 roubles to his 25 to 40 kopeks; an egg, 50 kopeks to his 1½ to 2 kopeks; the hire of a horse, 50-60 roubles for half a day to his 4 per day; a donkey, 30-40 roubles for half a day (10-12 roubles in the North Caucasus) against his 1 rouble per day.

A study of all available literature and a lively correspondence with our Continental friends enabled us to prepare a flexible plan of campaign. Herr Egger insisted on our visiting his own speciality the Jailik group, while Herr Schwarzgruber sent us an inspiring photo of the N. face of Tetnuld, and suggested that we should make a first ascent of it by a carefully marked route of alarming steepness. The first fortnight would be spent in the Jailik group to test our food and equipment, and to get us into training for the more important journey south into Suanetia. We proposed to cross the main range by the Betsho Pass, and after descending the valley S.E. to the village of Mazeri, to attempt the great S. peak of Ushba (15,409 ft. F.).² Thence we would

² Map references: F. Freshfield, E. Egger, M. Merzbacher.

follow the Mulkhura valley to Mestia, returning to the northern side by the Zanner Pass and, given time, attempting Tetnuld (15,918 ft. F.) and some of the high peaks in its vicinity on the way.

We left London on July 10, and travelling *via* Harwich, Flushing, Berlin, Warsaw, Kiev, Kharkov, Rostov, eventually reached Nalchik after 100 hours of third-class discomfort. From Flushing to Nalchik we crossed the Central European plain all the way. We were depressed by the landscape which was flat and featureless, and across the Ukraine treeless, and the long-delayed sight of the mountains was a welcome contrast.

On July 16 we left behind Five Year Plans and sight-seeing tours, and climbing into a large Ford of Russian extraction we were bumped across the dusty plain for the mountains. We soon entered the limestone gorges of the Baksan valley and passed through squalid Balkar villages of flat-roofed mud huts with their curious conical chimney pots. We passed a hydro-electric station and a collective farm or two, the only signs of Soviet penetration among these hill people. We soon entered a new world of snow mountains, wild torrents and even wilder Balkarian horsemen, who occasionally galloped by in their long sheepskin *bourkas* and broad hats. High across the head of the valley stretched the many-peaked Dongusorun, while on the left lay the granite peaks of Andirchi, looking very like the Chamonix Aiguilles from this side. We passed through Upper Baksan (Urusbieh) and at dusk concluded the 80-mile journey at Tegenekli (Adyl Su). We gratefully lifted our bruised bodies from the car and entered the unexpectedly luxurious Intourist hotel. Its luxury was only on the surface, however, for that night we dined on 'cutlets' whose origin we shuddered to imagine.

Next day work began in earnest, and we over-exerted ourselves, as one always does on the first day. In grilling heat we slogged the dusty 10 miles down the road to Upper Baksan carrying 45-lb. loads on our backs. Here we struck off to the right up the alpine Adyr-su glen and four hours later had just enough energy left to cache our loads among some boulders. We were thoroughly exhausted when a commercially minded lorry man picked us up on the road and deposited us back at the hotel at 8.30 P.M.

There is a pernicious germ at Tegenekli that lies in wait for unwitting travellers. Beaumont was its first victim, and so only three of us remained to pack up the fortnight's food on the following day. We had learned our lesson, and this time we deposited both ourselves and our loads on a waiting lorry and were rattled

down to Upper Baksan. Beaumont was to follow when he recovered. Without his linguistic abilities we were at a loss, and the only word we knew was the Balkarian *ēshak*, a donkey. After bringing into action Donkin's 'greatest requisite of all—infinite patience,' and achieving miracles in pantomime, we secured a donkey and driver. We gathered another donkey on our way up the Adyr-su valley, and on reaching the cache we loaded it with yesterday's packs. To our surprise we found the upper reaches of the valley crowded with proletarian holiday camps, some very elaborate and others less pretentious. I think there were six in all.

And now for a few words about these Russian climbers. The majority of them indulge in long, single-file walks in parties of thirty or forty up neighbouring glens or up to the foot of local glaciers. Some of the more adventurous make the ascent of Elbruz in the same manner. This seems to satisfy their mountaineering ambitions, and they leave untouched the finer mountains. After they have asked you if you have any equipment to sell, Russians invariably say: 'Have you climbed Elbruz?' Collectivization in mountaineering, as in other aspects of Soviet life, seems to breed quantity rather than quality.

Some brave spirits attend the School of Alpinism in the Adyr-su valley, where a few experienced Austrians and Russians teach the art to 200 students. We saw some of these climbers on Jailik and Adyr-su Bashi and were impressed by their keenness, pluck, and endurance. Technically they have inherited some of the less desirable traits of their teachers, and they climb very slowly and without polish. This technique often involves them in a chilly night on the summit, for which they are inadequately equipped. They do very little pioneering, preferring to follow old routes of ascent which they adorn with sundry ironmongery. They have established a number of climbing centres at salient points and we found some of these at Tegenekli, in the Adyr-su valley, at the Betsho N. hut and at Mestia. All are in wireless communication and have nearby camps of potential rescuers who can be rallied at a moment's notice. A few Russians have, however, reached a fairly high standard of climbing, as we found that a Tiflis party had ascended the S. peak of Ushba by the Red Corner, and on most of the peaks we climbed we found in the summit cairns evidence of previous Russian ascents.

We made our first camp that afternoon on the charming meadows of the upper Adyr-su valley. On the third day our donkey-boys reported early with their charges, and we were off by 7.20 A.M. Very soon we turned left up by the Junom glen,

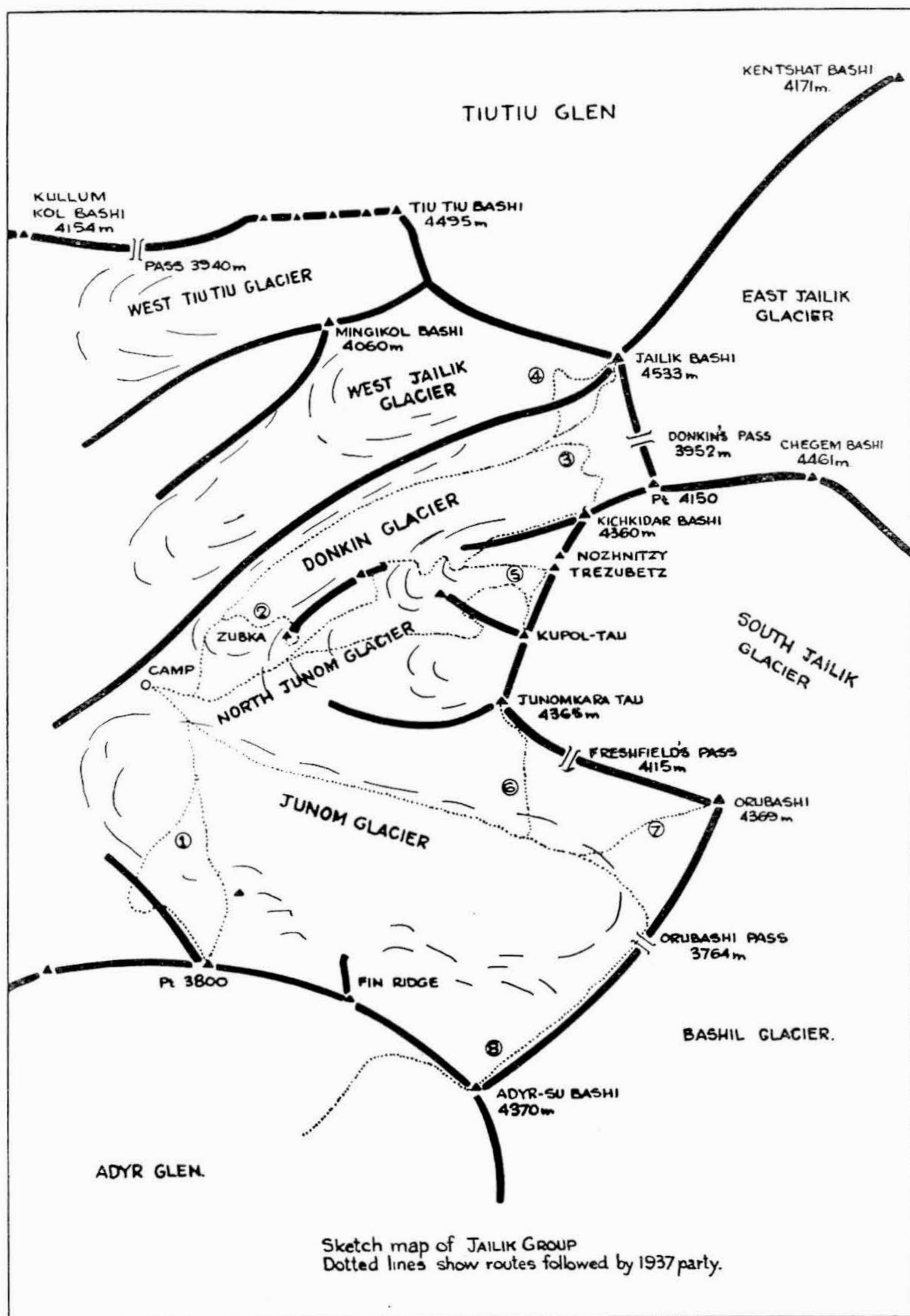
which rose steeply ahead of us in the mist. The pleasant pastures soon gave way to rough moraines, and we cajoled the donkeys as far up as we could. At last the boys struck and unloaded the animals, and we were faced with the task of back-packing the 250 lb. to our first base camp. Just then the mists were blown aside and revealed on our right a beautiful white mountain, with a steep and sharply defined N. ridge of ice and snow rather like that of the Grivola. We unanimously decided to make this our first climb. It was gruelling work relaying heavy loads over the loose boulder slopes, and we kept on picking on likely-looking camp sites, but there was always a better one higher up. Eventually we found ourselves at a height of about 10,000 ft. on the right moraine of the Junom Glacier, where we found a perfect place; it was a sheltered trough in the moraine with a level floor, and with a spring of fresh water, a glacier stream and a bathing pool quite close by.

During the next twelve days we were very lucky with the weather, and except for one unfortunate day we had fair conditions with a waxing moon at night, which made early starts almost a pleasure. Although the hot sun had stripped the rocks of snow, it laid bare large areas of ice which gave us many hours of step-cutting. The snow on the glaciers was usually firm in the early morning, but the midday sun reduced it to a maddening slush into which we often sank waist deep. Each evening we would return to camp to find cold mists rolling up from the valleys, which enveloped us as darkness came on.

Pt. 3800 m. E., First Ascent by N. Ridge

On July 20 we left camp at 5 A.M. and crossing the Junom Glacier, ascended the lower slopes of the mountain which had attracted us the day before. The snow was in excellent condition, and putting on crampons we made for the N. ridge at a point where it abuts against a small rock peak. By climbing rocky gullies we avoided an icefall, and a long snow slope brought us to the ridge at 7 A.M. After snatching a second breakfast, we roped up and made steady progress up the crisp snow of the arête, which gradually increased in steepness. We passed a bergschrund by a short traverse on to the W. face, and above it the angle of the hard snow increased to almost 50 degrees. Zig-zagging up the E. side of the ridge we approached a prominent bulge; 200 ft. below this we encountered hard ice, and half an hour of vigorous step-cutting brought us to its top. Above, the angle eased off a little and climbing up deep powdery snow

we reached the summit at 10.30. Our ignorance of the local topography and the insufficiencies of our maps caused consider-



able argument as to what peak we were climbing, but once on its summit we saw Adyr-su Bashi towering immediately above us, and matters straightened themselves out. From an unintelligible

Russian note in the summit cairn we assumed that we had made the second ascent, and faint traces in the snow leading down the S. side showed that we had been anticipated by only a few days.

We made a second new route for the day by a long descent of the W. ridge, which gave us alternating rock and snow climbing, the quality of both deteriorating as we got lower. A pleasant memory remains of a delightfully narrow and exposed section of rock ridge, full enjoyment of which was marred by tiredness and heavy sacks. Before we could get down to the Junom Glacier we had to descend scree slopes and loose gullies on the S. side of the ridge, finally crossing a snowfield to a notch from which we glissaded down a long snow couloir to the N.

On the following day we were taking our ease sun-bathing and repairing garments when Beaumont appeared suddenly and, with a Doctor-Livingstone-I-presume gesture, announced that he had come up the day before and, following a mysterious line of cairns, had reached the W. Jailik Glacier. Darkness had overtaken him there, and frying some crusts in rancid butter he had bivouacked in a crevasse. That morning he had climbed a pinnacle of the intervening ridge and spotted our camp.

We wanted to climb Jailik by a new route, and from the top of Pt. 3800 m. we traced imaginary lines up its great S. face. We decided that we could get a closer view from the top of a square rock tower which stood prominently above our camp, so that afternoon three of us walked up the terminal icefall of the Donkin Glacier, leaving Beaumont to make up arrears of food and sleep. This aiguille, which we called Zubka (big tooth), provided a tough little problem. We had to skirt round on to its E. face before we could find a way up. A broad ledge led to 80 ft. of difficult climbing up a smooth slab and a chimney, and passing between some overhanging blocks we reached the summit.

The S. face of Jailik was seen to be split in its lower half by a great snow couloir, which stretched up to a shoulder on the S.W. ridge. After about 800 ft. it narrowed down to a neck and the continuation was a steep ice gully which we thought would be dangerous from falling stones. It would therefore be necessary to branch out to the right as soon as possible, but if this were done too early, we should land ourselves in an area of holdless slabs.

Kichkidar (4360 m. E. ; 14,304 ft.)

We had intended to leave at 3.30 A.M. next day for Jailik, but the dawn was dull and cold and we did not get away until 5 o'clock.

In two hours we had reached a snow ledge among the upper séracs of the Donkin Glacier. The weather was threatening, but at 9 o'clock the sun came out, and as the clouds kept tactfully clear of the summits we decided to attempt the easier Kichkidar. We swept round in an arc to the south; the snow steepened as we skirted under an ice wall and cut steps up the steep slopes of the mountain's N.W. face. We approached the final 300-ft. rock peak by a long traverse, snicking steps in the soft ice. It looked steep and forbidding from this side, and the only possible line we could discover was a holdless slab to the right which led round a corner on to the edge of the W. face. Hodgkin took over the lead, and cutting steps across a steep slope of hard blue ice he reached the slab's foot. By jamming his ice-axe in a crack, he managed to round the corner and climbed up a 50-ft. slab beyond. This was devoid of any but the smallest holds, and after climbing a steep and exposed wall we reached a small snow shoulder high up on the W. face. Ledges and cracks in the final rocks soon brought us to a shallow snow gully which led up to the summit. It was cold and cloudy, so at 11.30 A.M. we descended directly by the easier W. ridge, down which we were chased by fitful hail showers. The rocks ended in a snow col with a number of sharp pinnacles looming above us in the mist. We rapidly glissaded down snow slopes to the S. and found ourselves at the head of an unknown icefall. The descent of this in mist was rather an exciting proceeding and we slid down ice slopes and wallowed over snow bridges, eventually reaching a snow saddle below. From here a rapid descent of a scree gully brought us on to the easy névé of the N. Junom Glacier, and we plodded back to camp arriving at 2.30 P.M. to find the tents flooded and most of our equipment soaked. After a desperate effort to get warm, we gathered our few dry things together and headed for the first Russian holiday camp in the main valley. Arriving somewhat weary at the Kharkov Mountaineering Club's tents just before dark, we were welcomed by a German-speaking girl of more than ordinary beauty, and were provided with a generous meal and comfortable beds in a nearby tent. Our hosts amazed us by their lack of knowledge of the surrounding mountains. The fact that we had climbed Kichkidar meant little to them, their field of interest not extending beyond the two major peaks of the group—Adyr-su Bashi and Jailik.

Next day was fine, so bidding farewell to our hospitable friends, we returned to camp and dried everything out. Beaumont had unfortunately succumbed to his germ again and returned to Tegenekli.

Jailik (4533 m. E. M. ; 14,872 ft.). *First Ascent by the S. Face*³

On July 24 at 6.30 A.M. there were only three of us eating a chilly breakfast at the foot of the great snow couloir. We had no crampons, so snicking steps in the hard snow we quickly climbed upwards until the couloir narrowed to an ice gully. Here the angle steepened, and occasional patches of hard ice slowed us up. The intense cold caused us great discomfort, and our fingers stuck to the steel of our axes, but by continually changing the lead we managed to keep warm. As there was no evidence of falling stones, we passed the first possible line of traverse to the right. On reaching the foot of a prominent bastion we came upon a steep ice gully branching up to the right which led to a skyline ridge. A hundred feet up, this steepened into a frozen waterfall ; but it was our only way. The ice was of an unusual toughness, and Hodgkin avoided a particularly steep bit by a *détour* over ice-glazed rocks to our left. He then had to hack his way up the steepest part of the ice, the angle of which exceeded 50°, necessitating both foot- and hand-holds. At 10.30 we clambered over a rock bulge to find ahead an easy exit to the left on to a snow patch on which the first rays of the sun were shining. We had a short halt here and got ourselves thoroughly warm for the first time that day, and later climbed up to the right and reached the ridge at a notch, from which we were rewarded by a magnificent view across to the great Bezingi peaks to the east. We scaled the steep buttress above and followed a delightfully exposed horizontal ridge to an impasse. By descending to the left we gained easier ground, and scrambling up rock ribs and snow patches we reached an ice gully leading to a snow crest, which we took to be the summit. This, however, we saw was beyond, set back from the main body of the mountain. We had to clamber round the difficult rocks of a subsidiary tower before the base of the final peak was reached. We knew this to be hard, as Egger had been forced to encircle it by a corkscrew route, gaining its top from the N.E. side. We followed ledges on to the E. face, and after passing an obvious overhanging bivouac place we ascended direct by a series of difficult cracks and slabs, reaching the summit cairn at 1 P.M.

Being rather doubtful about the route of descent, we left at 1.25 and descended the final peak by the same way. Egger's route lay on the W. face, and keeping in this direction we reached

³ *A. J.* 18. 494.



Photo, R. A. Hodgkin.]

PT. 3800 M., FROM BASE OF N. RIDGE.



Photo, M. S. Taylor.]

LEFT, KICHKIDAR ; CENTRE, TREZUBETZ ; RIGHT,
NOZHNETZY.

Route up Trezubetz leads diagonally to right to final
chimney.

[To face p. 20.]



Photo, M. S. Taylor.]

S. FACE OF JAILIK FROM DONKIN GLACIER.

Route follows snow couloir on left, then central buttress at lowest snow patch.



Photo, M. S. Taylor.]

ADYR-SU BASHI AT DAWN. ORUBASHI PASS TO LEFT, AND N.E. RIDGE.

a rock shoulder. The prospect beyond this was far from encouraging, but we were relieved to see two Russians laboriously climbing up towards us. We traversed to the base of the rocks of the S.W. ridge and passed the Russians at 2.30. They were extremely voluble, but as we could not understand a word they said, the conversation was somewhat one-sided. Realizing that they were in for a chilly night on the summit, Hodgkin presented them with some extra clothes, which they accepted gladly. Their technique was somewhat disconcerting, and we expected them to fall off at any moment. As we continued we found that the climbing was far from easy; we had to descend on rocks sticking out through steep ice, and could only move one at a time. Using the Russians' steps we soon gained a difficult rock rib which led down to the lower ice slopes. After 100 ft. of step-cutting (the Russians had come up on a thin snow-covering in crampons early in the day), we reached the last rocks, to find that we were separated from the upper snowfields of the W. Jailik Glacier by a 200-ft. slope of ice. Cutting down this proved extremely wearisome so late in the day, and on reaching open snow we glissaded down to the level glacier. Crossing the first col on the left at a cairn, we descended a scree gully to the Donkin Glacier and reached camp at 7.30 P.M., to find Beaumont in occupation again.

Kupoltau and Trezubetz

We spent the next day climbing these two virgin points on the Kichkidar-Junomkara ridge. The weather was perfect, and there was a relief of nervous tension which made the day wholly enjoyable. On the N. Junom Glacier we separated, Taylor and Hodgkin climbing the icefall towards Kichkidar, while Beaumont and I kept to the right, intending to climb the snow dome by its W. face. A 300-ft. wall of rock ahead appeared climbable by a gully on its right, but when we came to the foot of this we found it plastered with *verglas*. We eventually climbed the wall by traversing an exposed and narrow ledge to the left which led right across the face to some small snow patches. Above these, easy rocks brought us up to the final snow slope. We put on crampons, and after $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours of steady climbing reached the first summit of our peak. Sighting a higher point beyond, we traversed the intervening ridge and soon reached the summit, where we solemnly shook hands and left our cards in a cairn. We named the peak 'Kupoltau,' the nearest our Russian could get to 'dome-peak.' Descending by the N. ridge we joined the other two, who had climbed an aiguille which we called 'Trezubetz' (the

Trident) by a difficult 300-ft. rock climb in rubber shoes. This aiguille, together with another nearby, 'Nozhnitsy' (the Scissors), were very like lesser editions of the Mummery and Ravanel.

We all descended by the icefall, discussing on the way various routes for climbing the N. face of Adyr-su Bashi opposite. Taylor complained of a sore heel, which later turned septic and prevented him from climbing for the next week.

Junomkara (4365 m. E. ; 14,321 ft.). Ascent from S.E.

Hodgkin and Beaumont climbed Junomkara from Freshfield's Pass next day, descending in very rapid time by a 3000-ft. glissade. They said that the summit rocks gave them excellent sport, whilst as a viewpoint this mountain was one of the best in the district. I walked up to the Orubashi Pass and built a cairn on top of a small rock point to its right. I examined the N. face of Adyr-su Bashi, but nowhere could I see a safe route. The various rock ribs and snow slopes were continually swept by falling stones and ice. The only alternative was the long and jagged N.E. ridge, and I decided that with luck a fast-moving party of two would have a fair chance of success by this route.

*Adyr-su Bashi (4370 m. E. M. ; 14,337 ft.).
First Ascent by N.E. Ridge*

I persuaded Hodgkin to accompany me, and on July 27 we set out at 3.30 A.M. accompanied by Beaumont. Below the Orubashi Pass he left us, to make a gallant solo ascent of Orubashi itself. We reached the pass at 5.10 and, roping up, followed a sharp snow crest to the base of the first tower. We kept to its W. face, following scree-covered ledges and scaling steep walls, and at 6.30 we sat down to breakfast on its summit. A 15-ft. jump landed us on the sharp knife-edge of snow leading to the second tower, which we passed by a slaty groove on its W. face. The next tower was split in two by an exceptionally steep ice gully, and we had to reach the rocks on its far bank. I took half an hour to cut across, although it was only about 30 feet wide. The following rocks gave us some exhilarating climbing on steep rough granite slabs ; there was a bare minimum of holds, and the positions were delightfully exposed. We gained the top of this tower at 8 A.M. and started along the horizontal part of the ridge, which consisted of a succession of gendarmes separated by sharp snow arêtes. Some we climbed direct and others we skirted on

the W. by neat traverses, treating their loose foundations with great care. While traversing the second one we had a further bout of step cutting. We occasionally met patches of loose rock, and in descending from one gendarme I loosened several tons of *débris* which crashed down alarmingly in a cloud of dust. Approaching the last eminence below the summit, we kept to the rocks as much as possible to avoid the snow which by now was becoming dangerously soft. At one point we made a foolish diversion on to the W. face and we had difficulty in regaining the ridge. As Hodgkin was climbing the final few feet of snow it avalanched from under his feet, but he was just able to scramble up in time. We were near the summit now, but our difficulties were not over; the way was barred by a long crevasse, the upper wall of which approached the vertical. I decided to attempt it direct and found that rough ice under a covering of mushy snow gave just sufficient foot-hold. Traversing up to the left we made for some rocks above, but here we found our progress impeded by hard ice. Later we reached the final steep wall, and to scale this I had to put on crampons. At last I broke through the cornice, and racing over the snow slopes of the N.W. ridge we clambered up easy rocks to the summit (12 noon). We had climbed the N.E. ridge in the surprisingly short time of $6\frac{3}{4}$ hours from the Orubashi Pass.

We intended to traverse the mountain, descending into the Adyr-su glen to the S.W. by the route originally made by Cockin and Holder in 1896.⁴ We followed a straightforward snow slope and came to the first rocks of the N.W. ridge. On these were perched a party of five Russians, who kept warning us in German of falling stones and pointing to places where less fortunate climbers had fallen off. The rocks below were unexpectedly difficult, one 50-ft. slab in particular giving trouble. We left the ridge and, scrambling down loose rocks, reached the snow slopes above the southern glacier at 3.30 P.M. We swooped down these in a sitting glissade, and after negotiating a steep icefall in crampons we wandered down to the level of gentians and deep blue harebells.

We were now in the upper reaches of the Adyr-su glen, and descending a rocky gully we found ourselves in a desolate wilderness of pathless moraine *débris*. After two hours of struggling over boulders and down dusty slopes, we eventually reached grassland just as a thunder-storm was breaking. At 6 P.M. we came on the uppermost holiday camp, where we received a warm welcome from a party of Moscow students. They sang songs

⁴ A.J. 18. 490.

and fed us on prunes and rice. The tent they gave us had a hole in its roof, and we spent a damp and chilly night lying in six inches of water. Next morning they made us do physical jerks and wash ourselves with unaccustomed thoroughness. After breakfast we left them and returned wearily to our camp, where we hungrily ate the last remnants of food, and packing up the remaining equipment we carried it down to the Baksan valley. We reached this at 7.30 P.M.; we were too weary to walk all the way to Tegenekli, but by dint of waving ten-rouble notes at every lorry which passed, we managed to stop one which brought us back to the hotel at dark.

In Tegenekli we all fell victims to the pernicious germ except Beaumont, who had by now successfully mastered it. On July 30 he left at 5 A.M., and climbing the path to the Betsho Pass he reached the Ozengi Glacier at 8 o'clock. From here he mounted scree slopes to the left and reached the saddle to the south of Ozengitau by a loose rock ridge and a short ice slope. Turning to the south he traversed Merzbacher's Pt. 3504 m., and over shattered ridges reached a higher point beyond. This may have been the point marked 3844 m. on Merzbacher's map, but it was certainly not as high as this, and there was no intervening point of this height between him and the Betsho Pass. After reconnoitring the latter, he returned by the same route, reaching the hotel in the evening.

Meanwhile inquiries at the local Climbing Centre produced the amazing fact that donkeys could be hired to cross the steep and snowy Betsho Pass, but that the charge would be 400 roubles (£16). As our financial resources did not rise to this we decided to take pack animals as high as we could get them up each side, and to carry the loads ourselves over the actual pass.

On July 31 Beaumont and I started out with two donkeys and a horse, all heavily laden. Leaving the untidy and barren Baksan valley we passed through woods and ravines full of wild strawberries and flowers to the pastures below our pass. At great expense we bribed the driver to go quite a long way up the right moraine of the central Ozengi Glacier, before being forced to relay the loads ourselves to a sloping scree platform under the lower snow slopes of the pass, where we pitched camp in a thunder-storm.

Here we were confined to our tent for two miserable days of rain. Hodgkin arrived at dawn on the second day, after an uncomfortable night in a rhododendron bush. He had been roused from his slumbers by a flourish of trumpets and found himself surrounded by Russians who insisted on rescuing him.

It eventually transpired that when lighting his pipe he had flashed the distress-signal. He managed to pacify them, and they left him to a downpour of rain which soaked everything he had. Taylor had also recovered and arrived at dusk the same evening. On August 3, in a day of heroic effort, we relayed all the loads over the Betsho Pass in two carries, crossing into Suanetia in a windy mist more reminiscent of the hills of Cumberland than the Caucasus. The following two days were fraught with delays and minor tragedies, which caused us to follow repeatedly Donkin's memorable advice. Travel in the southern Caucasus is no easier than it was fifty years ago and infinitely more expensive.

The valleys of Suanetia offered a pleasant contrast to those on the northern side. Once in the main valley, we passed through waist-high beds of many-coloured flowers, across airy slopes above the ravine of the Dola-chala torrent and through charming woods of birch, beech, and ash. Lower down were tall pine forests and parklands of hazel, alder, and rhododendron. Our enjoyment was somewhat marred by our exceedingly heavy loads, and repeated ironic references to a 'light' expedition were always a good joke.

In Mazeri, as in all Suanetia, many houses were ages old, with massive stone walls, and often dominated by a square tower some fifty feet high. The villages presented a picturesque forest of these towers, which were built as fortifications in the days before the Czarist penetration of last century, when every village was liable to attack by its neighbour.

While we were waiting in Mazeri for a horse and driver the clouds rolled back and revealed the great S. face of Ushba far higher in the sky than we expected it. We could just see the lower snowfield forming the base of the Red Wall which encircles the upper face with a 500-ft. girdle of vertical granite. On previous occasions this wall had been scaled at its W. edge by the difficult rocks of the Red Corner, where 'the melting snow from the summit snow-cap falls as through a sieve in the face.'⁵

As this route was seldom in good condition and involved a wide détour, we had hopes of climbing the Red Wall at its eastern end, thus making a direct ascent. In 1903 Schulze had first attacked it at this point, but after trying for three hours he had 'returned with nothing but reports of hopeless smoothness and unfathomable precipices.'⁶

We eventually secured a horse and driver who lost us that evening on the upper pastures of the Gul valley in a thunder-

⁵ A. J. 46. 367.

⁶ A. J. 22. 344.

storm. We camped in a downpour and woke next morning to see, towering above us, the menacing bulk of Ushba, its ledges and slopes white with new snow. More back-breaking labour followed, and by midday we had pitched our base camp at 9200 ft., in a hollow marked by a cairn and the empty tins of our predecessors, where a pleasant flowery slope met the left moraine of the Gul Glacier.

Gulba (3790 m. M. ; 12,434 ft.). First Ascent of E. Ridge

On August 7 we left at 6 A.M. and decided to climb up to the Bear Pass to get an idea of the lie of the land. As we breasted this pass into the sunshine the view beyond was breath-taking. The huge white mass of the Bezingi group dominated the horizon, while to the W. lay a maze of peaks and glaciers with our old friends Jailik, Tiutiu, and Adyr-su Bashi recognizable beyond. The time was 8 A.M., and the only immediately accessible route was the unclimbed E. ridge of Gulba rising above us.

We climbed on two ropes, and after an interesting start we had to traverse across the loose scree ledges of the N. face to avoid the pinnacles on the arête. We crossed a snow couloir, and climbing a difficult rib by steep and slabby rocks, reached the skyline below the final tower. We scaled its steep rocks on good holds and reached the summit at 10.45 A.M.

From here we were able to study the line of our proposed route on Ushba. At the top of the steep snow couloir, forming the second stage of the original route, was a notch, the *Obere Scharte*. From this, leading upwards at first steeply and then more gently, the S.E. ridge ran into the Red Wall at the corner where it meets the precipitous E. face. Here was a small snow-field and some red towers, among which we hoped to find a bivouac place. Beyond this there seemed little hope of further progress unless a route could be forced round on to the great E. wall which falls to the glacier in a sheer sweep of 5000 ft. An upward sloping ledge across this face, which we later called the Yellow Gangway, could be seen clearly, leading from the base of the Red Wall to the edge of a great re-entrant in the precipice. This was certainly worth a closer inspection.

On the descent of Gulba by its short W. ridge I unexpectedly dislodged a mass of loose rock. In attempting to jump clear I landed on a ledge some 15 ft. below, with the stonefall about my ears. I crawled from under the débris somewhat shaken, little worse for the accident beyond some nasty cuts and bruises. It was clear that I should be out of action for the next few days.

I was lucky to be able to make a slow and painful descent to camp under my own power.

On August 8 a first attempt was made on Ushba. The weather was threatening, but Hodgkin, Taylor and Beaumont got away by 5.15 A.M., and crossing the Gul Glacier, strapped on crampons and steadily mounted the first broad snow couloir. At 8 o'clock they left this for the subsidiary one to the right, a convenient rock traverse taking them across. The second one was narrower and much steeper, and at its top there were patches of loose rock and ice. A final steep pitch brought them to the Obere Scharte (3900 m. E.) at 10.30, from which they obtained an impressive view of the complex ice slopes and rock precipices of the S. face through swirling mists. Starting up the S.E. ridge they were on new ground. As expected, the first few hundred feet of awkward overlapping slabs were difficult and gave one or two severe steps. On reaching easier rocks they rapidly gained height, and crossing the small snowfield reached the red towers at 2.15 P.M. They began to search for a suitable site for the bivouac, and on a spur between the upper tower and the main mass of the mountain they found a small sloping ledge at a height of 13,800 ft.—'a horizontal oasis in a vertical desert.' They had to build this up with stones before it could accommodate the Marco Pallis tent.

At 4.30 black thunder-clouds were piling above the Ingur valley, and fierce gusts of wind began to pluck at the tent as they turned in. With darkness came intense cold and a thunder-storm which raged half the night. The rising gale caused the thin tent walls to flap with a noise which drowned the persistent thunder. At dawn snow was driving about, and they decided that immediate descent was imperative before their retreat was cut off. Cairns built on the ascent assisted their progress and by a series of *rappels* on a frozen rope they reached the Notch. Once in the shelter of the upper gully they descended carefully, and glissading down the main couloir they reached camp at 1 P.M.

That afternoon they decided that Ushba was worth a lot of perseverance, even if a siege lasting the whole of the rest of our time was resorted to. Next day two of the party descended to the valley on a foraging expedition, and by dipping into our sadly depleted stores and by cutting a lot of red tape and presenting natives with packets of tea, they returned with enough food to last a further week.

All this time Ushba was enveloped in cloud plumes while we enjoyed sunshine in the camp. The mountain itself seemed to me friendly enough, but when accompanied by its all-too-

faithful allies the storm-clouds, it becomes Weckert's 'fiend' ⁷ or Rickmers' 'the Terrible.' ⁸

Ushba (S. Peak, 15,409 ft. E., F.). First Ascent by the S.E. Ridge and E. Face

(See illustrations *A.J.* 49. *opp.* 276, 277.)

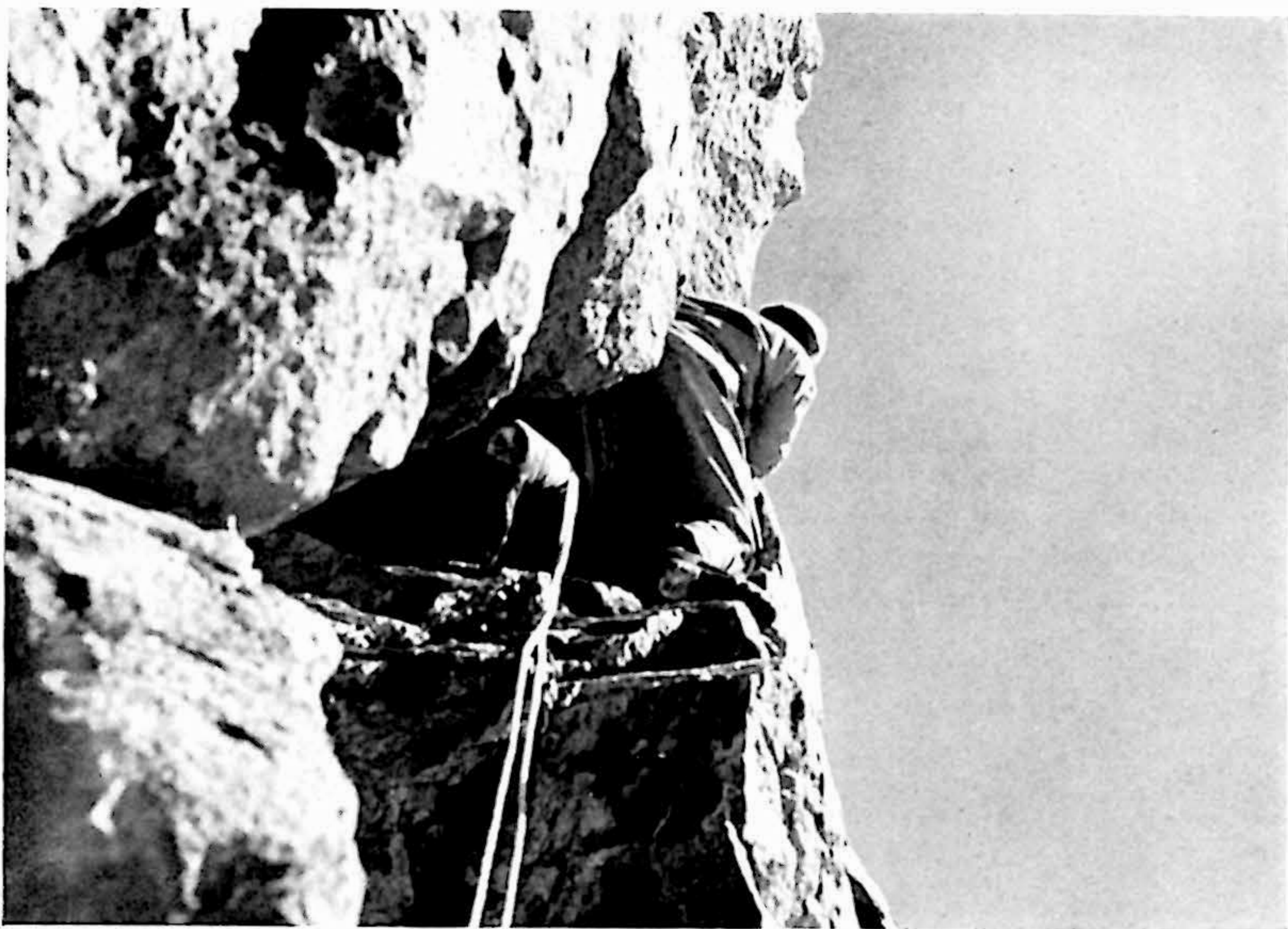
On August 11 they did not get away until 7.20 A.M., and I hobbled across the glacier to see them on their way. This time they found the ascent of the long couloir very tedious, and after mounting steadily for an hour and a half Hodgkin broke the silence with 'That's three thousand steps.' They reached the old bivouac place in good time at 2.30 P.M., and while Beaumont prepared camp Hodgkin and Taylor went ahead to reconnoitre. For about two hundred feet above the bivouac, an ice couloir led up behind the large red tower. Straight ahead, the only break in the vertical E. face was the Yellow Gangway, which steepened up into vertical slabs. They next turned to the Red Wall itself, and reaching a snow terrace at its base managed to scale it for about a hundred feet to a place where they found an old rope loop. At the right-hand edge of the wall they noticed a thin discontinuous ledge which ran round the corner, out across the E. face towards the top of the Yellow Gangway. It seemed as though it might lead to more hopeful rocks beyond. They returned with mixed feelings and crawled into the little tent, where they spent a cold but comparatively peaceful night.

As soon as the rising sun touched the tent they began to stir. It was a perfect morning. Below lay a complex pattern of clouds and valleys, the snowfields of the Laila glistening in the early sunshine. Beyond rose line upon line of dark hills, until in the distance could be seen the two blue-grey cones of Ararat. At 6 A.M. they climbed the couloir and descended by a chimney on to the Yellow Gangway. Here they wasted 1½ hours in a futile attempt, turning back at a hiatus of vertical and holdless slabs.

They returned and scrambled up to the start of the sinuous ledge. It was 8 o'clock, and although the sun warmed the E. face it had not yet reached the Red Wall. Lying on the outward-sloping ledge with his back against its upper lip, Hodgkin wriggled along it for 20 ft. until his progress was barred by a bulge of rock. The only way to reach the continuation a few feet beyond was to tie a rope loop round a jammed stone, and swinging out over space to reach some small holds leading to

⁷ *A.J.* 46. 366.

⁸ *A.J.* 22. 347.



Photo, M. S. Taylor.]

HODGKIN LEADING ON SINUOUS LEDGE, E. FACE OF USHBA.



Photo, R. A. Hodgkin.]

LAILA CHAIN FROM E. RIDGE OF GULBA. GUL AND INGUR VALLEYS
IN FOREGROUND.

[To face p. 28.]



Photo, M. S. Taylor.]

KATUINTAU, W. PEAK, AND JANGA FROM N. FACE OF TETNULD.
In foreground Adish plateau and icefall descended to E. Zanner Glacier.



Photo, M. S. Taylor.]

E. FACE OF TETNULD, SHOWING TRACKS OF DESCENT.

a foot-wide ledge. The others followed, burdened as they were with rucksacks, and found the traverse even more difficult.

They had now reached the edge of the great re-entrant in the E. face. The cliff opposite was more than sheer, for the great icicles which kept falling off did not touch anything for 2000 ft. The wall above was at a more climbable angle and broken into cracks and ledges ; but it gave the hardest stretch of climbing on the mountain. For three hours they worked their way upwards, meeting several patches of loose rock, always expecting the angle to ease off and always being disappointed. Eventually they reached the top of the buttress, where a horizontal ridge led to the upper snowfield ; they realized now that the worst difficulties were over.

Two hours later they reached the summit—a gentle snow crest, an inappropriate climax to so fierce a climb. It was 1 P.M., and through breaks in the clouds they caught glimpses of the now familiar view ; the twin domes of Elbruz, the long gentle chain of the Laila peaks, and the great ice precipices of Shkara, Janga, Katuintau, and Tetnuld set against the dark background of Dykhtau, Mishirgitau, and Koshtantau. Across the gap, and at an equal height, was the snow-cap of Ushba's N. peak.

On the descent they passed the difficult rocks of the re-entrant in three *rappels* of 100 ft. By roping down a further 100 ft. of unclimbable wall they reached the top of the Yellow Gangway, and descending this in a fifth *rappel* were able to avoid the hair-raising traverse of the morning. At 6.45 P.M., over twelve hours after leaving it, they arrived back at the bivouac, which despite its rocky floor and cramped quarters seemed very much like home. Next day the further descent over the rough granite of the ridge in sunshine was a pleasant contrast to their forced retreat three days before.

In the meantime I had recovered sufficiently to make a modest expedition towards Mazeritau. I made a rather painful ascent of the loose rocks and snow of the broad couloir second to the left from that leading to the Mazeri Lücke. In four hours I reached its head, where a sharp red pinnacle stood on my left. Quickly climbing a short snow slope beyond, I breasted a snow col (the Mazeri Pass), and suddenly came upon an unforgettable view. On the left rose the distant domes of Elbruz, while before me was the most amazing mountain I have ever seen—it was Shikilditau ; seen from this angle its summit rocks present a thin column of red granite over 2000 ft. high. In the foreground loomed the bulk of Ushba, its western precipices plunging vertically for 6000 ft. to the Ushba Glacier.

I bagged the red pinnacle, and then succumbed to an enticing snow gully leading down into the head of the small glen between the Gul and Betsho valleys. This took me into a wilderness of rock débris, and skirting up to the left I crossed the intervening ridge and descended a rocky couloir to the Gul Glacier.

For the next three days we forsook the comparative ease and simplicity of mountaineering for the trials and complexities of Suanetian travel. We crossed the beautiful lawns of the Bal ridge, taking a last lingering look at Ushba, and dropped down into the Ingur valley. In Latal we turned off up the Mulkhura valley and reached Mestia in darkness. As we wearily crossed the last bridge a voice greeted us with : ' Say, are you guys English ? ' ⁹ Its owner was a Russian Canadian, and he was in charge of the town's Tourist House and Climbers' Centre. That night we enjoyed ' cutlets ' and beds, and next day we pushed on to Jabmush where we camped above the village. In the night, a wily thief (we acclaimed him an artist) put his hand through the narrow tunnel entrance of the Marco Pallis tent and stole my rucksack and its contents from under my feet. Taylor's ice-axe suffered the same fate. All our efforts to raise the natives from their habitual lethargy were of no avail, so we shook the dust of the last village of Suanetia from off our feet and set off for the Zanner Pass with two heavily laden animals. We had fixed on the outrageous price of 90 roubles (£4) for a carry up to the Zanner Glacier. After an hour's going, the path disappeared and our drivers emphatically refused to continue. We refused just as emphatically to pay. After a contretemps, the younger suddenly seized our most valuable sack and stood over it, brandishing his sword in an alarming way. The situation was beyond our control, so we paid him, and tails between legs, we shouldered 60 to 70 lb. loads and struggled up the rapidly deteriorating path to the Zanner Glacier. We found a charming camp site an hour beyond on its left bank, on a broad terrace above the glacier in a garden of brightly coloured flowers.

Hodgkin and Beaumont nobly surrendered to Taylor and me their most vital items of equipment. Being thus crippled, they succumbed to the charms of this place, and, except for a scramble on the rock-ridge W. of Lyaler, they lazed away three days on its sunny slopes.

Tetnuld (15,918 ft. F.). First Ascent by the N. Face

On August 17 Taylor and I left at 8.45 A.M. with the bivouac tent and three days' provisions for an attempt on the N. face of

⁹ Cf. *A.J.* 29. 157.

Tetnuld. We avoided the icefall of the E. Zanner Glacier by contouring over moraine débris and grass slopes, and once beyond it we descended to the open glacier. After dodging a maze of crevasses we reached the flat ice beyond, and sat down on a boulder for lunch at midday. Above us rose the N. face of Tetnuld in a perfect inverted parabola of snow and ice, crowned with a hanging rim of séracs. Its upper part was hung with ice-bulges, and the ice falling from them had scored out flutings in the steep snow slopes. To the left, and clear of the bulges, a slender scimitar-shaped ridge curved upwards to lose itself in a steep white wall above. This was the line of ascent suggested by Herr Schwarzgruber, and its feasibility turned on the question whether this wall was snow or ice; a question which could only be answered when the scimitar ridge had been climbed.

We threaded our way through the intricate icefall above, but before we could find a suitable bivouac site we had to mount a difficult slope above a curious upper basin. We pitched the tent in a snow hollow at 4 P.M. The night was clear and cold.

We got away at six o'clock next morning under a cloudless sky and climbed the steep slopes above the hollow, our crampons biting on hard snow. A dangerous ice-swept funnel led over very steep slopes to the base of the scimitar ridge.¹⁰ At first a cornice forced us on to its left flank, but later we followed its steep knife-edge, gaining height rapidly. The situation and climbing were superb, and in two hours we gained a group of small snow humps where the ridge merged into the great wall above. We could see now that it was snow—only a covering of a few inches on hard ice, but enough to support the spikes of our crampons. As we mounted steadily upwards, the surrounding rocks and glaciers sunk below us and our confidence grew as we approached a band of rocks. We reached these at 9.40, but as they were loose and ice-bound we skirted their base and made for an ice gully on the right between them and the sérac wall. This was difficult and gave us some anxious moments. We stood on the upper snows at 11 A.M. and pressed on to the summit, which we gained forty minutes later.

The superb view was marred by a biting wind, which forced us to descend immediately to the shelter of some ice blocks below.

We proposed to descend the E. face¹¹ to the Adish plateau and from there to find a way down to the tent through the topmost icefall of the E. Zanner Glacier. For a while steep snow slopes

¹⁰ See illustration *A. J.* 49, *opp.* 271.

¹¹ First ascended by Poppinger, Moldan, Schintlmeister, and Frank in 1931. *A. J.* 43. 400.

took us rapidly down until our way was barred by a maze of deep crevasses. We turned towards the N.E. ridge but were stopped at the edge of a vertical step. The only alternative was to make a traverse to the E. of the entire face. This involved the anxious crossing of a steep ice wall under threatening séracs, but we reached easier slopes beyond which led steadily down to the col above our camp. The snow covering had thinned out in places, and after some difficulty we skirted a subsidiary snow peak on its E. side and began the descent of the icefall. It came as rather a shock to find our progress blocked by a wall of ice some 50 ft. high. We spent half an hour in searching for a possible weakness, and in the end, hammering an ice-piton into a crack, we descended on the doubled rope. We picked our way through the tangled mass of séracs and crevasses below, reaching the bivouac at 5 P.M. Packing up our sacks, we lightheartedly raced down to base camp, which we reached as darkness was falling.

A day later we jettisoned all surplus kit and set off at dawn with lightened loads for the Zanner Pass (the northern of the two passes is generally preferred by modern mountaineers). We avoided the main Zanner icefall by a difficult gully on its left, and after a monotonous slog over the upper snowfields we reached the top of the pass. The monotony vanished as the Bezingi wall burst into view; rising from the depths of the Bezingi Glacier was a gleaming precipice of hanging glaciers and snow slopes 8000 ft. high. It culminated in a sharp ice crest which for five miles never dropped below 15,000 ft., rising to the 17,000-ft. peak of Shkara at its eastern end. To the N., in sharp contrast, rose the great rock pyramid of Dykhtau, the second highest mountain in the Caucasus.

We rapidly descended snow slopes to the shale dump below called Kelbashi. We were able to glissade down the broken débris of its N. slope, and reached the moraine of the Bezingi Glacier over steep grass slopes as the inevitable evening mists were drawing a curtain across the valley. These complicated the crossing of the glacier and the further walk down to the Missesskosh. Two days later we managed to telephone from Syel Soviet below Bezingi, and secured from Intourist the only car which could travel the road from Nalchik, a twin-rear-wheeled Ford truck. In this we rattled to the end of our journey, past ruined fortresses and through another limestone gorge down to the plain.

In conclusion, I have nothing to add to Clinton Dent's immortal words in the thirteenth volume of the *ALPINE JOURNAL*.¹² I hope

¹² *A.J.* 13. 242.

that our modest expedition will encourage British mountaineers to continue with the pioneering which they suddenly relinquished in 1914. 'The grandest chain of ice mountains that Europe can claim' is only superficially explored. There are still unclimbed peaks and many new routes for those who look beyond the Alps, where the valleys are crowded with trippers and every ridge and face is dotted with routes.

If you go to the Caucasus remember these points. One of the party must know a little Russian. Each man is allowed a spare set of equipment; take it—you will find out why when you get there. Do not try to travel, transport is difficult to get and exorbitant; stay in one district and climb from a central base camp. Keep out of the valleys as much as possible—you get lethargic and fall prey to pernicious germs. Take the majority of your mountain food out, and let Intourist buy the rest for you (food coupons 8s. 6d. each). You can pin your faith in Intourist, they know all about it now and will give you reliable service. Lastly, and most important: make sure your base camp tents have flysheets.

The cost (approximate) per man works out as follows:

	£	s.	d.
Equipment	10	0	0
Expenses in the mountains	17	0	0
Fare (Third Class): London—Tegenekli— Bezingi—London (including Russian food coupons)	32	0	0
Food: cost and transport	9	0	0
	<u>£68</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>

To this should be added expenses on the journey to the Polish border, bringing the total to about £72.