Daniil Gauss's Ascent of the Volcano Kliuchevskaia Sopka

The Origins of Russian Mountaineering

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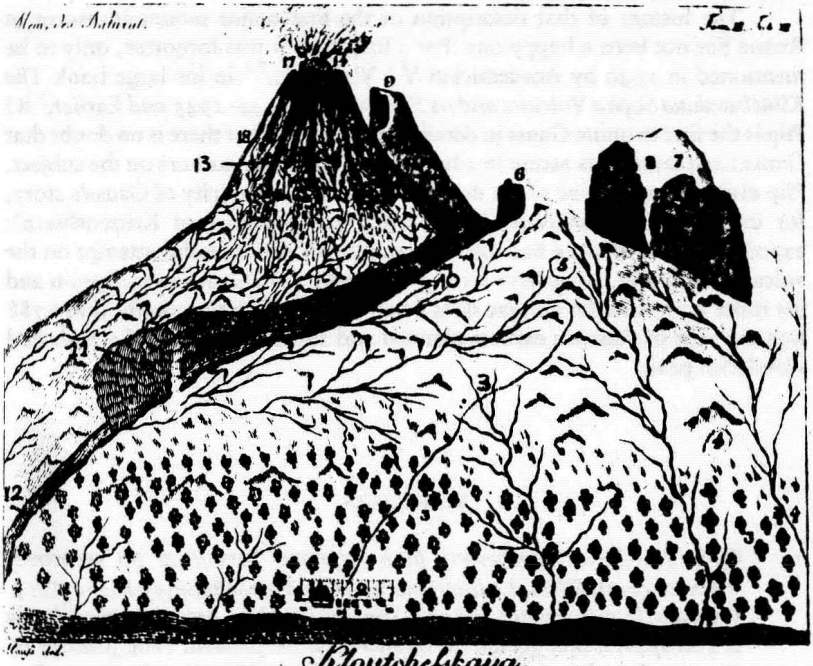
Between 1785 and 1794 a large Russian expedition led by Captain J Billings and Lieutenant G Sarychev recorded a detailed description of the shores of north-eastern Siberia, Kamchatka and the Aleutian Islands, and the adjacent waters.[1] The expedition had reached the ocean using the route known at the time – by river to Irkutsk and Iakutsk, along the Maia and Iudoma rivers and by portage on to the river Okhta, then along that to Okhotsk. This fairly large expedition included the mining engineer Daniil Gauss whose name is linked with the first ascent of the volcano Kliuchevskaia Sopka (4750m) in Kamchatka.

Daniil Gauss's description of his ascent has come down to us through Dr O de Huhn of Riga who published it in French in 1809.[2] That paper was based on a copy authenticated (against the original report) by Matvei Ignat'ev, secretary of the province, in the presence of Captain Timofei Shmelev as witness. (Shmelev was well-known for his earlier descriptions of the volcano in 1773.[3]) The copy was authenticated in 'Ichiginsk,' or 'Ischinsk', a settlement on the western shore of the peninsula, or else in 'Gizhiginsk', as some contemporary authors suppose. The publication does not indicate how the manuscript came into the possession of de Huhn or the Moscow Society of Naturalists.

Gauss's description is accompanied by a diagram depicting the volcano as seen from the settlement of Kliuchi Kamchatskie, together with a detailed legend describing the route of the climb. That diagram (*reproduced right*), as is obvious to anybody familiar with the area, fully authenticates Gauss's description of the settlement and of the climb up the volcano itself.

It should be noted that Gauss's climb is not mentioned in either the description of the expedition published by G A Sarychev in 1802, or in the reports compiled by Martin Sauer, the secretary/translator of the expedition, which in 1802 were published both in London and, in a French translation, in Paris.[4] Most of the members of the expedition were at the time busy transporting its main equipment to Okhotsk, building boats there, and so forth. Information about Gauss's activities is furnished by later writers.[5,6] For instance, it is they who mention his participation in 1787 in Elistratov's hydrographic expedition which left a description of the western shore of Kamchatka from Tigil to Penzhina and gathered a large collection of minerals. The available facts, however, leave no room for doubt about the accuracy of the description of the climb. On the map which forms an appendix to Sarychev's



book a dotted line marks the route of the expedition which followed the western shore of Kamchatka and then turned east, towards the volcano.

Gauss's ascent was made in the company of two unnamed fellow-climbers between 4 and 8 August 1788 (the exact date was not mentioned in his 1789 report). He describes how the group slowly moved upwards, 'expecting to meet (their) doom at any moment' owing to the snow-slips and the stones lying upon the ice. Nevertheless, 'his curiosity got the better of him and impelled him to the summit of the mountain with the desire to leave for his descendants the description of such an interesting place'. The climb took all day, hampered by a strong wind and the clouds which had gathered. Towards the summit it was as cold as in winter. Upon reaching the summit, Gauss saw the walls of an enormous crater about a kilometre across, roughly triangular in shape, and surrounded by massive blocks of black and rock-marked lava. Along the edges of the lava-blocks one could see, besides the main crater, many large openings from which vapours and flames were erupting. When those vapours reached

me, the author wrote, there was a strong smell of sulphur. That was what caused Gauss and his fellow-climbers to start their descent at once, and afterwards they felt ill for several days.

The history of that description of the first major mountain ascent in Russia has not been a happy one. For a long time it was forgotten, only to be mentioned in 1940 by Academician V I Vlodavets.[7,8] In his large book *The Kliuchevskaia Sopka Volcano and its Eruptions of 1944–1945 and Earlier*,[9] B I Piip is the first to quote Gauss in detail. He points out that there is no doubt that Gauss had planned his ascent in advance, and cites later authors on the subject. Piip also addresses some of the doubts about the authenticity of Gauss's story, for instance those entertained by Friderizzi, a member of Kruzenshtern's expedition, who in 1804 had made an admittedly unsuccessful attempt on the volcano. However, as we have already observed, both Gauss's description and his route map, and the oblique data from Sarychev leave no doubt that 1788 was the year of Russia's earliest planned and successful ascent of a high and wonderful peak.

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