Up the valley from here, Francis Younghusband had his famous encounter with the Russian, Colonel Yanov, in Bozai Gumbaz.¹ Centuries earlier, Zahiruddin Babur sent female family members here in times of conflict and probably came through to keep the contact to the Daughlats in the Tarim Basin.² Before that, European merchants and missionaries passed on their way to China. Buddhist monks stayed here and erected a stupa that is standing until this day. Not for no reason is the last village on the Tajik side of the Wakhan Valley before entering the higher Pamir called Langar, a common name for a place where food is given away to travelers.

Walking on the Tajik side of the Wakhan Valley, we talked to a farmer busy bringing in the late summer harvest. I pointed up to some caves that I assumed belonged to hermits many centuries back. History, of course, looms closer than a stranger might expect. He laughed, perhaps Buddhists, yes. More importantly, snipers used these caves in the Russo-Afghan war.

Higher up in the Pamir, the Soviets have left behind their high-altitude research program. South of Murghab, on the road to Osh, lies a compound that in its slightly derelict state looks more like a rancheria on the set of a Western film.

Guarded by barracks, a watchtower (occupied by a solitary Tajik soldier), rotting tanks and a couple of yaks, locals know it as a place they are still prohibited from entering. They claim that it reaches many stories deep into the ground (which if true would have been a considerable achievement considering the permafrost soil) and used to house secret experiments with cosmic rays and radioactive material conducted by Soviet Scientists for reasons remembered by few.

Its doors are locked only the toilets and the garage are open. But one can imagine from the stuffed animals inside that this used to be a scientific institute in former times, when Tajikistan was part of a former empire.

It turns out to be an outpost of the Lebedev Institute, an institution with some fame and active today, especially in the field of optical physics.³ The cosmic rays and radioactivity story rings true.

Today the place is of interest, since its well goes many meters deep into the ground, dug by German prisoners of war, and may be a future source of water for the local village community.

3. It’s most famous member was probably Andrei Sakharov. http://lebedev.ru