

## The Pamir Has a History

by Jakob Steiner - 13.08.2012

[Editor's note: Mr. Steiner's article and photographs made me think of Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*. The book describes a hospital that was as much a research lab as a palliative hospice in Tashkent, Uzbek SSR. Solzhenitsyn's view of the Soviet system is clear and is worthy of more than an introductory paragraph, but it is interesting to note how even when Solzhenitsyn decries the system, he is unsure of what should take its place. Steiner's tale of Lebedev Research Lab, high in the Pamir, is a sort of post-apocalyptic vision of what happens after the cataclysms of 1990. Lebedev is the epilogue to Solzhenitsyn's pre-apocalyptic prose.]

Even though I have used the term "apocalypse," I have probably used it a bit too freely. One of this website's greatest issues with reporting on the current conflict in the Tajikistan Pamir is the ahistoricity demonstrated. The people involved, both in the current conflict and in Mr. Steiner's piece, have their own histories and their own stories to tell. Conflict does not happen due to ageless rages or reckless violence. Complexities ought to be respected and stories ought to be told. That is what we stand for at The Tuqay and what Mr. Steiner presents here.]

Up the valley from here, Francis Younghusband had his famous encounter with the Russian, Colonel Yanov, in Bozai Gumbaz.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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. ❀



1. Patrik French, *Younghusband: The Last Great Imperial Adventurer*, HarperCollins UK, 2004.
2. *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, Transl: W.M.Thackston Jr., Modern Library Edition, 2002.
3. It's most famous member was probably Andrei Sakharov. <http://lebedev.ru>