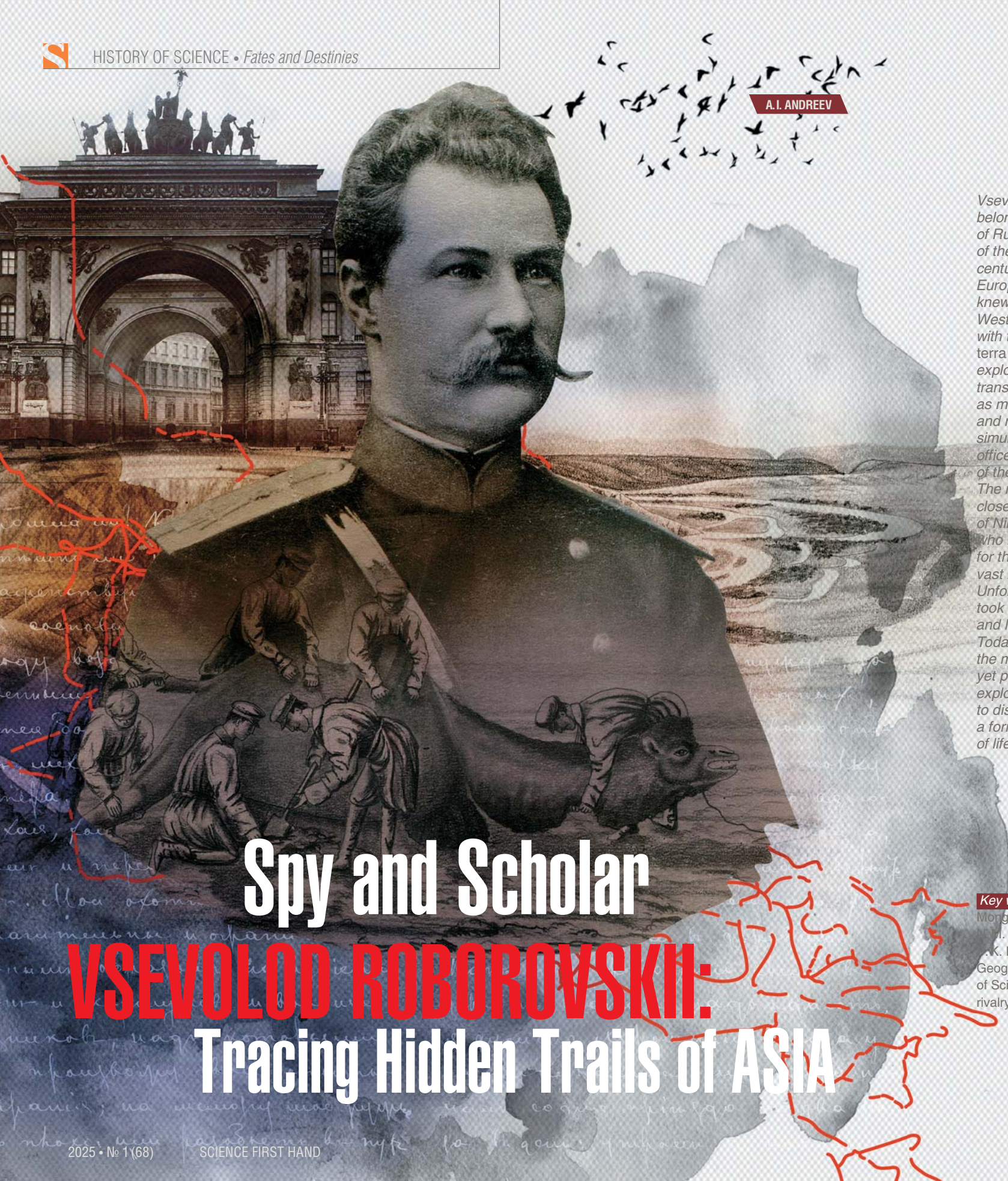




A.I. ANDREEV

Vsevolod Ivanovich Roborovskii belongs to the heroic cohort of Russian pioneering explorers of the late 19th – early 20th centuries. At that time, European geographers still knew very little of Mongolia, Western China, and Tibet, with the latter being an actual terra incognita. The Russian explorers of Central (Inner) Asia transcended their roles as mere travelers and researchers; they served simultaneously as military officers and emissaries of the Russian Empire. The name of Roborovskii bears close ties to the famous names of Nikolai M. Przhevalskii, who laid the foundation for the scientific study of this vast region, and Petr K. Kozlov. Unfortunately, a serious illness took Roborovskii out of action and led to his early death. Today we seek to revive the memory of this outstanding yet presently overlooked explorer, for whom journeys to distant lands were “not only a form but also the meaning of life”

Key words: Central (Inner) Asia, Mongolia, China, Tibet, India, Tian-Shan, N.M. Przhevalskii, V.I. Roborovskii, P.K. Kozlov, Main Staff, Russian Geographical Society, Academy of Sciences, Great Game (Anglo-Russian rivalry in the region)

Translated by Alla Kobkova



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Spy and Scholar

VSEVOLOD ROBOROVSKII:

Tracing Hidden Trails of ASIA

A pivotal moment in the life of Vsevolod Roborovskii occurred in 1878, when he turned 22. Two years before that, he had enlisted as a volunteer in the 145th Novoherkassk Infantry Regiment, stationed in St. Petersburg. A few months later, the future traveler was sent to the infantry cadet school in Helsingfors, which he graduated from as an ensign. However, military service, especially the constant drills, soon began to weigh him down.

It was then that he accidentally met his school friend Fedor Eklon, who had just returned to St. Petersburg from a journey across Central Asia, where he took part in the Second (Lop Nur) Expedition led by the famous traveler Nikolai Mikhailovich Przhevalskii. Later Roborovskii (1892) would write, “My friend’s fascinating stories about his travels in Central Asia captivated me so much that I got a burning desire to experience it all myself, everything I was listening



The old building of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society was founded by the Highest Command of Emperor Nicholas I in 1845. At first, the society held its meetings in rented apartments, but in 1862 it was granted for free use an apartment in the building of the 6th Gymnasium on Fontanka near Chernyshov Bridge (now Lomonosov Square). *RGS Archive*

Little is known about Vsevolod I. Roborovskii's childhood and early youth. He was born in St. Petersburg on April 26, 1856, into a modest noble family. His favorite subjects in high school were geography and history; he had difficulties with mathematics and Latin. On holidays, Vsevolod loved to take walks in the outskirts of the city, observing nature. In the summer, he collected plants, butterflies, lizards, and fish in the forests and meadows of the Tver province. According to his peers, he "devoted himself entirely to observing various fishponds, aquariums, and museums and arranged similar ones at home" (Kozlov, 1910, vol. 46). Young Roborovskii was also fond of reading and especially loved books about travels to distant lands

to with such curiosity, and I asked Eklon to introduce me to Nikolai Mikhailovich."

Roborovskii really wanted to take part in Przhevalskii's new expedition, but the latter did not hurry to accept the young ensign into his party. He had his reasons – one of his assistants in the Lop Nur Expedition turned out to be fully incapable of doing field research: he could neither dissect birds nor conduct topographic surveys, and he was a bad hunter. Roborovskii, however, passed the test with honorable distinction. "A very capable man, draws decently, knows how to make surveys, is good-natured, and in excellent health" – such was Przhevalskii's assessment of him, as expressed in a letter to his own friend (Dubrovin, 1890). Perhaps, what mattered most was that Przhevalskii needed a good draftsman since he did not use photography in his travels.

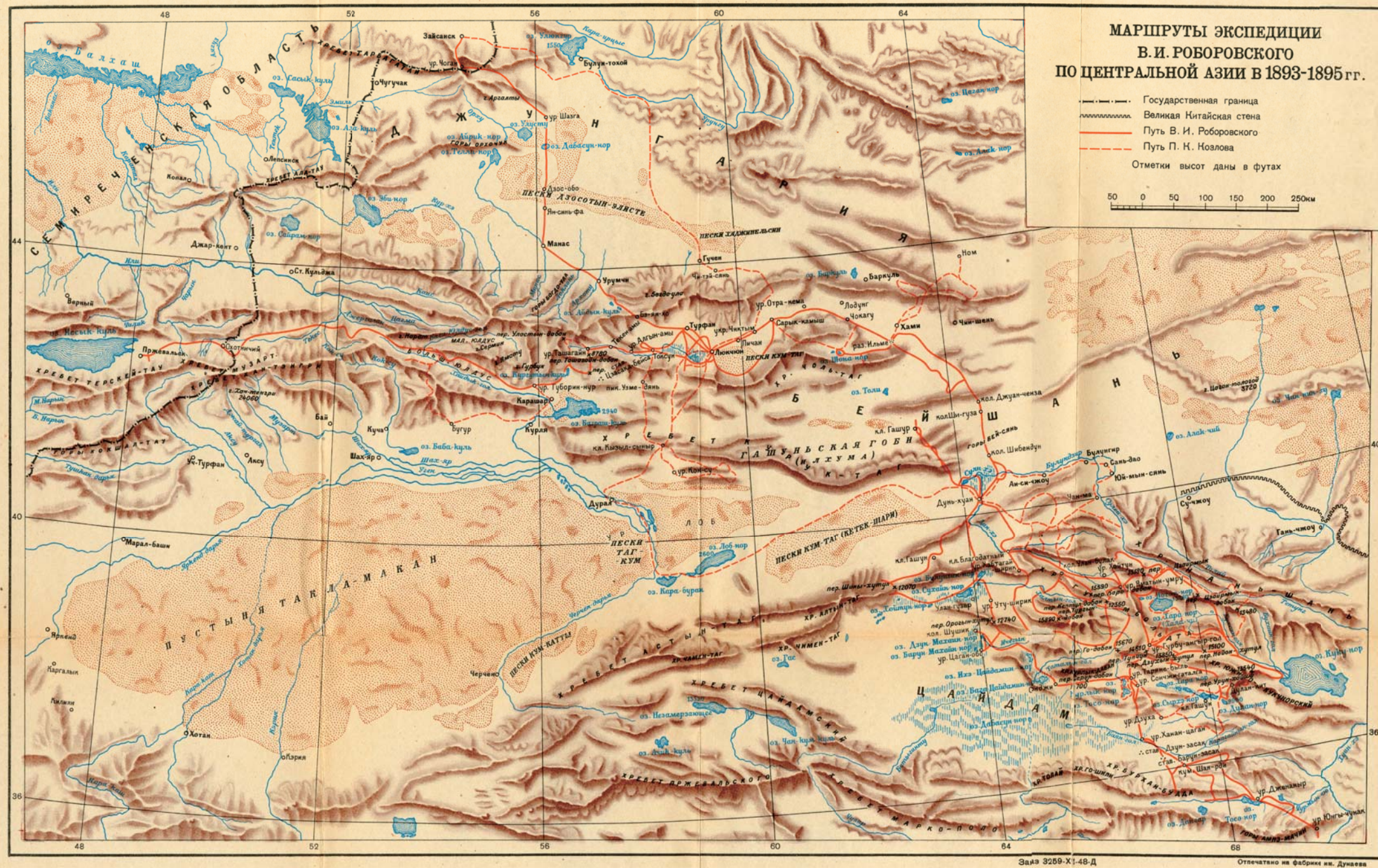
On December 14, 1878, Roborovskii was detached from his regiment to join Przhevalskii's new expedition – he was thrilled beyond words.



Arch of the General Staff. This historic building on Palace Square in St. Petersburg housed the General Staff, the highest military and strategic body of the Russian Empire's Armed Forces. Among other things, the General Staff was in charge of all military topographic and statistical work

Participants of the Second Tibetan Expedition (1883–1885). Sitting (from left to right): P. K. Kozlov, N. M. Przhevalskii, and V. I. Roborovskii, 1888. *Kozlov Memorial Apartment and Museum (St. Petersburg)*





Map of Przhevalskii's travels and discoveries. Adapted from: V.I. Roborovskii. *Journey to the Eastern Tien Shan and Nan Shan. Proceedings of the IRGS Expedition to Central Asia in 1893-1895*. Moscow, 1949

Excellent shooting skills were the best of all Chinese passports

At the end of February 1879, the members of Przhevalskii's Third Central Asian Expedition gathered together in Zaisan on the Russian-Chinese border. As the second assistant, Roborovskii was tasked with collecting a herbarium and making sketches of landscapes, animals, and local people. The responsibilities of Eklon, the first assistant, involved more complex work, such as dissecting animals and compiling a zoological collection.

In Zaisan, the expedition party spent more than three weeks, during which the Cossacks practiced shooting with Berdan rifles and revolvers every day. Przhevalskii explained the need for this training in his report: "Excellent shooting skills were a matter of primary importance – it was a guarantee of our safety in the depths of Asian deserts, and the best of all Chinese passports. If we had not been well armed, we would have never gotten into Tibet or to the upper reaches of the Yellow River. We would not have been able, as it often happened during this journey, to go straight ahead without asking permission or, better to say, without attending to Chinese threats or prohibitions" (Przhevalskii, 1948, p. 24).

Here it should be noted that Przhevalskii called his expeditions "scientific reconnaissance missions" (a term he borrowed from Petr P. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky) and considered them "feasible studies of the least known and most inaccessible places of Inner Asia" (Przhevalskii, 1875, p. 381). In essence, what they did was preliminary geographical surveys, which were supposed to pave the way for more detailed stationary studies by specialists in various fields of knowledge (zoologists, geologists, ethnographers, etc.).



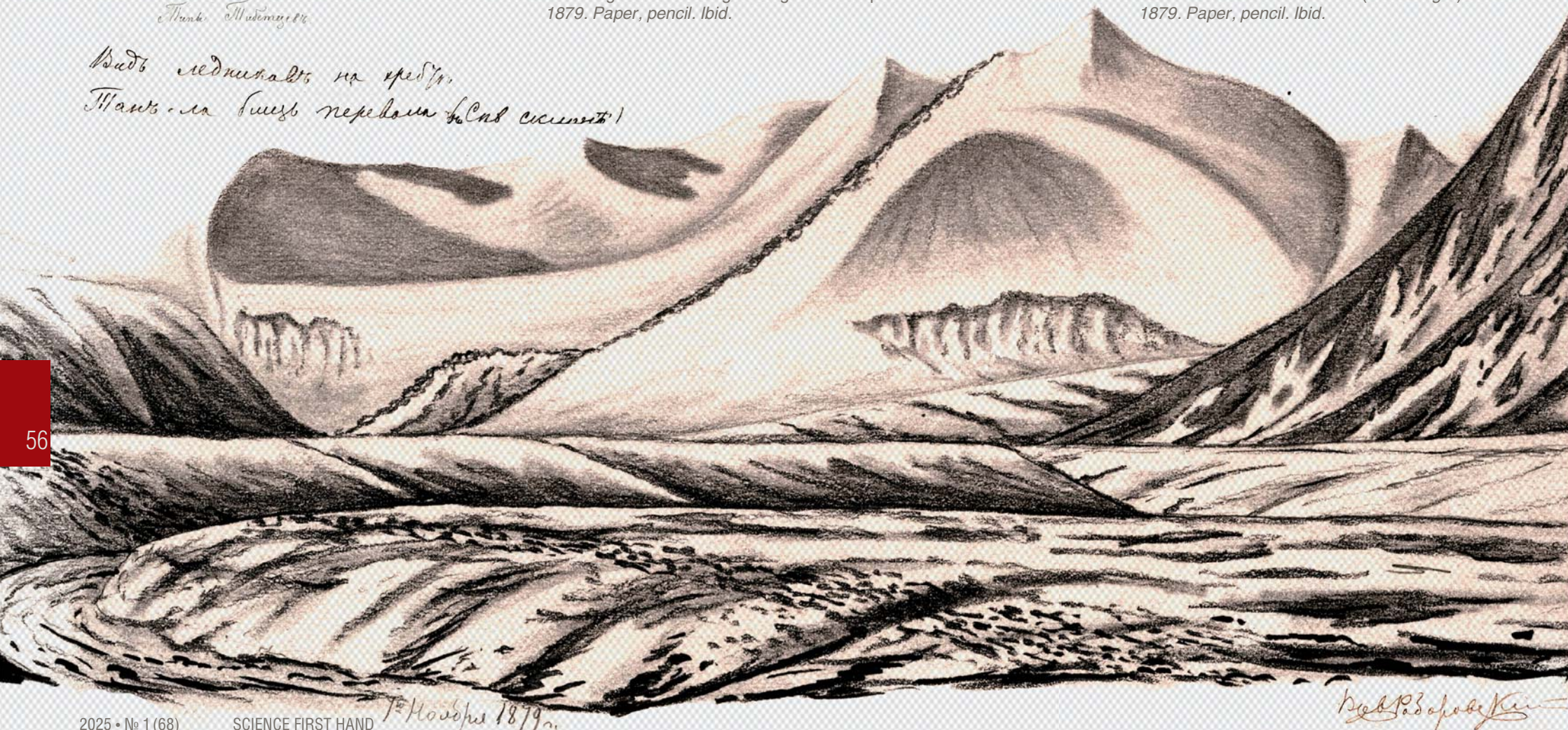
The escorts in these reconnaissance expeditions were military personnel and Cossacks – people without families, who were used to strict discipline, were loyal to their leader and obeyed him unquestioningly. The expedition's main tasks involved route surveys and various types of instrumental observations (astronomical, barometric, meteorological, etc.), which were necessary, first of all, for making more accurate maps of the region (by the military topographic department of the General Staff of the War Ministry) and describing its general geographic (landscape) features (*Rossiiskie ekspeditsii v Tsentral'nyu Aziyu...*, 2013).

As aptly put by the famous geographer Yuli M. Shokalskii (1940, p. 466), “the expedition route mapped out from field surveys and the astronomical determinations of places along the route” lay the “foundation for the geographical exploration of a new country.”

Tibetans types. 1879. Paper, pencil. Smolensk State Museum and Reserve

View of glaciers on Tang-la Ridge near the pass. 1879. Paper, pencil. Ibid.

Вид с вершины на экспедицию
Танг-ла-рида



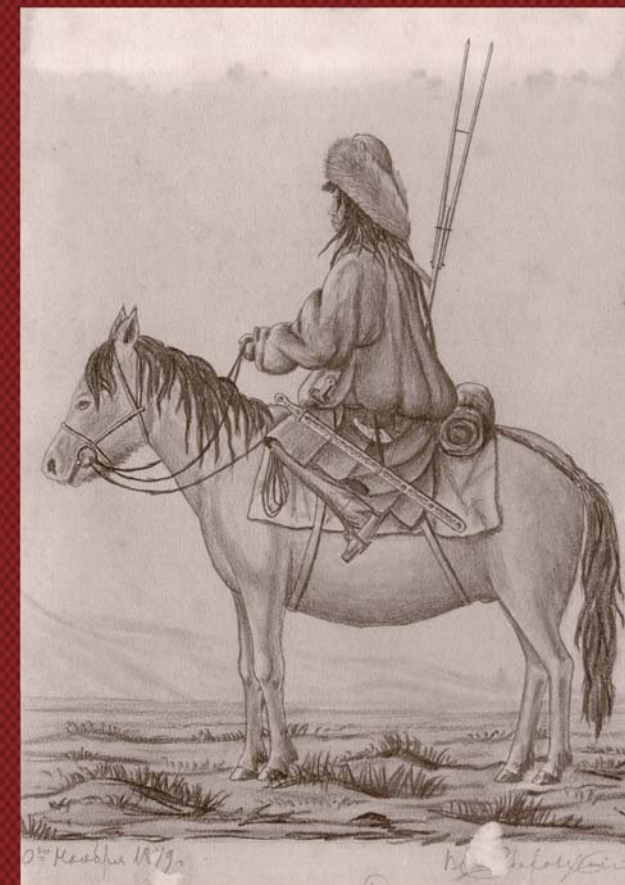
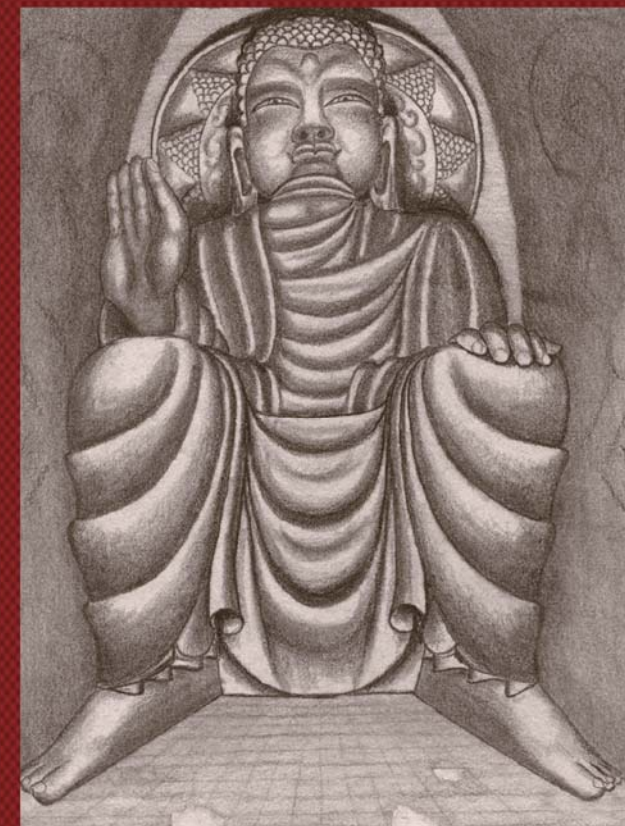
“Against us loomed
a waterless desert, then frosts
and storms, and, eventually,
human hostility”

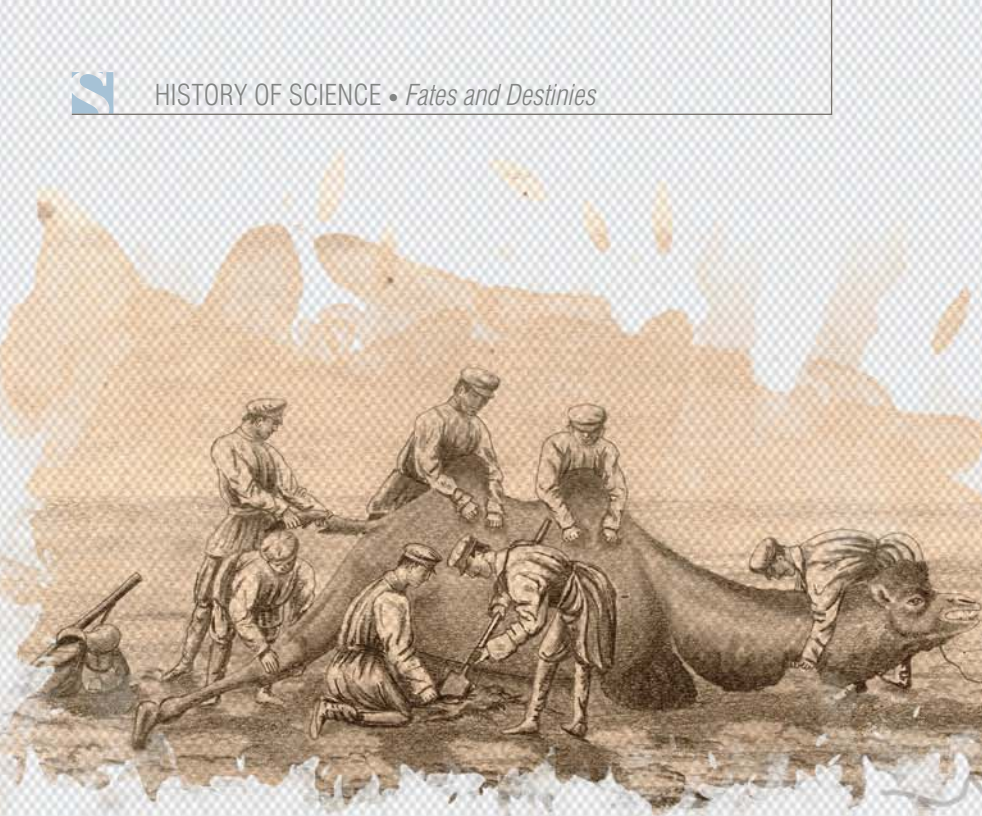
On March 27, 1879, the expedition left Zaisan. Its route ran through Dzungaria and Western China, ultimately reaching Tibet. The latter was the expedition's main goal, which is why this mission entered the annals of geographical science as Przhevalskii's First Tibetan Expedition. Like all previous expeditions to Central Asia, it was organized by the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (IRGS) with the support of the General Staff.

Having climbed the Tibetan plateau and crossed Tang-la Range, the party moved towards Lhasa, the “forbidden” capital of Tibet, a destination eagerly

On the right is the Da-Fu-Yang idol. 1879. Paper, pencil. Ibid.

Tibetan soldier on horseback (bottom right). 1879. Paper, pencil. Ibid.





Digging out a camel stuck in the sand.
1879. Paper, pencil. *Ibid.*

sought by both Russian and English explorers at that time. The English sent specially trained scouts (*pandits*) from British India to Tibet and Western China, which served as yet another stimulus for the so-called “Great Game,” the Anglo–Russian geopolitical rivalry in the Central Asian region (Shaumyan, 2017).

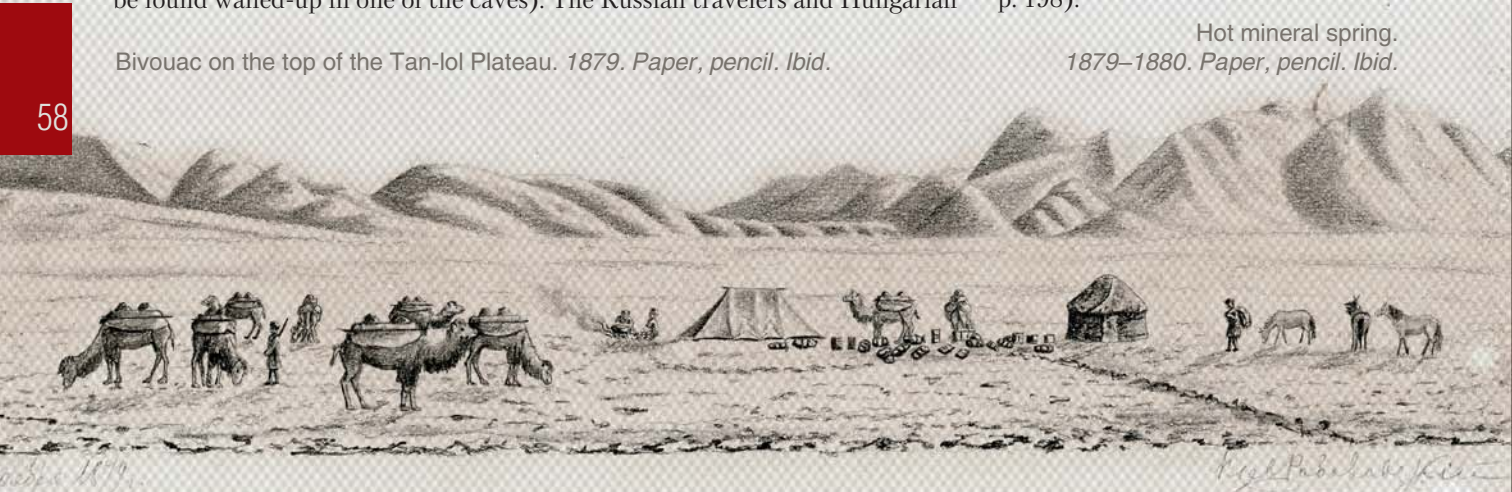
But the Tibetans stopped Przhevalskii’s expedition 300 km from Lhasa under the pretext that the Russians were supposedly planning to kidnap the Dalai Lama and destroy the Buddhist faith (the Tibetans of that time treated both the Russians and English as suspicious *pilins*, i.e., foreigners). As a result, the travelers were forced to turn back.

During this expedition, Roborovskii encountered a new, previously unknown world of scorching deserts, endless steppes, picturesque lakes and rivers, and majestic mountain ranges. Together with Przhevalskii, he visited the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas, located near Suzhou Oasis (Dunhuang) on the Great Silk Road (later, an amazing library with ancient manuscripts would be found walled-up in one of the caves). The Russian travelers and Hungarian

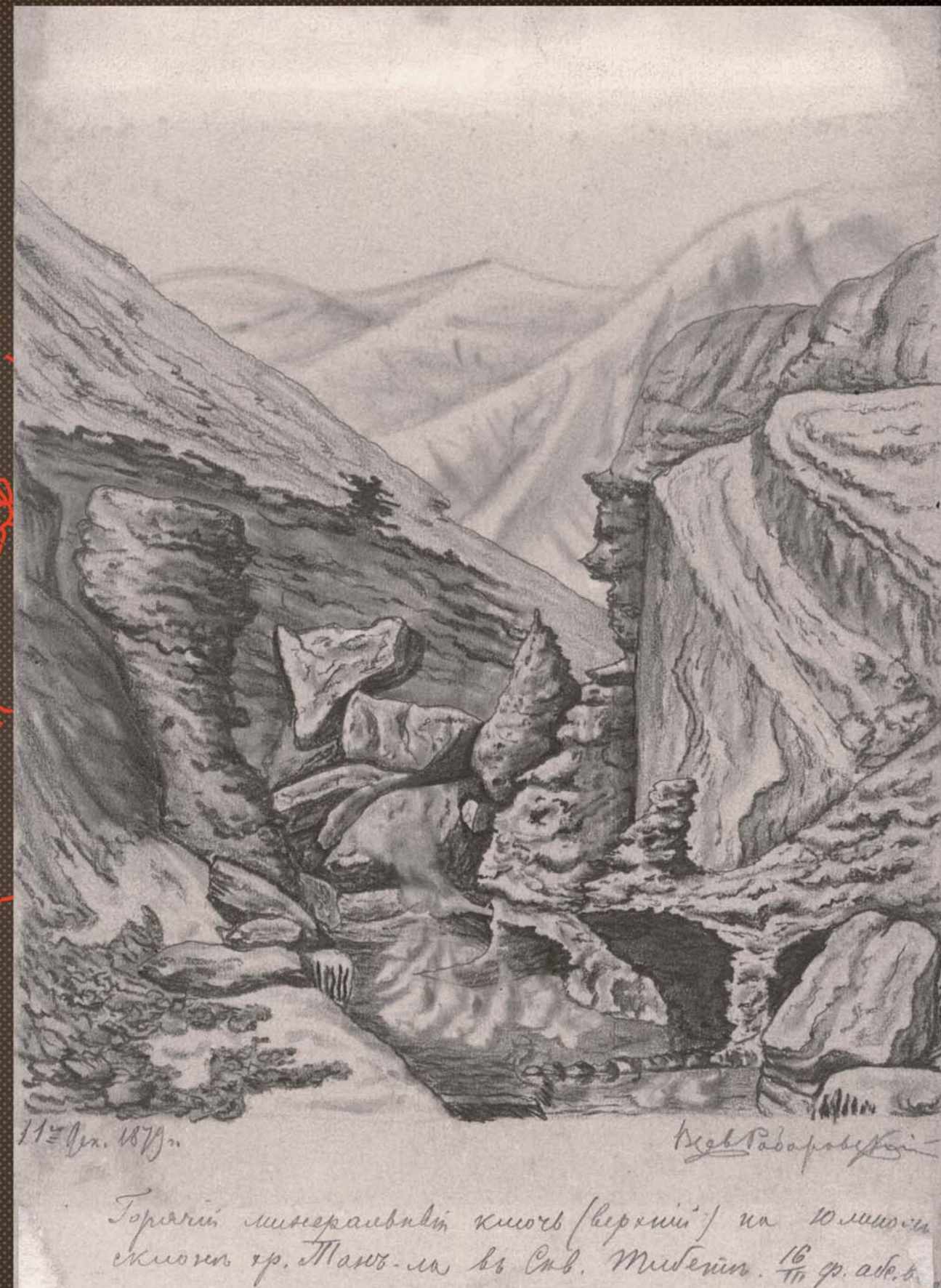
Count Bertalan Széchenyi, who had traveled in these places two months before the expedition, became the first Europeans to visit this secluded corner of Asia. While examining the “holy caves,” Przhevalskii and his assistants discovered idols made of clay, and Roborovskii sketched one of them.

The first journey with Przhevalskii also became a harsh lesson for Roborovskii. The following fact speaks volumes about the difficulties he encountered. Having climbed the high mountain ridge of Tang-la, the members of the expedition fired a volley from their Berdan rifles and shouted three times: “Hooray!” “Indeed, we were allowed to rejoice in our success,” Przhevalskii would write in his report. “More than seven months had passed since we left Zaisan, and during all this time, we had not had a few nice days in a row. Against us loomed a waterless desert with its unbearable heat, then giant mountains, next frosts and storms, and, eventually, human hostility. We coped with all that successfully. People here did not give us guides, so we went without them, at random, finding our way by sending patrols, and we almost did not take a single unnecessary step thanks to our amazing luck. The latter was our permanent companion, as in my previous travels” (Przhevalskii, 1883, p. 198).

Hot mineral spring.
1879–1880. Paper, pencil. *Ibid.*



Bivouac on the top of the Tan-lol Plateau. 1879. Paper, pencil. *Ibid.*



11-12 Jan. 1879

Przhevalskii

Топящий минеральный ключ (вершин) на 10 вершин
высоты г. Мань-ла в Сиб. Мусульм. 16 г. а. д. б.

Przhevalskii



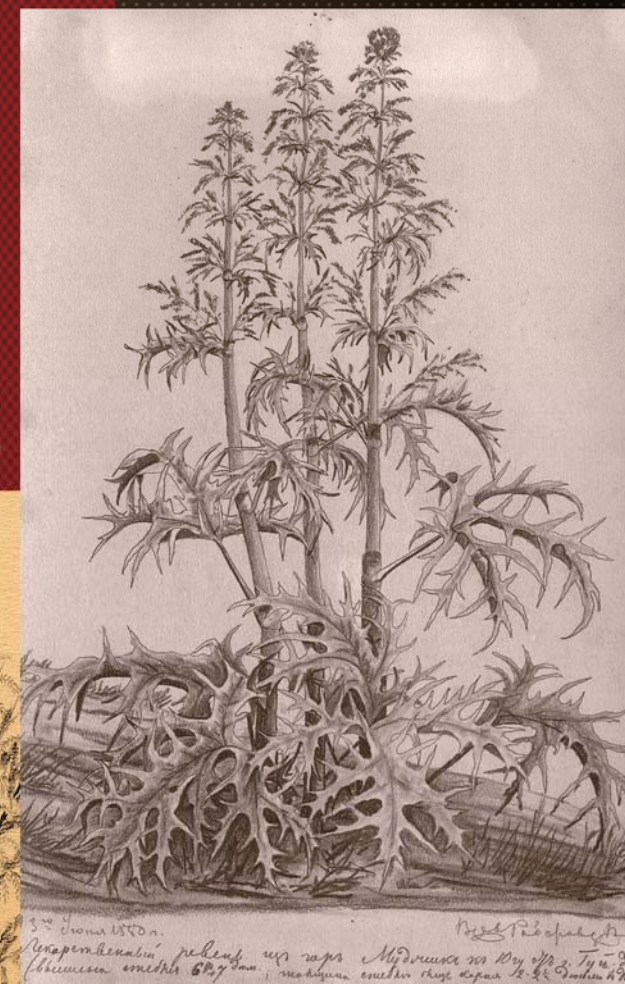
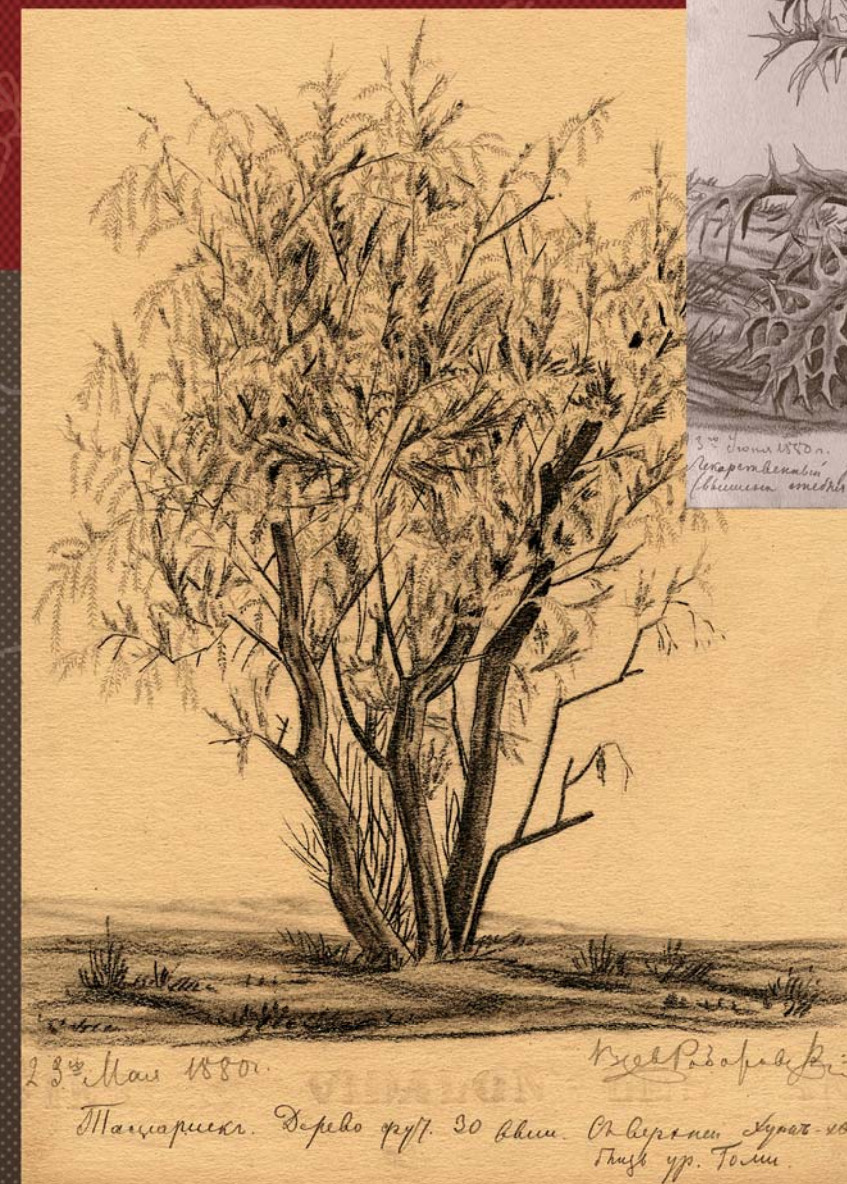
The Yograï, one of the northern Tibetan tribes, particularly notorious for their bandit-like ways – they had long lived by robbing peaceful caravans heading to Lhasa. On the left is a Yograï man; below is a Yograï attack on Przhevalskii's expedition near the pass through Tai-la Ridge. 1879. Paper, pencil. *Ibid.*

In Northern Tibet, Roborovskii got involved in a military skirmish with the Yograï, local nomads, in which he demonstrated considerable courage. One of the Yograï attacked the expedition's interpreter with a spear, but, according to Przhevalskii, "Ensign Roborovskii, who fortunately happened to be nearby, grabbed the spear and broke it before the blow was struck" (Przhevalskii, 1883, p. 199)

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Roborovskii would later write about his work as a botanist collector in his memoirs: "... It just so happened that I found botanical excursions particularly appealing and they were assigned to me as an exclusive duty; my passion for botany reached the point that I would often climb mountains at the risk of my life and get a flower that seemed almost impossible to reach; but if I had not seen it before or I thought that it was a new species of plant, then I would strain every effort: stones would fall from under my feet, it seemed as if I would soon fall into the abyss, but still I would get the flower of interest to me" (Roborovskii, N.M. Przhevalskii in 1878–1888, 1892)

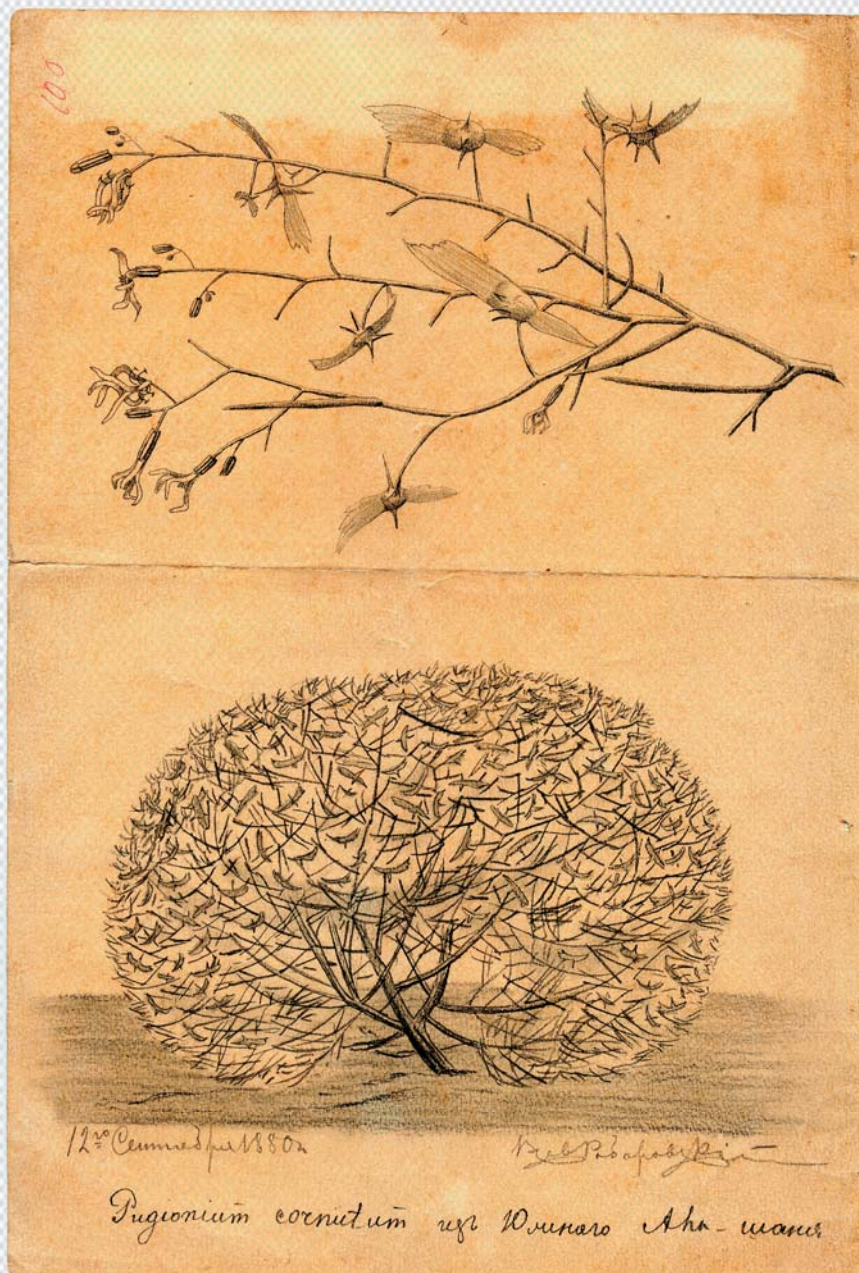


Medicinal rhubarb from the Mudzhik Mountains. The stems of this plant reach two meters in height, and its leaves grow more than a meter in length. 1880. Paper, pencil. *Ibid.*

Tamarisk. Representatives of the genus *Tamarix* are typical, often dominant plants in the deserts, semideserts, and steppes of southern Europe as well as Asia and Africa. 1880. Paper, pencil. RGS Archive

Roborovskii also collected ethnographic material, mainly by questioning local people with the help of an interpreter, showing great diligence, patience, and respect for his interlocutors.

Volya, as Przhevalskii affectionately called him, was drawing a lot. At the end of the expedition, he sent all his drawings (240 sheets in total) to Przhevalskii, who used the best of them for his summary book *From Zaisan through Hami to Tibet and the Upper Reaches of the Yellow River* (1883). This edition included 35 inserts with Roborovskii's drawings depicting ethnic types, dwellings, religious buildings, natural landscapes, etc.



“This new life left an indelible mark on me”

The expedition to Tibet once again brought glory to Przhevalskii. The mission mapped 4100 km of routes through previously unexplored territories and delivered large collections of plants and animals. Roborovskii's herbarium contained 12,000 specimens, including new species, which were subsequently named after him. In St. Petersburg, the merits of Przhevalskii's junior assistant were highly appreciated: the IRGS awarded him the Small Gold Medal, and the military department promoted him to second lieutenant and gave an annual lifelong pension of 200 rubles.

This first journey through Central Asia ultimately decided Roborovskii's fate. Several years later, in an official report to Przhevalskii, he would write: "This new and original life left an indelible mark on me: the life of our caravan; the work of the expedition in all its sections, in which I had to partially participate; the difficulties of crossing the desert sands and going through the passes in enormous mountain ridges; the dangers encountered [on our way], at first attracted and interested me, and then I became so close and accustomed to them that life without them seems to me now incomplete" (RGS Archive. Archive Ref.: Coll. 13 / Inv. 2 / Doc. 219 / Pg. 7, 7 rev.).

Pugionium cornutum
from the southern Alashan.
The bushes of *Pugionium cornutum*
reach 2 m in diameter. This desert
plant from the cruciferous family
was known before Przhevalskii's
expedition from two small branches
obtained in the 17th century
by the Russian academician Johann
G. Gmelin. 1880. Paper, pencil.
Smolensk State Museum
and Reserve

Since then all of Roborovskii's thoughts would forever be connected with Central Asia and new expeditions together with his beloved teacher and friend Psheva (N. M. Przhevalskii). It would be no exaggeration to say that Przhevalskii took the place of Roborovskii's father, who died when he was in the expedition (Vsevolod's mother had long since passed away).

After the celebrations in St. Petersburg, Roborovskii went to the village of Taraki, his parents' estate in the Tver province, where he took up household repairs: building a bathhouse, a bathroom, and a water closet, for which he brought all the necessary "mechanisms" from St. Petersburg. In his free time, he went hunting in the forest – he shot crows, kites, and other birds of prey, on which he carried out "experiments in stripping," apparently in order to train in dissection (*Ibid.*). He also went to visit his teacher at his new estate Sloboda on the shores of Lake Sapsho, a wonderful corner of virgin nature. At this time, Przhivalskii was also busy improving his estate, after which he sat down to write a report on his latest expedition.

In the spring of 1883, Przhevalskii submitted to the IRGS Council a project for the fourth Central Asian (second Tibetan) expedition, the main goal of which was to continue the exploration of Tibet and visit Lhasa, Przhevalskii's long-standing obsession. His assistants were Roborovskii and twenty-year-old Petr Kozlov. The expeditionary party comprised 21 more people, including the amateur entomologist M. Protopopov; the convoy consisted of four grenadiers from Moscow as well as Transbaikalian Cossacks and soldiers.

The expedition began in August of the same year in Kyakhta, a town on the Russian–Mongolian border. The expedition caravan consisted of 7 riding horses and 40 pack camels. A herd of sheep, purchased in Urga as live provisions, was trailing behind

и взетъ чегло, ми разскажат
градъ, не приеся преминавао рудни
тата. Итоки много, но вѣтъ е
многогласи и е побѣду на себе
графа Битъ и въ Бѣлѣ пирѣ, за
то хуликовъ, какъ времѣни,
непрѣдѣлно. Какъто своѣ отъ
пѣда, за гѣа гѣа, Битъ въ похѣ
по невидѣти ми поновѣао адо
тачѣта, ми камаириѣа похѣ,
а попомѣу и сѣмѣ за Битъ вѣрѣѣ
сѣ е вѣтъ и пѣаѣвѣа неѣѣѣ
гѣаѣа гѣаѣа въ гѣаѣа.
Какъ ми пѣаѣвѣа вѣаѣа въ
гѣаѣа, сѣаѣа пѣаѣаѣаѣа,
и гѣаѣа. Кѣаѣа ми пѣаѣа у
вѣаѣа и кѣаѣаѣа ми таѣа, а пѣаѣа
сѣаѣа пѣаѣаѣа по гѣа пѣа.
за въ гѣаѣа: гѣаѣа сѣ пѣаѣаѣа

Roborovskii's first letter to Przhevalskii, which he sent from the village of Taraki after their first joint expedition.
May 25, 1881. RGS Archive

the camels. Before setting out on the campaign, Przhevalskii addressed the party with the words: "Dear friends! The undertaking we are embarking upon today is a great endeavor. We go forth to explore the unknown Tibet and reveal its secrets to science. All of Russia is looking upon us with trust and hope. Let us spare neither strength nor health, nor even our lives if necessary, to fulfill our grand mission and serve both science and the glory of our beloved Fatherland" (Kozlov, 1947, p. 106).

On this new journey, Roborovskii collected herbarium and took photographs with a portable camera (*Rossiiskie ekspeditsii v Tsentral'nyu Aziyu...*, 2013). He photographed everything that caught his attention: typical landscape views, even if not at all spectacular; local

Mongolian child from Alashan. 1880. Paper, pencil.
Smolensk State Museum and Reserve

Tsaidam Mongol. 1880. Paper, pencil. *Ibid.*



people; not-so-photogenic vegetation of semidesert areas. Unfortunately, we would see neither Przhevalskii nor his companions in these photographs.

With the new expedition, Roborovskii again traversed the whole of Inner Asia – from Kyakhta to the sources of the Huang He and Yangtze Rivers in the northeastern part of the Tibetan plateau, located at an altitude of over 4000 m. Then Przhevalskii returned to Tsaidam (he visited this huge salt marsh for the fourth time), from where he moved on to Lake Lop Nur, which he discovered during his second (Lop Nur) expedition. There, the travelers collected information about the stay of Russian Old Believers in the mid-19th century, who were looking for the miraculous land of Belovodye. During the final stage of the expedition, they passed along the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert.

This journey became a severe test for all the participants, including due to clashes with bellicose mountain tribes of Tangut nomads, who robbed caravans passing through their lands. Przhevalskii called them "bandit tribes." It was after such a skirmish that Przhevalskii abandoned

During the Second Tibetan Expedition, in the first of the skirmishes with the local bellicose tribes in the upper reaches of the Yangtze, the Tanguts fired three times at Przhevalskii and Roborovskii but missed. The next time, the party was attacked by several hundred mounted Tanguts. According to Przhevalskii, "this horde was rushing towards us like a cloud, bloodthirsty and wild, while our small group – 14 people – stood in front of our bivouac silently, our rifles aimed, for there was now no other outcome for us except death or victory" (Przhevalskii, 1948, p. 119)

his original plan to visit Lhasa and decided to concentrate his efforts on exploring little-studied geographical regions such as the Tsaidam Plain.

Yet dangers awaited the travelers everywhere. Once, while ferrying a flock of sheep across a mountain river, Roborovskii almost drowned. He disappeared under the water twice, but a Cossack jumped into the river and save him.

During their stay in Khotan, the travelers had a conflict with the Chinese authorities, who sent soldiers to the camp to inspect their baggage. In retaliation, Przhevalskii sent to Khotan Roborovskii together with Kozlov and a group of Cossacks, who made a military demonstration. In order to intimidate the Chinese, they marched through the entire city, carrying guns with fixed bayonets and loudly singing Russian songs.

All these misadventures, however, were more than redeemed by the valuable finds and discoveries made by the travelers. The views of East Tibetan nature, too, filled their hearts with joy. The mountain valley of Tetung Gol especially charmed the three travelers. As Kozlov later recalled, "never and nowhere were

Tangut woman from Kuku Nur.
1880. Paper, pencil. *Ibid.*

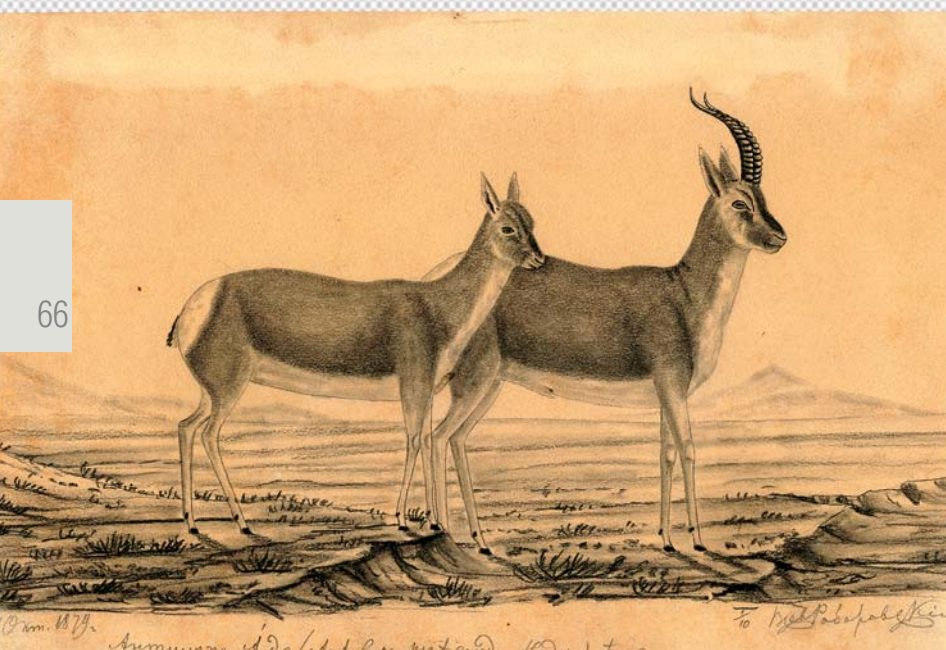
we so happy, so pure in heart, so receptive to everything beautiful and holy, as in these charming places, among forests and mountains, among wild rivers and streams, among the virgin nature" (Kozlov, 1947, p. 107).

The expedition ended on November 7, 1885, on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul. Roborovskii's main contribution was a huge (799 species) collection of plants from Mongolia, Gansu, and Northern Tibet, which was donated to the Imperial Botanical Gardens. He also brought back many of his photographs, which Przhevalskii used for his report "From Kyakhta to the sources of the Yellow River: exploration of the northern outskirts of Tibet and the route through Lop Nur along the Tarim basin" (1888).





С.-Петербург. — Выставка зоологических коллекций полковника Н. М. Пржевальского, из академии наук. (Рисов. А. Вандервер).



On February 2, 1887, an exhibition of Przhevalskii's zoological collections opened at St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. These magnificent collections, which, according to Academician Veselovsky, "were a museum in themselves," became a source of national pride for Russia

Tibetan gazelle. This little creature lives in the high valleys and deep gorges of the Nan Shan mountain system. 1879. Paper, pencil. Smolensk State Museum and Reserve



Przewalski's horse. This new mammal species was discovered by Przhevalskii's expedition in the Dzungarian desert. The wild horses can do without water for a long time, feeding on juicy plants growing on salt marshes. It is a rare species, and hunting them is extremely difficult. Przhevalskii managed to meet them only twice. 1879. Paper, pencil. *Ibid.*

Przhevalskii's last expedition

The two Tibetan expeditions led by Przhevalskii ultimately molded Roborovskii into a true field researcher and naturalist. The publication of Przhevalskii's reports supplemented by his drawings and photographs made Roborovskii's name famous both in Russia and abroad.

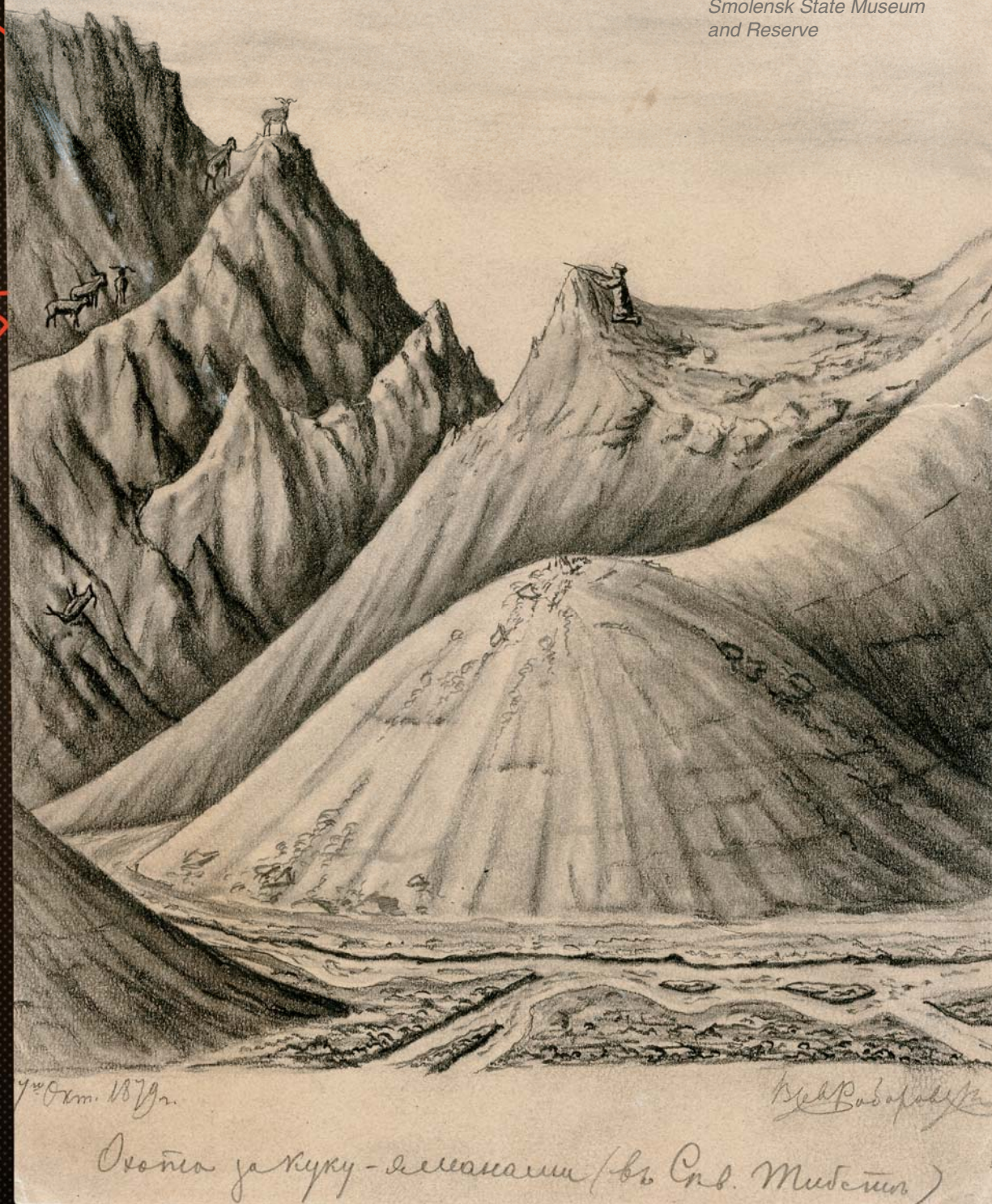
Roborovskii and Kozlov settled in St. Petersburg for a long time. Trying to fill the gaps in his education, Roborovskii regularly visited the Botanical Gardens on Aptekarsky Island and the Zoological Museum and consulted with leading specialists in Central Asian flora and fauna. On Przhevalskii's advice, he was preparing to enter the Nikolaev Academy with the General Staff. He failed the entrance exams, but upon Przhevalskii's petition, he was allowed to attend classes as an auditor, although there was no such a category of students at the Academy. Meanwhile, Kozlov entered the cadet school in St. Petersburg, after which he was assigned to the Yekaterinoslav Regiment.

In February 1887, the Academy of Sciences held an exhibition of Przhevalskii's zoological collections, which he delivered from his four expeditions to Central Asia. These collections included rare specimens of vertebrates, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish (279 exhibits in total). The items on display also featured traditional clothing of the indigenous inhabitants of Lop Nur, made from duck and swan skins and feathers. The exhibition was visited by the royal couple together with the heir to the throne, Tsarevich Nikolai Alexandrovich, and Przhevalskii himself, as well as Roborovskii and Kozlov, acted as a guide.

Roborovskii's sedge (*Carex roborowskii*). Herbarium in the Sector for Central and East Asia, A. E. Grabovskaya-Borodina (curator), Komarov Botanical Institute, Russian Academy of Sciences



Hunting for *kukuyamans* in Northern Tibet. This animal combines features of goats and sheep; no wonder its alternative name is blue sheep. 1879. Paper, pencil. Smolensk State Museum and Reserve



In the autumn of the same year, Przhevalskii proposed a plan for the fifth expedition to Central Asia, whose main goal was again the sky-high Tibet and the inaccessible yet alluring Lhasa. The project received the unconditional support of the IRGS Council and the General Staff; the treasury allocated 80,000 rubles for its implementation, which was greater by the factor of 15 than the amount granted for the first expedition. In addition to the research program, the expedition was to engage in political reconnaissance, i.e., “collect information regarding the current actions of the British through Sikkim to Tibet” (Russian State Military Historical Archive. Archive Ref.: Coll. 401 / Inv. 4/928 / Doc. 40 / Pg. 11). An interesting detail: in addition to the usual weapons, the expedition received, at Przhevalskii’s request, the recently invented Maxim machine gun, in case the travelers were again attacked by Tibetan nomads.

At the end of July 1888, Przhevalskii’s “expedition family” – the main participants in the future journey – gathered together in Sloboda. From there they went to Karakol towards Lake Issyk-Kul, the starting point

of the expedition. However, in Pishkek (modern Bishkek), Przhevalskii contracted typhoid fever after drinking raw water from River Chu while hunting pheasants. This disease took him to the grave within two weeks. Przhevalskii passed away on October 20, 1888. Before his death, he presented his two best hunting rifles to his faithful assistants and friends: Roborovskii and Kozlov.

Przhevalskii’s death struck his companions – “no one could control themselves... everyone was sobbing loudly, even the doctor,” recalled Roborovskii (1888, p. 279). The great traveler was buried on a high shore of Lake Issyk-Kul.

After Przhevalskii’s death, his orphaned expedition found itself in limbo. For a while, it was temporarily headed by Roborovskii, but he did not dare to take the place of his teacher and friend. The new head of the expedition was the famous traveler, Colonel Mikhail V. Pevtsov, an explorer of Dzungaria, Mongolia, and Northern China. At that time, he was acting as a record keeper at the Asian section of the General Staff.

Pevtsov was an explorer of a different type than Przhevalskii. While generally adhering to the reconnaissance method of exploring Central Asia, he moved from “linear” reconnaissance to “areal” one, which is why the surveyed territory increased substantially. This was achieved by additional reconnaissance “excursions” carried out independently by his assistants (Vinogradov, 2012, p. 81).

First of all, he reorganized the expedition party. Keeping Roborovskii and Kozlov as his closest assistants, he also took the budding geologist K. I. Bogdanovich. The escort was reduced by half because Pevtsov abandoned the idea of making the risky journey across the Tibetan plateau in the direction of Lhasa, as planned by Przhevalskii. He set for the expedition the task of exploring Kashgaria and the territory adjacent to the Kunlun Range, where he wanted to investigate the existing passages to Tibet.

Pevtsov’s expedition left Karakol on May 14, 1889, and ended a year and a half later in Zaisan. The travelers crossed Tien Shan, skirted the Taklamakan Desert to the west, and reached the base of Kunlun Range. There they conducted a series of studies over a vast territory, with Roborovskii making five independent excursions. As before, he was mainly engaged in botanical collections and took travel photographs, while Kozlov collected samples of local fauna and surveyed the area.

One of Roborovskii’s reconnaissance excursions proved to be especially risky, i.e., the one to Tibetan Plateau together with a noncommissioned officer M. Bessonov in May–June 1890. Recalling this mission, Roborovskii wrote: “At the overnight stop, our horses suffered from a strong wind with snow despite the felt blankets and shook as if in a fever. It was the first time I happened to be in such a wild and terrible desert and, lured by the desire to get



Female Antelope gygeni. 1884. Paper, pencil. RGS Archive



Tanguts of the Lun-chu tribe.
1880. Paper, pencil. Smolensk State
Museum and Reserve

along the entire route (Roborovskii also participated in this work), geological studies, and zoological/botanical collections. And, of course, there were expedition photographs taken by Roborovskii.

"One of the most remarkable and fruitful expeditions of modern times"

Upon his return to St. Petersburg, Roborovskii was promoted to staff captain, and a year later, the IRGS awarded him, along with Kozlov and Bogdanovich, the Przhevalskii Large Silver Medals, which was instituted by the society that same year.

Almost immediately, Roborovskii got down to processing the materials of the Tibetan expedition, primarily the herbarium; to this end, he began to regularly visit the Botanical Gardens. There he made friends with the gardener Aleksandr Lapin and his widowed daughter Lidiya Osipova. In early 1893, the young couple became engaged.

In the spring of the same year, the IRGS decided to send two new expeditions to Central Asia. One of them was headed by the famous traveler Grigori N. Potanin and the other, called the Expeditions of Przhevalskii's Companions, was led by Roborovskii himself, who had become by that time a reputed traveler and geographer. The two expeditions were to come together in the province of Sichuan, which borders on eastern Tibet and is famous for its luxurious

wild nature, a destination that Przhevalskii had dreamt of seeing but failed to reach.

Roborovskii's expedition was planned for two and a half years. Its party consisted of 13 people, including 2 assistants: Kozlov and V. F. Ladygin, who spoke the Chinese and Turkic languages. The travelers were accompanied by a caravan of animals: 25 pack and 10 spare camels, 15 horses, 5 rams, a goat, and 3 dogs. In addition to the usual instruments for route surveying and various measuring observations, Roborovskii received a set of instruments from the Main Physical Observatory for creating a meteorological station, including a barograph and a sundial. Przhevalskii's brothers also gave Roborovskii several of his geodetic instruments.

The expedition's tasks included exploring territories not yet covered by geographical reconnaissance: the Eastern (Chinese) Tien Shan, Lukchun Basin south of Turfan, and Nan Shan.

The party left the town of Karakol–Przhevalsk on June 15, 1893, after a memorial service at Przhevalskii's grave. The travelers moved east, in the direction of Big Yuldus, a huge plain in the central Tien Shan.

At the very first stop in the Heavenly Mountains, on the bank of the Aksu River, Roborovskii got enchanted by the panorama opening up before him: "Yes, we left behind the civilized life, full of the so-called conveniences, which are in fact restrictive, and embarked on a new life of freedom, full of enjoyments of nature, into whose embrace we lovingly surrendered ourselves for three years! We eagerly climbed rocks and clung to bushes and trees, looking for prey that would feed us; in cozy places we sat down to rest and enjoyed the views, inhaling with full chests the aromas of emerald meadows, variegated with wonderful flowers. Numerous charming little songbirds vied with one another to delight our ears with their cheerful, melodic songs, accompanied by the sound of a nearby stream, babbling over the stones and scattering splashes of diamonds onto the overhanging grass, which shimmered in the sun with all the colors of the rainbow" (Roborovskii, 1949, p. 42).

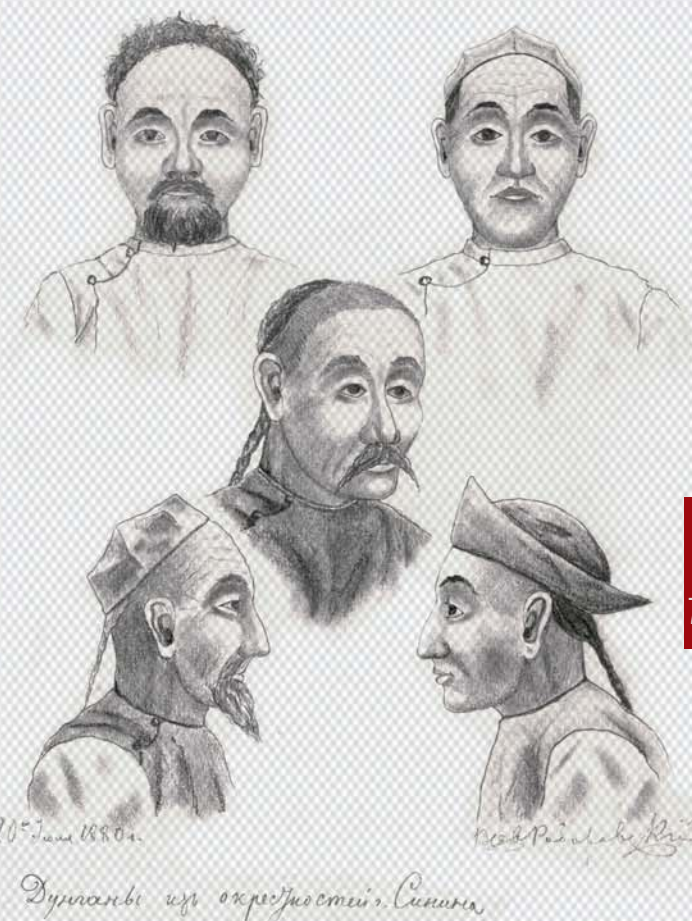
The studies continued in Turfan (Lukchun) Basin, a tectonic depression 200 km long and 70 km wide, located 154 m below sea level. In the village of Lukchun, Roborovskii set up a weather station in a small *fanza* (house) rented from a local resident. He turned the *fanza* itself into a warehouse and built on the roof a booth for meteorological observations, which he entrusted to Nikolai Shestakov, a specially trained Cossack.

This weather station worked successfully for two years. Shestakov was also tasked with collecting ethnographic material, seeds of local plants, and animal skins and skeletons. For him not to get bored, Roborovskii left him a young and very affectionate horse, Gegen, a gift from an old friend of Przhevalskii, and a big hunting dog, a "surprisingly smart" pointer Yashka, his "own friend."

In May 1894, the party headed for the western Nan Shan, a huge mountainous country consisting of several narrow parallel ridges stretching in a northwestern direction. Moving up the Sharagojin River (upper Danhe), the travelers stopped every hundred miles for 20–30 days in the "best places," where there were springs and food for the caravan animals. From these locations, Roborovskii and Kozlov made "swift" geographical reconnaissance missions in different directions. Ladygin stayed at the main bivouac to replenish the botanical and entomological collections and conduct systematic meteorological observations at a temporary station (Roborovskii, 1949, p. 190). Thus, in four months they managed to clarify the complex relief system of the western Nan Shan, its boundaries, and features of the mountain ridges.

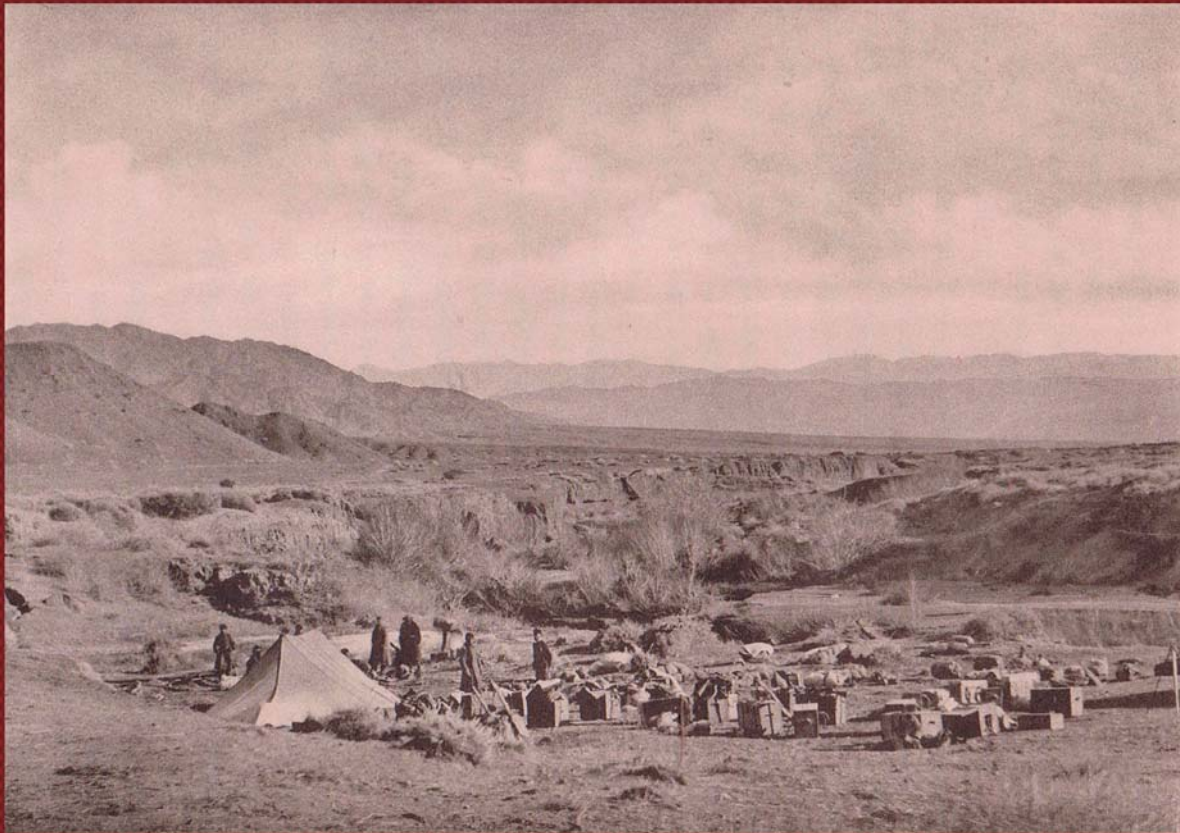
Summer horse rides along and across Nan Shan took place at a high altitude, where, according to Kozlov, "even in summer the frost reached 10°, and at night the travelers

Dungans from the vicinity of Xining.
1880. Paper, pencil. Ibid.



to know it closer, I might have gone further than I should have" (Roborovskii and Kozlov, 1896, pp. 40–41). While traveling back across the plateau, Bessonov's horse died unexpectedly, soon followed by the death of their only pack horse. The travelers had to abandon their luggage, put the bare necessities (warm clothes and a kettle) on Roborovskii's horse, and go on foot more than 40 km through rocky terrain until they reached the expedition's storage at the Syut-Bulak spring.

The results of this Tibetan expedition led by Pevtsov were indeed impressive: more than 10,000 km of route surveys, coordinate determinations for 50 locations, determinations of 350 mountain peaks, meteorological observations



Лагерь экспедиции на южном склоне Тянь-шаня по дороге из Токеуна в г. Урумчи.

got buried in snow several inches deep" (Kozlov, 1910, vol. 46, p. 358). In winter, the entire party suffered from diphtheria, and many felt constantly unwell. Roborovskii himself wrote about his illnesses: "While still on the ride, I fell ill with the running nose, which tormented me and prevented me from sleeping at night for more than half a month; the ulcers in my throat also got worse, and in addition, I had an upset stomach. All these illnesses exhausted and weakened my body so much that in the last few days I could barely sit out on the horse during the day's ride" (Roborovskii, 1949, p. 244).

Having left Nan Shan, the expedition headed towards the warm Sichuan (nowadays it hosts the world's largest panda reserve). Having climbed the high mountain range of Amne Machin, revered by Buddhists as "holy mountains," the party stopped near a pass beyond which opened up the Yellow River valley, inhabited by the warlike Tanguts.

It was here that the misfortune occurred that upset the expedition's plans: on January 28 (February 9), 1895, Roborovskii suffered a stroke; the right half of his body was paralyzed. As the head of the expedition, he had to give the order to turn back. This decision was painful for him: "I did

Expedition camp on the southern slope of Tien Shan on the road from Toksun to Urumqi

not allow the thought that this would delay our movement to Suchuan... The possibility of not fulfilling the task planned and cherished back in St. Petersburg caused silent tears, and my heart squeezed with unbearably pain. I felt I could not reconcile myself to this thought" (*Ibid.*, p. 307).

On February 3, the expedition was attacked by a large group of armed Tanguts. A shootout ensued, which turned into a real battle that lasted more than two hours. Fortunately, none of the travelers were hurt. Suffering from hardships, the expedition reached the village of Kurlyk, where there was a temporary warehouse.

Two months later, the expedition moved towards Lukchun. There, in the autumn, Roborovskii, who had somewhat recovered from his illness, conducted together with Kozlov a series of new studies. Between Turfan and Lukchun, the researchers discovered the ruins of the ancient Uyghur cities of Assa-Shari and Idygot-Shari and gathered a large collection of artifacts: ancient coins, various jewelry items, clay statues (*burkhans*), dishware



16. Апрель 1880 г.

Н. В. Павлов

*Rhododendron przewalskii.**Rhododendron przewalskii.*

This powerful flowering shrub is almost never found in Western botanical collections.

1880. Paper, pencil. RGS Archive

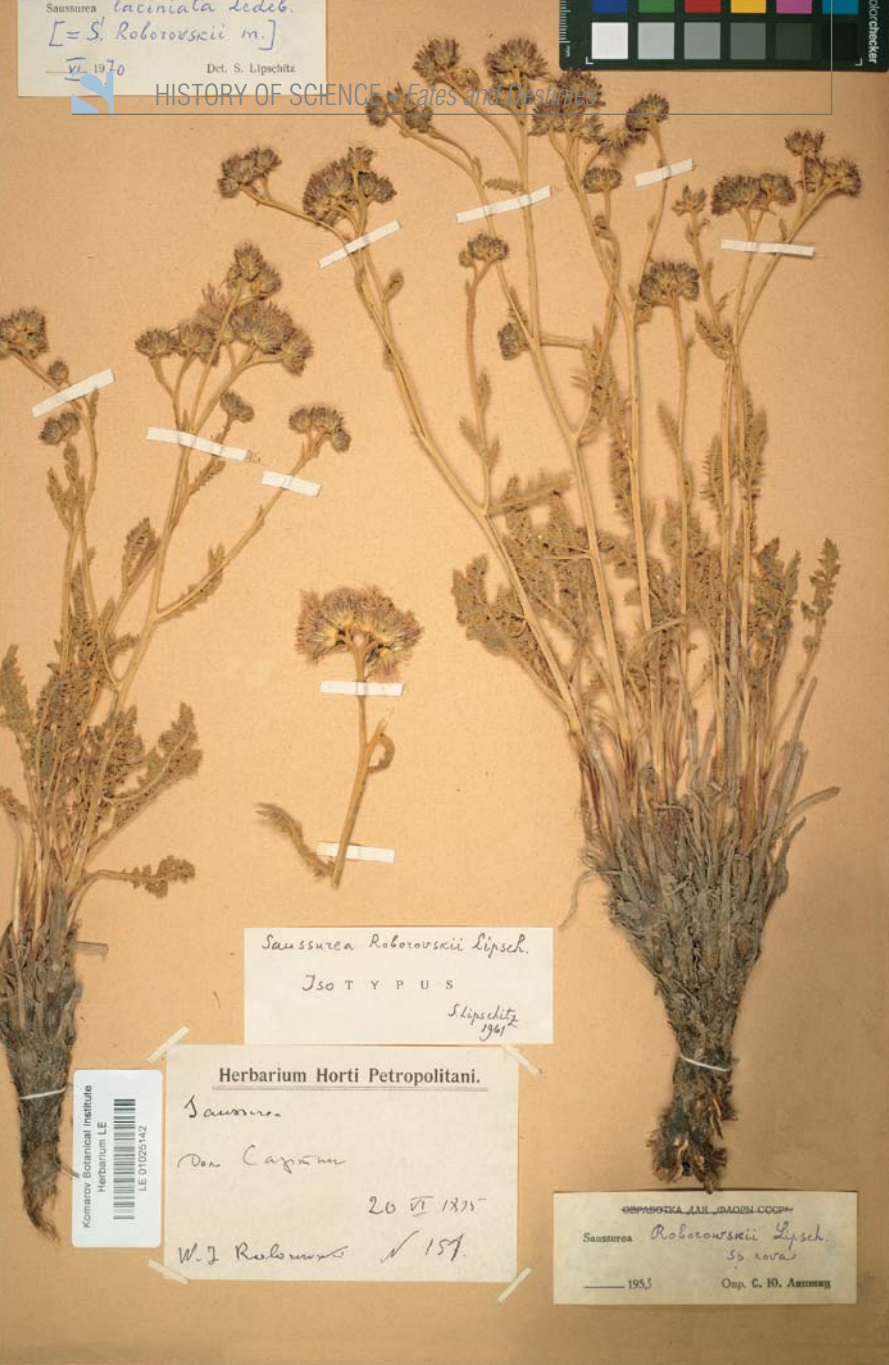


17. Апрель 1880 г.

Н. В. Павлов

Тангутская ель с красной опадающей корой.

Himalayan birch. The Tanguts used the brownish-red bark of this tree for packaging instead of paper.
1880. Paper, pencil. *Ibid.*



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a real sensation for archaeologists and orientalists.

Roborovskii and Kozlov returned to St. Petersburg on January 2, 1896. The results of the expedition exceeded all expectations although it failed to achieve its main goal, i. e., to reach Sichuan. They made a topographic survey of over 17,000 km as well as meteorological observations and altitude determinations; delivered a huge zoological collection, including 250 skins and 30 skeletons of rare animals, and a botanical herbarium of 1300 species (Grigoriev, 1898). In addition, the expedition also obtained most valuable landscape descriptions as well as ethnographic and archaeological materials.

The IRGS learned secretary A.V. Grigoriev called this endeavor “one of the most remarkable and fruitful expeditions of modern times” (*Ibid.*, p. 15). On January 13, 1896, Roborovskii and Kozlov were introduced to Nicholas II. That same day, the emperor personally promoted Roborovskii to captain, and a year later the IRGS awarded him the Great Constantine Medal, the society’s highest award.

Last years of Colonel Roborovskii

Roborovskii settled in St. Petersburg for several months, where he received medical treatment and sorted out his collections. But he spent most of his time in the company of his fiancée, preparing for the wedding. In a letter he wrote: “...I will not be able to finally arrange my future happiness until autumn. But I still consider myself lucky that I now have a lot of time to visit Lidiya Aleksandrovna, where I feel very well and forget all my infirmities” (RGS Archive, Archive Ref.: Coll. 18 / Inv. 3 / Doc. 89 / Pg. 33 rev.).

Roborovskii, however, lacked the strength to write a long report on his journey. On the doctors’ advice, he went to a German spa town in Schwarzwald – this was his first trip to Western Europe. In Berlin, he visited both the famous zoo and the botanical gardens, where he saw North American cacti known as peyote, from which the Aztecs prepared a special drink. Roborovskii first learned about this sacred cactus from Przhevalskii, who until his last days dreamed of finding it in Sichuan.

After their wedding, the Roborovskies traveled to Crimea and the North Caucasus. Thanks to this trip, the warm family atmosphere, and the medical treatment, Roborovskii’s condition improved markedly and he began writing about his journey. But the work progress was still very slow.

According to recollections left by D. K. Ivanov, an employee at a cartographic factory, who often met with Vsevolod Invanovich in 1898–1899, “despite his illness, Roborovskii was still slim at that time; his tall stature and proportional build spoke of natural strength and robustness of his body. His face with light brown hair and a beard, also light brown, was sickly yet valiant and handsome.

“Vsevolod Ivanovich’s simple, affable, and naturally cheerful and witty disposition immediately endeared him to others. Around him there were always circles of listeners enchanted by his words, whom he infected with his energy and passion for travel and his great love for nature. His thoughts and words were always imbued with a sense of admiration for his teacher N. M. Przhevalskii, to whose precepts he was infinitely devoted” (*quoted from*: Yusov, 1949, p. 26).

Roborovskii’s report was published by the IRGS in three volumes in 1899–1900. In 1901, Roborovskii was promoted to lieutenant colonel, but two years later he was discharged from service “due to illness” and



A calf of a wild Tibetan yak described by Przhevalskii in 1883. 1884. Paper, pencil. *Ibid.*

awarded the rank of colonel, a uniform, and a pension. His illness unexpectedly returned and worsened sharply, turning him into an invalid: he could not move independently and spoke with difficulty.

Roborovskii died on July 23, 1910, from a stroke in his estate Taraki and was buried nearby, at the cemetery in the village of Ovsishche. The coffin was accompanied to the cemetery only by a small procession of local landowners and peasants, perhaps because his colleagues in St. Petersburg did not immediately learn of Roborovskii’s death.

All that we know about Roborovskii’s widow and daughter is that they both died in Leningrad in the terrible years of the blockade during World War II. Nowadays, there are none of his living descendants left in Russia (Vinogradov, 2012, p. 126).

Roborovskii lived a truly heroic life, dedicating himself entirely to serving science. This brave traveler and explorer of the nature and peoples of Central Asia made a noticeable contribution to geography, cartography, meteorology, zoology, and botany. Today, 28 genera of plants and 10 genera and species of animals bear his name, as well as one of the glaciers of Taby-Bogdo-Ola Range in the Mongolian Altai near the Russian border.

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