

Terrorism on Elbrus

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British and Russian media blamed the attacks on Islamic/Chechen militants. The Russian Interior Ministry linked this attack with others on local police officers, military personnel, judges and prosecutors and an attack, the summer before, on the Baksan Hydropower Plant by Chechen militants. The British newspaper, *The Guardian*, connected the attacks with a promise by Doku Umarov, the insurgents' Chechen leader to give Russia, "a year of blood and tears." Two weeks prior, Umarov orchestrated the Domodedovo Airport bombing that killed 36 people.

As Backcountry probed deeper into the nature of the attacks, however, we received a maze of rumors and alternate theories. Few people were willing to go on the record, but many of the skiers and climbers we talked to, people intimately familiar with the region, dismissed the notion that the 2011 attacks were motivated by ethnic or political strife. Instead our sources cited the economy and recent development in the area as the cause of the attacks. The stories we heard were of separate incidents, none related to ethnic or political terrorism. In one version of the events the bombed gondolas were not the work of religious extremists but that of disgruntled mountain workers being forced out of their jobs by big business. When asked why locals would attack their own source of income our source cited an attitude of "if I can't work here, neither will anyone else." Backcountry was also told that the shootings were a mob-related incident, possibly even a tragic case of mistaken identity. Another cynical source wrote that one only needed to follow the money to find those responsible. His version of events blames the security industry itself for creating the situation.

The attacks occurred just two weeks after then Russian Federation President Dmitry Medvedev unveiled a 15 billion dollar plan to establish five ski resorts in the war-torn Caucasus Mountains, which guard the border between Russia and Georgia. Additionally, development for the 2014 Winter Olympics, slated to take place in Sochi, Russia, is in full swing less than 250km to the west.

In response to the February 2011 attacks, former President Medvedev launched a fierce anti-terrorist campaign in the Caucasus. Military strikes canvassed the valleys. Regional governor Alexander Khloponin ordered a halt on tourists' movement in the area, claiming that the government needed to "clean up the territory" and only then "explain and show to everyone that it is safe in the Caucasus." A strong military presence covered the area and non-residents were not allowed to pass certain checkpoints. The Baksan Valley, which surrounds the southern aspect of Elbrus, was closed off to all visitors.

The majority of Mount Elbrus's thousands of yearly visitors use local guides. The most popular southern approach is often completed in as few as seven days, with chair lifts and snow cats carrying skiers and climbers as high as 4600m, depending on snow conditions. Three successive chairlifts constitute the beginning of this route: the second of the three, between stations Stary Krugozor and Mir, was bombed. These moderate and popular slopes—the bread and butter of local companies' Elbrus tours—were unreachable all of 2011 because of the Baksan valley closure.

In a typical season, the routes and slopes on the north and west aspects are far less traveled than those from the Baksan valley. (See "A Crux Mistake" in the October issue of Backcountry for the story of an accidental descent down the north face.) These routes are more challenging and take more time to ascend. They lack the permanent facilities, like the barrel huts and the "world's nastiest outhouse" (so dubbed by *Outside* in 1993), that are encountered to the south. With the main route of ascent closed for the entire 2011 season, skiers and climbers were forced onto the more technically demanding and less frequented northern and western aspects of Elbrus. Military checkpoints sprouted along access roads to the northern base camp, enforcing inconsistent access rules. "Checkpoints on the north side were pretty much for show," writes Gleb Myasnikov, a guide who lives in the area. "One could go around the closed area on basic roads and it was not even a violation." Some companies directed their groups on a 90km detour around checkpoints. Though sometimes a cash payment allowed groups to pass by the checkpoints completely.

By August 2011, the northern route was officially opened and military checkpoints disbanded. The southern route was declared open on October 28, 2011. Though federal and local government promises no more lengthy access closures, many companies advise flexibility in route choice since the situation may change unpredictably. "This is the Caucasus; something is always happening," writes Myasnikov, whose company has not planned any seven-day trips for the 2012 season. Instead they have opted for longer trips which give groups the flexibility to choose either the south or north route depending on access conditions.

The international outfits that Backcountry spoke with while researching this story reported that all of their trips to Elbrus were complete successes, and that whatever trouble was caused in 2011 it had been, "cleaned it up in traditional Russian style," said one.

At least one local was inclined to give a different report, however. "The area is still dangerous may be even more than before...due to the yearlong economic blockade, the local people became more desperate and chance of being robbed or killed for the reason of robbery is very obvious," writes Alex Trubachev, a guide based in Moscow whose company temporarily halted their Elbrus tours. "Locals have lost everything—two seasons of nothing," agrees Myasnikov. The region is not a stranger to conflict. Ethnic, religious and political tension dominate the history of the Caucasus; six separate wars have plagued the area since 1988. Elbrus itself has been a platform for political messages many times before.

In 1929, the burgeoning Soviet government founded an official mountaineering section of their tourism bureau, and Elbrus became the star of their programs. Over the next decades, the government sponsored mountaineering camps (alp'lageri) and training programs in all of the Soviet Union's mountain ranges to give citizens access to the mountains, snow, and the training to travel along the heights. The Elbrus region hosted the first alp'lageri, built in 1929, and many Soviet citizens visited each year. With its moderate, non-technical slopes, it was reasonable for beginners to reach the summit after a brief training period—and its summit was the tallest on the continent. With every successful summit of Elbrus, Soviet citizens were standing on the top of Europe, and it was the Soviet government that made their ascents possible. The government portrayed each successful climb as a testament to the opportunities and enrichment that were offered to its citizens.

The Soviet program focused on getting as many people involved in mountain sports as possible, a manifestation of the government's Communist ideals. This meant that not only did many people visit the mountain camps each summer, but many people would participate in-group ascents as well. For example, a 1935 climb of Elbrus saw 638 farmers reach the summit of Elbrus in a literal display of the heights that the lowly proletariat could reach with the support of their new government.

Massive group outings became the staple on Elbrus, with a record being set in 1960 when an enormous party of 1,395 people ascended the mountain in honor of Vladimir Lenin's 90th birthday. The party placed a bust of Lenin on the summit (now only the concrete base remains).

During World War II, Elbrus invited international political statements. The German Gebirgsjaeger Unit, an elite mountain-warfare military division, left a Nazi flag on the summit in the summer of 1942. No gunfights occurred on the slopes of the mountain then, and anecdotes report that Hitler was furious with the unit for wasting their time on such a stunt. But the

lure of a flag on the highest mountain in Europe was unavoidable. After German forces left the area in January 1943, the Soviet army's first action in the Caucasus was to send a military group to the summit of the mountain to replace the Swastika with the Hammer-and-Sickle.

But these historical demonstrations on Elbrus were not violent. And that's what changed in the February 2011 attacks on Elbrus. "2011 was the first time that tourists became victims," writes Myasnikov. "Understand—Elbrus is a ski resort, not a war zone...but there are rebels in the Caucasus and to them, this is just their business. Nothing personal. And that may never change."

--Contributed by Casey O'Malley

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