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**The Dyatlov Pass Incident**

Everybody loves mysteries. From fictional works such as *Gone Girl* to real-life mysteries such as the Bermuda Triangle, the mystery genre remains as one of the most popular genres in the world of entertainment. The thrill of suspense and the sheer satisfaction of connecting all the dots and pieces to produce a bigger picture is widely enjoyed by people. However, there are some mysteries that until now remains unsolved. The mystery regarding London’s infamous Jack the Ripper’s identity is an example of a mystery that has yet to be solved to this day. The Voynich manuscript, a codex filled with illustrations of plants, animals, and zodiac symbols written in a hitherto undecipherable writing system, is another example of a mystery left unsolved (Blumberg, 2016). This is a tale of yet another mystery that has yet to be solved. This is the story of the Dyatlov Pass incident.

The Dyatlov Pass incident was an incident whereby nine Russian hikers died at Kholat Syakhl, a mountain in the northern Ural region of Russia, during a mountaineering expedition. Diaries uncovered from the incident site contained entries that approximated the date of the incident to be between 1-2 February 1959 (Dyatlov group diary, n.d.). The expedition was set on 23 January 1959 with the end goal being to reach Otorten, a mountain roughly 10 kilometers north where the site of the incident took place to earn a Grade III hiking certificate which at the time was the highest level of certification available (Eichar, 2013). This means that all 9 hikers were experienced Grade II hikers who were no strangers to the rough terrain and atmosphere. Eichar stated that the team initially consisted of 10 members, 9 of whom were students of Urals Polytechnic Institute along with a sports instructor before one of the students pulled out of the expedition team due to joint pain thus leaving the team with a total of 9 members. The team was led by Igor Dyatlov, an engineering student, and the trip was planned to take around 3 weeks (Ash, 2019). Igor was to report to a nearby sports club as soon as his team was safely back at their base by mid of February. At first, nobody suspected a thing when the team did not make it in time due to the harsh winter condition. According to Ash, by February 20, families of the team members got worried and thus the university issued a search party composing of student volunteers to look for the missing hikers. Upon arriving at mount Kholat Syakhl, the search party found and followed ski tracks left by the original expedition team. These tracks led the search party to a tent covered in snow. Inside the tent were blankets and rucksacks along with a pile of boots lying in one corner. Documents such as the team’s route map and official papers were also present on the site. What perplexed the search party was the fact that the tent seemed to have been cut open from the inside as if the expedition team was trying to get out. The search party also found tracks of frozen bare footprints on the outside of the tent that continued for 5-10 meters which were extremely odd considering the freezing temperature outside. Over the next few months, the search party was able to uncover bodies of the original team member along the mountain slope yet these bodies only serve to add more questions to the table. Several of the bodies were found semi-clothed, some had their chest and skull crushed, two of them had missing eyes, one had a missing tongue, and some had traces of radioactivity (Specktor, 2021).

After the case was exposed to the general public, there were numerous theories on what had happened to the expedition team. Perhaps the most plausible theory now is that an avalanche had struck the site of their tent. Initially, this theory was heavily revoked due to numerous reasons. Firstly, the team’s encampment site was on a slope seemingly too mild to cause an avalanche. The recovered diaries also did not mention any form of snowfall which could have increased the weight of the snow burden. Another flaw in this theory is that the injuries sustained by the expedition team, especially the crushed chest and skull, are atypical for an avalanche as victims of avalanches typically dies due to asphyxiation (Andrews, n.d.). However, a group of researchers led by Alexander Puzrin, a geotechnical engineer at ETH Zurich, and Johan Gaume, head of the Snow Avalanche Simulation Laboratory at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne, have created a simulation demonstrating how the avalanche theory can hold up against the aforementioned inconsistencies. According to Gaume, the undulating topography on mount Kholat Syakhl deceived the eyes of the search party who initially made the report. On closer inspection, the actual angle of the slope was steep enough to have caused an avalanche. Next, inconsistencies regarding the lack of snow burden could be explained through the diary entries. There were entries describing the presence of very strong winds on the 1st of February, which coincidentally was the approximated date of the incident. Lastly, regarding the skull and chest injuries, the research team concluded that the incident must have happened when some of the hikers were lying flat on their backs as they slept, thus crushing their ribs and skull as the snow rushed onto their tent (Specktor, 2021). This also explains the cut made on the inside of the tent as the hikers hastily attempt to escape their flattened tent and made their way out barefoot into the freezing wilderness.

With evidence such as radioactivity, holes present in the tent, and a missing tongue, other much wilder theories were bound to appear. There were rumors regarding UFO sightings around the area and that everything that happened to the expedition team can simply be explained by “supernatural forces”. Lev Ivanov, the lead investigator on the 1959 Dyatlov inquiry, stated that the expedition team was killed by a “heat ray or strong energy that is completely unknown to us”. Other wild theories include the involvement of the military in the form of the KGB and CIA, a nearby rocket test dropping debris onto their tent, the involvement of an unexplainable weapon coined the “vacuum bomb”, and the fact that the surname of the deputy engineer of Chernobyl nuclear power plant was identical to Igor Dyatlov was no mere happenstance (Luhn, 2020). Luhn also mentioned that Yuri Yudin, the 10th member of the original expedition team and the sole survivor of the incident, stated himself that he believed the death of his friends was caused by them seeing something that they should not have seen and thus were forced at gunpoint to create a scene so discombobulated as to throw off investigators before being left to die. Lastly, Luhn stated that Dyatlov’s parents were convinced that the military was involved in this incident.

At the end of the day, all these theories are, after all, just theories. There is no possible way to prove what exactly happened to the expedition team in their tent. As of now, the tomb of all 9 hikers who died in this incident can be found at Mikhajlov Cemetery in Yekaterinburg (Zurich, 2021). What exactly happened to Igor Dyatlov and his team on that cold winter night of 1959? This mystery will remain unsolved.

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