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Title	Eric Shipton's Secret History
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/20285/">https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/20285/</a>
DOI	
Date	2017
Citation	Westaway, Jonathan (2017) Eric Shipton's Secret History. The Alpine Journal 2017, 121. pp. 215-229. ISSN 0956930964
Creators	Westaway, Jonathan

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.

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JONATHAN WESTAWAY

## Eric Shipton's Secret History



Peaks north-east of Zug Shaksgam from the point reached by Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman. (*All images courtesy of the Shipton family*)

Eric Shipton was notoriously circumspect about many aspects of his life and there is much that remains unexplained about his career and his motivations. Mountain travel books like *Mountains of Tartary* (1950) tell us next to nothing about the political context of his time as consul-general in Kashgar, Xinjiang in the years 1940-2 and 1946-8, indeed the text serves quite deliberately to deceive. Enmeshed in the apparatus of the British Imperial security state in Chinese Central Asia, Shipton became adept at covering his tracks by directing his readers' attention elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of the Shipton story is a missing decade. Leaving Kashgar early in 1942 Shipton travelled through Soviet Central Asia, eventually ending up working for the Foreign Office as a consular official in Iran in March 1943, then under Allied-Soviet occupation. In the few lines he ever wrote about this 20-month period, he described his job as that of an agricultural adviser, a role he was singularly unqualified for. In his biography of Shipton, Peter Steele asserts that he was almost certainly undertaking

1. J Westaway, 'That Undisclosed World: Eric Shipton's *Mountains of Tartary* (1950)', *Studies in Travel Writing special issue on Xinjiang*, vol 18 (4), 2014, pp357-73.

intelligence work in Iran.<sup>2</sup> Leaving Iran in December 1944, by March 1945 he was working for the War Office as an attaché with the British Military Mission in Hungary. In May 1946 he was posted to Vienna working for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. After a second spell in Kashgar, Shipton accepted the Foreign Office offer of the post of consul-general in Kunming, Yunnan, one of the last anti-Communist bridgeheads in Nationalist China, a post he held from the summer of 1949 until expelled by the Chinese communists in the summer of 1951.

In his early thirties at the start of the Second World War, Shipton's wartime career is highly unusual. Far from joining the army in India or returning to England to enlist, he spent the war years and the start of the Cold War working respectively for the External Affairs Department of the Government of India, the Foreign Office, the War Office and the United Nations, always in geographical locations immediately adjacent to Soviet or Chinese communist spheres of influence. The Kashgar consulate was of prime geostrategic importance to the defence of British Imperial India, situated at the junction of the Soviet, Chinese and British empires. His posting was highly prized and usually held by Indian Army officers seconded to the political branch of the Government of India which ran the Kashgar consulate, or held by career civil servants, the 'heaven born' of the Indian Civil Service. The question of how Shipton landed this prize posting remains unanswered but it undoubtedly has a lot to do with his growing entanglement with the agencies of the British imperial security state in India from the mid-1930s, in particular his work with the Survey of India.

The Survey of India's role in compiling geographical intelligence on the un-demarcated border with Chinese Xinjiang had begun to assume a greater geostrategic significance in the mid-1930s due to a number of internal and external factors. Having ceded many government ministries to Indian National Congress officials under the 1935 Government of India Act, British imperial rule became increasingly concerned with the security of India's borders, fuelled by 'tribal' and Islamist insurrections in the North-West Frontier Province and the growing Soviet influence in Xinjiang. The increasingly problematized border zone of British India was also mountain frontier, running in a long arc from the Suleiman Mountains on the borders of Afghanistan, through the Karakoram and the main Himalaya ranges, to modern day Arunachal Pradesh and the Chittagong Hills on the borders of Burma in the east. This mountain frontier was a tightly controlled political zone. Various methods were used to control local populations and limit free movement within this zone. Both the North-West Frontier Province and the North-East Frontier Agency were extraterritorial political agencies where separate tribal law prevailed. Governed by political officers, the indigenous populations were kept in check by tribal levies and periodic punishment campaigns by the Frontier Force. An Inner Line of Control stretched along the entire frontier, outsiders requiring official permission to cross.

2. P Steele, *Eric Shipton: Everest and Beyond*, London, Constable, 1998, pp118-23.

A number of client states also secured the mountain frontier. Nepal remained nominally independent, its borders closed to outsiders, in return for allowing the British Army of India to recruit to Gurkha regiments. Access to both Everest via Tibet and to the Karakoram via the Gilgit road was through nominally independent princely states that were politically controlled by the British under a system of diarchy. North of Darjeeling, Sikkim was controlled by a British political officer with British sepoy's periodically deployed deep into Tibet at Gyantse to protect the trade delegation there. The Karakoram were approached via Kashmir, British political interests being watched over by the British resident in Srinagar. No one gained access to travel in these regions without political oversight and clearance and by the mid-1930s there was a tightening of control. By 1936 the British had become so concerned about the potential for Soviet infiltration from Xinjiang that they ended the system of diarchy in the Kashmiri tribute state of Gilgit and assumed direct rule.

The year 1936 also seems to represent something of a turning point for Eric Shipton. The 1936 Everest expedition, a complete failure, had only served to heighten his disillusion with large-scale expeditions. In July of that year Shipton was planning on lecturing in Simla and hoping to interview the viceroy and get him interested in his plans for exploration in Kashmir when a request came through from the Survey of India.<sup>3</sup> Major Gordon Osmaston of the Survey had spent the early part of 1936 surveying the Gangotri and Chaturangi glaciers in the northern Tehri Garhwal when he was ordered by the surveyor-general to extend the survey to the east and include the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. In his privately published memoirs, Gordon Osmaston records that 'knowing that Shipton had been exploring round Everest, and was still in India, I wrote to him, asking if he would come and act as my guide to Nanda Devi.'<sup>4</sup> This seemingly informal request represented an extraordinary opportunity for Shipton. In many ways the Survey of India had already pioneered the model of lightweight expeditionary travel that Shipton had been increasingly advocating.<sup>5</sup> It put him in the pay of the Government of India and gave him unprecedented access to key individuals, such as the surveyor-general, Brigadier H J Couchman. It presented the possibility that he might gain access to the restricted mountain border zones of the Karakoram, where mountaineering skills, exploration and survey work were still required to fill in all of the blanks on the map. In 1936 Shipton was forced to make choices, always with his eye on the bigger prize. Unable to both go to Everest and also join Bill Tilman on the British-American Himalayan Expedition to climb Nanda Devi, Shipton chose Everest. Ascending the Rishi gorge on his way to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary with Osmaston, Shipton met members of the successful Houston party returning from Nanda Devi. Shipton would have had to console

3. J Perrin, *Shipton and Tilman: The Great Decade of Himalayan Exploration* London, 2013, p267.

4. G Osmaston, *Memoirs of Surveying in India 1919-1939*, T G Osmaston (ed), Windermere, 2005, p32.

5. K Mason, *Abode of Snow: A History of Himalayan Exploration and Mountaineering* London, Rupert Hart-David, 1955.

himself on missing out on the first ascent of Nanda Devi with the thought that he had set out on a course of action that would facilitate his ready access to restricted mountain zones beyond the Inner Line in northern Kashmir. That this was already uppermost in Shipton's plans in the summer of 1936 becomes immediately apparent in a set of documents from the former India Office Library, now held at the British Library in London.

In undertaking government survey work, Shipton became the subject of attention of the British imperial security state, the External Affairs Department of the Government of India, which opened a 'Travellers' file on him in 1936, maintaining it until 1944.<sup>6</sup> In many ways there is nothing unusual in this. All significant individuals who received permission to travel beyond the Inner Line of Control or to cross into Central Asia or Tibet had Travellers files held on them, containing the records of the complex diplomatic, political and security arrangements generated by all requests to traverse the frontier zone. Shipton's Travellers file starts on 30 July 1936 with the copy of a letter sent from K P S Menon<sup>7</sup>, additional deputy secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department (subsequently the External Affairs Department), to the British Resident in Kashmir. Menon notes that:

*I am directed to say that Mr Eric Shipton who was a member of the Mount Everest Expedition this year wishes to come out again next spring to explore the country between Shimshal (Hunza) and the Shaksgam (Leh). The Government of India are aware that while agreeing to the German expedition to Nanga Parbat the Kashmir Darbar expressed the hope that no other expedition would be allowed to visit the state in 1937. Mr Shipton, however, will be accompanied by only one European and four porters whom he proposes to take with him from Darjeeling.*

Aware of the Kashmiri government's concerns about the economically destabilising effects of large expeditions on food prices and labour costs, Menon went on to assert that Shipton has pointed out that his expedition will not be a large expedition like the Visser's Netherlands-Karakoram Expedition of 1929-30 and that Shipton will bring his own food from the plains, only requiring twenty 'coolies' to carry to base camp. On 2 September 1936 the British resident in Srinagar replied that the Kashmiri Durbar had no objection to Shipton's visit, writing again on the 12 September to indicate that the political agent in Gilgit had also intimated he had no objection to 'Mr Eric Shipton's proposed expedition' and that Shipton should get in touch with the agent 'direct over details'.

These letters are evidence of the complex political interactions necessary to gain expeditionary knowledge and the importance of having friends in high places. They also suggest Shipton's philosophy of lightweight exploration was just as much a political necessity as an ethical standpoint.

6. 'Travellers: Northern Frontier Tibet. Mr Eric Shipton', British Library, IOR/L/PS/12/4324.

7. 'K P S Menon (senior)', [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K.\\_P.\\_S.\\_Menon\\_\(senior\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K._P._S._Menon_(senior)), [Accessed 20.05.17]

The colossal impact of large-scale expeditions, with men absent at harvest time and the inevitable toll of porter deaths, all meant that the authorities were extremely reluctant to provide access to multiple large-scale expeditions in any one year in economically and environmentally fragile mountain regions. The authorities were also at pains to point out to Shipton the politically sensitive nature of the border region. On 22 September 1936, Menon wrote to Shipton from Simla. With reference to their conversation of 28 July 1936, Menon informed him that permission had been granted 'to your proposed visit to Shingshal (Hunza) and the Shaksgam (Leh) in 1937', going on to point out that

*You are doubtless aware that the Indian frontier in this area is un-demarcated. The Chinese authorities should not be approached for passports unless, for any unforeseen reason, you wish to travel beyond the mountain regions into undisputed Chinese territory, and in that case, your subsequent journey should not be connected with your exploratory activities in the Karakoram.*

Shipton's response survives in a series of Kashmiri government telegrams and letters forwarded to the External Affairs Department by the British resident in Srinagar on 30 April 1937. A copy of a letter from Shipton, dated 5 March 1937, Royal Geographical Society, London, starts:

*Thank you very much for your letter and the extracts from "Notes for Visitors to Kashmir". I did not write before as my plans were somewhat vague. When I got home I was asked to take with me to the Karakoram (1) Michael Spender, who has the post here of research assistant, and (2) John Auden of the Geological Survey, Calcutta ...*

*Brigadier Couchman, surveyor general of India, has very kindly taken an interest in the project and I hope to receive financial assistance from his department ...*

*We will be a party of four Europeans and seven Sherpa porters from Darjeeling. Owing to this increase I have decided to tackle the work from a base to the north of the Baltoro Glacier instead of going to the Shaksgam via Hunza and Shingshal. In this way we will not encounter any people after leaving Askole (to be reached via Dras and Skardu) until we return. We will not go north into Chinese territory ...*

*We will require about 40 coolies (or 20 animals) to transport our equipment from Srinagar to Askole, and we will require about the same number for a week or so after leaving Askole after which we will be self-supporting ...*

*I hope this change of plan meets with your approval. I am sorry I did not communicate with you sooner, but it was some time before I was in the position to make final decisions about my plan ...*

*The 40 porter loads which I have referred to include about 20 maunds of coolie food which I propose to take from Srinagar as I do not suppose that it will be available at Skardu or Askole ...*

*PS The object[s] of this trip are purely scientific and it will receive no newspaper publicity.*



Having changed his itinerary, increased the number of European expedition members, added three more Sherpas to the proposed party and raised the consequent porter loads required, Shipton is at pains in this letter to reassure the British resident in Srinagar that he will address all the known government concerns. He offered to supply the 'coolie' food from Srinagar rather than rely on local resources on the Gilgit road, reminds the resident of the support from the surveyor general and addressed political concerns by indicating that there would not be any undue publicity that might come to the attention of the Chinese authorities. Above all, Shipton promised not to go north into Chinese territory. All of these changes had to be approved by the Kashmiri government, the prime minister of Jammu and Kashmir sending a telegram to the British resident, Kashmir dated 23 April 1937 referencing

*Your demi-official letter D.1173, April seventh, Mr Shipton's expedition His Highness Government have approved change in composition of party and have issued necessary instructions to local revenue officers to arrange for requisite transport on payment.*

Immediately following this in the archive is a handwritten letter, addressed to 'Sir F Stewart' from the India Office in London. It notes:

*The frontier is un-demarcated in the neighbourhood of the Shaksgam. I understand we would probably claim the valley up to its northern watershed, but not beyond. Mr Shipton said he would not go north 'into Chinese territory'.*

This letter is stark evidence of British territorial 'maximal-ism' at the time, which went hand-in-hand with concerns for border security. Most British administrators in India would have considered the Karakoram watershed the de facto border, although some British maps at the time pressed the case for the northern border of Jammu and Kashmir extending to the Yarkand river. Despite his assurances to the contrary, by crossing the Aghil Pass in 1937, Shipton crossed the northern watershed of the Shaksgam river and surveyed down to the banks of the Yarkand river, clearly beyond the limits set by the India Office in London. This would have been seen as an unauthorised infringement of Chinese territory by the Chinese authorities in Urumchi and Peking. Whilst it was highly unlikely that Shipton, Tilman and Auden would have encountered a Chinese patrol on the remote upper reaches of the Yarkand, the consequences of such an encounter would have been very serious indeed.

What are we to make then of Shipton's promise not to go north into Chinese territory? Clearly the British Indian state increasingly problematized its geographical intelligence deficits in the Shaksgam and stood to gain by this purposeful infringement into the un-demarcated border region. Menon in his letter to Shipton of 22 September 1936 had only advised Shipton not to 'travel beyond the mountain regions into undisputed Chinese territory', which would require the acquisition of Chinese passports and



The Shaksgam valley.

raise questions about where he had come from and what he had been doing. We do not know the exact orders Shipton received from the surveyor-general but clearly, part of the draw of exploratory journeying for Shipton in this un-demarcated border region was exactly this thrill of extraterritoriality; of being neither 'here' nor 'there', of wandering in debatable lands with all the risks that that entailed.

Shipton's Travellers file also reveals a hitherto unreported attempt by Shipton to gain access to western Tibet, part of an intended extension of his Karakoram survey work in 1939 that was cut short by the outbreak of the Second World War. On 5 December 1938, G E Crombie at the India Office in Whitehall wrote to Sir Aubrey Metcalfe, foreign secretary of the Government of India:

*In Peel's absence on sick leave I enclose a copy of corr which he has had with Shipton about the latter's desire to enter Tibet from Leh during the summer of 1940. We assume that the GOI are already fully seized of Shipton's proposals for exploring in the Shimshal and Shaksgam valleys during the winter of 1939-40. As regards his subsequent plans we understand that he wishes to enter Tibet via the Indus valley and travel up the Indus as far as the*

mountain on the north side called Alling Kangri which he would like to explore (see the Survey of India's new map of highlands of Tibet and surrounding regions). From there he would make his way Gartok and return to India in the autumn along the ordinary trade route. We should be grateful if you would let us have the Government of India's views on the question of approaching the Tibetan Government for permission for this project so as to enable us to reply to Shipton's letter. The summer of 1940 is, of course, still a good way ahead.

On 24 May 1939 the political officer Sikkim wrote to the under secretary to the Government of India in the External Affairs Department, Simla, referring to Simla's 'demi-official' letter of 25 April 1939. Scribbled in pencil at the top of this copy is the phrase 'for I O', indicating that the political officers comments should be copied to the India Office in London. Basil Gould, the political officer for Sikkim was also the Government of India's representative in Tibet and Bhutan between 1935-45 and perhaps the most influential member of the British Tibet cadre in the Indian Civil Service, attending the installation of the 14th Dalai Lama in Lhasa on 22 February 1940. Gould, it is fair to say, determined much of British policy towards Tibet. In his opinion:

*It is highly improbable that the Tibetan Government would view with favour an application to visit Aling Kangri, which is north of the Indus; and it is still more improbable that they would consent to anything in the nature of a survey, if Shipton has one in view; and it is undesirable that any surveying should be undertaken without prior consent of the Tibetan Government.*

*In view especially of the letter from the Tibetan Government forwarded with my demi-official letter No 7 (9)-/38, dated the 24 May 1939, I feel that we shall need, for some time at least, to confine our applications for permission to travel off the trade routes to cases to which the GOI attach special importance, and/or to cases in which there is reason to suppose that the Tibetan Government will be willing to grant permission.*

*One has always to keep in mind the prospect of having to concentrate effort on securing permission for a further Everest Expedition. In connection with this matter it may be remarked that the fact that there has been no pre-monsoon Everest effort this year is not to be regretted, as the whole of May up to date appears to have been even wetter than May 1938 in the high hills.*

The letter from the Tibetan government that Gould mentions here appears next in the archive and relates to another request to travel, this time in eastern Tibet. The request appears to have been made by George Sheriff, the former British vice-consul at Kashgar 1927-31 and a renowned Himalayan botanist who had already visited Tibet in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> In granting permission for Sheriff to enter Tibet, the Tibetan government made clear its displeasure at continuing to receive such requests:



Camp on the Aghil Pass.

*Translation of a Tibetan letter dated the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the 3rd Tibetan month [corresponding to 26 April 1939] from Minister of Tibet, to the British Trade Agent, Gyantse, Lhasa ...*

*Reference your letter requesting permission for Mr Sherriff, a friend of his and a doctor to visit Poyul, west of Yirong chhu, near Tongyuk Dzong to collect flower seeds, travelling via Gyantse, Nagartse, Tsetang, Tsegang and returning by Tsari, Sanga Choling, Chayul Dzong and Tsona.*

*In view of the great friendship existing between the British and the Tibetan Governments, permission is granted for the proposed visit for this time.*

*As granting of permission to visit various parts of Tibet will be followed by more applications from foreigners causing great embarrassment to us, the Government of India may kindly be approached with request not to let visitors apply for such visits in future and a reply to this may please be communicated to us.*

Gould's opinion on the matter was final. Shipton's request did not meet the Government of India's criteria of 'special importance' and threatened to scupper the delicate negotiations required for future Everest attempts. The External Affairs Department of the Government of India wrote to the India Office in London in June 1939 advising them that the 'GOI are averse from approaching the Tibetan Government to obtain their sanction for Shipton to visit Tibet in 1940.' As befits British Indian bureaucracy, Shipton received an

8. 'George Sheriff', [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Sheriff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Sheriff) [Accessed 22/05/17]





K2 from the Aghil Pass.

emphatic official double negative from both branches of the Government of India. The External Affairs Department in Simla wrote to him 'C/O Officer Commanding 'A' Company, Survey of India, Muree' on the 9 June 1939:

*Dear Shipton,*

*Will you please refer to your letter dated the 28 November 1938 to Mr Peel, regarding your desire to enter Tibet from Leh during the summer of 1940.*

*As you probably know the Tibetans are particularly sensitive regarding applications for permission to visit parts of Tibet which are off the normal trade routes and unfortunately they have recently adopted a more uncompromising attitude in the matter. The question of placing your supplication before the Tibetan Government has been carefully considered by the GOI in consultation with the Political Officer in Sikkim and we feel that to forward a formal application to the Tibetan Govt from you in the near future would merely court an immediate refusal and would give rise to difficulties in obtaining permission for the Everest expeditions in 1940 which are under consideration. In the circumstances we must, I am afraid, ask you to give up your idea of visiting Tibet next year.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Sd/- C A G Savidge*

Shipton received a similar letter from the India Office in Whitehall dated 15 June 1939 and addressed via the Royal Geographical Society. The door to Tibet was firmly but politely closed.

Shipton's Travellers file also contains a series of letters from the early 1940s dealing with the survey data from the 1937 and 1939 Karakoram surveys, letters that demonstrate the close working relations between the Royal Geographical Society and the India Office in Whitehall and the importance placed by both on securing geographical intelligence. On 23 January 1940, Arthur Hinks at the RGS wrote to the India Office:

*Dear Mr Peel,*

*As you probably know Eric Shipton led an expedition last summer to the Karakoram where they made further important surveys, which Shipton is now working up at the Geodetic Branch, Dehra Dun. He wrote on January 5 to Michael Spender "At the moment we are plotting my photo survey of the Panmah which is going to take a long time as I did 16 major stations and 5 sub stations in the area. Where are Auden's photographs and angle-books. If they are at the RGS, could you get them to send them out by Air Mail. It is very important to have them as we want many intersections in areas covered by his photos that I have not got".*

*I find that the weight I gave you by telephone this morning did not cover all the material which they want at Dehra Dun, and the weight of the package is now about one pound seven ounces. I do not think that the photographs and map can be sent out of the country except in official bags: so that I hope it may be possible for you to include this material in the next Air Mail bag to India as it is for the Survey of India at Dehra Dun.*

*Yours very sincerely,  
Arthur R Hinks*

At the bottom of Hinks's letter, written in a separate hand, are the instructions from the India Office to use official air mail as the 'package is required in connection with Mr Shipton's work for the Indian Survey & that being so, I think we should waive recovery.' There is then nothing in Shipton's Travellers file covering the subsequent two years when he was consul-general in Kashgar. Having returned from Kashgar, a letter from 4 November 1942 indicates Shipton was still using official channels to transfer geographical data back to the RGS:

*From The Secretary to the Govt of India in the External Affairs Department*

*To The Secretary, External Department, India Office, London*

*Negatives of photographs taken by Mr Shipton on his expedition to the Karakoram in 1939.*



Kun Lun from the Aghil Pass.

*Sir,*

*I am directed to forward at Mr Shipton's request a packet containing negatives of photographs taken by him of his expedition to Karakoram in '39. If there is no objection, the packet may kindly be forwarded to the Royal Geographical Society, Kensington, Gore, London, S. W.7.*

*I have the honour to be, Sir, Your most obedient servant  
A, [K]oorhah*

*For Secy. To the Govt. of India*

The final section of Shipton's Travellers file descends into high bureaucratic farce. On the 9 October 1943, the India Office in Whitehall wrote to Shipton care of the RGS, clearly unaware of his posting to Persia, attempting to obtain information from him about rent owing on a theodolite used in the Karakoram in 1939. They forwarded a letter from the Government of India, Simla, dated 19 September 1943, who were similarly unaware of Shipton's whereabouts:

*Reference enclosed copy of express letter from the Custodian of Enemy Property, Bombay, No P/Forms/G/91-4598, dated the 19<sup>th</sup> August 1943 and its enclosures, Photo theodolite obtained on loan from messrs. Zeiss Aerotopograph of Jena, Germany, by a representative of Mr. E. E. Shipton's expedition to the Karakoram. Mr. Shipton is no longer the British Consul General, Kashgar, and his present address is not known here. It is understood that his future employment was under the consideration of His Majesty's Government in January last. The GOI would be grateful if the information regarding the*

*rent paid for the instrument by the Expedition could be obtained from Mr Shipton and communicated to this Department at an early date.*

*The issue of the above has been duly authorised.*

*V J Shiveshwarkar*

*Under Secretary to the Government of India*

Attached to this is a copy of an express letter from the Custodian of Enemy Property, Bombay, dated 19 August 1943, addressed to the Department of Commerce in Simla. What this reveals is that the Zeiss Aerotopograph 'TAL' photo theodolite used by Shipton in the Karakoram in 1939 had been stored with the Survey of India in November 1939, subsequently becoming part of the technical equipment of the Survey Company in the 10th Army. The scrupulous Custodians of Enemy Property had then pursued the Director of Survey for either compensation or a rental equivalent to the amount they assumed Shipton had been paying, receiving the following exasperated response from somewhere in Persia or Iraq, where the 10th Army was stationed:

*Copy of letter No. Svy-70/8/3/1310, dated the 27<sup>th</sup> August 1942, from the Survey Directorate, Head Quarters, Tenth Army.*

*Refce:- Your letter No.P.Forms/G6059 dated 15 July 1942*

*Your proposal that I should pay the rupee equivalent of £300/- to the Reserve Bank of India, Bombay does not suit me. Will you kindly inform me what rent was paid by Mr. E. E. Shipton's Expedition to the Karakoram Himalayas as I am unaware of the figure. If you do not know I suggest that reference be made to Mr. E. E. Shipton who is I Under-stand His Majesty's Consul in Kashgar.*

By 24 March 1944, the India Office in Whitehall had finally tracked Shipton down in Persia and pressed him for a response:

*To: E S Shipton, Esq,  
Consular Liaison Officer  
c/o H B M. Consulate,  
Korramshahr,  
Persia.  
22 mar 1944*

*Dear Mr. Shipton,*

*I enclose a copy of a letter, together with enclosures, which Clauson addressed to you last October, regarding a theodolite, and to which we have not received a reply.*



[box] dated 9<sup>th</sup> October 1943 (with enclosures)

It is possible that the letter, which in ignorance of your location was sent c/o the Royal Geographical Society, has not found you, or perhaps you have replied direct to the GOI.

In any case would you be good enough to let us know so that we can satisfy ourselves here that there is nothing further we need to do.

(Signed) JR Blair

Copy to India by air mail.

[handwritten] Mr Blair This is rather out of date but it is only recently that I have been able to locate Mr S. I think we might try to clear it up. If you agree will you sign? 18/3/44

This is an important piece of evidence in attempting to understand Shipton's time in Persia as it locates Shipton in Khorramshahr on the Persian Gulf, the bridgehead of the Allied war effort to supply the Soviets via the Persian Corridor. Peter Steele, with access to Shipton's letters, only noted that Shipton was in Tehran as a consular liaison officer, with a subsequent posting to Kermanshah 'in the northern Zagros Mountains on the border of Persia and Iraq' where he was supposed to be undertaking 'Food Control Work'.<sup>9</sup> Further letters were to follow to and from the office of the Secretary of State for India on the subject of Shipton's theodolite, the correspondence ending wearily on 19 July 1944, the last entry in the Travellers file held on Shipton by the Government of India. It indicated:

Two letters have been addressed to Mr Shipton, of which copies are enclosed, but no reply has yet been received from him ...

So far as is known here, Mr Shipton is still serving as Consular Liaison Officer in Persia and it is suggested that the GOI might more conveniently reach him by addressing a letter to him direct C/o the British Embassy, Tehran, who will know his location.

(Sgd) JR Blair

Copy to FO

[handwritten] Mr Blair I am proving weary of chasing this theodolite!

It seems the very height of absurdity that during British India's deepest existential crisis, with the Japanese Imperial Army in India trying to fight its way beyond Imphal, that the organs of the British Indian state should go



Shipton's map of the Aghil Pass. (By permission of the Royal Geographical Society)

9. P Steele, *Eric Shipton: Everest and Beyond*, London, Constable, 1998, p119.

to such lengths to secure the property rights of enemy aliens. Then again, perhaps this emphasis on rights and the rule of law is exactly what the Allied and Indian forces were fighting for. Shipton's Travellers file provides us with a rare glimpse of the British imperial security state at both its most effective and at its most banal and pettifogging. The same imperial security apparatus that maintained such tight control over the trans-Himalaya border regions was also seemingly unable to track down and locate one of its own across all of its various agencies in wartime. Shipton's Travellers file sheds further light about the ways in which he sought to negotiate access to the politically controlled border zone of British India, providing us with many more tantalizing details of his movements and motivations. It reveals, for the first time, his concerted efforts to explore in the remote regions of western Tibet and the power of British India's border cadres to deny access to anyone whose interest did not align directly with those of the Government of India. It somehow seems appropriate then that Shipton's Travellers file ends with the India Office awaiting a reply from Shipton, a reply one suspects that never came. Given to reticence, Shipton in the archive is elusive, always on the move, as befits a traveller. You have to wonder: if the Government of India couldn't find Shipton and get a reply from him, what hope has the modern historian or biographer got of finally tracking him down?