

HELMUT DE TERRA, 1900–1981



When Helmut de Terra went on his first geological field trip in 1927–28, he literally got to the top of the world—the Himalayan area of East Asia—and there, in addition to engaging in geological pursuits, he investigated two caves containing evidence of early human occupancy. Thereafter, he was seldom willing to settle down for any extended period of time or to give up combining archaeology with geology. Over the next couple of decades he both promoted and directed a series of expeditions, mainly to Southeast Asia and Mexico, that yielded much new geological, biological, and cultural information relating to man's first appearance in, and subsequent spread through, these areas. When he died on July 22, 1981, he was living in retirement in Switzerland at Chateaux d'Oex just east of Lac Léman, among mountains that must have reminded him of the many scenic places of his explorations.

Hellmut (to use the spelling he gradually gave up between 1939 and 1946) was born on July 4, 1900, in Guben, in present East Germany. His father's family, of Huguenot origin, had settled

there before the French Revolution. After attending public schools in Marburg (Hesse), Hellmut entered the University of Munich, receiving a Ph.D. degree *summa cum laude* in 1924. In 1929, following the Himalayan expedition mentioned above, he visited several American universities on a lecture tour and the next year emigrated to the United States. Seven years later he became a naturalized American citizen.

De Terra's first institutional connection in his new homeland was at Yale University. It was from this base that he organized and directed his first two expeditions: to North India in 1932–33 and in 1935. One of the notable archaeological finds was a new Paleolithic culture, named Soan after the river valley in which it was found. The reports on these expeditions, including the one given verbally at the International Symposium on Early Man held in Philadelphia in early 1937, gained him an appointment as Research Associate at the Carnegie Institution of Washington and the encouragement to promote and direct another expedition, this one to Burma and Java in 1938–39. The archaeological findings there led Hallam Movius (one of the participants) to the generalization that throughout the settled part of the Old World during Middle and Early Upper Pleistocene times, chopping-tool and hand-ax cultures had separate distributions.

At the outbreak of World War II de Terra volunteered for government service and was put in charge of the Regional Geographic Section of the Geographic Board in Washington. His work in this agency was recognized by a special citation. By 1945, when his war-related services ended, he found the recently created Viking Fund in New York well-established and willing not only to make him a research associate, but to fund his proposed expedition to the Valley of Mexico in search of evidence relating to the antiquity of man in America. The resulting two field seasons (1945–46, 1947) yielded the well-publicized Tepexpan human skeleton, a putative ancient man.

De Terra spent many of his later years in Europe. With the exception of an archaeological-geological reconnaissance in Spain during the winter and spring of 1956, much of this time was

given over to biographical work on early explorers, particularly two he most admired: Humboldt and Teilhard de Chardin. The latter was known to him personally from association in the field during the expeditions to Southeast Asia. During the 1960s in Germany he directed the Werner Reimers Foundation which he had helped to organize. In 1978 he was made Research Associate of the Museum of Paleontology at the University of California. The Museum hopes to participate in publication of his autobiography, "My Colorful Planet: Travel Incidents on Three Continents."

The publications that follow document the fact that de Terra gave many other scientists the opportunity to join him in interdisciplinary search for new knowledge in remote places.

T. D. STEWART

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