

MORE NEWS FROM TARTARY

By H. W. TILMAN

NEWs from Russia is hard to come by in this country, but in Delhi there used to be published a quarterly bulletin giving much detailed information about economic and social conditions in the various Soviet Central Asian Republics. This consisted mostly of extracts from the Russian press and wireless and one of the bulletins published in 1947, contained an article *Alpinism in the Pamirs* made up mostly of chunks lifted bodily from a Russian publication called *Soviet Literature*.

I propose serving up the meat of this unhashed, for I might not improve it by re-writing and some of its refreshingly immodest flavour would be lost. The Moscow 'Dynamos' showed us that over there football is no laughing matter, and Russian mountaineers seem to take their pleasure sadly. I have added *in square brackets* an occasional explanatory or derisory remark but it is highly likely that the heroes of these exploits are not such pompous asses as I think ; for they did not write about them, and we all know that when the British press turns its attention to mountaineers, the victims, even those who have not fallen off, have occasion to writhe :—

' Demobilised from the Red Army, Soviet Alpine enthusiasts are getting ready for the first post-war climbing season. The 1946 programme is handicapped because Alpine bases and training camps suffered during the German occupation. Three camps were refitted last year, while another ten will provide training for 5000 mountain climbers this season. An Alpine Department has been created at the school for instructors run by the Physical Culture and Sports Council, while the Tbilisi Physical Culture Institute provides a six-month course of instruction.

' Plans are in hand for climbing peaks in the Pamirs and the Tien Shan mountains. Leading Alpinists will tackle the Victory Peak in the Tien Shan range, which is about 23,500 ft. just a little lower than the Stalin Peak, the highest mountain in the U.S.S.R. [*vide infra*]. Those taking part in the assault on Victory Peak are A. A. Letavet who has made a close study of the Tien Shan, E. M. Abalakov who made history by scaling the Stalin Peak, N. A. Gusak and E. A. Beletsky, who also made the Stalin Peak ascent, and other Alpine climbers holding the " Master of Sports " title.

' The success of these expeditions should determine the passing on to more difficult tasks, such as the first assault in the history of Alpinism on K2, the second highest peak in the world. [News of the American attempts in 1938 and 1939 has not yet penetrated the Curtain.]

' With the end of the summer season reports on the results attained are accumulating. According to Alex. Gusev, head of the All-Union

mountaineering section, the first post-war season was a great success, not only from the number of records attained but from the number of men and women who took part. Not less than 5,000 climbers scaled the peaks. Besides eleven record ascents two expeditions went to the Pamirs and the Tien Shan where a group of physiologists from the Moscow Physical Culture Institute conducted experiments on the endurance of the human body at high altitudes. With eleven record ascents to their credit, Soviet climbers are now coming home from the Caucasus, the Pamirs, Tien Shan, Carpathians, proud of their exploits of the summer.

‘ Achievements in Russian Central Asia may be summarised :

‘ MAPPING THE TIEN SHAN RANGE. A report from Tashkent mentions the preparation of a new map of the Tien Shan range, the work of a number of topographers who have been aided by mountain climbers in charting some of the most inaccessible peaks.

‘ Exploration of the “ celestial ” Tien Shan was started in the last century by a number of Russian scientists and travellers. So great were the discoveries made by P. P. Semenov that he came to be known as Semenov Tienshansky. [Cf. “ Mont Blanc ” Balmat, and Charlie “ Matterhorn ” Simpson, the hero of H. F. E.’s epic story “ Himalyan Adventure. ”] The renowned explorers Przhevalsky and Mushketov also helped to fill in many white spots in this area, but maps remained inaccurate until Soviet topographers have now made it possible to map correctly the location of many peaks. Last year alone they charted an area of 30,000 sq. km., discovering several peaks towering 6,000 to 7,000 metres above sea level.

‘ SCALING THE MARBLE WALL. Last summer a group of Soviet alpinists climbed the “ Marble Wall,” a summit of the Tien Shan estimated to be 6,150 metres high. The expedition was led by the well-known sportsman Professor A. A. Betevat making his ninth visit to the Tien Shan. In an interview at Alma Ata with the correspondent of “ Pravda ” the leader made the following statement : “ The Marble Wall is a snow-clad mountain of marble strata at the junction of the Sary-jas and Meridional ranges. There had already been two attempts at conquering it. A European scholar was the first to attack it in 1902. The second attempt was made by a group of Soviet alpinists in 1935 but avalanches forced them to return. Before starting the attack this summer our group made an elaborate reconnaissance of four summits 4,700 to 5,350 metres high which afforded us an opportunity to study the Marble Wall from various points. The alpinists began to attack on August 24 from a camp at 3,950 metres. Each carried about 25 kgm. of supplies—tents, sleeping bags, hooks and rope, provisions for seven days, alpine stoves and signal rockets. At a height of 5,100 metres we dug trenches in the snow and pitched four tents. The injured were left here too [mountain warfare?]. On August 27 seven alpinists set out on their final journey. The following day they planted the red flag on the summit. Their instruments indicated that they had reached a height of 6,150 metres. To the south-east of the peak stretches the crest

of the Meridional Range which ends in an enormous peak the shape of a cupola to which the conquerors of the Wall gave the name "Centenary of the Russian Geographical Society." We were prevented from ascending the peak by a snow storm which raged for four days, the temperature dropping to 23 deg. below freezing. The party began its descent on Sept. 3rd." [The Marble Wall was so called by Merzbacher who surveyed the Tien Shan in 1902. Khan Tengri has always been accepted as the highest peak of the Tien Shan (23,600 ft.) but *vide infra*.]

' ASCENT OF KARL MARX AND PATKHOR PEAKS. A group of alpinists who took part in the Pamir high altitude expedition, organised by the All-Union Committee of Physical Culture and Sports of the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R. have now returned to Moscow. The leaders were the well-known sportsmen E. A. Beletsky and E. M. Abalakov. The expedition was to the south-western Pamirs which are extremely difficult of access. After a fortnight's climb twelve alpinists [presumably one of the Lesser Hordes] completed a record ascent to a nameless peak, now Patkhor peak, the highest point of the Rushan range, about 7,150 m. high. The second achievement of the alpinists was an ascent to the highest point of the Shakdharian range—the Karl Marx peak of about 7,000 m. [This, I think, is the peak overlooking the Oxus valley near Kila Punja in Wakhan marked 23,000 ft. on our maps.] The expedition started from Moscow at the end of July. Surmounting craggy cliffs, glaciers, and canyons, the courageous alpinists first reached the Patkhor peak of the Rushan range, and their exploration of the Shakdharian range led to an ascent of the hitherto unvisited Karl Marx peak.

' The three highest peaks in Russian Central Asia are the Stalin, Lenin, and Victory peaks. (a) The Stalin peak (7,495 m. or 24,590 ft.) at the junction of Peter the Great range and that of the Academy of Sciences [in the U.S.S.R. mountaineering and science are honourably married and not in illicit liaison as with us] is the highest and was first climbed by Abalakov in 1933 [see H. J. vol. 8], who on the 3rd Nov. of that year erected a tablet on its summit recording the height and naming it Stalin. [In "Burrard and Hayden" this peak is listed as "Garmo."] Abalakov, the foremost mountaineer in the Soviet Union, has a number of record climbs to his credit. He climbed the Dykh Tau [17,050 ft. climbed by Mummery and Heinrich Zurfluh in 1888] in 1931, the Stalin peak in 1933, the Khan Tengri (6,992 m.) in 1936, and five peaks in the Trans-Ili Ala Tau in 1939 [a range north-west of the Tien Shan]. According to a recent report his ambition is to crown his unique record by the ascent to the Everest. Who knows? Maybe it will fall to the honour of a Soviet sportsman to climb the summit of this highest mountain in the world.

' (b) The Lenin peak (formerly Kaufmann) is in the Trans Alai range of the Pamirs near Fedchenko glacier (48 miles long) which lies to the west of the peak. It has the distinction of being situated not only near the largest glacier in the world [at any rate the longest in Asia] but of towering 23,390 ft. above lake Kara Kul, the second highest

lake in the world. [Kara Kul lies at an altitude of 13,430 ft. so that Lenin towers rather less than 10,000 ft. above it.]

' (c) The Victory peak (7,434 m.) The following report made by V. Ratsek, a member of this summer's Tien Shan expedition may be of interest: "The knot of mountains lying due east of the Soviet Tien Shan have for a long time attracted the attention of explorers. Here, surmounting passes hidden beyond the clouds, by-passing roaring rivers and gigantic glaciers, went expeditions whose work tore asunder the veil which had kept the secret of Nature concealed from Science. Until recent years the current opinion was that the Khan Tengri, the principal summit of the Tien Shan, was the highest peak in Russia. The alpinists conquering the Sary-Jas chain observed in the south-east only clouds covering the peaks of the Kokshal Tau range. Thick banks of clouds perpetually lay on snow-covered ledges. Travellers considered the mists over the Kokshal Tau as a regular phenomenon. Members of the 1940 expedition, however, managed to get a glimpse of the summits of the range from the Sary Jas pass. These peaks clearly surpassed the Khan Tengri in altitude which, however, could not be finally determined as the explorers did not have the necessary precise geodetic instruments, neither had they the benefit of the important preparatory exploration which the Military Topographic Department carried out in 1943. Surveys made by that expedition ascertained that about 16 kms. south of Khan Tengri on the upper regions of the Zvezdochka glacier there towers another gigantic pear-shaped ice wall. This peak of 7,400 m. is not only the principal summit of the Kokshal Tau but is the highest point of the whole Tien Shan system. The Khan Tengri, 6,995 m., hitherto regarded as the highest of sky-piercing mountains, should thus stand aside and give up its right to pre-eminence. The 7,440 m. peak discovered in 1943 is the principal summit and not the Khan Tengri. This summit was discovered and its height determined in the phase of our patriotic war when our victory over the enemy was regarded as a foregone conclusion. That is why this gigantic summit, the second in altitude in the U.S.S.R., should serve as a monument to our great victories and bear the proud name of Victory peak.' [The discovery of a mountain 1,500 ft. higher than Khan Tengri and only about 10 miles from it is very remarkable to say the least. Merzbacher's survey of the range was fairly thorough.]

HIGH MOUNTAIN WALLS

BY C. R. P. VANDELEUR

LOFTY mountain walls are always fascinating, whether they can be climbed or not; and it is interesting to consider which are the highest walls in particular mountain regions, and which is the highest in the world. But first one must try to decide how steep a