# CONQUEST OF FIRST 7,000-METRE PEAK

By A. Polyakov

*Master of Sport of the U.S.S.R.*

[No account of the first ascent of Mount Stalin (24,590 ft.) has appeared in the Alpine Journal, though it took place twenty-five years ago. We are grateful to Mr. Polyakov for the paper that follows on some of the achievements of Russian mountaineers.

It must be made clear that the title refers to the first conquest of a 7,000-m. peak by an all-Russian party. Already in Russia, Pik Lenin, 23,383 ft., in the Trans-Alai Pamir, had been climbed by Herren Allwein, Schneider and Wien in 1928, and several other summits in excess of 7,000 m. had been reached in the Himalayas and elsewhere before the ascent of Mount Stalin.

The full story of the ascent is available in English in Michael Romm's *The Ascent of Mount Stalin*. Lawrence and Wishart. (London, 1936.)]

The time is September 1933, the place—the side moraine of Ordjonikidze Glacier at a height of 4,600 m. Several tents belonging to Detachment No. 29 of the Tajik-Pamir expedition hug the foothills of the giant mountain peaks in the Western Pamirs.

The ice camp is bustling with activity. The reason for this is the arrival of a caravan. The people who have lived in this kingdom of ice and cliffs for over a month roll up the tents and pack up their belongings. They are about to descend.

Only the medico of the expedition, Victor Maslov (now a senior-rank doctor of the Moscow ambulance service), does not take part in these preparations. He is busy carving out two inscriptions on a boulder at the edge of the vanishing camp. One inscription is in a black frame notifying all future readers of the sacrifices suffered in the conquest of the summit: ' Climber N. A. Nikolayev, 30, and porter Djambai Irale, 20, died tragically in the course of preliminary work.' The other inscription speaks of the brilliant triumph of man over the peak, of the high standards of Soviet mountain-scaling: ' Stalin Peak, the U.S.S.R.'s highest, 7,495 metres, conquered on September 3, 1933.'

The battle to overcome the peak went on for over a month. Of the nine climbers who took part in the ascent, only one, Yevgeny Abalakov, a 25-year-old sculptor, got to the top. The way up to the summit was most difficult and dangerous. Six sheer walls loomed up before the mountaineers as gendarmes on the eastern rib. A vertical 800 m. separated the first gendarme at 5,600 m. from the sixth and last one, at 6,400 m. The fate of the ascent was decided on these sheer and treacherous walls where supports crumbled underneath hands and feet

every second. N. Nikolayev, an engineer and chairman of the Moscow Alpine Association, perished [1] when the second gendarme was tackled. The fifth and sixth gendarmes were the most difficult to subdue. Hooks had to be driven and rope ladders rigged up every few metres above the kilometre-deep abyss. Between No. 5 and No. 6, when Abalakov was inching his way along a narrow ledge, a loose rock hit the safety rope running from Abalakov to Daniil Gushchin and cut Gushchin's hand to the bone. Covered with blood, Gushchin did not lose his balance but instead stood firm until Abalakov returned to dress his injury. The two men continued upwards: the sixth gendarme had to be surmounted at all cost. Yevgeny Abalakov was the lead-man in the conquest of all six walls. It was not in his nature to retreat. A stockily-built Siberian with muscles of steel, Yevgeny and his brother Vitaly, had trained in their boyhood years on the famous Krasnoyarsk pillars. When they arrived in the Caucasus in 1931, the brothers immediately occupied a leading place among Soviet mountaineers.

At last, the rib was forced, and on August 29 the last camp was pitched on a névé patch at an altitude of 6,900 m. A spell of bad weather set in on August 31. The temperature dropped to 40 degrees of frost (Centigrade) at night and a snow blizzard began which on September 2 developed into a terrific storm. Only three mén remained in the camp. The tents were buried under snow that night and the people in one of them were crushed when the poles snapped under the weight of the snow. In the morning Abalakov dug a passage through the high drift, crawled out of his tent and dug out his comrades, one of whom, A. Getye, fell seriously ill from a heart attack caused by the great height. Food stocks were practically gone, only one tin of fish and a bar of chocolate remaining.

The bad weather ended on September 3. After great difficulty N. P. Gorbunov and Yevgeny Abalakov climbed into their ice-frozen storm suits and resumed the ascent. Progress was painfully slow, the climbers needing to pause for rest every eight or ten steps. The snow was loose and deep. A huge crevasse rose up as another obstacle, but a snow bridge was found straddling it. Gorbunov began to fall behind. Abalakov cast off the safety rope and proceeded upwards alone. The summit crest, sharp as a knife-blade, was in sight. The plucky scaler had to drive in the climbing irons and ice-axe with force to keep his balance against the strong gusts of a side wind. In haste to get to the top, Abalakov fell out of rhythm of movement. He felt his strength gradually leaving him, dark objects began to whirl before his eyes and the blood hammered terribly in his temples. Yevgeny felt himself fall,

[1] On July 30. A handhold broke away, he lost his balance and fell 1,600 ft. The porter Irale, mentioned earlier in the article, died of pneumonia some days later.

CAMP OF KUZMIN ALPINE GROUP ; MOUNT STALIN BEHIND.

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but after regaining his breath and summoning all his remaining strength, overcame the last metres of the way on all fours. At the summit he slowly rose to his feet. Below lay the ' Roof of the World '—the Pamirs.

This was how, a quarter of a century ago, the highest peak in the Soviet Union was conquered.

In 1937 Soviet mountaineers decided to mark the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution by scaling three 7,000-m. summits —Lenin Peak (7,137 m.), Stalin Peak (7,495 m.) and Yevgenia Korzhenevskaya Peak (7,105 m.).

Following the route blazed by Yevgeny Abalakov and overcoming a five-day blizzard, five men ascended to the top of Stalin Peak on September 13, 1937, on the ninth day of the assault. The five were L. Barkhash, E. Beletsky, N. Gusak, V. Kirkorov and I. Fedorkov. The sixth member and head of the scaling party, Oleg Aristov, chairman of the Moscow Alpine Association, was only several dozen metres away from the summit when he lost his hold on a sharp, ice-covered ledge and fell to his death.

Only eighteen years later, in 1955, climbers of the Georgian Alpine Club made a third attempt to scale the country's highest peak. Another route, from the west, was adopted this time. Overcoming many obstacles on the way across the Garmo Glacier to its sources, the mountaineers ascended a steep wall to the crest of the Academy of Sciences ridge. Further hardships were linked with altitude and foul weather. On August 21, four men—I. Kakhiani, D. Medzemariashvili, M. Khirgiani and L. Akhvlediani—reached the summit.

And so, the Soviet Union's highest peak had already been conquered by ten climbers, but nobody had yet succeeded in subduing it via the Pamir névé plateau, well-known for its inaccessibility, which nature had raised to a height of 6,000 m. and protected on all sides by two-kilometre vertical slopes. The most complicated ascent, about which scores of Soviet mountain-climbing enthusiasts had dreamt in vain, was accomplished in 1957 by Kiril Kuzmin and his comrades, the majority of whom were young scalers.

The course to the plateau lay across the top of Kuibyshev Peak. It was a 500 m. descent from this peak to the edge of the plateau.

On the way up Kuibyshev Peak the scaling party encountered steep snow-and-ice-covered walls (at angles up to 55 degrees), sharp crests which could be surmounted only with the aid of ice-axes, and plumb ice gendarmes. After a five-day assault nineteen men reached the top of Kuibyshev Peak (6,189 m.) and descended to the plateau on the following day. The latter stretched for ten kilometres in length from west to east and three kilometres in width from south to north. The climbers passed over the plateau back and forth, making a thorough examination and taking pictures of it.

From the plateau, fifteen climbers, headed by Kuzmin, completed their first-ever ascent of Leningrad Peak (6,507 m.). A few days later ten scalers under his guidance rose to the top of Stalin Peak. The last stage of the ascent, from an altitude of 6,900 m., found the participants overcoming great difficulties. They had to climb up on the front teeth of their crampons, cut out footholds and be most careful when protecting one another with safety ropes. This requires knack and experience on the part of scalers on a small height, but at an altitude of 7,000 m. it consumes a great deal of energy and strength.

On September 1, when the temperature was down to 30 degrees of frost and even eiderdown clothing failed to keep the cold out, the mountaineers emerged on the top.[2]

After Yevgeny Abalakov another 122 Soviet climbers[3] have conquered peaks in the Soviet Union rising more than 7,000 m. above sea level. An interesting feature about these ascents is that they were all accomplished without oxygen masks, a singular achievement unsurpassed till this day by anyone else.[4]

[2] Mr. Polyakov does not refer to the attempts on the other two 7,000-m. peaks on the 1937 programme. The third ascent of Pik Lenin was duly accomplished on August 17 by Messrs. Beletsky, Iskin and Martynow, but it was not until 1953 that Pik Korzhenevskaya was climbed for the first time after two unsuccessful attempts had been made in the pre-war years.

[3] This figure indicates considerable activity amongst the highest peaks of the Soviet Union during the last few years, for when Mr. Beletsky lectured to the Alpine Club in 1956 he reported that fifty-three Russian climbers had ascended peaks over 7,000 m. in height.

[4] This claim can hardly be accepted. It is worth recalling that four of the highest mountains in the world have been climbed by Austrians: Cho Oyu (26,750 ft.), Nanga Parbat (26,660 ft.), Broad Peak (26,414 ft.) and Gasherbrum II (26,360. ft.). All four ascents were made without oxygen, as was the ascent of Rakaposhi (25,550 ft.).