

THE FIRST ASCENT AND FIRST TRAVERSE OF VICTORY PEAK

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SOVIET mountaineers had climbed all of their country's 7,000 m. high summits : Stalin Peak (7,495 m.), Lenin Peak (7,134 m.) and Evgenia Korzhenevskaya Peak (7,105 m.). The last to be climbed was Victory Peak (7,439 m.) in the East Kokshal-tau Ridge, the Tien-Shan. It was discovered and plotted on the map as recently as 1943.

Three attempts to scale it were unsuccessful, the weather being the greatest trouble. ' Rotten Nook ' is how that place came to be called, and rightly so, for even in summer there is but scanty sunshine because of the clouds. A fine spell of two or three days is a rare occurrence.

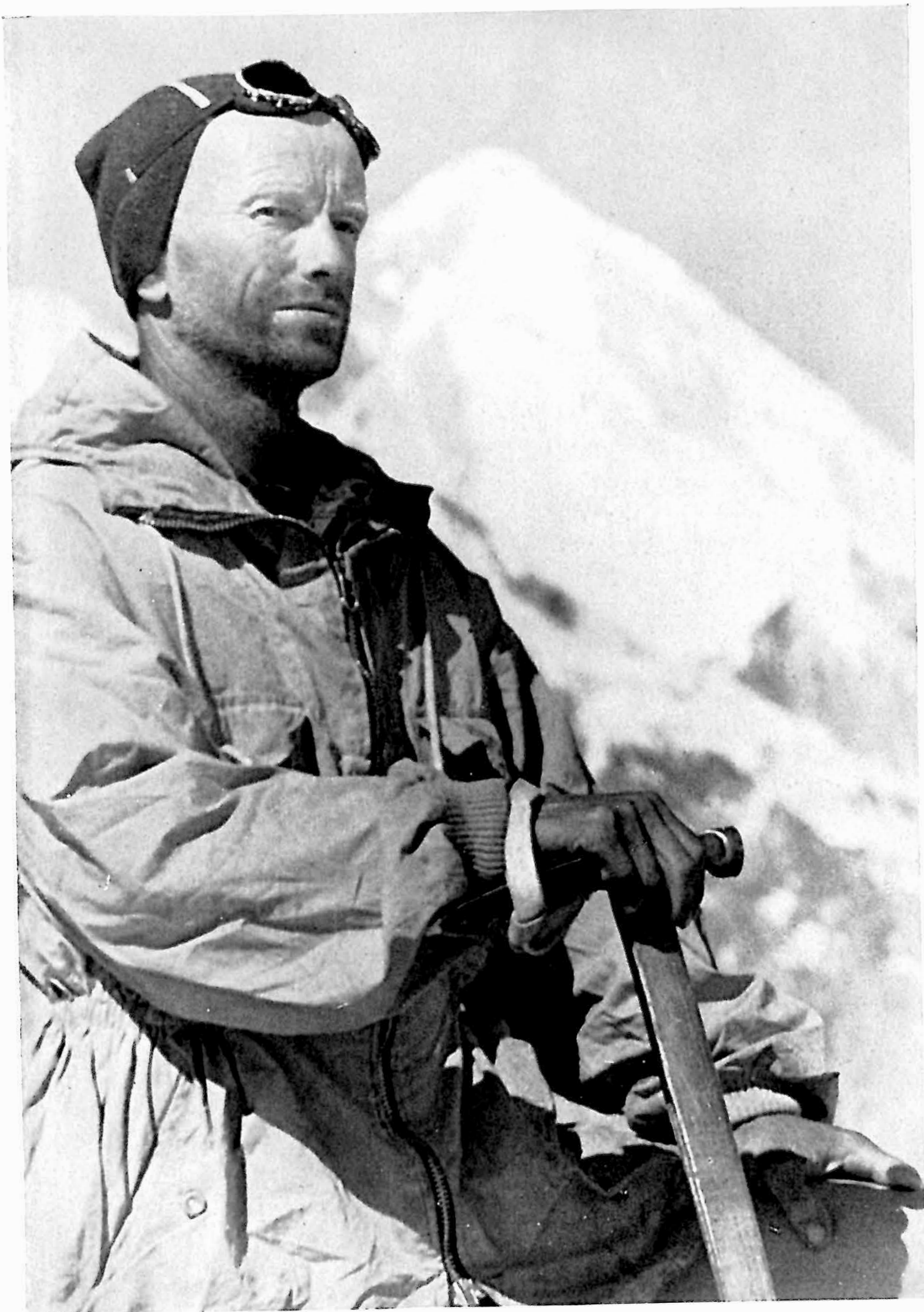
An expedition of the Spartak Society set out for Victory Peak in June 1956. A party of Kazakh climbers joined it at Frunze. I was fortunate to be on that 32-man expedition, which was led by the Honoured Master of Sports, Vitaly Abalakov.

Our base camp lay at the foothills of the Diki Ridge at the height of 4,100 m. That was at the junction of the Inelchek and Zvezdochka glaciers. Rising up in front of us was the marble pyramid of the Khan Tengry, and next to it stood the yet unclimbed sheer face of Maxim Gorky Peak.

With the base established, the climbers set about exploring the route and pitching intermediate camps. There were two spells of foul weather during the next four or five days. Thick snow covered our tents and everything around us, which made the camp look like an Arctic station.

From July 24 to August 14 the climbers three times went out to explore and prepare the route. They set up four intermediate camps. The first of these was pitched at the starting point of the ascent of Victory Peak on a stony platform of the lateral moraine of the Zvezdochka glacier. The second one was on the snow plateau at the height of 5,300 m. The third camp was laid out on a steep snow and ice slope at the height of 5,800 m. and the fourth one at 6,200 m. Snow caves—caches for food supplies and equipment—were dug out at the three highest of these camps. The one at 5,300 m. had even a kitchen inside. You could stand nearly upright in any of the caves. The entrances were curtained with tents and shuttered with snow slabs.

On August 18, after a four-day respite, the advance party of Vitaly



Photo, M. Amfrikov

VITALI ABALAKOV.

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Abalakov and Nikolai Gusak, Honoured Masters of Sports, and Pyotr Budanov and Lev Filimonov, Masters of Sports, set out to assail the summit. They were followed on the next day by another group of seven—Honoured Master of Sports Ivan Leonov, Master of Sports Yakov Arkin, young 1st Category mountaineers Konstantin Kletsko and Yuri Tur, and Simbai Musayev and Ural Usenov of Kazakhstan—led by Master of Sports Vladimir Kizel. Then came the days full of suspense.

At 4 p.m. on August 30, the thirteenth day of the climb, the eleven tiny figures were seen to disappear in the clouds of the summit crest and in the evening they sent back a light signal : the summit achieved ! On the morning of September 1, by spy-glass, we saw our comrades starting down towards the snow cave at 6,200 m. Our little camp was all astir. We put up a big sign with the word ' Halt ' near a wide crevasse in front of the camp. It was already dark when we saw the party approaching. They were filing down, weary, sun-burnt, unfamiliarly bearded, but proud of their triumph. And they did have something to be proud of ! On August 18, the eleven of them set out to ascend the summit. They did it and came back safe and sound, without so much as a scratch or a frost-bite. We gave a rousing ' Welcome back ' to our friends, whose every move had held our attention all through those days.

At night Vladimir Kizel told us the details of that ascent, and, chary of words though he was, his story made it quite plain for us that the advance party had gained a big sporting achievement.

' In the first four days,' he said, ' we reached our cave at 6,200 m. without any incident to speak of, by the trail that we already knew, as we had blazed it before. Then, a foul spell pinned us down there for a couple of days. On the sixth day the sky was clear but there was a very strong and biting ground wind. Yet, two of us—Abalakov and Gusak—went out to explore the way up.

' On the following day the weather grew fairer but we could not move on yet as anyone would at once have got frost-bitten by strong gusts of a severe ground wind. Again we had to bide our time in the cave. On the 25th we moved up to 6,500 m. Some of us stayed there to dig a cave, while the others went back to fetch up the rest of the things. In the meantime our scouts—Abalakov and Gusak—were looking for a way up through an ice-fall, a formidable obstacle across our path. On the 26th we passed the ice-fall without much difficulty by the route they had found, and then, after a long and hard ascent, we reached the height of 7,000 m.

' It was a very difficult ascent, indeed. We had to walk in snow that was so compact in places that we had to cut steps with the ice-axe. In other places we fell through, waist-deep, in thick snowdrifts. Every



Photo, M. Amufrikov]

EAST RIDGE OF VICTORY PEAK.

THE 1955 ACCIDENT IS MARKED BY A CROSS, THE DASHED LINE SHOWS THE 1949 ROUTE AND THE DOTTED LINE THE ROUTE OF ABALAKOV'S 1956 EXPEDITION.

abrupt movement at that height required a lot of effort as we were carrying heavy burdens. With a rocky ridge on our left, we put off our rucksacks and set about digging a cave. It was clear and quiet at daybreak. But by one o'clock in the afternoon the temperature dropped to -20° C. The camp we were pitching was to be the starting point for the final dash for the summit. When the cave was half-ready there were signs of bad weather coming on again. Abalakov dispatched us down to the cave at 6,500 m., where we had left our sleeping bags. The precaution was wise for we had to stay in the cave for the next two days, waiting for the gale to subside.

' On the 29th it was fine in the morning. There was a frost of 18° . We climbed to the 7,000 m. point again. The route we had blazed on the 26th had to be rediscovered. At the 7,000 m. cave we stopped for the night. Everybody was too excited to sleep as that was the night before our final breakthrough to the summit. We gave a careful once-over to our equipment and the warm things. Abalakov, who had explored the way further up that day, told us of what was ahead.

'At the sound of the reveille we got up quickly, dressed in no time and drank enough tea and coffee to last us all through the day. We set out rather late—at 10 a.m.—having been held up by a severe frost and a ground wind. The temperature was -20° . We went up without rucksacks, carrying only one cine camera. Our leader, as on all the previous days of this difficult ascent, was Vitaly Abalakov. He was a perfect route finder, taking into account the direction of the wind and the character of the snow on the slope and picking a short-cut to the highest point of the summit crest.

' We crossed a vertical ridge. The man at the rear now and again lost sight of the one at the head as he would disappear in a cloud of powder snow. Once beyond the rocks we came upon a steep firm slope with patches of ice here and there. We had to move with the greatest caution. Our warm felt boots with special nails designed by Abalakov, held us fast even on ice. We had to do more step-cutting as we climbed on. Then, there was yet another obstacle—a ridge of rocks, which, although you would not ordinarily call it very difficult, took much effort to surmount at that height. We passed over the ridge only to face an even steeper firm slope. For several hours we struggled up in the teeth of an icy wind at -18° . But our windproof garments kept us warm.

' The long and thorough acclimatisation training stood us in good stead: we went on at what was a good pace for that altitude. Nobody suffered from mountain sickness. Two more hours of laborious climbing and the leading pair—Abalakov and Gusak—zigzagging between the ominous-looking cornices, reached the summit crest. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon we were all up there.

'After advancing along the crest a little and making sure that we were at its highest point, we stopped. The goal was won; the last of the country's 7,000 m. high peaks was conquered.'

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A large party of climbers from the Bauman Higher Technical School of Moscow and from Moscow University traversed the 60 km. long South Inelchek glacier and its tributary—the Zvezdochka glacier, to reach the foothills of the Chonteren Pass last summer. They set themselves the complex task of making a full traverse of the Victory Range by starting up the East ridge from the Chonteren Pass and descending from the principal summit down the North ridge (by the Abalakov group's route).

As they knew, from the experience of the preceding expeditions, how difficult it was to bring provisions, equipment and fuel supplies over to that place, the climbers had planes do it for them. About five tons of various cargo, including liquid cooking gas cylinders, were parachuted to them at the heights of 4,300 m. (Zvezdochka glacier) and 5,500 m. (foothills of the Chonteren Pass). The parachutes opened at 200–300 m. above the ground to prevent any of the parcels getting lost.

On July 31, sixteen climbers made the first ascent of a very difficult summit—the Military Topographers' Peak (6,873 m.) in the vicinity of Victory Peak in the East Kokshal-tau Ridge.

On August 5, after a brief respite, the climbers set out to traverse Victory Peak. The Victory's eastern 7,050 m. high summit was reached on August 9 by forty-four mountaineers, including three women—Master of Sport I. Y. Sokolova, a post-graduate student of physics at Moscow University, Anya Tikhonova, a physicist, and Svetlana Shchukina, a graduate of the Bauman Higher Technical School in Moscow. The party included four Czechoslovak mountaineers and four Kirghiz climbers. Thirteen of them climbed on. They advanced along the crest at the height of over 7,000 m. and reached the principal summit of Victory Peak on August 16.

The climbers had to negotiate difficult terrain. They built snow caves in which to sleep at nights, safe from hurricane winds. The descent down the North ridge, with snow avalanches rumbling day and night, was dangerous. But the thirteen young climbers came through with flying colours. Their success was due to good physical training, acclimatisation, resolution and perseverance developed in the earlier climbs. On August 18 the thirteen climbers returned to the base camp, safe and sound.