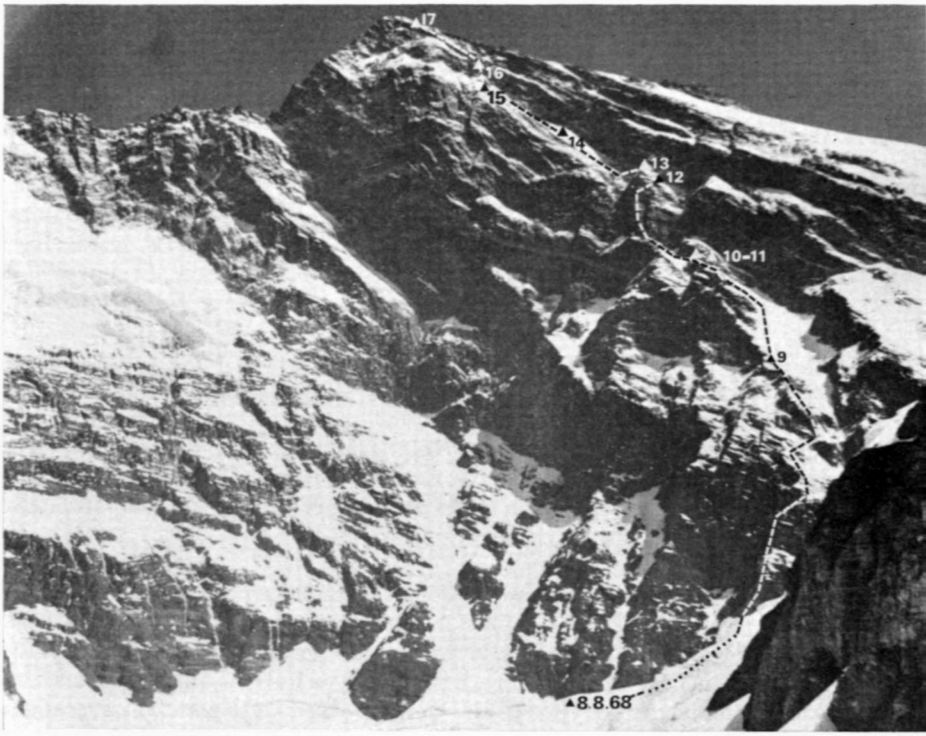
The first ascent of the South face of Peak Communism, 1968

Anatoli Ovchinnikov
(Translation: Alan Imrie)

Peak Communism (7495 m), in the centre of the Pamirs, where the Academy of Sciences and the Peter the Great ranges intersect, has always attracted the attention of mountaineers, but for a long time its remoteness, its difficulty of access, and the fact that it was unexplored did not allow an attempt to climb it to be launched. The 1933 expedition achieved the first success, one of its members—the outstanding Soviet mountaineer Yevgeniy Abalakov—reaching the summit on 3 September (*A.J.* 63. 203). Thirty-five years have gone by since the first ascent, during which time many mountaineers have climbed the mountain, especially at the end of the 50s, after the successful expeditions led by Kyril Kuzmin, a talented mountaineer of the present day. Now there are eight different routes on the mountain, graded 5 or 6, the highest grades of difficulty.



14 *The South face of Peak Communism, 7495 m;* from the Belyaev glacier. Shows the route of the first ascent, 8–17 August 1968. The section up to the second bivouac was prepared on 20–23 July. This and following photos: V. Glukhov

In 1962 Peak Communism was climbed by four British mountaineers, who were members of Lord Hunt's joint British-Soviet expedition, namely Malcolm Slesser, Joe Brown, Ian McNaught-Davis, and Graeme Nicol, the expedition's doctor (*A.J. 68.* 243). The expedition also made the first ascent of an unnamed peak (*A.J. 68.* 96) which at the request of the climbers concerned was given the name of Peak Soglasiye-Concord by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Tadzhik S.S.R.

In 1968 Peak Communism became very popular with parties from the sports societies Burevestnik and Spartak, the Central Council of Physical Culture, the town of Cheliabinsk, Czechoslovakia, and the Mountaineering Federation of the U.S.S.R., successfully storming it from different sides and by various routes. During the year a total of sixty-two climbers got to the top, among whom was Lyumila Agranovskaya from Leningrad, who thus became the first woman to climb the highest peak in the U.S.S.R.

A direct South face route was first thought of after a successful assault on the peak in 1959, by a party led by K. Kuzmin, which followed a buttress on the South face. However, the first attempt, launched in 1962 by a party from the Spartak society led by Vitali Abalakov was unsuccessful, due to bad weather conditions. In 1965, a Burevestnik party decided to begin preparations for a new assault on the South face, and a reconnaissance was planned for that summer, to be followed the year after by a comparable route on Peak Korzhenev, and after this by the assault on the South face. Two climbers, V. Bozhukov and A. Belopukhov, in fact spent the summer on the Belyaev glacier observing conditions and a route of ascent was chosen after a study of photographs. In 1966 Peak Korzhenev was climbed by a buttress on the South rib as a test of the party in roughly similar conditions and as high-altitude training (see *La Montagne et Alpinisme*, 1967, p. 173). The odd-number year 1967 proved to be a non-expedition year for climbers of the Soviet Union. A party of climbers from the Burevestnik society however climbed Peak Lenin (7134 m), and found that Peak Communism could be climbed from the north, from the Fortambek and Valter glacier side.

The Mountaineering Federation of the U.S.S.R. proposed a joint Soviet-French expedition to the Pamirs in 1968, with the aim of climbing Peak Communism by the South face. However, the organisation of the joint expedition was somewhat delayed, and in March 1968 we learnt to our disappointment that the French Alpine Club (C.A.F.) was unable to take part. The Presidium of the Mountaineering Federation of the U.S.S.R. entrusted the task of organising and carrying out the expedition to the Burevestnik sports society, as they were considered to be better prepared for this route than parties from

other societies. The expedition was to consist of ten men—eight climbers, a radio operator, and a man in charge of administration. I was appointed leader of this small expedition. In spite of the reconnaissance which had been carried out in 1965, there was insufficient information about the face for the size of the assault party to be decided before we left for the Pamirs.

The first party of climbers went from Djirgital to the tongue of the Garmo glacier on 13 July, where the Base Camp of the British-Soviet expedition had been in 1962. We thought of our climbs together. Where are our British friends now? We know that the ever-smiling Joe Brown is paying a lot of attention to his shop. Lord Hunt, in spite of being busy, is as before, giving much attention to the development of mountaineering in Britain. The expedition doctor, Graeme Nicol, has married and is doing very well in medicine. We have no news of our other colleagues on the expedition. The impressions of the past expedition gave way to the present day, and we began to set up the Base Camp.



15 *Camp on first section, during initial preparation*



16 *Between Camps 4 and 5*

This year a Czech expedition led by Slavomir Homeli was to combine with us. Among its members were climbers well known in Czechoslovakia; Ch. Voitsik and P. Baudish, with experience of climbs in the Alps and the Caucasus. While the Base Camp was being established, four climbers were sent out to the Belyaev glacier to receive stores landed by helicopter. The helicopter pilots had built up a lot of experience in mountain flying, and were now flying bravely to the foot of Peak Communism. But bad weather delayed the landing of the stores, and it was only on 18 July that they were dropped on the Belyaev glacier, in the area of the Georgian Camp, two hours march from the foot of the South face. Now we could begin to work out our climb.

Because of the route's difficulties, we adopted tactics similar to those used by Himalayan expeditions, by which we established intermediate camps on the proposed route of ascent, and on difficult sections we secured fixed ropes to make climbing with heavy rucksacks easier.

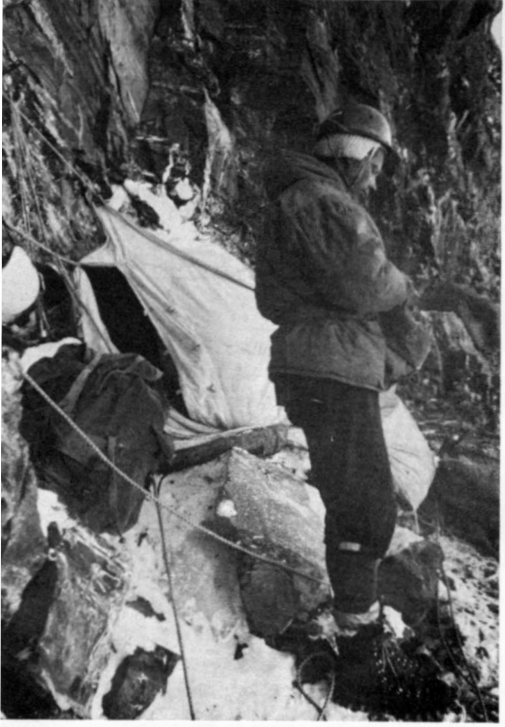
On 19 July we left the Georgian Camp in two parties of four. One party was to work out a route on the South face, and the other to climb Peak Pravda by a new route. Having climbed to the foot of Peak Pravda and Peak Communism, the two parties put up their tents. Edik Myslovsky and I set off to work out a route on the face, while the remainder began to look at other routes. That day we did six rope lengths and returned to the plateau in the evening. The rock was found to be rotten and the climbing quite difficult. We realised that the route would be too difficult for a party of four climbers. It was essential to ferry very many loads. We suggested to the second party that they should take part

in making the route and then in the ascent. However, every man of the second party of four said that he was not ready for such a climb and that naturally he could not take part in it. We thus had to resolve the problem of the ascent without anyone's help.

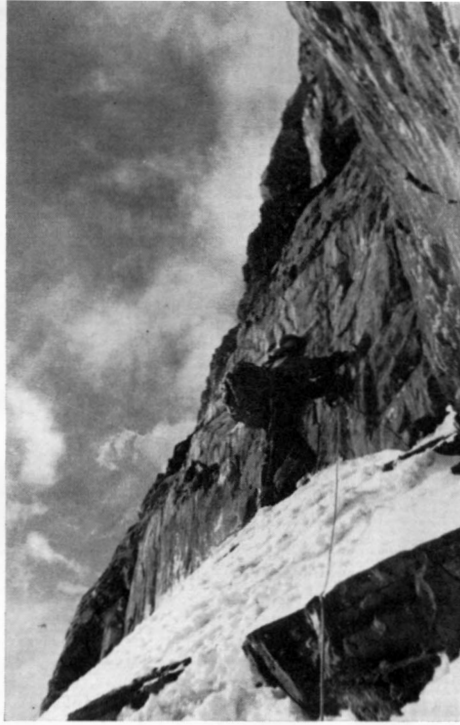
Next day our second pair, Valentine Ivanov and Slava Glukhov, went out to work on the route. We rested and watched Nikolai Alkhutov's party climbing Peak Pravda. We continued to take turns in making a route and watching our comrades who were doing the climb on Peak Pravda. On resuming our task on the 23rd, it was clear that it was no longer sensible to continue making this route from the plateau. We had to take the tent on to the face. All the essential loads for the climb were carried about 600 m up from the plateau. For the time being there was nothing more to be done. We waited for Alkhutov's party of four, whose control time for return to the plateau was up that day. There had been no recent contact with them, and if they did not return that day, we would have to go out and look for them the day after. About 6pm we saw them descending the snow-ice slopes of the 'Georgian Couloir', arriving down about 10pm; very tired but happy, having done a new grade 5b route on Peak Pravda. We questioned our comrades N. Alkhutov, G. Karlov, I. Roschin and V. Shatayev about the difficulties of the route. Next day we got up very early and without our rucksacks went down for a rest to Base Camp where our comrades were waiting impatiently for us. It was 24 July, a day of remembrance for Wilfrid Noyce and Robin Smith (*A.J.* 67. 384). Nikolai Shalayev and members of the other expeditions had made wreaths from flowers, which we were to place at the foot of the memorial obelisk. Members of the Czech expedition, and the Central Council of Physical Culture and the Mountaineering Federation of the U.S.S.R. expeditions observed a minute's silence in memory of Wilfrid Noyce and Robin Smith.

On 29 July, after four days rest, our party left Base Camp again to continue work on the route and complete the ascent. Two days later, our second party led by V. Shatayev left to do the ascent of Peak Communism by the Kuzmin route. (The buttress on the South face of Peak Communism.)

On 31 July and 1 August we did another 200 m of the route. On the morning of 2 August we came out of our tents to continue work on the route, but a distress signal from a Central Council of Physical Culture party on Peak Patriot made us descend and hurry to help. It later turned out that on the approach to the summit, one of the climbers, V. Fedorov, had been hit by a loose stone which broke his leg (an open fracture). The Physical Culture Council party were unable to carry the injured man by themselves. E. Myslovsky and N. Altukhov were the first to climb up to the casualty and they arranged



17 *Camp 5 showing V. Ivanov*



18 *On the eighth day*

to get him down. Next day V. Shatayev and I. Roshchin came up to him and on 6 August he was brought down to the Marmot Camp at a height of 4000 m. Here an operation was carried out by B. Zhukov and V. Sedlak, the doctor of the Czech expedition, and the injured man was taken by helicopter to the town of Dushanbe for further treatment.

On 8 August we were at the foot of the face again. We hadn't enough time to go on making the route. We had to begin the assault and on the following day we were back on the face. It was easy going, and as a result of all our trips we were well acclimatised. We took only the essentials with us: only 400 g of foodstuffs per man-day, and a minimum of warm things. There was no limit only on the number of pegs and the amount of petrol, for without these the climb would be impossible.

But the conditions on the face had changed considerably, especially as the snow had completely melted. We climbed 500 m and there was a line of stonefall which we had not seen when we were working on the route. The ropes which we had fixed previously were broken in many places. They had to be used with a certain caution. On getting to the first tent, we found that a rock had made a hole in it. We could not stay there. The stone fall increased and it became impossible to go on. We sheltered under an overhang. We were only able to continue the climb after 6pm, reaching the second tent at 11pm. Here also the traces of falling stones could be seen, but there was no stonefall at night, and we fell asleep peacefully after a strenuous day. We had climbed 800 m in a day, which is a lot!

We left early on the morning of 10 August, as we needed to get on to safe ground before the stonefall began. The route went up an ice slope of about 50°. We put on our crampons. It turned out that in the commotion of the rescue operation, Edik had got the wrong crampons. He could not put them on over his boots, but managed it after a great effort! The front of one of Valya Ivanov's crampons fell off, and down the slope it went. We went on together, relying on good technique. We couldn't wait about for fear of the stones, which began to fly again at about 11am. Several went past literally only a few centimetres away from us, but everything turned out all right. Fortune smiled on us! After climbing a buttress of snow alternating with ice, we realised that we were now out of the stonefall zone. We rested and looked at where the stonefalls began. First of all, a single stone fell for some unknown reason, bouncing from one ledge to another. Then it gathered speed, dislodging other stones which rushed past us with a crash and a whistle. It was fine to watch, but to get under a stonefall. . . . There was no point in going any further that day; the face was vertical and there was not a sign of a place to bivouac. We had a look at a rocky ridge, made a space and put up the tent. We exchanged views on the next part of the route. We decided that next day we would make a route on this wall. That day we climbed seven rope lengths, left part of our loads and went down to the tent. Towards evening the weather got worse and it snowed.

On 12 August we struck the tent and climbed the part of the route which had been made the day before. The snow which had fallen made rock climbing difficult. Our feet were slipping and we put on crampons. The climbing was very hard! The sloping ledges were like tiles, and in several places the walls were overhanging. That day we only climbed fifteen rope lengths. We climbed until it was quite dark, but could not find a place where we could put up the tent. We settled down on a small shoulder, glad that we had all managed to get there. It was a good effort! We covered ourselves with the tent, cold and uncomfortable. The weather got worse.

On 13 August we climbed for three rope lengths. We were over the first rock barrier! We were on a snow-névé shoulder on the face. Visibility was nil. Because of the fear of stonefall we decided to stop on the shoulder. We hacked out a space, put up the tent, rested and looked at the next section of the route in the remaining hours of day light. In a break in the clouds we suddenly saw our second party. They had already come onto the shoulder. The technical difficulties were left behind. Now we were no longer anxious about them. They had done their job. As yet we could not say the same for ourselves. They saw us and waved their hands joyfully. The next instant a cloud appeared, and we did not see them again. The plateau came into view. We could see there the little figures of the six Czech climbers climbing Peak Pravda. On a difficult



19 *Also on the eighth day*

route it is pleasant to see other parties and feel ourselves not alone in the silence around us.

14 August. The day began with an abseil down to a large sloping ledge of snow and ice. A climb along this ledge brought us to the second rock barrier. We put up the tent on a patch hacked out of the ice. There was no comfort. In the night, powder snow poured down the face, burying the tent. The snow weighed us down and we had to crawl out and shovel it away.

15 August. It was hard to breathe in the tent. Today we left without breakfast. It was very cold, our feet were freezing, and we were tired; the going was difficult. We climbed a snow shelf to avoid the second barrier. The sun which came out at 11am warmed us up, and we were able to stop to make tea and prepare some food. The early start and the tension of these days was telling on us. We discussed the route and decided to carry on climbing along the shelf to a snow triangle which we could see from below, and at the beginning of which we could storm the second rock barrier. Tiredness was affecting us all. Even the tireless Edik became less careful. While knocking in a peg, he slipped and fell down a slope of snow and ice of about 40°. A jerk, but the belay held. I asked him, 'How are you?'. I heard him puffing in reply, the rope slackened off, and I took it in. Edik came up. He was all right. Slava Glukhov took the lead. A few more rope lengths and we were at the beginning of the snow triangle. Here we spent the night. We had a good rest that night, and in the morning everyone was cheerful and ready to continue the assault. That day Edik continued his rest, and we changed his position on the rope. Four rope lengths of difficult climbing brought us to a ledge in front of the third and last barrier. It was 4pm. We put up the tent in a rock recess under a big overhang. We did another half rope length on the third barrier.

17 August. After one rope length of difficult rock climbing, we went along a ledge to get round the barrier. Edik was in the lead again. Here the ledge was covered with snow, and it was slippery. Four rope lengths along the ledge and we began the assault on the third barrier. We were now above 7000 m. Peaks Russia, Moscow and Leningrad were left below us. We had a tremendous



20 *The South face as seen during the British ascent of Peak Communism, 1962*
Reprinted from *A. J. 68*. [35]: expedition photo

desire to overcome the third barrier that day and reach the snow slope near the summit. Four more rope lengths of difficult climbing, partly on overhanging rock. But then I heard Edik's happy voice, 'We can go on foot from here!' One more rope length and we were on the snow slope. We had climbed the face; it was 5.30pm. There was a group of people on the summit, and there were also some climbers 100 m lower down. We found that on the top there was a party from our Burevestnik society, led by Y. Borodkin. They had climbed from the north, from the Valter glacier. Below us were climbers from the Central Council of Physical Culture. They congratulated us on our success. We bor-



21 *On the summit* From left to right: E. Myslovsky, A. Ovchinnikov and V. Ivanov. In the background: Peak Eugenia Korzhenevskaya, 7105 m

rowed a little food from them, as ours had run out. During the past few days we had had to reduce even the half starvation rations on which we had planned. We finished off the pressed caviare. Today we weren't going to tie ourselves on to anything. What bliss!

18 August. There was no hurry to move off, the weather was fine, all the difficulties were behind us, there were no problems. A rope of climbers from the Council of Physical Culture came by us. We set out, following their tracks. The scree below the summit. The view to the north opens up, over there is Peak Korzhenev and beyond it Peak Lenin. We took the usual still and ciné shots. There were no changes here, there was still the sparkle of the scattered iron deposits in the shale.

We did not hurry going down, we had been climbing for such a long time, and now we wanted to enjoy the warm high mountain sun and the beauty and vastness of the Pamir giants around us. We shared impressions of endless human possibilities in every sphere of activity, science, sport, or mountaineering. The fact was that many people had considered that a route on this face was impossible. Now that was past history. The face is open to all, though there are more difficult routes on it. We had taken the first step in mastering it, we had shown that, 'it would go'. We dedicated our ascent to the memory of our friend and comrade Lev Myshlyaev. On 20 August we were met at Base Camp on the tongue of the Garmo glacier.

Summary—Pamirs, Soviet Asia.
Peak Communism (7495 m), first ascent by the South face. 19–23 July (preparation of lower section) and 9–17 August 1968. V. Glukhov, V. Ivanov, E. Myslovsky, A. Ovchinnikov (leader).
Peak Communism, first ascent by a woman: Lyumila Agranovskaya, 1968.
Peak Pravda (6400 m), new route of 5b standard. *c.* 22–27 July 1968. N. Alkhutov, G. Karlov, I. Roschin, V. Shataev.