

30 Pic Lenin—the English Spur. Photo: D. Scott

International Meet to Transalai Pamir, July/August 1974

Some impressions of Soviet mountaineering attitudes

R. Richards

'Have you come for climbing competition?' inquired the camp site warden. It was the Scottish Delegation's first night in the Soviet Union en route to International Alpine Camp 'Pamir' and the remark highlighted our uncertainty regarding the event. Along with other parties assembled in Moscow, we were as opposed to the bizarre vision of teams racing each other up huge faces as to the prospect of being programmed into long crocodiles plodding up the world's most climbed 7000 m peak, Pik Lenin. 'Don't worry,' our special adviser and roving commissar, Eugene Gippenreiter assured us, 'You will be free to do as you please.'

The journey to Base Camp on the N side of Pik Lenin was punctuated by a sequence of flags, bouquets and welcoming banners, culminating in reluctant flag hoisting and the Official Opening Ceremony when all 170 participants from 10 countries had arrived. Our dollar payments were evidently to provide currency for proposed Soviet expeditions abroad, and can scarcely have covered the lavish hospitality received.

A Soviet climbing consultant was attached to each group to discuss plans. Our unassuming adviser, Viktor, was not enthusiastic at the thought of his 2 British parties independently crossing the 5900 m Krylenko Pass in search of more attractive and less crowded climbing than seemed available on the N slopes. We were requested to submit our plan to the Doyen of Soviet Mountaineering, Vitaliy Abalakov, with details of itinerary, proposed camps, dates, radio call times, flares carried and so on. Although only prepared to account for the first 2 days of the next 20, we agreed to contact one of the radio control units planned to operate high on the mountain, and were given the go-ahead.

There had been exhortations just to make sure of attaining the summit of Pik Lenin, not bother with lesser peaks or uncertain ventures. This point of view certainly seemed prevalent on earlier Alpiniades, when hundreds of climbers made the pilgrimage up one of Pik Lenin's standard routes to commemorate significant anniversaries. This represented the main bulk of climbing activity in the area due to the magic 7000 m status and name of the peak, coupled with its ease of access, technically easy ascent routes and usually good weather. Nonetheless, some notable multiday high altitude traverses had been carried out in the 1950s and all the peaks accessible from Base had been climbed. Some technically harder face routes had also appeared recently, partly as a result of Austrian or German visits, but scope remained, mainly on the S side of the mountain. It had been tantalising to see superb looking lines on presumably unvisited peaks during our approach by lorry. These would probably be out of bounds and irrelevant to the Alpiniade mentality.

It would of course be misleading to see this as the main characteristic of Soviet mountaineering attitudes, any more than the respective numbers of summit visitors to, say, Cairngorm compared to Beinn a'Bhuird indicate our own. Soviet mountaineering also has the status of a serious competitive sport. Impressive performances have resulted from this accent on overt competition, particularly in the official Mountaineering Championships, which are held annually in 4 categories: High Altitude, Traverses, High Altitude/Technically Difficult and Technically Difficult. Entries in the Traverses section have apparently been declining due to lack of many suitable objectives remaining and the length of time involved, while the increasing number of technically difficult routes on the highest peaks is tending to erode the High Altitude section. Adjudication pays regard to both the nature of the route and the style of ascent—time taken, weather, aid used etc. Members of highly placed teams are awarded medals and certificates, including a special category for top trainers! Success in the Championships is also one of the gateways to coveted 'Master of Sport' status, an added attraction since one then has relative freedom to organise one's own expeditions or climbs (but not alone: solo climbing is proscribed). Competitions are also held in 'pure' rock climbing, in which given routes are top roped and abseiled as quickly as possible—they have recently been attended by some Western 'Observers'.

Our objections to climbing competitions can be countered by the charge of hypocrisy, since competition is and has been an important influence in Western climbing development. There is surely a distinction however between a formal organised competition with the emphasis thereby encouraged, and a more flexible individual effort where other, more important motivations are usually present. Does the Soviet system offer more choice, since one can elect to compete or not, or does this claim merely obscure a lack of more basic options? Would our vague, but generally accepted ethos of mountaineering be damaged by formal competitions? Many would feel this to be the case, although some latent support may lurk around.

Their development of an organised system of competition bears upon Soviet proposals to include Mountaineering as an Olympic Sport. Although a precedent does exist from 1936, the suggestion is probably anathema to most Western climbers, who value just those aspects of mountaineering which set it apart from conventional sports. It was reassuring to find Eugene and other Russian climbers sharing our views. Conditions peculiar to the Soviet Union explain the proposals: firstly, the existing framework has developed attitudes and an administrative structure whose officials would gain in power, status and prestige—their voice is presumably influential in a political climate where organised sport is encouraged at the expense of individually instigated efforts. Secondly, mountaineering is something of a poor relation compared to other sports—elevation to Olympic status would increase resources available for more and better equipment and clothing; most items are at present a camp issue, sometimes of bygone design.

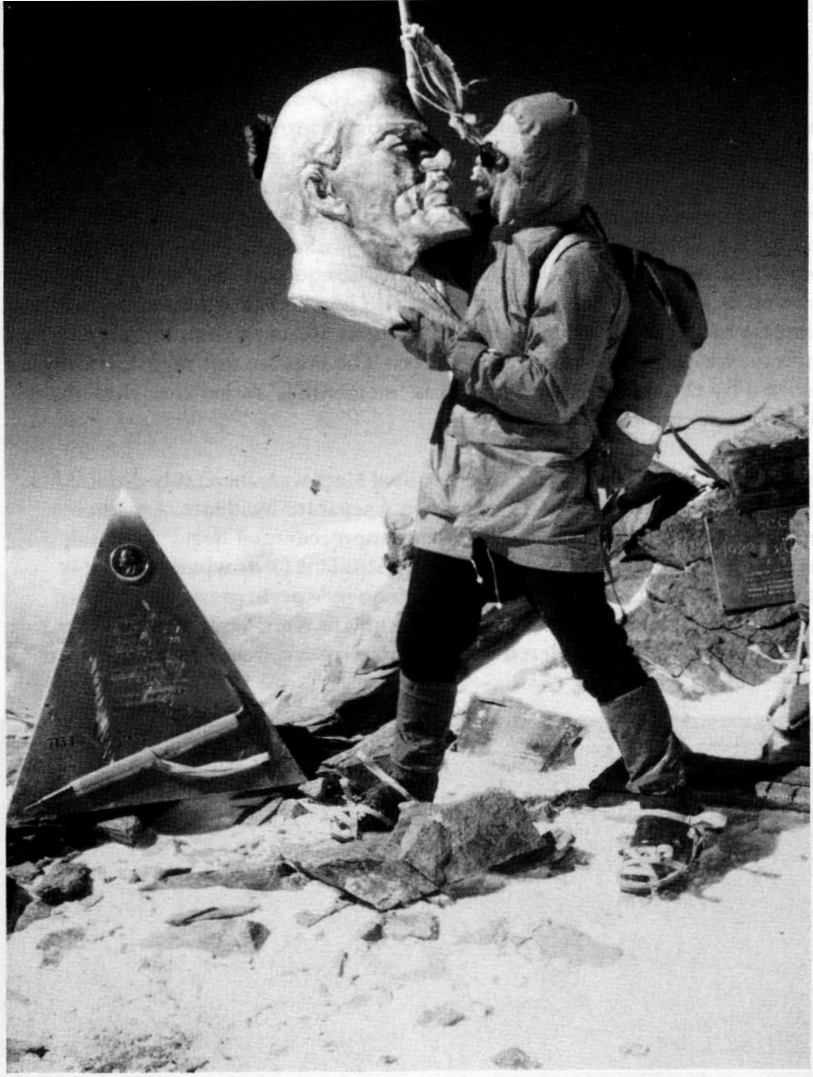
Most mountaineers in the Soviet Union climb within the system of large camps organised by various Sports Societies; about 15,000 people attend the

25 camps (3 open during winter) every year. Holidays to these camps are usually subsidised by Trade Unions and provide introduction to the sport, continued instruction and supervision. There is not much allowance for 'naturals', however, progress to hard routes is only via documented and systematic working through the grades of difficulty and categories of climbing ability. It was taken for granted that we would share the Soviet predilection for certificates and badges, awarded to the 'Conquerors' of Pik Lenin. They were taken aback when we demurred at this invidious distinction since other climbers had been far more deserving, without attaining the summit, and anyway, we did not climb for certificates! The impasse was diplomatically resolved by the Russians giving them as 'mementoes' rather than diplomas of sporting achievement.

Our reflections concerning the International Meet were inevitably dominated by the terrible death-toll of 15 people in 4 separate incidents. Avalanches (initially triggered by earth tremors) and unprecedented heavy snow-fall caused the deaths of an American and 5 Estonians (2 of whom died only later) on technical, serious routes; a consequence perhaps of the intrinsic risks in mountaineering. Although the Estonians were based on the other side of the mountain, we wondered whether help from our side might have lent



31 Mountaineering Olympics. This and next photo: R. Richards



32 The summit of Pic Lenin

assistance to the Estonian rescuers. This would apparently not be allowed, for since each camp is required to cater and function independently for mountain rescue purposes, our Soviet rescue allocation had responsibility to our camp alone.

In a later spell of extreme bad weather, a party of 8 Soviet women and a Swiss woman, on different easy ascent routes, died of hypothermia high on the mountain when tents or bivouac equipment could not withstand the conditions. Soviet mountaineering, with its strict system of supervision, methodical Sports Plans and control times, is very safety conscious and until this year there had been only 2 deaths on Pik Lenin in over 1300 ascents since 1928. This is a good record compared to other high mountains or even

the Alps and is paralleled elsewhere in the USSR, except for the Tien Shan. Many of us felt uneasy however at a seeming reliance on a preplanned system. This could encourage a dangerous inflexibility and determination to meet planned targets overriding a more prudent judgement. There are inevitable uncertainties of weather and fitness in a high mountain environment and only an on-the-spot appraisal and action can be effective. Furthermore, the numerous safety precautions such as radios, large numbers of people and rescue 'patrols' could paradoxically have the converse effect of that intended by inducing a false sense of security in those unfamiliar with severe mountain conditions. Tighter control would compound the problem and further reduce the whole point of the enterprise. These issues are equally relevant at home.

The British parties, along with others, felt most emphatically that the best safeguards are not increased external provisions but individual responsibility within the context of group decisions and informed self-reliance. Just as our attitudes reflect the society in which they develop, Soviet mountaineering attitudes lay emphasis on furthering the collective through comradeship, solidarity and group responsibility, together with courage, discipline and endurance. Although there may be little room for individual initiative, it was evident that romantic and aesthetic sentiments also had their place. Whatever the fundamental differences in the way mountaineering is organised and officially regarded, good personal contacts were made with individual Russian climbers; shared experiences helped us to a better understanding of our different points of view and to recognise the common call of the mountains. This is a choice open to and responded to by us all.