Russia and Central Asia 1992-94

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The demise of the Soviet Union has made the mountain ranges of the former Soviet Union easily accessible to Western climbers. It has also made it possible to report local mountaineering developments in more detail. Information is becoming more available to English speakers, with a number of guidebooks and maps now available in English, including Frith Maier's remarkably comprehensive *Trekking in Russia & Central Asia*. These Area Notes introduce the principal mountaineering areas and provide information about the most significant ascents accomplished by foreign and local climbers since the winter of 1991-92. The activities of local climbers diminished after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which left mountaineering prohibitively expensive, but they are now on the rise again.

**The Pamir**

**General** The mountains of the Pamir are mainly located in Tajikistan, although the NE edges run into Kyrgyzstan and the S and E parts run into Afghanistan and China. The Pamir span 280km N–S and 420km E–W. The climbing is expeditionary in character. The NW part of the range contains three of the four 7000m peaks in the former Soviet Union: *Pik Lenin* (7134m); *Pik Kommunizma* (7495m); and *Pik Evgenii Korzhenevskoi* (7105m). Most climbing activity has been based around the popular base camps for these mountains. The climbing season is July-August, with winter ascents taking place generally in February.

**Access** The political situation in Tajikistan is rather unstable at the time of going to press. The traditional jumping-off point of Osh is not at all safe. Most expeditions have been using Tashkent. It is worth noting that many groups (both Russian and foreign) experienced difficulties with helicopter transport from Tashkent to NW Pamir during the summer of 1994. The problem seemed to be Tajik authorities banning Uzbek helicopters, and then Tajik helicopter prices being pushed up to extortionate levels.
Summer 1992  Pik Kommunizma (7495m) saw a fair amount of activity. The 1987 Lunyakov route (5B) on the left SE buttress received a second ascent from a Kazakhstan team led by P Vorobiev. Three teams, all from Kazakhstan, climbed the S ridge (5B) from the Bivachnyi glacier. The N face (5A) from the Valter glacier was climbed by three climbers from St Petersburg led by Yuri Krasnoukhov. On Pik Evgenii Korzhenevskoi (7105m) the S rib (5A) received three ascents, while the 1984 Markelov route on the SW ridge (5B) was climbed by four climbers from Cheliabinsk led by E Nagovitsina.

The route judged the best in 1992 in the high-altitude class was on Pik Russia (6875m) on the E side of Pik Kommunizma. Five climbers led by A Ruchkin made the second ascent of the Ilyinsky route on the buttress of the SE face (6A). A Mikhailov and party climbed the NE face of Pik Engels (6510m). In the Sauk-Jailyau massif (E end of the Alai ridge) the Ekaterinburg mountaineering team made several important ascents, including the first ascent of the buttress on the N face (6A) of Main Sauk-Jailyau (5120m), the second ascent of the W face on SE Sauk-Jailyau and a first ascent of the S face of Krutaja Stena (3450m). In the southern Pamir A Mikhailov and party climbed the NE face of Pik Engels.

Summer 1993  On Pik Kommunizma (7495m) the S ridge (5B) was climbed, as was the N face (5A) from the Walter glacier. On Evgenii Korzhenevskoi (7105m) the 1980 route on the Central Pillar of the W face (6A) was climbed by a team from Vladivostock led by G Shaferov.

Winter 1993-94  The major event this winter was the first ski traverse of the Pamir range from SE to NW by Vadim Vasiljev and three companions. They took 30 days to cross the 480km between Murgab and Daraut-Kurgan. (See article 'The Transpamirs Ski Expedition', pages 175-177.)

Summer 1994  A team from St Petersburg led by Yuri Krasnoukhov climbed the SW ridge of Evgenii Korzhenevskoi (7105m).

The Pamir Alai

General  The Pamir Alai is a range 700km long, N of the main Pamir and stretching further W. The principal ridges are the Alai, Zeravshan and Turkestan. The summits in the Pamir Alai are generally under 5500m in height. The Fansky mountains used to be the best known of the ranges of the Pamir Alai, lying 40km E of Samarkand and containing the highest summits of the Zeravshan ridge. Recently mountaineering attention has focused primarily on the eastern end of the Turkestan range which lies between the Fergana depression and the Zeravshan valleys, where there are 35 peaks over 5000m.

In the Fansky mountains the climbing generally consists of single-day alpine rock routes. Elsewhere in the Pamir Alai climbing has become more ambitious since the mid-1980s, particularly on the N side of the Turkestan
ridge. The best known areas are the Laylak (Ak-Su) and Karavshin valleys, where numerous high quality rock and mixed routes have been put up on the granite faces. These areas are popular both among Russians and foreigners and research will be needed for those who want to escape the crowds. The climbing season is from mid-July to September.

**Access** Some areas in the Pamir Alai can be accessed by truck (from Samarkand), notably the Fansky mountains. So too can the Laylak (Ak-Su) valley in the Turkestan range, where the Alai mountaineering camp is still functioning (reached from Hudjand via Isfana). The Karavshin river region is most easily accessed by helicopter from Tashkent, as are the other regions of the Pamir Alai, like the Mynteke area.

**Publications** West Col have published a map of the Fansky mountains.

**Summer 1992** In the Karavshin gorge, a new route was climbed up the centre of the E face (6A) of Kyrkchilta (4507m), by an Uzbek team led by O Grigoriev. They also made the second ascent of the left buttress of the E face (6A) on the same mountain. The Kyrkchilta Peaks (4507m, 4300m and 4810m) were traversed by some of the same climbers, this time led by A Kotelnikov. A different team from Uzbekistan, led by P Ann, made the first ascent of the SW face (5B) of Pik Slesov (4240m). Three Spanish climbers (Gallego, Gomez and Seiquer) made the first ascent of the Spanish Dihedral (6B) on Slesov. A new route at 6B was put up on the NNE face of Pik Gorniak (5013m) by a team of five led by D Sidorov.

In the Laylak area Pavel Shabalin and Andrei Antonov spent nine days making the first two-man ascent of the 1982 Troschinenko route on the N face of Ak-Su North (5217m).

**Summer 1993** In the Laylak gorge there was more activity on the N face of Ak-Su North (5217m), with V Babanov and A Ruchkin from Omsk making the second ascent of the 1986 Popov route up the centre. It took them 14 days of work in bad weather. Pavel Shabalin, Andrei Antonov and N Medvedev made the second ascent of the 1984 Moschnikov couloir. A new route on the E face of Little Iskander (4520m) was climbed by a three-man Italian team including Fabrizio de Francesco.

In the Karavshin region, a new route on the E face (6B) of Pik 4810 was put up by A Klenov and party from Ekaterinburg over five days. Two ascents were made of the E face (6B) on the same peak. A Klenov and three companions also climbed a new route on the right of the N face (6B) of Pik Slesov (4240m). There were two more new routes on the N face of Slesov: by the cleft (6B) by S Khabibullin and S Tarasov from Ekaterinburg; and up the left side of the centre (6A) by S Semiletkin and V Lebedev. Semiletkin and party also made the second ascent of the Spanish Dihedral (6B). Also on Slesov, the Morozov route up the centre of the N face (6B) was climbed twice, including an ascent by the omnipresent Shabalin and Antonov. Two French expeditions were active here. A large group led by Luc Jourjon made a range of repeats and first ascents, including the first free ascent of
the 1991 French route on Pik Slesov (by L Pouzadoux and F Pallendre). On the NE face of Pik 4810 R Karle, D Dumont and E Guy climbed a direct line at ED+ (6b French). A Franco-Russian team climbed Voie Papillon on the W face of Pik 3850 (5b+ French ED). Their principal new route was Le Paradis Artificiel (ABO 6b A4) which was climbed using bolt belays between 16 July and 31 July. A smaller group of four French climbers (Serge Angelucci, Eric Frossard, Pierre Isosar and Jean-Christophe Moulin) were also very active in the region. They repeated the Russian Directissima (6B) on the SE face of Pik 4520, as well as climbing a new route on the face in three days. They climbed a new route, Totem (6B), on the W face of Pik 3850, to the left of the Russian Direct (6A). Jean-Christophe Moulin soloed a hard gully line on the N face of Pik Pyramidalny (5509m).

**Summer 1994**

In the Laylak gorge, a British team (Clive Davis, Jerry Hadwin, Andy Lewington and Neil McAdie) repeated the NE Pillar (6A) of Pik Admiral (5090m), although they did not reach the summit. They graded it at E2/A2 with about half the pitches climbed free (see MEF Reports, ref. 94/30).

In the Karavshin region a new route was put up on the centre of the left side of the NW face of Pik 4810 by a Moscow team led by K Sakharov.

In August a team from Bylorussia led by Stas Shabunia climbed in the Mynteke valley in the Matcha massif (accessed by helicopter from Tashkent). They made four first ascents, including the NW rib (5B) of Pik Rosich; the W face (6A) of Pik 5070; the W face (6A) of Pik Basilia (4708m); and the pillar of the S face of Pik 4600. They also made a route up the right side of the wall that bounds the E side of the Mynteke glacier, grading it at 6B.

**The Tien Shan**

**General**

Most of the 2500km-long Tien Shan range lies within Kyrgyzstan, with the fringes running into Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and China. The best known area is the Central Tien Shan, which includes the world's most northerly 7000m peak, Pobeda (7439m) unless the nearby Khan Tengri (6995m) is given its alternative height of 7010m. This height for Khan Tengri is generally disregarded by locals. The many other ranges offer a variety of climbing on peaks up to 5000m and often have more settled weather than around the highest peaks. The usual summer climbing season is July-August, with winter ascents taking place in February.

**Access**

The usual access points for the Tien Shan are Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and Almaty in Kazakhstan. For parts of the Western Tien Shan, Tashkent is more convenient. Currently there are no active conflicts in any of the Tien Shan mountain areas. Special permits are required to enter some areas, particularly those adjacent to the China border. These should be obtained in the main towns.
Central Tien Shan  The mountaineering camps on the Inylchek glacier continue, with increasing numbers of climbers now tackling peaks other than Pobeda and Khan Tengri. The area’s popularity with foreign climbers has been increasing owing to rapid helicopter access and reasonable costs. However, modest peak fees have been introduced by the government of Kyrgyzstan and it is feared that these may increase in future years.

Winter 1992  In February Khan Tengri received its first winter ascent, by a seven-strong Kazakhstan team including Vladimir Suviga and the late Valeri Khrishchaty. The usual route via the W rib was taken, with the main problem being extreme exposure to storm winds.

Summer 1992  A considerable number of climbers from Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine made successful ascents of Pobeda via the usual Dikiy Pass route. A team from Ekaterinburg led by A Agafonov climbed a new route on the Right Pillar of the S ridge of Sovetskaya Kyrrgyzia (5660m) at 5B. A German team led by Leo Baumgartner was the first to climb from the Proletarskiy Turist glacier (immediately W of the Dikiy glacier leading to Pobeda), in mid-September. Ascents were made of peaks 5100m and 5200m, in poor snow conditions.

Summer 1993  Activity around the Inylchek glacier has been previously reported (AJ99, 273, 1994). Immediately south of its lower reaches, a British team led by Daniel Cousins travelled by truck and on foot to the Kan-Dzhailoo glacier. Ascents were made of Nansen (5697m), P 5016, P 4500 and P 4894.

Summer 1994  A British-Ukrainian team led by Nick Williams attempted a number of new routes on peaks around the S Inylchek glacier including Pogrebetsky (6527m) and Chapaev (6371m), but all were foiled by bad weather or conditions (see MEF Reports, ref. 94/18). A team of two from Kemerovo in Siberia climbed a new route R of the Sviridenko rock triangle on the S face of Khan Tengri. The mountain also received an ascent by a Japanese women's team led by Junko Tabei. Its difficult N face was attempted by a six-man team led by V Suvita. After eight days the climb was abandoned at 6100m owing to poor weather. As in 1993, there were several fatal accidents on the Semenovsky glacier leading to the W ridge.

Kyrgyz Range  This range, a short distance S of Bishkek, is readily accessible by road and is a popular training ground for locals and Russians. The first Western visit was by George Lowe’s party in 1976. The main areas are the Ala-Archa and Alamedin valleys, with the highest peak being Semionov-Tien-Shansky (4875m). Other parts of the range are less frequented.

Winter 1991/2  A winter ascent of the Semiletkin route on Svobodnaya (Free) Korea (4740m) was made by a Kazakhstan-based team. This was the first winter ascent of a 6B route, and the 4th ascent overall, taking many days to complete. In February 1994 a team of five from Krasnoyarsk led by V Balezin climbed the Right Pillar of the N face of Svobodnaya Korea at 5B. In July Balezin led a different team of five on the central SW face of the 5th tower of Korona (4860m) at 6A.
Terskiy Alatau  This extensive ridge S of the Issyk-Kul lake has several peaks topping 5000m. In August 1993 a multi-national team including Nick Shea and Ian Steel from the UK climbed above the Karakol valley. Ascents were made of Gastello (4145m), Tulenina (4240m), and G.T.O. (4245m), all likely to have been first foreign ascents although well established by Russians as training routes. In the same area but previously unvisited by mountaineers is the isolated Khrebet Borkoldoy range.

Summer 1994  A British team including Philip Bartlett, Marion Elmes and Mike Parsons made nine first ascents of peaks between 4500m and 5000m. (For full details see 'Hills, Horses and Hunger', pages 82-84.)

Western Tien Shan  There are a number of reports of recent activity around the Oygaing valley in Uzbekistan, close to the borders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Although comparatively low in altitude, these mountains offer some hard and serious climbing. In July 1992 in the Maidantalski range a Tashkent team led by I Tukhvatullin climbed a new route on the N ridge of Udacha (3500m) at 5B. Earlier the same year a Uzbekistan team led by O Grigoriev made a winter ascent up the W face of Pik 3980, also at 5B.

Summer 1993  A team from the Oygaing mountaineering camp climbed a new route on the NW face at 6A. The first British teams were also active in the area. Stuart Gallagher and Ken Mosley climbed the E ridge of Haskova (4220m), the NE ridge of Profsoyus (3750m) and, with Mike Gill and Keith Lambley, the E ridge of Pamyat (4090m). Brian Swales teamed with Russian Valeri Pershin to climb a 300m rock wall overlooking the main valley. John Chadwick, Pete Holden, Dave McKinney and Chris Woodall attempted a new route on an 800m face. In the Pskemsky range Mike Gill and Keith Lambley made a probable first ascent of Pik 4360.

The Caucasus

General  The mountains of the Caucasus stretch for 1150 km from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, with the highest summits being Elbrus (5642m), Shkhara (5200m), Dykh-Tau (5198m) and Koshtan-Tau (5150m). The range divides the states of the Russian Federation from Georgia. The climbing is Alpine rather than expeditionary in style, although routes tend to be longer and more serious than in the Alps. The best time to climb is July-August, when the weather is reasonably settled.

Publications  Friedrich Bender's Classic Climbs in the Caucasus (translated from the German) is available in the UK. It gives descriptions and topos for routes in the Bezingi and Elbrus regions. These are often outdated and unreliable and should be used with caution. West Col have issued transcriptions of Russian maps. These are very expensive and not particularly good, but the best available at present. The history of climbing in the Caucasus is covered in On the Edge of Europe by Audrey Salkeld and José Luis Bermúdez.
Access The Caucasus is best reached by plane from Moscow to Mineralnye Vodye or Nalchik (two hours). Trains from Moscow are not recommended for non-Russian speakers. The Caucasus is well provided with mountaineering camps set up in Soviet times. The principal ones are Bezimgi, Shkhelda, Adyl-Su and Ullu-Tau. Almost all of these are still functioning and provide basic food and accommodation as well as co-ordinating rescue facilities. Exceptions include the Baksan camp (occupied by Russian border guards) and the Tseya and Torpedo camps which are occupied by refugees. Visitors to the Caucasus are advised to check that camps are open and arrange transport to them in advance. The only area in the Caucasus at all comparable to the Alps (with hotels etc) is the village of Terskol, the jumping off point for ascents of Elbrus.

The political situation in the Caucasus is unsettled. The dispute between Russia and Chechnya has made the Eastern Caucasus a no-go area, and it would be foolish in the extreme to plan a visit to the Georgian side of the range (e.g., Suanetia). The major mountains are in the Central Caucasus, which lies in Kabardina-Balkaria, currently the most stable of the Caucasian republics. The rule of law is not very clearcut in the Caucasus. Robbery and banditry do not raise eyebrows; nor is terrorist activity unknown. Various acts of sabotage took place at Mineralnye Vodye airport in the summer of 1994.

Winter 1991-92 In the Eastern Caucasus a team led by S Semiletkin made the first winter ascent of the Samoded route (5B) on Main Peak of Erydag (3925m). In the Central Caucasus A Abromov's team from Moscow made a winter ascent of the S face of Pik Free Spain (4200m).

Summer 1992 The Kustovsky route on Ushba South (4710m) received its first alpine-style ascent by S Antonov and M Shtarkov (Moscow) between 4 and 9 August. The route is one of the hardest (6B) on Ushba, a traditional forcing ground. In the Bezimgi region the N face (6A) of Krumkol (4860m) was repeated by Andreyev and party. A visiting South African mountaineer, Martin Seegers, was killed by lightning descending Gestola. In the Abkhazian Chain (Western Caucasus) a team from the city of Dniepropetrovsk carried out a number of first ascents more exploratory than technical in nature. The Snegovoy and Bogosskiy ranges in the Eastern Caucasus were visited by a joint British/Ukraine expedition led by Paul Knott and Nick Drobotenko.

Winter 1992-93 The principal event was the first winter ascent of the Kustovsky route (6B) on the SW face of Ushba South (4710m) by a team from St Petersburg led by V Smirnov. The ascent took seven days and one member was killed in the Ushba icefall on descent. In Digoria (Eastern Caucasus) four climbers from Rostov led by A Moiseev put up a new route (5B) on the S face of Galdor (4130m).

Summer 1993 The Kustovsky route on Ushba South was climbed again, by a team from Krasnodar. The Central Caucasus was visited by Mark Gray
and Julian Eliot who climbed the *Abalakov route* on the N face of Nakrattau and made the first British ascent of the S face of *Pik Free Spain* by the *Sybartovich route* (5B).

**Winter 1993-94**  
G Melnikov and D Petrov (Elbrus mountaineering camp) traversed Ushba in February (5A). A five-man team from the Elbrus mountain rescue service led by V Avtomov climbed the N face (5B) of Chatyn-Tau. S Egorin led a team of five climbers from Vladikavkaz in a first ascent of the NW rib and N face (5B) of Arkhon Malyi (3942m). A ski traverse of the Caucasus was attempted by a British party led by David Hamilton. *(For full details see 'Almost a Russian Haute Route', pages 178-182.)*

**Summer 1994**  
Two British parties visited the Bezengi region in the Central Caucasus. A party led by Will Edwards made the first British ascent of the N face (5A) of Ullu-Auz-Bashi (4671m) and climbed the *Tomaschek-Muller route* on the N rib (5B) of Shkhara (5200m). J L Bermúdez and N Wilson spent seven days making the first British traverse from Shkhara to Jangi-Tau (5030m). *(For full details see 'Crab Crawl on the Bezengi Wall', pages 85-90.)*

**Siberia and the Russian Far East**

**Altai**  
These mountains have been accessible for a number of years, and had several visits from British and other foreign climbers up to 1990. Attention has been focused on the Ak-Kem area of the Katun Range, although several ranges to the east also offer interesting climbing. Local climbers have been active for many years, and have made a number of winter ascents. The usual time for climbing, however, is July and August.

In the North Chuyski Range, there are routes up to 5B on peaks to 4000m. The Ak-Tru area is the most developed. In the South Chuyski Range the Iiktu area has routes up to 4A/B on peaks above 3900m (*Iiktu 3941m*), and to its east the area of *Pik Chuyski (3777m)* is little developed. Further east still, by the Mongolia border, are the formerly closed Tapduair-Sailugem and Ashatin/Dabani-Har ranges. It is also possible to cross via Tashanta into the Ulgi region of Mongolia, where there are several mountain chains.

**Summer 1993**  
A team from Krasnoyarsk led by V Balezin made the third ascent of a 6A route on the right-hand side of the E face of 20th October Peak. In spring 1994 a new fifth category ice route in the Ak-Tru region was climbed by three pairs, taking advantage of frozen conditions. Also in the spring a party including S Kurgin and German B Brakus made the first ascents of Besimyannaya (3480m) at 3A/B and Tobduair (3505m) at 3A/B. In the summer members of the Altai rescue service climbed a new route on Kupol (3400m) in the Ak-Tru region at 3A/B.

**Kamchatka**  
Most of the mountains of Kamchatka are volcanoes, of which around 30 are still active. All of the summits are said to have been
reached. Most routes on these mountains do not exceed Russian 3B, except on Kamen (4579m) which has routes at 4A and 4B. Nevertheless the height gain, loose terrain and threat of eruption make ascents relatively serious. The most popular areas are the Klyuchevskaya region and near to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, both of which can be accessed by truck.

Despite normally adverse conditions there have been winter ascents of peaks including Klyuchevskaya (4750m), the highest peak in Kamchatka. The first winter ascent of Kamen was in April 1991 by Fedor Farberov and Alexey Boltanov. Farberov also made a ski descent of the peak in 1993.

Foreign visits to the region started in 1991, when Klyuchevskaya was climbed by Russian/Japanese teams. In summer 1994 groups from Japan and several European countries, including the first British groups, climbed Klyuchevskaya. Filter masks were worn to protect against noxious gases and, weeks later, Klyuchevskaya erupted. (See MEF Reports, ref. 94/7)

In the Ganalskiy Range, 100km from Petropavlovsk, technical routes up to 6A have been climbed in recent years by local climbers including Fedor Farberov and Sergey Panyukin. These walls, up to 500m in height, now have the hardest technical climbing in Kamchatka. Other walls in the area reportedly have similar potential. The range is accessible in one long day from the road.

Cherskiy The Cherskiy is one of several extensive ranges in Eastern Siberia. The central and most interesting part of the range, the Buordakh Massif, was visited by a British party led by Paul Knott in July-August 1994. (See MEF Reports, ref. 94/16)

Russia and Ukraine

Crimea Although not alpine in character, Crimea’s mountains have a number of limestone cliffs up to 500m. Some routes commonly take more than one day. Guidebooks are becoming available, including Rocks near the Sea by A N Shcherbakov, in both English and Russian. Crimea is currently part of Ukraine. It can be reached without first entering Russia, and has no access problems.

Kola Peninsula At the end of August 1993 a team from St Petersburg climbed two new routes in the Khibins mountains, near Kirovsk. The Central Pillar of the N face of Bolshoi Woodyavrchorr (1068m) was climbed at 5A by A Remenjuk and three others; the N face of Tahtarvumchorr (1154m) was climbed by D Timoshenko and three others at 5B.