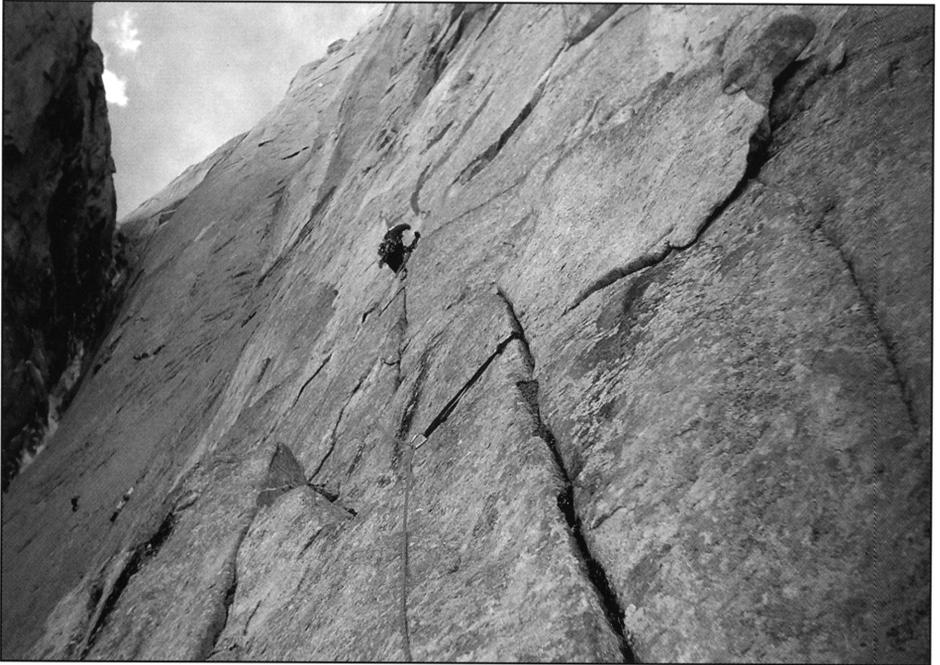


The Russian Way

Cameraderie and tribute on the Great Trango Tower

by Yuri Koshelenko, *Russia*

translated by Igor Politiko, with Henry Pickford



Parallel worlds: the American (left) and Russian teams hard at work on the headwall pitches.
YURI KOSHELENKO

I first heard the name Trango in 1992, when I had just begun climbing in competitions.* The very combination of the word's sounds evoked profound respect, eliciting associations with something fantastically monumental, inaccessible and distant, like the moon. The second stage of my growing familiarity with Trango occurred in 1996, when I agreed to participate in the project "The Russian Way: The Walls of the World." The Great Trango Tower, which would involve Alexander Odintsov as leader, Ivan Samoilenko as cameraman, Igor Potankin and me, was one of the objectives of the Project.

Time passed, and the mountain became a concrete goal, the center around which revolved our thoughts and deeds, our aspirations and emotions. I re-read "Grand Voyage," the article by John Middendorf, dozens of times, using it as a tuning fork with which to adjust my mental

*For an explanation of the climbing competitions of the former Soviet Union, see 1997 *AAJ*, pp. 108-111.

attitude toward the coming ascent.

Up until February, 1999, we lacked comprehensive information about all the aspects of the Great Trango Tower. We knew only that one wall had not been climbed. Things came into focus when, during the Piolet d'Or ceremony in Chamonix, we were helped by Bernard Domenech, who had found the book by Patrik Cordier, *Cathedrals de Trango*, in the inner vaults of the ENSA library.

This was the first time that we had seen the northwest face of the Great Trango. The impression it made on us was so deep that the decision to climb it came absolutely naturally. There was only one enigma. In spite of the relative popularity of the region, there had been no attempts made on the wall. This spoke indirectly of its great difficulty. The wall was so original and striking, both from the front and the side, that it couldn't be confused with anything else. The most exciting part of the wall was its steep, curved profile, which resembled the arched chest of a bird. The very thought that our route might lie here made my heart pound and the blood rush to my face, as though I were on my first date. All in all, the mountain's shape reminded me of a rocket hurtling upward that we would have to chase during our ascent. Everything about the photo of the wall moved, excited, and challenged us. During the following months, the pictures from Cordier's book became my treasure, my irrational bond with the future, the truth of my life, my goal, my dream.

But the aura of magic and poetry surrounding our future encounter with The Mountain dissolved in the prose of the preparations for the expedition. The pace of our planning and packing accelerated each day until our departure for Pakistan.

We arrived in Karachi on June 25 with the intention of crossing the entire country by train and auto. The reason for such a circuitous approach was simple: Russian Aeroflot flies only to Karachi, and only Aeroflot offered us the open-date return ticket for the money we had.

Inured to Central Asian trains during the rosy days of developing socialism, our team fearlessly occupied a compartment in the so-called "sleeping car" of the passenger train. The compartment consisted of a window replete with a grate, two fans of monstrous design, four berths hardly distinguishable from prison plank beds and a very hot and dense interior. Whenever the train moved, dust obscured our compartment, settling upon all the immovable objects in a uniform yellow-gray layer, allowing each of us to repeatedly marvel at the life-like imprint of our bodies on the surface of the plank bed. This hallucination lasted about 40 hours. Nonetheless, it's probably worth it to take such a journey once in your life.

In Rawalpindi at the Ministry of Tourism, we were told about an American team that, to all appearances, had already begun working on the northwest face of Great Trango. We already knew about their expedition, and the news didn't worry us too much. The unclimbed wall of the Great Trango Tower was great enough to give both teams the possibility to test their skills and persistence. The question of who should start up first was not so important to us, because if both groups were successful, both routes would be put up in 1999.

On July 7, our team arrived at BC. The northwest face of Great Trango rose straight above our camp—about 40 minutes, and you are on the route. The Americans by now seemed like the old-timers there; they had climbed the lower part of the wall, and were shooting video and a film and making reports from the wall twice a day. If our arrival slightly surprised them, they nevertheless met us very cordially. Our meeting was consolidated by an evening party after the American climbers and film crew descended to BC from their preparations higher up.

We admired what the Americans had achieved on the Trango. They climbed the wall and at the same time brought the extreme energy of their ascent to the entire world via the internet. This made our common mission many-sided: alpinism, friendship and the grandeur of the

mountain spirit had to triumph simultaneously and harmoniously.

From BC, the wall seemed like the nose of a warship with its prow cutting through space. After some consultation with the American team of Alex Lowe, Mark Synnott and Jared Ogden about their route, we planned our line to the right of theirs, along the left side of the overhanging "prow." We understood how difficult the main part of the wall was, but the desire to make a fine route and the requirements of safety ultimately convinced us that our decision was correct.

On July 14, Alex, Mark and Jared went up to finish what they had begun. Seven fixed ropes on the main part of the wall was not a bad start, yet all the same they spoke of the climbing on their route with considerable restraint: "very monolithic, smooth..."

Our team fixed all the static ropes we had on the 15th and 16th. After one final day of preparation, we started up. That day, Alex, who had descended the day before, was ascending the fixed lines parallel to us. We saluted each other warmly, which increased our good mood throughout the following sunny day.

Sleeping by pairs in portaledges on the vertical sections and in our one Bibler tent (all four of us together) on the ledges, our team reached the big ledge under the main part of the wall in four days. For the next three days the weather didn't pamper us: wet snow, water, sand and endless carries trashed half of our working ropes.

On July 21, after a morning carry in wet snow, Alexander Odintsov climbed the last two and a half pitches that separated us from the main wall and visited Alex, Mark and Jared. We set up our camp 100 meters below theirs. It seemed to me that the next period was emotionally the brightest time of the whole ascent.

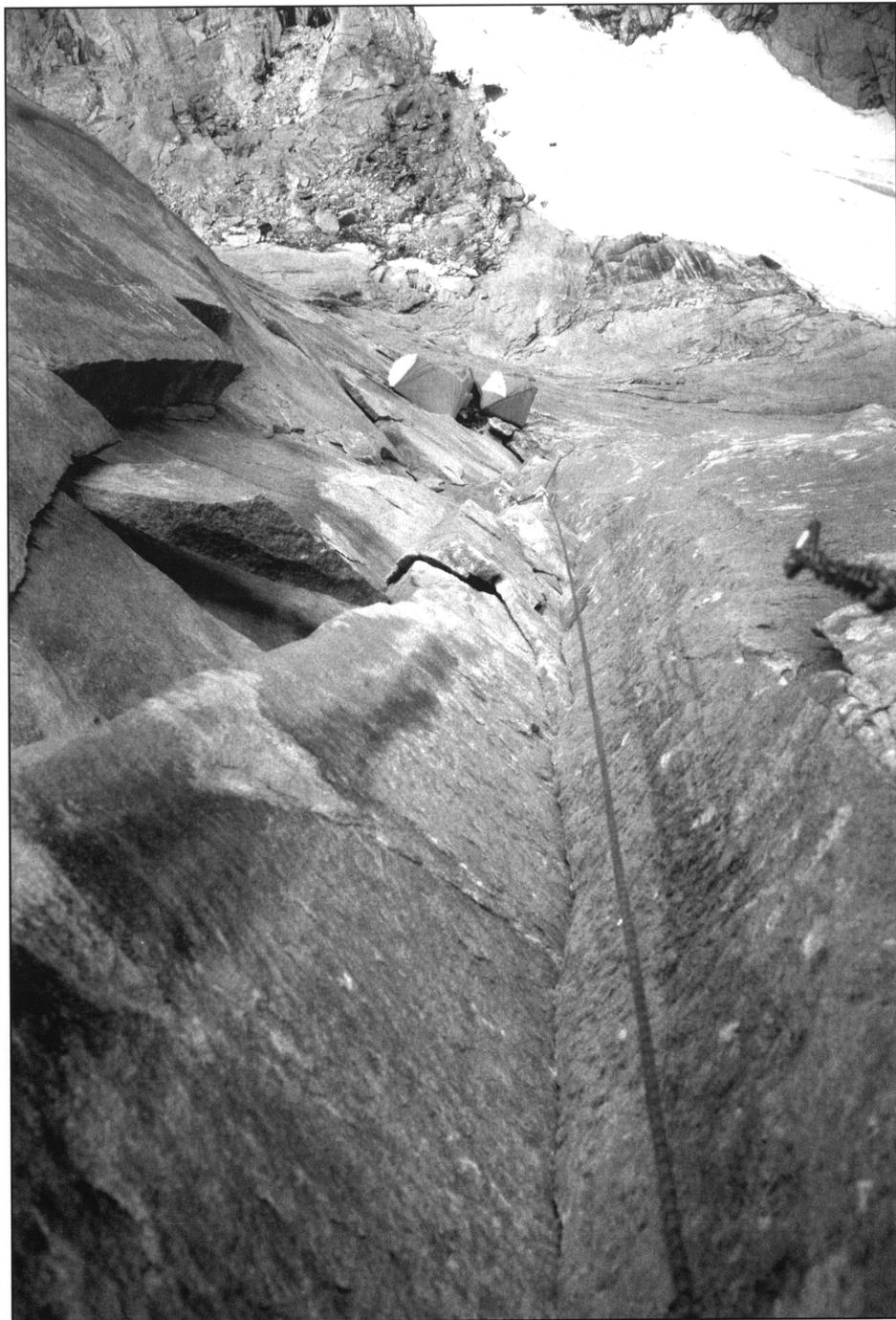
The next day, after the obligatory descent for a load in the morning, Igor Potankin, Alexander and I, along with Ivan Samoilenko, our high-altitude cameraman, started climbing, and fixed our first rope on the main part of the wall. I dodged the falling stones that Ivan was sending down from the upper ledges, watching in horror as they ricocheted on the slabs close to the ropes pulled taut by my weight. Climbing up to the ledge and suffering nothing more than a slightly bruised shoulder, I was unexpectedly seized by the warm hospitality of the American team. I took huge gulps of piping hot tea from Alex's cup while thinking about the condition of the wet rock, in my mind selecting the gear I would need. On the whole, the evening was a success. While belaying me, Ivan told tales about Russian gear, and I climbed the pitch, took some photos and then descended to our tent via a route less prone to rockfall.

The schedule remained the same for the next few days. We carried loads from dawn onward, and toward evening fixed ropes and prepared the route.

Between the Americans and ourselves there developed genuine mutual assistance. They let us contact our doctor using their walkie-talkie, and we left our ropes for them so that they could descend for foodstuffs more quickly, for they had moved their ropes that had been closest to the ledge to the main wall. On his way back up, Alex brought along all our ropes and anchors, observing, "a dry run is a loss for the state."

On July 24, our teams said goodbye to one another. Alex, the very epitome of strength and skilled training, started ascending the fixed ropes first, in one go carrying a haulbag, a smaller haulbag and a portaledge, each tied to the next. Mark set off silently and Jared, radiating joy and mischief, turned 360s on his rope.

We had a veritably difficult, dangerous, hopeless section of climbing next: a consecutive series of roofs increased outwardly like an Archimedean screw as we climbed up. Unreliable vanishing cracks gave way to overhangs and "washboards," crumbling, out-sloping roofs and blind corners. We understood now what the Americans had told us: that no matter where we



Rock and roll, Russian style. YURI KOSHELENKO

tried to climb, there was no route. The terrain was of the utmost difficulty, terrible A3 and A4 sections, sometimes compounded by dangerous 5.10 to 5.11 free climbing. At times a tiny crack behind a roof would look promising, but then it would either disappear or end abruptly.

On July 26, Alexander, while climbing a roof, pulled off a huge block. For some time both rock and man flew together, before a jerk of implacable force tried to drag me through the eye of the nearest carabiner, my self-belay torn away. Alexander managed to part company with his dangerous granite companion; thanks to a stepped overhang, the block hurled downward without touching the wall, while Alexander, forsaking his deadly trajectory, was caught by a well-placed cam. But he hadn't cheated fate completely: the stone had injured his hip and shoulder. From a distance, the red webbing on his drill looked like blood stains on a smashed wrist. On this day, he fell two more times, but not as badly.

The tension of our ascent increased from day to day. On the 29th, having taken a minimum of food and water (60 liters), we left the big ledge and went upward into the unknown. Our hopes of finding less difficult terrain were fatally crushed each day. There was unstable weather: the new moon was approaching. And it was raining—at 5400 meters!

On the 30th, toward evening, we saw our American friends. They had done their work and, soaked by a downpour, were descending via their line of ascent. The ascent was over for them and the happiest time in a climber's life lay ahead: the victorious return. It was somewhat sad to feel that now we were alone with the wall; although we had competed a bit, for the most part we had encouraged and supported each other.

Each day on this wall was dramatic in its own way. We battled with all our might, opposing the severe and impersonal elemental forces of Trango with our will, experience and skill. Rain and wet snow interfered incessantly with our plans, but nevertheless, on August 3, we climbed between two roofs we called the "sickle" and the "eye." The next day—Ivan's birthday—we moved our camp, in the process getting ourselves soaked from head to foot. It was simply a miracle that nobody fell ill. I could virtually see the burning face of pneumonia before it was suddenly washed away by stronger emotions: Ivan incorrectly loaded the rope I had fixed and slid down over the edge of an overhang. It looked as if he had fallen. My feelings were so intense and powerful that it took me an hour and a half to struggle with them, during which time Ivan safely worked his way back to the platform and was already drinking tea, celebrating his birthday by himself.

On this and the next two days, although we did not advance much, we did solve a riddle composed of two roofs. Igor had finished the traverse begun by Alexander, and, after completing two pendulums one right after the other, found himself at the base of a beautiful crack and chimney system that led right to the ridge. It was a new type of climbing on the main wall, and after the terrible lower pitches, filled as they had been with fear and uncertainty, I simply reveled in climbing these outstanding cracks.

On August 8, we dropped our haulbag and two portaledges and made the spurt to the ridge but stopped one pitch short, spending the night in our Bibler on a small ledge that seemed as if it had been hewn out of the vertical for just this purpose. The ridge was moderately difficult, with individual cruxes. The accumulated fatigue and heavy loads (video and photographic gear alone weighed around 20 kilos) prevented us from reaching the summit that day.

The morning of August 10 didn't want to let us out of our tent. Mighty snow squalls and winds warned us plain and simple against climbing. The weather in the afternoon turned out to be somewhat better, but more guileful. After lunch, Igor and I began the assault on the summit tower; Alexander and Ivan were to strike and move our bivouac. From what we could see, there were two pitches of difficult rock and mixed climbing ahead. It required two attempts

to climb the first pitch, which badly delayed us. Night was falling; it snowed intermittently. A snow and ice slope was partially punctuated by ice-covered rocks. Somewhere behind them lay the summit. I put my crampons on and climbed to the point where the top of this slope merged with the inky-gray sky. My crampons were gnashing on a few final meters of rock; only a straightforward section of snow remained to be climbed.

Suddenly, my ice axe started to buzz shrilly. Then it seemed like all around me was buzzing as well. The first lightning bolt struck somewhere in the distance; the second struck a rock on the ridge where I was planning to set up an anchor. The invisible howitzer gunner took aim. The next strike was behind me: I was bracketed by his shots. Grabbing all the gear, I made a few more obstinate steps toward the slabs I took to be the summit, in order to touch them with my hand. I don't know what it was, a direct hit from above or more likely an electrical discharge from below, but my desire to stick around yielded, finally, to my awakening instinct for self-preservation.

But our trials didn't end there. On August 11, during a moderate snowstorm, we were traversing a relatively complicated ridge after the summit. I should add that our supplies had largely run out toward the end of our climb. Our ration consisted basically of garlic and dehydrated potatoes, which several of us could not bring ourselves to eat.

Forty meters before the col between our summit and the central summit of Great Trango, something irreparable happened. During a difficult rappel, Ivan lost his balance and slid down along the ridge, dropping his haulbag that contained all the film and photo equipment as well as the film he'd already shot. As it later turned out, that haulbag also contained all his documents, money and credit cards, upon which we very much depended. In an hour, as though confirming the irreversibility of this event, the waning sun appeared from behind the clouds. It was a solar eclipse.

The image was surrealistic and terrible. If at that moment the mountains around us turned into an ocean or the heavens crashed upon the earth, I would not have been surprised.

After a short pause on the col, we continued our descent. True, we couldn't get by without another overnight bivouac. On August 12 at mid-day, we fell into the merciful hands of Doctor Bakin who, while waiting for us, had healed all the residents of BC in the best tradition of doctors, winning for himself love and esteem. On August 9, he even attempted to climb up to the col with an Austrian climber but was forced to turn back due to a bad bivouac and poor weather.

This story would be incomplete if I did not recount the two subsequent days of attempts to find the haulbag on the southeast slopes of Great Trango. Twice Ivan and I went in search. He was certain that the lost items awaited him at a certain point "x". Our second search attempt reminded us of an ascent. Reaching the col between the first and main summits of Trango, we climbed about 200 meters higher and traversed the slope. However, if there was anything there, the nightly snowfall and avalanches buried any hope of finding it. Someone joked that now all the film Ivan had shot belonged to posterity.

Our stay in Karakoram was coming to an end. We had made the ascent. Together with Alex, Mark and Jared, we, as it were, slipped through an ever-so-slightly-opened door of this wall. Each team, I think, rendered tribute to Trango in the form of joy, suffering, hope, persistence and exhilaration. The mountains always accept the tribute, though sometimes the price may seem excessive. But humanity cannot exist without extremes—such is the law of evolution.

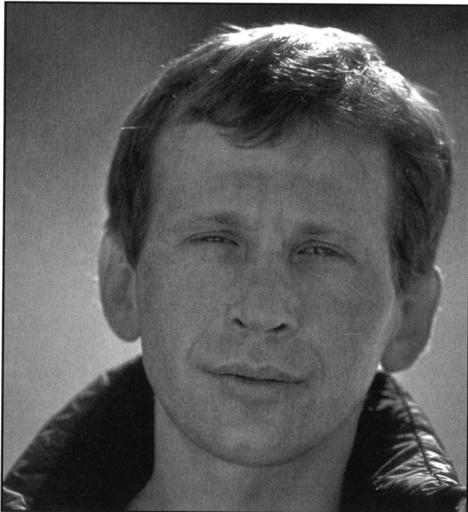
SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: PAKISTAN KARAKORAM

New Route: *The Russian Way* (VII 5.11 A4, 2675m) on the “prow” of the northwest face of Great Trango Tower, July 15-August 10, 1999, Alexander Odintsov, Ivan Samoilenko, Igor Potankin, Yuri Koshelenko

PERSONNEL: Alexander Odintsov, leader; Ivan Samoilenko, high-altitude cameraman; Michael Bakin, expedition doctor; Igor Potankin; Yuri Koshelenko

Yuri Koshelenko, from Rostov-on-Don, Russia, began climbing in 1983. Since 1992, he has been a member of the Area Mountain Federation team, coached by Alexander Pogorelov.



Among his ascents are numerous Russian grade 5s and 6s in the Caucasus, Turkestan Gorge, Crimea, and Pamir-Alai, a new route on the Petit Dru (1998) and six ascents of 7000-meter peaks in the CIS. In the Russian national competitions, he has placed first in the high altitude class (1992 and 1993), the winter class (1994 and 1998) and the rock class (1997). He has been a Master of Sport since 1994 and an International Master of Sport since 1997. In 1998, he was rated the best climber in Russia according to that country's rating systems. In addition to his role in the Great Trango Tower climb, his ascents as part of The Russian Project include new routes on Peak 4810 (1996), Norway's Troll Wall (1997) and Bhagirathi III (1998).

Yuri Koshelenko. P. TOURNAIRE