ROB COLLISTER

Success and Failure in the Tien Shan

(Plates 42–46)

> A man ought to rate his achievements only by the satisfaction they give him, for they will soon be outdone, outshone and speedily forgotten by everyone but himself.
>
> *H W Tilman*

Introduction

The objective of our expedition to the Tien Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia was the first ascent of Kirov Peak, 6073m. This was one of only three peaks over 6000m still unclimbed in the range. It is a remote peak lying on the watershed of the South Inylchek and Terekty glaciers, with its S face falling into China. This remoteness could have been rendered meaningless by the use of helicopters, used as a matter of course by the Russians in the past and by many visiting parties today. However, by starting our expedition early in July, two to three weeks before the start of the helicopter season, we were able to preserve an element of genuine mountain exploration.

The South Inylchek glacier, which is the approach to Pik Pobeda, 7439m, the highest peak in the range, has been much visited in recent years; but it seemed that the Terekty valley to the south might never have been visited by climbers. It was to the Terekty, therefore, that we chose to go.

Two events conspired to turn a relatively orthodox four-person expedition to an unclimbed peak into an extremely strenuous, serious and committing journey by two people. The first was information from Vladimir Komissarov of Tien Shan Travel, our agent, that the Kayndy glacier, between the South Inylchek and the Terekty, was the only feasible route for us to take.

From hunters and from the border police Vladimir had learned that the old road to China which we might have used for some of the way was now impassable; and that, further on, a deep, fast-flowing river in a narrow gorge made it difficult, if not impossible, to progress up the Terekty valley in summer when glacial melt is at its height. A subsequent reading of Merzbacher's account of exploration in the region at the turn of the century confirmed this. He tried, and failed, to gain access to the Terekty and was told by the locals that they only took their flocks up into the upper valley in winter when the river was frozen. However, Vladimir assured us

that there were passes from the Kayndy over to the Terekty, straightforward enough for porters without axes or crampons. This belief was based on a 'hunting trip' by helicopter over the area a few years before, and unfortunately it proved to be untrue. There are no easy passes from the Upper Kayndy at any rate, and we were not given the option of exploring passes at the lower end – not that any of the side valleys we saw looked obvious or inviting routes.

The other event that transformed the nature of our expedition was the decision of two of our members to go home early. In fact, the two events were linked since it was the reality of crossing from Kayndy to Terekty without porters – breaking trail in deep snow with heavy packs – that so discouraged them. As a result, when John Cousins and I eventually reached Kirov Peak, having found a way over the divide, we felt very much out on a limb and many days' travel from any sort of help.

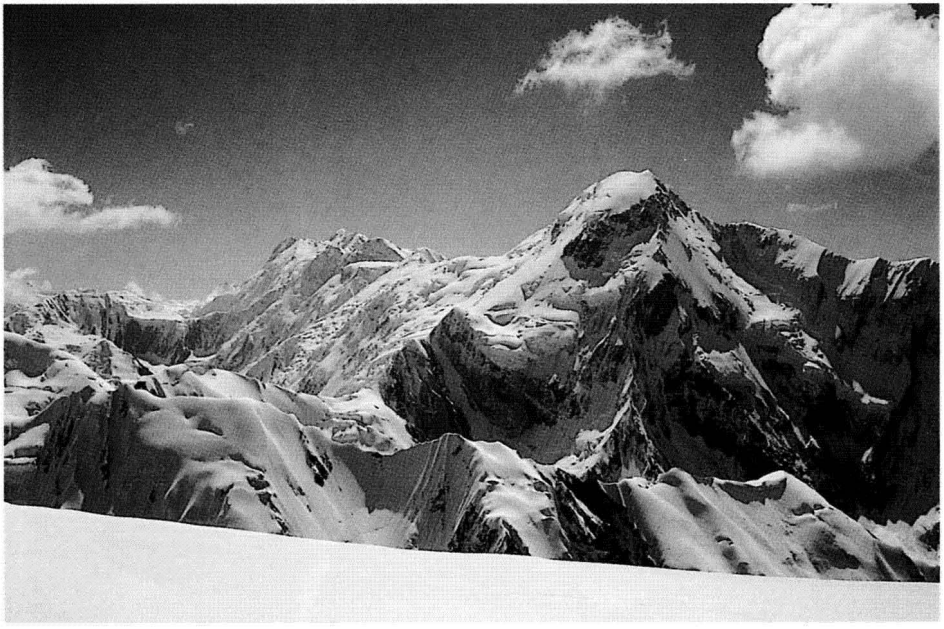
Success on 'Moelwyn', 5784m

On 9 July John and I made a reconnaissance to Col 4900m, a long day mostly in deep snow. The col was easy to reach from the north but looked a non-starter from the South; and the Terekty looked a *long* way below. Two days later we said goodbye to our porters Sergei and Ernst, who had been retained for a few extra days above Base Camp. On 11 July we spent the day ferrying loads up the glacier to the mouth of a branch leading to Col 5000m, ploughing our way through wet and heavy snow. It was after we had returned for a second load that Alun Hughes and Lisa Holliday decided that they would stay on the Kayndy rather than try to cross to the Terekty glacier. Subsequently they attempted a satellite of P5315, turning back near the top, and Lisa soloed a satellite of P5171. They walked out a few days later with the rest of the group.

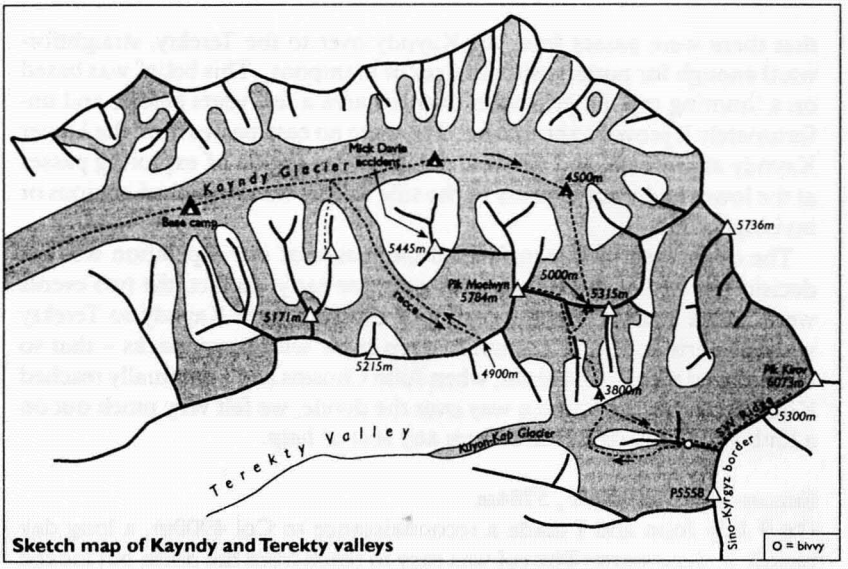
Now on our own, John and I made a reconnaissance trip to Col 5000m from which we could see Kirov Peak. Our first impression was daunting, to say the least, but we spotted a good line on P5784, the highest peak in the Kayndy basin, so it seemed worth putting a camp on the col. The next few days were hard graft. We set out with monster loads but made slow progress owing to the exhausting heat and collapsing steps. We camped at 4500m but later, in the cool of the evening, carried a load of food and fuel to the top. Overnight our old steps filled in but, to our relief, were still just visible. After camping on the col and climbing a small top to the east, P5315, we worked our way along the ridge until we could find a way through the giant cornices. Next day, we had to down climb and traverse on ice through séracs and round bergschrunds into a bowl beneath P5784. Crossing the bowl we reached a spur coming down from the E ridge of the peak. It looked a safe and attractive route. Even better, below the spur a 40° snow/ice slope led to a rock ridge and scree slopes dropping into the Terekty valley – for the first time we knew that a crossing was feasible. This had been an enjoyable and rewarding day!



42. The British Tien Shan Expedition 1995. P 5736 seen from the 5000m col at the head of the Kayndy valley. (*Rob Collister*) (p140)



43. Pik Pobeda (L), 7439m, and Pik Kirov (R), 6073m, seen from the 5000m col at the head of the Kayndy valley. The SW Ridge of Kirov is the R skyline. The high point reached was the end of the horizontal section. (*Rob Collister*) (p140)



Sketch map of Kayndy and Terekty valleys

Up to now we had experienced afternoon cloud and snow showers nearly every evening, but nothing serious and no wind. But now there was a change in the weather. By the next morning wind and heavy snow had obliterated all our hard-won tracks when we returned to the Kayndy to pick up enough food and fuel for the next 12 days. We decided to make do with a single 8mm rope and to leave behind helmets and most of the rock gear. It was a hard slog back up to the col and, after camping there overnight, we made our way along the ridge and into the bowl on the other side with single mega loads (30kg at least), lowering them down the steep, icy bits.

We climbed P5784 by way of the S spur and along the E ridge. It was about Alpine AD, with some mixed ground halfway up and a short but exciting ice pitch through some séracs. Otherwise, the route involved a lot of deep, loose snow lying on ice and some weaving in and out of double cornices on the final ridge. Sadly, it was cloudy all day with wind and some snowfall, so there was little visibility and no views at all. 'Moelwyn' – 'white hill' in Welsh – seemed a suitable name.

After camping for a second night at the foot of the S spur of our peak, we down climbed, in ten pitches, the big snow slope into the Terekty valley. The snow was the usual Tien Shan combination of thin, breakable crust over 2ft of huge, totally unconsolidated melt-freeze grains. With heavy unwieldy packs we pitched it all, digging deep to find ice-screw belays. Then horrible loose rock on or near the ridge crest gave way to easier scree leading down to a complicated dry glacier. After much weaving about among crevasses, we finally camped at 3800m, our first night off ice for a fortnight. It had been an exhausting day, but at least we were now in the right valley.

An attempt on Kirov, 6073m

We treated ourselves to a rest day before the big effort that would be needed on Kirov Peak. We could not see the col immediately north of Kirov and lacked both the time and the food for a reconnaissance in that direction. Instead, we opted for the W spur which led to the SW ridge – an immensely long route but apparently straightforward. Success would depend on favourable snow conditions and weather and on moving fast; but we were fit and acclimatised now and, touch wood, the weather around here never seemed to become seriously bad – or so we thought.

We set off with five days' food on a perfect morning. Unfortunately the weather deteriorated from midday onwards as we descended onto the Kuyon-Kap glacier at 3600m, and crossed it. Then it was up loose scree and a big open ice slope to the crest of the W spur. Purple saxifrage in flower on the scree seemed a good omen, but higher up a rock, dislodged by John's dangling ice-axe loop on a short pitch, hit me at the bottom of my back. My involuntary gasps and groans caused John to climb rapidly back down. Fortunately I suffered no serious injury, but the incident gave us food for thought. We bivvied just past a satellite summit at the junction of the N and W spurs, using the Quasar flysheet and ski poles to make an effective lightweight tent.

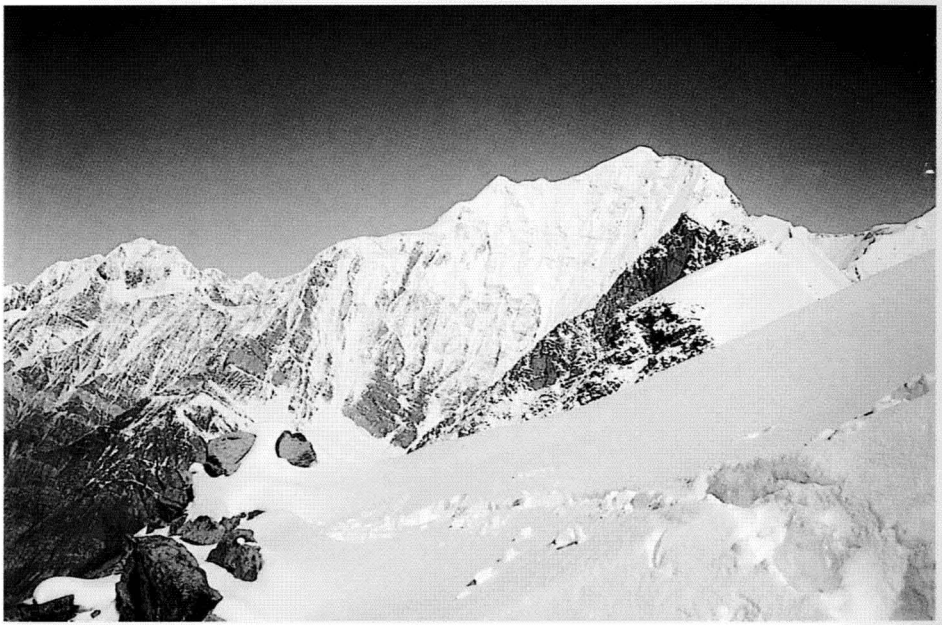
During the night fresh snow fell and there was much rumbling thunder in the distance. We climbed to the junction with the main SW ridge via a couple of ice pitches and a lot of unconsolidated snow. Before the weather closed in we caught a brief glimpse of enormous cornices leading to Kirov and wide, easy-angled glaciers on the Chinese side. We worked our way along the ridge in wind, snow and poor visibility, at first on hard ice for several rope lengths on the Chinese side, moving together with ice-screw runners, and then on the west, or Kyrgyz side, to stay on top of the cornices. We managed to find a flat section on which to pitch the fly at about 5300m.

At 5am a start was out of the question. It had been a stormy night and despite snow blocks all round the fly, everything at each end was buried under inches of spindrift and there was a continuous shower of hoar frost as the wind shook the walls. Thank goodness for Gore-Tex bivvy bags! At 8am there was a lull and a slight clearing, so we brewed up and started getting ready, only for the weather to clamp down again. Moving along such a heavily corniced ridge in zero visibility was not an option, so we dug a snow cave to make ouselves more comfortable. We could ill afford this lost day.

Conscious that this would be our only chance of reaching the summit, we set out next morning with one light sack between us in poor weather but some visibility. It was a trying day involving long traverses on steep slopes over huge drops down the NW face, pockets of soft slab alternating with the usual bottomless melt-freeze crystals. Visibility came and went but we never saw the summit. We gave cornice edges a wide berth (or so we thought) until, on one flat section – a place where we would confidently have pitched a tent – a huge segment at least 10m deep and 50m long



44. Looking down the Terekty valley from the West Spur of Pik Kirov, 6073m, towards the shoulder (R) of Moelwyn, and P 5215. (*Rob Collister*) (p140)



45. P 5215 (L) and Moelwyn, 5784m, seen from the West Spur of Pik Kirov. A satellite peak is in the foreground. (*Rob Collister*) (p140)

suddenly broke away. John had just taken over the lead and, relaxing after mental as well as physical strain, I was plodding along in his footsteps, brain in neutral, when it happened.

The fracture-line was between my feet, though John was on terra firma with the rope tight. I dangled for a moment from my ice axe, thrust instinctively into the snow. Then, amazingly, a small section of the cornice which had failed to break off swung back like a rat-trap to imprison me from the waist down. It all happened too quickly to be frightening and, but for the pressure on my legs, it would have been almost comic. I had the shovel. I managed to get it out of my sack and, while John anchored the rope downslope, I started digging. It took ten minutes, with cautious help from John, to release myself.

The mountain seemed to be telling us something, but we didn't want to give up yet and continued, albeit in chastened mood; but after six hours' climbing, the weather was becoming steadily worse and we were still on the horizontal section of the ridge. We had a brief glimpse of more vicious cornices ahead and knew that beyond there was 600m vertical height of unknown technical difficulty to be overcome. Suddenly it seemed too far and too much. We had done our utmost, but yesterday's wasted day had stymied us. Reluctantly, but with a strong sense that we were not welcome on this mountain, we turned back.

The Retreat

Conditions rapidly deteriorated and next day we retreated in a full-blown storm; with snow, wind and swirling spindrift, it was very cold, very Scottish, but with no Red Burn to make for ...

With only a day's food left and slab avalanche conditions developing, we could not afford to sit it out. Climbing back along the ridge was dangerous and exhausting, involving clearing away the slab before taking each sideways step, belaying all the way. As we climbed down the spur, we set off a big slab near the top. We down climbed the first little ice pitch where a sérac wall abutted the ridge crest, but sacrificed an ice screw to abseil the start of the next one. Late in the day we reached the site of our first bivvy, the worst now behind us.

Finally, the mountain let us off the hook! Blessed with good weather at last, we found an easy alternative descent on the south side of the spur, followed by an improbable but straightforward route beside the glacier all the way down to a moraine shelf where we could brew up and dry out in sunshine. Easily we scrambled down to the valley, revelling in warmth and familiar alpine flowers – purple and orange asters, yellow rock-roses and creamy rock-jasmine. On the lateral moraine of the valley glacier, to our astonishment we stumbled across a solitary cairn – no more than one stone on top of another, on a boulder, but an unmistakable sign that someone

had been here before us. Not surprising really, and in our situation it was poignant rather than disappointing, for we were still a very long way from Base Camp, let alone other people. Wearily – and hungrily – we plodded back up to our food-dump.

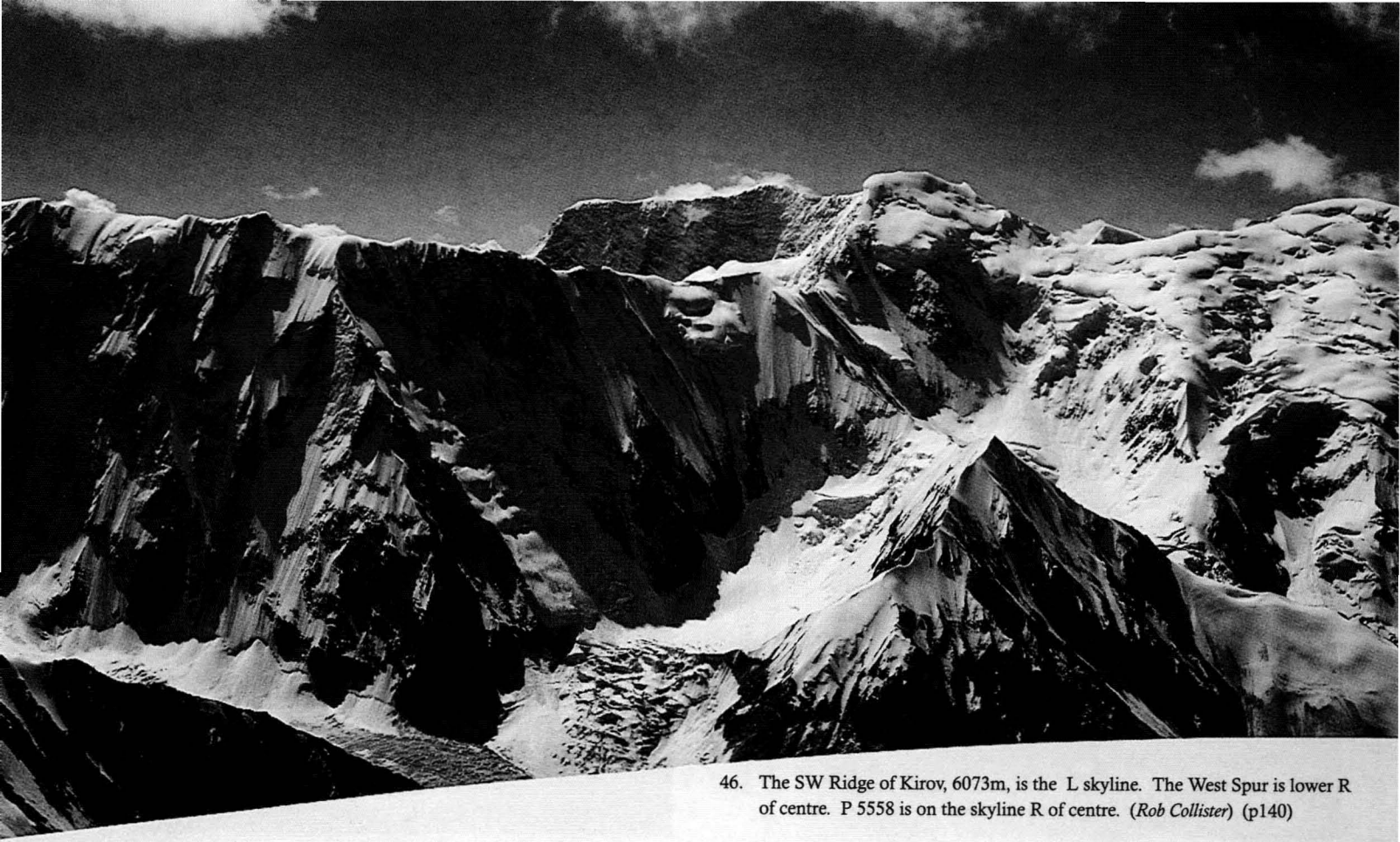
Toiling back up to the ridge above the Terekty valley was scary, with crevasses masked by several inches of new snow. Carelessly, I dropped a ski pole while probing and it disappeared with a tinkling sound of breaking icicles. Slowly we continued up steep, unstable scree which became slightly easier as the new snow deepened towards the top. We pitched the tent right on the crest of the sharp ridge dropping from Moelwyn Peak, at the foot of the big snow slope. Though there were memorable views across to Kirov and the icy sérac-ridden faces of peaks to the west, this was no place for sleep-walking!

Climbing back up the snow slope, the ubiquitous crust bore our weight for some of the time, otherwise we might never have escaped the Terekty valley. Once in the bowl beneath Moelwyn, however, the snow was soft and deep and the heat enervating. After covering 300yds in an hour, we abandoned the packs and put in a set of tracks up onto the ridge, unladen. That done, we pitched the inner tent and spent the afternoon brewing and sleeping. At 4pm we packed up and climbed easily onto the ridge in cooler conditions. Along the ridge, still in deep powder, we felt strong again, invigorated by glorious evening sunlight and valedictory views of Kirov and the Terekty valley. Even the cornices, icicles dripping like fangs from their jaws, seemed almost friendly now we were saying farewell. A bitter little wind substituted freezing fingers for such sentiment, as we donned crampons and the rope to negotiate an ice step and some nasty-feeling slab at the top of the Kayndy slope. Down, labouring through a crust that was breakable but only just, into the reds and oranges of sunset. Finally we camped as light faded at 9pm and cooked by torchlight.

Out of food now, we quickly descended the side glacier on a crust that was breakable at first but miraculously improved as we lost height. We indulged in coffee and biscuits in the sun at the kit-bag of food where we said goodbye to our friends all that time ago. Then, having added the contents of the cache to our rucksacks to bring them back to the regulation 30kg, we headed down the glacier.

For the first time in days I had time to reflect. Although we had not climbed Kirov, I felt utterly content. Our names would not go down in the record books, but I would remember these three weeks as one of the best of times, with one of the best of companions.

A circling helicopter was the first indication that civilization might not be far away now. Soon afterwards we met two British climbers, just arrived, and heard about the double tragedy on P5445 in which first Mick Davie and then two Russian guides died in cornice accidents. Mindful of our own experience, I could only reflect that 'there but for the Grace of God ... '



46. The SW Ridge of Kirov, 6073m, is the L skyline. The West Spur is lower R of centre. P 5558 is on the skyline R of centre. (*Rob Collister*) (p140)

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Kirov Peak can be climbed from the Terekty valley, the main problem being access. The route we attempted is perfectly feasible but it would be much safer with three or four climbers spaced well apart in case of collapsing cornices, which are clearly a feature of climbing in this region.

Another option would be to attempt the mountain from one of the two cols to the north. The one furthest north (the furthest away from the mountain) looked the most straightforward, if slightly higher of the two. This route would mean first negotiating a complex icefall on the Kuyon-Kap glacier at the head of the Terekty valley (probably best taken on its true left side, close to a rock buttress). Once either col has been reached, a small bump which does not look totally straightforward must be traversed to reach the northern slopes of Kirov. Here there appears to be a choice of route. That on the NW flank would entail a long traverse on snow beneath a rock band to reach a snowy line of weakness cutting through it. On the NE slope there are a number of séracs and from our viewpoint it was impossible to tell whether there is a route that would be unthreatened.

Either of these routes could be reached, possibly more easily, from the Komsomol glacier on the north, or Inylchek, side. If helicopter transport were to be used, this would certainly be a cheaper approach than the Terekty. However, Vladimir mentioned that two previous attempts on the mountain from this side failed, mainly owing to deep snow, with steps being regularly filled in by overnight snowfall.

Summary

The object of the British Tien Shan Expedition 1995 was to climb Kirov Peak, 6073m, from the south by way of the Terekty valley, but the peak was approached from the Kayndy valley in the light of local advice. When there proved to be no easy pass from the Upper Kayndy, Alun Hughes and Lisa Holliday decided to explore the Kayndy valley (instead of continuing) before returning home. Rob Collister and John Cousins battled on through difficult snow conditions to reach the summit of the highest peak (5784m) on the Kayndy/Terekty divide. They called this 'Moelwyn Peak'. Owing to adverse weather and dangerous cornices, their attempt on Kirov was abandoned at *c*5400m.