

Lenin the Hiker

Roland Boer

2012

Lenin's love of donning his hiking boots and heading off with glee to the mountains, his urge to set out skating on any piece of frozen ice, his pleasure in diving into a river or the sea for a good swim, or his joy in pulling out his bicycle and riding it all day are rarely, if ever, understood for the vital role they play in his life. In these extended periods in the mountains, in the sea or on the road, Lenin would typically banish any thought of work from his mind. Now his body would work hard, allowing his mind to run freely to whatever thought might appear next. For anyone who engages in such activities (mine is long-distance cycling for days and weeks at an end), the effect is extraordinary: as the end of the ride or hike draws nigh, a reluctance to return home sets in and plans and dreams of much longer expeditions begin to form. All one wishes to do is stay on the road, concerned merely with the next meal, a place to sleep for the night, the smooth working of one's body and, if on a bicycle, machine. And when the door of home does open all that had weighed so heavily on one's mind at departure now seems far less pressing, so much so that one wonders what all the fuss was about.

In Lenin's case, of course, the issue is the body of a revolutionary. People noted that he had the body of a well-built athlete, enjoying even sailing and the trapeze. That he was supremely fit goes without saying; that he was skilled to the point of impressing observers is noted by Krupskaya when Lenin skated on the frozen river in Shushenskoye on his mercury skates, cutting figures and performing all manner of tricks such as 'giant steps' and 'Spanish leaps', or when he swam (daily when possible) (Krupskaya, *Reminiscences*, pp. 39-40, 262; *Collected Works* 37: 71, 78, 112, 176, 204, 209, 227, 238, 307, 332, 365-6, 369, 387, 463, 485, 489, 494, 509, 560, 573, 574, 576, 578-9, 582-3, 602, 604, 610. One caveat must be noted here, for Lenin was a lousy hunter, no matter how passionately he pursued it. Again and again in her letters to Lenin's mother and sisters, Krupskaya would comment on how 'Volodya' would grasp his 'famous gun' and go out for hours, dressed in leather breeches and hunting jacket, with a dog he had trained and a local accomplice from Shusehnskoye, but come back empty-handed. On one occasion when they were out for a walk together, he brought his gun, but said, "You know, if I come across a hare I won't shoot it, because I didn't bring my bags. It will be awkward to carry." Yet as soon as a hare came bounding out he would let go at it'. But he missed, for he was 'apt to get too excited' over hunting (*Reminiscences*, p. 39). An equally successful

expedition took place in autumn of 1898. Faced with a flock of partridges rising from the sides of the road, Lenin groaned with pleasure, took aim and fired, ‘but the partridge simply walked away without even bothering to fly’ (*Collected Works* 37: 464, 579, 558, 583).

But let me draw out an activity on which he spent much energy, namely, hiking. For most of the information on these matters, we are dependent largely on Krupskaya, who more often than not accompanied Lenin. Or rather, these were activities they undertook together, relishing the opportunity to share in what was close to both their hearts. At the simplest level were the daily walks, a habit they maintained even after the October Revolution, albeit intermittently and more limited in extent. Unlike the extended hikes when they would banish all thought of work from their minds, the daily walks were a time for talk, sharing thoughts on what they were writing. For Lenin, this process was an extension his habit of writing, in which he would ‘pace up and down the room, whispering what he was going to write’. In this light the daily walks ‘became as much a necessity to him as whispering his article over to himself before putting it down in writing’ (*Reminiscences*, p. 63; see also *Collected Works* 37: 112, 332, 361, 365-6, 509, 516, 560, 578-9, 583, 601, 614). More strenuous were the day-long hikes together, usually ‘scrambling up mountains’, at times with a group dubbed the ‘excursionist party’ (*Collected Works* 37: 516, 507-8). Krupskaya writes of walks in the Wolski Forest near Krakow, the snow-capped summits of the Tatra Mountains in the south of Poland around Poronino, the mountains around Zakopane and those near Sörenberg, such as the Rothorn and Schrattenfluh, in Switzerland. At Sörenberg, they would try to work in the morning and set off in the afternoon, but often the temptation became too great and they would climb mountains all day (*Reminiscences*, pp. 262-3, 268, 307-8, 310-11; *Collected Works* 37: 622). From these locations, they would send ‘hikers’ greetings’ to family members, occasionally on a postcard (*Collected Works* 37: 363-4, 471). The Bolshevik Pianitsky tells of Lenin’s cycling when he could and of a hike together up to the ‘The Eye of the Sea’ (Morskie Oko), the largest mountain lake in the Tatra Mountains, near Poronino. They arrived home after dark, drenched and cold, after climbing over rocks and up cliffs with the help of iron hooks made fast in the rock. When they made the peak, it was covered in cloud, and three times they began their descent, only for the sun to come out and another scramble to the top (*Memoirs of a Bolshevik*, pp. 182-3).

Yet what draws me in, causing me to dwell long over the brief notes, recalling my own experiences and imagining what it would have been like to walk with them, are the

hikes for weeks on end in the mountains. They were extraordinary, almost utopian expeditions. For instance, they spent six weeks hiking in the Swiss Alps in 1916, with a base in Tschudiweise. Living a ‘carefree existence’, they would set out from their base and ramble through the mountains. So absorbed was Lenin, that on one descent he caught sight of some mushrooms and began to pick them eagerly (as he often did with berries and other wild fruits). The problem was the rain, for it was pouring. Soaked to the skin but with a bagful of mushrooms, they of course missed the train home and ‘had to wait two hours at the station for the next one’ (*Reminiscences*, p. 327).

Above all, the month hiking in the Swiss Alps in July 1904 was a glorious experience. After the split of the Second Congress and the party squabbles that ensued, they took to the mountains in early July. They left behind their worries at their home in Geneva and retreated to Lausanne. After a few days, the books they had brought with them for quiet study were sent back to Geneva. Instead, they eagerly packed their rucksacks and planned two weeks of hiking through the mountains, leaving at 4.00 am and aiming for Lucerne via Interlaken (*Collected Works* 37: 362). Seduced by the walking, two weeks became a month. As Krupskaya writes, ‘we always chose the loneliest trails that led into the wilds, away from any people’. The planned route was forgotten, so they set out each day not knowing where they would rest their tired bodies by nightfall. And as happens on such ventures, sleep is long and deep, often more than ten hours before waking at first light. With very little money, they ‘lived mostly on cold food such as eggs and cheese, washed down with wine or water from a spring’. Or acting on a tip from a worker, they avoided the sections of hotels where bourgeois tourists would sit, preferring the tables with coachmen and labourers, for there the food was twice as cheap and far more satisfying. As with planned route, the last remaining books in their rucksacks were neglected – a fat French dictionary in Lenin’s backpack and a thick French book for translation in Nadya’s: ‘It was not at dictionaries we looked, but at the snow-capped everlasting mountains, at blue lakes and turbulent waterfalls’ (*Reminiscences*, pp. 105-6). A glimpse of the sheer pleasure of the hike may be gained from the postcards Lenin sent to his mother and sister Maria: ‘Greetings from the tramps’, he writes on the back of one from Kandersteg near Frutigen, and ‘Greetings from our *Mon Repos*. In a day or two we shall be off once again’ on a card with a view of Iseltwald am Brienzersee (*Collected Works* 37: 363-4).

So vital to Lenin were these times that he gained a reputation for always wearing his hiking boots. And given that for a walker, one’s boots are the most important piece

of equipment, he would clean his and Nadya's boots himself. He took the boots every morning to the shed and work at them with complete absorption while chatting with the other boot-blacks. Nadya puts it simply: 'Ilyich was terribly fond of hiking' (*Reminiscences*, pp. 326 and 262-3).