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The Sporting Life of V. I. Lenin

ABSTRACT: The conventional picture of V. I. Lenin found in all Soviet and most Western biographies is that of a man committed solely to factional politics and the attainment of revolutionary power. In 1953, N. V. Vol'skii, writing as Nikolay Valentinov, referred to this as "the geometric Lenin." He noted that there was another dimension to the Bolshevik leader: a man with very human foibles and, often, bourgeois tastes. One of the over-looked aspects of this "non-geometric Lenin" was his interest in a wide variety of athletic endeavours. During his privileged upbringing, he learned to ski, swim and row. While in Siberian exile, he took up hunting and ice-skating. In his long years as a political émigré in Western Europe, he continued to pursue some of these sports as well as becoming a committed mountain climber and a long-distance cyclist. This article discusses these sporting interests. It suggests that he was unique among his revolutionary colleagues in the breadth of these activities and it questions the assertion that he pursued them simply because he felt they made him a better revolutionary. Lenin, like many sportsmen, liked to challenge himself physically and he derived a certain pleasure from being in close touch with nature.

March 15, 1917, was a dismal day in Zurich. There was a heavy mist in the air and patches of dirty snow on the ground. The mood of V. I. Lenin was no better than the Swiss weather when a fellow émigré burst into his apartment to announce that there had been a revolution in Petrograd. The response of the disbelieving Bolshevik leader was to wander down to the offices of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* where press clippings confirmed the rumours but offered few details. A brief visit to the Russian Reading Room did little to relieve either his depression or his uncertainty. Abandoning plans to work in the cantonal library, Lenin set off instead to climb the Zurichberg. It was hardly a strenuous excursion. The crest of the Zurichberg was only 270 metres above the city and a couple of kilometres from its centre. The walk, however, cleared his head and helped to restore his optimism concerning the day's unexpected news.¹ It was to

¹ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Lenin in Zurich*, translated by Harry Willetts (New York: Farrer, Straus & Giroux, 1976) 201–218. Solzhenitsyn's account of Lenin's activities on 15 March (2 March, according to the 'old-style' Russian calendar) is partially confirmed by Nadezhda Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, translated by Bernard Isaacs (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959) 335–336; Willi Gautschi, *Lenin als Emigrant in der Schweiz* (Zurich and Cologne: Benziger Verlag, 1973) 239; and Lenin's letter to Inessa Armand of 15 March 1917 in V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 55 vols. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1958–1965) 49: 254.

be the last of his many forays into the Swiss mountains for on that same day Tsar Nicholas II abdicated his throne in the first of a series of events that was to bring Lenin to power eight months later.

The fact that he should choose to climb a mountain, albeit a small mountain, on a crucial day of the February Revolution was not inconsistent with Lenin's character. His response to political or emotional pressures was frequently to seek physical release through hiking. Mountain climbing, however, was but one of Lenin's many athletic endeavours. He was also a strong swimmer, a passionate hunter, a skilled skater, a gymnast, a rower and a cyclist at a time when "sports were by no means fashionable among the democratic intelligentsia."² Lenin's fellow revolutionaries much preferred the café to the beach and none shared his obsession with physical exercise. Nikolay Valentinov, one of the few observers to recognize the breadth of Lenin's sporting interests, considered these to be a reflection of his "non-geometric" personality; an indication that he was not just the single-minded compulsive revolutionary found in most of his biographies.³ While evidence supporting Valentinov's assertion has long been available in the *Reminiscences* of Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaja, and in their extensive correspondence with his family, no biographer has used it to provide a detailed study of his multi-faceted sporting life.⁴ It is the intention of this modest article to fill that lacuna and in doing so to contribute to a more nuanced, non-geometric picture of the first Soviet leader.

Lenin's initiation into outdoor sports came during his youth. He spent every summer from the early 1880s until 1893 either at a family estate at Kokushkino near Kazan or at Alekaevka, a country house outside of Samara. Both were near the Volga and surrounded by fields and woods where the Ul'ianov children whiled away their teen-age summers. It was in these "nests of gentleness," to the embarrassment of Lenin's Soviet biographers, that he developed his lifelong appreciation of nature and the opportunities it offered for athletic pursuits.

Lenin's expulsion from the University of Kazan in December 1886 and his subsequent enforced residence for six months at Kokushkino gave him a chance to take up skiing on the country lanes near the estate and to try his hand at tobogganing.⁵ "A winter without snow is unpleasant," he later wrote his mother

² Leon Trotsky, *The Young Lenin*, translated by Max Eastman (New York: Doubleday, 1972) 137.

³ Nikolay Valentinov (N. V. Vol'skii), *Encounters with Lenin*, translated by Paul Rosta and Brian Pearce (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 77.

⁴ A partial exception is Tamara Deutscher's edited collection *Not by Politics Alone... The Other Lenin* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973) 52–67. Robert Service's recent and comprehensive *Lenin: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) touches in passing on many of the points raised in this article.

⁵ Service, *Lenin* 64.

from Munich. "I recall with pleasure the real Russian winter, the sleigh rides and clean frosty air."⁶ His fond memories of cross-country skiing were still strong in late 1916 when he asked his friend Inessa Armand, "Do you go skiing? You really should! Learn how, get some skis and go to the mountains—you must. It is good in the mountains in the winter! It's lovely and smells of Russia."⁷

Lenin also acquired a fondness for water sports during his summers along the Volga. Experience gained rowing in the treacherous currents near Kokushkino proved useful later on when he took longer and more demanding trips down the Volga from Samara and then back up the Usa River. These three- or four-day excursions covered more than one hundred kilometres and required great stamina, especially when hauling his boat overland between the two rivers at Perevoloka. On several occasions, when bored with academic reading at Alekaevka or desiring a physical challenge and freedom from his family, Lenin repeated these self-styled "round the world tours."⁸

Unlike rowing, swimming was a water sport learned at Kokushkino that Lenin was able to pursue throughout his life. By the age of eight he had learned to swim across the Ushna River. "The swimming course, however, was not yet over," one of his sisters recalled. "We had to learn to float on our back without moving, to make a running dive head first, to recover a ball of clay from the bottom of the river, to jump into the river from the roof of the bath house [...]"⁹ Such antics terrified his parents, especially given the strong river currents. On two occasions, according to Robert Service, the future leader of the Soviet state had to be rescued by passers-by.¹⁰ The pond on the family estate at Alekaevka offered a safer opportunity for Lenin to perfect his swimming techniques.¹¹

Lenin's next opportunity to swim on a regular basis came in 1897 after he was sentenced to three years "administrative exile" in central Siberia for revolutionary activity. He was fortunate to be sent to Shushenskoe, a village south of Krasnoïarsk, in an area referred to as "Siberian Italy" because of its relatively benign climate. This allowed him to swim in a tributary of the Ienisei River. This was not as convenient as it had been in the Volga since it required a two-kilometre walk through mosquito-infested fields. It nevertheless provided

⁶ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (26 December 1900), in Lenin 55: 197.

⁷ Lenin to Inessa Armand (18 December 1916), in Lenin 49: 341. See also similar advice of 17 December 1916, 49: 339.

⁸ Lenin's account of these trips is repeated by Valentinov in his *Encounters* 80–81, and in his *The Early Years of Lenin*, translated by Rolf H. W. Theen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969) 47.

⁹ Quoted without attribution in Valentinov, *Early Years* 46.

¹⁰ Robert Service, *Lenin: A Political Life*, vol. 1: *The Strengths of Contradiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 20.

¹¹ Trotsky 134, 137.

an outlet for his pent-up energies. "A plan was drawn up for swimming whereby we get up each morning at 6 a.m.," reported Krupskaya shortly after joining Lenin in 1898. "I don't know how long it will last."¹² As she was soon to find out, her husband's urge for aquatic exercise overcame his dislike of mosquitoes to the point that he often made two trips a day to the Yenisei.¹³ Many years later he demonstrated swimming skills developed in the Volga and the Yenisei when he challenged his much younger students at the Longjumeau school to a two-lap race across the Seine.¹⁴

Another sport that Lenin pursued in Siberia, just as he had without great success along the Volga,¹⁵ was hunting for small game. Taking advantage of lax tsarist security regulations, he not only travelled unescorted on the Trans-Siberian Railway to Krasnoyarsk but also soon after arriving purchased a shotgun for use in the temperate forests surrounding Shushenskoe. In one of his first letters to his mother, he reported, "the shooting here is not bad. Yesterday I walked about 12 kilometres to shoot duck and great snipe. There is a lot of game."¹⁶ Several months later he informed her "I still go hunting [...]. Whenever there is a fine autumn day I grab my gun and wander off across the fields and forest."¹⁷ In jocular fashion, he told her he was "clever enough" to be off shooting on the day his wife-to-be arrived in Shushenskoe.¹⁸ Krupskaya soon recognized that Vladimir Il'ich had become "a passionate hunter"¹⁹ and accordingly accommodated herself to his new obsession. "He is terribly carried away with shooting," she wrote. "They are all such enthusiastic hunters that I too will probably soon be on the constant look-out for duck, teal and other such creatures."²⁰ And so she was. That fall she wrote, "the season is now open for grey hen and partridge. They are noble birds—you don't have to go into swamps for them like you do for ducks and things." "We once saw about twenty partridge [...] a whole flock of them rose from both sides of the road; you can imagine what our hunters were like. Volodia [i.e., Lenin] actually groaned. Still, he managed to take aim but the partridge simply walked away without bothering to fly."²¹

¹² Krupskaya to M. A. Ul'ianova (14 June 1898), in Lenin 55: 391.

¹³ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (18 May 1897, 25 May 1897, 19 July 1897, 14 June 1898), in Lenin 55: 35, 40, 47, 92.

¹⁴ I. S. Belostotskii, "Vstrechi s Leninyim," *Iuzhnyi ural* 30 (1958): 6.

¹⁵ Trotsky 39, 122, 137.

¹⁶ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (18 May 1897), in Lenin 55: 36. See also his letter to M. A. Ul'ianova (25 May 1897), 55: 39–40.

¹⁷ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (12 October 1897), in Lenin 55: 54.

¹⁸ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (10 May 1898), in Lenin 55: 88.

¹⁹ Krupskaya 39.

²⁰ Krupskaya to M. A. Ul'ianova (10 May 1898), in Lenin 55: 390.

²¹ Krupskaya to M. I. Ul'ianova (11 September 1898), in Lenin 55: 397.

Hunting required accessories not always easily obtained in Siberia. "Shooting without a game dog is difficult," Lenin confided in his mother several months after his arrival.²² By October he had acquired a young Gordon setter named Jenny, which he planned to train to point and retrieve. Either the trainer or the dog was not up to the task. Rather than finding birds for Lenin to shoot, Jenny preferred to chase them to the indignation of her master.²³ On one memorable occasion, Lenin and his colleagues missed a score of partridges but managed to shoot their "game dog." Even though Jenny survived, one suspects that her master regretted turning down an earlier offer by his brother-in-law to ship a trained dog from Moscow via the Trans-Siberian.²⁴

Lenin had more success acquiring hip-high waders for spring shooting in swampy areas and he requested that his mother send some moleskin trousers to replace those torn by rugged brush.²⁵ For protection against mosquitoes, which Krupskaja said "went out of their way to bite Volodia,"²⁶ he asked that she send kid gloves to go with the net he wore over his head.²⁷ And then in December 1898 a new crisis developed when he dropped his gun on the ice and cracked its barrel. When the local gunsmith declared it beyond repair, the convicted revolutionary entered into an extensive correspondence with his brother that resulted in a new double-barrelled shotgun being sent to him just in time for the spring hunting season. To confuse the already lenient authorities, Lenin instructed that it be addressed to his aged mother-in-law who was living with them at the time.²⁸

Lenin clearly developed an addiction to hunting while in Siberia. "Life here goes on as usual," he informed his mother. "I am not working much at present and as soon as the hunting season opens, I shall probably work even less."²⁹ In the spring, summer and well into the fall, rather than spending his time writing *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, as Soviet commentators would have preferred, Vladimir Il'ich hunted partridge, snipe, grouse and ducks in the forests and swamps near Shushenskoe. As winter approached, he went to the islands in

²² Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (18 May 1897), in Lenin 55: 36.

²³ Krupskaja to M. A. Ul'ianova (14 June 1898), in Lenin 55: 391.

²⁴ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (30 September 1897) and to M. I. Ul'ianova (27 December 1897), in Lenin 55: 53, 65.

²⁵ Krupskaja to M. A. Ul'ianova (4 April 1899) and Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (7 February 1898), in Lenin 55: 409, 73.

²⁶ Krupskaja to M. A. Ul'ianova (14 June 1898), in Lenin 55: 391.

²⁷ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (7 February 1898), in Lenin 55: 73.

²⁸ Krupskaja to M. A. Ul'ianova (20 December 1898), Lenin to D. I. Ul'ianov (26 January 1899), Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (4 April 1899 and 11 April 1899), in Lenin 55: 121, 130–132, 154–155, 157.

²⁹ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (20 June 1899), in Lenin 55: 165.

the Ienisei where rabbits were easy prey.³⁰ He did not, however, venture forty kilometres to the taiga where bigger game was to be found. While not a good shot, as he himself admitted,³¹ he brought home enough birds to feed his family and to receive their praise for his marksmanship.³² Lenin's aptitude for hunting is probably best summed up by a fellow exile, P. N. Lepeshinskii:

The amount of game he used to bring back from his expeditions was generally minimal. The birds at which he aimed his deadly weapon nearly always had an opportunity to jeer at the art of this amateur marksman. But this in no way discouraged him. The instinct of a hunter was quite satisfied when he could steal cleverly towards his prey perched on a branch of a tree, when he could measure with his 'practised' eye the distance between the unfortunate woodcock and the muzzle of his gun, when he could savour with all his being the anticipation of his 'perfect' shot, without, however, worrying unduly when his feathery victim, after the 'deadly shot' was fired, would soar towards the blue sky and disappear into the brightness of the day instead of toppling head over heels to the ground.³³

An alternative to hunting was fishing. Lenin had earlier been prohibited from pursuing the sport after a near-fatal accident while fishing in the Volga as a youth.³⁴ Free of parental control in Siberia, he tried his luck in the Ienisei. As Krupskaya informed his mother in June 1898,

at this time of the year Volodia does not go hunting [...] it is nesting time or something, and even his waders have been put in the cellar. Instead of shooting, Volodia has tried his hand at fishing. Occasionally, he goes at night to the Ienisei to fish for burbot but since the last time, when he came back without even a minnow, there has been no more talk of burbot.³⁵

Later in Western Europe, where hunting was not an option for impoverished Russian émigrés, he fished once in the Mediterranean. As Maksim Gor'kii later recalled, the local

fishermen explained to him that the fish must be hooked when the finger feels the vibration of the line. '*Così: drin, drin. Capisce?*' A second later he hooked a fish, drew it in and cried out with child-like joy and hunter's excitement, '*Drin, drin*'.

³⁰ Krupskaya 39; Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (19 October 1897), Krupskaya to M. A. Ul'ianova (27 September 1898 and 14 October 1898), in Lenin 55: 57, 398, 406.

³¹ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (18 May 1897), in Lenin 55: 36. This verdict is endorsed by both Krupskaya (39) and Trotsky (122).

³² Krupskaya to M. A. Ul'ianova (26 August 1898 and 3 July 1899) in Lenin 55: 395, 412.

³³ P. N. Lepeshinskii, "Na rubezhe dvukh vekov," in *Vospominaniia o Vladimire Il'iche Lenine*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1969) 70, as cited in Deutscher 56.

³⁴ For details of this mishap, see Service, *Lenin* 44–45.

³⁵ Krupskaya to M. A. Ul'ianova (14 June 1898), in Lenin 55: 391.

The fishermen roared with laughter, gay as children, and nicknamed the fisherman 'Signor Drin-Drin'.³⁶

Trotsky was probably right that in general Lenin "couldn't endure sitting still with a hooked line."³⁷ Hunting at least gave him an opportunity to walk for hours on end through the forests.

In November of his second year in Siberia, Lenin noted that "the only change is in the form of relaxation—now that winter has come I go skating instead of hunting. I recall the old days and find that I have not forgotten how, although it is ten years since I skated last."³⁸ According to Olga Lepeshinskaia, ice-skating was Vladimir Il'ich's favourite sport and one where his skill was far more evident than in hunting. Once the Yenisei froze and before too much snow had fallen, it was possible to skate for miles on the river. Ever competitive, Lenin challenged his fellow skaters to a race. "Our skates would cut into the ice. In front of everybody [was] Ilyich, straining all his willpower and his muscles in order to win at any price, no matter how big the effort."³⁹ After the snow came, the exiled socialists of Shushenskoe cleared the ice on the Shush River in front of their village to make a skating rink. Krupskaya provided an admiring audience. "Volodia is an excellent skater," she informed his sister Anna; he "even keeps his hands in his pockets of his grey jacket like a true sportsman."⁴⁰ After a Christmas trip to the near-by town of Minusinsk, where Lenin was given a new pair of Mercury skates and some lessons in figure skating, they returned home where he "amazed the people of Shushenskoe with his 'giant steps' and 'Spanish leaps'." The self-effacing Krupskaya admitted that she in contrast "strutted around like a chicken on skates."⁴¹

Fourteen years later, when bored with émigré life in Cracow, Lenin bought himself another pair of skates and reported to his mother "with great enthusiasm" how skating "brought back memories of Simbirsk and Siberia."⁴² Once again he impressed the locals by "executing elaborate figures on ice."⁴³ This time, however, his entreaties to Krupskaya to join him fell on deaf ears.⁴⁴

³⁶ Maxim Gorky, *Days with Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1932) 28.

³⁷ Trotsky 137.

³⁸ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (15 November 1898), in Lenin 55: 109.

³⁹ Olga Lepeshinskaya, "The Siberian Deportee II", in *Deutscher* 52–53. See also Krupskaya 40.

⁴⁰ Krupskaya to A. I. Ul'ianova (22 November 1898), in Lenin 55: 404.

⁴¹ Krupskaya to M. I. Ul'ianova (24 January 1899) and M. A. Ul'ianova (10 January 1899), in Lenin 55: 408, 406.

⁴² Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (24 February 1913), in Lenin 55: 335.

⁴³ S. I. Bagotskii, "V. I. Lenin v Krakove i Poronine," in *Vospominaniia o Vladimire Il'iche Lenine*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1969) 314.

⁴⁴ Krupskaya to M. A. Ul'ianova (7 January 1914), in Lenin 55: 509.

In 1900, after his term of administrative exile was over, Lenin left Russia and spent most of the next seventeen years living as an émigré in various European cities with regular breaks in the summer for holidays at the seashore or in the mountains. Perforce, many of his sporting interests changed while abroad.

When Nikolay Valentinov arrived in Geneva in 1904, one of the first persons he met was Lenin. He was immediately impressed by his fellow Bolshevik's muscular build and his interest in all forms of sport and physical exercise. Lenin, when he heard that Valentinov had once been a champion weight-lifter, insisted that he demonstrate the proper ways to lift weights. Lacking equipment, Valentinov used one of the Ul'ianov household brooms to make his points. Lenin then replicated the moves, much to the amusement of his mother-in-law. "Don't disturb us," was Vladimir Il'ich's response to her laughter, "we are engaged in very important business."⁴⁵

The two men also discussed gymnastics and exercise regimens. Lenin told his colleague that while living in Alekaevka he had rigged up two posts with a horizontal bar between them to use as a makeshift trapeze. He used this to show his brother how to do chin-ups and to balance on the bar.⁴⁶ Later he advised both Dmitrii and his sister Mariia that daily exercise was imperative while in prison. On the basis of his own incarceration, he recommended that they do push-ups, sit-ups and touch their toes fifty times from a standing position. "The main thing is never to forget the obligatory daily gymnastics. Force yourself to do all kinds of stretches, several dozen at a time, without slacking."⁴⁷ He also, according to Dmitrii, "always polished the cell floor himself since this was a good form of gymnastics. And so he acted like a real old floor-polisher—with his hands held behind him, he would begin to dance to and fro across the cell with a brush or a rag under his foot. 'Good gymnastics, and you even get a sweat up'."⁴⁸ Lenin was proud of the fact that he did at least ten minutes a day of more normal calisthenics while living in emigration.⁴⁹

Another form of exercise he favoured was walking. Initially, when Valentinov heard that his new friend was hard at work on *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, he expressed his fear that their conversations would come to an end. "Not at all," answered Lenin. "I don't intend to work without a break: I shall work and relax by turns. For example, at about four o'clock each day I shall without fail go for a walk for half an hour or forty minutes. It's an old habit

⁴⁵ Valentinov, *Encounters* 79.

⁴⁶ Trotsky 137. See also D. I. Ul'ianov, "V Alekaevke," in *Vospominaniia o Vladimire Il'iche Lenine*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1969) 93–94.

⁴⁷ Lenin to M. I. Ul'ianova (19 May 1901), in Lenin 55: 209. See also Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (7 February 1898) 55: 72.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Service, *Lenin* 108.

⁴⁹ Valentinov, *Encounters* 79, 147.

of mine. I have nothing against your calling on me at that time so that we can go out together.”⁵⁰ He confessed that he much preferred “wondering around and seeing the evening amusements and pastimes of the people to visiting museums, theatres, shopping arcades, etc.”⁵¹ For over twenty years, his correspondence and that of his wife was filled with the details of walks they had taken in the various places they resided. From London, for instance, he informed his mother “in general, we do not miss a chance to go for a walk. Of the local comrades, we are the only ones who have explored *every bit* of the surrounding countryside. We have discovered various ‘rural’ paths, we know all the places nearby, and intend to go further afield.”⁵²

S. I. Bagotskii recalled that in Cracow Lenin “would get up at eight o’clock and, no matter what the weather was, go for a short walk [... at] about five o’clock there was [another] break for a walk.”⁵³ He and some friends formed what Krupskaja referred to as the “excursionist party that is always finding excuses for excursions.” “It is our local joke,” she continued in a politically incorrect fashion, “that we have a ‘cinemist’ party (of cinema lovers [Lenin’s Jewish friends G. E. Zinov’ev and L. B. Kamenev]), and an ‘anti-cinemist’ or ‘anti-semitic’ party [...] Volodia is a confirmed anti-cinemist and an enthusiastic excursionist [...] After all, what else is there to do in Cracow but to go walking?”⁵⁴

One of the things he could do was swim in the Vistula, which he did regularly, just as he had done earlier in the Volga and the Yenisei and on summer vacations along the Gulf of Finland and the Bay of Biscay.⁵⁵ On many other occasions, Lenin and his wife simply went “bathing” in smaller bodies of water or municipal facilities. Since it is safe to assume that virtually all of their modest accommodations in Western Europe did not come with a shower or a bath,⁵⁶ one might conclude that these outings were for hygienic reasons. This raises the interesting question of Lenin’s bathing attire. What he wore in general is another of the non-political aspects of his biography that has attracted little attention. The limited number of photographs of him during the pre-revolutionary period always show him wearing conservative business clothing even when playing chess in the Mediterranean sun on Capri or climbing mountains in the

⁵⁰ Valentinov, *Encounters* 120.

⁵¹ Lenin to M. A. Ul’ianova (29 August 1895), in Lenin 55: 12.

⁵² Lenin to M. A. Ul’ianova (29 March 1903), in Lenin 55: 231–232 (Lenin’s emphasis).

⁵³ Bagotskii 313–314.

⁵⁴ Krupskaja to M. A. Ul’ianova (26 December 1913), in Lenin 55: 346.

⁵⁵ Lenin to M. A. Ul’ianova (27 June 1907), in Lenin 55: 238; Krupskaya 209, 238.

⁵⁶ The only mention I have found to these facilities in their extensive correspondence is Krupskaja’s mention of her husband taking a “cold shower every day” in Cracow. Krupskaja to M. A. Ul’ianova (26 December 1913), in Lenin 55: 347.

Carpathians.⁵⁷ There is certainly no photograph of him in a bathing suit and no mention of such a garment in the extensive correspondence with his family. A Swiss writer, who interviewed residents of Sörenberg where Lenin vacationed in 1915, raised an intriguing possibility. According to one old-timer, an irate tourist once found the future head of the Soviet state bathing in the Emme River wearing nothing at all.⁵⁸

Like swimming, bicycling can be considered a semi-utilitarian sport in that Lenin used his cycle both as a source of cheap transportation in Geneva and Paris and as a means for long and strenuous excursions in the countryside surrounding these cities. Curiously, he did not learn to ride until Dmitrii Ul'ianov gave him a lesson in 1894.⁵⁹ He purchased his first bicycle, which he kept "as clean as a surgical instrument,"⁶⁰ only after arriving in Munich in 1901. Riding in urban areas may have saved money but it had its hazards. In 1904, while daydreaming on a ride through Geneva, he ran into the rear end of a tramcar and, according to Krupskaya, "very nearly had his eye knocked out."⁶¹ Paris, where traffic a century ago was already "simply hellish,"⁶² was no better than Geneva. In December 1909, on a short trip to watch an air show at Orly, Lenin's bicycle was demolished by a motorcar driven by a viscount. While he eventually gained financial revenge through a French court,⁶³ its replacement was stolen shortly thereafter outside the Bibliothèque Nationale despite his paying a neighbouring concierge for parking privileges on her front steps.⁶⁴

To the chronicler of Lenin's sporting life, his longer trips into the Swiss and French countryside are of much greater interest. "This week we have been cycling our heads off," Krupskaya informed her mother-in-law in 1911. "We made three excursions of 70 to 75 kilometres each exploring three forests [...] Volodia is extremely fond of excursions that begin at six or seven in the morning and last until late at night. But the result is that we don't get our work done."⁶⁵ He made at least six other lengthy day trips through the forests and parks surrounding the French capital. On one occasion, Lenin interrupted a

⁵⁷ *Lenin: Sobranie fotografii i kinokadrov*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970) 33–39, 42.

⁵⁸ Paul Scherer, "Lenin in Sörenberg," in *Heimatkundliches aus dem Entlebuch: Festgabe für Nationrat Otto Studer zu seinem 60. Geburtstag* (Schöpfheim: n.p., 1958) 238.

⁵⁹ D. I. Ul'ianov, "Vospominaniia o zhizni sem'i Ul'ianovykh v Moskve," in *Vospominaniia o Vladimire Il'iche Lenine*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1969) 116.

⁶⁰ Valentinov, *Encounters* 147.

⁶¹ Krupskaya 100.

⁶² Lenin to D. I. Ul'ianov (13 February 1910), in *Lenin* 55: 307.

⁶³ Lenin to M. I. Ul'ianova (early January 1910 and 30 or 31 January 1910), in *Lenin* 55: 303, 305.

⁶⁴ Krupskaya 194.

⁶⁵ Krupskaya to M. A. Ul'ianova (26 August 1911), in *Lenin* 55: 440.

family vacation to cycle fifty kilometres to visit the aged daughter of Karl Marx and her husband, Paul Lafargue.⁶⁶ Krupskaja, who joined her husband on most of these outings, must have had second thoughts about the sport. In May 1913, after moving to Galicia where the unpaved roads were often muddy, she wrote her mother-in-law that “fortunately, you cannot do a lot of cycling [here] because Volodia used to abuse this sport and overtire himself; it is better to walk more.”⁶⁷ Her optimism was misplaced for the next summer her husband and Zinov'ev hopped on their cycles and peddled one hundred kilometres simply to buy a bottle of Hungarian wine.⁶⁸ The less athletic Zinov'ev apparently learned a lesson from this experience. A year later, while holidaying in Hertenstein in central Switzerland, he resisted Lenin's efforts to coax him to bicycle to Sörenberg—a distance of less than sixty kilometres. “I am greatly surprised,” Lenin responded, “that for no apparent reason, you have shirked a meeting.” The “reason” was an elevation gain of over 700 metres. Lenin himself had often done part of the trip to expedite delivery of his mail but arguments about free-wheeling one way could not convince his colleague that this was worth the considerable effort going uphill in the other direction.⁶⁹

In January 1904 Lenin and Krupskaja walked up the Grand Salève, a limestone ridge just south of Geneva. It was the first of many mountains he was to climb prior to returning to Russia in 1917. “Down below in Geneva,” he informed his mother,

it was all fog and gloom, but up on the mountain (about 1200 metres above sea level) there was glorious sunshine, snow, tobogganing—all and all, a good Russian winter's day. And at the foot of the mountain—*la mer du brouillard*, a veritable sea of fog and clouds, concealing everything except the mountains jutting up through it [...] We are beginning to know Switzerland and its scenery. In the spring we intend to make a long walking tour.⁷⁰

To prepare themselves for their tour, they frequently went hiking in the hills around Geneva. Valentinov, who initially accompanied them, soon found that Lenin was not only an accomplished gymnast but also “a very good walker.” After three excursions, he dropped out simply “because I could not keep up with Lenin as he clambered up the mountain paths.”⁷¹

⁶⁶ P. V. Moskovskii and V. G. Semenov, *Lenin vo Frantsii, Bel'gii i Danii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1982) 89.

⁶⁷ Krupskaja to M. A. Ul'ianova (25 May 1913), in Lenin 55: 341.

⁶⁸ G. E. Zinov'ev, “Vospominaniia,” *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* 6 (1989): 196.

⁶⁹ Lenin to G. E. Zinov'ev (three letters in early July 1915), in Lenin 49: 87–90.

⁷⁰ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (8 January 1904), in Lenin 55: 233.

⁷¹ Valentinov, *Encounters* 81–82.

In late June, their nerves frayed from factional infighting, Lenin and Krupskaja set off on their “long walking tour.” What had been planned as a two-week excursion, turned out to be an absence of over two months during which they covered 400 kilometres on foot and in doing so crossed half of Switzerland.⁷² After reaching Montreux, Lenin took time off to climb Rochers de Naye. Mariia Essen, a family friend who accompanied them on the first part of their journey, later described Lenin’s style of hiking.

To get to the top [of the 2045-metre mountain] more quickly we left the path and climbed straight up the slope. With each step the climb became more difficult. Vladimir Il’ich strode briskly and confidently, chuckling at my efforts to keep up with him. After a while I was climbing on all fours, clutching at the snow which melted in my hands, but still managing to keep up with Vladimir Il’ich.⁷³

Like Valentinov, she also soon went back to more normal pursuits.

The two remaining hikers then proceeded up the Rhone valley as far as Leuk where they turned north and climbed the Gemmi Pass, one of steepest crossings into the Bernese Oberland. Mark Twain, who had traversed the Gemmi twenty-six years earlier, described the “path as steep as a ladder, almost cut in the face of a mighty precipice” over which he claimed numerous incautious hikers had plunged to their deaths in the past.⁷⁴ Lenin survived to enjoy a long walk down the Kandertal to the Lake of Thun. After a short rest, they climbed up to the col at Kleine Scheidegg where they stopped long enough to admire the Jungfrau and to send a picture postcard of it to Lenin’s mother.⁷⁵ As Krupskaja later recalled, “we always chose the loneliest trails that led into the wilds away from any people. We tramped for about a month [...] This restored Vladimir Ilyich’s nerves to normal. It was if he had bathed in a mountain stream and washed off all the cobwebs of sordid intrigue.”⁷⁶

As a result of this excursion, Lenin became a committed hiker in Europe just as he had been a “passionate hunter” in Siberia. Whenever the opportunity presented itself and especially when depressed, he grabbed his rucksack and headed for the high mountains. In August 1908 he left Geneva on the spur of the moment to hike alone in the near-by Les Diablerets chain. If he made it to the

⁷² Krupskaja to M. A. Ul’ianova (2 July 1904), in Lenin 55: 235. For a more detailed discussion of this extraordinary hike, see my “Lenin on Holiday,” *Revolutionary Russia* 21.2 (2008): 121–122.

⁷³ M. M. Essen, “Vstrechi s Leninyim,” in *Vospominaniia o Vladimire Il’iche Lenine*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1969) 118.

⁷⁴ Samuel Clemens to Olivia Clemens (24 August 1878), in *The Letters of Mark Twain* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920) 184; Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), *A Tramp Abroad* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1898) 344–353.

⁷⁵ Lenin to M. A. Ul’ianova (20 July 1904), in Lenin 55: 237 (with a picture of the Jungfrau).

⁷⁶ Krupskaya 105–106.

3210-metre summit despite heavy rain, it would have marked the highest climb of his hiking career.⁷⁷ Three years later, while in Switzerland for meetings of the International Socialist Bureau, he took time off from an impromptu lecture tour to climb the Pilatus, another peak over 2100 metres.⁷⁸

In 1912 Lenin and Krupskaja moved to Austrian Galicia. The stated reasons were to get away from the tensions of the Paris émigré community and to be nearer the rising unrest in tsarist Russia. An unmentioned factor was that Cracow was close to the High Tatras, a part of the Carpathians, where hiking opportunities rivalled those in Switzerland. Very soon after arriving, Lenin joined Bagotskii for a hike in the foothills of the Tatras. True to form, “wanting to shorten the way, Vladimir Il'ich suggested we should walk straight up” with the result that the two hikers got lost and very wet and barely avoided spending the night in the woods. On a second attempt a few days later, they made it to the summit of the Babya and there, “in the distance, lit up by the bright rays of the sun, [we saw] a long range of the Tatra peaks as if suspended in the air.”⁷⁹

Lenin and Krupskaja spent the summers of 1913 and 1914 living near Poronin, within cycling distance of the mountains, which gave Vladimir Il'ich an excellent opportunity to climb some of these peaks. Delegates attending party meetings at his summer home were hauled off on these excursions and were amused at the sight of their leader wearing a business suit and climbing with an umbrella. With his wife, he hiked up to Czarny Staw, “a mountain lake of remarkable beauty.” On other occasions, he went off alone to peaks over 2600 metres.⁸⁰ Krupskaja told his mother the obvious: that “Volodia is very fond of Poronin and particularly likes scrambling up the mountains.”⁸¹ On 5 July 1914, as war clouds hung heavy over Europe and unrest was increasingly evident in St. Petersburg, Lenin took time off from party and political crises to go scrambling one last time in the Tatras. He justified this on the grounds that “the weather is good after weeks of rains [sic].”⁸²

The First World War forced the Ul'ianovs to flee to Switzerland but it did not alter Lenin's summer hiking habits. In early June 1915 he and Krupskaja left

⁷⁷ The only information we have of this climb is a postcard Lenin sent to his sister Mariia (9 August 1908), in Lenin 55: 388.

⁷⁸ Lenin to M. A. Ul'ianova (28 September 1911), in Lenin 55: 321 (picture postcard of the Pilatus).

⁷⁹ Bagotskii 310–311.

⁸⁰ For mention of these excursions, see *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin: Biograficheskaia khronika*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1971) 130, 144, 217; Adam B. Ulam, *The Bolsheviks: The Intellectual, Personal and Political History of the Origins of Russian Communism* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 265; Krupskaya 263, 268.

⁸¹ Krupskaja to M. A. Ul'ianova (16 March 1914), in Lenin 55: 352.

⁸² Lenin (in English) to Inessa Armand (before 6 July 1914), in *V.I. Lenin: Neizvestnye dokumenty, 1891–1922* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999) 149.

their winter residence in Bern for the village of Sörenberg higher in the Alps. Besides an occasional dip in the Emme and bicycle trips to pick up his mail, Lenin spent much of his time mountain climbing. Soon after arriving, he asked Inessa Armand to stop at the offices of the Swiss Alpine Club in Bern before coming to Sörenberg herself to get information about the use of the club's huts by non-members and about group expeditions that climbed peaks between 3000 and 3500 metres "just in case we have an opportunity to go on a *long* excursion."⁸³

Such an opportunity did not materialize but this did not stop the intrepid hikers from climbing the Brienzer Rothorn—at 2,350 metres, the highest peak in the region. Rather than taking the rack-and-pinion railway to the summit from Brienz, as was the custom of most tourists, Lenin, Krupskaja and occasionally Armand ascended from Sörenberg. It was a strenuous eight-hour hike that they did without the recommended guide. Not surprisingly, Zinov'ev declined an invitation to join them.⁸⁴ The last of the three times Lenin climbed the Rothorn came after the Zimmerwald Conference in September 1915. He returned, according to Krupskaja, in "a pretty irritable frame of mind." "It took several days rambling about the mountains and the general bracing atmosphere of Sörenberg to bring Ilyich around."⁸⁵

The story was much the same the next summer. Lenin and his wife spent most of July and August 1916 at the remote Kurhaus Tschudiwiese seventy-five kilometres southeast of Zurich. There, Krupskaja wrote, "we lived a carefree existence, spending all day rambling about the mountains. Ilyich did no work at all."⁸⁶ Perhaps for that reason, Soviet scholars paid little attention to this chapter in Lenin's life and we know nothing about the peaks he climbed six months before the February Revolution. After leaving the Tschudiwiese, the next and last mountain he climbed was the Zurichberg.

After the overthrow of the tsar, Lenin's life changed, as did opportunities for pursuing his sporting interests. At the end of June 1917, headaches and insomnia brought on by overwork and nervous tension led him to take a vacation as he had so often done in summers past. He chose to go to Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich's dacha in southern Finland. For four days, as the unrest of the July Days came to a climax in Petrograd, he regained his equilibrium by walking in the birch forests and swimming in a near-by lake where he impressed his host with skills developed much earlier in the Volga and the Ienisei.⁸⁷ After his own seizure of power and the transfer of the capital to Moscow, Lenin relaxed by

⁸³ Lenin to Inessa Armand (after 4 June 1915), in Lenin 49: 80 (Lenin's emphasis).

⁸⁴ Lenin to G. E. Zinov'ev (after 24 June 1915), in Lenin 49: 86.

⁸⁵ Krupskaya 310–311.

⁸⁶ Krupskaya 327.

⁸⁷ V. D. Bonch-Bruevich, *Vospominaniia o Lenine*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 'Nauka', 1969) 99–101.

walking around the Kremlin and in the surrounding countryside.⁸⁸ He also went hunting for the first time since Shushenskoe but “with nothing like the old zest.” Lepeshinskii would have nodded his head in agreement, had he witnessed Lenin’s participation in a foxhunt outside Moscow. “The beaters drove the fox straight towards him, but he seized his gun when it was too late. The fox stopped and looked at him, then slipped away into the woods. ‘Why didn’t you shoot?’, [Krupskaia] asked him. ‘The fox was so beautiful,’ he said.”⁸⁹ The reaction of Vladimir Putin many years later when faced with a less attractive wild boar would be much different.

The diversity and intensity of Lenin’s sporting interests set him apart not only from his revolutionary colleagues of a century ago but also from political leaders of other countries. Fidel Castro and Lester Pearson undoubtedly had considerable baseball skills. Chairman Mao may have swum in the Yangtze. Theodore Roosevelt certainly shot big game. John Turner and Pierre Trudeau were skilled canoeists and Dwight Eisenhower preferred the golf course to the Oval Office. Only the Kennedys, however, with their passion for sailing, touch football and skiing, came anywhere near equalling Lenin’s enthusiasm for sports of all types—swimming, rowing, hunting, skating, gymnastics, cycling, walking and especially mountain climbing.

How is this obsession with physical activity explained? Valentinov was quite correct that these activities are inconsistent with the usual picture of a man absorbed solely with politics and revolution. They add yet another dimension to his non-geometric biographical portrait. He is incorrect, however, to see Lenin in the Rakhmetov mould.⁹⁰ He did not climb mountains simply to make himself a better revolutionary. While he may have admired Chernyshevskii’s aesthetic hero, I doubt if he ever would have said that “good health was the revolutionary’s main asset”⁹¹—an interpretation that Valentinov shares with Leon Trotskii, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Robert Service. It is, interestingly, a conclusion resisted by Nadezhda Krupskaja, who certainly knew her husband better than his biographers and who deserves credit in her own right for gamely joining him on many of his arduous excursions.

Lenin was an avid sportsman for two reasons. First, physical exercise was his response to psychological stress and emotional uncertainty. When faced with factional division and personal defeat in 1904, he went off on an extended hike through the Swiss mountains. After the Zimmerwald Conference had marginalized his few followers, he escaped to the Rothorn. And, when he did

⁸⁸ Krupskaya 379, 452–553.

⁸⁹ Krupskaya 39.

⁹⁰ Valentinov, *Young Lenin* 140.

⁹¹ Solzhenitsyn 79.

not anticipate or comprehend the rumours of massive unrest in Petrograd in March 1917, he retreated to the Zurichberg. Secondly, like many sportsmen, Lenin truly liked to challenge himself physically even to the point of exhaustion that often comes from a day spent rowing long distances or scrambling up a mountain. It would be a mistake to deny that he enjoyed being in close touch with nature while hunting in the woods of Siberia or cycling through the forests outside Paris. I suspect, however, the physical challenge of climbing the Rothorn was for him greater than his appreciation of the glorious view from its summit but he did not climb the mountain because he thought it would make him a better revolutionary.