

Lenin the Nudist

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A lesser known aspect of the Russian Revolution is the flourishing of ... nudism. After the revolution, the famous actress, Ida Rubenstein, played naked on stage. The poet Goldschmidt would appear naked on the streets. A movement called 'Down with shame' would walk the streets in Soviet cities, catch trams, go about their daily lives wearing nothing but a red sash over their shoulders. A White Army newspaper joked in 1919 that the price of suits must have skyrocketed, since so many people were going around naked. At international nudist conferences in the 1920s, the Soviet delegates far outnumbered those from other countries. Over the summers, rivers, beaches and lakes witnessed millions of old people, children, families, singles in the prime of their life gathered to play games, picnic or enjoy the sun – all naked.

How did it begin? It appears that during his long exile before the Revolution, Lenin visited a nudist beach in Austria and was favourably impressed. It was not so much the naked bodies everywhere, but the emphasis on healthy living. Given that Lenin was – as many noted – a muscular man with a love of outdoor activities, nudism was a natural extension of that passion. Soon enough both he and Krupskaya were regularly tossing their clothes in a corner and diving into the nearest river, lake or sea completely starkers. I'm not sure whether they also hiked and rode their bicycles naked (ice-skating might be a little tricky), but in this light one of Lenin's favoured phrases, 'tearing off the fig-leaf', takes on a whole new meaning.

As do regular observations in the letters concerning swimming. For instance, Krupskaya writes about their stay at Pornic in France in the summer of 1910, 'He went sea-bathing a lot, cycled a good deal – he loved the sea and the sea breezes – chatted gaily with the Kostitsins on everything under the sun'. Of course, one can enjoy the breeze much more when naked, even while chatting away with all and sundry. It mattered not where they were, for they would swim naked – in Longjumeau or in Pornic on the French coast, or in Stjernerund in Sweden, or in swimming pools in Munich, or in Pronin or in the Vistula River in Krakow. Nor were they alone, for other Bolsheviks were also given to stripping down whenever possible, among them Anatoly Lunacharsky, Nikolai Bukharin, Alexander Bogdanov.

After his return to Russia in 1917, Lenin bemoaned the fact that people still gathered in summer and swam in costumes, so he asked why they couldn't do so without clothes: 'We have much work to do for new forms of life, simplified and free', he observed.

Why? As one of those early communist nudists observed, 'In nudity class distinctions disappear. Workers, peasants, office workers are suddenly just people'. An image of a classless society, perhaps.

