

Bolshevik Love: Beyond the Icon

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One figure stands out in Russia's Bolshevik Revolution—Lenin. Like a Russian icon, Lenin has become a one-dimensional, mystic figure: a movement's godhead. Maxim Gorky's tribute takes the tone of a hagiography: "His was that heroism which Russia knows well – the unassuming, austere life of self-sacrifice of the true Russian revolutionary intellectual who, in his unshakable belief in the possibility of social justice on the earth, renounces all the pleasures of life in order to toil for the happiness of mankind" (Gorky 517-18).

But behind the icon was a man who loved things and people besides the cause. Looking at Lenin's love life, rather than being a purely prurient pursuit, gives fresh insight into a man who operated the levers of history. Our knowing these loves gives us a human perspective, demythologizing history.

Lenin was born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov in Simbirsk on the Volga River on April 22, 1870. His father, a school inspector, was a loyal servant of the Tsarist state and a faithful member of the Orthodox Church; his mother was the daughter of a small landowner (Ulam 1). According to Lenin's biographer Adam Ulam, "The life of the Ulyanov family unrolled with Victorian orderliness and decorum" (6), until the sudden death of Lenin's father in 1886 and the hanging of his older brother in 1887 for plotting against the Czar.

In late 1893, Lenin, now a lawyer, made his way from Samara to St. Petersburg to agitate for Marxist revolution. According to historian Bertram Wolfe, however, his life was not all conspiracy and polemics. In the spring of 1894, five or six months after his arrival in the capital, the twenty-four year old Lenin met the twenty-six year old Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya at a pancake party:

Almost all of the circle of Petersburg Marxists were there [...]. The table was spread with the traditional foods and drinks, but the solemn and un festive talk turned around questions of 'revolutionary tactics.' [Krupskaya] could not keep her eyes off the new arrival from Samara. [...] After the party, he walked home with her along the banks of the Neva. [...] She told him about her evening and Sunday classes among the workingmen beyond the Nevsky gate. He spoke to her of his hopes and plans, and of the life and death of his brother Alexander. It was the first she had heard of the tragedy. Such was the beginning of their Marxist courtship. (Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution* 99-100)

Krupskaya was typical of the period's female radical intelligentsia. Her parents were of noble birth, but from families that had fallen onto hard times. Her father, Konstantin Krupsky, had entered the civil service, but his liberalism led the Czarist government to dismiss him from office and bring trumped up charges against him. After his death in 1883, Krupskaya and her mother supplemented her mother's modest widow's pension by giving lessons (Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution* 100).

In 1897, following his arrest and conviction for revolutionary agitation, Lenin was sent to Siberia by the Czarist authorities. After his first year of exile, Krupskaya was also arrested and condemned to three years in the city of Ufa in the Urals. She petitioned to join Lenin in Siberia, claiming to be his fiancée. The authorities allowed her to join him, provided they marry immediately (Ulam 132).

Adam Ulam argues that Lenin found an ideal wife in Krupskaya: “She shared his ideas and tastes and was an excellent secretary. We are not allowed a glimpse of their personal life, but the marriage was a happy one, and Lenin’s letters to her, even after many years, breathe warmth and great solicitude” (133).

When Lenin’s exile ended in 1900, he left Russia for Western Europe to lead Russia’s revolutionary movement from abroad, first settling in Munich. Krupskaya, his secretary as much as his wife, joined him in 1901. From then until 1917 (except for an interval from 1905 through 1907, when they were in Russia and Finland), they remained in Western Europe, living in many different cities, including Paris from 1909 to 1912 (Service, xxii and chapters 8-14).

It was in Paris, on a winter day in 1911, that Lenin delivered a eulogy in Russian at the funeral of Paul Lafargue, son-in-law of Karl Marx. Harrison Salisbury describes the scene:

When he had finished, a slim, graceful woman, her golden hair combed into billowing waves which framed her face under a heavily ribboned hat and almost covered her small ears, a broad open brow, a large mouth, green eyes with a kind of warm sadness, went to the podium. There was a luminosity about her that contrasted with the gray and dripping day, the bitter wind, the inevitable melancholy of the graveyard. In perfect French she translated Lenin’s remarks and then retired. (227-28)

The luminous woman was thirty-seven-year old Inessa Elizabeth Armand, whom Lenin had then known for about a year. The mother of five children by Alexander Armand, the son of a very wealthy Moscow manufacturer, Inessa would not submit to the conventional life of a Moscow matron. With her husband’s consent, she had taken on the causes of temperance, women’s education, fighting prostitution, women’s right to vote, and the improvement of conditions in the family mills.

Like Lenin, she had been moved by *What is to Be Done?*, N. G. Chernyshevsky’s novel about aspiring revolutionaries, and she “more and more began to shape her life in the pattern of its idealistic heroine, Vera Pavlovna” (Salisbury 228). Consciously or unconsciously following the path of the fictional Vera, in 1903 she had gone to Switzerland, leaving her husband, Alexander, for his younger brother, Vladimir. She also read Lenin’s book on the development of capitalism in Russia and this, she later said, turned her toward Lenin’s Bolsheviks (Salisbury 228). Inessa returned to Russia only to be sent into exile for revolutionary activity in 1907, but escaped late in 1908 to Switzerland, where Vladimir Armand, in the last stages of tuberculosis, awaited her. “With his death she buried herself in studies for a year in Brussels,” writes Salisbury; “Sometime during that year she probably met Lenin for the first time. It may have been a fleeting encounter in one of the cafes where the Russian revolutionaries spent their days [...]. But in the autumn of 1910 Inessa moved to Paris” (228).

Wolfe reports, “[Inessa] had a wider culture than any other woman in Lenin's circle. [...] She played the piano like a virtuoso, was fluent in five languages, was enormously serious about Bolshevism and work among women, and possessed personal charm and an intense love of life to which almost all who wrote of her testify” (*Strange Communists I Have Known* 17). In Paris, Inessa moved into the house next door to Lenin and Krupskaya on the Rue Marie-Rose (Salisbury 229).

From Paris, Lenin and Krupskaya next moved to Cracow, and Inessa followed (Pearson 95-96, 104). Inessa was frequently in Lenin’s entourage; Krupskaya said of Inessa: “All of us – our entire Cracow group – were drawn very close to Inessa. She was brimming with vitality and good spirits. [...] Things seemed cozier and more cheerful when Inessa was there” (quoted in Salisbury 229). Inessa grew close to the married couple: “Ilyich, Inessa, and I often went on walks together,” Krupskaya later wrote. “Zinoviev and Kamenev dubbed us the ‘hikers’ party. We walked in the meadows on the outskirts of the city. [...] Inessa was a good musician, urged us all to go to Beethoven concerts, and played very well many of Beethoven's pieces. Ilyich especially loved Sonata Pathétique, constantly begging her to play it” (quoted in Wolfe, *Strange Communists* 18). At the end of 1913, Inessa suddenly left Cracow and returned to Paris, but she returned to Russia with Lenin in 1917, continuing party work throughout the revolution and civil war (Ulam 284).

Lenin and Inessa Armand were obviously good friends and close associates. Were they also lovers? Historians have disagreed.

Neil Harding strongly discounted the possibility of an affair, writing, “some make so much from so slender a stock of evidence” (250). Ulam also dismissed the possibility:

The available correspondence can but testify to a very close friendship between Vladimir Ilyich and Inessa. He entrusted her with important Party missions, commented upon her literary work and readings, alluded to his own state of mind. That he was very much taken with this attractive woman who combined revolutionary passion with broad culture is clear. That he had a fleeting romance is possible. But that he had a long-drawn-out liaison with Inessa [...] is most unlikely. In view of both his own and the general Russian revolutionary mores, it would have been inconceivable for him to conceal such a liaison, to go on living with his wife (and mother-in-law) while sleeping with another woman. (285)

All that could be established, Ulam concluded, was that, “Lenin at one period of his life was very much attached to the woman who in addition to sharing his political beliefs was obviously livelier and more intelligent than Krupskaya, and that he addressed her by the familiar ‘thou.’ Even if there was a more passionate connection it was evidently managed with discretion and was not allowed to interfere either with his marriage or with his vocation” (208-09).

Yet on this same slender stock of evidence, Harrison Salisbury postulated just the opposite, that Lenin and Inessa were lovers, with Krupskaya’s knowledge, in a kind of *ménage à trois*. Two well known revolutionaries, Alexandra Kollontai and Angelica Balabanoff, had no doubt of this, Salisbury noted, and there were “plain hints of it” in Lenin’s published correspondence (229). According to Salisbury, when Inessa returned to Paris, Lenin “directed an endless stream of letters to her, often on matters of strict Party business but often not and almost

always flavored with the special playful affection which marked his correspondence with her and her alone.” (244). His letters to her are, Salisbury claims, “the most extended correspondence Lenin ever conducted with anyone except members of his family. The most striking feature of the letters is Lenin’s use of the intimate familiar pronoun *ty* in addressing Inessa instead of the ordinary *vy* [...]. With perhaps two exceptions Lenin in his whole correspondence never used this form except with members of his family” (230).

Over eighty of Lenin’s letters to Inessa from 1913 to 1917 were published in his official correspondence, but with the opening and closing passages omitted; Salisbury felt that even with the excisions, Lenin’s “special feelings shone through” (230). Salisbury also noted that immediately after Lenin visited Paris for public speaking engagements in 1914, he wrote Inessa on at least three successive days. The published versions of these letters as well as two he sent her just before going to Paris were unusually mutilated by the Soviet authorities. In one case only a postscript had been published (231).

For a long time, most researchers dismissed the idea of an affair, but the opening of the Soviet archives has dramatically affected the question. In 1992, Inessa Armand’s biographer R. C. Elwood wrote that the affair could not be substantiated, but he also noted that while ninety-five new letters from Lenin to Inessa had appeared, Soviet authorities had published almost none of her extensive correspondence with Lenin; when more of that correspondence was published, he revised his position (*Inessa Armand* 7; “Lenin and Armand: New Evidence” 49-65).

Drawing on the newly available correspondence, Michael Pearson wrote a 2001 biography of Inessa Armand that made the alleged affair intrinsic to the story of her life (iv-vii). Pearson argues, for instance, that Inessa left Cracow so abruptly because Lenin broke off the affair (106-07). Another historian, Robert Service, uses the correspondence in his 2000 biography of Lenin to argue that the relationship began slowly, its passion originating with Inessa. “At that time I was terribly scared of you,” Inessa wrote to Lenin about the early days of their acquaintance.

The desire existed to see you, but it seemed better to drop dead on the spot than to come into your presence; and when for some reason you popped into N.K. [Krupskaya]’s room, I instantly lost control and behaved like a fool. [...] I so much loved not only to listen to you but also to look at you as you spoke [...]. At that time I definitely wasn’t in love with you, but even then I loved you very much. (quoted in Service 98)

No letter of Lenin reciprocating with equally unequivocal feelings survives, leading some of the aforementioned historians to conclude that there was no affair. But Lenin’s written silence may have another explanation. In mid-1914, when the relationship had waned, he asked Inessa to return the correspondence he had sent her. Service writes, “it is difficult to imagine that his purpose was other than to destroy the evidence of what had taken place between them” (198).

Service also finds evidence of the romantic connection in Inessa Armand’s last writings. In 1920, knowing she was dying, she put down her last thoughts:

Previously I would approach each person with warm feelings. Now I’m indifferent to everyone. [...] Hot feelings have remained only for my children and

for V.I. [...] It's as if my heart has died in all other respects. As if, having devoted all my strength and all my passion to V.I. and to the cause of our [political] work, all sources of love and sympathy for people — to whom it once was so rich — have been exhausted. (quoted in Service 415-16)

Service asserts that there was only one person Inessa would have referred to as “V.I.”—Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (415). She died of cholera on September 24, 1920.

Lenin too may have retained strong feelings. Bolshevik Angelica Balabanoff's credibility is diminished by her claim that Lenin and Inessa had a daughter, a claim that R.C. Elwood demolishes (Elwood 177-78), but can we entirely dismiss what Wolfe calls the breaking of her “puritanical silence” in relating her observations from Inessa's funeral?

I cast sidelong glances at Lenin. He was plunged in despair, his cap down over his eyes; small as he was, he seemed to shrink and grow smaller. He looked pitiful and broken in spirit. I never saw him look like that before. It was something more than the loss of a ‘good Bolshevik’ or a good friend. He had lost some one very dear and very close to him and made no effort to conceal it. (Wolfe, *Strange Communists* 34)

Was there an affair, or not? There may never be absolute proof. We must perhaps be guided by our own experiences of heart. In that light, let us conclude with a selection from a letter written by Inessa to Lenin after she left Cracow, referencing a possible meeting between her and Lenin shortly afterwards in Arosa, a letter most likely never sent:

Paris, Saturday morning. Dear one, [...] It was sad because Arosa was so temporary, so transitory. Arosa was so close to Cracow while Paris is, well, so final. You and I have parted, we have parted, my dear, and it is so painful. You'll never come back here again! I know it! When I gaze at these places I know so well, I realize more clearly than ever how big a place you occupied in my life here in Paris, so that almost all activity has been bound by a thousand threads to my thoughts of you. [...] Even here I could cope without your kisses if only I could see you. To talk with you sometimes would be such a joy for me – and this could not cause pain to anyone. Why deprive me of that? [...] You asked me if I am angry with you for “carrying through” our separation. No, for I don't think that it was for your own sake that you did it [...].ⁱ

The likelihood of an affair with Inessa Armand, even if it can never be confirmed, tempers the old Soviet hagiography of Lenin. A portrait of greater depth than that of an icon emerges. A fallible man steps out from behind the god-head. Why does honesty concerning Lenin matter? Honesty is a precursor to free will and critical thinking necessary for a free and democratic society. When one mythology falls, other mythologies may follow. Consider this simple observation of Lars-Erik Nelson: with the success of the Bolshevik Revolution, Communism became a religion. Its Holy Trinity was Marx, Engels and Lenin. Its sacred relic was Lenin's embalmed body. Its Holy Scriptures were Lenin's Complete Collected Works. Yet it only took

bit of honesty by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to begin loosening the fetters of unthinking faith when he uttered these fourteen little words: "We are, of course, far from claiming to be in possession of ultimate truth" (quoted in Nelson).

Note

ⁱ Pearson, pp. 107-08. Pearson speculates that "Arosa" might be a reference to a secret liaison between Lenin and Inessa between Inessa leaving Cracow and her arrival in Paris.

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*Biographical Note:



Richard B. Schoenbohm grew up in Appleton, Wisconsin, where he still resides and practices law. His first adventure outside of Wisconsin was for his higher education: a BS in Biology with a minor in History from Valparaiso University, an MS from Purdue University in Entomology, and a JD from Indiana University, Bloomington. His second adventure away from home was a recent twenty-six month stint as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Romania.

His love of Russian history began during the summers of his undergraduate years, when he would devour every Russian history book he could get his hands on. Working in Eastern Europe afforded an opportunity to visit the Ukraine and renew his interest in the former Soviet Union and its leaders. Schoenbohm has been a member of the Torch Club of the Fox Valley since February, 2011, and is its current President.

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