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# An Academic Escape to the Periphery? The Social and Cultural Milieu of Soviet Mountaineering from the 1920s to the 1960s

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Even if work, not play, was at the center of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the Bolshevik regime from its very first days used the field of leisure—especially sports—for purposes both political and ideological: to train and discipline its citizens' bodies for work and defence in a practical as well as a Foucaultian sense, to further implement ideas of hygiene and a modern lifestyle, to propagate collectivist values and to demonstrate symbolically the youthful vigour of socialism in sports parades. Various organizations could and did offer and support 'healthy' leisure activities, partly to draw young people in particular away from pastimes considered harmful to either the individual, the collective or both (such as excessive drinking), but also as an attractive offer to convince them of the strengths of the Soviet system, a system where the state showed its concern for the welfare of its subjects by taking care not only of their needs, but also their wishes. Within the Soviet Union, as well as in its propaganda abroad, Soviet sports and leisure were used to demonstrate the radical social changes that were to follow the Revolution by opening up leisure activities formerly confined to the elite. Sports and leisure became markers of a better, or even a "good" life for Soviet citizens, just as the sporting man and, even more, the sporting woman were visualized as icons of all the bodies socialism was to liberate from oppression.<sup>1</sup> Such images were widely distributed, either on a symbolical level or with concrete illustrations, to show that after the Revolution sports and other physical pastimes, pursuits that had been a privilege of the upper classes and intelligentsia, should be accessible to ordinary Soviet citizens, especially workers.

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<sup>1</sup> On the visual history of Soviet sports, see Mahony, Mike (2006). *Sport in the USSR. Physical culture—visual culture*. London: Reaktion Books; Gronow, Jukka (2003). *Caviar with champagne. Common luxury and the ideals of the good life in Stalin's Russia*. Oxford: Berg.

Mountaineering, an activity at the crossroads of sports and *turizm*,<sup>2</sup> was such a pastime that had been accessible only to a small part of society before 1917, as was tennis, yachting and indeed even soccer.<sup>3</sup> A weak or non-existent infrastructure for mountain climbers, difficult transportation and the sheer vastness of the country, with its enormous distances between the cities and the mountains, did not make it a prominent sport—only a few hundred city dwellers, mostly members of the intelligentsia or (much less numerous) the aristocracy, had joined the few Russian climbing societies before 1917. By the eve of World War II, however, the authorities estimated that over 25,000 people had received the officially approved training in mountaineering and could thus be counted as *al'pinisty*.<sup>4</sup> Even after the demographic catastrophe of World War II, the Soviet climbers' official association, the All-Union Section of Mountaineering (*Vsesoiuznaia seksiia al'pinizma*, hereafter VSA) still counted about 8,000 active mountaineers.<sup>5</sup> Soviet climbing's enormous quantitative growth in participants and infrastructure had only been possible as a result of substantial support from different government and social agencies during the Stalinist era. In 1949, an official anniversary publication thus proudly announced that mountaineering, "accessible only to the privileged classes in capitalist countries, has become possible for all people in our country."<sup>6</sup> Seven years later, when the VSA's president profited from the Thaw climate of cultural exchange to present Soviet mountaineering at the Alpine Club in London for the first time in 1956, he confirmed that climbing in the Soviet Union was generally accessible to everyone and often united "miners and academics, steelworkers and engineers,"<sup>7</sup> the latter representing quite a specific segment of Soviet society. This was, however, not so much a realistic picture of the social background of Soviet climbers as inclusivist

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2 In early Soviet Russia, this term usually covered all forms of travel using one's own locomotion, such as hiking, canoeing (*vodnyi turizm*) or cycling tours (*velosipednyi turizm*). Koenker, Diane (2003). Travel to work, travel to play. On Russian tourism, travel and leisure. *Slavic review*, 63, 658–9.

3 For more details on tennis, see Sandra Budy's article in this volume, on soccer see Ekaterina Emeliantseva's article.

4 The figures vary between 20,000 and 27,900. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (in the following GARF) f. 7576, op. 30, d. 136, ll. 2–3; *Na sushe i na more* (hereafter *NSNM*) 1939, 8, 4.

5 GARF f. 7576, op. 14, d. 33, l. 22.

6 Zatulovskii, David M. (ed.). (1949). *K vershinam Sovetskoi zemli. Sbornik, posviashchennyi 25-letiiu sovetskogo al'pinizma*, Moscow, 7.

7 Beletsky, Evgeny (1956–57). Mountaineering in the USSR. *Alpine Journal*, 61, 310–29, 316.

rhetoric that served as an ideological affirmation of the system. In fact, by the 1950s, though there may have been an occasional miner or steelworker among Soviet climbers, academics and engineers were much more typical, as we will see. Another twenty years later, the ‘official’ history of mountaineering in the Soviet Union, published in 1977 and written by the long-time head of the VSA, had altogether dropped the rhetoric of social equality; with obvious pride the author noted that over 80 percent of all Soviet mountaineers possessed higher (tertiary) education and that there were even many university professors were climbers.<sup>8</sup>

This development, I suggest here, began long before the 1970s. The first part of this article will focus on the social inequalities in the Soviet Union under Stalin which fostered this process. However, climbers themselves also contributed to the growing predominance of one socio-cultural milieu and the creation of a niche activity: Sports and leisure in the Soviet Union were an area of active distinction within society. A variety of sources, from internal statistics and debates within mountaineering circles to yearbooks and climbers’ autobiographies, will be used to illuminate more clearly what was specifically ‘Soviet’ about Soviet mountaineering.<sup>9</sup>

## Access to climbing from the 1920s to the 1960s

If we look at its origins and development since the late nineteenth century, climbing as a sport seems to have been attractive mainly to an urban population, predominantly to the white collar and intellectual professions of a rising bourgeoisie—not only in Russia, but also in West European countries where mountaineering was much more popular, such as Great Britain, Germany, France and Switzerland.<sup>10</sup> However, the Russian Revolution set out to do away with bourgeois privileges (or with the bourgeoisie altogether) to

8 Rototaev, Pavel (1977). *K vershinam. Khronika sovetskogo al'pinizma*, Moscow: Izd. fizkul'tura i sport, 7; Shataev, Vladimir (2001). *Kategoriia trudnosti, Moscow 1977*. Moscow: Izd. I.V. Balabanov, 13–4.

9 For a discussion of the different sources, see Maurer, Eva (to be published 2010). *Wege zum Pik Stalin: Sowjetische Alpinisten, 1928–1953*. Zurich.

10 Ambrosi, Claudio and Riccardo Decarli (2000). La storia dell'alpinismo nell'Arco alpino. Saggio di bibliografia ragionata. In Claudio Ambrosi and Michael Wedekind (eds.). *L'invenzione di un cosmo Borghese. Valori sociali e simboli culturali dell'alpinismo nei secoli XIX e XX*, 215–28. Trento: Museo Storico.

create a classless society. If mountaineering was to find its place therein, it could certainly not be the sport of a small elite: it had to attract not only more climbers, but also a different sort of mountaineer—people from other parts of society. The fact that this goal was not successful in the long run was due to a gradual retreat from the active social policy that had once been so important and, at the same time, a growing social stratification within Stalinist society which led to enormous differences in living conditions between different social groups.

In the 1920s, the few remaining and revived pre-Revolutionary tourist and mountaineering associations came under attack for allegedly neglecting worker tourists and for concentrating their efforts almost exclusively on the intelligentsia. Their opponents, Soviet activists engaged in the promotion and regulation of mountain climbing (*al'pinizm*), emphasized the need to open this sport to the “masses,” especially to young workers. The newly founded “Society for Proletarian Tourism and Excursions” (*Obchshestvo proletarskogo turizma i ekskursii*, hereafter: OPTE, 1928–1936) soon became the only state-approved and sponsored organization for tourism and mountain travel. Its concept of “proletarian tourism” meant not only a change in destinations and sites to visit, but also an active social policy intended to replace climbing’s clientele of intellectuals and white collar employees with more workers and other low income groups in Soviet society. It was thus very much in tune with the spirit of the “Cultural Revolution” 1928–1932.<sup>11</sup> The OPTE did receive substantial funding from state agencies and the organizers did indeed try to tear down traditional economic and cultural barriers: in order to attract more—mostly young—workers, membership fees in the “Society for Proletarian Tourism” were kept low and socially differentiated. Agitators went to workers’ clubs and the big industrial plants to convince young workers to join the climbers’ ranks. Moreover, since the written exchange of experience is of crucial importance in a climbing community, traveling and climbing workers were provided with models and help to master

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11 On OPTE’s theoretical concepts and their (not always successful) implementation, see Koenker, Diane (2006). The proletarian tourist in the 1930s. Between mass excursion and mass escape. In Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane Koenker (eds.). *Turizm. The Russian and East European tourist under capitalism and socialism*, 119–40. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. On “proletarian” climbing, see, Maurer, Eva (2006). Al’pinizm as mass sport and elite recreation: Soviet mountaineering camps under Stalin. In Gorsuch and Koenker (2006), 142–5.

these texts and were encouraged to write down and talk about their experiences.<sup>12</sup>

However, while the share of workers in *turizm* grew (slowly), not many found their way into mountaineering. Much of this had to do with the notable gap between an inclusivist rhetoric and a lack of sufficient funding to do the job properly—support for the OPTE was often more verbal than substantial. They were under constant pressure to operate without financial losses, but also to ensure that the quality of lodging and food was adequate. Moreover, of course, like any organization in these “bigger is better” years, they were encouraged to enlist more and more members without a similar extension in infrastructure. As a result, mountain trips were often either expensive or badly organized, or (most often) both. The Society was dependent on many other state agencies for products and services. Most importantly, railway prices to the Caucasus were high (since it was a three day journey from Moscow) and went up further during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Despite repeated attempts, the organisation could not secure enough train fare discounts for their members. That already put a trip to the Caucasus out of reach of most workers and virtually all peasants.<sup>13</sup>

Possibly even more important than financial resources was the amount of leisure time at one’s disposal. Like most leisure activities, “proletarian mountaineering” and Soviet sports in general were aimed at the young population who were also the most likely group to participate in sports. From the beginning, students were especially attracted to mountaineering and made up a large portion of the newcomers, despite the fact that their budget was usually limited. However, even if they did not have much money, they had plenty of time. For workers, however, the situation was different: Older workers, especially those with families, could usually not find the time to get away to the Caucasus for a period of at least ten days, while younger workers usually had very low incomes which did not permit extended trips.<sup>14</sup>

‘Affirmative action’ rhetoric about including more workers in mountaineering faded gradually after 1932—and disappeared in the second half of the 1930s, after Stalinism’s turn towards a seemingly inclusive, “classless” society

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12 The OPTE’s journal *Na sushe i na more* (hereafter NSNM) featured a multi-part series called “Litrabfak turista” where the different genres of travel writing were presented and instructions given on how to put one’s experience on paper, see NSNM (1932).

13 Adelung, N. (1931). Nado gotovit’sia k sezonu. *NSNM*, 13, 3.

14 For a few—although not too reliable—statistics on early membership, see Antonov-Saravtsovskii (1930). Na visshuii stupen’. *NSNM*, 11, 2; Rost Ural OPTE (1931). *NSNM*, 24, 2.

as symbolized by the new constitution of 1936. True, vacation trips to mountain camps were also among the prizes awarded to selected shock or Stakhanovite workers. However, these were—despite the attention they received in the media—privileges for a few and not yet a “good life” for all. Much more important was that the 1930s saw a substantial extension of the mountaineering infrastructure. Many trade unions and big showcase industrial plants built their own camps which primarily served their own employees—by the late 1930s, mountaineering camps had become the backbone of mountaineering instruction.<sup>15</sup> This allowed many more people to participate in mountaineering and workers—at least those from big plants with better benefits—profited along with the others.

For a number of years, this alleviated the effect of a changing social policy where workers gradually lost their status as the preferred target group for the state’s social benefits while another group, the intelligentsia, was rising in the regime’s favour. After World War II, the situation of workers—especially young ones—deteriorated more drastically. Not only had the once rather egalitarian wage system been replaced by a pay range which by now differed widely between unskilled workers and university graduates, above all scientific and academic staff.<sup>16</sup> Vacation time had become another indicator of social stratification. Late Stalinism saw the longest working hours in Soviet history and ordinary workers usually had only twelve days vacation a year, while university and academic staff could get up to 48.<sup>17</sup>

This was important because during the post-War years, almost the only way to learn and later to practise climbing in the Soviet Union was to get hold of a voucher to stay in a mountaineering camp in the Caucasus. Instruction took place in shifts of 20 days, which was reasonable given the long train journey from European Russia, but it made climbing inaccessible for most workers with limited vacation time. In addition, a great part of the infrastructure in the Caucasus had been destroyed during World War II, which meant that places in the camps were rare, expensive and highly coveted. Sta-

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15 For more details see Maurer (2006), 145–50.

16 Filtzer, Donald (2002). *Soviet workers and late Stalinism. Labour and the restoration of the Stalinist system after World War II*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Duskin, J. Eric (2001). *Stalinist reconstruction and the confirmation of a new elite, 1945–1953*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Zubkova, Elena (1998). *Russia after the war. Hopes, illusions and disappointments, 1945–1957*. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.

17 Gintsburg, L. Ja (1961). *Otputka rabochikh i slushashchikh*. Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 78.

tistics from the late 1940s show that workers made up only 10–15 percent of all participants in mountaineering camps, while students amounted to 40–60 percent and the rest went to the so-called ITR—the intelligentsia and white collar workers mostly from technical or scientific domains. Thus, Soviet mountaineering in the late 1940s was dominated by the Soviet ‘middle class’ and its future members, the students.<sup>18</sup> Peasants did not even figure in these statistics. Not only was the leisure of *kolkhozniki* definitely not a high priority to the Soviet regime, their half-enslaved status in the late 1940s (without even internal passports) severely limited their mobility, not only with regards to leisure.<sup>19</sup> Thus, mountaineering in the Soviet Union was, maybe even more than elsewhere, an urban phenomenon.

While the statistics about the camps give an idea about the people learning to climb, the lists of promotions to “masters” of mountaineering indicates which professional groups were active over a longer period; these were people for whom climbing became a part of their life. *Master al’pinizma* was the highest rank in the hierarchical Soviet sports system and it usually took at least five years of continuous practice at a high level to achieve this title.<sup>20</sup> If we take the four lists of promotions to *master* between 1950 and 1970, the same three professional categories dominate: engineers, academic employees (*nauchnye rabotniki*) and teachers, which together constituted between 40 percent (1953–55) and 70 percent (1968–71) of all “masters”. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the staff of universities and scientific research institutions had a particularly strong position: In the list of 1950–51, every third new *master* belonged to this group. This large share sank in the mid-fifties and by the 1970s had stabilized at around 10–15 percent of all masters.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, engineers, who in the 1950s made up around 15 percent of

18 These percentages are for 1947, but they are typical; see GARF f. 7576, op. 14, d. 33, l. 23 (1948); f. 9480, op. 3, d. 69, l. 20 (1947); loc. cit. d. 133, ll3–4 (1949); loc. cit. op. 22, d. 20, l. 5 (1947).

19 It was only in the late 1960s, that the situation for peasants improved; see Noack, Christian (2006). Coping with the tourist. Planned and “wild” mass tourism on the Soviet Black Sea coast. In Gorsuch and Koenker (2006), 288.

20 The lists appeared in the mountaineering yearbooks *Pobezhdennye vershiny* (hereafter: PV) 1951, Moscow 1952, 531–2 (for 1950–51); PV 1954, Moscow 1957, 428–30 (for 1953–55); PV 1958–1961, Moscow 1963, 344–52 (for 1956–61); PV 1968–69, Moscow 1972, 288–91 (for 1969–71). The earliest regulations for the title of “master” date from 1936/37: GARF f. 7576, op. 14, d. 25, l. 26.

21 Job designations became, on the one hand, more detailed in the later statistics; on the other hand, “engineer” is a broad category that can cover quite differently skilled and experienced people—these statistics are, as usual, to be treated with caution.



“masters,” rose to the single most important group with 56 percent of all new “masters” in 1968–1970.

The dominant position of academic personnel in the early 1950s was due in part to their above-mentioned vacation privileges, but also to the legacy of World War II. Climbers in the Soviet Union were organized in so-called sections at their workplace or place of study—and sections in universities and research laboratories had suffered much less disruption during the war. The fact that many academics did not have to go to the front helped them to continue their sporting career—beyond the initial advantage that they, quite simply, did not die or come back as invalids like so many other climbers. This gave academic sections a head start in the post-War years. At the same time, late Stalinism was a period of radical social stratification. Higher education was promoted much more (student numbers rose sharply in the post-War years) and the well-educated, especially technical specialists and academics, were given a high public status reinforced by material privileges. Part of the lifestyle of these new specialists became a model for the new Soviet citizen, as Vera Dunham has argued.<sup>22</sup> The engineers of the 1960s and 1970s, on the other hand, were already the products of the expansion of the educational system since the 1940s; they were the representatives of a new functional elite in the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> However, the most important reason for the rise of other groups was that from the early 1960s working hours were reduced, wages were generally raised and a summer holiday of several weeks increasingly became a standard for many Soviet citizens. Thus, from the 1960s onwards, the better-off urban dwellers could enjoy climbing during their yearly vacation, something that had been possible only for privileged academics during the 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>24</sup> This is also reflected in the sinking share of professional sports employees (trainers and instructors) over the years (from around 15 percent in 1950–51 to only 5 percent in 1968–71): Whereas directly after the War working in the sports system had been an attractive way of pursuing one’s hobbies, this may have been much less interesting once

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22 Dunham, Vera (1976). *In Stalin's times: middleclass values in Soviet fiction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

23 It is interesting to note that many other rather exotic professions appeared on the list of masters, such as housewife (a profession little known in the SU and possible only if the husband earned very well), architects, doctors, one director of a *Sovkhoz*, orchestra directors and other quite specific elite jobs. While workers were also present, they always held more qualified and skilled industrial jobs. Peasants were absent, as were people working in low-status service jobs or unskilled workers.

24 Noack (2006), 282–8.

most citizens had a summer vacation long enough for a stay in the mountains.

## The culture of Soviet climbing

It was, however, not only external social factors like time and money that partly kept non-academics out of Soviet climbing. From the very beginning, the community of climbers had been active in fostering the growth among their own kind, the like-minded or similarly educated. This was also promoted—whether it be intentionally or unintentionally—by the structure of the Soviet sports system.

The first climbing sections in Soviet times had been established during the late 1920s at the big showcase industrial plants, but also at prestige universities (such as Moscow Bauman Institute) and at the *doma uchenykh*, the “Houses of Scholars,” in Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. These sections at the “Houses of Scholars” brought younger academics into contact with an older generation of scholars who had already been climbing before the revolution. Recruitment into mountaineering happened if not by way of active “propaganda” by the sections (thus usually in the place of study, among other students), then very often through personal networks between professors, university staff and students, as well as through membership in the same kind of scientific or educational associations, for example the Geographical Society.<sup>25</sup>

Not only was it much easier to begin with mountaineering as a student than, for example, as a young worker; mountaineering was also a sport that many people would participate in up to old age and an academic occupation usually gave one the time and money to do so. Therefore, university sections grew constantly and developed strong internal traditions because more than one generation worked continuously in the sections. Former student climbers became professors and continued to climb; others found permanent places of occupation at the university sports departments which helped them to pursue climbing semi-professionally. In addition, professors and staff who climbed or had climbed were often sympathetic to the needs of young climb-

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25 Nemitskii and Vorontsova (1941). *Po goram i rekam. Sovetskii turizm i al'pinizm*, January 5, 3; Delone (1940). *Untiteld. Sovetskii turizm i al'pinizm*, November 7, 2; Solovov (1941). *Turisty-uchenye NSNM*, 4, 2.

ers—they tolerated it when they stayed away from class too long or supported them financially (by realigning budgets etc.).<sup>26</sup> Sections in ‘regular’ workplaces, on the other hand, suffered from the usual high fluctuation in personnel in the Soviet Union, especially in the provinces where everyone who could sooner or later took off to the big cities. Consequently, when university sections were united with the academic *doma uchenykh* sections to form the sports society *Nauka* in the late 1930s, the latter became the most important sports club in mountaineering, uniting 35–40 percent of all mountaineers.<sup>27</sup> The “academization” of climbing was rarely criticized and not touched upon by climbers themselves in the public discourse after World War II.<sup>28</sup> On the contrary, when the VSA discussed measures to raise the instructors’ level, higher education was a prominent requirement.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, instead of recruiting more non-academics into climbing, climbers partly reproduced themselves: In the late 1940s and 1950s, it became quite common for couples (who had often met on a mountaineering trip) to come to the camps as families with their children (although the camps were intended to house adults only).<sup>30</sup> In climbers’ and tourists’ journals, famous climbers’ children were explicitly presented as the next generation of Soviet climbers.<sup>31</sup>

By the post-War years, climbing had become more than just a sport—it was a network of the like-minded, a lifestyle or, as later Soviet climbers would call it, an *obraz zhizni*—with its own rituals, jargon, buttons and pins, jokes, folklore and songs, but also certain values, “ethics” and discourses.<sup>32</sup> These

26 See, for example, the memoirs of a climber about his years at the Moscow Technical University (MVTU). Ovchinnikov, Anatolii G. (1998). *Al’pinisty MVTU imeni N. E. Baumana*. Moscow: Izd. MGPU im. N.E. Baumana, 38–46.

27 Until the 1950s, “Nauka” united all students and personnel of national universities and academic institutions. GARE, f. 9480, op. 22, d. 88, l. 21.

28 One single representative warned in 1948 that climbing was “on its way to become the sport of the intelligentsia”; however, his remark was left uncommented. GARE, f. 7576, op. 14, d. 40, l. 45 (Plenum VSA, March 1948, Simonov).

29 See the debate at the climbers’ reunion in 1953: GARE, f. 7576, op. 14, d. 49, l. 6.

30 The VSA’s attempts to stop this practice were unsuccessful, as many memoirs of climbers testify. See, for example, GARE, f. 7576, op. 14, d. 35, l. 83.

31 A well-known case would be Igor Tamm, the physicist and Nobel Prize winner, who had been an active climber since the 1930s. His son Evgenii, also a scientist, eventually became the team leader of the first Soviet ascent of Everest in 1982. Studenin, Boris and Galina Mulenkova (1991). *Al’pinizm-shkola muzhestva*. Alma-Ata: Rauan, 4–5; Lin, A. (1951). *Dorogoiu pobed. Fizkul’tura i sport*, 5, 11.

32 This culture of memory was often built around a place with specific emotional importance; see, for example, a collection of tales, jokes, songs, pictures and poems by moun-

communities cultivated by climbers were somewhat closed off to outsiders—mountaineers looked down not only on “ordinary” tourists who lay on the beaches, but also on low-hill walkers.<sup>33</sup> It was a culture which rested on material privileges, but it was nevertheless a conscious choice for a certain milieu and only one option among several: most other Soviet citizens who had the chance to take a vacation chose to spend their summer in a tourist resort or a sanatorium, preferably on the beach. This alternative called *otdykh* (vacation in one place, rest/relaxation) was something mountaineers distinguished themselves from by contrasting their activity to that of the great majority of Soviet citizens who just “passively” rested on the beach and “splashed in the water”. While both forms—*turizm* and *otdykh*—were nominally accepted in the Soviet Union and *otdykh* probably outnumbered active *turizm* at all times, the ideological discourse of the 1920s and 1930s had left no doubt that a form of ‘active relaxation’ was to be preferred. Even if the strong anti-hedonist stance grew less evident following Stalin’s death, especially after the 1960s, some of the bias against *otdykh* remained, fostered over the years in which climbing journals had presented *turizm* as clearly more fitting for the Soviet citizen than a beach holiday, where differences to the much-decried ‘bourgeois’ tourism were much harder to make out.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, many climbers cultivated a distinctly ‘old Bolshevik’ ethic of hard work and asceticism, reminiscent of the tales told of Lenin—who had, after all, loved to climb the mountains.<sup>35</sup> Climbing was therefore also a marker of distinction within the system. (Stalin, on the contrary, had been more the sanatoria type, which gave this choice yet another layer of meaning.)

This was especially pronounced during the mid- and late 1950s, the years of de-Stalinization. The writer Pavel Luknitsky expressed this *zeitgeist* in an account of his own travels on a expedition to the Pamir during the 1930s: “Now every one of us was left to his own [...] Now, there were no more formalities, no decoration, nothing fake [...] On the long march full of pri-

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taineers in honour of ‘their’ mountaineering camp: *Ja pomniu tot kraj okrylennyi. K iubileiu al’plageria “Dzhailik” 1938–1998* (1998). Sbornik poezii i prozy, Moscow: Dialog-MGU.

33 “Ordinary” tourists accused climbers of having a “caste” demeanour. Romashkov, Ulitskii and Shtuber (1937). *Zhizn’ gosluet. NSNM*, 2, 29.

34 On *turizm* and its connotations during the Thaw, see Gorsuch, Anne (2003). “There’s no place like home.” Soviet tourism in late Stalinism. *Slavic review*, 62, 760–85; for the Brezhnev era, see Noack (2006).

35 An article entitled “Kak otdykhali Il’ich” (How Lenin used to relax) pictures the Bolshevik leader together with his wife Nadezhda Krupskaja in front of the Swiss mountains: *NSIM*.

vation [...] your comrades will get to know even the most hidden sides of your character; you can no longer deceive anyone [...]. Neither [...] enormous knowledge nor a high cultural level will put you above your comrades.”<sup>36</sup> Such celebrations of the *vita activa* and the egalitarianism of climbing deny the inevitable hierarchies within the system, as well as the conflicts on all expeditions. They idealize the mountains as a testing ground for man’s moral integrity: Only high up, in isolation and in the fight against nature, the true value of men and the reliability of their relationships are revealed—not in the “hectic” and “crowds” of the city.<sup>37</sup> This rhetoric was arguably most broadly popularized a decade later by the famous Russian singer-songwriter Vladimir Vysotskii, whose song “Song about a friend” portrays climbers as a close-knit community with special emotional codes, strict discipline and an unwritten, but strong, code of behavior, all of which are essential for the survival of the group.<sup>38</sup> The song is an important element in the popular Soviet feature film *Vertikal* (1966/67) with Vysotskii in the role of guitar-playing radio operator Volodia: four men and two women are on a fateful and nearly tragic climb in the Caucasus, where one climber’s ambition for the summit nearly costs everyone’s life. On the mountains, songs are sung and meaningful discussions (and even more meaningful silences) take place. Not physical strength, but something beyond “wherein all the strength lies” makes a great climber—something inexplicable which, again, closes out those who do not have “it”: mountaineers do not seek advantages, only their own happiness and pride in the mountains, as an old Swanetian friend of the climbers’ leader pronounces.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the film conveys an image of the lifestyle and the norms of behavior of Soviet climbing in the 1960s: its opening scenes show the six protagonists, a group of climbers, before their departure in Moscow—in a very modern, apparently affluent apartment lined with books in the newly constructed Moscow quarter of Fili. While this is a fictional film and certainly also meant to convey the norms of a cul-

36 Luknizki, Pawel (1957). *Gletscher, Räuber, blaue Steine: Gefährliche Reisen auf dem Pamir*. Leipzig: Brockhaus, 26. My translation is from the German as the original was unfortunately unavailable.

37 “For me, climbers are one of the most close-knit communities of people; people where you will find out the value of each one faster than in the lowlands. Everything is the same but on a different scale.” Studenin and Mulkova (1991), 4.

38 *Pesnia o druze* (1966), see for example May 5, 2009 <http://www.kulichki.com/vv/pesni/esli-drug-okazalsya-vdrug.html>.

39 The film—or maybe the genre—shows quite a few similarities to the Western genre—a frontier landscape which acts as the main protagonist, tough men, deep emotions, few words.

tured lifestyle, it is at the same time not an unrealistic depiction of the lifestyle of Soviet climbing: the city and material well-being are renounced in search of nature and an experience beyond the comfort zone, but only for a limited time.

## Distinctly Soviet? Soviet climbing in a comparative perspective

Soviet leisure offered itself as a field of social and cultural distinction: Different social groups could and would align themselves to different themes, people and fragments of discourse as a means of creating a group identity—not unlike leisure in Western countries, albeit arguably less (and later) intertwined with material consumption—often simply because there was not much to consume, at least until the 1960s.<sup>40</sup> In other regards, too, Soviet climbing showed remarkable similarities to climbers' cultures in other countries, notwithstanding the specific historical conditions of its existence. This is true with regards to the high proportion of academics and to the prevalence of a culture of masculinity,<sup>41</sup> but also to its discursive framework; much of it rested, in the Soviet Union just as elsewhere, on a basic opposition of nature (mountains) vs. civilization (urbanity)—an almost classical anti-modern topos which has accompanied mountaineering (and in general, tourism) ever since its beginnings in the nineteenth century: the climber flees the city but brings the civilization he wants to escape with him—his perspective on “nature” cannot be anything other than a projection, an answer and an antidote to the questions, wishes and blank spots of his everyday life. Similarly, the climber wishes to leave the veneer of civilization behind in search of another—‘true’ self and different ‘genuine’ relationships which rest on grounds other than the everyday hierarchies and norms of behavior, without, of course, being able to leave them behind.<sup>42</sup> In a broad sense, mountaineering shows a way out of the modern world, out of the everyday, into a

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40 For a critical view of these mechanism of distinction see Hennig, Christoph (1999). *Reiselust. Touristen, Tourismus und Urlaubskultur*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 13–26.

41 Mountaineering is often seen as a last test or refuge of manhood in a world of changing gender and social relations. On this topic, see Maurer, Eva (2009). *Männerurlaub? Geschlechterkonstruktionen im sowjetischen Alpinistenlager, 1928–1953*. In Wiebke Kolbe et al. (eds.). *Voyage. Jahrbuch für Reise- und Tourismusforschung* 8, 70–85. Munich: Profil-Verlag.

42 Hennig (1999), 102–23.

counter-world, a temporary respite where man may be—or just feel—different in different surroundings.

In the cultural framework of mountaineering, there was thus always a critical reservation or, at the least, an ambivalence towards modernity; an ambivalence which is often seen as an essential quality of modernity itself.<sup>43</sup> Soviet climbing had inherited it as part of the package—the interpretation of climbing is inseparable from the practices. However, Stalinism was not a cultural system which valued ambivalence in any form and its own version of modernity very much concentrated on aspects of rationality, control and efficacy (at least in theory). This ‘rational side of modernity’ was arguably one of the main ideological building blocks of the Soviet system. Consequently, the discourse of climbing was not fully compatible with the ideological framework of the Soviet Union; it was through the tension between those two systems of reference that the culture of Soviet climbing gained another layer of meaning.

In public, Soviet mountaineering was presented as a thoroughly rational practice, combining body, spirit and tactics, neither as a heroic individual feat nor as a form of ‘silent communion with nature’. Risk should be minimized, accidents were frowned upon and thoroughly investigated.<sup>44</sup> Discourses emphasized those values in mountaineering central to the concept of the Soviet (and not only Soviet) modern man—self-discipline, teamwork, control of one’s body and emotions. At the level of character and qualities, initiative, strong personal ambition and the patience necessary to pursue an often rather abstract goal were probably values close to Soviet academics and may have attracted them into the sport. However, as the analysis of *Vertikal* shows and countless letters and memoirs of Soviet climbers testify, other motives were also important: the beauty of landscape, a need for solitude, a temporary escape from city life, the wish for a highly personal challenge in the mountains. While these motifs were pushed into the background during Stalinism because of their close resemblance to “bourgeois,” “individualist” climbing, they were more widely recognized during the Khrushchev period and after. Nevertheless, leisure had to be purposeful and the collective was still more important than the individual. Consequently, any ambivalence about modernity or just escapes into alternative modes of conduct could eas-

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43 Günther, Dagmar (1998). *Alpine Quergänge: Kulturgeschichte des bürgerlichen Alpinismus (1870–1930)*. Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 17–9.

44 In the late 1930s, the authorities explicitly set the goal for Soviet mountaineering to be completely free of accidents: *Za bezavariinost’ v al’pinizme* (1938). *NSNM*, 5, 20–1.

ily acquire another layer of meaning and even a subversive undertone. When mountaineers cultivated a direct, informal, egalitarian style of conduct and communication, it may just have been the appeal of the “simple life” for people working in the most sophisticated branches of the professional world (with a bit of “rugged masculinity” thrown in); an emotional code which connected them with their group. However, at the same time, it could be read as an implicit critique of Soviet hierarchical structures and the bureaucratic routines in the center. Indeed, as early as the 1930s, the authorities criticized the lack of discipline and formal rules inherent in the widespread attitude among climbers that “in the mountains, there are different laws”. This cult of the ‘direct’ and unspoiled was also echoed in the glorification of friendship, solidarity and emotional ties among climbers, in the adoration of nature as landscape and in the “*romantika dal*,” the “romanticizing” of the periphery.<sup>45</sup> As mentioned above, these were urban projections and ideas of the center about the periphery. Yet the focus on unspoiled nature ran counter to the Stalinist drive for urbanization and industrialization and the love for the periphery questioned the role of Moscow and European Russia as the absolute center of the Soviet Union. After all, everyone supposedly wanted to go to Moscow, not away from it.<sup>46</sup> These ambivalences provided some of the ground from which part of the *turizm*, climbing and student movement moved from escapist to slightly more openly critical or dissident discourses and practices in the late 1950s and 1960s.

For most climbers, the mountains remained just a temporary escape into another world, even if there were always a few, mostly well-educated, Russian climbers who consciously chose to stay in the mountains all year long and left the official job placement system in search of something else.<sup>47</sup> The latter practice seems to have been much more widespread in the socialist ‘brother’ country of the German Democratic Republic, where in the 1970s and 1980s a climbers’ subculture evolved whereby people escaped the obligation to work, spent most of their time in the mountains, took off to forbid-

45 Boym, Svetlana (1994). *Common places. Mythologies of everyday life in Russia*. Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 110–7.

46 During the first five-year plan, anti-urbanist travel writers had been the target of critique in the press; see for example O pol’ze puteshestvii (1928). *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, May 28, 3.

47 Richter, Zinaida (1935). *Sturm El’brusa. Vtoraia al’piniada RKKK*, Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia.

Boldyrev, S. (1940). Spasatel’naia sluzhba v gorach. *NSNM*, 3, 16–7; Kavunenko, Vladimir (2000). *Kak budut bez nas odinoki vershiny*, Moscow: Russkii mir.



den trips to the Pamirs and were accordingly regarded as a critical and problematic group by the regime, a community somewhat radical in its individualism and with a general distrust of any political ideology.<sup>48</sup> In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, climbing remained a socially accepted form of sport and climbing was held in rather high esteem, something probably also fostered by the fact that among Soviet climbers there were often prominent academics in high positions—such as Aleksandr Aleksandrov, rector of Leningrad State University in the 1950s and Rem Khokhlov, rector of the Moscow State University in the 1970s.<sup>49</sup> In retrospect, even after 1989, Soviet climbers never regarded climbing and communism as incompatible. Rather, many understood the comradeship of climbing as a successful variant of the “collectivism” the Soviet Union always propagated: To be a top climber, one recalled, one needed more than just technical skills; it also took “the ability to fit into the collective, to be communicative, patient, to be able to align one’s own goals with the goals and tasks of the collective.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, climbers found and cultivated a niche which enabled a limited break from official norms into different emotional codes and a seemingly better world. Whether it predominantly undermined the system in the long run or, on the other hand, stabilized it by providing an outlet, a respite which kept people content, we will probably never be able to tell. However, it is clear how leisure practices confirmed and even furthered the fragmentation of Soviet society into distinct socio-cultural milieus with their own lifestyles. While a certain amount of material privilege was a necessary precondition for this development, education, or rather cultural capital, was a crucial factor of distinction, maybe even more so than in Western societies. In a modern, increasingly complex society, this development is not surprising, but it clearly shows that Soviet propaganda about the accessibility of sports for all was just as illusory as the idea of a special Soviet ‘solidarity between working class and intelligentsia’.

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48 See Kai Reinharts doctorate on climbers’ milieus in the late GDR. Reinhart, Kai (2007). *Herrschaft und Widerständigkeit im DDR-Sport. Eine Analyse des staatlichen und des informellen Sports vor dem Hintergrund der Theorie Michel Foucaults*. Diss. Munster: Universitätsverlag. Many thanks to the author for the manuscript.

49 Aleksandrov’s daughter wrote about her father’s enthusiasm for climbing, May 5, 2009. [http://www.alpklubspb.ru/persona/aleksfndrov.htm#\\_ftn2](http://www.alpklubspb.ru/persona/aleksfndrov.htm#_ftn2). There is much material on Khokhlov, see for example 05.05.2009. <http://www.alpklubspb.ru/persona/hohlov.htm>.

50 Studenin and Molenkova (1991), 34.

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