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Ordinary Miracles: Lenin's Call for Revolutionary Ambition

Lars T. Lih

[1] But a circle of inspiring leaders [korifei] such as Alekseev and Myshkin, Khalturin and Zheliabov are capable of political tasks in the most genuine and practical sense of the word – precisely because their impassioned preaching meets with an answering call from the masses awakening in an elemental fashion, and the leaders' seething energy is taken up and supported by the energy of the revolutionary class. [2] Plekhanov was a thousand times right when he not only identified the revolutionary class, not only proved the inevitability and unavoidability of its elemental awakening, but also presented to the 'worker circles' a great and noble political task. [3] But you refer to the mass movement that arose afterwards in order to lower this task – in order to narrow the energy and sweep of the activity of the 'worker circles'. [4] What is this, except an artisan's infatuation with his own artisanal limitations? [5] You brag about your practicality and you don't see (a fact known to any Russian praktik) what miracles for the revolutionary cause can be brought about not only by a circle but by a lone individual. [6] Or do you think that our movement can't produce real leaders [korifei] like those of the seventies? Why? Because we're unprepared? [7] But we are preparing ourselves, we will go on preparing ourselves – and we will not stop until we are prepared! [8] True, over the stagnant waters of 'an economic struggle against the owners and the government', a layer of slime has unfortunately formed – people appear among us who get down on their knees and pray to elementality, gazing with beatitude (as Plekhanov put it) on the 'posterior' of the Russian proletariat. [9] But we will be able to free ourselves from this slime. [10] And it is precisely at the present time that the Russian revolutionary, guided by a genuinely revolutionary theory and relying on the class that is genuinely revolutionary

and that is undergoing an elemental awakening, can at last – at last! – draw himself up to his full stature and reveal all his heroic [bogatyrskii] strength.

The process by which certain passages from a famous book become emblems of the book as a whole is not a straightforward one. In the western academic tradition, Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* has come to be represented by two or three passages where Lenin seems to be expressing his worries about lack of revolutionary fervour among the workers.¹ The rest of the book might as well not exist. In Russia, the passages regarded as central in the west are the ones that do not exist. In 2005, a book of Russian political quotations was published in which Lenin has the most extensive entry – 216 items – but his famous (in the west) remarks about the limitations of the 'spontaneous worker movement' do not appear.²

The quotations that constitute the Russian memory of *What Is to Be Done?* create a dramatically different sense of Lenin's outlook – not worry about workers but exhilaration about their elemental awakening, combined with a call for revolutionaries to think big.³ One of these quotations begins with the words 'in a tight little band, hands firmly joined, we are treading a steep and narrow way.' This passage was set to music by Sergei Prokofiev in his *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution*; the propulsive energy of Prokofiev's setting is an excellent commentary on the spirit of *What Is to Be Done?*⁴

If I had to choose one passage from *What Is to Be Done?* to be ceaselessly recycled in textbooks and histories of Russia, I would pick the textual moment analysed here. It helps us understand why the young underground activists who were the book's first readers were so thrilled by it. One such activist, N. Valentinov, broke with Lenin soon thereafter. Yet he later reminisced that, in his youth, he and his fellow activists were attracted by 'struggle, risk and danger'; for this reason, '*What Is to Be Done?* struck just the right chord with us and we were only too eager to put its message into practice.'⁵ Any interpretation of Lenin's book must account for this enthusiastic reaction.

Our passage also shows Lenin's idiosyncratic blending of aggressive polemic with what another early reader (Aleksandr Potresov, who also later became a determined foe of Lenin) called political poetry. In order to understand the impact of *What Is to Be Done?* on its target audience, we must have a sense of this poetry. In order to have a sense of the poetry, we must first wade into the polemical context.

What Is to Be Done? was written in late 1901 and early 1902 in order to propagate Lenin's plan for achieving a widely held goal: creating a nationwide party

structure out of the existing scattered and isolated underground organizations of Russian Social Democracy. Lenin was a prominent member of the *Iskra* group, named for an underground newspaper printed in Western Europe and smuggled into tsarist Russia. The *Iskra* editorial board represented a coalition between the founders of Russian Social Democracy (Georgii Plekhanov, Vera Zasulich, Pavel Axelrod) and younger activists who had practical experience in underground work (Lenin, Iulii Martov, Aleksandr Potresov).

Iskra's highly ambitious political programme was to create a national party structure, secure it a strong base in the burgeoning mass worker movement and thus give Russian Social Democracy an important role – perhaps even a leading role – in the imminent overthrow of the tsarist system. In support of these optimistic perspectives, Lenin and his comrades could point to an upsurge of politicized worker protest that had taken place in the early months of 1901.

By the time Lenin sat down to draft his book, *Iskra's* programme had been subjected to withering criticism by a rival group of Social Democratic émigrés associated with the journal *Rabochee delo*. This group argued that *Iskra's* political aims were too ambitious, since 'political tasks in the actual and practical sense of the word – that is, in the sense of a rational and practical struggle for political demands – are not in general accessible to worker circles' (see sentence 1 for Lenin's paraphrase). In a way extremely typical for Lenin, he seeks to refute *Rabochee delo's* 'no we can't' with his own 'yes we can'.

In the passage we are analysing, Lenin rhetorically addresses these critics with an argument that can be paraphrased as follows:

You say that small underground circles cannot rally the Russian workers around the banner of an all-out fight against tsarism? This is true, perhaps, of an underground organization made up of people like yourself: people who whine about the difficulties facing them and use the workers as an excuse for their own lack of ambition and refusal to think big. But what if the underground organization was made up of genuinely inspiring leaders such as those who created Narodnaia volia (People's Will) in the 1870s? Those were true heroes with ambitious aims, although the situation they faced back then prevented them from achieving their full potential. But today we have exactly what they lacked: a mass movement that is seeking *us* out – the revolutionaries of today – with the same energy that we revolutionaries have always sought them out.

Yes, there are practical difficulties that confront a persecuted, illegal underground organization that is trying to reach out to the masses. But instead of treating these difficulties as a challenge, you let them overwhelm you. You use the presence of the mass movement as an excuse to *lower* your ambitions.

Precisely at the present time, even a lone activist who thinks big and who is able to convey to his audience the grandeur of his revolutionary dreams can achieve miracles!

The above paraphrase gives the logical outline of Lenin's argument. He wants to show that his opponents have set their sights too low, and he points to the heroic revolutionaries of the 1870s who accomplished great things (Lenin assumes that his audience agrees with this assessment). He then argues: think how much more they could have accomplished with the advantage we enjoy, namely, support from a growing mass movement full of energy and enthusiasm.

To back up his argument and inspire his readers, Lenin deploys an extensive battery of rhetorical devices, all of which rely on the contrast between high and low – between great and noble tasks versus stagnant lack of ambition. A review of these devices will help put our passage in its full context.

One of Lenin's favourite techniques throughout his writings is to take a formulation of his opponents' and turn it against them. One of the *Rabochee delo* group, Aleksandr Martynov, had advanced as a tactical slogan the idea of 'an economic struggle against the owners and the government' – that is, using economic grievances to stoke anti-tsarist sentiment among the workers. The *Iskra* group objected that workers were already capable of responding to directly political appeals. Lenin loves to take a slogan like Martynov's and repeat it so often that it begins to lose meaning and appear ridiculous. The appearance of Martynov's slogan in our passage (sentence 8) is due to this rhetorical technique. The words 'worker circles' and 'practicality' are also taken directly from *Rabochee delo* (sentences 3, 5). Lenin wants to expose his critics as people who talk about 'practicality' as a way of condescending to the *praktik* – that is, the activist out on the frontlines of local underground organizations. In contrast, Lenin evokes the paradoxical image of the *praktik* as miracle-worker (sentence 5).

A more subtle and fundamental example of this ideological jiu-jitsu is Lenin's use of 'elemental' (*stikhiinyi*). Anyone picking up *What Is to Be Done?* will get the impression that Lenin was obsessed with the concept of *stikhiinost*. Indeed, scholarly consensus regards such an obsession as established fact.⁶ Nevertheless, this impression is an illusion, due entirely to Lenin's habit of sarcastic repetition of his opponent's phrases. The only reason *stikhiinost* is prominent in *What Is to Be Done?* is because the term was used in September 1901 by Boris Krichevsky, a leading member of *Rabochee delo*. Lenin showed very little interest in the topic of *stikhiinost* either before or after this particular polemical joust.

The best English translation of *stikhiinyi* is 'elemental'. The etymological origin of the Russian word is the Greek *stoikheion* or 'element'; both the

Greek and its Latin equivalent became associated with 'force of nature', a connotation that *stikhiinyi*, its Russian descendant, still retains. Nevertheless, in English translations of *What Is to Be Done?*, *stikhiinyi* is most often (but never consistently) translated as 'spontaneous'. There were practical reasons for this rendering. The polemics of *What Is to Be Done?* gave rise to constant use of the noun form *stikhiinost* (otherwise a rather rare word in Russian when compared to the adjective). Unfortunately, 'elemental' has no familiar noun form ('elementality' is the best I could come up with), whereas 'spontaneous' does. Furthermore, the phrase '*stikhiinyi* element' is a common one in *What Is to Be Done?* And so, out of a purely practical translation problem arose a great subject of theoretical debate: Lenin's attitude towards 'spontaneity'.⁷

As mentioned, the word 'elemental' is centrally connected to the idea of a force of nature – a metaphor that can go in many directions. A force of nature can be seen as unfocused, unorganized, violent and destructive. When this set of connotations is in the forefront, Lenin is 'against' elementality – as was Russian Social Democracy as a whole, which saw its task precisely as organizing and channelling originally chaotic worker protests. In fact, the Menshevik wing of Russian Social Democracy was considerably more focused on the need to overcome elementality than was the Bolshevik wing.⁸

The metaphor of a force of nature can also be mobilized to evoke the idea of a mighty and irresistible power that is working, not against you, but for you. To understand our passage, we have to see that Lenin uses 'elementality' in both negative and positive senses. The negative sense is associated with his polemical opponents, who (according to Lenin) pray to elementality – that is, they not only passively accept the given situation, the current limitations, but they do so almost as a matter of principle. Lenin relays Plekhanov's joke about idealizing the proletariat from behind, with no sense that the proletariat itself is moving on (sentence 8).

The positive connotations of 'force of nature' – as inevitable, unstoppable, transformative power – are mobilized in the image of the 'elemental awakening' of the workers, an image used three times in our passage (sentences 1, 2, 10). This particular force of nature is working *for* us, so we should have the confidence to think big – this is the heart of Lenin's message, not only in *What Is to Be Done?* but also throughout his writings.

Lenin repeated *ad nauseam* not only his opponents' formulations but also his own newly minted polemical coinages. One example that resounds throughout *What Is to Be Done?* is 'kowtowing to elementality', a variant of which is found in our passage (sentence 8). Another example is *kustarnichestvo*, which I have

translated as ‘artisanal limitations’ (other renderings include ‘amateurism,’ ‘primitivism’). A *kustar* is a traditional Russian craftsman, working for a local market with little or no division of labour. When applied to party organization, the *kustar* metaphor referred to local party committees that were isolated and separated from each other, due to the absence of nationwide organizational structures. With this meaning, the term became part of the standard lexicon of Russian Social Democracy. In our passage, *kustarnichestvo* plays an additional role as yet another evocation of thinking small and unambitiously (sentence 4).

Opposed to the *kustar* in Lenin’s system of images is the *korifei*, an exalted word for ‘leader’ (sentences 1, 6). Its etymological origin is the coryphaeus, the leader of the chorus in Greek tragedy.⁹ As examples of *korifei*, Lenin lists ‘Alekseev and Myshkin, Khalturin and Zheliabov’. These populist revolutionaries from the 1870s have specific connotations that are mobilized by Lenin in his argument. First and foremost, they were ‘inspiring’ due to selfless dedication and their ‘impassioned preaching’ of ambitious revolutionary goals (sentence 1). The four leaders evoked by Lenin symbolize the union of workers and intelligentsia that was a key aspect of the new mass movement Lenin saw arising. These leaders also represent a shift in populist thinking from aiming at purely economic revolution to working for a political one, even if this new commitment was expressed first of all in the dead-end tactic of individual terrorism (the assassination of Alexander II in 1881). Finally, all of these *korifei* ended badly, personally and politically: death in Siberia or on the scaffold, combined with a stalled and demoralized revolutionary movement.

There is an autobiographical aspect to Lenin’s evocation of populist *korifei* that might have resonated with some of his readers. Lenin’s older brother Aleksandr Ulyanov was himself an inspiring and dedicated revolutionary leader who got embroiled in a futile attempt to assassinate the tsar in 1884 and died on the scaffold. Where Aleksandr failed, Vladimir was determined to succeed – because in the following two decades a genuine mass movement had sprung up, and Russian revolutionaries had also discovered Marxism, a ‘genuinely revolutionary theory’ (sentence 10). This evolution in the Russian revolutionary tradition is vividly incarnated in Plekhanov, whom Lenin cites not only as an authority but also as a living link between the *korifei* of the 1870s and the *praktiki* of the new century (see Christopher Read’s discussion in this volume of Plekhanov’s adoption of ‘modern socialism’).

Lenin’s rhetorical opposition between high ambition and low routine even finds expression in sound effects. Alliteration of *v* and *k* adds to the solemnity

of 'great and noble' tasks (*vysokii i velikii*) (sentence 2). In contrast, the hissing *z*'s and *i*'s of 'to lower' (*prinizit*) and 'to narrow' (*suzit*) strengthen the imagery of reptilian sloth (sentence 3). An even lower life form is evoked by the image of slimy pond scum (sentence 8). In contrast to all this creeping, crawling stagnation is the heroic *bogaty*r who strides forth to do battle in the final sentence. The *bogatyri* were the giant marvellous heroes of the Russian folk epics. Lenin could have chosen no better word to evoke his romantic conception of the Social Democratic *praktik* as people's hero.

The scholarly consensus concerning Lenin's worry about workers arises from focusing attention on a few of Lenin's formulations about *stikhiinost*/elementality/'spontaneity', while completely ignoring the overall system of images that governs Lenin's rhetoric throughout *What Is to Be Done?* – a rhetoric that continually contrasts high ambition to low routine, to the decided advantage of the former. If our passage had been chosen as the exemplary textbook quote from *What Is to Be Done?*, we would have a very different and much more accurate idea of Lenin's outlook.

'It is precisely at the present time that the Russian revolutionary ... can at last – at last! – draw himself up to his full stature' (sentence 10). The repeated 'at last' reveals the emotional investment that Lenin put into his argument and that so impressed the first readers of *What Is to Be Done?* The same emotional investment is manifest throughout Lenin's career. We will conclude our consideration of his 1902 book with a passage from early 1919, when Lenin still thought the Russian Revolution would quickly spread to Western Europe (he was soon to be disillusioned):

Comrades, behind us there is a long line of revolutionaries who sacrificed their lives for the emancipation of Russia. The lot of the majority of these revolutionaries was a hard one. They endured the persecution of the tsarist government, but it was not their good fortune to see the triumph of the revolution. The happiness that has fallen to our lot is all the greater. Not only have we seen the triumph of our revolution, not only have we seen it become consolidated amidst unprecedented difficulties, creating a new kind of government and winning the sympathy of the whole world, but we are also seeing the seed sown by the Russian revolution spring up in Europe.¹⁰

Lenin's hopeful words in 1919 provide a gloss on our passage from *What Is to Be Done?*, a gloss that brings out the essential political poetry without the dross of momentary polemics. In both passages, the ongoing force of history has

made meaningful the sacrifices of earlier generations of Russian revolutionaries (including Lenin's brother Aleksandr Ulyanov). In 1919, Lenin asserts that the isolated *praktiki* of 1902 did in fact accomplish miracles: the Russian proletariat, led by the party, has carried out a revolution that is now inspiring the whole world. No wonder so many of the first readers of *What Is to Be Done?* were themselves inspired by Lenin's injunction to think big.

Further Reading

Lih, Lars T., 'How a Founding Document was Found, or One Hundred Years of Lenin's *What Is to be Done?*', *Kritika* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 1–45.

Lih, Lars T., *Lenin Rediscovered* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009).

Miliukov, Paul, *Russia and its Crisis* (Forgotten Books: 2012). Written in 1903 in English for American audiences by a prominent Russian historian and liberal opposition leader, this book is the best introduction to the immediate historical background of *What Is To be Done?*

Tucker, Robert C., 'Introduction: Lenin and Revolution', in *The Lenin Anthology*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1975). Robert Tucker was one of the few historians to grasp the power of Lenin's romantic self-image.