3 Tracking Social Change Through Sport Hunting

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It remains as a classic text of Russian political history: Ivan Turgenev’s *A Sportsman’s Sketches*. The enserfed peasantry sprang from the pages as live people, individuals with whom the privileged reader could share human desires and misfortunes. Russia’s version of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *A Sportsman’s Sketches* inflamed public opinion against serfdom, thereby paving the moral path for the emancipation that would turn both noble and peasant worlds topsy-turvy. However, just as Stowe’s masterpiece offers equally compelling insights into the problematic domestic economy of nineteenth-century America, so too must Turgenev’s work be mined for more than its abolitionist subtext, which Turgenev surely intended less bluntly than did Stowe. In both cases an analysis of the action that provides the context for the political motif proves fruitful; *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* describes the maintenance of various households, and *A Sportsman’s Sketches* chronicles the adventures of a hunter whose life, like that of his peasant carriers, is about to change for many reasons other than just the proclamation of 19 February 1861.

Turgenev’s fictional recollections of an unnamed provincial nobleman also stand out aesthetically for the crystal clarity of his realistic prose, and his descriptions of dawn breaking as the hunters set out undoubtedly raised emotions other than political in many readers’ breasts. This story joins a long tradition of sporting literature, fiction dating back to ancient Greece, in which descriptions of organised competition or deft pursuit of live prey serve as metaphors for other aspects of the societies in which they are played out. The hunt in Turgenev’s story functions as a metaphor for feudalism because it represents a type of sport associated with a lifestyle based on specific proprietorship over land. As his hunter–protagonist says, ‘one of the great advantages of shooting, my dear reader, is the perpetual going from place to place by those persons who indulge in it, and for idlers there is nothing more agreeable’. By ‘place to place’
he meant towns and villages where he spent weeks, even months, idling after game. His primary guide was an expert serf forester, one of the few who enjoyed limited hunting rights in his lord’s domain and for which he paid in kind – fowl for the lord’s table. As E. P. Thompson eloquently argued, pre-capitalist England’s forests were the sites of vicious class warfare, resulting in the Black Act of 1723 that made poaching a capital offence; the poachers were not hungry peasants by and large, but wilful outlaws who blackened their faces (hence the law’s title) and stole for protest as well as profit. By the nineteenth century, hunting was becoming increasingly less about putting food on the table and more about exercising privileges over the land.

Although to a certain extent it can be argued that Turgenev’s protagonist was ‘playing’ – that is, he was engaged in activities that offered him a diversion from his workaday world, the realms of ‘work’ and ‘play’ were not so easily distinguishable from one another in the feudal setting. It is the changes in ‘play’, symbolised here by the hunt, that form a microcosm of the threat to the status quo posed by industrialisation. The essential balance of peasants as servitors guiding and carrying for the wealthy hunters did not change. However, fifty years later, when the merchant millionaire Pavel Ryabushinskii retained several peasant villages to help him in (successful) pursuit of bear, he epitomised both the participation of new social groups and the introduction of the money economy into hunting. In 1915 the extremely busy Ryabushinskii took limited time from work and spent what he had to in order to bag the trophy that he displayed so proudly. And his guides were adequately compensated wage earners, several earning more than twenty rubles each.

This chapter uses the hunt to illustrate Russia in transition between feudalism and modernity. Hunting for sport, rather than for food or protection, is an organised social activity that separates humans from other animals. The hunt, which symbolises the conquest of nature, has long had a ritual element, usually associated with the journey of the young male into adulthood. But with the intensification of social organisations, hunting became a privilege, or ‘private law’, that carried with it an indication of royal status. Images of tribal rites of passage juxtaposed to those of royalty shooting game that had been captured and overfed to slow down the pace of escape illustrate incremental perversion of this privilege. In society as in the forest, the over-stuffed nobility had to give way to new economies of consumption; capitalism changed the legalities of land tenure, which opened the door for non-noble hunting for sport. The gleam of rising social status shone from the rifle barrels. As Rosalind Williams has argued, when the bourgeoisie sought to establish a