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# Nadezhda Krupskaya's Contributions to Early Soviet Adult Education Theory and Practice.

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## Abstract

Abstract: This article examines Nadezhda Krupskaya's contribution to early Soviet adult education, outlines key principles of her adult education theory, and discusses tensions and challenges in implementing them in the Soviet context.

*Keywords:* adult education, Nadezhda Krupskaya, political education, Soviet adult education

There are many historical studies of socialist or democratic adult education projects to enact social change, from political education for national liberation in Guinea-Bissau (Borges, 2019) to literacy campaigns for nation-building and economic development in China (Peterson, 1997). However, this scholarship centers male perspectives, obscuring women's contribution to adult education, and neglects the Soviet Union. The latter is a surprising omission, since the Bolshevik regime was the first 20<sup>th</sup> century project to use adult education to enact social change on a state level, becoming a reference or inspiration for similar projects globally (Kenez, 1985).

This paper addresses these gaps by examining the adult education theory and practice of Nadezhda Krupskaya, head of the Adult Education Department in the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) from 1917 to 1930. We outline three key principles of Krupskaya's adult education praxis: recognizing adult learners' needs and experiences, including adults as co-participants in education and state governance, and using political literacy in consciousness-raising. Prior analyses of Krupskaya's work either focus on her involvement in formal K-12 education (Bagdasaryan, 2019; Holmes, 1991) or dismiss the theoretical value of her work (McNeal, 1972; Volkogonov, 1994). By contrast, we argue that her theory of adult education contained ideas that became foundational in the field and that her contribution to adult education needs to be reevaluated.

## Methodology

Krupskaya's most important works were published from 1957 to 1963 as an 11-volume collection titled *Pedagogicheskie Sochineniya* (Pedagogical Essays; Krupskaya, 1957).<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on textual analysis of materials published in seven volumes relevant to adult education, including her two most important theoretical works, *Public Education and Democracy* and *The Woman Worker*. Antanovich (fluent in Russian) performed thematic analysis, including open and axial coding (Creswell, 2013), to answer the following questions: What were the principles of Krupskaya's theory of adult education? How did Krupskaya see the purpose of adult education in Bolshevik Russia? The analysis was supplemented with materials from the Narkompros archive and other relevant primary sources to understand the historical context.

## Background

Krupskaya had a lifelong interest and personal experiences in adult education. As her involvement in the social democratic movement grew, she became a teacher in a Sunday evening school for adults, where she taught, organized, and agitated factory workers from 1891 to 1896. Krupskaya considered this work her most significant life experience and the most influential for

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<sup>1</sup> These works will be cited as *PS* along with the volume number and the original publication date.

her development as an educator and organiser. She met Lenin while teaching at the school; both were arrested and exiled for their revolutionary activities. Krupskaya returned to Russia in the spring of 1917 and briefly served as the head of a Department of Education in one of the districts in St. Petersburg, developing a blueprint for its system of adult education (Kaplan, 2006). After the October 1917 revolution, she became the head of the Adult Education department in Narkompros and was its only leader until its dissolution in 1930. Increasingly ostracised by Stalin after Lenin's death, Krupskaya nevertheless continued to work on educational issues until her death in 1939.

## **Principles of Adult Education**

### ***Recognition of learners' needs and experiences***

Krupskaya's teaching experiences in the 1890s helped her understand that workers and peasants were not passive recipients of education, and she criticized educational approaches that treated them as such. Her analysis of the dominant model of schooling critiqued learner passivity, memorization, and teacher authority. She called institutions that employed such methods "schools of study," in which

students sit quietly on their desks and listen to what the teacher says from the podium; school where nothing is taught except for book knowledge which has a very weak relationship to living reality, where the individuality of students is suppressed in every possible way and through strict external discipline, they turn into some kind of machine for the intake of an infinite number of information communicated to them.<sup>2</sup> (*PS*, I, p. 318 [1915])

She believed that such schools prepared learners to reproduce the material instead of developing abilities to create knowledge and analyze the reality that surrounded them. She also pointed out that discipline maintained in such schools implicitly taught students to obey the authority and stifled their agency. Contrary to teaching adults as if they were children, Krupskaya insisted that instructional methods should be differentiated based on the age and experience of students:

Many think that adult schools need to be given a program and textbooks they use in children's schools. A teacher cannot think so, only those [do] who do not understand where the peculiarities of children's perception lie, those who put an equal sign between the child and the adult. Adults are not children. They have a lot of life experience, they thought about many things on their own, they know a lot. To talk about the equivalence of programs and textbooks in schools for adolescents and for adults is to deny the need to link theory with practical experiences, and these experiences are different for a teenager and an adult. (*PS*, IX, p. 659 [1937])

Krupskaya believed that learners should be active participants in learning. She recommended involving them in determining class content and using their practical experiences to make education more meaningful and to show how education can enrich their lives.

Krupskaya posited that people were equally capable of learning irrespective of their class, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, or age, and often challenged Party officials who viewed people as ignorant masses. She understood that illiteracy or low levels of education were not

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<sup>2</sup> Antanovich translated all excerpts and used plural pronouns to rectify the gendered, male-centric bias of the Russian language.

evidence of backwardness, but rather results of systematic disenfranchisement and unsuitable conditions for adults to start or continue their education. Thus, she argued that educators needed to investigate circumstances that might hinder adults' learning, particularly women's domestic responsibilities. As she visited adult schools, she criticized the formalistic approach and lack of attention to individual needs:

How is adult education organized in our country? Often a teacher comes and starts shouting at women with low literacy skills, sometimes even summons a low-performing woman to the village soviet and scolds her there. And why she does not have time, what keeps her at home is forgotten, but in my opinion, this is how concern for a person should show itself... These days I hear little about such work, and more and more about reprimands for poor attendance. Little attention is paid to caring for people. (*PS*, IX, p. 672 [1937])

This quotation shows that despite her weakening influence after her tenure as Director, she continued to criticize bureaucratic approaches even in the 1930s, when Stalinist "storming" approaches to work, characterized by the focus on numbers, haste, and coercion, were applied to education (Eklof, 1987). Krupskaya stressed that coercion to attend adult schools was unacceptable. Instead, she argued that administrators and educators should remove obstacles to learning and explain the importance of education to people who were reluctant to enter schools and libraries. This time-consuming approach clashed with the urgency Narkompros and the Party's Central Committee attributed to education and literacy campaigns. Regardless of high illiteracy rates, the vast need for education, dire material conditions, and people's resistance, the Bolshevik leaders clung to their utopian plan of speedy universal literacy. Krupskaya's criticism of coercion in education, however, was not enough to counter other forces in the Soviet context such as the Party's political goals of universal literacy or the economy's needs for a skilled laborforce that frequently ignored people's needs and well-being.

#### ***Participatory approach to education***

Krupskaya argued for people's participation in education on the institutional level. She championed educational soviets, a participatory structure of national education governance that stressed local control, because she believed they were an ideal vehicle to foster learning, organizational abilities, and new habits of cooperative work. She envisioned that educational soviets would be created at each local administrative level; consist of elected representatives of local organizations (unions, cooperatives, women councils, etc.), teachers, and students; and have all decision-making and administrative power to organize education. Narkompros would provide consultation and support rather than making decisions and controlling local education.

Krupskaya had to defend educational soviets in heated debates regarding their relationship to other administrative units, jurisdiction, election of constituents, and sources of funding. Lunacharsky, the head of Narkompros, argued that such a structure diminished the department's leadership and reduced its work to merely recording local initiatives. Others proposed a hierarchy where local soviets reported to their regional counterparts and ultimately to Narkompros. Krupskaya insisted that the autonomy of educational soviets would allow them to work without fear of repercussion. She also pointed out that the hierarchical structure and establishment of Soviet Commissars to oversee education were not different from the Imperial Russian practice of designating school inspectors to control teachers (*PS*, II, p. 41, [1918]).

Her vision for educational soviets shows that she differed from many Bolshevik political elites whose vanguard party membership often translated into condescension toward the masses (Kenez, 1985). They were sceptical about people's active participation in local and state

governance, believing that they lacked the necessary knowledge and expertise. Although Krupskaya also believed in the leading role of the party and the need for an educated cadre of leaders, she argued that these leaders could come from the population once workers and peasants gained necessary knowledge. Refusing to see people from the deficit perspective, she constantly challenged the Party members' paternalistic view of the population as incapable:

Inert masses? Absolutely not!... Many cannot yet cast away their old views of the masses as an object of the intelligentsia's care, as a small, and unreasonable child. [What if we] organize a soviet, and they elect black-hundredist<sup>3</sup> teachers... will turn school into who knows what, will not listen to the Soviet government or carry out its directives... Abandon all these fears, comrades! .... We were not afraid to organize a revolution, we are not afraid of the people... We want the masses to govern the country, to be their own masters.... We keep thinking in the old ways, that if we take no mercy on ourselves, and work in people's cause day and night, this will be enough. It is not enough. Our task is to help people take their fate in their hands *in practice*. (PS, II, p. 76, [1918])

Believing in people's capacity to learn and make decisions, Krupskaya argued that the party vanguards' role was to provide educational opportunities to create grassroots leaders, and that they should create conditions for educational praxis through structures like educational soviets that allowed people to learn and practice decision-making and organizational skills.

Ultimately, Krupskaya suffered defeat in her struggle for educational soviets because she failed to realize that educational soviets and their principles of local governance and decentralization concerned power and distribution of resources. By mid-1918, it became evident that local population used educational soviets for purposes that did not align with the Bolshevik agenda. Some soviets used their authority to reinstate teaching of religion. National republics used them to resist Moscow's oversight and promote their own visions of education (Blank, 1988). Local administration, not willing to lose their power in the area, often subverted soviets' decisions. Pressured by the Party's Central Committee, Narkompros abandoned the model and adopted a more centralized system of educational governance (Holmes, 1991). Krupskaya, however, continued to advocate for the rights of local bodies to make educational decisions, believing that democratic participation in this decision making was one of the key ingredients to build a truly socialist society.

### ***Political literacy and participation***

Studies of Soviet literacy campaigns (Clark, 2000; Eklof, 1987) usually conceptualize literacy as the ability to read and write. Krupskaya's multi-faceted vision of literacy recognized its importance for functioning in daily life, economic development, and personal self-reliance, but most importantly, for politicizing people. She criticized literacy instruction that concentrated on grammar, spelling, rote memorization of rule, and dictations as a form of testing. In her opinion, such methods alienated people and did not help them understand their reality. Instead, she argued that literacy instructors should start from learners' life experiences and connect them to larger political issues and thus, heighten their understanding of politics and its impact on people's lives:

Teaching illiterates and semi-literates, one must constantly search for what concerns the group at this particular time: sometimes it is some kind of a problem that exists

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<sup>3</sup> The Black Hundred was a reactionary, monarchist, and ultra-nationalist movement of the early 20th century.

in the collective farm, sometimes it is some kind of a political or economic campaign. In general, any teacher should know what worries students at this moment... And one needs to be able to grab it, start with it. Then, starting from private, small questions, approach political questions ... This method, in my opinion, should be taken as a rule. Only by such methods will we really reach the illiterate and semi-literate and teach them to understand political issues. (*PS*, IX, p. 445 [1930])

Krupskaya envisioned this as the first step in raising people's consciousness of their reality, followed by equipping people with knowledge and skills needed to intervene. Her vision of the Soviet Union as a participatory democracy shaped her beliefs about requisite knowledge and skills. She believed the ability to listen critically, debate, find relevant information, and explain and argue for one's position would equip people to participate in political life:

the masses choose those who are entrusted with organizing the life of the country and they monitor their work: if the delegates work poorly, voters can always replace them. To know who to choose, to follow a delegate's work, it's necessary to understand what is happening around, what is needed for the country now, it is important to know a lot. (*PS*, VII, p. 22 [1919])

Scholars have argued that Bolshevik policies were "a combination of extravagant hopes, sharp debates, and dismal realities" (McClelland, 1989, p. 114). Studies of Soviet education suggest that this was also true of literacy efforts. Krupskaya's vision of political literacy instruction was hard to implement due to material constraints such as shortage of teachers and educational materials and because such instruction required a different kind of teacher, one well-versed in political economy and participatory adult education teaching methods. Due to the education campaign's focus on speed and numbers, literacy was often reduced to learning words and phrases without understanding their meaning and wider significance. Krupskaya criticized both the superficial manner of instruction and the bureaucratic obsession with quantities of schools, stressing that "what and how things are done in them is the most important thing, this is the 'heart of the matter'" (*PS*, IX, pp. 37-38 [1920]).

### **Conclusion**

Although scholars have recognized Krupskaya for her work in secondary education (Fitzpatrick, 2002; Holmes, 1991), we argue that examining her legacy shows that she also made important contributions to Soviet adult education. Using her public platform as a Narkompros official and Party representative, she promoted and popularized principles that later became foundational in emancipatory adult education globally: that learners are active participants in education, that their particular contexts should be a starting point for learning, that these contexts are different for children and adults and require different teaching approaches, and that education is not neutral. Rather, its goal is to develop in learners a deeper political understanding of the world and their position in it.

Krupskaya's theory of political adult education contained tenets of radical adult education that are most often associated with Paulo Freire (1996). Similar to Freire, she believed that education allows people to claim their subjectivity and become members of society capable of analyzing reality and speaking for themselves. She also highlighted the importance of praxis, the need to learn in action and use education to transform social reality. Her theory of adult education reflects a strong influence of the Russian tradition that positioned vanguard intelligentsia as a vehicle for mass movement and Marxist theory that foregrounded economic

and material conditions. These local and global ideologies influenced her praxis and sometimes led her to overestimate the importance of party leadership or overlook social conventions such as patriarchal views on the education of women, for example, that impacted participation in adult education.

A closer examination of her adult education legacy not only adds to our knowledge of Soviet adult education, but also enhances our understanding of how political, economic, and sociocultural contexts shape theories of adult education and the implementation of education initiatives to foster social change.

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