Drew University

College of Liberal Arts

Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya:

Reclaiming a Feminist Revolutionary

A Thesis in History

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Bachelor in Arts

With Specialized Honors in History

May 2025

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to thank Dr. Carter, my advisor and mentor, for guiding me through the thesis writing process every step of the way. I would not have been able to take on this project without his time, patience, and advice. Dr. Carter's constant encouragement and faith in me helped me grow both as a person and a scholar. I truly would not be where I am today without him. I would also like to extend this gratitude to the other two members of my committee: Dr. Pechilis, who guided me through the inception of this project in Historical Research Methods; and Dr. Anderson, who continuously offered not only academic guidance, but also personal encouragement and moral support throughout this journey. A special thanks to Dr. Calder as well, who provided me with the comprehensive education in women's history and gender studies necessary for this project.

I am also sincerely thankful for the support of my friends and peers throughout this process. To my "thesis cohort," Jocelyn and Katelyn: without our designated "Thesis Thursdays," I highly doubt I would have been able to get this done. I also owe a special thanks to Simon, Vani, and Marianela for listening to me incessantly talk about this project for months. Thank you, Simon, especially, for reading hundreds of pages of drafts.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my mother who, like Krupskaya, bears the weight of many burdens—often quietly and without recognition. In many ways, this work is for women like her.

Dziękuję Ci bardzo, Mamo, za wszystko.

Abstract

This thesis offers a revisionist history of Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya (1869-1939). Although predominantly known in Western scholarship as Vladimir Lenin's (1870–1924) wife, Krupskaya—a Russian revolutionary, Marxist feminist, pedagogue, and top official at the People's Commissariat of Education (*Narkompros*)—was a significant historical figure in her own right. This thesis challenges the prevailing historiographical paradigms that frame Krupskaya through the reductive lens of "Lenin's wife" by critically analyzing Western historiography and underexplored primary sources—including original archival research conducted in Poland's Archive of Modern Records (*Archiwum Akt Nowych*). In doing so, I draw on key contributions from women's and gender historians to shape my methodological framework.

In Chapter I, I establish this framework through an in-depth analysis of gendered historiographical narratives, gender dynamics among Russian revolutionaries, and Krupskaya's place in Soviet collective memory. Chapter II provides a biographical account of Krupskaya's pre-revolutionary work, focusing on her essential organizational role in the Bolshevik Party and the double burden she shouldered while simultaneously caring for Lenin. Finally, Chapter III examines her post-revolutionary educational work in the Narkompros, with a focus on the Soviet school system, the LikBez literacy campaign, and their implications for women's emancipation.

Ultimately, this thesis uncovers Krupskaya's historically misrepresented and multifaceted role in Soviet history, illuminating broader patterns of historical erasure. In reclaiming Krupskaya's place in the historical narrative, this thesis contributes to a broader project of historical revision that seeks to understand women's marginalization and revolutionary movements in their full complexity.

Note on Transliteration, Dating, and Translation

All Russian terms and names in this thesis are transliterated using a simplified Anglicized system, omitting technical characters such as apostrophes for soft and hard signs (ь, ъ), and reflecting common English spelling conventions (e.g., “Krupskaya” rather than “Krupskaia”). All dates referenced follow the New Style (Gregorian) calendar, including those occurring before the 1918 calendar reform. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Russian and Polish to English are my own.

Contents

Introduction

"Who?"—The most common question raised upon hearing the name Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya (1869-1939). The answer should be simple. Krupskaya was a Bolshevik feminist, Russian revolutionary, the first Marxist pedagogue, the head of the Department of Political Education (*Glavpolitprosvet*), and the Deputy Minister of Education of the Soviet Union, among numerous other titles. Yet, the majority of historians—especially those in the West—would respond to this question with two simple words: "Lenin's wife." This answer in itself reveals a fundamental problem within contemporary Soviet historiography: the marginalization of women—especially those related to the "great men" of Soviet history.

Although Krupskaya married Lenin, her repertoire of accomplishments throughout the pre-revolutionary and Soviet eras warrant a reexamination of her life and of how historians have portrayed her as a historical figure thus far. Becoming a Marxist years before she met Lenin, she devoted her life to what she believed to be the cause that would liberate the people of Russia from tsarist oppression—often risking her life to do so and suffering years of political persecution, imprisonment, and exile. She wrote her first propaganda pamphlet *The Woman Worker* (*Zhenshchina Rabotnitsa*) in 1899, one of the first Marxist analyses of women's conditions in Russia, and continued to contribute to progressive women's and feminist movements for the rest of her life. After her marriage to Lenin, she served as the nexus of essential emotional and logistical support—without which he would have not survived until 1917.

Moreover, Krupskaya acted as an essential party operative in regards to organizing revolutionary activities, becoming one of the Bolshevik's most experienced revolutionary organizers. She held numerous secretarial positions for the party, organizing correspondence and

spearheading networking operations, spreading Bolshevik influence throughout Europe, Russia and the Caucuses. Upon returning to Russia following the February Revolution of 1917, she immediately began work in education, and upon the creation of the People's Commissariat of Education (*Narkompros*) in October 1917, she became one of its leading members. Although she held a number of positions in the Narkompros, her work continuously focused on issues of adult education, literacy, women's emancipation, and revolutionary pedagogical theory. Krupskaya helped create the new Soviet school system, institutionalizing progressive gender norms. She served as an architect of one of the most successful literacy campaigns in history, transforming Russia from an illiterate peasant nation into one in which, for the first time in its history, the majority of the population could read and write in just two decades. These efforts and accomplishments serve as the primary subjects of analysis for this study, which attempts to resituate Krupskaya in the historical record.

However, the scope of Krupskaya's work expands far beyond what will be covered here. She pioneered the creation of a centralized Soviet library system, participated in state censorship activities, joined the opposition against Stalin after Lenin's death, and routinely contested the party line when she felt it necessary. She made notable political contributions and served as an important female opposition to male leaders; however, the focus of this study remains her educational and revolutionary work. In sum, the title of "Lenin's wife" simply cannot encompass the full scope of Krupskaya's significance to Russian and Soviet history.

Regardless, the assumption that Krupskaya's success as a revolutionary, administrator, and pedagogue stemmed from her relationship with Lenin pervades the historiographical narrative. However, the modern study of primary sources offered here proves that Krupskaya was successful in her own right. In fact, being "Lenin's wife" often impeded the progress of her

career. Her Narkompros career fully flourished only *after* Lenin's death, which freed her of the constant double burden of being responsible for his care.[1] Therefore, Krupskaya's place in the historical record must be reexamined in contrast to the superficial, patriarchal analysis that has been afforded to her thus far. As such, this study encompasses multiple avenues of historical inquiry: Why has Krupskaya been marginalized in Western historiography? What narratives and frameworks drive this marginalization? What was the significance of her secretarial and organizational work throughout the revolution? How did her relationship with Lenin impact or impede her work? And what is the value of her contributions to Soviet society and state building as a Narkompros administrator? In seeking an answer to these questions, we will uncover the true story, not of "Lenin's wife," but of Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya.

Beginning this analysis requires an overview of Krupskaya historiography. While this study revolves around her representation in Western historiography, an understanding of Soviet and post-Soviet representations of Krupskaya provides important context. Although Soviet society considered Krupskaya an important figure throughout her lifetime, the trajectory of the state narrative changed after her death. The historiographical trends show that Soviet leaders routinely co-opted Krupskaya's life and legacy to suit various political agendas. Starting with Stalin who, directly following her death on February 27, 1939, allegedly suppressed posthumous references to Krupskaya in the press. Although some of Krupskaya's non-political work in

[1] Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3, 336, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511665158.
The term "double burden" refers to the dual responsibility and gendered imbalance in which women engage in paid labor outside the home while also being expected to perform unpaid domestic work. Although the term lacks a singular origin, it is widely used in feminist literature. Goldman uses the term in reference to Bolshevik theorists, who recognized this burden and sought to eliminate it under socialism by transferring household labor to the public sphere. See Chapter I for further discussion.

education was occasionally published by educators, she was scarcely mentioned until after Stalin's death in 1953.[2]

During the Khrushchev era (late-1950s - early-1960s), according to Russian historian Vardan Ernestovich Bagdasaryan in his 2019 study of Krupskaya's pedagogy, "the true cult of Krupskaya was created."[3] Khrushchev positioned Krupskaya as Lenin's wife and used her tumultuous relationship with Stalin in an attempt to further his de-stalinization initiatives. Additionally, Bagdasaryan suggests, Khrushchev found Krupskaya particularly valuable because of her consistent leftist positions:

> Krupskaya was a committed atheist and developed recommendations for improving the system of atheist education in schools. She disagreed with the growing emphasis on Russian themes in the ideological positioning of the USSR, viewing this as a relapse into great-power chauvinism. All of this aligned with Khrushchev's policies.[4]

However, due to Khrushev's adherence to the neoclassical pedagogical model—which Krupskaya contested with her revolutionary pedagogical model—adopting her pedagogical theory became "taboo."[5] While Khrushchev did not forbid the study of her pedagogical works, "the unspoken prohibition was on fully embracing her paradigm for the project of a new school."[6]

Furthermore, in the 1950s and 1960s, a ten-volume collection of Krupskaya's pedagogical works was published—a collection that serves as a foundational primary source for

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[2] Robert Hatch McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution: Krupskaya and Lenin* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 295.

[3] Vardan Ernestovich Bagdasaryan, *Крупская И Педагогическая Эпоха [Krupskaya and the Pedagogical Era]* (Москва: МГОУ, 2019 [Moscow: MGOU, 2019]), 156.
Khrushchev started the trend of naming educational institutions after Krupskaya.

[4] Bagdasaryan, *Крупская И Педагогическая Эпоха*, 157.

[5] Ibid., 157.
For more on pedagogical models, see Chapter III.

[6] Ibid.

this study. However, according to Bagdasaryan, the publication omitted a significant number of speeches and articles that contradicted the party line. Bagdasaryan describes the official state portrayal of Krupskaya as follows: "Krupskaya's biography was polished—portrayed as a teacher, a Marxist, Lenin's loyal companion, and the founder of the Pioneer movement. Even her ancestry was adjusted."[7] Around this time, under Khrushchev, numerous artistic depictions of Krupskaya began to emerge as well—especially in film.

Following Khrushchev, Brezhnev instituted a policy that ignored the "controversial" aspects of history; thus, Krupskaya's image began to focus more on her work with the pioneer movement, ignoring her involvement in leftist pedagogical experiments.[8] However, the Brezhnev era also entailed "grandiose historical anniversaries," which often featured Krupskaya. On the 100th anniversary of her birth, she became the namesake of the RSFSR State Prize for the best works of art and literature for children.[9] The prize continued to be awarded until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, although, as Bagdasaryan notes, "in its final two years, Krupskaya's name was no longer mentioned."[10] These shifts in Krupskaya's public perception during the Brezhnev era foreshadowed the patterns of erasure that would come to characterize her legacy outside the Soviet Union.

Primarily, Bagdasaryan asserts that "Krupskaya was mostly presented in Lenin's shadow," a trend that persists in Western historiography.[11] Although artistic representations featuring Krupskaya as the central figure emerged over time, Soviet biographies of

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[7] Ibid., 156.

[8] Ibid., 158.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

Krupskaya—especially those published in the last decade of the Union's existence—simply served as extensions of Lenin's biography.[12] In the late-1980s, as the Soviet Union moved steadily towards collapse, criticism of Soviet figures abounded—and Krupskaya's image did not escape vilification. Bagdasaryan argues that "[t]his discrediting of Krupskaya's image was an inevitable aspect of the broader delegitimization of the Soviet system by its opponents."[13] However, Bagdasaryan offers important insights into the contemporary post-Soviet mentality surrounding Krupskaya, providing important context for Western historiography.

Bagdasaryan reports that Krupskaya has not been entirely forgotten in the post-Soviet period, and that she regularly resurfaces in films, newspapers, and popular literature. However, the portrayal of Krupskaya as a historical figure has drastically changed:

> …portrayal of Krupskaya is often shaped by a framework that downplays her legacy, focusing instead on her role within the political dynamics and personal life of the Soviet state leader. Internet searches reveal that the most popular topic associated with Krupskaya is the love triangle involving her, Inessa Armand, and Lenin. Another frequently discussed theme is her depiction as a victim of Stalin.[14]

Significantly, the contemporary popular sentiment surrounding Krupskaya seems to invoke the same framework utilized by Western historians: portraying Krupskaya as "Lenin's wife," rather than a historical figure who operated with agency in her own right. Regardless, Bagdasaryan's 2019 study of Krupskaya represents the beginning of a transition in Krupskaya historiography; one in which historians seek to return her to her rightful place in history.

Given the trend of Krupskaya's marginalization in Soviet and post-Soviet historiography, Western historians seldom give her recognition. Currently, there exists only one comprehensive English-language biography of Krupskaya: Robert H. McNeal's 1972 biography, *Bride of the*

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 159.

[14] Ibid.

Revolution. Although *Bride of the Revolution* serves as a necessary starting point for my study of Krupskaya, McNeal's book by no means covers all of the information that is currently available after the opening of Soviet archives in the early 1990s. Moreover, McNeal's narrative reinforces out-of-date, gendered historiographical narratives and harmful Cold War paradigms that strip the autonomy away from female Russian revolutionaries in favor of perpetuating narratives of the de-radicalization of the Soviet push for women's emancipation. Overall, this study aims to counter and amend the prevailing historiographical paradigms perpetuated by McNeal and offer a new framework for Soviet women's historiography.

Aside from McNeal, Krupskaya has received little dedicated attention from historians since 1972. In Chapter I of this study, I offer a comprehensive analysis of McNeal's *Bride of the Revolution* in conjunction with a limited number of secondary sources that offer somewhat substantial depictions of Krupskaya. Chronologically, these include Robert Payne's 1964 biography *The Life and Death of Lenin*, McNeal's 1972 work, and Hellen Rappaport's 2010 study *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile*, in which Krupskaya plays a significant role. This examination of secondary sources reveals the trajectory of Western historiographical representations of Krupskaya, which I analyze through the lens of Ann Oakly's thesis in *Forgotten Wives*. Entering into this scholarly discourse regarding gendered paradigms in women's history, I analyze the fate of female Russian revolutionaries in the historical record—especially the wives of prominent Bolsheviks.

The following chapter, Chapter II, focuses exclusively on Krupskaya's contributions to the Bolshevik Party and the revolutionary movement leading up to 1917, including the instrumental role she played as Lenin's caretaker. This chapter predominantly utilizes primary sources, including the ten-volume collection of Krupskaya's speeches and articles,

Pedagogicheskie Sochinenia (*Pedagogical Works*) and letters from the Polish Archive of Modern Records (*Archiwum Akt Nowych*) in Warsaw, written between 1912 and 1914, the years that Krupskaya and Lenin operated out of Poland. The letters provide a valuable snapshot that contextualizes the scope and importance of Krupskaya's secretarial and organizational work and serve the purpose of reflecting the broad scope of the Bolshevik underground, for which Krupskaya served as the key point of contact and information dissemination. Coupled with a gender-focused analysis of the implications of Krupskaya's social position as a woman and wife, Chapter II incorporates these rare primary sources into a narrative contesting that of McNeal.

Finally, Chapter III offers an analysis of Krupskaya's work in the Narkompros and her remarkable contributions to the LikBez (*likvidatsiya bezgramotnosti*) elimination of illiteracy campaign through a combination of secondary scholarship on Soviet education and primary documents including speeches and articles from *Pedagogicheskie Sochinenia*. Additional secondary scholarship includes Soviet women's and gender historian Dr. Anna Krylova's articles on Bolshevik feminism, in an attempt to highlight the intersection between the struggle for women's emancipation and Krupskaya's educational work. This chapter also makes use of Russian scholarship, including Vardan Ernestovich Bagdasaryan's 2019 book *Krupskaya and the Pedagogical Epoch* (*Krupskaya i Pedagogicheskaya Epoxa*), which offers one of the most substantial accounts of Krupskaya's pedagogical theory and its significance to Soviet state building projects.

The trajectory of Krupskaya's legacy, from Soviet leaders co-opting her biography for state interests to her near-erasure in Western historiography, reflects broader historiographical paradigms regarding women in the Russian and Soviet historical records. Both Eastern and Western scholarship have failed to recognize the breadth of Krupskaya's historical significance,

with the prevailing Western narrative being particularly egregious. Critically engaging with Western historiographical trends reveals the complex interplay between gender, power, and historical memory in Russian and Soviet women's history. The ultimate goal of this study is to develop a more nuanced framework by challenging reductive historical narratives, and finally restore Krupskaya to her rightful place in the historical record—not as "Lenin's wife," but as a revolutionary.

Chapter I: What It Means to Be Forgotten

Wives type their husbands' manuscripts, even if they have already written their own and slipped these into a dark drawer because publishers aren't interested in them. Wives feed and educate the children and keep them quiet so husbands can work. Wives look after husbands' bodies and minds, not like mothers, but like wives. Their unassuming modesty, and the way in which biographers have lapped this up and thought, 'well, she didn't really do much, did she?' brings tears to one's eyes.[15]

Ann Oakley, *Forgotten Wives*

Forgotten Wives

To be a woman in history is to be forgotten; to be a wife in history is to not only be forgotten but to be misremembered, trapped in the shadows of "great" men. Historian Ann Oakley writes about the "phenomenon of wife-forgetting" in her appropriately titled book, *Forgotten Wives: How Women Get Written Out of History*.[16] She argues that, throughout the male-dominated discipline of history, "the work and experiences of wives have been subject to an entrenched process of historical neglect and burial" founded on gendered assumptions.[17] As the wife of one of the most notorious men of the 20th century, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, serves as an excellent case study of such a woman—arguably she is one of the greatest victims of the phenomenon of "wife-forgetting."

Due to her position in the social hierarchy—as a woman and the wife of a powerful, charismatic leader—Krupskaya serves as a compelling analytical subject and her contributions to Russian history offer a glimpse into a unique historical perspective. Krupskaya was a revolutionary and educator who selflessly devoted herself to a cause that changed the trajectory of the 20th century. Yet, if at all mentioned in the historical record, she remains known as

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[15] Ann Oakley, *Forgotten Wives: How Women Get Written Out of History* (Policy Press, 2021), 198.

[16] Oakley, *Forgotten Wives*, 3-4.

[17] Ibid., 21.

"Lenin's wife." This is the phenomenon of "wife-forgetting" in action. According to Oakley, there exists a "whole methodology" to writing women—especially wives—out of history. Thus far, this has constituted the dominant methodological frameworks in the historiography of Soviet women like Krupskaya.[18]

The available scholarship on Krupskaya exemplifies this dichotomy as few Western historians have devoted their time to studying her life and contributions, and those who have, often reinforce the wife-forgetting narrative rather than deconstruct it. Prior to the 1970s, Krupskaya existed as a footnote in Western Soviet historiography. Although almost every Soviet historian either references her by name or cites her famous memoirs, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, they only mention her in relation to her husband. Moreover, the historians that do choose to elaborate on her role in Lenin's life nevertheless inaccurately represent her through the lens of an antiquated gendered historical framework common in the Cold War era. Most notably, historian Robert Payne does so in his 1964 biography *The Life and Death of Lenin*. He depicts Krupskaya as no more than a submissive wife, punctuating his commentary with misogynistic remarks about her physical appearance.

In 1972, historian Robert H. McNeal published an English-language biography of Krupskaya titled *Bride of the Revolution*. Although the biography's publication reflects an increased consideration of Soviet women's history, McNeal remains Krupskaya's only Western biographer. This, in itself, indicates the limited importance Western historians afford to Krupskaya. While McNeal's scholarship demonstrates an understanding of certain nuances of the emerging sub-discipline of women's history, it perpetuates the wife-forgetting narrative to a greater extent than the works of Payne and the numerous other historians who offhandedly mention her as "Lenin's wife." Ultimately, McNeal portrays Krupskaya as an unimpressive

[18] Ibid., 3.

historical figure whose only notoriety stems from her infamous husband. As a male historian writing in the 1970s, McNeal's analysis reflects Cold War era historians' general sentiment towards Krupskaya, revolutionary women, and wives of famous men.

Commenting on this phenomenon, Oakley argues that such methodologies result from the utilization of history and biography as a "tool for the reproduction of dominant [social] values."[19] The dominant values, in the cases of Payne and McNeal, being those of the Western gender binary and women's place in the social hierarchy in accordance to Western gender relations. As a result of the dominant values perpetuated in the creation and recording of history—specifically the relationship between marriage and gender—wives' contributions are more likely to be ignored:

> The relationship between marriage and gender means that we've inherited an enormous skewed collection of narratives shaping the ways in which the lives and achievements of married people are remembered…Its focus is on wifehood as a political filter through which women's lives are passed so as to yield a product which only partially records what they actually did.[20]

Historians cannot convey an accurate history of non-Western cultures within the confines of Western binaries. Yet, historians like Payne and McNeal routinely fall into the trap of a linear, binary retelling of history through subconscious projections of their Western male subject position and understanding of gender relations This projection entails linking wives' accomplishments to those of their husbands; framing wives as subordinates; linking their historical value, if at all acknowledged, to their roles as wives and mothers rather than their individual accomplishments; and ignoring or not acknowledging alternative, non-Western gender constructions and social relations in countries like Russia and the Soviet Union. As a result,

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[19] Ibid., 179.

[20] Ibid., 2.

historians have carved out a marginal crevice for Krupskaya in the historical record, barring nuanced analysis.

Historiography

In analyzing the existing historiographical narrative of Krupskaya—and other women in history—it becomes evident that women's historians shoulder the burden of having to *prove* women's significance in history. On the other hand, as Oakley points out, historians automatically attribute historical significance to men:

> Ensuring the production and accessible survival of sufficient documentary evidence may be an important prerequisite for wives wishing to escape being forgotten, whereas famous men seem to achieve fame without this.[21]

This dichotomy demonstrates the double standard deeply embedded in the discipline of history—which also applies to how archivists and historians preserve historical memory. Oakley notes that "[w]here records of women's lives do exist, they must generally be looked for under the names of men."[22] Even when evidence of women's historical significance exists, it often falls under the umbrella of their husband's identity. Thus far, this has been true for Krupskaya.

In the following historiographical analysis of McNeal and Payne's works, I demonstrate that Oakley's "forgotten wife" paradigm remains deeply embedded in Western narratives about female historical figures—as exemplified by portrayals of Krupskaya. Upon closer inspection, McNeal's pioneering effort in *Bride of the Revolution* nevertheless reflects dominant Western biases about gender and marriage, ultimately skewing the historical narrative. Similarly, Payne's *The Life and Death of Lenin* exemplifies how this trend extends beyond Krupskaya-specific scholarship into broader Soviet historiography. Ostensibly, both works belittle, marginalize, and

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[21] Ibid., 10.

[22] Ibid., 179.

overlook Krupskaya, rarely treating her as a historical figure of the same caliber as Lenin. Oakley describes this treatment as part of a "consistent theme…[of] sidelining…the contributions made by women who were also wives, especially those married to men with public reputations."[23] Rather than recognizing her as a figure instrumental to the Russian Revolution and Soviet history, historians frame Krupskaya as Lenin's dutiful, subservient wife. Their marriage becomes a discursive device used to justify Krupskaya's erasure—a rhetorical tool that reduces her identity into that of a wife, obscuring the scope of her political work. Through a framework that implies her contributions entailed little more than following Lenin's commands, historians have posthumously robbed her of her agency.

McNeal's *Bride of the Revolution* offers a particularly egregious example of this paradigm, as evidenced by the title alone, indicating that he viewed Krupskaya through the lens of a wife more so than a revolutionary or state administrator. In his closing remarks, McNeal writes, "Krupskaya remains the symbol of the liberated woman, the devoted spouse, the loving mother—in sum, the bride of the revolution."[24] In concentrating their narratives around Krupskaya's role as a wife, both historians impose onto her their preconceived notions, motivated by their Western subject position, of gender and what women *should* be; thus ignoring her life and accomplishments autonomous of or in collaboration with Lenin.

As a result, he arguably ignores the period of her life that constituted her most significant accomplishments—her educational work in the Narkompros. Although McNeal does discuss Krupskaya's work in this capacity after Lenin's death in 1924, he nevertheless frames her as a widow, continuously reinforcing her—former—wifehood. Although a copious amount of

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[23] Ibid., 179.

[24] Robert Hatch McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution: Krupskaya and Lenin* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 296.

archival resources testify to her continued political engagement from 1917 to 1924, Krupskaya arguably made some of her most significant contributions to Soviet history once Lenin's death freed her from the burden of nursing a sick husband. In this regard, McNeal's continued reinforcement of her wifehood as the dominant factor of her identity—even without a husband—speaks volumes about the persistence of gender-based historical frameworks that continue to shape seemingly progressive historical scholarship, even when explicitly attempting to recover women's contributions. Ultimately, in Krupskaya's case, such categorization makes little biographical or historical sense.

Regardless, in his attempt at progressive scholarship, McNeal shows some semblance of understanding Krupskaya's significance outside of her relationship with Lenin, even acknowledging that Krupskaya "lived in the shadow of her great husband," reflecting the language Oakley uses in *Forgotten Wives*.[25] Nevertheless, in his insistence on exemplifying her wifehood, he leaves little room for the possibility of Krupskaya possessing agency and, as a result, often contradicts himself. He points out Krupskaya's grit and tenacity, yet he continuously returns to describing her as meek and unassuming. He claims that "Krupskaya's life [was] marked by a sternness and integrity that [was] her own," nevertheless concluding that "Krupskaya was a pathetic figure at the end of her life."[26] Such problematic value judgements lead to his conclusion that "Krupskaya's place in the Soviet pantheon is secure, below Lenin and nobody else," fundamentally undermining his earlier attempts to recognize her independent significance.[27] Through such assertions, McNeal ultimately reduces Krupskaya's agency and

[25] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 296.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

achievements to mere extensions of Lenin, perpetuating the very narrative of marginalization he claims to challenge.

McNeal's narrative reveals the forgotten wife paradigm's deep roots in Western conceptualizations of gender within marriage. Although marriage no longer entails the literal trading hands of the ownership of a woman from father to husband, the roots of marriage as an institution lay within this transaction. This foundation and its implications permeate contemporary society's view of marriage—a view which historians often project onto the historical record. As Oakley points out, "wifehood is, traditionally and systemically, a condition of subjection to the dominance of husbands."[28] Once a woman marries, she loses her autonomy—she is no longer an individual, rather she is a part of a unit. Although this unit includes the husband, *he* nevertheless retains his autonomy. Consequently, Lenin remains one of the greatest historical figures of the 20th century, and Krupskaya exists as a footnote in *his* story.

Building on this foundation, McNeal's scholarship clearly reflects the assumptions inherent in this paradigm. McNeal places virtually all of Krupskaya's accomplishments under the umbrella of the constructed unit of her marriage to Lenin. In doing so, he often discredits Krupskaya's intellectual capabilities and contributions, corroborating Oakley's assertion of wives being viewed as mere "appendages" of their husbands.[29] Oakley argues that this narrative stems from a "bias against collaboration as a working practice" between spouses.[30] Historians consistently frame wives as assistants rather than collaborators, regardless of the mutual intellectual engagement and shared revolutionary commitments that characterized many revolutionary partnerships. Oakley attributes these misinterpretations to men's discomfort with

[28] Oakley, *Forgotten Wives*, 189.

[29] Ibid., 13.

[30] Ibid., 189.

women entering traditionally male spaces.[31] The idea that a "mere woman" could be the closest collaborator to a "great man" such as Lenin, and a contributor to the development of his thought, evades historians' considerations.

Yet, as will be discussed in Chapter II, ample evidence exists showing that Krupskaya *did* act as Lenin's intellectual collaborator in many respects. In fact, Lenin often consulted Krupskaya on his theoretical work and engaged in discourse with her to develop his ideas. She also helped him transcribe and translate numerous significant texts. Nevertheless, McNeal often questions Krupskaya's understanding of Marxist-Leninist theory and politics, ignoring the fact that she began her path to radicalization *before* ever meeting Lenin and joined the revolutionary movement as early as 1890. This selective interpretation not only misrepresents Krupskaya's identity as a revolutionary but also perpetuates a reductive narrative that fails to capture the complex gender dynamics of revolutionary Russia.

Moreover, certain aspects of McNeal's narrative indicate a subconscious misogynistic bias that extends beyond the forgotten wife paradigm. Particularly, he often employs a condescending tone when questioning the merit of Krupskaya's intellectual agency—especially in regards to her disagreements with Lenin. Although McNeal acknowledges Krupskaya's intellectual contributions, citing Lenin's reliance on her feedback on his key works including *What Is To Be Done?*, he nevertheless dismisses it as her acting as Lenin's "audience" rather than his collaborator.[32] McNeal's subconscious commitment to gender stereotypes causes his cognitive dissonance, as acknowledging Krupskaya's intelligence—and, therefore, her capacity for dissent—would shatter his illusion of women as mere appendages to their husbands.

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[31] Ibid., 14.

[32] Ibid., 95.

Consequently, this mentality explains why the few historians who choose to include Krupskaya in the historical narrative often write her history as one of failure—or, at the very least, one lacking in success. Presuming Krupskaya subservient, both Payne and McNeal seemingly find it difficult to separate Krupskaya's actions from Lenin's and present her legitimate, important secretarial work as mere servitude. Payne, for example, blatantly discredits Krupskaya, equating her secretarial work to "simply [serving]...him [Lenin] faithfully and obediently, endlessly performing chores for him, writing his letters and coding and decoding secret messages," without acknowledging the skill and intellect such work required.[33] He portrays Lenin as the proverbial 'brains' of the operation and Krupskaya as the dutiful administrative assistant. In doing so, historians misattribute significant organizational contributions, inadvertently skewing the historical narrative.

A comprehensive understanding of the revolution's success requires an appropriate framework for recognizing the critical work of female revolutionaries. Neglecting to recognize women and, in the case of Krupskaya, framing them as mere servants and secretaries transcends misogyny and enters the realm of historical distortion. In Chapter II, I attempt to amend this distortion, proving that Krupskaya's secretarial work was anything but trivial, despite the predominant historical narratives exemplified by Payne and McNeal. While they frame her work as unskilled, inferior secretarial tasks, I argue that the party's success depend upon Kruspkaya's secretarial work.

Moreover, both Payne and McNeal's work reflect a corresponding paradigm that devalues women's domestic labor. Oakley describes this as the "cultural neglect of domestic labuor."[34] In her words, this paradigm relies on the dichotomy of the public/private split in which

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[33] Robert Payne, *The Life and Death of Lenin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 98.

[34] Oakley, *Forgotten Wives*, 4.

"wives [manage] the private sphere, while husbands [feature] in the public one."[35] Historians seldom acknowledge the assistance wives provide their husbands as legitimate historical contributions, as the Western gendered division of labor dictates that the role of wifehood comes with the implication—the *requirement*—of domestic labor. As such, historians tend to give precedent to the public sphere of action—politics, economics, and government—while neglecting the foundation upon which it rests—the private sphere. In this vein, Oakley poses an important question: "What might *he* have accomplished without *her*?"[36] What would any of history's 'great' men have achieved "without this subterranean industry of wifely labour[?]"[37]

In Krupskaya's case, scholars cannot adequately assess her role as a professional revolutionary without considering her work in *both* spheres of labor. Throughout the émigré years (1900-1917), Krupskaya ran the party's underground communication network, dealing with hundreds of letters every week.[38] At the same time, she performed domestic labor essential to the success of her and Lenin and the party's underground network, secured residences for herself, Lenin, and other revolutionaries, as they lived nomadic émigré lifestyles; cooked and cleaned; and cared for Lenin's health, both physically and mentally. In tandem with her party work, Krupskaya's domestic labor paints a fuller picture of her importance to Lenin's success and arguably the success of the revolution. Publicly, Lenin served as the poster child for the Russian Revolution, yet the reason historians can afford him such recognition remains unnoticed. Lenin

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[35] Ibid., 198.

[36] Ibid., 191.

[37] Ibid., 4.

[38] Helen Rappaport, *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile* (Random House, 2010), 63.
The émigré years refer to the period between 1900 and 1917, when many Bolsheviks, including Krupskaya and Lenin, lived in exile due to political persecution under the Tsarist regime.

has been cemented in the historical record as a "great man," precisely *because* of the women who played instrumental roles in his life.

Beyond the forgotten wife paradigm and the neglect of Krupskaya's double burden, her historiographical representation reveals a more insidious problem: blatantly misogynistic narrative construction. This problem predominantly occurs in biographical works focussed on Lenin—such as Payne's biography—in which historians either render Krupskaya invisible or subject her to demeaning characterizations that would never be applied to male historical figures. Payne's scholarship offers a particularly egregious example of such a narrative. He not only omits any recognition of her historical contributions, but he actively undermines her with reductive commentary targeted at her physical appearance or femininity.

Although the inclusion of such details is not inherently problematic, Payne incorporates them into his narrative without instructive historical commentary. Rather, he utilizes these narrative descriptions to signal a value judgment based on Krupskaya's womanhood. Payne goes as far as to compare Krupskaya to one of Chekhov's heroines, only to, shortly thereafter, declare that "[i]n time she was to become fat and ungainly, but in those early years she possessed a quiet beauty."[39] The deterioration of Krupskaya's beauty hallmarks her historiography—historians always focus on her physical appearance. Historians seldom make such comments about male historical figures, and when they do, they do not associate them with the notion that physical appearance diminishes their value, as they do with women.

Additionally, Payne's characterization of Krupskaya's femininity reveals how women's adherence to socially constructed gender norms significantly influences their portrayal in the historical record. He claims she "tried to imitate the other women of her time who devoted

[39] Payne, *The Life and Death of Lenin*, 96-97.

themselves to revolutionary work and lost their femininity in their driving determination to sacrifice themselves for the revolution." However, Krupskaya, he notes, "remained wholly feminine."[40] In this context, Payne ascribes value to Krupskaya as a historical actor based on her conformity to what he believes constituted the constructed notion of femininity of her time. By contrasting her with other female revolutionaries who relinquished their femininity for revolutionary activities, he implies that Krupskaya's femininity—a concept he deems incompatible with true revolutionaries—renders her less impactful or significant. Payne makes no further comment or analysis on this statement, indicating a lack of nuance and hyperfocus on traditional Western gender construction.

Overall, the scholarship of both Payne and McNeal serves as an instructive case study on the historiographical paradigms Oakley critiques, revealing a pervasive pattern of misogynistic narrative construction that contributes to the historical marginalization of women. Both historians constantly undermine Krupksaya's historical significance through historically inappropriate fixations on her physical appearance, physical characteristics, and adherence to Western gender constructions. McNeal's dismissive commentary about Krupskaya's revolutionary work—a critique he would likely never levy against her male contemporaries—and Payne's reductive focus on her beauty and femininity demonstrate how internalized misogyny and preconceived notions about womanhood distort historical analysis. Ultimately, their narratives reveal more about historians' biases than about Krupskaya herself. And, perhaps most significantly, these narratives stand in stark contrast to how Krupskaya perceived herself and to how her contemporaries perceived her.

[40] Ibid.

Developments in Historiography

Although McNeal's 1972 biography remains the only substantial attempt to center Krupskaya in historical scholarship, developments in women's history have since enabled historians—primarily female scholars—to begin amending the historiography and confronting the erasure of women like Krupskaya. Most notably, Hellen Rappaport's 2010 book, *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile*, contains one of the most nuanced contemporary analyses of Krupskaya and her status as Lenin's wife. Although she focuses her book on an analysis of Lenin's pre-revolutionary years, she shifts the narrative away from peripheral mentions of Krupskaya to a more nuanced exploration of her role and significance. Unlike the aforementioned historians, Rappaport continuously refers to Krupskaya's work as "essential," unequivocally acknowledging her significance to Lenin's success and the revolutionary movement.[41] She makes it evident that Krupskaya's pivotal role in the revolutionary movement and her unwavering support for Lenin throughout their exile demand her presence in *Conspirator*—no meaningful historical account of Lenin in exile can exist without mentioning Krupskaya.

Moreover, Rappaport immediately recognizes Krupskaya's erasure from the historical record. She acknowledges that the social understanding of gender in Krupskaya's time, and the modern social construction of gender, play into the marginalization of female revolutionaries. She states that underground work, including Krupskaya's work in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party's underground newspaper and central organ, *Iskra* (*the Spark*), "offered a unique environment where women took equal risks with men."[42] Rappaport observes that women

[41] Rappaport, *Conspirator*, 154.

[42] Ibid., 49.

performed "important but subordinate functions," but often "took little credit for the work they did," arguing that the revolutionary movement "did not encourage women to promote themselves."[43] However, she also displays an understanding of the complicated nature of gender relations in the revolutionary movement, explaining that revolutionaries "valued their [women's] 'plodding, tireless work,'...and nominally treated them as equals."[44] Additionally, she clarifies that "[t]here was no traditional division of labor between males and females," in the movement.[45] Although, as will be discussed in the following section, gender historians present a more nuanced analysis of gender relations among Russian revolutionaries, Rappaport's analysis nevertheless signals a significant development in historiographical methodology.

The fact that Rappaport imbues her narrative of Lenin's life in exile with a nuanced understanding of women's revolutionary roles signals an emerging trend in Soviet historiography: the attempt to move away from the wife-paradigm entrenched in the work of 20th century historians. Notably, Rappaport also amends some of the misogynistic narrative construction present in McNeal and Payne's works. While they grossly hyper-fixate on Krupskaya's physical appearance—providing only a shallow, ahistorical caricature of her as a woman—Rappaport offers a portrayal centered on Krupskaya's revolutionary commitment and personal sacrifices. Making use of a physical description of Krupskaya, she provides commentary on Krupskaya's self-neglect, deepening the narrative of her revolutionary dedication. She notes that "Nadya [Krupskaya] had never taken care of herself," elaborating that Krupskaya "had long since trained herself to internalize her physical problems; she did not have

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

time to be ill and did her best to hide how she felt."[46] Rappaport invokes these ideas to contextualize what she views as Lenin's complacency in the marginalization and exploitation of women within the revolutionary movement—a dynamic that operated both through intentional and systemic mechanisms.

This acknowledgement of Lenin's potential role in Krupskaya's marginalization, testifies to the nuanced historiographical contribution Rappaport provides in *Conspirator*. She argues not only that Lenin relied on Krupskaya, but that he relied on a network of women—his mother, sisters, and lovers—to achieve success. She writes that, in the turbulence of exile, "[t]he women in his [Lenin's] life…remained devoted, unshakable constants," providing critical emotional and logistical support.[47] According to Rappaport, Lenin often left domestic arrangements and logistical planning to the women around him, a factor epitomized by her inclusion of Krupskaya's observation that Lenin "had more important things to think about" than domestic labor.[48] Rappaport's narrative suggests a previously unconsidered dynamic: Lenin never learned to take care of himself, instead, he systematically imposed domestic responsibilities onto Krupskaya. Evidently, Krupskaya internalized this burden, consistently prioritizing Lenin's revolutionary work and personal needs at the expense of her own aspirations.

Given this dynamic, Rappaport counters the previous narratives that attribute Krupskaya's success and notoriety to her marriage. Rather, she argues that Krupskaya's position as Lenin's wife often acted as an impediment to her success rather than a catalyst. Reflecting on her research for *Conspirator*, Rappaport describes how "[t]he women in Lenin's life were ruthlessly exploited by him…[they] were all worn ragged in the cause of his own political

[46] Ibid., 210, 230.

[47] Ibid., 50, 192.

[48] Ibid., 198.

ends."[49] However, I argue that her analysis still falls short in some respects. Although she argues that Krupskaya served an essential—previously unacknowledged—role in the Russian revolutionary movement, she nevertheless clarifies that Krupskaya was not a "power player" in the movement. Rather, she frames Krupskaya as Lenin's anchor, always there to pick up the pieces and keep him "going through repeated bouts of physical and mental collapse," all at the expense of her own well-being.[50] While Rappaport offers a valuable, nuanced perspective, the scope of her book greatly limits her analysis.

Regardless, *Conspirator* serves as a crucial foundation for advancing analytical approaches in Soviet women's history as Rappaport acknowledges the pervasive problem of erasure women face in the historical record. Moreover, she argues that this problem must be resolved through scholarship that views the lives of famous men "through the eyes of the women in their lives…[to] accord these often underrated women their true place in the record."[51] She begins this process in *Conspirator*—though it remains secondary in her work. This thesis aims to build upon such perspectives, offering an expanded revisionist framework that reveals and amends the impact of Western gender constructions on representations of women in the historical record.

Gender and the Russian Woman

Ultimately, developing a nuanced analytical framework requires a reevaluation of gender construction in Revolutionary Russia. As exemplified by Payne and McNeal, historians typically found their analyses of Soviet women on a fundamental misunderstanding of Imperial Russian

[49] Helen Rappaport, "The Women in Lenin's Life," *Helen Rappaport*, n.d., https://helenrappaport.com/russia/lenin-stalin-revolution/the-women-in-lenins-life/.

[50] Rappaport, "The Women in Lenin's Life."

[51] Ibid.

and Soviet gender constructions. They ostensibly project Western imaginations of gender and what constitutes womanhood—and therefore wifehood—onto a drastically different society. Payne, in particular, reflects this tendency in his treatment of Krupskaya's femininity. Although many ideas around the social construct of gender in Russia overlap with those of the West, Russian women—especially Bolshevik women—imagined and enacted their gender differently. In Russia, it was socially acceptable for women to display behaviors or do work that would be labeled as 'masculine' in the West—especially in the context of Russia's 19th- and 20th- century progressive revolutionary movements.[52]

However, it should be noted that Russian society—especially aristocratic society—adhered to a semblance of traditional Victorian sexual morality. In her article, "Society and the Sexes in the Russian Past," historian Dorothy Atkinson, cites one of the earliest social studies on women in Russia as evidence. Written in 1850, the study characterized women by sensitivity, love, and modesty and characterized men by intellect, honor, and a sense of duty.[53] The author of the study concluded that "men predominate naturally in civic life as do women in the domestic sphere," reinforcing the idea of women exclusively occupying the private sphere.[54]

The laws of 19th century Imperial Russia further reinforced this mindset. According to Russian social and political historian Wendy Goldman in her 1993 book *Women, the State and Revolution*, in Imperial Russia:

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[52] Dorothy Atkinson, "Society and the Sexes in the Russian Past," in *Women in Russia*, by Alexander Dallin, Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, and Dorothy Atkinson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 3–5, 28.

[53] Atkinson, "Society and the Sexes in the Russian Past," 34.

[54] Ibid.

> Women were accorded few rights by either the church or the state. According to state law, a wife owed complete obedience to her husband…A wife was 'responsible to obey her husband as head of the household,' in 'unlimited obedience.'[55]

This power dynamic also applied to fathers and daughters. Moreover, laws made divorce "almost impossible" in pre revolutionary Russia, despite the attempts of progressive-minded jurists, which conservative authorities quickly struck down.[56] However, the de jure forms of gender relations did not represent the mindset of the entire empire. In fact, women occupying revolutionary spheres had drastically different relationships with their gender.

Progressive ideas regarding women's emancipation permeated Russian society well before 1917. Following the 1863 publication of utopian socialist author Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?*, radical sentiments about the "woman question" began to spread throughout 19th century Russia.[57] According to Goldman:

> The populists and terrorists of the 1870s and 1880s subordinated the woman question to a broader politics of class, but they unhesitatingly embraced the ideals of comradeship, companionate union, mutual respect, and women's equality…Women's unusually influential role in the leadership of these groups, especially the terrorist People's Will, was 'a unique phenomenon in nineteenth century European history.'[58]

The Marxist radical circles of the late-19th and early-20th centuries continued this progressive tradition. Specifically, the Bolsheviks drew inspiration from a combination of native revolutionary culture and radical European tradition to form their party line regarding marriage, family, and women.[59]

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[55] Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 49, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511665158.

[56] Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 50.

[57] The book became a foundational text in Russian radical circles. Chernyshevsky's depiction of Vera Pavlovna, an independent woman who rejects traditional marriage, shaped Russian revolutionaries' ideas regarding women's emancipation. Lenin later borrowed the book's title for his infamous 1902 pamphlet.

[58] Ibid., 44.

[59] Ibid.

As more groups of working women began organizing, these emancipatory convictions grew stronger among Marxist groups; they understood their party platforms now had to contend with the "woman question." As a result, they adopted programmatic positions on maternity benefits and equal voting rights with relative ease.[60] Additionally, the Russian radical movement saw significantly greater female participation than those in the West; however, not without shortcomings. Preconceived notions about gender continued to plague many radicals and impact their view on and treatment of women—even those who earnestly supported women's emancipation. Ultimately, deep-rooted social attitudes resisted rapid change due to their structural and systemic foundations. Even with genuine commitment to the cause, revolutionaries could not immediately unlearn and deconstruct internalized social attitudes—a reality which complicates the study of gender and female revolutionaries.

Nevertheless, acknowledging the broader reality of Russian social relations does not contradict the fact that Krupskaya primarily associated with and understood her identity within the context of the drastically more progressive circles of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party and, later, the Bolshevik Party. Even as a child, Krupskaya's family exposed her to progressive ideas and radicalism.[61] As such, she became a champion for women's emancipation and—despite the internalized misogynistic biases of certain revolutionaries—her closest comrades viewed her as an equal. More importantly, they did not tie her revolutionary identity to her marriage. With this context, historians' hyper-focus on Krupskaya's identity as a wife reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of Bolshevik ideology regarding marriage and wifehood. Ultimately, radical groups like the Bolsheviks placed very little emphasis on the institution of

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[60] Richard Stites, "Women and the Russian Intelligentsia: Three Perspectives," in *Women in Russia*, by Alexander Dallin, Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, and Dorothy Atkinson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 50.

[61] For further analysis, see Chapter II.

marriage itself, as they believed that, upon the abolition of capitalism, marriage would become superfluous.[62]

Moreover, the official party line held that the double burden of domestic labor impeded women's participation in the public sphere of work and politics—regardless of the increasing number of women entering the workforce in the early 20th century. According to Goldman, the Bolsheviks believed that, unlike socialism, "Capitalism…would never be able to provide a systematic solution to the double burden women shouldered."[63] Demonstrably, these progressive social ideals of radical Marxist groups *did* manifest in gender relations between revolutionaries. For one, the Bolsheviks advocated for transferring domestic labor into the public sphere, allowing women to obtain equal education and wages, and "pursue their own individual goals and development."[64] In accordance with the party line and as a Narkompros leader, Krupskaya championed and helped institute systemic solutions to women's double burden. She created public nurseries, childcare centers, and schools, reflecting not only her own understanding of her identity as a woman but also a Bolshevik commitment to women's emancipation—one that, despite historians' arguments about a conservative turn under Stalin, retained these institutional supports.[65]

Additionally, Krupskaya and Lenin's marriage reflected Bolshevik skepticism about the institution of marriage. McNeal himself notes that Krupskaya decided to marry Lenin for "conspiratorial reasons" following their arrests in 1896 and Lenin's subsequent exile.[66] In

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[62] Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 3.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid., 6.

[66] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 53.

pre-revolutionary Russia, only political prisoners' family members or their betrothed could visit them in jail. As McNeal explains, "No evidence of intention to marry was required, so revolutionaries took advantage of the system to provide their incarcerated comrades with fictitious fiancees who could deliver books, coded messages…, and encouragement."[67] Lenin and Krupskaya, too, took advantage of this system.

During Lenin's imprisonment in 1895, the two discussed this kind of revolutionary engagement, but nothing came of it until after his release from jail in 1897, when Lenin received a sentence of exile in the Siberian village of Shushenskoe.[68] Then, after Krupskaya's arrest in 1896, she too faced the possibility of exile. However, as mentioned previously, tsarist law dictated that Krupskaya could only visit or join Lenin in exile if she was officially recognized as his fiance.[69] Moreover, she knew that, if she petitioned for joint Siberian exile rather than accepting exile in European Russia, she could obtain a reduced sentence, which would allow her to leave Siberia with Lenin. McNeal presents these factors as the primary incentive for their marriage: "Knowing that she would receive a three-year sentence of rustication, she had nothing much to lose by letting the authorities know about her 'engagement' to Lenin."[70] Thus, after submitting a request to the Minister of Internal Affairs, Krupskaya received permission to join Lenin in exile, providing that she marry him upon her arrival in Shushenskoe.[71]

In this regard, the evidentiary record presented by McNeal contradicts his own analysis of Krupskaya's marriage. While he acknowledges that Krupskaya married Lenin as a matter of

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[67] Ibid., 52.

[68] Ibid., 53.

[69] Ibid., 54.

[70] Ibid., 55.

[71] Ibid., 56.

revolutionary pragmatism, he still frames her primarily as "Lenin's wife," reinforcing the marginalization his biography should challenge. Although this contradiction is not unique to McNeal, its presence in a work dedicated to Krupskaya's life reveals a fundamental gap in his analytical framework—namely, the failure to account for how Russian revolutionaries conceptualized marriage. Without this context, his narrative misrepresents both the historical reality and the contemporary revolutionary understanding of Krupskaya's role as a wife. Ultimately, Krupskaya saw her marriage as a revolutionary act. She *chose* a pragmatic marriage and retained her agency throughout.

Moreover, the available historical evidence demonstrates that Krupskaya—and Bolshevik women more broadly—did not perceive herself through the lens later imposed onto her by Western historians. Arguments to the contrary reveal more about the biases and interpretive frameworks of historians than about Krupskaya herself. For example, in a 1977 article titled "Women and the Russian Intelligentsia," Richard Stites argues that many female revolutionaries, including Krupskaya, found themselves forced into "secondary or lower levels of leadership."[72] He explained that professional, trained, and experienced communist women often found themselves relegated to the roles of secretaries, deputies, assistants, or vice-directors, rather than positions of high political power.[73] While Stites correctly identifies this trend, he nevertheless problematically frames these "secondary" positions as less valuable than top leadership positions. Contemporary scholars, however, present evidence to the contrary.

As early as 1997, Barbra Evans Clements, in her book *Bolshevik Women*, presented a drastically different framework for analyzing female Bolsheviks' roles within the party. She

[72] Stites, "Women and the Russian Intelligentsia: Three Perspectives," 60.

[73] Ibid., 61.

posits that many female Bolsheviks voluntarily *chose* their roles within the party: "[They] went where they felt capable and accepted, that is, into agitation and administration."[74] More importantly, there exists no evidence that women's male comrades explicitly told them that they were not welcome in top party councils.[75] Rather, Clements argues, these women "appear to have chosen of their own accord not to assert themselves in those councils."[76] Krupskaya, for one, received a nomination for the position of Central Committee secretary in April 1917. However, she *chose* to reject the opportunity as she wanted to focus on her true passion—reforming education.

Regardless, Clements acknowledges that "assumptions about the division of labor between women and men that had been established in the underground among Bolsheviks" affected these choices, but she adamantly asserts that these women "were not simply conforming to the collective expectations about them as women."[77] She cites Krupskaya as an example:

> Service to her husband was also service to the cause of liberating Russia, but Krupskaia did not think of herself primarily as a woman doing her wifely duty. Rather, she saw herself as a revolutionary who was married to the man best qualified by the penetrating power of his intellect and the purity of his resolve to play a leading role in finding the way to the revolution. Few other Bolshevichki arranged their careers in the underground as successfully as Krupksaia, and none made a greater contribution to the creation and maintenance of the Bolshevik faction.[78]

Moreover, according to Clements, Krupskaya "had never liked politics and was always relieved to withdraw from it."[79] Although Krupskaya unabashedly and vocally engaged in politics when

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[74] Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 141.

[75] Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 140-141.

[76] Ibid., 141.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid., 110.

[79] Ibid., 242.

she felt it necessary—such as during the power struggle of the 1920s following Lenin's death—she had always shown more passion for education. As such, she serves as a testament to Bolshevik women's agency within the party.

Additionally, other options *did* exist for women who chose to follow more ambitious political paths, the stories of which Clements documents in her book. In the pre-revolutionary era, female revolutionaries occupied almost all spheres of the revolutionary movement. Stites himself cites Socialist-Revolutionary Party women who worked as teachers or "Third Element technicians" in villages, acting as propagandists when necessary.[80] He also notes that women engaged in violent resistance and combat. They committed acts of domestic terrorism—such as twenty-one-year-old Tolia Ragozinikova who opened fire in the Okhrana Headquarters. Women armed themselves during uprisings and demonstrations, and some even became commissars to entire fronts in the Civil War.[81] These women actively participated in the revolutionary struggle on all fronts, to the extent that even Tsarist officials acknowledged them as threats to state order on par with their male counterparts. One St. Petersburg official remarked that "women, in terms of criminality, ability, and possession of the urge to escape, are hardly distinguishable from men."[82] While these factors must be accounted for in any accurate historical analysis, they do not negate the reality of gender-based discrimination that revolutionary women may have faced. Contextualizing these complex dynamics underscores that neither revolutionary participation nor gender itself can be neatly confined to binary classifications.

After all, at times, even Krupskaya experienced gender-based discrimination. For example, after Lenin's death, Stalin treated Krupskaya with profound disrespect, often making

[80] Stites, "Women and the Russian Intelligentsia: Three Perspectives," 60.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

misogynistic remarks about her marriage. According to Stalin historian Simon Sebag Montefiore, after Lenin's death, Stalin made the following comment: "Why should I stand on my hind legs for her? To sleep with Lenin does not mean you understand Marxism-Leninism."[83] Clements, too, reports that, in an interview, Stalin remarked, "Krupskaia followed Lenin around her entire life, before the revolution and afterwards, and in fact she didn't understand politics"—a statement with no factual basis.[84] While such instances are valid and important to consider, they do not universally define how her contemporaries perceived her. Contemporary accounts and Soviet-era memory further reveal the complexity of her historical portrayal.

Krupskaya in Her Time

Soviet and Eastern Bloc representations of Krupskaya offer an alternate epistemology of her significance—one often neglected by Western historians. Including these perspectives provides a more accurate understanding of Krupskaya, preventing the projection of Western cultural assumptions onto a figure who operated within a fundamentally different social and ideological context. In this way, scholars can avoid the historiographical distortion that occurs when analyzing Soviet figures solely through a Western lens. To illustrate this point, I analyze news articles from the Polish People's Republic (*Polska Ludowa*), preserved in the Archive of Modern Records (*Archiwum Akt Nowych*) in Poland, and a pamphlet written by Cecileia Bobrovskaya, a close comrade of Krupskaya, as part of a case study of her place in Soviet collective memory. These works, notably published by women, suggest that Krupskaya's contemporaries and the citizenry of the Eastern Bloc defined her as a revolutionary, pedagogue, and influential state administrator rather than Lenin's wife.

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[83] Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 35.

[84] Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 242.

In her article commemorating what would have been Krupskaya's 100th birthday, Polish historian Maria Meglicka offers an overview of Krupskaya's life and accomplishments. Published in *Trybuna Mazowiecka* (*Mazovian Tribune*), the central organ of the Warsaw sect of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), in 1969, "In the 100th anniversary of her birth: Nadezhda Krupska" (*W 100 rocznicę urodzin: Nadieżda Krupska*) indicates Krupskaya's esteemed role in the collective memory of the entire Eastern Bloc, not just the Soviet Union. While Meglicka describes Krupskaya as "Lenin's most loyal companion, his tireless assistant, and a friend until the end of his days," the word "wife" (*żona*) does not appear in the article at all. Interestingly, however, she uses the word "husband" (*mąż*) to refer to Lenin. Significantly, Meglicka describes both Krupskaya and Lenin as "ardent revolutionaries," treating them as equals. She also includes Krupskaya's own words about her marriage: "From the moment I married Lenin...I helped him in his work as best I could." Although she clearly acknowledges their marriage, Meglicka does not feel the need to emphasize her wifehood. Given the context of the article, the wife paradigm loses its credibility.[85]

Moreover, Meglicka acknowledges Krupskaya's double burden. She dedicates a significant portion of her article to Krupskaya's struggle with Graves' disease and the challenge of caring for her dying mother as she managed both domestic and party responsibilities during the émigré years. These personal hardships reflect the complexity of Krupskaya's life, beyond her public image. Notably, Western scholarship lacks these details, although McNeal makes brief mention of her illness. Arguably, such omissions obscure the true scope of Krupskaya's

[85] Maria Meglicka, "W 100 rocznicę urodzin: Nadieżda Krupska" [On the 100th Anniversary of the Birth: Nadezhda Krupskaya], *Artykuły publikowane dotyczące polskiego i międzynarodowego ruchu robotniczego* [Published Articles on the Polish and International Workers' Movement], 1969. File 2/2470/0/2.2/6. *Akta Marii Meglickiej* [Maria Meglicka Papers], *Archiwum Akt Nowych* [Archive of Modern Records], Warsaw, Poland.

commitment to the revolution, underscoring historians' tendency to overlook or simplify the personal challenges faced by female figures in history.[86]

Representations of Krupskaya in the Eastern Bloc also circulated through broadcast media. In 1961, Polish communist and intellectual Jadwiga Siekierska delivered a radio broadcast, "Nadieżda Krupska," on Polskie Radio Program I. Aired on December 3 from 11:40–11:53 a.m. as part of a historical series, the broadcast survives in transcript form in the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw. Siekierska's broadcast offers a more intimate perspective on Krupskaya. Unlike Meglicka, Siekierska personally met her and recounts their meeting in the broadcast. Like Krupskaya, Siekierska worked as a communist activist and theorist, but she spent most of her career in education and, briefly, in propaganda. Incidentally, she also married a famous man: Polish communist Stanisław Bobiński. Siekierska and Krupskaya met at a meeting of Old Bolsheviks in Moscow in the early 1930s.[87]

Throughout the broadcast, Siekierska describes Krupskaya as "Lenin's wife." However, she does so in a non-reductive way, not diminishing Krupskaya to her role as a wife, thereby avoiding the wife paradigm often present in Western historiography. Significantly, Siekierska portrays Lenin and Krupskaya's relationship as one of mutual dependency. She explains that "For the old Bolsheviks who knew Lenin well and worked closely with him, his figure was inseparable from that of his wife." By "figure," she refers to his persona or identity, using the Polish word *postać*, suggesting that Lenin's public and personal image was intertwined with Krupskaya's—much like how Western historians often describe her image as intrinsically linked to his. However, unlike Krupskaya, Lenin's legacy does not suffer from the same historical

[86] Meglicka, "W 100 rocznicę urodzin," 1969.

[87] Jadwiga Siekierska, "Nadieżda Krupska," *Pogadanki radiowe* [Radio Talks], 1961. File 2/1565/0/2.5/98. *Akta Jadwigi Siekierskiej* [Jadwiga Siekierska Papers], *Archiwum Akt Nowych* [Archive of Modern Records], Warsaw, Poland.

neglect or marginalization. From the perspective of Siekierska the old Bolsheviks, Lenin and Krupskaya acted as a unit—as equals.[88]

In this respect, she continuously refers to Kruspkaya's work as "shared" with Lenin. While one could argue that this notion ignores the work she did in her own right, it nevertheless highlights an important dynamic. By emphasizing their codependence, Siekierska confirms Rappaport's point: Lenin depended on Krupskaya as did his status as a "great man." Furthermore, Siekierska's narrative does not stop with Krupskaya's assistance to Lenin—she still acknowledges her independent accomplishments. Siekierska explicitly states that "[i]n various memories about Lenin and his closest associates…the figure of Krupskaya holds a significant place, along with her role in Lenin's life and her own work." She goes on to describe Lenin as "a great mind of the revolution," and Krupskaya as "a born teacher and Russian revolutionary," ready to make the "greatest sacrifices" for her cause. Like Meglicka, she portrays Krupskaya not as a mere appendage of Lenin, but as his equal. This stands in stark contrast to the Western idea of a gendered division of labor often projected onto her. Evidently, in Soviet collective memory, their work differed but remained equal in importance.[89]

Moreover, having personally met Krupskaya, Siekierska offers a unique characterization of her. Although she reaffirms the qualities presented by Western historians—Krupskaya's humbleness, softspokeness, and discipline—Siekierska does so with a different tone. Overall, she describes Krupskaya as having a "gentle face and a sad smile," being soft-spoken and kind.[90] When describing her physical appearance, Siekierska carefully avoids derogatory remarks, sympathetically noting that, in her old age, Krupskaya gained weight and had an unsteady gait.

[88] Siekierska, "Nadieżda Krupska," 1961.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

In doing so, she does not make superficial remarks or use pejoratives. However, rather than echoing McNeal's sentiment about Krupskaya being a "pathetic figure at the end of her life," Siekierska takes a different approach.[91] She writes that "tragic" moments marked both Krupskaya and Lenin's lives, yet "[i]n the face of these trials, Krupskaya displayed great strength of spirit and self-control."[92] Overall, Siekierska offers a more personal portrayal of a kind, soft-spoken, humble woman with an intense passion for education.

Cecilia Bobrovskaya, Krupskaya's comrade and fellow revolutionary, offers additional context to Krupskaya's public perception in her 1940 pamphlet *Lenin and Krupskaya*. The pamphlet serves as a significant primary source for details regarding Krupskaya's revolutionary activity; however, it also speaks to the common people's reverence for her. Bobrovskaya describes her not only as the wife of Lenin but as his comrade, and emphasizes her popularity among the masses:

> It was not only the Young Pioneers [Komsomol] that knew and loved the name of Nadezhda Krupskaya. Women, members of the Young Communist League, workers, collective farmers, teachers, librarians—all wrote to her and came to her for advice and help.[93]

Eventually, the volume of letters grew so large that Krupskaya had to hire assistants to manage them.[94] Bobrovskaya attributes the public's adoration to Krupskaya's constant work among the masses.[95] She constantly gave speeches at schools and factories—especially those with majorities of women workers.[96] Ultimately, Bobrovskaya reveals that the personal relationships Krupskaya

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[91] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 296.

[92] Siekierska, "Nadieżda Krupska," 1961.

[93] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 3, 34.

[94] Ibid., 35.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

developed through her work in education, rather than her marriage, cemented her place in Soviet collective memory.

Overall, these three women recognize and praise Krupskaya's work as both a revolutionary and an educator. They align with the broader consensus in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, viewing Krupskaya as a successful figure in her own right. One might argue that this analysis is skewed, given that Meglicka, Siekierska, and Bobrovskaya represent only a small fraction of the Soviet demographic, with their perspectives potentially influenced by their gender. However, these women wrote years apart, in different publications, and from different countries. While male perspectives in the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence may not have held Krupskaya in such high regard, there is no evidence to suggest this. On the contrary, the works of these authors offer ample evidence of Krupskaya's significance.

Given the apparent reverence held for Krupskaya in the sources above, one must ask themselves: *why*? If Krupskaya garnered adoration and respect throughout the Soviet Union, both by the masses and her comrades, why does she remain marginalized by Western historians? The evidence examined here reinforces Oakley's central claim: these narratives project historians' presumptions and subject positions onto Krupskaya, misrepresenting her legacy rather than accurately reflecting her historical position. Her unjust erasure from the historical record does not merely reflect historians' oversight—it reveals the persistence of the very patriarchal structures she fought to dismantle. Her proper recognition is long overdue.

To address this historiographical oversight, I propose a new framework for approaching women like Krupskaya in the historical record—one that rejects the reductive "forgotten wife" paradigm. Instead, I seek to recognize the historical significance of revolutionary collaboration, organizational (secretarial) labor, and domestic labor. Rather than evaluating female

revolutionaries through Western constructions of gender and the gendered division of labor, this approach recognizes the complex—at times contradictory—gender dynamics within the Bolshevik movement and interrogates how historiographical methodologies have obscured them. By revisiting the archival record with this lens, scholars can simultaneously restore Kruspkaya's rightful place in history and reconstruct how historians understand women's historical significance.

Chapter II: A Russian Woman's Fate

Fate! — the Russian woman's fate!
Hardly could a harder one be found.[97]

Nikolay Alexeyevich Nekrasov

The Birth of a Revolutionary

Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya set out on her revolutionary path far before Lenin's shadow eclipsed hers. Born on February 26th, 1869, Krupskaya grew up surrounded by radical influences that would eventually lead her to the revolutionary movement. Although her parents were of noble descent, she grew up modestly as her parents owned no land or property.[98] Krupskaya's father, Konstantin Ignatyevich Krupski—a bibliophile, an atheist, and an officer in the Russian military—died when she turned fourteen. Her mother, Elizaveta Vasilyevna Tistrova, an educated woman, worked as a governess, offering private lessons to children in upper-class households.[99]

Although born in St. Petersburg, Krupskaya spent time in Russian-occupied Poland, where the Russian military stationed her father, until 1874. Evidence suggests that she and her family also lived in Germany for some time—at age six, she recalled her first day of school in Nordhausen, Germany. She briefly lived in Kyiv at age eight and spent the rest of her childhood

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[97] Nikolay Alexeyevich Nekrasov, "The Village Harvest Is in Full Swing…," 1862, Culture.ru, https://www.culture.ru/poems/40029/v-polnom-razgare-strada-derevenskaya.
In 1899, Krupskaya began her first propaganda pamphlet, *The Woman Worker* (*Zhenshchina Rabotnitsa*), with this quote from her favorite radical poet, Nekrasov.

[98] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "Моя Жизнь [*My Life*]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 1 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/book/krupskaya_nadegda/avtobiograficheskie_stati_dorevolyutsionnie_raboti.html.

[99] Robert Hatch McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution: Krupskaya and Lenin* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 11.

in various Russian villages. She returned to St. Petersburg as an adult, until the Russian authorities exiled her for revolutionary activity in the late 1800s. Afterward, she lived nomadically, traveling throughout Europe until the official establishment of the Soviet state in 1922.[100]

Krupskaya's first exposure to radicalism came from her father, who had some experience with the various resistance movements of the late 19th century. As a military officer in Russian-occupied Poland, he begrudgingly took part in the suppression of the Polish uprising. Krupskaya recalled that he "generally…[tried] to ensure that there were fewer victories for the tsarist army over those who rebelled against the unbearable yoke of Russian tsarism." Unfortunately, his sympathy for the Jews and Poles resulted in his dismissal. He lost his right to enter government service with 22 crimes brought against him—one of which included simply speaking Polish. After they left Poland, Krupski took various odd jobs, moving "from city to city," which Krupskaya credited for exposing her to "a lot of people of all kinds…[and] how different strata of the population lived." Significantly, revolutionaries frequently visited the Krupskis' home during Krupskaya's childhood: "first nihilists, then narodniks, and later narodovoltsy," a sequence of radical anti-tsarist groups, each increasingly militant, spanning the late 19th century.[101] Although her parents often sent her out to run errands during these visits, Krupskaya understood their significance. She later wrote that, although she could not be sure about the extent of her father's involvement in the revolutionary movement, it radicalized her: "I understood early on what the autocracy of the tsarist officials was, what arbitrariness meant.

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[100] Krupskaya, "Моя Жизнь," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[101] Nihilists, a late 19th-century cultural and intellectual movement that rejected traditionalism, advocated radical social and political change. Narodniks, an anti-tsarist revolutionary movement among the Russian intelligentsia active in the 1860s and 1870s, promoted agrarian socialism and sought to mobilize the peasantry. In the 1870s and 1880s, their radical offshoot, the Narodovoltsy (from *Narodnaya Volya*, or *People's Will*), embraced political violence and carried out the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881.

When I grew up, I became a revolutionary, fighting against the tsarist autocracy." Such exposure to radicalism continued to shape the course of her life.[102]

At age five, she became antagonistic towards landlords after hearing about her mother's experiences as a governess: "how landowners treated peasants, what kind of beasts they were." Later, in a conversation with her mother, Krupskaya overheard her father's powerful words: "he spoke about the centuries-old hatred of the peasants for the landowners, and how the landowners had deserved that hatred…I remembered my father's words for the rest of my life." At age six, after hearing her father discuss the dismal conditions at a factory in Uglich, Russia, where he worked as an inspector, her animosity extended to factory managers. From then on, she and the local village children threw snowballs at them. At age eight, in Kyiv, after witnessing the horrors of the Russo-Turkish war firsthand, she came to understand the horrors of war: "I saw wounded prisoners, played with a captive Turkish boy, and found that war was the most harmful thing." Krupskaya's formative years exposed her to the worst parts of the oppressive tsarist system and the growing capitalist one, all of which contributed to her desire to overthrow it.[103]

Not only did Krupskaya's path to revolution begin practically from birth, but so did her journey to becoming an intellectual. She described how her first book "fell into…[her] hands" at age three.[104] Later, she reminisced about her first day of school in Nordhausen, Germany, at age six:

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[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya,"Что Я Помню Из Прочитанных в Детстве Книг [What I Remember From Books I Read as a Child]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 1 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/book/krupskaya_nadegda/avtobiograficheskie_stati_dorevolyutsionnie_raboti.html.

> I stood in the doorway and told everyone who passed by that I was going to school today. My mother took my hand and we started walking. I think I would have run if it hadn't been for my mother, who was holding my hand tightly.[105]

Arriving at school, Krupskaya sat excitedly at her bench as all the other children cried or screamed, not wanting their mothers to leave. To the amusement of her class, she taught them how to draw a "piggy" on the chalkboard—her first foray into teaching. She graciously demonstrated this sophisticated "piggy" drawing technique in her 1911 article "My First Day of School" (*Moy Perviy Shkolny Den*).[106]

Her pursuit of education continued when, at age ten, she entered Gymnasium, the Russian term for secondary school. She recalled that the Gymnasium forbade students from reading "silly novels." However, her parents, as intellectuals themselves, did not subscribe to this philosophy: "My father believed that…instead of forbidding, one should give children interesting, captivating, and good books."[107] As such, Krupskaya's parents nurtured her intellectual curiosity—a curiosity she carried with her for the rest of her life. Captivated by academics from a young age, she discovered her life-long passion at age eleven: education.

At the time, Krupskaya's father managed the affairs of some landowners in the Pskov province. There, she met Alexandra Timofeevna Yavorskaya, or "Timofeika," an eighteen-year-old school teacher.[108] Although shy, Krupskaya immediately felt at ease with Timofeika. She not only influenced Krupskaya intellectually, but radically: "From her words, I

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[105] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "Мой Первый Школьный День [My First Day of School]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 1 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/book/krupskaya_nadegda/avtobiograficheskie_stati_dorevolyutsionnie_raboti.html.

[106] Krupskaya, "Мой Первый Школьный День," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[107] Krupskaya, "Что Я Помню Из Прочитанных В Детстве Книг," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[108] Krupskaya, "Моя Жизнь," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

understood that landowners were something very bad, that they did not help, but harmed the peasants, and that the peasants needed help."[109] She loved sitting in on Timofeika's lessons and, most importantly, her Sunday gatherings for adult peasants. These gatherings sparked her love for the radical poet Nikolai Alexeyevich Nekrasov, whose works she later incorporated into her activism. She began her first propaganda pamphlet, *The Woman Worker* (*Zhenshchina Rabotnitsa*), with a Nekrasov quote.[110]

Together, she and Timofeika traveled to neighboring villages distributing books and talking to peasants. McNeal cites Timofeika as the person "who gave Krupskaya her first clear idea of social protest."[111] Years later, she found out that the police raided Timofeika's house, finding illegal literature and a vandalized portrait of the Tsar. They placed her in Pskov prison for two years; Krupskaya never saw her again. Nevertheless, Timofeika's influence left a lasting impact on her. She inspired Krupskaya's dream of becoming a village teacher: "Since then, I have remained interested in rural schools and rural teaching for the rest of my life."[112] This interest in rural education would later manifest in one of history's most successful literacy campaigns.[113]

Determined to continue her quest for enlightenment, Krupskaya entered the Obolenskaya Gymnasium upon the family's move to St. Petersburg in 1881.[114] In 1883, while still attending

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[109] Ibid.

[110] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 16.
The same quote featured in the epigraph of this chapter.

[111] Ibid., 166

[112] Krupskaya, "Моя Жизнь," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[113] For more information on the literacy campaign, see Chapter III.

[114] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 17.
According to McNeal, the building would be renamed the "N.K. Krupskaya Secondary School" during the Soviet period.

the Gymnasium, her father died. She described him as someone "with whom…[she] was close and spoke about everything."[115] His death affected both her and her mother deeply, emotionally and financially. Despite these hardships, Krupskaya held onto her dream of becoming a teacher after graduation. Unfortunately, upon graduating, she could not find a position.

In the meantime, she briefly explored the Tolstoyan movement—a movement grounded in Leo Tolstoy's philosophical and religious views, focused on self-discipline, individual moral regeneration, and social reform through education.[116] However, she quickly realized that the Tolstoyan emphasis on self-improvement was no match for oppressive systems: "I soon realized that this didn't change anything, and the unfair rules would continue to exist no matter how hard I worked at my job." She sought a way out, a way to change her life and "destroy exploitation." She believed university held the solution. However, at the time, Russian law forbade women from participating in higher education, so she taught herself to the best of her ability. That is, until women's courses finally opened in St. Petersburg in 1889. At age twenty, she enrolled, and there she embarked on an irreversible path toward Marxism.[117]

Krupskaya reflected on this experience in her 1922 article, "How I became a Marxist (From My Memories)" (*Kak ya stala marksistkoy (iz moikh vospominaniy)*), originally published in *Yunyy Kommunist* (*The Young Communist*). According to Krupskaya, at twenty years old, she had not heard of Marx, the labor movement, or communism. Slowly, however, she began engaging in the St. Petersburg student movement, attending literary circles. In spring, she read *Das Kapital*: "I realized that only a workers' revolutionary movement can change our lives, that in order to be useful and necessary, we must devote all our strength to the work of the

[115] Krupskaya, "Моя Жизнь," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[116] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 20-22.

[117] Krupskaya, "Моя Жизнь," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

workers."[118] For three years, she immersed herself in underground radical circles. By the time she started teaching at the Smolensk Evening-Sunday School, around winter of 1890/1891, she had become a true Marxist.[119]

As such, Krupskaya became well-versed in Marxist theory and continued studying it for the remainder of her life. Yet, historians often overlook—sometimes outright deny—her intellectual contributions to Lenin's work and their collaboration. McNeal reiterates this notion as he questions Krupskaya's political consciousness upon a disagreement with Lenin: "Did she really grasp the full implications of this criticism, which went right to the heart of Leninism..."[120] This subtle dismissal of her intellectual authority constitutes an ad hominem attack—one of many in his book. As an intellectual, a committed Marxist, an educator of Marxist theory, and a skilled propagandist, Krupskaya possessed an indisputable understanding of Marxism, which played an integral role in her life, as demonstrated by her intellectual and political development.

In *Forgotten Wives*, Ann Oakley speaks to this notion. Although women's and wives' domestic labor does not "strip…[them] of their intellectual power," Oakley argues that many historians have "created an insidious caricature of wives as too practical and concerned with the everyday to have anything at all significant going on in their minds."[121] Additionally, historians often refute intellectual collaboration among spouses, seeing wives as "helpers" rather than "progenitor[s], of…[their husband's] ideas," frequently projecting these assumptions onto

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[118] Ibid.

[119] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "Как Я Стала Марксистской (Из Воспоминаний) [How I became a Marxist (From My Memories)]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 1 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/book/krupskaya_nadegda/avtobiograficheskie_stati_dorevolyutsionnie_raboti.html.

[120] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 145.

[121] Ann Oakley, *Forgotten Wives: How Women Get Written Out of History* (Policy Press, 2021), 189.

historical subjects and adjusting archival material to fit them.[122] McNeal, for example, declares that Lenin "did not require a real collaborator," thus discrediting the intellectual merit of Krupskaya's work.[123]

In another instance, again discrediting her intellectual contributions to the revolutionary movement, McNeal makes an unfounded claim that Krupskaya lacked sufficient oratory skill and equates her speeches to "redundant droning."[124] However, primary sources show that, even early in her career at Smolensk, she delivered demonstrably successful speeches, despite proclaiming herself as "extremely shy" and having difficulty presenting.[125] On one occasion, after she became more comfortable in her new role at Smolensk, she took initiative and "offer[ed] some innovations," proposing she teach a seminar on geography. She lectured to "a large audience of workers [who] sat shoulder to shoulder on the benches."[126] Although nervous, she gained confidence within five minutes of her lecture. She inspired lively conversation among the workers, starting a geography trend at the school. She even impressed her co-workers. Proper historical scholarship should seek to amend the biases of past historians. Therefore, historians must carefully examine Krupskaya's intellectual development to properly contextualize her as a historical actor and overcome the biases embedded in her historiography.

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[122] Oakley, *Forgotten Wives*, 189.

[123] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 77.

[124] Ibid., 188.

[125] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "Пять Лет Работы В Вечерних Смоленских Классах [Five Years of Work in Evening Smolensk Classes]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 1 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/book/krupskaya_nadegda/avtobiograficheskie_stati_dorevolyutsionnie_raboti.html.

[126] Krupskaya, "Пять Лет Работы В Вечерних Смоленских Классах," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

Moreover, the framework through which Krupskaya has been depicted thus far portrays her as meek and subservient—historians have robbed her of her agency. Yet, her autobiographical articles reveal her undeniable agency, determination, and willingness to lead. All of which, she expressed in her earliest years as a Marxist:

> Illegal workers' circles were few at that time; there were many more people wanting to lead circles than there were circles, and for me, a quiet, shy young woman who was just beginning to understand Marxist issues, there was almost no hope of being given a circle to lead.[127]

Eager to "take an active part in the labor movement as soon as possible," Krupskaya created her own opportunities in Smolensk. There, she planted her roots as an organizer and propagandist and made herself into the leader she yearned to be. At the Sunday school, she began secretly teaching the workers about Marxism. Eventually, she wrote, "it [the school] became well known in revolutionary working-class circles," and a hub for revolutionary propaganda. Many of her students would go on to join the movement—many of them were arrested. Krupskaya never forgot her work at Smolensk, often writing about the cherished connections she made with her students until the end of her life: "The work at the school provided me with skills in political education work and an understanding of how to organize it effectively." As a result, her work at the school became an integral part of her success as a revolutionary and a stateswoman.[128]

To recapitulate, Krupskaya's path toward political consciousness began far before she met Lenin—as did her revolutionary and propaganda work. In St. Petersburg, she successfully established herself as a respected activist in her own right, prior to Lenin's arrival on the scene. Thus, historical analysis of Krupskaya must be founded on the premise that she was revolutionary in her own right, rather than implicitly linking her accomplishments to Lenin. They

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.

worked collaboratively, that is undeniable, but collaboration does not equate to subordination. One cannot give Lenin credit for her choices and accomplishments as that distorts the historical reality and perpetuates out-of-date, gendered historiographical narratives.

Additionally, available primary sources show that Krupskaya saw Lenin as her equal and collaborator. For one, in her memoir, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, Krupskaya described decisions regarding the movement, party organization, and intellectual works as collective, using the pronoun "we," rather than attributing them to Lenin specifically. Furthermore, in her preface to part three, she explicitly described her role as Lenin's collaborator: "Until our arrival in Russia in 1917 I had worked side by side with Ilyich [Lenin]. My work had been a direct aid to his activities…"[129] Arguably, Lenin also viewed Krupskaya as his equal, but evidence regarding his thoughts on their intellectual collaboration remains inconclusive. As a "great man," Lenin had a propensity for self-importance and pretentiousness. Even so, he understood Krupskaya's significance both to his well-being and to the party. As historian Helen Rappaport describes in *Conspirator*, her biography of Lenin's revolutionary years, throughout his years of exile, Lenin relied on a "network of female activists who kept him going…"[130] Lenin's predisposition to self-importance and pretentiousness, along with the cult of personality that would develop around him, frame the typical analyses of the women in his orbit. This framework carries on the notion that "great men" and "geniuses" did not need collaborators.

However, plenty of evidence exists that Lenin acknowledged Krupskaya's intellectual contributions to the revolution and understood her as a revolutionary in her own right. In 1915, Krupskaya completed a study on education and democracy, entitled "National Education and

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[129] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, trans. Bernard Isaacs (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 379.

[130] Helen Rappaport, *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile* (Random House, 2010), 50.

Democracy" (*Narodnoye Obrazovaniye i Demokratiya*). According to the editor's notes on the study in her collected works, it was the first work to systematically apply Marxist philosophy to education, connecting it with productive labor. In her research, she studied an abundance of primary sources and the work of contemporary pedagogues from all over the world. She compiled 26 notebooks filled with excerpts from her research. In 1916, Lenin forwarded the manuscript to the famous Soviet writer Maxim Gorky. He praised the work, not addressing Krupskaya as his wife, but as an author. He wrote, "The author has been involved in pedagogy for a long time, over 20 years…This is very important…The demand for literature in this field has undoubtedly increased in Russia now." Krupskaya pioneered Marxist educational theory, and Lenin acknowledged the importance of this endeavor. Any argument to the contrary reflects a historiographical error: projecting the Western sexual division of labor onto female Russian revolutionaries.[131]

Further complicating this analysis, Krupskaya understood Lenin's historical significance and devoted a significant portion of her labor to upholding his legacy, seldom writing about herself. In the introduction to her memoir, she wrote that Lenin took part in an epoch of "tremendous historical importance," motivating her to write about her life with him.[132] It would be naive to deny Lenin's significance, however, it would be equally as naive to deny the necessary, collaborative roles of the women he worked with. Lenin and Krupskaya's revolutionary work *was* different, but it constituted equal parts of a whole. Marx and Engels, for example, operated with a similar dynamic; however, as two men, the sexual division of labor has

[131] Ioncharova, Kairova, and Konstantinova, note on "Народное Образование и Демократия [National Education and Democracy]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], vol. 1 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/book/krupskaya_nadegda/avtobiograficheskie_stati_dorevolyutsionnie_raboti.html.

[132] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin,* 5.

not been imposed upon their historical relationship. Krupskaya also assumed the responsibility for additional labor, which will be addressed later in this chapter. Thus, imposing a subordinate role onto Krupskaya projects modern, Western, capitalist constructions of gender roles and the sexual division of labor, skewing the historical narrative. Scholars of Russian and Soviet women's history must bear this in mind, and consciously avoid such projections.

In reality, Krupskaya understood her work as work that served a cause—the Party and the revolution. Lenin was the founder and leader of the Bolshevik Party, later of the Soviet Union. With this in mind, portrayals of Krupskaya's work as "under Lenin's direct supervision," start to take a different form.[133] While such language is arguably dismissive, we must understand the reality of the fact that she—like numerous other important historical figures—worked on *behalf* of a party. Historians like McNeal may describe this argument as an attempt to "inflate her independent role" in the party; however, placing Krupskaya within the proper historical context is hardly "inflating" her role.[134] Her work speaks for itself.

On the Front Lines

Around 1893, Krupskaya and other St. Petersburg radicals began to develop, what she described as, "a very weak organization" which would later become the Social Democratic Party.[135] By 1894, Lenin had come to St. Petersburg and worked in Krupskaya's district. According to Krupskaya, they "soon became very good friends" after a secret meeting of local Marxist circles—infamously disguised as a "pancake party" (*Blinnyaya vecherinka*).[136] With

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[133] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 101.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Krupskaya, "Пять Лет Работы В Вечерних Смоленских Классах," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[136] Krupskaya, "Моя Жизнь," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.; Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin,* 12.

Lenin's help, their "weak organization" began to develop into a more sophisticated party. In her memoir, Krupskaya described this period as one of "great importance" as they established closer contact with the masses and learned "how to win their confidence and rally them behind us." She admitted, however, that the work itself offered little of note. She credits this period for molding Lenin into "a leader of the working masses."[137] This marked the beginning of Krupskaya's career as a professional revolutionary.

In the spring and summer of 1896, Krupskaya busied herself with propaganda and organizational work, setting the stage for her professional revolutionary work until 1917. She assisted in organizing the summer strikes of 1896 which, according to Cecilia Bobrovskaya, "resulted in the adoption of the first law ever introduced in Russia restricting the work day—to eleven and a half hours."[138] Unfortunately, under increased police surveillance, the police arrested Krupskaya—along with a handful of her comrades—on August 12, 1896.[139] In her memoir, she devotes a single sentence, in parentheses, to this fact: "(I was arrested myself in August 1896)"[140] However, Bobrovskaya confirmed that "Krupskaya was kept in solitary confinement [in St. Petersburg detention prison] for seven months as a political prisoner."[141] There, she spent her time studying Marxist theory.[142] Even in prison, Krupskaya never stopped working. Bobrovskaya attests that she immediately "established a secret correspondence with Lenin, who had been confined in the same prison since December 1895."[143]

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[137] Ibid., 25-26.

[138] Cecilia Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1940), 12.

[139] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 12.

[140] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin,* 27.

[141] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 13.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

Figure I

Fig. I: Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, c. 1890s. Public domain.

Source: "Nadezhda K Krupskaya," Wikimedia Commons, public domain, accessed May 14, 2025, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nadezhda_K_Krupskaya.jpg.

After the self-immolation of prisoner Mary Vetrova, the authorities released Krupskaya early, and she followed Lenin into exile, where they married out of convenience: "Since then, my life has followed his life, and I have helped him in his work in any way I could." From that point forward, Krupskaya devoted her life to party work. Self-described, her work "during the years of emigration consisted mainly in relations with Russia." This included acting as secretary to the

Central Committee from 1905-1907 and managing the underground Bolshevik network through various party publications.[144]

One of these publications being *Iskra* (*The Spark*), an underground paper and the official organ of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.[145] According to her memoir, "Vladimir Ilyich told me when I arrived that he had arranged for me to be the secretary of *Iskra* upon my arrival [in Munich, April 1901]."[146] He felt it "necessary [to appoint her] in the interests of the cause."[147] She described how she had her "hands full at once," diligently managing covert correspondence between *Iskra* operatives, sending illegal literature, working on developing transport lines for sending *Iskra* to Russia, and leading "all kinds of negotiations."[148] Overall, Krupskaya had a tremendous impact on coordinating the party's underground work. According to McNeal, Krupskaya stood "at the center of a fairly complicated and effective network of agents."[149] A feat which Bobrovskaya attested to.

According to Bobrovskaya, *Iskra,* like the later official party organ *Pravda* (*Truth*), played a "vital role…in the developing revolutionary movement."[150] She described *Iskra* as a turning point in the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party's organization as it brought together a single party formed from a plethora of "disconnected groups and circles."[151] *Iskra* became a

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[144] Krupskaya, "Пять Лет Работы В Вечерних Смоленских Классах," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[145] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 96.

[146] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin,* 59.

[147] Ibid.*,* 60.

[148] Ibid.

[149] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 101.

[150] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 19.

[151] Ibid., 20.

"collective organizer" around which a group of party agents formed. As a result, "[t]he part Krupskaya played in organizing regular communication with these agents was of the greatest importance," precisely because these publications served as the party's central organ.[152] Without *Iskra*, and later without *Pravda*, there would be no party.

Moreover, even McNeal acknowledges that this "remarkable one-woman operation…[provided] the *Iskra* underground organization a degree of coordination that no previous Russian revolutionary organization had known."[153] However, he nevertheless dismisses Krupskaya's role as "under Lenin's direct supervision." [154] While it should be noted that Krupskaya herself admitted that her appointment to *Iskra* secretary strategically ensured "that all intercourse with Russia would be closely controlled by Vladimir Ilyich," her work entailed a considerable level of autonomy.[155] She worked collaboratively with, rather than subordinate to, Lenin. In her eyes, they acted as a unit. Primary and secondary sources contain no concrete evidence that Krupskaya lacked autonomy; however, they *do* contain evidence of a male-dominated historical framework projecting a subordinate role onto her.

For historians like McNeal, their assertion of Lenin's authority constitutes nothing more than a projection of a subconscious judgment about the inherent subordination of wives. Even though McNeal points out that "Krupskaya carried on her taxing work without a great deal of direct guidance from Lenin," he insists on falling back on the idea that Lenin held sole control, not considering the possibility of collaboration, let alone Krupskaya's autonomy.[156] By not

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[152] Ibid., 21.

[153] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 101.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 59-60.

[156] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 102.

situating Krupskaya's party work properly within party operations and the larger historical framework of the revolutionary underground, he poses an ahistorical argument. The following examination of Krupskaya's party work throughout the pre-revolutionary period reveals that her contributions were imperative for the party's success and—especially in her later roles—she operated with a high degree of autonomy within a collaborative framework. Her work cannot be described as blindly subordinate; she exercised independent judgment and initiative within the larger party structure.

Krupskaya's influence within the party grew in 1903, following the Second Party Congress and the resulting Bolshevik-Menshevik split. Due to conflict among the respective factions, Lenin left the *Iskra* editorial board on October 19th. Krupskaya, however, chose to remain in her position as secretary, presumably to ensure some semblance of Bolshevik influence remained in *Iskra*. Krupskaya constituted the center of *Iskra*'s underground operations, and, with trepidation, the editors recognized this. McNeal posits that the editors did not immediately vote her out as they may have "feared her ability to sabotage their efforts by withholding the files of addresses [and] codes." However, in December of 1903, the board appointed her a deputy to handle correspondence with Russia, and Krupskaya resigned, feeling disrespected by the power move.[157]

After her resignation, she performed secretarial duties for the Russian branch of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party's Central Committee until 1907. Such organizational work spanned throughout Krupskaya's career as a professional revolutionary. In August of 1906, she went on to become the secretary of Lenin's new central organ, *Proletarii* (*The Proletarian*). In 1911, she became one of the leading members of the Paris group of the "Emigrant

[157] Ibid., 112.

Organization" alongside Lenin and French-Russian Bolshevik Inessa Armand.[158] Before the revolution of 1905, she held a similar position in the "Foreign League of Russian Revolutionary Social Democrats." She continued such work throughout the First World War. Around the same time, Krupskaya served as secretary for yet another of Lenin's factional newspapers, *Rabochaya Gazeta* (*The Working-Class News*), where she continued "writing her accustomed letters in defense of the Bolshevik cause." Beyond secretarial work, at one point, she also served as the party accountant.[159]

In 1912, Krupskaya's responsibilities mounted. After the January 1912 conference in Prague, the Social Democrats officially split into two different parties: the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. Thus, a new Bolshevik Central Committee formed, with Krupskaya effectively acting as its secretary, although the position did not formally exist. McNeal describes her role as "not only taking care of correspondence but also carrying the main burden of organizational details, including false passports and housing when the committee met secretly in Austrian Poland." Considering her expertise lay in underground organization, she did not assume the position of a formal member of the committee, although she did participate in meetings and "once gave a major report on the activities of the local underground committees." After *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Bolshevik Party, began legal publication in St. Petersburg in mid-1912, its organization became the focus of Krupskaya's party work. Around this time, she and Lenin left Paris for Kraków, Poland, where they would live until 1914, leaving shortly after the outbreak of World War I. In Poland, frustrations regarding the remote organization of the

[158] Ibid., 139.

[159] Ibid.,112, 129, 139, 144.

paper abounded—and Krupskaya remained at the forefront. This short, two-year period offers a compelling snapshot of her work and her indispensable role in the Bolshevik underground.[160]

Based on the contents of the abundance of letters she received from 1912-1914, preserved in the Polish Archive of Modern Records, much of Krupskaya's work revolved around the intellectual and informational needs of the party. This meant intelligence acquisition and dissemination—both from the top-down and the bottom-up. As with *Iskra*, in 1912-1914, Krupskaya's role primarily consisted of managing correspondence, disseminating literature, and managing or assisting in organizing various party publications. As the link between smaller factions of the Bolshevik underground network and the Central Committee, the party's organizational stability depended on her.

Although the letters in Poland's Archive of Modern Records are only a fraction of Krupskaya's correspondences, the sheer volume of letters from just two years speaks to the vastness of the operation Krupskaya oversaw. As *Iskra's* secretary, hundreds of letters passed through Krupskayas hands every month.[161] Presumably, correspondence continued at this rate in 1912, if not increased. Her correspondence spanned multiple countries—and sometimes various languages—offering an intimate glimpse into her many responsibilities within the party.

Particularly, much of her correspondence related to the dissemination of various Bolshevik publications—primarily, *Pravda*, but also *Prosveshcheniye* (*Enlightenment*), the Bolshevik theoretical journal. As the Bolshevik Party's central organ, *Pravda* served as the center of the Bolshevik underground network's communication and served as propaganda and political education for the working class; direct engagement with the populace constituted an

[160] Ibid., 144-145.

[161] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 19.

essential element of the revolutionary movement. It provided updates, ideological clarity, and served to unify the internationally dispersed party cells that made up the larger Bolshevik Party. Ensuring party members across Europe and the Caucasus clearly understood the party line proved essential—especially in turbulent times. For the Bolsheviks, a well-informed party served as the primary defense against one of their biggest threats: factionalization.

Since the Menshevik-Bolshevik split of 1903, the prospect of factionalization constantly worried Lenin, Krupskaya, and other Bolshevik leaders. Risking further stratification jeopardized the party, weakening its platform against the Mensheviks. As such, Krupskaya's correspondents kept her updated on such threats. Her contacts warn of "liquidationists," a less radical faction that advocated for the liquidation of the Bolshevik's underground organizations in favor of legal means, as well as "Vperyodists," members of the *Vpered* (*Forward*), a sub-faction of the Bolsheviks critical of Lenin.[162] Lenin particularly criticized the Vperyodists, claiming in 1914 that their actions were "tantamount to waging war against Marxism, against the organized and united majority of the workers."[163] In this sense, Krupskaya served as a primary line of defense.

Krupskaya organized lines of transportation for *Pravda* and illegal publications. When things went awry, she took responsibility for fixing them. As such, her contacts often reached out to her to ensure that they received necessary literature. In one instance, one of Krupskaya's correspondents in Geneva, Olga, sought her help obtaining essential party publications. On March 10th, 1914, she expressed that, in Geneva, the party significantly lacked recent editions of both *Pravda* and *Prosveshcheniye*. She lamented, "In Geneva, there are no copies of

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[162] Korespondencja do W.I. Lenina i N. Krupskiej [Correspondence to V.I. Lenin and N. Krupskaya], letters from M.E., 1913-1914. File 2/1233/0/60/47. Archiwum Włodzimierza Ilicza Lenina w Polsce [Archive of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in Poland], Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of Modern Records], Warsaw, Poland.; Vladimir Lenin, "The Vperyodists and the Vperyod Group," Marxists Internet Archive, June 1914, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/jun/00b.htm.

[163] Lenin, "The Vperyodists and the Vperyod Group."

Prosveshcheniye at all, so even our comrades can't read it." Both Olga and Krupskaya understood what this meant: not only were their propaganda activities inhibited, but there was a break in party communication. Even worse, Olga informed Krupskaya that they had not received *Pravda* since mid-1913. She requested that Krupskaya "arrange" for them to receive copies of the respective publications, emphasizing that it was "necessary." This became especially pertinent to developing a stronger Bolshevik presence in Geneva, as Olga conveyed that they had difficulties organizing. As the person responsible for maintaining the party's intellectual and informational needs, this represents one of, what were no doubt, hundreds of such instances for Krupskaya.[164]

Moreover, Krupskaya did not just disseminate necessary intellectual information; she acted as the hub for data on party progress. She relied on her contacts to update her regarding local party cells and future organizational plans. As the first line of defense when issues arose in a regional cell, contacts urgently reached out to Krupskaya, seeking advice and directives. In one undated letter from St. Petersburg, signed "Solnyshko," this sense of urgency is palpable:

> As for the forces we have, they are too insignificant…this is a serious danger because we—"the center"—are weak in terms of personnel…there's no one to immediately replace us, and so there will be a delay, or we will have to start again. I draw your serious attention to this situation…[165]

In conjunction with this letter, he sent her "a summary of reports from the field…on the developments [in St. Petersburg]."[166] According to him, the situation in Moscow was "a complete

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[164] Korespondencja do N. Krupskiej [Correspondence to N. Krupskaya], letters from Olga, 1913-1914. File 2/1233/0/60/33. Archiwum Włodzimierza Ilicza Lenina w Polsce [Archive of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in Poland], Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of Modern Records], Warsaw, Poland.

[165] Korespondencja do W.I. Lenina i N. Krupskiej [Correspondence to V.I. Lenin and N. Krupskaya], letter from Solnyshko, 1914. File 2/1233/0/60/38. Archiwum Włodzimierza Ilicza Lenina w Polsce [Archive of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in Poland], Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of Modern Records], Warsaw, Poland.

[166] Korespondencja do W.I. Lenina i N. Krupskiej, letter from Solnyshko, 1914.

debacle" as well.[167] In such instances, Krupskaya's role proved indispensable to party organization and development. In an undated letter from "Nikolaev" in Moscow, he expressed to an "M.G." that "[they are] absolutely idle here [Moscow] without any directives from the Central Administration."[168] The party cells felt lost without their lifeline.

However, Krupskaya's party work did not solely entail passive intelligence gathering and dissemination—she played a key role in transnational organizing as well. In 1912-1914, conditions were ripe for revolutionary organization and exposing the masses to Bolshevik ideas. With heightened tensions and a war looming over Europe, radicalism was in the air. On July 3rd, 1914, Olga expressed that, in Geneva, despite the state of affairs, there was "an air of optimism among the youth" and that the "proletarian environment…[was] much more positive."[169] In another, undated letter from Georgia, the sender relayed to Krupskaya that "the time is now more favorable than ever for Bolshevik activity."[170] Through Krupskaya's work, the Bolsheviks took advantage of the transnational revolutionary atmosphere.

Via correspondence with individual agents, Krupskaya developed connections across Europe, Russia, and the Caucasus. Often, this proved to be a difficult task as these "connections" sometimes entailed only one person. Yet, as Bobrovskaya described, Krupskaya had a remarkable ability: from that one contact, she could "get in touch with the advanced workers in the given locality" and convince their friends to write for party publications or help with

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[167] Ibid.

[168] Korespondencja do W.I. Lenina i N. Krupskiej [Correspondence to V.I. Lenin and N. Krupskaya], letter from Nikolaev, 1914. File 2/1233/0/60/38. Archiwum Włodzimierza Ilicza Lenina w Polsce [Archive of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in Poland], Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of Modern Records], Warsaw, Poland.

[169] Korespondencja do W.I. Lenina i N. Krupskiej, letters from Olga, 1913-1914.

[170] Korespondencja do W.I. Lenina i N. Krupskiej, letters from M.E., 1913-1914.

distribution.[171] Although Krupskaya used her organizational and network-building skills throughout the entire pre-revolutionary period, one series of letters offers insight into her influence on a crucial period of network-building in the Caucasus, around 1913.

First, it should be noted that, from 1912 to 1914, the Caucasus—particularly Georgia—were a hotbed of revolutionary activity and, as a result, a place of strategic significance for the Bolsheviks. Geographically, this region constituted the borderlands of a dying empire with a powerful sense of national identity. Material conditions had rapidly deteriorated since the start of the 20th century, meaning an angry proletariat ripe for radicalization. The Bolsheviks understood this, as did the Mensheviks. Unfortunately, the Mensheviks had driven the Bolsheviks out of Georgia around 1909; as such, they lacked adequate numbers.[172] Things looked bleak—unless they built a network. Thus, from 1912 to 1914, the Bolsheviks were locked in a battle for the Caucasus—with Krupskaya on the front lines.

In a series of three letters, the story of a piece of the Bolshevik's network in the Caucasus unfolds. The newly formed Bolshevik Party, lacking in numbers, had numerous enemies surrounding them: Mensheviks, liquidationists, and Vperyodists. Hoping to outmaneuver them, around late 1913-early 1914, Krupskaya passed on a letter to Inessa Armand to deliver to one of her contacts. Her goal: strengthening the Bolshevik network in the Caucasus against the rising tide of Menshevism. Presumably, weeks went by until she finally received a letter signed, somewhat legibly, "M. Edilierov." In the Caucasus, either Tbilisi or Baku (he does not specify), Edilierov frantically wrote to Krupskaya:

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[171] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 20.

[172] Ronald Grigor Suny, *Stalin: Passage to Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 375.

> …I didn't reply right away, and I hope you won't judge me. I don't have any reliable addresses for our comrades in the Caucasus at hand, so I immediately sent three letters to secondary addresses, asking them to reply and provide the addresses of specific comrades. As soon as I receive answers, I'll write to you right away…until now, I was constantly in a miserable situation, which prevented me from taking up this useful task…

After his apology, he expressed optimism, "If it's possible to reach all these people and connect with them as we should, with all necessary precautions, we could establish a good network." At the time of his letter, only one Georgian Bolshevik besides Edilierov remained in his vicinity. Clearly, he understood the importance of Krupskaya's mission.[173]

Fortunately, his second letter contained good news. Having received replies from "three comrades in Georgia," their potential network looked promising. Being a diligent organizer, Krupskaya already happened to be in correspondence with one of Edilierov's comrades—a "Malakia." The other, "Niko Sakareli," a former Baku worker and a Bolshevik, Krupskaya allegedly knew from party congresses. The third, in Edilierov's words, appeared to be "unknown" to her. Edilierov then summarized the letters Malakia and Niko forwarded him.[174]

Malakia reaffirmed what Krupskaya already knew: "the time is now more favorable than ever for Bolshevik activity, but…there are absolutely no resources or people. All of the more or less energetic people have been arrested and sent to distant locations." At the same time, Edilierov lamented the Bolshevik's past glory in the Chiatura region in 1905 where he worked with Koba (Stalin). He further attested to the significance of Krupskaya's organizational efforts as he described the "dissatisfaction…expressed by the intelligentsia" towards the "liquidators" who he claimed "stifle" the voices of the workers. He also complained of the liquidators' "unchecked" control of workers' papers. The resulting tension between the workers and the

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[173] Korespondencja do W.I. Lenina i N. Krupskiej, letters from M.E., 1913-1914.

[174] Ibid.

intelligentsia could prove detrimental to the party's efforts. Slowly, however, things began to improve.[175]

Once Krupskaya updated Lenin and the Central Committee on these developments, she wrote back to Edilierov with Lenin's questions about the Georgian press, and what appears to be a legislative draft regarding the "national question" (*natsionalnyi vopros*). According to Stalin historian Ronald Suny, at the time, the "national question" was a "vital issue that vexed the Georgian Marxists." He explains that the question revolved around "how to deal with ethnic and cultural tensions and how should a future Russian state be structured [sic.]." Thus, the Bolshevik movement and their political prospects required an unwavering party platform on the "national question"— especially in the multi-ethnic Caucasus region. In this respect, Edilierov's response paints a rather optimistic picture of their progress.[176]

With Krupskaya's guidance, he established continuous contact with the aforementioned individuals, two of whom, he wrote, "are writing a lot now in the Georgian press on the national question." Circulating the Bolshevik party line regarding the national question in the Georgian press got them one step closer to countering Menshevik influence in the region. Additionally, Edilierov established contact with Filipp Makharadze, whom he described as "a prominent figure in the Georgian socialist press…a composed Bolshevik and an educated Marxist." He promised to get his opinion on the national question and expressed confidence that his input would be "very useful for the cause" due to his influence in the press. He advised Krupskaya to put Lenin in contact with him and sent his address. Finally, following Krupskaya's directives, Edilierov

[175] Ibid.

[176] Suny, *Stalin: Passage to Revolution*, 106, 513.

concluded his letter with a commitment to continue their networking efforts: “I will try with all my might to focus on correspondence with the Caucasus, as you say.”[177]

In the context of these letters, Krupskaya emerges as far more than a passive secretary. She played an essential role as an active organizer and revolutionary. Her work went beyond administrative duties; she actively engaged with the ideological divisions and factionalism that could have undermined the party’s unity. The correspondence in these letters reveals how Krupskaya helped the Bolsheviks push their party line through socialist papers in the Caucasus, fostering support and gaining insight into the revolutionary climate of the region. Her contributions proved pivotal to re-establishing Bolshevik presence in the area, and it is likely that the network she built only expanded as her correspondence continued. By strategically navigating these complex political landscapes, Krupskaya ensured the party’s success, setting the stage for future victories in the region.

Admittedly, without the letters authored by Krupskaya, fully understanding her organizational role becomes more difficult. Regardless, Edilierov’s letters indicate that Krupskaya served as the central link between party cells, such as those in Baku and Tbilisi, and the Central Committee. For one, Edilierov’s letters often included requests for Krupskaya to pass information along to “Vladimir Ilyich.” Additionally, network building worked both ways. Krupskaya sent the addresses she already had in her repertoire of local comrades to Edilierov, instructing him to establish connections with them. He references one such comrade of Krupskaya’s—a “non-factional, though anti-liquidationist” stationed in Baku. Krupskaya also reminded him of a “Fyodor” whom she advised Edilierov to contact, and he agreed. Thus, through cooperation, she linked handfuls of scattered contacts into a stronger party cell.[178]

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[177] Korespondencja do W.I. Lenina i N. Krupskiej, letters from M.E., 1913-1914.

[178] Ibid.

Moreover, the tone of the letters implies that Krupskaya had more authority and respect than historians have afforded her thus far. Although McNeal acknowledges the essential nature of her party work, he frames it as unskilled labor: "Her contribution to the development of the organization that became Bolshevism required not genius but inexhaustible devotion."[179] While he correctly identifies Krupskaya's "inexhaustible devotion," he downplays and minimizes her skills and expertise. Her contemporaries, however, do not; they never treated her as a faceless secretary. Krupskaya's skills entailed more than impressive organization—she established rapport and long-lasting relationships with her contacts. As a result, they often shared personal details with her, gave updates on their lives, and asked about hers. Edilierov did so in his first letter, sharing his feelings of "what the poets call a longing for the homeland, for Russia" and updates about his family.[180] They also understood the significance of and appreciated her arduous work. In one letter, the sender began with a declaration that reflected this understanding: "Knowing how busy you are, I considered it inappropriate to distract you with my affairs."[181] Building rapport, keeping up a constant communication stream, and recording and safeguarding addresses and contact information for hundreds of people took skill. It took intention and, more importantly, it took autonomy.

In the context of these letters, Krupskaya emerges as an autonomous actor and authority figure—a revolutionary. Through historians' depictions of Krupskaya as Lenin's faceless subordinate, the significance of her work remains unacknowledged. However, by situating her accurately in the historical record as the crucial link between the central party apparatus and its regional organizations, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the

[179] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 101.

[180] Korespondencja do W.I. Lenina i N. Krupskiej, letters from M.E., 1913-1914.

[181] Korespondencja do W.I. Lenina i N. Krupskiej, letters from Olga, 1913-1914.

Bolshevik movement and its eventual success. As a party organizer and secretary, Krupskaya controlled the fate of the party—and its leader.

Doubly Burdened

Krupskaya's diligent party work, however, constitutes only *some* of what she contributed to the revolution; thus, somewhat complicating this analysis. Oakley points out the phenomenon of confusing wifely labor with secretarial labor: "Secretaries are often confused with wives, but the two are not the same, except sometimes in the eye of the beholder…"[182] That being said, this both is and is not the case with Krupskaya. While she formally worked as a secretary and held various other organizational positions within the party apparatus, this role remained separate from and in addition to her "wifely labor."

In this respect, she embodied the phenomenon of the double burden: not only did Krupskaya work for the party, but she also did unpaid domestic labor. Rappaport best describes Krupskaya's place in relation to this phenomenon:

> [Krupskaya] spent her life worrying about her husband's well-being and managing his levels of rage…[she] always considered herself to be Lenin's first and most important political sounding board…[she] too needed a break not just from her burden of party work but also from the "constant turmoil" of housekeeping.[183]

Additionally, as previously mentioned, Krupskaya served as the core of the network of women that Lenin relied upon for his emotional and physical stability. Throughout her memoir, Krupskaya repeatedly mentioned Lenin's "nerves" and her attempts to stabilize him emotionally. In fact, according to Rappaport, Lenin later received a diagnosis of "neurasthenia—a catchall for

[182] Oakley, *Forgotten Wives*, 194.

[183] Rappaport, *Conspirator*, 107-108.

stress."[184] Arguably, Krupskaya bore more than just a 'double' burden. She constantly remained present for Lenin—always at the expense of her health and career.

For instance, one poignant example of Krupskaya's emotional labor exists in her memoir. While Lenin was in prison in the mid-1890s, prior to Krupskaya's arrest, he succumbed to what Krupskaya described as "the prison dumps." In a letter, he told Krupskaya about a window near which prisoners passed when the guards brought them out for exercise. He asked Krupskaya to wait on the street across from the window, hoping to catch a "momentary glimpse" of her. Krupskaya described how she "stood on the pavement for a long time several days running [sic.]." Although the plan ultimately failed for one reason or another—she could not remember why—such instances display her integral supportive role for Lenin. Additionally, her emotional labor at times merged with party work. Throughout Lenin's stints in prison and exile in the late 1890s, she wrote to him "about everything…[she] saw and heard," keeping him informed about party operations.[185]

Moreover, Krupskaya simultaneously held responsibility for the brunt of domestic labor. This included arranging housing for her and Lenin as they moved across Europe, forging Lenin's documents, and typical tasks such as cooking and cleaning. In many respects, Lenin found himself helpless without her. Once Krupskaya's period of exile ended and upon her subsequent arrival in Munich in 1901—where she would assume her position at *Iskra*— she discovered that Lenin had been living without a passport.[186] As usual, she immediately procured papers for him. Rappaport describes that, despite Lenin's relative self-sufficiency, "there is no doubt that

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[184] Ibid., 99.

[185] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin,* 28*,* 31.

[186] Ibid.*,* 59.

Nadya's presence was hugely calming and reassuring for him."[187] Prior to her arrival, "he had been living on cups of tea from a tin mug and his landlady's dodgy food."[188] Only occasionally did Krupskaya get a reprieve from her domestic burdens: "When money allowed, Nadya sometimes offloaded some of her domestic duties and paid her landladies to change the beds and wash their dishes."[189] However, Krupskaya also took on the burden of economizing and ensuring she and Lenin did not live beyond their meager means.[190] All the while, Lenin buried himself in his intellectual pursuits.

These instances were part of a continuous pattern in which Krupskaya shouldered both the practical and logistical burdens of their shared revolutionary life. As such, while domestic labor is traditionally framed as reproductive labor, Krupskaya's emotional and domestic labor directly contributed to the Bolshevik cause and Lenin's political productivity; thus, like productive labor, resulting in tangible outcomes. As Oakly describes, "What is construed as personal work done for a husband actually benefits those who enjoy the fruits of the husband's work."[191] Although Krupskaya never complained about her "enormous workload," her stoicism could not hide the effect it had on her emotional and physical health.[192]

Krupskaya had struggled with health issues since childhood; however, they became increasingly worse throughout exile and continued to plague her until her death. As early as February 1900, when she arrived in Ufa, southwest of the Ural Mountains, to serve the remainder

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[187] Rappaport, *Conspirator*, 37.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Ibid.

[190] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin,* 75.

[191] Oakley, *Forgotten Wives*, 199.

[192] Rappaport, *Conspirator*, 38.

of her exile, her health began to decline.[193] Lenin, too immersed in his party work, did not offer Krupskaya the same unwavering support she had always given him. Then, as she detailed in her memoir, in early 1913, in Poland, her health deteriorated further:

> [M]y heart became tricky, my hands trembled, and I suffered from general debility...The doctor said my case was serious—my nerves and heart were out of order as a result of goitre [sic]...in the state I was in I was hardly fit for work.[194]

Her health steadily continued to decline, until, on July 10th, 1913, she underwent an operation—a thyroidectomy—without general anesthetic as a result of the potential complications of her irregular heartbeat.[195]

Despite this trauma, Krupskaya never slowed down. Rappaport describes how "Nadya was anxious to get back to her party work and Lenin was not inclined to dissuade her."[196] Thus, although her doctor ordered her to spend another fortnight recovering from the operation, she wrote, "we got word from Poronino [Poronin, Poland] that a lot of urgent business was waiting to be attended to…which induced us to go back."[197] According to Rappaport, she "fiercely resisted all requests to cut back on party work and go to the doctor for regular checks."[198] According to Bobrovskaya's testimony, such behavior remained constant for the rest of Krupskaya's life—not even her health could impede upon her dedication to the revolution. Bobrovskaya detailed how, even in 1937, at age 68, "it was very difficult to tear Krupskaya away from her work, to make her rest and undergo medical treatment."[199] When she took breaks, she

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[193] Ibid., 27.

[194] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin,* 263.

[195] Rappaport, *Conspirator*, 237.

[196] Ibid.

[197] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin,* 263.

[198] Rappaport, *Conspirator*, 237-238.

[199] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 45.

expressed profound guilt for being away from her work. In a letter, she admitted: "I feel very queer with no work to do—like a fish out of water."[200]

In this respect, Krupskaya resembled her husband: compulsively work-driven, almost to a fault. Interestingly, when male historical figures possess these qualities, historians attribute qualities of ruthlessness to them. For example, in his 1964 biography, *The Life and Death of Lenin*, Robert Payne describes Lenin as someone with a "fanatical will" who "reached a position of towering eminence in world history."[201] Yet Krupskaya, someone just as dedicated, remains a mere footnote in history, with her obsession and devotion to her work framed as submission to Lenin.

However, with the above context, this traditional framework quickly shatters. Krupskaya's dedication was to the revolution. While she cared for Lenin, she had achieved intellectual and political consciousness far before she met him. More than that, *she* did not define herself through the man she married—historians retrospectively imposed this onto her story, as Oakly describes, "corralling her in that vast array of preconceptions about what it means to be the wife of a famous man."[202] Such deeply gendered retellings of women's histories skew their stories in favor of "great men." Reframing Krupskaya's story is not an effort to glorify her or overstate her achievements. It is an attempt to ameliorate the mistakes in the deeply gendered narratives of Western Soviet historiography. She was human—at times she succeeded, and at times she failed. She had flaws, however, this does not diminish her importance.

Regardless of her successes and failures, Krupskaya's efforts cost her dearly. Both mentally and physically, her health suffered and her marriage greatly impeded her

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[200] Ibid.

[201] Robert Payne, *The Life and Death of Lenin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 13.

[202] Oakley, *Forgotten Wives*, 98.

career—especially once Lenin became disabled as a result of a series of strokes in the early 1920s. Burdened, yet devoted, Krupskaya carried the weight of the revolution on her shoulders. In many respects, Lenin's death was her ultimate liberation: she could finally devote her life to her true passion—education.

Chapter III: A Woman's Problem — Liberation Through Literacy

The problem of eliminating illiteracy is a women's problem above all... but primarily the problem of the married woman... While men can attend literacy centers three times a week in the evening, a woman can attend only on Sunday afternoons, after she's done the cooking, and at most once in the evening. The work of a number of literacy centers must be reorganized in this regard.[203]

Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, c.1928

All Power to the Soviets

After two decades of devoting her life to the Bolshevik cause, Krupskaya finally found herself amid the fall of Russia's tsarist regime. Having abdicated the throne upon the 1917 February Revolution, Tsar Nicholas II relinquished power to the newly instated Provisional Government. While this did not yet bring "all power to the Soviets," as Lenin infamously declared in October, it marked the first step in the road that led to the creation of the Soviet Union. A road in which, contrary to popular historical narratives, Krupskaya played a key role. Later that year, after the official overthrow of the Provisional Government with the October Revolution, Krupskaya, as one of the heads of the newly established People's Commissariat of Education (*Narkompros*), began what would become her life's work: the development of the Soviet education system and the massive Soviet literacy campaign. No longer collaborating with Lenin directly, her work in the field of education constitutes some of the most significant accomplishments of her career.

Arriving in Petrograd in March 1917, Krupskaya began work at the secretariat of the party's Central Committee. Among the uncertainty following the February Revolution, the

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[203] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "Знать Особенности Каждый Района [Know The Features Of Each District]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 5 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/likvidatsiya_negramotnosti_i_malogramotnosti_shkoli_vzroslih_samoobrazovanie.html#917183.

Bolsheviks recognized the importance of Krupskaya's organizational and secretarial expertise.[204] In the early stages of the revolution, the Bolsheviks had to improvise with limited personnel, given the lack of established, experienced party members—making Krupskaya indispensable.[205] However, Cecileia Bobrovskaya alleged that Krupskaya "soon felt cramped there [in the Central Committee]," preferring to return to work among the masses.[206] Thus, the party elected Elena Stasova as the *official* party secretary, and by April Krupskaya abandoned her career in the secretariat, turning her attention to education.[207]

By late April 1917, Krupskaya began educational work in the Vyborg district of Petrograd, devoting her attention to working class youth—which she would continue to write about in articles and publications throughout the 1920s.[208] Again, the Bolsehviks recognized the merit of Krupskaya's educational expertise. Russian historian Vardan Ernestovich Bagdasaryan refers to Krupskaya as "one of the main revolutionary experts on education."[209] Even at such an early stage in the Bolshevik's struggle for power, Krupskaya began planting the seeds of her most revolutionary contributions to the Soviet state and the women's movement.

By late April 1917, Krupskaya began educational work in the Vyborg district of Petrograd, devoting her attention to working class youth—which she would continue to write about in articles and publications throughout the 1920s.[210] On June 3-5, 1917, Krupskaya ran as

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[204] Robert Hatch McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution: Krupskaya and Lenin* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 168.

[205] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 168.

[206] Cecilia Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1940), 29.

[207] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 173.

[208] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 29.

[209] Vardan Ernestovich Bagdasaryan, *Крупская И Педагогическая Эпоха [Krupskaya and the Pedagogical Era]* (Москва: МГОУ, 2019 [Moscow: MGOU, 2019]), 68.

[210] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 29.

the Bolshevik candidate in the Petrograd municipal elections in the working-class.[211] Given her background in education, Krupskaya won the election.[212] According to Bobrovksaya, in the Duma, Krupskaya ran the District Department of Public Education: "she organized a Council of Public Education made up of representatives of shops and factories —of active working men and women who enthusiastically took part in educational work."[213] Though rarely acknowledged in Western historiography, Krupskaya began laying the groundwork for her future work in the Soviet literacy campaign in Vyborg.

According to Bobrovskaya, upon assuming the position as head of the District Department of Public Education, Krupskaya "organized a Council of Public Education made up of representatives of shops and factories—of active working men and women who enthusiastically took part in educational work."[214] In doing so, she gathered a small section of local intelligentsia, loyal to the Bolsheviks, and began work toward the elimination of illiteracy in the Vyborg district. In the district of eight thousand textile plants, she established classes for illiterate and semi-literate factory workers—classes held on company time in conjunction with adult schools, evening courses, libraries, factory clubs, and lectures. [215] At the same time, Krupskaya also focused her attention on establishing a new network of schools, nurseries, kindergartens, and playgrounds.[216]

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[211] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 175.

[212] Ibid.

[213] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 30.

[214] Ibid.

[215] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 176.; Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 30.

[216] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 175-176.

Moreover, throughout her work both in the Vyborg district and leading up to the October Revolution, Krupskaya emerged as a significant figure in the Bolshevik women's and feminist movements. As Bobrovskaya noted, "Krupskaya had always taken a keen interest in the lives of the women workers and the workers' wives," exemplified by her first propaganda pamphlet, *The Woman Worker* (*Zhenshina Rabotnitsa*), published in 1899.[217] However, her hands-on work with working class women drastically increased in 1917, firmly establishing Krupskaya as a feminist symbol for Bolshevik women: "[i]n the factories, among the women workers, Krupskaya felt at home, in her own element."[218] In her memoirs, Krupskaya herself admitted:

> I had a lot of work to do among the women too…I threw myself into the job with enthusiasm. I wanted to draw all the masses into social work, make possible that "people's militia" of which Vladimir Ilyich had spoken.[219]

Through her agitative propaganda efforts, Krupskaya served as one of the party's grassroots links to the working people—especially working women—in a way that Lenin could not.

Bobrovskaya cites one such case in which Krupskaya assumed control over the Vyborg district department for the assistance to wives of soldiers, or Committee for Relief of Soldiers' Wives, after Nina Struve, the wife of former-Marxist-turned-liberal Peter Struve, relinquished control over the committee upon realizing that the soldiers' wives distrusted her.[220] The soldier's wives *did*, however, trust Krupskaya, who saw the potential for radicalization among these women; thus, Bobrovskaya noted, she "carried on systematic [agitational] work among them."[221]

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[217] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 31.

[218] Ibid., 35.

[219] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, trans. Bernard Isaacs (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 363-364.

[220] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 177.; Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 30.

[221] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 31.

Through her agitational propaganda efforts, Krupskaya succeeded in bringing the soldiers' wives to the side of the Bolsheviks, which Bobrovskaya credits for helping the Bolsheviks gain "great success in their fight to win the majority in the Soviets and to expose the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries and their policy of compromise with the bourgeoisie."[222]

In this context, one must remember the importance of women's work in the revolutionary effort. Not only did the International Women's Day demonstrations—which incidentally originated in Krupskaya's Vyborg district—act as a catalyst for the February Revolution, but women workers consistently rallied around the proletarian cause.[223] In her memoirs, Krupskaya described that, when some employers in the Vyborg district refused to comply with the district Duma's call to provide premises for reading and writing classes for the workers, the women workers "kicked up a terrific row [sic.]"[224] As such, Krupskaya's agitation efforts among women workers hold significant historical implications. And, with the beginning of the July days, a period of armed demonstrations in Petrograd against the provisional government, the importance of Krupskaya's work in this respect, and beyond, only grew.

On July 16th, demonstrations began in Krupskaya's Vyborg district, gradually escalating "into a huge general armed demonstration demanding the transfer of power to the Soviets."[225] Throughout the July days, leading up to August, Krupskaya continued, what Bobrovskaya described as, "her energetic work in her district."[226] In August, as the Bolsheviks prepared for what would become the October Revolution, she participated in the Sixth Party Congress.

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[222] Ibid..

[223] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution: 1917-1932* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1984), 38.

[224] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 362.

[225] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 31.

[226] Ibid., 32.

Although historians rarely frame Krupskaya as a proponent for armed uprising, Bobrovskaya clearly stated that, while certain party leaders—Zinoviev, Kamenev, Trotsky—opposed this notion, Krupskaya and "her militant Vyborg district" sided with the revolution.[227]

Meanwhile, Krupskaya continued to shoulder the double burden of political work and domestic responsibilities. Among the chaos of the July days, Lenin had to go into hiding (again), throughout which Krupskaya traveled back and forth, visiting him and providing him with crucial information about the revolutionary developments in Petrograd, all while, she writes, "running his errands, too, *all the time*."[228] Her emotional and practical support for Lenin continued until the official Bolshevik seizure of power.

However, Krupskaya simultaneously made active contributions to the revolution itself—she did not silently spectate as a dutiful, worried wife. According to Bobrovskaya, she actively engaged with machine-gun regiments in her district, keeping in touch with them and helping organize the arming of workers. Bobrovskaya also recalled that Krupskaya helped organize "teaching hundreds of women workers first aid."[229] At the same time—and even during the October Revolution itself—Krupskaya continued this work in the Vyborg district. Although Krupskaya prioritized working in education since March 1917, her participation in and support for the October Revolution deserves credit. It should also be noted that, given the political upheaval and the eventual overthrow of the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty, Krupskaya saw little of Lenin throughout 1917. As her and Lenin's collaboration ceased, she began to develop a more individualized political identity.

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[227] Ibid.; McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 181.

[228] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 375.
Emphasis mine.

[229] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 32.

On October 24th, 1917, as Krupskaya and her district prepared for the armed uprising that would become the October Revolution, district committees worked to arm the workers. In the meantime, Krupskaya visited Smolny—essentially, the headquarters of the revolution—to survey their progress and, hopefully, make contact with Lenin.[230] Far from a passive spectator, Krupskaya played an active role in organizing and facilitating revolutionary efforts on the ground. The following day, at approximately 10 a.m., the Petrograd Soviet released a statement: "The Provisional Government has been overthrown."[231] Thus began Krupskaya's career as a Soviet stateswoman, administrator, and propagandist.

Taking Power - The Narkompros

Almost immediately after the Bolshevik's seizure of power, on November 8th[232] Krupskaya and other Bolshevik leaders—including her long-time comrade Anatoly Lunacharsky—"took power," in Krupskaya's words, at the Ministry of Education (later named the People's Commissariat of Education or *Narkompros*):

> [We]...went to the building of the Ministry which was situated at Chernyshov Bridge. The saboteurs had pickets outside the Ministry…[s]omeone even tried to argue with us on the subject. Apart from the messengers and office cleaners there were no employees at the Ministry. We walked through empty rooms with desks from which the papers had not been cleared away. Then we went into a private office and there held the first meeting of the Board of the People's Commissariat of Education.[233]

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[230] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 374, 386.
Although, as she admits in her memoirs, she cannot remember if she actually ended up seeing Lenin at Smolny that night.

[231] Ibid., 387.

[232] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts Under Lunacharsky October 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 15.

[233] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 416.

Although Krupskaya makes no mention of Lenin in this particular account of her start with the Narkompros, historians—including McNeal and Sheila Fitzpatrick, an expert on Soviet education—routinely emphasize that Lenin was behind her appointment to the Narkompros. Allegedly, upon running into Lunacharsky, who he appointed to take the leading position as People's Commissar of Education, in the corridors of Smolney, Lenin suggested he take on Krupskaya and historian M.N. Pokrovsky as deputies.[234] Krupskaya did not elaborate upon the conditions of her appointment other than a brief mention of the fact that Lenin "persuaded…[her] to take up work on the educational front," although she had already been active in educational work within the Vyborg district.[235]

However, as demonstrated above, Krupskaya's expertise in the field of education made her an obvious choice for the role—with or without Lenin's suggestion. In fact, Pokrovsky would later describe her as "the only Marxist pedagogue in the entire Comintern."[236] McNeal, too, admits that Lunacharsky "had little background in pedagogy."[237] And, in a November 5th, 1927 article in *Vechernyaya Moskva* (*Evening Moscow*), Lunacharsky himself wrote that, despite the tribulations of the ministry's early years, the groundbreaking nature of their work "[was] made possible only thanks to the preparedness and steadfastness of the pedagogical vision of N. K. Krupskaya, the inspiration behind the People's Commissariat of Education."[238] Her appointment to the Narkompros was not by chance.

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[234] Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 192.

[235] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 379.

[236] Bagdasaryan, *Крупская И Педагогическая Эпоха*, 68.

[237] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 204.

[238] Anatoly Lunacharsky. "Мы Занимаем Министерство Народного Просвещения [We are Occupying the Ministry of Education]," *Вечерняя Москва [Evening Moscow]*, November 5, 1927, https://yandex.ru/archive/catalog/f751c0d1-155e-43fd-92f2-d421713c06c4/3?center=914+656.

Moreover, in her memoirs, Krupskaya did not shy away from admitting the breadth of her pedagogical experience: "...we had no great difficulty in getting the hang of things. Most of us were familiar with the organization of education…I had a lot of school experience, too, and all of us were propagandists and agitators."[239] Further bolstering claims of Krupskaya's de facto authority in the Narkompros, she assumed control over the entirety of the Narkompros from March to November 1918 when the Soviet government moved its base of operations to Moscow, while Lunacharsky remained in St. Petersburg.[240] Around this time, she also assumed the title of "deputy narkom," or deputy minister, but dropped it in May 1918 for unspecified reasons.[241] Eventually, Krupskaya assumed one of her most influential roles as the "directing commissar" for the adult education department, later renamed the Glavpolitprosvet in 1920, along with her general role as a member of the Narkompros' executive committee.[242] She remained head of the Glavpolitprosvet until its dissolution in 1930. However, she continued her career in the Narkompros until her death in 1939 under numerous other titles. In 1929, she assumed the position of Deputy People's Commissar of education, earlier, in 1927, she became a member of the Central Committee, in 1924 she joined the Central Control Commission, and in the 1920s she founded the scientific and pedagogical section of the State Academic Council.[243]

Once in Moscow, Krupskaya dove head-first into the tasks of adult education and the designing and construction of, what McNeal describes as, "a humane, cultivated, socialist

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[239] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 416.

[240] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 192.

[241] Ibid.

[242] Ibid.; Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 185.

[243] M.V. Boguslavsky, "Крупская Надежда Константиновна [Krupskaya Nadezhda Konstantinovna]," Большая Российская Энциклопедия - Электронная Версия [The Great Russian Encyclopedia - Electronic Version], n.d., https://old.bigenc.ru/domestic_history/text/2637574.

system of education."[244] This work included the development of libraries, the Communist youth movement, cultural institutions, political propaganda, and combating illiteracy along with working towards women's emancipation.[245] According to Bobrovskaya, "[b]esides the organization of cultural and educational work among adults, Krupskaya was occupied at the time with the organization of children's homes, nurseries, kindergartens, etc."[246] In short, she had her hands full all while taking an active role in the pedagogical debates of her time and developing the pedagogical theory upon which she founded her Narkompros work.

Revolutionary Pedagogy and the New Soviet School

To understand Krupskaya's role in forming the Soviet education system, one must first understand basic tenets of 20th century pedagogical theory. In early 20th century Russia, there existed two main pedagogical models: the revolutionary and neoclassical models. Krupskaya served as the main ideologist for the revolutionary model which relied on Marxist theory and drew heavily from the American educational methods. In the early 1930s, the neoclassical model emerged, advocating for a system akin to that of the tsarist regime in conjunction with some Marxist elements. Ultimately, Krupskaya's revolutionary model lost to the neoclassical model. However, this does not discredit the merit of her theory, nor the role she played in the development of the Soviet school system—especially as her critiques of the tsarist model remained relevant as issues and flaws arose within the neoclassical system.[247]

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[244] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 188.

[245] Ibid.

[246] Bobrovskaya, *Lenin and Krupskaya*, 33-34.

[247] Bagdasaryan, *Крупская И Педагогическая Эпоха*, 6-7.

Historian Vardan Ernestovich Bagdasaryan places particular emphasis on the merit of Krupskaya's pedagogical theory in his 2019 book, *Krupskaya and the Pedagogical Era* (*Krupskaya i Pedagogicheskaya Epokha*), in which he seeks to answer the question of the significance—or, potentially, lack thereof—of Krupskaya's pedagogical legacy. Bagdasaryan concludes in the affirmative, emphasizing the foundational nature of the pedagogical discourse she engaged in and the remarkable results of the education system from which it emerged. Admittedly, Krupskaya's revolutionary pedagogical model did not come to fruition, but her constant support for pedagogical experiments helped develop, through a system of trial and error, what became regarded as one of the best education systems in the world.[248]

The Soviet education system overcame incredible barriers to success—ranging from civil war, to famine, to bureaucratic hurdles—and survived World War II, the development of the atomic bomb, and the Cold War. Bagdasaryan asserts that the Soviet's ability to handle such trials originated "at the systemic level" and that "[t]he foundational principles of this system were developed during the pedagogical debates of the 1920s and 1930s," debates in which Krupskaya played a leading role.[249] Although many of the pedagogical experiments of the era—including Krupskaya's—failed or necessitated reconstruction to better suit the state's needs, Bagdasaryan believes that "this period played a defining role in the genesis of the Soviet pedagogical project and the Soviet historical project as a whole."[250] As such, he agrees that Krupskaya's pedagogical theory "holds a rightful place in the history of global pedagogical and social thought."[251]

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[248] Ibid., 160.

[249] Ibid., 8.

[250] Ibid.

[251] Ibid., 159-160.

Beyond Krupskaya's revolutionary pedagogical model, she, significantly, pioneered Bolshevik feminist pedagogy by utilizing pedagogical theory and the literacy campaign as vehicles for the institutionalization of women's emancipation. The Bolsheviks saw education as a tool for reconstructing Russian society. Krupskaya in particular advocated for a methodology of collectivist education through which, she believed, the Narkompros could foster a new type of society predicated upon Soviet social relations and, ultimately, develop and educate a "new type of person."[252] The education of the "new person"—the Soviet—became a focus of Krupskaya's efforts in restructuring the school system and she incorporated the core tenets of Bolshevik feminism into her methodology in an effort to further the struggle for women's emancipation. With her help, the Narkompros eventually institutionalized a new, progressive Soviet system of gender construction—arguably one Krupskaya's most understudied, yet remarkable achievements—and bolstered women's participation in Soviet politics through the literacy campaign.

The New Soviet Woman

Yet, ironically, historians seldom discuss Krupskaya as a champion for women's emancipation. While most admit that she had an interest in feminist and women's movements, they neglect to elaborate on the important role she played in merging Marxist and feminist theory and how her feminist activism pervaded the Soviet state building projects of the 1920s and 1930s. McNeal in particular takes care to acknowledge that Krupskaya "was…the party's first writer on the liberation of women," yet simultaneously downplays her views, portraying them as

[252] Ibid., 77.

"conservative"; thus, less impactful.[253] Furthermore, he portrays Krupskaya, and other Bolshevik feminists, as pawns of the male-led state:

> …she and a few others served as tokens of the party's traditional belief in equal rights for women. In reality they were symbols of the bygone society of the radical intelligentsia, which had been a more open society for women than the socialist order that it created.[254]

McNeal's narrative of the "de-radicalization" of Bolshevik feminism casts aside the significant progress made by the Soviet state with respect to women's emancipation and the institutionalization of more progressive gender ideology. Therefore, he casts aside Krupskaya's role in such progressive progress and, yet again, forces her into a subordinate, ineffective role in history at the hands of "great men."

Soviet women's and gender historian Dr. Anna Krylova refers to these narratives as "Cold War paradigms": narratives that insist "on the socialist state's instrumental use of women and the perseverance of traditional gender norms despite economic and social changes introduced into women's and men's lives by socialist governments."[255] In the case of Soviet history, as epitomized by McNeal's book, these narratives "[tell] the story of [the] de-radicalization of the Bolshevik and, later, Soviet commitment to women's emancipation," presuming a fundamental conflict between the agendas of feminism and Marxism.[256] Such narratives, especially in the 1970s, served as a way to argue against the Soviet's emancipatory historiography and they continue to pervade in modern Soviet women's and gender scholarship.

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[253] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 274.

[254] Ibid., 275.

[255] Anna Krylova, "Legacies of the Cold War and the Future of Gender in Feminist Histories of Socialism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (Routledge, 2021), 43, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781138347762-8.

[256] Krylova, "Legacies of the Cold War and the Future of Gender in Feminist Histories of Socialism," 43.

To combat Cold War paradigms, Krylova suggests, scholars must fundamentally reconstruct gender analytics to encompass the "uneven, contradictory and, still transformative impact [of Bolshevik feminism] on Soviet society."[257] This entails breaking away from the Western understanding of gender relations and recognizing that Soviet society predicated its understanding of "womanhood" and "manhood" on a fundamentally different framework. Therefore, according to Krylova, Western gender analytics lack the theoretical and analytical tools to engage with non-binary, yet heterosexual relationships under socialism; thus, falling short of "heterosexual regimes of imagining and enacting womanhood and manhood that do not warrant…oppositional hierarchical connotations of difference."[258]As such, Krupskaya's history serves as an effective counter-narrative to Cold War paradigms. By marginalizing her, historians have done a disservice not only to her legacy but also to Soviet historiography in general.

Ultimately, an examination of Krupskaya's feminist legacy requires an acknowledgment of the complexities of emancipatory efforts for women, in order to accurately represent her role as a Bolshevik feminist. Lacking this perspective, McNeal fundamentally misunderstands Bolshevik feminism, undermining Krupskaya's ideological consistency with the principles of the socialist women's and feminist movements. He continuously invokes her supposed "conservatism" to diminish the value of her work, portraying her as a less radical women's activist, one that capitulated to the desires of the more conservative party men, such as Stalin, falsely claiming that her activism did not include "all-out attack[s] on male chauvinism."[259] In this sense, McNeal distorts her contributions and fails to recognize the depth of her commitment to Bolshevik feminism.

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[257] Ibid., 46.

[258] Ibid., 47.

[259] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 275.

On the contrary, Krupskaya pushed a progressive agenda on gender and women's emancipation from the beginning of her revolutionary career. As early as 1899, she wrote her first propaganda pamphlet, *The Woman Worker*—the first Marxist pamphlet on women's conditions in Russia.[260] In *The Woman Worker*, she urged women to join the revolutionary struggle alongside and as equals of men and critiqued the powerlessness of peasant women brought on by their dependence on their husbands. [261] Openly writing about men's subjugation of women, Krupskaya by no means avoided the topic of male chauvinism.

Moreover, in 1910, she published an article in the journal *Svobodnoe Vospitanie* (*Free Education*) entitled "Should Boys be Taught 'Women's Work'?" (*Sleduet li obuchat malchikov babyemu delu?*)—one of her first works on the topic of merging feminist principles with education. Here, too, contrary to McNeal's claims, Krupskaya openly attacked male chauvinism:

> The hypocrisy of these [men's] speeches is evident from the fact that the men who talk at length about the great respect household work deserves never stoop to actively participating in it. Why? Because, deep down, they despise this work, considering it the task of a less developed being with lower needs.
>
> All this talk about women being 'naturally destined' to manage the household is just as absurd as the arguments once made by slaveholders that slaves were 'naturally destined' to be slaves.[262]

As a champion of women's emancipation, Krupskaya continued to push for the realization of the Bolshevik feminist agenda and actively institutionalized its tenets through her work in the Narkompros.

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[260] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, *The Woman Worker*, trans. Mick Costello (1899; repr., Manifesto Press Cooperative Limited, 2017), i.

[261] Krupskaya, *The Woman Worker*, ii.

[262] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya,"Следует ли Обучать Мальчиков «Бабьему Делу»? [Should Boys Be Taught "Women's Work"?]" in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 1 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/avtobiograficheskie_stati_dorevolyutsionnie_raboti.html#0.

However, in his commitment to Cold War paradigms, McNeal ignores the instrumental roles of female Bolsheviks as architects of state institutions—institutions that ostensibly adhered to the tenets of Bolshevik feminism. He goes as far as to dismiss Krupskaya's efforts in constructing institutions such as day-care facilities and public dining rooms as "limited practical suggestions," rather than legitimate solutions for working women too overburdened with housework to participate in politics.[263] This misunderstanding of Bolshevik feminism inaccurately skews the historical narrative.

In reality, in the early years of the republic, Bolshevik feminists considered more progressive forms of socialized housework and childcare as essential tenets of the struggle for women's emancipation.[264] They believed that women, once freed from family and household obligations, could "cross traditional gender lines" and become politically active.[265] Such positions came to light at the November 1918 First All-Russian Congress of Women Workers and Peasants in which, according to Krylova, delegates "called for the abolition of the family" and presented the government with "a list of urgent measures to aid the process," including the very measures presented by Krupskaya above: "communal dining halls, public catering establishments, state-run laundry services, clothes-mending centers, nurseries, kindergartens, children's homes and colonies."[266] Dismissing the significance of such efforts perpetuates the narrative of the Soviet Union's "de-radicalization" regarding women's emancipation.

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[263] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 275.

[264] Anna Krylova, "Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism," in *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, 2017, 428, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137024.020.

[265] Krylova, "Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism," 430.

[266] Ibid.

In contrast, Krylova argues that projects such as those suggested by Krupskaya and the congress delegates *did*, in fact, constitute impactful progressive efforts. She suggests an expansion of the scope of gender analysis "beyond the institutional and social terrains that the early Bolshevik legislation and party initiatives treated as primary sites of state intervention."[267] This nuanced analytical framework reveals the interplay between the women's movement and the development of the Soviet school system.

Although the Soviet school system faced routine criticism for being "bourgeois" and unoriginal, it became a tool for socializing and resocializing children; thus, making it a powerful instrument for state development and propaganda.[268] According to Krylova, by the early 1930s, with the beginning of rapid industrialization of the first five-year plan taking effect, the status of the Narkompros drastically changed: "the Soviet school became the largest state-sponsored project of the first half of the twentieth century built on the rejection of traditional gender roles," turning it into "a grand social laboratory where core socialist feminist ideals acquired their most radical institutionalized form."[269] This radical institutionalization of feminist ideals dismantles McNeal's portrayal of Krupskaya's "conservatism."

In fact, Krylova directly names Krupskaya as she credits the work of "key figures at the top of the People's Commissariat of Education [Narkompros]," for the school system's success in regards to proliferating feminist ideals.[270] Krupskaya especially, as a Narkompros member with ties to the Women's Department of the Communist Party (*Zhenotdel*), utilized the main premises

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[267] Krylova, "Legacies of the Cold War and the Future of Gender in Feminist Histories of Socialism," 43.; Krylova, "Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism," 441.

[268] Krylova, "Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism," 441.

[269] Ibid.

[270] Ibid.

of Bolshevik feminism—"the historical contingency and open-endedness of female and male personalities"—as the "building blocks of a thoroughly integrated school system."[271] The fact that Krupskaya, as early as 1910, acknowledged the ambiguity of gender and pushed for the breakdown of traditional gender roles, bolsters Krylova's claim.

In her aforementioned 1910 article, "Should Boys be Taught 'Women's Work'?," Krupskaya suggested integrationist educational policies and aggressively combated socially constructed notions of gender:

> In essence, there is nothing inherent in household work that makes it more suitable to a woman's individuality than to a man's...shared work and equal conditions for development foster mutual understanding and emotional closeness among young people of both sexes, laying the foundation for healthy relations between men and women…
> …in most families, distinctions between boys and girls are introduced from a very young age…Girls are given dolls and toy dishes, while boys receive trains and toy soldiers. By the time boys reach school age, they have already been taught to disdain "girls' work" and the activities associated with it. To be fair, this disdain is often superficial, and a different approach in school can quickly eliminate it. To this end, boys should be taught sewing, knitting, and mending clothes—tasks essential in life…[272]

The Narkompros incorporated the same integrationist policies Krupskaya wrote about in 1910 into the Soviet education system. In collaboration with the Komsomol—the party youth organization—and the Ministry of Defense, they instituted paramilitary training for boys and girls. This contributed to, what Krylova describes as, the "re-gendering of the status of the modern citizen-soldier as shared between men and women"—which became especially important during World War II.[273]

Moreover, the Narkompros not only dismantled the "social components of conventional stereotypes in school," but also recruited teachers to help "educate parents on how not to recreate

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[271] Ibid.

[272] Krupskaya, "Следует ли Обучать Мальчиков «Бабьему Делу»?," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[273] Krylova, "Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism," 442.

'bourgeois' gender roles (via traditional division of domestic chores, for example) at home."[274] Presumably, such work would have, at least partially, fallen under the jurisdiction of extracurricular education—Krupskaya's department.

Through such efforts, Krylova asserts, the Narkompros effectively helped foster an environment for children to experiment with unconventional "female and male personas" and exposed them to "the perpetual open-endedness of the very question of what constituted appropriate, socialist womanhood and manhood."[275] Although, as Krylova acknowledges, Soviet gender construction could be inconsistent, ambiguous, and, at times, contradictory, the Soviet school system nevertheless provided the first post-revolutionary generation with a semblance of "Bolshevik gender education," outside the confines of essentialist gender construction, and opened the floor for gender discourse in which "[e]ven the very notion of the 'natural' was an open question…"[276] As a top-level Narkompros administrator, Krupskaya intimately involved herself in the construction of this system and notes of her pedagogical and feminist thought permeated throughout the institution. To accurately situate Krupskaya in Soviet history, historians must portray her as such and acknowledge her impact on the construction of Soviet society.

LikBez

Not only did education play an important role in constructing a new Soviet society, but it played a remarkably important role in the Soviet Union's success and longevity. According to historian Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, the Narkompros' educational developments served as the

[274] Ibid.

[275] Ibid., 443.

[276] Ibid., 444.

foundation for Soviet state planning and technological and economic progress.[277] Although some historians argue that the Narkompros built its success on the foundation of the tsarist school system, Riasanovsky points out that, regardless of the Soviet's adaptation of the neoclassical pedagogical model, their "main…contribution has been the dissemination of education at all levels and on a vast scale," a feat that would not have been possible within the confines of the imperial system.[278] One such contribution—one which truly exemplifies the scope of Narkompros operations—includes the illiteracy elimination campaign, which fell under Krupskaya's jurisdiction in the Glavpolitprosvet.[279]

Admittedly, one might downplay the success of Narkompros in the realm of literacy and education, given that efforts to improve education and literacy began as early as 1861 under Tsar Alexander II.[280] However, according to Bagdasaryan, the tsarist educational reforms progressed at an incredibly slow pace:

> In the Russian Empire, according to the all-Russian census, in 1897 only 27% of the population was literate…On the eve of the 1917 revolution, the share of literate people in Russia was, by minimum estimates, 30%, by maximum estimates - 45%…over twenty years the growth in the proportion of literate people was only 3%, in the second - 18%. Even if it was 18%, for Russia such dynamics promised big problems in the future. Going forward at such a pace, Russia would have been able to achieve universal literacy only by the early 1980s.[281]

Additionally, the tsarist government never implemented compulsory primary education—which Krupskaya felt was a necessity for eliminating illiteracy—nor did they possess the ability to do

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[277] Nicholas Valentine Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 631.

[278] Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 634.

[279] Kathryn Martin, "The Baba and the Bolshevichka: Learning to Read Soviet Representations of Women's Literacy in Early Soviet Culture," *Journal of Languages, Texts, and Society* 2 (2017): 55, https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/languagestextssociety/documents/lts-journal/issue-2/baba-and-bolshevichka-language-texts-society-issue-2.pdf.

[280] Martin, "The Baba and the Bolshevichka," 59.

[281] Bagdasaryan, *Крупская И Педагогическая Эпоха*, 129.

so effectively.[282] That said, the Glavpolitprosvet's illiteracy elimination campaign managed to rapidly accelerate the growth of literacy in the Soviet Union, and remained central to state objectives, even becoming a feature of Stalin's first and second five-year-plans.[283]

Moreover, the Glavpolitprosvet managed to accomplish this feat despite the immense challenges facing the early Soviet state. The Narkompros committed to the literacy campaign in the early 1920s, among the devastation of the Civil war, famine, and an economic crisis. The 1921 adoption of the New Economic Policy, designed to deal with the economic crisis, and its subsequent implementation in 1922 hit Krupskaya's department particularly hard. The Glavpolitprosvet suffered significant budget cuts and shrank from a reported staff of half a million people to only 10,000, and the party cut them off from their one million rouble party subsidy.[284] This, coupled with paper and personnel shortages, set the Narkompros back significantly in regards to the elimination of illiteracy. Ultimately, they did not achieve their original goal of eradicating illiteracy by the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution; However, the Soviet literacy campaign still reached a remarkable level of success within two decades.[285]

While a comprehensive analysis of the Soviet education system, literacy campaign, and pedagogical models necessarily requires an acknowledgement of these challenges, the Narkompros' work still had an enormous impact on the development of Soviet society and played an instrumental role in state development, legitimizing the new Bolshevik regime. Rather

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[282] Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 353.

[283] Martin, "The Baba and the Bolshevichka," 54.

[284] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 196-197.

[285] Martin, "The Baba and the Bolshevichka," 54.

than attempting to evaluate or quantify the ultimate success or failure of Narkompros programs and initiatives, or making broader moral judgements about them, this analysis aims to showcase Krupskaya's autonomy and her substantial role as an administrator, beyond Lenin's wife, combating Cold War paradigms. Even in her failures, Krupskaya was more than just a wife.

Krupskaya had spoken out about the issue of illiteracy in Russia as early as the 1890s. Now, as head of the Glavpolitprosvet, she took initiative in developing a comprehensive illiteracy elimination campaign for the Soviet Union. Having worked in adult education for decades, she recognized the dire nature of Russia's illiteracy problem. Historians estimate that, at the time of the Russian Revolution, the literate population in Russia constituted only about 30-45% of people.[286] Meanwhile, several industrialized Western nations boasted almost 100% literacy.[287] Recognizing this reality, Krupskaya correctly identified the significant issue of illiteracy in rural areas of the country. She aimed most of her work towards combating rural illiteracy and illiteracy among women—especially rural women, who were among the least literate in the Soviet Union.[288]

In this sense, Krupskaya expanded the scope of her work for women's emancipation as she continuously emphasized the importance of women's literacy and the significant roles women played in the literacy campaign. According to census data, in 1897 the literacy rate among women between the ages of 9-49 within the entire empire amounted to only

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[286] Bagdasaryan, *Крупская И Педагогическая Эпоха*, 129.

[287] Ibid., 128.

[288] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya,"Ликвидация Безграмотности [Liquidating Illiteracy]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 5 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/likvidatsiya_negramotnosti_i_malogramotnosti_shkoli_vzroslih_samoobrazovanie.html#24404.

16.6%—among the population of rural women in particular, only 12.5%. While men also had low literacy rates, they surpassed women significantly at 40.3% literacy within the same cohort across the empire, and 35.5% in rural areas. [289] This discrepancy resulted from the Imperial system lacking provisions for adult education, which severely impacted literacy among non-aristocratic women.[290] As such, Krupskaya and the Glavpolitprosvet worked to resolve the issue of illiteracy at large, with a concentration on female literacy.

Thus, during one of the most turbulent periods in Soviet history, the Civil War (1917-1922), Krupskaya and the Narkompros began their battle with illiteracy. Due to the Civil War, these efforts coincided with famine, epidemics, and disorganization—all of which proved detrimental to the educational and literacy levels of the newly formed RSFSR.[291] According to historian Peter Kenez, in his 1982 article "Liquidating Illiteracy in Revolutionary Russia," given the dire Civil War conditions, "In the first two years of Soviet power the war against illiteracy was largely fought with words: speeches, announcements, meetings, but little instruction."[292] Nevertheless, through these efforts, the Narkompros and Glavpolitprosvet built an essential foundation for their successful campaign.

As early as 1918, Krupskaya began to develop some of the most influential organizational strategies for the literacy campaign. At a 1918 congress on education, she delivered a speech on behalf of the Glavpolitprosvet in which she advocated for the creation of a

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[289] Центральное статистическое управление при Совете Министров СССР [Central Statistical Administration of the USSR], *Народное образование, наука и культура в СССР: Статистический сборник* [Public Education, Science, and Culture in the USSR: Statistical Yearbook] (Moscow: Statistika, 1971), 21.

[290] Martin, "The Baba and the Bolshevichka," 50.

[291] Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 631.

[292] Peter Kenez, "Liquidating Illiteracy in Revolutionary Russia," *Russian History* 9, no. 2/3 (1982): 178, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24652703.

network of *likpunkty* (centers or points for illiteracy elimination). According to Kenez, Krupskaya's significant ideas in this regard led to the congress passing a resolution "which called for freeing illiterate workers an hour or two each week from labor in order to participate in these *likpunkty*."[293] Although, as with many resolutions and decrees of the early Soviet government, the creation of *likpunkty* and the literacy campaign remained ideas committed to paper that would only *later* manifest in their real form. Kenez reports that Krupskaya's *likpunkty* became a reality in the 1920s when "thousands of these little schools [*likpunkty*] were indeed created and became the major tools in the struggle."[294]

The campaign officially began on December 16, 1919, when the *Sovnarkom* (Council of People's Commissars) passed its famous decree on the eradication of illiteracy—an event later celebrated as a national Soviet holiday.[295] The decree essentially institutionalized the Soviet government's commitment to the literacy campaign and declared it the responsibility of the Narkompros, giving them rights to organize schools and draft literate citizens as teachers for the cause.[296]

The provisions outlined in the 1919 decree reveal the political importance of the campaign. The decree exemplifies what Dr. Kathryn Martin, in her article on Soviet women's literacy, describes as, "the overtly ideological nature" of the literacy campaign.[297] The first line of the decree states: "For the purpose of allowing the entire population of the Republic to participate consciously in the political life of the country, the Council of People's Commissars

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[293] Kenez, "Liquidating Illiteracy," 179.

[294] Ibid.

[295] Ibid., 180.

[296] Ibid.

[297] Martin, "The Baba and the Bolshevichka," 54.

decrees...”[298] The Bolsheviks recognized that the legitimacy of the new Soviet state rested upon a literate populace that could be reached by written propaganda and their subsequent participation in politics. Kenez describes the illiteracy elimination campaign as “one of the means through which the regime attempted to spread its ideology and to mobilize the population for its purposes.”[299] Krupskaya recognized this, and routinely invoked this notion to advocate for the Narkompros’ campaign: “Without basic literacy, we will not have a socialist system.”[300] Within this context, Krupskaya’s efforts in illiteracy elimination testify to the instrumental role she played in Soviet state building and, in conjunction, women’s emancipation.

By the summer of 1920, the Narkompros officially established the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Elimination of Illiteracy (*Cheka LikBez*), setting in motion the practical implementation of the literacy campaign.[301] Technically, as the People’s Commissar of Education and head of the Narkompros, Lunacharsky headed the LikBez. However, on November 12th, the Narkompros officially dissolved Krupskaya’s “out-of-school department” and established her new department: the “Main Political Education Committee of the RSFSR Narkompros,” or the Glavpolitprosvet.[302] The Glavpolitprosvet controlled libraries, reading huts,

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[298] Kenez, “Liquidating Illiteracy,” 180.

[299] Ibid., 186.

[300] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, “Из Выступления На II Всероссийском Съезде Губернских Отделов Народного Образования [From a Speech at the 2nd All-Russian Congress of Provincial Departments of Public Education],” in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 5 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/likvidatsiya_negramotnosti_i_malogramotnosti_shkoli_vzroslih_samoobrazovanie.html#24404.

[301] Bagdasaryan, *Крупская И Педагогическая Эпоха*, 75.
Cheka LikBez is a portmanteau referring to the original Cheka (secret police of the Soviet Union) and LikBez (elimination of illiteracy).

[302] Ibid.

schools for adults, and, later, communist universities and party schools. As such, the LikBez operated under the jurisdiction of Krupskaya's department.[303]

From this point forward, Krupksaya and her Glavpolitprosvet held the responsibility of implementing and organizing the illiteracy elimination campaign. The women's department of the Central Committee, the Zhenotdel, also took an active role in the campaign.[304] Although Krupskaya was not a Zhenotdel member, in the past she had worked closely with its leaders Inessa Armand and Alexandra Kollontai. The campaign divided its target students into two categories: the illiterate (*negramotnye*) and the semi-litearate (*malogramotnye*).[305] According to Martin, many of those who could read and write fell under the semi-literate category due to the LikBez's definition of literacy which, she describes, "went far beyond the conventional Western definition, and included having a working knowledge of the various areas of production most pertinent to the Soviet Union, including but not limited to the textile, metallurgy and mining industries."[306] Thus, with the establishment of the Glavpolitprosvet and LikBez, the ideas Krupskaya proposed in speeches and pedagogical articles began to come to fruition.

As mentioned before, in 1920, the Narkompros built the network of *likpunkty* Krupskaya had suggested in 1918. In his article, Kenez cites LikBez statistics: "in November, 1920, the country had 12,067 *likpunkty* teaching 278,637 students."[307] The Glavpolitprosvet sought to further mobilize their campaign by supplying *likpunkty* and reading rooms with printed materials—a goal inhibited by the paper shortage following the Civil War. Yet, by 1925,

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[303] Ibid.

[304] Martin, "The Baba and the Bolshevichka," 52.

[305] Ibid., 56.

[306] Ibid., 55.

[307] Kenez, "Liquidating Illiteracy," 185.

although Krupskaya reported that progress had been "slow so far," the Glavpolitprosvet managed to send 350,000 textbooks to the countryside. Alongside the contributions from other agencies such as the All-Union Society for Land and Labor, Krupskaya reported a total of more than one million books sent to rural villages.[308] However, in the early 1920s, the literacy campaign faced issues more serious than the paper shortage.

Despite some semblance of progress in the campaign, their efforts stagnated with the 1921 New Economic Policy (NEP). As a result, some historians heavily critique the Narkompros' attempted reforms during the NEP period. Even critics like McNeal concede that the disaster in the education system resulted from the Civil War and economic collapse rather than from within the Narkompros.[309] The fallout from the Civil war and subsequent transition to the NEP, among other detrimental external factors such as famine, resulted in the closure of many schools and left many of the remaining schools under repaired, without heating, and understaffed.[310] As shown in Table I., Soviet statistics show that, between 1914 and 1921, the number of elementary and secondary schools, as well as the number of students, increased. However, after 1921, the number of elementary schools rapidly declined, only rising again in

[308] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "Культурно-Просветительная Работа Среди Крестьянок (Доклад На Совещании По Работе Среди Крестьянок При ЦК РКП(б)) [Cultural and Educational Work Among Peasant Women (Report at the Meeting on Work Among Peasant Women at the Central Committee of the RKP(b))]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 5 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/likvidatsiya_negramotnosti_i_malogramotnosti_shkoli_vzroslih_samoobrazovanie.html#24404.

[309] McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution*, 204-205.

[310] Krupskaya, "Знать Особенности Каждый Района," in *Педагогические Сочинения.*

1924.[311] To the detriment of the literacy campaign, this effectively brought about a new cohort of illiterate children.

Table I

	Elementary Education		Secondary Education	
	Schools	Pupils	Schools	Pupils
1914-1915	104,610	7,235,988	1,790	563,480
1920-1921	114,235	9,211,351	4,163	564,613
1921-1922	99,396	7,918,751	3,137	520,253
1922-1923	87,559	6,808,157	2,478	586,306
1923-1924	87,258	7,075,810	2,358	752,726
1924-1925	91,086	8,429,490	1,794	710,431
1925-1926	101,193	9,487,110	1,640	706,804
1926-1927	108,424	9,903,439	1,708	784,871

Table I: The steady rise in educational facilities since the famine years

Source: Soviet Union Information Bureau, Washington D.C., *The Soviet Union: Facts, Descriptions, Statistics* (Washington D.C.: Soviet Union Information Bureau, 1929), 200, https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1928/sufds/index.htm.

Nevertheless, in her speeches, reports, and articles on the subject of illiteracy from the early 1920s, Krupskaya paints a picture of gradual success in certain areas of the campaign. In the early years of the campaign, the majority of the progress took place in urban, industrialized areas.[312] However, Krupskaya found the campaign's results in rural areas unsatisfactory; thus, she

[311] Soviet Union Information Bureau, Washington D.C., *The Soviet Union: Facts, Descriptions, Statistics* (Washington D.C.: Soviet Union Information Bureau, 1929), 200, https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1928/sufds/index.htm.

[312] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "Культурный Поход В Деревню [Cultural Campaign in the Village]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 5 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow:

continued to doubt the campaign's success as late as 1928. Yet, available statistics demonstrate the campaign's progress in both regions. By 1926, urban literacy rates in the USSR among those aged 9-49 rose to 80.9%—a 7.5% rise since 1920. Rural literacy rates among the same cohort, while they remained at a much lower level—50.6% in 1926—rose a total of 12.9% since 1920.[313]

In an attempt to further the campaign's success, according to Krupskaya's June 1924 speech at the Third All-Russian Congress on the Elimination of Illiteracy, the Glavpolitprosvet implemented compulsory measures to achieve literacy.[314] While Krupskaya strongly advocated for universal compulsory education, she nevertheless warned against excessively harsh measures, calling them "a double-edged sword."[315] However, historians like Bagdasaryan credit these compulsory measures for part of the campaign's success, regardless of their "draconian" nature.[316]

Among the steadily increasing literacy rates and the growing numbers of schools and literacy institutions in 1924, Krupskaya turned her attention to the rural areas of the country—a region which the Bolsheviks notoriously struggled to reach ideologically. In a June 1924 speech at the Third All-Russian Congress on the Elimination of Illiteracy, Krupskaya outlined further

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Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]),https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/likvidatsiya_negramotnosti_i_malogramotnosti_shkoli_vzroslih_samoobrazovanie.html#1085875.

[313] Центральное статистическое управление, *Народное образование*, 21.

[314] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "Ликвидация Неграмотности В Деревне (Выступление На III Всероссийском Съезде По Ликвидации Неграмотности) [Elimination of Illiteracy in the Village (Speech at the Third All-Russian Congress on the Elimination of Illiteracy)]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 5 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/likvidatsiya_negramotnosti_i_malogramotnosti_shkoli_vzroslih_samoobrazovanie.html#528456.

[315] Krupskaya, "Ликвидация Неграмотности В Деревне (Выступление На III Всероссийском Съезде По Ликвидации Неграмотности)," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[316] Bagdasaryan, *Крупская И Педагогическая Эпоха*, 75.

measures to strengthen the Glavpolitprosvet's illiteracy campaign, focusing on rural areas and women.[317] The primary obstacle to women's literacy, she later reported in a 1928 *Pravda* article, remained the double burden faced by married peasant women:

> While men can attend literacy classes three times a week in the evening, women can only attend on Sundays during the day, after cooking and completing their household duties, and at most once in the evening.[318]

As such, Krupskaya believed that rural women constituted the sectors of the population most vulnerable to illiteracy and among which illiteracy proved the most detrimental.

Moreover, her concern over rural women's illiteracy extended past ideological concerns. At a January 1925 meeting on work among peasant women, she reported that:

> …more than 50% of children under the age of five die due to the fact that peasant women do not feed their children properly, do not know how to protect children from infectious diseases.[319]

For Krupskaya, eliminating illiteracy among these populations would arm rural women with the ability to remedy these problems through education. However, in this pursuit, Krupskaya never framed the women as helpless victims. In her eyes, these women were not weak. In fact, she declared, "In all this great explanatory work, the peasant woman must take the most active

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[317] Krupskaya, "Ликвидация Неграмотности В Деревне (Выступление На III Всероссийском Съезде По Ликвидации Неграмотности)," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[318] Krupskaya, "Знать Особенности Каждый Района," in *Педагогические Сочинения.*

[319] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "Культурно-Просветительная Работа Среди Крестьянок (Доклад На Совещании По Работе Среди Крестьянок При ЦК РКП(б)) [Cultural and Educational Work Among Peasant Women (Report at the Meeting on Work Among Peasant Women at the Central Committee of the RKP(b))]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 5 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/likvidatsiya_negramotnosti_i_malogramotnosti_shkoli_vzroslih_samoobrazovanie.html#635004.

part."[320] As such, the literacy campaign must be recognized as an effort aligned with Krupskaya's Bolshevik feminist ideals.

With the help of the Zhenotdel staff, who ran many local efforts for the campaign, the LikBez campaign became yet another avenue for institutionalizing new Soviet gender roles and became a path towards women's emancipation.[321] The Glavpolitprosvet and Zhenotdel came to the general consensus that once women became literate, they could educate their fellow women.[322] According to Martin, both departments placed a significant emphasis on the importance of education in the struggle for women's emancipation, a notion the Zhenotdel emphasized in their propaganda posters for LikBez.[323] Martin describes how, in one poster captioned "Knowledge and labor will give us a new way of life," the Zhenotdel placed knowledge before labor in the "hierarchy of what will bring the new life to women in the Soviet Union," speaking to the importance they placed on literacy and education.[324] With the help of Krupskaya's connections with the Zhenotdel and her commitment to Bolshevik feminism, women became vital participants "in one of the most socially radical political revolutions in history…[and] played key roles in the Sovietisation of Russia."[325] Fittingly, women became the symbol for the bringing of education and political enlightenment—a role ultimately exemplified by the woman at the forefront of the campaign: Krupskaya.

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[320] Krupskaya, "Культурно-Просветительная Работа Среди Крестьянок (Доклад На Совещании По Работе Среди Крестьянок При ЦК РКП(б))," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[321] Martin, "The Baba and the Bolshevichka," 56.

[322] Ibid., 58.

[323] Ibid., 52.

[324] Ibid., 58.

[325] Ibid., 64.

Around 1928, as Kruspkaya and the Glavpolitprosvet turned more of their attention to the rural USSR, the campaign gradually expanded into the rural villages and, by 1929, the campaign had widely spread to the countryside and achieved significant success.[326] Krupskaya reported success both in elimination of illiteracy *and* in the introduction of universal compulsory primary education and mass preschool education in some of the most "backward" areas of the country—all of which she lauded as "a huge achievement."[327] By 1931, she reported "significant progress in eliminating illiteracy":

> We have started to conduct universal education: we conducted it in the RSFSR in the amount of four years, covering children from 8 to 11 years-97.1 % (without autonomous republics), in the autonomous republics — 87.9. The school has begun to be polytechnized, attached to factories and collective farms, and we are fighting for the quality of our studies…There is no doubt that the cultural level of the country has significantly increased; a conscious attitude to work has grown.[328]

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[326] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "К 15-Летию Декрета О Ликвидации Неграмотности [On the 15th Anniversary of the Decree on the Elimination of Illiteracy]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 5 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/likvidatsiya_negramotnosti_i_malogramotnosti_shkoli_vzroslih_samoobrazovanie.html#1626175.

[327] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "Декрет Остается В Силе (Выступление На Торжественном Заседании Всероссийской Чрезвычайной Комиссии По Ликвидации Безграмотности И Президиумов Центрального И Московского Советов Общества «Долой Неграмотность») [The Decree Remains in Effect (Speech at the Ceremony of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Elimination of Illiteracy and Presidiums of the Central and Moscow Councils of the Society "Down with Illiteracy")]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 5 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/likvidatsiya_negramotnosti_i_malogramotnosti_shkoli_vzroslih_samoobrazovanie.html#1268026.

[328] Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, "10 Лет Назад И Сейчас [10 Years Ago and Now]," in *Педагогические Сочинения в Десяти Томах* [*Pedagogical Works in Ten Volumes*], ed. Іончарова, Каирова, and Константинова, vol. 5 (Москва: Институт Теории и Истории Педагогики АНП РСФСР, 1957 [Moscow: Institute for the Theory and History of Pedagogy of the ANP RSFSR, 1957]), https://royallib.com/read/krupskaya_nadegda/likvidatsiya_negramotnosti_i_malogramotnosti_shkoli_vzroslih_samoobrazovanie.html#1455808.

However, their work was still not done. Krupskaya continued to agitate for further development of advanced education and the political enlightenment of the masses.[329]

By 1934, 15 years after the passing of the Narkompros decree to eliminate illiteracy, the Narkompros managed to largely resolve the "enormous difficulties" they faced in regards to staffing, location, and material and managed to fully introduce universal compulsory education on an elementary school level—surpassing the achievements of the former tsarist regime.[330] And, with the expansion of the campaign into the rural areas of the Union in 1929, Krupskaya declared in a 1934 *Izvestia* (*News*) article:

> Thanks to the cultural campaign, it was possible to eliminate the illiteracy of many millions. Now the face of the village has changed, the position of women has changed, and the conditions that gave rise to illiteracy have been eliminated. This is the crux of the question. Basically, the RSFSR became literate.[331]

With these words, Krupskaya encompassed the true scope of the literacy campaign's accomplishments. While a small percentage of the population remained illiterate until the USSR effectively reached 100% literacy around 1950, with the help of Krupskaya, the remarkable accomplishments of the LikBez campaign changed the course of Soviet history.

Ultimately, with the literacy campaign, Krupskaya, the Glavpolitprosvet, and the Narkompros accomplished an unprecedented feat: within two decades, they more than doubled the literacy and education levels of what essentially constituted a feudal society at the turn of the century. For the first time in history, the majority of Russia could read and write. By the time Krupskaya died in 1939, literacy had risen from 28.4% in 1897 to 87.4% among those between 9-49 years old—a 59% increase. Even when examining the progress made exclusively during the

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[329] Krupskaya, "10 Лет Назад И Сейчас," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[330] Krupskaya, "К 15-Летию Декрета О Ликвидации Неграмотности," in *Педагогические Сочинения*.

[331] Ibid.

Soviet period, by 1939, literacy had increased by 43.3% from 1920, when the literacy rate stood at just 44%—a rapid increase in only two decades, one of which was ravaged by famine, an economic collapse, and a civil war. The most striking results appear in women's literacy rates. Between 1920 and 1939 overall women's literacy in the USSR increased by 49.4% totaling 81.6% literacy. Rates among rural women skyrocketed: a 51.6% increase totaling 76.8%.[332]

While women's literacy rates remained lower than men's in 1939, the difference between the sexes substantially decreased—a testament to Krupskaya's efforts. This gap was effectively cut in half across the USSR as a whole, as well as in both rural and urban areas. In 1920, male literacy rates exceeded female literacy by 25.2%, but by 1939, the difference had narrowed to 11.7%. A similar trend emerged in rural areas, where the gap shrank from 27% to 14.8%, and in urban areas, where it decreased from 14% to just 6.4%.[333]

[332] Центральное статистическое управление, *Народное образование*, 21.

[333] Ibid.

Figure II

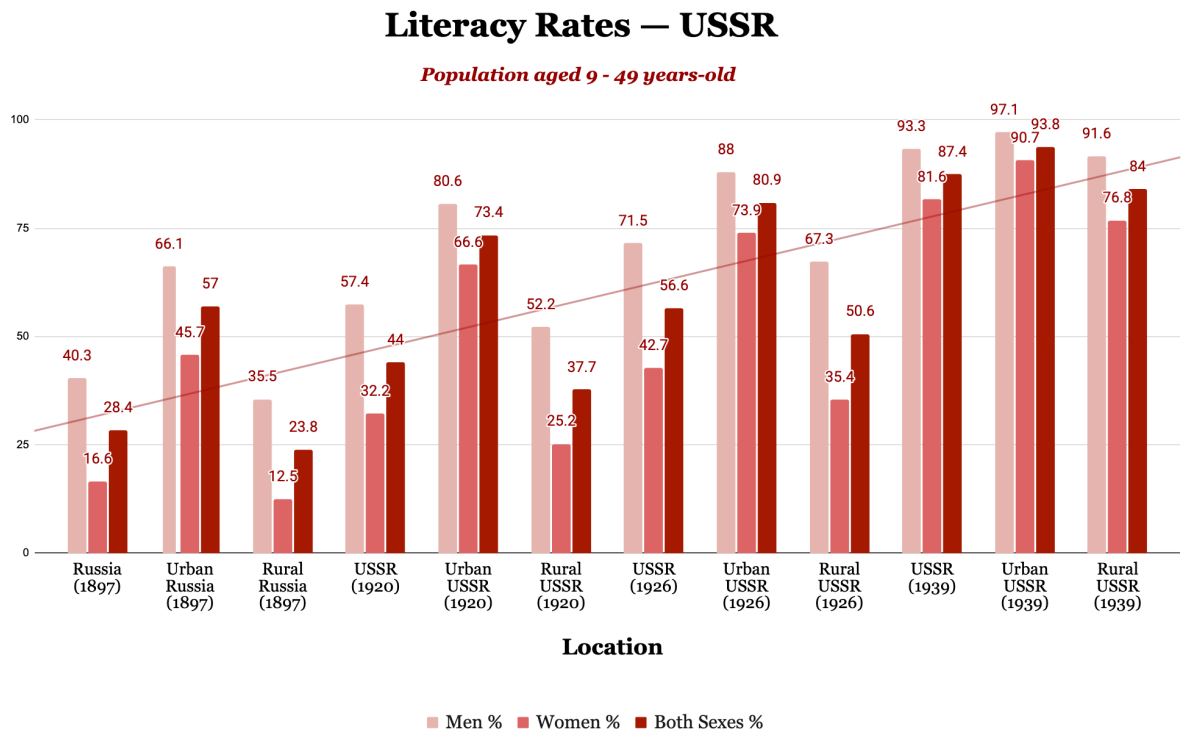

Fig. II: Literacy rates (in percentages) in Russia and the USSR. By Author.

Source: Data from Центральное статистическое управление при Совете Министров СССР [Central Statistical Administration of the USSR], *Народное образование, наука и культура в СССР: Статистический сборник* [Public Education, Science, and Culture in the USSR: Statistical Yearbook] (Moscow: Statistika, 1971), 21.

In the words of Bagdasaryan, "What the Bolsheviks managed to achieve in eliminating illiteracy alone is enough to warrant high historical recognition of Krupskaya and other literacy campaigners for their role in Russian history."[334] The campaign played a key role in propaganda; thus, helping to legitimize the Soviet regime—an incredible accomplishment in rural villages, where the Bolsheviks struggled to gain acceptance. Bagdasaryan goes as far as to credit the literacy campaign and the corresponding modernization of education for the Soviet Union's

[334] Bagdasaryan, *Крупская И Педагогическая Эпоха*, 130.

success in industrialization.[335] Not to mention the role the campaign played in transforming gender relations and furthering women's emancipation thanks to Krupskaya's ties to the women's movement and progressive philosophy on coeducation.

Given the scope of Krupskaya's accomplishments within the Narkompros and the women's movement, her influence stands alongside that of the biggest names in Soviet history. While Krupskaya by no means played an insignificant role in the years leading up to 1917, it was in the aftermath of the revolution—particularly following Lenin's death in 1924—that she fully emerged as a formidable force in her own right. Yet, it is precisely this period of her life that historians have largely overlooked—a pattern that raises important questions about gendered historiographical frameworks regarding women's contributions to revolutionary movements. In failing to recognize this, Western historians misrepresent her role in history. However, despite the historical narrative surrounding her life, the tangible results of Krupskaya's work speak for themselves—far more powerfully than the reductive title of "Lenin's wife" ever could. This study is not about "Lenin's wife"; it is about a revolutionary, an educator, and a name that demands recognition and respect: Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya.

[335] Ibid., 128.

Conclusion

History forgets wives—not by accident, but by design. Krupskaya was never merely a wife, and she was never meant to be remembered as one. By confronting that distortion, this thesis reclaims her historical significance and creates a foundation for future scholars to uncover the histories of other forgotten women. Here, Krupksaya appears in her true form: a Marxist, a feminist, a revolutionary, an educator, and a state administrator. If "wife" belongs on the list at all, it should be last—never first. After all, historians rarely feel compelled to remind us that Lenin was married. Krupskaya's legacy demands a retelling through which scholars can begin to dismantle the gendered hierarchies plaguing both historians and their subjects.

Through the lens of Krupskaya's life, this thesis addresses a fundamental problem within Soviet historiography: the systematic marginalization of women's contributions in favor of reductive identities as wives—sometimes stripping them of their identities all together. Such marginalization reflects not only a failure to accurately document and present women's historical contributions, but exemplifies broader patterns of gendered erasure within historical scholarship. Reducing women to their marital relationships perpetuates narratives that privilege male revolutionary experience while relegating women to supporting roles, ignoring their legitimate contributions.

Solving The Problem

Given the presented evidence—ranging from archival letters to overlooked primary sources—Krupskaya comes to life as far more than a wife. With the much needed context provided in Chapter II, her instrumental impact on the Russian Revolution and the growth of the Bolshevik Party comes to the foreground. Krupskaya was a figure paramount to the party's success. Her organizational capabilities, theoretical contributions, and practical implementation

of revolutionary pedagogy and propaganda helped pave the way to success in 1917. The documentary evidence demonstrates beyond dispute that Krupskaya functioned as the nexus of the Bolshevik's revolutionary networks. She maintained correspondence and organizational coherence during periods of exile and repression—even as Lenin remained imprisoned.

After October 1917, as shown in Chapter III, Krupskaya played a central role in both the ideological and practical infrastructure of early Soviet state-building. Her logistical, pedagogical, and intellectual labor helped shape Soviet institutions in ways that have been systematically under acknowledged in conventional historical accounts. Clearly, sources testifying to her significance exist—historians have made the *choice* to not use them. This continued neglect indicates broader structural gaps in the historiography of Soviet women and, as a result, the Soviet Union more broadly.

Countless historians have published books attempting to understand the intricacies of the Soviet Union, its success, its failures, and its ideology. However, they have neglected the women who took part in every aspect of its history. Women like Krupskaya may serve as the missing link in Soviet and Russian revolutionary studies. Her archival letters especially provide scholars with crucial information for understanding the revolution and the Bolshevik Party's success. Through Krupskaya, historians gain insight into the minutiae of how the Bolshevik's organized, how they became successful, and how an initially small radical group grew immensely and gained power in the largest country on the planet.

Historical Misrepresentation

By examining the existing Western historiographical record, this study reveals the root cause of the systematic marginalization of revolutionary women. As shown, substantial documentation of Krupskaya's historical contributions exists, yet she remains forgotten. This

signals not a problem of invisibility, but a problem of misrepresentation. Shaped by Cold War paradigms, Western historiographical traditions have led historians to position Krupskaya as a passive figure—a subordinate of Lenin—rather than a political agent in her own right. This project dismantles such paradigms by emphasizing both her intellectual independence and historical impact. Telling Krupskaya's story accurately requires acknowledging her intellectual development and path to radicalization—a journey that began before her life with Lenin. There exists no valid evidence upon which to predicate the assumption of Krupskaya's subordination and passivity. Lenin played no role in introducing her to radicalism—radicalism introduced her to Lenin.

Furthermore, the ideological frameworks rooted in the Cold War era sought to simplify and vilify Soviet leadership, leaving no room for accurate portrayals of Soviet women. Within the limited scope of Cold War narratives, historians chose to sacrifice the study of revolutionary women's contributions in favor of reductive characterizations that served political rather than historical purposes. This critique, of course, also applies to the Soviet Union's co-optation of Krupskaya's legacy to suit state narratives—although thorough analysis of this phenomenon remains beyond the scope of this study. By recovering Krupskaya's voice, this thesis disrupts such simplified narratives, revealing the complex reality of revolutionary women's lives and their tangible impact on Soviet history.

Role in Education and Revolutionary Work

Though Krupskaya is most often remembered for her work in Soviet education, scholars frequently overlook the revolutionary significance of that work. As demonstrated in Chapter III, Krupskaya's educational theories represented more than mere pedagogy—they embodied revolutionary praxis. Krupksaya bridged Marxist theory with its practical implementation,

utilizing education as both a revolutionary tool and a means of constructing a new social order. In this sense, her dual role as theorist and state administrator enabled her to translate the Bolsheviks' abstract ideals—particularly those related to women's emancipation—into concrete institutional structures.

Gender Dynamics and Historical Erasure

Notably, this research revealed a rather striking pattern. Krupskaya possessed unwavering humility—she refused to center herself in the revolutionary struggle, even amid a life of impressive accomplishments. She wrote extensively, organized tirelessly, and shaped revolutionary structures from behind the scenes, rarely seeking credit. Even her memoirs prioritize Lenin's legacy over her own. While this self-effacing approach aligned with her ideological commitments, it may have created fertile ground for her posthumous marginalization—it gave historians the space to overlook her. Again, this serves as a testament to the idea that women in history and women's historians consistently must *prove* their worth, while men are afforded it by default.

This aspect of Krupskaya's life presents a poignant irony: the legacy of a woman who clearly recognized the double burden and the structures of women's oppression nonetheless became subsumed by the narrative of a man's. Her silence and humility, whether intentional or unintentional, has had lasting historiographical consequences. This in itself raises profound questions about revolutionary women's relationship to their identities and historical memory. Paradoxically, it seems that their revolutionary commitment to the collective rather than the individual—particularly strong among female revolutionaries like Krupskaya—facilitated their historical erasure. Male revolutionaries, too, committed themselves to collectivism; however,

they remain lionized in the historical cannon. Evidently, gendered patterns of historical memory persist even in studies of movements explicitly committed to women's emancipation.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

However, this study represents only a first step. It focuses primarily on Krupskaya's educational and revolutionary work, but her political life extended far beyond this scope. She transcribed and delivered Lenin's testament, actively campaigned with the opposition against Stalin, created and edited multiple journals, and acted as a skilled propagandist—among many other roles that fall outside the boundaries of this project. These aspects of her legacy warrant further exploration—not only to complete her story, but to further understand the gendered dynamics of power in revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union.

Historians cannot dismiss her historical contributions as peripheral. Krupskaya—and numerous other Bolshevik women—intimately involved themselves with revolutionary work, and later state-building work. The collective complicity of keeping these narratives on the margins constitutes a disservice to the discipline of history. History is not linear, nor black and white; historians must recognize this and seek to include the wealth of perspectives available to further our understanding of revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union. Women like Krupskaya provide historians with key insights.

Thus, comparative studies examining Krupskaya alongside other revolutionary women in Russia or across different national contexts could yield valuable insights into gendered patterns of revolutionary participation and subsequent historical narratives. Krupskaya in particular serves as a valuable case study in this regard because of her deep commitment to women's emancipation. Further exploration of her relationship to gender could illuminate the complex interplay between Bolshevik theory and practice. Born into an era dominated by Victorian sexual

morality, Krupskaya's personal and intellectual evolution reflects broader transformations in Russian society's approach to gender relations. Her subsequent involvement in institutionalization structures for women's emancipation—from school reform to initiatives targeting women's literacy—offers a glimpse into how the Soviets translated revolutionary ideals into policy, with varying degrees of success.

Future researchers may also examine how Krupskaya navigated the contradictions between the Bolshevik's push for women's emancipation and practices that may have marginalized women within the party. Her writing on the abolition of the family, women's literacy, and domestic labor could further reveal tensions between theory and practice in the early Soviet attempt to reconstruct gender. The development of Kruspskaya's feminist thought may also reveal her practical adaptive responses to changing political circumstances—especially in the Stalin era. In this way, studies of marginalized women allow historians to engage with broader historical questions regarding the successes and limitations of Soviet gender policies, the relationship between ideology and lived experience, and the complex legacy of Bolshevik feminism.

Concluding Statement

History is not just about who we remember—but about who we forget. The misrepresentation of Krupskaya within Western historiography reveals broader patterns of erasure that must be amended by future historians. In reclaiming Krupskaya's legacy as a revolutionary, this thesis contributes to a broader project of historical revision that seeks to understand revolutionary movements in their full complexity. By restoring Krupskaya to her rightful place in Russian and Soviet history—not as Lenin's wife or assistant but as a critical revolutionary actor—scholars collectively gain a broader understanding of Soviet history and

insight into how gender shapes historical events and their subsequent narration. More importantly, Krupskaya's place in historical memory reveals the importance of responsible historical scholarship. Historiographical practices themselves have the power to either reinforce or challenge structures of inequality. By exposing the pervasive problem of gendered historiographical erasure through Krupskaya, she becomes a posthumous vessel for the very project she once championed: women's emancipation—this time, within history itself.

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