

NADEZHDA KRUPSKAYA'S INFLUENCE ON BOLSHEVIK FEMINISM

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To westerners, the Russian pedagogue and communist activist, Nadezhda Krupskaya, is remembered primarily, if not solely, as Vladimir Lenin's wife. Krupskaya's obscurity is mostly related to the west's tendency to marginalize Russian and communist intellectuals. With new information coming to light, Krupskaya is among the more prominent feminists of the time, such as Alexandra Kollontai and Clara Zetkin, despite being overshadowed by them. With a pedagogical lens, Krupskaya's interests were rooted in female and proletariat emancipation not just from capitalism, but the patriarchal chains of it as well and thus influenced Bolshevik feminism in many notable ways. For example, Nadezhda Krupskaya influenced the Bolsheviks' feminism because she was mostly responsible for the engendering of class issues, she initiated the development of social programs that positively impacted women, and her participation in the *Rabotnista* and *Zhenotdel*.

Nadezhda Krupskaya was overshadowed by the many influential revolutionaries of her time, including her husband, Vladimir Lenin. Born in 1869,¹ Krupskaya came from a “paternal legacy of radicalism”² and was a teacher, who taught at several academic levels. Her most revered and personal work though, was her time teaching industrial workers and peasants. Krupskaya taught at night school with workers, and she considered this to be “the front lines of the class struggle.”³ In these night school teachings, Krupskaya would include Marxist ideologies which in turn, led her to meet Lenin in 1894.⁴ Although Krupskaya departed from her teaching position to work with Lenin and the Bolsheviks, her political opinions were influenced by education. Throughout her political career, Krupskaya upheld that access to education was key to the emancipation of women and the proletariat. This pedagogical lens on the class struggle and the woman question is what made her influence on the Bolshevik party immense and legitimate. Specifically, her influence on the Bolsheviks’ feminism is where Krupskaya’s ideologies are truly illuminated. Nadezhda Krupskaya influenced the Bolsheviks’ feminism because she was mostly responsible for the engendering of class issues, she initiated the development of social programs, and her participation in the *Rabotnista* and *Zhenotdel*.

Nadezhda Krupskaya’s influence on the Bolsheviks’ feminism begins with her being mostly responsible for the engendering of class issues. Before Krupskaya was involved with the Social Democrats (the soon to be Bolsheviks), the extent of all Marxist and socialist feminism was focused on marriage as an institution. Moreover, there was a general “theoretical repudiation of marriage as a form of slavery”⁵ at the time. There was little development of Marxist feminist

¹ McNeal, Robert H. *Bride of the Revolution*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972, 5

² *Ibid.*, 10

³ *Ibid.*, 31

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3

thought before Krupskaya's contributions, and the pattern that emerged from the discourse regarding the woman question at the time "was merely a liberalized form of the traditional family."⁶ When Krupskaya joined Lenin and the soon to be Bolsheviks in the 1890's, there was still little conversation about women proletariats and the role of women within the class struggle, but there were minor developments from other feminists that offered some influence on the discourse surrounding the woman question, such as the German author, Clara Zetkin.⁷ However, in 1898 this changed. After being arrested and imprisoned, Krupskaya was sent to exile in Siberia with Lenin. During their time together in Siberia, Krupskaya, under Lenin's advisement, wrote her first Marxist work, *The Woman Worker*⁸ under the pseudonym Sablina.⁹ Published in *Iskra*, Krupskaya presents a "grim tableau of the experience of the peasant and factory woman"¹⁰ in her writing. In *The Woman Worker*, Krupskaya asserts that "the woman worker is a member of the working class and all her interests are closely tied to the interests of that class."¹¹ Overtly anti-czar, she perpetuates the idea that labor is a source of emancipation for women and cautioned male workers to avoid discriminating women in the workforce and directly taking them out of it because exploitation would not end with or without women.¹² Finally, Krupskaya declares that "the road to emancipation for women lay through winning economic independence," and that "workers, both women and men, could only be emancipated with the

⁶ Ibid., 4

⁷ Ibid., 78

⁸ Stites, Richard. *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*. N.p.: Princeton University Press, 1978, 240

⁹ Kolesnik, Dmitriy, and Alex Gordon. *Introduction to The Woman Worker*. N.p.: Manifesto Press Cooperative Limited, 2017. Marxist Archives <https://www.marxists.org/archive/krupskaya/1899/the-woman-worker.pdf>, i

¹⁰ Stites, 241

¹¹ Krupskaya, Nadezhda. *The Woman Worker*. N.p.: Manifesto Press Cooperative Limited, 2017. Marxist Archives <https://www.marxists.org/archive/krupskaya/1899/the-woman-worker.pdf>, 4

¹² McNeal, 241

winning of a socialist system to replace capitalism.”¹³ *The Woman Worker* is specifically influential on the Bolsheviks’ feminism for a number of reasons. Firstly, Krupskaya’s work was the only Russian Marxist statement on the woman question until 1910, when Alexandra Kollontai’s *Social Bases* was published.¹⁴ This means that Krupskaya’s work was the main contributor to the discourse surrounding female labor for the majority of time before the Bolsheviks came into power. Secondly, *The Woman Worker* was “widely used as propaganda material among the factory workers and was illegally circulated for years.”¹⁵ Because Krupskaya’s work was proliferated amongst factory workers, she helped educate the working class about class issues and female labor issues. As Krupskaya’s writing was passed through the hands of both men and women in industrialized jobs and the peasantry, she helped spread not only Marxist ideas but eventually Bolshevik ideologies as well, thereupon gaining support for the Social Democrats and ultimately, the Bolsheviks. Finally, Krupskaya was the first of the Russian Marxists to acknowledge women’s labor issues. *The Women Worker* helped “focus the attention of the Russian Social Democrats more closely on the problem”¹⁶ of women’s labor issues and women’s rights. Furthermore, Krupskaya helped define the role of women in class issues and established both men and women as part of the working class. This specific engendering of the working class and thus class issues influenced Lenin. Lenin maintained that there be an “establishment of full equality of rights of men and women”¹⁷ in the Social Democratic party. Lenin’s assertion was added to a draft program at the Social Democratic party’s second congress in 1903.¹⁸ The complete draft program called for “equality of the sexes in civil and political

¹³ Kolesnik & Gordon, iv

¹⁴ Stites, 242

¹⁵ Ibid., 241

¹⁶ Ibid., 242

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

rights and in education,” and it included the requirements of the “exclusion of women workers from ‘harmful’ industries, ten-weeks of maternity leave, factory nursery facilities, and women inspectors.”¹⁹ Overall, *The Woman Worker* is the most notable contribution from Krupskaya’s efforts of engendering class issues. Because of this work, Social Democrats and eventually Bolsheviks were able to make changes that, for the most part, properly addressed women’s rights and labor issues in their parties’ ideologies. Therefore, Nadezhda Krupskaya influenced the Bolsheviks feminism by being the first Russian Marxist to discuss women’s labor issues and thus, engendering class issues. Nadezhda Krupskaya also influenced the Bolsheviks’ feminism with the development of social programs.

After the October revolution and the Bolsheviks came into power, Nadezhda Krupskaya continued to influence Bolshevik feminism with the development of social programs. When Russia’s government was restructured, Krupskaya joined the Narkompros,²⁰ known in English as the People’s Commissariat for Education, in the summer of 1918.²¹ Because of prior teaching experience and her general interest pedagogy, Krupskaya devoted herself to the creating “a humane, cultivated, [and] socialist system of education.”²² This was a nearly impossible task as the country “was economically ruined, racked by civil war, and ruled by an increasingly dogmatic bureaucracy.”²³ While working at the Narkompros, Krupskaya developed two key social programs; the Komsomol and Likbez. Although the Komsomol, known in English as the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lasilli, Michael. "The Creation of Soviet National Consciousness, or Why Nadezhda Krupskaya Matters." NYU Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia. <https://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/the-creation-of-soviet-national-consciousness-and-why-nadezhda-krupskaya-matters/#.Yal1fS9h1QJ>

²¹ McNeal, 188

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Russian Communist Union of Youth,²⁴ was created to entrench Russian youth in communist propaganda, the program also sponsored activities such as “dance, theater, gymnastics, choirs, and reading circles,”²⁵ which had never been made available to the youth of the working class before. The decision to sponsor such programs was on behalf of Krupskaya, and she enforced that the Komsomol was open to not only young men but also young women, including students, industrialized workers, and peasant youth.²⁶ In addition, through Krupskaya’s advisement, both the Narkompros and the Komsomol “oversaw education programs, curriculum standards, and other vehicles for delivering social services,”²⁷ which also originated from an equal opportunity perspective on a gendered and class level from Krupskaya. The other social program, Likbez, was an equally difficult undertaking at the time. Likbez, known as *Down with Illiteracy!*,²⁸ was an initiative created by Krupskaya. With a heavy emphasis on the “importance of mobilizing uneducated rural women from peripheral Russian regions,”²⁹ this initiative spearheaded the improvement of literacy, overall education, and development of class consciousness of peasant women. Nadezhda Krupskaya’s work in the Narkompros, specifically on the Komsomol and Likbez, influenced Bolshevik feminism because both programs focused on the education of women. Because of Krupskaya’s belief that the emancipation of women could be reached through education, the development of these government sanctioned programs allowed the Bolsheviks to expand their feminism to reach women of all ages and of the working class. Although the Bolsheviks did not carry out this action because of Krupskaya but rather Krupskaya

²⁴ Von Geldern, James. "Young Communists." *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*. Last modified , 2021. <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1924-2/young-communists/>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lasilli

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

used her government position to improve the status of women in Russia, it is still considered an influence on the Bolsheviks' feminism because these programs put the Bolsheviks in good standing with the youth and peasantry of Russia at the time.³⁰

Nadezhda Krupskaya's influence on Bolshevik feminism can also be illuminated through her participation in the Bolsheviks' *Rabotnista* and *Zhenotdel*. Firstly, the *Rabotnista* was a "monthly periodical for women."³¹ First published in 1914,³² the periodical was named after Krupskaya's first work, *The Woman Worker*.³³ After the breakout of World War I, the *Rabotnista*'s production was shut down, but revived again in 1917 after the Bolsheviks came into power.³⁴ Amongst other women, such as Inessa Armand, Krupskaya was elected to the editorial board of the periodical by Lenin³⁵ in 1914 and during its revival in 1917. The *Rabotnista* published many kinds of articles, but they all held the same central sentiments about female labor. Regarding female industrialized and factory labor, the *Rabotnista* shared and bolstered the ideas that "women suffered from an inequality vested on them by traditional customs and by the inhumanity of the modern factory system" and working-class women "would overcome these difficulties only by banding together with men to destroy the status quo."³⁶ Regarding peasant women, the *Rabotnista* also discussed the hardships peasant women faced.³⁷ The periodical documented "the difficulties of their lives, both those they endured in common with men, such as

³⁰ Lasilli

³¹ Meek, Dorothea L. "A Soviet Women's Magazine." *Soviet Studies* 4, no. 1 (1952): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/148721>, 3

³² Clements, Barbara E. *Bolshevik Women*. N.p.: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 104

³³ Meyer, Donald. *Sex and Power: The Rise of Women in American, Russia, Sweden, and Italy*. N.p.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987, 85

³⁴ University of Toronto, . "Rabotnitsa." Archive-It. Last modified , 2016. <http://wayback.archive-it.org/6473/20160819151252/https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd/RussianHeritage/9.WO/9.L/Rabotnitsa.html>

³⁵ Clements, 104

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 105

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 105-6

low wages and dangerous working conditions,” and the experiences of gender based oppression, such as “sexual abuse, the burdens of caring for children, and lower pay than men even when the work they did was equally skilled.”³⁸ As Krupskaya worked on the editorial board of the *Rabotnista*, she was responsible for the collection, publishing, and dissemination of the periodical. Nadezhda Krupskaya’s work on the *Rabotnista* influenced the Bolsheviks’ feminism because through this publication, Krupskaya was again able to engender class issues. Krupskaya and the other editors at the periodical “added to the general Marxist interpretation a shrewd emphasis on the importance of women joining men in the revolutionary movement.”³⁹ Much like her first work, *The Woman Worker*, Krupskaya was able to enlighten women with class consciousness. The only difference *The Woman Worker* and the *Rabotnista* have is within their impacts. *The Woman Worker* was intended to educate women, while the *Rabotnista* intended to rally women behind and into the Bolshevik party. Therefore, Krupskaya’s work on *Rabotnista* influenced the Bolsheviks’ feminism because Krupskaya, amongst others, was able to recruit women to the Bolshevik party through discussion of the emancipation of women, thereby establishing it as a core Bolshevik value. Secondly, Nadezhda Krupskaya’s work at the Zhenotdel also influenced the Bolsheviks’ feminism. The Zhenotdel, known in English as the women’s department of the Secretariat of the Central Committee or the department for work among women,⁴⁰ was a government committee responsible for the advancement of women and women workers.⁴¹ It was created after the Bolsheviks came into power in the summer 1918.⁴²

³⁸ Ibid., 106

³⁹ Ibid., 106

⁴⁰ Ibid., 204

⁴¹ Stites, 325

⁴² Workers' Advocate Supplement, . "Women's commissions in the revolutionary movement in Soviet Russia: Zhenotdel, 1919-1930." *Workers' Advocate Supplement* 8, no. 7 (1992).
<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-7/wa-supplement/8-7.html#top>.

While participating within the Zhenotdel, Krupskaya was also working for the Narkompros, but this does not mean she was not part of the major achievements of the Zhenotdel. For example, Krupskaya assisted the Zhenotdel in enacting “decrees providing protection for female and child labor” and establishing formal “social insurance including pregnancy leaves for women workers, equal rights in marriage including the right to divorce,”⁴³ and access to abortion. Krupskaya and the Zhenotdel were also responsible for the revival of the *Rabotnista* in 1917⁴⁴ and the creation of the First All-Russian Congress of Working Class and Peasant Women in the fall of 1918.⁴⁵ This Congress was a large forum for female industrialized or factory workers and peasant women to discuss women’s rights and labor issues. Despite the fact that the overall goal of the Zhenotdel was to disseminate propaganda to women workers across Russia, Krupskaya’s participation in this department did influence the Bolsheviks’ feminism for a number of reasons. Firstly, through the Zhenotdel, Krupskaya gave access to certain social and political programs that women in Russia had never had before. This means that Krupskaya, amongst the other women working at the Zhenotdel, were directly responsible for the Bolsheviks’ upliftment of women through social programs. Secondly, Krupskaya also enabled the Bolshevik government to recognize what female workers and peasant women require in their new society. For example, the creation of the First All-Russian Congress of Working Class and Peasant Women gave women the opportunity to increase the female working class’ civic engagement, which in turn would help make a more representative government. This path of civic engagement was also another contribution of Krupskaya and the other women working in the Zhenotdel. Finally, while Krupskaya was working with the Zhenotdel, like her contributions from the Narkompros, also

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Clements, 205

⁴⁵ Ibid., 204

gained massive amounts of support for the Bolshevik party from the female working class and increased recruitment to the party through both her government positions.⁴⁶

Throughout scholarly research, Nadezhda Krupskaya is represented to have lived in her husband's shadow, and that's far from the truth. Even more so, scholars gloss over her achievements in feminism and the emancipation of women in Russia and tend to focus on the contributions of more prominent and radical feminists of that time, such as Clara Zetkin or Alexandra Kollontai.⁴⁷ Despite this trend by researchers and scholars, Nadezhda Krupskaya had an illustrious political career not just because of her proximity to Lenin, but rather her devotion to the upliftment of working class women through education. Krupskaya's pedagogical approach to the woman question and the class struggle is what made her contributions to the Bolsheviks' feminism notable and significant. Nadezhda Krupskaya influenced the Bolshevik's feminism because she was mostly responsible for the engendering of class issues, she initiated the development of social programs, and her participation in the *Rabotnista* and Zhenotdel.

⁴⁶ Lasilli

⁴⁷ Stites, 250

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