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The *ABC of communism* revisited

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Abstract
The *ABC of communism* by Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii was both an exercise in utopian planning and a Left Communist manifesto. As such, Lenin viewed it with some suspicion. Its educational section combined ideological prescription with description of the actual policy of the Soviet People's Commissariat of Education (Narkompros), as well as elements of polemic with that policy. Preobrazhenskii, its author, would shortly emerge as a major opponent of Narkompros's core commitments in education, clashing with Nadezhda Krupskaia, Lenin's wife, and other Narkompros leaders.

Keywords Bukharin · Preobrazhenskii · Soviet · Education · Utopia · Lenin · Krupskaia

Revolutions have always involved a degree of utopian imagination of the new world of the future. It is rarer to find revolutionary leaders engaging in detailed *planning* of utopia—but then, for Marxist revolutionaries, planning, especially in its economic aspect, was a core revolutionary commitment. The *Azbuka kommunizma* (*ABC of communism*), co-authored by leading Bolsheviks Nikolai Bukharin and Evgeny Preobrazhenskii in 1919, at the height of the Civil War and within 2 years of the Bolshevik seizure of power, is the manual of utopian revolutionary planning par excellence (Bukharin 1920). Bukharin, one of the party's most notable theoreticians, wrote the theoretical sections and two-thirds of the text (though the authors said that the whole book was a truly collaborative work throughout), and Preobrazhenskii wrote the rest, including the chapter on education which is the particular focus of this article (Carr 1969, 17). The *ABC* was conceived as an elaboration of the Party Program (*Programma*, 1919) adopted a few months before its publication. Although some sections, including that on education, reflected or even polemicized with current Soviet government policies, the book was, in Stephen Cohen's words,

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"a statement of Bolshevik aspirations and utopian hopes…, of party innocence, not Soviet reality" (Cohen 1973, 84).

It was also a classic statement of the "left Communism" emerging in the Bolshevik party over the contentious issue of the Brest–Litovsk peace in the spring of 1918, which constituted the main ideological challenge to Lenin, the party's undisputed leader, during the Civil War period. Both authors belonged to the Left Communist group, which had clashed with Lenin not only over the Brest peace but also over workers' control in industry and the theory of "state capitalism" (Daniels 1969, 70–91); and, in addition, Lenin, was already dubious about Bukharin's utopianism as a Marxist thinker (Cohen 1973, 21–22). Thus, while Lenin made no public criticism of the *ABC*, he undoubtedly had reservations about it as a Left Communist manifesto. As Bukharin would recall in 1926, "we [the *ABC*'s authors] took quite a heavy whipping from Lenin" in private (quoted Löwy 1969, 126).

Nikolai Bukharin, the book's first author, working as editor of *Pravda* at the time of its writing, was 18 years younger than Lenin, but already quite a substantial figure in the party. Drawn into the revolutionary movement in 1905 as a gymnasium student in Moscow, he was an intellectual with foreign languages who had lived abroad as a revolutionary from his early 20s. Evgenii Preobrazhenskii, a few years older than Bukharin, was distinctly junior to him in the party, as well as coming from lower in the social scale. Son of a priest, Preobrazhenskii joined the revolutionary movement at the end of his gymnasium studies and then worked in the Bolshevik underground in his native Urals, never going abroad, although, as a *komitetchik* (committee man or local organizer) in Russia, he had written communication with Lenin and his wife Nadezhda Krupskaia as central party organizers in Europe (Gorinov 2014) At the time of his collaboration with Bukharin in the writing of *ABC*, he was just back from service on the eastern front of the Civil War and working under Bukharin at *Pravda* (Bukharin 1969, 26). Preobrazhenskii was later to clash with Krupskaia (deputy People's Commissar of Education) on a number of educational issues in 1920–1921, when he was working in the Central Committee Secretariat, but his personal relations with the Lenins, like Bukharin's, were evidently good. Bukharin was famously described as "the favorite of the party" in Lenin's "Testament," and both he and Preobrazhenskii were among the select few invited out to the dacha in Gorki during Lenin's last illness in 1923 (Service 2000, 477).

At close to 300 pages, the *ABC* was a runaway success from the start, making Bukharin's name, as lead author, familiar to thousands of young Communists who went through party schools in the 1920s. According to Cohen, the book went into at least eighteen Russian editions by the early 1930s, not to mention 20 translations (Cohen 1973, 84). Russian-language editions of the whole or part of the text came out in Ekaterinodar, Odessa, Novonikolaevsk, Vologda, Kazan, Novgorod, and Gomel as well as the capitals in the years 1920–1923. By 1931, it had been translated into German in Vienna and Hamburg; Italian in Milan; English in Glasgow, Michigan, Chicago, New York, and London; Lithuanian in Brooklyn; and Spanish in Mexico, not to mention no less than five separate editions in Japanese. After a lull of several decades, international interest revived in the 1960s, with three editions into English, including a Pelican classic introduced by E. H. Carr, and translations into German, French and Persian, with a Greek edition following in 1976, a Chinese in

1988 and a Korean in 2011.[1] Interested readers can still find multiple versions of the text uploaded on the internet (See figures at the end of the article.).

The irony of this was that the utopian moment that the *ABC* captured had already passed by the time the book went into mass circulation. The transition away from the utopian maximalism of War Communism to the more sober and realistic New Economic Policy at the beginning of the 1920s made both the *ABC* and the 1919 Party Program with which it was associated irrelevant for all practical purposes, as Bukharin himself pointed out in 1923, noting that as "our program in all its concrete aspects has clearly become outdated… Life outgrew it," and suggesting that a future party congress should update it. Moreover, "one has to say the same also about its commentary, the *ABC of communism*, which has become canonical in the party. That *ABC* has become outdated, and it is outdated above all because the Program is out of date" (Bukharin 1923, 1). Bukharin, meanwhile, was moving rightward politically, although his co-author Preobrazhenskii, about to join the Trotskyite Left, was not. His scruples did not prevent the ABC from remaining an iconic text of what Lev Kritsman called the "heroic period of the Great Russian Revolution," (Kritsman 1925), with at least a generation of young party and Komsomol activists being schooled on it.

The general level of non-realism and excited abstraction in the *ABC* may be gauged from the way its introduction (authored by Bukharin) deals with the topic of administration. This is now to be done on a rotational basis by "the whole working population," getting rid of the old official caste with specialized experience:

> Every comrade must, after a definite time, change over from one occupation to another, so that by degrees he shall become experienced in all the important branches of administrative work. The comrade must not stick for years to one and the same job, for if he does this he will become a routinist official of the old type. As soon as he has learned the routine of one office, he must move to another. (Bukharin 1969, 240)

Admittedly, "serious difficulties" had already been encountered in implementing this model (Bukharin 1969, 237), but no possibility of compromise is discussed. The ultimate aim was "the disappearance of the State authority" (Bukharin 1969, 439). This, of course, was fully consonant with Lenin's *State and Revolution*, written in mid 1917; however, Lenin himself, in an argument with Bukharin at the XII Party Congress in March 1918, had described any such withering away of the state as "a long way" off and not relevant to the present (quoted Cohen 1973, 21).

Elsewhere, Bukharin described the future operation of the dictatorship of the proletariat with respect to economic planning (Bukharin 1969, 118):

> The main direction will be entrusted to various kinds of book-keeping offices or statistical bureaux. …When the social order is like a well-ordered machine,

[1] Thanks to Alexandra Price for the bibliographical research underpinning this paragraph, drawing on *Knizhnaia letopis* (1921–1931), *Bibliograficheskii ezhegodnik knig* (1918–1931), and *Ezhegodnik knigi* (1946–2011).

> all will work in accordance with the indications of the statistical bureaux. There will be no need for special ministers of State, for police or prisons, for laws and decrees—nothing of the sort. Just as in an orchestra all the performers watch the conductor's baton and act accordingly, so here all will consult the statistical reports and will direct their work accordingly.

This particular flight of fancy[2] had no basis in any current reality. But that was not the case with the section of the *ABC* (chapter 10, authored by Preobrazhenskii) dealing with education. This chapter drew extensively on the ambitious and radical reform plans for schools, universities and adult education already set forward as policy by the new education ministry, the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment of the RSFSR in Soviet nomenclature, popularly known as Narkompros. The People's Commissar was the cultured Bolshevik intellectual Anatolii Lunacharskii, and his chief deputies were Nadezhda Krupskaia, Lenin's wife, and the Marxist historian Mikhail Pokrovskii. Krupskaia, whose background and central interest was in education, had, with her husband's encouragement, produced the only Bolshevik theoretical treatise on education, *Narodnoe obrazovanie i demokratiia* (*Public* e*ducation and democracy*) (Krupskaia 1957, 249–350), written in emigration in 1915 and published in Russia 2 years later. In it, she outlined the history of "progressive" education in the West, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to John Dewey, focusing particularly on workers' schools (with particular attention to the work of Georg Kerschensteiner in Munich) and labor training. In fact, Krupskaia initially intended to highlight the proletarian focus by calling her book *Narodnoe obrazovanie i rabochii klass (Public education and the working class)*, but then decided that that might cause problems with the censorship (Krupskaia 1957, 490). For Krupskaia, it was a given that the old "rote learning" methods were harmful and that any kind of educational privileging of elite children over lower-class ones was unacceptable. Children should learn by doing, and there should be no hard-and-fast separation of abstract academic learning from the practical experiences of the child's everyday life.

Krupskaia's own educational experience was with adults, and she was so passionately committed to the cause of adult education that in the months after her and Lenin's return to Russia in April 1917 and before the October revolution, she devoted herself wholeheartedly to educational work in the Vyborg soviet in Petrograd, uncharacteristically detached from the tense political maneuverings that were central to Lenin's life at this period, as can be gathered from her later reminiscences. (Krupskaya 2004, 347–413; McNeal 1972, 171–182).

She was an unwilling recruit to her official position as deputy commissar, preferring to continue her grass-roots activity, but nevertheless her ideas on education—largely shared by Russia's small "progressive education" community, mainly socialist in sympathy but non-Bolshevik—informed the policy statements and programs that Narkompros issued in 1918. There was to be a 10-year "united labor school" (*edinaia trudovaia shkola*) (Fitzpatrick 1970, 30–34) for all children from age 7,

[2] For a different reading of this passage, and a critique of my and other scholars' dismissal of the *ABC* as a utopian vision, "stress-induced" by civil war, see Lih (1997).

teaching by activity methods without textbooks and homework. Practical labor skills would be part of every child's education, but at the same time the principle of general education—as opposed to specialized job training—was strongly emphasized. Nurseries and kindergartens were essential parts of the educational structure, both for socialization purposes and to take the burden off working mothers.

For both Krupskaia and Lunacharskii, giving the people access to "enlightenment"—the culture and education previously reserved for the upper classes—was a key objective of the whole revolution. "Were we, Communist propagandists, ever really concerned with anything other than the enlightenment of the people?" Lunacharskii rhetorically asked (Lunacharskii 1919, 1). But that was not how many Bolsheviks understood their past and present tasks, and the Narkompros leaders' educational principles did not go uncontested even among their own Bolshevik subordinates, some of whom had a more utilitarian approach to training in technical skills. There was criticism from the Left of Narkompros's would-be classless "humanism," which translated into qualified support for the old intelligentsia and dislike for the "class war" approach that favoured banishing "bourgeois" professors and students from the universities and the children of "class enemies" from schools. The Narkompros leaders were also under attack from their counterparts in the Ukraine, who advocated giving up on the family as an institution of child upbringing altogether (a radical position that Krupskaia never held) and educating all children in state "children's homes" (*detskie doma*, the new term for orphanages). Narkompros's leadership was, in its own way, deeply utopian, but it was a humanistic and non-coercive utopianism that seemed suspiciously close to "bourgeois liberalism" to some of the party's zealots.

However, Narkompros's stance on educational matters had one important supporter: Lenin. Of all the top Bolshevik leaders, Lenin was the one who thought education was really important, a *sine qua non* to overcoming the cultural backwardness which was Russia's curse and giving the population the tools for political participation (see Lenin 1980). Though he sometimes clashed with Lunacharskii on high cultural priorities, for example, Lunacharskii's advocacy on behalf of the elite Bolshoi Theater, Lenin was a staunch supporter of Krupskaia's educational goals, not only regularly finding time to address educational conferences but also supporting Narkompros on educational issues in Sovnarkom and the Politburo. That support from the head of the government was of great importance for the often embattled Narkompros.

Unlike Lenin, neither Bukharin nor Preobrazhenskii was ever a reliable source of support for Narkompros. Bukharin was, at this point, too radical and intolerant of the arts for the eclectic and tolerant Lunacharskii, while Preobrazhenskii, as evidenced by his text in *ABC* and his later policy clashes with Narkompros, inclined towards the radical Left on a number of educational issues. Although his priest father had also been a dedicated and successful teacher, Preobrazhenskii had no firsthand experience as a teacher or educational administrator, only as a radical gymnasium pupil. For his education chapter in the *ABC*, he did a fair amount of background reading, judging by the unusually long list of references given at the end, including Narkompros declarations on the united labor school and works by various Russian Marxist

educationalists including Blonskii and Krupskaia[3], as well as a paragraph of references of "non-communist literature" including John Dewey's *School and Society* (Dewey 1907), the Russian progressive educator Stanislav Shatskii's *The Cheerful Life* (Shatskii 1915), a major influence in Narkompros, and works by European educationalists such as Georg Kerschensteiner on the labour school (Kerschensteiner 1918), some of which had appeared in Russian translation from the Gorbunov-Posadov publishing house, with which Krupskaia had also published. The other major influence on his text, not overtly acknowledged, was section 12 (articles on education) of the Party Programme (*Programme* 1919, 443–446), which he followed fairly closely, though with some amendments: for example, Narkompros's term "united labor school" was used in the *ABC* though not in the Party programme.

The *ABC*'s education chapter recapitulated the main planks of the party Program and Narkompros' policy statements on educational reform. Education in the united labor school was to be free, compulsory, secular, and co-educational for children up to the age of 17[4]; kindergartens and pre-school institutions would be available for younger children and professional training schools for the 17-plus group; universities (whose "future form could not be fully foreseen") would in any case be thrown open to all, with full stipends for proletarians; the teaching profession at all levels must be replenished with Communists (Bukharin 1920, 178–187). This was prefaced by a section on the "destructive tasks of communism" in the educational sphere, notably abolishing class-based hierarchy of schools at the secondary level and the obligatory study of scripture and getting rid of the closed professorial caste dominating the universities (Bukharin 1920, 180–181). The grammatical tense of the statements varied between the present imperfect—"we are creating" kindergartens and so on—and the prescriptive—"the united labor school must be…" This ambiguity characterized Narkompros's policy statements as well.

As of 1919, implementation of Narkompros's policies was severely restricted by civil war, poor communications, and a reliance on local initiative, which often resulted in outcomes unexpected and undesired by the center. The pride of the Narkompros leaders was a network of children's colonies and experimental (*optyno-pokazatel'nye*) schools, set up mainly in the vicinity of the capitals and run by sympathetic educational reformers, as well as the kindergartens it had set up in the capitals—"light grains of the future for which we struggle against the twilight, cruelly battle-coloured backdrop of our suffering land" as Lunacharskii put it in 1920 (Fitzpatrick 1970, 49–50). In August 1918, fees and entrance exams had been abolished in universities, which were now theoretically open to all; and the first rabfaks (institutions preparing workers for entrance to university) were established early in

[3] The Russian text (Bukharin 1920) correctly cites Krupskaia's main educational work as *Narodnoe obrazovanie i demokratiia (Popular education and democracy)*, but the most familiar English translation mistranslates this as *Popular culture and democracy*, as well as mangling Dewey's name unrecognizably to "Dune."

[4] In the original Russian text, the age for starting school is given as 8, but in the English edition (Bukharin 1969, 286), this becomes 7, which was indeed the age specified in Narkompros instructions. The Party Programme did not specify a starting age, specifying only that free compulsory schooling for all children will go "up to the age of 17" (Bukharin 1969, 444).

1919 (Fitzpatrick 1970, 77–80). But often, to the dismay of Narkompros, there was more Bolshevik enthusiasm at local level for the "destructive tasks" like purging the teaching body than for the more difficult tasks of building the new school.

From Narkompros's standpoint, Preobrazhenskii's chapter must have raised some alarm flags. With regard to universities, about whose future the *ABC* was doubtful, Narkompros was resisting pressure to close, purge or drastically proletarianize; with regard to teachers, the Narkompros leaders, unlike many others in the party and even in the commissariat, wanted to convert rather than purge and punish. In addition, Preobrazhenskii's strong emphasis on the ideological dimension of education would also have put Narkompros on guard. Of course, Narkompros leaders were in favor of educating children in such a way as to form future Communists, but they tended to balk at methods involving forcible ideological indoctrination. This had already led to conflicts and allegations in party circles that the Narkompros leader were woolly liberals and humanists. Preobrazhenskii's basic mode of argument was to describe and deplore the ways in which bourgeois education trained up and brainwashed future capitalists, and then propose a similar (but opposite) process for Soviet education. The point of bourgeois schools was to prepare lackeys of capitalism; the teachers—including priests who taught religion—were the trainers (the word used is *dressirovshchiki*, usually used for trainers of performing animals) (Bukharin 1920, 178). The higher levels of the school were closed to workers and peasants, making high school and university "in effect educational institutions for bourgeois youth". Thus, the first task of the revolution was to destroy the old secondary school and university, including the professorial caste, and drive religion out of the educational process and curricula. Now that the proletariat has the schools in its own hands, its first priority must be to "raise the Communist consciousness of all the other strata of the toiling population to the necessary level" (Bukharin 1920, 180–182).

Like Krupskaia in her 1915 book, Preobrazhenskii's chapter in the *ABC* emphasized the labor principle in education. This had two aspects: the activity school, as described by the American educationalist John Dewey (1907), and the "labor school" which incorporated the acquisition of labor skills into the curriculum, as recommended by the Kerschensteiner (1918). In Deweyite mode, Preobrazhenskii's chapter stated that children must be brought up to approach labor (work) as a continuation of play, so that they come to look on it "not as an unpleasant necessity or punishment, but as something natural, a spontaneous manifestation of capacities… a need, like the wish to eat and drink." (Bukharin 1920, 185). As for the "labor" component, his text recommended that labor training in the schools must give students a wide range of practical skills, making possible the de-professionalization of society envisaged in Bukharin's theoretical section of the *ABC*.[5] This was fully in accordance with Narkompros's principles, but Preobrazhenskii added a twist that, with its implication of coercion rather than free choice, might have given Lunacharskii and Krupskaia pause. While capitalist society functions with a reserve army of unemployed, he wrote, communist society, in which there will be no such reserve of unemployed, will instead

[5] See above.

deploy the polytechnically-trained graduates of Soviet schools to whatever branch of industry that needs them (Bukharin 1920, 183).

I have not found any reaction to Preobrazhenskii's text in any of Narkompros's numerous though often ephemeral publications of the Civil War period, but almost certainly Lunacharskii and Krupskaia shared Lenin's opinion of the *ABC* as a whole, viewing it as an example of "Left Communism," or unrealistic utopian radicalism. Otherwise, they would surely have publicized and commented on its publication rather than treating its appearance as a non-event. When he wrote his chapter in the *ABC,* Preobrazhenskii had had few direct dealings with Narkompros, though its "Statute on the United Labor School" and other publications found their way into his bibliography. His main contact there may have been Vladimir Pozner, radical head of the Union of Teacher-Internationalists as well as a Narkompros employee, since Pozner's comparatively obscure article on the united labor school is cited among the chapter's references.

Treatment of teachers was already a contested issue in the party and government. The old teachers' union, representing the non-Bolshevik majority in the profession, had gone on strike after the Bolsheviks October takeover; and a radical splinter group of pro-Bolshevik "teacher-internationalists," headed by Pozner, was pushing for dissolution of the old union and its own recognition as organizational leader of the profession. Narkompros was unwilling to go so far, but in the spring of 1919 had to accept dissolution, although Pozner was passed over for leadership of the new union created in its place. (Fitzpatrick 1970, 37–42). In his *ABC* chapter, Preobrazhenskii acknowledged that "progressive pedagogues of bourgeois society" sympathized with much of the principle of the united labor school, but at the same time insisted that they "were and remain enemies of proletarian revolution"; and his conclusion put more emphasis on the need to train new Communist teachers than (as Narkompros preferred) working on the re-education of the old ones (Bukharin 1920, 190).

On higher education, too, Preobrazhenskii's chapter in the *ABC* took a more radical position than that of the Narkompros leaders. All participants in the Bolshevik debates agreed that both the current professoriate and the student body were "bourgeois" and would need to be proletarianized; the question was, at what speed, and to what extent the expertise of the professoriate was acknowledged to have any supra-class value. The most radical position was that the universities should be closed down altogether, and, while the rhetoric of the Narkompros leaders (especially deputy commissar Pokrovskii, himself a Marxist historian with a low opinion of his erstwhile colleagues) sometimes approached this, in practice they ended up as quasi-defenders of existing higher educational institutions, or at least mitigators of the most draconian actions against them (Fitzpatrick 1970, 68–88). While Preobrazhenskii had evidently not yet made up his mind about the universities' fate, his treatment of higher education in the *ABC* suggested sympathy with the radical position. He stated "with full certainty that our universities in their current form, with their current faculty, are institutions that have outlived their day," and inclined to the view that any status distinction between professors and students was probably incompatible with socialism (Bukharin 1920, 187).

Throughout, the *ABC*'s education chapter emphasized the function of political indoctrination ("instilling of proletarian consciousness") at all levels. The Narkompros leaders made such statements themselves, but it was soon noticed—with disapproval in party circles—that in specific instances of conflicts between the indoctrination/general-educational function, they almost always came down on the general-educational side. The same was true in the conflicts that quickly arose over whether the "labor" in the labor school ought to have direct economic or purely pedagogical benefits. With regard to the political function of education, Narkompros's natural antagonist was the agitprop department of the party's Central Committee. When Preobrazhenskii was appointed a Central Committee secretary in the spring of 1920 (Daniels 1969, 424), he became a major force pushing (in opposition to the Narkompros leadership) for radical reorganization of education. These conflicts of 1920–1921 shed a useful retrospective light on the *ABC*'s education chapter as an ideological-political statement.

By 1920, Narkompros was under sustained criticism in party circles, partly for being too liberal in its dealings with the old non-Communist intelligentsia and partly for being disorganized, over-staffed and ineffective. A major exacerbating factor was the Proletkult affair, when the claims to autonomy of this self-styled "proletarian" cultural organization were slapped down by the party Central Committee, overruling the more tolerant and sympathetic Lunacharskii (Fitzpatrick 1970, 89–109, 174–180, 185–187). The blow to Lunacharskii's standing was all the more damaging because Lenin, usually a supporter of Narkompros, was on this occasion on the other side (he feared the influence of his old political opponent, Aleksandr Bogdanov, an eminence grise in Proletkult). It was at one point proposed—and supported by Preobrazhenskii as Central Committee Secretary—that Lunacharskii should be sacked as People's Commissar, but as a result of Lenin's intervention, he was only humiliated by the appointment of an assistant (*pomnarkom*) charged with conducting the reorganization of Narkompros under the supervision of Lenin and the Central Committee (Fitzpatrick 1970, 180). The man appointed to this position was Evgraf Litkens, a childhood friend of Preobrazhenskii and his fellow teenage revolutionary in the Urals almost 20 years earlier (Gorinov 2014, 6–7).

Among other duties, Litkens took over direction of a new body within Narkompros, named Glavpolitprosvet or GPP, that was to focus, under Central Committee direction, on adult political education. The underlying intention was presumably to make Narkompros focus more directly on its tasks of political indoctrination, but this quickly got swamped by disagreements about turf and accusations and counter-accusations of departmental imperialism. Preobrazhenskii was the Central Committee representative on GPP's board.

At the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, Preobrazhenskii was dropped from his position as secretary of the Central Committee, receiving the much lower-status job as head of another new body within Narkompros, the directorate of professional and technical education (Glavprofobr or GPO). Nobody ambitious for party preferment was likely to welcome being sidelined in a government department, and clashes between Preobrazhenskii and the old Narkompros leaders were virtually inevitable. Moreover, there were substantive issues at stake. If it had not already been clear that Preobrazhenskii's views on labor training

were more practically oriented than those of Lunacharskii and Krupskaia, with a stronger focus on providing industry with workers with basic skills, it quickly became so. Effectively, Preobrazhenskii's policy was to turn the top two grades of the united labor school into specialized technical–training institutions (*tekhnikumy*). This was a popular policy with the Bolsheviks working in industry and economic management, the co-called *khoziaistvenniki*, to whom Preobrazhenskii was close, but very unpopular with those humanists, like the Narkompros leaders, who put a high value on universal *general* education. Such a conversion of the top two grades cut off direct access from school to higher education. With the technical-training component of middle school (grades 4–7) beefed up as well, that left only the first three grades for general education, just as in tsarist times (Fitzpatrick 1970, 216–217).

This was a bitter pill for Narkompros, particularly Krupskaia, to swallow. She had been holding out for five years general education rather than three; and even in regard to the secondary level (starting at age 13 according to her scheme, but age 11 according to Preobrazhenskii's), she emphasized the importance of a theoretical as approached to purely practical approach to technical skills, and wanted to include history of labor and political history in the "labor" component of the school's curriculum (Krupskaia 1959, 35–37). She prepared a sharp objection to Preobrazhenskii's proposals for the First Party Meeting on Education in 1920, but in the end was unable to attend and deliver it because of illness. This was the only time Lenin differed from Krupskaia on an educational question, albeit privately in a note to himself written at the end of 1920, and it caused him some distress. In his notes on the argument over technical education, he recognized that "the extremely difficult economic position of the republic" required immediate transformation of the secondary level of the school from general to "professional-technical." This implicitly put him on the side of Preobrazhenskii and the *khoziaistvenniki*, and against Krupskaia and Lunacharskii. The polytechnical move was "super-important," Lenin wrote. "We are beggars. We need carpenters and metalworkers at once. No doubt about it." At the same time, he accepted Krupskaia's premise that there should be five rather than three years of general education before the technical slant kicked it and that the technical component of the middle grades should not amount to practical job training. In Lenin's opinion, only 16–17-year-olds in the last years of school should be trained in trades, so as to be fitted for jobs immediately on graduation (Lenin 1920, 228–230). Torn between his deep commitment to education and his sense of the magnitude of the economic problem, as well as on account of his loyalty to Krupskaia, Lenin agonized about this. His notes—which Krupskaia published after his death, at the end of the 1920s—were marked "Private. Draft. *Not for publication*. I have to think this over a couple more times."

As of 1920–1921, Preobrazhenskii had emerged as Narkompros's nemesis on a wide range of issues. He clashed repeatedly with the commissariat on questions of technical, higher and political education, as well as harshly criticizing its administrative functioning and accusing Lunacharskii of taking positions of "departmental imperialism" in his various battles with other party and government institutions (*Desiatyi s"ezd* 1963, 146). Preobrazhenskii was currently a member of the collegium of the Finance Commissariat as well as of Narkompros's GPO, and for him, at

least in these critical times, general and higher education—not mention the arts—looked like luxuries that the country could not afford. He argued publicly that

> it is improper, above all for our socialist state, to imitate the ruined aristocrat who refuses to mend the roof so as to buy a valuable painting or an expensive library… [in budgetary terms], higher education must be hugely diminished in favor of lower; and, in lower education, the general branch must be enormously diminished in favor of what is urgently important for industry and agriculture (Preobrazhenskii 1921).

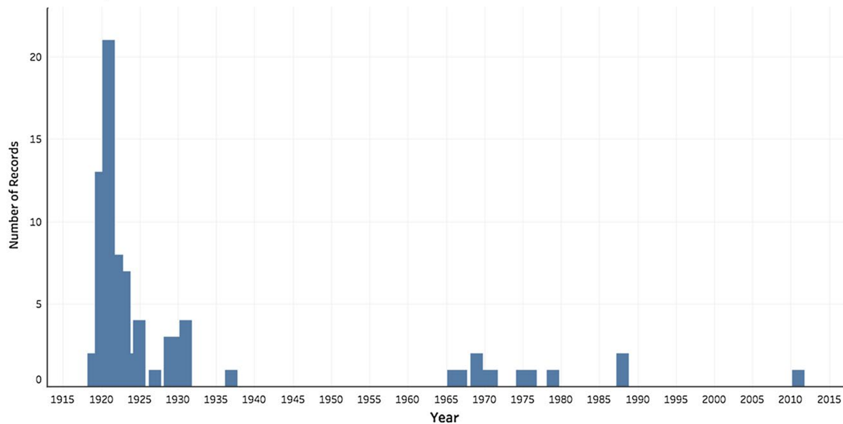
This was a direct blow at Lunacharskii, who responded with his own denunciation of "that sort of puritanism which announces the principle that 'man lives by bread alone'." Culture was the source of joy in life, Lunacharskii asserted. "The question is, are even poor and hungry people to have the great comfort of art or are they not?" (Lunacharskii 1921, 2).

Luncharskii and his colleagues were appalled by Preobrazhenskii's encouragement of Communist student militancy in 1920–1921, which led to a series of strikes by the professors in major universities. Lenin, too, was displeased. Having vainly attempted to get Preobrazhenskii to work with "bourgeois specialists" (including professors), he lost confidence in him as an educational administrator at this point, telling the Eleventh Party Congress in 1922, apropos of Preobrazhenskii's repressive stance towards the higher school, that "everyone knows and values [Preobrazhenskii's] strong side, but when he comes up with a political and administrative point of view, something monstrous comes out (*Odinnatsatyi s"ezd* 1961, 142).

Preobrazhenskii's education chapter was, like the *ABC* as a whole, something of a Left Communist ideological statement. As such, it was provocative in many respects to the Narkompros leadership, particularly Lenin's wife Krupskaia, just as the whole volume was to Lenin. With the transition to the New Economic Policy, the *ABC*'s lack of relevance to contemporary Soviet policy and practice could scarcely be denied, as Bukharin himself recognized. But it had already entrenched itself as the bible of Communist youth and staple of courses in "political literacy" (*politgramota*), and the radical positions Preobrazhenskii inclined to, notably an emphasis on practical technical training and a high priority on the rapid proletarianization of higher education, were increasingly to bedevil Narkompros. Young radicals in the Komsomol Central Committee (who had no doubt cut their ideological teeth on the *ABC*) joined Soviet *khoziaistvenniki* in savage criticism of Narkompros throughout the 1920s, and after Lenin's death the Narkompros leaders lacked a defender in the Politburo. The radicals' brief triumph during the Cultural Revolution led to Lunacharskii's resignation as People's Commissar for Enlightenment in 1929, and Krupskaia tried her best to do the same, although her pleas to be allowed to give up her administrative positions in Narkompros were unavailing (Fitzpatrick 1979, 133; Kumanev 1994, 141). Until his death in January 1924, Lenin never ceased to harp on the importance of popular education as a basis for socialism, and Krupskaia to foreground this in the reminiscences of him she published in the 1930s (Krupskaya 2004).

Despite its quick obsolescence, the *ABC* became something of a bible for Western historians of the early Soviet Union as well as young Soviet Komsomol members—a

kind of handbook of the “War Communism” of the Civil War period. It is salutary, therefore, to remember that actual Soviet governmental practice during the Civil War and the communism imagined (or prescribed) in the *ABC* had only intermittent points of resemblance. As we analyze the intellectual documents of revolution, it is easy to confuse them with descriptions of political and social reality, especially when, as with the *ABC*’s education chapter, fragmentary elements of such description are in fact contained, along with other elements such as concealed polemic on educational policy. Revolutions do not follow the scripts of their theorists, although it may also happen that those scripts, remaining in memory, influence future events in a variety of ways. The *ABC of communism* is a classic example.



Geographical Distribution of Editions of *ABC of Communism*

Figure compiled by Alexandra Price

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