

“Literacy is a clean window onto the world ...”

100 years since formation of Soviet Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy

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On June 19, 1920 the Soviet government led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky established the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy (Cheka Likbez).

The organisation played an important role in leading the campaign to wipe out illiteracy within the Soviet Union, eliminating one of the most damaging legacies of Tsarist backwardness and poverty. The Soviet literacy campaign remains the largest and most successful in world history. Historian Ben Eklof noted: “There is good reason to conclude that in 22 years (1917-39), the Soviet Union had accomplished what it took Britain, France, and Germany at least a hundred years to do.”[1]

The Soviet literacy campaign serves as an enduring demonstration of the extraordinary possibilities for reorganising society in the interests of the working class on a planned, socialist basis.

The campaign’s achievements stand in stark contrast to the global illiteracy that continues to plague humanity under capitalism in the 21st century. According to UNESCO statistics, at least 750 million people are illiterate, with 100 million of these people aged between 5-24. Most are in the former colonial regions of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In addition, however, within the advanced capitalist countries, access to proper literacy education opportunities is under threat as austerity and privatisation measures restrict access to adequately funded public education. In the United States, multiple law suits have sought to establish the as yet unrecognised constitutional right to literacy.

In 1917, when the Bolshevik Party overthrew the bourgeois provisional government and established the world’s first workers state, the revolutionary government confronted mass illiteracy across the former Tsarist empire. An 1897 census reported that just 21 percent of adults could read, though that was almost certainly an exaggerated figure given that anyone who could sign their name and who claimed to be able to read was counted as literate.[2] In the last two decades of the Tsarist regime the literacy rate increased somewhat, in parallel with the rising urban population, but by 1917 a large majority of the country’s 150 million people remained unable to read.

Tsarist authorities regarded the growth of literacy with suspicion and fear. In the early 19th century, Tsar Alexander I’s minister of instruction declared: “Knowledge is only useful, when like salt, it is used and offered in small measures according to the people’s circumstances and their needs. To teach the mass of people, or even the majority of them, how to read will bring more harm than good.”[3]

Exactly the opposite conception was advanced by the revolutionary government led by the Bolshevik Party.

The elimination of illiteracy was understood to be the essential prerequisite for the assimilation of culture and knowledge that was

required by the working class to begin to construct a socialist society. Lenin, in his classic work written on the eve of the October insurrection, *State and Revolution*, explained that the great majority of state administrative functions could be performed by “any *literate* person” (emphasis added), with universal literacy therefore a basic prerequisite for a workers state in which “the door will be thrown wide open for the transition from the first phase of communist society to its higher phase, and with it to the complete withering away of the state.”[4]

After the October Revolution, Lenin emphasised: “The illiterate person stands outside politics. First it is necessary to teach him the alphabet. Without it there are only rumours, fairy tales and prejudices—but not politics.”

The rapid acquisition of universal literacy was an immediate educational priority for the Soviet government. Just three days after the completion of the Bolshevik-led insurrection, on October 29, 1917 (November 11 on the new calendar), the newly appointed commissar for education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, issued “An Address to the Citizens of Russia” that explained:

Any truly democratic authority in the educational sphere of a country where illiteracy and ignorance are rife must make its first task that of combatting this atmosphere of gloom. It must, in the shortest period of time, try to achieve universal literacy by organising a network of schools that satisfy the requirements of contemporary education and by introducing universal, compulsory, free education. The fight against illiteracy and ignorance cannot be confined merely to organising proper school teaching for children, adolescents and young persons. Adults too will want to be rescued from the humiliation of being unable to read or write. Schools for adults must occupy a prominent place in the general plan of education.[5]

In December 1919, Lenin signed a nine-point decree titled “The Elimination of Illiteracy among the Population of the Russian Soviet Republic.”

Hundreds of thousands of copies of the decree were distributed across the country. It explained that, “for the purpose of giving the entire population of the Republic the opportunity for conscious participation in the country’s political life,” the Soviet government was making it obligatory for everyone between 8 and 50 years of age to learn to read and write in Russian or their native language, according to their choice.

The Commissariat of Education was given the power “to recruit, for teaching the illiterate, the country’s entire literate population which has not been called to war, as a labour responsibility.” It became a criminal offence for a literate person not to teach at least one illiterate how to read (though no-one was ever prosecuted for this). Illiterate workers were given two hours a day off work, on full wages, to study.

The June 1920 formation of the Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy aimed at advancing the practical implementation of the 1919 decree.

One historian summed up its role as follows:

This was an organisational mechanism to handle co-ordination and collaboration with all other organs of the government and the [Communist] Party, as well as public organisations and voluntary associations. The Commission included representatives of various state and public organisations and had extensive powers and functions; these included motivational work among the masses, registration of illiterates, elaboration of methods of instruction and production of primers and other textbooks, and recruitment of teachers and supervisors to implement the programme.[6]

The organisation’s decisions were binding for all government institutions and public employees. It was known in abbreviated form as the Cheka Likbez, underscoring its importance to the revolution through the echo of the name of the Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, or Cheka, the security agency organised to defeat counterrevolutionary efforts to overthrow the Soviet government.

The Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy was organised under the Commissariat of Education’s Main Administration for Political Education (Glavpolitprosvet), led by Nadezhda Krupskaya. Sometimes dismissed by bourgeois historians as nothing other than Lenin’s wife, Krupskaya was in fact an important revolutionist in her own right. Before the revolution, she had spent time working as a teacher and had made an extensive study of educational theorists. Her educational writings comprise multiple volumes, only a small fraction of which has been translated into English.

Collaborating closely with Lenin and Lunacharsky, Krupskaya in the 1920s developed many of the extraordinary initiatives in schooling and adult education that became renowned among educators internationally.

Red Army literacy campaigns

The Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy did not begin its work from scratch in 1920. Early Bolshevik efforts to eradicate illiteracy developed amid conditions of civil war, after counterrevolutionary forces, backed by European and American imperialist states, attacked the Soviet government. The campaign centred on the Red Army, which under Trotsky’s leadership mobilised millions of workers and peasants between 1918 and 1921 in defence of the revolution.

“Literacy is far from being everything, literacy is only a clean window onto the world, the possibility of seeing, understanding, knowing,” Trotsky explained in a 1922 speech at the Moscow Soviet. “This possibility we must give them [Red Army soldiers], and before everything else.”

He continued:

Our preparation is, above all, preparation, in the soldier, of the revolutionary citizen. We have to raise our young men in the army to a higher level, and, first and foremost, to rid them decisively and finally of the shameful stain of illiteracy. ... You, the Moscow Soviet, you, the district brigades and schools—the Red Army asks you, the Red Army expects of you, that you will not let anyone remain illiterate among your “sons” in the great family you have adopted. You will give them teachers, you will help them master the elementary technical means whereby a man can become a conscious citizen.[7]

Few details of the literacy campaign within the Red Army escaped Trotsky’s scrutiny. In early 1919, for example, amid some of the fiercest campaigns of the civil war, he took the time to write a scathing review of a compilation of literature and political material. “The general-education section attached to the military department of the Central Executive Committee has issued a First Reading-Book for use by the soldiers,” he wrote. “I do not know who compiled this book, but I can clearly see that it was someone who, in the first place, did not know the people for whom he was compiling it; who, secondly, had a poor understanding of the matters he was writing about; and who, thirdly, was not well acquainted with the Russian language. And these qualities are not sufficient for the compilation of a First Reading-Book for our soldiers.”[8]

Compulsory teaching was introduced for all ranks in April 1918.[9] Teachers who volunteered for the literacy campaign on the front quickly discovered that they had to abandon pre-revolutionary teaching methods. Krupskaya wrote about the experience of one teacher, Dora El’kina, a former Socialist Revolutionary who joined the Bolsheviks after the revolution: “El’kina began to teach them, as was the custom, from textbooks written on the basis of the analytical-synthetic [phonics] method: ‘Masha ate kasha. Masha washed the window.’ ‘How are you teaching us?’ protested Red Army men. ‘What’s all this about kasha? Who’s this Masha? We don’t want to read that.’”[10]

El’kina initially attempted to continue by discussing why the soldiers could not be with their Mashas and why there was a shortage of kasha. But she then wrote a new sentence of her own, which was subsequently published as the opening line of a new literacy book, becoming famous in Soviet Russia as the first words read by millions of newly literate workers and peasants—“We are not slaves; slaves we are not.”

El’kina and the co-authors of her book, titled *Down with Illiteracy*, explained in their preface the connection between acquiring the ability to read and the development of socialist consciousness: “We know that political work is not limited to clarifying slogans, just as teaching is not limited to instruction in reading and writing. But this book allows us to introduce the student to both. We regard the acquisition of political literacy and learning how to read to be interwoven goals. Students should not only be taught educational skills, but we should also pique their interest in public life. Students should not only assume their place in society as educated people, but they also should join the ranks of the fighters and builders of Soviet Russia.”[11]

Other early literacy initiatives included the recruitment of artists and writers, including Vladimir Mayakovsky, to develop simple and appealing first readers and alphabet books.

Aiming to develop the new found literacy abilities of millions of Red Army fighters, the Soviet government devoted substantial resources, including precious foreign currency reserves, to the provision of reading materials, despite chronic difficulties in sourcing paper, ink, and means of publishing texts. According to one survey of the Red Army’s work, in 1920 soldiers had been supplied with 20 million pamphlets, leaflets and posters, 5.6 million books, and 300,000 to 400,000 copies of newspapers a day.[12]

Eliminating illiteracy in the working class and peasantry

The Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy developed a series of initiatives in the factories and workplaces to ensure that all workers, including those who had just arrived from the countryside, could read.

Literacy centres or schools (*likpunkty*, “liquidation points”) were established across the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Larger factories and workplaces had their own literacy centres and libraries. As early as November 1920, the Extraordinary Commission had established 12,067 literacy centres, teaching 278,637 students.[13] Between 1920 and 1928, a total of 8.2 million people attended literacy schools.[14]

In line with the directive of Lenin’s 1919 decree, workers unable to read and write were given reduced shifts on full pay for daily study. Workers were also encouraged to attend classes taught by volunteers on Sunday. Literacy courses often culminated in public celebrations timed to coincide with revolutionary anniversaries—some workers’ courses first semester concluded on January 21 (the date of Lenin’s death in 1924) and second semester on May 1 (May Day).[15]

Literacy courses had high expectations of the enrolled workers. Far from the old Tsarist standard of a literate person being one who could sign their name, the Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy explained that a 3-4 month literacy centre course provided only a “key” to literacy, with a worker who participated in such a course for two hours each working day to be regarded as only “semi-literate.” A longer, 6-8 month course involving at least 6-8 hours of study each week was necessary as a precondition for genuine literacy.[16]

In 1923, the Extraordinary Commission’s work was expanded through the formation of the Down with Illiteracy society, a mass organisation led by the Communist Party. By October 1924, 1.6 million Soviet citizens had joined.[17] The society organised volunteer literacy teachers, distributed anti-illiteracy campaign posters, and raised money for the publication and distribution of pamphlets and books. It also organised regular literacy festivals and campaigns. One three-day campaign, beginning on May Day, 1925, involved the organisation of public plays, films and other public art, mass graduations from literacy centre courses, and the organisation of “agitational streetcars,” distributing brochures and popularising slogans from Lenin (“We have three tasks: first, to study, second, to study, and third, to study”) and Trotsky (“We will create a thick network of schools everywhere in the Russian land. There should be no illiterates. There should be no ignorant workers.”).[18]

Results varied in different industries throughout the 1920s. Illiteracy persisted in workplaces that absorbed former peasants who moved to the cities, especially women, such as the textile industry. In other sectors it was wiped out, including among metal, print and rail workers. By the end of 1924, literacy rates among rail workers were reportedly as high as 99 percent, with all of the remaining illiterates enrolled in literacy centre courses. In 1928, the rail workers union developed plans to eliminate illiteracy among the estimated 93,000 spouses and family members of their worker members.[19]

Within the peasantry, the campaign for universal literacy was more protracted and difficult. Serfdom had been abolished in Russia only 56 years before the October Revolution and religious superstition and different kinds of backwardness still afflicted the peasantry. Women were especially affected, and they were substantially more illiterate than men throughout the former Tsarist Empire. In the villages, boys were typically educated before girls. “We have full equality of men and women here,” Trotsky noted in 1924. “But for a woman to have the real opportunities

that a man has, even now in our poverty, women must equal men in literacy. The ‘woman problem’ here, then, means first of all the struggle with female illiteracy.”[20]

An initial boost to the campaign came with the demobilisation of the Red Army at the end of the civil war, as the number of troops reduced from 5.5 million to 800,000. Millions of newly literate peasants returned to their villages and taught their family members how to read.[21]

Across the vast Russian countryside in the 1920s, the Soviet government established a network of village reading rooms (*izba-chital’nia*, literally “reading hut”). During the civil war, more than 20,000 reading rooms were established, approximately one for every five villages. The number initially declined when the New Economic Policy forced cuts in government expenditure. Limited resources affected every aspect of the fight against illiteracy. One reading room established in Tambov county in 1923, for example, had reading materials consisting only of the regional newspaper, a pamphlet on political economy and Nikolai Bukharin and Yevgeni Preobrazhensky’s *ABC of Communism*. [22] There were also protracted difficulties in securing sufficiently educated workers to run the reading rooms.

“The goal of the reading rooms is to make the reading of the newspaper a keenly felt need for each poor and middle peasant,” Krupskaya explained. “They must be drawn to the newspaper as the drunk is to wine. If the reading room can accomplish this, it will have done a great thing.”[23]

The rooms did more, however, than merely make newspapers available. They developed as vehicles of literacy and culture, breaking down the isolation and backwardness of traditional peasant life. A December 1925 survey reported 6,392 “socio-political circles” convening in reading rooms, with 123,000 members. Larger still were “agro-economic circles” (7,000 circles with 136,000 members) and “drama/theatre circles” (9,400 circles with 185,000 members).[24]

New technologies were utilised to promote the value of learning to read and write. Where radios could be purchased for the village reading room, attendance increased sharply and in some regions had to be restricted to different groups of people on different days.[25] In addition, by April 1926, 976 travelling film groups were each visiting 20 villages a month. One historian explained: “Literate peasants introduced the films and used them as stimuli to create a demand for further information through books.”[26]

Children’s literacy education

The Soviet literacy campaign was always affected by limited financial resources. The Bolsheviks had established a workers’ government in October 1917 with the perspective that this would be the first shot in the world revolution. The spread of the revolution to the advanced capitalist countries, beginning with Germany and other European centres, was eagerly anticipated, not least because of the prospect of alleviating Russia’s economic backwardness through the sharing of financial resources and industrial technique. In Germany, however, in 1918–1919 and again in 1923, revolutionary upheavals ended in bourgeois counterrevolution, as did working-class uprisings in other European countries.

The immense economic backwardness of Russia was compounded by the impact of the civil war and imperialist onslaught. In 1921, the Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy issued a pamphlet outlining short-term literacy courses, which featured one chapter titled, “How to get by without paper, pencils, or pens.”[27]

Poverty and shortages especially affected the development of the Soviet

school system in this period. One American educator who visited the USSR in 1925 described the situation:

It would be hard to find poorer equipment than that in many of the Soviet institutions. Buildings are old. Benches are worn out. Blackboards and books are lacking. Teachers and other educational workers are badly paid—sometimes, for months, unpaid. Only about half the children of school age in the Soviet Union can be accommodated in the schools. Lunacharsky, People's Commissar for Education, estimates that the Union is now short of 25,000 teachers. Even if they had these teachers, they would have no rooms in which to put them. Probably there is no large country in Europe where educational conditions are physically worse than they are in the Soviet Union.[28]

Despite these immense challenges, the early Soviet Union developed the world's most innovative and progressive approaches to teaching and learning.

The Educational Act of October 1918 abolished the old, Church-dominated education administrative system that was geared towards the Tsarist elite and advanced the principle of freely accessible, secular education from primary to tertiary levels, developed as a "United Labour School." A historian has explained that this Act reflected a consensus within the Commissariat of Education for "a school system with the following features: a single type of school, the United Labour School, providing nine years of polytechnical education as well as shoes, clothing, hot breakfasts, medical care, and academic materials free of charge to all children regardless of gender or social origin; little or no homework; no standard textbooks, promotion, or graduation examinations or grades (marks); socially useful exercises as part of the standard curriculum (care of public parks, campaigns against assorted evils from illiteracy to religion and alcohol); the study and practice of labour from modelling in the earlier grades to work in a school shop or plot in later grades, perhaps even a practicum in a factory for senior pupils; and self-government to teach school in which the public, parents, and pupils would play a vital role." [29]

While not all of these commitments were immediately met, given the material shortages, the Soviet Union nevertheless became a laboratory of pedagogical experimentation.

"Our socialist country is striving for the reconciliation of physical and mental labour, which is the only thing that can lead to the harmonious development of man," Trotsky explained in a 1924 speech, "A Few Words on How to Raise a Human Being." He continued: "Such is our program. The program gives only general directions for this: it points a finger, saying 'Here is the general direction of your path!' But the program does not say how to attain this union in practice. ... In this field, as in many others, we shall go and are going already by way of experience, research, and experiments, knowing only the general direction of the road to the goal: as correct as possible a combination of physical and mental labour." [30]

Children's literacy learning changed substantially in many schools after the revolution. The Tsarist system, for the minority of children able to access it at all, had featured authoritarian, rote-learning methods, with grammar and other aspects of the reading and writing processes taught without any connections to other aspects of the curriculum, let alone to the child's environment and interests.

Soviet schools, on the other hand, were encouraged to adopt an integrated curriculum and teach reading and writing through engagement with, and exploration of, society and the natural world. Krupskaya incorporated the approaches developed by progressive American

educators in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, developing them on the basis of a Marxist understanding of human society and the productive process. This became known as the "complex method," with teachers planning children's literacy and numeracy learning within the framework of three "complexes"—nature, labour and society. The closest connections were encouraged between schools and their communities, with frequent excursions and research projects on neighbouring factories or farms.

Krupskaya explained: "The first stage [of school] aims to give children the most necessary skills and knowledge for work activity and cultural life and to awaken their interest in their surroundings. ... It should not be forgotten that language and mathematics must play a purely functional role in the first stage. Their study as separate branches of knowledge in the first stage is premature. Study of their mother tongue and mathematics must, therefore, have a modern character, which is closely tied to a child's observations and activities." [31]

Writing on the development of Soviet education in the 1920s, American journalist William Henry Chamberlin reported:

The most striking and novel educational experiments are to be found in the lower and middle Soviet schools. ... Old-fashioned teaching methods, with every subject placed in a water-tight compartment and taught separately, have been completely discarded. ... I witnessed a practical application of this [complex] method in a Moscow school, named after President Kalinin. The given theme was 'The City of Moscow.' The history lesson was based on past events in the life of the city. Some geographical ideas were imparted by taking the children to the Moscow River and showing them what are islands, shores, and peninsulas, etc. Arithmetic had its turn when the children turned out in a body to measure the block nearest the school and make various calculations regarding its relation to the city as a whole. ... From time to time they visited factories, museums, and historical monuments. The purely scholastic method is anathema in Soviet pedagogy. Every effort is made to give the pupils some concrete and visible representation of the things which they are studying. [32]

The 1930s and the impact of Stalinism

The isolation of the Soviet state, a consequence of the defeats suffered by the working class in western and central Europe in the years after World War I, together with the country's enormous poverty and social inequality, gave rise to a new bureaucratic caste. In the early 1920s, this privileged social layer became increasingly self-satisfied and conservative and lined up behind Joseph Stalin after he unveiled in 1924 the nationalist perspective of "socialism in one country."

This was directly aimed against the theory of permanent revolution, which Trotsky developed amid the 1905 revolutionary upheavals in Russia and which was the basis on which the Bolshevik Party seized power in 1917. Trotsky analysed that the tasks of the democratic revolution in Russia—including the elimination of Tsarism and all remnants of feudal backwardness—could only be advanced through the taking forward of the socialist revolution, led by the working class. The workers would lead the revolution and, once in power, Trotsky correctly anticipated, would be compelled to take into public ownership the commanding heights of the economy and institute socialist measures, including state planning. However, given Russia's immense economic backwardness, the victory of the revolution ultimately depended on its

development internationally, above all in the advanced capitalist countries.

The bureaucracy came to identify the theory of permanent revolution and the fight for world socialist revolution as a threat to its interests. Trotsky recalled in his autobiography: “The sentiment of ‘Not all for the revolution, but something for oneself as well,’ was translated as ‘Down with the permanent revolution.’ The revolt against the exacting theoretical demands of Marxism and the exacting political demands of the revolution gradually assumed, in the eyes of the people, the form of a struggle against ‘Trotskyism’.”[33]

Trotsky and the Left Opposition fought a determined and principled campaign in defence of the revolution and its internationalist perspective. The Stalinist bureaucracy responded with a ferocious campaign of slander, historical falsifications, factional manoeuvres and violent state repression. Krupskaya, who briefly joined the Opposition before capitulating to Stalin, noted in 1926 that if Lenin had then been alive he would have been jailed by the new regime. After the Left Opposition organised demonstrations within the official rallies in 1927 for the 10th anniversary of the October revolution in Moscow and Leningrad, unfurling banners in defence of soviet democracy and internationalism, the Stalinists expelled Trotsky and other oppositionists from the Communist Party and sent them into internal exile. Trotsky was expelled from the USSR in 1929, and assassinated while in exile in Mexico in 1940, two years after he founded the Fourth International.

The Stalinist counterrevolution had a devastating impact on education and pedagogy, as it did in every other area of culture.

Lunacharsky was forced out of the Commissariat of Education in 1929. The Marx-Engels Institute of Marxist Pedagogy was disbanded in 1932. Also that year, Stanislav Shatsky was removed from his position as head of the “First Experimental Station,” a network of progressive child and adult educational centres that had also served as a teacher training hub. Shatsky had collaborated closely with Krupskaya in the 1920s, and his school network had been visited by numerous appreciative Western educators, including the American philosopher and pedagogue John Dewey. The Stalinist regime in the 1930s elevated as national-educator-in-chief Anton Makarenko, a previously obscure administrator of GPU secret police-operated “colonies” for orphaned and homeless children. These were run as military-style boot camps, with students spending as much time working on assembly lines producing drills and cameras as they did learning in classrooms.

In the early 1930s, a series of Central Committee resolutions and government edicts condemned educational “experimentation,” prohibited the complex method, effectively junked any commitment to polytechnism, abolished student democracy in favour of principal and teacher authority, imposed mandatory school uniforms, and wound back school autonomy in favour of centralised state control.[34] Teachers were rewarded for increasing their students’ individual test scores, while exams were introduced for students entering each year level. Authoritarianism saturated every aspect of the education system. A “Rules for Conduct” was issued for every primary and secondary school—they included commands for students to “obey the instructions of the school manager and the teachers without question,” to “rise when the teacher or director enters or leaves the room,” and to “stand to attention when answering the teacher; to sit down only with the teacher’s permission; to raise his hand if he wishes to answer a question.”

In his masterpiece analysis, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky in 1937 noted that the new generation in the Soviet Union was emerging “under intolerable and constantly increasing oppression.” He added: “In the factory, the collective farm, the barracks, the university, the schoolroom, even in the kindergarten, if not in the creche, the chief glory of man is declared to be: personal loyalty to the leader and unconditional obedience. Many pedagogical aphorisms and maxims of recent times might seem to

have been copied from Goebbels, if he himself had not copied them in good part from the collaborators of Stalin.”[35]

The campaign for universal literacy was, inevitably, adversely affected by the Stalinist counterrevolution.

At the same moment that the Soviet Union was on the verge of wiping out illiteracy, the Stalin regime relentlessly propagated lies and historical falsification. The “big lie” of Stalinism—that Stalin represented the continuity of Lenin’s leadership of the Bolshevik Party, and that Trotsky and the theory of permanent revolution were enemies of the working class—assumed monstrous proportions during the 1936-1938 purges and show trials. Virtually every one of Lenin and Trotsky’s comrades other than Stalin was accused of being a spy, a fascist or a provocateur. Historical falsification was institutionalised in the schools, universities and party education institutions, and any teacher or student who objected to the regime’s crude lies was subject to imprisonment or execution.

In such conditions, the development of genuine literacy—understood as more than the simple ability to read words on a page, instead involving critical-minded engagement with texts—was all but impossible.

A historian noted that the 1930s campaigns “produced a sharp rise in the national literacy rate, but at the expense of true education as Lenin had understood it. The chief aim was an economic and not a cultural one—to provide a barely literate mass labour force as fast as possible for employment in the Five-Year Plans.”[36]

Krupskaya, despite her accommodation to the Stalinist regime, acknowledged that the literacy campaign work in the late 1920s and early 1930s had “helped millions of people to read and write, but the knowledge gained was of the most elementary kind.”[37] One survey indicated a significant decrease in the time that workers spent reading in the 1930s. Between 1923 and 1939, the average time that city workers devoted to reading newspapers each week declined from 2.3 to 1.8 hours, and the time spent reading books and periodicals from 2.1 to 1.0 hours.[38]

Stalinism also affected the literacy campaign work among the non-Russian nationalities, which comprised around half the population of the Soviet Union. Some of the nationalities were pre-literate societies at the time of the October Revolution, and in others literacy rates were very low. In the 1920s, in order to allow people to become literate in their native language, Soviet linguists, as one account describes, “diagrammed and codified alphabets, grammars and vocabularies for the whole range of Northern Caucasus, Turkic and Finno-Ugric peoples.” In addition: “Narkompros [the Commissariat of Education] retooled dozens of academic institutes and created new ones (the Central Institute of Living Eastern Languages, the Institute of Orientology, the All-Union Association of Orientology, the Communist University of the Workers of the East) in order to prepare linguistic studies, alphabets, dictionaries, school texts, and native language cadres for work in the east.”[39]

Stalin’s promotion of great-Russian chauvinism hindered these initiatives—in the 1930s Cyrillic scripts were imposed on those nationalities that had previously developed use of the Latin alphabet. Some newly literate workers and peasants had to relearn how to read their own language in Cyrillic. In addition, learning Russian was made mandatory in school from 1938.

Despite these Stalinist hindrances on the literacy campaign, the number of people who could read and write significantly increased in the 1930s. As Trotsky analysed, the bureaucratic caste usurped political power from the working class in Soviet Union, but it retained the state monopoly of foreign trade and public ownership of the means of production. The USSR remained a workers state, although a severely degenerated one. As such, the state was capable of planning and distributing vast resources as part of the literacy campaign.

Ensuring that many more workers and peasants could read and write was an essential requirement of the industrialisation drive. Stalin’s industrialisation and forced collectivisation of the peasantry—sharply

condemned by Trotsky and the Left Opposition for its needlessly violent and reckless character—saw a sharp increase in the Soviet Union’s urban population. Forced collectivisation, while having a devastating economic impact, allowed literacy teaching within a now more concentrated peasant population. The Komsomol, Communist youth organisation, was mobilised to assist the literacy campaign in the countryside. Between 1931 and 1933, 50,000 Komsomol members taught in schools, although most of these and other young teachers lacked any formal qualifications.[40]

Worker enrolment in literacy centre courses increased. Significant resources were devoted in the 1930s to ensure universal schooling for children. Between 1927 and 1932, the number of school teachers doubled, increasing by 230,000. Student numbers for grades 1-7 increased from 11 million in 1927-1928 to 21 million in 1932-1933, with 8 million of this increased enrolment being in rural schools’ early grade levels. One historian has noted that this “increase of 8 million in rural schools exceeded the entire primary school enrolment in the Russian Empire in 1914.”[41]

Conclusion

A 1939 USSR census demonstrated that illiteracy was then in the process of being entirely wiped out, just 22 years after the October revolution. For those aged between 9 and 49 years, 87.4 percent were literate. The literacy rate remained higher in the cities than in the countryside, and higher among men than women. The urban male literacy rate was 97.1 percent, and the urban female rate 90.7 percent.[42] Some of the most extraordinary gains in literacy were recorded in the non-Russian Soviet republics. In the Central Asian region of Turkmenia, for example, literacy rates increased from less than 8 percent, recorded in the 1897 census, to 78 percent in 1939.[43]

The literacy campaign laid the basis for the deeply cultured character of Soviet society. Notwithstanding the Stalinist regime’s censorship and repression, the Soviet population revered literature, poetry and the arts. More immediately, the literacy campaign also undoubtedly played a role in the military campaign against Nazi Germany between 1941-1945, in which an estimated 27 million Soviet citizens lost their lives. The tens of millions of Soviet men drafted into the army between 1941 and 1945, and men and women who staffed the armaments factories, were capable of following and issuing written instructions. The mass mobilisation of the entire population for the fight against fascism would likely have been made even more costly had there not been near-universal literacy.

From today’s perspective, the Soviet literacy campaign remains an extraordinary achievement. The world crisis of capitalism brings with it a stepped-up assault on public education and the ability of the working class to access culture. In the United States and other countries, the coronavirus pandemic is being used as a pretext to slash spending on public education. Chronic shortages of resources in public schools across the world, including in the advanced capitalist countries—together with appalling working conditions for teachers and mandated regressive pedagogical methods—threaten to deny the younger generation their right of acquiring a genuine, critical literacy. No doubt among the financial oligarchs and their political hirelings there is a similar mindset to that expressed by the 19th century Tsarist minister of instruction, with literacy and knowledge for working class youth believed to be a dangerous thing, best restricted.

The defence of universal, high quality literacy, as with the defence of every other aspect of human culture, again falls to the socialist movement.

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