

THE
COMMISSARIAT OF
ENLIGHTENMENT

SOVIET ORGANIZATION OF
EDUCATION AND THE ARTS
UNDER LUNACHARSKY
OCTOBER 1917-1921

BY
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CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

1970

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1970

First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 07919 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52438 5 paperback

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1*a* Lunacharsky wearing fur coat presented to him
by Red Army soldiers

b Lunacharsky and Lenin at the unveiling of a
monument

2*a* Lunacharsky and V.M. Pozner, organizer of Union
of Teacher-Internationalists

b Narkompros delegates at meeting for reform of
higher education

3*a* A.V. Lunacharsky

b P.I. Lebedev-Polyansky

c Nadezhda Krupskaya

d E.A. Litkens

4*a* Lunacharsky playing chess with his brother-in-law,
I.A. Sats

b Presidium of meeting held in State Academy of
Artistic Sciences

Acknowledgements for help in obtaining illustrations are
due to I.A. Lunacharskaya, I.A. Sats, A.I. Deich, E.A.
Dinershtein, K.S. Pavlova of the Lunacharsky Museum
and staff of the State Museum of the Revolution

INTRODUCTION

I began the present work in Oxford as a study of Lunacharsky. It became, in the course of research in Moscow, a study of Narkompros, the commissariat in charge of education and the arts which Lunacharsky headed from 1917 to 1929. The decisive factor in this change was the archival material to which I had access in Moscow, which consisted largely of minutes and documents of the collegium of Narkompros and its departments. What most impressed me about the Narkompros archives, as compared to published materials of Narkompros and other Soviet institutions, was that they showed both the manner in which decisions were made in the commissariat and the gap which normally existed between a decision and its implementation. This is particularly true of the period 1918-19, when debates in the collegium of Narkompros were sometimes reported almost verbatim: from the beginning of the '20s protocols of meetings were entered more formally and professionally and have less to add to the material published in Narkompros' weekly bulletin. It would be difficult, I think, to read through the early Narkompros documents without catching the sense of excitement, of a world in flux but changing for the better, which was felt by the founding members of the commissariat. I hope something of this sense remains in my narrative.

The subject of this book is the establishment of a Soviet commissariat: its formulation of policy, internal workings, relations with other government departments and the Bolshevik Party, dealings with subordinate non-government institutions and the public. I have dealt only with the period 1917-21, ending with the introduction of the New Economic Policy when, for better or for worse, the institutional structure of the commissariat was stabilized and the scope and nature of its work for the next half-dozen years determined. I hope to deal with the later years of Lunacharsky's work in Narkompros (1921-9) in a separate volume.

This is institutional history; but as I came to write it through an

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interest in Lunacharsky, and as an historian and not as a political scientist, I have devoted considerable attention to the individuals creating the institution and working within it. Biographical data in this field is not easy to come by, and I have therefore included an appendix of biographical notes on the people who worked in Narkompros or influenced its early development. The information is by no means exhaustive, but I have done my best to check its accuracy.

Perhaps the narrative which follows will be more comprehensible to the reader if I introduce the main characters in advance. The most important of the *dramatis personae* are Lunacharsky, Krupskaya, Pokrovsky and Litkens within Narkompros, and Lenin outside it. Lunacharsky, the commissar, is a large, untidy man with pince-nez and a benevolent expression. During the winters of the Civil War he often wears an enormous fur-coat of the type worn by rich merchants under the old regime (a gift from Red Army men at the front), and can be seen striding through Moscow streets in animated conversation, arms waving, scarf flapping, coat unbuttoned and trailing behind him in the snow. He is an enthusiast but not a fanatic, tolerant—in the opinion of some of his colleagues—to a fault, with a past history of Party unorthodoxy; erudite, a lover of philosophy and the arts, a prolific playwright. Lunacharsky's deputy is the historian Pokrovsky: belligerent, sharp-tongued, radical in his political and intellectual views, intolerant to his former academic colleagues. Unlike Lunacharsky, who has little taste for political manœuvring at any level, Pokrovsky is a born academic politician. But neither he nor Lunacharsky plays an important role in internal Party politics, and neither is a member of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party.

Lenin's wife Krupskaya is, in Lunacharsky's phrase, 'the soul of Narkompros', and is deeply concerned in the formulation of its educational policy. She dislikes administrative work and has no pleasure in holding high office. She belongs to the honourable tradition of Russian revolutionary enlighteners. A number of the early members of Narkompros taught with her at the Smolenskaya evening adult-education classes in Petersburg in the 1890s: this experience remains her spiritual touchstone. She is by nature practical, self-

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contained, attached to old friends, suspicious of pretension and style.

Lenin, like Krupskaya, comes from the popular-educational as well as the revolutionary tradition of the Russian intelligentsia: his father was a radical inspector of schools under the tsar. Through Krupskaya, and through friendship with Lunacharsky, one of his neighbours in the Kremlin, Lenin is in particularly close contact with Narkompros. He attends virtually every educational conference during the period of his active participation in government (to 1922); and he is familiar with the minutiae of Narkompros affairs not only through Krupskaya, but directly through his presidency of the Party Central Committee's commission on the reorganization of Narkompros in 1921. He is in frequent telephone contact with Lunacharsky about educational matters, and in 1921 receives daily telephone reports from Litkens, who is in charge of the Narkompros reorganization.

Lenin, Krupskaya, Lunacharsky and Pokrovsky belong to the same generation and the same revolutionary tradition. Evgraf Litkens, who comes to Narkompros at the end of 1920, is of another generation and a new revolutionary tradition, born in the Civil War. The new revolutionary tradition carries its own style of dress: army boots and leather jackets *à la* Sverdlov (even Lunacharsky adopts the military-style 'French' jacket during the Civil War, though Lenin does not); and gives pride of place to the military virtues of discipline, organization and toughmindedness. Litkens perhaps models himself on Trotsky, who was sheltered by his father after the collapse of the Petersburg Soviet in 1905, when Litkens was still a schoolboy. He presents himself as a hard-headed practical revolutionary, making no concession to sentiment or intellectual self-doubt; he is nevertheless a graduate of the University of St Petersburg. Litkens comes from the front with a mandate from the Central Committee to turn Narkompros into an efficient administrative machine. He finds Narkompros deeply civilian and thus—as it seems to him—non-revolutionary in spirit. He is particularly offended by the retinue of self-centred, over-articulate, non-political poets, actors and musicians employed and supported by Narkompros and enjoying the protection of the commissar. He banishes the

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poets and—being an energetic and fairly efficient organizer—imposes a new rational organizational structure on the commissariat. But no sooner has he completed his work of rationalization than it is swept away in the wake of a general campaign to reduce costs and limit the number of government employees. Narkompros reverts to an irrational organizational state; the poets quietly return. Litkens is then murdered by Crimean bandits. The collegium of Narkompros, perhaps conscience-stricken, resolves to publish a book of memorial essays; but this turns out to be one of many Narkompros resolutions never fulfilled.

These, then, are the characters of the story. The institution they created was incoherent, rambling, malfunctioning, over-staffed with middle-aged intellectuals and under-staffed with proletarian Communists. This condition was not peculiar to Narkompros, but common to all Soviet institutions during the Civil War. It extended even to Party bodies, usually considered to have been on a higher level of organization. The *agitprop* department of the Central Committee, for example, was no more and probably less operational at the end of 1920 than Glavpolitprosvet, the corresponding organ of Narkompros. Effective organization was achieved—partially and with great difficulty—only in the areas directly essential to national survival: the army, the Food Commissariat and the transport authority, Tsektran. Although it was frequently said that Narkompros was extraordinarily badly organized, and Narkompros as frequently claimed that it was extraordinarily badly treated, its condition appears to have been typical of commissariats not directly involved in the war effort: such complaints should not, in my opinion, be taken at face value.

The central organizational task facing Narkompros, as the Commissariat of Education, was the administration of the school system; and this was the area of its most conspicuous failure during the Civil War period. But Narkompros had a number of achievements to its credit. Universities, the Academy of Sciences, scientific research institutes and theatres were kept open with government subsidy, and without excessive interference from Narkompros in the face of considerable provocation. Public libraries, art collections and museums were preserved and opened to the public. Narkompros

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formulated basic principles of educational reform, and set up a large number of kindergartens and a network of experimental schools and children's colonies. It subsidized the arts on a fairly catholic basis which was in effect favourable to the development of experimental and avant-garde art, but at the same time discouraged the avant-garde from persecuting the conservatives. The leaders of Narkompros were exceptionally well-qualified for their work, democratic in their methods, appreciative of expert advice and co-operation.

What was the enlightenment Narkompros had to offer? Lunacharsky, if challenged, might have made three major claims. The first was in the sphere of educational theory, where Narkompros stood firmly on the side of the contemporary European and American progressive educational movement: for encouragement of the child's individuality and creativity, development of his social instincts, informal relations between pupils and teachers, activity methods of teaching, broadening of the school curriculum to include study of the surrounding environment, physical and aesthetic education and training in elementary labour and craft skills. These principles were more than once described by Lunacharsky as a cause of 'our legitimate pride before Europe'; and he told VTSIK that Narkompros' *Statement on the United Labour School* of 1918 would become 'an educational classic'.

The second claim was in the cultural and scientific sphere. An enlightened government, Lunacharsky believed, recognizes that creative work in science and the arts must be carried out with a minimum of outside interference and pressure. But it also recognizes that such work is to the ultimate advantage of the state, and so provides generous subsidies. In relation to the arts (and undoubtedly to the sciences, had the possibility of a Lysenko situation occurred to him), Lunacharsky held that the greatest possible misfortune was for the government to show special preference to any one group, thereby putting it in a position of artistic monopoly. He resisted the demands of Communist avant-garde artists like Mayakovsky and Meyerhold for special privileges, and did his best to protect the artistic traditionalists against their attacks. Believing that respect for scholarship was a mark of enlightenment, he supported the

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Academy of Sciences in its demand for subsidized autonomy (although the Academy's secretary, Oldenburg, who put forward its claim, was a former member of the Cadet Central Committee and Lunacharsky's immediate predecessor as Minister of Public Education under the Provisional Government). He encouraged Communist artists and scholars, but not in persecution of their colleagues or bids for monopoly.

The third claim was on the principle of equality of educational opportunity. Narkompros held that the educational system should make it possible for a factory worker's child to become either a factory worker or an industrial manager or a member of the Academy of Sciences, without occupational choice being automatically restricted at an early age. This meant universal *general* education at both primary and secondary levels. It ruled out the possibility of early professional specialization in schools or trade apprenticeship for school-age children. Thus the United Labour School, according to the Narkompros programme, was 'polytechnical' but not 'professional': it taught a variety of labour skills without specializing in any one of them or providing a professional or trade qualification.

Narkompros' style and methods were often criticized for their lack of Bolshevik toughmindedness. Lunacharsky's commissariat—and Lunacharsky himself—were believed by many Bolsheviks to be too permissive, too liable to flights of fancy, too easily manipulated by the non-Party intelligentsia, not sufficiently vigilant in defence of Party orthodoxy. But Narkompros encountered relatively little serious objection on principle in the Civil War years. At this time, the official policy towards the arts was non-discriminatory. The natural tendency of a Communist government to give preference to Communist artists was counterbalanced by the instinctive dislike which most Communist politicians felt for the artistic avant-garde. Only Bukharin among Party leaders really sympathized—and then not for long—with the iconoclasm of the artistic left and its demand for monopoly privileges. The Central Committee (in its letter 'On the Proletkults' of December 1920) ruled against it. The most common objection to Narkompros' cultural activity was not on policy but on the extent of its patronage: it was said to be too generous and gullible a patron, and to spend too much money on

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the arts and too little on schools. Similarly, there was no basic disagreement with Narkompros' policy towards the scientific world. Indeed the initiative in granting autonomy to the Academy of Sciences belonged as much to Lenin—who believed that it was necessary to find a *modus vivendi* with specialists in all fields—as to Narkompros. Narkompros was criticized for its gentle handling of anti-Communist professors. But its respect for science and for some degree of scientific independence was not controversial.

The educational principles which Narkompros put forward in 1918 were received with indifferent approval by the Soviet government. VTSIK accepted the Narkompros *Statement on the United Labour School* without discussion, in view of its 'completely uncontroversial nature', as one delegate put it. However, the issue of professionalization of secondary education became controversial in 1920-1. The case for professionalization, argued by Otto Schmidt (head of Glavprofobr) and the trade unions, rested on the expected shortage of skilled labour during post-war reconstruction of Russian industry. The professional lobby was popular in the economic commissariats, the unions and local Party committees, which instinctively supported the more practical and utilitarian alternative offered. Part of the Central Committee supported professionalization. But Narkompros continued to oppose it, as a limitation on equality of educational opportunity; and it was defeated by the intervention of Lenin—using superior cunning from what was probably a position of weakness—in support of Narkompros.

The particular interest for the historian of Narkompros' first years lies in the struggle to translate ideas into practice, to find appropriate institutional forms in a revolutionary situation. In this respect, the early history of Narkompros presents a case-study in the problems of revolutionary government. But this is not all. Lunacharsky believed that Communism meant, above all, the enlightenment of the people. The October Revolution put him at the head of the Commissariat of Enlightenment: 'a true apostle and forerunner of enlightenment', as he was described in a greeting from revolutionary provincial teachers in 1918. The Civil War period was necessarily a time of limited practical achievement for Narkompros, but it was a time of great expectations. For Narkompros its new

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kindergartens were 'corners full of joy, full of the morning light portending future socialism; light grains of the future for which we struggle against the twilight, cruelly battle-coloured backdrop of our suffering land'. As Thomas Carlyle (contemplating the sky-blue coat which Robespierre had made for the Festival of the Supreme Being and wore on the day of his execution) wrote in his history of the French Revolution: 'O Reader, can thy hard heart hold out against that?'