

The Baba and the Bolshevichka – Learning to Read Soviet Representations of Women’s Literacy in Early Soviet Culture

Kathryn Martin

University of Nottingham

The importance of the female role in the Sovietisation process in post-Revolutionary Russia and beyond was not lost on many of the key figures of the Bolshevik party, not least Vladimir Lenin, who wrote many articles prior to the seismic social shifts of 1917 extolling the need to emancipate women from their current social positions, and emphasising the key role that the female figure had to play in bringing communism to the nation. Clara Zetkin, the German Marxist theorist and female activist recalled that in 1920, Lenin told her that: “We can rightly be Proud of the fact that in the Party, in the Communist International, we have the flower of revolutionary womankind. But that is not enough. We must win over to our side the millions of toiling women in the towns and villages. [...] There can be no real mass movement without women” (1929: 69). However, one of the greatest barriers to this process were the overwhelmingly low levels of literacy among the adult female population

Journal of Languages, Texts, and Society, Vol. 2 (2018), 48–66.

© 2018 by Kathryn Martin. This content is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) license.

after the Revolution, which according to some estimates, were as low as 17% (St George 25). This paper draws on Soviet linguistic theory and language policy in order to explore the relationship between the female literacy movement in the early Soviet period and its artistic representation in three different cultural items from this period: state produced propaganda posters, Olga Preobrazhenskaia's 1927 film *Baby Riazanskie* (The Peasant Women of Riazan), and Andrei Platonov's 1929 novel *Kotlovan* (The Foundation Pit). These sources have been carefully selected to provide contrasting representations of the subject, encompassing an official state approach, a female led depiction, and the hyper-realistic approach to the Socialist Realist construction novel taken by Platonov. Through these analyses, it will demonstrate the role of two contrasting figures of Soviet femininity - the baba and the bolshevichka - and argue that their images reflect an acknowledgement of the vital role of the female figure in the development of the Russian language in the early Soviet period, and the subsequent Sovietisation of the Russian nation.

In *The ABC of Communism*, written in 1922, Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii lament that: "In tsarist Russia, the method by which the masses of the people were kept in subjugation to the aristocratic State was not, on the whole, that of a bourgeois-priestly-tsarist enlightenment, but simply that of withholding enlightenment of any sort" (Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii 280). That is to say, they argued that for many, it was not the content of the education that was provided which was used as the main mechanism for maintaining the dogma of the Church and State, but rather the total deprivation of access to education in general. On the surface, statistics regarding literacy at the time certainly appear to corroborate this lamentation, since at the outset of the Revolutions of 1917, levels of literacy in Imperial Russia were overwhelmingly low. Some estimates of the literacy rates for the general adult population were as low as 28.2% in 1897 (Elkof). However, this Soviet analysis fails to consider the work that had been started as far back as 1861, when Aleksandr II's social reforms which eradicated serfdom in the country began to tackle some of the educational inequality in the nation. One such measure included a law passed in 1864 which tasked the local

*zemstva*¹ with ensuring that adequate schooling facilities were provided in their area, as well as passing a law which asserted that there must be a school house within three versts, or 3.2km, of each dwelling in the area (Elkof 127). However, the speed at which these measures were implemented was painfully slow. As late as 1914, although 91% of *zemstva* had signed agreements to work towards the fulfillment of this aim, only 3% of 441 regions had actually managed to do so. Of the remainder, 65% of authorities thought that it would take them five years to achieve the goal; 30% stated they were ten years away, and a further 8% were more than ten years away from providing adequate local education facilities in their region (Elkof 127).

Equally problematic was the lack of provision for adult education in the Imperial system, which had the most severe impact on adult women. Indeed, among women, the crisis of literacy was considerably worsened in the wake of October 1917. At the time of the last census to be undertaken before the revolution in 1913, 83% of the female population was illiterate; and here more than in any other strata of Russian society, the division of literacy in the late Imperial and early post-Revolution eras was the most strikingly demarcated along lines of class. While there was a reasonably good infrastructure for teaching at least a basic degree of literacy to the rank and file members of the army, which was continued and developed post-Revolution by the Red Army, literacy among women was almost exclusively the preserve of the aristocracy.² The situation, and the crisis that the Revolution unleashed on women's literacy, is summed up most succinctly by George St. George, when he states that: "In 1913 [...] 83% of all women were found to be illiterate. The vast majority of the remaining 17% were women of the higher classes; among peasant women illiteracy was almost universal. After the Revolution had swept away the higher classes, either physically destroying them or driving them into exile, the percentage of illiterate women remaining was

¹ *Zemstva*, plural of *zemstvo*, was an administrative unit of local government in Imperial Russia

² For an excellent psychological analysis into teaching, learning and language usage practice among the Red Army, see Shpil'rein (1928).

much higher – at least 90%, and some estimates go as high as 95%” (St George 25).

Although both of these factors were interpreted and skillfully manipulated in the public debate surrounding literacy and its relationship with the social position of the proletariat in the pre- and early post-Revolutionary era, and the results of the Tsarist era literacy schemes largely downplayed in order to further the social cause of the Bolsheviks, many literacy historians now consider the role of the pre-revolutionary literacy schemes as vital to the later success of the Soviet schemes. Indeed, some consider that the astonishing rate of literacy improvements in the 1920s is buoyed by the results of those who received childhood education under the previous system.

The Bolsheviks centered the problem of women’s rights and emancipation in their calls for social action long before the Revolutions of 1917, and their attention to the issue spread further than mere academic interest of higher-level revolutionary thinkers. As early as 1912, *Pravda* published a series of exposé style reports on conditions for women in the workplace and established a regular column which denounced factories for their treatment of women, including in them graphic accounts of physical and sexual abuse in the workplace. One such incident is detailed in a column about the Treugol’nik factory, where a factory manager attempted to rape a female worker in a storage cupboard. The reporter laments the fact that the cupboard was close to three male workers, but they had become so accustomed to hearing women’s screams that they did not investigate (*Pravda*). In another exposé in the same column, the reporter likens conditions in the weaving factories, which as he points out, were usually staffed solely by female workers, to those in the *katorga*, the Imperial prison camp system which formed the basis for the developing *gulag* system under the Soviets.

After the October Revolution, political focus on the status of women in the Soviet Union was solidified by the first constitution of the RSFSR signed in June 1918, which enshrined men’s and women’s political and citizen’s rights as equal. This was further enhanced in December 1918 by the creation of the Commissary of Propaganda and Agitation Among Women, which was headed by Inessa Armand, before being restructured in 1919 to become the *zhenotdel* – or Women’s Department – which

operated in an official capacity until its liquidation in January 1930, and among whose ranks were included many of the leading female revolutionary figures. The department was involved in many projects and took an active role in the literacy campaign. It sent staff on the *agitparokohdy* – propaganda boats, which were sent to the remote areas of the republic which were far from the reaches of the cosmopolitan centers, in order to bring the Soviet message, and literacy to the people in the more isolated regions. Furthermore, they were involved with the setting up of literacy circles, and in the creation of a series of posters that formed part of the *Likbez* – Liquidation of Illiteracy campaign.

Furthermore, the *zhenotdel* took responsibility for the writing, publication and distribution of a variety of women’s magazines, including *Rabotnitsa* – Female Worker, *Krest’ianka* – Female Peasant, *Bolshevika* and *Kommunistka*. These magazines attracted many of the leading female Revolutionary figures, including Konkordiia Samoilova, who died whilst leading a mission on the *agitparokhod*, *Krasnaia Zvezda* – Red Star, after contracting cholera in 1921. Lenin’s sisters Anna Il’ichna Elizarova and Mariia Il’ichna Ulianova were both involved in the drive for female representation in the press. In the pre-revolutionary era Anna was involved in fundraising, establishing a print mechanism, and maintaining communication with the émigré community, as well as sitting on the editorial board of *Rabotnitsa*, while Mariia was a strong advocate for a female presence in the *rabkory* – people’s correspondent (*or zhenkory*) movement.³ Women themselves were encouraged to write letters to the magazines, and many of these extol the benefits of literacy to the readership, and emphasise that it was crucial not only for both their personal and political emancipation, but also as a key factor in their ability to participate in the spread of communism. In 1933, 12.7% of contributors to 3850 different newspapers in the USSR, were women (Serebrennikov 198). Women’s voices were also heard in the form of published *Letters to Stalin*, and these equally emphasised the importance of literacy, for example one such letter states, “Fekla Golovchenko, one

³ For more on the roles of Lenin’s sisters in the Revolution see Katy Turton, *Forgotten Lives*.

of our active workers, almost fifty, gladly took to study. ‘If I’m not properly educated,’ she says, ‘I can’t handle my brigade’. They all say the same, young and old. Now that we are called upon to take part in the administration of public life and economy, education is no longer a luxury, it is an absolute necessity, like water for a thirsty man” (Serebrennikov 194–95).

However, the *zhenotdel* was beset by problems throughout its tenure, and was viewed with suspicion by both male and female critics alike throughout its operation. Its activities, such as the organisation of communal crèches, laundrettes and canteens, were designed to free women from the burden of what Lenin himself termed “domestic slavery”. However, they were also costly to a state that was in the grip of a civil war, and which was later faced with the task of jump-starting a floundering economy after the end of the War Communism period. Never far from the *zhenotdel* was the spectre of feminism, which was deeply mistrusted, and regularly denounced as anti-Soviet; the Marxist doctrine, aimed at the emancipation of the proletariat en-masse, had no room for gender specific policy. Even Aleksandra Kollontai, one of the department’s most radical leaders, whose views on marriage, free love and the place of women in society were viewed as far too radical by many, and whose novel *Love of Worker Bees* was described as pornographic by conservative party members, was “in no sense a political feminist” (Brodsky Farnsworth 294). Equally, the department struggled with sexism, and an entrenched sense of patriarchy, even among the communist revolutionaries. This resulted in the department gaining the derogatory moniker of *tsentrobaba*, or “Grandmother Central”, and as a result of this lack of respect, it struggled with chronic underfunding, both in terms of financial resources and manpower. As Sofia Smidovich, leader of the *zhenotdel* between 1922 and 1924 lamented: “If Zhenotdel was not regarded as necessary, the party must say so; if it was needed, then qualified workers had to be provided” (Smidovich, quoted in Boxer 190).

The epithet of *tsentrobaba* gives an insight into a feminine duality which was unfolding throughout the entirety of Soviet discourse in the post-Revolutionary era, and which continued well into the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union. In Soviet Russia, two distinct female characters had emerged: the ‘backwards’ baba, and her more enlightened

Soviet sister, the bolshevichka. While on the surface the bolshevichka appeared to be far more emancipated than the baba, the more politically powerful group was in fact that of the baba, for she acted as a symbol of the gatekeeper to the uneducated, rural masses who made up a significant percentage of the Russian population. Her participation in the Soviet project was the key to its success in the village, away from the urban heartlands in the towns and cities.

The Soviets moved quickly to set up an ambitious programme of adult literacy, which can be divided and broken down further into several different constituent literacy campaigns. According to literacy scholar H. S. Bhola (1982), a literacy campaign is characterised as having the aim of promoting literacy for all men and women within a given period of time, with the aim of increasing literacy across the population. He notes that a campaign sees literacy as “a means to a comprehensive set of ends, economic, social–structural and political”; furthermore, he alludes to the combative and urgent nature of literacy campaigns (Bhola 211). The ambitious aim was to eradicate adult illiteracy entirely by the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution in 1927. However, the reality of the situation and the scale of the resources needed to deliver on such a lofty ambition meant that the deadline was pushed further and further back, and literacy campaigns were still active throughout the early post-Revolution and NEP eras, as well as being a feature of both the first five-year plan and, and were finally considered to have been achieved during the second of Stalin’s five-year plans, in 1934. Although this is a relatively long time period to still be considered as a campaign, rather than a literacy programme, the overtly ideological nature of the Soviet literacy schemes and their close relationship with the transformation and development of the socio-political structure in the fledgling Soviet state means that they can be categorised as falling within Bhola’s parameters of a literacy campaign.

These campaigns fell under the jurisdiction of the *Cheka Likbez*, the Extraordinary All-Russia Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy, more commonly known as *Likbez*, which operated under the umbrella of Glavpolitprosvet (The Main Political and Educational Committee), which in turn was responsible to Narkompros (The People’s Commissariat for Education). The commission also set up its own literacy points known as

likpunkty, and at the height of the campaign, there were around 40,000 of them in operation across the Soviet Union. Although progress was slow, and levels of literacy varied across the nation, it was being made and in 1926, even in the regions of the Far East of Russia – in which the liquidation of illiteracy was generally considered a difficult task – overall 58.4% of women were literate, and some 86.7% of 18–25 year old women in the region could read (Kulinich 132).

Learning to Read and Speak Soviet: The Role of Propaganda in the Literacy Campaign

One of the most effective methods of reaching illiterate members of society was the propaganda poster, and in the early Soviet era it was a crucial tool in encouraging both the uptake and participation in literacy classes and the development and propagating of the figures of the baba and the bolshevichka in Soviet society. The prime target of such posters was the baba, as she was less likely to have been reached by other methods in the past. The emphasis on visual arts, as opposed to written calls to action, was also highly effective. The Soviets categorised their target students, and the corresponding literacy programmes, into two distinct categories: *negramotnye* (illiterate) and *malogramotnye* (semi-literate). What the Soviets defined as literacy went far beyond the conventional western definition, and included having a working knowledge of the various areas of production most pertinent to the Soviet Union, including but not limited to the textile, metallurgy and mining industries. Thus, many of those who could already read and write were classified as being only semi-literate. However, due to the Imperial education system's primary focus on male education, women usually fell into the former category. Posters, which relied heavily on visual cues, were particularly effective in reaching such illiterate women.

The propaganda poster campaign served as a tangible, visible display of the baba and the bolshevichka. In these posters, women often occupied central positions, and the roles of the baba and the bolshevichka were tacitly implied. The two characters can often be differentiated merely by their style of dress: the baba is usually depicted wearing traditional dress such as a *platok*, a large, ornately decorative scarf which was used as a head covering, with the knot tied at the front of the head under the chin,

in the traditional style. Conversely, the bolshevichka is usually shown to be wearing a much more utilitarian style of dress, her headscarf was often plain (and red) and tied at the back of the head. Equally, while the baba was almost always pictured wearing conservative, modest attire, the bolshevichka was often shown wearing more socially liberal clothing, and images of her often feature fitted blouses and even trousers, which would have been unthinkable in the staunchly Orthodox Christian Imperial society. Far beyond the appearance of the characters, however, was the emphasis on the role that the two women played in society. The bringer of education, or enlightenment (*prosveschenie*) as it was referred to in the Soviet Union, was often the bolshevichka herself. This was a direct reflection of the fact that it was often the *zhenotdel* staff who were in charge of running literacy schemes in local areas.

What is equally clear from the propaganda posters, is that what the two female characters had in common with one another was the insoluble connection between the woman and her role as mother. In the eyes of the state, all Soviet citizens owed a debt to the state itself, for the freedom that they were afforded by the October Revolution. According to a sign-up sheet from a 1920s literacy scheme, the method by which they were to repay this debt was in taking responsibility for their education; after the Revolution, “Every worker can study and must learn the national economy.”⁴ However, for women, even in the socially more enlightened society of the USSR, there was a responsibility to learn not only because of their debt to the state, but also in order to fulfil their role as a good Soviet mother; propaganda posters declared that illiterate children were a mother’s shame. The baba was more strongly targeted by posters inciting the shame of her illiteracy.

⁴ Tsentralnaia Gosudarstvennaia Arkhiv Moskovskoi Oblasti (TsGaMO) f.966, o.4. d.945, l.7.



Illustration 1 Woman! Learn to Read and Write!

The poster above states at the top “Woman! Learn to read and write!”, while her child at the bottom implores “Hey, mama! If only you were literate, you could help me.” The message is blunt, and abundantly clear: the ultimate responsibility for the child’s success was the mother’s. This poster targets the baba directly, as the woman in the poster can be clearly understood to be the a peasant woman, and not her Soviet sister due to the variety of traditional items in the picture, such as the traditional dress, and *bast* shoes which mark her status as a peasant.

The role of mother does not however, belong to the baba alone. In the picture below, both the figure of the baba and the bolshevichka are depicted working together for a new life:



Illustration 2: Knowledge and Work Will Give us a New Life. In the Villages, in the towns, at the machines and in the fields we are building happiness for children

Again, the bolshevichka is in the position of providing education to the baba, which is evidenced in the act of her passing over the books, emphasising once again the importance of the role that Soviet women played in bringing education to her fellow women in the union. The baba's willingness to participate is shown, not only in the way her hand is extended towards the bolshevichka, but in the papers she is shown grasping in her hand. That knowledge is placed before work in the hierarchy of what will bring the new life to women in the Soviet Union, again speaks to the importance of the literacy campaigns, and the emphasis that was placed on literacy and education. However, despite the fact that there is clearly a duality in the feminine role in Soviet propaganda, their status as mother is an overarching feature of her femininity, and one which unites the two figures; the importance of this mother role is displayed in the second part of the caption, which highlights that a woman's emancipation and education is not truly her own, but rather for the benefit of the future children of the USSR.

Beyond the poster campaign, the image of the baba and the bolshevichka is also reflected in cultural materials that were produced in this era. One significant example of this is the 1927 film *Baby Riazanskie – The Peasant Women of Riazan'*, directed by the renowned female Soviet

director Ol'ga Preobrazhenskaia.⁵ Although the film was criticised at the time for not containing a strong enough pro-Soviet message, the two characters which had been created by the state propaganda can be clearly seen to be represented in the silent film, which depicts life in a small village in the Riazan' region, some 200km from Moscow. Beginning in spring 1914, the film follows the fate of two girls in the village: Anna, the peasant orphan who marries Ivan, the son of a *kulak* (kulaks were landowning peasants, who were the target of a sustained campaign of 'liquidation' during the collectivisation period in the late 1920s), shortly before he is sent to the front line of WWI; and Vasilisa, Ivan's sister, a wilful character who defies her father's demands, and leaves the family home to live with her lover, Nikolai. The two characters, Anna and Vasilisa, portray the baba and the bolshevichka, respectively. Though literacy is not expressly referred to in the film, it is shown that Vasilisa is one of the only people in the village who is literate; letters from the front are taken to her for reading, and it is she who corresponds with the local Soviet to procure funding for a children's home in the village. The fate of the baba and the bolshevichka are darkly juxtaposed against one another in the film. Anna is raped by her father in law, Vasili, and is left pregnant as a result of the attack. This leads to her being shunned by the community, including Ivan when he returns from the front. Without questioning the identity of the baby's father, he rejects his wife, leading to her committing suicide by drowning in the river during a village festival. On the other hand, Vasilisa is shown to be a strong, new Soviet woman type character. She defies her father's demands that she should stop seeing Nikolai, the local blacksmith, and instead enters into a common law marriage with him, a socially radical feature of the early Soviet era. She endures the shaming of the local village women, and when Nikolai is also sent to the front she remains at home and learns to man the smithy herself. Upon seeing the aftermath of Anna's suicide, it is Vasilisa who reveals the identity of the baby's father to Ivan, before

⁵ The film and a short review can be found online at: <http://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/2140/the-film-club-the-peasant-women-of-ryazan>.

taking the child and leaving the village behind. The film ends on Vasilisa's exit, with the image of the new children's home superimposed on the screen ahead of her, a striking juxtaposition against the relative poverty of the rural village she has left behind.

In Preobrazhenskaia's film, the need for female emancipation that was brought about by the embracing of new, Soviet ideals, is shown to be a matter of life and death. The difference between the fates of the baba and the bolshevichka cannot be more different. However, once again the two characters are brought together in their role as mother, although Anna is the biological mother of the child, Vasilisa takes the baby with her when she leaves; thus, her emancipation from the yoke of peasant life is not entirely her own, she will share it with the child.

The focus on motherhood and the importance of women becoming literate for the sake of her children becomes even more significant if it is examined from within the parameters of the language planning programme and linguistic theories that were being developed by Soviet linguists during the 1920s and early 1930s. What becomes clear from the vantage point of the modern researcher, is that there is often a clear disconnect between Soviet academia and the practicalities of engineering such studies and replicating their effects in real terms. However, one theory which has proven to be an effective gateway between Soviet theory and Soviet practice, is Boris Larin's *mnogoiazychnost'*. Born in Poltava (then Ukraine) in 1899, Larin had worked on studies of language use in Moscow in the Rus' era. After the revolution, when scientists across the board began to scramble to align themselves with the correct factions, much work was begun which looked to find "Marxist" solutions to traditional scientific questions, and to create "Marxist" scientific theories. This phenomenon can be observed in early Soviet linguistics. Larin developed *mnogoiazychnost'* to allow him to work within the school of Japhetidology, the dominant theory of Nikolai Marr, which was accepted as the true Marxist linguistics theory, until it was denounced as anti-Marxist by Stalin himself in the early 1950s. Although his work does not align precisely with Marr's paleolinguistic theory, he was able to continue working as a student of Marr's, and in 1928 he published two significant papers, which called for a greater study into the language used by the proletariat in the cities (Larin). His study called for a change

in the focus of Russian linguistics, which had previously been preoccupied with the study of the various languages and dialects of rural Russia, and instead called for a study into the language of the city. Although the direct translation of the term *mnogoiazychnost'* into English is multilingualism, it is important to note here that Larin's idea of multilingualism is very different to the modern understanding of the term. The focus of Larin's theory is not on the ability to speak several different languages, but rather looks at the different sociolects, that is to say the varieties of a given language that different social groups use to communicate. Larin's work was focussed on the urban sociolects of the Russian language in major Russian cities.

Indeed, the fact that the term sociolect is now the most appropriate translation of *mnogoiazychnost'* in the contemporary context shows the extent to which linguistics has developed in the direction that Larin himself argued that it must, and predicted that it would. In *K lingvisticheskoi kharakteristike goroda*, he lamented that there was "Very little material, and practically no research into any of the dialects of the city, apart from literary [standard] language" and states that "It is impossible to start a sociological study of literary [standard] language without studying the everyday linguistic environment, that is to say, the other types of written language, and all of the varieties of language spoken by the linguistic collective" (Larin 189).⁶ Indeed, Larin advocates for a more sociologically based approach to linguistics, which today is known as sociolinguistics, a tradition to which the study of sociolects now firmly belongs. Larin identifies three sociolects as having significance in the urban language collective in Soviet cities: that of the family, which can include diminutive use among family members, the workplace, and political language. Although the latter two were regarded as the most significant because of the position of work and political ideology at the centre of Soviet society, the familial sociolect is equally significant in terms of the development of language, and the spread and assimilation of political terminology and ideology between sociolects. Perhaps more so

⁶ Translation my own.

than in other sociolinguistic contexts, the three sociolects are uniquely interlinked in the USSR, via the mechanism of the literacy campaign. Because of the nature of the campaigns, their reliance on state controlled media as a method of teaching literacy, and even the very definition of literacy, the literacy campaign was able to be used as a mechanism for state influence over the familial and work sociolects, by bringing citizens into contact with a broader variety of terminology. Furthermore, because terms were introduced by the state, the aim was to control the way that the terminology was received and subsequently used.

Another key depiction of women's literacy in literature, and a prime example of the use of sociolects is Andrei Platonov's 1929 novel *Kotlovan - The Foundation Pit*. Despite the fact that the novel has gained a widespread notoriety for its reputation as a work of anti-utopian, anti-Soviet fiction, there is a growing academic shift away from this interpretation of the text and towards a different approach which sees it placed in the realm of the socialist realist construction novel. His inclusion as a figure in Socialist Realism, is in itself divisive, as Marina Zavarkina notes, "Even now, researchers opinions vary: some believe that Platonov has written a "hymn to socialist construction", others, not a very good work according to all the canons of the production genre, still others consider it to be a parody of the industrial novel" (Zavarkina 571). Further still, there are those who categorise the novel as both meriting its conclusion within the canon of socialist realism as a production novel as well as a acknowledging its capacity for interpretation as an antiutopian novel, including Rolf Hellebust, who states that "We are left face to face with this world, without ironic distance, but the colossal subversive potential is already palpable [...]. *The Foundation Pit* realizes the collectivist allegory of the building of communism as the creation of a single, monumental 'all-proletarian home'" (Hellebust 124–25).

However, by incorporating not only the historical context of the novel and the author's ideological values, but also elements of Larin's sociolectological linguistic theory, I argue that Platonov's representation of women's literacy is a further facet of the hyper-realism which not only characterises the text, but justifies its inclusion in the category of Socialist Realism.

There are very few female characters throughout the novel, and the ones which exist are mired in misery – the peasant women must endure the horrors of collectivisation, Nastia’s mother dies early in the novel, and Nastia herself, is an orphaned child who comes to be a symbol to the workers of their end goal – to build a socialist future for the children, which in Platonov’s novel is a responsibility for all the workers, and not merely the female characters - who starves to death in the wake of the collectivisation of the local farmland. Indeed, one of the only positive engagements with women in the entire novel is one in which peasant women are learning to read. In it, a student called Makarovna recites the words she has learned which begin with the letter A: “Avantgarde, activist, advance, archleftist, antifascist! All of them to be spelled with a hard sign, except for archleftist!”

Platonov’s depiction of the depth and scope of literacy, reduced to the parroting of propaganda terms, seems a far cry from the ideals of teaching each student about the importance and the workings of the state economy. However, there are also kernels of truth in his depiction, which make it difficult to dismiss his representation as the bitter reflections of a man disillusioned with a cause he had once fought so passionately for. In the scene, he describes the students writing on the floorboards with chalk in the reading huts. This is a strikingly accurate portrait of the reality of literacy in the provinces. Although the Soviets moved quickly to mobilise their literacy campaigns through the printing of books, pamphlets, newspapers and magazines, they also suffered from a chronic lack of paper, caused by the disruption resulting from the chaos of the civil war, and the reading huts, especially in small towns and villages, were often in dire need of reading and writing supplies.

The discussion of the use of the hard sign, and its ideological value also points to Platonov’s awareness of the linguistic revolution of the time, a parody of the orthographic reforms that took place throughout the early post-revolutionary period. Platonov shows his awareness of and contempt for the discussion surrounding the ideologisation of the language, and its minutiae in the early Soviet period by having the activist teacher support the losing side of the soft sign debate.

There is also a parodic reflection of Lenin’s own language, which can be seen in the use of the word archleftist – or *arkhilevyi*. Although the

prefix *arkhi* had existed in Russian for hundreds of years before the Revolution, it came to be a hallmark of Lenin's language that can be seen throughout his speeches and writing. Whilst still sticking closely to the original etymological meaning, he modified the emphasis upon application to mean 'extremely' or 'very', and the words which he applied this prefix to became very ideologically loaded. The term began to be picked up by the newspapers after Lenin's death, and although it was a somewhat short-lived trend in Russian prefix use, Platonov's use of the term – which incidentally is itself a hapax legomenon – is thus a further parody of the Soviet habit of creating terminology for their own ideological ends, and demonstrates his adept command of, and ability to manipulate the political sociolect.

If Lenin had identified the flower of women revolutionaries in the Communist International, this article has thus shown that there were several species of Soviet feminine flora and that their depiction in various areas of Soviet cultural production provides a vital insight into their role not only in their own personal emancipation, but in the spreading of communism in the Soviet Union. By means of diachronic study of the history of the *zhenotdel* and their work in the early Soviet period in liquidising illiteracy alongside the analysis of cultural items of the period, this article has demonstrated the rapidly developing position of women, from that of powerlessness under the oppression of the patriarchy in the Imperial system, to a vital participant in one of the most socially radical political revolutions in history. Although each figure, both the *baba* and the *bolshevichka*, still faced difficulties, and neither was truly emancipated in the early Soviet period, it is difficult to deny that they both played key roles in the Sovietisation of Russia. The *bolshevichka* was the driving force behind many of the mechanisms that brought literacy to women and men alike through the literacy campaigns, while the *baba* herself was the gatekeeper to changing social attitudes, and the language changes that were brought along with them. Through them, Soviet messages were enforced in the home, and Soviet vocabulary found its way into the familial sociolect; and their role as mother ensured the continuing dissemination of these ideas and nurtured the future Soviets who were necessary for the continuation of the Soviet project.

WORKS CITED

- Bhola, H. S. "Campaigning for Literacy: A Critical Analysis of Some Selected Literacy Campaigns of the 20th Century, with a Memorandum to Decision Makers." UNESCO/ICAE Study, 1982.
- Boxer, Marilyn J. *Socialist Women: European Socialist Feminism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*. Elsevier, 1978.
- Brodsky Farnsworth, Beatrice. "Bolshevism, the Woman Question and Aleksandra Kollontai." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 81, 1976, pp. 292–316.
- Bukharin, N., and E. Preobrazhensky. *The ABC of Communism*. Penguin, 1969 [1922].
- Eklof, Ben. "Russian Literacy Campaigns, 1861–1939." *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff. Plenum Press, 1987.
- Hellebust, Rolf. *From Flesh to Metal: Soviet Literature and the Alchemy of Revolution*. Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Kulinich, N. G. "Gorozhanki dal'nego vostoka RSFSR v 20-e 30-e gody XX Veka (Opyt gendernogo issledovaniia)." *Gendernye otnosheniia v Rossii: Ocherki sotsial'noi transformatsii*, edited by L. E. Bliakher, Izdatel'stvo Khabarovskogo tekhnicheskogo Universiteta, 2005, pp. 128–41.
- Larin, Boris. *Istoriia russkogo iazyka i obshchee iazykoznanie*. Prosveshchenie, 1977.
- Pravda. "Na fabrikakh i zavodakh." 30 Aug. 1912.
- Preobrazhenskaia, Ol'ga. *Baby riazanskie*. Sovkino, 1927.
- Serebrennikov, Georgii Nikolaevich. *The Position of Women in the USSR*. Victor Gollancz, 1937.
- Shpil'rein, Isaak. *Iazyk Krasnoarmeitsev*. Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo otdel voennoi literatury, 1928.
- St George, George. *Our Soviet Sister*. Robert Hale, 1974.
- Turton, Katy. *Forgotten Lives: The Roles of Lenin's Sisters in the Russian Revolution, 1864–1937*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Zavarkina, Marina. "Kvaziutopiia v Tvorchestve A. Platonova 1930-kh godov." *Problemy istoricheskoi poetiki*, vol. 13, 2005, pp. 570–88.

Zetkin, Klara. *Reminiscences of Lenin*. Modern Books, 1929.