behind every good man

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The women who act for, sustain and support the men who march across the pages of history are seldom credited with being more than the good women who stand behind good men. In this framework such women are said to be powerful. This is debatable and most live vicariously through the lives of others. In general, written history ignores any contribution they make in their own right.

All too little has been written of the lives of women revolutionaries, but now a book* on Krupskaya brings to life one of the most important women of the Russian revolution. The author, Robert McNeal, does not deny that her life can be considered outside her association with Lenin, but he presents her as an individual who made a determined contribution to the revolution from her youth, before she met Lenin, till old age, long after

Lenin's death. McNeal seeks to rescue Krupskaya from any suggestion that she was no more than Lenin's companion although he recognises that this relationship determined the main arena for her contribution.

Until now, readers in English primarily know Krupskaya from her own writings about Lenin, but McNeal has availed himself of a much wider range of sources, notably materials published in Russian, including a Soviet bibliographical work produced in Moscow in 1969, the archives of the Paris office of the secret police of Imperial Russia and those of Trotsky. From these emerge the first substantial biography of Krupskaya in English.

A problem for biographers, and McNeal is no exception, is the tendency to pass contemporary judgments on the atmosphere and values of another time. In this case, the author sometimes adopts a hectoring tone to dismiss as invalid some of the sacrifices which may have been quite reasonable for a revolutionary in Czarist Russia, moreover he can be remarkably insensitive to some of Krupskaya's values.

Undoubtedly, Krupskaya was not a feminist in the sense that such a term is used today, but she came out of a tradition of Russian intellectuals, notably Chernyshevsky, who propagated the equality of women, repudiated bourgeois marriage as a form of slavery and stressed the ideal of male sexual self-denial as a sign of a new morality. In the circumstances, Krupskaya, according to today's values, probably had a mixture of "advanced" and "conservative" attitudes but the author quite misses the point, obvious to any feminist, socialist or not, when he records Krupskaya's approach to the development of youth activities in the Russia of mid-1917. Krupskaya helped to establish youth organisations which, at the time, involved young Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and anarchists. McNeal, describing their activities, dismisses them as non-political, but the politics have considerable feminist significance and accord with the socialist tradition. All members of the organisation, known as "Light and Knowledge", were required to learn sewing and it is recorded that Krupskaya overwhelmed with criticism a Bolshevik boy who objected to learning this skill on the grounds that wives do the sewing. This was not Krupskaya's idea of relations between the sexes.

Krupskaya was the child of a radical man and, for the times, an emancipated woman. Her name, Nadezhda, is the Russian for hope. Both parents exposed their daughter to their views on class oppression, religion, education and service to the people. Nadya chose to become a country school teacher and it is not without significance for feminists that her first propaganda essay begins with the following quotation from Nekrasov:

Thy lot is hard, a woman's lot
A harder lot can scarce be found.

Influenced by Tolstoy, who sought to bring culture to the downtrodden, her first social contribution was to translate the 'Count of Monte Cristo' for a cheap Russian language edition. Nadya soon tired of this rather esoteric method of bringing enlightenment to Russia and sought more practical work and theories. She became an early reader of Marx whom she found difficult, and a teacher in evening class for illiterate workers. She was already a revolutionary political worker when she met Lenin.

The marriage of Lenin and Krupskaya was in part determined by the ideological influence of men like Chernyshevsky and Czarist police laws. Marriage was often seen as a means to assist revolutionary women to escape from oppressive situations while the police laws provided for fiancees to join each other in exile. The law was used to maintain contact with exiles. Women revolutionaries volunteered as fiancees when necessary. Because the law was so used, the Czarist police demanded an alteration to ensure that actual marriages took place in exile. In Krupskaya's case, after both she and Lenin had been imprisoned and sentenced to exile, she was chosen as Lenin's secretary, but the actual marriage had not been firmly arranged. Her mother travelled with her to the village of Shushenskoe and she carried a police order for an "immediate" marriage which, after some Czarist bureaucratic bungling, took place in July 1898.

The detail of the life of Krupskaya and Lenin as told by McNeal is the detail of firmly committed women and men through difficult days and years of exile inside and outside Russia, through incredible setbacks to the triumph of the October Revolution and beyond.

Krupskaya emerges as Lenin's devoted helper, utilising her talents to maintain an organisation of revolutionaries. She did the hard and detailed work, writing letters, organising the printing and distribution of clandestine publications, keeping codes, translating texts. She became the secretary of the Bolshevik Party but at that time the status of the position was not as it is today. Through all this she maintained and pursued her own interests, particularly in respect to education.

Biographies may be read by the curious, by those who like adventure and by those who appreciate "living history", but this bi-
ogy is of special interest for those who seek to observe the historical connection between the ideas of socialism and feminism and for those who want to understand the real, not the idealised, Russian revolution with all its heroism and its warts.

In the orthodox Soviet histories, no mention is ever made of the relationship between Inessa Armand and Lenin although there has been much speculation on this. McNeal presents the known evidence fairly and without sensationalism. He cannot "prove" beyond doubt the extent of this relationship but he does not shy away from the personal lives of his subjects, rejects the view that knowledge of personal relationships will in some way demean the great, and connects the personal with the political. It is the last question which is of considerable interest. McNeal writes convincingly of Krupskaya's hurt as the relation­ship between Lenin and Armand developed but pays tribute to her objectivity and close friendship with Armand and her children. He then develops a theory that the key pressure exerted on Krupskaya to identify with Stalin in his struggle to win total control of the Bolshevik Party in the years following Lenin's death is connected with Krupskaya's vulnerability over the relationship between Lenin and Armand.

Many different pressures were exerted on Krupskaya and she held out for a long time but, according to McNeal, her endorsement of Stalin in 1927 coincided with the publication of a short novel "A Great Love" by Alexandra Kollontai. "A Great Love" is the story of an emigrant Russian revolutionary leader complete with beard and cap. His wife, like Krupskaya, is ill. His lover is younger, a woman of experience and independent means. She works for a time as the party secretary and is an excellent linguist. She chooses to leave her lover and return to Russia to work in the underground. Leaving aside the notion of lover, which cannot be proven, all the other facts fit Armand. Kollontai's story was in circulation briefly in 1927 and shortly after Krupskaya's partial endorsement of Stalin it was withdrawn and never republished.

The facts are clear enough and the theory seems plausible. It is well known that Krupskaya was an opponent of Stalin before Lenin's death and that Lenin intervened against Stalin's rudeness to Krupskaya. Less well known is the fact that Krupskaya fought against the Lenin cult, opposing from the beginning the Lenin Mausoleum.

She battled to have published Lenin's testament and McNeal records the whole sorry tale of this struggle, the allies who forsook her, the cynical manoeuvres in the leadership, the silence of Trotsky. Krupskaya refused to give in. She used her moral authority as Lenin's widow in the 13th Congress in 1924 to cut across Stalin's insistence that Trotsky recant his errors or admit his factionalism. In general, Krupskaya supported the line of the party in this period, remaining outside the factions and seeking a united party through reconciliation rather than confrontation. Yet she took her demand for the publication of Lenin's last writings to a vote at a meeting of "senior" delegates, forty in number, on the eve of Congress. Some who were later to be Stalin's victims voted against publication or refused to speak. They included Kamenev, Zinoviev and Trotsky. In the latter's case, he was to write years later of Krupskaya's gentle insistence that to conceal the testament was a "direct violation of the will of Lenin to whom you could not deny the right to bring his last advice to the attention of the party", but at the time he maintained silence. Nevertheless, 10 of the 40 present voted for publication.

By 1925, Krupskaya was moving towards the opposition, becoming openly critical that too much was being conceded away from socialism in the name of economic recovery. She suffered suppression of her own views and was subjected to heckling in meetings. In the period that followed, she signed opposition documents including the famous "Declaration of the Thirteen", initiated by Zinoviev and Trotsky, and one criticising Soviet policy in respect to the British General Strike of 1926.

In that year, after seemingly exhausting all possibilities for the publication of Lenin's testament inside the Soviet Union, she returned to her illegal style and sent it abroad, but its publication in the 'New York Times' in October 1926 did not reach the USSR. (Krupskaya had been dead for many years when Lenin's testament was published for mass consumption inside the Soviet Union after the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956.)

In various ways Stalin moved against the opposition. Zinoviev and Trotsky made a promise to end their activity in the interests of the working class but such high motives were not offered to Krupskaya. Rumours and innuendo were used to discredit her. It is in this context that McNeal judges the book­let by Kollontai. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is clear that Krupskaya was not active in the opposition after November 1926, and that her first public statement of qualified support for Stalin came in May 1927 shortly after "A Great Love" had been published. At this time, she attacked the opposition although she never completely recanted her support.

Perhaps she felt justified, too, when the Lenin testament was published in the Bull-
etin of the party congress in 1927. The circulation was limited to delegates but at least it was no longer a secret. McNeal's theory about the use made by Stalin of the publication of "A Great Love" to win some support from Krupskaya allows for more speculation. For example, Kollontai was herself an early and outspoken oppositionist yet she was one of the very few Bolshevik leaders at the time of October 1917 who survived Stalin's purges. Perhaps this was part of the price extracted from her. Perhaps, too, Kollontai, an exponent of the sexual revolution, felt little compassion for Krupskaya who held very conservative ideas on such questions. Later she was to support the strengthening of the Soviet family and to welcome the repeal of the law which guaranteed legal abortion. Whatever the truth of the matter it suggests another aspect of the feminism of Kollontai, which is in general justifiably admired, that is that then, as now, it is difficult for women in political organisations to always determine their priorities and to express that solidarity with each other which is now called sisterhood.

McNeal records how, in the following years, until her death in 1939, Krupskaya did her best to protect Lenin's memory from the growing bad taste of painters, film-makers and story-tellers who made him less of a man by presenting him as a god. Her chief political concern remained with education and the care of children. Although conservative on several matters which feminists regard as essential for the liberation of women, she often protested the burdens of women in Soviet Russia, and sought ways to alleviate them through the establishment of child care centres, public laundries and dining rooms. In education, she fought a losing battle for a concept of education where study and work would be combined. At the time, the need for many semi-skilled workers and a relatively few specialists, for a rapidly developing industry, determined a different form of education. In recent times, Soviet education has developed more in keeping with Krupskaya's theories.

In her last years she was to add the customary number of praises to Stalin in her speeches and writings, but she always refused to acknowledge the myth that Stalin was Lenin's closest comrade. She did, however, endorse the purges while pleading the cause of many of its victims.

McNeal offers some convincing reasons for her support of the purges and suggests that her motivation was similar to those who agreed to confess in the name of some greater good, presented as party and working class unity in face of the greater danger out there (counter-revolution, foreign intervention, fascism, war -- all real enough).

He argues that Krupskaya was devoted to an abstraction -- the ideal revolution and that by not coming to terms with the harsh realities of post-October Russia, she left herself little alternative but to remain devoted to the revolution regardless of the corruptions under Stalin. Whether this is true or not, it is now much clearer than it was in Krupskaya's lifetime that no one can, with certainty, guarantee the progress of socialist development. Such factors as the state of the economy before, during and after the revolution, the democratic experience of the working class, the international trend (for or against revolution) as well as the integrity of the revolutionary party and its leadership must all be taken into account. No one should underestimate the latter point but it cannot be seen in isolation from the rest.

In this case, McNeal hides none of the subjective weaknesses of the Bolshevik Party after Lenin died, and even hints that some of the problems which later emerged could be attributed to Lenin -- for example, some areas of censorship -- but his admiration for Krupskaya, and Lenin, over-ride other questions. His Krupskaya is a woman in her own right, determined to work for humanity and showing great strength against odds which would have destroyed many others.

To acquaint oneself with her life through McNeal's work, one can only agree that:

"Although she lived in the shadow of her great husband, Krupskaya's life is marked by a sternness and integrity that is her own. If necessary she could and did suffer imprisonment, break with Menshevik friends, accept Inessa Armand as a dear comrade, suppress undesirable books, and risk the consequences of smuggling Lenin's testament abroad. Above all she was tough enough not to be personally corrupted by the power that her husband and his party had won, against very long odds."

One may regret the compromises she eventually made with Stalin, but in fairness one must also marvel that she held out so long and that the compromises were never total capitulation.

There are all too few revolutionary heroines and even fewer presentations of revolutionaries who are neither all good nor all bad. Professor McNeal deserves our gratitude for his Krupskaya who is both revolutionary and human.