

Soviet Education in the 1920s: Reforms, Challenges, and Local Adaptations in Georgia

The 1920s marked an experimental phase in the development of the Soviet education system, as the newly established Bolshevik government sought to transform society through mass schooling and ideological instruction. This period was characterized by ambitious reforms aimed at eradicating illiteracy, expanding access to education, and embedding communist ideology into every aspect of learning. However, these reforms were not without challenges - both in their design at the central level and in their implementation across the vast and diverse Soviet territories.

This essay examines the development of school education in Soviet Georgia within the broader framework of Soviet educational reforms. Drawing on archival documents, it explores the policies formulated in Moscow, the obstacles faced by reformers in both the center and the periphery, and the ways these policies were adapted and applied at union, republic, and local levels in Georgia.

Archival Insights: Educational Reforms in Soviet Georgia

An examination of archival documents from early Soviet Georgia provides valuable insight into the development of the education system during the 1920s. Two key reports, prepared by the National People's Commissariat for Education (Gansakhkom) to summarize the academic years 1923 and 1924–1925, reveal both the ambitions and challenges of implementing Soviet educational reforms at the republic and local levels.

The 1923 report highlights one of the fundamental challenges faced by the Soviet education system: the acute shortage of trained teachers, particularly in rural areas. It states, *“Since properly trained teachers are not available in our schools, let alone in the provinces, and if there are any, they all go to the cities, the villages remain without them, which greatly hinders the work of education.”*¹ To address this issue, Gansakhkom organized summer training courses for teachers, as well as two-year-long teacher training programs. These courses were designed to prepare educators for middle and high school teaching and were offered in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Khoni, Gori, and Bodbe.²

Additionally, the report emphasizes the introduction of new educational programs aligned with the Soviet model of “labor education.” These programs were translated from Russian and printed by Gansakhkom, demonstrating that, as early as 1923, educational reforms initiated in Moscow were already being implemented in Georgia.³ The report also provides an overview of various types of education beyond schooling, including university education, technical colleges, and vocational training. Notably, it does not present any critique or discussion of the challenges related to these reforms.

In contrast, the 1924–1925 report offers a more detailed and critical assessment of the ongoing educational transformations. While the 1923 report may have been too early to evaluate the effectiveness of reforms, the later document reflects a more nuanced understanding of the difficulties encountered. It states, *“We had to demolish the old school and build a new school on its ruins, on new soil, which should serve the interests of the workers. But it is difficult to say that*

¹ Georgian Central Archive of Contemporary History (sakartvelos uakhlesi istoriis centraluri arkivi - SUICA). f. 300, o. 1, d. 79. 6. 2.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. 7. 1.

*we have fully implemented this and that the current labor school serves the interests of the workers fully and is built as needed. The reason for this is that we did not have the proper conditions and suitable factors. The teaching staff, which is an important factor in the construction of the school, was not properly trained.”*⁴

This passage highlights the ongoing challenges Gansakhkom faced in implementing educational reforms, particularly regarding teacher training. According to the report, 6,000 teachers had already participated in training courses, and additional summer courses were organized to supplement the main program.⁵ However, these measures were met with criticism, particularly from regional authorities in Georgia.

During this period, discussions surrounding teacher retraining and broader educational challenges reveal not only the tensions between Moscow and the periphery but also the dynamic between Georgia's central administration and its regions. For instance, on October 1, 1924, an expanded plenum session of the Executive Committee of the Kutaisi District Council of Workers', Peasants', and Red Army Deputies (Aghmaskom) took place. During this session, A.M. Chumburidze, head of the Executive Committee's common department, identified the shortage of properly trained teachers as the primary obstacle to educational development. He stated, *“In order to train teachers and improve their qualifications, it was intended to organize retraining courses for them, but this was rejected by the center.”* Chumburidze also criticized the central authorities for the inefficiencies in curriculum design and textbook distribution.⁶

⁴ SUICA, f. 300. o. 1, d. 119. 1. 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ SUICA, f. 300. o. 1. d. 110. 7. 2.

Despite these and other challenges, the report maintains an overall positive assessment of the educational progress in Georgia, pointing to quantitative data that illustrate the expansion of the school network:⁷

Academic Year	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Number of Teachers
1914/17	1484	94 004	4261
1917/20	1663	156 599	5681
1921/24	1855	229 899	8858
1924/25	1965	247 631	9449

Although the data reflects significant growth in the number of schools, students, and teachers, the report acknowledges that substantial challenges remained, particularly in adapting education to the needs of the working class. It states, *“It is necessary for our school to rely on agriculture. Much work is still needed in this regard, and we must support it with an appropriate program. Such a program was developed in 1923. In 1924, at the summer courses for teachers, this program was revised, and today we have a complex program based on regional needs.”*⁸

The reference to a “complex approach” is particularly significant, as it underscores one of the core principles of early Soviet education, which was dictated by Moscow. The report also reiterates concerns previously raised by Chumburidze in Kutaisi, particularly the lack of

⁷ SUICA, f. 300. o. 1, d. 119. 1. 2.

⁸ Ibid. 2. 2.

textbooks and the slow progress in implementing new curricula. Although the document does not explicitly attribute these delays to Moscow, it is evident that central educational authorities were often responsible for such inefficiencies. This issue will be explored in further detail in the following sections.

The Broader Context: Soviet Educational Policy and Institutional Struggles

After examining archival documents from Soviet Georgia on the development of the early education system, it is essential to explore how, where, when, and by whom these reforms were designed, as well as the challenges they encountered.

First of all, the People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros) was the central authority responsible for overseeing education in the Soviet Union. It was established in 1917 by the Bolshevik government to create a unified socialist education system, promote communist ideology, and combat illiteracy. The first head of Narkompros was Anatoly Lunacharsky (1917–1929) “a poet of revolution”, who played a key role in shaping early Soviet education, advocating for progressive teaching methods and mass literacy campaigns.⁹ Another prominent figure was Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, who was instrumental in developing adult education.

Narkompros implemented major reforms, including free and universal education, the establishment of labor schools, and the secularization of learning. Over time, as Stalin

⁹ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917–1921*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. pg. 1

consolidated power, Narkompros became increasingly centralized, with stricter ideological control over curricula and educational institutions.

But before Stalin took over, Narkompros did or tried to do many things. To begin with the institutional conflicts we should note that the formation of Soviet education policy in the early years of Bolshevik rule was marked by intense institutional conflicts, as different government and party bodies sought to shape the direction of schooling. Narkompros, led by Lunacharsky, Pokrovsky, and Krupskaya, advocated for a general, non-specialized education system and opposed social discrimination in schools. However, its stance brought it into conflict with powerful entities like the Supreme Council for the National Economy (Vesenkha), the trade unions, and the Komsomol, which pushed for more vocational training and ideological purging. The Komsomol, in particular, sought to influence educational policy, often positioning itself as a more "Bolshevik" alternative to Narkompros, which it accused of defending bourgeois interests.

¹⁰ Despite its alignment with Lenin's earlier views, Narkompros struggled to gain support from the Communist Party leadership, which perceived it as too lenient and detached from proletarian priorities. At the same time, the growing number of working-class Communists in administrative roles influenced party attitudes toward education. Many of these former workers, now holding managerial positions, were anti-intellectual and supported discriminatory policies against students from bourgeois backgrounds.¹¹

Narkompros faced significant institutional challenges that inevitably influenced its decisions. In the early 1920s, its Academic Council (GUS) sought to implement programs based on the

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921–1934*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. pg. 11-12.

¹¹ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 16-17.

principle of polytechnical education, introducing what became known as the "complex method." This approach aimed to move away from traditional subject-based teaching by integrating various disciplines under broad, socially relevant themes connected to the child's environment and experiences. These themes were categorized into three main areas: Nature, Society, and Labour. However, GUS provided little concrete guidance on how these themes should be taught. When the new curriculum was introduced for grades I to V in the 1923-1924 school year, many teachers found themselves completely unprepared. While they were skilled in teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, most had never encountered progressive educational theories, had no familiarity with Marxist ideology, and struggled to grasp the methodologies outlined by GUS. Adding to their confusion, they were instructed to shift from academic teaching to activity-based methods, a concept that remained poorly defined and widely debated even within Narkompros itself.¹²

When GUS introduced the complex method in late 1923, its challenges were not immediately addressed in the initial reports but were later documented in the Gansakhkom and Kutaisi Agmaskom reports. While these reports were relatively polite in discussing the issues caused by this uncertain approach, the underlying difficulties were evident. Resistance to the complex method gradually surfaced at higher levels of authority. Nikolai Bukharin, the Politburo's spokesperson on youth matters, voiced concerns about the chaotic consequences of unchecked educational experimentation. Even Alexei Rykov, the head of Sovnarkom and typically a strong supporter of Narkompros, was troubled by the volume of complaints he received regarding the method. As he pointedly remarked, by the eighth year of Soviet rule, one would have expected greater stability and clarity in educational methodology, curriculum structure, and school

¹² Ibid. 20.

organization.¹³ Unlike Gansakhkom, Bukharin and Rykov were far more outspoken in their criticism of Narkompros.

By 1926, the shortcomings of Narkompros' methods had become evident. The committee was required to revise both primary and secondary education programs. In 1927, Narkompros introduced its first mandatory teaching plans and official timetables. Additionally, it was compelled to adopt "catechism" methods in Soviet schools, as this was the most practical and arguably the only way to implement the 1927 social studies curriculum.¹⁴ As a result, schools naturally reverted to traditional instructional techniques, much like those used in the pre-revolutionary education system.

These changes and criticisms directed at Narkompros did not emerge unexpectedly. Lenin's death in 1924 significantly weakened Narkompros' position in the ongoing institutional struggle, particularly as Krupskaya's conflict with Stalin became a political liability for the committee. Had circumstances been different, Krupskaya might have been able to negotiate the continuation of the "complex" method, potentially extending its implementation for a longer period.

In conclusion, the Soviet education system was in a state of flux during the 1920s, evident from the internal conflicts within Narkompros in Moscow to the debates at Aghmaskom meetings in Kutaisi. But by the late 1920s, as Stalin consolidated power and launched the First Five-Year Plan, education policy shifted dramatically to prioritize the rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union. This led to a large-scale affirmative action program, which aimed to elevate working-class individuals into technical and administrative roles by adjusting admissions to higher education rather than improving secondary schooling. While this policy helped create a loyal

¹³ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 35.

¹⁴ Ibid. 38.

proletarian elite, it also led to tensions with educational institutions and resentment from middle-class families. These developments reflected a broader pattern in Soviet politics, where ideological commitment to the working class was both a genuine goal and a practical necessity for maintaining control in an industrializing state.¹⁵ From a modern perspective, it is striking to realize that, at the beginning of Soviet rule, old Bolsheviks like Krupskaya and Lunacharsky were initially opposed to introducing ideology into school-level teaching.

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Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921–1934*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

¹⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 15.