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Scripts and Politics in the USSR

1. *Four Aspects of the Alphabet Problem*

The Soviet Union existed for 69 years, from 1922 to 1991, as a multinational and multilingual entity. It is difficult to calculate the number of the languages in the USSR (due in part to the problematic differentiation of languages and dialects), but it was upwards of 150 (for further details on the linguistic map of the former Soviet Union see Matthews 1951, Creissels 1977, Isaev 1977, Comrie 1981, as well as the monumental scholarly work in five volumes edited by Vinogradov 1966-1968). Almost half of these did not have written alphabets even during the Soviet period, but more than 80 have or had alphabets. Moreover, the majority of these languages changed their alphabets two or three times (for some examples see Glück 1994: 747-751). No country in the world has changed its language policy – including the choice of alphabet – so frequently (Jachnow 1994). There were three main periods of alphabet change: the 1920's; the second half of the 1930's; and the last years of the USSR.

The alphabet situation was stable before the October Revolution of 1917. At least seven alphabets were used: Cyrillic, Latin, Arabic, Old Mongolian, Hebrew, Georgian and Armenian (Grenoble 2003: 48); many languages remained without writing (scripts). The creation of new alphabets for unwritten languages was mostly the work of Orthodox missionaries (Baldauf 1993: 3-34), such as Nikolaj Ivanovič Il'minskij (Kreindler 1979); these alphabets were all Cyrillic, the only exception being the Latin alphabet, based on IPA, created by Semën Andreevič Novgorodov (1892-1924) for Yakut before the Revolution (Polivanov 1928: 316-318; 1931: 82-86 = 1974: 186-188).

The Revolution set new goals. It posed the need to transfer official communication from Russian into the languages of ethnic minorities; to create middle and higher education; and to encourage the creation of *belles lettres* and theatre in all of the country's languages. However, this was impossible if the language was unwritten or if the existing script was considered unacceptable. It was necessary to create new alphabets, but it was difficult to realize this program during a time of civil war; it only came into full force after the end of the war with the creation of the USSR. The only significant change of the alphabet situation in the first years after the Revolution was the almost complete extinction of the Latin script (except for German in the settlements in Volga region, where the people using this alphabet were not associated with the Soviet state).

The choice of an alphabet involves four main issues: linguistic, economic, psychological and political.

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1.1. The linguistic aspect of this problem concerns the degree of a script's rationality, that is, how suitable it is for the structure of a particular language. Usually this aspect is not the predominant one. We will cite two interesting cases.

The first is the absolute uselessness of an overly 'rational' script. An example of this is Nikolaj Jakovlevič Marr's 'analytic' alphabet (Marr 1926; on this alphabet see Tomelleri 2016). Marr was not a specialist in these problems and did not understand the difference between an alphabet and phonetic transcription (Jakovlev 1931: 49-50; see also Simonato 2005: 265). Thus, he tried to take phonetic nuances into account as much as possible and his alphabet became too difficult. There were several attempts to introduce it for the Abkhazian language but it could not be taught, not only to pupils but even to teachers (Kamčin-Bek 1929: 63).

The second example is when a script appropriate to one language is imposed on another which has a different structure. For instance, the traditional Arabic script without signs marking short vowels is convenient for Arabic but not for Turkic languages. Many Turkic nations, however, used this alphabet for many centuries because the linguistic difficulties were compensated for by its prestige among Muslims. Before the Revolution the Turkic secular intelligentsia pointed to the inconvenience of this alphabet and proposed its reform. A project for a reformed Arabic script (with signs for vowels) was proposed by Achmet Bajtursunovič Baitursunov (Baitursyn) for Kazakh, and was given a positive assessment by Nikolaj Feofanovič Jakovlev in his article *A mathematical formula for the construction of an alphabet* (Jakovlev 1928: 60; on this formula, and the criticism by Rozalija Osipovna Šor 1928, see the recent contributions by van Helden 2014 and 2016).

Hence the difference in the degree of fitness of a script for a language is not very significant. It would be possible to compare the suitability of Latin, Cyrillic and reformed Arabic scripts for Turkic languages but the real differences would not be evident. Usually when somebody speaks about the linguistic advantages of the Latin or Cyrillic alphabet for some Turkic (or other) language, such arguments are only a formal cover for political or other extra-linguistic issues. As Evgenij Dimitrevič Polivanov wrote, the Latin alphabet is neither better nor worse than the Cyrillic alphabet in its quality (Polivanov 1928: 321-322). By nature, an alphabet is to a greater or lesser degree a system of conventions, and its correlation to a given language is determined by usage.

1.2. Economic factors are not very significant either. They work in the direction of preserving the existing script, insofar as a change of alphabet is costly. This can be important in times of peace, while in revolutionary epochs reformers do not consider expense, although this may influence implementation. Even though the Soviet power did not have much money in the 1920's-30's, the change of alphabets took place quickly. In contrast, it has been suggested that the restoration of the old national script in Mongolia in the 1990's failed due to economic factors.

1.3. The psychological aspect of the problem of alphabet change is connected with historically established habits and stereotypes. It seems that everybody wants to have a simple and convenient script and orthography. But this is a major problem primarily for people who do not yet know any script. In the modern world, the majority of such people are little children or persons not yet born. The people who have an influence on linguistic policy are literate adults, who have already overcome the difficulties of education and do not want to have to do so again. In periods of revolutions and social change other significant ideas and feelings may play a role, but in times of evolutional development this tendency toward stability predominates. English or French orthography is very difficult and old-fashioned but there is little possibility of making it better. Pre-revolutionary Russian orthography was complicated (although less so than English or French orthography) but it was reformed only during the revolutionary period, in 1917-1918; some further attempts to improve it in the 1960's and 1990's failed – society rejected them.

The same is true for the choice of a script. The challenge of abolishing Chinese characters was urgent at the time of Europeanization in several countries. However, this was accomplished only in two countries: in the Korean People's Democratic Republic after the revolution and in Vietnam in colonial times. There were projects to abolish characters in China after 1949 and in Japan in 1945. However, the moment passed, and now such reforms seem impossible both in Japan and China.

In 1937 one Soviet linguist said that a great number of people became illiterate for several years at the time of transition from one script to another one (Alpatov 2000: 63; see also Glück 1994: 748). This is a time when political or cultural factors become more significant.

1.4. The political aspect is not significant in periods of historical calm but it becomes a major factor in times of social transformation, of the formation or disintegration of states, or of changes in cultural orientation. Political, social and cultural considerations can be more or less significant depending on specific circumstances.

2. *First Period of the Alphabet Change*

The Soviet Union of the 1920's faced important decisions concerning the choice of alphabets. For the Turkic and many other languages of the Muslim peoples in the country, there were four logical possibilities:

1) the traditional Arabic script;
2) the reformed Arabic script;
3) the Latin script;
4) the Cyrillic script.

All four were equally suitable linguistically with the exception of using the traditional Arabic script for Turkic or Iranian languages. However, the traditional Arabic script had

a psychological advantage because of its familiarity to many people; this advantage was important only for literate persons, but literacy was very low. The main factor was political. The Buryat and Kalmyk people had to choose between Cyrillic, Latin and Old Mongolian scripts. The problem of choice also existed in Georgia and Armenia but their traditional scripts were preserved, although it was planned in 1932 to transfer Armenian to the Latin alphabet (Vasil'ev 2016: 236). The Hebrew alphabet was preserved as well.

2.1. From the political point of view, the traditional Arabic alphabet was unacceptable since it was connected with the old political and economical system and with the old Muslim culture. The Cyrillic alphabet was not acceptable either: it was associated with tsarism. Polivanov wrote about "the hatred of the people for missionary transcriptions" (Polivanov 1928: 320). Thus, both the Soviet power and the national intelligentsia of the 1920's accepted only two possibilities: the second and the third ones, reformed Arabic or Latin.

2.2. Reformed Arabic seemed to hold the edge in the first half of the 1920's: it was suitable for the Turkic languages and it did not have any religious connotations; and people who knew the Arabic script had no need to change their habits. However, it had significant political shortcomings: the reformed Arabic script was not used anywhere except the USSR, and its use furthered the isolation of the Muslim peoples of the USSR both from the peoples of the other parts of the Soviet Union and from those in other countries. Some Turkic and Caucasian peoples used this alphabet for several years but then abolished it at the end of the 1920's.

2.3. The most neutral script was the Latin alphabet: it did not have any undesirable associations (its association with English appeared later) and was really international, "the most international writing system" (Polivanov 1931: 85-86 = 1974: 188). Hopes for a worldwide Socialist revolution were still significant; the Soviet Union "hoped to become the Piedmont of world revolution" (Kučera 1952: 116; for a general survey of the Latinization see Imart 1965). The example of Latinization in Turkey was also important and was taken into account in the USSR (S.Š. 1929); the alphabet reform in the USSR also had an influence on Latinization in Turkey (Lewis 1961: 426; on the political discussion around the alphabet revolution see Bayraktarlı 2008).

The USSR's new linguistic policy faced little direct resistance but internal difficulties were significant. Only one of them was recognized at that time: the uneven development of languages, which involved problems with alphabets. Intensive work in order to overcome this situation spread, under the banner of language building. Many of the best Soviet scholars took part in it: Jakovlev, Polivanov and others. The main organization supporting the new alphabet policy was the All-Union Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet (Vsesojuznyj central'nyj komitet novogo tjurkskogo alfavita), whose name was later changed to All-Union Central Committee of the New Alphabet (VCKNA) after the reorganization of the committee (Winner 1952: 144). It was established in Baku and then moved

to Moscow from 1926 to 1937. A considerable number of its documents have recently been published (Vasil'ev 2016).

One of the most important stages of the alphabet reform in the USSR was the First All-Union Turkology Congress, held in Baku in 1926 (Menzel 1927, Baldauf 1993: 387-457). The problem of the alphabet was central there, as the speakers said: "the question of the reception of alphabets is a part of Party interests" (Vasil'ev 2016: 26-27). There was a desperate struggle between the supporters and the opponents of Latinization. The centre of the pro-Latinization group was Baku and the centre of those defending the reformed Arabic alphabet was Kazan. The supporters of the Latin alphabet won out. Originally the decisions of the Congress were only recommendations but in 1929 all Arabic alphabets were forbidden. The Old Mongolian script was forbidden too.

To the end of the 1920's all the main Turkic, Mongolic and other non-Christian peoples of the USSR (except Jews) began to use the Latin alphabet for their languages. Some people had to change their habits but the number of persons who learned to read and write for the first time in the Latin script was more significant. The creation of the new alphabets was considered not only as a Soviet but as a universal, worldwide policy. The data on Turkey, for example, was included in the reports of the VCKNA (Vasil'ev 2016: 276). These reports also noted every statement of support for Latinization in Iran, Afghanistan, China and Japan (Vasil'ev 2016: 191, 220), but such hopes turned out to be vain. At the same time, the successful example of Latinization in Vietnam was ignored because it was accomplished by colonizers. A project for the Latinization of Chinese was proposed by a group of Leningrad scholars and was used by the Soviet Chinese for several years. About 80 new alphabets were created in the 1920s and 1930s.

2.4. VCKNA's report of 1932 noted that the change of alphabets from Arabic to Latin script was realized more quickly than the analogous change from other "backward alphabet forms" including the Cyrillic script (Vasil'ev 2016: 213). For instance, Chuvash people preserved the Cyrillic missionary alphabet even in 1935 (Vasil'ev 2016: 285). The Latin script for this language existed but was never used in practice.

However, the main impediments to universal Latinization in the USSR were Ukrainian, Belorussian and especially Russian. As Jakovlev wrote:

> Nowadays the territory of the Russian alphabet is a kind of wedge between the countries of the October Revolution, where the Latin alphabet is used, and the countries of Western Europe, in which we find national-bourgeois alphabets, resting on the same basis (Jakovlev 1930a: 35-36).

There was an attempt to transfer Russian from Cyrillic to Latin in 1929-1930 (Kučera 1951: 133-137). A special committee headed by Jakovlev proposed three versions of the Latin script for Russian (*Materialy po voprosu o latinizacii russkoj pis'mennosti*, "Kul'tura i pis'mennost' Vostoka", 1930, 6, pp. 208-221). The resolution contained a very negative assessment of the Cyrillic alphabet:

> The Russian State alphabet appears as an anachronism of the 18th and 19th century class-alphabet of the Russian feudal landowners and bourgeoisie, an alphabet of the autocratic yoke, of missionary propaganda, of Great-Russian national chauvinism and the forcible russification of the majority of the nationalities of the USSR and at the same time, as a heritage of Tsarist Russian expansion abroad (Jakovlev 1930b: 208 – English translation: Kučera 1951: 135).

The project was solid from a linguistic point of view but by 1930 the political situation in the Soviet Union had changed. A stable, centralized political system had been firmly established. The policy of building 'Socialism in one country', first declared in 1925, rejected the idea of an imminent world revolution maintained by Trockij and his supporters, and this led to the rise of the role of the Russian and of the Cyrillic script. The Latinization project was considered unacceptable by the Politburo, the leading organ of the Communist party (in March, 1930), and was therefore rejected (Alpatov 2015).

3. *Second Period of the Alphabet Change*

The previous language policy continued until the middle of the thirties, and then it was changed. From 1935 to 1938 it was decided to transfer all Soviet languages using the Latin alphabet into Cyrillic. On the whole, this transfer was finished by 1941, before the beginning of the Second World War. A unique exception to this process took place in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (part of the Georgian Republic): in 1938 Abkhazian and Ossetian changed its script from Latin not to Cyrillic, but to Georgian (the Cyrillic script was introduced later, in 1954). The official slogans remained the same, but the spread of Russian became a main task of Soviet language policy. However, the Latin script was preserved in the USSR because Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian and Finnish became languages of the USSR from 1940. At the same time, the number of languages with alphabets decreased. This situation did not change until the 1980s.

The number of people who had to be re-trained was more significant than earlier but this change of alphabets seemed to be natural for the majority of the population. It might have been disagreeable to the nationally-oriented intelligentsia of many nations, but the situation represented a *fait accompli*. In about a half of a century many people had become accustomed to the Cyrillic alphabet.

4. *Third Period of the Alphabet Change*

The situation changed abruptly in Gorbačëv's time. National movements in the USSR spoke out against Russian and the use of the Cyrillic script. Already at the end of the Soviet era Moldavia introduced the Latin script. After the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 and the formation of many new states the problem of alphabet choice again became urgent. This was the case, in particular, for the former republics of Central Asia. Four possibilities faced them. The reformed Arabic script had been forgotten and was not used anywhere; a

rebirth of this alphabet was not feasible. As before, the linguistic factor is not significant. One major psychological factor is connected to the desire to preserve a modern system (i.e. the Cyrillic alphabet), especially since the majority of the population is literate. This factor works together with the economic one: a change of alphabet would be expensive. But political factors can be even more powerful.

A radical change of scripts was realized quickly only in Azerbaijan (since 1992). This republic was the pioneer of Latinization both in the 1920s and in the 1990s. Turkmenistan realized this transition too. Resolving this problem in Uzbekistan proved to be more complicated. The coexistence of two alphabets there has been preserved for many years. To cite only one example (which I observed in Tashkent in 1999): on a New Year's street billboard the phrase "Happy New Year" was written in Uzbek in Latin script but the date on the calendar ("31 December") was written in Cyrillic (Alpatov 2005). One should mention that the experience of Soviet language building is not taken into account in the new Latinization process; there is no return to the alphabets of the 1920's-1930's, while the imitation of Turkic orthography clearly prevails (except in Uzbekistan). This model of development is considered to be Turkish and not Sovietic.

The other new states and all of the national territories within the Russian Federation continue to use the Cyrillic script (the only exception is the Karelian language that has adopted the Latin script). The problem of the choice of alphabets depends on political and cultural orientation. The Arabic script has prestige in the new states but is not used anywhere except in the religious sphere. Its use in schools, mass media, official documents, etc., would mean isolation both from the USA, Europe, and Turkey as well as from Russia. This path of Muslim development has been avoided (at least officially) by all the new states. Preserving the Cyrillic script means continuing a traditional orientation to Russia. This is natural for national territories within Russia but is also sustainable for the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The choice of the Latin alphabet is naturally correlated with Western or Turkish orientation. This script is accepted or will be accepted in Azerbaijan, in Turkmenistan and in Uzbekistan. As to Russia, some attempts to abolish the Cyrillic script were undertaken in the 1990's (during the Chechen war the Latin script was officially introduced by the Chechen separatists) but now the policies of the Russian state offers no possibility for changing alphabets. There have been some proposals to latinize Russian (Arutjunov 2001) but they have no practical significance (Alpatov 2015: 9-10).

Thus, during the last hundred or so years there were three periods in which alphabets underwent change in the part of the world under consideration. We now see a period of new stability, although the spread of the Latin script to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is possible. Many nations that were becoming literate switched alphabets two or three times, while several established languages (e.g., Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian and Armenian) hardly changed at all.

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Abstract

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No country in the world has changed its language policy – including the choice of alphabet – as frequently as the Soviet Union did. There were three main periods of alphabet change: the 1920s; the second part of the 1930s; and the last years of the USSR. The revolution set new goals – it expressed the need to transfer official communication from Russian into the languages of ethnic minorities, to create middle and higher education in them and so on. However, many languages were unwritten; the existing scripts of some other languages (traditional Arabic or Mongolian) were considered unacceptable. It was necessary to create new alphabets. After some hesitation, the Latin script was chosen as predominant in the world. More than 80 alphabets were constructed in the 1920s-1930s. However from 1935 to 1938 it was decided that all Soviet languages using the Latin alphabet would adopt Cyrillic. This Cyrillization was completed in 1941, before the beginning of the war. The official slogans remained the same, but the spread of Russian and the Cyrillic script became a main task of Soviet language policy. This situation did not change until the 1980s when national movements in the USSR spoke out against Russian and the use of the Cyrillic script. After the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 and the formation of new states, the problem of alphabet choice became urgent. Latinization was accomplished in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Moldavia; it is planned in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Some proposals to latinize Russian have no practical significance.

Keywords

Soviet Union; Language Policy; Alphabet; Latin Alphabet; Cyrillic Alphabet; Arabic Alphabet; Latinization; Change of Policy; New States.