Language Policy in the USSR

Before, During and After the Soviet Union

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Part 1: General Overview USSR and Lenin’s Language Policy

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Dimensions of the USSR

- 8,649,490 square miles (1/6 of the land mass of the earth)
- 286,000,000 people in 1991 (over 50% Russian, 81% Russian speakers)
- 130 ethnic groups
- Approximately 200 languages
- 15 Republics, each organized around a major nationality

Republics can be grouped as

- Baltic (Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian)
- Caucasian (Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian)
- Central Asian (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, Uzbek)
- Slavic + Moldavian (Russia, Belorusia, Ukraine, Moldovan)
- Russian Far East (Siberia)

Map of USSR

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Organization of the Soviet State

- Republics did not follow strict ethnic or linguistic boundaries, but had political purposes
- Some republics were designed to create new identities or destroy old ones
- Central Asia was pan-Turkic (except Tajikistan) and pan-Islamic; the distinction Uzbek vs. Kyrgyz is new
- Old clan and tribal associations of Siberia were suppressed in favor of larger nationality

Ethnic Groups

- The three largest ethnic groups are all Slavic (Russian, Ukrainian, Belorusian) ➔ 78%
- Next largest segment of population has Turkic languages (Uzbek, Tatar, Kazakh)
- Remaining languages of top ten ethnic groups are the titular languages of the Caucasus (Azerbaijani, Georgian, Armenian)

Linguistic map of USSR

- Language families:
  - Indo-European
  - Altaic (Mongolian, Tungusic, Turkic)
  - Uralic (Finno-Ugric, Samoyedic)
  - Caucasian
  - Paleosiberian (families and isolates based on location: Chukotko-Kamchatkan, Eskimo-Aleut, Ket, Nivkh, Yukagir)
  - Isolates

Indo-European

- Over 80% of the population of the USSR had an Indo-European language as its native language
- Baltic – both living Baltic languages were spoken in the USSR
- Entire East Slavic subfamily, plus Poles and other West Slavs in the Lithuanian & Ukrainian SSRs

Altaic

- Composition of this family is controversial due to internal complexities, migrations of speakers, lack of clear ethnonyms, language contact
- Altaic languages: agglutinating, vowel harmony, grammatical number & case, but NO gender, SOV
- Three major branches in USSR:
  - Turkic (Uzbek, Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Tatar)
  - Mongolian
  - Tungusic

Uralic

Uralic: Finno-Ugric & Samoyedic

- Vowel harmony, lots of cases, agglutination, lack of gender
- Finno-Ugric:
  - 32 languages (includes Finnish & Hungarian), all spoken in USSR
- Samoyedic:
  - Very small numbers of speakers, ranging from only 200 up to 35,000
Ethnic composition of USSR

- No republic was monolingual
- Language was seen by the Soviet state as the key trait in identifying ethnicity, and this fact was manipulated both by official policy and by individuals reporting census data
- The majority of non-Russians declared their heritage language to be their native language, only 15% (1989) declared Russian as their native language
- Over half of non-Russians speak Russian, total of 75% of USSR spoke Russian

The Early Soviet Years

- In 1917 between 70% and 100% of population of various republics was illiterate
- Vast numbers of different languages and cultures precluded simply sending out teachers
- First it was necessary to target which languages would be developed

The Literacy Campaign (Likbez: likvidaciia bezgramotnosti)

- At time of Revolution only 19 languages had a written form
- In 1932, 80 of 127 eastern nationalities of the USSR had acquired written languages; in 1936, 90 out of 102 Soviet nationalities had a written language
- Lack of clear linguistic boundaries
- Basic research to identify and codify languages was a priority

Alphabets and Orthography of languages (7 options)

1) No written form at all
2) Written form in Cyrillic
3) Tradition of using Latin script (Moldavian and German)
4) Tradition of using Arabic script (Turkic, Tajiki, and some Nakh-Dagestani and North Caucasian)
5) Mongolian script (Buriat & Kalmyk)
6) Unique orthographies (Georgian, Armenian)
7) Chinese (Chinese immigrants)

Lenin’s Nationalism

- Lenin claimed to believe that all minorities should be treated equally, but that nationalism is incompatible with Marxism
- Lenin’s goal was the unification of all people via assimilation, not diversity
- But nationalism was useful when it could be used to advance the proletarian cause; if people would support the revolution because they believed they had the right to self-determination, they would be led down that path...

How to communicate in such a huge state?

- The right of every ethnic group to use their own language was a founding principle (see Article 121 of 1936 Constitution)
- Early Bolsheviks were mostly from the Jewish urban elite, and had a hard time communicating beyond their group; even speakers of Russian dialects could not comprehend them
- And then there were all the other languages (approx. 200), spoken mostly by less well-educated people
**Names, Ethnonyms, and Spelling**

- Language for communication was needed by the Bolsheviks.
- Goals were not transparent, sometimes contradictory, and always secretive.
  - Promotion of Russian accelerated over time.
  - Suppression of other languages.
  - Squelching of nationalist movements.
- Before formation of the USSR, many minority languages and ethnic groups did not have names.
- Creation of ethnic groups with Russified names.
- Lots of confusion.

**National in Form, Socialist in Content**

- Lenin viewed nationalities as being on the path toward the development of the Soviet state; the content of the message was more important than the form (language).
- This would be accomplished by “convergence and fusion of people” – the ethnic groups would just naturally merge to form a single *Sovietskii narod* (Soviet ethnic group).

**Nativization (korenizaciia)**

- Education in indigenous languages.
  - Practical goal was to educate indigenous people → workforce.
  - Political goal was to reconcile them with Soviet rule.
  - This went well in Georgia & Armenia, but only slowly in Central Asia & Siberia.

**Problems of Nativization**

- Lack of trained teachers and materials.
  → those who were sent to Leningrad for training didn’t return.
- Low education levels; many educated people were bourgeois.
- Some languages were unwritten; teachers gave up and taught in Russian.

**Outcomes of Nativization**

- Essential link between language and ethnicity.
- Language as the main criterion for nationhood.
- An officially recognized language provided recognition as an ethnic group.
- To be officially recognized: written language was necessary.
- This led to the creation of dozens of literary languages: translation of Soviet political information.

**Doctrine Shift in Language Policy**

- Nativization was abandoned in late 1920s, Russian was promoted as the best means to develop the Soviet society.
- Stalin shifted focus from national autonomy to centralized government and economy in the 1930s; he labeled nationalism “dangerous.”
Russification

- policy shift from indigenization/nativization to Russification in late 1920s/early 1930s
- Russification stood in contrast to nativization
- changes due to new policy:
  - where?
  - how?
  - consequences?

Measures of Russification

- Alphabet/orthography changes
  - 1920: switch to Cyrillic
  - by 1928-1929: switch to Latin alphabet instead of Arabic script languages
  - early 1930s: switch to Latin script for nearly all languages (purpose: create distance to the tsarist past); also proposals to Latinize Russian as well but this was not done
  - late 1930s: switch to Cyrillic; now ALL languages had to use the Cyrillic alphabet

Measures of Russification

Changes in education
- 1938: Russian becomes a compulsory subject for non-Russian students “at the request of the people”
- two educational options:
  - native-language schools
  - Russian-language schools
  - parents were free to choose BUT: Russian-language schools were the sole option for those who would like to see their children advance in the Soviet system
- 1977: the right to education in native language (Constitution of 1936) was reformulated as an opportunity

Measures of Russification

  - intensified study of Russian
  - teaching of more specialized disciplines only in Russian (in institutions of higher learning)
  - introduction of Russian as a subject in pre-school institutions and preparatory classes
  - Further proposals:
    - start of the study of Russian in the 1st or 2nd year at the expense of other subjects
    - use of Russian in the upper classes of general education schools
    - course/diploma projects, reports etc. were to be written in Russian

Measures of Russification

- Persecutions:
  - 1930s: Purges to eliminate those who did not agree to Stalin’s policy
  - WWII: deportations of those who were regarded as “enemies of the state” collaborating with Nazi-Germany (e.g. Volga Germans, Chechens)

Measures of Russification

Society:
- Guiding concept: eventually all cultures and all languages will merge into one; it is expected that everything will merge into Russian language/culture
- “Two streams” policy:
  - National languages fulfill local and cultural functions; Russian is used for functions having to do with the Soviet state, technology and industry
  - 1970-1979: growth of bilinguals in Central Asia who speak Russian as their 2nd language since Russian is necessary for an academic, political or social career and mandatory in some technical/scientific occupations and public administration
Measures of Russification

- Bruchis (1984) sees the "two streams" policy as following: "On the one hand the party (...) aims to create the appearance of a blossoming of national languages (...) while on the other hand pursuing the ultimate goal of establishing Russian as the sole language in the USSR."

Consequences

Creation of artificial differences between related languages as in the case of Central Asian languages

- Modifications of the Latin script ➔ same phoneme represented by different characters in different languages
- Actually related languages now separated ➔ also separated peoples ➔ reduced possibility of an uprising of Central Asian nations since they do not form such a close unity anymore

Consequences

Separation from cultural past and religion
- Switch from Arabic to Latin and Cyrillic script ➔ Muslims educated after the introduction of new alphabets are not able to read Arabic texts (e.g. religious texts) anymore
- Those who might organize an anti-Soviet campaign among Muslims (e.g. the clergy) have to learn reading and writing all over again ➔ become semi-literates, not able to lead a resistance movement

Consequences

- More possibilities for Russian influence ➔ massive influence of Russian terms
- Before: translation of Russian loan words allowed, e.g. by making them morphologically conform with the local language; after Russification: Russian terms had to be incorporated without further change
- Existing equivalences of Russian words were removed
- Reactions to Russian language policy: see the case studies of Estonia and Belarus

Part 3: Case Study & Situation Today

- Case Study: Estonia
  - Under Soviet Rule
  - Following Independence
  - Situation in Belarus Today

Case Study: Estonia

- Occupied by Soviet Union in 1940
- Regained sovereignty in 1988
- Estonian as a Finno-Ugric language
Case Study: Estonia
Soviet Rule

Russification:
- Russian was the preferential language in education
- Propagandistic writing was pro Russian
- Restrictions on use and teaching of Estonian were in effect
- Book-burning and restrictions on access to Estonian-made publications were carried through
- Russian was necessary for everyday life

Case Study: Estonia
Soviet Rule

Russification:
- Deportation of Estonian-speaking natives
- Immigration of Russian-speakers (1950s-1980s)
- 1934-1989:
  - Estonian speakers: 88% -> 61%
  - Russian speakers: 8% -> 30%
- In some cities there were only single-digit Estonian percentages; Tallinn: 47%

Case Study: Estonia
Soviet Rule

Resistance:
- Estonian remained obligatory in Estonian schools
- Estonians never abandoned their language

Case Study: Estonia
Post-Soviet

- 1988: Estonian was made the single official language
- 1989: Language Law (Estonian proficiency was required for certain jobs)
- 1990: All laws discriminating against Estonian were repealed
- 1990: National Language Board was established

Case Study: Estonia
Today

- A constitutional right to Estonian use in public dealings and education exists
- The creation of Russian-language schools is virtually impossible
- Citizenship requires proficiency in Estonian
  - Most Russians (30% of population) are stateless
- 14th March: Mother-Tongue Day

Belarus Today

- Belarusian is linguistically close to Russian
- In 1992 it became the only official language, but a referendum reintroduced Russian in 1995 (with 83% of all the votes)
- The percentage of actual Belarusian speakers in the single digits (intellectual elite)
- No real consensus exists as to what (pure) Belarusian is anymore
Belarus Today

- Speaking Belarusian (in Minsk) is a risky political statement
- In 1999, only 8% of printed material was in Belarusian (albeit subsidized by 75%)!
- Interviewees on Belarusian TV answer Belarusian questions in Russian
- De jure Belarusian schools teach de facto in Russian

Transyanka

- Russian-Belarusian interlanguage
- Russian lexicon, Belarusian phonetic inventory, mixed Russian-Belarusian grammar
- "ever-increasingly just an accented Russian speech with some localisms unknown in Standard Russian"
- "unofficial" main language besides Russian
- President Lukashenka speaks it, too

Belarus Today

- Although only 12% of the Belarusian population is (ethnic) Russian, the overwhelming majority speaks Russian (only)
- Language shift / abandonment
- Strong governmental support for "re-Russification"

Sources

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