

## **SOVIET LANGUAGE POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA**

**by Mark Dickens**

*Please note that this paper was originally written before the breakup of the USSR, so it reflects the pre-independence situation in Central Asia*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 resulted in a transfer of power from the autocratic Tsar Nicholas II to the Bolshevik Party and the subsequent establishment of the world's first socialist state. The victorious revolutionaries inherited from the Tsarist regime a politically, culturally, and linguistically complex situation, with over 100 million citizens speaking no less than 150 different languages. The possibility that some of these groups might take advantage of the opportunity to assert their independence during this time of national upheaval presented the new Soviet rulers with a serious challenge. Preventing the Russian Empire from disintegrating into a host of smaller entities, as so many other empires had done in the past, was a high priority on the agenda of the new government. Beyond this, however, the primary concern of the new Soviet regime was to spread the doctrine of Communism among the different peoples within the borders of the now-defunct Russian Empire, with the ultimate goal of establishing an egalitarian Communist society in which differences were minimized as much as possible.

Various strategies were employed to consolidate Bolshevik power in the fledgling Soviet Union and to build the foundations of a Communist society. One of the most important of these was the language policy that the Soviets adopted in dealing with the non-Russian nationalities. Recognizing the crucial role that language plays in nationality affairs, the new regime instituted a number of significant steps to guide the development of the non-Russian languages in conformity with the overall goals of the Communist Party.

This paper will examine the unfolding of the Soviet linguistic policy in that part of the USSR now known as Soviet Central Asia. The area contains five of the fifteen constituent republics of the Soviet Union: the Kazakh<sup>1</sup> Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), the Kirghiz SSR, the Tajik SSR, the Turkmen SSR, and the Uzbek SSR<sup>2</sup>. Each is named after the dominant ethnic group within that republic. Since the overall picture of Soviet language policy in Central Asia cannot be seen by just examining one aspect of that policy, this paper will be concerned with several, namely the development of literacy, alphabet reform, the influence of Russian on the Central Asian languages, and the growth of bilingualism in Central Asia.

### **THE PRE-SOVIET LANGUAGE SITUATION IN CENTRAL ASIA**

Central Asia is located, as the name implies, in the middle of the continent of Asia. The area was earlier referred to as Turkestan, which means "Land of the Turks", since most of the inhabitants are of Turkic origin. In actual fact, the broad definition of Central Asia includes northwest China (formerly called Chinese Turkestan, now known as Xinjiang<sup>3</sup> province in the People's Republic of China) and northern Afghanistan, but this paper will be restricted to that portion of Central Asia located in the USSR.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of these names have several variant spellings in English.

<sup>2</sup> These republics are also known as, respectively, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

<sup>3</sup> Pronounced "shin-jong".

Before the advent of the modern geopolitical borders that separated Russian, Chinese, and Afghan Turkestan from each other, there was a significant degree of religious, cultural, and linguistic homogeneity throughout all of Central Asia. This was accomplished by means of the unifying effects of the Muslim religion, the common Arabo-Perso-Turkic cultural heritage, and the close similarity (phonetically, syntactically, and lexically speaking) among the various Turkic languages in the area. Although Soviet Central Asians have been largely cut off from their Turkic brethren beyond the border and the Muslim *Ummah* (community) has been broken up and rendered ineffective, there is still a considerable degree of cultural and linguistic homogeneity amongst the peoples of Soviet Central Asia. However, as we shall see, that too has been changing since the advent of Soviet rule.

The majority of the native peoples are primarily of Turkic ancestry, the four largest groups being the Kazakhs, the Kirghiz, the Turkmen, and the Uzbeks (see Table 1 for comparative population statistics). There is also a significant Iranian element in the cultural makeup of the region, represented primarily by the Tajiks, whose language is closely related to Persian. Because of the area's situation on the famous Silk Road and the fact that the armies of nearly every great Asian empire (including the Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Mongols, and Russians) have marched through the region at one time or other, there has been considerable mixing of ethnic groups over the centuries. As a result, in addition to the major groups mentioned above, one can also find Arabs, Jews, Gypsies, Persians, Tatars, Koreans, Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Germans, Ukrainians, Belorussians, and (of course) Russians in the area.

Prior to the arrival of Turkic tribes in Central Asia, most of the inhabitants were Iranian-speaking. Beginning in the second century BC, nomadic Turks began moving out of their homeland in what is now Mongolia and migrating in hordes to the Central Asian steppe, pasturing their flocks and plundering their new neighbours as they went. Various Turkic tribes united in 552 AD to form a massive empire called the Gokturk Empire, which, at its height, stretched from the Black Sea to northern China. These early Turks have left behind inscriptions in the runic Orkhon script (based on the Aramaic alphabet used by Nestorian Christians in the area at that time), giving evidence that there was some form of literary culture amongst these semi-barbaric nomads even at this early time. Later on, the Uighurs, a Turkic group in Eastern Turkestan, also developed their own script, based on the Syriac alphabet. It was in widespread use throughout Central Asia until it was replaced by the Arabic script; a modified version of it is still used in Mongolia.

Central Asian culture was abruptly altered by the advent of Islam in the area, as the armies of the Caliph swept across the Oxus River (now called the Amu Darya) in 673 AD. By the early eighth century, the Arabs had consolidated their power in what was then known as Transoxiana (The Land Across the Oxus), and by the tenth century, Islam was firmly established as the religion of the general population (although some of the more nomadic tribes in the north continued their animistic and shamanistic practices for several centuries after). Arabic became the language not only of religion but also of higher learning and the Arabic script was employed in all writing, although only a privileged few were able to read and write. In addition to Arabic, classical Persian was also utilized in academic circles. However, most of the people continued to speak in various Turkic or Iranian dialects.

Over the next several centuries, the Central Asian cities of Bukhara, Khiva, and later Samarkand became elite centers of learning in the Islamic world. The area has produced several famous sons, including

Al-Khwarizmi (783-847), a brilliant mathematician who has been called "the father of algebra", and the great philosopher, physician, and poet Ibn Sina (980-1037), known in the West as Avicenna. Over the years, a large body of Central Asian literature developed in Arabic, Persian, and Chagatay, a Turkic literary language named after one of the sons of Chingiz Khan. However, despite the great accomplishments of the scholars, most Turkestanis remained illiterate. Indeed, there was little need for the vast majority of them, whether merchants, farmers, or herdsmen, to know how to read or write. In the absence of widespread literacy, though, a rich body of oral literature developed; Central Asia is still renowned as the home of some of the longest epic poems in the world.

Meanwhile, as the empires of Chingiz Khan (1167-1227) and Timur (1336-1405) came and went, a new force began to gain power on the edge of the Mongol-Turkic sphere of influence. For several centuries, the Russians had been subservient to the Tatars, a Turkic tribe which had maintained the power of the Mongol Golden Horde west of the Urals well into the fifteenth century. The tiny principality of Muscovy (Moscow) had been gradually increasing in size and power until, in 1552, Ivan the Terrible captured the Tatar stronghold of Astrakhan. From that time on, Russia was the power to be reckoned with as she rapidly expanded her empire into Asia. The process of colonizing Central Asia began in the eighteenth century and continued up to 1884, by which time the Russians effectively controlled all of what is now Soviet Central Asia.

With the advent of Russian rule in Central Asia came numerous changes, including some in the education system. Before the Russian conquest, education could only be obtained through the system of *mektebs* (Muslim religious schools) and *medressehs* (Islamic seminaries). However, although most boys in urban areas attended a *mekteb*, the instruction was largely restricted to rote memorization of the Qur'an (in Arabic) and other religious books (in both Arabic and Persian), so very few actually learned how to read and write even in these languages, let alone in their native tongue. Only the privileged minority who were able to study in a *medresseh* (where, in addition to theology, they were taught history, mathematics, astronomy, and poetry) could hope to attain the degree of literacy needed to be a *mullah* (Muslim cleric) or to work in a governmental administrative position. Beyond that, unless one was involved in extensive trade or desired to advance one's social status, there was little need for the average person to be literate. Illiteracy was even more pronounced among women, who had virtually no access to schooling, unless they came from wealthy families.

This traditional system of Islamic education was augmented by two external sources during the nineteenth century. The first was the network of Russian and Russo-native schools that the Tsarist colonizers set up in Central Asia, beginning with Kazakhstan (the Kazakhs, the northernmost of the Turkestani peoples, were the first to come under Russian rule). As Russian settlers moved into the area, Russian language schools were established, at which a limited number of promising Central Asian students were able to study. In addition, Muslim children were taught about the Russian culture in their native language at special Russian-native schools. Only a very small percentage of local children had access to this education, but it was hoped that students from both of these types of schools would serve as a cultural bridge between the Russian rulers and the local people. Russian was, of course, the official language of the Empire and the Tsarist regime pursued an active policy of Russification. However, despite their efforts, the native intelligentsia that emerged was by and large extremely nationalistic. Books and periodicals began to appear in Kazakh, Turkmen, and Uzbek, which were all in varying stages of becoming literary languages. It was also at this time that the twin

doctrines of pan-Islamism (which envisioned a rebirth of the great Muslim Empire of the past) and pan-Turkism (which sought to unite politically all peoples of Turkic origin) became popular in the nearby Ottoman Empire.

The second external source of educational change came from the *Jadid* (Reform) movement which originated amongst the Turkic Tatars who lived in the region of the Volga and who were probably the most westernized and Russianized of all the Muslims in the Russian Empire. The founder of the *Jadid* movement was the Crimean Tatar Ismail Bey Gaspirali (1854-1914). Recognizing that Muslims in Russia would not be able to maintain their ethnic and religious heritage without significant reform, he pushed for religious and educational changes amongst the Tatars, including the promotion of a common Turkic language, which he propagated in his newspaper *Terjuman* ('The Translator').

Soon, *Usul-i-jadid* ('new method') schools began appearing in Tatar areas and, before long, they had spread to Central Asia, to such an extent that the Russian government, fearing the spread of pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic sentiments, began to ban Tatars from setting up or teaching in *Jadid* schools in Central Asia. However, although Gaspirali's proposed Turkic language had never caught on, his reform schools had, so that the Turkestanian intelligentsia continued to operate *Jadid* schools in the area. Nevertheless, despite these different efforts to improve education in Central Asia, relatively few of the local people were touched. By 1912, only 0.9% of the children in the Samarkand region (in Uzbekistan) were in school - in the Ferghana region (also in Uzbekistan), the proportion was only 0.5% (Desheryev and Mikhailchenko 1976:389). The situation was similar elsewhere. As a result, the vast majority of Central Asians remained by and large illiterate.

### **THE SOVIET LITERACY CAMPAIGN**

Before examining the language policy of the Soviets as it unfolded in Central Asia, it will be helpful to review their efforts to promote literacy among the Central Asian peoples, since this was the first active step they took to change the linguistic landscape of the area and, in many ways, made possible the more radical changes that were to come later.

On the eve of the Russian Revolution, Tsarist Russia was still a largely illiterate nation. The 1897 census had revealed that the literacy rate for the general population was 28.4%, the lowest of any European state (see Tables 2 and 3 for an overall view of the growth of literacy in the USSR and, more specifically, in Soviet Central Asia - note that the figures given are for those aged 9-49). The literacy rate among women was even lower (16.6%) (Kazakova 1976:53). Among the Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Uzbeks the rates were 1.0%, 0.6%, 3.9%, 0.7%, and 1.9%, respectively. Again, the rates for women were lower for each of these groups. The situation had changed little twenty years later.

This state of affairs was unacceptable to the Bolsheviks for several reasons. Although perhaps there was some general concern for the well-being of the people, the primary motivation for eradicating illiteracy was avowedly political: "mass illiteracy hindered the building of socialism. It was of vital importance for the success of the cultural revolution that illiteracy should be eradicated" (Tonkonogaja 1976:26). No less an authority than Lenin himself said, "It is impossible to build a Communist society in a country where people are illiterate" (cited in McLeish 1972:310). The Communist Party stated in 1918: "General education (literacy), in

school and out-of-school, must be closely linked to Communist propaganda. There is no form of science or culture which cannot be linked with the great ideas of Communism" (cited in McLeish 1972:308). Kalinin, a key member of the Soviet hierarchy, expressed the position even more blatantly: "In literacy teaching, all the work must be permeated by the political views of the revolutionary proletariat - otherwise expressed, by the revolutionary theory of Marxism-Leninism" (cited in McLeish 1972:319).

Motivated by these underlying convictions, the fledgling regime set out to tackle the illiteracy problem. The 1919 decree, *On the Eradication of Illiteracy Among the Population of the Russian Federation*, declared: "All illiterate citizens of the Soviet Republic [the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic, or RSFSR] aged between 8 and 50 years are required to learn to read and write in their native language, or in the Russian language, as they prefer" (cited in McLeish 1972:309). Similar decrees were proclaimed in the Central Asian national republics.

With an almost religious fervor, inspired by the notion that literacy was the key to the future Communist utopia, the Bolsheviks embarked on their crusade to eradicate illiteracy. Utilizing slogans like "Literates - teach one illiterate!", literate citizens were mobilized en masse to assist in this massive undertaking. Commissions, such as the *All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy*, were formed and congresses convened to deal with the problem. A voluntary society, known as the *Down with Illiteracy Society*, was organized.

A network of literacy centers and schools were set up for both illiterates and semi-literates. Reading libraries were established and special newspapers and journals for semi-literates were published in various republics. Provisions were made for those who were not able to attend regular classes so that they could receive individual instruction. In addition, in Central Asia, some literacy centers were mobile, as they were set up in *yurts* (the circular felt tents used by those Turkic peoples, such as the Kazakhs and Kirghiz, who were still nomadic). Thus the literacy classes travelled with the people as they followed their flocks and herds.

A special concern of those promoting literacy in Central Asia was the high illiteracy rates among women, which was largely due to their seclusion from public life and generally low status in the traditional Muslim culture. The literacy courses developed for women therefore had a strong emphasis on women's rights and political involvement. Because of the traditional culture of the area, literacy classes for men and women were conducted separately.

The classes were taught in either Russian or the local language. Initially, the literacy courses were three months long - this time was later extended to between six and eight months. Although there were some professional teachers involved in literacy work, there were not enough to complete the task, so many volunteer teachers were needed. "The training objectives of literacy schools were threefold: to teach students the elementary skills of reading, writing and counting... to raise the standard of general culture, to promote a better understanding of political problems, and bring about the active participation of students in community affairs and in the building of socialism"(Tonkonogaja 1976:30).

By 1920, the first phase of the literacy campaign was finished, but, although progress had been made, results were minimal, partly because of the effects of the Civil War that was going on at this time. It was recognised that better teacher training, better materials, and better teaching techniques were needed. Primers were developed, employing such phrases as "We have fought for the Soviets," "The Soviets have given us

land, factories and plants," and "The Soviets are our strength" (Tonkonogaja 1976:40). The four key themes in the literacy materials that were developed were: "1) the building of state industry; 2) the raising of productivity in agriculture; 3) the consolidation of the Soviet state; 4) the relations of Soviet Russia with other countries" (Tonkonogaja 1976:41).

The second phase of the literacy campaign began in 1921, its completion coinciding with that of the First Five-Year Plan in 1932. By the end of this phase, the literacy rates in the Tajik SSR, Turkmen SSR, and Uzbek SSR had risen to 52%, 61%, and 72%, respectively (Tonkonogaja 1976:48 - it should be noted that these figures as well as those in Table 2, include all the inhabitants of a given SSR, not just the members of the ethnic group it is named after). The third phase in the campaign began in 1933 and, by the time of the 1939 census, the literacy rates in the five Central Asian republics were 83.6% (Kazakh SSR), 79.8% (Kirghiz SSR), 62.8% (Tajik SSR), 77.7% (Turkmen SSR), and 78.7% (Uzbek SSR). Although there were temporary setbacks due to World War II, this overall upward trend continued after the war until near universal literacy was achieved in Soviet Central Asia and throughout the USSR in 1950's (see Tables 2 and 3). Nothing like this has ever been achieved in any other Muslim country in Asia.<sup>4</sup>

There is no doubt that the Soviets have accomplished an incredible feat in transforming the Central Asian Republics from near universal illiteracy to near universal literacy. Their efforts are indeed laudable and serve as an example of how literacy can be advanced in a highly unfavorable environment. However it would be naive to consider that this was accomplished purely as a result of benevolent motivations. We have seen that one of the major reasons for spreading literacy was in order to indoctrinate the people effectively in the path of Communism. The question is: what else has the increase in literacy opened the door to? An examination of Soviet linguistic policy provides some interesting insights into the implications of literacy in Central Asia.

#### **SOVIET LANGUAGE POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA**

The Soviet Union as a multilingual and multicultural socialist society has been officially committed to the development of communism on the one hand, and, on the other, to the development and growth of various languages and the ethnic groups speaking them. One requires a standardized proletarian culture and presumably also a standardized language and the other strives for some form of linguistic if not cultural pluralism. This is the Soviet dilemma (Shorish 1984:35).

This inherent tension between the nationalist and the nationalistic functions of language (to use Fishman's terms<sup>5</sup>), between centripetal and centrifugal forces in the Soviet multicultural society, has resulted in a linguistic policy which has alternately emphasized either centrism or pluralism. In turn, these changing emphases can be viewed as reflexes of the political situation at various points in modern Soviet history.

The early years of the Communist era were characterized by an active promotion of the minority languages in the Soviet Union. It is difficult to separate benevolent from political motivations at this stage in

---

<sup>4</sup> For example, literacy rates in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey are 6%, 25%, 64%, 44%, 18%, and 62%, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> No attempt is made in this paper to distinguish between "nation" and "nationality", as Fishman does, since this distinction is generally not made in either Soviet or Western literature on the subject, the two often being used interchangeably.

Soviet history. Whereas Russian had been the official language in Tsarist times, in the new Soviet state, all of the peoples and languages were declared to be equal. There was (and still is) no official language *de jure* and everyone was declared to have the right to education in his own language. Lenin wrote that "the workers support the equality of nations and languages... full equality includes the negation of any privileges for one of the languages" (cited in Bruchis 1984:129). Lenin spoke out vigorously against "Great Russian chauvinism", criticizing those who wished to make Russian the official language of the Soviet Union, although he undoubtedly held the language in high regard:

We know better than you do that the language of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dobrulyubov and Chernyshevsky is a great and mighty one.... And we, of course, are in favour of every inhabitant of Russia having the opportunity to learn the great Russian language. What we do not want is the element of coercion... a compulsory official language involves coercion, the use of the cudgel (cited in Desheriyev and Mikhailchenko 1976:391).

An obvious question to ask is why the Soviets were so eager and willing to promote national languages at the outset. Soviet language policy is inextricably linked with the Marxist-Leninist (and subsequently Stalinist) view of nations. The Soviet policy on nationalities is founded upon the "doctrine which traces the evolution of the human group from the clan to the nation, which is the ultimate outcome of the group"(Bennigsen and Quelquejay 1961:1). More specifically, Stalin defined a nation as "a stable and historically constituted human community founded on its community of language, territory, economic life, and spiritual makeup, the last contained in the idea of community of national culture"(cited in Bennigsen and Quelquejay 1961:2-3). Of these characteristics, "language is a nation's most obvious and important attribute. There is no such thing as a nation without a common linguistic basis"(Isayev 1977:192).

Since a nation is primarily defined by its language and (to a lesser degree) its territory, one of the first tasks of the government was to legislate geographic boundaries and develop national languages for those groups that were considered to be nations. Before the advent of the Soviet regime, Central Asians had never been subject to any sort of deliberate language policy. There was little concept of national solidarity in pre-Soviet Central Asia - on the one hand, they were all Muslims, united by a common religious, cultural, and linguistic heritage, as well as by their general dislike of the Russians. On the other hand, their primary loyalties were to their specific tribes or clans, not to any larger national grouping. In many areas, given the similarity of the Turkic languages, there were no abrupt linguistic boundaries between groups, but rather a gradual shift from one dialect to the next. Often there was a greater cultural difference between urban and rural populations of the same ethnic background than between two different groups living in the same location, especially in the towns.

Where there was a tendency for larger macro-groupings to occur, three such groups had the potential for evolving: a nomadic Kazakh-Kirghiz group (the two languages are very close), a Turkmen group, and an Uzbek-Tajik group (although from two different language families, they were culturally similar and extensive intermarriage had resulted in a significant linguistic influence of the two languages on each other). These groupings were reflected in the fact that Kazakh, Turkmen, and Uzbek were in various stages of being established as literary languages at that time, alongside Arabic, Persian, and Chagatay. It is possible that, left to themselves, these three natural groupings may have continued to evolve further.

Up to the Revolution of 1917 the Muslim peoples of Russia had evolved in a way which might be described as 'natural': they reacted to economic and social factors whether internal or external... But since 1928,... the evolution has not been completely 'natural'; it has been directed by the authorities who have been able to bend it to their will by manipulating the factor which is essential for the existence of a nation, that of language (Bennigsen and Quelquejay 1961:16)

One of the chief linguistic tasks of the new government was to develop a separate literary language for each significant ethnic group in the Soviet Union. "In the USSR, the emergence of a written language is not always the result of a long internal evolution; it is frequently the consequence of a decision by the central authorities who can present a community with a literary language worked out by Russian linguists" (Bennigsen and Quelquejay 1961:16). Each Central Asian Group chosen to constitute a nation was given a literary language which was artificially differentiated from those of neighbouring nations which were often linguistically similar (as, for instance, with the Kazakh and the Kirghiz). Thus, the linguistic unity of the area was broken up while differences between the languages were emphasized. This process of separation was helped further by the National Delimitation of 1924, which fixed the boundaries of the five Central Asian republics, primarily along ethnic and linguistic lines.

On the surface, the provision of a territory and a literary language for each Central Asian nationality seems like a generally beneficial development for the groups in question and certainly, the latter was necessary if the people were to become literate in their own language. At the same time, however, definite political motivations can be seen for this move. This divide-and-rule strategy obviously helped to diffuse any potential pan-Turkic tendencies. In addition,

the early policy-makers harnessed nationalist sentiments and used them to promote unity within the Communist framework. Instead of suppressing the national languages and the expression of cultural heterogeneity, the Soviets encouraged them, thus deflecting any criticisms from nationalist factions. The symbol around which nationalists could rally, namely the language, was openly encouraged by the young Soviet regime and even championed by it, weakening the nationalist cause (Allardyce 1987:4).

It must be remembered also that it was the central government which initiated and carried out the process, not the local population. the Soviets maintained total control of the situation throughout.

Parallel with the pluralistic theme in Soviet language policy is the view, expressed by Lenin, that, "nations are an inevitable product, an inevitable form, in the bourgeois epoch of social development"(cited in Isayev 1977:188).As such, they are only a temporary stage in the evolution of a truly Communist society which will erase all such national and class distinctions, resulting in "the fusion of nations, languages and cultures"(Stalin, cited in Lewis 1972:54). This merger of all languages and cultures into one is known as *sliyaniye* (Allardyce 1987:10). This theme, to be returned to later, was clearly enunciated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in October 1961, when a program was adopted which stated, among other things:

The construction of Communist society has become the immediate practical task of the Soviet people... the disappearance of disparities between the classes and the development of Communist relations strengthen the social homogeneity of the nations... the erasing of national

differences, especially language differences, is a considerably lengthier process than the erasing of class differences (cited in Bruchis 1987:231).

Obviously, the CPSU views "the erasing of language differences" as an essential ingredient in the building of a Communist society.

Whereas Lenin had stressed the pluralist aspect of Soviet language policy, the centrist aspect became increasingly evident with the rise to power of Stalin, after the death of Lenin in 1924. While there was no official language *de jure*, the heavily centralized Soviet system demanded a *de facto* official language for the purpose of governing the state, and only one language could fulfill that purpose effectively for the Soviets, namely Russian. As we will see later, this practical need opened the door to an active policy of Russification during the Stalin years which has continued up to the present. "One must view the post-Lenin policies as a fundamental change from language egalitarianism and national language promotion towards the imposition of Russian"(Kreindler 1982:133).

It is interesting to note that the Soviets could have developed a common Turkic language in order to promote *sliyaniye*, but they chose not to.

Although on the surface the coalescence of many Turkic languages into a single Turkic language would have corresponded to the CPSU program position on 'purging language differences,' it would have contradicted the Bolshevik's real aim, that is to 'purge language differences' in such a way that the Russian language would eventually supersede all other languages (Bruchis 1984:135).

The development and promotion of a common Turkic language, though linguistically logical, would have been politically suicidal, especially as the Soviet leadership began to realize that the expected world revolution was not as imminent as they had hoped. The reality of the situation was that the USSR was increasingly surrounded by political systems hostile to Communism. There was a need to consolidate internal unity, identifying the various Soviet languages with Russian and setting them apart from outside influences.

In order to achieve this end in Central Asia, the Soviet language policy encompassed three broad aims: "first, 'the "completion" and "enrichment" of existing languages, the widening of their scope and the transformation of tribal and community languages into developed national languages with a rich terminology and vocabulary'; secondly, the removal of the large Arabic and Persian loan vocabulary inherited from the Muslim conquests; and thirdly, the establishment of Russian as 'a second native language'."(Wheeler 1964:195). We turn now to an overview of how these aims have been pursued.

### **ALPHABET REFORM**

At the time of the Revolution, many of the languages of the national minorities lacked written forms. Others employed alphabets which were deemed to be unsuitable by the authorities for various reasons.<sup>6</sup> Soviet linguists set about the monumental task of devising alphabets for those groups which lacked them (over fifty languages received a written form for the first time) and modifying the writing systems which were considered

---

<sup>6</sup> The only alphabets now used in the USSR are the Cyrillic alphabet (for the vast majority of languages), the Latin alphabet (in the Baltic republics), the Armenian and Georgian alphabets (in their respective republics), and the Hebrew alphabet (limited use among the few Yiddish speakers left).

to be inadequate for the purposes of the state. Certainly, the need for an effective vehicle to spread literacy was a legitimate reason for doing so in many cases, but other motivations can be inferred from this action as well.

One of the alphabets slated for reform was the Arabic script used throughout Central Asia, as well as among the other Muslim nationalities in the newly-formed Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> Various pragmatic reasons were given for the proposed reforms and indeed there were certain Central Asian intellectuals who wanted to get rid of the script. One of the chief problems was that the rich system of vowel harmony found in Turkic languages cannot be represented adequately by the Arabic alphabet, since it has letters for only three vowel phonemes. In addition, the script contains several letters for sounds not found in either Iranian or Turkic languages, and most graphemes have different forms depending on their position in the word. All this tended to make it a difficult alphabet to learn and hence a potential barrier to the spread of literacy.

However, there were equally important political reasons why the alphabet was not satisfactory to the new Soviet rulers. As the alphabet of the Qur'an and of all the great Islamic literature of the past, whether Arabic or Persian, it served as a powerful symbol of the natural ties that the Turkestanis had with the rest of the Muslim world, particularly the Arabs and Persians, who had so shaped the religious and cultural landscape of the area. Indeed, most of the Turkic languages had a significant percentage (e.g. 20-40%) of Arabic and Persian loan elements. In an atheistic state that realized the power of symbols, such a potential rallying point for pan-Islamism could not be permitted to remain. In addition, the common alphabet made communication between the Turkic peoples of the Soviet Union, as well as their kinsmen across the border, all too easy. The spectre of pan-Turkism was equally as threatening to the Soviets as that of pan-Islamism.

The Bolsheviks realized that they could not do away with the Arabic script all at once without inviting massive unrest among their Muslim subjects. The process of reforming and eventually replacing the script took place over a long period of time. Perhaps as a result of an anti-Russian movement in Central Asia at the time, which threatened to establish a massive Islamic state comprised of Russian and Chinese Turkestan, as well as Afghanistan and Iran, the alphabet was initially modified in the early 1920's. Diacritic marks were added to represent the full set of vowels possible in Turkic languages and letters representing uniquely Arabic sounds not found in the local tongues were eliminated.

The next step in alphabet reform came at the 1926 Baku (Azerbaijan) Turkological Congress, which proposed the adoption of the Latin script for all Turkic languages in the USSR. By 1930, the Arabic script had been replaced by the *Birlashdirilmish yangi Turk alifbesi* (New Unified Turkic alphabet). By 1935, a total of seventy Soviet languages (not all of them Turkic), representing 36 million people, were being written in the Latin alphabet, modified by diacritics where needed. Although this obviously slowed down the literacy campaign, it also came at a time when there was a new push to eliminate illiteracy. Furthermore, this changeover coincided with the adoption of the Latin alphabet in Turkey, at the instigation of Ataturk. The alphabet was viewed as a culturally neutral script, unlikely to communicate any desires for Russification on the part of the Communist leadership.

At the same time, however, the Latinization of the script "dealt a crushing blow to the Moslem clergy, which utilized the Arabic script as an instrument of spiritual oppression of the... working people"(cited in

---

<sup>7</sup> The alphabet used was actually the Persian version, with four additional letters for sounds occurring in Persian but not in Arabic, namely *g*, *p*, *ch*, and *zh*.

Isayev 1977:242). It cut off Soviet Muslims from their literary past and the traditional ties to Arab and Persian culture, as well as the rest of the Muslim world.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it served to emphasize rather than diminish linguistic differences between the Soviet Central Asians and their compatriots in adjoining countries. Finally, the Muslim clerics and intelligentsia, two possible sources of leadership for anti-Soviet agitation, were essentially reduced to the status of semi-literates, having to learn how to read and write all over again. "For the generations beginning their education in Soviet schools and adult education classes, the literacy blackboard was wiped clean, ready for new writing"(Bacon 1966:191).

Further modifications to the Latin script served to create artificial differences between related Turkic languages as the same phoneme was represented by different letters in different languages,<sup>9</sup> a practice which was intensified when these languages were subsequently switched over to the Cyrillic alphabet. There is no good linguistic reason for having done this. An important change in the alphabet of a specific language occurred in 1934 when the standard for literary Uzbek was switched from a northern dialect which utilized vowel harmony to the Iranized Tashkent dialect, which had lost its harmony. This necessitated removing four vowel letters from the alphabet, thus further differentiating Uzbek from related Turkic languages, as well as frustrating the attempts of Uzbek nationalists to maintain the purity of the language. A final change came in 1938 when the letters in the Latin alphabet were rearranged to conform to the sequence of the Cyrillic script,<sup>10</sup> as if in anticipation of the next move.

In the late 1930's, the suggestion was made that the Latin script should be replaced by the Cyrillic. Many of the potential voices of opposition had been silenced in the terrible purges carried out by Stalin during that decade, in which the majority of the Central Asian intelligentsia were liquidated and the remainder were reduced to unwilling collaboration with the regime. The switch to Cyrillic in Central Asia was largely completed by 1940. Again, linguistic reasons were given for this move but, contrary to what Soviet linguists may maintain, the Cyrillic alphabet is no better for representing the Turkic sounds than the Latin script, nor does it involve fewer diacritical marks. Extra letters for certain Turkic sounds are necessary in both systems.<sup>11</sup> The contention that the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union, recognizing the great value of the Russian script, desired to make this switch also arouses suspicion.

Once again, the literacy campaign was slowed as Central Asians had to adjust to a new alphabet for the second time in a decade. However, the gains for the Soviet leadership far outweighed this temporary inconvenience. With the demise of the Latin alphabet, a potential bridge for pan-Turkic ideas to travel from Turkey into the Soviet Union had been removed. Furthermore, most significantly of all, the Russian alphabet would facilitate the incorporation of more Russian words into the Central Asian languages as well as making it

---

<sup>8</sup> One can imagine some of potential effects that recent developments in Afghanistan and Iran might have had on Soviet Central Asia if the Arabic script were still in use there.

<sup>9</sup> "For example: in Uzbek, *c* stood for the English *ch*, *ç* for the English *j*. In Azeri, as in the alphabet of Turkey, *c* stood for the English *j*, and *ç* for the English *ch*" (Allworth 1964:171).

<sup>10</sup> The sequence of letters in the Cyrillic script is: *a b v g d e j z i y k l m n o p r s t u f kh ch sh* (plus some others that represent two sounds) - the letters representing sounds not found in Russian were tacked on to the end of this sequence.

<sup>11</sup> The Cyrillic alphabet also has letters for sounds not found in Turkic or Iranian languages, such as *shch* and *ts*.

easier for the people to learn the Russian language, two themes to be explored below.<sup>12</sup> It is notable that no effort was made to unify the Cyrillic transcription of non-Russian phonemes in the different languages.

A few quotations should suffice to illustrate the political motivations behind this final change in writing systems:

One of the most important cultural acquisitions of the peoples of the USSR... is the development of alphabets and systems of writing for the languages of the [minority] peoples on the basis of the Russian character.... The adoption of the Russian script by most of the languages has not only contributed to their development, but has been of notable assistance to the various nationalities of the Soviet Union in their successful mastery of the Russian language and in the assimilation of Russian culture (cited in Rywkin 1963:86).

Advancing to meet the toilers of the Uz[bek] SSR who have raised the question of the conversion of the Uzbek written language from the Latinized to the new Uzbek alphabet based on the Russian writing, which is the means for further rise and development of the Uzbek written language, and considering this measure a most important step on the path to further strengthening of the inviolable friendship of USSR peoples, the Supreme Soviet, Uzbek SSR, resolves... (cited in Allworth 1964:175).

But a certain period of time was needed before Soviet peoples could become aware of the completely new role of the Russian language and Russian script as a medium of communication within a common socialist family of equal peoples... the Russian language and the Russian written form advanced the socialist development of all peoples, contributing to their rapid attainment of socialism and assisted communication among individual nations (Isayev 1977:266).

Thus, the linguistic journey from the Arabic to the Cyrillic script succeeded in effectively separating these closely related Turkic languages from each other and from their Arabo-Persian roots, as well as preparing the way for the introduction of Russianisms into the local languages and the development of Russian-native language bilingualism. However, Soviet authorities continue to maintain that "above all, this complex and painstaking project was carried out on a completely voluntary basis by these peoples, led by the Communist Party and the Soviet government" (Isayev 1977:271).

### **THE RUSSIANIZATION OF CENTRAL ASIAN LANGUAGES**

The adoption of the Cyrillic script opened the door for the Central Asian languages to be influenced by Russian in the lexical, phonological, morphological, and even syntactic domains. Perhaps the most obvious influence has been the massive influx of Russian terms into these languages. Many languages in the young Soviet state, including those in Central Asia, were perceived to be deficient in the lexical domains considered to be most important in a Communist society, namely the language of Marxism, Soviet political structure, science and technology, and industrialization. Thus, it was necessary to introduce into the languages terms which expressed these concepts.

---

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note, by comparison, what has happened to the Uighur language (which is almost identical to Uzbek) in China. The Arabic script was modified in 1947 (in much the same way that it was initially modified in the USSR in the early 1920's) and a Latinized alphabet similar to the official Pinyin system was devised in 1965. Both are still in use, and the former is actually more popular than the latter. The Chinese authorities were obviously unable to impose their writing system on the Uighurs, since the Chinese characters cannot be used with non-Chinese languages. Had this not been the case, one wonders whether Beijing would have attempted what Moscow has done.

In the early days of the Soviet regime it was permissible to use loan translations of Russian words, to extend the meaning of Arabic, Persian, or Turkic words already in use, or to coin neologisms from the local languages. However, as time progressed, these methods were discouraged in favor of incorporating "international" words into the lexicon. Inevitably, the majority of these "international" words were Russian, if not in origin, at least in form. The continual appearance of Russian terms in the government-controlled press served to emphasize this trend. It is also interesting to note that "international" terms like *Hamlet* are spelled in the Russian way *Gamlet*, even though the Cyrillic alphabets used for the various Central Asian languages all have a letter for [h] (Russian lacks this sound) (Fierman 1985:224).

In keeping with the aforementioned aim of Soviet Central Asian language policy, Arabic and Persian terms with Russian equivalents were often removed from these languages. One example of the results of this policy is the fact that, between 1923 and 1940, words of Arabic and Persian origin in Uzbek declined from 37% to 25% of the total lexicon, while words of Russian origin increased from 2% to 15% (Rywkin 1963:86). However, this trend has been reversed in recent years as Central Asian language scholars have reintroduced many classical Turkic terms as well as some of the Arabic and Persian words which were formerly removed. Although some Russian terms (such as *kolkhoz* 'collective farm') are a permanent part of the vocabulary of these languages, others have not caught on.

With the introduction of Russian words, other aspects of the Central Asian languages have been affected to varying degrees also. Originally, the official policy was that Russian loan words should conform to local pronunciation. In addition, the suffix endings of the local languages could be used. However, since 1952, it has been mandatory to write these loan words as they are written in Russian, complete with Russian suffix endings. Although these words are frequently pronounced according to the patterns of the local languages, the emphasis on proper Russian pronunciation in the school system has resulted in the intrusion of Russian phonological and morphological features into these languages. Russian has also had a limited influence on the syntax of some of these languages in the translation of Russian literature, where occasionally the Central Asian syntactic patterns are modified to reflect Russian patterns. However, the effect of this on everyday spoken speech is virtually non-existent. It might be added that conversely, these languages have had next to no effect on Russian. The overall strategy behind these developments is not hard to discern:

This process, in which the Turkic languages were subjected to Russian phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical semantic influences, led on the one hand to the undermining of their structures and systems and, on the other, narrowed their social functions, creating the necessary preconditions for the dominant language eventually to supersede them (Bruchis 1984:138).

### **THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF BILINGUAGLISM**

As noted above, Soviet language policy has had to maintain a delicate balance between centrism and pluralism, although the underlying Marxist concept of *sliyaniye* (the eventual merger of all languages and cultures into one) is the overall guiding principle. This was clearly stated by proponents of the CPSU language policy in the mid 1960's:

The future development of social processes connected with the building of Communism in the USSR, does not lead to an increase in the number of existing languages but to their gradual reduction, to the steady replacement of some languages by others (cited in Bruchis 1987:233)

As mentioned above, Russian was the obvious choice for the unofficial "official" language of the Soviet state. It takes little insight to see that it is also the projected super-language which is ultimately intended to absorb all the other languages in the Soviet Union, although Soviet statements to that effect have hinted at this more than stating it outright:

The Russian language is assigned a position superior to that of all other languages spoken in the Soviet Union, and future Communist nations of the USSR are envisioned as merging into one culture with one common language, Russian [this Western analyst follows this statement with a quote from Soviet sources]:

The merging of nations in the future, the withering away and the replacement of [their] national tongues by a common language - all this will take place as a result of the flourishing of the Communist nations.... Russian is becoming more and more the common language for all the socialist nations of the USSR (cited in Rywkin 1963:88).

The role of Russian in the life of Soviet peoples is increasing daily... it is becoming the second native language of hundreds and millions of speakers of various languages [of the USSR] (cited in Bruchis 1984:139-140).

The justifications for this were given by Feodot P. Filin, director of the Russian Language Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences:

(1)The Russians form more than half the population; (2) Russian contains the classics of literature; (3) It contains the classics of Marxism-Leninism; (4) The Russian people through their revolutionary traditions, their wealth in science and culture, their deeply internationalist and unselfish aid to the other brotherly peoples, have earned the sincere respect of all (cited in Kreindler 1982:133-134).

Not only is Russian "the language of the Union's most developed nation, which guided the country through its revolutionary transformations and have [sic] won itself the love and respect of all peoples"(Isayev 1977:299-300), it also offers "unlimited opportunity to join the most progressive human culture, and to gain a deep and lasting knowledge in all the fields of science"(cited in Rakowska-Harmstone 1970:248).

The result of this underlying conviction of the CPSU has been the policy of *dva potoka* 'two streams' (Allardyce 1987:8). The national languages are developed in order to fulfill local, cultural functions, while at the same time, the Russian language is promoted to fulfill broader functions having to do with the Soviet state and matters such as industry and technology. Thus, the Soviet objective is "the attainment of complete bilingualism in the Soviet Union, thereby elevating Russian to the status of the 'second native language' of the non-Russian nations"(Solchanyk 1982b:23).

The Soviet efforts to promote bilingualism in the USSR are far from over. In 1979, 23.3% of the overall population was bilingual in Russian and their native tongue. However, breaking down these figures reveals that only 3.1% of ethnic Russians were bilingual at that time, while the figure for non-Russians (who comprise nearly half the total population) was 49% (Comrie 1981:28; Solchanyk 1982b:25 - please see Tables 4a and 4b). Obviously, it is a one-sided policy and, despite the higher figure for non-Russians, approximately one quarter of the population still do not speak Russian fluently enough to operate in it on a day-to-day basis.

The number of Central Asians bilingual in Russian rose significantly between 1970 and 1979, but the percentages for the different nationalities are generally not as high as the national average for non-Russians (see table 5), except for the Kazakhs, who are now a minority in their own republic and are the most Russianized of all Central Asians (the 1979 figure for the Uzbeks, as noted in the table, is suspiciously high). The primary reason for the considerable growth in Russian as a second language is that a knowledge of Russian is necessary to climb the academic, political and social ladder, and mandatory in certain technical and scientific occupations, as well as public administration. It is interesting to note, however, that Uzbek, the most prestigious and widely spoken Central Asian language, has become the second language of a considerable number of non-Uzbek Central Asians and has the potential for becoming a *lingua franca* in the area.

However, beyond universal bilingualism, Moscow hopes that Russian will ultimately move from being the secondary language to the primary language of all Soviet citizens. This policy has been successful in certain parts of the USSR, as the annual increase (averaged out over the periods between national censuses) in the number of non-Russians considering their native language to be Russian shows (103,000 people per year between 1926 and 1959; 254,000 per year between 1959 and 1970; and 373,000 per year between 1970 and 1979 - Bruchis 1984:143). Currently, 13.1% of non-Russians speak Russian as their primary language (see table 4b). However, virtually all Central Asians still consider their own language as their mother tongue (see table 5). Obviously, the hoped-for shift to Russian as the primary language is a long way off in Central Asia.

The policy of *dva potoka* has been evaluated by one Western analyst as follows: "On the one hand the party (mainly guided by exterior political considerations [i.e. the desire to woo developing African and Asian nations]) aims to create the appearance of a blossoming of national languages during the years of Soviet rule..., while on the other hand pursuing the ultimate goal of establishing Russian as the sole language in the USSR"(Bruchis 1984:145).

The general strategy for accomplishing this is for Russian to gradually take over the social functions of the national languages. The Soviet policy that each nationality has "the sovereign right to use its language *within the bounds of its vital interests* [italics mine]" (cited in Bruchis 1984:141-142) leaves ample room for interpretation of "vital interests".

A recent sociolinguistic study of the USSR identified the different domains in which Russian and the local languages are used. In Central Asia, Russian is used exclusively in the Armed Forces and in all government communication except oral communication at a local level. Russian and the local languages are both used in the courts, in the press, in TV and radio broadcasting, in written business and professional communication, and in official signs. The local languages are used exclusively in indigenous film-making, indigenous scholarly publications, and in local trade and commerce (Robson 1984:4). The educational situation is somewhat more complicated and will be dealt with below.

## **BILINGUALISM AND EDUCATION**

Perhaps the primary area in which this encroachment of Russian upon the social functions of the non-Russian languages can be seen is the school system, the main vehicle for promoting facility in the Russian language among non-Russians. "At the request of the people," Russian was instituted as a compulsory subject for all non-Russian students in the USSR in 1938. Up until the early 1970's, there were two basic educational

options available in Central Asia, as in the rest of the USSR. Parents could send their children either to native-language schools (where the language of instruction was the mother tongue, but Russian was taught as a subject) or to Russian-language schools (where all subjects were taught in Russian). Although they were free to choose either, it was generally understood that the latter option was the only logical choice for those who desired to see their children advance in the Soviet system. Certainly, it was preferable for any who intended to work in the area of science and technology.

Developments in Soviet policy since 1973, however, have resulted in an increasing Russification of the educational system. A decree issued in that year, *On the State of and Measures for Further Improving the Teaching of Russian Language and Literature in the National Schools of the Union Republics*, "approved the practice of establishing mixed schools employing both Russian and the native language as languages of instruction"(Solchanyk 1982b:26).The First Tashkent Conference (1975), *Experience in the Study and Teaching of the Russian Language in Schools and in Higher and Secondary Specialized Institutions of the Country*, dealt, among other things, with the topic of preschool education: "Naturally, the question arises: should we not begin the study of the Russian language here as well, with games and discussions?"(cited in Solchanyk 1982b:27).In addition, it was proposed "that the teaching of Russian be initiated beginning in grade 1 in all the national republics"(Solchanyk 1982b:27- only nine republics were doing so at the time. Increases were also called for in the number of hours of Russian language instruction in the native-language schools, the number of mixed schools, and the number of schools with enriched or intensive Russian language classes. The field of higher education was addressed by the Presidium of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1978, which concluded that "the specialized disciplines, which are required subjects in institutions of higher education in the USSR, should be taught in Russian"(Solchanyk 1982b:30).

Many of these proposals became official law in the October 13, 1978 decree, *On Measures for Further Improving the Study and Teaching of the Russian Language in the Union Republics*. This legislation dealt with several significant areas, including "expanding the system of intensive study of Russian at the expense of the redistribution of hours in the curricula; disseminating more widely the practice of teaching specialized disciplines [in institutions of higher learning] exclusively in Russian; [and] introducing Russian language study in all pre-school institutions and preparatory classes" (Solchanyk 1982b:30). The effect of this legislation in the Uzbek SSR can be seen in the growth of both preschools with Russian language instruction and general education schools with intensive Russian study. The former increased from 211 in 1978 to 618 in 1979 to 1050 in 1981-82. The total projected for 1985 was 2212 (Fierman 1985:231). The latter grew from 400 in 1980 to 676 in 1981 to 1959 in 1982 (Fierman 1985:221).

Further proposals were made at the Second Tashkent Conference (1979), *The Russian Language - the Language of Friendship and Cooperation of the Peoples of the USSR*. It was recommended:

... that specialized disciplines in the professional and technical schools be taught in Russian and that Russian be used in the teaching of other subjects in the upper classes of the general education schools... that the social studies, general education and specialized disciplines in institutions of higher education be taught in Russian starting in the second or third year, and that the study of Russian should begin in the first or second year at the expense of other subjects. Moreover, students in institutions of higher and secondary specialized education are expected to write their course and diploma projects, as well as reports and essays in their major field of study, in Russian (Solchanyk 1982b:32).

Needless to say, the general response of the nationalities to these measures was not favorable, especially in the Baltic republics, the non-Russian Slavic republics (the Ukraine and Belorussia), and Georgia, where various protests and demonstrations occurred and many national scholars spoke out against the new policies. Since this opposition, Moscow has backed off somewhat, but there is no indication that the overall goal of Russification has been abandoned.

Undoubtedly, the increased emphasis on the Russian language in the educational system is largely motivated by the changing demographic situation in the USSR. The 1979 Soviet census revealed that Russians constituted barely half of the population (52.4%). Soviet projections put that percentage at 46-47% by the end of the century. Western analysts conceive that it may be even lower than that (Solchanyk 1982b:24). More specifically, recent estimates put the present ethnic Muslim population at 18% (approximately 50 million people) - the five major Central Asian nationalities make up 60% of this number.

The primary reason for this growth in the non-Russian (and specifically, Central Asian) population of the Soviet Union is the high birth rates that they have maintained over the last thirty years. For instance, the Uzbek population increased by 53% between 1959 and 1970. The present birth rate for Central Asians is 34 per 1000, three times the national average. It is estimated that, by the year 2000, every second child born in the USSR will be from a Muslim background (Anon.1984:3). By this time also, 40% of all Soviet teenagers and young adults will be non-European, the majority of these being Central Asian (Allardyce 1987:15). When one considers that this age group supplies the vast majority of "the workers and soldiers" of the USSR and that recent Islamic developments in Afghanistan and Iran conceivably have the potential of spilling over into Soviet Central Asia, it is not hard to appreciate why "the prospect of Russians becoming a minority in the Soviet Union is a source of deep concern to the Soviet leadership"(Solchanyk 1982a:116). If they cannot maintain their numerical majority they must at least maintain the dominant influence of the Russian language and culture. This fact was stated quite forthrightly by Filin: "the correlation along nationality lines of children in the pre-school age group (and also in the school age group) is shifting substantially in favour of the Turkic-speaking population. In this connection, knowledge of the Russian language as the language of inter-nationality discourse is becoming particularly urgent" (Solchanyk 1982b:24).

## **CONCLUSION**

An examination of Soviet language policy in Central Asia clearly shows the intent of Moscow not only to Sovietize, but perhaps more significantly, to Russianize the Central Asian peoples. In many ways, the promotion of literacy opened the door to this. Subsequently, alphabet reform, the attempt to Russianize the local languages, and the growing fact of Russian-national bilingualism have all been used as tools to advance the Soviet's ultimate aim of absorbing the Central Asians into the Russian culture. Although much effort has been expended towards that end, to a large degree the Russians and the local people in Central Asia are still culturally distant from each other. There is little social mixing between the two groups unless it is required and few Russians living in the area make the effort to learn the local languages, a fact which frequently arouses public complaint from the locals. In addition, there seems to be an increasing concern among the five major

Central Asian nationalities to preserve and develop their individual cultures in the face of stepped up efforts to Russianize them.

In a situation as complex as that of the Soviet Union, it is difficult to predict what may happen in the future. Some Western analysts conclude that, short of "a quantitative leap (as at the time of the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy)... the languages of the non-Russian peoples of the USSR seem doomed to eventual extinction"(Bruchis 1984:14). Others project that, "if the present trend continues, the net effect of the Soviet developmental and linguistic policies will be the economic development of the area and the proficiency of the Central Asians in Russian *and* their own mother tongue"(Shorish 1984:46). Still others maintain that "increasing bilingualism among Soviet Muslims has very little to do with increasing Russification. It may, in fact, eventually put Soviet Muslims in a much stronger position to assert their prerogative to manage their own fate as full-fledged nations"(Henze 1984:127). Given the sheer number of Central Asians and their long-standing cultural heritage which has remained strong in the face of numerous external influences over the centuries, it seems unlikely that they will ever willingly allow themselves to be completely Russified.

**TABLE 1**  
**POPULATION OF SELECTED NATIONALITIES IN THE USSR<sup>a</sup>**

NATIONALITY	NUMBER OF NATIVE SPEAKERS (in millions) <sup>b</sup>				
	1926 <sup>c</sup>	1959	1970	1979	1986 <sup>d</sup>
Russian	77.8	114.1	129.0	137.4	138.0
Ukrainian	31.2	37.3	40.8	35.1 <sup>e</sup>	43.0
Uzbek*	3.9	6.0	9.2	12.3	15.0
Belorussian	4.7	7.9	9.1	7.0 <sup>e</sup>	10.0
Kazakh*	4.0	3.6	5.3	5.2	7.8
Tatar*	2.9	5.0	5.9	-- <sup>f</sup>	7.4
Azerbaijani*	1.7	2.9	4.4	5.4	6.5
Armenian	1.6	2.8	3.6	3.7	4.5
Georgian	1.8	2.7	3.2	3.5	3.9
Tajik*	1.0	1.4	2.1	2.8	3.4
Moldavian	0.3	2.2	2.7	2.8	3.2
Lithuanian	0.1	2.3	2.7	2.8	3.0
Turkmen*	0.8	1.0	1.5	2.0	2.4
Kirghiz*	0.8	1.0	1.5	1.9	2.3

a. Sources: Lewis 1972; Robson 1984.

b. Rounded off to the nearest 100,000.

c. All figures are from the official Soviet census of that particular year, except figures for 1986, which are estimates.

d. Total population of the USSR in 1986 was 278 million.

e. These drops in the figures are probably due to language loss among these Slavic peoples (the 1986 estimates may reflect ethnic background more than mother tongue, resulting in a higher estimate - i.e. there are numerous ethnic Ukrainians and Belorussians who speak Russian, rather than their native language, as their mother tongue).

f. Figure unavailable.

\* = Muslim peoples

**TABLE 2**  
**LITERACY RATES FOR CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS<sup>a</sup>**

REPUBLIC	PERCENT LITERATE <sup>b</sup>			
	1897 <sup>c</sup>	1926	1939	1959
USSR	28.4	56.6	87.4	98.5
Kazakh SSR <sup>d</sup>				
overall (O)	8.1	25.2	83.6	96.9
male (M)	12.0	35.4	90.3	98.8
female (F)	3.6	14.5	75.8	95.1
Kirghiz SSR				
O	3.1	16.5	79.8	98.0
M	5.0	23.9	84.9	99.0
F	0.8	8.4	74.4	97.0
Tajik SSR				
O	2.3	3.8	62.8	96.2
M	3.9	6.4	87.4	98.0
F	0.3	0.9	77.5	94.6
Turkmen SSR				
O	7.8	14.0	77.7	95.4
M	11.5	18.3	83.0	97.7
F	2.7	8.8	71.9	93.4
Uzbek SSR				
O	3.6	11.6	78.7	98.1
M	5.6	15.3	83.6	99.0
F	1.2	7.3	73.3	97.3

a. Sources for tables 2 and 3: Allworth 1964, 1967; Comrie 1981; Desheriyev and Mikhalchenko 1976; Isayev 1977; Lewis 1972; McLeish 1972; Shorish 1984.

b. For ages 9-49: note that some of these figures may be inflated or may include semi-literates. Also, the figures do not distinguish between Russians and natives.

c. The figures for 1897 are for the areas corresponding to the present-day USSR (e.g. the Russian Empire) and the five Central Asian republics.

d. It should be kept in mind that not all citizens of the Kazakh SSR are Kazakhs (the same is true for the other SSR's as well). Table 3 gives literacy information for specific nationalities.

**TABLE 3**  
**LITERACY RATES FOR CENTRAL ASIAN PEOPLES**

NATIONALITY	PERCENT LITERATE		
	1897	1926	1959
Kazakhs	1.0	25.0	97.0
Kirghiz	0.6	4.5	-- <sup>a</sup>
Tajiks	3.9	2.3	96.0
Turkmen	0.7	7.8	95.4
Uzbeks	1.9	3.6	98.0

a. No figure available, but presumably between 95 and 100%.

**TABLE 4**  
**BILINGUALISM IN THE USSR<sup>a</sup>**

**TABLE 4a** **NUMBER OF SPEAKERS OF RUSSIAN (in millions)<sup>b</sup>**

	as L1	as L2	Total
Russians	137.2	--	137.2
non-Russians	16.3	61.1	77.4
Total	153.5	61.1	214.6
Percent of USSR population	58.6%	23.3%	81.9%

**TABLE 4b** **PERCENTAGE OF NON-RUSSIANS SPEAKING RUSSIAN**

	as L1	as L2	Total
1970	-- <sup>c</sup>	-- <sup>c</sup>	48.7%
1979	13.1%	49.0%	62.1%

- a. Source: Solchanyk 1982b.  
b. Statistics from 1979 Soviet census.  
c. Figures unavailable.

**TABLE 5**  
**THE STATUS OF LANGUAGES IN CENTRAL ASIA<sup>a</sup>**

NATIONALITY	A <sup>b</sup>	B <sup>c</sup>	
	1979	1970	1979
Kazakhs	97.5%	41.8%	52.3%
Kirghiz	97.9%	-- <sup>d</sup>	-- <sup>d</sup>
Tajiks	97.8%	15.4%	29.6%
Turkmen	97.9%	19.1%	29.4%
Uzbeks	98.5%	14.5%	49.3% <sup>e</sup>

- a. Sources: Henze 1984; Olcott 1985.  
b. Percentage of those considering their own language as their native tongue.  
c. Percentage of those considering Russian as a second language.  
d. Figures unavailable.  
e. This statistic is questionable.

## REFERENCES

- Allardyce, Rory (1987)  
"Planned Bilingualism: The Soviet Case." *Journal of Russian Studies* 52.3-15.
- Allworth, Edward (1964)  
*Uzbek Literary Politics*. The Hague: Mouton.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1967)  
*Central Asia: A Century of Russian Rule*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Anonymous (1984)  
"The Uzbeks." *Society of Central Asian News* 1.1-8.
- Bacon, Elizabeth E. (1966)  
*Central Asians Under Russian Rule: A Study in Culture Change*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bennigsen, Alexandre, and Chantal Quelquejay (1961)  
*The Evolution of the Muslim Nationalities of the USSR and Their Linguistic Problems*. Oxford: Central Asian Research Centre.
- Bruchis, Michael (1984)  
"The Effect of the USSR's Language Policy on the National Languages of Its Turkic Population." In Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *The USSR and the Muslim World: Issues in Domestic and Foreign Policy*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1987)  
"The Language Policy of the Soviet Communist Party: Comments and Observations." *East European Quarterly* 21.231-257.
- Comrie, Bernard (1981)  
*The Languages of the Soviet Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Desheriye, Yunus, and Vita Yourozovna Mikhailchenko (1976)  
"A Case in Point: the Soviet Experience with Languages." *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Education* 6.38-392.
- Fierman, William (1985)  
"Language Development in Soviet Uzbekistan." In Isabelle T. Kreindler, ed., *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages: Their Past, Present and Future*. Amsterdam: Mouton.
- Henze, Paul B. (1984)  
"The Significance of Increasing Bilingualism Among Soviet Muslims." In Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *The USSR and the Muslim World*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Isayev, M.I. (1977)  
*National Languages in the USSR: Problems and Solutions*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Kazakova, F.I. (1976)  
"The Eradication of Illiteracy Among Women of the Soviet East." *Literacy Discussion* 7.53-72.
- Kreindler, Isabelle (1982)  
"Lenin, Russian, and Soviet Language Policy." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 33.129-135.
- Lewis, E Glyn (1972)  
*Multilingualism in the Soviet Union: Aspects of Language Policy and its Implementation*. The Hague: Mouton.
- McLeish, John (1972)  
"The Soviet Conquest of Illiteracy." *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 18.307-326.

- Olcott, Martha Brill (1985)  
"The Politics of Language Reform in Kazakhstan." In Isabelle T. Kreindler, ed., *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages*. Amsterdam: Mouton.
- Rakowska-Harmstone, Teresa (1970)  
*Russia and Nationalism in Central Asia*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press.
- Robson, Barbara (1984)  
*Country Status Report: USSR*. Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Rywkin, Michael (1963)  
*Russia in Central Asia*. New York: Collier Books.
- Shorish, M. Mobin (1984)  
"Planning by Decree: The Soviet Language Policy in Central Asia." *Language Problems and Language Planning* 8.35-49.
- Solchanyk, Roman (1982a)  
"Language and Education in Soviet Schools." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 33.113-118.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1982b)  
"Russian Language and Soviet Politics." *Soviet Studies* 34.23-42.
- Tonkonogaja, E.P. (1976)  
"Illiteracy Eradication in the Soviet Union." *Literacy Discussion* 7.25-52.
- Wheeler, Geoffrey (1964)  
*The Modern History of Soviet Central Asia*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.