

Central Asia under Soviets; A paradigm shift to Bilingualism.

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Abstract

Central Asia from the dawn of civilization has been influenced by many foreign influences. During the seven decades of Soviet rule, language was dramatically influenced. Language is the vehicle of communication and a potential symbol of ethnic or cultural identity. Prior to Russian revolution the use of language in central Asia had been marked by two trends acceptance and assimilation. While both nomadic and sedentary people came in contact with variety of cultures, languages and religions, the contact laid its great influence on the language of the region. According to the findings of the paper, most of the Central Asian native languages were catastrophically affected by making Russia as lingua franca. The paper will delineate the status of vernacular languages and the impact of alien language (Russia). Eminent German historian, Frichrich Meinecke (d.1954) while analysing the soviet civic and ethnic nationalism said USSR promoted nations on the basis of their own history, culture and language. The Soviet ideology aimed at building a Socialist union by denationalized its people. The language family of the Soviet Union was remarkably diverse, multi ethnic and multi lingual world itself. In this paradoxical duality soviet communists radically altered its attitude towards central Asian indigenous languages. With the assuming power, Bolsheviks, a dramatic change took place in order to re-construct the Soviet identity; language was often allotted a central place. After the process of delimitation, Soviets viewed language to be main criteria for nationality. Lingualistic identification was equated with ethnic identification. Soviets took some measures like *Russification*, *Narkomats*, *Korenizatsiia* (*Nativization*), in order to maintain their communist identity alive.

Keywords: Central Asia, Russia, Multilingualism, Narkomnates, Russification, Soviets, Orthography, Language.

Introduction

Linguistically, ethnically and culturally speaking Central Asia is one of the most diverse areas of the world. Language among the three identities is an essential component of the regions identity. Language of an ethnic people is a means of preserving its customs, culture and tradition. Language is a mirror of the ethnic history. The validity of any language is defined by the scope and extent of its

usage preservation of national features, dialectical diversity and preservation or observation of written form. From the dawn of Civilization, religious identities have become less silent and language increased in importance.¹

Multilingualism is a distinguishing feature of Central Asia. The vast majority of the languages spoken by the people in the Central Asia belong to the Turkic language family. This family is actually a sub-group of the Altaic group.

The Turkic languages are then sub-divided into regional groups. South-western Turkic includes Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Tatar and Kara kalpak. South-eastern includes Uzbeks and Uyghur. North-eastern Turkic's comprises languages of Siberia. The titular Turkic languages of Central Asia are Uzbeks, Turkmen, Kazakh and Kyrgyz. Sometimes these languages are simply mutually intelligible dialect.² The region has seen the ups and downs from the earlier times, in other words changing of the political scenario has laid tremendous influence on the languages of the region. During the Muslim era, Islam provides a demarcation line in the language of the region. The era has provided a galaxy of literary giants and a bulk of literature was given to the world in Arabic, Persian and Chagatary.³ These languages were certainly the most widespread and were spoken by a bulk of the indigenous population.

Despite its multi-lingual and multi-cultural character, until eighteenth century, Russia had no consistent language policy.⁴ Once their grip on Central Asia was firm, the Soviets embarked upon an aggressive set of developmental policies that would alter radically the evolution of Central Asia and its people. The issue of identity became primary importance to the Soviets during the first decade of power. A new phase in the evolution of central Asian languages began with the arrival of Russian immigrants during the nineteenth century. Russian remained the language of a major political, military, economic superpower of the geopolitical region, its main energy supplier and an important cultural, informational and academic centre. One of the most important consequences of the Russian expansion into the region was the introduction of language as a criterion of shared consciousness.

After the Revolution in 1917, when Bolsheviks assumed power an evolutionary and a dramatic change took place in the field of language of the region. The empirical thinking, the paradigm of great power, and with the collaboration of Marxist concept of "Proletarian Internationalism", became the core concept of the Communist govt, in the Post

Revolutionary Central Asia. The policy of Bolsheviks and of the Soviet govt was radically different from Russians, both in conception and in execution.⁵ The language policy was so centred to the Communist party leaders stems from the very nature of the territory over which they ruled.⁶ In the mid-19th century, Alexander ii attempted to unify the

empire through a number of measures, language is one of them. In order to unify the heterogeneous, multiethnic, multinational, multicultural and multilingual world under a single banner of communism, language serve as a powerful symbol to unite and maintain their identity in region. After the creation of administrative units by Soviets like the Turkistan Autonomous Soviet Socialistic Republic in 1918, the Kazak Autonomous Socialistic Republic in 1920, the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic in 1920 and the Khorezm People's Soviet Republic in 1920 and after the Delimitation process in 1924, which was also carved out on the ethno-linguistic bases. Soviets were in search of the single language which could fulfil their aim of expedition. Another factor was linguistic assimilation, which brought Russians, Ukrainian (Little Russians), Cossack and German settlers and the indigenous population together. Another linguistic development during the soviet era was Russian as a lingua-franca.⁷ (Lingua-Franca is a national language used as a common language among a linguistically-mixed population). Soviets supported Russian not only as a common lingua-franca, but also as a key component for a common Soviet Cultural foundation.⁸

They adopted the comprehensive programme and declared the equality of all the nationalities and one of the most obvious aspects of this declaration was its language side. Parallel with the pluralistic theme in Soviet language policy is, expressed by Lenin.

"...stressed the absolute equality of all languages in a multinational state and came out against the maintenance of any single mandatory state languageand was quick to accuse of chauvinism those colleagues who argued that such a role should be guaranteed for Russians."

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 fulfil that purpose effectively for the Soviets, namely Russian. This practical need opened the door to an active policy of *Russification*.⁹ One must view the post-Lenin policies as a fundamental change from language egalitarianism and national language promotion towards the imposition of Russian⁹

The first decade of soviet language planning concentrated on the issues of dialect and alphabet. The second decade stressed on other areas like simplification and codification, with the publication of dictionaries, grammar and text.¹⁰

The soviet language policies initially encouraged their fellow non-Russians to continue using their native languages. During the Stalin era, language policy was changed to emphasised fluency in Russian as key to ‘*uber-soviet-ness*’ a ‘second mother tongue’ for all nationalities.¹¹ According to the 1989 census, 64.2 per cent of Kazaks claimed fluency in Russian, 37.3 per cent in Kyrgyzstan, 30.5 per cent in Tajikistan, 28.3 per cent in Turkmenistan and 22.7 per cent in Uzbekistan. By the late Soviet era, the majority of Soviet citizens claimed bilingualism in Russian, and a significant proportion of people had given up their native languages in favour of Russian as a first language. At the same time, a number of ethnic groups tenaciously held onto their heritage languages. Thus although bilingualism was heavily promoted in the USSR, it was a very unidirectional kind of bilingualism: non-Russian speakers learned Russian, while ethnic Russians did not learn a second language. Over the course of a single decade, reported fluency in Russian increased, as seen in the Table 1.

Table 1

Ethnic group	1970	1979	1989
Azerbaijani	16.6	29.5	34.5
Kazakh	41.8	52.3	60.4
Kirghiz	19.1	29.4	35.2
Tajik	15.4	29.4	27.7
Turkmen	15.4	25.4	27.7
Uzbek	14.5	49.8	56.2

Source: Sotsialogicheskie issledovaniia (1982/3:11–16); Scherer (1983:273) and Soiuз (1990/51:1516).

More emphasis was placed on the learning of Russian as requisite for belonging. The role of language in ethnic identity was quite deliberately manipulated by Soviet language planners by making maximally distinct from each other. In Central Asia, the Russian language never moved beyond bureaucratic structures, and native languages enjoyed an unprecedented revival.¹²

Narkomnates and Russification

In the complex ethno-linguistic milieu, it was the need of an hour to make Russian language the first language and the medium of communist ideology. Soviets through official decrees and directives make this dream possible. The terms “Narkomnates, Russification and Linguistic integration” will refer to intentional spread of Russian as an official language to the Empire (second language, L2) of its non-Russian subjects. In 1917, *Narkomnats* was established, with four folded objectives like; the selection of a standard code for every autochthonous languages and its dissemination as a common language of communication for the population of its autonomous territorial unites. The modernization of the lexicon according to the modern industrial society, the reform or creation of new alphabets for native languages and the large scale literacy campaign in the peripheral region by means of the teaching of the autochthonous languages in new national schools.

Soviet language policies were explicitly aimed at extending the Russian language among non-Russian nationalities. *Russification* of Native languages was three –folded like; it was an attempt of colonization, to control national sentiments and it is a design to humiliate and undermine Native cultural artifacts, including history, language and literature.¹³ Table 2 reveals the tremendous increase of Russian language.

Table 2

Nationality	Native Language		% of Russian speakers	
	1979	1989	1979	1989
Kazakh	97.5	97.0	52.3	60.4
Kirgыз	97.9	97.8	29.3	35.2
Turkoman	98.7	98.5	25.4	27.8
Tajikis	97.8	97.7	29.6	27.7
Uzbekis	98.5	98.3	49.3	23.8

Source: Carrere ‘D’ Encaus, Decline of an empire: the Soviet Socialist Republics in revolt, News Week Books, U.S.A, 1989

During Soviet times, there were five hours mandatory Russian language studies and several Russian language television channels. The main news, sources, such as newspapers, magazines were in Russian language. The constitution mandate was furthered by Decree No. 835,

adopted by the Soviet Ministries in Oct 1978, ‘On Measures of further improving the study and teaching of the Russian language in the Union Republics’. The decree mandated concrete, extensive measures for improving Russian language institutions and includes the implementation of a new syllabus for these institutions and creation of new pedagogical material for all schools where Russian was not primary language of instruction. The aimed of decree of 1946 from ministry of Education, was to increase the usage of Russian language and Republics were directed to make the teaching of Russian compulsory at the primary school level. Russian, which was made compulsory, in 1950’s in non-Russian schools, became secondary in 1980’s in titular language was made the official Republican language.¹⁴ In case of Kyrgyzstan, Russian became the first language of urban Kyrgyz elite, some of whom lost the use of their mother tongue. In 1989, only three of Frunze’s 69 schools used Kyrgyz as the primary language of instruction and 4% of the national library’s books were in Kyrgyz, while 83 per cent of students took higher education in Russian.¹⁵

During the Khrushchev era (1953-1964), Khrushchev emphatically declared Russian to be “the Second National Language”, Clause 19 of the Education Reforms of 1958-59 stated that Education in mother tongue is no compulsory. The overall impact of the reform was the instruction of Russian increased at the expense of the native languages. The overall status of Russian language scenario can be further vivid through the Table 3.

Table 3

Republics	Ethnicities%	Russian language %	Other languages %
Kazakhstan	Kazakhs (40%) Russians (38%)	64% --	-- 9%
Tajikistan	Tajikis (62%) Uzbeks (24%) Russians (8%)	31% 22% -	-- -- 4%
Turkmenistan	Tukemens(72%) Russians (10%) Uzbeks (9%)	28% -- 29%	-- 2% 16%
Uzbekistan	Uzbekis (71%) Russians (8%)	27% --	-- 5%
Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyz (52%) Russians (22%) Uzbekis (13%)	37% -- 39%	-- 12% 4%

Soviets adopted the comprehensive policy of “*Korenizatsiia (Nativization or indigenization)*”. The policy officially begun in June 1923, when Stalin presented it to the fourth conference of the ‘Central Committee of the Russian communist party’. Which itself was part of a large nation-building program which supported national culture and language. The declaration of equality all languages was part of a larger policy of *Korenizatsiia*, which was intended to eradicate the indigenous people and more than into workforce, especially into the soviet administrative workforce.

Orthography change

As mentioned earlier, the first decade of the Soviet language planning concentrated on issues of dialect and alphabet. Orthographic instability remained main issue during the Soviet era. Before Revolution in 1917, Central Asia used the Arabic script. Soviet authorities introduced a modified Arabic alphabet as the standard script for writing *Kazakh, Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Turkmen*. However in 1920’s, this policy was reversed, and all materials printed in the Arabic script was proscribed by a decree. It was direct result of the govt policies that Russian was the only or at least the main source of *Neologism*, as a massive influx of Russian terms into native languages. Latin alphabet for all Turkic languages was proclaimed at “*Turkological Congress at Baku*”. One of the main reasons given for the choice of the Latin alphabet was the need to avoid the impression, especially among traditionally Islamic people. The replacement of their traditional script, with its religious connotations, was part of a policy of linguistic cultural. The Latin alphabet was thus a compromise neutral between the conflict of the Arabic and Cyrillic script.¹⁶ The Latin alphabet was declared a fine weapon in the struggle to achieve an international socialist society. The change from Arabic to Latin script was one of the most meticulous and comprehensive development policies the Soviet ever attempted with regards to language. In 1940 Latin orthography was replaced by Cyrillic. By adopting Cyrillic script opened the doors for native languages to be influenced by Russian in the phonological, lexicon, morphological and even in syntactic domains, which resulted massive influx of Russian terms and words in these languages. Within a short span of time thousand s of terms were incorporated in the vocabularies of the native

languages. It is believed that the move was more political than linguistic reasons. The shift was introduced because Latin orthography was adopted by Kamal Atatürk (1923-46) for Turkey. The shift to Cyrillic introduced diverse symbols for Turkic sounds for phonemes of each language.¹⁷ Most scholars argue that the Cyrillic script was adopted more for political than linguistic reason.

Conclusion

In summation, a new phase of evolution has erupted in the language family of the region with the arrival of Soviets in power. During the reign language was introduced as a criterion of the shared consciousness. Language was considered a power symbol of unity and identity in the multilingual region. Soviets were aware of the fact they adopted a single dialect in the linguistic diversity which would determine the national language of the central Asia. The Bolshevisation of central Asia was implemented within a new governmental framework essentially both for socialization and reshaping of soviet identity. Demarcation of national boundaries and creation of national socialistic republics in 1924 gave birth to multilingualism. In this complex situation language was great challenge faced by Soviets. In order to overcome, soviets adopted a strict approach towards native languages through official decrees and directives. Orthographic change, loanwords, Russification and other measures changed the language scenario in the region. 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.

Footnotes

1. Arne Haugen, *the establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2003, p.54.
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3. Chagatay was the dominant literary language in central Asia from eleventh to the nineteenth century.
4. Belikor and Krysin, 2001, *weeks 2001*.
5. Bernard Comri, *The language policy of the soviet union*,p.22
6. L. A.Grenoble. *Language policy in Soviet Union*. Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, U.S.A.vol.3 .p.1
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8. William Fierman, *The failed Transformation*, p.219-31.
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11. Aneta Pavknko, '*Multilingualism in post soviet countries, Revival language, Removal and Sociolinguistic theory*'. p. 270.
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13. Karan Dwasha.op.cit.p.80.
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16. L.A. Grenoble. *Language policy in Soviet Union*. Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, U.S.A. 3: 23.
17. Elizabeth E. Bacon, *Central Asians under Russian Rule: A Study in Culture Change*. Op.Cit; pp.194-95

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