Anna Whittington
Higher School of Economics, Moscow

Alphabet Soup: Orthographic Reform under Lenin and Stalin

In the first decades of Soviet rule, orthographic practice was in a state of constant flux across Eurasia. Among the fledgling state's earliest policies after the revolution was the implementation of a major overhaul of Russian orthography, and the 1920s and 30s brought both the reform of existing Arabic scripts and the introduction of new Latinized scripts across Soviet Eurasia, affecting nearly every non-Slavic language. By the mid-1930s, however, the state began to change course, as the Latinization campaign among certain peoples in the far north and the North Caucasus was declared a mistake, ushering in a policy of Cyrillization that would ultimately capture nearly all recognized ethnicities by the early 1940s, with relatively few exceptions. For many peoples of Eurasia, the new Cyrillic alphabets represented the third (or more!) script in use within just two decades, a disruptive process that came at heavy educational and financial costs that were almost always borne by ethnic minorities.

I interpret changes in orthographic choice as reflective of changing policies and priorities of the Soviet state in its first decades of rule. Drawing on archival documents collected in Russia, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan concerning the transition to new alphabets and extensive central newspaper coverage of proposed alphabet changes, I suggest that the state's approach to questions of alphabet use did not represent a carefully orchestrated plan to "divide and conquer" its various peoples in order to bring them more thoroughly under Moscow's control as some scholars have proposed. Rather, by studying the longer trajectory of script changes under Lenin and Stalin—including changes, both proposed and realized, to the Russian alphabet, we see that orthographic changes reflected leaders' disagreements about the direction and priorities of the country. Alphabets, and languages more generally, emerged as a major field of contestation, as political leaders, linguists, and cultural activists offered competing visions for the future. In

particular, I explore how the introduction of new scripts in the Soviet Union reveal changing understandings of the meaning of internationalism, from one that saw the Soviet Union as part of a global movement of reform and anti-imperial liberation to one that was much more narrowly focused on connecting peoples within the Soviet Union, as mediated through a new emphasis on Russian language.

As I demonstrate throughout the paper, changes in orthographic practice were also closely connected to Soviet ideas of progress, liberation, and equality, which elites discussed extensively throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Writing systems were widely seen as a tool of enlightenment and progress, and local actors were heavily involved in the process of creating alphabets that were believed to be more effective for teaching literacy and promoting more engaged citizenship for all. With Cyrillization in particular, elites at both the center and across the Soviet Union praised new alphabets for helping non-Russian peoples participate more thoroughly in public life. Of course, this did not always mean equality in practice: the economic, educational, and social burdens of introducing new scripts were almost always borne at the periphery and by non-Russians. In this sense, the politics of script reform across Eurasia embodied the Soviet Union's at once imperial and anti-imperial tendencies.

Script Changes on the Eve of Revolution: The "Simplification" of Russian Orthography

Even before the revolution, the status of alphabets was much debated by scholars and leaders within the Russian Empire. Revised versions of Russian orthography published in the late nineteenth century sought to standardize and rationalize the writing of Russian, making it more accessible to a greater number of readers.[1] It was only with revolution, however, that major

[1] For example, Iakov Karlovich Grot, *Russkoe Pravopisanie*, 11th ed. (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk", 1894). The introduction to the book mentions the larger social discussion of orthographic practice

changes were actually implemented. Among the key reforms enacted by the provisional government after the February Revolution was a massive overhaul of Russian orthography as part of a broader overhaul of the system of education. The refom, described as a "simplification" (*uproshchenie*) of the script, was adopted in May and June 1917 and removed redundant letters, eliminated hard signs at the end of words, and standardized and simplified spellings, grammar, and punctuation. Draft versions of the educational reforms emphasized continuity with the past: "Retaining all former basis of our orthography, the reform seeks only to establish the needed correspondence between writing on one hand and the sound composition and the etymological regime of living literary language on the other." Specifically, the reform sought to remove archaisms that were deemed unnecessary in contemporary usage, making the language more accessible to language learning.[2]

Implementation of the reform, as outlined by the provisional government, was to take place incrementally, beginning first with the youngest classes and working up to eventually include all classes and adult readers. Although study of the revised orthography would be mandatory at the elementary school level, drafts of the law suggested that forced re-training of students and adults who had already attained literacy should be avoided at all costs. In older classes, the guidelines suggested, instructors needed to train students patiently and without force (*bez nasiliia*), while strictly ensuring that there be no partial implementation of mixing of the two systems.

However, though the reform was passed under the tenure of the Provisional Government, implementation of the reform came about only after Bolsheviks had seized power later that year.

---

at the time. This edition established the standardized orthography that would be "simplified" in the 1918 reform. The emphasis on reading and writing also carried over into non-Russian languages. Across Central Eurasia, Jadid reformers emphasized literacy in Arabic through advocating a phonetic approach to language study.

[2] GARF, f. 1803, o. 1, d. 5, l. 4ob.

By December (January 5, 1918 O.S.) of the same year, the Commissariat of Education published a decree bearing Commissar Anatolii Lunacharskii's signature, requiring all printing institutions to publish in the new script, effective January 1, 1918. State and government institutions and schools would follow "as soon as possible" (*v kratchaishii srok*). As the provisional government had proposed, schools were to follow under a "gradual" path." The decree officially emphasized mass literacy and efficiency, justifying the reform as a means of "making it easier for the broad masses to master Russian literacy, raising the general (level of) education, and liberating schools from unnecessary and unproductive waste of time and labor when studying orthographic rules."[3] True to this goal, the first decades of Soviet rule saw a new emphasis on education, with the expansion of mass literacy as a cornerstone of early Soviet cultural policy.[4]

Implementation of the reform, however, was a fraught process, not least since the country found itself embroiled in a vicious Civil War. Given the circumstances of the enactment of the reform, it is hardly surprising that some of the Bolsheviks' most hardened opponents focused on orthography as yet another arena in which they might be able to oppose Bolshevik policies. In the Provisional All-Russian Government (1917–22), based in Omsk, leaders debated reversing the reforms that had already been partially implemented in the educational sphere. Although the old orthography had its supporters (many of whom feared the downgrading of all Russian

[3] "Dekret Narkompros RSFSR ot 23.12.1917 o vvedenii novogo pravopisaniia," available https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%94%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%82_%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B0_%D0%A0%D0%A1%D0%A4%D0%A1%D0%A0_%D0%BE%D1%82_23.12.1917_%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B0_%D0%BE_%D0%B2%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B8_%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F

[4] On literacy, see Charles E. Clark, *Uprooting Otherness: The Literacy Campaign in NEP-Era Russia* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2000). Sheila Fitzpatrick addressed Narkompros more generally in Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). Although early Soviet state placed unprecedented emphasis on the expansion of mass literacy, literacy campaigns were not uniquely Soviet, see Jeffrey S. Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917*, Studies in Russian Literature and Theory (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003).

culture), most educators opposed the return to the old script, citing the major advances in teaching literacy and a desire to avoid orthographic confusion among students who had just made the transition.[5] Similar orthographic changes were also being implemented for both Ukrainian ad Belarusian around the same time, which saw similar debate among émigrés and locals alike.[6] These conversations suggested both the tensions that were involved in the larger questions of script choice, as well as the overarching emphasis on expanding literacy.

"The Great Revolution in the East": The Latinization Campaign

Literacy campaigns and language reforms, however, extended far beyond the Russian language and ethnic Russians. As scholars have emphasized repeatedly, the nascent Bolshevik state sought to "liberate" the formerly oppressed peoples of the tsarist empire through an ambitious program that promoted non-Russians in politics, culture, economics, and education.[7] Across Eurasia, literacy rates and the general cultural level (as understood by Soviet authorities) lagged far behind European Russia, with literacy rates often well below one or two percent for many "eastern" minorities (and even lower among women).

Because of the widespread lack of standardized alphabets (or written alphabets, in many cases), literary cannons, and trained teachers, the state focused especially on studying, standardizing, and promoting non-Russian languages. For most of its first decade, the state continued, reformed, and expanded the use of modified Arabic scripts for most non-Slavic languages. Arabic scripts were in turn replaced in the 1920s and 30s with modified Latin alphabets as part of a larger cultural revolution, justified in the name of expanding literacy,

[5] GARF, f. 320, o. ,2 d. 337; o. 3, dd. 383 and 455; o. 4, d. 83.
[6] NEED SOURCE.
[7] Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2001); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

reducing religious influence, and promoting communication within and outside the Soviet Union. Latinized alphabets had the specific advantage of being disconnected from Russian imperial legacies, allowing the fledgling Soviet state to distinguish itself from Tsarist Empire.

In an oft-quoted aphorism, Lenin allegedly described Latinization as a "the great revolution in the east" to Azerbaijani activist Səməd Ağa Ağamalıoğlu, who spearheaded Latinization efforts in Azerbaijan. Latinization promised new educational horizons, as mastering the Latin script was widely considered to be far easier than learning the Arabic scripts widely in use at the time, which were typically described as particularly ill-suited for Turkic languages. With the 1926 Turkological Conference in Baku, widely attended by political, cultural, and educational elites, efforts surrounding Latinization became far more organized, standardized, and centralized. Ahead of the conference, the Communist Party in Moscow issued strict instructions that, though Latinization was to be deeply discussed, no firm position was to be adopted that would mandate the use of the language. Instead, party leaders emphasized the need for the transition to Latin to be voluntary, with no appearance of force or central mandate.[8]

At the conference, activists stressed the importance of script reforms within education and on an international level, emphasizing both the benefits of easing the process of mastering literacy (much as the Russian orthographic reform had claimed) and the need for connecting with a broader international movement. The Latin script, activists emphasized, featured at the center of reformist movements across the world, including nascent movements in Turkey, India, Persia, Syria, and China. Latinization, thus, was seen as part of a global anti-imperial movement, through which formerly colonized peoples could liberate themselves through education and enlightenment.

In the wake of the conference, the formation of the All-Union Central Committee for the

[8] RGANI, f. 3, o. 33, d. 15, l. 1.

New Alphabet (VTsKNA) was established in 1926, headquartered in Baku with representation in Moscow (the commission would later move to Moscow in 1930). The committee, led by Ağamalıoğlu until his death in 1930, became the centralized institution through which new alphabets were approved. Initial efforts focused primarily on Turkic languages, especially those with developed Arabic scripts. During the late 1920s, new Latinized alphabets were passed for most of the titular peoples of union and autonomous republics. By the 1930s, efforts expanded into the smaller minorities, to Persianate languages (like Tajik), to other language families, to groups that had previously had no writing system, and even to groups that were located primarily outside the boundaries of the Soviet Union—including a proposal for a new Chinese script.[9]

However, the transition to Latin script should not be understood as a discrete, singular process. Throughout the 1920s, Soviet Eurasia was awash with various proposals, experimental scripts, and modifications, especially once efforts became newly centered on creating a "unified alphabet" that would be shared by all groups using Latinized scripts. Of course, each language had its own particularities, making it difficult to introduce a single script that would be appropriate for all languages. Problems with the "unification" of the script became especially apparent as non-Turkic languages—especially those of the North Caucasus and for Finno-Ugric groups in the Far North, many of which contained additional consonant and vowel sounds rarely present in Turkic languages—also moved towards adopting new Latinized scripts. To accommodate extra sounds, the Latinized scripts together contained nearly 100 separate characters, which would later come under criticism as breaking the principles of mutual understanding and unification that the Latin script was supposed to offer. Still, despite various shortcomings, the Latin script saw major successes, particularly in the field of rising literacy. In Kazakhstan, for example, literacy rates expanded dramatically in the late 1920s and early 1930s,

[9] CITATION.

a move that was credited to the comparative ease of mastering the Latin alphabet relative to the Arabic script. (The expansion of literacy campaigns, however, surely also contributed to these rising figures.)[10] DO MORE WITH STATISTICS.

In general terms, Latinization reflected the contemporary ideas about the meaning of "internationalism," as understood by cultural and political elites at the time. Leaders explicitly saw Latinization as part of a global anti-colonial, anti-imperial movement, of which the Soviet Union was just one (key) part. Although Latinization has been interpreted as part of a broad agenda of "affirmative action" explicitly disadvantaging Russian and Russians, "derussification" or otherwise "anti-Russian" measures should not be overstated.[11] Although the Soviet state prioritized the promotion of ethnic minorities in new and innovative ways during the first two decades of rule, several caveats should be made. First, despite elements of derussification implicit in the decision not to embrace a Cyrillic script in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the interpretation of the Latinization campaign as primarily a measure of derussification overstates the importance of Russian at that time. In almost every case (Kalmyk being a notable exception), alphabets shifted not from Cyrillic but from Arabic scripts. Latinized scripts were celebrated as part of a broader cultural revolution, which would reduce the influence of religious leaders and promote literacy. Latinized scripts were specifically described as "international alphabets", and there were even attempts, ultimately abandoned, to introduce this new alphabet for Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian.[12] More generally, the position of Russian, while implicitly centered in

10

11 On Latinization as derussification, see especially Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2001).

12 Newspapers frequently described Latinized scripts as "rational" and highlighted their role as a counter to "pan-Islamism" and religious influence more broadly. See: Kul'besherov, "Kul'turnaia zadacha tiurko-tatarskikh narodov Soiuza SSR," *Izvestiia*, 22 May 1927, 3; Khosroev, "Latinskii alfavit — orudie kul'turnoi revoliutsii na Vostoke," *Izvestiia*, 18 February 1929, 5. Reports, both internal and in newsapepers, frequently suggested the new alphabet was playing a helpful role in increasing the rate of literacy in previously pre-literate populations, see, "Bor'ba za novyi tiurkskii alfavit," *Izvestiia*, 7 June 1927, 4; "Krasnyi Dagestan," *Izvestiia*, 23 June 1935, 1; G. Musabekov,

the Soviet Union, was not necessarily seen to be at the heart of the Soviet Union's international mission. In point of fact, even the Comintern, the Soviet Union's main international organization to promote revolutionary movements abroad, conducted its business primarily in four languages: German, English, French, and Russian. By the late 1930s, however, the international position was beginning to change, as Soviet leaders themselves began to reevaluate the script choices that had been made for many of the languages that had transitioned to Latin.

Between Russification and Friendship: Cyrillization in Stalinist Eurasia

As demonstrated (though variously interpreted) by scholars, the mid-1930s represented a period of considerable change in nationalities policy as the state shifted away from policies explicitly disadvantaging Russian(s) to a more whole-hearted embrace of the Russian language, culture, and people.[13] The introduction of mandatory Russian language education in all Soviet schools in 1938 represented perhaps the most important aspect of this new policy emphasis. Alongside a growing recognition of Russian's preeminent importance in society, cultural and political activists began publicly to question the utility of Latinized scripts beginning in the mid-1930s, even as some languages were still transitioning. In 1936, central newspapers began to discuss the possibility of Cyrillization through criticism of Latinized scripts and the celebration

---

"Pobedy novogo alfavita," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 26 January 1936, 2; "Rech' tov. Erbanova," *Izvestiia*, 30 January 1936, 3. On Latin as an international alphabet, see D.K., "Mezdunarjodnyj alfavit – Mezhdunarodnyi alfavit," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 16 December 1929, 1. Terry Martin describes halted Latinization for the East Slavic languages in Ibid., 196–98.

[13] Terry Martin, for example, sees this as a "revised nationalities policy" that saw a "reemergence of the Russians, see *The Affirmative Action Empire*. Francine Hirsch, in contrast, takes a longer view and argues this shift was always part of the state's long-term plan, as it sought to integrate citizens through a process of "double assimilation," whereby citizens became integrated first into ethnicities, which were in turn integrated into the Soviet body politic, see: Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). On the role of the Russian people, Russian heroes, and the Russian language more generally, see: Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*; Peter Blitstein, "Nation-Building or Russification? Obligatory Russian Instruction in the Soviet Non-Russian School, 1938-1953," in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 253–74; David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

the potential benefits of Cyrillized ones.

In particular, newspapers criticized the decision to implement Latinized scripts among peoples who had been previously familiar with the Russian language and alphabet. This was especially true in multilingual environments, where Russian already served as a *lingua franca* between non-Russian groups. At a 1936 meeting of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, representatives criticized the decision to use a Latinized script on the Taimyr Peninsula in the Russian Far North, home to various ethnic groups:

> The Committee on the New Alphabet introduced a Latinized alphabet for the peoples of the Taimyr Peninsula; meanwhile, in everyday life, only the Russian language connects these peoples. Both for adults and children, the Russian alphabet comes easily, but the Latinized is not within their power. Were it not for the mistake of the Committee on the New Alphabet, the successes in liquidating illiteracy and promoting culture in Taimyr would have been much greater.[14]

The following year, after Cyrillic alphabets were approved in Northern and Eastern Siberia, *Izvestiia* similarly declared: "Considering that these people are surrounded by a population and use the Russian language and Russian writing to a significant degree, and that the implementation of Latinized alphabets among them has not been fully completed, the Presidium of the TsIK approved a new alphabet for these peoples."[15] This transition, however, was far from universal: finalized versions of Latinized alphabets for Buriat-Mongol and Turkmen were approved at the same meeting.

Kabardian, spoken in the North Caucasus, became one of the first languages to begin the process of switching from Latinized to Cyrillized alphabets in 1936. Central newspapers celebrated the decision as a prudent and necessary choice. The Latinized script, one article complained, had 46 single-letters and 9 double-letters, many of which were so significantly altered from the Latin original so as to render them unrecognizable, a veritable "graphic

[14] "Zasedanie prezidiuma VTsIK," *Izvestiia*, 3 September 1936, 3.
[15] "Vchera na zasedanii Prezidium TsIK SSSR," *Izvestiia*, 8 March 1937, 1.

mismash."[16] This greatly limiting the ability to use linotype printing, and made reading and cursive writing difficult. Moreover, it hindered cross-cultural communication: "The Latinized alphabet makes it more difficult for the Kabardian people to master the Russian language and culture and vice-versa, for the Russian population to learn the Kabardian language and culture." This, *Pravda* further remarked, had made the alphabet a "hindrance for the long-term growth of culture of the workers of Kabardino-Balkaria," thereby justifying the transition to a Cyrillic-based script.[17] The new alphabet would use the 32 letters of the Russian alphabet with the addition of an apostrophe, which was deemed sufficient for representing all Kabardian sounds. In a September 1936 article in *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, N. Izgoev hailed this "brave and necessary decision," and emphasized the greater suitability of the Cyrillized script. In adopting a new alphabet, Izgoev concluded, "Kabardians and Cherkessians are making a true and brave step which demands the help of our literature and our science, a step which can play an enormous role in our struggle for the flourishing of the great family of Soviet peoples."[18]

Others similarly emphasized the greater suitability of modified Cyrillic scripts. Speaking generally, V.A. Petrosian, director of the Institute of Languages and Writing at the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, emphasized the scientific process that went into the development of new alphabets in a 1939 overview: "Under the creation of the alphabet and orthography, the particularities of each language are considered. Additional letters for denoting specific sounds of one or another language have been introduced."[19] Activists highlighted the distinctly modern, scientific advantages conferred by transitioning to Cyrillized scripts. Petrosian particularly highlighted the difficulties posed by languages with many sounds, and suggested Cyrillic could

[16] N. Izgoev, "Azbuka: O smelom i nuzhnom reshenii Kabardy i Cherkesii," *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 3.
[17] "Novyi kabardinskii alfavit," *Pravda*, 11 June 1936, 4.
[18] N. Izgoev, "Azbuka: O smelom i nuzhnom reshenii Kabardy i Cherkesii," *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 3.
[19] "S latinizirovannogo na russkii alfavit," *Izvestiia*, 17 April 1939, 4.

provide an opportunity to simplify orthography.

Many specifically criticized the Latin script as unsuitable or otherwise problematic. A 1939 report on Cyrillization in Azerbaijan, for example, argued: "The Latinized alphabet with 24 basic graphical characters does not satisfy the particularities of the Azerbaijani language, which has considerably more sounds."[20] In Crimea, Memet Ibragimov, a Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, further suggested the adoption of a new script could offer an opportunity to cleanse the Crimean Tatar language of undesired influences:

> Bourgeois nationalists have tried in every way possible to slow down the development of the culture of the Crimean Tatars. As an object of their harmful work, nationalists chose the Tatar language, which they littered with Arabic, Persian, and Turkish words. The orthographic rules were drawn up so as to make it difficult for a Tatar to master the writing of his own native language. Bourgeois nationalists vigorously defended the Latin alphabet, even though it did not reflect the particularities of the Tatar language, and did not convey its phonetics.[21]

Others emphasized the greater suitability of new Cyrillized scripts. G. Bel'gaev, the head of the Presidium of the Buriat-Mongol ASSR, similarly noted: "The letters of the Russian alphabet more accurately denote the sounds of the Buriat-Mongol language. They eliminate the denotation of a single sound with two letters, as is in case in the Latinized script."[22] G. Dinmukhametov, of Tatarstan, argued that the Latinization had left continuing confusion between several letters in Tatar, focusing particularly on the guttural K and G.[23] Cyrillized scripts were seen as rational, modern alphabets that could express the specific sounds of languages, which indexed Cyrillic as the an alphabet of science, progress, and good linguistic practice.

Across the country, scholars, activists, and politicians emphasized the importance of new Cyrillic scripts for the long-term development of national cultures and languages. At a 1940

[20] "Vtoraia Sessiia Verkhovnogo Soveta Azerbaidzhanskoi SSR," *Izvestiia*, 12 July 1939, 1.
[21] Memet Ibragimov, "Russkii alfavit dlia tatarskogo iazyka," *Pravda*, 25 April 1938, 4. In Tatarstan, G. Dinmukhametov similarly noted the overabundance of Arabic words that might be eliminated from (Volga) Tatar, see G. Dinmukhametov, "Perevod tatarskoi pis'mennosti," *Pravda*, 29 March 1940, 4.
[22] G. Bel'gaev, "Perevesti buriat-mongol'skuiu pis'mennost' na russkii alfavit," *Pravda*, 7 April 1939, 4.
[23] G. Dinmukhametov, "Perevod tatarskoi pis'mennosti," *Pravda*, 29 March 1940, 4.

republic conference held to introduce teachers and educators to the new Tajik alphabet, Tair Pulatov, the head of the commission on the new alphabet, argued that the Latin script, once progressive, was now woefully out of date. Latinization, he noted, had helped improve literacy among a population that had been nearly universally illiterate before the revolution. In current conditions of "brotherhood and Stalinist friendship between people of the Soviet Union," the Latinized script had become a "barrier that obstructs the people from the path to the new culture and art." It represented a "grievous obstacle in the matter of development of the socialist culture of the Tajik people," and stood in "clear conflict with the tendencies of development of the modern Tajik language."[24] A 1940 *Pravda* editorial discussed the elimination of illiteracy across the country in similar terms: "Now this [Latinized] alphabet has ceased to answer to the tasks of the growth of socialist culture. Only the transition of writing to the Russian alphabet is able to ensure a more complete mastery of the culture of the Great Russian people."[25] In drawing clear associations between Latin and Arabic scripts and the past, and between the Cyrillic script and the future, Pulatov and others indexed the Cyrillic script and the Russian language with progress, socialism, culture, and the future of the Soviet state and local communities.

Activists in Kazakhstan made similar claims. In a 1939 letter addressed to Kazakhstan's First Party Secretary N.A. Skvortsov, two research scholars, brothers Abusagit and Nugman Zhirenchin, offered four principle reasons for shifting to the Russian alphabet. First, the Soviet Union was a "unified system of socialist economy and a community of economic and political interests" and home to a common culture that was "national in form and socialist in content."[26] Russians' leading place in society, they argued, justified a common alphabet based on Cyrillic.

[24] TsGART, f. 360, o. 11, d. 69, l. 13. Amanzholov, creator of the new Kazakh script, similarly claimed that the Latin script, once useful for combatting religion, had outlived its usefulness. See APRK, f. 708, o. 3/2, d. 38, l. 3.
[25] "Polnost'iu likvidirovat' negramotnosti," *Pravda*, 14 June 1940, 1.
[26] APRK, f. 708, o. 3/1, d. 1099, l. 10.

Secondly, a Cyrillic script would make it easier for the peoples of national republics to become literate in both their native language and Russian, and for Russians to learn local languages. Mastery of Russian, they noted, would enable non-Russians to learn science and technology and read Russian literature. Thirdly, they emphasized, Russian and international terms would be more easily rendered in Kazakh, which would help Kazakh-speakers pronounce, read, and understand Russian terms. This would also "relieve children from the study of two alphabets."[27] Finally, they claimed, the transition to a single script across the Soviet Union made economic sense, since it would require fewer typewriters and presses.[28] Aside from the final point, clearly of less ideological significance, their justifications were indicative of larger discourses surrounding the role of Russian and the Cyrillic script and merit further discussion.

The brothers first emphasized the dominance of Russians and the Russian language, reflecting the hierarchical ethnic relations that existed in the Soviet Union as a whole. In their brothers, use of Russian language and script made practical sense in light of the Russians leading role in politics, economy, and culture. Because Russians led Soviet society, the logic went, it made sense to base the alphabet on the Russian script. This view reflected the changing ideological discourse of the time: the dominant role of Russian(s) had been increasingly prominent in the Soviet press beginning in the mid-1930s, as the state grew more comfortable with formally acknowledging their preeminence in Soviet society.[29] In the brothers' view,

[27] Ibid., 10-11.
[28] Ibid. Others pointed to practical and economic benefits: two article noted that Latinized scripts were difficult for cursive writing and made it difficult if not impossible to use typesetting machines, see: "Novyi kabardinskii alfavit," *Pravda*, 11 June 1936, 4; N. Izgoev, "Azbuka: O smelom i nuzhnom reshenii Kabardy i Cherkesii," *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 3.
[29] The rhetorical presence of the "Russian people" (*russkii narod*) began to circulate regularly first around 1937. For examples of reporting that favored the particular role of the "Russian people," see: "Chest' i slava geroiam stalinskoi epokhi!" *Pravda*, 13 July 1937, 1; V. Volin, "Velikii Russkii narod," *Istoricheskii zhurnal*, no. 5 (1938): 1-17.; "Geroicheskie syny geroicheskogo naroda," *Izvestiia*, 15 January 1940, 1. Terry Martin and David Brandenberger have offered excellent discussions of this phenomenon, see: Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, especially 394-431; Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*.

Russians played a leading role in unifying the Soviet Union, a topic of deep significance as the country faced the looming prospect of war, discussed in greater depth in the following section.

This related closely to their second justification, which concerned fostering better mutual connections and communication. The embrace of Cyrillized scripts dovetailed with the 1938 introduction of mandatory Russian language education. The law itself emphasized the importance of Russian as a language of interethnic communication, and *Pravda* declared Russian to be the common inheritance or property [*dostoianie*] of all Soviet citizens, regardless of their ethnicity.[30] Meetings to discuss and fine-tune new Cyrillized scripts frequently focused on the importance of mutual understanding and communication across ethnic lines, and cultural and political activists emphasized the need for and timeliness of a new Cyrillic alphabet as local communities entered a new phase of development under socialism. The Cyrillic script, its proponents either stated formally or implied subtly, was the only script appropriate to their new, modern circumstances, suggesting a close connection between Russian and Soviet modernity.

Interestingly, the Zhirenchin brothers highlighted the change in script as positive not only for Kazakhs learning Russian, but also for Russians learning Kazakh. They were not alone in this claim. At a Party meeting to discuss the new Kazakh alphabet, Sarsen Amanzholov, creator of the new alphabet, similarly claimed that a Russian alphabet would ease language learning for all language learners, both Russian and Kazakh, and that this Cyrillic alphabet would bring all the nationalities in the Soviet Union closer together.[31] As already cited, *Pravda* made similar declarations about the Cyrillized script for Kabardian.[32] Although this suggested a degree of mutual effort in fostering communication, Russians rarely mastered other languages, even though study of the republic language was generally mandated. Communication was almost

[30] "Russkii iazyk – dostoianie sovetskikh narodov," *Pravda*, 7 July 1938, 1.
[31] APRK, f. 708, o. 3/2, d. 38, l. 4.
[32] "Novyi kabardinskii alfavit," *Pravda*, 11 June 1936, 4.

always mediated through Russian, which served as the language of communication not only between Russians and non-Russians, but between non-Russians of different ethnicities, as had been highlighted in articles on the Taimyr Peninsula and the North Caucasus, discussed above.[33] Even so, the idea that it should be made more easy for Russians to read non-Russian languages further underscored the privileged position of the Russian people.

Activists and newspaper reporters alike highlighted the specific pull of the Russian language and alphabet for various Soviet peoples. Indeed, many were at pains to emphasize that new scripts were a response to popular demand and were greeted with excitement from the population at large, as citizens increasingly embraced the study of Russian.[34] In Tatarstan, G. Dinmukhametov argued the Cyrillic script would help Tatar students learn Russian.[35] In a 1939 article on the proposed transition of Buriat-Mongolian to a Cyrillic alphabet, the Head of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Buriat-Mongolian ASSR, G. Bel'gaev, similarly noted that the "transition of Buriat writing to the Russian alphabet makes the study of the Russian language easier for Buriats. The great draw of Buriat-Mongols to the study of Russian is understandable. The workers of our republic know what a great historical role the Russian working class played in their liberation from the yoke of capitalists."[36] The article went on to note that the future "flourishing" of the republic depended on the help of Russians, emphasizing the hierarchical relationship between Russian and non-Russian peoples.

This was closely related to the brothers' third reason, which focused particularly on pronunciation of foreign words and reducing the educational burdens of learning two alphabets.

[33] "Zasedanie prezidiuma VTsIK," *Izvestiia*, 3 September 1936, 3; "Vchera na zasedanii Prezidium TsIK SSSR," *Izvestiia*, 8 March 1937, 1.
[34] "Novyi kabardinskii alfavit," *Pravda*, 11 June 1936, 4; Memet Ibragimov, "Russkii alfavit dlia tatarskogo iazyka," *Pravda*, 25 April 1938, 4; G. Bel'gaev, "Perevesti buriat-mongol'skuiu pis'mennost' na russkii alfavit," *Pravda*, 7 April 1939, 4; "S latinizirovannogo na russkii alfavit," *Izvestiia*, 17 April 1939, 4; V. Tsyganko, "Prazdnik moldavskogo naroda," *Izvestiia*, 12 October 1939, 2.
[35] G. Dinmukhametov, "Perevod tatarskoi pis'mennosti," *Pravda*, 29 March 1940, 4.
[36] G. Bel'gaev, "Perevesti buriat-mongol'skuiu pis'mennost' na russkii alfavit," *Pravda*, 7 April 1939, 4.

Illustrating their point, they pointed out that sounds like "ts," "ch," and "v" had no Kazakh equivalents and had not been included in the Kazakh Latin alphabet, leading to confusion of how to render Russian names and common terms like "soviet" (*sobet*, in Kazakh).[37] This was clearly undesirable. The brothers were not the only people who noted the confusion and difficulties associated with using Latin scripts that were poorly adapted to Russian words. Amanzholov also noted that the Latin script lacked some of the important sounds needed to convey Russian sounds, echoing discussions in newspapers about the unsuitability of the Latin script discussed above.[38] Pulatov, in Tajikistan, noted that typical Latin renderings for Russian loan words often created confusion once pupils started learning Russian.[39]

Many saw the introduction of new Cyrillic scripts as an important measure to reduce the educational burdens of non-Russian students, who were forced to learn and operate in two different alphabets from an early age. At another meeting to discuss the alphabet in 1939, one of the Zhirenchin brothers suggested that a new script could improve students' educational outlook. A Latinized script, he argued, forfeited potential advantages, since it would only help students with German or French, both of limited practical, everyday significance for Kazakhs. A switch to Cyrillic, in contrast, would help them learn Russian, which could deepen connections to the Soviet Union.[40] Another argued that students wasted a lot of time mastering the too-complicated Latinized alphabet.[41] Teachers especially observed that many students struggled with

[37] APRK, f. 708, o. 3/1, d. 1099, l. 9. Elsewhere, people noted that Kazakh students struggled to pronounce the "ts" in *sotsialism* (socialism). G. Dinmukhametnov similarly noted the growing number of Russian/Soviet words that had entered the Tatar lexicon. G. Dinmukhametov, "Perevod tatarskoi pis'mennosti," *Pravda*, 29 March 1940, 4.
[38] APRK, f. 708, o. 3/2, d. 38, l. 3-4.
[39] He illustrated with the Russian term *samolet* [airplane, самолёт], which had been transliterated into Latinized Tajik as *samoljot.* This, he argued, caused confusion when students transitioned to Russian, when the reverse transliteration would render the word *samol'et* [самольёт], with a soft sign. TsGART, f. 360, o. 11, d. 69, l. 13.
[40] APRK, f. 708, o. 3/2, d. 38, l. l8. The stenograph report only indicates the last name, but it is highly unlikely that the person present at the meeting was not one of the letter writers.
[41] N. Izgoev, "Azbuka: O smelom i nuzhnom reshenii Kabardy i Cherkesii," *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 3

orthographic confusion, often misreading Cyrillic letters as similar-looking Latin ones.[42] Fear about seemingly minor mistakes in spelling reflected the general obsession over policing orthographic, spelling, and punctuation errors in Russian, a fear that was heightened by the unreasonable expectation that non-Russian students have near-native proficiency.[43]

For journalists, cultural and educational activists, and political figures, the transition to Cyrillized scripts made sense in light of the growing importance of the Russian language in society. As citizens were increasingly expected to master Russian as a "second native language," simplifying their orthographic exposure to a single script was seen as a logical and progressive step that would help them integrate into Soviet society at large. The choice of the Cyrillic script in particular served as a visual reminder of the growing importance of the "great Russian people," whose language and alphabet were now deemed to be critical tools for communication and unity.

The "Friendship of the Peoples": A New Internationalism

The shift to Cyrillized scripts was never exclusively a tale of Russification in script and language. As already hinted above, discussions about orthography represented one part of a larger process of unifying the Soviet population, something that became especially urgent as the threat of war loomed in Soviet society. The adoption of Cyrillized scripts contributed to the growing emphasis on a coherent Soviet identity, an identity that depended on interethnic and transregional communication and connection. Although a thorough discussion of the growing

[42] TsGARK, f. 1692, o. 1, d. 133, l. 17; TsGARK, f. 1692, o. 1, d. 220, l. 170-171.
[43] This obsession is well illustrated in a short anecdote published in Krokodil in 1937, about a father, a teacher of Russian, and his third-grade son. When asked to account for low passing rates among students in Russian, the father prepares a short report and gives it to his son to read. His son corrects the explanatory note, responding: "Three orthographic mistakes, five syntactical mistakes," and ordered his father to correct them before sending them on to NKP. Although used to illustrate how children needed to help their parents, the joke also illustrated how proficiency was typically measured, as well as the lack of proficiency among many teachers. "Pomogai svoemu pape," *Krokodil,* No. 21 (1937), 5.

importance of Soviet identity is beyond the scope of this paper, the 1930s were central in the development of Soviet identity, specifically the concept of the Soviet people (*sovetskii narod*) that began to circulate in the mid-1930s.[44] This discourse did not erase differences between Soviet peoples, but rather, emphasized their inherent diversity while declaring their common belonging to the Soviet state. This emphasis was perhaps best represented in the rhetoric of the "friendship of the peoples" that also first found valence in the late 1930s (Figure 1).[45]

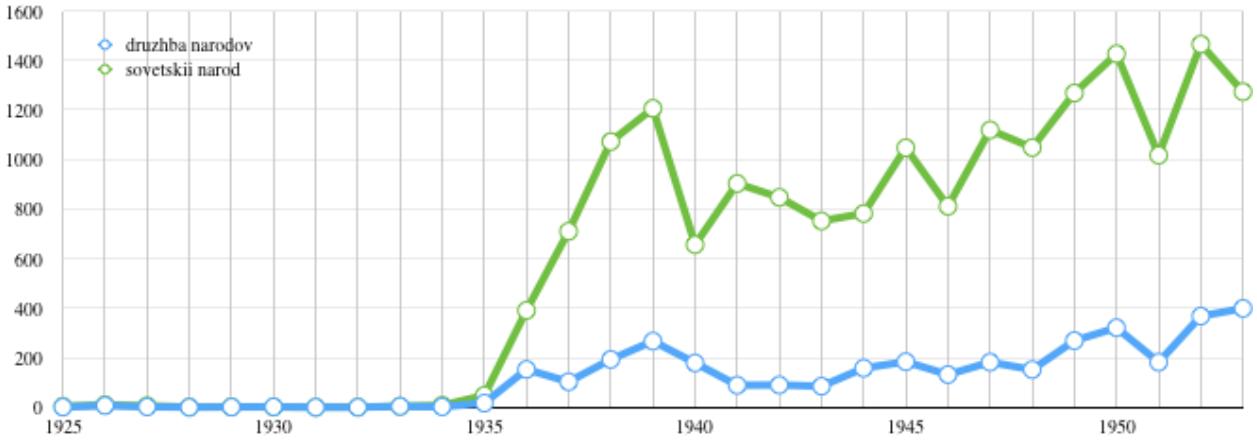

Figure 1: "Soviet people," (*sovetskii narod*) and "Friendship of the peoples" (*druzhba narodov*), 1925-1953. Data includes both singular and plural of Soviet people and both terms in all six cases; each page the phrase appears is counted only once. Searches were done with the Cyrillic phrase in quotation marks. Data collected through East View Publications in June 2017.

Legal changes were part of this rhetorical shift. The 1936 Constitution declared formal equality for all citizens, irrespective of ethnicity, gender, or class. The Short Course, authored largely by Stalin and read by millions, emphasized how the constitution established the equality for all citizens, "irrespective of their nationality or race" as "an indefeasible law."[46] Both the constitution and the Short Course envisioned the citizenry as a "Socialist society" unified in

[44] Nikolai Bukharin was one of the first to develop the concept of the Soviet people in a 1935 article, see Nikolai Bukharin, "Geroicheskii sovetskii narod," *Izvestiia*, 6 July 1935, 3.
[45] On unity, see, for example: Nikolai Bukharin, "Geroicheskii Sovetskii Narod," Izvestiia, 6 July 1935, 3; "Stalinskaia konstitutsiia," *Izvestiia*, 24 November 1936, 1; "Pod znamenem stalinskoi konstitutsii," *Pravda*, 5 December 1938, 1; "Triumf sotsialisticheskoi demokratii," *Istoricheskii Zhurnal*, No. 12 (December 1937), 12-15; "Edinstvo partii i naroda," *Izvestiia*, 28 June 1938; B. Volin, "Velikaia pobeda sovetskogo naroda," *Istoricheskii zhurnal*, 1938, no. 7 (July), 1-4.
[46] Central Committee of the CPSU, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), 345.

loyalty to the "Socialist fatherland."[47] This was a "new stage of development," marked by the "completion of the building of a Socialist society and the gradual transition to Communist society, where the guiding principle of social life will be the communist principle: 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.'"[48] Although the Soviet Union far from represented an egalitarian society in practice, the state persistently emphasized that all citizens enjoyed the same rights and privileges.

Soviet ideology understood the Russian language to play in important role integration across ethnic lines. In union and autonomous republics, leaders repeatedly believed new Cyrillized scripts would foster communication between non-Russian peoples. This emphasized connections not only from the periphery to the center, but also between peripheries. Although each language had its own specially adapted Cyrillic alphabet, there was some coordination. Representatives from other republics frequently attended and participated in conferences and meetings to talk about their approaches and strategies, and final alphabets frequently took into account the orthographic decisions made by other republics. At a 1939 meeting that presented the Cyrillized Kazakh script to the public, pedagogue and translator Muktar Zhangalin noted that other republics had already started to transition to new scripts, making the transition a "practical necessity" for Kazakh.[49] The committee that implemented the transition in Kazakhstan made it clear that their final version took into account similar sounds in other letters – and indeed, many of the final versions of other Turkic and Tajik alphabets settled on versions of extra letters marked similar sounds in similar ways.[50]

Although some have pointed to differences as a blatant attempt to make non-Russian

[47] An English language edition of the constitution appeared the same year under the title, *The Soviet Constitution* (New York: International Publishers, 1936). For the Russian original, see Iu. S. Kukushkin and O.I. Chistiakov, *Ocherk istorii Sovetskoi Konstitutsii* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987).
[48] Central Committee of the CPSU, *History of the CPSU*, 346.
[49] APRK, f. 708, o. 3/1, d. 738, l. 1.
[50] APRK, f. 708, o. 4/1, d. 747, d. 21.

languages more distinct from one another, this has been overstated, especially given the difficulties of organizing alphabets for languages with different sound systems. The desire to make alphabets roughly intelligible can be seen in discussions of how to best represent unique sounds. In Kazakhstan, officials emphasized the need to make all letters familiar with the Russian script. In an 1940 report, S. Kenisbaev and M. Balakaev, both heads of Kazakh language departments at local universities, reported on a recent conference about the new Uzbek alphabet in Tashkent, which they had attended alongside representatives from other Central Asian republics. In Uzbekistan, they reported, researchers and activists had developed an alphabet with 37 characters, including all Russian characters. For sounds unique to Uzbek, they noted, the Uzbek committee modified the existing Russian letters that were closest to the sounds in question (for example: ғ, ў, қ; roughly similar to г, у, and к).[51] The Committee in Kazakhstan ultimately made similar choices, with some overlap in the letters in Uzbek.[52] New Cyrillized alphabets, including those proposed for Tatar, Bashkir, Azerbaijani, and Tajik, were reviewed for comparison.[53] These choices made approximate pronunciation accessible to Russian speakers, suggesting an underlying interest in fostering mutual understanding and communication.

Similar themes played out in another closely related debate: whether alphabets should include all Russian characters, including those that had no equivalent sound in a given language. In Kazakhstan, though some believed there was no need to include letters without equivalent Kazakh sounds, the committee ultimately concluded in favor of including all Russian letters in the new Kazakh alphabet for the purposes of accurately representing loan words from Russian.[54]

[51] APRK, f. 708, o. 4/1, d. 747, l. 2.
[52] TsGARK, f. 1692, o. 1, d. 309, l. 95.
[53] TsGARK, f. 1692, o. 1, d. 309, ll. 111-115.
[54] For the committee's final decision, see: APRK, f. 708, o. 4/1, d. 747, l. 17. For additional discussions about including all Russian characters, see: APRK, f. 708, o. 3/2, d. 38; APRK, f. 708, o. 3/1, d. 738; TsGARK, f. 1692, o. 1, d. 309. A letter by P.F. Krasnikov and S. Amanzholov at the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR and sent to the communist party in 1941 similarly reported on the ongoing compilation of Russian-Kazakh and Kazakh-Russian

Final Cyrillic alphabets for other languages reflected similar conclusions, highlighting the overarching importance of Russian-language literacy and communication between Russian and non-Russian peoples, almost always mediated through the Russian language. This provided a certain degree of unity across alphabets, making it much easier to incorporate Russian words.

Concerns about fostering better communication between Soviet peoples reflected the larger ideological projects of forging a unified society. If, as suggested by two anthropologists, "orthographic choice is really about 'imagining' the past and the future of a community," new Cyrillic alphabets offered a visual representation of the fact that non-Russian republics were now firmly within Moscow's orbit.[55] In 1939, this had particular ramifications in the newly acquired territories in Moldova, which transitioned into a new Cyrillic script immediately after the Soviet annexation of the territory. In a 1939 *Izvestiia* article, Secretary of the Moldovan regional committee of the Communist Party V. Tsyganko praised the new script: "This transition enriches the Moldovan language, strengthens the linguistic connection with the Ukrainian and Russian peoples, makes the study of the Russian language easier." This, he went on, enabled Moldovans to study the works of Stalin and Lenin more easily.[56] Elsewhere, as cited already, cultural activists believed new scripts would promote Soviet integration and the long-term development

---

dictionaries. Krasnikov and Amanzholov highlighted the need for clearly defining Russian loan words in Kazakh, and argued that the forthcoming dictionaries would be of great use for Kazakhs learning Russian and Russians learning Kazakh, specifically noting the growing importance of Russian. See APRK, f. 708, o. 5/1, d. 649, ll. 52-54.

[55] Quotation from: Bambi B. Schieffelin and Rachelle Charlier Doucet, "The 'Real' Haitian Creole: Ideology, Metalinguistics, and Orthographic Choice," in *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, ed. Bambi B. Schieffelin, Kathryn Ann Woolard, and Paul V. Kroskrity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 285. Olivier Roy has interpreted the near-universal shift to Russian-based orthography as a "channel of Russification." Although there can be little doubt that the Cyrillic alphabet certainly paved the way for greater Russian proficiency, this interpretation does overstate the impact of the script, particularly in the light of the multifaceted justifications offered by local activists. See Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Birth of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 78.

[56] V. Tsyganko, "Prazdnik moldavskogo naroda," *Izvestiia*, 12 October 1939, 2.

of local languages and culture, a development that was clearly in a Soviet key.[57] Across the board, the Cyrillic scripts offered a visual, linguistic reminder that non-Russians were members of a unified Soviet society. Officials saw these new alphabets, alongside newly mandated Russian-language instruction in all Soviet schools, as important tools for ensuring full participation in the Soviet state and communication between citizens across ethnic lines.

Conclusion: The Burdens and Privileges of Empire

The 1920s and 30s were a period of extreme uncertainty in orthographic practice across Eurasia for all languages within the Soviet sphere. In the 1920s, reformed Cyrillic scripts for Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian offered a "simplification" to reading and writing that help expand literacy rates among the population, while modifications to the Arabic script and the introduction to new Latin scripts offered similar promises to non-Slavic peoples. Latinization in particular was seen as an international movement that connected Soviet citizens with global anti-imperial efforts across the world, a movement in which the Soviet Union could play a unique role. Beginning in the mid-1930s, however, understandings of "internationalism" narrowed considerably, as the Soviet state placed new emphasis on the unity of its population, a diverse body of citizens brought together in their commitment to their Soviet homeland and to communism. As war threatened the country from outside the country's borders, the need for unity within them became stronger, driving a need for communication and interaction that brought citizens together across geographic, linguistic, and ethnic lines. Reflecting these needs, the state embarked on a new political agenda that would bring greater uniformity and make possible a greater degree of communication and coordination. This included policies of

[57] TsGART, f. 360, o. 11, d. 69, l. 13; N. Izgoev, "Azbuka: O smelom i nuzhnom reshenii Kabardy i Cherkesii," *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 3; G. Dinmukhametov, "Perevod tatarskoi pis'mennosti," *Pravda*, 29 March 1940, 4; G. Bel'gaev, "Perevesti buriat-mongol'skuiu pis'mennost' na russkii alfavit," *Pravda*, 7 April 1939, 4.

mandatory Russian language schooling in all native-language schools and the introduction of new Cyrillized scripts for most languages across Eurasia.

Perhaps to avoid the appearance of imperialism, Cyrillized scripts were described as local initiatives that responded to popular demand, which would benefit non-Russian speakers in a myriad of ways. In some cases, new scripts were celebrated as a tool for ensuring greater equality: that they would reduce the educational burdens of non-Russians and improve their educational prospects by making it easer to learn Russian, pursue higher education, and communicate with their fellow citizens. Better knowledge of Russian and the use of more suitable, scientific alphabets, activists seemed to imply, would enable non-Russians to participate more fully and equally within Soviet society, a society that afforded unprecedented opportunities for advancement and upward mobility for all its citizens. Better communication, too, would serve as a tool of integration and unification that brought all citizens together.

Despite the emphasis on communication, however, scripts changes across this period came with major costs that were borne primarily by non-Russians, who saw not mere orthographic reforms but the adoption of entirely new scripts. The transition to new alphabets created material shortages across Eurasia. Since students educated in the new alphabets were no longer trained to read materials in now outdated scripts, books needed to be reissued and textbooks needed to be rewritten. Although the state devoted financial and material resources to this transition, the process often went slowly, particularly given widespread material shortages that increased during and after World War II. A 1947 report highlighted some of the long-term costs in Kyrgyzstan, still noticeable years after the adoption of the new alphabet: “Many necessary books are not being republished. The works of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Gorky, and also several books by Kyrgyz writers, published in the Latin alphabet, are not accessible to

students now. Pupils, who read books in the Russian alphabet, do not understand the Latin typeface."[58]

There were also human costs, since the adoption new alphabets rendered entire populations illiterate. Teaching people to read new alphabets required training teachers, massive literacy campaigns for adults, the printing of new textbooks and educational materials, and the republication of any literature that was to be preserved, all processes that happened twice in less than two decades. Teaching citizens to read in the new script devoted both time and energy to relearning to read. Even though the new script might ultimately decrease the educational burdens of pupils formerly required to learn two alphabets from an early age, a certain number of citizens never fully transitioned. In a published oral history account, one woman recalled that her parents remained "barely literate" (*malogramotnyi*), having learned to read in outmoded alphabets. Her father learned to read prayers and the Quran in Arabic script; her mother "spent four years studying in what was already a Soviet school, but then, study was in Latin, and then she never managed to master the Cyrillic, and in practice, she did not know how to read or write."[59] In this sense, both the Russian language and script served as both a tool of and obstacle to upward mobility and further progress.

For all the emphasis on unity and communication, the state made it manifestly clear by the late 1930s that these would take place on the basis of Russian language, the privileged language of the Soviet state.[60] Thus, as both the only language learned by all Soviet students and the basis for most non-Russian alphabets, Russian enjoyed a position of growing importance.

---

[58] "Beseda s predsedatelem pravleniia SSP Kirgizii Tokombaevym," *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 14 June 1947, 1.
[59] Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva, ed., *XX vek v vospominaniiakh, ustnykh istoriiakh, pis'makh i dnevnikakh zhenshchin Uzbekistana* (Moscow: Natalis, 2008), 75.
[60] Although roughly concurrent, the two processes were not coordinated. Indeed, as emphasized by Peter Blitstein, the transition to Cyrillic alphabets placed great strains on the printing of textbooks, publication of which was perpetually behind schedule. New Russian textbooks following the 1938 law were barely off the presses before the alphabet changes made them obsolete, see Blitstein, "Nation-Building or Russification?," 260.

Non-Russians bore the brunt of the burden of communication and forging this elusive "unity," both through demands that they learn Russian and had alphabets subject to the whims of state policy. Paradoxically, the new scripts intended to bring non-Russians onto a more even playing field with their fellow citizens simultaneously reinforced their secondary position relative to Russians. Soviet "equality," then, was achieved primarily through the efforts of non-Russians, on the basis of hard work, sacrifice, and of course, knowledge of the Cyrillic alphabet and the Russian language.