The Soviet Legacy
Language, culture, and polity could never be kept apart in any society. Language, as a defining characteristic of being human, is the determining factor of nationality, repository of its tradition and the most important way of ensuring its continuity. Nowhere else has this been more evident than in the erstwhile Soviet Union, the vast linguistic ‘conglomerate’ that it was.

One of the abiding legacies of the Soviet system was to view language and culture of the Soviet people as an appendage to politics of the leadership of a given period. Stalin was its chief practitioner from the beginning of thirties onwards. So much so, that linguistics became entwined with Soviet nationalities and their problems. New republics, regions, etc. were created on Stalin’s whim. Not only that such a policy introduced an element of instability in Soviet system as well as Russia later, but it also mystified linguism and its study.

The present linguistic situation in Russia, however much it may have been affected by political and economic considerations, is overwhelmingly the consequence of what people have made of their geographical conditions, their history and their long-standing language and ethnic contacts over many centuries. The present linguistic complexity of Russia is a part of the heritage of a long history as well as the consequence of policies pursued during the last seventy years by the

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erstwhile Soviet State. This was further complicated by the huge ethnic migration and instability as a result of the Soviet disintegration.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the details of linguistic-diversity, and to examine the relations between the various languages of the former USSR and Russian, the most widespread language. This shall be done with a quick glance at the historical background vis-a-vis the language policy, both in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet state.

**Historical Background**

The history of both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union shows constant territorial growth, and the problems accompanying relationships between peoples with quite different cultures and languages have existed for almost a thousand years. First peoples whose territory was conquered by the Russians were the Finno-Ugric tribes in the East of European Russia, and several people speaking Turkic language, who became isolated from their fellow Islamites when the Russians moved eastward.²

The heterogeneity of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century can be understood by viewing it against the historical development of the Russian Empire / USSR. Around the beginning of our millennium, the East Slavs,

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² Nieuweboer, Rogier & Graaf, Tjeerd de, “Languages and Cultures of the Arctic Region in the Former Soviet Union”, based on a Seminar at Waseda University, Japan, 5 April 1992 and a Lecture Course on Siberia, Sep-Nov 1992, organized by the Arctic Center and Department of Linguistics, Groningen University, Netherlands, p.2.
not yet differentiated into (Great) Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians, had established a number of political entities in eastern Europe, the most important being Kiev in the South and Novgorod in the North. These early East Slav states soon lost large parts of their western territory to Poland and Lithuania, while more easterly territories were taken over by the Tatar, with their center in Kazan. Traditionally, the period of Tatar suzerainty over Russia is dated from AD 1240 to AD 1480.³

This situation changed drastically from the fifteenth century onwards as the grand dukes of Muscovy (Moscow) consolidated their hold over Russia with the capture of Novgorod in 1478. The Tatar stronghold of Kazan was captured by Ivan the Terrible in 1552, to be followed four years later by the capture of Astrakhan. This effectively opened the door to Russian consolidation of Siberia.

The frontier with the United States was settled in 1868, when the Russian Empire formally ceded Alaska to the USA, thus establishing the Bering Strait as the frontier. Russia had to cede southern Sakhalin to Japan following 'the defeats of Tsarism in the war of 1905'. The revolutionary events in the country in the spring and summer of 1905 were, in a way, a response to the heavy defeats in the Russo-Japanese War.⁴

In addition to the eastward expansion, Russia was also able to undertake the incorporation of the Caucasus range and Transcaucasian republics. The success of the USSR in the Second World War led to a considerable territory gain, in particular, the Baltic states and Bessarabia (Moldavia), and large areas with mixed Polish-Ukrainian or Polish-Belorussian populations, in addition to a small part of the former German province of east Prussia.

The expansionist policies of the Tsars not only created the framework within which any subsequent 'nationalities' policy had to operate, but to a large extent, and perhaps inevitably, determined some of the directions, which such policies followed. As a result, the Russian Empire became an immense multilingual state, consisting of about 180 different linguistic groups. Some of these belonged to a Western European tradition, such as the Russians and the Ukrainians. Likes of the Armenians and Georgians belonged to different, yet equally great traditions. A few consisted of the very complex Tatar-Turkic Muslim groups. Having incorporated such diverse national groups, the Tsars had purposed a policy of ruthless assimilation. Their policy blocked the development of the national languages of even such large populations as the Belorussians and the Ukrainians.

Not only did the Bolsheviks inherit this vast linguistic conglomerate but also, with it, the inherent complexity. In their preparations for the Revolution and later, when in power, they were committed to rectify the harm the previous rulers had

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perpetrated. The new rulers understood what a mighty weapon language policy could be.

**Pre-Revolutionary Policy**

Changes in language behaviour and ethnic identity of a population seldom take place quickly. When they do occur, it is often an intergenerational process. 6 The levels and rates of assimilation among the nationalities in the Tsarist Russia were influenced by a variety of factors. Regime policies were one.

In Tsarist Russia, there were about 140 different nationalities that did not speak Russian. There were twenty nationalities of one million each: the Turko-Tatars numbered 20 millions, the Ukrainians 25 to 30 millions, the Poles 8 millions, and the Jews 7 millions. The non-Russian speaking nationalities were 57 per cent of the total population. The old policy, under the Tsar, was to pitch one nationality against the other. Attempts were made to Russianise “aliens” by bringing them into the Russian Church. Even the teaching of minority languages was not encouraged and sometimes actively repressed. In 1831, under a decree of the Czar all Polish schools were closed; only the religious schools of the Jews and the Muslims were permitted to

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continue. Thus these minority communities became very backward as far as their linguistic competence was concerned.7

In the period before the Revolution, Russian was the official language for almost the whole of the Russian Empire. Only in the Russian parts of Poland, Finland and the Baltic provinces, a limited amount of local autonomy permitted the use of other languages. In Finland, where the Swedish minority held a dominant political and economic position, Swedish was used as the official language in the nineteenth century. A similar position was held by German in the Baltic provinces, where it was the language of the land owners. But for most of the Russian Empire, languages other than Russian had no right whatsoever. Instances of languages being actively discouraged or even forbidden are not rare, as happened with Ukrainian between 1876 and 1905 as part of the government's policy to discourage Ukrainian separatism. The languages were treated with official neglect where the use of languages other than Russian was not actively discouraged.

They were not admissible for official purpose. And any promotion of their use was the work of private individuals. It was due to these private efforts that written forms of some languages, e.g., Chuvash, Abkhaz were devised. Often they were linked to missionary activity, such as that of the Translation Commission of the Orthodox Missionary Society in Kazan, which translated parts of the Bible into several languages of non-Orthodox people.

The traditional written languages continued in use for some of the languages with a literary tradition, such as Armenian, Georgian, the Turkic languages of Central Asia, and Tajik (Persian).

Russian imperial rule over the non-Russian people was quite inconsistent and had an extra-ordinarily varied effect on the Tsar’s subjects. The Tsarist State promoted certain people at some times (for example, the Baltic Germans and the Armenian merchants until the 1880s) and discriminated against others (Jews, Ukrainians and Poles particularly after 1863, Armenians after 1885, and Finns at the turn of the century). 8

The treatment of non-Russian people of the Russian Empire was similar to that of their languages, or in some cases even worse, as with the Jews. Ukrainians were encouraged to think of themselves as a sub-division of the Russians, whence their name ‘Little Russians’ during the Tsarist period, as opposed to the ‘Great Russians’ (Russians proper).

There was no explicit plan envisaged or executed to enable non-Russians to learn Russian and assimilate, and of course no possibility was provided for them to develop within their own culture, in their own language. To the extent that there was any choice, it was between assimilating to the Russian population and this could only be done by one’s own efforts, since there was no widespread educational programme of instruction in Russian for

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non-Russians, etc., or remaining within one's own ethnic community and stagnating for lack of opportunity. 9

Soviet Policy

Language policy in the Soviet Union and the theoretical considerations, which led to its formulation, were well established before the revolution. When the Revolution had been inaugurated, the Bolsheviks had to tackle the problem of the co-existence of social organizations and communities on several levels of development. Not only was the range of heterogeneity very considerable but it was derived from many diverse sources.

The policy of the Bolsheviks party and of the Soviet government was radically different from the Pre-Revolutionary policy, both in conception and in execution. A commitment to the equality of all people, and of all languages10 and the guidelines to implement this principle were manifest in the efforts of Lenin and his associates before and after the October Revolution. It was a part of the common plan to change the society on rational principle, e.g., to liquidate any inequality of people and nations. In 1921, the 10th Congress of the Communist Party put the task of the transition of all the administration, court, economic organizations, newspapers, theatres and so on to local languages for all the nationalities of the country. So the need of identification was to be settled in the centre of the language policy. The Russification or the Russian

10 The Constitution of the USSR, Article 34 and 36, 1924.
chauvinism was considered as the main evil. In terms of ethnic relations, the new programme declared the equality of all the people of the new state, and one of the most obvious aspects of this declaration was its linguistic side.

The new state was to have no official language, which remained true de jure for the USSR and its constituent parts. Russian was not ‘the’ or ‘one’ of the official languages, nor were any of the languages of the USSR. Lenin’s severe criticism of those who wished to have the Russian language as the official language may be recalled. Replying to liberals in an article entitled “Is a compulsory Official Language needed?”, he wrote: “We know better than you do that the language of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dobrolyubov, 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. We do not want to have people driven into paradise with a cudgel; for no matter how many fine phrases about ‘culture’ you may utter, a compulsory official language involves coercion, the use of the cudgel.”  

Lenin further says, “that is why Russian Marxists say that there must be no compulsory official language, that the population must be provided with schools where teaching will be carried on in all the local languages”. Although, in the USSR, there existed a model of a language policy, which

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13 Ibid., p.73.
was not fixed in laws. The national language was used for inter-ethnic communication and the Russian language for communication between the nations.\textsuperscript{14}

Everyone was to have the right to use his/her own language, both in private and for public matters, such as addressing meetings, correspondence with officials, giving testimony in courts. Everyone was to have the right to education and availability of cultural materials in his own language.

Hence, until recently the long-standing goal of Soviet nationality policy had been the eventual merger or fusion of all nations and nationalities into a single Soviet socialist community. This merger was to be accomplished in two stages. During the first stage, through participation in a common polity and economy, members of various nations and nationalities were to draw closer together (\textit{sblizhenie}).

During the second stage, they were to merge (\textit{sliianie}) into a single socialist community. Attempts to manage cultural diversity based on these notions have been called “syncretic amalgamation”. “Syncretic amalgamation” represented an attempt to dilute or eradicate existing cultural identities through the creation of completely new bonds or cases of collective solidarity through high levels of governmental interference in social relations.\textsuperscript{15} “Syncretic amalgamation” in its revolutionary form attempted to replace existing group


loyalties with bonds deriving from class-consciousness so that parochial
loyalties were superceded by regime ideology.16

This process of ethnic amalgamation was not based on the study of
actual developments among various nations and nationalities in the Soviet
Union; rather, it was determined a priori by party ideologues and presented as a
historically inevitable process. Developments on the ground were expected to
fit ideological requirements. Even though the persistence and resilience of
parochial identities could not be denied, party ideologues kept insisting that the
process of ethnic amalgamation was well under way.17 This primarily had been
the factor affecting the Language policies right through in the Soviet Union.
The following discussions revolve around the same with subtle changes here
and there along the vectors of political compulsions.

The Early Centrifugal Policy: the Non-Russian languages

Support for and development of the non-Russian languages was one of
the most visible signs of the policy of nation building. In the 1920s and 1930s,
publication of language projects, dictionaries, and spelling reference books
flourished. Written languages were developed for 48 nations and nationalities.
The Turkmen, Kirgiz, and Karakalpaks of Central Asia, and many small
nationalities in the far north were among the peoples without written languages

16 Ibid., p. 12.
17 Eminov, Ali, "Nationality Policy in the USSR and in Bulgaria: Some Observations", The
Anthropology of East Europe Review, Vol. 9, No. 2, Fall 1990, p. 5.
until then. This language policy's goal was to remove the Russian language from the national territories' public sectors: administration, the judiciary, education and the media. Here, we can have a look at the changing position of some major non-Russian languages under the new Soviet rule.

**Ukrainian:** The Ukrainian language had basically been a colloquial language and a language of *belles-lettres*, but not one that fit into the modern world. During this period, however, the Ukrainian cities, whose population and culture had been predominantly Russian, enthusiastically adopted Ukrainian for use in public life. In 1926, seven million people in the Ukraine were able to read and write Russian although only 2.7 million Russians lived there. They were balanced by 23.2 million Ukrainians, 6.3 million of whom could read and write Ukrainian.\(^{18}\)

Not only did the majority of mass media, administrative and judiciary organs adopt Ukrainian as their official language, but also so did the whole education system to a large extent. From elementary schools to technical colleges conducted classes in Ukrainian. A contemporary later characterized the situation around 1930 in the then capital Charkov: “If a person did not speak Ukrainian in public, he was suspected of being an enemy of the revolution.” In 1926, only 38.3 percent (1,60,000) of Charkov's population were Ukrainian

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nationals; by 1933, this figure had risen to nearly 50 percent (3,30,000). The Ukranization of the cities was not only a consequence of migration from Ukrainian villages but also a result of the fact that many Ukrainian nationals who had spoken Russian as their primary language once again began using Ukrainian. After 1926, the number of Ukrainian nationals whose primary language was Russian declined in nearly all the Ukraine’s conurbation.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Belorussian:} In some cases, establishing the national language required considerable administrative pressure and occurred against the will of those involved. This made nation building seem somewhat artificial. For example, the Belorussian upper strata were mostly Russified or Polonized. The Belorussians’ national identity was only marginal, but the new language policy vastly advanced it in the 1920s. As a result, some have called the Belorussian national consciousness a virtual “gift of the Soviet regime.”\textsuperscript{20} Many Belorussian teachers and peasants resisted the introduction of Belorussian as the teaching language for general education. Consequently, such people were publicly accused of being Russian chauvinists.

In the standardization of the Belorussian written language (which by no means was finished yet) and the creation of neologisms in economics and technology, the Belorussians explicitly borrowed from Western examples and

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thus contributed to increase the distance between Belorussian and Russian. The rural population, who spoke a mixed dialect, was maligned as “Muscovites”. Although The Belorussian SSR’s language law of July 1924 had assigned equal status to the four languages spoken in the republic (Belorussian, Russian, Yiddish, and Polish), Belorussian received priority in public life.21

Bashkir: In Central Asia and Bashkiria, the language policy’s goal was to separate supra-national communities and to create nations because the Soviets wanted to prevent the development of Pan-Islamic or Pan-Turkish movements. Not unlike Belorussia’s, the Bashkir national identity was somewhat artificial because in Bashkiria the educated strata were heavily Tatarized and had adopted the Tatar language as their written language. With Russian, this dialect was declared the “state language.” This legislation was unusual because Lenin is known to have repeatedly expressed fundamental objections to declaring an official state language.22 The Bashkir “state language’s” purpose was to breathe life into a Bashkir national identity distinct from the Tatar national identity – to a certain extent, this strategy probably succeeded. In 1926, 53.6 percent of Bashkirians listed the Bashkir language as their mother tongue; by 1959, this figure had increased to 61.8 percent. In any case, the Soviets halted the

22 Only in a few other republics was the titular language officially considered the state language for example in Georgia and Daghestan (Azeri-Turkish).
Bashkirians’ national assimilation process by fighting the theory and practice of “a uniform ethnic group of Tatars and Bashkirians.”

**Azeri, Tatari, Uzbeki, Tajik, Kazakhi, Chechen, Ingush, and some other North Caucasian languages:** An important step was introducing the Latin alphabet, which allegedly created conditions conducive to achieving literacy rapidly in the Soviet East. This introduction affected first of all the sixteen Islamic peoples, who so far used Arabic script (the Azeri, Tatars, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Chechens, Ingush, and other peoples of the Northern Caucasus). Their written languages were developed to varying degrees, and frequently, only the Islamic clergy used them. Over 90 percent of these nationals could neither read nor write. An extensive secular literature in Arabic script existed only in Azeri (Azeri-Turkic), Tatari, and Uzbeki.

**Buryati and Kalmyki:** Besides Arabic script, the Latin alphabet also replaced the Uigur-Mongolian script that the Buriats and Kalmyks used.

**Udmurt, Komi, Ossetian, and Yakutian:** The revolutionary enthusiasm prevailing in the 1920s and early 1930s considered the Roman alphabet as the “only revolutionary” script and “the alphabet of the communist world society”. As a result, in about 1930, the Udmurts, Komi, Ossets, and Yakuts, who previously had used the Cyrillic alphabet, adopted the Latin alphabet.
The New Alphabet

Languages borrow linguistic items from other language because of necessity and prestige. After the introduction of the Latin alphabet everywhere, a completely new development began to surface after 1937. This development negated all previous accomplishments. Although, in February 1937, Khatskevich, the Secretary of the CEC’s Council of Nationalities, publicly cautioned against “jumping from one alphabet to the other.” During the next three years, the Soviets forced languages that had just adopted the Latin alphabet to change to the Cyrillic alphabet. A general change of the Party line in language policy accompanied this forced adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet. The simplified chain of alphabet borrowing which led to the writing systems of languages of the Soviet Union, and of the present-day European languages, can be shown in the following way:\textsuperscript{23}:

(North) Semitic $\rightarrow$ Phoenician $\rightarrow$ Greek $\rightarrow$ Etruscan $\rightarrow$ Latin.

\begin{center}
\textit{Cyrillic}
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Indications that moving closer to the Russian standard would be an essential feature of language development in the future had been discernible since the mid-1930s. Until then, there had been no question that the way to expand the vocabulary of the Turkic languages was to borrow from Arabic or Persian or to include historical Ukrainian words from the time of the Cossacks to enrich the contemporary Ukrainian language. Now, the Soviets denounced such efforts as “local nationalism” or even as “a nationalistic-counter revolutionary principle” designed exclusively to keep national languages as far away as possible from Russian.

Publication in the Non-Russian Languages

“Constructing” new written languages and expanding old ones was not the business only of institutes and commissions; the publication of books and newspapers in non-Russian languages also furthered the cause as it rapidly increased in the 1920s and 1930s. This increase was not only in total numbers but also in relation to publications in Russian. In 1913, only 7.5 percent of all individual copies of books published in the Russian Empire were written in non-Russian languages. By 1927, this percentage had increased to 14.5 percent and probably reached its climax at 26.6 percent in 1933. In 1938, only 21.2 percent of all copies printed were published in a non-Russian language; by 1956, this percentage had decreased to 17.2 percent and has kept decreasing

ever since. During the same period, the total number of books printed increased from 86.7 million copies in 1913 to 462 million copies in 1940 and 1,107.5 million copies in 1956. Newspapers experienced the same development. In 1928, only 10.5 percent of all newspapers (copies per single edition) were published in non-Russian languages. In the following years, this percentage increased considerably and climaxed at 37.5 percent in 1933. In 1938, only 23 percent of the newspapers were published in non-Russian languages, and by 1957 this percentage had decreased to 21.6 percent.

Between 1876 and 1905, the Russian Empire had prohibited printing Ukrainian books and periodicals, but even after this period, the supply of Ukrainian printed material was extremely limited. Only in the 1920s, did the distribution of literature in Ukrainian vastly increase. In 1913, only 3.2 percent of the book titles published in the Ukraine were in the Ukrainian language. By 1933, the percentage had increased to 70 percent but decreased to 52 percent in 1938. Similar data are available for newspapers. In 1933, 85.5 percent of the newspapers (titles) were published in Ukrainian. This percentage had decreased to 58.7 percent by 1938.

For the first time in history, speakers of many languages got the opportunity to communicate in print. In 1913, books were published in forty languages; in 1928, in sixty-six languages; and in 1931, in eighty languages. In 1928, 205 non-Russian newspapers (titles) were printed in forty-seven languages; in 1931, 1620 newspapers in fifty-nine languages; and finally in 1938, 2188 newspapers in sixty-six languages. The non-Russian periodicals
developed much more slowly and involved fewer languages. In 1935, towards the end of the growth period for non-Russian publications, only 390 different periodicals (or 19 percent of all titles) were published in a language other than Russian.

Of course, the majority of non-Russian publications – particularly in those languages that were in the process of acquiring a written form – were elementary in nature. The publications were mainly primers for adults and children, elementary school books, and easy-to-read political propaganda. Even in Ukraine, Russian still maintained its importance for scholarly publications. Non-political technical literature, including college textbooks, was not available in the new literary languages and only to a very limited extent in the old non-Russian literary languages. A high percentage of political propaganda and school books were translations from the Russian. In 1935, 57 percent of non-Russian titles were translations, the vast majority of them from the Russian.

Achievements of this Language Policy

Despite the shortcomings, the language policy’s achievements in the 1920s and 1930s were praiseworthy. Three of the peoples, the Kirgiz, the Turkmen and the Tajiks, received their written languages only then. The same is true for several titular peoples – Bashkirs, Mordvinians, Buryats, Kalmyks, Ingush, Chechens and Karakalpaks. The introduction of written languages and of publications in national languages was an essential factor in the
development of national identities. Communication among the members of individual peoples rose to a new level and simultaneously differentiated each nation from the other.

Although, from the start, the Soviets pushed the nations' presses to make their political messages conform to Soviet guidelines. These presses nevertheless developed a life of their own and by no means limited themselves to translating Pravda and Izvestia. During the collectivization campaign, most local non-Russian press (raion newspapers) practiced passive resistance by keeping quiet about this subject. The newspapers not only did not organize “the class struggle in the village” – as the central leadership had ordered them – but they even refused to acknowledge class antagonisms existed in national villages. The word was that only “about 15 percent” of the non-Russian local press followed the general political Party line. In 1931, a third and fourth grade Tatar schoolbook description of the new kolkhozes went: “Now the rural population is not able to eat meat on a daily basis. They also lack good tea with sugar and white bread.” Anti-religious Tatar literature amounted to demonstrating that Islam was superior to Christianity.

These examples clearly show that despite many translations, the national press – especially with the peoples with large populations – was by no means either conforming or uniform. Although restricted, the press expressed national interests. Fiction, poetry, and drama played an even more important role in developing national identity because the forms of these arts frequently deviated from Russian-European genres and because they used the historical
tradition of the respective national folklore and depicted the national characteristics of countryside and people. In this manner, the creation of new written languages and the expansion of old non-Russian written languages contributed - contrary to this policy's intentions - to strengthening national identity.24

The Centripetal Policy

Politically, though, language was recognized as the main criterion of nationality in the USSR. For this reason, the administrative boundaries, within the Union or the Union Republics, reflect broad linguistic divides. The problems of language were tied to those of ethnicity and language loyalty was a symbol of an attachment to such groups. Nevertheless, language could be useful, irrespective of any ethnic affiliation or emotional association. This is precisely what Stalin assumes when he argued that "culture and language are two different things. Culture may be bourgeois or socialist, but language, as a means of intercourse, is always common to the whole people, and can serve both bourgeois and socialist culture".25 This precipitated a shift in the Soviet policy towards a centripetal movement. Stalin’s period was a period of contraction. Once Stalin had a firm grip on the country, the relative freedom was put to an end. Late in 1927, the Central Committee of the Communist

Party in various republics drew attention to what they conceived as the danger of 'petty bourgeois nationalism'. In 1930, Stalin directed his most blistering attack against deviation towards local nationalism, including the exaggerated respect of national languages. In line with this shift of emphasis towards 'centralism', large numbers of creative intelligentsia, who had encouraged the study of national languages, was expelled from the party and many were 'eliminated'. This adversely affected the local languages.

The 'motto' Socialism in one country led Soviet Union into a period of total isolation from the rest of the world. This also had its effects on the Language policy. Since contacts with other countries were now considered suspect rather than something to strive for. Russian in theory, still no more than one language among many equals, became more important. It was now praised as the "Elder Brother", the language all others should borrow from and had to be oriented towards. It was believed that all languages spoken in the country would converge and thus a new language would arise.

During the Second World War, amidst the growing fear of separatism, Soviet authorities made some concessions. But, the 'centralist' propaganda of Soviet patriotism continued unabated. There was suspicion of the loyalty of elements within some nationalities. They were discriminated and publications in their respective languages were banned. The case of Soviet patriotism was
promoted in the Russian language. This was almost a reversal of the pre-Revolutionary policies.

The post-Stalin era restored some sanctity of linguistic freedom. A reasonable adjustment, between the centralist and pluralist aspects of Soviet language policy, was established.

Nationality policy evolved under Khrushchev and Brezhnev in remarkably similar ways. Like Lenin, they maintained flexibility during the early years of their regimes. Like Stalin, they promoted Russian values and the use of the Russian language, in the later years as they gained political power and prestige.

Initially, Khrushchev denounced the full scale Russification practiced since the end of World War II. As part of this overall rejection of Stalin, the policy of eliminating nationalist elite in Republican Party organizations was also attacked. But, soon after he consolidated his political position, Khrushchev reversed his approach to the nationalities. However, he softened somewhat the assimilationist tone of the Party Program. On the subject of rapprochement, for instance, he noted that this was occurring "on the basis of free will and democracy" of all Soviet nationalities. On the sensitive subject of language, he said that the party would tolerate no forced use of any language. He added, however, that he expected the "ongoing process of the voluntary
study of Russian” would play an increasingly significant role in the development of nationality relations.28

But, culturally, the earlier emphasis on Russification intensified, especially in terms of language policy, under Brezhnev. Brezhnev weighed in heavily on highlighting the special role of Russian, “the rapid growth of internationality ties and co-operation has led to a heightened significance of the Russian language, which has become the language of mutual communication of all nations and nationalities of the Soviet Union”.29

In the following section, we discuss the Soviet language policy, its implementation, and the problems associated with the same. We shall also assess the periodical shift of tendencies in the language policy affecting the over all language situation. The Soviet policy and its goals were too idealistic on paper.

Process and Problem of Policy Implementation

As often with an idealistic policy statement of this kind, there were immense practical difficulties in implementing this goal, leading in certain instances to partial abandonment of the goal, and it is with the successes and partial failures of this policy that shaped the Soviet linguistic composition down the years.

29 Brezhnev, Leonid, Leninskim Kursom, Vol.4, p.60, as quoted in Ibid., p. 80.
One of the main practical problems facing the new regime was the need to unify the country, so that all of its people would feel part of the new development. One requirement dictated by this was the existence of a common language to facilitate communication among members of different ethnic groups. The obvious choice for this language was Russian.

Since few of the languages of the new Soviet State had written forms, one of the first priorities was the creation of a writing system and the development of literacy programmes. Even further preparatory work was required for some of those languages, which had not even been analyzed linguistically to an extent sufficient to make possible the creation of a serviceable orthography. In this category fall the languages of the Far North.

Already existing writing systems of certain languages were made easier to learn. In 1918, even Russian orthography was slightly simplified. Certain orthographic distinctions with no phonetic counterpart were removed from the Russian alphabet. Orthographies of some languages, i.e., Armenian, Chuvas and Georgian, were phonemic or close to phonemic, and hence, required no modification.

The writing systems, which used Arabic alphabet, were poor in phonemic variations. Initially an attempt was made to devise a simplified form of the Arabic alphabet. Later, this idea was abandoned in favour of adoption of Latin alphabet for all languages of the USSR other than those with other traditional alphabetical writing systems. The choice of Latin alphabet, as against much more widespread and common Cyrillic alphabet, was basically to
avoid the impression, especially among traditionally Islamic people, that the replacement of their traditional script, with its religious connotations, was part of a policy of linguistic, cultural and religious Russification. The Latin alphabet was thus a compromise neutral between the conflicts of the Arabic and Cyrillic scripts.

The Arabic script’s inadequacy and complexity had long been a subject of concern in the USSR. Engels wrote in a letter to Marx: “Persian is a complete toy of a language. If it wasn’t for that damned Arabic alphabet, in which you can have six letters in a row looking exactly the same, and in which you don’t write the vowels, I reckon I could master the entire grammar in 48 hours”.30

This only highlights the prejudiced and superfluous nature of Soviet policy, which all so clearly corresponds with Engels’ toying observation. Languages would not evolve as naturally as they do if Engels’ propositions could even be fractionally true.31

Although the movement of Latinizing alphabet was initiated as early as 1922, in Azerbaijan, which Lenin termed as a revolution in the East, it was only on August 7, 1929 that a resolution was adopted by the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR and the Council of people’s Commissars concerning Latinized alphabet for the Arabic script. In the

31 This Researcher has four years of University education in Arabic language and a Masters degree in linguistics.
resolution, it was emphasized that this measure was being carried out in accordance with the "wishes of the workers and labouring peasants (dekhans) of those people in the USSR, who possessed Arabic forms of writing". Consequently, Latinized writing replaced less adequate forms of writing based on Arabic, Hebrew and ancient Uigur-Mongolic scripts. By January, 1935, about 70 languages of nationalities with a population of 36 million had shifted to the new alphabet. Soon, the Latin alphabet was proclaimed to be the "alphabet of a world communist society", and several gross errors were also made in the process of Latinization of alphabet. The attempt to create Latin based alphabet, even for those who were using Russian script, did not succeed for it ran counter to the natural historical development of individual people as well as their own wish to use the Russian alphabet.

In August 1936, at the First All Russia Meeting of the people's Commissariats for Education of the Autonomous Republics and Directors of the Regional Offices of People's Education of the Autonomous Regions, it was concluded that the time had come to introduce the Russian alphabet among Northern peoples, and in particular, that it would be easier for pupils to assimilate it since they were simultaneously learning Russian in schools.

This development of writing systems, in many parts of the USSR, was faced with the problem of dialect variations. The dividing line between

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32 The Brotherly Community of the peoples of the USSR (1922-36), (collection), Moscow, 1964, pp. 383 - 84.
different dialects of the same language and different languages was drawn in the USSR, often by criteria of mutual intelligibility, but also taking into account social and political factors. In some instances, the problem of dialect base for the standard language could not be solved because of dialect disparity, and several written languages were developed for different dialects. An extreme case of this is Khanty; where up to five different dialects have been used in publication.

In some instances, written languages were not created for a few languages, which were spoken by small population groups. This phenomenon simply continued a traditional situation where speakers of one of the smaller languages used a language with more speakers as their second language, for all communication outside their own narrow circle. Many of the smaller Caucasian people used one of the larger languages - in many instances, Avar - as their lingua franca and as their first medium of literacy. In the Pamir region of Tajikistan, Tajik played a similar role. 34

A certain amount of retrenchment was followed in the development and maintenance of literacy programmes in various languages in the USSR from 1930s onward. Publication in certain languages having a small number of speakers was discontinued, and the range of social functions exercised by certain languages was restricted. Four Finno-Ugric languages, Ingrian, Karelian, Veps and Lapp, as written languages were discontinued in the USSR. The official Soviet policy, in this period, was to encourage the consolidation of

smaller groups with larger groups, so that in the future the USSR was to have fewer, but larger, ethnic groups. But the mother tongues of the smaller ethnic groups and communities continued to function as means of communication in everyday life. In cases of this type, bilingualism should be viewed as a transitional stage to monolingualism, which will be reached by the small ethnic groups when their assimilation into the corresponding nations is complete.  

In addition to phasing out languages with a small number of speakers, there was one period in the Soviet history when certain written languages were forcibly discouraged. At the beginning of the Second World War, certain ethnic groups were accused of collaboration with the enemy. In addition to being deported, they had their written languages banned. Subsequently, the written languages were reinstated, with the apparently continued exception of Crimean Tatar.  

The third phase of policy implementation reveals a new readjustment of the language policy, a compensatory shift, following the repressive centralizing bias of Stalin. A duality of approach became evident, as there was considerable latitude to express opposing views concerning national problems at the two conferences held in 1956, the first at Makhachkala and the second in Moscow. Following Stalin’s death, Khrushchev maintained that a denial of the contribution which nationalities and national loyalties can make to the  

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advancement to socialism is regrettable. Now efforts were made to establish a new equilibrium between centralist and pluralist dogmas.37

In practice, the Soviet policy, for the most part of it, generally made allowances for the existence and even temporary cultivation of traditional cultural practices, provided that such activities were of essentially of a folklore or pro-regime character.38 The rationale behind the temporary cultivation of ethnic institutions was that once different groups became aware of their own identities through the development of their languages and cultures, they would become aware of the superiority of an international identity and willingly substitute proletarian internationalism for parochial nationalism. However, such policies contributed to the strengthening rather than diminishing of ethnic loyalties, ethnic chauvinism and ethnic antipathies. The expectation still remained that traditional cultural ties would eventually decay as a result of modernization, but it was acknowledged that this would be a very extended and gradual process. Moreover, although the merging of long-established identities could be encouraged and guided this process required methods more mild and subtle than those utilized by the earlier policies.39

In short, Soviet language policy not only promoted the Russian language as the ‘lingua franca’ used for All-Union and inter-republican communications, but also improved and strengthened the position of the titular nations of the republics as well as that of their respective languages. At the

37 Lewis, E. Glyn, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.
same time, the gradual decline of the percentage of ethnic Russians in the USSR and a birth rate dramatically lower than that of the populations of Central Asia and Caucasus contributed to create a latent feeling of insecurity within the majority group. This provoked the raising of a new type of Russian nationalism as a reaction towards the intensification of nationalist movements in the borders and the core itself of the Union. Finally, the outcomes of the Soviet language policy reflect the contradictions in the processes of centralization and decentralization and those of promotion and repression which constituted the main characteristics of Soviet nationalities policies splitted between the class strategy and the nationalist tacticism.

**Supremacy of One Language**

The above record of policy implementation (the third phase) does not accord with what is usually regarded as the normal concept of Soviet totalitarian politics, according to which monolithic political solidarity was the aim.

The Russian Language, with the process of urbanization, became a powerful tool of individual choices for better career opportunities, as well as a means of communication in Soviet society at large and in ethnically mixed regions specifically, like the North Caucasus or Volga regions. Individual choice or strategy, irrespective of politics, has always influenced language
behaviour and preferences. However, state politics also play a crucial role in defining the status of languages.\textsuperscript{40}

During the progress of history, in order to safeguard the promotion of a particular language, three language policies have been pursued in the Soviet Union at one time or the other. In the first place, the language of the most dominant nationality was imposed deliberately and consciously upon other Nationalities and their languages. This was the Tsarist policy. Stalin favoured this policy. Secondly, a supra-national legitimacy, derived sometimes from religious, cultural or ideological resumption, has been attributed to a particular language. This has been the major effect of Soviet Policy.

A third policy, which was virtually to create new languages by the elevation of local dialects or by developing two or more variants of the same language in different regions so as to ensure that the supremacy of a favoured language is not threatened, was also pursued by the Soviet state.

This is hard to understand, how the Soviet policy for language can claim convincingly to safeguard the non-Russian Languages, when such attempts were made to ensure the continuing supremacy of one language, namely Russian.

Massive dissemination of the Russian language began during and after World War II, when major relocations of people took place and official propaganda of Soviet patriotism and glory reached the most remote areas. And

yet, the census of 1970 revealed that there were 57 from 112 million non-Russians in the country, which could not speak fluent Russian. It became a new drive and an important component in creating a single ‘Soviet people’ for all citizens to learn and to speak Russian.41

**Perestroika Reform Scenario**

Each stage of Russia’s historical development in the 20th century has produced ideas and terms, which need not be translated from the Russian. It was “pogrom” in the last few years of Nicholas II’s rule. The Stalinist years produced, c/o Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the untranslatable acronym of “GULAG”. Nikita Khushchev’s ten years in power are remembered by the word “sputnik”. In the epoch of Leonid Brezhnev, the world learned another acronym, the KGB. Mikhail Gorbachev made the linguistic present of “perestroika”.42

Its consequences by far exceed the limits of this discussion. Nevertheless, one feels compelled to point out that the perestroika years generated unprecedented expressions of the popular will. In many decades, for the first time, the people enjoyed the freedom of genuine choice. This new sense of freedom reminds us of the old Soviet joke that before the Revolution the national minorities knew only two feelings: cold and hunger, but that after

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41 Ibid.

the advent of Soviet power they came to know three: cold, hunger – and a deep sense of gratitude. Behind this grim humour, there lay not just a recognition that non-Russian identity and culture had been saved to a degree by Sovietisation, but also warped or dwarfed by it. The freedom of genuine choice, hence, was like a straw on the sinking boat.

With the advent of ‘glasnost’ and ‘perestroika’ a serious reexamination and rethinking of Soviet nationality policy began. During the January and July 1987 plenums of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, past approaches to ethnic relations in the Soviet Union came under serious criticism. Soviet social scientists were criticized for being too simplistic, rigidly dogmatic, and abstract in their discussions of the nationality question, painting the state of nationality relations only in rosy colours. They were criticized for treating nationality relations in the Soviet Union as a zone of general harmony, while anything that did not fit into that harmony was tossed aside, branded as a phenomenon of bourgeois nationalism. As a response to such criticisms, there came about a more realistic discussion of the complexity of ethnic relations in the Soviet Union. The search for simplistic and dogmatic solutions was abandoned. Gorbachev and his supporters came to the realization that there was no single universal answer to the nationality and linguistic questions. It was recommended that greater attention be paid to the development of indigenous languages and cultures; and that more emphasis be

44 Ibid., p. 24.
placed on the flourishing of nations and nationalities and less on their convergence and merger.

Gorbachev’s policies of ‘perestroika’, ‘glasnost’ and democratization helped to stimulate ethnic consciousness seeking greater cultural, economic and political autonomy for the non-Russian people. This growing national self-awareness, in some cases, retarded and reversed the processes of linguistic and ethnic assimilation. This is duly attested by some preliminary data from the 1989 Soviet Census. 45

Of all the policies that were promoted by the Gorbachev leadership, ‘glasnost’ was perhaps the most distinctive and the one that had been pressed furthest by the end of communist rule. 46 Glasnost led to changes in the quality of Soviet public life, from literature and the arts to the general transparency in social behaviour. All the banned writers had been published by 1991, including Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago, Zamyatin’s futuristic We, and Vasilii Grossman’s Life and Fate (all in 1988); Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag Archipelago and Nabokov’s Lolita both appeared in 1989 (so did Orwel’s 1984), and by 1990 some extracts from Hitler’s Mein Kempf were being published in the main military-historical journal. 47 The prevailing censorship was abolished completely in the new press law adopted in June 1990.

46 The term had already been employed in the 1977 Brezhnev constitution and had been used as early as 1874 by the radical writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who noted, accurately, that it was a ‘bureaucratic expression thought up to replace “freedom of speech”, as cited in White, Stephen, Russia’s New Politics, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 21.
Gorbachev’s policy can be seen as having evolved in the context of the failure of Brezhnev’s approach to nationalities. Unlike Brezhnev, Gorbachev was intent on dealing with problems in a way that would ensure the progress of each nationality and ethnic group. Although, he acknowledged the successes of the past in overcoming the nationality problems, he cautions against getting carried away with them. He says, “our achievements must not create the impression that there are no problems in nationality processes. Contradictions are inherent in any development, and they are inescapable in this sphere as well.”

In a rare televised speech to the nation on July 1, 1989, Gorbachev noted the serious threat of ethnic conflict in the country. While firmly rejecting the demands of ethnic separatists, he indicated Moscow’s growing willingness to accommodate the flourishing of ethnic consciousness among nations and nationalities in the Soviet Union. He advocated greater sensitivity and greater flexibility toward all legitimate ethnic demands and aspirations and called for free development of all languages and cultures of ethnic minorities. Gorbachev also admitted that the root causes of current ethnic conflict in the country are to be found in serious mistakes of the past, among which he identified “economic hardship, historical efforts to stamp out local cultures and the forced relocation of groups like the Meskhetians, all of which have sometimes been exploited by corrupt officials to protect their power.”

As far as language policy is concerned, Gorbachev considered it a two-way street. While acknowledging the need for literature in nationality languages, he maintained that Russian was the common language of all Soviet citizens. Regarding national languages, Gorbachev said, "there is sometimes heated debate on the development of ethnic languages in this country. What can be said on this score? Even the smallest ethnicity can not be denied the right to its own Mother tongue". But, Gorbachev also encouraged Russian as the common language of the country. He posited, "Everybody needs this language, and history itself has determined that the objective process of communication develops on the basis of the language of the biggest nation".

Thus, Gorbachev tried to create a balance between adoption of Russian as a common language and a new emphasis on the importance of nationality languages. But, Gorbachev’s moderate course of action towards the nationalities and their languages, instead of solving the problem, aroused the long-smouldering fires of nationality resentment. It is in the light of this emerging ethnic consciousness that the implications of Gorbachev’s reforms should be analyzed.

Reforms were considered necessary to revive the system; instead they revived the national problem, eventually breaking the Soviet stability. The nationalistic turmoil in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and the Baltic States

50 Gorbachev, Mikhail S., Perestroika, Collins, London, 1987, p. 120.
51 Ibid., p. 121.
demonstrated the strained relations between the dominant Russians and the non-Russians. The reforms of Gorbachev, in fact, awakened the dangerous centrifugal tendencies along the ethnic, linguistic and national questions.

The years of perestroika completely undermined the theory of the merging of nations in the Soviet Union. In the Union Republics, especially in Latvia and Estonia, issues of language began to surface. The official policy began to be challenged. In December 1988, Estonia’s Supreme Soviet passed an amendment to the Estonian constitution granting Estonian the status of state language on Estonian territory. Lithuania followed it in January 1989. Latvia followed suit in May 1989, followed by Uzbekistan in June and Tajikistan in July. In September, a draft law on language, in Ukraine, enhanced the status of Ukrainian at the expense of Russian.

The proliferation of language laws, in 1988 - 89, was countered by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in April, 1989, when it passed the Law on the Languages of the USSR people. Not surprisingly, it was at variance in important respects with many of the republican laws already passed.

From the point of view of language planning, the result was an impasse. Republican language laws enhanced the status of the indigenous language and to varying degrees, downgraded the status of Russian. The USSR law, however, specified that, firstly its provisions took precedence over those in the Republican laws, and, secondly, that the teaching of Russian was compulsory.

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Thirdly, it was unlawful to discriminate against an individual on the basis of language. Moreover, the right of parents to choose the language of instruction for their children was retained. For the first time, Russian was given legal status as the official language in the Soviet Union.  

**The Disintegration of the USSR: The Linguistic Factor**

The Break-up of the USSR was determined not only by political and economical factors but also by the absence of the scientifically justified language policy in the upper echelons of powers both in the Centre and in the national republics. The origins of aggravation of international relations lie in the sphere of the language policy towards the minorities and small nations. The absence of the real equality among languages and national minorities engenders suspicion towards the titular nation. Many national minorities see the only solution in creating their own state and so, inevitably come to separatism. The language situation in the late 1980s, in essence, remained the same as in pre-Revolutionary Russia and in the USSR. This situation could not be changed by change of a social system or by any policy of the central or local power. The situation could be partly changed, as realized later, only by a new change of frontiers. As Afanasyev, a Soviet historian and a radical

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A parliamentarian in the Congress of Peoples Deputies, wrote in a commentary, "the USSR is not a country, nor is it a state…. It is a neighbourhood of states and nations that are tired of their colonial and colonizing past, that have been tortured and humiliated by Stalinist efforts at unification." It was time they wanted to come out of it.

The idea of everyone speaking one language was probably no less appealing to non-Russian bureaucracies and managerial personnel. In the 1960s-1970s, local authorities implemented drastic cuts in native language education, for example, in North Caucasus. In North Ossetia, the entire education system became Russian-speaking by the late 1970s. Kabardino-Balkaria, Checheno-Ingushetia, Karachevo-Cherkessia, Adygei and Kalmykia followed the same pattern. In the 1970s there were only two autonomous republics in Russia – Tataria and Bashkiria – where several schools kept native language instruction. But in 1978, there was only one ‘national Tatar’ high school in Tataria’s capital, Kazan – a city with a population of about 993,000, of which 38% were ethnic Tatars, according to the census of 1979.

Linguistic and ethnic affiliations of non-Russians could not change mechanically as a result of policies introduced by the central Soviet authorities. Regime policies do play a role, but they have not been formulated or implemented without regard to social, cultural and historical conditions. Nor have their outcomes always been those anticipated by the planners. Despite

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57 Tishkov, Valery, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
frequent assumptions to the contrary, the Soviet regime could not easily change society, nor could it reframe the linguistic composition and complexity.

In the Soviet context, it is difficult to separate ethnicity and language. Years of 'contempt and prejudice against cultural and religious identity of the non-Slav people' have contributed greatly in the growing friction and tension among nationalities and ethnic groups. Their linguistic affiliations have since long been a subject of great apprehension. But, it was only after Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost that the ethnolinguistic consciousness began to surface. Soon, it was evidently clear that almost every nationality in the USSR felt deprived and aggrieved, although the intensity of this feeling varied from region to region. It appeared as if the Soviet system has been sitting all along on a dormant volcano, which suddenly has erupted.

It is in the sphere of federal and inter-ethnic relations that the unintended consequences of glasnost and perestroika had their most dramatic and fateful impact. It may be recalled how a painful and emotional discourse had developed around language and culture issues since the beginning of perestroika. Belorussian writer Vasil Bykov publicly proclaimed, “I would prefer to die than to witness the disappearance of my language”. Widespread appeals to revive Russian cultural, religious, and national traditions played an

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59 Ibid., p. 37.
61 As quoted in Tishkov, Valery, op. cit., p. 87.
important role in mobilizing the masses in support of the opposition to the already prevailing Russian chauvinism in all spheres of life. This precipitated the *ethnolinguistic* consciousness among the smaller nationalities. With time, a strong articulation of simmering resentment began to come up in form of social unrest and protests.

While introducing reforms, Gorbachev apparently hoped to defuse the latent hostility among many Soviet nationality groups. But, the long-standing problems of uneven economic development, biased social planning, and inadequate language policy only precipitated nationality unrest, leading to the eventual disintegration of the USSR.

It is in the background of this specific legacy that we shall study the linguistic scenario in the Russian Federation, in the following chapters.