

PREFACE

Soviet language policy provides rich material for the study of the impact of policy on language use. Moreover, it offers a unique vantage point on the tie between language and culture. While linguists and ethnographers grapple with defining the relationship of language to culture, or of language and culture to identity, the Soviets knew that language is an integral and inalienable part of culture. The former Soviet Union provides an ideal case study for examining these relationships, in that it had one of the most deliberate language policies of any nation state. This is not to say that it was constant or well-conceived; in fact it was marked by contradictions, illogical decisions, and inconsistencies. Yet it represented a conscious effort on the part of the Communist leadership to shape both ethnic identity and national consciousness through language. As a totalitarian state, the USSR represents a country where language policy, however radical, could be implemented at the will of the government. Furthermore, measures (such as forced migrations) were undertaken that resulted in changing population demographics, having a direct impact on what is a central issue here: the very nature of the Soviet population. That said, it is important to keep in mind that in the Soviet Union there was a difference between stated policy and actual practice. There was no guarantee that any given policy would be implemented, even when it had been officially legislated. One of the vagaries of Soviet language policy was that it could be invoked—or not—at the bidding of whoever happened to be in charge at the moment. This makes evaluation of the policy all the more challenging. One cannot assume that any policy was actually implemented, any more than one could assume that the purported motivation behind a given piece of legislation was genuine.

It might be argued that the Bolsheviks had no choice but to take account of language in the early years of the Soviet Union. To a certain extent this is true. Faced with a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and largely illiterate population, the newly instated Bolshevik government had two pressing needs. One was to quiet unrest among its citizens: opposition to the new government was felt in a number of quarters, and support of the nationalities was critical. The other was to compensate for years of backwardness under tsarist rule and push the country into the industrial age. Rapid industrialization was a critical goal. The first need requires a sensitivity to the demands of the multitude of ethnic groups in the USSR, and the second requires an educated workforce. From this standpoint, language policy is crucial. That said, the attention given language policy goes beyond what was necessary to satisfy these demands. Literacy rates rose dramatically, and by World War II the population was largely literate. But the manipulation of the Soviet citizenry only intensified in the post-World War II period: under the guise of Communist “internationalism,” the non-Russian population was being pushed toward Russian.

In creating the new Soviet state, the government tried to manipulate the cultures and identities of the many different ethnic groups living in its borders, in part by affecting language use. The extent to which language use can actually be legislated remains an open question. The data from the Soviet Union provide at least a partial answer: language use can be legislated, depending upon a number of other factors, some of which may be beyond the control of even the most totalitarian states. Thus, for example, the Soviets created a situation where the Russian language was required for all administrative exchanges; this was an effective method of instigating

language shift in some parts of the population. But for sectors of the population which were quite large, this was less effective. And the Soviet government never managed to control the Population growth in Central Asia was beyond the government's control. Thus the large Uzbek-speaking population was less affected by Soviet language policy than was the Itelmen-speaking population. Yet it would be an oversimplification to think that speaker population size is the only factor which determined the efficacy of Soviet language policy. Some quite small groups have managed a relatively high level of language retention, while some larger groups have shown a higher rate of language shift. An example is provided by the Beluchi, with a population of less than 30,000, versus the Belorusians, with a population of over 10 million. As of the 1989 census, 96.9 percent of Beluchi considered their heritage, ethnic language to be their first language, while only 70.9 percent of Belorusians did. In a similar vein, Germans—with a population of over 2 million—reported a retention rate of only 48.7 percent. Clearly more than population size is involved.

These issues lie at the heart of the present study. The text is designed to be useful to a variety of readers, whether read in its entirety or selectively. The first chapter provides an overview and introduction to the Soviet Union, its ethnolinguistic makeup, and general political structure. The second chapter presents a chronology of Soviet language policy which is aimed at painting the general development of language policy at a national level, independent of local variables. By its very nature, the highly centralized governmental system of the Soviet Union repeatedly attempted to implement the same policy throughout its vast territory, regardless of local particulars. Yet, as history has shown time and time again, local particulars do matter, and blanket policies which fail to take them into account often produce results as varied as the people affected by them. For this reason, the bulk of this book is divided into regional chapters, each of which contains information about several Union Republics or, in the case of Siberia, a single vast territory that is home to a wide range of languages and cultures. These chapters are intended to provide surveys of the all the geographic and ethnolinguistic regions of the Soviet Union. This organization is itself debatable, and no doubt a finer level of categorization could and would produce a more detailed analysis of each individual region. Alternatively, some might argue that the geographic groupings themselves are misleading. For example, the Moldavian SSR is presented together with the "Slavic" republics, in large part because they shared borders and, together with the Baltics, constituted the European part of the USSR.

The spelling of language names is complicated; most of the languages of the former USSR do not use the Latin alphabet. For the sake of accessibility, wherever possible I follow the spelling used by the fourteenth edition of the *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000). This provides a consistent standard; spelling alternates are listed in Appendix II. See Chapter 1, section 4.2 for further discussion of the issues involved in naming languages and peoples of the former USSR. Cyrillic names (other than language names) are transliterated according to the Library of Congress system; this is particularly relevant to the references section, with the hopes that it will make the references there more readily accessible.

In translating the names of administrative territories, the following conventions are followed: *Sovetskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Respublika* 'Soviet Socialist Republic'

or simply SSR, and the *Avtonomnaia Sovetskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Respublika* 'Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic' or ASSR; and the smaller administrative regions are: *oblast* 'region' (often also translated as 'province'), *krai* 'territory', *okrug* 'district' and *raion* 'area'. These translations are among the most standard and are commonly used.¹

The year 1991 saw the end of the Soviet Union. Yet at the same time, the people living in that country at that time continued living in the same territories, which had new political boundaries, and new notions of statehood. In order to avoid cumbersome wording, I have often abbreviated references to former boundaries and political divisions, referring not to "the former Tajik SSR" but rather to "the Tajik SSR" or "the Russian SFSR." This is intended as a shorter way of referencing political entities which no longer exist.

As one final caveat, I should point out that not all the languages of the former USSR are discussed here, and those that are introduced are not all analyzed in equal levels of detail. Such discussion is beyond the scope of the present work. For a more complete overview of the linguistic structures of these languages, see Comrie (1981).

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Lenore A. Grenoble
Dartmouth College

¹There is variation in translation of these terms; *oblast*, for example, is often translated as 'province,' with reference to the provinces of Australia and Canada.