CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The former Soviet Union provides one of the most interesting examples of the deliberate use of language policy by a nation state to further its political goals. Throughout its history, the Soviet government implemented far-reaching language policies that fundamentally changed the nature of language use within its borders. Soviet leaders knew that language counts, that it is a crucial part of both a nation's and an individual's identity, and it could be manipulated to serve as a powerful tool for the State. It is clear that the Soviet government did not always achieve its goals with its language policies, which at times were contradictory and confusing. Yet at the same time Soviet language policy was strikingly deliberate. This tension stems from two opposing yet concurrent trends in Soviet thinking. On the one hand, the national languages were manipulated to create a sense of identity among individual groups of people, despite the potential that this created for emerging sense of nationalism. On the other hand, there was a strong tendency to promote a single language in the formation of a unified, industrialized nation state, with Russian serving all the functions of a state language in its official use in government, law, and education.

One of the unique aspects of studying language policy in the former USSR is the advantage of the relatively short-lived and self-contained history. The Soviet Union existed as a nation state for just under 75 years, providing the opportunity to view the development of Communist language policy from its very inception to its termination over the course of a brief and closed time period. The February Revolution of 1917 led to the overthrow of the tsarist regime and the establishment of a provisional government. Vladimir Ilych Lenin, exiled for some ten years, returned from abroad to lead the Bolshevik Revolution in October of that same year. Yet even prior to the Revolution, Lenin and his followers had met and discussed language policies for the region. This fact alone underscores the importance of language to the Communist leaders, and portends the significant role language policy would play in the shaping of the Soviet state. From a historical perspective, the country's life was relatively short, and in December 1991, the Commonwealth of Independent States was formed, officially signaling the end of the Soviet Union. The Union Republics became independent states and sought international recognition; in fact some (such as the Baltic Republics) had sought independent recognition even before the ultimate downfall of the USSR. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev formally resigned on December 25, 1991, marking the end of an era.

That language policy was so central to the Communist Party leaders stems from the very nature of the territory over which they ruled. From its inception in 1917 to its ultimate break-up in 1991, the Soviet Union was a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic state. At its point of greatest expansion, it encompassed some 8,649,490 square miles with a total population of just under 286,000,000. The 1989 Soviet census cites approximately 130 ethnic groups, including indigenous and immigrant people, with a varying percentage of each group speaking its heritage language, and an

official language count of about 150 languages. Linguists, however, estimate that there were actually closer to 200 languages spoken in the former USSR. The discrepancy stems the fact that language/dialect boundaries were often defined according to social and political factors rather than linguistic ones, and official Soviet statistics should be taken as providing only partial information about the linguistic map. The census regularly asked questions about language use and all Soviet citizens were required to declare a "nationality" (Chapter 2, section 2). There is not, however, a one-to-one correspondence between the two. For example, although Russians comprise the largest ethnic group, in 1989 they constituted just over 50 percent of the total population (slightly more than 145,000,000 people). Yet at the same time a full 81 percent of the population considered itself to be fluent in Russian, either as a first or second language.

Language policy was central to the Soviet planning from the very moment of its foundation. Its significance comes, in large part, from the multi-lingual nature of the State, which no leader could ignore. Yet the role of language policy was also determined by the government's own aspirations for the nation. In the early years of its regime, Party leaders set ambitious goals to raise educational levels rapidly, so as to enable the country to industrialize at an unprecedented rate, in an effort to catch up with Western Europe. This entailed quickly raising the literacy rates of its citizenry, a feat which could be accomplished only through the deliberate development of language as a necessary tool for education. One of the great achievements of the Communist government was its literacy campaign, which transformed a largely illiterate population to a highly literate one in its first twenty years of existence (Chapter 2, section 4).

To date, the most comprehensive study of Soviet language policy in English is E. Glyn Lewis' (1972) book, *Multilingualism in the Soviet Union. Aspects of Language Policy and its Implementation.* Lewis introduces his work in terms of what he calls "four levels of investigation:" (1) the synchronic-descriptive level, i.e., description of the contemporary situation; (2) the historical context of language contact; (3) the synchronic-comparative level, defined as comparisons of the Soviet situation with other complex linguistic areas in other parts of the world; and (4) the relationship between changes in language, and changes in society and culture. Part of this last issue, and one that will be taken up in the present work as well, is the question of how two or more languages in contact affect one another and, more centrally to issues of language policy, how they affect the two or more cultures and societies which are in contact. Lewis proposes that the Soviet Union is an ideal place to test Joseph Greenberg's hypothesis that social and cultural change will correlate with languages of the same geographical region, rather than with languages which are genetically related but not spoken in the same region. In other words, the areal influence is more relevant than the genetic one.

Now, some thirty years after the publication of Lewis' book, we have the opportunity to frame questions of Soviet language policy differently. The first level, the contemporary-synchronic investigation, is no longer relevant, and instead the break-up of the Soviet Union enables us to consider its language policy from a strictly historical perspective, i.e., as a closed system. We can now examine the history and development of language policy and planning over the span of the

country's entire existence, a relatively brief period of less than 75 years. Perhaps more importantly, we can now assess the impact of those policies. In the present work, the question of the relationship of language to culture and society is central. That the Soviet government recognized the importance of language in nation-building is beyond question. It is less clear how successful their policies were, and furthermore, to what extent any successes or failures were the direct result of those policies themselves, and to what extent these outcomes are the result of other circumstances, or if they are in some way inevitable.

Lewis approaches this topic from the standpoint of a specialist in bilingual education, whose primary focus is how bilingualism plays itself out in the USSR. My view here is different, that of a linguist interested in testing the actual impact of language policies. This includes the primary question of just how effective language policy can be, and to what extent language use and linguistic relationships can be legislated. Related to this is an examination of the Soviet assumption that language policy can and does affect sociolinguistic change. One obvious way in which governments can exercise power over language use is in the granting of official language status. This process was in and of itself highly politicized in the Soviet Union, and the allocation of financial resources hinged more upon official status than numbers of speakers. Thus having official status in the USSR was of the utmost significance to language vitality, and to acquiring vital resources. Decisions regarding the publication of numbers of titles, or numbers of copies, were made more on the basis of political status than actual population size, educational or cultural needs and so on. An illustrative example is provided by the numbers of books published in three Turkic languages: Azerbaijani, Kazakh and Tatar. The first two are the titular languages of Union Republics, and for that reason enjoy relatively high political status. Tatar has lower status, as it is not the titular language of any Union Republic, but rather of an Autonomous SSR. The Tatars, for example, constituted the largest ethnic group of the three in 1970: there were approximately six million Tatars and an additional 400,00 Bashkirs who saw Tatar as their native tongue, as opposed to 4,380,000 Azerbaijani and 5,300,000 Kazakhs. Despite the large population size, fewer books were published in Tatar than the other two languages. In 1971 there were some 302 books and booklets published in Tatar, with a print run of 4,538,000 total copies, as opposed to 817 books and booklets in Azerbaijani (and 9,922,000 copies) or 657 in Kazakh (and 13,189,000 copies).

By the end of its era, the Soviet government had, in effect, created a four-tiered language hierarchy. The bottom, fourth tier was comprised of languages without official support, where "support" includes allocation of financial resources for creating written materials. This group includes languages with very small speaker populations which were not developed due to practical limitations, as well as some other languages whose status (as individual languages) was not recognized for a range of reasons, often political. The third tier was occupied by languages like Kazakh, with written forms and some governmental support but lacking official status. In the second tier were the titular languages which enjoyed official status within each Union Republic but in most cases lacked widespread influence or use outside of the Republic. And the first, uppermost tier was occupied by Russian alone. It was developed not only as the sole lingua franca of the USSR, but with the