

CHAPTER 2

AN OVERVIEW OF SOVIET LANGUAGE POLICY

1. THE EARLY SOVIET YEARS

At the beginning of the Soviet period in 1917, only 28.4 percent of the total population aged 9-49 was literate; illiteracy rates were nearly 100 percent in some regions. Given the overall goals of the new government to modernize the country and its industry, one of the first crucial steps in that process was raising the literacy of its citizenry. This could be accomplished only through a concerted education effort, yet the newly formed Bolshevik government faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The vast numbers of different languages and peoples within its borders, and their very different cultures and lifestyles, meant that the government could not simply send out cadres of teachers to instruct the masses. First, a number of measures had to be undertaken. Decisions needed to be made as to which languages were to be languages of instruction, which languages were to be developed, how to train teachers, and so on.

The early language initiatives were based on Lenin's own policy with regard to the many ethnic groups (or "nationalities"), a policy which had been formulated several years prior to the Bolshevik Revolution. Lenin believed, or at least claimed to believe, that the nationalities should be treated with absolute equality. In a private letter dated 1914, he outlined a plan for the equality of nations and the rights of national minorities; these were to include "freedom and equality of language." This freedom encompassed language choice in the schools and other public institutions. Lenin emphasized the legal right of all citizens to seek restitution for any violation of their equality of rights (cited in Wolfe 1964: 585). He is quite explicit on this point in his "Critical Remarks on the National Question" (Lenin 1948/1913) where, although he asserts that nationalism cannot be reconciled with Marxism, Lenin does advocate the right of the Soviet Union's nationalities to self-determinism. The issue of the nationalities is repeatedly raised in Lenin's writing as one which the Communist government need to address with utmost care.

At the same time Lenin's ultimate goal was the unification of all peoples in a single Communist state, a unification based on the assimilation, not the diversity, of the ethnic groups. This general principle lay at the heart of much of the development of the nationalities. Stalin's 1913 essay, *Marxism and the National Question*, written in support of Lenin's position, is quite clear on this point. Stalin argues for the "merging of the backward nations and nationalities" of the Caucasus "within the general stream of superior" culture (Stalin 1951/2:351). Lenin's nationalities policy would seem to directly contradict that goal. But it seems that Lenin saw this as only an intermediary stage that was a necessary prerequisite to reaching the higher, Communist stage of development. (This kind of thinking is echoed in Stalin's essay on the nationalities; Chapter 2, section 3.1.) For Lenin, nationalism was useful when it could be used to advance the proletarian cause. The active promotion of the

nationalities was also, in theory at least, a safeguard against what Lenin dubbed “Russian chauvinism.” This principle of parity was guaranteed by law, as formulated in Article 23 of the 1936 Constitution, which proclaimed “equality of rights of citizens of the USSR, irrespective of their nationality or race.” This constitution was in effect for just over forty years, until it was surpassed by the 1977 Constitution.

Whether Lenin was voicing his actual political beliefs or manipulating popular opinion has been questioned by political analysts, and the real intent of his nationality policy has been the subject of much debate. In certain regions, such as Ukraine and Transcaucasia, support for the Bolshevik Revolution almost certainly depended on the Bolsheviks’ promise of self-determination. As of 1921, some 46 percent of the population was non-Russian; the non-Russian intellectuals tended to be nationalists politically and were strong supporters of self-determination.¹⁷ Regardless of the underlying political motivation, *The Declaration of Rights of the People of Russia* (November 2, 1917) proclaimed a policy of equality of all people of Russia and proclaimed the right of the people to self-determination. This policy was based on four principles which are clearly stated in the *Declaration*:

1. The equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia.
2. The right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, even to the point of separation and the formation of an independent state.
3. The abolition of any and all national and national-religious privileges and disabilities.
4. The free development of national minorities and ethnic groups inhabiting the territory of Russia.¹⁸

Regardless of whether Leninist language policies were the result of an adherence to Communist principles or were based solely on pragmatic considerations, the basic tenets of Lenin’s language policies are unequivocally stated: Lenin believed that no single language should be given the status of a *state* language; rather, he promoted national equality and self-determinism. All Soviet citizens were guaranteed education in their native tongue. This principle of equality, that each ethnic group had the right to use its own heritage language, became a founding principle of the early Soviet years. Article 121 of the Constitution of 1936 guaranteed Soviet citizens the right to instruction in their own mother tongue.

The complex ethnolinguistic issues which faced the young Bolshevik government provided the impetus for many of their central policies. Communicating the newly established government’s political agenda was necessarily a priority, yet this communication was at best flawed, and frequently simply impossible. These communication problems stemmed from a number of factors. The political leaders had been accustomed to communicating with a relatively small and educated group of like-minded Bolsheviks and Bolshevik sympathizers; they were primarily an

¹⁷See Liber (1992:26) and Hirsch (1997:254) for further discussion.

¹⁸The full English translation of this document can be found in Wade (1991:24-6). Note that the *Declaration* makes reference to the peoples of “Russia” as it was written before the formation of the USSR.

urban elite, and a relatively high percentage of the Jewish population was involved in the early years of the Bolshevik party. (This is of particular relevance here because the Jewish population was almost exclusively urban and had the highest literacy rate of any single population in the USSR at the time of the Revolution, placing them in a unique position among the various ethnic groups.) The inability of the Bolsheviks to communicate the political ideals and goals of the Communist Party played a key role in determining the emphasis placed on establishing widespread literacy, a policy decision which at first may seem odd for a country which has just come out of a period of civil war.

At the same time, the linguistic rift between educated urban Russian and uneducated rural Russian was great. Standard literary Russian, the only linguistic variant respected by the educated population, which included the former aristocratic and middle classes, was minimally comprehensible to uneducated speakers of some Russian dialects. The distinctions between the educated few and the non-educated many extended beyond fundamental linguistic differences: the gaps in the lexicon of the average Russian, mirrored by gaps in political and philosophical worldviews, were such that even fundamental terms like *communism* and *bourgeois* were not just foreign words, but were completely foreign—and incomprehensible—concepts. The very proletariat which the Bolsheviks were trying to reach could not understand their political platform.

In addition, the newly formed country was populated by vast numbers of speakers of languages other than Russian, who—except in a few cases—had even lower educational levels than the Russians. Where they were concerned, the gulf between the language of the Russian Communists and their own speech was wider still. The Party leadership saw the necessity of providing its people with an education at the most basic level, in order to be able to further educate them as full-fledged Soviet citizens. Basic literacy was seen as a necessary prerequisite to political literacy. Faced with a multitude of languages and ethnicities, many Bolsheviks favored policies which would promote the singularizing use of the Russian language and nation to create a unified proletarian state. Despite the 1917 *Declaration of Rights of the People of Russia*, there was a general reluctance to surrender any control of government, education, or economics to the nationalities. Moreover, the Soviets used the guise of overtly inclusive language policies (which stood in direct contrast to the exclusive tsarist policies) to Russify native languages. Although the government officially supported the use of native languages in education, publications, and the media, it did much to influence them to acquire a vast number of Russian lexical items, and collocational and grammatical patterns, as well as to directly impose Russian orthography and spelling. Thus while the development of the native languages was encouraged, it was encouraged only in a certain, Soviet way.

As soon as the Bolsheviks came to power, they established a new set of administrative bodies to implement their policies. These organizations, called *People's Commissariats*, were established on October 27, 1917 at the Second Congress of Soviets (and much later reformulated as Ministries, on March 15, 1946). Two are of particular relevance with regard to Lenin's nationality policies. Moreover, because they were charged with implementing those policies, the make-