CHAPTER 3

THE SLAVIC REPUBLICS AND MOLDOVA

The Soviet Union encompassed the homelands of all three of the East Slavic languages: Belarusan, Russian and Ukrainian (Chapter 1, section 2.1). Each of these was the titular language of a Union Republic; their populations, taken together, constituted a large percentage of the total population of the country, making up the Slavic majority of the Soviet citizenry. Although ethnic Russians accounted for far more than half of the country's population for many years, by the time of the break up of the Soviet Union, they made up a mere 51 percent of the total. This is largely due to extremely high birth rates in Central Asia, among Uzbeks, Turkmens and Tajiks, as opposed to low birth rates for ethnic Russians (see also Chapter 8, section 2). Still, the total number of people from these three Slavic groups constituted a full 73 percent of the Soviet population, making them a significant force in a number of ways. Adding to this total the ethnic population of Central Asia accounts for a full 90 percent of the total population. (Figures calculated on the basis of the 1990 statistics; see Chapter 1, Table 1.)

The Russian SFSR was the center of the Soviet government, and the Russian language had a major impact on all languages in the Soviet state. By virtue of their geographic and linguistic proximity, Belarusan and Ukrainian were in a precarious position. Many of the early Bolsheviks considered both simply to be dialects of Russian, as had been the prevalent view in tsarist Russia. It was not until 1919 that Ukrainian was adopted as an official language in its own right, distinct from Russian. Early years in the Soviet Ukraine show what appears to be a serious effort toward "Ukrainization;" by 1923 over 61 percent of the elementary schools were Ukrainian. For both Belarusan and Ukrainian, official policy encouraged creating new lexical items that differed from the Russian equivalents. Examples include the coinage of Ukrainian *vyrobnya* for Russian *zavod*, or 'factory', a slight departure from its original Ukrainian meaning of 'manufacture', or Ukrainian *litun*, rather than Russian *lëtchik*, for 'pilot'. Grammatical distinctions were encouraged too, such as the use of the vocative in Ukrainian (where Russian has no vocative), or the Belarusan prepositional plural ending *–okh*, as opposed to the Russian cognate morpheme *–akh*. This shifted dramatically in the 1930's, when the use of native Belarusan and Ukrainian forms was not only actively discouraged, but sometimes punished.

In the post World War II period, the pressures and legislation for Russification of Belarusan and Ukrainian only intensified. Both of these Slavic territories have a large percentage of speakers who have maintained their heritage language (83 percent of ethnic Ukrainians, and a full 98 percent of Belarusans), but a relatively large percentage of the population living in these regions is Russian. Russification has been intense, whether as a result of deliberate policies, or as the natural result of heavy contact between two closely related language groups, or a combination of the two. In addition, the Bolshevik Revolution brought about major changes in the

nature and scope of bilingualism: in tsarist Russia, bilingualism was largely between Russian and a European language, in particular French, where such bilingualism was limited almost exclusively to the upper levels of society. In tsarist Russia, French was the language of the gentry, and Russian the language of the peasants. In the post-Revolution era, bilingualism was chiefly found between Russian and a language of the USSR and affected nearly all sectors of the population by the late Soviet era, due to the emphasis placed on Russian-language instruction. The Slavic languages stand in a special position with regard to Russian: all three belong to the Eastern branch of Slavic, and are thus closely related. In a certain sense the close linguistic ties of Ukrainian and Belarusan to Russian prohibited their development: from Tsarist times through the Soviet era, claims were made by the authorities that Ukrainian and Belarusan were mere dialects of Russian, not distinct languages. Belarusan was, in particular, marginalized. It has the lowest language retention rate for any of the native languages with a million or more speakers, and the absolute lowest retention rate for any of the titular languages of a Union Republic (70.9 percent in 1989). The only other titular language with a retention rate of less than 90 percent is, significantly, Ukrainian (81.1 percent in 1989). By the same token, Belarusan has the highest assimilation rate to Russian of both of these two categories; this rate (28.5 percent) is on par with immigrant populations (e.g. Bulgarians, Poles) and with some of the endangered indigenous languages.

These same issues are reflected in language policy in Moldovan SSR, but with opposite results. The titular and majority language, Moldovan, is from a linguistic standpoint a dialect of Romanian and not a distinct language. Official policy treated Belarusan and Ukrainian as maximally close to Russian, at least in part to facilitate their coalescence, and at the same time taking measures to distinguish Moldovan from Romanian as much as possible. A crucial part of this was the change from Latin to Cyrillic alphabets, meaning that young Moldovans would need to learn a new alphabet to read Romanian, but not to learn Russian. These steps were intended to create a specifically Moldovan identity, thereby preventing a larger "Romanian" identity.

1. THE RUSSIAN SOVIET FEDERATE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC

The Russian Federation was initially formed in 1917 as a result of the successes of first the February Revolution and then the October Revolution that same year. The Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (the Russian SFSR) was officially established on July 10, 1918, with the ratification of the Constitution by the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets.

1.1 The Russian Language

To a certain extent the story of Soviet language policy could be seen as a discussion of the development of Russian, although the two should not be entirely equated with one another. The present section focuses on the development of Russian as the first language of ethnic Russians in the USSR; the impact of Russian as the sole lingua

franca and leading second language of the Soviet citizenry is analyzed in detail in Chapter 8. The role of Russian in the USSR cannot be overstated, as the 1989 census figures show. By 1989, some 97.8 percent of the population of the Russian SFSR declared some knowledge of spoken Russian. The figures for first-language use are even more impressive: 86.6 percent of the Soviet population claimed Russian as its mother tongue, including 144,800,000 ethnic Russians, and 18,700,000 non-Russians.

The literacy campaign (Chapter 2, section 4) was aimed not just at non-Russian nationals, but at Russians as well. While Russia had relatively higher literacy rates than some other parts of the country, long-standing class distinctions between the bourgeoisie and the peasants were reflected in the educational divide, and a large percentage of the peasant population was illiterate. Regular sound change meant that the form of the Russian Cyrillic alphabet in use at the turn of the century no longer reflected the phonetic system of the language, making a poor match between orthography and sounds. The fact that certain sounds had collapsed, and others were lost, meant that much of the spelling seemed arbitrary, and learning to read and write involved a fair amount of pure memorization. The alphabet reforms were instituted to amend this problem.[26] The reforms involve eliminating archaic letters entirely, such as the letters *jat'*, *θ* and *i*, to be replaced by *e*, *ф*, and *u*, respectively, and eliminating the use of the hard sign (ъ) at the end of words and in compounds. Certain morphological changes were proposed as well, which again involved replacing archaic forms that had been maintained in writing but lost in the spoken language. Examples are the older feminine forms of adjectives and pronouns, and archaic forms of the genitive singular of masculine and neuter adjectives.

It might be thought that alphabet reforms could not be a priority for a newly formed government, but in fact the government moved with remarkable speed in this matter. The tsarist monarchy fell on February 27, 1917, and shortly thereafter (on December 23, 1917), a decree was issued by the People's Commissariat of Education requiring all governmental and educational institutions to adopt the new orthography immediately. As of January 1, 1918, all government and state publications were required to use the new orthography.[27] The importance which the newly formed government placed on literacy is shown by the remarkable speed with which this new legislation was enacted. Alphabet reform was a high priority.

Beyond issues relating to orthography, early Soviet policy vis-à-vis Russian is twofold. First, it was concerned with coining economic and political terminology for the new Soviet state. While the roots of many of the new lexical items can be traced to tsarist Russia, it is in the Soviet period that we see an organized influx of new terminology aimed at reflecting the political spirit and beliefs of the new government. Second, language policy is marked by overt attempts at linguistic purification, namely, concentrated efforts to rid the Russian language of elements that were viewed as "impure," "undesirable" or "vulgar." The result was an early

[26]See Comrie et al. (1996: 283–307) for a more detailed discussion of orthography and punctuation, with specifics about the development of orthographic reforms in the USSR.

[27]See Chernyshev (1947: 247–248) for the text of the decree; discussion can be found in Comrie et al. (1996) or Krouglov (1999:36).