



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Language Politics and Turkmen National Identity Construction, 1880's-2000

Topic of Research:

This study examines the history of Turkmen alphabet, language content, and education reforms 1880s-present. Turkmen, like other Turkic groups, have changed their modern writing system three times (from Arabic to Latin-base (1928), to Cyrillic (1940), to Latin (1993)) and, at various times, have made multiple alphabetic changes within each script. Each alteration illustrates the politicization of language either by broad external political forces, such as Soviet nationalities policy, or internal discontent over an alphabet's ability to symbolize Turkmen identity. Recent reforms are linked to nation-building efforts. For example, in January 2000 Turkmenistan modified its alphabet for the third time since 1993, to facilitate use of Turkmen over the Internet.

My project traces the various Turkmen philosophies (linguistic, Islamic, Turkic, communist) that affected language or education reform. When Turkmen intellectuals formally began to discuss modernization, education, and literacy, they saw the alphabet and spelling as symbolic of Turkmen identity. For example, in the early 1920s Turkmen intellectuals and political actors debated whether to (1) participate in a common Turkic alphabet representative of the shared Turkic heritage, (2) maintain the original Arabic script as a marker of membership in the Islamic community, or (3) reform the alphabet and spelling specifically to distinguish Turkmen from other Turkic dialects. Discussions

about language and identity ran through the Imperial period, into the Soviet era, and continue today in independent Turkmenistan.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field:

This is the first English language study about Turkmen language reform. The work is not only topically unique, but Turkmen components of my source base combined with archival resources make this study different from Russian, German, Turkish language works on similar subjects. Moreover, this study benefits from consultation with Turkmen experts in this history, and from access to primary sources regarding post-Soviet alphabet, language and education reforms.

Approach and Research Methodology:

This study necessarily follows a linear history tracing the various alphabet, language, and education reforms and the political exigencies that influenced reformers. It is not a linguistic study, but rather examines how language is affected by many other cultural questions. It begins with the influences from pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic ideas of jadids and how the Russian empire's 1881 victory at Gök Depe secured the Turkmen lands for Russia. This becomes very important when looking at the lineage of schooling and the role of tuzemsty schools versus medreses in Central Asia. I conclude my study with the alphabet, language and education reforms sponsored by the post-Soviet Turkmen government. This study would not be complete without this final chapter. Thus, while this long duree method may seem to cover a enormous amount of history for a dissertation, the historical facts demand no less and actually serve the approach. Moreover, I expect the timeline of this study to contribute to discussions of periodization in Russian/Soviet history as it spans the traditional delineators of 1917, 1953 (Stalin's death) and 1991.

I take this study beyond the linear history to include a broad world history perspective to discuss how contemporary global themes influenced Turkmen language reform (pan-Islam, pan-Turkism, modernization, Sovietization, post-colonialism, etc.). While primary influences have stemmed from the Turkic and Islamic worlds, similar experiences with alphabet and language in Latin America, India, the Balkans, to name a few, will demonstrate that the Turkmen were confronting issues that have faced most societies at one time or another.

A rudimentary outline begins with a chapter on the late 19th-early 20th centuries discussing jadidism, early modern-Turkic cultural and education reforms and interaction with the Imperial government. This will lay the foundations for themes that will continue throughout the study and will discuss the importance of broad themes such as pan-Islam, pan-Turkism, modernization and the social role of the intellectual. It was during these years that Turks began to talk seriously about the role of alphabet as a symbol of their modern identity, as well as a major factor in education.

II. The 1920s saw the excitement of the Turkic movements merged with Soviet cultural endeavors. In 1926 Turkic languages shifted from an Arabic script to a latin-based alphabet. My discussion of this will comprise the next two chapters, focusing on the role

of the intellectual in major social and cultural movements, the points of negotiation between Turkmen intellectuals and Soviet state powers, the development of print culture and the endeavors to spread literacy. Chapter two will examine the Turkmen endeavors and their interaction with neighboring Turks. *Korenizatsiia* was a point of intense interaction between Moscow's policies and Turkmen intellectuals' aspirations. The Russian Academy of Sciences' Latinization Committee and *SredAzBiuro* archival documents aid my examination of both the ideals of *korenizatsiia* and the actual problems officials faced in implementing it. This leads to questions of administration, logistics, and Moscow's motives. Articles from the newspapers *Turkmen Medeniyeti*, *Turkmen Ili* and *Soviet Turkmenistan* as well as numerous primers and scholastic works provide insight into the Turkmen perspective during this period.

III. Chapter three will start from the 1926 Turcological Congress proceedings and the related archival documents, providing background for policy initiative, alongside the published polemics of Turkmen, showing how the peripheral intellectual leadership was reacting to these initiatives and what ideas of their own they hoped to salvage in the face of Moscow's tightening grip. The newspapers remain an important source, especially *Soviet Turkmenistan* and *Turkmenskaia Iskra*.

IV. The 1930s necessitates its own chapter because of the dramatic shifts that took place not only in 1937-38, but in Turkmenistan in the early 1930s, with the death or persecution of many intellectuals, including those who worked on alphabet reform. Those men who had found methods of accommodation and negotiation with Moscow in the 1920s found themselves labeled "nationalists" and "enemies of the state" less than a decade later. Their elimination dramatically changed the face of Turkmen cultural development. Despite these devastating circumstances, some Turkmen continued to publish—often they were the ones mudslinging, accusing colleagues sometimes even posthumously. While newspapers contribute, a series of congresses and committee meetings specifically dealing with Turkic and Muslim alphabet reform provide important sources.

V. In 1940 the latin-based script was replaced with a Cyrillic alphabet. This accompanied major changes in literary policies, indicative of larger political shifts union-wide. This chapter tackles the question of Russification and contrasts the cultural policies as related to administrative exigencies with those circumstances during *korenizatsiia*. At the 1954 Second All-Turkmen Linguistic conference complaints were heard that not enough Persian and Arabic terminology had been excised from the lexicon. These conference proceedings and the decrees lend much to a discussion of Russification versus Turkmenification during these decades.

VI. Publications by Turkmen scholars during the 1960s and 1970s, along with *Turkmenskaia Iskra*, *Turkmenistan*, and various literary works will show the status of language and education during the "era of stagnation".

VI. The mid-1980s were exciting years for Turkmen socio-linguists. The scholarly articles of this period ask pointed questions about bilingualism, state language, the role

of Russian and the primacy of Turkmen. Polemics, in many ways similar to those of the 1910s and 1920s began anew. This topic provides a good opportunity to explore the cultural policies of perestroika and glasnost' from the center while comparing them to the reaction from a periphery. And, the 1980s and 1990s demonstrated vividly that the issues of alphabet and language symbolism, the role of education, the importance of identity addressed by Turkmen in the 1880s and 1890s are still relevant today.

VII. The post-Soviet era has seen a growing intensity in nation-building efforts. In 1993 the Turkmen government passed laws to abandon the Cyrillic script and adopt a latin-based alphabet. The Turkmen chose to implement this reform over a number of years, beginning with street signs and newspaper mastheads and broadening slowly from there. The schools began with the first grades and each subsequent year expanded the focus to include the upcoming class. This allowed for the introduction in the schools to keep pace with the development of new textbooks, and teacher training. The documentation concerning alphabet, language and education reform is immense. State proclamations, president Nyýazow's speeches, teachers' manuals, academic publications and conferences are numerous. In addition to reading the written information, listening to the broadcast information and talking to Turkmen reformers, I participated in the conferences and got a sense of Turkmen methodology first hand. I believe that the diverse sources and accompanying methodology employed during these final reform eras (interviews, access to personal memory, personal libraries) that I have experienced first hand have enriched this study both in scope and in nature.

Research Sites:

Turkmenistan

Golyazmalar Institut [Manuscript Archive]

Turkmen State Library—Historical Fond

Moscow

Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA)

Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii (GARF)

Gosudarstvennaia publichnaia istoricheskaia biblioteka

Arkhiv rossiiskii akademii nauka (ARAN)

Preliminary Conclusions:

Two major shifts in my thinking occurred during this research period. The first pertains to the methods of Soviet governance and how that affected language usage and education reform in the non-Russian regions. The traditional western explanation of language shift (from local to Russian) in Central Asia focuses on Russification achieved through a menacing, “divide-and-conquer” form of administration and rule. The Moscow archives document the massive scope of Soviet administration. This is a factor that can

not be ignored when thinking about how a state would undertake social or educational reform. That is, economics and logistics must be taken into consideration along with larger cultural issues. More importantly, interaction with Russian scholars, who are extremely well versed in these topics, helped me begin to envision how my focused study fits into a larger Soviet picture.

The second shift or expansion in my research involves the details of *korenizatsiia* and the importance of education as an important means by which language policy was disseminated. The daily demands on the administration made this policy of “nativization” nearly impossible, but the energy and funds put toward it were enormous. The ideals behind it say much about Soviet policy that may betray assertions of “divide and conquer” rule. Moreover, contemporary educational policy lends much to a study focused on language and national culture. Again, the long duree approach is an appropriate method for this topic.

As a result of these findings and my conversations with scholars in Moscow and Turkmenistan, I feel that what began as a cultural history could just as accurately be defined as a history of policy. This finding in itself is useful because it demonstrates the limitations of trying to separate these categories.

Future Research Agendas:

My next project will be to interview the Turkmen who participated in the 1993-2000 alphabet reforms. While I gained from the advice and insight of these Turkmen with respect to my historical investigation, the study of how the Turkmen government, with the cooperation of scholars, undertook this most recent alphabet reform requires a separate formal study.