

## **Seize the Ё: Linguistic and Social Change in Russian Orthographic Reform**

*Eugenia Sokolskaya*

It would be convenient for linguists and language students if the written form of any language were a neutral and direct representation of the sounds emitted during speech. Instead, writing systems tend to lag behind linguistic change, retaining old spellings or morphological features instead of faithfully representing a language's phonetics. For better or worse, sometimes the writing can even cause a feedback loop, causing speakers to hypercorrect in imitation of an archaic spelling. The written and spoken forms of a language exist in a complex and fluid relationship, influenced to a large extent by history, accident, misconception, and even politics.<sup>1</sup> While in many language communities these two forms – if writing exists – are allowed to develop and influence each other in relative freedom, with some informal commentary, in some cases a willful political leader or group may step in to attempt to intentionally reform the writing system. Such reforms are a risky venture, liable to anger proponents of historic accuracy and adherence to tradition, as well as to render most if not all of the population temporarily illiterate. With such high stakes, it is no wonder that orthographic reforms are not often attempted in the course of a language's history.

The Russian language has undergone two sharply defined orthographic reforms, formulated as official government policy. The first, which we will from here on call the Petrine reform, was initiated in 1710 by Peter the Great. It defined a print alphabet for secular use, distancing the writing from the Church with its South Slavic liturgical language. The second

---

1 Н.В. Перцов. “О соотношении письменной и устной форм поэтического языка.” *Вопросы языкознания*, №2, 2008, ст. 31.

was made public in 1917<sup>2</sup> by a committee of academics sanctioned by the Provisional Government, then enforced by the Bolshevik government starting in 1918. The mixed packet of rules included in this second reform eliminated several remaining superfluous Church Slavonic letters and standardized certain spelling conventions to be more phonetic. Each of the two reforms coincided with a historical period of societal change: the Petrine reform constituted a part of the many changes imposed by Peter the Great as he forced Russia to open up to the West, while the 1917 reform saw two revolutions in the same year and remained joined in popular memory with the early period of Bolshevik rule. Both Peter's forced westernization and the two revolutions of 1917 have been remembered as violent or unnatural events; in some interpretations they are treated as aberrations in Russia's history. This same perception has also been extended to the orthographic reforms, viewed by some as an imposition contrary to the natural flow of language development. However, a closer look at the context for both reforms gives evidence for the reforms' beneficial effect in removing artificial barriers to language change.

Due to the specifics of its development, the writing system itself was one such barrier. The Cyrillic alphabet was created in Bulgaria as a version of Greek adapted to suit the phonetics of Old Church Slavonic,<sup>3</sup> the language used continually in church services since the arrival of Christianity in the Slavic world. According to Alexander M. Schenker's classification, Old Church Slavonic belongs to the Southeastern branch of the Slavic languages, as evidence by its alternative name of Old Bulgarian. Contrary to Russian popular belief, it is not merely an older form of Russian, which belongs to the Eastern group. The two languages share a common

---

2 This reform has been referred to as the 1917 reform, the 1918 reform (as per the date when it was reaffirmed by the Sovnarkom), and even, misleadingly, the Soviet reform. For the sake of consistency, in this paper it will be referred to exclusively as the 1917 reform.

3 Alexander M. Shenker, *The Dawn of Slavic: An Introduction to Slavic Philology* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 178.

ancestor in Proto-Slavic, but there is no direct line from Old Church Slavonic to Russian, since as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century Proto-Slavic was already diverging into separate dialects.<sup>4</sup> As a liturgical language, Church Slavonic is extremely conservative, allowing almost no phonetic change over time. The Russian vernacular, meanwhile, had been developing freely for several centuries.

Not only was the alphabet created for a different language, literature was written primarily in Church Slavonic, or in its East Slavic recension. Although the exact interaction between Church Slavonic and medieval Russian is hard to pin down in retrospect, Ian Press points out that Church Slavonic was “not just a liturgical language (any written language of the time had, with only slight exaggeration, to be connected with non-secular topics), but also the language of culture.”<sup>5</sup> During Kievan Rus', there appears to have still been some mutual influence between Church Slavonic and East Slavonic, but in later centuries Church Slavonic remained static while continuing to influence the lexicon and syntax of Russian. Even legal texts and private letters, in theory separate from church writings or from high culture, in practice consisted of a mix between spoken Russian vernacular and Church Slavonicisms. Phonetically, however, the Russian of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was far removed from the unchanging language of church service.

In the two centuries before Peter's reforms, the Church's hold on literary language was steadily weakening. The rise of the centralized Moscow state fueled the development and spread of a non-religious legal style for writing laws and decrees, a secular purpose outside the influence of the church.<sup>6</sup> With the growth of the bureaucracy, scribes developed a separate script for business needs, known as *prikaznoy* ('chancery'), a flowery cursive that can be written much

---

4 *Ibid.*, 68-71.

5 Ian Press, *A History of the Russian Language and its Speakers* (Munich: Lincom Europa, 2007), 7.

6 А.И. Ефимов, *История русского литературного языка* (Москва: Учпедгиз, 1957), 85

faster than the meditative, thick letters of religious inscriptions. This legal style was terse and somewhat stilted, not quite matching ordinary speech, so “by the end of the sixteenth century there were two established forms of written Russian—[the legal style] and the Russian variant (recension or redaction) of Church Slavonic [...] – both 'vying not only with the still-evolving vernacular but also with each other.’”<sup>7</sup> In addition to the bureaucratic style, other forms of literary expression began to appear during the Muscovite period. Aleksandr Ivanovich Efimov counts four new styles, including the “publicistic” (newspaper and public speech), instructional (professional guidebooks), popular scientific (accounts of interesting natural phenomena or travel logs), and letter-writing, in addition to changes in the properties of existing modes of expression, such as chronicles, petitions, legal documents, epic poems, and even hagiographies.<sup>8</sup> As written documents became relevant to more and more aspects of everyday life, the tension between the static, artistic Church Slavonic alphabet and the dynamic, versatile forms of existing common speech began to make it difficult to transfer from spoken to written language and vice versa.

To make matters worse, this was also the period of the Second South Slavic Influence, when the Turkish invasion of the Balkans led to an influx of South Slavs into Muscovy, with the metropolitan Cyprian among them. Cyprian was the driving force behind a correction of the Orthodox liturgical texts, in an attempt to bring them back to the original forms of Old Church Slavonic.<sup>9</sup> This intentional distancing of the orthography from contemporary Russian speech and written traditions exacerbated existing tensions, as Efimov points out: “Orthography, to put it poetically, is 'language's old-fashioned and ill-fitting dress'; it does not usually keep up with the development of natural speech. But if orthography is, in addition, made more archaic, if older

---

7 James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 32

8 А.И. ЕФИМОВ, *История русского литературного языка* (Москва: Учпедгиз, 1957), 86

9 *Ibid.*, 104. Translation mine.

forms are intentionally restored in writing, then the development of language will be somewhat slowed down.”<sup>10</sup> As Efimov goes on to mention, the written language has only limited influence on the natural changes occurring in language, but this intentional alteration of the most respected style of writing spurred debates about the relationship between preserving historical ties and representing the actual sounds of speech. Inevitably, the orthographic reform of Peter's time – at this point not all that far off – drew on these debates.

As a culmination to this gradual weakening of the church's cultural preeminence, Peter's reforms institutionalized the dominance of politics over religion. According to the *Ecclesiastical Regulation* of 1721, the church would be administered like a government department, making it entirely subordinate to the emperor, as part of what James Cracraft calls “the bureaucratic revolution.” The church became a casualty of Peter's drive to centralize, since the patriarch's authority may have, at times, supplanted that of the secular monarch, or so it seemed to Peter. In the *Regulation*, among the reasons for why this new organization should be supported, Peter's loyal cleric Feofan Prokopovich writes:

For the simple folk do not understand how different ecclesiastical authority is from the autocratic, but dazzled by the great honor and glory of the supreme pastor, they think that such a ruler is a second sovereign, equal in power to the autocrat or even bigger than he, and that the ecclesiastical order is another and better state. Thus the people are used so much to reasoning among themselves... so that in some matters they look not so much to their autocrat as to the supreme pastor. And when they hear of some dispute between them, they blindly and stupidly take sides with the ecclesiastical rather than the secular ruler.<sup>11</sup>

The reorganization of the church as just one of many government departments – along with an abolition of the patriarchy – sent a clear message that religious authority was no longer

---

10 *Ibid.*, 105.

11 Feofan Prokopovich, *Ecclesiastical Regulation* (1721), quoted in James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 178.

meant to be a major force in Russian society. Building on the already emerging secular genres of literature and journalism intended to inform or entertain, this change definitively extracted writing from out of the dominion of the church, delegating the archaic-sounding forms of Church Slavonic to high poetic styles.<sup>12</sup>

Another blow to traditional patterns of literacy was the advent of printing. The first printed book in Russia is traditionally thought to be Ivan Fedorov's *Apostle* in 1564, although in the *Apostle* itself there is mention of previously published books. Several hundred books were printed in Russia from the beginning until 1700 – a very small amount relative to European printing – mostly religious books published at the Printing House in Moscow, subject to the authority of the patriarch. Despite this slow start, the presence of a new technology gradually changed the nature of literacy. Movable type requires standardization and simplification, which, unlike Cyprian's regressive corrections, applies directly to the day-to-day reading and writing of Russia's literate population. Before the advent of printing, orthography was very chaotic, often slipping into phonetic representations, as Efimov recounts: “Even under Alexei Mikhailovich decrees would state: if a petitioner writes *a* for *o* or *i* for *e*, do not make too much trouble for him.”<sup>13</sup> To ensure that the same text would be printed in the same way in various locations, a standard orthography was needed. Furthermore, the existing Cyrillic script involved a large number of diacritical marks, ligatures, and variable punctuation, possibly to maintain the elite status of religiously-educated scribes.<sup>14</sup> Although books printed before Peter's reign managed to make use of this complicated script, it was not convenient for mass production, especially since

---

12 Анатолий Алексеев, “Семантическое снижение как отражение социальной структуры в русском языке XVIII века.” *Russian Linguistics*. Vol. 4, 1978.

13 А.И. Ефимов, *История русского литературного языка* (Москва: Учпедгиз, 1957), 106. Translation mine. The specific pairs of letters refer to the change in quality of unstressed vowels, a northern feature which had become standard with the rise of Moscow's influence.

14 James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 26

many of the marks were superfluous, while ligatures, often used to save copyists time, would not be as useful given the relative speed of a printing press.

At the same time, Peter's bureaucratic reform required a large body of educated and professional bureaucrats, while other reforms, primarily in military matters, required a mass of new knowledge to be readily available to anyone involved in the government. As Peter's reforms progressed, he began to realize the volume of printing that would be needed to satisfy his informational needs: after all, he was attempting to import an entire culture, with a long history of scientific discovery. After a century and a half of neglect, the printing industry finally received official sanction and patronage: Peter set up paper mills to avoid importing paper during the Swedish War, founded new printing houses, and invited Dutch printers to train Russian apprentices.<sup>15</sup> This expansion of printing exacerbated an existing problem of inadequate script, and Peter took on the challenge of fixing it as well. Fedor Polikarpov, a copy editor and director at the Moscow Printing House, recalled that Peter “wished to publish by printed means, for the instruction of youth in science, books civil, military, architectural, manufactural, and historical, and to this fine end was pleased to design by his own untiring labor and care a new abecedarium, or alphabet, which to this day is used in all civil matters.”<sup>16</sup> Notably, church books maintained a majority in the printing industry and their previous orthography, since the orthodox nature of the texts required orthographic precision and unchanged content as a matter of religious devotion and purity.<sup>17</sup>

In concrete terms, the new script was a joint effort by Peter and Dutch and Russian printers that spanned the first decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The process began with a charter issued by Peter to a Dutch merchant, Jan Tessing, which allowed Tessing to print any non-religious

---

15 *Ibid.*, 260.

16 Fedor Polikarpov in *ibid.*, 267.

17 *Ibid.*, 264, 266.

books and sell them in Russia. For Tessing's purposes a new Russian font was created, consisting of merely 28 simplified letters, styled after Western printing fonts. According to James Cracraft, the books published by Tessing were not in wide circulation in Russia and had little impact directly on the reading public. However, these books with their simplified alphabet set a precedent for Peter and his printers as they worked towards a single alphabet in 1706-1710. The tsar took a very active role in the process, to the point where it has been claimed by contemporaries (see Polikarpov's comment above) and historians that he solved the script problem single-handedly. Peter commissioned samples of new fonts from Dutch and Russian printers, sending manuscripts with various "hands" (scripts) for type to be cast. He would then review the samples, crossing out letter shapes he thought were too complicated, sometimes eliminating entire letters, as in the following note on an alphabet book (*azbuka*) from 1710: "Print historical and manufactural books with these letters. And those [letters] that are crossed out, do not use them in the aforesaid books."<sup>18</sup> With each round of new corrections, books would be printed with the latest version of the new civil type, and many would also end up on Peter's desk for editing, giving him new ideas for changes to the script. By January 1710, with the corrections made to the *azbuka* mentioned above, the civil script had taken on a relatively well-defined shape and was mostly to Peter's satisfaction, although minor changes continued to be made for the rest of his reign.<sup>19</sup>

The new typeface was inextricably linked with the subject matter of the books in which it appeared. Since religious books were still printed in the old Cyrillic script, initially the new script was used primarily in educational materials and newspapers. Such books were full of loanwords and calques from Western languages, matching the Western look of the new letters.

---

18 Quoted in *ibid.*, 272.

19 *Ibid.*, 264-272.



Newspapers were a novel concept entirely, a form of communication which only very briefly appeared in the old script. Peter's invention became the standard for all writing related to his reforms, so if anyone wanted to be up to date on the newest developments in this rapidly changing society, their first task would be to learn the script, educate themselves with some Western instructional books, and begin reading newspapers. Thus, the script was a symbol of change and a gateway to Peter's new society – but, as we have seen, it was not just Peter's idea to reform the writing system. Russian society was already changing in the period leading up to his time, the use of writing had broadened and diversified. Historians may argue about whether the Petrine Revolution had a beneficial or detrimental effect on the course of Russian history, but in terms of language it appears that his decisive action was a much-needed solution to a growing problem.

However, Peter left some issues unresolved, while others resurfaced as Russian continued to develop. James Cracraft mentions in passing that while the script was being reformed, orthographic instability continued.<sup>20</sup> There is no evidence of an attempt to standardize spelling, despite the need for standard spelling mentioned above with regards to printing. Even Peter's own writing was a disorderly mix, similar to his father's. At the time, writes V.V. Vinogradov, the speech of the capital was not standardized, either. Moscow set the tone, but Moscow speech was not well-defined, incorporating various proportions of dialect features from all over the country. In addition, the influence of the Orthodox Church and its written tradition, although diminished, was still a significant force. In educated circles, “church pronunciation, which in principle aimed for utmost precision in recreating the graphic forms of the written text [...], would burst into the sphere of influence of day-to-day language and mix in with its phonetic

---

20 *Ibid.*, 271.

differentiations.”<sup>21</sup> Some would even show off by speaking in Church Slavonic – and it appears that they were still understood. Despite the wide gulf between the forms of Church Slavonic and contemporary Russian, and the gradual abandonment of the term “Slavic” to refer to Russian, Church Slavonic continued to influence both speech and writing, to the point of reversing some of Peter's changes. V.V. Vinogradov acknowledges the symbolic meaning of the development of a civil alphabet, but points out that “concessions were soon made in favor of the Slavic alphabet: accent stress marks show up, the [monograph uk]<sup>22</sup> and  $\bar{w}$  return, 'i' is always written with two dots,  $v$  gradually comes into use.”<sup>23</sup> Vinogradov stresses the mixed nature of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Russian, in which there remained a “fetish” for Church Slavonic in upper, literate levels of society. Russian spelling remained relatively chaotic and unregulated until the publication of Ya. K. Grot's manual “Russian spelling” in 1885, and even then the manual had only limited acceptance and no official authority.<sup>24</sup>

The letters 'uk' and 'ot,' which Vinogradov mentions, disappeared rather quickly. However, several distinctly Slavonic letters remained in Cyrillic: the aforementioned  $v$  (izhitsa),  $\text{ѣ}$  (yat'), the Western-looking  $\text{ѣ}$  (i-desyaterichnoye, a naming based on its numerical value), and  $\text{ѣ}$  (fita). While most the other letters in Cyrillic also had roots in Slavonic, these four stood out because their pronunciations had merged with existing letters. Izhitsa and fita were reserved for loan words: fita was distinct from  $\text{ф}$  only in that it represented the 'f' sound in Greek words, while izhitsa was the equivalent of a Latin 'v', with the same variable pronunciation of 'v' or 'u,'

---

21 В.В. Виноградов, *Очерки по истории русского литературного языка XVII-XIX веков* (Москва: Высшая школа, 1982), 74.

22 Unfortunately, earlier Unicode fonts only render the digraph  $\text{oy}$  (also called  $\text{uk}$ ), whereas what Vinogradov is referring to is the monograph, which looks somewhat like the modern 'y' with a circle for a tail. It appears that my operating system does not support more recent additions to Unicode.

23 П.П. Пекарский, *Наука и литература при Петре Великом*, т. 2, с. 645, quoted in В.В. Виноградов, *Очерки по истории русского литературного языка XVII-XIX веков* (Москва: Высшая школа, 1982), 91.

24 Bernard Comrie, Gerald Stone, and Maria Polinsky, *The Russian Language in the Twentieth Century*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 284.

depending on its position. I-desyaterichnoye was homophonous with 'и,' while yat' was homophonous with 'e', but unlike izhitsa and fita both carried semantic meaning: until 1917, there were minimal pairs in which the use of yat' versus modern 'e' and i-desyaterichnoye versus modern 'и' would change the meaning of the word.<sup>25</sup> Why did Peter not eliminate these letters? The answer depends to a large extent on when their pronunciations merged, and there is still much debate over the exact timing of the merger.

The case with izhitsa and fita is simple. By their definition, they never had distinct phonetic values, and had only etymological significance. Peter did not eliminate these two letters, merely simplifying them to look like theta and 'v,'<sup>26</sup> possibly because, unlike certain Cyrillic letters, they still resembled Western letters, and that aesthetic quality may have been more important to Peter than phonetic concerns. These two letters gradually disappeared on their own, without significant government effort. As early as the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century they were already unwelcome even in the writing of educated people; in 1850 there were calls to get rid of them, and the izhitsa was last seen around that time, while the fita survived long enough to be explicitly banned by the 1917 reform.

Based on some sources, it would appear that for some speakers 'e' and yat' were merged either during Peter's reign or slightly afterwards. Dr. A. A. Sokolsky characterizes Lomonosov's high style as distinct from lower styles in that “the sounds 'Ѣ' and 'e' were pronounced differently,”<sup>27</sup> implying that in day-to-day Russian they were already merged. He does not, however, expound on how exactly the two sounds differed, and how people reading the high style, a written form, could be aware of their difference. G.I. Shklyarevsky, in his discussion of

---

25 Н.В. Перцов. “О соотношении письменной и устной форм поэтического языка.” *Вопросы языкознания*, №2, 2008, ст. 33-34.

26 “Old and new Russian alphabet with notations made by Peter the Great,” A.A. Sokolsky, *A History of the Russian Language* (Madrid: Taravilla, 1965), 116.

27 A.A. Sokolsky, *A History of the Russian Language* (Madrid: Taravilla, 1965), 124.

the significance of V.K. Trediakovsky in the development of Russian literary language, gives much stronger evidence that the two sounds had merged. He cites Trediakovsky's 1748 work "Conversation between a foreigner and a Russian about old and new orthography, and all that pertains to this matter," in which Trediakovsky criticizes Church Slavonic's inadequacy in representing contemporary Russian and proposes a new orthography, which would merge many Church Slavonic letters. On the other hand, Shklyarevsky also points out that Trediakovsky's new phonetic spelling was not widely supported "because at the beginning of the XVIII century one could not yet speak of any consolidated orthographic norms in the Russian literary language, and the transition to phonetic spelling principles would have caused significant variation,"<sup>28</sup> which would be the exact opposite of the desired effect. Shklyarevsky does not specify what the variation would be, but in the mixed linguistic community of 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia, it was likely that some still retained the distinction between 'e' and yat', and perhaps between other letters as well.

Russian grammarians continued to insist on differences between 'e' and yat' for the next two centuries, with the occasional author claiming that they were phonetically equivalent. N.V. Pertsov provides the most thorough summary of the irregular progression towards admitting the letters' equivalence.<sup>29</sup> Lomonosov (1755), Kurganov (1769), and Barsov (1780) all claim that 'e' and yat' are phonetically distinct, particularly for Ukrainians (*malorossy*), where the yat' is either pronounced as a diphthong [je] or collapses into [i]. They do admit that for some speakers the sounds have merged, but also stress the semantic weight of the two graphemes, as an argument for why they should remain in force despite the merger. Sokolov (1792), on the other hand, says

---

28 Г.И. Школяревский, *История русского литературного языка (первая половина XVIII века)* (Харьков: Издательство Харьковского университета, 1968), 47-48.

29 Н.В. Перцов. "О соотношении письменной и устной форм поэтического языка." *Вопросы языкознания*, №2, 2008, 37-38.

the letters are different in usage, not in pronunciation; although 16 years later, Born (1808) regresses to distinguishing the two, claiming that yat' is pronounced like a German 'ee' (based on his name, it is safe to assume he has German roots, hence the German examples). From then on, according to Pertsov's summary, grammarians continue to assert the semantic and syntactic distinction between the two letters, but no longer claim a difference phonetically.

This debate is further complicated by the feedback loop between written and spoken language. In the words of Ya. K. Grot, “changes in script do lead to changes in speech, and although really people write as they speak, it can often be the other way around, where they speak as they write.”<sup>30</sup> We cannot be certain that when an 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup>-century source writes that 'e' and yat' were distinct, he is referring to the phonetic properties of the two sounds. He may be intending to speak only of the semantic difference, or, in accordance with Grot's observation, the written convention may be influencing his perception of the two letters, causing him not to notice their lack of phonetic distinction. However, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no question that the pronunciations had merged for the majority of standard speakers, and the use of these separate letters was purely etymological, introducing unnecessary difficulty into the spelling system.

The other noticeably superfluous letter in pre-Revolutionary orthography was the hard sign, ъ, also known by its traditional name, jer. The jer (along with its palatalized counterpart, the jer') had a long history in Slavic languages. Schenker traces their origins from Proto-Slavic short high vowels ĭ and ŭ, where in a long process of shortenings and qualitative distinctions the jers obtained their own phonemic value.<sup>31</sup> Based on some of his examples, it would appear that

---

30 Я.К. Грот, quoted, in original orthography, in Н.В. Перцов. “О соотношении письменной и устной форм поэтического языка.” Вопросы языкознания, №2, 2008, ст. 31. Translation mine.

31 Alexander M. Shenker, *The Dawn of Slavic: An Introduction to Slavic Philology* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 97, 99.

the jers, when in stressed (strong) positions, later opened back up into full vowels in Modern Russian, with the palatal jer (jer') changing into a front vowel and the hard jer changing into a back vowel, usually 'o' (for example, Late Proto-Slavic дѣнь → Modern Russian день, 'day'; Late Proto-Slavic сѣнь → Modern Russian сон(ъ), 'sleep'). There is therefore some truth to the linguistically strange comment made in 1827: “Regarding the semi-vowels one must note that ъ is half of the vowel 'o', while ь or й are halves of the vowel 'и.’”<sup>32</sup> The palatal jer' retained some phonetic value, as it indicated the palatalization of the preceding consonant in the absence of a palatal vowel. In words like сонъ (the pre-Revolutionary spelling of 'sleep'), the final jer gives no additional phonetic information, since the phonetic minimal pair of сон versus сонъ in Modern Russian shows that the absence of a jer' already indicates hardness. As a vestige of the open syllable nature of Proto-Slavic, the now-unnecessary final jer was present in most if not all words ending in a consonant, making it one of the more visible archaisms of pre-Revolutionary Russian orthography.

The first active calls for reform came from members of the teaching profession, since they were the ones responsible for imparting the rules of this somewhat redundant spelling system to children encountering it for the first time. Under the leadership of scholars F.F. Fortunatov and A.A. Shakhmatov, the movement towards reform gradually took shape. On April 12, 1904, a Commission on the Question of Russian Orthography, organized by the Academy of Sciences, met to discuss the matter, voting in favor of reform and the abolition of some of the letters mentioned above. It then set up a subcommission to work out further details. With a long interruption following the 1905 revolution, the subcommission finally published its *Resolutions of the Orthographic Subcommission* in 1912, which was to become the basis for the actual

---

32 Греч (1827), as quoted in Н.В. Перцов. “О соотношении письменной и устной форм поэтического языка.” *Вопросы языкознания*, №2, 2008, 34.

implementation of reform in 1917. Despite the political instability of the time, those involved were convinced that the timing was perfect: according to a letter from the All-Russian Congress of Teachers of Russian in Secondary Schools, “the difficult circumstances of the time we are living through not only cannot constitute an obstacle to the realization of reform, but on the contrary demand a drastic elimination of everything that up to now has prevented the broad development of popular education.”<sup>33</sup> After the fall of the monarchy, the Ministry of Popular Education sent out directives to the schools to implement these new orthographic rules; the fate of the reform was sealed when the People's Commissariat of Education issued a decree ordering the immediate transition to the new orthography in government and educational institutions, as well as in all printed materials.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout this progression towards eventual reform there were voices of opposition for various reasons: linguistic, historic, and political. One source of opposition would stem from the real linguistic significance of a change in orthography: linguists or grammarians who had worked extensively with Russian and who were aware of the semantic weight of the various letters, or who were convinced that declensional endings had to be kept constant for clarity, may have pointed to these distinctions as an argument for the preservation of traditional orthography. In practice, the majority of opposition opinions had more to do with other social or political antagonisms in Russian society. For Slavophiles, the traditional orthography, especially letters associated with Church Slavonic, represented a connection with the idealized Russian roots they held dear, the uniqueness of traditional Russian culture independent of Western influence.<sup>35</sup> This is likely to be

---

33 Bernard Comrie, Gerald Stone, and Maria Polinsky, *The Russian Language in the Twentieth Century*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 288.

34 *Ibid.*, 284-290.

35 While the Slavophiles consider Church Slavonic to be one of Russian's roots, other voices at the same time scorn “Slavic” influence as foreign: cf. Mayakovsky's expressed hatred of “everything ancient, everything ecclesiastic, everything Slavic.” Quoted in И.П. Прядко, “Орфографическая реформа 1918 года и ее

the reason for, notably, Leo Tolstoy's opposition to the reform, considering his obsession with traditional Russian culture as represented by the peasants. Furthermore, the imperial government, ignoring linguistics entirely and heeding the opposition views of the Slavophiles, opposed any reform whatsoever, viewing it as an attack on the established order and therefore on the basis of their power.<sup>36</sup> The situation had been made political, as a member of the Orthographic Commission noted: “Although orthography itself has no relation to political parties, nonetheless conservatives are wont to see libertinism in deviance from the usual forms (for example, in the absence of ъ), and, along with their other idols, thought it worthwhile to protect the ancient letters as well.”<sup>37</sup> Like a religious cult, the conservative ministers were inclined to see an attack on the whole in a call for minor reform, even at the expense of better serving the population's educational needs. It is for this reason that the reform was stalled until the fall of the monarchy, although the Provisional Government also had its occasional objections: as soon as the new Minister of Education ordered the implementation of the reform in schools, there was a backlash from civil servants “who claimed that there were more important educational issues than spelling reform,” while rumors spread that the reform was not to be implemented after all, despite denial of these rumors by the Ministry.<sup>38</sup> It was therefore up to the Bolsheviks to take definitive action on the orthographic reform.

The new Soviet government did much more than just publish a decree ordering the transition to the new reform. As they spread literacy through propaganda campaigns and support

---

социокультурные последствия. Опыт культурологического анализа последствий одной реформы русского литературно-письменного языка.” *Русская ассоциация чтения* (Sept 2010), 20.

36 Bernard Comrie, Gerald Stone, and Maria Polinsky, *The Russian Language in the Twentieth Century*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 285.

37 Р.Ф. Брандт, quoted in И.П. Прядко, “Орфографическая реформа 1918 года и ее социокультурные последствия. Опыт культурологического анализа последствий одной реформы русского литературно-письменного языка.” *Русская ассоциация чтения* (Sept 2010), 8. Translation mine.

38 Bernard Comrie, Gerald Stone, and Maria Polinsky, *The Russian Language in the Twentieth Century*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 290.



for public education, they were certain to make it clear that the new orthography was more than a linguistic rule – it was a symbol of a new era, a new way of thinking. In a time of sharp revolutionary rhetoric and condemnation of the pre-Revolutionary “bourgeois” culture, when almost every aspect of life was grouped into “revolutionary” or “counter-revolutionary,” the old orthography was quickly dumped into the “counter-revolutionary” box. From a matter of literacy the issue turned into one of ideology, according to I.P. Pryadko: “The pre-Revolutionary corpus of books, just by virtue of its orthography, became, in the perception of masses raised by the Bolsheviks, outdated and ideologically inadequate. Books with jers and yat's had by then become artifacts of a bygone era.”<sup>39</sup> In some cases, the identification of letters as counterrevolutionary got out of hand, and when in the late 1920s the jer was allowed back into print publications (in the middles of words, where up until then an apostrophe had been used), “some objected to the restoration of what they regarded as a pre-Revolutionary letter.”<sup>40</sup>

The opposition to Soviet rule also played into this perception of the orthography as a symbol for political loyalties. Newspapers continued to print in the old orthography, although not for long – in 1918 the opposition press was closed down by the Bolsheviks.<sup>41</sup> *Emigré* communities and publications also avoided the new rules, some as a conscious decision and some for lack of re-education.<sup>42</sup> Possibly the longest holdout in Russia itself was the Academy of Sciences, which continued to be relatively independent for almost the first decade of Soviet rule.

---

39 И.П. Прядко, “Орфографическая реформа 1918 года и ее социокультурные последствия. Опыт культурологического анализа последствий одной реформы русского литературно-письменного языка.” *Русская ассоциация чтения* (Sept 2010), 9. Translation mine.

40 Bernard Comrie, Gerald Stone, and Maria Polinsky, *The Russian Language in the Twentieth Century*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 295. The prevalence of the apostrophe even where it had not been intended by the 1917/1918 decrees was in part due to the fact that, previously, Soviet forces had, in some places, confiscated the “types and matrices” for the outdated letters, including ъ, as a response to printers who disobeyed the decrees.

41 *Ibid.*, 295.

42 *Ibid.*, 10. Since the fall of the Soviet Union I have also seen copies of *Законъ Божій* printed in the old orthography, but it is unclear whether those are reprints of the imperial-era textbook or new books made to look archaic.

A review of the volumes of *Sborniki* from the Russian/USSR Academy of Sciences shows that the texts and articles were published in the old orthography until sometime in 1926, at which point there is an abrupt switch – in both academic content and front matter – to new spellings.<sup>43</sup> This coincides approximately with the crackdown on the independence of the Academy and its integration into the power structures of the Soviet government.

This explicit connection between the 1917 reform and the new communist order is why in many sources – even recent ones, including, for example, the 2010 article by Pryadko (see below) – the Bolsheviks are credited with the entirety of the 1917 reform,<sup>44</sup> even though its origins are to be found well before the Revolution. The use of new orthography as a symbol is also observed in the Petrine reform, where, as we noted above, new subject matter and new orthography went hand in hand. Pryadko goes so far as to claim that “like Peter, the initiators of the reform – the Bolsheviks – consciously worked towards disrupting the mechanisms of communication between generations. According to the conception of the country's new leaders, the reform was supposed to remove all literature published before the Revolution from the reading material of people who became literate after the reform.”<sup>45</sup> It does seem likely that such was the Bolsheviks' goal – although as a person literate in modern, post-1917 Russian, I can testify that pre-Revolutionary orthography is not all that unreadable – but in comparing their intentions with Peter's Pryadko exaggerates to some extent. The October Revolution was, at least in theory, a fundamental break from the past, and in the following months and years the Soviet government went to much

---

43 *Известия отделения русского языка и словесности Императорской академии наук* and *Известия отделения русского языка и словесности Российской академии наук*, (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1964). See volumes for 1916-1928.

44 А.И. Кайдалова и И.К. Калинина. “Краткие сведения из истории русской орфографии.” *Современная русская орфография*. Москва: Высшая школа, 1973. See also the brief mention or conspicuous silence of Matthews 1953 and Efimov 1957.

45 И.П. Прядко, “Орфографическая реформа 1918 года и ее социокультурные последствия. Опыт культурологического анализа последствий одной реформы русского литературно-письменного языка.” *Русская ассоциация чтения* (Sept 2010), 9. Translation mine.

trouble to discredit manifestations of the old order, including the old orthography. Peter, on the other hand, had no intention of abolishing the Orthodox Church entirely, but only of subordinating it, and in his charter to Jan Tessing he made sure to specify that church books were to remain outside of Tessing's privilege as an independent publishing enterprise.<sup>46</sup> Peter did not mean to influence the readability of church literature, or entirely disenfranchise those who were literate in Church Slavonic; he simply had another purpose in mind for a simple, printable Western-style alphabet, separate from the authority of the church – and it was the autonomy of his new civil script that by itself constituted an attack on the *status quo*. Peter went no further than that.

Despite this difference in the scale of change and destruction, there are many common elements between the Petrine and the 1917 spelling reforms. As we have mentioned before, both reforms became a part of larger changes in Russian society, either from the top down or from the bottom up. In each case an older authority was swept away, unseated, or diminished in power, along with the societal order that provided its power base. However, as we have shown, these societal changes were not, as is commonly believed, the cause of the language reforms, but rather a convenient time to carry them out, as pointed out by the 1917 letter from the Teachers' Congress. Both in 1700 and 1904 the existing written language was recognized as inadequate, due to natural changes in the way Russian society used language: pronunciations had changed over time, newer styles of writing needed new forms of expression, while more and more sections of society were becoming literate and acquiring access to written material. The decisive action of reformers, conveniently placed within the context of greater change, proved to be a blessing, not a curse, an aid, not an impediment, to the natural development of the Russian language.

---

46 James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 264.

## Bibliography

- Comrie, Bernard, Gerald Stone, and Maria Polinsky. *The Russian Language in the Twentieth Century*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Cracraft, James. *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Matthews, W.K. *The Structure and Development of Russian*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953.
- Press, Ian. *A History of the Russian Language and its Speakers*. Munich: Lincom Europa, 2007.
- Sokolsky, A.A. *A History of the Russian Language*. Madrid: Taravilla, 1965.
- Schenker, Alexander M. *The Dawn of Slavic: An Introduction to Slavic Philology* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Алексеев, Анатолий. “Семантическое снижение как отражение социальной структуры в русском языке XVIII века.” *Russian Linguistics*. Vol. 4, 1978.
- Виноградов, В.В. *Очерки по истории русского литературного языка XVII-XIX веков*. Издание третье. Москва: Высшая школа, 1982.
- Ефимов, А.И. *История русского литературного языка*. Москва: Учпедгиз, 1957.
- Известия отделения русского языка и словесности Императорской академии наук and Известия отделения русского языка и словесности Российской академии наук*. Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1964.
- Кайдалова, А.И. и И.К. Калинина. *Современная русская орфография*. Москва: Высшая школа, 1973.
- Перцов, Н.В. “О соотношении письменной и устной форм поэтического языка.” *Вопросы языкознания*. 2 (2008): 30-56.

Прядко, И.П. “Орфографическая реформа 1918 года и ее социокультурные последствия.

Опыт культурологического анализа последствий одной реформы русского  
литературно-письменного языка.” *Русская ассоциация чтения*. Сент. 2010.

Шкляревский, Г.И. *История русского литературного языка*. Харьков: Издательство