

# HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## RUSSIAN SCRIPT

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*“Being still pagans, the Slavs did not have their own letters, but read and communicated by means of tallies and sketches. After their baptism they were forced to use Roman and Greek letters in the transcription of their Slavic words but these were not suitable ... At last, God, in his love for mankind, sent them St. Constantine the Philosopher, called Cyril, a learned and upright man, who composed for them thirty-eight letters, some (24 of them) similar to the Greek, but some (14 of them) different, suitable to express Slavic sounds”*

*Chernorizets Hrabar (An Account of Letters)*

**Overview** A writing system is a pivotal element in the historical evolution of a language. The writing system is the only means that allows people to communicate with visual symbols, document information about history, culture, people etc. that can be used and read in the future. Writing also brings power and civilization to modern societies by making it possible to transmit knowledge and information, and it aids in political and social growth in that sense it plays a major part in how modern civilization came to be.

### ANCIENT PERIOD

Before alphabets were invented, ancient cultures used pictographic symbols to communicate with each other, and so did the Eastern Slavic people. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, concerning the use of letters in ancient Russia, the Arab traveler Ibn-Fadlan describes an Eastern Slavic funeral where the grave poles carried the names of the dead. However, it is not clear what letters were used for this purpose and whether it was an original script of the Eastern Slavs.

### POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

Writing was not known to the Pagan Rus' and only came to Rus' in the wake of Vladimir I's Christianization process that began in 988. It was the two Slavic speaking Byzantine brothers and missionaries, Saints Konstantinos (Cyril) and Methodios, sent by the Emperor Michael III from Constantinople to Moravia in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century who devised the first alphabet, *Glagolitic*, for the Slavs. When Cyril and Methodios died, Methodios' successors were forced by the Catholic clergy to move to the south of Bulgaria, and Clement of Ochrid and Konstantine of Preslav continued to work on an alphabet, called *Cyrillic*, that was closely based on the Greek alphabet. Later on, the Cyrillic alphabet used by the Eastern Slavs was adapted to some changes in spoken language.

The first Cyrillic writing style was called *ustav* (uncial), characterized by sharp, geometric letters. *Semi-ustav* (half-uncial) distinguished by more roundish letters and the frequent use of ligatures, diacritics, and stress marks along with various abbreviations and contractions was the second type of writing which was developed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. *Cursive writing*, was used in the 15<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> centuries, was the third writing system and is characterized by letters partially linked to one another.

### EARLY MODERN PERIOD

**Orthographic reform:** By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Russian language has undergone an orthographic reform. The existing Cyrillic alphabet still had archaic features that belonged to Church Slavonic, and consisted of 43 letters, over half of which were Greek. During the modernization and secularization period, Peter the Great introduced a simplified *civil script* (Grazhdanskiy shrift) in 1708. This modernized version of the ancient Cyrillic alphabet helped to distance modern writing from the Church. Many of the old Cyrillic letters were replaced by new letters and phonetically unnecessary Greek letters such as  $\theta$ ,  $\xi$ ,  $\psi$ ,  $\nu$  as well as all diacritics and accents were thrown out. The new civil script was utilized in secular writings such as textbooks

and works on mathematics, geography, artillery, and military science etc. However, the Russian Orthodox Church continued to use the Church-Slavonic alphabet. After Peter founded printing houses in Moscow and Petersburg, he instituted standardized symbols for the Russian alphabet to make printing easier. The geometry text book issued in 1708 was the first book printed in the civil Russian alphabet.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Empire imposed mandatory usage of the Cyrillic alphabet for non-Russian communities, such as the Baltic and Central Asia as part of the Russification policy.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY

With the reforms introduced by the Assembly for Considering Simplification of the Orthography were implemented by the Ministry for Popular Education in 1918, the new orthography was purged of all the old characters, and the authorities enforced the use of standard spelling and usage.

This new orthographic reform threw out, for example, letters like *ѣ*, and *ѣ* from the Cyrillic alphabet. A reform of Russian spelling carried out by Aleksey Shakhmatov, removed more letters from the Russian orthography; the letter *yat* (ѣ) was replaced with *e*, and the hard sign *yer* (ъ) was dropped at the end of a word.

This orthographic reform was intended to increase literacy among native speakers of Russian and speakers of Russian as a second-language and to spread socialist ideology to the citizenry.

Increased Russification, compulsory Russian instruction, the obligatory replacement of Latin-based alphabets with the Cyrillic alphabet regardless of phonetic appropriateness, and the standardization of orthography were all imposed on all citizens of the Soviet Union to form a unified Soviet national identity. This Cyrillization process was completed in 1941. The Soviet Union was a multinational and multilingual entity, and many languages remained without writing. It was necessary to create new alphabets, but this was a major problem for people who did not yet know any script. Specifically, in Central Asia switching from the Arabic to the Latin, and then to the Cyrillic alphabet became a major factor in cultural orientation. After the centralized political system was firmly established, the policy of building a socialist system and spreading ideology in those countries led to the rise of the role of the Russian language and of the obligatory usage of the Cyrillic script.

## Discussion/Questions

1. What radical changes did Peter the Great introduce to distance the existing Cyrillic alphabet from the Church Slavonic alphabet?
2. Why did the Soviets give up the Latin-based Russian alphabet proposed by Lenin? Why did Latinization process fail? Why did the Cyrillic alphabet gain importance?

## Readings

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- 5- Alpatov, Vladimir M., "Scripts and Politics in the USSR", *Studi Slavistici* xiv, 2017, pp. 9-19