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THE "CULTURAL REVOLUTION" IN UZBEKISTAN: THE TRANSITION TO THE LATIN ALPHABET AND THE POLITICIZATION OF THE NATIONAL SCRIPT (1926–1940)

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Abstract. Article provides a comprehensive scientific analysis of the linguistic and cultural policies implemented in Uzbekistan between 1926 and 1940, specifically focusing on the transition from the Arabic script to the Latin alphabet (Yanalif) and its subsequent replacement by Cyrillic. The study examines how the Soviet "Cultural Revolution" instrumentalized alphabet reform not merely as a tool for eradicating illiteracy, but as a profound geopolitical and ideological weapon. By deconstructing the discourse surrounding the 1926 First All-Union Turcological Congress in Baku, the author demonstrates that the politicization of the national script was designed to sever the Central Asian populace from its Islamic-Arabic literary heritage, isolate it from pan-Turkic influences, and neutralize the traditional intelligentsia. Utilizing contemporary historiography, the research highlights how the Jadid intellectuals initially participated in these reforms for modernization purposes, only to be systematically purged when the Soviet linguistic policy shifted toward rapid Russification and totalitarian homogenization.

Keywords: Cultural Revolution, Latinization, Yanalif, Uzbekistan, Soviet language policy, Jadids, alphabet reform, Cyrillization, cultural memory, Bolshevization.

INTRODUCTION

The period between 1926 and 1940 was a time of unprecedented social and ideological engineering in Central Asia, often encapsulated by the Soviet concept of the "Cultural Revolution." At the heart of this transformative era in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR) was the radical reform of the national script. For over a millennium, the Turkic populations of Central Asia had utilized the Arabic script, which served as the epistemological foundation of their religious, scientific, and literary heritage. However, following the consolidation of Soviet power, the central Bolshevik leadership initiated a aggressive campaign to dismantle this linguistic tradition, culminating in the official adoption of the Latinized alphabet (Yanalif) in the late 1920s, and later, an abrupt shift to the Cyrillic alphabet in 1940.

The historical trajectory of these alphabet reforms was defined by a profound, systemic contradiction between local modernization aspirations and imperial ideological control. For the indigenous reformist elite—the Jadids, led by figures such as Abdurauf Fitrat and Ashurali Zohiriy—script reform was viewed as a pragmatic necessity to simplify orthography, boost mass literacy, and integrate the Uzbek nation into the modern globalized world. Conversely, for the Bolshevik apparatus in Moscow, the transition to the Latin alphabet was a calculated political mechanism. It was engineered to artificially sever the deep-rooted cultural and religious ties connecting Central Asia to the broader Islamic world, thereby creating an ideological vacuum that could be filled with Marxist-Leninist dogma. This paper investigates the multifaceted linguistic experiments carried out between 1926 and 1940, analyzes the politicization of the script, and deconstructs the mechanisms that led to the tragic purge of the national intelligentsia and the ultimate imposition of Cyrillic.

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METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This research employs a historical-analytical and source-critical methodology, evaluating the structural evolution of the Uzbek writing system within the context of changing Soviet geopolitical and ideological dynamics. The historiographical landscape surrounding the Soviet language policies in Uzbekistan can be categorized into three distinct paradigm groups.

Soviet historiography, represented by scholars such as Baskakov (1960) and Reshetov (1959), framed the history of script reforms as a triumph of socialist modernization and a natural progression toward proletarian internationalism. Within this Marxist-Leninist framework, the transition away from the "backward and clerically dominated" Arabic script was portrayed as a benevolent gift from the Soviet state to eradicate illiteracy. The independent linguistic initiatives of the Jadids were systematically minimized, and the forced shift to Cyrillic in 1940 was justified as an objective necessity for inter-ethnic communication and technological advancement.

Western historiography, most notably Fierman (1991) and Khalid (2015), provided a critical counter-narrative. They focused heavily on the mechanics of Soviet cultural imperialism and language planning. These scholars interpreted the alphabet changes as classic instruments of colonial control, emphasizing how the central government utilized orthography to divide closely related Turkic groups, cut off younger generations from their historical archives, and isolate Central Asia from cross-border ideological threats.

Modern Uzbek historiography initiated a comprehensive re-evaluation of the period following independence. Historians like Alimova (2015) and Karimov (2000), utilizing previously restricted archival documents, emphasize the agency and subsequent tragedy of the Jadid leadership. These contemporary studies highlight the transition as a process of cultural trauma and epistemological rupture, detailing how the politicization of the script was directly linked to the physical extermination of the Uzbek intellectual elite during the Great Purge of 1937–1938.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, the structural nature of the initial alphabet reform was characterized by a tactical alliance between the Soviet state and the national intelligentsia, which masked fundamentally divergent goals. The turning point was the First All-Union Turcological Congress held in Baku in 1926, which officially recommended the adoption of the New Turkic Alphabet (Yanalif) based on Latin characters. For the Jadids, participating in the creation of the Latinized Uzbek alphabet was a progressive step; they believed it would accelerate mass education and foster a unified, modernized Turkic identity. However, for the Bolsheviks, the primary objective was strictly negative: the absolute eradication of the Arabic script, which they associated with the Islamic clergy, Quranic education, and feudal backwardness.

Second, the implementation of the Latin alphabet between 1928 and 1930 resulted in a profound, state-engineered cultural amnesia. By legally banning the use of the Arabic script and confiscating millions of manuscripts and lithographed books, the Soviet state effectively rendered the entire pre-1928 literary, scientific, and historical heritage of Central Asia illegible to the incoming generation. The Yanalif became the sole medium of state administration, education, and press. Consequently, within a single decade, young Uzbeks were completely alienated from the works of classical thinkers like Alisher Navoi, Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur, and the very generation of Jadid writers who had initially advocated for reform.

Third, the modernization experiments took place against a backdrop of intense political destabilization, leading to the severe politicization of linguistics. By the mid-1930s, the Latin alphabet itself became politically problematic for Moscow. The adoption of a Latin script by the newly formed Republic of Turkey in 1928 created unintended cultural bridges between Soviet Turkic peoples and an

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external capitalist nation, sparking Soviet fears of Pan-Turkism. Consequently, the Jadid linguists and writers who had engineered the Uzbek Yanalif—including Fitrat, Chulpan, and Elbek—were systematically accused of "bourgeois nationalism," "pan-Turkism," and "sabotage." During the Stalinist purges of 1937–1938, the vast majority of these intellectuals were arrested, subjected to show trials, and executed.

Fourth, the path to total linguistic assimilation culminated in the abrupt transition to the Cyrillic alphabet in 1940. Once the national intelligentsia had been physically liquidated, the central government faced no domestic opposition. The official justification for the Cyrillization of the Uzbek language was that it would "facilitate the learning of the Russian language" and bring the Uzbek people closer to the "great Russian culture." In reality, the imposition of Cyrillic was the final phase of a deliberate strategy of Russification and Sovietization. It broke the brief linguistic unity that the Latin alphabet had provided among Soviet Turkic peoples (as each republic was given a slightly different, mutually incompatible Cyrillic modification) and permanently embedded Russian phonetic and lexical dominance into the structure of the Uzbek language.

CONCLUSION

The historical trajectory of the "Cultural Revolution" and the alphabet reforms in Uzbekistan between 1926 and 1940 stands as a critical chapter in the study of linguistic imperialism and state-sponsored cultural engineering. Far from being a mere technical evolution to improve literacy, the transition from Arabic to Latin, and subsequently to Cyrillic, was a profoundly politicized process designed to dismantle the epistemological foundations of Central Asian society.

The ultimate failure of the Jadid vision for a modernized, independent national script was not caused by linguistic incompatibility. Rather, it was the direct result of the Bolshevik state's geopolitical strategy to isolate the region from its Islamic past and its pan-Turkic neighbors. By weaponizing the alphabet, the Soviet regime successfully orchestrated a demographic and cultural rupture, ensuring that an entire generation was cut off from its historical memory. The physical liquidation of the Uzbek intelligentsia who spearheaded these reforms, followed by the forced imposition of the Cyrillic script in 1940, firmly institutionalized Russian cultural hegemony and totalitarian control, leaving a complex, fractured linguistic legacy that the independent Republic of Uzbekistan continues to navigate today.

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