
A Broken Promise : A Hundred Years of Language Policy in Kalmykia

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Abstract :

This article analyses language policy in Soviet Kalmykia in the 1920s-40s. It argues that the ill-thought alphabet reforms which entailed three changes of the Kalmyk language script in less than fifteen years contributed to the general failure of the rootinisation policy in the republic and resulted in a decline in Kalmyk language proficiency among its native speakers and a disruption in its written culture. Exacerbated by the deportation of Kalmyks in 1943 to Siberia, the Kalmyk language risked undergoing a radical language death, and is currently experiencing a gradual language shift, with Kalmyk listed as a «definitely endangered» language in the UNESCO *Atlas of Endangered Languages*. The article seeks to demonstrate how political expediency of Soviet language reforms and nationality policies led to a paradox when the predominantly Kalmyk-speaking community in the 1920s lost their native language in the course of a century.

Key-words: Republic of Kalmykia, language policy, alphabet reform, rootinisation, Mongol script, latinisation, Cyrillic alphabet, language shift, deportation, literacy campaign, linguistic revival.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is symptomatic that the users of online forums devoted to all sorts of issues about Kalmykia (an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation) are passionate contributors to discussions on the preservation and promotion of the Kalmyk language. It is also ironic that nearly one hundred years after the start of a conscientious language policy in Kalmykia (driven by the October revolution of 1917 and the proclaimed aim of the new socialist state to ensure the right of all peoples to their own language), the Kalmyk language is listed in the UNESCO *Atlas of Endangered Languages* as «definitely endangered»², and the number of Kalmyk native speakers has been steadily declining.³

Recent research on sociolinguistic situation in Kalmykia has successfully demonstrated that the Kalmyk language is experiencing a so-called gradual language shift⁴, characterised by the enclave existence of language, the predominant role of its written form, changing patterns of language use and the formation of age-graded proficiency continuum in a speech community. Many hopes for the revival of the Kalmyk language were risen in the 1990s, when Kalmykia declared its sovereignty and passed a few acts of language legislation aimed at the revitalisation of the language and the reassertion of Kalmyk culture. In 1991 a *Law on languages in the Republic of Kalmykia* proclaimed the state status of Kalmyk and Russian languages, which was later enshrined in the 1994 Constitution. The most important piece of language legislation, however, appeared in 1999, in the form of a comprehensive *Language Act*, which did not only declare language rights and obligations of the peoples of Kalmykia but, importantly, presented a language policy programme, which outlined concrete measures for the preservation, study and development of the Kalmyk language⁵. It is fair to say that such a determined language policy, complemented by the growing sense of national identity, bore fruit throughout the 2000s, when social functions of the Kalmyk language were significantly extended. It is now the language of instruction in some primary schools, and a compulsory profile subject in all primary and secondary education institutions. Together with Russian, Kalmyk is the language of legislation and public administration; in legal proceedings both

² «Definitely endangered» implies that «children no longer learn the language as a mother tongue in the home». See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/>

³ According to the 1989 Russian census, the number of Kalmyk speakers in Russia was 156'329, out of whom 154'442 persons spoke Kalmyk as their native language. The 2002 census provides the lower number of Kalmyk speakers at 153'602, in spite of the fact that the general number of ethnic Kalmyks increased. Unfortunately, the most recent data of the 2010 census are not as yet available.

⁴ Language shift is a sociolinguistic process whereby a speech community who share a language shifts to speaking another language.

⁵ For a detailed analysis of the 1999 *Language Act*, see Grin, 2000.

state languages are used depending on the nationalities of the concerned individuals. There are Kalmyk language newspapers and magazines, radio and television programmes, Internet sites. Social prestige of the language has also grown, mainly as part of the national revival process and the reassertion of the Kalmyk identity. And yet, Russian remains the dominant language in the Republic. All Kalmyk speakers are bilingual and prefer to use the Russian language in most domains : the use of the Kalmyk language in official sphere remains limited :

Bilingual speakers do not use the opportunity to represent their interests in court, or to conduct an electoral campaign in Kalmyk; only in exceptional cases is Kalmyk the language of a scientific report or a scholarly paper. (Baranova, 2009, p. 26)

Recent extensive sociolinguistic fieldwork in Kalmykia confirms that, in spite of the official policy for the promotion of the language, fewer people speak it today as the mother tongue. The majority of Kalmyk speakers belong to older generations and live in countryside, often in small remote villages. The capital Elista and other big towns see mostly the use of Russian, and it is Russian that is predominantly used in everyday communication between parents and children in ethnic Kalmyk families (Baranova, 2009, p. 26).

The deportation of the Kalmyk people to Siberia under Stalin in December 1943 is usually marked as the critical point in the fate of the Kalmyk language and as the main factor, which led to the language shift. The conditions of deportation, harsh Siberian climate and starvation caused thousands of deaths among the Kalmyks whose number fell from roughly 120 thousand at the time of deportation to less than 78 thousand in 1957 when the Kalmyks were permitted to return to their native land⁶. In Siberia, the Kalmyks were resettled over disperse locations and were surrounded by Russian speakers, which had a devastating effect on Kalmyk language and culture. Quite simply, in those years «language policy was aimed at the exclusion of Kalmyks and the Kalmyk language from social life». Even original Kalmyk toponyms were substituted with Russian names, with Elista being called Stepnoj until 1957 (Baranova, 2009, p. 25). A victim of political repressions together with the people who spoke it, the Kalmyk language partly experienced the process of a radical language death⁷, characterised by the distortion of the natural mechanisms of language transfer from generation to generation : during their exile, many older members of the Kalmyk community remained monolingual in Kalmyk, whereas a big number of Kalmyk children (especially orphans or those who

⁶ The figures vary in different sources. I am referring here to the numbers quoted in Baranova 2009, p. 25. In general, the estimates of Kalmyks who died as a result of deportation range from one fifth to half of the population.

⁷ The term «radical language death» is from L. Campbell, M.C. Muntzell (Campbell, Munzell, 1992).

were born and grew up in Siberia) spoke only Russian. Thankfully, the return to Kalmykia in the late 1950s and the re-introduction of native-language education, supported by a high degree of language loyalty among the Kalmyks, saved the Kalmyk language from complete disappearance and reversed the situation of radical language death. Although nominally upholding the principle of equality of minority languages and Russian, postwar Soviet language policy was in practice focused on the promotion of the Russian language whose social prestige and functions grew at the expense of titular languages in Soviet republics. While Russian became the dominant language in Kalmykia, the Kalmyk language entered the process of a gradual language shift, which continues today.

There exists, however, an additional factor which is often overshadowed by the tragic experience of deportation in the available analyses of the sociolinguistic situation in Kalmykia. It may be argued that Soviet language construction of the 1920s and 30s, which elsewhere achieved some genuine successes in the creation of alphabets, institution of native-language education and the eradication of illiteracy, was much less effective in Kalmykia and may, in actual fact, have contributed to the woes of the very language the reform sought to promote. Suffice it to say that between 1924 and 1938 the writing system of the Kalmyk language was changed three times which resulted in a situation when a whole generation of Kalmyks grew up without a clear reference for the written language. This and other aspects of language reform in Kalmykia are the focus of this paper, which aims to analyse linguistic as well as political implications of early language construction work in the republic, with particular emphasis on the assessment of its overall benefit for the development of Kalmyk language and culture.

2. FOR THE CREATION OF A NEW CULTURE

The Kalmyks are a Western Mongolian people, descendants of Oirats, who used to live in North-Western Mongolia (Djungharia) and in the 17th century moved westwards to Siberia and beyond, reaching the Volga river in European Russia. Kalmyks voluntarily joined the Russian Empire in 1609. Their main religion is Tibetan Buddhism, which makes Kalmyks the only Buddhist nation in Europe. The Kalmyk language belongs to the group of Mongolian languages, and is closely related to Oirat languages spoken today in China's Xinjiang and Mongolia.

The Kalmyk language has a long literary tradition. In 1648 a Buddhist missionary Zaya Pandita adopted the traditional Mongolian script to the Oirat language creating the so called *Todo Bičig* ['clear writing'], a vertically written alphabet which is still in use in Xinjiang⁸. A scholar of

⁸ The alphabet designed by Zaya Pandita was not only graphically beautiful but more accurate in rendering the Oirat pronunciation in comparison to the traditional Mongolian script. It

great renown, Zaya Pandita is credited with translating a great number of Buddhist works into Kalmyk; his name is revered among the Kalmyks, while *Todo Bičig* is generally regarded as a symbol of the renaissance of Kalmyk culture. Zaya Pandita established a literary basis for the Kalmyk language and introduced its orthographic rules, mainly based on the etymological principle. Works published in the Kalmyk language in pre-revolutionary period included religious and philosophical texts, the Kalmyk epic Džhangar, national folklore and a translation of the New Testament. There existed periodicals such as a calendar published both in Russian and Kalmyk, Russian-Kalmyk dictionaries and a primer, published in 1915. It is worth emphasising, however, that the use and functioning of the written language was limited only to a very small number of literate Kalmyks who attended Buddhist schools and received a religious education. For the masses of Kalmyk population, *Todo Bičig* and its literature remained inaccessible, which resulted in a gradual distancing of the written form of language from the vernacular. Indeed, the spoken Kalmyk of the early twentieth century considerably differed from the norms of Zaya Pandita's books. Among the changes was the loss of vowels in a word followed by the reduction in the number of syllables, and the replacement of diphthongs with long vowels (Kotvič, 1929, pp. 17-23). These phonetic phenomena could not, however, be reflected in writing, imprisoned by the straitjacket of the etymological principle. The existence of an outdated alphabet had become – in a curious twist – a contributing factor to the «outrageous illiteracy», to quote professor Boris Vladimircov, one of the most prominent scholars of Mongolian studies and a specialist on Kalmyk language and culture. For Vladimircov, the fossilised writing system led, in practice, to the disappearance of all orthographic norms, to «illiterate, almost unreadable writing, with words written every time in a different way» (Vladimircov, 2005, pp. 881-94, p. 892). In 1919, there were only 56 literate Kalmyks per thousand of population, which amounted to less than six per cent of the population aged eight and over (Sartikova, 2008, pp. 71-76).

Proclaiming the right of minority peoples to self-determination and the emancipation of national cultures, the Bolsheviks set out on an ambitious programme of reforms which included language development, eradication of illiteracy, creation of primary, secondary and vocational systems of national education and, ultimately, in practical as well as ideological terms, creation of a new socialist culture for every minority nation of the Soviet Union. In Kalmykia, appeals to all «honest forces of intelligentsia» affirmed the «utmost necessity to study our national language, literature, and history» in order to join the sweeping process of cultural construction in the country and be able to share the progressive

eliminated the polyphony of letters by introducing additional diacritic signs and distinguishing between such letters as *t* and *d*, or *ö* and *ü* which gave it an advantage over the Mongolian alphabet, where one letter could signify a few different sounds. On this, see Pavlov, 1969; Poppe, 1929.

human values⁹. Although extremely difficult, given the very high level of illiteracy among the population and the sheer physical conditions of the nomadic way of life in the road-less steppes, the process of the formation of Kalmyk national language and education received a fresh impulse in 1920, after the first All-Kalmyk Congress of Soviets declared the creation of the Kalmyk Autonomous Region and enabled the unification of disperse parts of Kalmyk population in a single administrative unit. The Congress also focused on the organisational problems of establishing in the republic a system of primary and secondary education, which required the provision of textbooks, primers, methodological and scientific literature in the Kalmyk language, on one hand, and the supply of qualified national teacher cadres, on the other.

Central to the fight against illiteracy and the rise of national Kalmyk culture was the alphabet issue. In 1923 a local educational committee prepared first primary textbooks and curricular in the Kalmyk language, which were supposed to be published in the course of the same academic year. This, however, did not happen due to the lack of printing types for the existing Kalmyk script. Children in primary schools continued to be taught in Russian with the use of Russian primers, which was extremely difficult for Kalmyk speaking pupils and, more in general, contradicted the Narkompros ['People's Commissariat of Education'] policy of the transition of all school education into local languages in 1924-26 (*korenizatsiia* or rootinisation). Modernisation of the writing system of the Kalmyk language became therefore a matter of paramount importance and urgency. There were initial projects of simplification and improvement of the *Todo bičig* alphabet, aimed at preserving the originality of the Kalmyk language and ensuring its historical and literary continuity (Kitljaeva, 2007, p. 68). Crucially, already in 1923 early concerns were voiced about the danger of Russian assimilation and an «abnormal absorption of the Kalmyks by Russian national culture». To counter such a strong influence, the regional educational committee proposed principles of a truly national system of education, which included instruction in Kalmyk and teaching of such elements of Kalmyk culture as mythology, religion (in a critical interpretation), folklore (especially songs) and traditional upbringing. At a meeting of the committee in December 1923, it was decided to say a «positive and everlasting yes» to the Zaya Pandita alphabet or a transcription (Kitljaeva, 2007, p. 69).

The idea of using a Russian transcription for the Kalmyk language was neither new nor unpopular. In pre-revolutionary Russia, the Cyrillic alphabet was adapted by missionaries and scholars for some of the local languages of the Empire, mainly for educational and ethnographic purposes, such as the collection and recording of the examples of national

⁹ Archival materials, quoted from Kitljaeva, 2007, pp. 66-69.

folklore¹⁰. In the first decades of the twentieth century, scholars such as Vladislav Kotvič and Nomto Očirov (the author of the 1915 Kalmyk primer) conducted a number of field expeditions in Kalmykia, collecting riddles and publishing them in Kalmyk in a Russian transcription. In 1906 members of an underground nationalist organisation in Elista proposed the use of Cyrillic as a measure of ensuring the survival of the Kalmyk language under the assimilationist policies of the tsarist government (Pavlov, 1969, p. 204). Existing Russian printing types allowed for the publication and wider circulation of Kalmyk texts. The newspaper *Ulam Xal'mg* [‘The Red Kalmyk’], which firstly appeared in October 1919, was initially published in Russian and Kalmyk with the use of the Russian alphabet, due to the lack of printing types for Kalmyk traditional writing. Between 1920 and 1923 the newspaper was coming out in the Kalmyk script, but quite soon this practice had to be stopped as the very scarce printing types of *Todo bičig* became worn out and unusable (Romanov, 1971, pp. 43-53). In sum, even while the idea of transition to Russian graphic system was being widely discussed in Kalmyk society, it was simultaneously tested and applied in practice, driven by the necessities of the literacy campaign, cultural construction and the rootinisation policy in the republic.

3. ALPHABET OVERKILL

It may be argued that the ultimate decision of the Kalmyk authorities in 1924 to abandon the Zaya Pandita alphabet in favour of the Cyrillic script was reached with public consensus and was justified by a number of reasons. A report to the Fifth All-Kalmyk Congress of Soviets in October of that year highlighted the «disadvantages» of the Zaya Pandita alphabet – such as its complex orthographic rules¹¹, unusual symbols, and the lack of printing types – which «created considerable obstacles for the cultural growth of the Kalmyk people» (Pavlov, 1969, p. 205). The transition to Russian transcription, it was hoped, would become the steam engine of cultural development and socialist construction in Kalmykia¹².

¹⁰ After the revolution and especially during the latinisation campaign, such attempts at adopting the Cyrillic script for languages of national minorities were labelled as demonstrations of «Great Russian chauvinism and «colonial power».

¹¹ One and the same letter, for example, could be written in three different ways depending on its position in a word.

¹² The resolution of the so called First linguistic conference which took place in January 1924 and deliberated on the adoption of Cyrillic stated that the Zaya Pandita alphabet should be kept for academic study of the written monuments of the Kalmyk people (Pavlov, 1969, p. 204). An interesting observation has been made by Arai Yukiyasu in an article on the language policies and dynamics of the Mongol peoples from 1920 to 1940. Yukiyasu points out that the newly adopted Cyrillic was never called an alphabet but a transcription in the resolution. The author suggests this unusual formulation can be referred to the Japanese script system, where similar relationship exists between the scripts Hiragana and Katakana,

The alphabet was developed by a specially appointed commission at the Regional Department for People's Education. It was based on the phonetic principle which stated that a «system of practical writing should graphically reflect all the phonemes of a given language – and nothing more» (Dešeriev, 1968, p. 31). This dictum would later receive a brilliant expression in Nikolaj Jakovlev's famous «mathematical formula for the construction of alphabets», which provided a scientifically rigorous basis for the extensive phonological work of Soviet language construction (during the latinisation campaign). The alphabet adopted in Kalmykia contained, apart from the ordinary Russian letters for similar or analogous sounds in both languages, six distinct letters with diacritic signs (two dots at the top) for specific sounds of the Kalmyk language (Table 1). This solution, however, proved impractical as the dots were used inconsistently and, indeed, were often lost completely in the printing process. The problem of finding adequate symbols for the sounds in question remained open throughout the 1920s. It was one of the main topics discussed at the second Kalmyk linguistic conference in February 1928, which agreed to substitute the controversial letters with the new ones (usual Russian letters without diacritics). In a sign of things to come, Evgenij Polivanov, a famous linguist and a member of the All-Union Central Committee for the New Turkic Alphabet, proposed (unsuccessfully) to convert the Kalmyk writing from Cyrillic to Latin alphabet (Pavlov, 1969, p. 208).

Understandably, the introduction of the Russian script alone was not sufficient to produce immediate results in raising the literacy levels among Kalmyks or improving the quality of national education. Some success was achieved in organising the publishing of school materials. First textbooks appeared in 1925; for every pupil there were approximately two textbooks in Russian and one in Kalmyk language (Romanov, 1971, p. 124). All in all, twenty new textbook titles were published between 1924 and 1928. Kalmyk was the language of instruction in the first grade of primary school. In general, however, the fight against illiteracy was conducted in Russian and on the basis of Russian materials. The curriculum taught at *likbez* ['eradication of illiteracy'] centres reflected their role as the tools of political and ideological education, sometimes at the expense of the basics. In Kalmykia, it included a compulsory course in «political literacy» ['politgramota'], an introduction into agricultural and veterinary studies, hygiene and sanitation, but lacked lessons in elementary reading and writing (Sartikova, 2008, p. 73).

and Kanji, the Chinese characters. The first two scripts with syllabic letters were formerly used as the transcriptions of the only proper script, the Chinese characters. Moreover, the idea of word transcription among the Kalmyks was exactly the same as the idea of script reform among the Buryats in the 1910s, when a Latin transcription was proposed with the purpose of mediating between the Buryat people and the traditional Mongolian script. See Yukiyasu, 2004, pp. 309-34.

Additional letters to Cyrillic and Latin Alphabets in Kalmyk (1924–1941)	
IPA	æ ö Ü ʏ ɕ ɲ ʃ ʦ
1924	ä ö у г ж ң - - (Cyrillic)
1926	d v ю h дж нг - -
1928	я э ю г ж нг - -
1930	ə ø y h z ɲ c ɕ (Latin)
1931	ə ø y h z ɲ ɕ c
1938	ä ö ʏ гъ дж нь - - (Cyrillic)
1941	ə ø ʏ h ж ң - -
IPA – International Phonetic Alphabet	

Table 1

The 1926 All-Union census revealed that literate people constituted only 17.3 per cent of the entire population of the Kalmyk Autonomous Region. The recorded number of Kalmyks who were literate in the Kalmyk language was as low as 5'411 (*Ibid.*). These figures show just how unrealistic were the Narkompros plans to eradicate illiteracy among non-Russian nationalities by 1927 or, even more so, to accelerate the rootinisation campaign in 1924 by introducing local languages in the state office administration. Problems with adopting a suitable alphabet, as well as the lack of an established written norm of the Kalmyk language were often cited by the authorities as the main hurdles in the rootinisation process¹³. An experiment in 1927 to introduce the Kalmyk language to all state office administration in all enterprises of the Khoshoutovsky ulus and in some other places failed (Maksimov, 2008, p. 234). It is obvious, however, that other factors contributed to what can be seen largely as a failure of the rootinisation campaign in Kalmykia. In an economically and culturally backward region with a semi-nomadic population, even communication with the central authorities presented a challenge. Cash-strapped on one hand, the literacy campaign was also hit by high levels of drop-out rates. Between 1925 and 1928 more than thirty per cent of students failed to complete a *likbez* course¹⁴. Under such circumstances, another change of the alphabet could only exacerbate the situation,

¹³ See, for example, the report of the VXII Regional Party Conference in 1926. Cited in Romanov, 1971, p. 121.

¹⁴ In the 1924-25 academic year, only 68 out of the planned 130 *likbez* centres were established in Kalmykia due to the lack of funds. See Sartikova, 2008, p. 73.

reducing the number of Kalmyks literate in their native language. Similar arguments, however, bore little, if any, weight in what Terry Martin calls «symbolic politics of national identity», of which the latinisation campaign was a paradigmatic example¹⁵.

In 1930 the Kalmyk language was swept by the great wave of latinisation. A major practical project of language construction and radical linguistic reform, the latinisation movement of the late 1920s had three important ideological components : the avant-garde role of latinisation as a weapon against cultural backwardness at the service of cultural revolution and rooting; the zeal of unification, firstly in the form of pan-Turkism, and later as Soviet internationalism; and, finally, the anti-Russian, anti-colonial rhetoric, which sanctioned hostility towards Russian culture. As Martin explains, the anti-Russian element rested on the principle of the greater danger, the great-power chauvinism seen as a greater danger than local nationalism. A strong rhetorical advantage of the latinisation campaign was its initial ability to label any support of the Cyrillic script as great-Russian chauvinism (Martin, 2001, pp. 193-94). Unsurprisingly, no linguistic or, indeed, pragmatic arguments of the Kalmyks in favour of the recently adopted Cyrillic could withstand such a powerful ideological assault of the radical latinisers, supported by the central Party authorities. This is not to say that there was no resistance to the proposed change. Kalmyks were accused of acting against latinisation at the Conference of the New Turkic Alphabets in the Lower Volga region, held in Saratov in November 1929. A local newspaper argued that it would be difficult for school children to master two alphabets at the same time (Latin for the Kalmyk language and Cyrillic for Russian); that all printed materials published in Cyrillic in the previous years would become useless and would mean wasted economic resources (Ajtov-gil', 1932, p. 63; Paškov, 1934, p. 121). One may add here the perceived danger of a general linguistic confusion among Kalmyks and a threat to the modest results achieved in the fight against illiteracy. But the political success of the campaign meant that any opposition to latinisation – however reasonable – was deemed counter-revolutionary, and in January 1930 the Central Executive Committee of the Kalmyk Region abolished the use of Cyrillic and adopted the Latin alphabet in its place.

Apart from the obvious ideological momentum of the movement, two major interrelated factors may be suggested as the main underlying reasons for the latinisation of the Kalmyk alphabet which, on a purely linguistic level, was an unjustified «step backwards» (Nominxanov, 1969, p. 34). Both are concerned with a unifying, centripetal force that found realisation in the centralisation of the language construction work, on one hand, and the utopian drive for the unification of all alphabets, on the other.

¹⁵ Martin, 2001, p. 185. The latinisation movement was started and driven by the local elites of Turkic peoples, especially in Azerbaijan, where a revolutionary activist Samed Agamaly-Ogly initiated a campaign against the Arabic script and made latinisation his personal crusade.

The spontaneous alphabet reforms of the early 1920s were mostly initiated by indigenous elites before the emergence of any central policy on the matter. By the end of the decade, however, latinisation became one of the most important state projects, an inseparable part of the nationalities policy and symbol of the cultural revolution, sanctioned, funded and controlled by the Party. In this context, a reversal of the earlier semi-autonomous decisions of local political elites and their relatively free choice of writing systems was not only a centralising measure but, crucially, a symbolic message sent by the authorities in Moscow to local leaderships on shifting power structures and emerging political hierarchies (see Martin 2001, pp. 182-204).

The unification of alphabets for many different Soviet nations of the East and North (and, indeed, beyond the borders of the Soviet Union) was another important goal of the language reform. In linguistic terms, unifying efforts reflected the tremendous phonological work of Soviet linguists who strove to create an elegant graphic system which could represent analogous sounds in different languages by means of one and the same sign. From an ideological point of view, the drive for linguistic unity (also in orthographic and terminological systems of various languages) was based on the utopian dream of spreading the revolution and unifying as many peoples as possible with the help of a common latinised revolutionary script. It seems quite obvious that the shift of the Kalmyk alphabet to Latin owed a lot to the idea of the unity of Mongolian peoples. The latinisation movement for Buryats (a Mongolian people living in the Soviet Far East on both sides of the Lake Baikal) started in 1929, and the use of the traditional Mongolian script was officially abolished in favour of the Latin alphabet in 1931; in Mongolia proper the latinisation policy was adopted in 1930. As the only Mongolian nation in European Russia, the Kalmyks were perhaps seen by the Soviet government as an essential link to their XX «Buddhist brothers» in the Far East¹⁶, which necessitated the integration of their languages and writing systems. A pan-Mongolian linguistic conference was organised in Moscow in January 1931. The representatives of the three nations discussed such questions as the unification of the newly adopted Mongolian alphabets, the principles of making orthographies, terminological unity, and the choice of dialects for the creation of a literary norm for their languages. The conference adopted a Unified Mongolian and Buryat-Mongolian alphabet, which consisted of 27 common letters plus three additional letters for the Kalmyk language («Konferencija», 1932, pp. 66-77).

In the first half of the 1930s, educational and cultural work in Kalmykia intensified, producing quicker and more noticeable results. The literacy campaign assumed a systematic and coherent character. Publishing in the Kalmyk language grew to 53 titles in 1933, with the circulation of

¹⁶ An «Appeal to Oriental Peoples adopted by the First All-Kalmyk Congress of Soviets» in 1920 read: «Dear Buddhist brothers! Respond to the call and raise the banner of revolutionary struggle. [...] Go and fight!» (cited from Maksimov, 2008, p. 218).

192 thousand copies (*Kul'turnoe stroitel'stvo*, 1935, pp. 134-35). The data of the 1939 All-Union census show that the rate of literacy among Kalmyk population aged over nine achieved 70.8 per cent, which was a huge advantage compared to the results of 1926 (Sartikova, 2008, p. 75). At the peak of the latinisation movement, such success was enthusiastically attributed to the introduction of the Latin alphabet. It may be argued, however, that it was not so much the latinised script as the general methods and ethos of the *kul'tšurm* ['cultural attack'] campaign in 1931 that became the main driving force behind the growth of literacy numbers in Kalmykia. The «cultural army» consisted of up to 5'000 members, including teachers, high school and university students, as well as Komsomol and trade union activists. The allocated two million roubles were spent to increase the number of schools, reading clubs, literacy centres and libraries. A growing network of travelling «red *kibitkas*» enabled the educators to reach remote Kalmyk villages where they taught reading on a par with basic sanitary skills and fought against superstitions. It must be emphasised here that such educational and propaganda work was conducted mostly in Russian and was aimed at achieving only the «basic literacy» level, which implied the ability to read the alphabet and put down a signature (Sartikova, 2008, pp. 74-75).

CONCLUSION

The Latin alphabet existed in Kalmykia until 1938 when another change in Soviet nationalities policy brought a new wave of language reforming. All the so called «young-lettered» ['mladopis'mennye'] languages of national minorities on the basis of Latin were transferred to Cyrillic, what for the Kalmyk language meant a third change of the alphabet in less than fifteen years. As can be seen from Table 1, the new alphabet initially repeated the mistakes of the 1924 variant, introducing three letters with diacritic dots above. It was subjected to further adjustments in 1941 when, according to Pavlov, the Kalmyk writing finally became «very sophisticated, accessible and practically convenient» (Pavlov, 1969, pp. 209-10). Tragically for the Kalmyks, they could hardly benefit from this improvement, given the onset of the war and the horror of deportation in 1943. Although at the time of the deportation the majority of Kalmyks spoke Kalmyk as their mother tongue, the conditions of the exile and its long duration broke the inter-generational continuity of language transmission. Moreover, the alphabet turnover of the preceding years was, in my opinion, an additional serious factor that contributed to the plight of the Kalmyk language. At the beginning of the 1940s around thirty per cent of working age Kalmyks (including 36 per cent of women) remained illiterate (Sartikova, 2008, p. 75), and only a limited number of Kalmyk speakers were literate in their native language, albeit without a clear reference to an established writing system. This meant that in Siberia the young generation of Kalmyks had

very little chance of acquiring or maintaining their language through home schooling and reading. With their spoken Kalmyk being ousted and gradually lost in the Russian language environment, the Kalmyk children also found themselves dramatically disconnected from the written culture of their homeland.

When in 1928 professor Vladimircov gave a speech at the second Kalmyk linguistic conference, he defied the expectations by speaking against the use of Cyrillic for the Kalmyk alphabet and expressing support for the unity of the Mongolic world, epitomised in its ancient Mongolian alphabet¹⁷. In his 1931 article on the latinisation of the Mongolian and Kalmyk scripts, Vladimircov wrote : «For Mongolians, Buryats and Kalmyks, changing to the Latin script does not only mean to replace scripts but it means a great change to their languages themselves» (Vladimircov, 2005, p. 894). For Kalmyks, this implicit warning on the interrelated fates of peoples and their languages proved true in more ways than one, and to a far more dangerous extent than the scholar could have predicted.

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¹⁷ Yukiyasu, 2004, p. 317. Similar views were expressed by another prominent Mongolist, Nikolaj Poppe. See Poppe, 1929, p. 28.

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Un groupe de femmes kalmoukes près d'une «kibitka rouge» (tente de nomades où était installé le bureau de propagande).

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