

Russian Orthographic Reform

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CATEGORIES

The Writing on the Wall: The Russian Orthographic Reform of 1917–1918



1919 propaganda poster issued by White General Petr Nikolaevich Vrangeli. The caption reads "Why aren't you in the army?" in pre-revolutionary orthography.

TAGS

The sweeping notional and social changes brought by the Russian Revolution required a program for the rapid promotion of mass literacy. Despite Leninist appeals to raise the level of literacy in all (130+) languages of the Soviet Union, Russian, the lingua franca of the Tsarist Empire, remained the main vehicle for all-union communication and the primary means of building Soviet identity. While all languages, even those with no written tradition, were to become standardized to a greater or lesser degree in due course—socialist in content, national in form—expanding Russian literacy was a top priority for the new, Bolshevik leaders of the multilingual empire. From the revolutionaries' perspective the first step towards revolutionizing minds was to streamline the written form of the Russian word.

Contrived in the medieval period, the Russian orthographic system's Bulgaro-Macedonian inheritance impeded literacy, a hindrance well understood for at least a century prior to the Revolution. From a cost-benefit viewpoint, the orthographic forms meant economies of scale: the reduction of redundant signs generated savings in metal type,

typesetting labor, ink, and paper.

Russian writing was no stranger to reform and revolution. Writing in the Slavic languages began in the second half of the ninth century AD thanks to the efforts of Byzantine missionaries. In a radical departure from the exclusive use of Hebrew, Latin, and Greek for holy texts, Cyril and Methodius devised a new alphabet which enabled the use of the Slavic vernacular 700 years prior to Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German. As Christianization spread in the

following centuries, the Cyrillic alphabet, patterned after an earlier alphabet, Glagolitic, but rendering roughly the same letter-phoneme correspondences in Greek uncial letters and modifications of them for specifically Slavic sounds, was inherited by East Slavs. So, for example, Glagolitic *Ɱ, Ɐ, Ɒ, ⱱ, Ⱳ* became Cyrillic *А, Б, В, Г, Д, Е, Ж* (corresponding to modern Russian а, б, в, г, д, е, ж and the phonemes /a, b, v, g, d, e, ž/). Subsequently, the Cyrillic alphabet underwent gradual evolution, adapting partially to East Slavic sound changes, but also remaining in some many respects faithful to tradition. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, efforts were made to reintroduce Bulgaro-Macedonian orthographic practices into Russian, which retarded this evolutionary process to a degree. (See Appendix 1 on the medieval archaisms in Russian orthography.)

The first abrupt change in Cyrillic came with Peter I's (1672–1725) introduction of the 'civil type' (гражданский шрифт), which abandoned the florid calligraphy of the medieval tradition and aligned Russian letters with the new typefaces used in Western Europe. This reform was a response to the need to fix the shape of letters to be used in the movable-type printing press (introduced into Russia in the second half of the sixteenth century), as well as to streamline the alphabet for use in the growing number of secular texts. These changes would be gradually adopted in other Slavic languages using the Cyrillic alphabet.



Famous 1920 Red Army poster by Dmitrii Stakhevich Orlov (D. Moor) with the caption 'Have you volunteered?' written in the new Soviet orthography.

Although reforms of the orthography had been discussed and advanced incrementally from Peter's time to the early twentieth century, implementation of a complete reform awaited the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The changes were introduced via decree by the People's Commissariat for Education of December 23, 1917 and took effect with a decree of the Council of People's Commissars of October 10, 1918. The reforms corresponded with the shift away from preoccupation with historical-comparativism and a focus on Indo-European origins of Russian (and other European languages) to a rising concern with language structure and description, apperception of the social function of language, the study of language as a system of signs and, in particular, the recognition of the phoneme, the meaning-distinguishing unit of sound. Among the proponents of the reform was the renowned linguist J. N. Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929), a fundamental figure in the development of structural linguistics.

The orthographic reform was intended to facilitate rapid and widespread acquisition of literacy among Russian speakers, both native speakers of Russian and speakers of Russian as a second-language, state subjects of the Soviet Union. The Bolsheviks' challenge was to inculcate socialist ideology to a population that was highly stratified with a relatively small literate elite and a vast underclass of peasants and workers with little to no literacy. These, moreover, spoke varieties of Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian that were linguistically distinct from the literary language of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Additionally, Tsarist

attempts to acculturate non-Russians to Russian speech had been only partially successful, a process that was not yet fully complete even at the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Just as Peter had recognized almost two centuries earlier that the streamlining and westernization of the written language was essential to building a civil state on western models, the Bolsheviks saw language and the written medium as keys to forming a national and collective identity, *homo sovieticus*, and a new classless state.

Although the reform of the orthography would be criticized on ideological grounds by émigré groups and, after the collapse of the USSR in Russia proper, as a perversion of historical tradition committed by the Bolsheviks, the general outlines of the reform were already widely agreed upon in the nineteenth century. The last phase of attempts to reform the orthography began in earnest in 1862, in the period of Alexander II's Great Reforms. The process pitted traditionalists, who supported Ia. K. Grot's (1812–1893) orthography against reformists, who saw the archaisms of the old orthography as a drag on literacy and learning. The Russian linguist A. A. Shakhmatov (1864–1920), an early structuralist, viewed the reform as a continuation of the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition, given that the initial impulse to create a Slavic writing system was to render speech faithfully in writing as part of a living tradition. In view of this, the period of the “correction of books” (исправление книг) in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had reintroduced alien archaisms into the writing system, in effect distancing it from living Russian; the reform would thus bring the orthography better in line with the living language in the spirit of Cyril and Methodius' project. Broadly speaking, what was perceived as a revolutionary act was, in fact, the reassertion of an evolutionary process.

Bibliography

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Appendix 1: Letter replacement and morphological adjustments

Letters that had lost their sound-distinguishing function

Old Letter	Replaced by	Reason for the replacement
Ѣ, ѣ	E, e	The letter Ѣ in medieval Russian had signaled a diphthong /ie/, which subsequently merged with the vowel /e/, which in turn had been written with the letter E. Once the merger was completed, Russian speakers had to learn by rote which words contain Ѣ (e.g., <i>ѣсть</i> ‘to eat’ /jestʹ/, <i>бѣль</i> ‘white’ /bʲelʲ/) and which E

(e.g., *есть* 'is' /jest' /, *меньше* 'less' /m'en'she/). The elimination of the archaic letter removed an over-specification in rendering Russian vowel contrasts.

ъ	[∅]	In medieval Russian, the letter <i>ъ</i> signaled the sound /ə/, which subsequently disappeared. Nevertheless, the letter continued to be written consistently at the end of all words ending in a non-palatalized consonant, e.g., <i>въ словахъ</i> 'in words' /v slovaх/, <i>долженъ</i> 'must' /dolžen/. Removing the sign at the end of a word resulted in a loss of redundancy, viz. → <i>в словах, должен</i> . When this sound followed a consonant and preceded the sound /j/, the letter was preserved in the new orthography to signal the presence of a meaning-distinguishing /j/, e.g., <i>съестъ</i> 'to eat up' /sjest' / (≠ <i>сестъ</i> 'to sit' /s'est' /). This was the only remaining context in which the letter was still written up to the Revolution and it was preserved by the rule removing only word-final <i>ъ</i> .
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Non-functional letters carried over from Greek

Old Letter	Replaced by	Reason for the replacement
I, i	И, и	The distinction between I and И was functional in Greek, but it had never referred to a systematic sound contrast in Russian (a phonological contrast was assigned to them, however, in Ukrainian). In the nineteenth century the sign I ("десятеричное," as opposed to И "восьмеричное," following the numerical values of the letters in the Church Slavic tradition) was written before another vowel letter or й. It was also used to differentiate visually homophonous words, e.g., <i>миръ</i> 'peace' ≠ <i>міръ</i> 'world'.
θ, θ	Ф, ф	This letter was used to render the letter <i>theta</i> in borrowings from Greek. Russian lacks the interdental fricative /θ/, so it was pronounced as /f/, for which reason it was also replaced by the letter for this sound, Ф, e.g., <i>θедоръ</i> 'Theodore' → <i>Федор</i> (or <i>Фёдор</i>).
V, v	В or И	This letter occurred only in Greek borrowings, corresponding to classical Greek short /u/ and Byzantine Greek /y/. In Russian after the reform it was replaced by И when it denoted a vowel, as В when it denoted a consonant, e.g., <i>евангеліе</i> → <i>евангелие</i> 'gospel'; <i>Евфимій</i> → <i>Евфимий</i> 'Euthymius'; <i>вподіаконъ</i> 'subdeacon' → <i>уподиакон</i> .

Morphological adjustments

- The prefixes *без-*, *вз-*, *из-*, *низ-*, *раз-*, *роз-*, *чрез-*, and *через-* would henceforth be rendered *бес-*, *вс-*, *ис-*, *нис-*, *рас-*, *рос-*, *чрес-*, and *черес-* before voiceless consonants,

e.g., *черезчуръ* ‘excessively’ → *чересчур*. Though this brought Russian spelling more in line with pronunciation, the principle was not extended to other prefixes (or other morphemes), e.g., *отбить* ‘to chop off’ did not become **одбить*, though the word was pronounced /odb’it’/.

- The masculine and neuter genitive singular endings of adjectives, spelled in Church Slavic tradition as *-аго, -яго*, were henceforth to be written *-ого, --его*. This reform recognized a centuries-old change in Russian that extended the pronominal endings to the adjective, but failed to take the final step and recognize the change of *-g-* to *-v-* in this morpheme, e.g., *бѣлаго* ‘of something white’ → *белого* /b’elava/.
- The feminine and neuter nominative plural endings, also a relic of Church Slavic tradition, were no longer to be written *-ья, -ия*, but now *-ые, -ие*, e.g., *бѣльья* → *белые*. This brought the writing of the plural adjective in line with its morphological development, which had during the late medieval period eliminated gender distinctions in the plural.
- Adjustments were made to Church Slavic spellings of personal pronouns that did not correspond to Russian spoken usage, e.g., the feminine plural personal pronoun *онѣ* → *они*; the feminine singular accusative/genitive pronoun *ея* → *ее* (or *еѣ*).

Appendix 2 : The effect of the reform on Russian text

Here are three versions of the text of a letter by the writer I. S. Turgenev recalling the Ukrainian writer T. G. Shevchenko. The original letter is given in the old orthography. Using Microsoft Word’s track changes function, we can see at a glance the editorial changes that would be made to a typical stretch of text. In the third text, we see the “changes accepted,” which results in a shorter text, largely due to the removal of the redundant final *ѣ*. This results in a reduction of 281 of 6,721 characters (not counting spaces) for a final character count of 6,440 or 4.2%.

- [Download original text](#)
- [Download text with changes tracked](#)
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Source

Turgenev, Ivan S. 1876. И. С. Тургеневъ († 1883 г.) *Воспоминанія о Т. Г. Шевченко*. (Источникъ: *Споминки про Шевченка И. С. Тургенева*. // Т. Г. Шевченко. *Кобзарь з додатком споминок про Шевченка писателів Тургенева і Полонського*. — У Празі: Nákladem knižkupertvú dra Grégra a Ferd. Dattla, 1876. — С. III-VIII.) Русскій Порталь. Русскіе классики XVIII – нач. XX вв. въ старой орѳографіи http://lib.russportal.ru/index.php?id=authors.turgenev.turgenev1876_01_0001 [Accessed 24 November 2010]

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