The Baltic Sea Region
Cultures, Politics, Societies
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1. Language policies in the Russian Empire

In the middle of the 17th century, when the Russian Empire had recovered from political unrest, it directed its expansionist efforts towards the west and southwest, towards the Swedish and the Polish-Lithuanian states. This expansion was completed with the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The situation only changed with the revolution in 1917 and the end of World War I. Then Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland became independent states. Poland also won back parts of its former possessions in Belarus and Ukraine. With World War II, the Soviet Union restored many of the former borders of the Russian empire, recapturing Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Polish parts of Ukraine and Belarus and also incorporating most of Eastern Prussia. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 following the August coup reduced the empire’s area once again.

Clearly, the history and the language policy of the Russian empire has had a great impact on the history of many of the languages and peoples in the Baltic area. A short overview is therefore appropriate here. Russification has been a part of Russian policy from the beginning. After Mazepa’s cooperation with the Swedish king Charles XII, all traces of Ukrainian autonomy promised in the Treaty of Perejaslav of 1654 vanished. In 1720, even the printing of Ukrainian works was forbidden. In the Estonian and Latvian areas taken from Sweden in the Great Nordic War at the beginning of the 18th century, the Tsar, however, relied on the mostly German nobility who got extensive privileges. The same policy was used in the eastern parts of Poland, accomplished through the divisions of Poland. The Polish-speaking nobility was allowed to keep its status, as was the Polish language as the medium of education and administration. The role of Polish even increased in the first decades of the century. This policy changed after the Polish uprising in 1831 and especially after the uprising in 1863 when Polish was exchanged for Russian in education, administration, and the courts. The second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th witnessed a period of deliberate Russification broken only for a short period of more liberal thinking after the 1905 revolution. Nevertheless, this period also witnessed the birth and rebirth of many languages. The situation in the Russian empire was thus a typical diglossic situation with Russian as the dominant language. To have any possibility of “rising through the ranks”, a non-Russian had to master Russian.
2. Soviet policy and Russification

The Soviet Union's policy of the 1920s attempted both to appease local and national interests and to integrate them. The policy could be formulated as a slogan: “Socialist in form but nationalist in content”. This policy resulted in a period of blossoming for non-Russian languages and cultures. In the 1920s and partly into the 1930s, huge efforts were also directed towards giving many of the Soviet Union's peoples and nationalities, most for the first time, literary languages of their own. The five-year plan with its subsequent industrialization and collectivization, together with Stalin's purges, put an end to this policy. Most peoples and nationalities then lost both the national Communist leaders of the 1920s and the newborn national intelligentsia. The changes also severely affected the minorities and their languages, though the major name-giving nations of the republics, such as Belarus, could keep their languages and a somewhat superficial national culture. The slogan was “nationalist in form, but Socialist in content”.

The development in the thirties also meant Russification. Russians filled the posts emptied by the purges, and official linguistic policy aimed at bringing the languages closer together. A result was that many languages which in the 1920s or 1930s had received Latin alphabets later got Cyrillic ones.

In 1938 Russian became compulsory in all schools. This step was taken rather suddenly because Moscow realized that the development in the republics in the 1920s and the 1930s had caused Russian to lose its role as the lingua franca. Most measures taken in the post-war Soviet Union were aimed at restoring the role of Russian language and culture in the Soviet empire. The Russification policy, very typical of both the Khrushchev and Brezhnev regimes was, however, clothed in Socialist terminology. The 1977 Soviet constitution postulated a new entity, the Soviet people or nation which was supposed to differ from a bourgeois or socialist nation. It was a further step towards Communism, and a result of the presumed rapprochement and melding of nations in Socialism. The new nation was to be characterized by a common socialist culture, which in many respects had Russian characteristics, and a common language, the language of international communication, that was Russian. To promote this language, a policy of bilingualism was put forward, which in reality meant that all non-Russians should learn to speak Russian from a very young age, whereas Russians were not obliged to learn non-Russian languages. The result was a typical diglossic situation, with Russian as the high language and an increasingly diminishing area of influence and use for both the republics' languages and the languages of the nationalities and ethnic groups.

The Russification policy and the resistance it provoked were among the main reasons for the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

3. The Development of Latvian

Latvian and Lithuanian are the two remaining Baltic languages. An extinct Baltic language is the above-mentioned Old Prussian. Before the 19th century, as in the case of Estonian, the Latvian language was mostly used in the religious and judicial spheres. The Latvian area has changed rulers many times with Germans, Poles, Swedes, and Russians having competed for influence. In the 16th century the area was mainly Polish; later, it became divided between Sweden and Poland and in the 18th century between Russia and Poland. From the divisions of Poland to the end of World War I it was a part of the Russian empire. This has made the area
religiously heterogeneous and ethnically heterogeneous (before World War I Latvians constituted only about 60% of the population).

Expression of national feelings on a wider scale is a phenomenon of the early 19th century. 1822 saw the first Latvian newspaper, and in 1824 the first Latvian literary society was formed. One reason for this relatively early national build-up is probably the high rate of literacy, especially in Livonia where 2/3 of the population in the countryside was already literate in 1800. The development accelerated with the school reforms of 1817/19, which made Latvian the language of instruction in the lower and German in the upper grades. In 1881, the rate of illiteracy in Livonia was only 5% illiterates, whilst it was 78% in Russia. The Latvian national movement was especially strong in the middle of the century, though problems developed with the harsh Russification campaign which began in 1881. The language of instruction then became Russian. Liberalization after the 1905 revolution gave the national forces more space. The World War I years were especially harsh for the Latvian area but with post-war independence Latvian became the official language of the new-born Latvia. Minorities, however, had extensive rights at least in the beginning of the inter-war period. The language was also modernized. The percentage of Latvians rose in the period between the World Wars. In the 1935 census, 75.5% of the population were Latvians compared to around 60% just before World War I.

The Soviet occupation of the area; the persecutions and deportations; World War II, which vastly devastated the area; the postwar industrialization and the accompanying mass immigration have all reduced the number of Latvians to around 52%. In the capital, Riga, the Latvians are a minority (36.5% compared to 47.3% Russians). The industrialization and subsequent immigration of large groups of Slavs (not only Russians but also Ukrainians and Belarusians, who as in Estonia, are often Russian-speaking) are usually seen as a part of the Russification or Sovietization policy in the post-war period, but they can also be seen as a result of the negligence of the technocrats in the Moscow centre who did not pay any regard to demographic or environmental questions.

4. The Latvian language today

The ideological Russification in the 1970s and the 1980s made the Latvian language lose most of its functions in official communication, but nevertheless the Latvians were true to their mother tongue. Only 3% of the Latvians regard Russian as their first language.
is, however, the first language for more than half of the Ukrainians, Poles and Belarusians. Also in everyday communication the Latvian-speakers were very often forced to use Russian because few Russian speakers knew Latvian. The policy of bilingualism has led to a situation where the majority of the Latvians can speak Russian. The knowledge of Latvian among the Russians is still much lower.

The national renaissance in the late 1980s led to the Law on the Language of the Latvian SSR of 1989. Latvian was then declared the official (or national language) of the republic. Published when the country still was a republic in the Soviet Union, it legalized a Russian-Latvian parallelism in the use of the languages in documents, state affairs, etc. After independence, a subsequent document of 1992 abandoned this parallelism. The use of Latvian on the official level is thus increasing, as is bilingualism among employees of state offices, enterprises, firms and organizations, but the use of languages in everyday life has not changed much.

5. Lithuanian

The first real belletristic work in Lithuanian came in the 18th century, Kristijonas Donelaitis' *Metai* (The Seasons). It was, however, not printed until 1818. Until then the Lithuanian written texts were usually connected with the religious sphere. In the relatively liberal political climate of the Russian empire in the beginning of the 19th century, the university in Vilnius played a great role in the awakening of Lithuanian national feelings. A secondary school was founded, and private schools were opened. The uprising in 1831 led to the closing of the university and the secondary school as well as to harsh measures against the Catholic church, an important national institution for both Poles and Lithuanians.

The 1863 uprising led to even harsher Russification measures, and the Lithuanian national build-up was based, as in the Polish and Ukrainian cases, to a great extent on activities outside the Russian empire. In Little Lithuania, that is in East Prussia, some influential journals such as Auszra were published, and the emigré Lithuanians in America also played an important role. The Russian-Japanese War and the 1905 revolution meant a liberalization in Russia. The religious prohibitions were cancelled, and Lithuanian books and journals were allowed to be published. Private Lithuanian schools were again allowed. The German occupation of Lithuania in 1915 left more space for Lithuanian national strivings. A Lithuanian school system was then built up.

The creation of a Lithuanian republic after World War I made the Lithuanian language a national one. The Lithuanians amounted to more than 80% of the population. The Jews were the next most numerous minority, followed by Poles, Russians, Germans, Latvians and others. In spite of the demographic changes connected with the Soviet annexation, the German occupation, World War II, the renewed Soviet occupation, the changing borders, as well as immigration in the post-war period, the Lithuanians are still the majority in the independent republic (around 80%). In 1989, the Russians were the most numerous minority (9.4%) followed by Poles, Belarusians, and Ukrainians.

To a certain extent, the Lithuanians' clear majority position reduced the impact of the post-war Russification, but nevertheless Russian had a dominant position in many spheres of life. The Language Law of 1989 had as its main goal, as in Estonia and Latvia, to give Lithuanian the position of an official language. The rights of the minorities to use their languages were established in a minority law in the same year. In this context it must be pointed out that Lithuania was the only Soviet republic in the post-war Soviet Union where the Poles had some
minority rights, including the right to education in Polish. There was, however, an increasing tendency among the Poles to send their children to the Russian-language schools. At the end of the eighties about 65% of the Polish children got their education in such schools. The independence of Lithuania has naturally strengthened the status of Lithuanian, and the position of Lithuanian as a national language must now be considered the most “normal” in the former Soviet republics in the Baltic area.

Table 7d. The Baltic languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baltic</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of speakers</th>
<th>Earliest written records</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lithuanian</td>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>2,800,000</td>
<td>16th c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvian</td>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>1,400,000</td>
<td>16th c.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Kur (ext. 17th c.), † Old Prussian (ext. 18th c.), † Yatving (ext. 16th c.),

6. Belarusian – early development

The Belarusian literary language is essentially a product of the 20th century. This explains the fact that the Belarusian standard is much nearer to the popular language than Russian and that it has far fewer Church-Slavonicisms. The role of Old Belarusian in Polish-Lithuanian society had been reduced to a minimum already in the 17th century, and all continuity was broken after the divisions of Poland. The uprising in 1831 meant, as it did in all other areas, a Russification which became stronger after the 1863 uprising. In the 1830s, the Uniate church, which must be considered the most national of the three main churches in the area, was forbidden. The late 19th century saw the first signs of a national consciousness.

The towns in the area were inhabited mostly by non-Belarusians, while the countryside contained the overwhelming majority of the Belarusian population, which was poor, mostly illiterate, and usually had local identities. The fact that more than five million people in the area in the 1897 census claimed Belarusian as their language should probably not be seen as a sign of a clear national consciousness. The 1905 revolution led to the recognition of the Belarusian language, which had previously been considered a Russian dialect and to the creation of a Belarusian national movement.

Figure 77. Francisk Skaryna's Bible translation into Belarusian (printed in Prag, 1517-19)
The newspaper *Nasha Niva* was also a prominent medium for the Belarusian national strivings.

The 1921 Treaty of Riga divided the Belarusian area between Poland, the Belarusian SSR, and Russia. Later, Russia returned parts of the Belarusian territories, with the exception of the Smolensk region. In the Belarusian republic a fast Belarusification started: Belarusian institutions of various kinds were created and the language normalized and developed to a full-fledged literary language used in administration, education, and culture. The minorities and their languages, however, had extensive rights. Belarus got four official languages: Belarusian, Russian, Yiddish, and Polish. The minorities had their own soviets and a Polish province was established.

The thirties saw the same experiences for Belarusian as had been experienced by other nations and nationalities in the Soviet Union. However, the language and the more superficial symbols of the nation survived not only the purges but also the changes due to industrialization, collectivization, etc. The dismantling of minority rights started earlier and led as a consequence to a rapid decline in the use of minority languages. The changes in the 1930s, however, also affected the Belarusian literary language. The orthographical reform of 1934 aimed at bringing the written language closer to Russian. The new orthography, the so-called *narkomauka*, replaced the *tarashkevica*, the orthography of the 1920s which had been created by Branislau Tarashkevich. The changes were, however, not far-reaching. The *narkomauka* is still extremely phonetic. At present, both orthographies are used in Belarus, the *tarashkevicha* mostly by the opposition. The changes in policy in the 1930s also influenced the vocabulary which from that time became more and more open to borrowings from or deliberate adaptation to Russian.

In Polish Belarus the policy of strong Polonization elicited pro-Soviet sentiments in the Belarusian population, sentiments which however died quickly after the Soviet annexation of the area in 1939.

7. World War II and Post-War development in Belarus

World War II, which passed through the area twice, the purges in western Belarus, the German occupation and the partisan war, and the renewed purges after the Soviet victory all ravaged the area. Most of the industry, towns and cities, as well as the villages, were in ruins; one quarter of the population perished, among them 80% of the Jews. The rebuilding of the country also brought about very important social changes. The Belarusian population which before
the war was mostly rural (before the War the towns and cities were still to a great extent non-
Belarusian) became urban very rapidly.

The post-war period also brought a strong Russification of the republic, perhaps the most
far-reaching in any Soviet republic. The reasons for this are many: (1) There was not a fully
developed national consciousness. The results of the short period of Belarusification in the
1920s were countermanded by the purges in the 1930s and the war, during which most of the
new-born Belarusian intelligentsia perished; (2) Before World War II, Belarus was still mostly
a rural society whereas the towns were inhabited by a majority of non-Belarusians. The towns
and their culture were thus by tradition non-Belarusian. The post-war urbanization of the
Belarusians took place in a period when Russification was intensified. The towns thus became
Russian-speaking; (3) Some kind of feeling of kinship between Belarusians and Russians and
the close relationship between the two languages paved the way for Russification; (4) It is
probable that the Belarusians, when moving into the towns, viewed the relation between their
spoken language and the Russian language as a relation between dialects and a high language.
Knowledge of Russian gave prestige and became a means for social advancement.

In the 1980s the results of Russification were conspicuous. The administration, politics,
party, and higher education were almost totally Russian. In lower education almost all
schools in towns and cities were Russian; the mass-media were to a great extent Russian; in
1984, around 95% of the printed pages of belletristic works were in Russian; only 3 out 15
theatres used Belarusian, etc. The stronghold of Belarusian education was the rural schools,
but even there Belarusian was often exchanged for Russian as the language of administration,
medical service, etc. The spoken Belarusian language in the countryside was usually the local
dialect, not a spoken variant of Standard Belarusian. In many places the spoken language was
a mixed Belarusian-Russian, the so-called Trasjanka, a term literally meaning “mixed cattle-
food.”

The Belarusian language was thus in a clear minority position, even though the Belarusians
constituted the majority population in the republic, and Russian the dominant language, so
dominant that many feared the extinction of Belarusian as a literary language. Russian was
also dominant among the minorities who had no minority rights at all in the post-war period.
Outside the home, only Polish had a position as the language of service in the very circum-
scribed Catholic church. The fear for the extinction of the Belarusian language was strongly
expressed by the intelligentsia and the opposition, eventually leading to the Language Law of
January 1990 in which Belarusian was declared the state language of the republic. Russian was,
however, given ample space and its free use was guaranteed as well. Rights for the minorities
were later expressed in the minority law of 1992.

In the language law, a process of re-Belarusification taking from three to ten years was
foreseen, the goal being to make Belarusian functionally adequate in all spheres of public life.
The realization of the language law met hindrances in spite of the declaration of Independence
in 1991. Demands for making Russian a second state language, however, met strong resistance
in the beginning from the Belarusian opposition and the intelligentsia. The changes were most
evident in the school system. During the school year 1992/93, 68.5% of the first-grade pupils
were taught in Belarusian compared to only 28.9% two years previously. Some changes were
also to be seen in the mass media, but Russian-language newspapers and journals still had a
relatively dominant position, as is also the case with Russian-language television.

In 1995, however, the law underwent remarkable changes: as a result of a referendum,
Russian gained back its official status by the side of Belarusian. The process of
re-Belarusification has lost its previous impetus. During the school year 1999/2000, only 25%
of first-grade pupils got their education in Belarusian.
Linguistic rights of minorities in Belarus

Alena Korshuk

The most comprehensive set of Belarusian laws concerning language minorities are the Laws of the Republic of Belarus "On National Minorities in the Republic of Belarus" from November 11 1992, "On Culture in the Republic of Belarus", "On Education in the Republic of Belarus" (October 29, 1991) and on the "Law on Languages in the Republic of Belarus" passed on January 26, 1990 with June 1998 amendments. The comparative analysis of the Belarusian legislative acts and the International legal norms has shown that the Law on Languages, passed earlier than the respective European Charter, guarantees the inhabitants of Belarus practically all the linguistic rights required by the international community.

There are two basic differences between international law and Belarusian law. First, the European Charter is much more specific and detailed in its provisions, whereas the Belarusian law, though all-embracing, is too general. Other laws and acts refer to the Law on Languages. Second, the EU is much more demanding. It requires the governments of the parties to provide a lot of material, financial and logistic support to the representatives of the regional or national minority languages. There is but one document in the Belarusian legislation to this scope – "Постановление "О дополнительных мерах по государственной поддержке культуры" от 1 апреля 1996 г. N. 229" ("Resolution on additional measures of state support of culture" of 1 April 1996).

Belarusian law "does not regulate the use of languages in unofficial settings", whereas the Charter suggests that the parties shall base their policies, legislation and practice on "the facilitation and/or encouragement of the use of regional or minority languages, in speech and writing, in public and private life" (Part II, Art.7.1). As the words "to facilitate" and "to encourage" are devoid of the meaning "to impose", the discourse of the Charter actually broadens and specifies the rights of minority language speakers on the one hand and determines the duties of the state, on the other. Part III of the Charter – "Measures to promote the use of regional and minority languages in public life in accordance with the undertakings entered into under Article 2, paragraph 2" – starts with Article 8 – Education. It is composed of 2 paragraphs, the first of which has no less than 25 further sub-divisions.

The 1990 Belarusian law also required that the state should undertake to "ensure that representatives of other nationalities resident in the Republic have the right to receive upbringing and education in their native language" (Law, Part III, Art.22). The "number of users" criterion is applied to the provision of groups studying minority languages. The Law is less precise in respect to the undertakings of the state (cf. The Charter, "to make available", "to provide", "to encourage", "to facilitate", "to arrange", "to offer", "to favor", "to set up", etc.). Nothing is said either about the teaching of the culture and the history which is reflected by the regional or minority languages, or about providing the basic and further training of the teachers.

In the part of Belarusian law that concerns administrative authorities and public services, certain discrepancies can be observed. Whereas Article 5 of Part 1 clearly states that "any privileges or discrimination on language grounds are inadmissible" Article 4 of Part 1 says that "heads and employees of administrative, Soviet or trade union bodies, public organizations and enterprises shall have the command of Belarusian or Russian to allow them to carry out their responsibilities. Governmental and administrative bodies, and also institutions, enterprises and organizations shall accept and process applications submitted by the citizens in Russian or in Belarusian". No other languages are mentioned at all. In this case, how does the state ensure the provision of Article 3 of Part 1 stating that "citizens of the Republic of Belarus are guaranteed the right to use their national language..." when they only have "the right to submit an application to State and Party bodies, enterprises, institutions and public organizations in Belarusian, Russian or some other mutually acceptable language". One can only be punished for "denial of an authority to accept and process an application of a citizen in the state language, in the language of international communication or in the working language of the given body solely on the grounds of the language". What language can possibly be used for "international communication" today, when both Belarusian and Russian have become state languages? Is it to be English?

The current economic situation in Belarus can hardly allow for the implementation or even the legislative provision of adequate response to the cultural needs of the minorities as far as all the court written translations or publication of national materials is concerned, etc.

All in all, Belarusian law meets international requirements, and if the Belarusians take more responsibility and initiative into their own hands, the language rights of the minorities can be maintained at a good level.
8. Ukrainian in the Russian Empire

In spite of the continuous efforts to make the area Russian, the 19th century and Romanticism brought a national awakening to the Ukrainians. Actions designed to create a national consciousness have gone through periodic revivals and declines. Even the most famous of the Ukrainian authors from this century, Taras Shevchenko, the national poet of Ukraine, suffered severely for his engagement in a Ukrainian national organization and his poetic activities. A modern Ukrainian language was created, a language which was based on the popular language and thus not so full of Church Slavonicisms as Russian. As a result of the division of the Ukrainian-speaking area between Russia and the Austro-Hungarian empire, the language appeared under various names: Little Russian and Ruthenian. Ukrainian was, however, the name chosen by the Ukrainian patriots.

The constant pressure of Russification made it hard for the Ukrainian movement to work in the Russian part of Ukraine. In the Austrian part of the Ukrainian area, Galicia, the inhabitants had greater opportunities despite Polish pressure. Lemberg (Lvov, Lviv) also became a centre for the development of the language. With the beginning of the 20th century, Russian pressure lessened somewhat and Ukrainian organizations were able to work again in Russian Ukraine.

In 1905 Ukrainian was recognized as a separate language and Ukrainian newspapers began to be published. The counter-reaction in Russia was soon apparent, especially after the beginning of World War I when all appearances of national life were oppressed. This oppression against Ukrainians was also very severe in Galicia, most notably when it was occupied by the Russian army in 1914. A consequence of this oppression was that leading Ukrainians set as their goal the creation of an independent Ukrainian republic. The republic which existed for about two years after the War could not, however, withstand the troops of the Bolsheviks, and Ukraine became integrated in the Soviet Union as the Ukrainian SSR. The Ukraine’s western parts once again became Polish territory. In the beginning of the 1920s oppression from Moscow was still very harsh, but in 1924 the policy changed and the Ukrainians got, within the Socialist framework, another opportunity to develop a Ukrainian republic and to Ukrainianize the administration, the mass media, and the education system.

9. Ukrainian in the Soviet Union; the independence

The 1920s were thus a flourishing period for Ukraine. But the 1930s brought especially harsh repressions, most notably the Great Famine in 1932-33, which was inflicted upon the collectivized peasants to break their resistance and the national spirit of the Ukrainians. As a result of the Famine probably more than five million people died. At the same time the Ukrainian intelligentsia, the national Communists, and the churches were persecuted and purged, and their members to a large extent killed or deported. Taken together, these were tremendous blows to the Ukrainian national spirit. The annexation of Polish Ukraine and the subsequent purges, the War, the German occupation, the partisan struggles, and the renewed Soviet purges after the defeat of the Germans reduced the number of Ukrainians further, and it took some years after the war to reach the same number of Ukrainians as in 1926, even though Ukraine was considerably enlarged after World War II.

The post-war period also brought a growing number of Russians to Ukraine. From 1959 to 1989 the percentage of Russians rose from 16.9 to 22.1% of the overall population of...
Ukraine. During the same period the percentage of Ukrainians fell from 76.8 to 72.7%. To some extent these figures may be a result of assimilation. In the 1989 census nearly 12% of the Ukrainians claimed Russian as their first language. As linguistic assimilation is an important step towards total assimilation, these figures point to such a possibility.

The post-war period, especially the 1970s and the 1980s, meant in Ukraine as in all other Soviet republics an ongoing Russification. As a result, the Ukrainian language lost ground in all areas of public life. The number of schools with Ukrainian as the language of instruction fell and the number of schools with Russian rose. The so-called Ukrainian-Russian schools became more and more Russian. This was also the case in higher education, and the language of administration and party activities was almost exclusively Russian. The Ukrainian language was increasingly relegated more and more to a home language and a rural language, with Ukrainian culture becoming more and more a folkloristic reserve.

The Chernobyl catastrophe in 1986 was the spark for the political and national mobilization in Ukraine. Even if the ecological question was in the foreground in the beginning, the position of the Ukrainian language and culture quickly served as a new focus. As in the other republics these strivings led to a law which made Ukrainian the state language in 1989. This law was followed up in 1991 by a plan for the linguistic and cultural “re-Ukrainization” of Ukraine, which was expected to be completed in the year 2000.

In spite of gaining independence in 1991, re-Ukrainization is slow except in the western parts of the country and encounters resistance in many areas, especially in the eastern and southern parts of the country where the largest concentrations of Russians and Russian-speakers live. The number of schools with Ukrainian as the primary language rose only 2% in the first three years of the existence of the language law. In early 1993 the number of Russian schools comprised 50% and Ukrainian schools 49.3%. In Crimea there were no schools at all with Ukrainian as the language of instruction. Odessa, with 1.1 million inhabitants and 48% Ukrainians, had only two schools with Ukrainian as the language of instruction.

The position of Russian in Ukraine is thus not that of a minority language. The right to use Russian is provided for both in the language law and in subsequent documents. The minority law of 1992 also gives ample space for linguistic and cultural autonomy for minorities.

10. Yiddish

For a relatively long period the Jews found a sanctuary in Poland-Lithuania, and as a result the number of Jews and the number of speakers of the eastern Slavicized variants of Yiddish grew quickly. In time the situation changed for the worse. The greatest outbreak of violence against the Jews came with Bohdan Khmelnicky’s rebellion against the Poles when, according to some estimates, tens of thousands of Jews perished. Before that, the eastern variant of the language had already made an impact in the West, but the persecutions increased the stream of refugees and migrants towards Western Europe, consequently increasing the influence of the Eastern variant.

There were relatively few Jews in Russia before the divisions of Poland. The number of Jews in the empire increased considerably with the incorporation of the Polish Jewish settlement areas. The situation of the Jews in the Russian empire was far from good. They were isolated to a few gouvernements and often persecuted. But the xenophobic sentiments after the murder of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 led to even worse persecutions and horrendous pogroms in 1881-82, which were renewed at the beginning of the 20th century. This led to a stream of
refugees to Western Europe and further to the United States which, in the years 1882-1914, received 2.75 million Jews. The Eastern variant of Yiddish thus spread all over the world. The situation in Western Europe in the 19th century was better for the Jews but it took a long time for them to become accepted as citizens with full rights. In Denmark, for example, they got full political rights in 1849, in Sweden in 1870. The accomplishment of full political rights facilitated the change of languages. It is reported that it took the Jews of Denmark only one decade to change from Yiddish to Danish.

11. Yiddish culture and literature

The literature in Yiddish up to the end of the 18th century was almost exclusively written in the Western dialect. A popular literature in Yiddish, however, came into existence in Eastern Europe as a reaction against the demands that the Jews in the German-speaking areas speak German and not Yiddish. An influential writer in (Eastern) Yiddish of the 19th century was Sholem Aleichem. At a conference in Bukovina in 1908, Yiddish gained the status of the Jewish national language. Yiddish got a more uniform orthography in the 1920s.

The period between the World Wars was the heyday for the Yiddish language and literature both in Poland, the United States, and the Soviet Union. As an example can be mentioned the Belarusian SSR where, in 1926, 91% of the 407,000 Jews had Yiddish as their mother tongue. The new authorities were opposed to the Jewish religious and cultural traditions (including the use of Hebrew) but promoted the creation of a secular and Socialist Jewishness including the use of Yiddish. Yiddish became one of the four official languages in the republic, newspapers and journals were published, new libraries were opened, a Jewish state theatre was established, books were published etc.

An important centre for the study of Jewish culture was the Jewish section of the Institute of Belarusian culture at the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. It later became reorganized to the Institute for Jewish Culture. The Institute had, among others, the task of creating an academic dictionary and an atlas of the Yiddish language. The most important means for the creation of a Socialist Jewishness were the schools. As late as in 1936 more than 36,000 children were taught in Jewish schools (60% of the Jewish children). By the end of the 1930s, however, nearly all Jewish institutions had been abolished, and the schools were in a state of rapid disintegration. Another example is Poland, where more than 200 journals and newspapers in Yiddish were published in this period.

Before World War II about two thirds of the world’s Jews, that is, about 11 million people, were Yiddish-speaking. The only competing Jewish language, Modern Hebrew, which was developed in the late 19th century, was confined mostly to Palestine. The Holocaust reduced the number of Yiddish speakers to about 5 million after the World War II. With the adoption of Modern Hebrew as the official language of Israel, the role of Yiddish was much reduced.

In the Soviet Union the official anti-Zionist and partly anti-Semitic policy after the war reduced Yiddish to what was at best a home language, while the main group of Jews exchanged Yiddish for the dominant language, Russian. In the 1989 census, only 7.6% of the Jews in Belarus claimed Yiddish as the mother tongue while 90% mentioned Russian. In Ukraine the figures were about the same. In Estonia, 12.3% had Yiddish as the mother tongue, 78.3% Russian, and 8.4% Estonian. The Yiddish-speaking group counts mostly people of old age. In most countries outside Israel the number of Yiddish-speakers has been reduced due to voluntary conversion to other languages. Even though Yiddish is still not a
dead language, especially in the United States and even in Israel, the Jewish renaissance in the ex-Soviet republics includes a revival of Yiddish only to a very limited extent. The language studied in the numerous language circles is almost exclusively Modern Hebrew. Yiddish seems thus to be a historical remnant in the Baltic area.

The origin of Yiddish

According to the most accepted theories, Yiddish was first a Judaized German spoken in the Rhineland by Jews who had immigrated from northern France and Italy. From the very beginning this language had a Hebrew-Aramaic component associated with the Jewish religion. During the 11th and 12th centuries the Jews spread to other parts of the German area. The German component of the language then became High German. In the migrations eastward the Jews came into contact with Slavs and Slavic-speaking Jews, meetings which account for the Early Slavic component of Yiddish. This western Yiddish is the foundation for one of the main dialects of Yiddish, which is now nearly extinct as a spoken and written language. The eastern dialect, which is much more Slavicized than the western dialect, developed as a result of the mass flight of Jews in the 13th-16th centuries to the religiously more liberal Poland-Lithuania and Hungary; these Jews were persecuted in the west in connection with the crusades as well as with the appearance of the black death. In this period a relatively uniform literary language was already developed.

![Figure 78. Mani Leyb – Yiddish](image-url)
Contacts de langues et de cultures dans l’aire beltique
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