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► **To cite this version:**

Eva Toulouze. Vasili Lytkin and the latinisation of Komi. Ostapova, Elena; Fedina, Marina; Punegova G. ... : ... : ... , 25-26 ... 2010, ... , pp.9-12, 2010. hal-01276742

HAL Id: hal-01276742

<https://inalco.hal.science/hal-01276742>

Submitted on 19 Feb 2016

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Eva Toulouze

Vasili Lytkin and the latinisation of Komi

The so-called episode of the “latinisation” in Russia in the 1930ies is a curious one and deserves to be examined in detail. It played a certain role in the beginning and the development of a written culture in different languages of the URSS and the sequence of the events connected with it illustrates most eloquently the tragic unwinding of the Soviet tale in the two decades between the Revolution and the so-called Great Patriotic War. Vasili Lytkin was one of the main actors of this story in the Komi territory and the aim of this article is to unfold and comment it. Still, in order to understand what was at stake, I shall start by two introductory chapters: one about the general context of latinisation¹ and the other about the peculiar situation in Komi. Only when these two contextual questions have been reviewed, we may be able to analyse Lytkin’s role in it and his motivations.

1. Latinisation in Russia

The adoption of Latin alphabet for a large amount of the languages spoken in the Soviet Union is a process that covers almost two decades. In the eventual triumph of the Russian alphabet that happened in 1936-1940 and has been lately crowned by the decision of the State Duma in 2002 of denying the languages of Russia the right to be written in any other alphabet than the Cyrillic², one can symbolically recognise the victory of the hegemonic principles ruling Russian politics.

When the Bolshevik revolution could assert its rights on the territory of the former Russian empire, the languages spoken in this huge territory were written with different alphabets – Cyrillic for the Slavic languages, Latin for example in Carelia (but most of the languages written with the Latin alphabet were spoken in territories lost by Soviet Russia), Arabic for the Turkic languages as well as specific alphabets for Georgian and Armenian and others, as

¹ On this question in general, see Toulouze 1997.

² This decision was taken by the Duma, and later (in 2004) confirmed by the Constitutional Court in connexion with the attempt of Tatarstan to go back to the Latin alphabet adopted at the end of the 1920s (see below).

the Mongol and the Chinese circulating in Asia. This diversity in itself was not seen by the first Bolshevik leaders as a problem, but in their attempt to obtain control of the territory with its diverse population, they were mainly concerned by the use of the Arabic alphabet.

The Arabic alphabet presented different peculiarities that could displease the Soviet authorities both from the symbolic and from the practical side. From the symbolic point of view, the Arabic alphabet was of religious origin and thus it connected its users with a world the Bolshevik strived to eliminate. From the political point of view, the Arabic alphabet had its centre far from Russia and from the revolutionary system – it was mainly connected with the Arab world and with Mecca. This could represent a danger in a Soviet Russia harassed by solitude in an environment that did not follow its revolutionary example. From the practical point of view, the use of the Arabic alphabet for Turkic languages was doubly exposed to criticism: first of all, from a non-political, merely linguistic point of view, its peculiarity of not noting vowels could not be fit to languages in which the vowel system is so developed and important for distinguishing meanings. Therefore, and this was a political issue in Soviet Russia, the use of the Arabic alphabet made literacy a privilege of the elite and hindered mass schooling (Zak, Isaev 1966: 5-6), while education and literacy were vital for the Bolshevik in order to achieve their goals: they were among the main instruments used by the new rulers to strengthen their grip on the country³.

Therefore, quite early (in 1922), Lenin proclaimed that “latinisation was Revolution for the East” and the fate of the Arabic alphabet in Russia was decided: it was to be replaced by the Latin alphabet. This orientation was adopted in the 1920s, i. e. much earlier than in Turkey⁴. Undoubtedly, Atatürk was inspired in his reforms by the example of Turkey’s great Russian neighbour. But how can we explain the choice of the Latin alphabet, which was to be so thoroughly criticised later? The legacy, the time and the revolutionary leadership explain it convincingly. The legacy: for the revolutionary leaders, whose policy was supposed to be radically different from the tsarist regime’s, it wasn’t acceptable to promote the use of the Russian alphabet as an alternative, as the memory of the missionaries’ endeavours was still fresh. Nikolay Il’minsky, since the 1860s, had forced a Cyrillic transcription of Tatar, based on

³ About the criticism of the Arabic alphabet, see Ubriatova 1977: 113, Zak Isaev 1966: 5-6, Musaev 1965:10-11; about the political advantages of the Latin alphabet see Nurmakov 1934:5-6.

⁴ The Latin alphabet was adopted for Turkish only in 1928.

the language of the countryside people, and more fit than the Arabic transcription to the language features (Ilminsky 1870:13). Cyrillic was the symbol of evangelisation, and evangelisation meant Russification. The time: Lenin pronounced his famous sentence in a period in which there was urgency and in which the first priority was to convince the nationalities to support the Bolshevik. The beginning of the 1920s is not a time for russification: "Russian chauvinism" is criticised and often Moscow supports claims by ethnic groups against Russian endeavours⁵. The political nature of the choice of the Latin alphabet is clearly expressed in the resolution of a commission dedicated to the question: as both alphabets were fit upon linguistic criteria, the choice was political and fell on the Latin (Ubriatova 1977: 113). Moreover, the Bolshevik leaders in the first years of the Revolution are still very much the small group of intellectual that had been active before 1917: many had lived abroad in exile. For them, unlike for their followers, the Latin alphabet was quite familiar.

The movement started with the initiative of the Azeri, who were the first to abandon the Arabic alphabet and to latinise their written language in 1921. The Yakuts had also started a parallel movement as early as 1920 (Zak, Isaev 1966: 6). They were followed by several other people, among which the Bachkirs in 1926 (Iskhakov 1934). The last to accept this trend were the Tatars. The Tatars had a national elite, which had been shaped by Muslim culture and the intellectual sphere was thoroughly arabised⁶. They resisted longer than others and the intellectual debate about the way of writing the language was fierce. It was an old debate in the Tatar intellectual sphere. But eventually, in 1929, the Tatars were compelled, as the others, to write their language in the Latin alphabet (see Seid-Zade 1934).

Still this process was not completely spontaneous. The first period was characterised by separate attempts (Grande 1934: 21-23). But there was a need for coordination and there were decisions to take about the transcription of different phonemes in the new alphabet.

⁵ A good example is Moscow's position in several disputes between the Party's organisation of Izhevsk, which was strongly Russian and hostile to the Udmurts, and the Udmurt leader Trofim Borisov. Moscow, in 1923 and 1925, protected Borisov and promoted him, while in his region, the Russian leader attempted to eliminate him (Kuznecov 1994: 27-28).

⁶ Missionary Nikolay Il'minsky, who had been trained in his knowledge of Tatar by his teacher Kazem-bek, had written his first translation of religious texts in this language. He had later discovered, in living longer in the countryside, that the Tatar population spoke a much less arabised kind of Tatar than the city intellectuals (Ilminsky 1870).

The base was Latin, but it had to be adapted. After the Conference of Turkic languages speaking peoples called in 1926, this became the responsibility of the New Turkic Alphabet Committee (КНТА, Комитет Нового Тюркского Алфавита). The Turkic languages being quite close to one another, the Committee's task was not impossible to achieve: the phoneme systems allowed a great regularity in transcription based on the principle "one phoneme, one grapheme" (Grande 1934: 14-15, 19-21). It was to be a test, on a simple sample, of what would be generalised later.

The next stage was the generalisation of the experience acquired by the Turkic languages. The question arose in 1929, when the decision was officialised to provide several non-written languages with a written norm. The implementation of this decision required a huge amount of preliminary work: languages that had not been thoroughly studied previously had to be analysed from all points of view, a dialectal base had to be chosen and, last but not least, an alphabet had to be selected. The late experience of the Turkic languages provided a solution that was most coherent with the Bolshevik way of thinking. In 1930 the KTA was transformed into a Committee of the **New** Alphabet (КНА, Комитет Нового Алфавита), and started elaborating an alphabet that would be used for writing all the newly planned languages, the languages of small peoples of Siberia (Zak, Isaev 1966: 9). The project grew: it appealed very much to the Soviet aspiration to logical standardisation and to rational human interference. The idea was to create a kind of bank of phonemes/graphemes that would be fit for all the languages existing in the socialist space. For the same phoneme, every language would use the same grapheme. The graphemes corresponding to non existing phonemes in a given language would only be skipped in the alphabet of that language. The systematic approach was emphasised by the main linguist involved: Professor N.F. Yakovlev proposed in 1928 a mathematic formula for building an alphabet (Yakovlev 1928).

This project required enormous efforts aimed at identifying the phonological system of each language in order to apply the needed graphemes allowing the creation of a coherent alphabet. More visibly than this requiring scientific work, the Committee of the New Alphabet developed an ideology and a global project. The ideology was that the use of the Latin alphabet in the Western countries was chaotic; it served the interests of the local bourgeoisies and left the simple people in ignorance, because of the unsteady valour of each

letter. In the socialist framework, this alphabet, the one in which Marx and Engels had written their works, would serve the interests of the working class and of universal literacy. The project of having all the languages of the USSR passing to the Latin alphabet implied that Russian, and other languages in which the Cyrillic alphabet was well rooted, were to change. The peak was reached in 1933, when most of the languages were written in Latin letters, as it was the official orientation of the authorities. Still, even in that period, the unification was not totally achieved. There were several graphemes that represented different phonemes in different languages (Grande 1934:128-129). In 1934, we already see a tendency to seek “errors” in the field of the “latinisers” (BSE 1934), and two years later the course is entirely changed and all the previously latinised languages were undergoing a new transformation – going over to Cyrillic alphabet, under its Russian form.

Komi written culture in the 1920s

The Komi language is among those languages in which the Cyrillic tradition was quite well rooted. Notwithstanding an older original tradition – St Stephen of Perm’s invented alphabet called *abur* – komi had been written in a scarce amount of documents since the 17th century with the help of the Cyrillic alphabet (Lytkin 1952: 50-59)⁷. In the early 19th century, it was in a Cyrillic notation that the first literary texts were composed by a generation of literate young men, among whom the most famous is the poet Ivan Kuratov – who wrote for himself poems that have become classics. It is also in this alphabet that Georgi Lytkin wrote both his translations into Komi and his original work - *Зырянский край при епископах пермских и зырянский язык. Пособие при изучении зыряннами русского языка* – written in 1889. So the tradition existed. But the existing transcriptions were not entirely satisfactory and in 1920 a linguist, Vladimir Molodcov (1886-1940), proposed a strictly phonemic alphabet, conceived for Komi, which was adopted.

This is a unique case in the Soviet Union: the process launched by the Revolution concerning the emancipation of nationalities led only in Komi to the creation of an alphabet peculiar to a particular language. The Molodcov alphabet was a very rational alphabet for the Komi

⁷ Those early monuments are mainly translations of religious literature (Martynov 1985:71).

language; it had been very carefully conceived. It was composed of letters from the Cyrillic alphabet⁸, some with additions on Molodcov's own. It was implemented in 1920, and all printed materials issued in Komi during the decade and later in the second half of the 1930s used this alphabet.

The question of going over to the Latin alphabet had been discussed in 1923-1924, even before it became a political trend all over the Soviet Union. Its followers considered the Molodcov's alphabet was narrowly nationalist, relying on its uniqueness (Oboturov 1934: 191). It had been rejected and the Molodcov alphabet had been confirmed. Some years later, however, the generalisation of the Latin alphabet for all new written languages in the country and the processes mentioned above led to a new debate in the Komi *oblast'* about the better way of writing the language. This discussion between the followers of the Molodcov alphabet and those who supported the Latin alphabet was concluded by the victory of the Latin alphabet, which was then officially supported by the Soviet authorities, both in Syktyvkar and in Moscow. A linguistic conference took place in 1929 and not even Molodcov expressed further opposition to the adoption of the Latin alphabet (Popov 1989: 59); it was followed by a resolution by the Party and the State organs confirming the decision (Baraksanov 1963: 180). Actually there was no difference in the conception of both alphabets: the Latin version was as phonemic as the previous one, only the form of the letters was changed. It was implemented in 1930, and for two years, it coexisted with the Molodcov alphabet (Baraksanov 1993: 179).

The experience lasted 6 years, but it seems that the first critical reports started earlier than in other regions: already at the end of 1934 reports in State organs draw the conclusion that it would be reasonable to go back to the Molodcov's alphabet (Popov 1989: 57). The assessment was more and more critical, until the Latin alphabet was condemned, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union: it was accused of driving apart the Komi language from Russian (Baraksanov 1963: 181). In 1936, the Komi went back to the Molodcov alphabet and resisted for two years the pressure to adopt the Cyrillic one, which came into being in 1938 and is still in use. It is interesting to observe that the accusation of nationalism, which had

⁸ Such as it was before the orthographic reform for Russian in 1918, for example with the letter « i », which exists no longer in Russian, but is present in other forms of Cyrillic and in the Latin alphabet.

been already produced in connection with the Molodcov's alphabet, was also issued against the adepts of the Latin alphabet, as Lytkin. Any choice of anything else than the Russian system appeared, in the times of repression, as nationalistic...

Vasily Lytkin and latinisation

Vasily Lytkin (1885-1981) is a key figure in Komi intellectual picture covering the 20th century. He has been a witness and an actor of the main changes in that period, from the Revolution until the Brezhnev era, being himself a victim in the Stalinist. He had enjoyed an enviable privilege: after having achieved his studies in Moscow, he was the only scholar among Russia's Finno-Ugrians, who was allowed to pursue Finno-Ugric studies outside the Soviet Union, in Finland and Hungary (Jelsova 1994: 15). And besides being a scholar, he was also a well-known poet under the name of Illya Vas'. But this aspect of his activity is beyond the scope of this article.

Vasily Lytkin had thus a wider experience of the world than most of his colleagues. He had already widened his perspectives during the Civil War: he has been a soldier first in the tsarist army, and later as a volunteer in the Red Army in the North, in the Urals, on the Polish front; he was even made prisoner in Prussia (Oni Ijubili 1993: 139; Baraksanov, Zherebcov 1994: 63, 65; Turkin 1995a: 208).

The years he spent in Moscow studying linguistics were mightily useful for his subsequent work as a Finno-Ugrist. Although he could not study Finno-Ugristics, for this discipline did not exist as such, he studied Russian linguistics and dialectology and his professors took advantage of his interest and his knowledge of Komi for orienting him towards comparative linguistics. They also supported him in his desire to pursue his studies and in 1925 he was admitted as a doctoral student at the Institute of the Oriental peoples⁹, whose director was the later famous academic Marr and the vice-rector a linguist (not indifferent to our purpose), N.F. Yakovlev (Turkin 1995a: 209). He was supported and got the scholarship that allowed him to spend two years, one in Finland and one in Hungary, and to visit bot

⁹ In Russian : Научно-исследовательский институт этнических и национальных культур народов Востока СССР.

Germany and Estonia. He returned home in 1929 (Turkin 1995a: 209, Turkin 1995b: 291). He took good advantage of this exceptional possibility. In Finland, in 1926, he attended lectures about basic Finno-Ugristics and about Finno-Ugric cultures (Turkin 1997: 22-25); He took advantage of it to visit Estonia during 10 days (Turkin 1995: 210, Turkin 1997: 23-24). In Hungary, he was awarded the title of Doctor for his work about the Permian suffixes (1927), he learned Hungarian and discovered the Hungarian school of Finno-Ugristics (Oni Ijubili 1994: 145, Turkin 1995c: 211n, Turkin 1995a: 212, Turkin 1997: 25).

The idea of latinising the writing of Komi is an old one for Lytkin. Even before his leaving for Moscow University, in 1923, he had expressed it, alongside recognition for Molodcov's work: the perspective was fixed for a later time but existed (Baraksanov 1989: 48). At the same time, it did not seem to be an issue for him at that time: the important was "to have a practical and scientific alphabet" (Oni Ijubili... 1993: 150). Then, for some time, the idea was overpowered by other concerns – as the creation of two Komi languages, Komi-Zyrien and Komi-Permiak, against which Lytkin positioned himself clearly. But actually it has been noticed that those who were favourable to the Latin alphabet were also favourable to a unique Komi language... (Oni Ijubili... 1993: 149).

Vasily Lytkin became a promoter of the Latin alphabet for Komi. He was the person in charge of introducing, in coordination with the overall process, the Latin alphabet in Komi. He was called at the board of the Committee of the New Alphabet and was expected to propose a project both for Komi and for Udmurt. The result of his work was accepted by the Party in November 1931 and the Latin alphabet was introduced at school in 1932 (Isayev 1979:203).

Lytkin's more resolute positions in favour of the Latin alphabet appeared after he returned from his studies abroad. Certainly, the years he spent in Finland and in Hungary increased his familiarity with the Latin alphabet. Not only in these countries the languages were written in the Latin alphabet, but moreover, the linguistic study of the Permian languages was also based on a Latin transcription and not on the existing official literary language. The wish to keep closer to the kin languages and of the languages of Western Europe played certainly a role in Lytkin's choice of the Latin alphabet.

More personal concerns might also have been determinant: on the one hand, his conflict with Molodcov. Molodcov seemed to be permanently at the core of conflicts, he has, according to scholars, quite a difficult personality (Oni Ijubili 1993: 210). At the beginning, Lytkin defended him, for example against A.A. Tsember, who criticised his alphabet and called him, in 1921, “an evil enemy of the Komi people” (Oni Ijubili 1993: 211). Quite early, Molodcov had expressed his objections against the adoption of a generalised Latin alphabet: according to him, many languages spoken in the USSR have very different phonetic systems from the ones transcribed with the Latin alphabet; the internationalisation of the alphabet is a waste for weak written cultures, the more so if it is not coordinated (Molodcov 1924: 155-156).

But perhaps even more important might have been Lytkin’s closeness to linguists directly implicated in the latinisation process. The main ideologist of the latinisation movement was the same N.F. Yakovlev, who had recommended Lytkin as a doctoral student and who was the vice-rector of the institution that received him. He called Lytkin to be part of a commission he chaired, and whose aim was to propose a Latin alphabet system for Russian. Besides the natural sympathy Lytkin could have for the Latin alphabet, these personal contacts may have strengthened his involvement in the struggle for it.

His involvement in the defence of the Latin alphabet for Komi was certainly a proof of his wide approach: he didn’t want his language to be encompassed in narrow frames, but wished it to dialogue, to be situated in an ample space. From this point of view, Lytkin was certainly not an obtuse nationalist. But he was a “nationalist” from another point of view: he was dedicated to his culture and devoted himself to it. If the debate could have been led further and could have been free, we may only suppose all the benefit the Komi culture would have derived from it.

The latinisation episode was closed and presented by the Party as a mistake. Perhaps it was a mistake from the point of view of the development of literacy in the vernacular. The permanent change of alphabet – four times in two decades – brought certainly instability. And this instability was probably not favourable to increase the popularity of the written form of Komi. Still the attempt became suspicious not only because it complicated the task

of the teachers, of the students and of the literate people, but also because, as earlier the Arabic alphabet, the Latin one was connected with a world – although without a recognised centre – that was more and more felt as threatening and dangerous. Some years later, Lytkin could not have studied abroad as he was allowed to – Kuzebay Gerd, the Udmurt writer and ethnographer, who dreamt to imitate him, did not obtain the necessary scholarship and permission.

The fact he had been involved as the main actor in a direction that was later disowned by the Party was certainly suspicious. But Lytkin was eliminated from public life before he could be reproached his role in the latinisation of Komi: he was arrested as soon as 1933 – when the promotion of the Latin alphabet was still not exposed to political accusations. There were other reasons for which Lytkin was considered an intellectual to eliminate: his poems were more and more criticised and, above all, he had committed the crime of spending a long time abroad and to have met during his travels people who were known for their hostility towards the Soviet regime.

Still Lytkin may be considered as lucky: not only he came back from prison and exile, but he came back to his job as a linguist and was able to contribute further to Permian studies.

His participation in the Latinisation episode, although central, has never been emphasised by later researchers before and after 1991, although other contributions to the development of the Komi language after the Revolution have been remarked, as his work on textbooks while he was a student in Moscow. His conflict with Molodcov is only rapidly mentioned (Baraksanov, Guljajev, Martynov, Turkin 1975: 5, Oni Ijubili 1993: 140-143). Still, this episode has its place in the history of the Komi written culture and I feel honoured to recall it.

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