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The Latinization Attempt in Mongolia

When considering the field of linguistic interaction between Central Asia and Europe, we may find a part of it related to linguistic policies, and especially policies concerning the choice of script. In fact, it may be more fitting to use the word interference instead of interaction, as this process is usually one-sided. At least this is the case with the main subject of this paper, the Latinization attempt in Mongolia in the 1930's and 1940's.

This Mongolian attempt at Latinization did not draw much interest probably because of its outcome: very limited use of the Latin alphabet in Mongolia for a few years and an aftermath in which the classical Mongolian script was maintained as the official script. But we should not underestimate the position the Latin alphabet held for some time in Mongolia, which was larger than the very limited use estimated by some scholars.¹

In this Latinization case, we will find European power, the USSR, attempting to extend a general linguistic policy to, as Owen Lattimore defined it, a satellite country² of which one of the attributes is that "any variations within the dominant state are promptly reflected within the satellite state." It thus seems necessary to sketch briefly the Latinization movement in the USSR as of the 1920's in order to understand how this tentative Mongolian Latinization is part of a more general process.³ As we know, moves toward Latinization appeared early in the USSR, Azerbaijan being one of the first to adopt a new Latin alphabet in the first half of the 1920's. After the 1926 Turcological Congress in Baku, the Latin alphabet was due to be adopted by the Turkic languages. This policy of Latinization was

¹ For Robert Rupen, "a few postage stamps and some currency were actually printed using [the Latin alphabet]. But a Latin alphabet never came into general use", *Mongols of the twentieth Century*, 1964, part 1, p. 243.

² Owen Lattimore, *Nationalism and Revolution in Mongolia*, Brill Leiden, 1955, p. 42.

³ This process of Latinization in the USSR is described in numerous scientific works among them Paul Henze, *Politics and Alphabets in Inner Asia*, *JRCAS*, XLIII, 1956, pp. 29-51, Ingeborg Baladauf, *Schriftreform und Schriftwechsel bei den Muslimischen Russland und Sowjettürken (1850-1937)* Akadémiai Kiadó, 1993, etc.

afterwards, from the late 1920's and through the 1930's, extended to most minority languages used in the USSR, either previously unwritten, or using other kinds of writing systems. This movement had different goals: one was to aid in the spread of literacy, another was to break ties with the history and religion of the different ethnic groups, to create a new solidarity within the USSR and to hamper contacts with other groups using the previous writing systems outside the USSR. Soviet authorities were quite open about these objectives. For example, in a report written in 1932 for the Society of Nations, the organization for cultural relations between the USSR and foreign countries said that a new unified Latin-based alphabet for the use of the working masses had replaced numerous narrow systems of representation made for the use of clergy, aristocrats and the bourgeois.⁴ These systems qualified as being "backwards". It was also said that the new script help to create a connection between the peoples of the Orient.⁵

One of these so-called backward scripts was the Mongolian script, used in the USSR by the Buriats and the Kalmyks as well as in Tannu Tuva. Latinization affected Buriatia from 1929 onwards, but, as shown by Robert Montgomery, the debate surrounding the possibility of Latinization had already been present for many years.⁶

In Mongolia itself, the first move toward Latinization appeared at the beginning of the 1930's, somewhat later than the general movement in the USSR. It should be noticed that in this case an appearance of independence was sought. In the report to the Society of Nations, cited earlier, Mongolia is quoted, together with Turkey, as a foreign country which had decided to engage in script reform in favour of the Latin script after the Soviet successes in that field.⁷ According to Paul Henze, "with isolated nationalities, like the Tuvinians and the Buriats, the Russian Communists employed more direct methods of linguistic coercion [...] In the Mongolian People's Republic they were more careful. Here the Russians were eager to maintain a greater illu-

⁴ *L'Adoption universelle des caractères latins*, Société des Nations, 1934:164.

⁵ *L'Adoption universelle des caractères latins*, Société des Nations, 1934:174.

⁶ Robert Montgomery, *Buriat Language Policy, 19th c 1928: A Case Study in Soviet Nationality Practices*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1994:368-387 and 449-462.

⁷ "Résumé du développement de la latinisation des alphabets dans l'USSR", *L'Adoption universelle des caractères latins*, Société des Nations, 1934:171.

sion of independence so as not to offend Chinese sensibilities or challenge Japanese ambitions too directly.”⁸

The first attempt at Latinization was estimated by Mišig to have lasted approximately three years, from 1930 to 1933.⁹ The beginning of this attempt is easy to date: in the first half of 1930 the 8th Party Congress made a proposal to replace the Mongolian script, which, according to the Congress, “is a part of the old bureaucracy and hampers the development of the new culture and education” with a Latin script fit for the Mongolian language.¹⁰ This proposal was followed by the adoption of the Latin script by the 6th Great Xural, and by a government decision later in the same year (Decree 36 of October 31, 1930).

This political decision was probably supported by a press campaign; for example, a table of the “new Mongolian script” was published in the main newspaper, *Ünen*, on February 19, 1930. The thirty-letter Latin alphabet proposed in this table drew heavily on the Mongolian alphabet, thus appearing to be more a direct adaptation of the Mongolian script than a proposal for a new orthography. Three different diacritics were used (cedilla, grave and circumflex accent). The influence of the Mongolian script could be found, for example, in the two back rounded vowels /u/ and /o/. These vowels have the same representation in the Mongolian script (using the graphic components called *ТИТИМ* and *ГЭДЭС* in Mongolian in the initial position) and they were also represented by the same letter *o*, but were differentiated by the use of the grave accent [o/ò]. Also the mid-rounded vowels /ö/ and /ü/ (*ТИТИМ*, *ГЭДЭС*, and *ШИЛБЭ* in the initial position) shared the same letter *u* also with a diacritic [u/ù].

The Latin Mongolian alphabet actually used in Mongolia a few years later was itself far from being similar to this first proposal. Its introduction was hampered by false starts, and it was only in 1932 that this alphabet really appeared on a large scale.

In 1932, the Latin script appeared in newspapers for several months. *Ünen* published a new script page with either general articles or articles about

⁸ Paul Henze, “Politics and Alphabets in Inner Asia” *JRCAS*, XLIII, 1956:36.

⁹ L. Mišig, “Б.Н.М.А. Улсад монгол хэлийг судалж байгаа байдал ба хойшид тавих зорилт”, *Монгол хэл бичигийн зарим асуудлууд*, Ulaanbaatar, 1956:9.

¹⁰ *Монгол ардын хувьсгалт намаас бух нийтийг үндэсний бичит үсэгт сургасан нь*, Ulaanbaatar, 1967:11.

Latinization. We may consider for example an excerpt of one of these new script pages, published on June 21, 1932.¹¹ The spelling mistake in the heading (with an inverted N in *Şine*) is not an exception; a similar one, may be found in another word, *Ysegiin*, in the May 11, 1932 edition.¹² This intrusion of a Cyrillic character inside the usual Latin fonts may suggest that the type was directly imported from the USSR and that even the typographers in charge of printing this new script page had not achieved full proficiency in the new Latin alphabet.

The Latin script may also appear in other parts of the newspaper, even among articles written in the Mongolian script, for example in a caricature.¹³ It could also be found in general publishing, but not really as the main script. It may be used for example to write the place of the edition or the title of a book. Often only a few sentences are written in the Latin script on the cover of a book entirely written in the Mongolian script.

Although the position the new alphabet held was more than merely one of nominal use, the introduction of the Latin alphabet did not go far enough to create the conditions of a single utilization of the new script in place of the Mongolian script.

The scope of this paper does not enable us to go into the orthography of this new Latin script in much detail. The script itself was alphabetically close to the one used in Buriatia, with a general base of 24 letters and a few letters which appeared only in loanwords. Three letters for loanwords could be found in the newspaper articles corpus used for this paper: F, V and X. But according to the Mongolian scholar, *Şagdarsüren*, three more letters existed: H, Q and W.¹⁴ So the Latin alphabet used in 1932 could count as many as 30 letters. It followed the general guidelines for the creation of new Latin alphabets inside the USSR: it used only Latin letters or eventually modified Latin letters (*s* and *c* with a cedilla and *z* with horizontal bar), and avoided diacritics separated from the letters. The only double letter was the double vowel to mark length. The aim of this new Latin script was to be nearer to the modern *Xalxa* pronunciation, and we may see in fact some connection to the future Cyrillic orthography. But we may notice some similitude with the Mongolian

¹¹ *Ünen*, 142 (755).

¹² *Ünen*, 108 (721).

¹³ *Ünen*, April 29, 1932.

¹⁴ C. *Şagdarsüren*, *ЛАТИН УСЭГ*. Unpublished paper.

script, like the same grapheme B for what will be disassociated later in the Cyrillic script into “Б” and “В”.

The New turn policy marked an end to this experiment. The Latinization project was abandoned for a time, and it was even used to prosecute some of its proponents, for example the former Minister of Education, which, according to Charles Bawden, was in 1937 “convicted, among other things, of trying to destroy the Mongol national script.”¹⁵

But the idea of using the Latin script in Mongolia was not yet totally forgotten, even though the Latinization process was already replaced in the USSR with a new alphabetical campaign: Cyrillicization, which had begun by the late 1930's. This second campaign of script reform was generally swifter and more coercive than the Latinization campaign, which was marked by debates. In Buriatia, the change from Latin to Cyrillic alphabets was made in 1938. So the second attempt at Latinization in Mongolia, in 1940-1941, was already separate from the general linguistic policy. After moves toward Latinization made in April 1940 during the 10th Party Congress and support from the 8th Great Khural, Čojbalsan signed two resolutions in July 26, 1940, one of general intent (no. 27), and a second one (no. 26) setting up a Latinization commission under the direction of Cedenbal, who was charged with creating a new script based on the Latin alphabet for “developing industry, cattleraising, trade, culture, education, and literacy by eliminating the old backward script.”¹⁶ This Latinization commission was replete with members of the Party, trade unions, youth organisations etc. The two foremost members representing the Academy of Sciences were Damdinsüren and Luvsanbandan. According to one of his interviews, Luvsanbandan took an active part in creating a new Latin script for the Mongolian language and prepared a 42-letter script as well as a handbook for the rules of the new orthography.¹⁷ This orientation toward the Latin script was confirmed by Resolution 17/13 made on February 21, 1941.¹⁸

¹⁵ Charles Bawden, *The Modern History of Mongolia*, 1989 (1st edition in 1968):344.

¹⁶ “Латин усгийг үндэс болгож, шинэ монгол усгийг зохиоъ хэрэглэх тухай”, *Монгол бичиг соёл*, no. 2, November 1993, Ulaanbaatar 6.

¹⁷ Interview published in *Ил Товчоо*, no. 22 (152), August 1-10 1995:10.

¹⁸ *Монгол ардын хувьгалт намаас бух нийтийг үндэсний бичиг үсэгт сургасан нь*, 32-33.

But these plans never had time to be put in practice, as the new wave of alphabet changes soon arrived in Mongolia, with the adoption of the Cyrillic script only one month later on March 25, 1941.

This attempt at Latinization in Mongolia seems to be a good example of outside interference in the linguistic policy of a country. It had the kind of chaotic features which often appeared in the alphabet changes inside the USSR with a hasty start in 1930, an introduction with a different alphabet in 1932, a sudden stop for political reasons, and a new attempt, years later, which did not go further than the creation of a politically oriented commission and a few legislative decrees. This second attempt, though, may have been more genuine than the first one, being somewhat at odds with the Soviet policy of the time. Its motivation could have been more related to the will to achieve at a higher level of literacy in the country. In today's Mongolia, this attempt at Latinization is not totally forgotten: in the actual debate on the choice of an official script for Mongolia, a minority of people openly regret that this reform did not succeed and ask for a change in favor of the Latin alphabet.