

# On Language, Political Power and the Regulation of Russian Orthography<sup>\*</sup>

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This interdisciplinary article excavates the history of the most important Russian language reform, which was approved by the Bolshevik Government Decrees more than a century ago, after the October Revolution of 1917. The orthographic reform was a linguistic and educational original effort (1) to promote a new simpler way of spelling of written informational materials, (2) to eliminate “double” letters and to present more constructive rules for spelling of certain grammar structures, and (3) to increase the population literacy in the Russian-speaking community. Indeed, the effective policy of language regulation was grounded in recommendations developed by special committees and commissions which represented the spelling reform movement in the imperial period of the 19th century and in the early 1900s. According to Russian linguists, language educationists, activists, and politicians, the proposed new rules could be implemented in a realistic way for the benefit of all learners, the language system, and the printing industry as well. The reform of Russian orthography was not an exercise in revolutionary violence or the Bolshevik’ evil intentions, as some frustrated scholars condemned this reform. This article provides relevant legislative documents issued in 1917-1918, that reflected revolutionary transformations including orthography that became an issue of politics. The use of new orthographic rules had special implications for language learning practices in schools and changed costs of typing and printing.

*Keywords:* language, politics, revolution, reform, orthography

## Introduction: Historical Facts (Not Fakes)

2017 marked the 100th anniversary of the two Russian revolutions of 1917 which became a turning point in Russian history and regulation of Russian orthography as well (Liberchuk, 2017). On May 11, 1917 the statement on spelling reform was issued by the Orthographic Meeting (today we would call it “a summit conference”) at the Russian Academy of Science. On May 17, 1917 the Ministry of Education proposed to introduce the reform in schools. On December 23, 1917 the People’s Commissariat issued a decree on obligatory new spelling in schools, but only the Council of People’s Commissars on October 10, 1918 approved the reform for the press. These historical activities, decades of persistent linguistic and educational efforts, and intense actions of lawmakers determined the reform of Russian orthography. Indeed, a role of chance in history given by Russian revolutions was a crucial factor in the reform of spelling movement.

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<sup>\*</sup> In memory of Professor Vera Fedorovna Ivanova (Saint-Petersburg State University, Russia).  
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## **Orthography is Power**

In the study of a language, orthography is a theoretical course that represents a fundamental area of written language and plays an important role in relation to (1) shaping knowledge of written language and reading skills based on prescriptive traditions, for example, learning the rules of spelling regarding particular letters will give a learner a higher score on tests, (2) the most conservative social institution and it's a measure of educated people, their identities and literary expertise, as well as social esteem, for instance, in a language environment, where non-standard dialects, not codification, are common, low social esteem could be a source of "linguistic insecurity"; (3) perception and speech behavior of writers and speakers, for example, spelling mistakes could make an individual a target for mockery, (4) the orthographic changes and reforms can be negative or positive: individuals could be hurt or harmed by spelling (written images of letters) or archaic spelling or deliberately misspelled of selected words, for instance, Russian words *мир*, *Россия* could be spelled with an "old" letter (i) instead of a correct spelling *мир*, *Россия* with a letter (и): it happened in conflicting printing materials published in Russian communities abroad.

Orthography aims to promote national standards and rules of written language and visual realization of communication represented in dictionaries, typescript, print and electronic media, as well as its diverse formats, as we would say today. An English linguist David Crystal (1997) mentioned that, "for several centuries, the written language held a preeminent place. It was the medium of literature, and, thus, a source of standards of linguistic excellence. It was felt to provide language with permanence and authority" (p. 180).

## **The Spelling Reform Movement and Its Scientific Grounds**

### **How Orthography Became an Issue of Politics**

In linguistic theories scholars, who describe language and its mediums, argue that language becomes a powerful tool and an intellectual product employed by politicians, strategists, administrative officials, and decision-makers to control communication, provide interpretations (and misinterpretations!) of events and judgments, and reflect our constant search for relevant representations of ideas, phenomena, and emotional reactions (Crystal, 1997). The relevant or irrelevant representations of letters, correct or wrong spellings, are advanced in words which describe our world, our societies, and activities. The function of politics is to deal with information and its influential segments, legal texts, discussions and social power by showing how decision-makers are skillful and competitive in their written speeches in which words with a particular sequence of letters must be used.

Since the late 19th century, theoretical and practical provisions of Russian spelling reform were actively discussed by linguists, teachers, writers, translators, and legislators in the Russian press and educational journals and at conferences of educational organizations, for instance: (1) Pedagogical Societies established in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, and Kazan, (2) School and Philological Journals, (3) Special Orthographic Meetings (1904, 1912). Publications and speeches of school teachers, academicians, writers, and translators promoted their views on the Russian spelling, e.g., teachers often discussed "what are the most difficult spelling rules in/for students' dictations"?

Most persistent prescriptive recommendations were based on educational, literacy concepts for the spelling reform and were published after 1885, when a reference "Russian spelling" by Ya.Grot became widely known. However, many language teachers couldn't adopt the most essential recommendations given by Grot

for everyday practice in class (Ivanova, 1991, p.98). Therefore, linguistic grounds for the reform were related to pedagogical problems of interpretation of how to simplify certain spelling elements in order to teach and learn writing standards, for example, via dictations as tests. Another distinctive feature of the spelling movement, discussed in journals, was a real living practice of writing (print and literary works) and a state of the Russian language.

In order to develop the project of spelling reform, in 1904 at the Imperial Academy of Science (see Appendix 1), the highest scientific authority in Russia, the Spelling Commission was established. In addition, there organized a spelling subcommittee in which famous academicians-linguists A. A. Shahmatov (see Appendix 1), F. F. Fortunatov, Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, and R. F. Brand participated as orthographic reformers. The first project of spelling reform had not been approved: the improvement over this proposal continued until 1912, when a new plan of the spelling reform was proposed. These two proposals became the basis for a historical discussion and voting at the Meeting of Spelling Commission under the chairmanship of academician A. A. Shahmatov on 11 (24) May, 1917, when a number of spelling simplifications became historically known as the reform of Russian orthography of 1917-1918 (Ivanova, Timofeeva, 1988, pp.50-52).

### **Orthographic Educationists, Committees, and Orthographic Events**

In the reform movement the most important contributions were made by Moscow and Saint-Petersburg linguists, such as: A. A. Shahmatov, F. F. Fortunatov, P. N. Sakulin, J. Baudouin de Courtenay, R. F. Brandt. Also, hundreds of gymnasium directors, teachers of public /zemskix/ schools should be remembered. They were very much aware of the needs for the reform and their activities in pedagogical societies or notes in the journals, such as: *For people's teacher*, *Native language in the school*, *Philological notes* (1860-1909), *Russian philological messenger* (1879-1917) developed the basis for particular discussions at meetings where the possibilities of the reform, coordinating efforts, and economic alternatives of the new Russian printing were identified. For example, despite the military events of World War I, in 1914 in Moscow 1st National Convention on People's Education took place, and in December 1916-January 1917 many presentations at 1st National Convention of Teachers of Russian Language provided scientific arguments for the need of normalization of spelling rules that had to be learned at schools.

### **Political Power and Agencies**

It should be mentioned that in the Russian Empire (later in the USSR and at present in the Russian Federation) the highest scientific authority is the Imperial (before 1917) Academy of Science. In 1904, Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov (see Appendix 1), *President of Imperial Academy of Science*, chaired the 1st Meeting on Russian Spelling, 50 participants attended, that took place at the Academy of Science in Saint-Petersburg. At this event the political power and decision makers of the future reform were inspired by the following officials: A. S. Budilovich—a representative of the Ministry of People Education; I. A. Anopov—a member of the Council of Minister of finance; N. N. Korevo—an aide of the State Secretary; P. V. Petrov—a representative of the Headquarter of Military Educational Institutions; V. I. Markevich—a chief manager of the Senate printing house (in our time we would identify his job as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Chief Financial Officer (CFO). The regulators formulated the main point, “We shouldn't delay the reform which promotes educational activities, a level of Russian enlightenment and cultural growth of our country, our fatherland” (Grigor'eva, 2004, p.272). Nevertheless, the proposal of the reform was not approved.

### Politicians, Language Meetings, and Legislations

In the next decade on September 10, 1912 in Saint-Petersburg the Second Special Orthographic Summit was conducted. The result of this conference was successful: all voted for the reform (it was unanimous voting for the reform). However, the extralinguistic events put the reform “on hold”. When the February Revolution of 1917 happened, the educationists, inspired by a democratic spirit, managed to get a large gathering of language officials on May 11 (24), 1917 where a talented speaker, academician A. A. Shahmatov offered the compromising project of the reform that immediately was issued as a Decree of Special Orthographic Summit prescribing the implementation of the spelling reform. Immediately after this decree, on May 17, 1917, the Provisional Government issued a new decree, entitled as the “Circular of the Ministry of People’s Education” and signed by A. Manujlov, Minister of Education. However, this document didn’t have regulatory power.

After the October Revolution of 1917, the spelling reform was an important legislative action of a new government. The crucial three decrees of the Bolshevik/Soviet Government were issued on December 23, 1917, on October 10, 1918, and on November 14, 1918: these legislations had prescribed the transition to the new spelling which played a critical role in political stability in the country. Due to the opposition to the Bolshevik power, the atmosphere in printing and publishing industry in Petrograd was not in favor of new spelling rules. At that time, V. Volodarsky, Commissar of Russian press, issued a special decree on publishing houses and printing standards, in which he declared that “the appearance of any kind of texts in old spelling will be considered concession to counterrevolution” (Grigor’eva, 2004, p. 126). For many groups of Russians abroad the spelling reform had become a symbol of Bolshevism: Russian-language publishers of papers in Paris (e.g., “Latest News”, Ed. Miliukov and “Revival”, Ed. Struve) continued to use the pre-reform spelling and “old” letters “ять”, “фита”, “и-десятиричное” and “ъ” —“твердый знак” until last editions of papers published in the late 1930s and the New York Russian paper *РОССИЯ* used the “old” letters until 1970s (see Appendix 2).

After the October Revolution of 1917 on December 23, 1917 a new government considered the spelling reform as one of the very major accomplishment: the decree on mandatory reform in schools was issued by *Narkompros* (the People Commissariat of Education) and signed by its head A. Lunacharsky. This regulation was not associated with the reform for the publishing houses. Finally, on October 10, 1918 the new government *Sovnarkom* (the Council of People’s Commissars) and its head V. Bonch-Bruевич formulated a law on mandatory spelling reform for all informational resources. The printing industry was very much opposed to this legislation. Therefore, the regulatory officials had been forced to secure the rule of law if someone would violate this law: in accordance with a new decree issued on November 14, 1918 passed by the Higher Council of People Economy on elimination of Russian letters, a violator must pay the violation fee—10 000 rubles.

### Implications of the Orthographic Reform

In accordance with the reform, the image of the Russian alphabet was changed (see Appendix 3): four letters were removed—фита” (as Ф),”ять” (as Е), “и-десятиричное” (as И) and “ъ -твердый знак”—at the end of words. In addition, rules of spelling of adjectival and pronominal inflections were made simpler. Also, spelling of words with prefixes in the “з” and the rules of hyphenation became easier to learn. As a result, teaching Russian spelling in schools became more logical and simple: more constructive rules for spelling of a few grammar structures were designed (Ivanova, Timofeeva, 1997, p.413). The reform and its simplifications increased the population literacy in all Russian-speaking regions. In keeping with the simplification emphases of the reform, Russian printing and publishing templates were unified: the spelling reform provided the

reduction of redundant signs, that, in turn, made cheaper metal type, typesetting labor, ink, and paper.

Overall, all innovations promoted speedy eradication of illiteracy in Russia. According to P. Sakulin, the active reformer, it was the “logical reconsideration of spelling on basis of practice of living language and its state” (Grigor’eva, 2004, p. 85). Also, it was pointed out that the reform is “acquisitions in favor of the future generation” (Flerov, 1917, p. 22). The critics of the reform had expressed their negative feelings towards the reform in the press. The Volodarsky’s statement, “the appearance of any kind of texts in old spelling will be considered concession to counterrevolution”, demonstrated the challenges of the spelling agenda especially in Petrograd where at that time effective actions were needed.

In the end of the 20th century in connection with *perestrojka*, the breakup of the Soviet Union and reconsideration of the revolutionary events and activities of the Bolsheviks, the issue of “Bolshevik” spelling rules were raised at the linguistic debates and conferences in order to present “old” letters as symbols of spiritual Russian traditions (e.g., the conference “The Fate of Russian Spelling”, Saint-Petersburg, 1996) or use for marketing purposes (e.g., the use of a letter “Ъ” in the end of a Russian newspaper *Коммерсантъ*). The spelling reform was not originated by the Bolsheviks’ revolutionists-educators: documents stored in the archives in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg and other cities trace the chronology of both projects of the orthographic discussions on the reform, which began in the 19th century and continued in the 20th century until after revolutionary days of February 1917. The spelling momentous event on 11 (24) May 1917 had been enshrined in law by the Soviet decrees of 1917-1918.

### Conclusion

A century ago, the transformative historical, political, and social Russian events highlighted linguistic and educational challenges impacted on regulation of Russian orthography. A “happy ending” of the spelling reform movement was determined by a combination of several factors: (1) consideration of written language as a source of linguistic excellence; (2) the revolutionary experiences, as “trigger”, provided orthography a status of national interest; (3) legislative activities of the provisional government, the State Duma, and a new Bolshevik government had acknowledged scientific legitimacy for the reform, identified a language evolutionary process, and promoted simplification in new standards of written language. These standards shaped a way for new printing templates and publishing new language textbooks, spelling references, and dictionaries for schoolchildren, adult learners of Russian at all level of language studies by rising literacy in the country. Sometimes, the reform of Russian orthography has been referred to as the Soviet reform misleadingly: Orthography became a key focus of philological, pedagogical, and sociopolitical discussions in the 1860s in the imperial Russian institutions. In 19th-20th centuries there were a number of prominent linguists, philological authorities, and school teachers contributed to the spelling reform movement and reform implementation efforts.

Professor A. A. Shahmatov, prominent linguist, the most successful reformer-orthographer was an eyewitness of the revolutionary transformations in Russia. A. A. Shahmatov taught and supervised Professor Stepan Barhudarov, Saint-Petersburg State University, who wrote a unique Russian textbook focused on spelling for a few generations of Russian-speaking schoolchildren. In turn, S. Barhudarov taught and supervised linguistic research of Professor Vera Fedorovna Ivanova, whose book *Contemporary Russian Orthography* is a top textbook for students-philologists (Ivanova, 1991). V. F. Ivanova taught the theory of orthography, supervised two linguistic dissertations on written language, was the co-author and unforgettable

teacher of the author of this article that accumulated the main points of the presentation delivered at the 38th North East Slavic, East European and Eurasian Conference on April 1, 2017.

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### Appendix 1. Imperial Academy of Science, SPb; Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov & Academician A. Shahmatov



### Appendix 2: (papers) Saint-Petersburg 1916; New York 1956



## Appendix 3. Changes in Russian Alphabet

## Древнеславянская азбука

А	Б	В	Г	Д	Е	Є
азѣ	боги	вѣди	гадогаи	добро	бѣтъ	есми
Ж	З	З	Н	і	ї	ѣ
животъ	зѣло	земля	нже	іжен	їнгъ	геръ
К	Л	М	Н	О	П	Р
како	лодіе	мыслетѣ	нашь	онъ	покой	рѣци
С	Т	У	Ѹ	Ф	Х	Ѡ
слово	тебѣдо	укъ	Ѹкъ	фѣротъ	хѣръ	Ѡъ
Ц	У	Ш	Ц	Ъ	Ы	Ь
цы	Уерьель	ша	ца	ерь	еры	ерь
Ѣ	Ю	Ѧ	К	Ѡ	Ѣ	Ж
ятъ	юнь	аръ	эдо	омъ	енъ	одъ
Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ
Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ

### Изменения в алфавите

Славянский алфавит просуществовал на Руси неизменным более 700 лет.

В Петровское время отменили буквы: «юс большой», «юс малый», «кси», «пси», «зело», «омегу» как обузу алфавита.

2-я половина XVIII века — появление новых букв «и краткое» и «ѣ».

Реформа 1918 года — упразднение букв: «ять», «фита», «ксица», и буквы «ер» на конце слова.

А — аз	Н — нш	Ш — шш
Б — бука	О — он	Щ — щш
В — вака	П — покш	Ъ — ѣ
Г — гакш	Р — рокш	Ы — ю
Д — дакш	С — сокш	Ѡ — ѡ
Е — екш	Т — токш	Ѣ — ѣ
Ж — жакш	У — укш	Ѧ — ѧ
З — закш	Ф — фокш	Ѧ — ѧ
И — иш	Х — хш	Ѧ — ѧ
Й — йш	Ѡ — ѡ	Ѧ — ѧ
К — кш	Ѣ — ѣ	Ѧ — ѧ
Л — лш	Ѧ — ѧ	Ѧ — ѧ
М — мш	Ѧ — ѧ	Ѧ — ѧ



Marketing: the use of an “old” letter Ъ for video