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From the History of Abkhaz Romanized Alphabets

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Abstract The article discusses the vicissitudes around the adoption of two versions of the Abkhaz alphabet based on the Latin script – the 'analytical' alphabet, proposed by Academician Nikolai Marr (adopted in 1926 and used until 1928), and the 'unified alphabet', which replaced Marr's alphabet. Marr's system was, in fact, nothing more than a phonetic transcription, complex and inconvenient even for linguists, and unfit for school and literary purposes, which motivated the Abkhaz authorities to opt for its radical reform. The new Romanized alphabet was introduced into school practice in 1929 and functioned until 1938. There is some controversy as to the authorship of this script. In later literature it was attributed to N. Yakovlev, but in reality those who were directly involved in the creation of the new alphabetical system were Y. Polivanov, S. Chanba and M. Khashba, though the latter two did consult with Yakovlev. The fact that both Polivanov and Chanba were executed during Stalinist purges may explain the silencing of their names. By the mid-1930s, the Soviet government had started replacing Latin scripts with Cyrillic-based ones, but with two notable exceptions: in 1938, the alphabets of the Abkhazians and South Ossetians were transferred into a Georgian graphic basis. It was only in 1954, after the death of Stalin, that the Abkhazians returned to their erstwhile Cyrillic alphabet.

Keywords Abkhaz Language. Abkhaz Alphabet. Romanized Script. Analytical Alphabet. Nikolai Marr. Yevgeny Polivanov.

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1 Introduction

The first known records in the Abkhaz language were made in the middle of the 17th century by the Turkish traveller Evliya Çelebi in the Arabic-Ottoman script.[1] Until 1919, all the Abkhaz alphabets – designed by Petr Uslar,[2] Ivan Bartolomei,[3] Konstantin Machavariani and Dmitry Gulia[4] and Andrey Chochua,[5] were based on the Cyrillic graphic system. In the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey, Mustafa Butba[6] developed the Romanized Abkhaz alphabet, which was published in 1919 in Istanbul, remarkably, seven years before the Abkhaz Romanized alphabet designed by Nikolai Marr and nine years before Turkey switched to the Roman-based alphabet. Butba's alphabet was one of the first attempts at creating a writing system for a Caucasian language based on a Latin graphic system. However, soon in the Caucasus, including Abkhazia, they too started to think about transferring the existing Cyrillic alphabets into the Latin graphics.

1 Himself of half-Turkish and half-Abkhazian origin, Evliya Çelebi (1611-1682) had a keen interest in recording the words and phrases of the curious languages he encountered during his numerous travels, among them Abkhaz, Ubykh and Circassian, which appeared in his ten-volume work named *Seyahatname* (Travelogue), cf. Gippert 1992, 12-21.

2 Baron Peter von Uslar (1816-1875) was a Russian general and a self-taught linguist, famous for his outstanding work on languages and ethnography of the peoples of the Caucasus. He is the author of the first Abkhaz grammar (lithographic edition in 1862; printed edition in 1887) and of the first grammatical sketch of the now extinct Ubykh.

3 Ivan Alekseyevich Bartolomei (1813-1870) was a Russian military officer, a well-known numismatist, archaeologist and writer, corresponding member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. He directed the creation of the first Abkhaz and Chechen primers (both in 1866), based on the alphabet designed and used by Uslar in his grammars of the Caucasian languages.

4 Konstantin Machavariani (1857-1926), together with his young pupil Dmitry Gulia (later to become the national poet of Abkhazia; 1874-1960), compiled and published in 1892 an Abkhaz primer using Cyrillic alphabet, drawing on the system designed by Petr Uslar.

5 Andrei Maksimovich Chochua (1879-1965) was a pedagogue and children's writer, who served as Commissar of Public Education of the ASSR of Abkhazia and later as Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz ASSR. He was the author of the Cyrillic-based Abkhaz Primer which appeared in 1909 and of a number of primary school textbooks.

6 The pedagogue and educator Mustafa Butba (1883-1946), descendent of emigrants from the mountainous C'abal region of Abkhazia, was a member of the Alphabet Commission, which was formed under the chairmanship of the *emigré* Circassian public figure Met Yusuf Izzet Pasha in Istanbul. He is also the author of the *Caucasus Memories* (Kafkasya Hatıraları) published posthumously in 1990 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu).

2 The Soviet Policy of Latinization

To understand why in the mid-1920s there emerged a need to transfer the existing Abkhaz graphic system from Russian-based to the Latin one, it is necessary to understand the era when Romanized alphabets were created for the peoples of the USSR. The young Soviet state lived by the expectations of the coming world revolution, and Latin script was seen as an instrument of internationalism and the unity of the world proletariat. The Romanization of the alphabets of ethnic minorities of the former Russian Empire was considered by Soviet leadership as a progressive phenomenon with a global perspective. Furthermore, in the Muslim regions of the former empire, the transfer to the Latin alphabet was additionally encouraged in order to weaken and eliminate the Islamic religious and cultural influence closely associated with Islamic Quranic education based on the Arabic language and script.

There were serious plans to transfer even the Russian script into the Latin base. The idea was not entirely new. In 1833 a project by anonymous author proposed a partial Latinization of the Russian graphic system (cf. [Anonymous] 1833). This was followed by Romanized alphabets proposed by K. Kodinsky (1842) and V. Belinsky (1845). The change to Latin script was apparently one of the topics discussed in Russia's intellectual circles, as reflected in Dostoyevsky's novel *Demons*: "They talked about the abolition of censorship and the letter ъ, *about replacing Russian letters with Latin ones*…" (italics added).

In 1919, the Scientific Department of the People's Commissariat for Education of the RSFSR (Narkompros) declared

> the desirability of introducing the Latin script for all the nationalities inhabiting the territory of the Republic […] which is a logical step along the path on which Russia has already embarked by adopting a new calendar style and metric system of weights and measures.

In 1930, the People's Commissar for Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, in the newspaper *Red Star* dated 6 and 7 January, proposed the Romanization of the Russian script, claiming that Lenin himself had told him about the need for such a reform (Lunacharsky 1930, 39). In 1929, the Narkompros formed a commission to look into the question of the Romanization of the Russian alphabet, headed by the famous linguist and Caucasian scholar, Professor Nikolai Feofanovich Yakovlev, with participation of linguists, bibliologists and polygraphists. In the article "For the Latinization of the Russian alphabet" Yakovlev wrote:

> At the stage of building socialism, the existence of the Russian alphabet in the USSR is an obvious anachronism, a kind of graphic

> barrier that divides the most numerous group of peoples of the Union both from the revolutionary East and from the working masses and proletariat of the West. (Yakovlev (1930, 35)

Another prominent Caucasian scholar, Anatoly Nestorovich Genko, emphasizing the ideological orientation of the choice of the alphabet, also believed that "after the October uprising" it was the Latin alphabet that "became the main factor in the cultural revolution" for the unwritten and young-written languages of the Caucasus.[7]

However, the situation was complicated by the fact that, sharing the general idea of the need for universal Romanization of the alphabets of the peoples of the USSR, two competing schools of Latinists clashed here – Marr and his followers (*the Marrists*) and the groups opposing them, including Nikolai Yakovlev, Yevgeny Polivanov and like-minded people.

Nikolai Marr proposed to use his so-called 'analytical' Latin-based alphabet which he developed for scientific recordings of the Abkhaz language as the basis for creating Latinized scripts for other peoples of the USSR. As he explained,

> The Abkhaz alphabet is so convenient at first for the approximate presentation of japhetidological transcription that, being integral in itself, that is, the alphabet of one language, it contains signs which express such a variety of sounds that they can more than satisfy the needs for the representation of sounds of most languages, even Japhetic languages, and quantitatively always surpass them, so there is no need in three-digit letters, such as e.g. ṫ°, for almost any of the other Japhetic languages. (Marr 1936, 39)

Given the authority, influence and energetic character of the academician, one can understand how these plans seriously alarmed those in the national republics, and in the centre, who had other ideas about traditional or newly created alphabets.

Academician Marr, although he was born and raised in Georgia and was half Georgian, was not very much liked in his homeland because of his emphasized internationalism.[8] At the same time, he developed excellent relations with the intelligentsia and the leadership of Abkhazia. Marr studied the Abkhaz language enthusiastically and extensively, and published a number of valuable works, including the first, in fact, dialectal dictionary of the Abkhaz language. Naturally,

7 Genko's manuscript in the Archive of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg), Fund 74, A.N. Genko's Archiv.

8 Cf. Mikhankova 1948, 75-6, 143, 239-40, *passim*; cf. also Cherchi, Manning 2002; Tuite 2011.

it was Abkhazia that was destined to become a springboard for the introduction of Marr's 'analytical' alphabet, which, in fact, was nothing more than a scientific phonetic transcription, complex and inconvenient even for linguists.

For Marr himself, the adoption in Abkhazia of the created by him Latinized alphabet was of great importance: after its successful introduction in the small republic, a victorious march of the analytical alphabet was planned throughout the Soviet Union, and, who knows, maybe even around the globe. In his article "The New Abkhaz Alphabet", published in 1924 in the newspaper *Voice of Working Abkhazia* (in the issues of 18, 19 and 20 September), Marr wrote:

> In general, of course, *we cannot but look at such an alphabet as intended to be pan-Caucasian and further*, i.e. it provides for covering the gaps existing between peoples in the letter, for *uniting all in the script*. (Marr 1938, 263; italics in the original)

The academician wrote to the pedagogue Andrei Chochua on 25 May 1927:

> with one foot […] the Abkhazians have already entered […] a new common ground for the further progress of all mankind, taking into account the possibilities of the inevitable unification of the writing of all mankind in the future. (Chochua 1976, 257)

One of Marr's followers, S.A. Vrubel explained:

> what is needed is an alphabet that is world-wide, that is, that it can reflect the sounds on a world scale […] This is how the Japhetic theory formulates the problem. N.Y. Marr created an alphabet for the Abkhaz language; thus, he laid the foundation for the world alphabet; it's a specialist's business […] to use this alphabet and add signs to it, thereby enriching the main table of the world alphabet. (Vrubel 1931, 128)

A.M. Chochua was also aware of Marr's global plans:

> Marr had long been planning to replace the Abkhaz alphabet with his analytical-Japhetic alphabet. His intention was, apparently, to test scientifically and practically his alphabet on the Abkhaz language, and then, if possible, to spread it beyond Abkhazia. (Chochua 1987, 100)

As the pupil and ardent supporter of Marr, the Abkhaz philologist Arseny Khashba emphasized,

> N.Y. Marr paid great attention to the creation and introduction of the Abkhaz new alphabet, he went to Abkhazia more than once, he wrote to comrade Chochua of the People's Commissariat for Education. The available to us correspondence between N.Y. Marr and A.M. Chochua and Marr's statements in general speak of this exceptional attention. […] To introduce a new alphabet and streamline the work and simplify it for writing, N.Y. [Marr] came to Abkhazia twice during 1924 and made several reports. On both of his visits, N.Y. Marr takes part in the work of the commission of People's Commissariat for Education of Abkhazia on the development and refinement of the draft of the new alphabet submitted by him. (Khashba 1936, 47-8)

The decision-making process to change the Abkhaz alphabet was not easy, and was conducted in the atmosphere of heated debates and discussions. The idea of Romanizing the Abkhaz alphabet was negatively viewed by the well-known Abkhaz public figure Semyon Ashkhatsava, which is obvious from his paper "Ways of the Development of Abkhazia's History", read on 12 September 1924 at the All-Union Congress of Local History held in Abkhazia (see Ashkhatsava 1925, 38). Ashkhatsava argued that the Latin alphabet contained even fewer characters than the Russian one, and therefore could not be considered as a better alternative to the current Cyrillic script based on Uslar's alphabet.

A sharply negative attitude to the proposed by academician Marr replacement of Uslar's Cyrillic alphabet by his Latinized script was taken by the enlightener and co-author of the third (after Uslar and Bartolomei) Abkhaz Cyrillic alphabet Dmitry Gulia. This is how it is described in Gulia's biography written by his son Georgy:

> Since the proposal [on a new alphabet] was sanctified by the name of Marr, it met with no objection in leading circles, especially since the analytical alphabet was adopted in some North Caucasian republics. This reckless and unjustified event did not go smoothly. Gulia literally rebelled against it. He was supported by a large group of intellectuals, especially the teachership. The poet tirelessly argued that the alphabet is difficult, and practically inapplicable. (Gulia 1965, 169-70)

Yet, at the meeting of a special commission held on 30 June 1924, consisting of the People's Commissar for Education S. Chanba,[9] his dep-

9 Samson Yakovlevich Chanba (1886-1937), Abkhaz writer, playwright, educator and statesman, in 1921-25 and in 1930-32 – head of the Commissariat of Education, in 1923-30 – head of the Central Executive Committee of the Abkhaz SSR; lost his life in Stalinist repressions in 1937.

uty A. Chochua, as well as D. Gulia, N. Pateipa, S. Basariya and others, as well as N. Marr himself, it was decided

> unanimously […] to adopt the Latin script as a basis, and for this purpose to approve the 'Abkhaz Analytical Alphabet' compiled by academician Marr. To ask him to revise the script, simplifying the written style from the point of view of both simplicity and artistry. (Marr 1938, 264)

In his letter to Abkhazia's leader Nestor Lakoba, speaking about his Latin script for the Abkhaz language adopted on 30 June, Marr informs Lakoba that he was busy adapting the alphabet to handwritten use and was preparing a brief note on this to be read at the Local History Congress in Sukhum.[10]

A year later, on 11 October 1925, at a meeting at the Narkompros of Abkhazia in the presence of N. Marr, N. Lakoba, as well as S. Ashkhatsava, S. Basariya, A. Chukbar, S. Pateypa, K. Dzidzariya and others, after a discussion, it was again decided to switch to a new writing system, taking as a basis the alphabet designed by Marr and at the same time creating a commission to simplify this alphabet (Chochua 1976, 300).

It is no coincidence that both cited rulings contained a clause on the need to simplify Marr's alphabet. Even Marr-loyalist Chochua (1987, 210) wrote openly to the academician that the alphabet received from him "made an unfavourable impression on all of us by its complexity, the difficulty of drawing letters and their ambiguity". Chochua later recalled:

> Although Marr's alphabet was adopted by the college, but not unanimously: many members of the college were not satisfied with the large number of letters (76) in the new alphabet, as well as the similarity and difficulty of drawing many of them. There was also a reasonable fear that the replacement of the old alphabet with a new one could slow down the development of the Abkhaz language and literature for many years. (Chochua 1987, 100)

Yet, not without hesitation and controversy, Marr's alphabet had to be adopted. The thing is that the transition to Latin alphabets in the national republics was encouraged from Moscow, which was essentially a directive. The introduction of Latinized graphics for the Kabardian language, authored by B. Khuranov, began in 1923. In the same year, the Latin alphabet for the Ingush language was approved

10 Cf. Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg), N.Y. Marr's Fund, No. 30, Sheets 17-18.

and adopted. The Adyghe script was transferred from Arabic to Latin in 1927. In Azerbaijan, the transition to the Latin script occurred as early as in 1922. Lenin called the transition of Oriental peoples to the Latin writing system "the Great Revolution in the East" (cf. Agamali-ogly 1928, 5, 8).

On the other hand, in the USSR Marr was considered the main specialist on the Caucasian languages and philology, his influence was enormous. These important circumstances, coupled with Marr's personal charisma, academicism, being one from the 'centre', and, admittedly, the assertiveness of the academician, who personally and quite ardently participated in lobbying for his alphabet at meetings in Sukhum, all convinced the leadership of Abkhazia and a part of the intelligentsia of the need to accept his alphabet as the basis for the new Abkhaz script. As Mikhail Delba wrote in his pamphlet, "N.Y. Marr literally imposed on us his artificial 'Abkhaz analytical alphabet'" (1951, 7).

The situation with the introduction of a new alphabet is eloquently described by Georgy Gulia:

> In a word, a new alphabet is introduced. Teachers are retrained, journalists are retrained, writers are retrained. Students diligently derive intricate hieroglyphics. If you forget to put a small circle on the side – you'll get a completely new sign. If you missed a 'tick' from above – again you'll get a new sign. Dots, quotation marks, ticks, circles around the branchy letters! (Gulia 1965, 172)

According to N.F. Yakovlev (Yakovlev 1931, 49), Marr's alphabet was adopted in Abkhazia in 1924 (see above about the meeting of the commission under the Narkompros of Abkhazia on 30 June 1924) and was in practice introduced into schools and the press in 1925. However, judging by the date of the above-mentioned meeting – October 1925, it should be assumed that in fact the introduction of the alphabet was carried out only the following year, as indeed A. Khashba writes (Khashba 1936, 50): "The new Abkhaz analytical alphabet began to operate in practice from 1926"; see also Bgazhba 1967, 58.

Yet, in the article dated 1926, A. Chochua writes:

> In the near future, the reform of the Abkhaz alphabet will be carried out by switching to the Latin script. The scientific development of both the new alphabet and its artistic decoration is already coming to an end. (Chochua 1987, 142)

If the article was written in 1926, which is likely, it means that at the time of its writing the alphabet had yet to be introduced. See also the following clause by A. Khashba (1936, 53): "When after the introduction of the Abkhaz analytical alphabet in 1927".

Indeed, as reported by D. Gulia in his note to the Council of People's Commissars of Abkhazia of January 1928, the script for the new Abkhaz primer was made in 1927 and in the same year it was printed (see Gulia 2003, 408), which should also be considered as the indication of the year of practical implementation of Marr's alphabet. On the other hand, D. Gulia himself, in a letter to N. Marr dated 27 October 1925, mentions the Abkhaz alphabet already printed in the new script. But, apparently, this alphabet was published in such a limited edition, that when Dmitry Gulia requested it from A.M. Chochua, the latter, as it turned out, had only one copy (see Gulia 2003, 448).

A.N. Genko in his apparently unpublished 1933 essay "The Abkhaz Language" for the planned *North Caucasian Encyclopedia*, informs us:

> Attempts to use after 1926 during the last three years (1926-29) the Abkhaz analytical alphabet by Acad. Marr, built on a Roman basis, did, however, encounter considerable practical difficulties in everyday use. Therefore, since the beginning of 1929, a new Latin alphabet has been introduced and is still being used in Abkhazia, developed on the basis of the so-called New Turkic alphabet.[11]

In the above-mentioned pamphlet, M. Delba writes:

> Abkhaz analytical alphabet by N.Y. Marr […] was only with great difficulty maintained merely for two years and then was replaced. (Delba 1951, 8)

If we consider that the new Latin alphabet was adopted in 1929, then minus two years, apparently, might mean 1927 as the year of the practical introduction of Marr's alphabet.

3 The 'Analytical' Alphabet and Attempts of Its Reform

The Abkhaz analytical alphabet of N.Y. Marr consisted of 67 main letters based on the Latin script, as well as 9 additional characters to convey specific phonemes of the archaic Bzyp dialect, a total of 76 graphic symbols. Of these, 6 characters were used to convey vowels (a, e, ı, o, u, ə), and the rest for the consonants.

A serious systemic drawback of Marr's alphabet was the use of different basic signs for simple phonemes and for their derivatives by timbre (non-palatalized – palatalized) or laryngeal features (non-

11 Manuscript in the Archive of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg), Fund 74, Archive of A.N. Genko.

aspirated – aspirated), which deprived close phonemes of a graphic connection between them.

Another significant practical drawback was the use of diacritics where appropriate letters could be found, or combinations of them. See Polivanov's remark on this subject:

> If the use of dots ˙ and ¸ in a number of dental consonants (for sounds such as c and č) can be justified theoretically, as a kind of analytical technique, then technically it is a murderous technique (comments, I think, are superfluous: why confuse such a thing in practical writing, when it is possible to find special letters for sounds of these types?). (Polivanov 1927; cf. Andronov, Simonato, Tomelleri 2017, 234)

In general, the Abkhaz analytical alphabet of academician N.Y. Marr, with all its 'scientific character', in practice turned out to be a perfect monster, the introduction of which, at the first experience of its use, showed its complete unsuitability for the purposes of school education, literary and office work. Immediately after its introduction into usage, it became clear that Marr's 'Abkhaz experiment' had failed. Teachers, as well as parts of the intelligentsia, including the influential Dimitri Gulia, started to complain about the extreme complexity and impracticality of the alphabet proposed by the academician.

As the Abkhaz pedagogue Kondraty Dzidzariya described this situation in his report at the Second Plenum of the All-Union Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet in 1928 in Tashkent:

> When the idea arose among the Abkhaz workers about the transition to the Latin alphabet, they naturally turned to Acad. N.Y. Marr with a request to compile an alphabet for practical work in school and for writing. In response to this, Academician Marr suggested […] to use in schools his scientific transcription almost unchanged. Academician Marr justified the practical convenience of his transcription by virtue of the fact that it was built on purely scientific grounds and therefore was the best for schooling purposes. The transcription of Academician Marr was discussed many times by Abkhaz workers and they asked him to simplify this transcription. Academician Marr commissioned artists to redraw the shapes of the letters without changing the very system, and in this form the alphabet was adopted in the autumn of 1925. Articles written in the new alphabet caused massive responses from the locals about its practical difficulty. Then, courses organized in August 1927 in the city of Sukhum for masses of teachers and village secretaries, organized to familiarize themselves with the new alphabet and to study it, clearly showed the negative attitude of the cadets to the new alphabet, due to its great difficulties, even in comparison with the old alphabet. (Yakovlev 1931, 48-9)

Such major Caucasus scholars as N.F. Yakovlev and A.N. Genko also took a negative position on Marr's analytical alphabet. As V. Bobrovnikov writes,

> His [Marr's] reform of the introduction of the 'analytical' alphabet in Abkhazia failed, which A.N. Genko opposed in 1928 together with the famous linguists Y.D. Polivanov and N.F. Yakovlev. (Bobrovnikov 2012)

In his polemical article "Analytical or New Alphabet?" N.F. Yakovlev wrote:

> Let us just say that the Abkhaz analytical alphabet, which was a major scientific achievement for its time, is now significantly outdated and requires revision along with the japhetidological transcription based on it. It seems to me that we were entitled to classify such an alphabet as a phonetic transcription 'with many sometimes very complex randomly selected signs' […]. Equally great are the shortcomings of the Abkhaz analytical alphabet from the practical point of view – pedagogical and productional. Due to the abundance of identical core letters, AAA [Abkhaz analytical alphabet] is extremely difficult to remember. (Yakovlev 1931, 50)

A sharply negative opinion on the alphabet came from a major orientalist Yevgeny Polivanov,[12] who was well acquainted with this problem. As he ironically noted in his 1927 report "The Abkhaz Analytical Alphabet", published only recently:[13]

12 Yevgeny Dmitrievich Polivanov (1881-1938) was a polyglot linguist, a specialist in Japanese and other oriental languages and in theoretical linguistics. Although we know little about his studies on Abkhaz, one of the obvious results of his interest was his article "Abkhaz Literature" in the *Literary Encyclopedia* (Polivanov 1930). Besides, he wrote an essay that has not come down to us, "Phonetic characteristics of the Abkhaz language" (cf. Andronov, Simonato, Tomelleri 2017, 201). More importantly, in the archival fund of academician N.Y. Marr in the St. Petersburg branch of the Archive of the Academy of Sciences of Russia, Polivanov's 1927 critical report "The Abkhaz Analytical Alphabet" has been preserved (Polivanov 1927). Apparently, it is this work that A. Chochua mentions in his letter to Marr cited above. The fate of Polivanov, whom some contemporaries considered a genius, is tragic. In 1938, he shared the sad fate of the first Abkhaz linguists and Marr's students A. Khashba and V. Kukba, as well as of many thousands of other innocent victims of Stalinist repressions.

13 Cf. Andronov, Simonato, Tomelleri 2017. The text of the report was sent by the author to the Commissariat for Public Education of the Abkhaz SSR in November 1927. Even before this date, the report was read by him in Moscow, and then repeated on 9 March 1928 at a meeting of the language and literature section within the framework of the collective topic "Problems of Applied Linguistics" of the Research Institute of Ethnic and National Cultures of Peoples of the Soviet East of the Russian Association of scientific-research institutes for humanitarian studies; see on this Andronov, Simonato, Tomelleri 2017, 197-8.

> One might think that N.Y. Marr deliberately set among his tasks not simplicity, but on the contrary – the complexity of the letters of his alphabet. (Polivanov 1927, f. 21)

Having subjected Marr's alphabet to a detailed critical analysis, Polivanov reproached its author in the uselessness of 'scientificity' for practical writing and in a conspicuous unwillingness to reckon with the interests of school and practice. He noted that the abundance of dots above and below the letters makes it extremely difficult for the writer and reader – it is necessary to continuously raise the pen from the page, and the system of dots and other signs

> is remembered with great difficulty and requires tremendous efforts on the part of both students and the teacher. (Polivanov 1927, f. 23)

Polivanov draws devastating conclusions:

> Thus, the AAA does not meet either the requirements that can be imposed on the theoretical system of phonetic transcription, or, especially, those that school and life impose on practical writing. What's the conclusion? And the conclusion is that the sooner this attempt with the AAA in Abkhazia is eliminated, the better it is for Abkhazia, which has become the object of this japhetidological experiment, and for other nationalities facing the reform of their writing: the elimination of the Abkhaz precedent will give them the opportunity to avoid dangerous recipes of the 'japhetidological transcription'. (cf. Andronov, Simonato, Tomelleri 2017, 236)

In his article on Marr as a scholar of Abkhaz, Arseny Khashba rather emotionally writes about Polivanov's participation in the criticism of Marr's alphabet:

> In Abkhazia during this period, from the Indo-Europeanists' side Prof. Polivanov acted on the sly, and in every way hindered the work promoting a new analytical alphabet. (Khashba 1936, 54)

In a letter to Marr dated 5 April 1928, Chochua informed him:

> The Abkhaz primer in the new alphabet was published […]. The new alphabet occasioned a lot of noise. Prof. Y.D. Polivanov and Prof. N.F. Yakovlev were against the new Abkhaz alphabet. Prof. Polivanov wrote a whole critical piece about the new Abkhaz alphabet, but did not give his own. Prof. Yakovlev too. In Turkestan, at the Turkological Congress, in January of this year, where Polivanov and Yakovlev were present, the representative of Abkha-

> zia – Kondraty Dzidzariya, at the insistence, apparently, of these professors, criticized the new alphabet. At the congress, the chairman of the CEC [Central Executive Committee] of Azerbaijan, Comrade Agamaly-oglu, also spoke with a sharp criticism of the Abkhaz alphabet. At the end of February, one of the capital's newspapers published his article under the headline "The Great Revolution in the East". This article devotes enough space to the criticism of the new Abkhaz alphabet. (Chochua 1976, 262, 125, 221-2)[14]

Debates about the newly adopted alphabet did not stop, as can be seen from the report of the Academy of the Abkhaz Language and Literature for 1925-28. In 1926, the Academy members listened to the reports by K. Dzidzariya and S. Bzhaniya on the degree of mastering by Abkhaz pupils of Marr's new alphabet. In 1927,

> in order to simplify the new Abkhaz alphabet, the considerations of several comrades were heard and worked out, including the lecture of Professor Yakovlev and the thoughts of some comrades on this issue, which required several meetings. (Gulia 2003, 393, 403)

Yakovlev also writes on this in the letter to R.O. Shor dated 14 September 1927:

> In Abkhazia I read a grammar course, and Abkhaz teachers gave me a written greeting in which, incidentally, they asked me to talk to Nick. Yakovl. [Marr] on the need to simplify his Abkhaz alphabet. What an assignment!?[15]

In 1928,

> together with Academician Marr, the issue of a possible simplification of the new Abkhaz analytical alphabet was discussed. N.Y. Marr's agreement in principle on the simplification of the new alphabet has been reached. (Gulia 2003, 394, 403-4)

14 Incidentally, the texts of this letter to Marr in the editions of 1976 and 1987 do not quite match.

15 Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Fund 677, Registration 3, File 107, Sheet 114 (reverse), cited in Andronov, Simonato, Tomelleri 2017, 204.

4 The 'Unified' Abkhaz Alphabet

In order to simplify Marr's alphabet, the People's Commissariat of Abkhazia created a special commission, which found it expedient to slightly simplify the forms of some letters, and remove signs depicting specific Bzyp phonemes (Bgazhba 1967, 58). But this could not solve the problem. The dissatisfaction with the new alphabet being almost universal, the authorities started to seriously prepare for its radical reform. Here is how A. Khashba describes the situation:

> In Abkhazia, the 'opposition' against the analytical alphabet was increasingly advancing, and by the end of 1928 the question of replacing the Japhetidological script with a new script based on the 'Ian Alifa' was raised in practice.[16] Various 'projects' of alphabets began to pour in from different sides, and the so-called Indo-Europeanists in the person of Polivanov et al. or of the type of temporary fellow travellers of the Japhetic theory (Yakovlev N.F., Genko A.N., et al.) openly spoke out. (Khashba 1936, 55)

Both Yakovlev and Genko took part in the discussion of the reform of the Abkhaz script. From Genko's report on the summer expedition to the Caucasus, it is clear that upon his arrival in Sukhum in June 1928, he was involved in the work of the Commission for the Reform of the Abkhaz Alphabet, where he read at the suggestion of the Chairman of the CEC (Central Executive Commission) of the SSR of Abkhazia Samson Chanba two reports – "On the current Abkhaz alphabets" and "On the principles of linguistic analysis of the sound system of the language" (cf. Volkova, Sergeeva 1999, 123). Upon his return to Sukhum from the field-work expedition, he continued to participate in the work of the commission for the reform of the alphabet (cf. Report 1928).

In a letter to the orientalist F.A. Rosenberg dated 19 June 1928, A.N. Genko writes that, having arrived in Sukhum, he found himself

> in an extremely ambiguous position – it was the Abkhaz educators who attacked me in terms of reforming the Abkhaz script proposed by Nik.[olai] Yak.[ovlevich] Marr. Having no way, without prejudice to my intended enterprise, to completely evade this matter, I had to give them various advice that tended to change the system of

16 *Ian Alifa* (New alphabet, in Turkic), the 'unified' Latin alphabet adopted for the Turkic peoples. On the Second plenum of the All-Union Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet held in Tashkent in January 1928, the Abkhaz representative K. Dzidzariya expressed Abkhazia's desire to join the alphabetical reform along the lines of the new Turkic alphabet. Following this, the working out of the design of the Abkhaz alphabet was included in the working plan of the Central Committee and the Scientific Council attached to it.

> N.Y. [Marr]. I fear an explosion of rage towards me, but there is absolutely nothing that can be done.[17]

There is still uncertainty as to the authorship of the new Abkhaz 'unified' Latin alphabet, which replaced Marr's 'analytical alphabet'. As Khukhut Bgazhba (Bgazhba 1967, 58-9) writes, in 1928 the Narkompros of Abkhazia commissioned Professor N.F. Yakovlev to compile a new Latinized Abkhaz alphabet. In the summary table of Abkhaz alphabets in Bgazhba's book (65), the alphabet number 5 is called 'the Latinized alphabet of N.F. Yakovlev'. However, according to Arseny Khashba, a contemporary and participant in the events, the new alphabet was developed by Y.D. Polivanov. As he writes,

> The leadership of the People's Commissariat of Education of Abkhazia in the person of S.Y. Chanba surrendered their positions and embarked on the path of reforming the writing. A draft of a new script proposed by Polivanov was adopted, corrected by Chanba S. and Khashba M.[18] with the participation of N.F. Yakovlev. (Khashba 1936, 55)

It is interesting that Bgazhba (Bgazhba 1967, 59) himself mentions some Yakovlev's criticisms of the new alphabet; if it were indeed his creation, such criticism would look strange. On the other hand, there is no mention of Polivanov's name in the interesting memoirs of Mushni Khashba (Ahashba 1977, 306-75), a participant in those events, that tell about the main vicissitudes associated with the creation of a new Latinized alphabet and about the role of N.F. Yakovlev. This is apparently explained by the fact that in 1938 Polivanov was arrested and executed on trumped-up charges of espionage in favour of Japan and for some time there was a taboo on mentioning his name.[19]

It is thus Polivanov, not Yakovlev, who has been commissioned in 1928 by Abkhazia's authorities to compile a new alphabet (see below). According to Bekir Choban-Zade,[20]

> After the 2nd plenum, prof. Polivanov, member of Scientific Council of the All-Union Central Committee of the New Turkic Alpha-

17 Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Manuscripts Fund, f. 850, op. 3, d. 34, l. 4, cited from Volkova, Sergeeva 1999, 107.

18 Mushni Lavrentievich Khashba (1903-1992), writer and newspaper editor.

19 In 1963, the Plenum of the Supreme Court of the USSR overturned the verdict and the case against Polivanov for lack of *corpus delicti*.

20 Bekir Vaap oğlu Çoban-zade (1893-1937), a Crimean Tatar poet and professor of Turkic languages at Baku State university. He was an active member of the Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet. Arrested and executed by Stalinist authorities in 1937.

> bet, made a report on this issue at the Research Institute of the Peoples of the East, after which the professor presented his views to the All-Union Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet. (Choban-Zade 1928, 30)

But the parallel work on the alphabet was being conducting in Sukhum as well. As Choban-Zade notes:

> At the same time, some Abkhaz comrades [Samson Chanba and Mushni Khashba] themselves took plied for compiling an alphabet for their language. As a result, an alphabet was developed that has a much smaller number of characters and a more simplified look. (Choban-Zade 1928, 30)

The active involvement of Samson Chanba, a prominent Abkhaz writer and statesman, in the compilation of the new Latin alphabet is evidenced by the note made by the hand of A. Genko on the typewritten text of V. Kukba's report "Prof. N. Yakovlev and N. [*sic*] Genko as researchers of the mountain languages of the Caucasus". Kukba writes:

> In the sphere of compiling an alphabet for the mountainous languages, Yakovlev is an ardent opponent of the use of the japhetidological transcription, reworked in relation to practical writing, and together with Polivanov he compromised the alphabet where it was used, replacing it with his alphabet.

Above the phrase "replacing it with his alphabet" there is a pencil corrective note with Genko's hand: "Chanba".[21]

Choban-Zade called Samson Chanba "the main initiator of the new unified Abkhaz alphabet", who

> coordinated this project with the North Caucasian peoples at the Congress, convened specifically for the purpose of unifying the national alphabets of the North Caucasian Territory.[22] At the end of October Comrades Chanba and Khashba came to Baku to carry out their project through the All-Union Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet. On a broad united meeting of Scientific Council and the relevant sections of the Society for the Study and Survey of Azerbaijan, after a detailed discussion of the reports of the above-mentioned comrades, the draft drawn up by them was approved in full. Thus, Abkhazia also received an alphabet that,

21 Archive of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg), Fund 74, A.N. Genko's Archive.

22 In 1928 a North Caucasian Regional Committee of the New Alphabet was created.

> while not inferior in phonetics to the analytical alphabet, is undoubtedly more convenient in social and pedagogical terms. (Choban-Zade 1928, 30)

The official involvement of Polivanov was met with some irritation by Nikolai Yakovlev, who was directly involved in the creation of alphabets for the peoples of the North Caucasus and who felt circumvented despite being a major specialist on the issue and on the North Caucasian languages. The point was raised at the Third Plenum of the All-Union Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet (1928). The Caucasian scholar and Iranologist L.I. Zhirkov, who spoke at the plenum, reproached the Scientific Council of the Committee on the grounds that the opinion of specialists on the Abkhaz alphabet was not requested, and that

> only Polivanov's experience was used, but in this area there are works of other specialists that cannot be bypassed, for example, those of Professor Yakovlev. (Стенографический отчет, 12)

Yakovlev himself in his speech also regretted that

> The request was sent to Prof. Polivanov, who is a specialist on the Far Eastern and Uzbek languages and for some reason he was made a specialist on Abkhaz, and for some reason they did not bother to find out who of the scientists of the RSFSR is now an expert on this issue. (Стенографический отчет, 126-7)

In his response to these reproaches, Polivanov stated:

> Here they said that I was instructed to make two projects of alphabets – the Dungan and the Abkhaz ones, but I declare that I personally did not undertake such a task, because sitting in Moscow and having contact with only two Abkhazians,[23] it is not possible to make a good alphabet, because it is necessary to take into account both the mood of the masses and all those controversial issues of the newly introduced outlines, which arise mainly in the local teachers' environment. All this can be solved only by knowing the mood of the local school staff, so I limited myself to very long notes, but with a modest purpose, with the task of figuring out the principles on the basis of which this alphabet can be created. To

23 In the 1927 report, Polivanov gives the surnames of his two informants – Kobakhiya (Кәабахьиа) and Bogapsh (*recte* Bagapsh, Багаԥшь); cf. Andronov, Simonato, Tomelleri 2017, 232; judging from their surnames, the first of these was the speaker of the Bzyp dialect of Abkhaz, and the other – of the Abzhywa dialect.

> draw up a draft alphabet from 'a' to 'z', to send it to the field with the recommendation of the Scientific Council so that the next day life would overturn this project that was drawn up far from the masses – I never dared to do this. (Стенографический отчет, 133)

His own version of the story of the creation of a new Abkhaz alphabet was recounted by Bekir Choban-Zade:

> The next issue that we dealt with was the working out of the Abkhaz alphabet. The Abkhaz alphabet is more complex in its sounds than the languages of Dagestan, which I have just mentioned. In Abkhazia, as the Plenum knows, there was an analytical alphabet of Acad. N.Y. Marr. This alphabet has about 70 sounds and even more, but it was declared unsuitable for practical – school and state – purposes. We developed a practical school alphabet and it meets all the requirements. Prof. Polivanov also came to the conclusion that this alphabet can be adopted, although Prof. Polivanov planned the creation of another project of an Abkhaz alphabet. We forwarded this draft to the Abkhazian Committee for consideration. The final elaboration of the Abkhaz alphabet was carried out by local workers, especially comrades Chanba and Khashba. They, with the help of cultural activists, with the help of scientists, have compiled a project that from the graphic side meets all the requirements and is the simplest of the projects that have been available so far. This project was thus approved by us. (Стенографический отчет, 110)

Given all this, it can be summarized that after reading Polivanov's detailed report of 1927 with criticism of Marr's alphabet, the Abkhaz leadership and the Commission for the Reform of the Abkhaz Alphabet, having become assured of his competences as a specialist, officially asked the Scientific Council of the All-Union Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet to commission Yevgeny Polivanov in the creation of a new version of the Abkhaz Latin alphabet. As Polivanov said (see above), in response he sent detailed recommendations to Sukhum on an updated script, although quoted above Arseny Khashba speaks rather of a draft of the alphabet sent by Polivanov. Be that as it may, Samson Chanba and Mushni Khashba, relying on recommendations, proposals or even the draft made by Polivanov, and/or on the project created by the Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet, made the final design of a new Abkhaz alphabet, while taking into account the advice of both A.N. Genko (see above) and the recognized authority in creating alphabets for the languages of the North Caucasus, N.F. Yakovlev, whose participation in this process, however, to the obvious displeasure of Yakovlev himself, was only informal.

In the report to the 3rd Plenum of the All-Union Central Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet D. Kamchin-Bek, in connection with the situation around the alphabet adopted in Abkhazia, wrote:

> In 1925, the Latinized analytical alphabet proposed by Acad. N.Y. Marr, with 62 signs, was adopted. The bulkiness of this analytical alphabet in terms of the number of characters and the difficulty of depicting signs forced the Republic of Abkhazia to treat its use with great caution. The alphabet proposed by Acad. Marr was tested for three years, and as a result it had to be abandoned, because not only pupils, but, perhaps, the teachers themselves could not master and retain in memory 62 signs, which were, moreover, difficult to depict. Therefore, the Republic of Abkhazia again faced the question of adopting a simpler and easier to master alphabet for its language, and this alphabet turned out to be a new alphabet generally accepted by the Turkic-Tatar peoples. Now a new Abkhaz alphabet built on the basis of a general unified one with the addition of a number of approximate signs has been finally resolved and adopted to denote certain peculiar sounds of the Abkhaz language. This alphabet will be the guiding star for the familiarization of also the Abkhaz people with proletarian culture. It remains to wish success to the Abkhaz people, who have long been looking for ways to resolve the alphabet-issue. (Kamchin-Bek 1928, 63)

The new Latinized alphabet was introduced into school practice in 1929 and functioned until 1938. However, there was no consensus among the Abkhaz intellectuals about this alphabet. Its adoption seems to have earned a positive response from Dmitry Gulia, although he proposed some measures to improve it.[24] And yet, judging by Georgy Gulia's book, the idea of an updated alphabet on a Latin graphic basis was not accepted by his father. Here is what Georgy Gulia writes on this occasion:

> The alphabet [of Marr] was no longer there, but there was a colossal and moral damage. A series of reckless experiments began: instead of immediately returning to the old alphabet, tested by time, they have started with an alphabet on a Latin basis. Why on a Latin basis? – [Dmitry] Gulia was asking. It was explained to him that this one was not like Marr's. That was really bad. And this one, on a Latin basis, is good. […] And again, a familiar argument was given: many republics switched to the Latin alphabet. Will the Abkhazians fall behind the others? (Gulia 1965, 173)

24 See newspaper notes by Gulia 1929a and 1929b, as well as Gulia's letter to A.M. Chochua, 19 September 1928 (published in Gulia 2003, 386-7).

The linguist Arseny Khashba was no less critical. He wrote:

> The new 'script', compiled on the basis of the Latinized alphabet used for the Turkic-Tatar languages, was adopted without taking into account the system and specifics of the sounds of the Abkhaz-Adyghe group of languages, in particular, of Abkhaz. This alphabet, as is now recognized, lacks a consistency in its system and some now even raise the question whether it is not better to switch back to the old Russian alphabet? (Khashba 1936, 55)

5 Features of the New Latin Alphabet

The new Abkhaz alphabet contained 63 letters (as opposed to Marr's 67). Of these, 11 were letter combinations, namely, a combination of the base sign and an auxiliary sign indicating the labialized (letter + sign u) or palatalized (letter + ı) nature of the consonant. The rest were separate signs. This is the difference between the new alphabet and Marr's graphic system, where there were no letter combinations at all. Noticeably more moderate than Marr's graphic system was the use of diacritics: 16 letters having different diacritics, versus 45 letters with diacritics in Marr's alphabet.

The accusations by Arseny Khashba of a lack of consistency in the rendition of Abkhaz phonemes in the new Latin-based alphabet were fair. Indeed, the new alphabet was devoid of consistency in its use of the means for denoting labialization, palatalization, aspiration and glottalization, which were displayed in a variety of ways. Although, in general, this alphabet made a better impression thanks to its simplicity than Marr's, yet it contained idiosyncratic signs, the memorization of which was also a difficult task in the schooling process.

In 1933, in order to simplify the alphabet, capital letters were removed (Bgazhba 1967, 59). Beside the aim at simplification, one might see a possible influence of the Georgian script, in which capital letters are absent. There were no capital letters in the Latinized alphabet of the Adyghe language either (used in 1927-38).

6 The End of the Policy of 'Latinization'

By the mid-1930s, the Soviet government had finished experimenting with Romanization of alphabets, apparently abandoning the illusion of an imminent world proletarian revolution, the victory of which would justify the introduction of a single 'world' alphabet. Another important reason for the abolition of the Latin alphabet was that the introduction of the latter successfully fulfilled the task of changing the alphabets of those Muslim peoples who were originally orientat-

ed towards the Arabic script. The task of excommunicating the Muslim masses of the atheist Soviet state from Islam and from their traditional orientation to the Arab and Middle Eastern cultural world was realized rather successfully. Speaking on the situation in Dagestan, A.N. Genko wrote in 1933,

> The victory over Arabism was achieved before our eyes by the revolution: the last and decisive blow was dealt to Arabism by the transfer of the Dagestani alphabets to the Latin basis in 1927-28.[25]

Interestingly, the temporal and tactical nature of the Romanization of the writing systems of the Muslim peoples of the USSR was predicted by the outstanding Russian philologist Nikolai Trubetskoy, who in one of the articles in the collection of his works published in Paris in 1927, wrote:

> It is very likely that the transition from the Arabic alphabet to Latin, caused by psychological reasons of a purely temporary nature, will be inconclusive and will serve only as a springboard for the final transition of the Muslims of Eurasia to the national alphabets built on the basis of the civic Cyrillic alphabet. (Trubetskoy 1995, 206)

The founder and ideologist of Eurasianism, Nikolai Trubetskoy was strongly negative towards the Latin alphabet, considering it a symbol of the

> depersonalizing imperialism of the Romano-Germanic civilization and the militant common Romano-Germanic chauvinism, hypocritically hiding behind the guise of 'internationality' and 'universality'. (206)

Noting the merits of the Georgian alphabet, perfectly adapted to the Georgian language, Trubetskoy believed that it should become the basis for written systems in the Megrelian and Svan languages, related to Georgian. However, as he emphasized,

> but the Georgian alphabet is not applicable to the Abkhaz language, although the ancient cultural connection between Abkhazia and Georgia would suggest the adaptation of the Georgian alphabet to this language. (203)

25 Cf. A.N. Genko, "The Fate of the National Script in the Languages of the North. [ern] Caucasus" (manuscript in the Archive of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg), Fund. 74, A.N. Genko's Archive.

Having fulfilled their 'transitional' role, the Latin alphabets were no longer needed, and since the mid-1930s the USSR had started replacing Romanized scripts with Cyrillic-based ones. First in 1936 the Kabardian alphabet was changed, and then in 1938 the Abaza and Dagestanian alphabets were transferred to the Russian basis.

However, there were two notable exceptions: in 1938, the alphabets of the Abkhazians and South Ossetians were transferred not into Russian, but into a Georgian graphic basis. The replacement of the Abkhaz Latinized system by the Georgian one was one of the measures in preparation for the upcoming abolition of the Abkhaz language in schools. Indeed, in 1945, education in Abkhaz was abolished, and the only language of instruction for Abkhaz children became the Georgian language, which they in their masses did not understand. It was only after the death of Stalin that Abkhaz schools were reopened and in 1954 the Abkhazians returned to their erstwhile Cyrillic alphabet.

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