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Teaching the Non-Russian Adult Population of Orenburg Province from the Late 19th to the First Third of the 20th Century

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Образовательная и просветительная работа среди взрослого нерусского населения Оренбургского края в конце XIX – первой трети XX века

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Abstract: This article examines the education of the Orenburg region's non-Russian adults from the end of the 19th century until the end of the 1930s. It begins with a brief review of the relevant historiography and the sources. It goes on to analyse the data of the First General Census of 1897, which sheds light on the scope of the task of schooling that remained to be done among the province's non-Russian nationalities. Already before the Revolution of 1917, local authorities and private individuals were active in cultural and educational work among this population by opening libraries as well as arranging readings and evening classes. At the same time, Zemstvos also strove to train the necessary teachers. During the early Soviet era, educational work was politicized. All educational activities were carried out using emergency methods, since the new government urgently needed a literate population. Due to the exigencies of the Civil War and famine, the authorities had no funds to spare and transferred the task's entire financial burden to public organizations and private individuals, although in the early 1920s, education in the province practically stopped. However, as the national economy recovered by the mid-1920s, schools reopened. The next important step in eradicating of illiteracy among the non-Russian population came around 1937. The author concludes that in the pre-revolutionary and Soviet periods, educating Orenburg's minorities faced major obstacles, namely the lack of funds, qualified personnel, as well as popular resistance.

Keywords: cultural and educational activities, local governments, Orenburg region, literacy, non-Russian population, literacy rate

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Аннотация: В статье ставится проблема раскрыть просветительную и образовательную работу среди взрослого нерусского населения Оренбуржья в период с конца XIX века и вплоть до конца 1930-х гг. В статье дается краткий историографический обзор, а также источниковая база исследования. Начало статьи предвьяет анализ данных Первой всеобщей переписи населения 1897 г., что дает материал для размышления по поводу глубины задач, связанных с последующим просвещением нерусских национальностей губернии. Характеризуя дореволюционный этап, не вызывает сомнения роль органов местного самоуправления в культурно-просветительной работе среди нерусского населения губернии. Среди нерусского населения проводились народные

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чтения, устраивались библиотеки, вечерние курсы. Земства проводили серьезную работу по подготовке квалифицированного педагогического персонала для обучения нерусских народностей. Кроме того, культурно-просветительной работой занимались общественные организации и частные лица. В годы Советской власти просветительной работе был придан политический акцент. Вся просветительная деятельность проводилась с помощью чрезвычайных методов, так как новой власти нужно было грамотное население в сжатые сроки и с минимальными затратами. Государство, в силу трудностей, связанных с Гражданской войной и голодом, переложило всю финансовую нагрузку по обучению населения на общественные организации и частные лица. В начале 1920-х гг. с связи с указанными трудностями просветительная работа в губернии практически прекратилась, к середине 1920-х годов народное хозяйство восстанавливается, просветительная работа возобновляется. На рубеже 1920–1930-х гг. просветительная работа велась при помощи чрезвычайных кампаний. Следующий значимый этап ликвидации неграмотности среди нерусского населения пришелся на середину – вторую половину 1930-х гг. Таким образом, можно сделать вывод, что и в дореволюционный, и в советский период работа по обучению нерусского населения сопровождалась определенными трудностями, а именно нехваткой средств, квалифицированных кадров, непониманием необходимости учиться среди местного населения.

Ключевые слова: культурно-просветительная деятельность, органы местного самоуправления, ликвидация неграмотности

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Introduction

Interethnic relations in Russia, including those with government officials, continue to attract considerable scholarly attention. This is particularly true during times of political upheaval. Both Soviet and post-Soviet specialists of education among non-Russian nationalities at the turn of the 20th century have noted that literacy among Slavs was much higher than among many ethnicities.¹ Only Germans, Jews and the Baltic peoples had literacy rates equal to or even higher than those of Slavs. Modern historians of the pre-revolutionary period highlight the special place of zemstvos (local elected councils) in educating non-Russian nationalities in the province of Orenburg.² They have convincingly proved that, in this respect, a very important role was played by civil society, such as public organizations, local

¹ I.M. Bogdanov, *Gramotnost' i obrazovaniye v dorevolyutsionnoy Rossii i v SSSR: (Istoriko-statisticheskiye ocherki)* (Moscow: Statistika Publ., 1964); Yu.N. Serebrennikov, *Uroven' gramotnosti i obrazovaniya naseleniya Urala (1861–1917 gg.)* (Orenburg: Orenburgskiy gosudarstvennyy pedagogicheskiy universitet Publ., 1998); V.B. Zhiromskaya, *Demograficheskaya istoriya Rossii v 1930-ye gg. Vzglyad v neizvestnoye* (Moscow: ROSSPEN Publ., 2001); A.A. Safronov, "Pervaya vseobshchaya perepis' naseleniya Rossii 1897 g.: razrabotka dannykh o gramotnosti, ikh informatsionnyy potentsial i dostovernost'," in *Dokument. Arkhiv. Istoriya. Sovremennost'* (Yekaterinburg: Ural'skiy universitet Publ., 2003); S.V. Lyubichankovskiy, "Foreign education" in the south Ural as a subject of study of regional historiography (1869–2004)," *Bulletin of the Samara Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Historical sciences* 1, no. 1 (2019): 99–104; S.V. Lyubichankovskiy, "Educational policy of the Russian Empire and the formation of the Kazakh intelligentsia in the Orenburg region in the second 19th century," *Samara Scientific Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (2018): 245–249; S.V. Lyubichankovskiy, "Acculturation model of understanding empire as a methodological alternative to the colonial approach," *History Journal*, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://history.jes.su/s207987840006065-0-1/>; D.V. Vasil'yev, S.V. Lyubichankovskiy, "Kazakhs and Russians: domestic acculturation in the 19th century," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 3 (2018): 151–165; K.G. Akanov, S.V. Lyubichankovsky, "Orenburg in the History of Integration of Kazakh Steppe in the Russian Imperia XVIII – beginning of XX century," *Bylye Gody* 48, no. 2 (2018): 484–495.

² D.F. Sivovolov, M.R. Yusupov, *Kul'turno-prosvetitel'naya deyatel'nost' zemstv Urala (1864 – fevral 1917 g.)* (Chelyabinsk: CHVVAKKIU Publ., 2008); L.V. Petrich, "Consideration of the ethnic component in the education of Kazakhs in the Orenburg Territory in the first third of the 20th century," *History Journal*, <http://history.jes.su>; S.V. Lyubichankovskiy, *Politika akkul'turatsii sredstvami prosveshcheniya islamskikh poddannykh Rossiyskoy imperii: istoricheskiy opyt Orenburgskogo kraya (seredina XIX – nachalo XX vv.)* (Orenburg: OGAU Publ., 2018).

government bodies, and the efforts of progressive individuals. Its initiatives were motivated by growing awareness of national identity and changes in policies for educating the region's minorities, not to mention their large share of the population.³ However, scholars add, such schooling was hampered by a lack of teaching aids, personnel, and money, as well as the public's inertia, among other.⁴ As for the Soviet period, the emphasis in pedagogy was on instilling a communist worldview in the population.

This article examines education among Orenburg's adult non-Russian population from the late 19th century to the 1930s. We have taken the comparative historical method, which enabled us to consider both general and specific aspects of education in the province, including that of non-Russian nationalities, during this period.

Primary sources include documents held in both regional and federal archives: The State Archive of the Orenburg Region (hereafter GAOO), the Orenburg State Archive of Socio-Political History (OGASPI), and the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). These collections preserve materials from the Orenburg district department of public education for the elimination of illiteracy among national minorities (including the charters of relevant societies in the Government of Orenburg), records of the Orenburg District Committee and the city committees of the All-Russian Communist Party, as well as the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Elimination of Illiteracy. These include the minutes of meetings of the Council for the Education of Nationalities of the Non-Russian Language of the People's Commissariat for Education of the RSFSR and reports on the elimination of illiteracy in Orenburg's districts.

We have also examined such important sources as the findings of the First General Census of the Population of 1897, which collected data on the literacy rate of the peoples living there.⁵ Local newspapers and magazines (*Orenburgskaia Gazeta*, *Orenburgskoe Zemskoe Delo*, etc.) reported on the activities of cultural and educational societies for non-Russian nationalities in Orenburg. At the same time, we also studied the Orenburg Zemstvo Assembly's reports on public education, which also dealt with extracurricular activities among the non-Russian nationalities of the Orenburg region.⁶

Cultural and educational activities among Orenburg's non-Russian population at the turn of the 20th century

According to the 1897 census, Orenburg's population was ethnically diverse, and literacy among different nationalities varied greatly. Let look at the Table 1.

Table 1 shows that literacy was higher among its Jews, Poles, and Germans. Moreover, differences in literacy between the sexes was minimal. By contrast, Kirghiz, Moldovians, and the Chuvash were the least literate. Among these nationalities literacy among their men was three or more times higher than that of women. This census defined literacy as the ability to read. Since literacy in the mother tongue was registered only if a respondent could not read Russian, we were unable to determine how many of the minori-

³ A.D. Safarova, *Razvitiye obrazovaniya natsional'nykh men'shinstv v Orenburgskom kraye (konets XIX veka – 1940 g.)* (Orenburg: Orenburgskiy gosudarstvennyy pedagogicheskii universitet Publ., 2009); L.V. Petrich, S.V. Lyubichankovskiy, "The literacy rate of the adult population of Orenburg region based on the materials of the first Soviet censuses," *Samara Scientific Bulletin* 6, no. 3 (2017): 242–246.

⁴ N.B. Tsibul'skiy, "Rabota po likvidatsii negramotnosti sredi natsional'nykh men'shinstv v Chelyabinskoy oblasti v 1930-ye gody," in *Dvenadtsatye Biryukovskiy cheniya: Tezisy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii* (Chelyabinsk: [S.n.], 1996), 69–71; S.A. Bakanov, "About the rate of liquidation of illiteracy in Kazakhstan in 1926–1939," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 8 (2002): 142–145.

⁵ N.A. Troynitskiy, *Pervaya vseobshchaya perepis' naseleniya Rossiyskoy imperii 1897 g.* (St. Petersburg: [S.n.], 1904).

⁶ *Doklady po narodnomu obrazovaniyu. Orenburg, 1916; Orenburgskoye gubernskoye zemskoye sobraniye. 3-ya ocherednaya sessiya. Doklady po narodnomu obrazovaniyu* (Orenburg: Tipo-litografiya B.A. Breslina Publ., 1916).

ties were literate in two languages. Moreover, we could not identify the proportion of those who could read in their native tongue.

Table 1

Literacy Rates among Orenburg's nationalities according to the 1897 Census

Languages	Literacy rates (% of total population)		
	Male	Female	Both Sexes
Great Russian	31.43	10.41	20.61
Little Russian	29.17	7.51	18.41
Belorussian	39.05	13.69	25.85
Bashkir	22.71	12.81	18.01
Tatar	32.75	22.10	27.68
Mordovian	16.95	3.32	10.10
Teptyar	19.86	15.87	17.93
German	54.21	53.14	53.69
Chuvash	19.66	2.22	11.12
Kirghiz	14.60	1.88	10.12
Meshcheriak	25.60	14.90	20.54
Jewish	69.44	55.35	62.80
Polish	62.75	64.86	63.44
Kalmyk	37.15	6.64	23.03

Source: N.A. Troinitskiy, *The First General Census of the Population of the Russian Empire of 1897* (St. Petersburg: Edition of the Central Statistics Committee of the Ministry of the Interior, 1904), 8.

Improving literacy among certain minorities in Orenburg was an important challenge, which social groups addressed in various ways. At a meeting of Orenburg's government in 1902, one of its officials, M.M. Eversman, presented a report on "Measures to raise the level of mental and moral development of the Bashkir population." He drew attention to the fact that inadequate education was the main reason for the "Failures in the mental and moral development of Bashkirs,"⁷ even though the province was particularly active in teaching its Muslim population.

In 1906, Zigangir Baiazitov, Mirkhaidar Kurpiachev, Khusain Donskoi and others founded the Muslim Society in Orenburg's eponymous capital⁸. The organization operated a library, which was housed in a two-room building on Soliany Lane that its members bought two years later. While people of different nationalities visited it, this was the only library for the city's Muslims. Known as the reading room of the Orenburg Muslim Society, it was renamed the Central Muslim Library No. 2 in the Soviet era.

In 1908, another Muslim Society was chartered in the town of Orsk. Founded by Akhmet-Safa Musich Burnaev and Akhmetzian Khabibullin Rakhmatullin, among others, its goal was "educating persons of the Mohammedan faith," and to achieve it, the society arranged public lectures, discussions, vocational courses, etc.⁹. The following year, the Troitsk Muslim Charity Society was registered in that town. The first paragraph of its charter stated that this organisation's purpose was to provide funds to improve the material, cultural and moral well-being of the Muslims in Troitsk and its surroundings. The plan was to open training schools, general education courses and reading rooms, where all Muslims could be admitted "without distinction as to gender, rank and class."¹⁰ Meanwhile, in 1912,

⁷ Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Orenburgskoy oblasti (thereafter – GAOO), f. 15, op. 1, d. 43/1, l. 51.

⁸ Ibid., f. 10, op. 1, d. 386/1, l. 2, 18.

⁹ Ibid., f. 47, op. 1, d. 1, l. 1–1 ob.

¹⁰ Ibid., f. 10, op. 2, d. 202, l. 3–3 ob.

to educate Muslim women, Fatima Mirkmilevna, Zainab Mustafievna Adamovas and Khadich Mustafievna Kutlubulatova established the Orenburg Muslim Women's Society, which also planned to open public libraries, arrange public lectures, literary evenings, and meetings, among other.¹¹

Other educational organizations were also set up in 1906–1907 to teach the province's Islamic population: the Bashkir Society of the village of the Usergan *volosts* of the Orsk *uezd*, the Muslim Society of the town of Iletskaia Zashchita, while the Orenburg *uezd* saw the establishment of Muslim societies for the Bashkirs-Burzians of the Kipchak *volost*, the Bashkirs of Bushman Suun, and the Bashkirs of the Burzianskii *volost*.¹² In all, we identified 16 Muslim societies with educational goals.

Poles undertook a similar initiative when in 1915, two officials, Mintzler, A.A. Petrellevich, as well as the mining technician B.I. Piotrovsky, created the “Polish Circle” in Troitsk. The circle's aim was “to unite the Polish society of Troitsk and to make it a place of constant communication, to provide moral and material support to the Poles without distinction as to religion.” Its members intended to arrange “lectures, amateur performances, literary and musical evenings in Polish not only for the members, but also for guests.”¹³ And in the following year, a second educational society for men and women of that nationality, the “Polish House”, was founded in Orenburg. With a charter similar to Moscow's Polish House, which had been set up in 1907, the society intended to open schools for the province's children and adults, libraries, reading rooms, and to organize lectures.¹⁴

A truly important development in educating Orenburg's non-Russian population was the cultural and educational activity of the province's *zemstvo*, which planned the following activities for those nationalities:

- 1) To develop a program for primary and two-year non-Russian schools...
- 2) To examine the existing textbooks and manuals for non-Russian schools and try producing new textbooks...
- 3) To apply to the Ministry of Education to open two Tatar teacher seminaries in the city of Orenburg ...
- 4) To start training teaching staff...
- 5) To recommend to the *uezd zemstvos* books in the native language of minorities.¹⁵

From 1915, I.M. Bikchenteev and his assistant, S.K. Sharipov, managed the province's “foreign department.” To understand the state of the non-Russian population's education, the department's staff distributed a 30-question questionnaire.

Meanwhile, folk libraries, evening courses, and readings were organized for the non-Russian population, primarily its Muslims. Their clergy often encouraged the need for literacy to members of their mosques.¹⁶

In 1915, the Orenburg *Zemstvo* Government developed a program of classes for the adult Muslim population. The training program was for 18–20 weeks for three hours, five days a week, or a total of 270 hours. Conducted in Russian, there were classes in Scripture (for 20 hours); arithmetic (40 hours) and Russian language and writing (80 hours).¹⁷

In 1916, nine courses for the province's adults were opened in six locations.¹⁸ Given the traditions and household conditions of the Muslim population, students were separated by sex. According to field reports, the courses were popular. Cheliabinsk's government wrote about courses in the Metelevskii *volost*:

¹¹ GAOO, f. 10, op. 1, d. 340, l. 1, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, f. 11, op. 2, d. 3439, l. 69–75.

¹³ *Orenburgskaya gazeta*, June 25, 1915.

¹⁴ GAOO, f. 10, op. 2, d. 263, l. 2–6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 43, op. 1, d. 106, l. 523–524.

¹⁶ *Orenburgskoye zemskoye delo*, no. 8 (1917): 13.

¹⁷ GAOO, f. 15, op. 1, d. 282, l. 150–150 ob.

¹⁸ *Orenburgskoye zemskoye delo*, no. 8 (1917).

A little test during the last school season showed that evening courses for non-Russian adults were extraordinarily successful; thus from the very beginning of the four month school 'year' until the end 90 men and 42 women attended the courses in the small village of Metelevo. To attract as many women as possible, they were segregated according to sex. In both groups, residents of neighboring villages made up almost a third of all students, and in the female group there were several women, even from the Shadrinsk district, who came solely for the courses.¹⁹

Evening classes were conducted for both literate and illiterate people at libraries, primary schools, and they were accompanied by visual aids, experiments, and practical work.

According to the decrees of the provincial zemstvo's first and second meetings in 1915, six non-Russian foreign libraries operated the following villages: Mrakovo (in Orenburg uezd), Metelevo (Cheliabinsk), Uchaly and First Askarov (Verkhneuralsk) as well as Temiasovo and Idilbaevo (Orsk Uezd). And by 1916 and 1917, local government bodies operated 24 and 32 such libraries, respectively.²⁰ Meanwhile, the province's department of public education opened a library with books in all languages spoken in Orenburg, including Russian.²¹ Readers greatly appreciated the new libraries. Metelevo's librarians reported that the new courses led to an increase in patrons:

Before courses began, there had been no women among the readers; two months after the opening of the courses there were 40 of them, and the number of male readers doubled.²²

Since a large number of Muslims, especially the Bashkirs of Orskii, Verkhneuralskii and Troitskii uezds, led a nomadic existence, the zemstvos also began to organize mobile libraries. In addition to opening libraries, zemstvos distributed free brochures in the Tatar language on such topics as "What is a zemstvo," "Pension and benefits to the lower ranks and their families," and "On infectious and contagious diseases."²³

Public readings and lectures for the non-Russian population were to be conducted in their native language and to be consistent with their way of life and psychology. Topics included: "on the harm of idleness," "on the advantages of settled life over nomadic life," as well as history and culture, hygiene, drunkenness and its consequences, as well as customs and morals.²⁴ For example, in 1915 in the Seitovskii Posad readings were organized on: "What is a zemstvo," "On the activity of zemstvo in the field of public education," "Credit partnership," while there were lectures on religion and morals, cooperative societies, and veterinary medicine.²⁵ Zemstvo leaders recommended accompanying the readings with music, singing, lanterns and shadow projections.

There were not enough teachers for these cultural and educational efforts among the non-Russian population. This shortage became particularly acute when men were drafted for military service as Russia entered the First World War in 1914. Members of the Orenburg Zemstvo calculated the "foreign schools" required 987 teachers, and there was even greater need for extra-curricular education workers.²⁶

¹⁹ GAOO, f. 43, op. 1, d. 106, l. 549 a.

²⁰ *Doklady po narodnomu obrazovaniiyu. Orenburg, 1916; Orenburgskoye gubernskoye zemskoye sobraniye. 3-ya ocherednaya sessiya. Doklady po narodnomu obrazovaniiyu* (Orenburg: Tipo-litografiya B.A. Breslina Publ., 1916), 75, 91, 119; GAOO, f. 43, op. 1, d. 106, l. 560.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

²² GAOO, f. 43, op. 1, d. 106, l. 561.

²³ *Doklady po narodnomu obrazovaniiyu; Orenburgskoye gubernskoye zemskoye sobraniye*, 119–120.

²⁴ GAOO, f. 43, op. 1, d. 106, l. 565.

²⁵ *Doklady po narodnomu obrazovaniiyu; Orenburgskoye gubernskoye zemskoye sobraniye*, 233.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

In August 1915, a provincial meeting to discuss of two-year zemstvo courses issued the following ruling:

1. To recognize the need to begin courses to train students for Russian and non-Russian schools, as well as for students of two-year program;
2. To entrust the provincial council to develop and submit a report on the establishment of two-year courses to the regular provincial zemstvo assembly;
3. In the event of a decision to begin courses at the provincial assembly, to convene a meeting of representatives of district zemstvos and towns, together with specialists in public education, to develop a program of courses and budgets.²⁷

At the time, funded mainly by the zemstvo, both regular and short-term pedagogical courses for teachers were also occasionally organized. In 1917, such courses were opened in: religious knowledge, the mother tongue, the Russian language, arithmetic, motherland studies, methods and didactics, social studies, school hygiene, etc.²⁸ They were very popular: in addition to local teachers, more than 80 Muslim women from various Russian towns took them, for a total of 250 participants.

The Islamic population reacted ambiguously to new cultural and educational ideas, and the press repeatedly reported about resistance to education. Thus, in the village of Imangulovo, the Bashkir Regional Council of the Bashkir Imangulov Society ordered the school and zemstvo library to be closed and courses for adults ended, and teachers were persecuted.²⁹ This was not the only such case.

Eliminating illiteracy among Orenburg's non-Russian population in the 1920–1930s

During the Soviet era, the most important task was eliminating mass illiteracy, together with political propaganda and other efforts to instill socialist ideals. The decree of the Council of People's Commissars "On the elimination of illiteracy among the population of the RSFSR" of December 26, 1919 emphasized that

the entire population of the republic, aged between 8 and 50, that are illiterate, must learn to read and write in their native or Russian language, according to preference.³⁰

Officials set up emergency commissions to abolish illiteracy.

During their first months in power, the Soviet government attacked illiteracy in two ways: teaching adults to read and write, and the creation of a network of school institutions to prepare for universal education. Teaching non-Russian nationalities was supervised by the Education Department for National Minorities, which was created under the People's Commissariat of the RSFSR. The "Regulation on the organization of education of the peoples of the non-Russian language" of February 1920 ordered the district education departments to teach the entire population of their territory, regardless of nationality. To coordinate its work among national minorities, the People's Commissariat of the RSFSR operated a special body, the Council for the Education of Nationalities of the Non-Russian Language (Sovnatsmen) of the People's Commissariat of Education of the RSFSR, which was subsequently transformed into the Committee for the Education of National Minorities in the RSFSR (Kommats) at the collegium of the People's Commissariat of Education of the RSFSR. Kommats was directly connected to the Department of Nationalities of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR.

²⁷ *Doklady po narodnomu obrazovaniyu; Orenburgskoye gubernskoye zemskoye sobraniye*, 56.

²⁸ *Orenburgskoye zemskoye delo*, May 21 (June 3), 1917.

²⁹ *Orenburgskoye zemskoye delo*, December 17, 1917.

³⁰ *Sobraniye uzakoneniyy i rasporyazheniy pravitel'stva za 1919 g.* (Moscow: Politizdat Publ., 1943), 845–846.

A meeting of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission on the Elimination of Illiteracy with the representatives of the Council for the Education of Nationalities of the Non-Russian Language of the People's Commissariat of Education of the RSFSR in 1924 drafted a resolution on the "Elimination of Illiteracy among National Minorities," which, inter alia, stated:

1. To consider it necessary that all provincial and district emergency commissions for the elimination of illiteracy pay attention to work among national minorities...
- 2 ...Trade unions should register illiterate people according to nationality.
3. ...Military registration and enlistment offices should indicate the geographical location in the information available to them on the national composition of pre-conscripts.
4. Depending on local conditions... an organizational plan should be drafted eliminate illiteracy among each nationality.
5. For nationalities leading a nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle... it is recommended to organize mobile schools and mobile teachers...
7. To consider it necessary to educate persons not speaking Russian in their native language...
8. To ask the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission on the Elimination of Illiteracy to develop a manual to train people from nationalities that do not speak Russian but wish to study it.³¹

On June 15, 1920, the Orenburg Provincial Executive Committee issued an order on the elimination of illiteracy among the province's population in connection with the decree of the Council of People's Commissars of December 26, 1919, according to which classes with illiterate people were to begin on July 1, 1919.³² During the first years of Soviet power, the Orenburg region lacked the basics for classes, including premises, lighting, and equipment. Funding educational institutions was assigned to local budgets and contributions of various organizations.

As the Civil War raged from 1918 to 1921, efforts to eliminate illiteracy at the local level were minimal and inconsistent, given the lack of money for educational materials, fuel, textbooks in national languages, and qualified teachers, as well as the cultural backwardness of the population. According to one report, in village of Burtinsky volost of the Orenburg district: ...2) more than 90% of the population is illiterate; 3) there are no cultural institutions in the village, except for a one-room school.³³ This situation was typical of most villages with a predominantly non-Russian population. Because there were not enough teachers, classes were often conducted by people who were barely literate. Moreover, one teacher instructed 15–25 students.³⁴ In 1920 Sh. Aminov, the head of the department of national minorities at the Party's Ilets district committee, reported to the Party's provincial committee that practically no work was being done to eliminate illiteracy. At the time, only Sh. Aminov worked for the department, and the rest of its staff was mobilized to thresh the grain.³⁵ Meanwhile, in 1922, the sub-department of national minorities of the Orenburg Department of Public Education stopped its work due to the complete lack of staff, and two years later only three schools for national minorities operated in the province.³⁶

In the mid-1920s, as the national economy recovered under the New Economic Policy public education improved. By fall 1925, a shock campaign was planned to eliminate illiteracy among non-Russian nationalities.³⁷ At the time, 40% of the Tatar-Bashkir

³¹ Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Rossiyskoy Federatsii (thereafter – GARF), f. 2314, op. 8, d. 100, l. 13.

³² "Prikaz Orenburgskogo gubispolkoma o likvidatsii negramotnosti sredi naseleniya gubernii v svyazi s izdaniyem dekreta SNK ot 26 dekabrya 1919 g.," in *Kul'turnoye stroitel'stvo v Orenburzh'ye: Dokumenty i materialy. 1918–1941* (Chelyabinsk: Yuzhno-Ural'skoye knizhnoye izdatel'stvo Publ., 1985), 20–21.

³³ Orenburgskiy gosudarstvennyy arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoy istorii (thereafter – OGASPI), f. 1, op. 1, d. 353, l. 4.

³⁴ GARF, f. 2314, op. 2, d. 42, l. 4 ob.

³⁵ OGASPI, f. 1, op. 1, d. 75, l. 24.

³⁶ Ibid., d. 551, l. 2 ob.

³⁷ GARF, f. 2306, op. 69, d. 178, l. 17.

population, mostly farm workers, of Orenburg Province were illiterate.³⁸ Already that year, in the Orsk district, out of 53 departments for eliminating illiteracy, 11 taught its Kirghiz and there were four for the Tatar population. There were also a Tatar club, as well as a library for 500 readers, which supplied literature to all the district libraries. The library's staff published the newspaper *Krasnyi Chitatel'* (Red Reader), and organized the "Society of Friends of the Library," with 25 members.³⁹ However, the Muslim clergy discouraged the education of its believers, especially women.

The 1926 All-Union census reported on literacy rates among Orenburg's various nationalities: 43% of the Russian population, 44% of the Tatars and 24% of other minorities.⁴⁰ Among the province's 4,659 educated people, 1,146 (25%) were from its non-Russian nationalities.⁴¹ During the first decade of Soviet power, literacy among non-Russian nationalities did improve in the RSFSR as a whole, and during the 1926/1927 academic year there were 4,710 elementary schools for national minorities in the country.⁴²

Nevertheless, the finding in the census about Orenburg's low literacy disappointed the government, and during the late 1920s and early 1930's, it decided to deal with this deficiency by mobilizing the masses through cultural "storms," "month campaigns" (*mesiachniki*), cultural relays (*kul'testafet*), cultural "assaults" (*kul'tpokhody*), etc. In other words, the authorities hoped rapidly to eliminate illiteracy with widespread political agitation and propaganda, along with its efforts with to study the agro-minimum in the countryside and to improve the population's way of life.

During the month campaign to eliminate illiteracy in the Orenburg district in 1928, the relevant commission planned a wide network of educational centers and schools for semi-literate people, primarily among ethnic minorities. It paid particular attention to the such "backward" regions as Dombarovskii and Burtinskii. At that time, these centers and schools taught 12% of illiterate Tatars, 4% of Kazakhs, 5% of Bashkirs and Mordovians, 6% of Ukrainians and 1% of Germans. A shortage of supplies and teachers hampered this work, although little effort was needed for the district's Mennonite Germans, since they were already fully literate.⁴³

The Tatar-Bashkir Bureau of the party's central committee announced a cultural campaign among members of that population through:

1. Publication of a special brochure, "The first results of the cultural campaign," and the illustrated newspaper *Kul'tpokhod* ("Cultural campaign").
2. Publication of the *Kul'tpokhod* wall newspaper and special newspapers for the semi-literate in the NTA [the new Turkic alphabet], posters and slogans...
3. Approaching Vostoko-Kino (Eastern cinema) to produce a film about the cultural campaign among Eastern minorities.⁴⁴

The cultural campaign reported increases in the number of educational centers, propaganda rooms, and libraries. It also endeavored to disseminate political, agro-zoo-technical, veterinary and sanitary-educational information, and intensified the activities of volunteer societies. However, the campaign would have been more effective if it had operated with greater competence. Overstated and often unrealistic plans, poor implementation, as well as the low educational level of the teachers – all meant that "cultural storm"

³⁸ OGASPI, f. 1, op. 1, d. 731, l. 25.

³⁹ Ibid., f. 7, op. 7, d. 372, l. 4, 13 ob.

⁴⁰ Ibid., f. 1, op. 1, d. 969, l. 43–43 ob.

⁴¹ GAOO, f. 451, op. 1, d. 1, l. 169.

⁴² OGASPI, f. 1, op. 1, d. 1043, l. 33 ob.

⁴³ N.B. Tsibul'skiy, "Novyy etap dvizheniya za vseobshchuyu gramotnost' v Chelyabinskoy oblasti vo vtoroy polovine 30-kh godov," in *Problemy sotsial'no-ekonomicheskogo i politicheskogo razvitiya Urala v XVIII–XX vekakh* (Chelyabinsk: Chelyabinskii gosudarstvennyi universitet Publ., 1997), 167.

⁴⁴ OGASPI, f. 4, op. 1, d. 163, l. 13, 24 ob.

(*kul'turshturn*, i.e. work to eliminate Illiteracy) was carried out by autodidacts. Combined with the wide dispersion of the non-Russian population, the low wages did not attract even partially trained specialists. Therefore, random members of the population were recruited, including Komsomol youth, who were not respected by adults, as well as insufficiently prepared to carry out their task.

In the mid-1920s, the Soviet government replaced the Arabic and Old Mongolian alphabets traditionally used by its relevant minorities to the new Turkic alphabet, which used Latin letters. Then, in 1936–1940, the state moved from Latin to Cyrillic script. Such changes made eliminating illiteracy and semi-literacy even more difficult, as students had to learn to read and write repeatedly. The mass campaign to transition to the Latin, and then to the Cyrillic alphabets among ethnic minorities was directed by the central committees of the party at all levels and carried out by central, regional and district committees of the new Turkic alphabet.

On November 30, 1928, the Orenburg District Bureau was set up to with the ambitious task of introducing the new Turkic alphabet to the Bashkir, Tatar and Kazakh population. Given their large share of the province's minorities, it was not an easy task. To eliminate illiteracy among the non-Russian population more effectively, the cells charged with introducing the new Turkic alphabet merged with those of the "Down with Illiteracy" Society. Once again, this process was significantly hampered by the lack of the necessary teaching supplies.⁴⁵

The vicissitudes of the alphabet complicated the elimination of illiteracy of the non-Russian population in their native language. During the cultural campaign, the Central Committee's Tatar-Bashkir Bureau resolved to introduce short-term courses for Tatar-Bashkir activists, issue enough textbooks, and mobilize the press to organize a competition of Komsomol cells among teachers of the new Turkic alphabet.⁴⁶ However, after the campaign, efforts to eliminate illiteracy, and the number of educational centers decreased.

Then, in early 1930, all of Orenburg's educational centers and schools for semi-literate people adopted the new Latin alphabet. Since industry and the Red Army presupposed Russian literacy among national minorities, instructors at many schools taught in both Russian and native languages. Nevertheless, in the second half of the 1930s, training the region's non-Russian peoples remained difficult. Among other, education continued to be hindered by the use of Arabic and Old Mongolian alphabets among the Muslim population and the lack of Soviet reading matter.

The 17th Party Congress in 1934 announced the goal to eliminate all illiteracy and semi-literacy by the end of the Second Five-Year Plan (1933–37). As a result, in its decree "On the Preparation of Schools for Adults for the New School Year" of August 15, 1935, the Orenburg Region Executive Committee's presidium noted that work to eliminate illiteracy in the province's national regions was unsatisfactory. The heads of public education bodies were given personal responsibility for provide schools for all minorities.⁴⁷ During the 1935–1936 academic year, 278 (15%) of 1,797 adult students in Orenburg's 41 schools were from non-Russian nationalities.⁴⁸

By the mid-1930s, reforming schools for adults became urgent. To this end, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR adopted the resolution "On the work of training the illiterate and semi-literate" in 1936. The document ordered the full elimination of il-

⁴⁵ OGASPI, f. 209, op. 1, d. 50, l. 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid., f. 4, op. 1, d. 145, l. 1–3.

⁴⁷ Ibid., f. 209, op. 1, d. 50, l. 3.

⁴⁸ К.А. Morgunov, *Istoricheskiy opyt gosudarstvennogo regulirovaniya natsional'nykh otnosheniy na Yuzhnom Urale (1917–1939 gg.)* (Orenburg: Orenburgskiy gosudarstvennyy pedagogicheskiy universitet Publ., 2000), 234–235.

literacy and semi-literacy among all people under 50 during the 1936–37 school year, and approved curricula and programs for schools for adults. The decree galvanized work to implement full literacy. A survey of the region was carried out. Taking into account all Kazakhs working on collective farms, the heads of state farms (*sovkhozy*) and political departments were instructed to identify the level of their literacy and eliminate illiteracy in their native language by the end of 1936. Plans were also made to provide newspapers and other reading matter, to teams of the most literate collective farmers.⁴⁹

The survey of seven districts of the region in 1936 revealed that teaching the non-Russian population remained hard due to continuing shortages lack of the necessary facilities, textbooks, as well as qualified teachers. In the Akbulakskii district, the school at the Kazakh collective farm “Communist” was located in the residence of its horse grooms, while there were no textbooks in the Kazakh language.⁵⁰ To address this situation, the Party’s Orenburg regional committee ordered educational centers to obtain notebooks and textbooks in the Kazakh and Tatar languages, as well as to teach Kazakh during vacation.⁵¹

Conclusions

Teaching Orenburg’s non-Russian adults proved to be very difficult. This can be partially explained by the fact that the work was carried out among the most poorly organized rural population. Given the predominance of Muslims among the province’s minorities and the brief existence of its *zemstvo*, plans to educate non-Russians were barely implemented before 1917. Nevertheless, the local government bodies made a significant contribution to the educational work among non-Russian peoples by setting up courses and public libraries, as well as organizing public readings tailored to the needs of minorities.

After the 1917 Revolution, the new authorities continued the work. However, eliminating illiteracy among these nationalities continued to lag. In parallel with teaching them to read and write, campaigns were launched to wean Turkic-Tatar ethnic groups away from the Arabic alphabet and adopt the new, Latin script (*ianalif*), and then retrain them to use Cyrillic letters. Nevertheless, eliminating illiteracy in the Soviet period established *de facto* equality among the country’s many peoples. Improving the population’s cultural and educational levels of the population helped to shape a new generation of Soviet citizens in the socialist spirit, as well as promoting the rise of an intelligentsia among each nationality in the republics.

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⁴⁹ GARF, f. 374, op. 27, d. 488, l. 132.

⁵⁰ OGASPI, f. 371, op. 1, d. 451, l. 24–25.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, f. 371, op. 1, d. 682, l. 11.

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