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Original Research

The role and place of foreign languages in Russian culture

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Foreign languages have always occupied a prominent place in Russia and the Russian culture. The paper states that despite being seemingly isolated from the outside world, Russia has always been closely connected with it, and not only by trade and political relations, but also by spirit and culture. The research contributes to the discussion of the role of foreign languages in Russian culture and reviews the development of the foreign languages teaching system in Russia. Adoption of Christianity was the first significant reason for the spread of foreign languages in the society, and that brought not only a new religion, but also the Greek language along with the theological books. Over time, more and more foreign languages began to spread in the society, sometimes even entering into conflict with one another: Latin with Greek (in the theological field), German with French (in the sphere of politics), and French with English (in the literary field). In certain historical periods (for example, in the first half of the 19th century), foreign languages even displaced the Russian language in some social strata. The contribution underlines the importance of analysing such historical periods with special reference to the interconnection between language as a means of communication and national identity. The investigation also argues that at times, for example, like in Soviet times, foreign languages acquired the status of 'dead' languages and became an exclusive tribute to tradition and a means of reading. In conclusion, the paper declares that foreign languages have always retained their important role, opening up new horizons for the Russian people and connecting them with the outside world.

KEYWORDS: *Russian culture, intercultural communication, history of education, national mentalities, interaction of cultures, foreign language learning, means of cognition*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of foreign language learning has been recognised in Russia since books and knowledge first began to spread in Ancient Rus'. One can say that religion, books, and foreign languages came to Rus' together with adopting Christianity. Nikolay Karamzin wrote that in those early days *'knowledge of the Hellenic language constituted scholarism'* (Karamzin, 1993, p. 220). This approach to education lasted for a surprisingly long time: the first (basic) stage of education consisted in learning how to read, and the next (advanced) level involved learning a foreign language,

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however, also for the purpose of reading. For quite a long period of time, the notion of an *educated person* was comprised of two components – knowledge of books and proficiency in foreign languages, and the more languages people knew, the more educated they were considered to be. It took several centuries before the concept of education grew broader, and the Russian society began to treat foreign languages as a learning tool, rather than a goal in itself.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Throughout Russian history, the role of foreign languages was closely associated with books. Of course, the development of international contacts in the diplomatic, political and cultural spheres, as well as the expansion of trade, served as important driving factors in language learning. Yet, books remained the main reason for Russians to learn foreign languages. In the early 18th century, Pososhkov (1985) opened his famous *Paternal Testament* with the following advice: *'At the beginning of your adolescence, my son, study language and literature before other subjects, and read not only Slavic books, but also Greek or Latin, or even Polish, because there are many books in Polish, which we do not find in the Slavic language'* (Pososhkov, 1985, p. 64). In Russia, foreign language learning was oriented towards reading books rather than communicating, and one of the major reasons for the popularity of foreign languages in the country was the love and respect for books.

Another reason was the nation's interest in the outside world is the desire to explore and understand it, so typical of the Russian culture. Russia's remote geographic location, its political isolation during certain (in fact, quite numerous) periods, and almost permanent closedness more psychological in nature, perceived rather than real – made foreign languages and books in foreign languages the main guides to other worlds and cultures. This resulted in a peculiar phenomenon: people who had never left their homes often knew more about the world outside than professional diplomats or travellers. As early as in the 12th century, Monomakh (1978) mentioned in his instruction to his children that his father had learned five languages while sitting at home. Klyuchevsky (1990b) cites an anecdote from the late 18th century about Count Buturlin, who impressed a French tourist with his detailed knowledge of Paris, its streets, hotels, theatres, and monuments. The guest's surprise turned into shock when he learned that Buturlin himself had never been to France, and all this extensive knowledge had been drawn exclusively from books (Klyuchevsky, 1990b, p. 159).

In the Soviet times, when ordinary Russians could not even dream of going abroad, many of them knew a lot about the most remote corners of the world, though in most cases their knowledge was not about real modern London, but about the London of *Sherlock Holmes*, or the Paris of the *Three Musketeers*, or the Latin America of *Jules Verne*. Thus, throughout the entire Russian history, books and foreign languages helped the Russian people to explore the outside world, and it was no less successful than tedious and expensive travels which were not always even feasible for various reasons.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The arrival of foreign books and manuscripts in Russia in the 10-12th centuries prompted the need to study foreign languages. Naturally, Greek was the first choice due to the connections with Byzantium, which went far beyond religion and were of paramount importance during that period. In the early 15th century Latin started to challenge the primacy of Greek. The fall of Constantinople, which complicated relations with the Christian East, the developing contacts with Western Europe, the emergence of book printing and, consequently, the growing number of books available – all this led to an increased inflow of literature in Latin, primarily from Germany.

The establishment of the Ambassadorial Chancellery in 1549, which played a leading role in the system of state administration under Ivan the Terrible, as well as the increasingly intensive and broad contacts with European countries, created an acute need for translators to facilitate international communication. It is known that Boris Godunov tried to organise schools to teach foreign languages to Russians. Interestingly,

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this was opposed by the clergy, who, according to Solovyov (1993a), *'said that their vast country was united in religion, customs, and language; if there are many languages, there will be chaos in this land'* (Solovyov, 1993a, p. 373). The way this comment is worded is quite telling: religion, morals, and foreign languages are presented as inextricably intertwined. If one of these elements is being threatened, others will inevitably be affected. Boris Godunov nevertheless continued with his attempts to provide young Russians with foreign language learning opportunities by sending selected boyars' children abroad, but the result of this endeavour was disappointing: having mastered a foreign language, the young people never came back. Language learning during that period remained the privilege of scholars and scribes, and the language was mostly used for reading books or translating them into Russian.

Some noticeable changes took place in the 17th century. The number of people with foreign language skills had increased; the number of languages being learned had expanded beyond the traditional Latin and Greek and there appeared more opportunities for foreign language learning, including the opening of various educational language institutions.

In the mid-17th century, English found its way into the Russian society. One of the documents remaining from that period is a manuscript of a Yaroslavl townsman that contained the English alphabet, an English-Russian glossary and a phrasebook, which indicates an interest in languages among townspeople – apparently, those who engaged in trade with foreigners. One of the earliest translations from English dates from the first quarter of the 17th century – the *Land Surveying Books*. Knowledge about the country of the *Anglo Germans* spread across Russia along with the English language. A Russian source from the mid-17th century gives a description of the inhabitants of the distant island, obviously written by a Russian Anglophile: *'The English people are of good character and in good spirit; they have pale skin and light eyes. They love to live in abundance, just like the Italians. Their manners and traditions are decorous and orderly, there is nothing you can shame them for. They are skilful, brave, and courageous soldiers. They stay united against the enemy without any reservation, holding their head high up. They are very skilful in seafaring, more so than other nations; their food consists of mostly meat, cold appetizers, and good beer, which they also export to other countries. They dress like French. Their wives are beautiful, they wear their clothes in a certain way typical only of them...'* (Alekseev, 1982, p. 49). A kind of rosy eulogy to a country which the author had probably never visited, but which he envisaged, based on European books and probably personal meetings with Englishmen in Moscow (at that time the English trading company, established a hundred years earlier, was very active in Moscow).

The inflow of foreigners to Russia intensified during that period. Many of them came to the country to enter the Moscow sovereign's service, in search of a better life and high rank. Some were implementing the instructions of their governments to collect data on the state that was gaining strength and international weight. Others came out of sheer curiosity, to learn more about the country. Some of the foreigners were hired by wealthy families, mainly for the purpose of teaching languages to the children.

The establishment of the Slavic-Greek-Latin Academy in the 1680s took the teaching of foreign languages to another level. The school's opening was preceded by a fight between Latin (the language of European science), and Greek (the language of the Russian Church), and the issue was certainly much bigger than just the language itself. As Klyuchevsky (1990a) stated, *'these languages were not just different grammars and lexicons, but different education systems, hostile cultures, irreconcilable worldviews'* (Klyuchevsky, 1990a, p. 296) The Hellenistic tradition prevailed, while the Latin teaching was considered harmful and dangerous.

This, however, did not affect the use of Latin, which remained an important means of communication with European countries. The administration of the new educational institution was entrusted to two Greek monks, the Likhud Brothers. The students studied Greek, Latin and Slavic languages, and some subjects were also taught in foreign languages – grammar and poetics were taught in Greek, while rhetoric and

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physics were taught in Greek and Latin. Upon graduation, the students became translators or proofreaders at the Printing House, or teachers, among other areas, meaning that they used their knowledge of foreign languages to meet the needs of the state. Interestingly, when the Likhud Brothers fell out of favour, they were sent to a print shop, where they were to teach Italian to children. A special tsar's edict ordered the children of boyars and other noblemen to learn this language from the Greek monks.

By the end of the 17th century, the number of people with foreign language skills had grown significantly. Now this group included not only members of the clergy, scribes, translators, diplomats, interpreters and statesmen, but also townspeople (who engaged in trade or were somehow affiliated with educational institutions), nobles seeking to make a career, as well as ordinary people who had the time and opportunity to learn a foreign language. The range of languages also expanded considerably: In addition to Greek and Latin, which retained their leading positions, and, understandably, Slavic languages, other European languages, such as German, English, Italian, French, and Dutch, gradually began to gain popularity in Russia. There were different ways of learning a new language, including home schooling, often by foreign teachers, self-education based on books, private schools, and the emerging state educational institutions. However, a true revolution in foreign language learning only occurred in the next century.

The reforms of Peter the Great were largely based on Western models, and his vision of Russia's future was closely linked to Europe, and that inevitably increased the importance of foreign languages. They were the only means to learn the secrets of Western crafts, military art and state government. And how could one travel to Europe to gain the necessary experience (which had become quite common practice by then) without being able to speak a European language? Besides, adopting foreign manners and way of life also required foreign language skills. It was clear not only to Peter, but to many of his courtiers as well. Now languages were used to meet some practical needs; books were translated to draw relevant information, and this process was assisted by the publication of various grammar guides and dictionaries. In accordance with the tsar's political preferences and personal sympathies, the German language grew in importance, followed by other living European languages – Italian, French, Dutch and English. Latin and Greek began to lose their leading positions, with the former still being practised in science, and the latter being used in church.

Learning languages became an indispensable tool for obtaining knowledge. All the new types of education introduced by the tsar required foreign language proficiency. Obviously, those who were sent to study abroad (one of the first measures to promote education at the turn of the 18th century), were expected to speak a foreign language, but those who studied in Russia also needed some foreign language skills, as most of the teachers at the newly established schools were foreigners with no knowledge of Russian. To give an example, among the first teachers at the famous School of Mathematics and Navigation were three Englishmen.

Since the early 18th century, all projects to reorganise the education system in Russia were necessarily associated with the acquisition of foreign languages. An interesting scheme was proposed by Fyodor Saltykov, a prominent statesman and supporter of socio-political and cultural reforms. He was a highly educated man, who spent three years in England and Holland at the end of the 17th century, studying shipbuilding and sea navigation, and then returned to Russia to supervise the construction of military ships. In 1711, he was again sent to England to purchase ships for the Russian fleet, and there he wrote two letters to Peter I, which he called *Propositions*, presenting his project to reform Russia: accelerated development of the education system, including for women, book printing, the opening of libraries, construction of factories, expansion of trade, searching for the Northern sea route to India and China, colonisation of Central Asia and Siberia. Saltykov did not return to Russia. According to some sources, Peter found his proposals too radical, so Saltykov chose to stay in England, fearing disgrace and arrest.

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Saltykov (1985) emphasised the need to create educational institutions (*academies*) in each of the seven Russian provinces, using monastic buildings for that purpose, and the problem of financing was to be solved by using monastic revenues. Each academy was to have a library with books *'in different languages and from different sciences like in England – at Oxford or Cambridge*' (Saltykov, 1985, p. 57-58). The primary focus in the curriculum was to be on foreign languages: *'And in those academies, students must learn languages to be able to converse with different peoples – Latin, Greek, German, English and French*' (Saltykov, 1985, p. 57-58). In addition, students were to study *liberal arts*, i.e. general education subjects, and *'to learn, for their own defence and for grace, how to ride horses, fight with swords and dance*' (Saltykov, 1985, p. 57-58). Saltykov (1985) supported women's education, arguing that living in their parents' home before marriage, where girls grew up *'not knowing how to behave in company and converse*' (Saltykov, 1985, p. 57-58), was harmful to them. He proposed to introduce compulsory education for them (which implied punishing the unwilling fathers with a fine) and develop a special set of women's *sciences*: *'for home economics*' (reading, writing, counting), *'for elegance in languages'* (French and German), *'for fun*' and *'for their own amusement and to make a good company'* (Saltykov, 1985, p. 57-58). Notably, already in the early 18th century French was described as the main language of communication in society.

Having stayed in Europe for a long time, Saltykov (1985) found that many of the books published there distorted Russian history and gave a false image of Russia. Eventually, this patriotically minded émigré concluded that it was necessary to write a history of the Russian state, translate it into German and French and send the books to Europe to disseminate the correct information about the country. Peter himself realised this and spared no expense to publish books on Russia in German and other languages abroad, trying to oppose foreigners' views by presenting a Russian perspective and disseminating knowledge about the country.

The role of foreign languages in social life kept growing throughout the 18th century, as it became increasingly more sophisticated, diverse and Europeanised. The early stage of the dominance of the French language and culture is usually associated with the era of Empress Elizabeth, but as was noted above, the trend had started much earlier. A new type of books, French and English love novels, appeared in Russia, rapidly growing in popularity, which provided an additional stimulus, especially for women, to learn foreign languages.

When young Denis Fonvizin, then a student at the gymnasium of Moscow University, was first exposed to St. Petersburg's high society in a theatre, he immediately realised the importance of being able to speak French. He found a way out of an embarrassing situation using his native wit, but he remembered that first lesson very well. *'Standing in the stalls,'* the writer recalled, *'I made acquaintance with the son of a noble gentleman who liked my physiognomy; but as soon as he asked me if I knew French, and I told him that I didn't, a change passed over his face and he became cold towards me; he immediately considered me to be badly brought up and ignorant, and he began to make fun of me; and I, having realised from talking to him that he, apart from knowing French which he also spoke poorly, did not know much else, began to get my own back throwing punches at him with my epigrams, so that he, to avoid ridicule, invited me over to his house*' (Fonvizin, 1989, p. 51). That incident stuck in his memory, and on returning to the gymnasium, Fonvizin (1989) began to take lessons in French, which he soon mastered to perfection.

The most common way of learning languages in those times was home schooling with foreign teachers. Entrusting foreigners with the upbringing of their offspring, the parents hoped that their children would speak foreign languages perfectly. Remarkably, the teacher's pedagogical abilities and educational background did not really matter. The most important thing was fluency in a foreign language. A good example of such a typical teacher can be found in Fonvizin's comedy *The Minor*. One of the central characters is Mitrofan, a young man, and his highest-paid teacher, who even enjoys some respect from Mitrofan's arrogant mother, is a foreigner hired on the following terms: *'A German gentleman Adam Adamich Vralman teaches him all subjects in French. We pay him three hundred roubles a year. We sit him down at the table with us. Our women wash his clothes. Wherever he needs to go–we give him a horse. At dinner – a glass of wine. At night, we give him a tallow candle, and our Fomka curls his wig for him for free. To tell you the truth, we are very happy with him, dear brother. He doesn't put much pressure on the child'* (Fonvizin, 1959, p. 114) The fact that Vralman, a former coachman, did not put much pressure on the child, was one of his main pedagogical techniques, and this was true for many other

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teachers like him. And how could he have forced his pupil to study anything, if his own knowledge was limited to the stables? Vralman himself would have preferred to return to his former occupation, but the problem was that there were enough coachmen in Russia, while the demand for foreign teachers was huge.

There were also funny stories. One anecdote from the 18th century tells of some simple-minded parents hiring a teacher, who they believed to be French, to teach French to their children. It later turned out that he was a pure Finn, and instead of French he taught Finnish to his pupils (Klyuchevsky, 1990c, p. 35).

4. DISCUSSION

By the mid-1800s, foreign languages had not only become a standard means of communication among the upper-class people but had also begun to push out the native tongue. In 1803, a three-volume dictionary was published in St. Petersburg which was titled *New Word Explainer: Containing Foreign Phrases and Technical Terms Found in the Russian Language, Whose Meaning is not Known to Everyone* (Yanovsky, 1803). Among other things, it noted that many of the borrowed foreign words quickly acquired the Russian meaning. Thus, the entry for 'club' said that *'in England, this word means groups of people who gather together on certain appointed days to discuss state affairs and gather opinions about the current events, but in our society, clubs are formed solely for fun and pleasure*' (Yanovsky, 1803, p. 863). The Russian people easily digested foreign words, giving them a twist to make them their own. However, the issue of foreign languages littering the Russian language remained extremely acute for a long time.

As Klyuchevsky (1990b) aptly described it, during the times of Catherine the Great a nobleman was *'a stranger among his own folk, he tried to belong among strangers, and of course he didn't succeed: in the West, abroad, they saw him as a disguised Tatar, and in Russia they took him as a Frenchman who was accidentally born in Russia*' (Klyuchevsky, 1990b, p. 167).

The dominance of foreign languages in Russian society and the nobility's obsession with them were popular points of criticism and ridicule. As early as in the 1750s, Alexander Sumarokov wrote: *'There is one gentleman – Mr. Taubert. He is laughing at Betsky because he is raising his children to speak French. Betsky is laughing at Taubert because he sent his kids to school (which had recently opened at the Academy) to study German; but it seems to me that both Betsky and Taubert are idiots: children in Russia should be raised speaking the Russian language'* (as cited in Solovyov, 1993b, p. 542).

Russian society continued to be critical of this foreign-language frenzy. Gogol (1948), for example, made some sharp comments in his novel *Dead Souls*: *'…the readers of the higher social strata: they are in the van of those from whom one will not hear a single decent Russian word, but when it comes to words in French, German, and English they will, likely as not, dish them out to you in such quantity that you'll actually get fed up with them, and they'll dish them out without spilling a drop of all the possible pronunciations: French they'll snaffle through their noses and with a lisp; English they'll chirp as well as any bird could, even to the extent of making their physiognomies bird-like, and will even mock him who is unable to assume a bird-like physiognomy; while German they'll grunt as gruffly as any boar. And the only thing they won't dish out to you is any good, plain Russian thing—save that, out of patriotism, they may build a log-cabin in the Russian style for a summer house'* (Gogol, 1948, p. 161). In fact, many Russians fiercely opposed the excessive fascination with foreign languages, believing that they could even disfigure the speakers' faces. Thus, in Odoevsky (1844) wrote in his short novel *Princess Mimi*: *'I know that the French language is beginning to fall into disuse but what kind of demon spirit had whispered to you to replace it not with Russian, but with this damned English language, for which you have to twist your tongue, clench your mouth, and stick your lower jaw forward? And with that necessity, say farewell to a pretty mouth with pink, fresh Slavic lips! It would have been better if it never existed!'* (Odoevsky, 1844, p. 330).

The abundance of comic Francophiles in the literature of the late 18th and early 19th centuries is a proof of their existence in real life, an illustration of the indig-

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nation and contempt that they aroused in society, and of the desire to lance the boil and stop further spread of the disease. However, these were the extreme cases, and generally, the knowledge of foreign languages and cultures and reading foreign books helped Russians to broaden their horizons, sharpen their minds, and make them get used to systematic intellectual work.

A letter by Alexander Gorchakov (1798-1883), at that time a student at the Imperial Lyceum (Alexander Pushkin's classmate) who later became the chancellor of the Russian Empire, demonstrates a rather calm and pragmatic attitude towards the French language which was common among young people. He wrote to his uncle on 14th August, 1815: *'It brings me pleasure to read in your letter, dear uncle, that you want to make a Russian out of a Francophile who you think I am, but allow me to say that you are a little mistaken here; I love the French language because of how indispensable it has become in our society (due to its excessive use, of course), and for it having become a magic wand, at the wave of which every chubby porter reverently opens the door and welcomes you, and because without knowing French it is impossible to appear anywhere in public, as, simply put, it has become a true sign of proper upbringing. That being said, I am not crazy about it to the extent that I will neglect our own Russian literature'* (as cited in Andreev, 1999, p. 96).

The English language came into vogue in the early 19th century, along with English culture and fashion, bringing many English teachers, governesses and even nannies to Russia. In *An Amateur Peasant Girl* Pushkin (1916) gives a humorous, but sympathetic description of the English governess of Liza, whose father is a true Anglophile. Miss Jackson was *'an affected old maid of forty, who powdered her face and darkened her eyebrows, read through 'Pamela' twice a year, for which she received two thousand roubles, and felt almost bored to death in this barbarous Russia of ours', who, painted and bedecked, entered the room with downcast eyes and with a low bow*' (Pushkin, 1916, p. 33). She did neither harm nor any good to her pupil's education. Liza was mostly brought up by nature, the maids' room and books, while the English governess was a tribute to fashion and her father's passions.

Here is a real-life story which provides an excellent illustration of the barriers that foreign languages created between different social classes in the Russia of that time. In 1812, Nikita Muravyov, a future Decembrist who then was a child, ran away from home to join the Russian army, but *'since he only spoke English and spoke in his native language like a foreigner, peasants mistook him for a Frenchman and brought him to General Rostopchine. And Rostopchine brought him back to his mother'* (Kern, 1989, p. 123).

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However, it was the French language that still ruled the minds of the Russian nobility. Its influence did not weaken during the years of Napoleon's invasion, showing that political events do not always directly affect society's spiritual life. Russian nobility's proficiency in French had reached an amazing level. Describing Tatyana, a country girl, Pushkin (1881, p. 102) wrote: *'At Russ she was by no means clever / And read our newspapers scarce ever, / And in her native language she / Possessed nor ease nor fluency…'*. Tolstoy (1973) in his *War and Peace* wrote that Prince Vasily Kuragin *'spoke in that refined French in which our grandfathers not only spoke but thought'* (Tolstoy, 1973, p. 1), while his son Prince Ippolit *'began to tell his story in such Russian as a Frenchman would speak after spending about a year in Russia'* (Tolstoy, 1973, p. 10-11).

Fluency in French as demonstrated by the Russian people was astonishing to foreigners. Jacques-François Ancelot (1794-1854), a French poet and playwright, whose light dramas and vaudevilles were staged both in Paris and St. Petersburg, visited Russia in 1826 as part of the French delegation to attend the coronation celebrations. His memoirs are, to a large extent, based on the accounts of the previous French travellers, however, the author's comments on the barbarian country are quite moderate in tone. He even goes as far as to express a pleasant surprise at certain achievements of Russian society – in particular, good foreign language skills. Here is what he writes about his own experience, permitting himself to disagree with his compatriots, whose opinions largely shaped his impressions: *'Some travellers… wrote about how ignorant Russian women were. <...> I found most of them to be quite erudite, with exceptional subtlety of mind, often acquainted with European literature and elegant in expressing thoughts so that many French women would envy. This is mostly inherent in young ladies, based on which we can conclude that in this century, the education of women in Russia has taken a new direction and what was true thirty years ago is not true today. In St. Peters-*

burg, one can meet ladies who speak French, German, English, and Russian with equal ease, and I can name those who could write in these four languages just as well as they could speak them. Perhaps, this vastness of knowledge and moral high ground of these young ladies is why the young men expressed lack of attention and unwillingness to approach them' (Ancelot, 2001, p. 48-49). This real-life counterpart of Griboyedov's *Frenchman from Bordeaux* even complains that he found too little national distinctiveness in Russia: *'Our national pride should be flattered by this attention given to our language, literature, and customs, but, judging this system from a philosophical point of view, wouldn't we find some grossest flaws in it? Of course, my friend, I must admit that it is a pleasant surprise for a French traveller to discover French manners, the French language, and even French jokes seven hundred leagues away from his homeland. But did I travel to Russia for that?'* (Ancelot, 2001, p. 57-58).

Alexandre Dumas, who was generally quite critical of life in Russia, also expressed his admiration for Russian women. On his voyage down the Volga River, he met three ladies – the wife of a garrison officer from Baku, the wife of a navy lieutenant and a general's daughter. According to Dumas, *'all three ladies spoke and wrote French like French women. <...> These ladies were not only well-educated and well-mannered, but also very knowledgeable about our literature. <...> It is simply unbelievable how accurate and fair their opinions and judgments were about our outstanding people; moreover, their assessments were intuitive, and the oldest of them was only twenty-two years old'* (Dumas, 1993, p. 269).

Representatives of other cultures also gave the palm to Russians in the knowledge of foreign languages. For example, one American traveller amazed by his experience, told the American reader in the second half of the 19th century about a Russian family he met, whose youngest son, a ten-year-old boy, was fluent in four languages – Russian, French, German and English. Americans, who themselves had little inclination to learn languages and were content with English at home and abroad, sometimes fell into pardonable exaggeration about the widespread dissemination of knowledge of foreign languages in all social strata of Russian society. Maria Mitchell, an American woman astronomer, noted that even the commoners in Russia tended to know more than one language, and to prove this, she described meeting a street vendor and a cab driver in St. Petersburg who were able to talk to her in English fairly well (Mitchell, 1896). The fact that the street vendor and the cab driver were both dealing with tourists on a daily basis, apparently, didn't change her overall impression.

'Thus, in the 19th century the use of foreign languages in Russia was primarily associated with home schooling, fashionable lifestyles, high-society socialising, day-to-day communication, including among compatriots, and served as a marker of belonging to the upper crust. While books, in a way, unified Russians, foreign languages, quite obviously, created divisions'

However, one should not believe that advanced language skills, including in French, were really widespread. Even Tatyana from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, who wrote exclusively in French, had a purely Russian soul and was very different from the French in the ways she felt and behaved. In addition, it is doubtful that her sister Olga was equally fluent in this language. French was mostly spoken by the aristocracy living in the country's capital city, while many Russians spoke the kind of French that is represented by a quote from one of Pushkin's characters: *'I can't dormir in the dark'* (Pushkin, 1881).

Thus, in the 19th century the use of foreign languages in Russia was primarily associated with home schooling, fashionable lifestyles, high-society socialising, day-to-day communication, including among compatriots, and served as a marker of belonging to the upper crust. While books, in a way, unified Russians, foreign languages, quite obviously, created divisions. Languages also played a significant role in the education system. Greek and Latin continued to be an indispensable part of the university education. Fascination with ancient languages at Russian gymnasiums throughout the 19th century has been described above. European languages were still used as means of obtaining knowledge, though their role in learning significantly declined over time. Thus, in higher education institutions languages were not taught as separate subjects, as students were expected to already have a sufficient level of proficiency, which was tested at the entrance exams. Pushkin (1949) even suggested reducing foreign language instruction at gymnasiums, arguing that most students developed the required skills much earlier: *'It seems, however, that languages take up too much*

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time,' he wrote in a memo on education commissioned by Nicholas I. *'Why, for example, study French for 6 years at school when the need to speak in French in social life develops skills that are more than sufficient?'* (Pushkin, 1949, p. 46).

From the mid-1800s, Russian society gradually developed a more sober and balanced attitude towards languages. They remained a necessary attribute of a well-mannered person, an indispensable component of education, a means of getting access to world literature, as well as a divider separating different layers of Russian society (the introduction of foreign languages in the popular education system was never even considered – apparently, because their influence on people's minds was believed to be pernicious).

The revolution of 1917 brought about major changes in people's attitude towards languages, at least at first glance. Initially, foreign languages, like many other things, were perceived as something alien to the grassroots population, something bourgeois and hostile. The proletarians of other countries were expected to learn the Russian language themselves to communicate with the Soviet people. But gradually, the need to study foreign languages became obvious, first at the university level, then more widely. In 1925, the Department of Romance and Germanic Philology was established at Moscow State University, marking a turn towards a serious scientific approach to foreign language acquisition. In the run-up to WWII, steps were taken to promote the study of languages, primarily German, not without political overtones, and in the post-war period German became an obligatory component of the school curriculum. And again, we are faced here with a unique situation – in complete isolation from the outside world, with no real contacts with foreigners in daily life, the government continued to support foreign language learning, making it an essential part of the Soviet education system, both at university and in secondary school.

In the Soviet period, opportunities to learn foreign languages became finally available to a cross-section of the Russian population. Not everyone saw that as an advantage, though. Foreign language classes were seen as something inevitable but having little to do with real life. The chances to have direct contacts with foreigners were very small, and the best works of world literature had long been translated and continued to be translated into Russian. A vivid illustration of a common perception was given by Soviet writer Valentin Rasputin in his story *French Lessons*. It depicts a remote Siberian village in 1948, a hungry post-war childhood, and a mother giving up her last penny to ensure a better future for her son, who is sent to the region's central city to study at a secondary school. He is talented and dedicated, and, finally, the teacher of French takes pity on the hard-working teenager and tries to help him. The French language is the only stumbling block for the village boy, perhaps precisely because the point of learning it is not quite clear. French pronunciation is especially difficult for him, betraying his *'Angaran origin, right down to the last generation, where no one ever pronounces foreign words, if at all suspected of their existence…'* (Rasputin, 1984, p. 292). Learning French turns into an ordeal. *'Well, what for if not for mockery, would one merge three vowels into one thick viscous sound. Take o, for example, in the word beaucoup (a lot), which you can choke on. Why would you use the nose to make some moaning nasal sounds if, since the beginning of time, it has served us a completely different purpose? What for? There must be some reasonable limits to this'* (Rasputin, 1984, p. 307). Interestingly, despite having little idea about Western culture, a Siberian schoolboy has a clear-cut, albeit hard-to-explain, perception of foreign languages, and a differentiated one at that. For example, he says that he *'has always been of the opinion that girls who learn French or Spanish become women earlier than their peers who learn, let's say, Russian or German'* (Rasputin, 1984, p. 308).

By the 1970s, foreign languages had become an integral part of the Soviet education system. The content and quality of teaching on a nation-wide level is a different issue but the fact that languages were taught as part of compulsory education in the country's most remote areas speaks for itself. Writing about the curriculum at his model school, renowned Soviet educator Sukhomlinsky (1980) said: *'Foreign languages play a significant role in one's intellectual upbringing. We strive for our students to feel the language and understand the ideas and connotations of the foreign language words and phrases as they were intended by its native speakers. We also see the educational role of a foreign language in that the word of the language of another people lives in the child's thoughts, so that translation is not always required to understand the meaning of what is read or heard. That is why we strive to ensure that our children learn the words and phrases through live communication*' (Sukhomlinsky, 1980, p. 237-238). Foreign languages were a thin thread that connected Soviet people with the outside world and gave them a sense of engagement in the global processes.

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5. FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY ISSUES

Discussing foreign language learning, we cannot leave out a major related issue: its influence on a person's national identity. Foreign languages, and especially the culture that they represent, will always have an impact on the learners' native culture, especially when the fascination with languages reaches such enormous proportions as have been seen in Russian history. This has been recognised in all historic periods and has always caused concern. Ivan Martynov (1771-1833), a public educator, publisher and statesman, a poet and translator with a profound knowledge of foreign languages, spoke at the Russian Academy in 1807, highlighting the danger posed by excessive passion for languages. He said: *'… a future officer, judge, city governor or minister in Russia first learns how to speak well with a Frenchman, rather than with their own compatriots; he turns a foreign language into his native one, overloading his memory with non-Russian phrases, instead of developing his intelligence through knowledge and feelings that are useful for the public good. <…> It is well known what major influence languages have on mores! The evidence of this can be seen in our own country. Instead of the firm and righteous character peculiar to Russians, in pupils of French teachers we only see self-indulgence, interest in trivial things, light-mindedness, mendacity, neglect of their civil duties, indifference to their fellow citizens and relatives who had not been raised in those fashionable ways, and a false notion of enlightenment. In their behaviour, propensities, habits, passions – in fact, in every way such Russian citizens become foreign citizens'* (Martynov, 1856, p. 37-38). His ideas were echoed by Shevyrev (1987, p. 344): *'Russians today easily turn into the French, Germans, Englishmen, etc.'*

In different time periods different languages acquired a central role in Russia, depending on a range of factors. Foreign languages brought with them the customs of other peoples. Ivan Bogdanovich (1758-1831), a graduate of Moscow University, who served for many years as governor of the city of Sumy and then the region's marshal of nobility, wrote a book *On the Education of Youth*, which immediately became a bibliographic rarity due to the small number of copies published. Bogdanovich (1987), who did not leave a big mark on history but was certainly a highly respected man, expressed his indignation at the empty-headedness of Russians. *'Have many years passed since the times when we imitated the Germans in everything?'* he wrote bitterly. *'Using their knowledge, we educated our children along the German lines, trying to be as cool-headed as they are, trying to be German-like in every little aspect. Their food, manners, wriggling dances – everything German was seen as graceful. But the charm was lost as soon as the French appeared. Their joyful nature, relaxed manners, bold and sharp ideas, agility and flexibility fascinated everyone. Everyone wanted to have a French teacher, everyone wanted to raise their children to be like the French. <…> We wanted upbringing to work a wonder – to make us exact copies of the original model. A few years later the obsession waned. We began to be more attached to the British, wishing to raise our children according to their rules'* (Bogdanovich, 1987, p. 102-103).

Indeed, the fascination with foreign languages sometimes produced peculiar results. Sergey Glinka, a student at a cadet military school, *'having got infatuated with the French language <…>, tried to persuade others that he was born in France, not in Russia'* (Glinka, 1996, p. 74). The life story of Vladimir Pecherin (1807-1885) is even more striking, resembling an adventure novel, and a rather tragic one. He graduated from the university with honours and had every opportunity to make an excellent academic career but chose the difficult life of an émigré, full of hardships and wanderings. He worshipped the educated Europe but suffered disappointment on getting first-hand experience with it. He became a Catholic priest but realised the falsity of this move twenty years later, when it was already too late to change anything, and wrote a book entitled *Sepulchral Notes*, filled with thoughts about Russia. Looking back on his life, Pecherin concluded that he had taken his step towards this life of wanderings at the age of 12, when he firmly decided to flee to France, explaining this decision by his love for the French language and literature, and for his first French teacher.

The need to spread knowledge about Russia was recognised in different time periods. Indeed, sometimes the knowledge that a Russian nobleman had of other

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cultures and countries exceeded his knowledge of his own country. Glinka (1996) noted that *'we were learning about America and the Americans, while Russia was still hiding from us in some distant mist'* (Glinka, 1996, p. 76). All this made it difficult to implement one of the most important functions of education in Russia – serving its homeland. Academic curricula were constantly reviewed to include courses aimed at providing knowledge about Russia. Pushkin (1949) noted that *'Russia is too little known to the Russians. Russian studies should be taught predominantly during the final years of training of the young noblemen who are preparing to serve their homeland faithfully and loyally'* (Pushkin, 1949, p. 47).

However, these fears were largely ungrounded. It is true that in certain time periods and in certain groups of Russian society, the fascination with foreign languages, manners, and fashions acquired excessive forms, but this did not damage national distinctiveness – it rather enriched the spiritual and cultural life of the country.

The obsession that Russians had with French culture in the early 19th century was an object of both ridicule and concern. However, it did it not stop the development of national literature and culture, and, perhaps, even contributed to its unprecedented flourishing. Russian writers, who had been raised by French lackeys, were able to write in perfect Russian, while Russian composers created music that was deeply rooted in folk melodies. Tatyana Larina's mother, a romantic and French-minded girl in her youth, quickly turned into a typical Russian landowner, a guardian of Russian traditions, once she got married. Tatyana herself preferred to write in French but was Russian in her soul and acted in a purely Russian way. This is, perhaps, one of the mysteries of the Russian national spirit: the language, manners, clothes, and everything else could be foreign, but the essence, the soul remained Russian. This was brilliantly illustrated in Tolstoy's (1973) *War and Peace* in the famous scene of Natasha's dance in her uncle's house: *'Where, how, and when had this young countess, educated by an emigree French governess, imbibed from the Russian air she breathed that spirit and obtained that manner which the pas de chale would, one would have supposed, long ago have effaced? But the spirit and the movements were those inimitable and unteachable Russian ones that 'Uncle' had expected of her. As soon as she had struck her pose, and smiled triumphantly, proudly, and with sly merriment, the fear that had at first seized Nicholas and the others that she might not do the right thing was at an end, and they were already admiring her'* (Tolstoy's, 1973, p. 289).

6. CONCLUSION

'It does not matter what nations borrow from one another and then turn to their own use. The English way of doing things is not so special that it cannot be adopted by other people, provided it is similar to their nature and thinking' (Popovsky, 1985, p. 133). This is what Nikolai Popovsky, one of the first Russian professors at Moscow University, an educator and translator, wrote in his *Preface to a Collection of Writings by John Locke*. A special attitude to foreign languages in Russia has never meant loss of national identity or national spirit. Foreign languages have carried knowledge, opened up the world, broadened the horizons, provided access to world literature and an opportunity to satisfy the passion for reading inherent in Russian people.

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