

Multilingualism, Language Policies and Russian Language Teaching in the USSR and Russia / *Multilinguismo, políticas linguísticas e ensino de língua russa na URSS e na Rússia*

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ABSTRACT

The article offers a brief overview of the language policies adopted by the USSR and Russia, with a particular focus on the Thaw period. From a post/decolonial perspective, it explores the trajectories and transformations of these policies in multilingual contexts, both domestic and international. Among the aspects discussed are the teaching of Russian to foreigners, the international circulation of books and periodicals as a mechanism of ideological projection, and the processes of translation.

KEYWORDS: Multilingualism; Language Policies; Russian Language Teaching; Translation; USSR; Russia

RESUMO

O artigo propõe um breve panorama das políticas linguísticas adotadas pela URSS e pela Rússia, com especial foco no período do Degelo. A partir de uma perspectiva pós/decolonial, explora os caminhos e transformações dessas políticas em contextos multilíngues, tanto internos quanto externos. Entre os aspectos abordados estão o ensino da língua russa para estrangeiros, a circulação internacional de livros e periódicos como mecanismo de projeção ideológica e os processos de tradução.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Multilinguismo; Políticas linguísticas; Ensino de língua russa; Tradução; URSS; Rússia*

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Introduction¹

Russian is the official language of Russia and one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. Approximately 225 million people are proficient in Russian, of whom 148 million are native speakers, which makes it the ninth most spoken language in the world and the seventh by number of native speakers. If we are to consider only natives, it is the most spoken language on earth and the most widespread Slavic language. It is predominately in use in post-Soviet countries, such as Kazakhstan, Georgia and Uzbekistan, due to historical connections. Russian is the sixth most used language on the Internet, representing 3.9% of the content available online.² It became an official language of the United Nations in 1946, a working language of the United Nations General Assembly in 1968, as well as of the Security Council in 1969. Moreover, it is recognized as the second official language in Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Article 17 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus; Article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan; Article 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan). There are Russian-speaking communities outside of Russia, including in Brazil (Smirnova Henriques, Ruseishvili, 2020; Américo, 2020).

The Russian language is also studied and internationally promoted as a foreign language. Notwithstanding its grammatical complexity and the fluctuating political contexts that have shaped its global reception over time, the main universities around the world have departments of Russian Studies and/or Slavic Studies. In Brazil, there are Russian undergraduate programs at the University of São Paulo (USP) and at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) in addition to elective courses on Russian Language and Literature offered by Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and Federal Fluminense University (UFF).

¹ This article is the result of the lecture *O ensino de russo no Brasil e na Rússia: perspectivas pedagógicas e políticas linguísticas* [The Teaching of Russian in Brazil and in Russia: Pedagogical Perspectives and Language Policies], delivered remotely on August 22nd 2024, as part of the 23a Roda de conversa Políticas linguísticas educacionais [23rd Dialogue Circle on Educational Language Policies], an activity linked to the project *Oralidade, multilinguismos e letramentos políticos: diálogos com a educação* [Oralities, Multilingualisms and Political Literacies: Dialogues with Education] (funded by the National Committee for Scientific and Technological Development - CNPq). The lecture was organized and mediated by Professor Cristine Gorski Severo and Professor Maria Luiza Rosa Barbosa, members of the Politics [Políticas] group (Federal University of Santa Catarina – UFSC), whom we thank for the invitation and the suggestion of such a complex and rich topic.

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262946/most-common-languages-on-the-internet/>

In this paper, we aim to examine the language policies implemented in the USSR and the Russian Federation, with particular emphasis on the period known as the Thaw. Our objective is to present the directions and changes of such policies in the multilingual context both within and outside the country from a post/decolonial perspective. Given the complexity of the subject, its extensive historical scope and the scarcity of studies dedicated to it in the Brazilian context, we propose a brief introductory panorama, drawn from our personal trajectories as teachers and researchers. The language policies under consideration include the teaching of Russian language, the dissemination of books and journals abroad, and various translation initiatives.

1 The Russian Language in the Multilingual Context

The USSR positioned itself as a multinational and multilingual nation, but, in practice, languages did not carry the same status (Kamovnikova, 2017). Although each of the Soviet republics had its own national language, Russian began to play the role of official and unifying language. The centrality attributed to Russian culture and language in the Soviet policies led to the systematic suppression of other cultural and linguistic manifestations, which showcased the disparity between the official discourse of multiculturalism and State practices. In 1965, 75% of the books published in the USSR were in Russian; in 1980, that number rose to 78% (Kamovnikova, 2017). At the same time, Russian acted as *lingua franca*, making the communication between people from different countries and nationalities, as well as the exchange of various sorts of information – such as translated literatures – possible (Kamovnikova, 2017).

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian language became a constant source of conflict between Russia and former republics. Currently, the younger generations from those countries tend to study less Russian, opting instead for the national languages and English.

Despite being the official language, Russian is not the only language spoken in the country. It is estimated that there are approximately 300 languages. As observed by the founder of Slavic Studies in Brazil, Boris Schnaiderman (1997, p. 249),³ “Russian

³ In 2007, Boris Schnaiderman was bestowed with the Pushkin Medal by the Russian government in recognition of his contribution to the dissemination of Russian culture abroad (Cardoso, 2021).

culture cannot be conceived without the strong imprint of a true mosaic of peoples.”⁴ Among the most widely spoken languages are Ukrainian, Tatar, Chechen, Bashkir and Chuvash. Some languages are endangered, with fewer than 100 speakers. That is the case of Aleut, spoken by indigenous peoples of the Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutian Islands; also spoken on the Commander Islands (Bering Island), and of Western Itelmen, the language of an indigenous ethnic group of the Kamchatka Peninsula. The languages of indigenous and minority peoples were generally confined to domestic spheres, excluded from official and educational domains, and maintained primarily within informal or traditional contexts. The ambiguities inherent in incorporating cultural and linguistic diversity under the Soviet framework were already the subject of debate during the very formation of the USSR. The 1928 animated short film *Samoiedsky Malchik* [The Samoyed Boy] tells the story of Chu, an Inuit boy who, upon exposing the supposed magical powers of the local shaman, is rescued by a Soviet ship and goes on to study in Leningrad. On one hand, the narrative celebrates the ethnic diversity of the Soviet territory, giving visibility to characters of indigenous and peripheral origin. On the other hand, as Pontieri (2012) highlights, that diversity is assimilated by state institutions, which reveals the ambiguous nature of the message: plurality is recognized but also disciplined.

A similar process can be observed in several countries, including in Brazil (Ikpeng, 2023; Prumkwyj Krahô, 2023; Tupinambá, 2023). According to the United Nations report,⁵ more than 8,000 languages are spoken worldwide, yet only about 350 are used in school-related contexts. For millions of children, education takes place in a language they command only minimally, which undermines their learning, limits their self-expression, and constrains the development of their full potential.

The endangerment of many languages in Russia is the product of a long process of territorial expansion and cultural colonization across the history of the Russian Empire, of the Soviet Union and of present-day Russia. As reported by UNESCO, among the most recent factors contributing to this scenario are globalization and climate change. Moreover, the education system in Russia and in the Soviet Union was and still is available mainly in Russian.

⁴ In Portuguese: “a cultura russa não pode ser pensada sem a marca forte de um verdadeiro mosaico dos povos.”

⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/mother-language-day>.

The book *Buluus da irer* [*And the Ice Melts*] by writer Kseniia Bolshakova, a representative of the Dolgan people of the Taymyr Peninsula, located in the Asian portion of Russia, was published in 2024:⁶

The Far-North is a flexible concept. It comprises the desert sands on the Mongolian border and my homeland, Taymyr, a snowy desert bathed by the Arctic Ocean. It is the Arctic itself, a permafrost zone. The imperial, Soviet and present-day Russian authorities have always treated the North as an inexhaustible well [...] Before the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, the Dolgans called the Russian tsar “the one who sits far away.” Our ancestors paid tribute to the tsar in soft gold—furs. Now we pay taxes, while all the gold—white, yellow, red, and black—is sucked out of our lands without permission⁷ (Bolshakova, 2025, pp. 9; 177).⁸

Alongside the story of her family, the author depicts the trajectory of the Dolgan people, whose nomadic existence has been sustained for generations by reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing. Nowadays, besides the exploitation of their land, the Dolgan suffer the effects of racial, cultural and linguistic prejudice. During the Soviet period, Dolgan children were forced to learn Russian, which caused them to stray from their native language and culture:

Alyosha became different. Mom says he is simply becoming a grown-up. But I fear he is becoming Russian. The teachers at the boarding school scold him, they say it’s impolite to speak Dolgan in front of others. His classmates laugh at him, saying that when he speaks Dolgan, he sounds like a roaring beast (Bolshakova, 2024, p. 109).⁹

⁶ The following excerpt is only partially available in English, in the author and Ainsley Morse’s translation. The full reference can be found in footnote n. 10.

⁷ In Russian: “Kráinii Séver — poniátiiie rastiazhímoie. K nemú otnósiatsia i pustýnnye peskí na granítsie s Mongóliei, i moi rodnói Taimýr, snézhnaia pustýnia, omyvaémaia Séverno-Ledovítym okeánom. Sámaia chto ní na est’ Árktika, zóna véchnoi merzlotý. Impérskie, soviétskie i nýnieshnie rossískie vlásti vsiegdá otnosílis’ k Séveru kak k neissiakáemoi skvázhine.”

⁸ BOLSHAKOVA, Kseniia. Freedom. Translated by Kseniia Bolshakova and Ainsley Morse. *Words Without Borders*, June 2025. Available at <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2025-07/freedom-kseniia-bolshakova-ainsley-morse/>. Access on 20 aug. 2025.

⁹ In Russian: “Aliósha stal drugím. Máma govorít, on prósto stanovitsia vzróslym. A ia boiús’, chto on tám stanovitsia rússkim. Uchiteliá v internáte rugáiu ego, chto neprilíchno pri drugíkh razgovárvat’ na dolgánskom. Odnoklássniki smeiútsia, chto po-dolgánski on ne govorít, a rychít kak zver’.”

Colonization, Russification¹⁰ and climate change, evoked by the title of the book itself, contribute to the abandonment of the nomadic way of life and the distancing from the traditions of the Dolgan people:

Taymyr is indeed an immense reserve of oil, gas, platinum, gold, silver and nickel. But there is nothing endless or eternal. The mining companies exhaust the innards of our land to the limit. And the indigenous peoples wither away, removed from their traditional way of life, buried by assimilation, and abandoned in the civilizational gap without access to basic resources (Bolshakova, 2024, p. 9).¹¹

The book is bilingual, written in both Dolgan and Russian. The goal is to prove it is possible to create works of literature in the Dolgan language. Moreover, the author hopes this bilingual reading will help the Dolgan people remember and relearn their language. Thus, the writer makes use of Russian, the historically dominating language, as a tool of resistance and revival of her mother tongue.

The history of the Dolgan people is part of a larger history of the Russian colonization of Siberia throughout the centuries.¹² Similar processes took place through the russification of many peoples and cultures that make up the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and present-day Russia. One of the most tragic developments of such practice are the recurring armed conflicts and wars. In the 19th century, the colonization of the Caucasus, reflected in the works of authors such as Aleksandr Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov and Lev Tolstoy, also happened through the violent subjugation of local populations. In the 20th century, during the Stalin administration, whole peoples were forcefully deported to other regions (Schneiderman, 1997, p. 249). More recently, in 2022, the defense of the rights of Russians and Russian speakers residing in Ukraine was one of the reasons of Russia's military invasion of that country.¹³

¹⁰ Terminology used by the author.

¹¹In Russian: "Taimyr — éto deistvitel'no besschislennye zálezhi néfti, gáza, plátiny, zólota, serébra, níkelia. No nét nichegó besknéchnogo i véchnogo. Globál'noe poteplénie stremítel'no podtáplivaet véchnuiu merzlotú. Dobyváúshchie kompánii vkonéts ischérpyvaiut náshi nédry. A korennýe naródy ugasáiu otreshionnye ot traditsiónnogo óbraza zhízni, pogriázshie v assimiliátsii i ostávlennye na tsivilizatsiónnom razlóme bez snabzhénia."

¹² The decolonial Project Asians of Russia (<https://asiansofrussia.com>) publishes daily reports of discrimination, racial prejudice and rampant exploitation of natural resources, but also contains information about the cultural and linguistic wealth of the Asian portion of Russia.

¹³ From Vladimir Putin's speech on February 24th, 2022.

2 The Teaching of the Russian Language and Language Policies

In both the Soviet Union and present-day Russia, education has functioned as a tool of domestic and foreign policy. The school curricula and textbooks were prepared and standardized in line with state ideology (Kiseliova, 2017, p. 267; Veselko, 2017, p. 312). They were distributed nationwide to install official values and ideological principles. With the establishment of the Soviet Union, this process became known as Sovietization. For instance, when Estonia was annexed to the USSR in 1940, and particularly after the Second World War, Soviet textbooks began to be translated from Russian into Estonian (Guzairov, 2017, p. 293). Before publishing, the translated textbooks went through a rigorous ideological revision, which aimed to align the contents of the translation to the original text in Russian (Pild, 2017, p. 301). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education compelled teachers to subscribe to educational journals. In this way, they followed the official guidelines of the educational policy, which were later reproduced in classrooms (Veselko, 2017, p. 312).

The teaching of the Russian language - both to native speakers and to foreigners - was an integral part of this policy. In the Eastern Bloc countries, the teaching of the Russian language was mandatory at schools and universities, but that changed with the collapse of the USSR. Such process is reflected in István Szabó's 1991 film, *Édes Emma, drága Böbe* [*Sweet Emma, Dear Böbe*], which depicts Hungary in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc. In the first few minutes of the film, we witness the burning of Russian language textbooks. The Russian language teachers, who are the protagonists of the feature, undergo a process of reeducation to prepare them for teaching English. In the former Soviet republics, the education system also changed: in most, the predominance of the Russian language gave way, firstly to bilingualism, then to the national languages.

In contemporary Russia, the teaching of Russian as a foreign language is carried out by specific departments in several universities, among which the Moscow and Saint Petersburg state universities stand out as centers of reference, as well as the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute, also located in Moscow. In general, the courses are organized in different programs – aimed at philologists and non-philologists – and make use of methods that are adjusted to the language profile of the students, which is particularly

relevant in the early stages of the learning process. For instance, Russian phonetics and alphabet may be more accessible to speakers of some languages, such as Portuguese, but can be much more challenging to speakers of other languages.

The apex and the consolidation of the methodology for teaching of Russian as a foreign language took place in the early 1950s, coinciding with the onset of the Cold War. Generally, Soviet instructional books and textbooks of Russian as a foreign language conveyed the values of Soviet society, serving not only as pedagogical instruments but also as vehicles for ideological transmission. For example, the book *Texts on Linguistic Ethnography*, part of the textbook series *Rússki iazyk dlia vsekh* [*Russian for All*], distributed by the USSR, contains informative texts on Soviet social and state systems, on history, demography, education, science, literature, arts and sports (Kostomarov, 1983).

Moreover, the instructional books and teaching programs provide a revealing panorama on the countries of origin of the students who came to the USSR and to Russia, as well as the languages they spoke. A large percentage of the students that would come to the USSR was connected to the Communist Party in some way. Until the 1980s and the 1990s, they hailed mainly from countries in the Eastern Bloc and the teaching materials were adapted to such linguistic and cultural reality. In some cases, they were refugees of the Latin American, Portuguese and Spanish military dictatorships. Starting in the 1990s, with the political and geopolitical shift that followed the collapse of the USSR, the programs were radically reformulated: the textbooks began to be redirected to speakers of English, French and other European languages. For many decades, the teaching of the Russian language was reoriented to serve mainly students from Western Europe and the United States.

As we have observed, the teaching was not limited to studying the language; foreign students were constantly offered special seminars and lectures on the country's history and culture at universities. On the State University of Moscow (MSU) website,¹⁴ we found the description of one such program: *Iz istorii rússkoi khudozhéstvennoi kultúry* [*On the History of the Russian Artistic Culture*], published in 2000 and organized by L. N. Kashezheva. The theme of this program is artistic culture as a special area of the

¹⁴ <https://rkiff.philol.msu.ru/%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%84%D0%B5%D0%B4%D1%80%D1%8B-2/>.

spiritual life of society, which synthetically absorbed various types of art: literature, architecture, painting, sculpture, music, theater, cinema, etc. The Russian artistic culture is presented by the program as a cohesive spiritual whole, instead of isolated manifestations. The goal of the program is to reveal the meaning of facts and events of the artistic culture and showcase their connection to the Russian language. According to the authors of the paper: “before anything else, philologists specialized in Russian studies are guides of the Russian culture in the worldwide cultural space. It is teachers of Russian who, by teaching the language in their classes, build the conceptual image of the Russian world, introducing it in the context of other cultures.”¹⁵

The teaching programs of Russian as a foreign language have always been guided by clearly defined objectives. According to Lidia Krasilnikova, “the graduates of the Faculty of Philology must become our colleagues – teachers of Russian language and literature, researchers of the Russian language.”¹⁶ By acting in their countries of origin, such professionals “will shape the image their students have of Russia by passing onto them the knowledge of Russian history and culture” (Krasilnikova, 2024, p. 191).¹⁷ This approach directly aligns with the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt, regarded in Russia as the founder of linguistics as a scientific discipline. To Humboldt, language uniformizes the subjectivity of experience and aligns one’s understanding to that of the collective. The identity of the individual is, in such regard, determined by family, community and national identities to a degree. The Humboldtian worldviews are collective symbolizations, which constitute a cultural identity that is essentially linguistic and conceptual (Glushkova; Domingues, 2022, p. 12). The shaping of collective memory, which is also part of this process, according to such theory, may include the dissemination of educational, scientific and artistic literatures, as well as translations.

Presently, the dissemination of Russian language and literature is promoted by the International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Culture (MAPRYAL),¹⁸

¹⁵ In Russian: “tak kak prézhde vsego filológii-rusísty iavliáiutsia provodníkami rússkoi kul’túry v mirovom kul’turnom prostránstve. Ímenno prepodáváteli-rusísty, obucháia iazykú, na svoikh urókkakh konstrúiruiut kontseptuálnuiu kartínu míra rússkogo chelovéka, vvodiá ee v kontékt drúgikh kul’túr.”

¹⁶ In Russian: “Vypuskníkí filológicheskogo fakul’téta dolzhny stat’ náshimi kollégami — prepodavateliámi rússkogo iazyká i literatúry, isslédovateliámi rússkogo iazyká.”

¹⁷ In Russian: “Budut formiróvat’ u svoikh uchenikov óbraz Rossíi, peredavaia im znániia o rússkoi istórii i kul’túre.”

¹⁸ The Association’s website: <https://ru.mapryal.org/>.

founded in 1967, which is responsible for organizing symposia, conferences, exhibitions and other events.

3 Translation and Language Policies

The Soviet cultural policy aimed to transfer the Russian cultural and literary canon to other cultures, mainly those that were part of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc. In this way, the goal was to cultivate the average Soviet citizen, homogenized and devoid of national distinctions (Stepanischeva, 2017, p. 199). Unification was to take place through the shaping of a common cultural memory. As a part of such policy, the country kept periodicals and radio stations that communicated political and cultural news from the Eastern Bloc in many languages, as was the case of the journal *Problemy míra i sotsialízma* [*Problems of the World and of Socialism*]. Headquartered in Prague from 1958 to 1990, the journal was published in over 20 languages with print runs of 500 thousand copies. Among other measures, the USSR promoted the shipment of books, periodicals and textbooks, including those of Russian language for foreigners, to its republics and other countries. In the case of Brazil, as witnessed by Boris Schnaiderman, the onset of the military dictatorship impeded cultural and editorial exchanges between the countries:

In the late 1960s and in great part of the 1970s, the reception of books from the Soviet Union was prone to countless obstacles. For that reason, reports of literary facts only arrived to us after their reception in the West, and frequently a Soviet author could only be accessed through a Western translation. It was for this reason that I encountered Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* via an Italian translation (Schnaiderman, 1983, pp. 8-9).¹⁹

Despite the diplomatic distancing (Cardoso, 2021), censorship and the scarcity of professional translators, not only works of literature, but also works of literary criticism and theory were published in Brazil. In 1981, the first direct translation of Mikhail

¹⁹In Portuguese: “Em fins da década de 60 e boa parte de 70, o recebimento de livros da União Soviética estava sujeito a percalços sem conta. Por isto mesmo, as notícias dos fatos literários geralmente nos chegavam depois que eles repercutiam no Ocidente e, muitas vezes, um autor soviético só podia ser lido em tradução ocidental. Foi por isso que tomei conhecimento de Problemas da Poética de Dostoiévski de Bakhtin através de uma tradução italiana.”

Bakhtin was published: the reference is to the book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, rendered into Portuguese by Paulo Bezerra. The book has been in such high demand among readers interested in Dostoevsky's oeuvre and among scholars of Bakhtin and the Circle's theoretical legacy that it has undergone numerous re-editions (Brait, 2021, p. 73). Its publishing gave impetus, particularly from the 2000s onward, to direct translations of Fyodor Dostoevsky's works as well as those of other authors, including contemporary writers.

The USSR inherited from the 19th century the conviction that literature is capable of transforming the world. For that reason, the translation of Russian and Soviet works of literature into other languages and of foreign literatures into Russian were part of the Soviet language policies. In 1919, even before the Soviet Union was created, Maxim Gorky founded the *Vsemírnaia literatúra* [World Literature] publishing house, whose goal was to translate classics of world literature into Russian. The project demanded the mobilization of many translators, and the activity of translation came to be recognized as a professional occupation.

The translations were not only of works from abroad, but also of those from the Soviet republics. For an author to gain recognition in the USSR, their work needed to be written in Russian or translated into that language (Kamovnikova, 2017). Thanks to such translations, Soviet readers could enjoy, for example, the works of Shota Rustaveli (Georgia), Chinghiz Aitmatov (Kyrgyzstan), Rasul Gamzatov (representative of the Dagestani Avars), Vilis Lācis (Latvia) and many other authors. In some cases, translators did not have command of the source languages and translated from a literal translation (*podstróchnyi perevód*) into Russian, provided by native speakers or the author themselves (Kamovnikova, 2017).

The phenomenon and concept of the Soviet school of translation include practice, theory and translation criticism (Witt, 2017). Implemented starting in 1934 as an official guideline to all Soviet cultural production, socialist realism also oriented translation, as announced in the 1st All-Union Conference of Translators, held in 1936 (Witt, 2017). A key issue discussed in that context pertained to the level of accuracy demanded in translations. In situations where the author represented capitalistic values, the idea of translating “without becoming a slave” was defended, an approach that not only reflected political alignment but also allowed broad freedom with the source text, including

changes, omissions, and major rewrites (Witt, 2017). Another issue regarded the selection of authors and texts. In that respect, Susanna Witt cites translator and translation theorist Ivan Kashkin:

We should not and do not desire to pollute the conscience of the Soviet reader with translations of Sartre or Henry Miller, Faulkner or André Gide, whose abject writings have been adequately analyzed and reviewed in many articles. Translation, at its best, must also intervene actively, accurately reflect reality, and genuinely help the reader understand it. The true advancement of the art of translation requires a more conscious and rigorous selection of books (Kashkin *apud* Witt, 2017, p. 45).²⁰

For many Soviet citizens, who were not permitted to travel beyond the country's borders, translated literature offered a window onto the outside world. Conversely, for some translators, translation functioned as a subtle means of circumventing the Iron Curtain by introducing forbidden authors and themes into the Soviet context (Stepanischeva, 2017, p. 200). In many cases, translation was used as a strategy to widen the horizons of readers beyond the limitations established by the Soviet authorities (Lange, 2017, p. 156). At times, the official commission for translations served as a pretext for producing personal and original statements (Stepanischeva, 2019, p. 219).²¹

Starting from the 1950s, as part of the early Cold War Soviet policy, many works were translated and published in impressive press runs.²² African, Asian and Latin American literatures were among the favorites, which was greatly owed to the crackdown on all that was “Western” or “imperialistic.” In that context, the translation of many European and North American writers into Russian were reduced to the bare minimum. The anticolonial struggle inspired African literatures of the 1940s and 1950s, in turn,

²⁰ In Russian: “My ne dolzhny i ne khotím zasoriát’ soznánie sovétskogo chitátelia perevódamí Sártra ili Génri Millera, Fólknera ili André Zhída, otvratítel’nye písániia kotorykh sovershénno dostatóchno byli osveshcheny dolzhnym óbrazom i otseneny v riáde statéi. Pervód, v méru svoíkh vozmózhnostei, tózhe dolzhen aktívno vméshivatsia, právil’no otrazhát’ proiskhodíashchee i déistvenno pomogát’ chitáteliu v ponimánii proiskhodíashchego. Nastoiáshchii rost perevodnogo déla predpolagáet soznátel’nyi i bólee strógií otbór kníg.”

²¹ One of the most striking cases was that of 16th century French poet Guillaume du Vintrais, invented by two political prisoners, Yuri Veinert and Yakov Kharon. In the poems, written between the 1930s and 1940s, emerge evocative images of the butcher-king and of freedom's love branded as sin (Kharon; Veinert, 1989).

²² Owing to the USSR's literacy campaign, by the 1950s approximately 98% of the adult population was literate, contributing to the development of a significant readership. The affordability of books further supported this trend (Cardoso, 2021).

attracted Soviet authorities and readers (Balezin *et al*, 2016). Tired of the clichés of socialist realism, Soviet readers avidly sought alternative narratives (Cardoso, 2021). Following 1960, the Year of Africa, the increasing interest in African cultures further encouraged translations. Besides literary works, books, articles and critical essays on African cultures and literatures were published (Balezin *et al*, 2016). This process likewise encompassed Latin American and Asian literatures.

A prominent role was played by the *Inostránniaia literatúra* [Foreign Literature] journal, the main Soviet promoter of translated literature. Initially, the translations were published in the journal's issues and were later released in book form. They were professional translations published with astounding numbers that ranged from 50 to 100 thousand copies. The editions featured professional editing, as well as paratexts such as introductory essays, footnotes, editorial commentary, and illustrations. In most cases, the selection of works to be translated was determined by political orientation (Beliakova, 2005; Balezin *et al*, 2016). The decisions regarding translation were the result of a previous ideological selection made by the party through the Foreign Commission of the Union of Soviet Writers (Darmaros, 2018). The paratexts were carefully prepared and necessary to introduce Soviet readers to the historical and cultural context of the countries of origin (Krasilnikova, 2012). For instance, in the preface of the Soviet translation of the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, Vladimir Vavilov situates the novel in the context of the struggle of African peoples against colonialism:

In the period in which the African peoples struggled for freedom, a novel about Africa's past is extremely relevant. By instilling in the reader a true vision of Africa's past, the novel *Things Fall Apart*, in the words of Ghanese poet Sutherland, "heals a people poisoned by colonialism" (Vavilov *apud* Achebe, 1964, p. 227).²³

The sympathy of the Soviet population and administration for the African, Asian and Latin American countries, which struggled for independence encouraged translation. Alejo Carpentier, César Vallejo, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda,

²³ In Russian: "V período osvoboditel'noi bor'by afrikánskikh národov román o próshlom Afriki neobyháino aktuálen. Priviváia chitáteliu vényi vzgliád na próshloe Afriki, román 'I prishló razrushénie...', govoriá slovámi gánskoï poetéssy Sutherland, 'léchit národ, otrávlennyi iádom kolonialízma'."

Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and, of course, Jorge Amado, are only some of the Latin American authors translated in the Soviet Union.

Jorge Amado was the most read author in the USSR. In 1951, he was honored with the Stalin Prize, and, in 1954, he took part in the Second Congress of Soviet Writers (Beliakova, 2005; Darmaros, 2018). His role in the promotion of Brazilian literature marked the highest point of Soviet translations: between 1957 and 1969, forty books were published, according to Elena Beliakova's survey (2005). Among the translated authors were José Lins do Rego (1937; 1960; 1967), Alina Paim (1957), Graciliano Ramos (1961, 1969, 1977), Machado de Assis (1961; 1968; 1989), Lima Barreto (1965), Érico Veríssimo (1969) e Guimarães Rosa (1980), as well as the collections *Antológia português'skoi i brazil'skoi literatúry* [Anthology of Portuguese and Brazilian Literature] (Vasilieva-Shvede; Gakh,²⁴ 1964); *Pod nébom úžhnogo krestá: Brazil'skaia novélla XIX–XX vekóv* [Under the Southern Cross Sky: the Brazilian Novel in the 19th and 20th Centuries] (Gakh; Golubeva, 1968), and critical studies, such as the book *Brazil'ski román XX véka* [The Brazilian Novel in the 20th Century], by Soviet Latin Americanist Inna Terterian (1965).²⁵ Starting in the 1980s, authors whose opinions diverged from the official ideology, as was the case of Jorge Luis Borges, began to be translated (Krasilnikova, 2012). More recently, several Clarice Lispector translations appeared (2000a, 2000b, 2022). It seems that, apart from Paulo Coelho's worldwide success and Jorge Amado's already established popularity, Lispector is today the most translated Brazilian writer into Russian.

Thanks to translations, starting in the 1950s, Soviet readers had a unique opportunity to become acquainted with the literature and cultures of many different countries. In the 1990s, the print runs and the volume of translations decreased. That was partly due to the fact that translations began to be commissioned by private-owned publishing houses, not state-owned ones, unlike in the USSR. In the 21st century, publishers prefer to publish only the translated text without the paratexts. This measure reduces both the cost and the time required for preparation and publication

²⁴ Anatoly Gakh (1937) was born in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, and for political reasons migrated to Poland, then to the USSR. He was the first native Portuguese language professor in the USSR. In 1961, alongside Olga Vasilieva-Shvede and Elena Golubeva, he became one of the organizers of the Portuguese Language Department in the Faculty of Philology of the Leningrad State University.

²⁵ The complete list of works of Brazilian literature that were published in the USSR can be found in Elena Beliakova's book (2005).

(Krassílnikova, 2012). As opposed to the Soviet era, when the choice of works to be translated was conditioned by political leaning, commercial factors prevail today. Moreover, it seems like literature has lost its central position in the Russian cultural hierarchy. Nevertheless, although in smaller scale, translation continues to be a part of the Russian Federation's language policy. In 2011, the Translation Institute²⁶ was founded. It is a non-profit organization whose goal is to promote Russian literature across the globe, by supporting translators and publishing houses that print it. The Institute organizes international congresses and conferences on translation, schools for young translators, as well as the grant of awards.

4 Friendship of Peoples

The Khrushchev Thaw contributed to the deepening of studies on foreign cultures and languages. In 1956, the Institute of Oriental Languages was established alongside Moscow State University, later renamed the Institute of Asian and African Countries. In 1961, the Institute of Latin America began operating under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences.

Regarding the teaching of Russian as a foreign language, the Peoples' Friendship University was founded in 1960 to support nations that had earned their freedom through anticolonial struggle and to host students mainly from Asia, Africa and Latin America. In general, the concept of friendship of peoples was widely popular in the Soviet Union. According to Koniaeva (2015, p. 190), following the October Revolution in 1917, the national policy of the new state changed drastically, leading to the emergence of an ideological concept such as the friendship of peoples. The friendship of peoples came to serve as the basis for new relations among the peoples of the USSR and implied "comprehensive fraternal cooperation and mutual assistance between nations and nationalities"²⁷ (*Filosofski entsiklopedicheski slovar* [Philosophical Encyclopedic Dictionary], 1983).

The concept can be generally considered more Soviet than specifically Russian, as it proclaims equality among peoples and seeks to eliminate national differences.

²⁶ The Institute's website: <https://institutperevoda.ru/>.

²⁷ In Russian: "Vsestorónnee brátskoe sotrudnichestvo i vzaimópomoshch' nátsii i naródnosti."

Among its possible roots is Christianity, in which all are equal before God.²⁸ From this perspective, what matters is not nationality, but faith or the adherence to a certain idea. It is expressed, for example, in the dream of Dostoevsky's underground man "to embrace my fellows and all mankind" (1918, p. 37).²⁹ In the Soviet context, the friendship of peoples represented the union of republics and, in some cases, of the countries with which the USSR kept close relations. In 1939, the literary journal *Drúzhba národov* [Friendship of the Peoples] was founded. It aimed to popularize the literatures of the Soviet republics that were translated into Russian.

In the Soviet representations of the friendship of peoples and, particularly, in paintings, posters, postcards and stamps, a circle, a round dance, or a group of people is often depicted, standing hand in hand, wearing national costumes representing different ethnicities and nationalities. Sometimes, in the center, there is a man or a woman whose appearance resembles the stereotypical Russian look, with blue eyes and blonde hair. It is as though this character kept the other peoples united. Interestingly, this character may often not wear a folk costume, but be dressed in more modern clothing, like a grey suit, thus representing not a Russian man, but a Soviet one.³⁰ For instance, in Valentin Bernadsky's poster *Da zdávstvuyet nerushímaya drúzhba národov SSSR!* [Long Live the Unshakeable Friendship of the Peoples of the USSR!] (1962), the representatives of the republics, dressed in traditional costume, walk down Red Square, hand in hand, carrying red flags. The tallest figure is that of the fair-haired man in working clothes. Over the group floats the Soviet coat of arms. In Murat Ishmametov's poster *Soiuz nerushim!* [The Union is Unshakeable!] (1964), a group whose clothing symbolizes the Soviet republics can also be seen. At the center, there is a man wearing a suit and tie. In the background one can see the Kremlin walls overlooked by the Soviet coat of arms. Some works of propaganda were aimed at a young audience, as is the case of Inga Shkuber's 1965 postcard, which cites verses by Soviet poet Sergei Mikhalkov: "Kremlióvskie zviózdý nad námi goriát, povsúdu dokhódit ikh svet! Khoróshaia Ródina est' u rebiát, i lúchshe

²⁸ In the extensive bibliography dedicated to the relation between Christianity and Marxism, the collection of transcriptions of the public debates between Anatoly Lunacharsky and Metropolitan Aleksandr Vvedensky, a prominent representative of the movement for the renewal of the Orthodox Church (Lunacharsky, 1926).

²⁹ DOSTOEVSKY, Fyodor. *Notes from the Underground*. Translated by Constance Garnett. New York: Macmillan, 1918.

³⁰ https://www.plakat-cccp.ru/rus_version/plakat_1/plakaty_i_s_gerbom_ssr.html#plakat_819.

toi Ródiny nét!” [“The Kremlin stars shine above us; their light reaches all places! The kids have a good Homeland, and there is no Homeland better than this one!”]. In the card, three children wearing different national costumes hold flowers and a small red flag. The fair-haired girl to the right represents Russia and the Slavic peoples. The costume worn by the boy in the center could allude to the Caucasus region, Ukraine and Moldova. The girl on the left represents the Asian republics. In the background, there is a painting with the image of the Kremlin over which airplanes hover. Therefore, all images mentioned contain a representation of national and cultural diversity, but also depict symbols of union, such as the Kremlin, Red Square and the USSR coat of arms. Such a vision is also expressed in the anthem of the Soviet Union, both in the 1944 and in the 1977 versions.

In the early 1960s, in parallel with the creation of undergraduate Russian Studies courses at UFRJ and USP (the oldest in Brazil), there was a growing interest about foreign cultures and languages in the USSR. This coincidence is not accidental. With the end of World War II and of the Stalin administration, the Thaw period began in the Soviet Union. In the later years of Stalin’s government, what was referred to as the struggle against cosmopolitanism took place, during which everything that was foreign was seen as hostile, alien (Witt, 2017, p. 48) and as a threat to the country’s integrity. Conversely, with the Thaw came the advances of the Soviet space program and the foreign policy directed to the strengthening of relations with African, Asian and Latin American countries. In the global arena, the invasion of Hungary, the start of the Cold War and the Soviet Union’s backing of revolutions and anticolonial movements and the independence of African, Asian and Latin American countries took place. The Cuban Revolution also counted with the USSR’s support. The Cuban missile crisis, which broke out soon after in 1962, further strengthened the ties of friendship. In 1964 the Soviet-Cuban film *Soy Cuba*, directed by Mikhail Kalatozov, was released. The screenplay written by Evgeny Evtushenko and Enrique Pineda Barnet tells a story of the oppression of the Cuban population by the United States-aligned regime.

In 1957, the Festival of Youth and Students was held in Moscow, and it became the symbol of the USSR’s relative opening. One of the emblems of the friendship of the peoples conceived by the festival was a representation of the terrestrial globe as a flower in which each petal symbolized a continent. 34 thousand people representing 131

countries, including the Brazilian delegation,³¹ took part in the festival, which lasted two weeks and featured over 800 performances, such as concerts, exhibitions, theater and film screenings, lectures and talks. It was a large-scale event that influenced mainly young people, who had the opportunity to get to know people from all over the world. The impact of the festival, which was televised nationwide (Pontieri, 2012), was enormous both in the short and in the long term. The Soviet youth came to appreciate jazz, rock-n-roll, jeans and sports shoes. Most importantly, the festival stimulated the interest of the Soviet people in foreign languages and cultures.

Today, the approach which articulates the dissemination of language and culture is commonly referred to as soft power. According to Joseph Nye, the originator of the concept of soft power, there is a thin line between information and propaganda (Nye, 2004, p. 4). It is difficult to establish a clear distinction between the mere learning of a language, the genuine interest in a people's culture and a deliberate language policy promoted by the state. Since the beginning of the Cold War, it has been discussed whether soft power constitutes a controlled channel for the dissemination of government information or functions as an autonomous expression of national culture. Its efficacy is difficult to predict, as many of its crucial resources lie beyond the direct control of governments, and its effects largely depend on the acceptance by the receiving public. Moreover, as they shape an environment favorable to a particular policy, the soft power mechanisms operate indirectly and, oftentimes, their impacts are only perceptible years later.

Among the works of research that have been published in Portuguese and associate this concept to the teaching of the Russian language, Nina Kozlovsteva and Natalia Tolstova's paper "Formation of the Image of the Russian World as an Aspect of Sociocultural Adaptation of Foreigners in the Process of Teaching the Russian Language" (2019)³² stands out. The authors present the teaching of Russian to foreigners as part of

³¹<https://arquivosdemovimentoestudantil.wordpress.com/2014/02/02/notas-sobre-as-participacoes-brasileiras-nos-festivais-mundiais-da-juventude-e-dos-estudantes-pela-paz-e-amizade-1947-1962-realizados-pela-federacao-mundial-da-juventude-democratica-fmjd/>.

³² KOZLOVTSEVA, Nina; TOLSTOVA, Natália. Formation of the Image of the Russian World as an Aspect of Sociocultural Adaptation of Foreigners in the Process of Teaching the Russian Language. *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de estudos do discurso, 14(1), Jan/March 2019, pp. 82-110. Available at: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnkcbpcqjclgclcfndmkaj/https://www.scielo.br/j/bak/a/dyhfHn3X7wbKLMtGR5MvkZG/?format=pdf&lang=em>. Access on Sept. 27, 2025.

the soft power policy of the Russian government directed to the dissemination of values and of a framework of perspectives (Kozlovsteva; Tolstova, 2018).

Conclusions

The reasons for the dissemination of the Russian language in the territory of modern Russia, as well as in the former USSR, were often more connected to state interests than to the interest of the people and speakers of other languages, which share the same territory. On one hand, the dominance of Russian language and culture allowed millions of people access to education, to the labor market and internal mobility. On the other hand, it unleashed countless national, family and personal tragedies. Such tragedies are reflected in the literatures of those nations, which deserve to be known and read.

The widespread study of the Russian language at both school and university levels led to the consolidation of a particular branch of pedagogy: the teaching of Russian as a foreign language. The active development of such field coincided with the Cold War period and was deeply influenced by political and economic shifts. The teaching and learning of the Russian language can be motivated by several reasons and, in certain circumstances, the dissemination of language and culture can be interpreted as a manifestation of soft power. Although the concept of soft power was initially formulated in the United States and the phenomenon is mainly observed in Europe, it can also be applied to Russia. This “soft” influence encompasses, other than linguistic expansion, the diffusion of literature, ideological, cultural concepts and translations. One of such ideological concepts was that of the friendship of peoples, which the USSR attempted to export to the Eastern Bloc with moderate success.

We sought to illustrate the extent to which involvement in the multicultural and multilingual context is fundamental to avoiding the monologization of cultures and countries. It was in such landscape that the reappraisal of Mikhail Bakhtin’s work, with the publishing of the books *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984)³³ and *Rabelais and His World* (2009).³⁴ Not coincidentally, both books condemn monologism - whether

³³ BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

³⁴ BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.

linguistic or cultural -, while they celebrate polyphony, plurilingualism and carnivalization, which deconstruct dogmatism and hierarchies, highlighting the joyful relativity of official power. Furthermore, the book on Rabelais itself was multilingual, a characteristic which made it stand out in the Soviet context. According to philosopher Natalia Avtonomova, Bakhtin became a “symbol of spiritual rebirth and, simultaneously, a methodological device to move beyond the era of dogmatism” (Avtonomova, 2009, p. 186).³⁵

The trajectory of the language policies adopted by the USSR and contemporary Russia for the teaching of Russian and foreign languages and in translation practices reveal multilingualism’s enriching potential. However, when reflecting on the cultural and linguistic diversity that marked the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union in *Os escombros e o mito: A cultura e o fim da União Soviética* [The Remains and the Myth: Culture and the End of the Soviet Union] (1997), Boris Schnaiderman expresses his concerns regarding the country’s future:

Will there be any possibility for Russians to cling to racial and ethnic prejudice, if their national poet, Pushkin, was of Abyssinian origin, and one of its literary geniuses, Nikolai Gogol, was Ukrainian? Or will the prevalence of ignorance and blind brutality prevail? Despite all that has been taking place lately, we hope the answer to such question is negative (Schnaiderman, 1997, p. 267).³⁶

After a couple of decades, the questions – as well as the hopes – remain unchanged.

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³⁵ In Russian: “símbol dukhóvnogo vozrozhdéniia i odnovreménno — metodológicheskoe orúdie dlia výkhoda iz epókhi dogmatízma.”

³⁶ In Portuguese: “Haverá para os russos alguma possibilidade de aferrarem aos preconceitos raciais e étnicos, se o seu poeta nacional, Púchkin, era de origem abissínia pelo lado materno, e um dos seus gênios da literatura, Nikolai Gógol, era ucraniano? Ou o predomínio da ignorância, da brutalidade cega, será mais forte? Apesar de tudo o que tem acontecido nos últimos tempos, esperemos que a resposta a essa pergunta seja negativa.”

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Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Reviews

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Review I

This is an article of relevance to scholars of Russian language and culture in Brazil, with an interesting historical approach to the language policies of the USSR and Russia. The

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article corresponds to the title and is developed consistently, in addition to presenting an original perspective, as the topic has been scarcely approached by Russian language scholars in Brazil. APPROVED WITH SUGGESTIONS [Revised]

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