

## THE ADOPTION OF THE CYRILLIC ALPHABET IN 1940 AND THE PROBLEMS OF UZBEK SCRIPT

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### Abstract

This article examines the political, social, and linguistic consequences of the adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet for the Uzbek language in 1940. It analyzes the historical circumstances in which the transition from the Latin-based script to the Cyrillic-based alphabet was introduced and explores the difficulties that emerged in Uzbek orthography, phonetics, literacy instruction, and the broader development of the national language. Particular attention is paid to the incompatibility between the phonological structure of Uzbek and the graphic principles of Cyrillic script, especially in the representation of vowels, specific consonants, and native sound patterns. The article argues that the 1940 alphabet reform was not merely a technical change in writing, but a political and cultural intervention that affected linguistic identity, educational practice, and the continuity of the national literary tradition [1], [2].

### Keywords

Cyrillic alphabet, Uzbek script, orthography, phonetics, pronunciation, Turkic languages, alphabet reform, language policy.

### Introduction

By the end of the 1930s, the replacement of the Latin-based script with the Russian Cyrillic alphabet in several Soviet republics, including Uzbekistan, began to be presented as a historically necessary and politically justified process. In official discourse, the reform was explained by the alleged demands of cultural progress, the growing influence of Russian culture on the peoples of the Soviet Union, and the need to create closer communication with the Russian-speaking world [1]. On 8 May 1940, an orthographic system based on Russian graphics was officially adopted for Uzbek, and almost all Russian letters were preserved in their original order, while only a limited number of additional signs were introduced for sounds specific to Uzbek [3].

Yet this reform had consequences that extended far beyond orthography. The adoption of Cyrillic affected the phonetic representation of Uzbek, complicated literacy instruction, weakened the natural relationship between the spoken and written forms of the language, and disrupted the historical continuity of national literary development. For this reason, the 1940 reform should be understood not simply as an alphabet change, but as a deeply consequential linguistic and political process [2], [4].

### Literature Review and Methods

The issue has been examined by a number of scholars, including T. Qoriniyozov, E. Yusupov, O. Sultonmurod, F. Kamol, G. Abdurahmonov, and A. Rustamov. Their studies focus on the history of Uzbek writing, the structural deficiencies of the Cyrillic-based script, and the broader



implications of script reform for language development and national culture [1], [2], [5].

This article is based on scholarly works and historical materials concerning the political and linguistic context in which the Cyrillic alphabet was introduced in Uzbekistan. The study employs historical-chronological, comparative-historical, and analytical methods. These approaches make it possible to assess the alphabet reform not only as a linguistic phenomenon, but also as a part of Soviet nationality policy and cultural transformation [1], [3].

## Discussion and Results

**1. The Introduction of Cyrillic and Its Political Context.** The transition to Cyrillic in 1940 was officially justified as a practical reform that would simplify the teaching of Russian to Uzbek children and Uzbek to Russian children. According to the dominant rhetoric of the time, the reform responded to the needs of workers, collective farmers, and intellectuals and reflected the cultural progress of Soviet society [1]. However, this justification concealed the fact that the reform also served broader political and ideological purposes by bringing the written systems of non-Russian peoples closer to Russian graphic norms [2].

The newly adopted alphabet was built largely on Russian graphic principles rather than on the phonological structure of Uzbek. As a result, a system emerged in which letters native to Russian but foreign to Uzbek phonetics were retained, while several important Uzbek sounds were inadequately represented. This imbalance became one of the major sources of later orthographic and pedagogical difficulties [3], [5].

**2. Structural Problems of the Cyrillic-Based Uzbek Alphabet.** The Cyrillic-based Uzbek alphabet contained serious internal inconsistencies from the moment of its adoption. Some letters represented genuine Uzbek sounds, while others reflected borrowed conventions or entirely foreign phonetic elements. Letters such as **ы** and **и**, for example, were not organically connected with the phonological structure of Uzbek, yet they remained part of the writing system [2], [5].

This problem was not merely technical. An alphabet functions as the basis of literacy, pronunciation, literature, and cultural continuity. When the graphic system does not correspond to the internal laws of the language, difficulties emerge in reading, writing, and teaching. In the case of Uzbek, the Cyrillic alphabet often failed to reflect accurately the vowel system, consonantal distinctions, and native sound combinations of the language [3].

One of the most serious deficiencies was the inadequate treatment of sounds such as **ж** and **нг**. These sounds were not granted full alphabetic status, which created confusion in literacy instruction and weakened the consistency of spelling and pronunciation. As a result, words containing these sounds were not always represented according to the real phonetic structure of Uzbek, and this problem affected school instruction directly [2], [4].

**3. The Problem of Vowels and Sound Representation.** A particularly difficult issue concerned vowel representation. Uzbek vowel harmony and its internal phonological distinctions could not be fully expressed through a graphic system based primarily on Russian orthographic patterns. The use of letters such as **ya, yu, yo, ye** in native Uzbek words often produced forms that did not accurately correspond to Uzbek pronunciation [3].

These letters were more appropriate for Russian phonetics and for borrowed vocabulary than for native Uzbek lexical material. Their application to Uzbek words obscured the natural structure of the language and created unnecessary complications in the teaching of reading and writing. From a pedagogical point of view, such letters should have been introduced later in school instruction,



after children had mastered the basic sound system of Uzbek itself [2], [4].

The broader implication of this problem is that the alphabet failed to preserve a stable one-to-one relationship between sound and sign. This weakened the clarity of orthographic norms and made it more difficult to establish a writing system fully compatible with the internal phonetic laws of Uzbek [5].

**4. Loanwords, Foreign Letters, and Orthographic Dependency.** Another major issue was the preservation of foreign graphic forms in Uzbek writing. The article emphasizes that some letters and spelling conventions entered Uzbek not because of real phonetic necessity, but because of the principle that borrowed words should preserve their original foreign written forms [2]. However, in linguistic practice, loanwords usually adapt to the phonetic and orthographic norms of the receiving language. Therefore, the rigid preservation of foreign spelling in Uzbek contradicted the natural laws of language development [4].

This tendency strengthened orthographic dependency on Russian and contributed to the alienation of Uzbek from its own phonological system. Instead of adapting borrowed elements to Uzbek pronunciation, the script often forced Uzbek speakers to conform to foreign graphic habits. Such a situation inevitably complicated literacy education and weakened the national character of the written language [3].

**5. Alphabet Reform and National Cultural Continuity.** The script issue must also be understood in relation to national cultural continuity. Uzbek is one of the ancient literary languages of the Turkic world, with a tradition stretching from Ahmad Yassawi and Hafiz Khorezmi to Alisher Navoi and Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur [5]. Any script reform that weakens the natural expressive capacity of the language therefore has consequences not only for orthography, but also for the continuity of literary memory and cultural identity.

The Soviet period witnessed the replacement of the writing system more than once, and the transition to Cyrillic was one of the most decisive breaks in this process. The article argues that even though the Latin alphabet had been used only for a relatively short period, it was considerably more compatible with the phonetic nature of Uzbek than Cyrillic was [2], [3]. Therefore, the 1940 reform cannot be regarded as a purely linguistic improvement; rather, it represented a politically determined intervention that subordinated the national writing system to broader ideological goals [1].

**6. Scholarly Criticism and Proposals for Improvement.** The shortcomings of the Cyrillic-based Uzbek alphabet were recognized relatively early. By the 1950s, scholarly and public discussions had already identified defects in vowel representation, the treatment of specific consonants, and the inclusion of unnecessary foreign letters [1]. Even some specialists involved in the design of the new alphabet later acknowledged that mistakes had been made and that certain features required revision [3].

Among the most significant proposals discussed in scholarship were the inclusion of separate letters for important Uzbek sounds such as **j** and **ng**, the removal of foreign symbols with no real phonological function in Uzbek, and a clearer system for representing Uzbek vowels [2], [4]. These proposals demonstrate that dissatisfaction with the Cyrillic-based script was not accidental or temporary; it reflected deeper structural incompatibilities between the alphabet and the language itself.

**7. The Future of Uzbek Script.** The central conclusion emerging from this discussion is that alphabet reform cannot be treated as a secondary or merely technical matter. Script design



directly affects literacy, pronunciation, literary norms, language teaching, and the preservation of cultural identity. A script that does not correspond to the phonetic and structural logic of the language weakens the conditions for its full development [2], [5].

For this reason, the question of Uzbek script must be linked to the broader issue of national language development. The article's overall argument suggests that a writing system based on principles closer to Uzbek phonology, rather than inherited foreign graphic conventions, is essential for preserving both linguistic clarity and cultural continuity [3], [4].

### Conclusion

The adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet in 1940 created long-term problems for Uzbek writing. These problems affected orthography, pronunciation, literacy instruction, phonological representation, and the broader relationship between written language and national identity. The reform was shaped not by the internal needs of Uzbek, but largely by Soviet political and ideological priorities [1], [2].

The evidence examined in this article shows that the alphabet issue must be approached as a major problem of language development and cultural history. A script that fails to reflect the internal laws of the language cannot serve as a stable basis for education, literature, and linguistic identity. Therefore, the history of the Cyrillic reform in Uzbek should be understood as both a lesson in language policy and an argument for the necessity of a writing system consistent with the phonological nature of the Uzbek language [3], [5].

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