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HOW CAN LANGUAGE BE A SWORD: EXPLORING THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE IN THE SOVIET STATE

Abstract
The review article examines the recent book by Eugenia Kuznetsova, an Ukrainian writer, translator, and specialist in postcolonial studies, "Language as a Sword: How the Soviet Empire Spoke" (2023). The main themes discussed in the article are the instrumentalization of language in the Soviet state and the development and characteristics of the Soviet Russian language. Despite possible criticisms of Kuznetsova's book, it nevertheless convincingly shows how the Russian language became the "sword" of the Soviet totalitarian state and why national languages should serve as "shields" for all nations and peoples living there. The importance of the study for understanding the current linguistic situation in Ukraine and the Russian Federation is also emphasized.

Keywords: the USSR, Ukraine, totalitarian language, linguistic assimilation, Soviet Russian language, national languages, linguistic trauma, the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The publishing house "Tvoia pidpilna humanitarka" (Your Underground Humanitarian Aid) was founded in 2021, based on an online project of the same name. Its primary focus is on humanities classics and nonfiction in philology, cultural studies, and ethnology. In 2023, they published a book by Eugenia Kuznetsova, a writer, translator, and specialist in postcolonial studies, which became a bestseller. The following year, a second revised and expanded edition was released, printing an unprecedented 6,000 copies for nonfiction. The book titled "Language as a Sword: How the Russian Empire Spoke" aims to describe the "linguistic reality" of the Soviet state[1] and its influence on the contemporary

[1] The author understands the linguistic reality as "everything in our everyday life that is connected with language: our way of life, our writing, television, art, language patterns, how we live with language and how language lives in us" (Kuznetsova, 2024, p. 5).

lives of Ukrainians, Russians, and other nations and peoples who lived there. Planned to be published in March 2022, the book was timely in Ukraine, which faced a full-scale invasion from the Russian Federation and had to reassess its attitude toward everything related to the Russian language, literature, culture, and so on. However, the book is not solely about the repression of the Ukrainian language in the Soviet Union. Its thematic focus is much broader,[2] arising from the author's discussions with Western observers about the current language situation in Ukraine and other post-Soviet states (Kolehina, 2024).

The book is a deeply personal project for Kuznetsova. She dedicates it to her ancestors, "born in the Russian empire, in the Russian-language environment… [who] managed to preserve their language and pass it to their descendants" (Kuznetsova, 2024, p. 3), and acknowledges that it was born out of her "irritation and an acute internal need to comprehend a sensitive and complex topic [i.e, today's linguistic reality in Ukraine]" (Kolehina, 2024). This personal dimension is consistently present in her storytelling: family stories, anecdotes, and memories from her own life are seamlessly woven together with references to Soviet-period sources and testimonies from those who lived in the USSR.

In Kuznetsova's words, her initial idea was to write a column about the current language situation in Ukraine, focusing on specific questions about Soviet linguistic reality that has caused it (Kuznetsova, 2023). It took her three years to answer all those questions; over this time, she shared her thoughts and findings on a YouTube channel (Kuznetsova, 2020–2021). The process of writing the book clarifies its format: it consists of unrelated 101 short chapters (2–4 print pages each) that cover a wide range of topics related to Soviet linguistic reality, from state policies, repressions, and deportations to humor (Kuznetsova, 2024, chapters 85, 88-89), Soviet folklore (chapter 64), and new Soviet names (chapters 97-99). The lack of internal logic in how the material is organized is the most obvious criticism that can be made.

According to Kuznetsova, this book is aimed at a broader audience, as it explains with "simple words the facts that should be common knowledge to all of us" (Tokhmachi & Nekrecha, 2024), rather than specialists in history, linguistics, cultural studies, or social studies, as she describes the interdisciplinary field of her study (Kuznetsova, 2023). It can be read in any order, starting from any chapter that interests the reader; she also leaves it to the reader to draw any conclusions (Kuznetsova, 2024, p. 6). I would disagree with the author on these two points. First, the disorganized presentation and absence of conclusions make it more difficult to comprehend the material. Second, despite this, the book may be valuable for specialists in all the fields mentioned because of the wide range of diverse material it presents, which unexpectedly allows Kuznetsova to achieve her main goal – challenging a persistent myth that the Soviet Union was a state of equal nations and that the choice of the Russian language was voluntary and the logical outcome of such nations' coexistence.

The metaphor used as a title – language as a sword – has sparked many discussions that prompted the author to clarify it in the Foreword to the second edition: "*Language as a sword* is not a call to arm oneself with language as a sword. This book describes how Russian became a sword in the Soviet Union. In the struggle against empires, one's native language should become a shield" (Kuznetsova, 2024, p. 6). In one of her interviews, she also admits

[2] "The processes studied here affect one hundred and fifty languages of the Soviet Union and explain the linguistic existence not only of Ukrainians, but also of many other peoples colonized by the USSR" (Kuznetsova, 2024, p. 5).

that she wanted to rename the book more neutrally and even suggested this to the publishing house (Kuznetsova, 2023). Because the book is meant for a broader audience, it avoids lengthy quotations and excessive references. But it includes the essential scholarly apparatus that enables interested readers to verify Kuznetsova's arguments. She uses a wide range of primary sources: from the "classics of Marxism-Leninism(-Stalinism)" to official documents, Soviet periodicals, literature, textbooks, personal testimonies, and visual sources. Her primary scholarly references are studies by linguists Michael G. Smith (2012), Larysa Masenko (2011, 2017), and Vladimir Alpatov (2000, 2010). Kuznetsova also thanks Ukrainian scholar and thinker Ihor Kozlovsky for his help in writing some chapters. At the same time, the absence of indices further complicates the reader's search for topics and names of interest.

It would be unfair not to mention the book's beautiful artistic design. Red and black dominate the color palette, referring to the revolutionary ambitions and the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union. Each section begins with a new page featuring an apt epigraph. The book features 22 Soviet-period visual sources – posters in various languages, photographs, and stamps – that illustrate the language issues discussed by the author in the corresponding chapter.

As already mentioned, the author does not present her material coherently, nor does she draw conclusions or generalizations from it. However, an attentive reader can identify the main lines of argumentation and assemble a complete picture from the puzzle Kuznetsova provides. This may be a challenging intellectual task, and I will attempt it in this review.

The instrumentalization of language in the Soviet empire is the central theme of the book. An essential task for any empire was to turn imperial language into a "sword," which involved two main processes in the Soviet context. First, the *Soviet Russian language* was to be created (the author does not use this term, but it clearly captures what she describes), and second, all other languages were to be assimilated. Kuznetsova explains the logic and driving forces of these processes, depicts broader political, social, economic, and cultural contexts, emphasizes the cost of these transformations, and draws attention to their consequences, in her words, to the *linguistic trauma* of most Soviet nations and peoples. When doing this, the author balances chapters on specific linguistic issues with broader contextual chapters and does not follow a strict chronological order.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the study, different specialists would likely interpret it in various ways. My perspective is that of a historian. In this review, I will focus on the following themes of the book: the language policy of the totalitarian state; the instruments and contexts of Russification; the making and nature of the Soviet Russian language; the fate of national languages in the USSR; and the actors who shaped the Soviet linguistic landscape and their destinies.

The nine opening chapters are arranged chronologically and cover the first two decades after 1917. In the first chapter, Kuznetsova (2024) presents her main argument: "The idea of national, linguistic, and cultural diversity in the USSR, which became a new Russian empire, was... more of an enforced step than a goal of the Bolsheviks" (p. 12). Language, like national costumes, was viewed as a "neutral" symbol of nationality and was therefore tolerated or even used to advance the regime's goals whenever necessary (pp. 13, 21–22). Chapters 2–8 discuss the necessity, logic, nature, actors, and driving forces behind the indigenization policy. Chapter 9 shifts the focus to Russification, which remained the dominant policy from the 1930s until the decline of the USSR.

The author revisits these early Russification steps in chapters 34–35, noting that the

development of the idea that a single language would serve as "clamps holding the totalitarian empire together" sparked fears of "linguistic disintegration" as early as the 1920s (p. 127). Therefore, *linguistic assimilation* was declared the ultimate goal while the indigenization policy was still in effect (chapter 31). "The 1938 resolution, 'On the compulsory study of Russian in the schools of the national republics and regions,' is considered a major milestone in the Russification of the Soviet Union" (p. 130), marking the final decision on the *single Soviet* language. The author points out that Russian was not initially chosen for this purpose; it was the "language of colonial oppression" in imperial Russia at the very end (chapter 30). She also discusses early revolutionary ideas about developing a new supra-language as the language of the "world revolution" and the proletariat (chapters 71–72).

This example illustrates Kuznetsova's claim that the ambitious reforms of the totalitarian state[3] were inconsistent, and most of them failed, while those who carried them out faced repression (chapter 78). The author discusses several high-cost failed reforms, including the indigenization policy, the development of the new Ukrainian orthography in 1928, the Latinization of the Arabic and Georgian scripts, and the promotion of Esperanto.

"World War II, and even more so the victory in it, became fertile ground for the growth of a new type of Soviet empire – the one based on Russian patriotic chauvinism or national Bolshevism" (Kuznetsova, 2024, p. 272). Kuznetsova does not trace the Soviet language policy after this turning point. Only Khrushchev's steps are mentioned: the law from December 24, 1958, "On strengthening the connection between school and life and on the further development of the education system in the USSR," which allowed parents to choose the language of their children's instruction (chapter 36), and the idea of Russian as the "second native language" voiced by Khrushchev during the XXII CPSU Congress in 1961 (chapter 81). Unfortunately, she completely ignores the consistent Russification policy under Brezhnev, which was as influential in shaping the current language landscape in Ukraine and other former Soviet states as the Stalinist policies of the 1930s (see Masenko, 2005, pp. 20–34).

Kuznetsova repeatedly emphasizes that Russification and bilingualism among Soviet people were not voluntary (chapter 42). She uses the metaphor of Russian as a "rich language" and all others as "poor languages," citing a 2019 report on the language situation in the Russian Federation: "Knowledge of one's native language is associated with poverty, marginalization, and lack of prospects." The latter was also true of all the national languages in the USSR, she states (Kuznetsova, 2024, p. 134). Besides the paramount status of Russian as the language of the proletariat, communism (chapters 28–30), and the "most developed nation, which led the revolutionary transformations" (p. 111), it was also the language of career (chapter 36) and of the "cultured people" (chapter 82). "Since the 1920s, the image of a cultured person in Soviet mass consciousness has been associated with a person of Russian culture, or its adapted version" (pp. 282–283).

One of her main concepts is the *hierarchy of languages* in the USSR. Russian, being at the top of this hierarchy, was the only language used in politics and science: "Any innovative field was served exclusively in Russian" (p. 150).

To promote the Russian language, all available tools and channels were used: from schools (chapter 32) to the press (chapter 12), radio (chapter 90), TV (chapter 91), "the great

[3] "The main declared goal of the USSR was a radical change in the way of life... The world had never seen such ambitions before: all spheres of life were subject to revolutionary transformation, and the whole world was the target of the revolution" (Kuznetsova, 2024, p. 61).

Russian literature" (chapter 80), and the Soviet army (chapter 65). An outcome was the enforced bilingualism for non-Russians in the Soviet state. Kuznetsova (2024) quotes Alpatov (2013, p. 12) when defining it: "Forced bilingualism is when the choice between knowing and not knowing a second language is also a 'choice between a full life and a life in a closed community'" (p. 242). Broader contextual changes and state policies in other spheres, mainly social and economic, also promoted Russification. The author's main focus is on Soviet migration policy (chapters 68 and 70) and the fate of Soviet villages (chapters 61–62). More than just fighting against traditional rural culture (pp. 218–219) and "rustic language" (pp. 223–224), "in 1961, the party declared a policy of fighting against villages, which were to be modernized into urban-type settlements" (p. 215). Therefore, not only was Russian regarded as "urban language," but also thousands of "non-promising villages" (*neperspektyvni sela*), the last strongholds of national or local identities and languages, became victims of Soviet modernization policies. Kuznetsova does not ignore the Gulag system and mass deportations either, depicting them as the environment for the Russification of both prisoners and deported peoples (chapters 66, 94) and residents (chapter 69).

The development of the Soviet Russian language is a topic of primary concern to the author. To make Russian an effective political tool (chapter 11), "clamps holding the totalitarian empire together," and an instrument of shaping the New Soviet Man (chapter 17), it had to be altered accordingly. Kuznetsova becomes very emotional when describing the process of transforming a *living oral language* into a *bureaucratized Soviet language*. The idea originated from the revolutionary belief that "language is a mechanism that can and should be purposefully constructed, considering certain elements desirable and others unacceptable" (p. 170). It involved purifying the language from any "bourgeois excesses" and "vicious manifestations from which people must purify themselves" (p. 201; chapter 53). The latter included dialects requiring assimilation (chapter 18), colloquial expressions (prostorichchia) (chapters 19–20), and abusive language (chapter 55), which needed to be cleaned up. She sees direct negative consequences of this in today's linguistic reality: "In fact, the division of words, stresses, and expressions into 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'correct' and 'incorrect', as well as social encouragement to make corrections, cannot simply disappear – the habit of correcting speakers and insisting that it is unacceptable to speak a certain way remains to this day" (Kuznetsova, 2024, p. 336; chapter 100). I am not a linguist, so I cannot comment on Kuznetsova here. But I agree with Oleksandra Malash, who highlights the need for more nuanced evaluations and the importance of distinguishing between "freedom of speech" and "linguistic arbitrariness."

> *Certainly, issues of this kind are best addressed through collaboration between native speakers – especially those lacking philological training – and linguists themselves. However, non-linguists reading the book are unlikely to take such a suggestion seriously and are more likely to interpret chapter 100 "What traces has Soviet linguistic purism left in the present day" (pp. 335–336) as permission to ignore the norms of literary language, regardless of the communication context* (Malash, 2024, p. 81).

Kuznetsova considers the development of Soviet New Speak a "language development dead end" (chapter 27) and "one of the longest-lasting consequences of Soviet linguistic reality, which post-Soviet countries still have to deal with today" (Kuznetsova, 2024, p. 108). New Soviet vocabulary (chapter 24) and terminology (chapter 25), new syntactic structures purified

of any "excesses" (chapter 44), poster language with memorable slogans (chapters 45–46), and bureaucratic language filled with clichés (chapter 50), along with the use of passive voice (chapter 83) and abbreviations (chapter 96), have shaped the Soviet Russian language, making it a "sword" of the Soviet empire.

This language was meant to create reality both inside and outside the USSR. The worldview of Soviet citizens was shaped by the language they spoke, one of the most defining features of which was viewing everything through "us" versus "them" lens; and this continues to influence perceptions and decisions many years after the decline of the USSR (chapter 17). The totalitarian empire did not limit itself to creating the New Soviet Man (Kuznetsova does not use this term). It also utilized "Russian for export" as an effective tool to promote Soviet ideals and attract Soviet admirers and supporters, primarily in countries of the socialist bloc and the Global South after World War II (chapters 75–76).

Kuznetsova states that, despite official declarations that "all languages are equal," a hierarchy of languages began to form while the indigenization policy was still underway. In its final version, it consisted of four hierarchical levels, with the Soviet Russian language at the top. The second level was reserved for the national languages of the republics: "At this level, languages were used for everyday communication 'among their own,' printing periodicals, and literature. However, they were not used in science or any other high spheres" (p. 139). The lower level of this hierarchy was designated for the languages of national minorities in the republics, with no other domains besides family communication and "several publications of children's literature" reserved for them (chapter 38). The author is genuinely concerned about the extinction of languages of "small peoples" during the Soviet era, with the situation in the Russian Federation being the most notable example (chapters 10, 93). Still, there were languages with an even worse fate – those at the bottom of the linguistic hierarchy. These were the languages of oppressed and repressed peoples: Crimean Tatars (chapter 39), Jews (chapter 40), and Kalmyks (chapter 94).

Kuznetsova discusses examples from different national contexts (Belarusian (chapter 23), Moldovan (chapter 59), Georgian (chapter 60)) and the fate of many languages, such as the 1930s efforts to Latinize the Arabic script (chapter 5), in her study. The Ukrainian case is predictably getting her main attention. A special position of the Ukrainian, like the Belarusian, language was because they "were unlucky enough to be related to Russian. This simple fact of the similarity of vocabulary, syntax, and grammatical structure of the languages made it much easier to assimilate them" (p. 95; chapters 21–22). The author explains how the idea of Ukrainian national identity and language being second-rate was formed and promoted in the USSR (chapter 84, 88) and discusses the effects of using stereotypical images of "a Russian-speaking intellectual and a simple-minded Ukrainian speaker" in today's Ukraine and Russia (p. 301).

The language processes discussed in the book are not abstract. The author fills them with the stories of voluntary and enthusiastic as well as involuntary and enforced "language missionaries" (as titled in chapter 4). Regardless of their reasons and the nature of their involvement, all of them have become victims of the Soviet repressive system, as Kuznetsova (2024) consistently emphasizes: "It doesn't really matter whether you were a passionate revolutionary, a linguistic Marxist, a conformist, or someone who tried not to attract attention to yourself – there was no guarantee that the machinery of repression would not crush you" (p. 39; chapter 7). The fate of Nikolai Maar, "prophet" of Soviet linguistics (chapter 13), and creator of the "new teaching of

language" based on the class character of language (p. 66), is the best example of the trajectory of enthusiastic language missionaries: from becoming the essential reference for all linguistic studies (chapters 14-15) to an untimely death caused by fear of arrest in 1934 (p. 67), and the debunking of his teaching in the 1950s (chapter 16). Ukrainian linguists, literary critics, and writers were among the first victims of the Soviet repressive system when 25 creators of the new Ukrainian orthography (Kuznetsova refers to them as "suiciders") were repressed due to the reversal of the indigenization policy (chapter 8). Such repression continued throughout the Soviet era; those who survived were forced to praise the "great Russian language," as exemplified by Sosiura and Tychyna (chapter 58).

Furthermore, not only were individuals repressed. Soviet linguistics serves as an example of a "repressed science" in the USSR (chapters 48–49), whose fate demonstrates Kuznetsova's thesis that "under authoritarianism, no humanities are possible, because sooner or later they all turn into curtsies toward the regime" (p. 171).

In conclusion, Eugenia Kuznetsova's book, despite all criticisms made and even more those that can be made to specific chapters and arguments, does answer the question of *how* Russian became a "sword" of the Soviet empire and *why* national languages should serve as shields for all nations and peoples that lived there. As such, it might be of interest to both specialists in the field and a broader audience, not just in Ukraine. Western observers might better understand the current linguistic situation in Ukraine and the Russian Federation, as well as the language policies of Putin's regime, including those in the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories, if they could read it.

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Анотація

Статтю присвячено аналізу нещодавно опублікованої книги Євгенії Кузнєцової, української письменниці, перекладачки та фахівчині з постколоніальних студій, – «Мова-меч: як говорила радянська імперія» (2023). Основними темами, обговорюваними у статті, є інструменталізація мови в радянській державі та постання, розвиток й особливості радянської російської мови. Попри можливі критичні зауваження до книги Є. Кузнєцової, вона, все ж таки, переконливо показує, як саме російська мова стала «мечем» радянської тоталітарної держави і чому національні мови повинні слугувати «щитами» для всіх націй і народів, що там проживали. Окремо підкреслено важливість цього дослідження для розуміння сучасної мовної ситуації в Україні та Російській Федерації.

Ключові слова: СРСР, Україна, тоталітарна мова, мовна асиміляція, радянська російська мова, національні мови, мовна травма, російсько-українська війна.

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