

USSR: Northern Peoples Develop Written Language

By Yevgeni Pozdnyakov
Novosti Analyst

The first ABC books for the peoples of the Soviet North were issued in the late 1920s and early 1930s, after the Socialist Revolution in Russia. At that time it was decided to enable everyone living in the USSR, even the smallest national groups, to use their language not only orally, as before, but also in a written form. Prominent Soviet linguists and ethnographers participated in developing written languages for the smaller nationalities of the North.

The task that the scientists faced was much more difficult than it might seem to non-specialists in this field, since many small groups in the Soviet North live spread across vast territories and the families of one nationality sometimes speak different dialects.

For instance, scientists have failed to develop a single written language for the 21,000 Khanty who live in the northern part of Western Siberia. The Khanty children can still elect to study at school one of the three basic dialects which philologists singled out of many dialects is being studied by only 400 children, but special primers have been issued for them too.

Similar difficulties were once encountered by the linguists who developed the primer for 2,000 Saami people living on the Kola Peninsula. In the past few years it has been noticed, however, that as a result of the extensive development of transportation and communication, contacts among the Saami people have considerably intensified, and this has led to a certain unification of the numerous dialects which they speak. For this reason, experts have recently modified the Saami alphabet, basing it on the main Kildin dialect. This alphabet is now being taught both at the national Saami schools and the Murmansk Pedagogical Institute, which trains language and literature teachers.

The reason for the changes made in the alphabet of the 12,000 Evenks who live in Yakutia, East Siberia, is somewhat different. While developing a written language for them in the mid-1930s, experts deemed it unnecessary to reflect in



At the lesson at the Nanai village Nizhniye Khably — Novosti Photo

it six minor phonemes of the Evenks' language. With the development of national culture, this defect in the alphabet became an obstacle to the effective use of written language, specifically in poetry. That is why early this year the Yakut government decided to effect the changes in the Evenks' alphabet proposed by linguists. The state will foot the bill for issuing new textbooks and retraining teachers.

The task of studying and modernizing the written languages of Northern peoples is more and more often tackled by experts of these nationalities. For instance, the Nanai children of Siberia are now using a new ABC book prepared by Sulungu Onenko, a Nanai researcher at the Institute of History, Philology and Philosophy of the Siberian Department of the USSR Academy of Sciences.

The USSR has a special research institute of national schools working under the Ministry of Public Education of the Russian Federation, the largest Soviet Union republic. Its staff is now working on textbooks, teaching aids and programs in 48 languages. Maria Pukhta, a researcher at this in-

stitute, together with writer Vladimir Sanghi, Doctor of Science Chuner Taksami and Candidate of Science Galina Otaina, are now working on a new primer for their small group of people, the Nivkhi, who live in the eastern USSR.

Way back in the 1930s, not only schools, but also specialized educational secondary establishments were set up to train the children of the people of the Soviet North in basic professions. Like elsewhere in the USSR, tuition is free there. In

addition, the state pays their upkeep, including clothing, meals and accommodation at the boarding schools and hostels, and gives them higher student grants. This is done to facilitate education for the children from the North and to train doctors, teachers, engineers and so on, from among them within the shortest possible time.

Thanks to these efforts, there is not only full literacy, but also a high proportion of specialists with a secondary or higher education among the Northern peoples. For instance, 60 percent of the Khanty and Mansi people now have a secondary or higher education, whereas 55 years ago there was not a single literate person among them.