russian

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE: A BRIEF HISTORY

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The Russian language is the largest native language in Europe, it is the primary language of 175 million people living in Russia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, and is unofficially spoken in most of the countries that were once republics of the USSR, making it the most geographically widespread language of Eurasia.

Despite its widespread use, for many of us in the Western world, Russian remains a mystery.

For starters, Russian uses a different alphabet known as "Cyrillic." The name of the alphabet often confuses people because it does not identify a commonly known reference of origin. Some even refer to Cyrillic as the "Russian alphabet" because Russia is the most populous and influential user of the alphabet. Many would be surprised to discover that Russian is, in fact, just one of dozens of languages using a Cyrillic derived alphabet.

The history of Cyrillic traditionally begins in the 9th century when the ruler of an early Slavic state in Eastern Europe, Moravia, requested the Byzantine Emperor send missionaries to Christianize his subjects. Emperor Michael III nominated two brothers, the monks Cyril and Methodius, to spread Christianity among the Slavic peoples of Bulgaria, Great Moravia and Pannonia (Central and Southeast

Countries that use a Cyrillic alphabet among their official languages (Mongolia not shown).

Europe). Their legacy would leave an indelible mark on the cultural development of all Slavs, for which they are still venerated by the Orthodox Church as saints.

Cyril and Methodius were chosen for this mission because they spoke a Slavic dialect. Cyril devised a first alphabet, now known as Glagolitic, based on this dialect, and the brothers used it to translate sections of the Bible, prayers and other texts used in Church services from Greek into a Slavic dialect that could be broadly understood in Central Europe. Today we refer to the language of their translations as Old Church Slavonic.

St. Clement of Ohrid, one of Cyril and Methodius' best known disciples, is traditionally accredited with simplifying Glagolitic into the earliest form of Cyrillic. New scholarship, however, suggests that the earliest known form of Cyrillic was actually created at the Preslav Literary School in the Bulgarian Empire. Whether or not he invented it, St. Clement used Cyrillic in his prolific translations. It is his writings that spread throughout the Slavic area.

The new Cyrillic alphabet was popular because it was not only simpler than Glagolitic, but it also augmented Glagolitic ligatures and consonants for sounds used by Slavic peoples not found in Ancient

Greek. Eventually the Cyrillic alphabet came to dominate over Glagolitic in the 12th century until it was the lingua franca of Eastern Europe.

Over the course of the next 9 centuries, the Cyrillic alphabet has adapted to changes in spoken language, developed regional variations to suit the features of different nations, and was subjected to academic reforms and political decrees. Today, over 90 languages throughout Europe and Asia write with a Cyrillic derived alphabet, including Russian.

For those of us who grew up speaking English with no exposure to Slavic languages, learning Russian can be quite difficult. According to the United States Intelligence Community, Russian is a "hard target" language, due to both its difficulty for English speakers and its critical role in American foreign policy. It is fortunate, then, that Russian is largely a phonetic language – it looks the way it sounds. If you can learn the Russian variant of the Cyrillic alphabet, you can read the words out loud...whether or not you know what they mean, however, depends on how much you study.

If you're feeling adventurous, take a look at the Russian Cyrillic alphabet chart in the following pages. Can you translate the words on the worksheet?

First complete Bible printed in Cyrillic, 1663.