

Greek Education in the Countries of the Former Soviet Union

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RÉSUMÉ

La tradition de l'éducation grecque dans l'Ex-Union Soviétique reflète l'histoire de la région. L'auteur brosse un portrait des communautés helléniques dans cette partie du monde depuis la fondation de leurs écoles jusqu'aux changements politiques effectués et constatés au vingtième siècle. L'article s'achève avec une description de l'influence du programme grec *Paideia Omogenon* sur l'enseignement de la langue dans les communautés côtières de la Mer Noire.

ABSTRACT

The tradition of Greek education in the Former Soviet Union reflects the history of the region. The author provides a portrait of the Hellenic communities in this part of the world from the foundation of their schools to the political changes seen in the twentieth century. The article concludes with a description of the influence of the Greek program *Παιδεία Ομογενών* on language teaching in the coastal communities of the Black Sea.

Introduction

The first contact of Greeks with the Black Sea region and Euxine Pontus, in general, is related to myth, as borne out by traditional legendary heroes such as Prometheus, Jason, Iphigenia, Phryxus, Hella, Aetes. Based on evidence provided by Strabo, historians also acknowledge the mid-eighth up to sixth century BC as the period during which these areas were first colonized by Greeks.¹

Greek colonies were founded for the apparent reasons of fishing grounds, fertile lands and mineral products, e.g., copper, coal, iron, manganese, zinc and gold.²

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Hence the phrase:

*“led from far away in Alybe, where is the birthplace of silver.”*³

More than 75 Greek colonies, established all over the Euxine Sea,⁴ contributed actively and substantially to the economic and cultural life of the wider region.

1. Greek schools in Russia from the revolution to now

At the beginning of the 20th century almost 700,000 Greeks, along with the other minority nationalities living in Russia, suffered the consequences of Pan-Slavism. The latter, based on the logic of *Homo Sovieticus*,⁵ was opposed to the establishment of schools in which basic courses would be taught in minority languages, including Greek.

Greeks resisted this Russian policy of assimilation by organizing a powerful educational movement and staging demonstrations and strikes with the aim of establishing or, in a few cases, maintaining already existing Greek schools.⁶

In retrospect, we see that from the first moment of their settlement Greeks, after the destruction of Trapezounta in 1461,⁷ tried to organize themselves around the church, based on their national identity. The fact that they shared the same Orthodox religion allowed for the establishment of churches, communities and schools which played a determining role in the economic life of the inhabitants.

Already from the 16th century, the Greek language was taught in Moscow along with Greek civilization. In 1594, Tsar Theodore established the Greek-Slavic School,⁸ and in 1619 a Greek-Italian school was founded in the monastery of Tsouda which later, in 1681, became an Academy.⁹

In the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries the scholar-cleric Evangelos Voulgaris and the Archbishop of Slavenio and Chersona established the Greek High School of St. Petersburg (1775), the Greek High School of Chersona (1783) and the seminary where Psalidas, Mavrokordatos, Psycharis and other Greek intellectuals received their education.¹⁰

During the first post-revolutionary years (1917-1918), two drastic changes were needed for the Greeks of Russia concerning the unhindered functioning of their communities, and thus the consolidation of their rights, as well as the enhancement of the Greek character of their children's education. Within the framework of their authority we also find the introduction of free and compulsory primary education along with the «nationalization» of schools.

There were two levels of studies offered by the Greek educational system being under reorganisation: primary (8 years- two cycles of four years each) and secondary.

Despite limited possibilities and restrictions, the members of the Central Council of the Russian Greeks Association managed to satisfy teaching needs by hiring Greek scholars, mostly refugees from Turkey and Romania.

On the eve of the First World War there were approximately 100 schools attended by 50.000 Greek children in the broader region of the Soviet Union.

There were two basic courses in the curriculum of these schools:

1. Greek language (modern Greek)
2. Marxist theory

The determination of the official language in Greek schools was especially problematic,¹¹ since there were the purists, the Demoticists and the promoters of dialects (Pontic and Romaic) claiming and seeking acknowledgement as official teaching languages. A Tower of Babel prevailed among teachers, too.¹² Out of almost 300 teachers, only 20 had a sufficient knowledge of Modern Greek. The rest used a mixture of Russian-Pontic-Romaic-purist Greek. In order to resolve this problem the Central Committee of the Modern Alphabet was founded with the aim of coordinating dialogue among educators.¹³ After long discussions they all agreed (in 1926 and certified in 1934) that Modern Greek would be the official language of education. The Greek alphabet was reduced from 24 to 20 letters, containing 5 vowels (α, ε, ι, ο, υ) and 15 consonants (β, γ, δ, ζ, θ, κ, λ, μ, ν, π, ρ, σ, τ, φ, χ). This change was aimed at simplifying spelling which created serious problems in the use of written speech.

Many Greeks who remained ideologically loyal to the traditional Greek education resorted to the pursuit of personal tutors for private courses which resulted in the blossoming of non-official “secret schools”. The latter were undoubtedly characterized by an intensely nationalistic spirit stigmatized by scholars and men of letters of that period.

Apart from public there were also community-run private schools which operated with the support of funds raised by expatriates.

The “General Association Meeting” in Rostov in 1926 accepted the new educational models and proposals while imposing the gradual nationalization of community schools. Furthermore, the 1926 reform established the first cycle of studies of seven years’ duration and the second one of three years’ duration. It promoted the ten-year education syllabus and specified the following elementary school courses: mathematics, music, language (mother tongue), literature, natural history, geography, physical education and painting.

Great importance was attributed to the ideology emerging from the teaching of the history of the Revolution, civil war and victory of the Bolsheviks. Young people joined political parties, pioneer orders and the Comsomol... These organizations were part of an attempt to alienate youth from the national and traditional practices of their families. Nevertheless, many Greeks resisted, maintaining their customs against the class enemy.

The period from 1917 to 1937 can be considered the golden age of Hellenism in the USSR,¹⁴ since Greek schools existed everywhere, as well as theatres, publishing houses, and printshops. Greeks had the opportunity to study and develop their cultural traditions. The publishing house called “Communist” in Rostov was responsible for the publishing of Greek schoolbooks.¹⁵

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, Greek schools operated in most Russian communities.¹⁶ Anapa, Novorosisk, Gelentzik, Ekaterinerburg, Maikop and Sotsi are some of the cities in which Greek schools were founded.

Russian writers were translated by Greek men of letters of the USSR, who had established contacts and communicated with writers and scholars from Greece. Within the framework of these contacts, P.Istratis (1928) and then

N. Kazantzakis, D.Glinos and K. Varnalis (1934) visited the Soviet Union.¹⁷

Tremendous significance was also placed on teacher training through the establishment of academies of pedagogy. Teacher training at such in a Krasnodar academy established in 1924 required four years' study.¹⁸ In order to meet scholastic needs several books were compiled such as teaching manuals, readers, math manuals, grammar and spelling books, and anthologies. During the period from 1927 to 1937, some 126 books were written, of which 46 were penned directly in Greek. The others were translated. An important figure in all these efforts was Marina-Lvovna-Ritova, a Hellenist professor and interpreter-translator for the Greek language.

2. Greek education in the Ukraine

All we know about Greek education in Ukraine is that Greek schools operated in Kiev, Niezin, Kharkov, Lviv and Odessa.¹⁹ Apart from the Greek school of Kiev, open in 1620, in the 17th century, the city of Niezin stood out for its Greek education and popular culture. The Greek School of K. Bouba and the rich Greek library were recognized in 1657 by imperial Ukase. In Niezin, Greeks built a church in 1679, where the mass was conducted in Greek. On its grounds, they built a school and boarding house for Greek children of the region.²⁰

However, Greek letters were cultivated much earlier in the bosom of the Greek-Italian Academy of Kiev, as well as in schools of various monasteries.²¹

In Crimea, a primary school operated in 1760 under the auspices of the bishop of the area. It was attended by 200 pupils who followed a non-traditional school curriculum focused on the study of religious books.²²

In Odessa, a Greek school operated with 72 pupils where Hatzibey village was in 1794.²³ That same year the Greek bishop Gabriel founded Saint Nicolas, Saint Aikaterini and Saint Trinity churches, the latter being the church of the founders of the Society of Friends.²⁴ The Greek tradesmen of Odessa founded in 1808 the Graeco-Russian Company of Securities, which in 1814-17 allocated 14.018 rubles to the Greek Trade School.²⁵

Mariupol in the Sea of Azov was a centre of paramount importance for Greek education. Already in 1820, Greeks who had moved there from Crimea founded schools where a purist form of Greek was taught. When Russia promoted the policy of Pan-Slavism in 1880, Greek schools closed due to lack of teaching staff. In Mariupol, a centre of Hellenism, two Russian high schools were built, the Greek language started to fade with its vocabulary becoming all the poorer as it assimilated more Russian and Ukrainian words.

Brown writes in 1890 that “Russianization advances quickly and in three or four generations’ time the Russian language will be established in the everyday life of Greeks...”²⁶

In the end of the 19th century Mariupol, the ‘city of the sea’ (from the Latin word ‘mare’) or possibly the ‘city of Virgin Mary’ developed along with the Greek-speaking villages Sartana, Chemarlik, Karakouba, Volnovaha, Constantinupol, Yianisol, Yalta, Urzuf, as well as with villages of mixed populations of Greeks and Tartars, such as Stari Krim, Bessev, Mangoush, etc. Greeks were not passive receivers of the Pan-Slavic policy; they resisted it vigorously by enhancing Greek schools which had already begun to be established by the Ecumenical Patriarchate as of 1890.²⁷

Nevertheless, Greek educators often had to change their names in order to survive and keep their job.²⁸ Thus, Triantafyllidis becomes Triantafyllov, Porfyros, Porfyrov, Krypidis Karypov.

After the Bolsheviks’ victory, Greek education seems to rediscover its path. Lenin’s revolutionary ideas on respecting the cultural identity of all nationalities living in the USSR offered the possibility of new schools, theatres and publishing houses in order to meet the needs of Greek-language education.

“...the number of Greek schools as well as teacher training for primary and secondary education constantly increased...”²⁹

During the twenty-year period of 1917 to 1937, Greek literature grew exponentially. *Collectivistis*, a local newspaper, along with messages of socialistic ideology passed on to the Greek population plenty of other issues related to Greek history and culture.³⁰

It is worth mentioning that in 1926, when Greek schools started functioning in an organized manner, the citizens of Mariupol claimed Greek as their mother tongue. Out of 93,739 citizens, some 82,193 claimed to be Greek-speaking.³¹

In 1938 schools, theatres, newspapers, publishing houses,... everything was shut down in the name of “simplifying” the country’s national structure. This measure obviously weighed negatively on national minorities.³² This simplification meant “liquidation of national minorities” and total Sovietization. These purges expanded all over the formerly known Soviet Union but were never fully accomplished because of the outbreak of the Second World War.

3. Greek education in Georgia and the South Caucasus

The Greek-Pontis of Georgia had all their courses given in Greek as long as they lived in Pontus. Their education remained the same after they moved into Georgia. However, in 1890-95, due to the establishment of the bilingual ministerial or state schools the use of Greek was restricted to history and language-specific courses, and thus Greek education faded.³³ All courses were taught in Russian, whereas teachers of Greek were chosen among the expatriates whose command of Greek was better.³⁴

Out of 200 schools in Kars, 100 were Greek for a total of 75,000 Greek residents.

Schools were directed by the Ministry of Education. In Caucasus, the supervision of schools was assigned to a supreme supervisor and three general inspectors of higher education.³⁵ All educators participated in the general educational meetings of primary secondary and higher education establishments across Russia, during which various educational issues were discussed, such as teaching methods. These meetings were held on a regular basis and were often of two months’ duration.³⁶

In 1905, after the political changeover in Russia, matters were simplified; formalities, eliminated. Greek colonies all over the Caucasus acquired the status of official Greek communities whose main concern was to establish Greek schools.³⁷

In Abkhazia, there were 34 Greek schools in 1921-22 and 48 in 1925-26. The number of educators grew from 42 to 80.³⁸ In 1927, a Greek pedagogical school functioned in Sohum. In 1926, Greek schools all over Georgia were already operating in an organized way.³⁹

During these years, a famous Greek pedagogue, Perikles Karchanidis, lived in Tyflis. One of his achievements was a bilingual (Greek-Russian) reader, approved by the Russian Ministry of Education.⁴⁰ The first Ponti grammar by Pantelis Melanofrydis entitled “Η εν Πόντω ελληνική γλώσσα” (*The Greek language in Pontus*) was also printed in Vatum in 1910.⁴¹ Newspapers were carriers of Hellenism, thus enhancing the Greek consciousness, education and culture. Some of the most noteworthy are the “Εθνική Δράσις” (*National Action*) published in Vatum by A. Dimitriadis, “Αργοναύτης” (*Argonaut*) of Vatum, “Ελεύθερος Πόντος” (*Free Pontus*) Vatum, “Νέα Ζωή” (*New Life*) published by Passalidis and “Κομμουνιστής” (*Communist*) of Sohum⁴², which after its sixth paper was named into “Κόκκινος Καπνός” (*Red Tobacco Worker*).

4. Stalin's persecutions

After Lenin's death, on January 21, 1924, a battle on the ideological character of the revolution ensued between his main successors, Stalin and Trotsky.

Trotsky was an advocate of internationalization; whereas, Stalin supported the theory of socialism in only one country. Finally, Stalin prevailed and after removing all political adversaries, he imposed his personal dictatorship.⁴³

The purges conducted by Stalin were not confined to the leading group of the communist party, but expanded also to scientific and other organizations, as well as to non-Russian nationals. The most affected were writers, teachers and all kinds of intellectual creators who were persecuted under the pretext of protecting people from the bourgeois formalism they supposedly promoted. As far as intellectuals of small communities are concerned, especially of “cosmopolitan Greeks”, their fate was tragic. Following orders from above, equality before the law was violated and hatred grew against them. They were arrested and executed. Greek schools and churches were destroyed and in a short period nearly the entire Greek intelligentsia was exiled to Siberia and the

desert of Kazakhstan.⁴⁴ Those who kept their Greek citizenship paid a high price, being excluded from all posts, under the pretext of their having participated in espionage against the Soviet Union.

Despite the reactions of the Greek deputies and the rallies and referenda which took place in Athens in 1949,⁴⁵ transportation did not cease until 1951 when Greeks were transported from Georgia.⁴⁶ The policy against the Greek population throughout the Soviet Union was unified. Even in regions where the Greek element was not moved (e.g., Mariupol), policies of breaking the solid Greek society and its culture were directly or indirectly implemented.⁴⁷

In his reference to the closing down of Greek schools Georgy Zorzoliani, head of a consultative body of the Georgian government on minority issues unfolds his challenging view whereby Greek schools were shut down because Greeks themselves did not wish to receive an exclusively Greek education since this would mean exclusion from society and higher education!⁴⁸

The Russian historian, Buchai, argues that the transportation of the Greek element was conducted by Stalin himself in order to reduce nationalistic tension within regions inhabited by Greek populations and remove non-reliable nationalities from the border areas.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, apart from the demographic change brought about by persecutions conducted in Greek-speaking regions, the professional career of the Greeks was linked through threats to the change of their nationality. This policy of Stalin struck a heavy blow against the Greek people. It essentially deprived them of normal intellectual development. The most prolific representatives of the Greek intelligentsia were either silenced or exterminated.⁵⁰

It was only on 14 November 1991 that the Supreme Soviet ensured the full restoration of the rights of Greeks who fell victims to Stalin's persecutions.⁵¹

5. Greek education in the post-Stalin period

Kruschov promoted free expression among scholars and intellectual creators and reduced censorship. Indicative of the liberalisation of the system

was the publication of Solzhenitsyn's novel *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich*.⁵² However, Kruschov's failure to reorganise the economy led to his removal from office and his replacement by Brezhnev whose governing (especially in the early 1970s) was characterized by stagnation due to bureaucracy and dysfunction in areas like education.

After the 1989 reform the Soviet educational system had the following structure:⁵³

1. **Pre-school education:** including nursery schools for babies up to 3 years' old and infant schools for infants up to 6 years' old.
2. **Unified 11-year polytechnic school:** divided in three cycles, basic primary school (classes 1-4), secondary semi-final school, which was compulsory (grades 5-9) and secondary final school (classes 10-11), comprising two cycles of professional or general education by selection.

After obtaining their certificate, 11th grade graduates could be enrolled in institutions of higher education. Nevertheless, those who did not wish to have a university education could follow professional training courses of one, two or three years.

The educational system with its curricula provides a good level of general education, initiating pupils into the arts, especially music and theatre. It enhanced their talents in out-of-school institutes and institutions, such as houses of culture, various associations, camps and sports activities.

The model of the "Soviet-type" school, based on the logic of the multi-faceted development of the personality of young people and the interconnection of teaching with production work (polytechnic education), applied until *perestroika*, also had its drawbacks, such as centralization and non-differentiation between curricula to the point that the latter would not correspond to the requirements of the Soviet economy. On the one hand, this model neglected personal output and the development of the pupil's creative competence. Yet, on the other, the absolute uniformity of its curricula brought about the leveling of cultural traits and traditions of peoples and nationalities living in the USSR.⁵⁴

In May 1988, a national committee was formed with the aim of restructuring popular education as well as tracing a reform strategy.

Within the new reality shaped by the implementation of *perestroika*, a new, creative educational movement was developed, which laid on the table the educational principles of teaching and human/pupil-centred education. “The new educators” movement created a positive climate for the revival of the Soviet school by introducing the new pupil-centred teaching model. According to this theory, children are not just pupils who go to school to be taught from teachers, but also personalities whom teachers ought to treat with respect.

The manifesto⁵⁵ of the “new educators” in 1987 stated that:

“...it is a dire necessity that teachers be interested in the shaping of their pupils' personality...”.

In 1989 the State Committee for Education and the Ministry of Popular Education of the Russian Federation published the basic curriculum which was divided in two sections:

1. Teaching material for the schools of the Republics.
2. Private courses for each Republic, according to its needs and national-cultural reality.

The common core curriculum consisted of the Russian language as *lingua franca*, Soviet literature, mathematics and social education.

Lessons of Greek and minority languages, in general, last two to three hours per week in public schools, are sometimes optional and rarely compulsory.

After 1981, the Ministry of Education of the USSR created a teaching department within the university of Krupsakya in Moscow, which was specialized in the “Greek and English languages”. At the same time, hundreds of students at the Philosophical Schools of Lemonosov in Moscow, of St. Petersburg, of Kiev, Odessa, Simferopol, Mariupol, Krasnodar, Piatigorsk, Vatum, Typhlis, Ahaltsihe, study Greek language and literature to become teachers of Greek in the schools of their regions.

In primary and secondary education, there are schools where the grade in the Greek language is calculated in the grade-point average, but this is rarely the case. Most often, Greek is an optional third language and, as such, is not given a mark. However, it is worth mentioning that the Greek language is

taught in an organized manner in Saturday or Sunday schools of the Greek associations, with the support of Greek communities and the Greek state, which intervenes through various programmes.⁵⁶ The teaching of Greek in these areas is undertaken by self-taught teachers.

Over the last years an attempt has been made by the presidents of the Greek Associations to make Greek a compulsory second language in schools, at least in the areas inhabited by Greeks. The latest information is that the Ministries of Education of the coastal countries of the Euxine Sea are favourably disposed.

It is worth noting that Greek education has been widely diffused in societies, and many foreigners are interested in learning Greek, thus the number of pupils has increased.

In Georgia, Greek-language education is mainly in the hands of the Georgians who pursue their studies at the University of Typhlis with excellent records and activities. The Greek language is “in fashion” as was French in pre- and post-war Greece.

6. The Development of Greek education along the Black Sea Coast and the Greek state

A significant project, financially supported by the European Union and the Greek Ministry of Education, is ‘Παιδεία Ομογενών’ (*Greek Education Abroad*), assigned in 1997 to the University of Crete and co-coordinated by professor Michael Damanakis at the Department of Education. The project is related to Greek-language education of Greeks living abroad including research on Greek as a second and foreign language in primary and secondary education for Greeks living in America, Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia and, especially, in the Black Sea Zone.

This project allowed the registering of educational data, various problems encountered by Greek teachers, but also the pupils who learn Greek in the former Soviet Union.

The inventory of this data referred to countries and in particular regions inhabited by Greeks, that is the Azov Sea, Crimea, South Russia and Georgia.

Apart from this project of the Greek Ministry of Education, many other groups, institutions, universities from Greece are active in the Black Sea region. Remarkable teacher training and library enhancement projects, as well as alternative cultural programmes have been applied up to the present day by the University of Ioannina, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) and the “Iason” project, the School of Modern Greek of the AUTH, the department of Primary Education in Florina, the University of Athens and the THYESPA project, the Institute of Greek Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the prefecture of Thessaloniki through the Centre for Research and Development of the Greek Culture of the Black Sea. Moreover, since its foundation in 1995 until today, the Council of Hellenes Abroad has been developing initiatives to assist schools and educators as part of other economic growth and health care projects in the coastal countries of the Black Sea.

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