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Summary Article: **Russian language**

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also called Great Russian, member of the East Slavic group of the Slavic subfamily of the Indo-European family of languages (see Slavic languages). The principal language of administration in the Soviet Union, Russian is spoken by about 170 million people as a first language. It is a second language for additional 100 million in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (the former Soviet Union) and of Eastern Europe. Closely related to Russian are the other East Slavic tongues, Ukrainian (also called Little Russian or Ruthenian) and Belarusian (or White Russian). The former is spoken by about 45 million people, mainly in Ukraine and Russia. The latter, which also uses a form of the Cyrillic alphabet, is the tongue of about 8 million persons, most of whom live in Belarus. Because of its large number of speakers and its leading position in the Soviet Union, Russian is one of the chief languages of the world; at the same time, a number of non-Russian former Soviet republics, most prominently the Baltic nations, have moved to replace Russian with the local language as the language of government, commerce, and education and to adopt English as a second language. Used officially by the United Nations, Russian is important in scientific writing as well. The great literary works written in Russian also have made the language culturally significant.

Pronunciation and Grammar

It is difficult to master Russian pronunciation because the accent is free; that is, it can be placed on any syllable. Thus, there being no set rules for stress, the accent of each word has to be learned separately. In fact, the position of the accent on a given word may vary as the word's case and number change when it is declined. Some words that are spelled alike are distinguished only by a different stress. In addition, no significant differentiation is made between long and short vowels. Grammatically, Russian is highly inflected. The noun has six cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, and locative), with an occasional seventh case, the vocative. There are three declensional schemes and three genders, masculine, feminine, and neuter. Although the verb has only three tenses (past, present, and future), it is enabled by a feature called aspect to express numerous subtle shades of meaning, some of which cannot be rendered even in English. In addition the Russian verb has five moods and four voices.

Historical Development

The historical development of Russian is not easy to trace because until the 17th cent. the religious and cultural language of the Russian people was not Russian, but Church Slavonic. However, within Russia the latter language became sufficiently altered by the vocabulary and pronunciation of spoken Russian to be transformed into a Russian form of Church Slavonic adapted to Russian needs; this change began in early times. The earliest extant document containing Russian elements is an Old Church Slavonic text from the 11th cent. Ukrainian texts can be distinguished from Russian by the late 13th cent., but Belarusian does not definitely appear as a separate language before the 16th cent.

When Peter the Great undertook to Westernize Russia in the early 18th cent., the Russian language was subjected to Western influences and absorbed a number of foreign words. Peter was the first to reform and simplify the Cyrillic alphabet used for Russian. In the late 18th and early 19th cent., partly as a result of the work of the great Russian writer Aleksandr Pushkin, the Russians succeeded in throwing

off the dominance of Church Slavonic and in developing their own tongue into a literary language, which was, nevertheless, influenced and even enriched by the Church Slavonic legacy. Literary Russian is based on the dialect used in and around the city of Moscow, which became the leading cultural center of the country in the 15th cent. Extensive reforms, aimed at simplifying and standardizing Russian writing and grammar, took place after the Revolution of 1917.

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