

STALIN AND THE LINGUISTICS CONTROVERSY IN THE U.S.S.R.

On May 9, 1950 *Pravda* published an "editor's note" to the effect that, in connection with the unsatisfactory state of Soviet linguistics, the editors considered it "essential to organize an open discussion in *Pravda* in order, through criticism and self-criticism, to overcome the stagnation in the development of Soviet linguistics and to give correct direction to further scientific work in this field". It was announced that *Pravda* would devote two pages weekly to articles on questions of linguistics. The first contribution came from Professor Chikobava of the Stalin State University of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, and was an unexpected attack on the linguistic theories of the late Nicolai Yakovlevich Marr. Marr, born in 1864 in Georgia, was the son of a Scottish father and a Georgian mother. He was already a prominent scholar in the field of philology at the time of the revolution and when he died in 1934 he had adapted himself successfully to the new regime and had developed what he believed to be a Marxist theory of linguistics. Like many philologists, Marr was attracted by the mystery of the origin of language and in his later years evolved the theory that all languages were a development from four primitive sounds, *sal*, *ber*, *yon*, and *rosh*. Although this theory, like his Marxist theory of linguistics, has been ridiculed, he is still respected for his important contribution to the study of the languages of the Caucasus.

Chikobava Attack Unexpected

Chikobava's attack on Marr was unexpected because Marr had been set up as a kind of minor deity of Soviet science. Like Lysenko's in the field of biology, his work was regarded as having a monopoly of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist virtue. He was supposed to have rescued the study of linguistics in the U.S.S.R. from the false doctrines of bourgeois philosophy, and it was customary for any article on the subject to begin and end with recognition of the writer's great debt to N. Ya. Marr. In January 1950 his memory was honoured in Moscow at a special gathering of Soviet scholars. On this occasion the leading students of linguistics made speeches extolling his genius and delivered sharp attacks on those philologists who still stubbornly refused to accept the new doctrine.

In many branches of Soviet art and science there have been post-war "purges". Musicians, writers, biologists, economists, philosophers and others have been given a new "party line" involving denunciation of established leaders in each of these fields. Such purges were usually directed against so-called bourgeois elements in science and decadent capitalist tastes in the arts. In the field of philology this process had worked in favour of Marr's doctrines and of those scholars who regarded themselves as his disciples, probably because Marr had repudiated most traditional internationally-accepted linguistic theory. One of the chief points of Marrist philology is, briefly, that languages are a class "superstructure" in a society, and rest on that society's economic and class base. Thus, according to the Marr school, a bourgeois society spoke a bourgeois language, and when the bourgeois base of society was liquidated, its superstructure, including the language, was also removed and replaced by a new superstructure, which included a new socialist language. As a corollary to this was the belief that in the development of languages, sudden upheavals sometimes take place similar to revolutions in the ideological field.

Stalin Enters Controversy

As *Pravda's* "free discussion" proceeded, it became clear that Marrism was no longer to enjoy its preferred position in Soviet science. Although one or two of the