

THE MISSION OF NIKOLAI IL'MINSKII, LAY MISSIONARY OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH (1821-1891)

■ Most of us take for granted the right to read the Scriptures in our mother tongue but throughout church history it has often required a person of special character and skills working against the status quo to provide it. Il'minskii was such a person with remarkable cross-cultural sensitivities.

By George Robinson

"and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

—Revelation 7:9

"The mother tongue forms the essence of the spiritual nature of both the individual and of a people, and thus is the most effective means for re-educating and teaching. Only the mother tongue can truly, rather than just superficially, set the people on the Christian path."

—Nikolai Il'minskii

SYNOPSIS

For over three hundred years from the time of the conquest of Kazan in 1552, many attempts were made by the Tsarist State to assimilate the eastern indigenous nationalities into the Russian empire. The attempted integration was in a few instances conducted through the use of schools. More often, though, the Russian Orthodox Church was used as a colonizing force, with bribery and threats the main tools of conversion. Consequently, most of the natives that were baptized became Christian in name only. Very few held on to their faith and in the early 19th century large scale defections swept the Volga area.¹ It was during this period of defection that Nikolai I. Il'minskii (1822-1891), a professor of Turkic languages at Kazan Theological Academy and Kazan University developed a system of native education. Initially Il'minskii devised his system to stem the defection of baptized Volga Tatars but eventually extended it, with varying degrees of application, to all natives living in the east. The principle feature of his system was

a basic reliance on the mother tongue.² Almost single-handedly, Il'minskii became responsible for the establishment of a network of schools, for the creation of alphabets, for the writing of native textbooks and for the translations of numerous languages throughout the Russian empire.

In the late 1860's, Il'minskii was greatly encouraged by gaining the support of the Minister of Education, D.A. Tolstoi. Tolstoi had become convinced that Il'minskii's approach was valid for all eastern nationalities, and, thus, in spite of Russian nationalistic opposition, the system was adopted by the Ministry of Education in 1870. It remained the official system of native education until the Revolution in 1917.³ In fully comprehending the great value of Il'minskii's life work, it must be stressed that above all else he was "a lay missionary of the Russian Church who aimed at ...instilling genuine Orthodoxy in the already baptized. His persistent efforts to thwart the political and cultural advance of Muslims and Buddhists, and his controversial promotion of native languages among the baptized, flowed logically from his self-appointed mission. Il'minskii wished to minimize Muslim and Buddhist influence on the Orthodox non-Russians and he was convinced that Orthodoxy can truly take root only via the mother tongue."⁴

Il'minskii's system, while strengthening the Orthodox belief amongst Christian converts⁵ also stimulated the development of national cultures and a national modern intelligentsia. In this way he thus promoted a self-respect and a self-awareness among the natives of the empire.⁶

He did not limit his efforts to Christians alone but sought to extend his work to all peoples⁷ who "lacked firm religious convictions and were in his view potential converts to Orthodoxy."⁸

His efforts were not unique in Russian Orthodox mission but flowed from a long tradition of mission exemplified in the work of St Cyril and St Methodius in the ninth century and to St Stephen of Perm in the fourteenth century.⁹

Il'minskii devised three different systems:¹⁰

a. For Orthodox non-Russians with emphasis on Orthodoxy and reliance on the mother tongue. It was by far the most wide spread version, centering chiefly in the Kazan area and extending into Siberia.

b. For the non-Russian, non-Orthodox, modified approach with substitution of what Il'minskii called 'a Christian world-outlook' for Orthodoxy. This was mainly for animists and Kazakhs of the Kazakh steppes.

c. The Ministry of Education's version which was more restrictive in its language form and was limited to the Kazan Orenburg area.

That Il'minskii was an incredible linguist is without dispute. He had a perfect mastery of Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. Amongst eastern languages, of the Arabic, Persian, and in part, of the Turkish languages. And amongst those languages of the natives, of Tatar, Mari, Chuvash, Kazakh, Mordvinian, Altai, Yakut and many others.¹¹

Besides being a remarkable linguist and visionary educator of native peoples, he was "a deeply learned theologian with a profound knowledge of

the Bible".¹²

Il'minskii "was devoted to missionary work [all his life], and by degrees he stood at the head of it, first in the Kazan region, and afterwards almost throughout the confines of Russia in its entirety, appearing everywhere as the leader and guiding spirit of the closest workers in the Russian mission field".¹³

His influence was felt even further afield. St Nicholas of Japan, founder of the Japanese Orthodox Church considered Il'minskii's counsels to be "the foundation of my missionary convictions and activities".¹⁴

In summary, Il'minskii never wavered from his goal of seeing those converted to Orthodoxy become truly Christian. He also remained ever sure that the path to this goal was through the use of the native's mother tongue.

His own words speak for themselves: "We believe that the evangelical word of our Saviour Jesus Christ, having become incarnate, so to speak, in the living tongue of the Tatars, and through it having associated itself most sincerely with their deepest thoughts and religious consciousness, would produce the Christian revival of this tribe".¹⁵

Il'minskii's belief was found true, not only for the Tatars, but for all the natives of the Russian empire for whom he laboured.

THE PATH TO UNDERSTANDING

"Christianity as a living principle should work as a leaven in the thoughts and feelings and after having taken shape in men of advanced minds it should come from and through them to others." (Il'minskii)¹⁶

A Father's Example

Nikolai Il'minskii was born in the year 1822, in the provincial capital of Penza. His father was head priest of the city's church "Nikolaev". From birth this future missionary grew up in the knowledge of God, learning from his father what it meant to be a disciple of Christ and to live a life of dedicated service to him.

His life's work was to be very different to that of his father's, yet no less significant to the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. In fact, history was to record that Il'minskii's life of devotion to the gospel and its spread to the native tribes of the Russian empire,

was one of marked spiritual excellence. Because of his life many others also gained life—life eternal.

Like other children of clergy, Nikolai attended the local ecclesiastical schools where his abilities gained him first place in his graduating class. His reward was to gain entrance, at university level, to the Theological Academy of Kazan.

A Talented Scholar

At the academy, Il'minskii showed a great talent for languages, so much so that on gaining his degree of master of theology in 1846, he was invited to remain at the academy as instructor of Turkic languages. His professor, Kazem Bek, a renowned Orientalist, also welcomed him as a member of a special native translation committee, engaged in the translation of Russian Orthodox literature into the Tatar language.

Prompted by his concern over apostasy occurring amongst the Tatar population of the Volga region, Tsar Nicholas I was directly responsible for the creation of the Translation Committee¹⁷ and had appointed professor Bek as its head.

Translation, Scholastic Approach

The approach to translation in this period was very scholastic, centering on high literary forms, while ignoring the spoken and colloquial language of everyday native life. "Kazem Bek's approach to Tatar was that of a bookish Muslim scholar, which is what Kazem Bek had been before his conversion to Christianity".¹⁸

"The committee proceeded on the basis of using the Tartar language of the Qur'an and the mosques".¹⁹ For the written language they used the Arabic alphabet as the Tatars had no written language of their own.

Understandably, Il'minskii initially adhered to this accepted approach. However, he soon developed a keen interest in the life of the Tatar peoples living in Kazan, and began to study their common language.

Act of a Servant

Excited about what he had begun to learn and committed to growing in greater knowledge he set out to live

amongst the Tatars themselves. So it was that he gave up his familiar surroundings amid his own people, as well as his own comfortable, rent-free apartment and moved into the Tatar area of Kazan.

In so doing we see that at the very beginning of his quest for understanding of a people different to his own he set the pattern for the rest of his life for Christ; willingly sacrificing himself for the sake of others, that they, like he, might know Christ the Saviour.

The Heart of Nikolai

In now learning and indeed marveling over Nikolai Il'minskii's life's work, his intellectual abilities and his incredible achievements, the very essence of who this man of God was must be kept in focus. For above all else, he was an obedient servant, who made full use of the talents given him by God for the Glory of God, that all might be saved, that every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

With the Tatars

Once settled amongst the Tatars, his knowledge of the highly esteemed Arabic tongue earned him entrance into the Tatar homes and schools. His enlightening of Tatars had begun. It was a time of awakening. To add breadth to his study he travelled during the summer months to Tatar rural areas where he would make contact with Muslim Tatars. His attempts at that time to befriend baptized Tatars were unsuccessful.

A Tartar Translation and a Trip Abroad

This initial period of his fieldwork came to an end in 1850 when he left for St Petersburg. Bek had been transferred to the university there and Il'minskii followed to finish the translation work already in progress.

The work of translation was completed in 1851 and as a reward, Nikolai was granted a three year travel grant to the Middle East. He made full use of his time abroad, travelling far and wide while studying at various centers of Islamic learning. At all times his aim was to perfect his understanding of the Arabic language. Dedication and persistence were but two of this Christian's attributes that enabled Christ to work so effectively through

him.

A Teacher of Language and Culture

He returned to Russia in 1854. On his return he was made head of the newly formed "Anti-Islam Department" in the Kazan Academy. Ignoring the political and negative elements of the title and its implications, he concentrated on teaching the literary language and culture of the Muslim natives.

At that time he had an idea that was to form an integral part of his future approach to translation and education. The idea was to directly involve native speakers in the education and translation processes. It was to have profound significance in the future of missions amongst the non-Russian population throughout the Russian empire and beyond.

As a consequence of his earlier direct contact with Tatars, Il'minskii had concluded that for his students to become proficient in conversation in the Tatar language, they needed a Tatar native with whom they could practice.

Although a seemingly simple idea, it was a new one and he had to first convince the academy of its value. Fortunately he was successful in so doing and as a result a Kazan Tatar was hired.

The Translation Fails

The time eventually came in 1856 when the first field test of the committee's translations was to be carried out. Il'minskii was given the responsibility to undertake the testing.

Unlike previous occasions, where he had only been able to contact Muslim Tatars, he now came into contact with Christian Tatars. It was providential as he was thus able to put the committee's translations to the test.

Excited in his anticipation to see the Tatars awe on reading about God in their own tongue, Il'minskii proceeded with joy to engage their response. His joy, however, soon turned to dismay for on sharing the Tatar texts with the natives he was shocked to find that they could not understand anything at all. "The translations were unintelligible".²⁰

The Measure of a Man

More than ten years of dedicated

work and untiring effort seemed to Il'minskii at that moment totally wasted. He was heart-broken. Yet it is in such moments, quiet, set aside, and very much alone that the greatness of a man is measured. It is at that point of his greatest failure that a man may rise to his greatest success. It is a success unseen for it occurs within the heart and it expresses itself in the refusal to accept defeat, and in the acceptance that with God all things are possible.

So it was with Il'minskii; in the sight of God he was successful and out of this inner success was born a vision, a vision that was to carry the light of the Gospel to thousands still living in darkness.

Brushing off the shock of the failed translation, he pressed ahead to discover the mistakes made and to find the correct path of translation. His subsequent research caused him to question the whole foundation of Russian missionary work²¹ and thus to call for fundamental changes of approach.

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IL'MINSKII'S TRANSLATION METHOD

"We believe that the evangelical word of our Saviour Jesus Christ, having become incarnate, so to speak in the living tongue of the Tatars and through it having associated itself most sincerely with their deepest thoughts and religious consciousness, would produce the Christian revival of this tribe." (Il'minskii)²²

In 1858 Il'minskii wrote "In order to serve effectually for the Christian enlightenment of the baptized Tatars, the translations ought to be made in a language entirely comprehensible to them, that is in a conversational language, because they have no written language...In order to sever completely the tie between the christianized Tatars

and [Muslims], the alphabet itself employed in the translations in question should be the Russian, adapting it to Tatar sounds".²³ He had found the answer.

Testing his new approach he discovered "Tatar boys understood his translation of the Gospel narrative of the Pool of Bethesda, and even corrected some of his expressions.

A white-haired old man amongst the baptized Tatars, hearing the prayers in his native tongue, fell on his knees before the icon, and with tears in his eyes thanked God for having vouchsafed to him at least once in his life to pray as he should".²⁴

Opposition

The missionary's vision, however, met with resistance from the academy authorities who mistrusted his innovative thinking, detecting in it "a fascination with Islam".²⁵ Il'minskii was even accused of being an Islamic propagandist.²⁶ In 1858 he was forced to leave the academy before being able to fully

develop his ideas. But he was already completely convinced that the literary Tatar language was totally unsuited for translation work; that it was in the popular tongue of the Tatars where the answer lie.

An Enlightened Benefactor

Il'minskii's work was not impeded for long, for in the same year as his departure

from the academy, he was invited to join the Orenburg Frontier Commission, headed at that time by another renowned orientalist, V.V. Grigor'ev. Explaining to Grigor'ev his vision, Il'minskii was greeted with much enthusiasm and encouragement.

In service to the commission, Il'minskii was sent to the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea to act as an interpreter to Russian surveyors where he could also continue to pursue his own calling. During his time there he studied the language of the Turkmen and published his findings. These formed some of the very first descriptions of the Turkmen language.²⁷

Respect for the Popular Tongue

Il'minskii's next assignment was to

prepare a Russian language textbook for Kazakhs. In carrying out this work he developed an interest in the Kazakh language and in his spare time gathered together information for a Kazakh-Russian dictionary.

To assist him, Grigor'ev sent him to the Kazakh steppe to enable him to gather his materials first-hand. In 1861, a dictionary was published—the first in Kazakh. As such it was of immense importance in the development of the Kazakh literary language. It was also the first Kazakh work in print.

"It is both strange and pleasant", wrote the Kazakh Altynsarin to Il'minskii, "for the [Kazakh] to see their language in print for the first time".²⁸

His time in the Kazakh steppe also proved immeasurably important for his future work of translation. It had "once and for all filled me with respect for popular speech, which I then began to view as genuine material for linguistic research".²⁹

His respect for the Kazakh people was seen in his wondering how "these nomadic people who in our view are total strangers to civilization...possess such a marvelous art of speech".³⁰

Reward for Excellence

Nikolai returned to Kazan in 1861 and because of the excellence of his endeavours, he was elected to the chair of Turkish languages at Kazan university, amid much acclaim. Interesting to note was that the Kazan academy soon followed suit and invited him back to their ranks.

Keeping Focus

The acclaim he received from the academic community could not divert him, however, from concentrating his efforts on helping the baptized Tatars acquire a living faith. While nominally Russian Orthodox in faith, they were "totally estranged [both] from the Russians and the Church".³¹

Il'minskii's System

Il'minskii gradually created his own special system of translation into the popular language and since that time regarded every other kind of translation as entirely useless. He wrote:

In the translation of the sacred and liturgical books the most difficult matter is the right understanding of

the Slavonic texts, which are often most difficult and obscure, and their rendering into the native languages.

The first part of the work requires a sound theological education and a knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew languages; the second, on account of the great differences in construction between Church Slavonic and the native languages, requires a considerable working out of the periods and expressions in order that the meaning of the original should be adhered to, and exposition be clear and easy of comprehension.

Moreover, it is essential that final touches should be put to translations, with the assistance of natives by birth, because a Russian, as I know by my own experience, having occupied myself with Tatar translations for about thirty years, cannot possibly know all the subtleties, shades, and psychological depths of a foreign tongue.³²

Il'minskii did not limit his work to the Tatar language alone. "We must study all languages, even those of the most obscure tribes".³³ Extending his thinking to cover all the different language groups of the native peoples he "came to the conclusion that his system of translation into all these languages, on account of their inner affinity, might and should be the same for all the native tribes. He wrote:

If this difficult work should be accomplished for one of any of these languages, that is, if a given portion should be translated from Church Slavonic into any native languages, then in translating into any other of these languages you can confine yourself to a literal transposition (of the translation already made, without further reference to the Slavonic original).

Such a course, considerably shortening and facilitating the difficulty of the translations into the various native languages, may moreover be of value in this respect, that it gives a uniformity in the understanding and tendency of translations for the natives, which is of particular importance for those living in vicinity to one another.³⁴

Native Alphabets

In his language planning for the various native groups, his work on alphabets of the different native groups was far-reaching and in all cases outstanding.

He created an alphabet for Tatar and also was involved in the development of the Kazakh alphabet. He directed the development of the Chuvash alphabet

and took part in devising and correcting existing alphabets for the natives of the Volga region as well as Siberia, including the Mari, Udmurt, Yakut, Buryat, and the Khakass. His alphabets and primers were also used by other linguists, including Egorov, the writer of the first Khanty primer in 1897.³⁵

Nikolai based his alphabets on Cyrillic letters although modifications were carried out for each different language so as to maintain each tongue's uniqueness. The use of only one alphabet for all peoples of the empire was rejected outright by Il'minskii, stating that such an idea was both constraining and despotic.³⁶ He regarded the Arabic alphabet as having too close an association with Islamic culture to be used for Orthodox writings. He rejected Mongolian script for similar reasons.

NATIVES HELP WITH IL'MINSKII THE GUIDE

"My desire is for the natives to experience an inner rebirth that originates and grows in the depth of the heart".³⁷

Active Involvement

Il'minskii's emphasis on "the living, spoken language of the people"³⁸ meant that native teachers had to be employed as well as priests and translators: "Only when the natives cease being passive recipients of exhortations and their leaders and men of talent take an active part in promoting enlightenment, will the success of native Christian education be assured".³⁹

Most of the translators working for the Kazan Commission were therefore non-Russian and included, among others, natives from the Altai, Chuvash, Mari, and Yakuts. These natives periodically had to return to their villages to preserve vital links with their people. A typical example of Il'minskii's insistence on this was his condition for accepting Kalmyk students to his Teacher's Seminary in Kazan. To their bishop he said, "Every year they must be taken to your steppe or to their birthplace so that they can refresh both body and soul and not forget their language".⁴⁰

An Invaluable Helper and Friend

Il'minskii's greatest assistance came from a baptized Tatar by the name of Vasilii Timofeev. His choice of

Timofeev proved to be a momentous decision and one that led to a life-time association and friendship.

Il'minskii came across Timofeev "by chance" and brought him from his village to Kazan and "for want of another place, placed him in a convent as a bell-ringer and water carrier".⁴¹ "Soon, however, he was appointed instructor of the Tatar conversational language at the Ecclesiastical Academy, and from that time he became Il'minskii's constant assistant in all his Tatar translations. He had the great advantage of knowing nothing of the literary Tatar language and was thus quite outside any influence of [Islamic] Arabicisms".⁴²

Timofeev was to prove invaluable for Il'minskii's work of translation. In referring to his indispensable helper, Il'minskii said: "I am a linguist and translator in constant need of Timofeev just as an artist needs a live model".⁴³

A Native Acknowledgement

As to the natives themselves, they saw Il'minskii as a man not only of special talents, but of special heart, and a heart for people. A native Chuvash linguist of the Soviet period once stated that "if not for him [Il'minskii] all of us would have remained illiterate; if not for him all the Chuvash and other Volga peoples would still be living in pitch darkness".⁴⁴

On the occasion of the first issue of the very first Chuvash language newspaper, the front page editorial declared that: "if not for Nikolai Ivanovich [Il'minskii] we couldn't even think of publishing a newspaper in Chuvash".⁴⁵

Il'minskii The Guide

In 1868, Il'minskii took the leadership of a new committee, formed especially for the task of translating and publishing the Holy Scriptures, the liturgical books, and educational works, in accordance with his system. The committee was supported by the Brotherhood of St Gurius, founded in Kazan in 1867 and then by the Orthodox Missionary Society in 1876.

With such support Il'minskii's system soon spread outwards from the Kazan region. In time, "he came to be

regarded as the only authoritative expert of his kind in the knowledge of the native languages and dialects".⁴⁶

He unceasingly continued to direct the work of translation undertaken in connection with missionary labours throughout the confines of Russia. Wherever it went on, the inspiring influence of Il'minskii was at once felt. Without his directions, instructions, and advice no one ventured to undertake either the study of the languages, or the compilation of grammars and dictionaries, or the direction of the work of translation. He was a sort of universal expert in all missionary questions, and a general guide for all those labouring in the mission field and amongst the native races.

Bishop Dionysius, the eminent scholar and compiler of the Yakut grammar, kept up a learned correspondence with him for twenty years. The missionary workers of Altai, Bishops Vladimir and Macarius, constantly had recourse to him for help.

Of the specialists in the Tatar, Chuvash, Marai, Mordvinian [and other languages] he was continually sought for guidance.⁴⁷

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His influence was seen even further afield in the work of none other than St Nicholas of Japan, founder of the Japanese Orthodox Church.

Even the renowned missionary to Alaska, St Innocent, as Metropolitan of Moscow and head of the Russian Orthodox Missionary Society was a friend and associate of Il'minskii and would often visit with Il'minskii whenever he was in Kazan.

THE KAZAN TRANSLATION COMMITTEE

The First Publication in Popular Tatar

Under his own initiative Il'minskii began work on a primer for the baptized Tatars. He wrote it entirely in the vernacular, using Russian characters. It was published in Kazan in the year 1862.

It was a significant moment for the

Tatar people, for the work of Russian Orthodox mission and for Il'minskii himself.

This primer was and remains a testimony of one man's faith; a man who leant not on his own understanding, but trusted in God. The one true God who promised that his Word once sent forth would not return to him without having first fulfilled the purpose for which it was sent.

More Publications

Further publications soon followed the primer including the book of Genesis, the Book of Jesus the Son of Sirach, "Elementary Lessons in the Russian language for Tartars", and the Gospel according to St Matthew.

These works were published almost entirely at Il'minskii's expense, and for the most part distributed free.

A Native Library

The efforts of the Translation Committee very rapidly resulted in a whole library of native language publications. Included among them were the "Holy Scriptures, educational works and text-books in the Tartar, Yakut, Buryat-Evenk, Nanai, Udmurt, Mordvinian, Mari, Selkup, and Kazakh languages".⁴⁸

Il'minskii's efforts and those of his followers were unsurpassed. Their contribution to the development of many of the different languages is obvious. Soviet references cite their involvement in the study and development of nearly all Turkic, Finno-Ugric and Far Northern languages.⁴⁹

A Remarkable Achievement

During the fifty years of its establishment, the Il'minskii Translating Commission produced a remarkable number of publications, in many different languages. The publications included devotional materials, dictionaries, grammars, and sometimes, even writings of native folklore. Also published were booklets against drunkenness, on cholera, trachoma and other diseases.

By the end of the 19th century, the Kazan Translation Committee had produced a remarkable achievement. In

just on thirty years, translations had been published in twenty native languages, including Tatar, Chuvash, Mari, Udmurt, Mordvinian, Kazakh, Bashkir, Calmuck, Permians, Altai, Buryat, Evenk, Nanai, Yakut, Selkup, Chukchi, Arabic, Persian, Avar, and Azerbaidzhan.⁵⁰

Through their work the Gospel thus spread through north-eastern Russia, the Volga region, the Caucasus, into Central Asia and Siberia. By 1899 the number of copies of publications and translations printed in native languages issued by the Committee reached 1,599,385.⁵¹

The Work Expands

Il'minskii's work of mission centred entirely on languages and the problems associated with translation. As his work progressed he saw more the enormity of need and scope of the work before him. Thus in 1870 he resigned from both the university and the Kazan academy to fully concentrate on his mission. God had given him special gifts and he was committed to fully use them for the sake of the Gospel in the area he knew best.

Work began to be produced from different centers, as the enormity of its scope required decentralization. Centers were formed in Simbirsk for the Chuvash, for example, in Archangel for translation of the sacred, liturgical and educational books in the Komi, Karelian, Lapp, and Samoyed languages, in the Altai for the Altai and in Yakutsk for the Yakut translations.

Integrity Of Language

In all respects he emphasized the need to respect the integrity of a language. Il'minskii's concern for the integrity of a given language was not only linguistically motivated but was also missionary. He said "Translations that violate the spirit of the language cannot reach the inner heart, nor enliven the spirit".⁵²

Il'minskii took the existing popular vernacular of a particular area as his standard language form.⁵³ He viewed language as something organic to each people. He saw that the use of its popular form in biblical and liturgical text translations would enhance the speed and depth of reception of the gospel. Here he diverged significantly

from his past teacher, professor Bek, who used a literary language known only to the educated natives, which were always by far the minority.

Where there were great variations in dialect between different areas he used more than one for the written standard. For example, his Kazan Translation Commission published Mari (Cheremis) works in three separate dialects.⁵⁴

Foreign Words

Where necessary, he used in his translations words introduced previously into the native's language and accepted by the natives themselves. Thus at times he used both Russian and Arabic terms. In these cases however, he employed them only in popular meaning. He was otherwise cautious with Arabic words because he wished to avoid where possible all Muslim influence from the natives.

He used the same approach when translating into Buryat and Kalmyk. He excluded, for example, scholarly Mongolian but used shamanistic or Buddhist terms that had already been accepted by the people.

A Thorough Worker

His painstaking concern for right translation produced fruit. He prepared all his translations with great care and continually revised and tested them. Even a Soviet evaluation conceded the excellence of his work, which were said to be "Notable for their accuracy and easy comprehensibility by the broad rural masses".⁵⁵

Il'minskii's efforts were untiring, his abilities and dedication to all aspects of his mission incredible.

Native Intelligentsia

Because of Il'minskii's revolutionary work natives, previously without a literary culture "for the first time acquired the basic cultural tool and the beginning of a nation's intelligentsia capable of using it".⁵⁶ All this of course was a "side benefit", as he always directed his efforts for the the conversion of all peoples in the Russian empire.

Even in those cultures with existing literary writing and rich cultures, Il'minskii had an effect. Through his

work many reforms were undertaken in attitudes towards language and education.

His effectiveness is seen in the response of Muslims to his work. Muslims were alarmed by the inroads made by Orthodoxy as a result of his work and set about reforming their own religion to increase its access for the different nationalities.

Some of its reformers were in fact accused by the more conservative Muslims of promoting Il'minskii's system.⁵⁷

His influence was understandably greatest in the Kazan district as this is where he had established his main base. He is credited with not only enhancing the languages of the Chuvash, Udmurt and Mari, but also prompting increased interest in these nationalities—in their own past, customs and culture".⁵⁸ This particular endorsement of his work was made by one of his critics.

NATIVE EDUCATION

"The basic point in native education is very simple. It consists of teaching native children in their own language in the most readily understood form, and in publishing special native language books for class and home use." (Il'minskii)⁵⁹

Spark For Missions Revival

In 1863, Il'minskii, with the invaluable assistance of Timofeev, extended his influence on the course of Russian Orthodox missions by introducing a system of native education. It was an influence that was to fan the flames of a revival of missions. His educational system, designed initially for the education of the baptized Tatars of the Kazan region, revolutionized not only the system of education of the Tatars but of other natives as well throughout the entire Russian empire. The system was to become known as "Il'minskii's system of native education".⁶⁰

The appointment of Timofeev as a tutor in spoken Tatar, a privileged position held previously only by highly educated Muslims, had the effect of gaining the confidence of other Tatar natives who began sending their children to Timofeev for teaching. His first pupils were three Tatar boys, brought to him for instruction in reading and writing.

"Placing them amongst his family, in

a poor, narrow, underground lodging, Timofeev, under Il'minskii's guidance, took up the work of teacher. He was very successful, so much so that in the following year it became necessary to open a regular organized school in Kazan".⁶¹

Small Beginnings

Timofeev first set up school in his apartment basement in 1863—one year after the publication of the first Tatar Primer. To the onlooker, it would have appeared to be a day of small beginnings. Indeed it was, but it was also the beginnings of the famed "Kazan Central Baptized-Tatar School", which was to become the model for all non-Russian schools throughout the Russian empire.

With Timofeev as teacher, the use of Tatar as the primary medium of instruction was quite natural. Yet, at the same time, it was revolutionary. Using the vernacular as a medium of instruction of the native population was quite unique during this period of Russian history.

Il'minskii's main involvement was to help Timofeev by preparing all the required written materials. The resultant handwritten sheets eventually became published textbooks. He also greatly assisted this work in obtaining official backing from the procurator of the Holy Synod as well as the minister of education.⁶²

Rapid Growth

The number of pupils grew rapidly. "In 1864 there were 19 boys studying in it and one girl, in 1865 40 boys and 2 girls, in 1866 60 boys and 5 girls".⁶³ In 1875, there were 113 students with 78 boys and 35 girls.⁶⁴

What was unique for the time was that the schools still remained autonomous and free from outside control. The rapid spread of the schools was thus greatly enhanced.

Success Acknowledged

The school soon became famous and as a result other schools opened up in villages throughout the Kazan region. Of remarkable achievement in this expansion was the fact that these non-

schools were led by Timofeev's students.

So successful was the work that the minister of education in 1870 officially adopted the Kazan school approach for its non-Russian schools in the eastern borderlands.⁶⁵ Use of the vernacular in all schools, however, still had to be fought for as bureaucracy and nationalism erected barriers to be overcome.

To the onlooker, it would have appeared to be a day of small beginnings. Indeed it was, but it was also the beginnings of the famed "Kazan Central Baptized-Tatar School", which was to become the model for all non-Russian schools throughout the Russian empire.

Influential Support

The Kazan Guri brotherhood, formed in 1867, did much to assist this new enterprise. Its reason for being established had been to financially support the enlightenment of the baptized natives. As such it automatically began to support Il'minskii's schools for the non-Russian baptized natives in the Kazan area.

An even greater influence in seeing the schools expand to native groups throughout the Russian empire was the patronage afforded the Commission by the Russian Orthodox Missionary Society in 1876, led by the famed missionary to Alaska, Archbishop Innocent. This patronage provided the Commission with a far greater financial and geographical base upon which to operate.

By this time Kazan had unquestionably become the center of Russian Orthodox missionary activity, with Il'minskii in the lead, "appearing everywhere as the leader and guiding spirit of the closest workers in the Russian mission field".⁶⁶

Reasons For Success

The success of these schools was due in a large measure to its principles of operation. These included:⁶⁷

1. The school was to be of the simplest and plainest, reminding the children of life in their native villages.

2. It was to be entirely a family life, under the closest fatherly supervision of their teacher, who would live together with the children.

3. It was strictly religious.

"The children lived together, studied together, learnt to read and sing the prayers together, said the prescribed morning and evening supplications together, attended the services of the Church together, and played their childish games together".⁶⁸

"The entire instruction was carried on in the popular Tatar language, which was at the basis of all the school teaching".⁶⁹

"The chief subjects—religion, the prayers, sacred history, and a short catechism—were carried on by means of manuals, printed in the popular Tatar language, but in Russian characters".⁷⁰

Some students who showed good progress were also taught the first rules of arithmetic, history, geography, etc. The students also gradually learnt the Russian language. They sang the prayers of matins and vespers set to music, and the liturgy, all of which had been translated by Il'minskii into the popular Tatar language.

The Liturgy In Tatar

The possibility of celebrating Divine Services in this language emerged naturally at this time. The entire Liturgy was first celebrated in the Tatar language "in Kazan on the Saturday of the first week of Lent of the year 1869, when the pupils, both male and female, after due preparation, received the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ".⁷¹

First Tatar Priest

So as to fully revive the missionary method of St Stephen of Perm one more thing was required—to ordain a native into the priesthood thereby establishing the rich Orthodox tradition of training indigenous clergy for the best care of the native flock.

The honour was rightly given to none other than Timofeev, Il'minskii's faithful and invaluable native assistant. Thus the Tatars were able to celebrate the Liturgy in their own tongue and

with their own priests.

Worship in Many Tongues

In time other Tatars as well as natives of other tribes, including the Chuvash, Mari, and Votyak, were ordained into the clergy and celebrated the liturgy in their mother tongues.

At the turn of the century "In the dioceses of Kazan, Simbirsk, Samara, Orenburg, Oufa, and Viatka there are many villages and hamlets where all the Church services are celebrated entirely in the Tartar, Chuvash, and other dialects".⁷² In both Yakutia and the Altai services in the vernacular were by this time standard practice.

During the lifetime of Il'minskii no less than 48 Tartar priests were ordained along with six deacons. Of the Chuvash there were eight priests and two deacons. From the Mari, there were three priests and six deacons and from the Votyak two priests. In all the total number of clergy was 75.

To appreciate just how rapid the process of the use of native tongues in worship was, consider the Orthodox diocese of Samara. In 1899, there were 128 clergy who knew the Chuvash language fluently; 74 priests (47 of whom were Chuvash natives), 17 deacons (12 Chuvash natives), 37 readers (20 Chuvash natives). Just six years previously this language was known only to three priests.

Also in 1899, in this diocese there were 107 schoolmasters (32 Chuvash), and 16 schoolmistresses (7 Chuvash). Thus the total of people using Chuvash in religious and educational areas was 251.

The Students Become The Teachers

The students themselves began to influence their own people. During summer vacations, for example, "taking with them the Primer, the Book of Genesis, the Wisdom of Sirach, and singing the Paschal Canon, the pupilswent from village to village, and everywhere the people flocked in crowds to listen to their singing and reading".⁷³

"The joy of the village inhabitants was general, and the school influence became still greater when the pupils at the termination of the course of studies were changed into teachers and began to open missionary schools in the Tatar villages, and teach the Tatar children in

accordance with Il'minskii's system and manuals".⁷⁴

The Kazan school by its very example and success became the central school for baptized Tatars and moreover served as a model for all missionary schools

A Base for Expansion

In 1872, Il'minskii was made director of the newly formed Native Teaching Seminary in Kazan, placing him head of all native education in the Kazan region. From this position he was able to direct and impart his vision and system of education throughout the Kazan district which gradually became covered with a complete network of missionary schools. Neighboring dioceses also began to adopt Il'minskii's system, under his direction, as did other native groups, such as Chuvash, Mari, and Votyak children. In time they were also converted into central schools from which teachers, male and female, were sent out for the missionary schools. In this manner schools were developed amongst native tribes throughout the eastern dioceses of European Russia and into Siberia as well.

A CONCLUSION WITH A CHALLENGE

To Conclude

Il'minskii "opened a new epoch of missionary labour for the whole of Eastern Russia".⁷⁵ He directed Russian missionaries to carry "the enlightenment of Christianity into the dark centres of the native population".⁷⁶

He devised means and methods for the enlightenment of the natives, which led to the adoption of the living, speaking tongue of the people, to the translation of the sacred, liturgical, and educational books into their dialects, to missionary schools with a complete system of native instruction, and to celebration of the Church services in the same native languages.⁷⁷

Through the assistance of these means and methods he communicated to the natives both Russian culture and Russian Orthodoxy to such a degree that he created from amongst them: teachers in the missionary schools as well as priests, preaching the Word of God and celebrating the Sacraments of the Church amongst their own kindred in body and soul—that is, the best and most natural missionaries for their further enlightenment.⁷⁸

To Challenge

The challenge that the life and work of Nikolai Il'minskii presents to us is as simple as the challenge the Lord presented him: Make full use of your talents, your gifts, for the glory of God; preach the Good News to all who would be saved; reach out to all nations, all peoples, all tribes, all tongues, so that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!

Nikolai was not a member of the clergy. He was a layman—a lay academic. But he knew the simple truth that the missionary work of the Orthodox Church was for all members—clergy and laity alike.

He was a friend, as noted, of many great missionary priests and monks: St Nicholas of Japan, St Innocent of Alaska, Macarius of the Altai, Dionysius of Yakutia and many others. What a host of witnesses! It is a host that Il'minskii is rightly part of.

Consider the words of St Nicholas of Japan. Referring to Il'minskii he said: "I consider his counsels to be the foundation of my missionary convictions and activities".⁷⁹ When one considers that St: Nicholas himself has been described as "the outstanding Christian missionary of the nineteenth century",⁸⁰ these simple words take on profound meaning.

Nikolai Il'minskii is a worthy member of that great host of witnesses that light our path as we go forth to preach the good news of the kingdom of our Christ.

He had heard the call of God to "Go therefore" and he was obedient to it. He knew he had a role to play—a duty to perform—and perform it he did. He was a faithful servant.

He worked as so many others in Russia's history have for the Gospel of Christ, for the salvation of all who would believe on the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. He worked in the Spirit of St Stephen of Perm, indeed, in the Spirit of Pentecost! ■

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ENDNOTES

1. Kreindler, I., "Educational Policies Toward The Eastern Nationalities In Tsarist Russia; A Study of Il'minskii's System". Ph.D. Thesis, Columbia University, New York, 1969, Abstract.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid, p. 6.

6. Ibid, Abstract.

7. Ibid, p. 6.

8. Ibid, p. 6.

9. Ibid, p. 6.

10. Ibid, p. 10.

11. Smirnov, E., *Russian Orthodox Missions*, Stylite Pub. Ltd., 1986 (first pub. 1903, Rivingtons), p. 30.

12. Ibid. p. 30.

13. Ibid. p. 30.

14. Kreindler, I., "Nikolai Il'minskii and Language Planning in Nineteenth-Century Russia", *Intl. J. Soc. Lang.* 22, 1979, p. 19.

15. Florovsky, G., *Aspects of Church History; Russian Missions: An Historical Sketch*. Collected Works, Vol. 4, Nordland Pub. Co., Mass., U.S.A., 1975, p. 154.

16. Ibid, p. 154.

17. Ever since the subjugation of Kazan in the mid-16th century, the state had endeavoured to use the Church as an arm of colonization. The outcome was that many natives had become nominal converts to the Orthodox faith. The heavy state restrictions placed on missions in the 19th century resulted in the removal from the field of most missionaries. Without constant spiritual guidance therefore, the natives returned to their pagan beliefs, or became converts to Islam or Buddhism.

18. Kreindler, op. cit., p.6.

19. Stamoolis, J., *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*, Orbis Books, New York, 1986, p. 32.

20. Kreindler, op. cit., p. 6.

21. Ibid.

22. Florovsky, op. cit., p. 154.

23. The literary Tatar language was a vehicle for Islam. For example, it contained many Arabic and Persian words heavily influenced by Islam. This "high" language form was used only by educated Tatars. Thus to proselytize, Muslims established schools in Tatar villages, instructing them in this form

and bringing them into Islam. Christian writings in the educated Tatar tongue, even when understood by educated natives, only served the aims of Islam. Arabic script was in itself associated with the teachings of Islam. Quote is from Smirnov, E., op. cit., p. 33.

24. Ibid, p. 23.

25. Kreindler, op. cit., p. 6.

26. Ibid, p. 6.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid, p. 8.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Smirnov, op. cit., p. 34.

33. Kreindler, op. cit., p. 11.

34. Smirnov, op. cit., p. 35.

35. Kreindler, op. cit., p. 11.

36. Ibid, p. 15.

37. Ibid, p. 1.

38. Ibid, p. 12.

39. Ibid, p. 13.

40. Ibid.

41. Smirnov, op. cit., p. 36.

42. Ibid.

43. Kreindler, op. cit., p. 8.

44. Ibid, p. 11.

45. Ibid, p. 17.

46. Smirnov, op. cit., p. 37.

47. Ibid, p. 38.

48. Ibid, p. 39.

49. Kreindler, op. cit., p. 15.

50. Smirnov, op. cit., p. 48.

51. Ibid.

52. Kreindler, op. cit., p. 11.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid, p. 12.

55. Ibid, p. 13.

56. Ibid, p. 16.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid, p. 10.

60. Ibid, p. 8.

61. Smirnov, op. cit., p. 40.

62. Kreindler, op. cit., p. 9.

63. Smirnov, op. cit., p. 40.

64. Ibid, p. 42.

65. Kreindler, op. cit., p. 9.

66. Ibid.

67. Smirnov, op. cit., p. 40-1.

68. Ibid, p. 41.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid, p. 44.

72. Ibid, p. 49.

73. Ibid, p. 41.

74. Ibid, pp. 41-2.

75. Ibid, p. 46.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid, pp. 46-7.

78. Ibid, p. 47.

79. Kreindler, 1979, op. cit., p. 19.

80. Neill, S., *A History of Christian Missions*, (Penguin Books, 1964), p. 447: a quote from H. Tucker, *The History of the Episcopal Church in Japan*, 1938, p. 102.

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