

To Win the Languages Race With

Russia

One of our chief handicaps in making friends in foreign lands is that we don't talk their language. At the moment, the linguistic-minded Russians

By JACOB ORNSTEIN

CPYRGHT

IN a small Vietnamese village a Red agitator addresses a group of peasants. Gesticulating animatedly, he lashes out against American "imperialism" and extols the virtues of communism. He is talking to his listeners in their own language—and, moreover, in the particular dialect of the area. In Moscow, tots of 6 to 7 in several elementary schools do their recitations in English. They are being groomed to become speakers of English and experts in the English-speaking world.

The Communist domain is increasing its linguistic firepower. Radio Moscow blasts forth in more than a hundred tongues, carrying the message of militant Marxism to the remotest areas of the globe. The Soviet Institute of Foreign Languages trains the cream of Russia's linguistically inclined youth in several hundred languages, ranging from Danish to Swahili. The Soviet State Foreign Language Publishing House is feverishly preparing dictionaries and texts in over eighty foreign languages.

The already demanding language requirements in Soviet schools have been made stiffer. If Ivan wishes to attend a *univ*, or higher educational institution, he must usually pass an entrance examination in a foreign language, preferably English. A recent text for the study of English states, "A Soviet officer must be * * * stronger in technique than his enemy. He must know * * * especially mathematics, physics and languages."

A LOOK at our own linguistic situation reveals a picture of a different sort. Thrust into a position of world leadership by World War II, we have found ourselves woefully underprepared from the linguistic viewpoint for this role. More than a decade after the war we completely lack real language experts for numerous sensitive areas of the world. A survey recently completed by the writer and published by the State Department's External Research Staff, revealed that only 165 of America's nearly 1,800 colleges teach Russian—

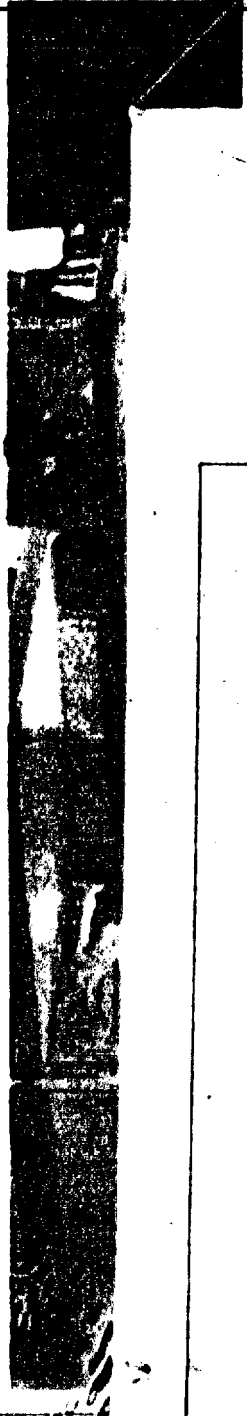
representatives abroad can even carry on a passable conversation in the language of the host country, much less analyze a newspaper editorial indicating which way the political winds may be blowing. Add to this the ignorance of area background and local customs, compound it further with the ill-concealed disdain for alien cultures of a small but harmful minority of Americans abroad, and you have the ingredients of a formula for alienating foreign peoples.

A DIPLOMAT returning from Libya, in the sensitive and critical Moslem area, reported that the Russians moved into that country with a mission of fifteen Arabic-speaking diplomats. The United States mission had only one language officer, who was shortly thereafter transferred to a post outside the Arabic-speaking world.

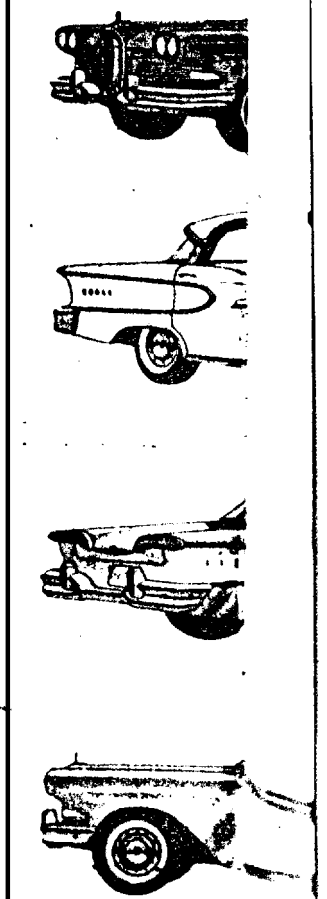
One illustration of the ridiculous and dangerous consequences of language unpreparedness came from Indonesia some years ago. Until 1949 all translating for the American Embassy in Indonesia was done by natives. To please their employers, the translators interpreted everything to make local comment sound friendly and pro-American. But when American language-area experts arrived and began to read Indonesian newspapers and attend sessions of the Legislature, the embassy learned with dismay that strong anti-American feeling was sweeping that country.

Repeated statements by our diplomatic spokesmen have pointed up the handicap which the lack of language knowledge imposes upon overseas personnel. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles has said: "The United States today carries new responsibilities in many quarters of the globe. We are at a serious disadvantage because of the difficulty of finding persons who can deal with the foreign language problem."

A letter to Washington headquarters from a United States Information Service officer stationed in Tehran



CPYRGHT



CPYRGHT
Edsel Ford

