Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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In August 1961, a curious event occurred, referred to by the New York Times as a one-round victory of the Yiddish language “in the struggle with the Kremlin.”\(^1\) for the first time in thirteen years, and nine years after the Stalinist purge of the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia, a Yiddish periodical called *Sovetish Heymland* (Soviet Homeland) appeared in the Soviet Union. A year earlier, editor-to-be Arn Vergelis had written a letter to Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party, requesting the creation of a Yiddish-language periodical to cater to the several hundreds of thousands of Soviet Yiddish-speakers and a potential worldwide readership. From 1961 until 1991, this highbrow political and literary journal would be the monthly, state-sponsored hub of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union.\(^2\)

Not only did the journal satisfy the need for the cultural expression of Soviet Yiddish literati and (contributing) readers, it was also meant as the weapon of the “Soviet Yiddish front in the Cold War” for persuading Jews worldwide of the benefits of Soviet communism.\(^3\) The (however limited) autonomy of Yiddish discourse within the Soviet Union combined with the journal’s global mis-

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\(^{2}\) The journal started out as a bi-monthly publication.


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sion meant that Soviet Yiddish succeeded on another intra-Soviet “battlefield.” From its very start, *Sovetish Heymland* was fertile soil for a lively discourse on the great cataclysm of Soviet Jewry—the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. While never actively repudiated or completely erased, outside of the pages of *Sovetish Heymland* the specifically Jewish catastrophe of the Second World War was otherwise of rather marginal importance in the emerging state-propagated cult of the “Great Patriotic War.” For Jewish communities worldwide, conversely, this topic was at the center of postwar (re)construction.

A comprehensive account of the engagement with the Holocaust in the pages of the Soviet Yiddish journal during its thirty years of existence is beyond the scope here. The Soviet party-line towards the Holocaust was as variable as Soviet Jewish confrontations with it—there was neither a coherent and linear policy of suppression regarding the Holocaust in public discourse, nor was there a monolithic Soviet Jewish coming-to-terms with it. Therefore, the following pages will spotlight only one specific chapter: *Sovetish Heymland*’s coverage of Soviet Jewish initiatives to commemorate the Holocaust through the erection of monuments during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which Gennady Estraikh has called “a unique form of Jewish independent activity in the Soviet Union” analogous to the concept of the American *landsmanshaftn*. These activities coincided with a steadily growing war cult which, besides literary works, poetry, memoirs, and

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4 Per Alexander Pomerantz, who summarized the contents of the journal’s first two issues, among 68 “non-ideological” poems (vs. 85 “purely ideological” ones) 13 were devoted to the Holocaust; among the 19 “non-ideological” prosaic texts (vs. 24 “purely ideological” stories) 6 were about the Holocaust; see Alexander Pomerantz, *Di sovetishe haruge-malkhe* [The martyred Soviet Jewish writers] (Buenos-Aires: YIVO, 1962), 97; mentioned in Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 89.

5 The Second World War had been proclaimed the “Great Patriotic War” by Stalin himself, deliberately invoking the victorious “Patriotic War” against Napoleon of 1812. See Jochen Hellbeck, “War and Peace for the Twentieth Century,” *Raritan* 26, no. 4 (Spring 2007): 24–48.

6 There were few examples of officially approved publications by Soviet Jewish authors writing in Russian that focused on experiences of the Holocaust. See for example, Masha Rol’nikaitė’s 1964 *Ya dolzhna rasika-zat* [I have to tell], Anatolii Rybakov’s 1979 novel *Tyazhelyi pesok* (Heavy Sand), Grigori Kanovich’s 1979 *Svechi na vetru* (Candles in the wind); on the publication history of Rol’nikaitė’s memoir, see Boris Frezinsky, “Il’ia Erenburg I devnik Mashi Rol’nikaitė,” *Narod knigi v mire knig* (October 2009), online, accessed February 24, 2019, http://www.narodknigi.ru/journals/82/ilya_erenburg_i_dnevnik_mashi_rolnikai-te/; Anja Tippner, “The Writings of a Soviet Anne Frank? Masha Rol’nikaite’s Holocaust Memoir I Have to Tell and Its Place in Soviet Literature,” in *Representation of the Holocaust in Soviet Literature and Films*, ed. Marat Grinberg et al. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2013), 59–82; for more on Rybakov’s *Heavy Sand*, see Anja Tippner, “Writing a Soviet Holocaust Novel: Traumatic Memory, the Search for Documents, and the Soviet War Narrative in Anatolii Rybakov’s *Heavy Sand*” in this volume.

7 See Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 132. *Landsmanshaftn* were mutual aid societies created by Jewish immigrants in the US. In these organizations *yizker-bikher* (memorial books) about the destroyed hometown were written, which can be seen as Holocaust monuments in their own right.
films, found its “most visible artifacts” in “thousands (if not tens of thousands) of monuments” erected across the Soviet Union.8 This commemorative environment also changed the way sites of Jewish suffering could be encountered. After overcoming bureaucratic hindrances, they could now be approached and inscribed into this memorial landscape as remnants of the Soviet tragedy.9

Several advantages accrue from this microscopic approach: (1) Sovetish Heymland’s coverage is a testament to these still understudied activities by Soviet Jews in and of themselves; (2) the analysis will open up a window on the ways Soviet Jews confronted and made sense of the Holocaust in the context of Soviet memory politics; and (3) it will speak to how these activities were instrumentalized by the journal in the Cold War battle for the right kind of Holocaust interpretation and the right kind of Jewish identity in a time of increased emigration by Soviet Jews to the State of Israel and the US in the 1970s and early 1980s. As such, the journal’s coverage of Holocaust commemoration could be read as evidence that such commemorative activities (and by extension the Jewish community as a whole) were not only not suppressed in the Soviet Union but, indeed, these activities could be presented as expressions of Soviet Jewish patriotism.

Rather than the clandestine and per definitionem dissident Soviet “Holocaust” literature of Jewish samizdat or the subversive commemorative activities of refuseniks who aimed to leave the Soviet Union,10 the grey zone of Sovetish Heymland’s “conformist agency,” i.e., the engagement with the Holocaust in a

8 Citations from: Scott W. Palmer, “How Memory Was Made: The Construction of the Memorial to the Heroes of the Battle of Stalingrad,” The Russian Review 68, no. 3 (2009): 373–407, here 373. Since this article was written, the definitive study on Soviet Holocaust monuments was published by Arkadi Zeltser, see Arkadi Zeltser, Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Monuments in the Soviet Union (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2018); Zeltser does not focus on the representation in Sovetish Heymland alone and this is where I intervene. Parts of this chapter draw heavily on my dissertation that I have since defended, see Miriam Schulz, “Keyner iz nit fargesn: Soviet Yiddish Antifascism and the Holocaust,” dissertation, Columbia University, 2021.

9 For more on these activities under Stalin, see Mordechai Altshuler, “Jewish Holocaust Commemoration Activity in the USSR under Stalin,” Yad Vashem Studies 30 (Jerusalem 2002): 271–96. Yad Vashem’s initiative “The Untold Stories: The Murder Sites of the Jews in the Occupied Territories of the Former USSR” studied a huge part of Soviet Holocaust commemorative activities and disclosed the obstacles that were faced in post-Stalin monumentalization work, often leading to monument inscriptions that would not mention Jews as victims specifically. See “The Untold Stories: The Murder Sites of the Jews in the Occupied Territories of the Former USSR,” Yad Vashem, online, accessed October 25, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/untold-stories/database/homepage.asp.

10 Roughly a quarter of activists who subsequently settled in the State of Israel stated that “learning about the Holocaust and its results . . . was the necessity of developing a national consciousness and of creating frameworks for collective national activism” for the sake of leaving the Soviet Union. This number is pulled from the unpublished survey “The Sociological Characteristics of the ‘Aliya’ Activists in the Soviet Union: Awakening or Continuity,” which is introduced and discussed in Yossi Goldstein, “The Jewish National Movement in the Soviet Union: A Profile,” in Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union, ed. Yaacov Ro’i and
state-approved setting, provides a barometer for the complexities of Holocaust memory of Jewish “insiders” who situated themselves within the Soviet system. As we will see, they were engaged in an alternative memory discourse, albeit a limited one, within the legitimate framework of Soviet Yiddish culture.

Yiddish in Postwar Soviet Union

In the early 1960s, Khrushchev’s “gesture” of recognition towards Soviet Jews by providing them with a mere literary outlet clearly did not stem from a desire to fully revitalize Soviet Yiddish culture, which late Stalinism (1948–1952) had virtually destroyed. It was primarily a means of containment of Soviet Yiddish culture and the product of increasing international pressure to stop the suppression of the Jewish minority unleashed under Stalin in 1948. Yet, apart from Khrushchev’s appeasement policy, why did the only state-approved Jewish magazine appear in Yiddish, not in Russian?

Yiddish held a special place in the Soviet Jewish mindset from the very beginning of Soviet state-building. In the years following the October Revolution, the new state installed ethnically identified intelligentsias as “cultural translators”—among them a Jewish intelligentsia operating in Yiddish—tasked with bringing Soviet ideology and culture to their ethnic constituency in their own vernacular for the sake of unifying a vast multiethnic state. By 1919, the authorities declared Yiddish the national tongue of Soviet Jewry and made it the primary marker of a secular Soviet Jewish collective identity, ousting its long-held rival Hebrew, which was seen as a symbol for everything that Soviet Jews had to overcome: Jewish religiosity and bourgeois nationalism, primarily in the form of Zionism. To be sure, Yiddish’s meteoric rise in status disregarded not only the

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11 Gleb Tsipursky describes the “conscious or willing decision, stemming primarily from one’s internal motivations and desires, to act in ways that closely follow top-level guidelines.” Applied to Holocaust coverage in Sovietish Heymland, we can deduce that it was read as being in conformity with top-down guidelines of war commemoration, see Gleb Tsipursky, Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945–1970 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 8.
