Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

Stach, Stephan, Hallama, Peter, Bohus, Kata

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Stach, Stephan, et al.

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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 *Sovetish 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.


“We Pledge, as if It Was the Highest Sanctum, to Preserve the Memory”

socio-linguistic and ethnic variety of Soviet Jewry but also the changing cultural-linguistic reality of an assimilating Soviet Jewry, which was fast moving toward the Russian language. But despite the steadily declining Yiddish reading public and even after the state-orchestrated purges, Yiddish never lost its aura as the chief indicator and “deliberate means of expressing” Soviet Jewish nationality. Thus, for the Yiddish-speaking/-reading subset of Soviet Jewry, post-Stalinist Sovetish Heymland symbolized the continuity of their Soviet Yiddish culture—including the resuming of a tradition of Soviet Yiddish responses to the Holocaust that had been started by the Jewish Antifascist Committee (JAC) in the 1940s. Indeed, “the vast majority of regular Soviet Yiddish readers were subscribers of Sovetish Heymland” beyond a doubt, despite the shifting nature of Soviet Jewish cultures and languages.

Towards a Straightening of the Lopsided Historical Record

The enduring status of Yiddish even after the Stalinist purges in the late 1940s and early 1950s has only recently been fully acknowledged by scholars such as Gennady Estraikh and Harriet Murav and led to the first scholarly discussions of Sovetish Heymland’s treatment of the Holocaust. This belatedness is a testament to the long-term effects of the myopic tendencies operative in Cold War scholarship. This myopia articulated itself, first and foremost, through simplistic juxtapositions of the Soviet regime’s alleged total silencing and successful repression of Holocaust memory with the “West’s” initially slow, but then full-frontal and dynamic embrace of it. To be sure, the Soviet regime distorted the understanding of the Holocaust as part of its memory politics and subsumed

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14 For a detailed analysis of language developments, see Mordechai Altshuler, Soviet Jewry since the Second World War: Population and Social Structure (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 22, 179–97; Mark Tolts, Yiddish in the Former Soviet Union since 1959: A Statistical-Demographic Analysis (2012), https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-fsu88. Sovetish Heymland’s circulation numbers decreased from 25,000 in 1961 to 5,000 in 1985. In the USSR, the number of a journal’s copies did not depend on the real demand of a reading public, though. Therefore, while the decrease in circulation numbers corresponds to the shrinking reading public, the authority’s decision to reduce circulation was arguably due to other reasons. For more on this, see Gennady Estraikh, “The Era of Sovetish Heymland: Readership of the Yiddish Press in the Former Soviet Union,” East European Jewish Affairs 25, no. 1 (1995): 17, 18; Chone Shmeruk, “Twenty-five Years of Sovetish Heymland: Impressions and Criticism,” in Jewish Culture and Identity, 201.

15 Altshuler, Soviet Jewry since the Second World War, 180.


17 See, for example, Harriet Murav, Music from a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Estraikh, Yiddish in the Cold War; Shmeruk, “Twenty-five Years of Sovetish Heymland: Impressions and Criticism.”