Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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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.”
the particular Jewish tragedy within the greater torment of the Second World War; the 2.5–2.7 million Soviet Jewish Holocaust victims were simply folded into the 26.6 million Soviet war victims (military and civilian) in total.\textsuperscript{18} At least since the 1960s, there was a concerted effort from above to fit the Nazi genocide of Europe’s Jews into a war cult that soon dominated all realms of the Soviet (Russian-speaking) commemorative culture. This war cult succeeded in overshadowing even the October Revolution as the vindicating event of the Soviet system itself and portrayed the Soviet Union, rather than Europe’s Jews, as the primary target of Nazi Germany.\textsuperscript{19}

What this image of top-down Soviet memory policies overlooks, however, is the bottom-up participation in Holocaust commemoration from Soviet Jewish/Yiddish insiders themselves. In addition to simplifying binaries in Soviet memory studies, scholarly enquiries of post-Stalin Soviet Jewry fell victim to certain paradigms that dichotomized this diverse community into two opposing camps: Jewish victims of the Soviet regime in want of (Zionist) rescue whose identity was allegedly formed by and large by their experience of the Holocaust versus anti-Zionist denouncers, who actively or passively betrayed and collaborated in the destruction of “their” Jewish culture.\textsuperscript{20} This dichotomy, it could be argued, was a mirror image of the Cold War binaries writ large.

\textit{Sovetish Heymland}’s editor-in-chief Arn Vergelis is arguably the most prominent figure to become a casualty of this zero-sum logic. Vergelis was vilified in


Western Jewish discourses as a toxic *apparatchik* who collaborated in the destruction of Soviet Jewish culture as early as the late 1940s by allegedly denouncing veteran Yiddish literati who were murdered on August 12, 1952. In 1961, Western onlookers suggested that he continued this destruction by usurping their legacy and becoming the editor of *Sovetish Heymland*—the authorities’ alleged mouthpiece. Others defended Vergelis “as a committed communist and anti-Zionist who tried to preserve the remnants of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union.” An “objective” biography of Vergelis is yet to be written, but as he himself noted in September 1994 with the privilege of hindsight:

> You, like others, will in the future evaluate what I did or did not do in the course of my life. But one does not have to see everything as either black or white. Keep in mind that I acted under specific conditions, at a specific time and place. . . . What is true is that I was and remain a committed Communist. However, I also was and remain a Jew who has felt the pain of his people. I defended them and devotedly served our *mameloshn*.[sic] I did what others could not do or did not want to do. . . . As for the authorities, they were occupied with their matters and I—with mine.

What can be established is that the authorities considered Vergelis the best suitable candidate for the editorship of *Sovetish Heymland* since (1) he was an experienced editor; (2) he had spent his youth in Birobidzhan and was considered a representative of the Jewish Autonomous Region; (3) he was a veteran of the “Great Patriotic War;” and (4) he was an intellectual without gulag experience. Thus, he was deemed fitter for foreign contacts and trips as a “cultural diplomat” than the recently rehabilitated Soviet Yiddish gulag returnees. Indeed, the “authorities permitted him to amalgamate the function of editor and [sole] censor” of the jour-

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24 *Mameloshn* means “mother tongue” and refers specifically to the Yiddish language.

nal—perhaps because (1) he was considered so trustworthy, (2) his enterprise so unimportant, or (3) there simply was no other censor competent enough in Yiddish.\(^{16}\) Whatever the reason may be, Vergelis was autonomous in editing and was not monitored by Glavlit—the Soviet censorship authority over printed material. Therefore, when it comes to the abundance of de facto existing Holocaust-related material in *Sovetish Heymland*, it was approved by Vergelis and Vergelis alone.

### A Monument over Babyn Yar

A relevant case in point for this chapter might be Vergelis’s article “*Der denkmol in Babi Yar vet shteyn ledoyres*” (*The Babyn Yar monument will stand forever*) published in *Sovetish Heymland*’s June issue of 1975. In it, he celebrates the coming unveiling of the Babyn Yar memorial and offers his readers a sneak preview of the monument.\(^27\) This article was part of a wide Soviet public debate about the German mass murder of Kyiv’s Jews,\(^28\) which had been ongoing for over five decades.\(^29\) The most important public breakthrough was Yevgeni Yevtushenko’s 1961 poem “Babi Yar” in which the poet—a committed communist himself and not a dissident despite what liberal histories tell us—lamented the lack of a monument as a Soviet turn away from Marxist-Leninist ideals back to

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\(^{26}\) Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 82.


\(^{28}\) On September 29–30, 1941, Einsatzgruppe C killed 33,771 Jewish men, women, and children at the ravine Babyn Yar at the North-Western outskirts of Kyiv. Until Kyiv was liberated in 1943, there were several successive executions of Kyiv residents regardless of ethnicities, massacres of more Jews, Roma, POW, concentration camp inmates, etc. Historians continue to debate the number of victims and estimate it between 33,771 and 150,000 people. They agree that the majority were of Jewish descent. See Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004), 65–68; Jeff Mankoff, “Babi Yar and the Struggle for Memory, 1944–2004,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2004): 393–415; Vitalii Nakhmanovych, Anatolii Podolskyi, and Mykhailo Tyaglyi, eds., *Babyn Yar: Masowe ubyvstvo i pamjat’ pro n’oho; Materialy mizhnarodnoi naukovoi konferentsii 24–25 zhotovi 2011 r., m. Kyiv* [Babyn Yar: Mass murder and memory about new; Proceedings of the international scientific conference on June 24–25, 2011, in Kyiv] (Kyiv: Ukrain’sky i tsentr vyvchennia istorii Holokostu, 2012).