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Kyiv as a Center of Soviet Jewish Culture in the 1920s-1930s

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Kyiv was one of the two largest centers of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union (the other was Minsk). Several factors in the recent history of Jews in Kyiv supported creation of Soviet Yiddish cultural and research institutions and organizations in the city. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Kyiv Jewish community was one of the wealthiest in the Russian Empire and had a large percentage of intelligentsia.¹ This high concentration of wealthy and well-educated Jews was created by imperial laws that kept the city outside of, but surrounded by, the Pale of Settlement. The presence of wealth and higher education opened the gates of the city for selected Jews. The same legislation limited and slowed the growth of the overall Jewish population in Kyiv. Despite the legal limitations, the size of the Kyiv Jewish community was quite large: in 1913, according to the census, 81,256 Jews lived in the city. After the February 1917 Revolution, the Provisional Government abolished all national and religious restrictions, and the Kyiv Jewish population began growing rapidly on account of Jews who came there from provincial cities and shtetls.

¹ Gennady Estraiikh, "From Yehupets Jargonists to Kiev Modernists: The Rise of a Yiddish Literary Centre, 1880s-1914," *East European Jewish Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2000): 34.

Kyiv had one of the largest urban Jewish populations in the Soviet Union. In 1926 the Kyiv Jewish population was 140,256 out of a total of 513,637 (27%); in 1939 224,236 Jews lived in Kyiv out of 847,000 inhabitants (26.5 percent).² So, Kyiv became the second city in the Soviet Union after Moscow by the size of its Jewish population.

Jewish-Gentile relations in Kyiv

Jewish-Gentile relations were quite complicated in Kyiv in the interwar period. Kyivan Jewry changed rapidly in Soviet times. Before the revolution, most Kyivan Jews were only allowed to live in three remote districts of the city: Podil, Ploskyi and Lybedskyi. Only Jewish merchants of the first guild were allowed to settle anywhere in Kyiv. After the February 1917 Revolution, restrictions were lifted, and Jews settled in all districts of the city. The rapidly increasing Jewish population, and the presence of Jews in city districts where they were not allowed to live before the revolution, greatly irritated anti-Semites. Russian nationalist Vasiliï Shul'gin illegally visited his native Kyiv in December 1925.³ He reported “On Khreshchatyk [the main street of Kyiv] it is possible to find at least a partial solution to the riddle of where the Jews from Podil had disappeared. They are here... on Khreshchatyk the multitude of Jewish faces are very

² I.I. Veitsblit, *Rukh evreis'koi liudnosti na Ukraini periodu 1897-1926 rr.* (Kiev: Proletar, 1930), 163; Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust. A Social and Demographic Profile* (Jerusalem: The Center for Research of East European Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 1998), 277; Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia, Volume III, 1914 to 2008* (Oxford, Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 275; A.V. Kudryts'kyi, ed. *Kiev. Entsyklopedychnyi Dovidnyk*, (Kiev: Golovna redaktsia Ukrain's'koi Radians'koi Entsyklopedii, 1981), 22.

³ Shul'gin's visit had been covertly arranged by the Soviet security police, the GPU, via a bogus monarchist organization called *Trust* (created so that the GPU could infiltrate émigré circles). The GPU had spread a rumor that Shul'gin's younger son, whom he had not seen since the Civil War, was alive and needed his father's help. They expected that Shul'gin would contact other monarchists while in the Soviet Union, which would help the GPU control the émigré movement. Victoria Khiterer, “Vasiliï Shul'gin and the Jewish Question: An Assessment of Shul'gin's Anti-Semitism” *On the Jewish Street*, 1, no. 2 (2011): 16.

visible.”⁴ He tried to measure the proportion of Jews versus gentiles on Khreshchatyk and estimated that there were “ten Russians for every forty Jews.”⁵

Perhaps Shul’gin’s estimate was an exaggeration, but it is obvious that many Jews moved from poorer remote districts of the city to downtown Kyiv during the NEP period in 1921-28 when the government allowed small private businesses and trade. In downtown Kyiv there were good business possibilities, which made it even more attractive for Jews. According to Victor Nekrasov’s memoirs, a Jewish theater worked on Khreshchatyk in the 1930s.⁶ There were many schools, universities, theaters, and businesses in downtown Kyiv, and so it is not surprising that many Jews preferred to live there rather than in remote districts of the former Jewish ghetto.

The famine of 1932-1933 (the Holodomor) increased tension in the city between Kyivans and newcomers. Many tens of thousands of starving peasants fled from rural areas to the large cities. The Russian poet of Jewish origins Naum Korzhavin wrote in his memoirs: “Kyiv, and our yard in particular, was literally flooded by the wave of migrants from the province. They occupied all basements in the city.”⁷ He mentioned that among the migrants were not only peasants, but also shtetl Jews, because the famine was in the shtetls as well as the villages. There was a severe shortage of food in Kyiv and other large cities of Ukraine in 1932-33, but the situation in villages and small towns was far worse. Korzhavin wrote that native Kyivans did not like the uneducated and rude newcomers and many newcomers – Ukrainian peasants – did not like Kyivans, who lived better than

⁴ Ibid., 141.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Victor Nekrasov, *Iz dal’nikh stranstvii vozvratias’*, Rim, Parizh, New York, Kamchatka i dale vezde... <http://nekrassov-viktor.com/Friends/Praxova-Nanina.aspx>

⁷ Naum Korzhavin, *V soblaznakh krovavoi epokhi* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2007), 99.

them, especially the Jews.⁸ Kyivans lived in communal apartments, while the newcomers settled in the basements of apartment buildings. According to Korzhavin, the place of living became the indicator of the social and cultural status of the person. Peasants felt a disrespectful attitude toward themselves in Kyiv.

Jews felt this hostile attitude of some gentiles and had “bad premonitions of how these people would behave during a war.”⁹ However, the Soviet authorities suppressed anti-Semitism before the Second World War. The Bolsheviks declared anti-Semitism to be a shameful remnant of the tsarist regime. So, anti-Semites were afraid of attacking Jews openly, as the attackers could be blamed for counter-revolutionary activities and could be prosecuted as ‘enemies of the people’. Thus, popular anti-Semitism was usually limited in the pre-war years to personal insults of Jews and typically did not acquire a violent character.

Jewish Cultural Life in Kyiv

Several Jewish cultural and scholar institutions, which functioned in Kyiv in the 1920s, were established in the years of revolution and civil war in Ukraine (1917-1920). Historical literature usually describes this period as years of total devastation for the Jewish population. However, despite the recurring bloody pogroms, there were some interesting innovations in Jewish cultural life. On January 9, 1918, the Central Rada passed a law entitled “The Personal-National Autonomy of the National Minorities of the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 95.

Ukrainian Republic” that guaranteed national and cultural autonomy for minorities.¹⁰

This law opened for Ukrainian Jews opportunities for cultural development that they never had in the Russian Empire.

After the Bolsheviks took power in Russia in October 1917 the social and cultural conditions of life became more favorable for Jews in Ukraine than in Russia. Simon Dubnov wrote about this time: “It appeared then that with its 2 million Jews Ukraine was to realize the great legacy of the February Revolution and of the ‘third emancipation.’ Many members of Petersburg and Moscow Jewish society sought refuge in Kiev.”¹¹ In 1917-1921 several Yiddish poets, writers, and literary critics lived in Kyiv including David Bergelson (1884-1952), David Hofstein (1889-1952), Itzik Fefer (1900-1952), Yeheskel Dobrushin (1883-1953), Der Nister (pseudonym of Pinkhas Kaganovich, 1884-1950), and others. These authors became known in the history of Yiddish literature as the “Kiev Group.”¹² Some of them wrote their works in symbolist and expressionist styles. In the beginning of the 1920s, most of the members of the “Kiev Group” escaped abroad due to the difficult conditions of life, but many of them returned to Kyiv or to other Soviet cities in the second half of the 1920s – beginning of the 1930s.

Jewish intellectuals, together with leaders of the Jewish Bund, *Paoley Tzion*, *Farainigte*, and Folkspartey political parties founded in Kyiv the Jewish secular cultural enlightenment organization “Kultur-Lige” in January 1918. This organization became a source of many innovations in Jewish cultural life in Kyiv and Ukraine. The goal of Kultur-Lige was the promotion of Jewish secular culture. “It had sections for literature,

¹⁰ Paul Robert Magocsi, *History of Ukraine* (Seattle: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 504.

¹¹ Cite in Hillel Kazovsky, *The artists of the Kultur-Lige* (Jerusalem and Moscow: Gesher, 2003), 18.

¹² Ibid.

music, theater, painting and sculpture, people's school, preschool education, and adult education."¹³ Kultur-Lige opened several secular Yiddish schools and kindergartens in various Ukrainian cities, and the Jewish University in Kyiv. The organization had its own printing house, library, club, music school, theater, and art studios. Many of these institutions worked in Kyiv, which became the center of Kultur-Lige activity and the location of its Central Committee. Kultur-Lige organized concerts, exhibitions of Jewish artists, and literary evenings. Historian Zvi Gitelman wrote,

The *Lige* was very active in publishing and worked through existing cultural organizations so that its influence was felt in every sphere of Jewish secular culture. By the end of 1918 the Lige had 120 branches in the Ukraine, and similar groups had sprung up in Russia, Bessarabia, the Crimea, Lithuania, and even Siberia.¹⁴

Unfortunately, civil war, anti-Jewish pogroms and widespread anarchy in Ukraine overwhelmed many of these positive initiatives soon thereafter. For example, the Jewish University in Kyiv disintegrated during the civil war due to pogroms and the devastating economic situation.¹⁵

After the Soviets consolidated their power in Kyiv in 1920, the authorities took control of all these Jewish institutions. They closed several of them but allowed others to function under Soviet censorship and control.

¹³ Zvi Y. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics. The Jewish Sections of CPSU, 1917-1930* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), 273.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁵ M. O. Rybakov, ed. *Pravda istorii. Diial'nist' Evreis'koi kul'turno-prosvitnytskoi organizatsii "Kul'turna Liga" u Kyevi (1918-1925)* (Kiev, 2001), 3-12.

Kultur-Lige continued its work under Bolshevik rule, however its activities were restricted by the Soviets. Under pressure from the Communist regime, many prominent Kultur-Lige members left the country. Most of the board members of the first convocation left for Warsaw, artists Isaac Rabinovich and Alexander Tyshler went to Moscow, poets Leyb Kvitko and Peretz Markish moved to Germany, and poet David Hofstein left for Palestine.¹⁶

“Following a December 17, 1920 decree of the Kyiv Gubrevcom (Kyiv Province Revolutionary Committee)” the Central Committee of Kultur-Lige “was liquidated and replaced by an Orcom (Organizational Committee) the overwhelming majority of whose members were communists or representatives of Jewish socialist parties who were ready to collaborate with communists.”¹⁷

In 1924 all Kultur-Lige educational institutions were subordinated to the People’s Commissariat of Education of Ukraine, and most of its other institutions were dissolved. Only the Kultur-Lige publishing house, which was the largest Yiddish publishing house in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, continued to work in Kyiv until 1930.¹⁸

From the first days of their rule, the Soviet authorities began to eliminate Jewish political parties and organizations, as well as Jewish communal and religious institutions. The Bolsheviks were especially hostile toward Zionist organizations and had already begun to attack them during the civil war in Ukraine. In 1919, the Bolsheviks banned the use of Hebrew, calling it a “counter-revolutionary language.” The Bolsheviks, with the support of Jewish pro-Communist organizations, also dissolved Jewish communal

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ Kazovsky, *The Artists of the Kultur-Lige*, 24.

institutions. Thus SETMAS (the Union of Jewish Working People) “made the first attack on the *kehilla* [Jewish community] in Kiev, literally smashing and wrecking its offices, and it was the Ukrainian Kombund which destroyed the Society to Aid Pogrom Victims in May 1919.”¹⁹ By the mid-1920s only one legal Jewish party, the Jewish Communist Workers’ Party, Po’alei-Zion, was left in Soviet Ukraine; it was also eliminated in 1928.

Starting in the early 1920s Soviet authorities closed many religious institutions in Ukraine: churches, mosques, and synagogues. To avoid the accusation of anti-Semitism, the Bolsheviks entrusted the liquidation of Jewish institutions and organizations and the requisitioning of their property to Jewish sections of the Ukrainian Communist Party. The annual report of the Jewish sections of the Kyiv Province Department of the Commissariat of Education stated that in 1921 these sections, together with Jewish sections of Kyiv Committee of the Communist Party, organized a campaign against clericalism, *kheder*, Zionism and religion featuring lectures and show trials.²⁰ Gitelman wrote about one of these show trials:

On *Rosh Hashonoh*, 1921, the *Evseksiia* [Jewish section of the Ukrainian Communist Party] in Kiev “tried” the Jewish religion, ironically, in the same auditorium where the Beilis trial had been held [in the building of the Kiev District Court]. [An actor dressed as a] ... “rabbi” testified that he taught religion in order to keep the masses ignorant and servile. When someone in the audience accused him of being a “lying ignoramus,” “stormy applause” broke out, according to stenographic report. The interpellator in the audience was immediately arrested. After further testimony by a corpulent “bourgeois,” bedecked with glittering gold and diamond rings, the *Evseksiia* “prosecutor”

¹⁸ Ibid., 26; David Shneer. *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture. 1918-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 150.

¹⁹ Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 271.

²⁰ Rybakov, *Pravda istorii*, 8-9.

summarized the “case against the Jewish religion” and asked for a “sentence of death for the Jewish religion.” Moshe Rosenblatt, a Kiev Hebrew teacher, rose to defend Judaism and the sympathies of the crowd were clearly with him. He was arrested immediately after completing his speech. The “judges” retired to their chambers and returned with a verdict of death to the Jewish religion.²¹

The closure of synagogues in Ukraine was protested by believers, who were sometimes violently suppressed. However, in the beginning and mid-1920s, the authorities still considered the mood of religious people, thus before 1928 only 10 percent of synagogues were closed in Soviet Ukraine. But starting in the second half of the 1920s the Soviet rulers declared total war on religion. They closed and used for other purposes or destroyed most of the houses of worship in Ukraine. The Soviet authorities always liked to show that they were fulfilling the will of the working people. So, they organized collective letters signed by working class Jews with requests to close synagogues and Jewish prayer houses. Jews signed these letters because they were afraid of losing their jobs and falling under the suspicion of the NKVD (the People Commissariat of Interior Affairs, the organization that was the predecessor of the KGB) as an anti-revolutionary religious element. In this way most of synagogues in Kyiv were closed. For example, in 1924 the Kyiv Convention of Jewish Working People discussed a question about the closure of the Kyiv Choral Synagogue and passed the following resolution:

We need a cultural center that can satisfy our cultural needs and rebuild our everyday life, and reeducate us, our wives and children.

The only building that has the size and location to satisfy these needs is the Brodsky Choral Synagogue.

²¹ Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 301.

Over many decades, the synagogue spread religious poison among Jewish working people and took their attention away from the struggle against exploitation. [The synagogue was built in 1898 by sugar industry tycoon and Jewish communal leader Lazar Brodsky]

This synagogue, which was named after one of the largest Russian capitalist and banker, is the best evidence of the existence of the tight connection between religion and capital.

Our revolutionary consciousness cannot tolerate that a building located in the center of the city that satisfies the religious needs of a few tens of nepmen (i.e. bourgeois), while 12,000 Kyiv Jewish workers badly need the facility for a club.²²

This attack on the Brodsky synagogue was quite sensitive for Kyiv religious Jews because the synagogue served as the focal point of the city's varied Jewish activities. In 1926 the Brodsky synagogue was closed and transformed in the Central Club of Jewish Handicraftsmen “Der Shtern” (“The Star”).²³ The Borishpol'sky synagogue in Kyiv had been closed a year earlier, in February 1925. In 1929 the Kyiv synagogue in the Podol was closed, this district traditionally had the largest Jewish population and was part of the former Kyiv Jewish ghetto. The buildings of these two synagogues were also transformed into clubs of Jewish handicraftsmen and workers. The last functioned synagogue in Kyiv was closed in 1933. This was the Merchant synagogue, built by Lev Brodsky.²⁴ So, from 1933 to 1945 there were no functioning synagogues in Kyiv.

²² Mykhailo Kal'nytsky, “Vykorystannia Evreis'kykh gromads'kykh sporud u Kyevi (1920-i – 1930-i rr.),” in *Dolia evreis'koi dukhovnoi ta material'noi spadschyny v XX stolitti. Materialy konferentsii 28-30 serpnia 2001 r.* (Kiev: Dukh i Litera., 2002), 16-17.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴ Mykhailo Kal'nytsky, *Khramy Kyeva*, 2nd edition, (Kyiv, Dmytro Bury Publishing House, 2011), 269.

By 1940 all Jewish clubs in Kyiv were shut down and the buildings of the former synagogues were used by the city administration for other needs that were not at all related to Jewish cultural life.²⁵ The buildings of some closed Kyiv synagogues were used by the local authorities for “city needs.” In 1930-1931 the building of the former Galitsky synagogue was transformed in a dining hall for workers of a local plant, and the Merchant synagogue was turned into a gym (after the war it was used as a club and movie theater), and the Jewish prayer house “Tal’ner” was demolished. All pleas of religious Jews and their requests to return the synagogues and the prayer houses were ignored.²⁶ In the end of the 1920s-beginning of the 1930s, by the order of the Soviet authorities, there were requisitions of the silver ritual objects from the working and closed synagogues and the Torah scrolls from the closed synagogues. Later many of the Jewish silver ritual objects were melted down and the scrolls of Torah were sent to various Ukrainian archives. However, archive workers resisted these donations and explained to the authorities that Torah scrolls were not proper archival documents. They sought permission to sell the Torah scrolls to *Gostorg* (The State Trade Organization) and some of them that were written on parchment were handed over to the Young Pioneers (the Communist youth organization) for the manufacture of drums.²⁷

Jewish Scholarly Institutions in Kyiv

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 18; Victoria Khiterer, “Konfiskatsiia evreiskikh dokumental’nyh materialov i evreiskoi sobstvennosti v Ukraine v 1919-1930 gg.” in *Dolia evreis’koi dukhovnoi ta material’noi spadshchyny v XX stolitti. Materialy konferentsii 28-30 serpnia 2001 r.* (Kiev: Dukh i Litera, 2002), 11.

²⁷ Ibid., 13.

The policies of the Ukrainian Communist Party and the Ukrainian government toward national minorities were completely subordinated to the policies of the Soviet government. Among the leaders of the Ukrainian Communist Party and the Ukrainian government were some number of Jews in the 1920s-1930s. The most odious figure among them was Lazar Kaganovich (1893-1991), the General Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party in 1925-1928.

In the 1920s - beginning 1930s Soviet and Ukrainian leaders encouraged the development of the secular cultures of national minorities in Ukraine and the Soviet Union. Jewish national districts with Jewish administrators were created in Ukraine, where Yiddish was used as an official language. Jewish collective farms, schools and colleges, libraries and theaters, Yiddish press and publishing houses worked in many Ukrainian cities. At the same time Kyiv became one of the major centers of Soviet Yiddish secular culture. Several Jewish state scholarly institutions worked there: the Jewish Historical-Archaeographical Commission (1919-1929), the Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture (1929-1936), and the Department of Jewish language, Literature and Folklore of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences (brief title, the Department of Jewish Culture) (1936-1949). Many scholars who worked in these institutions were subsequently imprisoned and executed during the repression of the 1930s-1940s.

The first Jewish scholarly organization in Kyiv, the Jewish Historical-Archaeographical Commission of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, was founded during the civil war in Ukraine in 1919 by Jewish historians. Four Jewish historians were on the first staff of the Commission: Ben-Zion Dinaburg (Dinur, later a well-known Israeli historian and politician), Yakov Izraelson, Avraam Kagan (Abraham Kahana,

biblical scholar and historian) and Ilia Galant. Ben-Zion Dinaburg and Yakov Izraelson prepared a detailed program of the commission's work. The goal of the commission was to gather, research and publish documentary sources of Jewish history in Ukraine. Perhaps the Jewish Historical–Ethnographical Society, established by Dubnov in St. Petersburg in 1908 was the model for the commission activities. However, in 1918 Ukraine declared its independence, and Jewish historians who lived in Kyiv argued in their proposal for the establishment of the commission about the need for a local scholarly institution that would research the history of Ukrainian Jews. So, Galant and other commission members were pioneers of Ukrainian Jewish historiography, who proposed to consider the history of Jews in Ukraine as an independent field from the history of Jews in Russia and other countries. The work of the commission was interrupted from its beginning by the civil war and three of four members, Dinaburg, Izraelson and Kagan, soon left the country.²⁸ It was impossible to replace them, because there were no other specialists in Jewish history in Kyiv. However, the commission formally continued to function. Thus, Ilia Galant continued alone to research archival sources on Jewish history.

In 1924 the commission was reestablished with a new staff. The Chair of the commission was a famous academic orientalist, the Secretary of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, Agafangel Krymsky (1871-1942). Krymsky did not participate actively in the work of the commission, but his well-known name gave the commission higher status. The real head of the commission was Ilia Galant, and the historians David

²⁸ Victoria Khiterer, ed. *Dokumenty, sobrannyye evreiskoi istoriko-arkheographicheskoi komissiei Vseukrainskoi Akademii Nauk* (Jerusalem, Kiev: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Gesarim Publishing House, 1999), 6-7.

Brodsky and David Vainshtein, Hebraist Victor Ivanitsky and philologist Valery Rybinsky worked there. The members of the commission worked without salary for a long time and only in the last two years of its existence in 1928-1929 did two members of the commission receive remuneration for their work. Nevertheless, the commission worked very effectively. The members of the Commission researched and described a significant number of sources in Jewish history in Kyiv archives and gathered Jewish materials from private collections. The members of the commission also copied many documents in Jewish history from different archives and gathered them in the Collection of the Jewish Historical-Archaeographical Commission of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences that is now located in the Central State Historical Archive of Ukraine in City Kyiv.²⁹ The commission also published two volumes of its proceedings in 1928 and 1929, which consisted of articles about the history of Jews in Ukraine and many interesting documents on various aspects of this topic.

Despite the important work done by the commission, its members were fired in 1929 from the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences “as hangers-on of the bourgeoisie and White Guards”³⁰ and the local press published articles denouncing the commission. The proximate cause of this accusation was that Ilia Galant published one of his articles in the emigrant press. (The title of the publication as well as where it was published was not mentioned in the critical articles). But the real reason for the closure of the commission was a new course of Soviet politics leading to the suppression of “old bourgeoisie” specialists. The Jewish Historical-Archaeographical Commission of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences and the “old” Jewish scholarly organizations, which had functioned

²⁹ The Central State Historical Archive of Ukraine in City Kiev (TsDIAK U), f. 1423, op. 1, 42 files.

³⁰ Khiterer, *Dokumenty, sobrannye evreiskoi istoriko-arkheographicheskoi komissiei*, 9.

since pre-Revolutionary times in St. Petersburg – Petrograd – Leningrad: the Jewish Historical-Ethnographical Society and the Society for Spreading Enlightenment among Jews in Russia were closed almost simultaneously in 1929-1930. Evseksiia and the Soviet press also accused the latter two institutions as “bourgeoisie organizations.”³¹ In all these cases Jewish activists from Evseksiia and the Communist Party initiated campaigns against the “old bourgeoisie” Jewish organizations. The Soviet authorities encouraged and directed these campaigns against ‘old bourgeoisie institutions and specialists’ in general and against Jewish old specialists in particular.

As alternatives to the old Jewish scholarly organizations, ‘new proletarian’ Jewish organizations were created. Thus, the Department of Jewish Culture of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences was established in 1926, but was officially opened only in 1928. The first Acting Department Chair was Yiddish linguist and philologist Nokhem (Naum) Shtif. He was well known in Yiddish literary circles, because he had published articles on Yiddish philology since pre-revolutionary times. In October 1920 Shtif emigrated, but in 1926 he returned to Kyiv lured by development of Jewish culture and scholarship in the Soviet Union. In 1924 Shtif proposed to create an academic Yiddish institute and library. This proposal was realized by other scholars, who established the Yiddish Scientific Institute, YIVO, in 1925 in Vilna (Vilnius).³² Shtif continued his scholarly career in the Department of Jewish Culture in Kyiv.

³¹ Abraham Greenbaum, *Evrei v Rossii. Istorikograficheski ocherki 2-aia polovina XIX veka- XX vek.* (Moscow – Jerusalem: Gesharim Publishing House, 1994), 27-28; Veniamin Lukin, “Fond Evreiskogo istoriko-etnograficheskogo obschestva v Tsentral’nom Gosudarstvennom Arkhive Leningrada,” in E. Krupnik, ed., *Istoricheskie sud’by evreev v Rossii i SSSR: nachalo dialoga.* (Moscow: Evreiskoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo, 1992), 252.

³² Gennady Estraiikh, *Soviet Yiddish: Language Planning and Linguistic Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 68-70, 74, 82.

He was soon replaced as Chair of the Department by Joseph Liberberg. Shtif became the head of the philological section of the Department and later the Institute of the Jewish Proletariat Culture in Kyiv.³³

The new Chair of the Department of Jewish Culture, Joseph Liberberg, did not have a scholarly reputation like Shtif. Liberberg defended his dissertation on the French Revolution in 1925 and taught Western European History in various Kyiv universities before he began to work at the Department of Jewish Culture. The authorities considered Liberberg the better candidate for the position of Department chair than Shtif, because Liberberg was a member of the Communist Party since 1919 and served as a Red Army political agitator in 1918-24. From the moment of his appointment as the Department Chair Liberberg faithfully implemented the government policy regarding Jewish scholarship. He organized a public campaign against the Jewish Historical-Archaeographical Commission.³⁴

Ukrnauka (Ukrainian Main Administration of Scholarly and Scientific Institutions) appointed to the Department of Jewish Culture communists recommended by the Evseksiia Communist Party of Ukraine, ignoring whether these people had any scholarly background whatsoever. The All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences resisted recognizing the Department of Jewish Culture as part of the Academy. The scholarly secretary of the Academy, Academic Krymsky, wrote specifically to Ukrnauka and the Ministry of People's Education:

³³ Greenbaum, *Evrei v Rossii*, 38.

³⁴ Khiterer, ed., *Dokumenty, sobrannye evreiskoi istoriko-arkheographicheskoi komissiei*, 10.

The general convention [of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences] unanimously decreed that the Jewish Department with this staff and head, which does not satisfy its scholarly needs, could not be a part of the Academy.³⁵

However, the authorities ignored the opinion of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences and forced the Academy to recognize the Jewish Department. The creation of this institution also foreordained the destiny of the Jewish Historical-Archaeographical Commission, as the Academy claimed that it did not need two Jewish scholarly organizations with similar goals.³⁶

The Jewish Department of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences was transformed into the Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture in 1929. The staff of this organization was less academic than the Jewish Historical-Archaeographical Commission and the similar Institute of Jewish Culture, which was opened in Minsk.³⁷ The main goal of the Institute, according to its Director Joseph Liberberg, was “the struggle against the scholarship of the Jewish bourgeoisie.”³⁸ Due to the great energy of Liberberg, and his even greater ambitions, Kyiv became a center of Soviet Jewish scholarly life in the first half of the 1930s. Between the Kyiv and Minsk Institutes of Jewish Culture there was competition for dominance in Jewish scholarship. Liberberg had strong connections with the communist nomenclature, and this resulted in the victory of the Kyiv Institute of Jewish Culture. The Minsk Institute began to decline from the beginning of the 1930s, while the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Greenbaum, *Evrei v Rossii*, 38.

³⁸ Khiterer, ed., *Dokumenty, sobrannye evreiskoi istoriko-arkheographicheskoi komissiei*, 10.

Kyiv Institute was at its zenith.³⁹ Over a hundred scholars worked there. The Kyiv Institute originally had six departments: Jewish literature, philology, history, ethnography, social-economic and pedagogical. Later, with the creation of Birobidzhan, the institute also created the Department for Study of Birobidzhan.⁴⁰ The Institute published the journal *Di Yiddishe Shprakh* (The Yiddish Language, from 1931 called *Afn shprakhfront* [On the Language Front]).

Liberberg prepared a project for the organization in Kyiv of the Central Archives of Jewish People of the Soviet Union. But this project was never realized. The Jewish section of the Kyiv Central Historical Archive, which was led by an Institute Presidium member Iona Khinchin was closed in 1932. The Historical Department of the Institute also was closed soon after its establishment. The official explanation was that the Department was closed due to the absence of the place for it, but it was really closed because of the lack of specialists in Jewish history. According to the historian Abraham Greenbaum, the work of the Kyiv Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture was much less productive than expected.⁴¹

Since the early 1930s Liberberg actively supported creation of Jewish autonomy in Birobidzhan. Gennady Estraiikh wrote that Liberberg “convened and presided over the most representative forum in the history of Soviet Yiddish-language planning: the Kyiv Yiddish Language Conference.”⁴² On the opening day of the conference, May 7, 1934,

³⁹ Greenbaum, *Evrei v Rossii*, 45.

⁴⁰ Leonid Fliat, “Liberberg i drugie... K istorii instituta evreiskoi kul'tury (Kiev).” *Novosti Nedeli*, July 15, 1999, 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁴² Gennady Estraiikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers' Romance with Communism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 136.

“the Soviet government declared that the Birobidzhan Jewish National District had been upgraded to the status of Jewish National Region.”⁴³ In the Fall 1934 Liberberg was appointed as the Head of the organizational committee of the Birobidzhan Jewish National Region and moved to Birobidzhan. In December of the same year Liberberg was elected as the first Chair of the Jewish Region’s Soviet (Council) of People’s Deputies. Liberberg planned to create in Birobidzhan the all-Soviet Jewish cultural and academic center and move there the Kyiv Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture as well as other Jewish scholarly and cultural institutions. However, he could not accomplish this plan, because he was arrested in August 1936 and accused as a “Trotskyist and bourgeois nationalist.” Liberberg was sentenced to death on 9 March 1937 and executed on the same day.⁴⁴

At the end of 1936, the Department of Jewish Language, Literature and Folklore of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences (brief title the Department of Jewish Culture) was opened in Kyiv as a result of the “reorganization” of the Kyiv Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture.⁴⁵ Elie Spivak was appointed as Director of the Department of Jewish

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ “Liberberg Iosif Izraelivich,” *Vspomnim vsekh poimanno*, <http://eao.memo27reg.org/pamat-1/semletmyziliozidaniempisem>; The Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR was located at Nikolskaia Street, 23, Moscow, in the so-called shooting house, where 31,000 death sentences were issued. The house is located 600 meters (less than half of mile) from Red Square. Death sentences were often carried out in the basement of the building. Many members of the Soviet political and military elite were sentenced to death there including Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Rykov, Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev, Marshall Mikhail Tukhachevsky and many others. Iliia Udovenko, “Rasstrel’nyi dom na Nikol’skoi,” *Zhivaia istoria*, accessed 3/9/17, <http://lhistory.ru/statyi/rasstrelnyj-dom-na-nikolskoj>

⁴⁵ E. I. Melamed, “Likvidatsiia Kievskogo Instituta evreiskoi proletarskoi kul’tury i repressii protiv ego sotrudnikov. Po materialam archivno-sledstvennykh del 1930-kh godov,” In O.B. Budnitsky, ed. *Archiv evreiskoi istorii*. Vol. 10 (Moscow: Politicheskaia entsiklopediia, 2018), 171; Greenbaum, *Evrei v Rossii*, 68.

Culture. The Department of Jewish Culture had three sections: philological, literature and folklore. The latter section was led by the Jewish folklorist Moisei Beregovsky.

The Department remained the only Jewish scholarly institution in the Soviet Union and many thought that it would also not last long due to changes in the nationalities policy and political repression. So, in the late 1930s, members of the Department preferred to keep a low profile and focus on some local projects without the previous ambitions of Liberberg for making Kyiv the center of Jewish culture for the entire Soviet Union. The Department also was much smaller than the Institute. Only eleven to twelve scholars worked there in 1936-49.⁴⁶

The Jewish proletarian organizations founded by Evseksiia and the Soviet authorities destroyed more than they created. When they, together with their creators, fulfilled their function and had destroyed the “old” Jewish culture in the Soviet Union, the authorities liquidated them also.

The “Proletarianization” of Jewish Culture and Stalin’s Terror.

The same processes of “proletarianization” occurred in general and in Jewish cultural life in the end of the 1920s - beginning of the 1930s. If in the 1920s many different literary groups and styles existed in the multi-cultural Soviet literature, in the 1930s the authorities allowed only one literary style, “socialist realism,” and one Union of the Soviet Writers with its national departments. At the same time, the Soviets used the “stick and carrot” approach toward the “new intelligentsia.” The regime badly needed obedient and faithful authors who would panegyricize it. Thus, the Soviets provided

⁴⁶ Ibid.; Leonid Fliat, “Kabinet zakryt navsegda,” <http://www.jewniverse.ru/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=1396>.

exclusive conditions of life for the new Soviet elite, while enforcing strict censorship and political repression for freethinkers. David Shneer highlighted in his monograph the process of the creation of “new proletarian” Jewish writers. Particularly he wrote about David Hofshstein that after his return from Palestine to Kyiv in 1927:

he quickly understood that the proletarian writers’ group was the rising source of literary power. In 1928, he became a member of the Jewish section of the All-Ukrainian Proletarian Writers Organization (*VUSP*) and was a founding editor of the proletarian Yiddish journal, *Prolit*. He wrote to [Yiddish writer Daniel] Charny in August: “I am now the jack of all trades at *Prolit*... I am secretary and publisher of the journal ... I have an assistant, an office, a telephone and more.”⁴⁷

According to David Shneer “many important figures of Eastern European Yiddish culture were involved in building the Soviet state’s Yiddish Cultural apparatus.”⁴⁸ Some of them even chose closer cooperation with the Soviet authorities and became, as did Yiddish poet Itzik Fefer, secret informers for the NKVD.

If in the first years of the existence of the Soviet regime this cooperation can be explained by the political naivete of part of the Jewish intelligentsia, later their praise of Stalin’s regime cannot be justified in any way. By the beginning of the 1930s the brutal features of the Communist regime became so obvious that was impossible not to see them. As a direct result of the collectivization policy of the Soviet government in 1932-1933, there was a terrible famine – the Holodomor in Ukraine that took about 3.9 million lives. There are no statistics available on the Holodomor losses by nationality. So, it is unknown how many Jews perished during the Holodomor in Kyiv and Ukraine.

⁴⁷ David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*, 163.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

According to official reports, in February 1933 in Kyiv streets, 918 corpses of Jews who had died from the famine, were picked up.⁴⁹ The total number of Jewish famine victims in Kyiv was certainly much higher than 918 people.

However, the Yiddish writers, as with many other Soviet writers, continued to create their buoyant works and praised the “wise” Soviet government and Communist party during these years. Fear of political repression kept most of the Soviet intelligentsia away from any form of political protest. The small minority who dared to show their dissatisfaction with the Soviet policy were arrested in the 1930s and either executed or sentenced to many years of prison and concentration camps.

The Stalin regime killed even its own faithful servants. Several Yiddish writers and literary critics became victims of political repression in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Many other Yiddish cultural figures were arrested during the anti-cosmopolitan campaign in the Soviet Union in the end of the 1940s - beginning of the 1950s. Several Yiddish authors were arrested and executed on August 12, 1952 during the “Affair of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.” Among them were David Hofstein, Itzik Fefer, Leyb Kvitko, Peretz Markish and David Bergelson, who in various periods of their lives lived in Kyiv.⁵⁰ All these authors were generously gifted by talent, but they devoted it to the Soviet regime, which they praised in their works and that eventually killed them.

Jewish Theaters in Kyiv

⁴⁹ A. Naiman, “Evreiskoe zemledelie na Ukraine v 1930-e gody,” *Vestnik Evreiskogo Universiteta v Moskve*, 8, no. 1 (1995): 221.

⁵⁰ Arno Lustiger, *Stalin and the Jews. The Tragedy of the Jewish anti-Fascist Committee and the Soviet Jews* (New York: Enigma Books, 2003), 221-244.

Jewish theaters in the Soviet Union developed under the same restrictions as other areas of Jewish culture. In the 1920s-1930s several Jewish theaters opened and worked in Kyiv. The Ukrainian State Jewish Theater of Sholom Aleichem was officially opened in the capital of Soviet Ukraine, Kharkiv, in December 1925. However, a director of the theater Moisei Loiev wrote in his memoirs that this theater began from the Kultur Lige theater studio, which was established in 1919 in Kyiv. In 1921 the theater studio with its director Efraim Loiter and actors moved to Moscow with permission of Kultur Lige. Loiev wrote that in the beginning of the 1920s Moscow was “a theatrical Mecca” where young theatrical studios came from the entire country.⁵¹ There studio members could learn from the best actors and directors and attend the best plays. The members of the Kultur Lige studio learned from the best theater directors Evgenii Vakhtangov and Vsevolod Meyerhold. In 1925 the Ukrainian government decided to create in Kharkiv, which was then capital of Ukraine, the Ukrainian State Jewish Theater of Sholom Aleichem and they chose for this purpose the Kultur Lige theatrical studio which was moved from Moscow to Kharkiv.⁵²

In the 1930s several new Jewish theaters were established in the Soviet Union. One of them, the Kyiv State Jewish Theater, was opened in 1930 on the base of the Fraikunst Theater, which moved to Kyiv from Moscow. When the capital of Ukraine was moved to Kyiv in 1934, the Ukrainian State Jewish Theater moved there also. Both these theaters merged into the Ukrainian State Jewish Theater of Sholom Aleichem. A student of Stanislavsky and a former director of MKHAT Boris Vershilov became the director of

⁵¹ Moisei Loiev, *Ukradennaia Muza* (Kiev: Dukh i Litera, 2004), 6-8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 12.

the Ukrainian State Jewish Theater. It was the largest and most prominent Jewish theater in Ukraine. The theater performed Jewish and World classic plays and the plays of Soviet Yiddish authors. All performances were in Yiddish. Among its performances were William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice," plays by Eugene O'Neil, and Yiddish writers Fefer, Markish, Lipe Reznik and others. In 1930-1937 the student of the prominent Russian theater directors Constantin Stanislavsky and Evgeniy Vakhtangov, Boris Vershilov, was a Director of the Ukrainian State Jewish Theater. On October 10, 1937 the Kyiv Jewish newspaper "*Der Shtern*" ("*The Star*") published an article under the title "*Take Away the Mask from 'Director' Vershilov.*" Six day later a second article "*Vershilovshchina*" was published by the same newspaper. By that time two actors of the theater, Libert and Dinor, had already been arrested and the newspaper articles claimed that Vershilov was directly connected with these "enemies of the people."⁵³ This was an open denunciation and encouragement to arrest Vershilov. His pregnant wife, the actress Esther Bongrad, went to Moscow to Stanislavsky and begged him to save her husband. Stanislavsky sent a request to the Ukrainian Committee of the Art Affairs to release his talented student Vershilov from his position in Kyiv, because "he is absolutely necessary to the [Moscow] Opera Theater" that was named after Stanislavsky during his life. Moisei Loev wrote in his monograph "*Ukradennaia Muza*" ("*The Stolen Muse*") about the role of Stanislavsky at this case:

It is difficult to say if the great theater director's appeal to the authorities helped Vershilov, perhaps it was so. However, Esther, after her return from Moscow, decided not to wait for the possible arrest of her husband. The Vershilov family

⁵³ Ibid., 47-82.

took only a few of their most necessary belongings and secretly at night left Kyiv.⁵⁴

Later Boris Vershilov worked at the Moscow Opera Theater.

In 1929 two new Jewish theaters were opened in Kyiv: the Kyiv Jewish Theater of the Working Youth (Russian abbreviation TRAM) and the Jewish State Children's Theater.

TRAM did not have professional actors, all people who performed there were professional workers, genuine Jewish proletariats. The repertory of the theater was completely in accordance with its name. In the report of the theater about its work in 1931, the topics of the theatrical performances were listed:

1. Heroic struggle of the working people for fulfillment of the industrial plan.
2. Militarization of the working youth.
3. Anti-religious theme and questions of the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁵

The Jewish State Children's Theater performed plays of Jewish authors: Sholom Aleichem, Lipe Reznik, Jewish folklore "Hershele Ostropoler," etc. The theater had success among its audience, however before 1935 it did not have a permanent stage and gave performances at various clubs.⁵⁶ After the Second World War, all Jewish theaters in the Soviet Union were closed and many of their actors arrested for "Jewish nationalism."

Jewish Education in Kyiv and the Change of Soviet National Policy

⁵⁴ Ibid., 85-86.

⁵⁵ The State Archive of City Kiev (DAMK), f. R-1, op. 1, d. 2297, ll. 54-57.

⁵⁶ DAMK, f. R-1, op. 1, d. 9575.

After the establishment of Soviet power in Ukraine, Jewish religious schools were closed. However, some melamedim secretly continued to teach Jewish children. Mikhail Kal'nitsky wrote that there is information that an underground yeshiva functioned in an apartment on Shchekavitska Street.⁵⁷ However, there is no further information available about the work of the other Jewish religious schools in Kyiv in the 1920s-1930s.

Under Soviet power Jewish secular educational institutions were transformed into state schools and subordinated to the Ministry of Education of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. In the 1920s - first half of the 1930s several Yiddish state schools and Yiddish colleges worked in Kyiv. At those times, the Soviet authorities encouraged Jewish parents to send their children to Jewish schools. They considered the Soviet Yiddish schools as the “only strong antidote against the clerical influence of kheder and Zionism.”⁵⁸ However, when the Soviets suppressed Judaism, and the kheder and Zionist movement by the mid-1930s, they decided that Jewish secular schools were not necessary anymore and began the process of their elimination. The other factor that became crucial for the fate of the Jewish schools was their unpopularity among Soviet Jews, due to their desire for assimilation and acculturation with Russian culture. Thus, in the 1924-1925 academic year only 19 percent of Jewish children of school age studied at Yiddish schools in Ukraine.⁵⁹ This percentage of students in Yiddish schools decreased with time.

⁵⁷ Mikhail Kal'nitsky, *Sinagoga Kievskoi iudeiskoi obshchiny 5656-5756. Istoricheskii ocherk* (Kiev: Institut Iudaiki, 1996), 19.

⁵⁸ The Central State Archive of the Higher Authorities and Government of Ukraine (TsDAVO U), f. 166, op. 4, d. 974, l. 89.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

The question about the reorganization of the national schools was discussed at the 14th Congress of the Communist Party of Ukraine in June 1938. The First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Nikita Khrushchev, said:

Polish-German agents, bourgeois nationalists are implanted in so called national schools... There are 70 Jewish schools in the Vinnitsky district. There are many schools without first and second grades, because the parents don't want to send their children to Jewish schools. The enemies dragged by force Jews to Jewish schools. They did this to make the people angry, and on the other hand to create nests of enemies.⁶⁰

In the second half of the 1930s the Soviet national policy toward all national minorities, including Jews, suddenly changed. Instead of encouraging the development of the various national cultures of the multi-national population of the Soviet Union, the authorities decided to emphasize the dominant Russian culture and suppress all others. The typical expression of the official policy toward the national minorities of the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1930s was the speech to the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Ukraine (May-June 1937) by one of the Soviet leaders, Alexander Shlikhter, about "the wrecking activity of the various nations."⁶¹ Thus the Soviets spread their political repression from individuals to entire nations that were accused of harmful activity.

Most Jewish organizations and institutions were closed in Kyiv and all over the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1930s. The administration and members of these organizations were accused of bourgeois nationalism and many of them were executed or

⁶⁰ Victoria Khiterer, *Documenty po evreiskoi istorii XVI-XX vekov v Kievskikh arkhivakh* (Moscow, Kiev: Gesharim Publishing House and Institute of Jewish Studies, 2001), 135-136.

imprisoned as the enemies of people. Soviet Jewish culture never recovered from this blow and the Soviet policy soon thereafter acquired its clear anti-Semitic character.

Conclusion

Kyiv became the center of the Soviet Jewish scholarly life and culture in the 1920s-1930s as a result of a combination of factors. Certainly, the large number of Jews in the city and the high percentage of Jewish intelligentsia played a significant role. The existence in the city of “old” Jewish cultural and scholarly institutions was also important. The personal factor also played its role: the Director of the Kyiv Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture, Joseph Liberberg, was an ambitious administrator with strong connections with the Soviet authorities that allowed him to centralize all Jewish scholarship in Kyiv within a short period of time.

Jewish scholarship and culture in the Soviet Union never developed under conditions of political freedom. The Jewish intelligentsia never had freedom of expression. The Soviets always defined what areas of Jewish culture should be developed and which ones should be suppressed. However, the 1920s were still a comparatively liberal time for Soviet culture, when the authorities tolerated different styles in art and literature, and the “old” cultural and scholarly organizations continued to function under the supervision of Soviet censorship. However, with the establishment of Stalin’s dictatorship, all “old bourgeois” organizations were closed and were replaced by the “proletarian” national organizations. In the second half of the 1930s, the centralization of the Soviet Empire went further, and the communist leaders decided that the national organizations should be liquidated. Many of them were closed and their members

⁶¹ Ibid.

imprisoned or executed. Thus, the new government policy suppressed national education, scholarship, and culture of the national minorities, and promoted instead the dominance of Soviet Russian culture.

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