Introduction

In no other country and in no other period of the history of the Yiddish language have such important foundations for a permanent life for Yiddish been laid as now in the Soviet Union.

– Baruch Glazman, 1924[1]

How does one reconcile the pull of one's membership in a particular people's existence with one's pull to partake in the whole wide world? . . . Jews have always been keenly alive to the exquisite agonies of being pulled apart by loves pointed, like vectors, in opposite directions.

– Rebecca Goldstein, 2001[2]

Nathan Englander opens his 1999 collection of stories, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, with "The Twenty-seventh Man," about the 1952 execution of a group of Soviet Yiddish writers in Stalinist Russia. As four prisoners sit in one of Stalin's prisons, Vasily Korinsky, a Communist Party functionary and Yiddish writer, imagines that if only Stalin knew he was sitting in prison, he would rescue him because of his Party loyalty. "He doesn't know. He wouldn't let them do this to me." To which Y. Zunser, the old man of Yiddish literature, the one who rode out the ebbs and flows of Soviet policies without ever politically affiliating, says, "Maybe not to you, but to the Jew that has your name and lives in your house and lies next to your wife, yes." And then the two return to the only thing they have in common, the thing that landed them in prison, Yiddish:

"It's not my life. It's my culture, my language. Nothing more."

"Only your language?" Zunser waved him away. "Who are we without Yiddish?"[3]

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NARRATIVES OF SOVIET JEWISH HISTORY

In the 1920s, the Soviet Union was the only country in the world to have state-sponsored Yiddish-language publishing houses, writers' groups, courts, city councils, and schools. The Soviet Union also supported the creation of a group of socialist Jewish activists – a Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia – dedicated to creating a new kind of Jewish culture for a new kind of Jew. This book examines what this cultural experiment looked like, why it was produced, and what it meant. Why would the Soviet Jewish writers in Englander's story, his fictionalized Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia, have asked "Who are we without Yiddish?"

Most histories of the Soviet Jewish experience echo Englander's tragic story, asking why so many important Yiddish writers, activists, publishers, critics, teachers, and others died at the hands of the very state that had given them the power to carry out their cultural visions. Nearly all of the major figures in this book were dead by 1952. They, like others who lived the tragic narrative of Soviet history, died in the Russian Civil War, during the Great Purges in 1936–9, during World War II and the Holocaust, and then in the anti-Semitic purges of 1948–52 that wiped out the final remnants of the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia. The last Soviet Yiddish school closed in the late 1930s, the Moscow State Yiddish Theater had its final performance in 1949, and Yiddish books and newspapers were not published between 1949 and 1958. The exploration of how and why this was so is an important historical endeavor, one in which many people have been and are currently engaged.

But that is not the only story to tell. Zunser poses another one: "Who are we without Yiddish?" Or put another way, why were these people who worked for and with the Soviet state so interested in creating Soviet Yiddish culture? Who were they, what did they do, and why did they have the state's support?

The focus on tragedy has led most scholars to deem the project of building Soviet Yiddish culture a failure, by which they mean that this group of people failed to achieve its goal of creating a lasting Yiddish-language Soviet Jewish culture. But as scholars of other times and places in Jewish history have demonstrated, tragedy is a narrative option, and just one of many a writer can choose. As Amos Funkenstein has noted, "Historical accounts do indeed choose a certain mode of narrative – romance, tragedy, comedy, satire. . . . Form and content, imposed categories and received facts, cannot easily be separated – or rather, they cannot be separated at all. . . . [O]ur choice of a 'form of narrative' dictates the facts we select to fit into it."[4] Tragic history is a narrative strategy, whose crafters select particular historical moments for the telling; it puts the end of the story before the story itself, and in its most extreme case, puts death before life.

Most scholars fall back on tragedy, because, for one, death and oppression are compelling. That is why Englander chose the prison cell as the setting for his story. But it is also because scholars often impose outcomes on the events they study, a practice sometimes referred to as hindsight. But this practice also entails significant consequences, as Michael Bernstein has shown with his concept of "backshadowing." Backshadowing affects all historical writing, but in the twentieth century – especially in the writing of Jewish history after the Holocaust – it has come to overshadow other modes of history telling. According to Bernstein, "backshadowing is a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they too should have known what was to come*."[5] Soviet Jewish culture, in what little has been written about it, has been viewed almost exclusively through the lens of the Purges. Those who were killed emerge as Jewish martyrs (except perhaps for the fictional Korinsky, the Communist writer in Englander's story, whose tale is the most tragic because he cannot see how he is "being used" by the Soviet state to betray his own people).

I try to avoid backshadowing the deaths of these people and their cultural project by focusing on the contingencies they encountered and the complex choices they were making in their time, the social and cultural context of the 1920s. By doing so, I hope to put secular, socialist Jewish culture back into the narratives of Jewish and Soviet history.

Until very recently, the production of such a Jewish culture in the Soviet Union has not been at the forefront of the research agenda within Jewish or Soviet history. Gennady Estraikh's work on the linguistic and cultural role Yiddish played in Soviet Jewish culture has shown the central role language played in Soviet Jewish cultural politics.[6] And in his recent monograph on the Soviet Jewish theater, Jeffrey Veidlinger countered the long-held argument that Soviet Yiddish culture was merely an outgrowth of the Soviet state's propaganda campaign by showing that it in fact had a "distinct Jewish identity." Jewish actors, directors, and producers used the stage to bring Jewish themes into Soviet cultural contexts, and could do so, in Veidlinger's view, due to the ignorance of its cultural supervisors. "Bolshevik propagandists failed to realize that national forms – languages, myths, archetypes, and symbols – were semiotic systems that aroused pre-existing emotions and expectations among audiences familiar with the codes." In other words, no matter how seemingly empty of Jewish content Soviet Yiddish culture might have appeared to some, there was no such thing as a "denationalized" Soviet Jewish culture.

Veidlinger is right to emphasize that Soviet Jewish cultural activists were actively, not passively, fostering Jewish identity. However, there remains a division in Veidlinger's work between culture producer and "Bolshevik propagandist,"

the former being "Jewish," the latter being somehow opposed to authentic Jewishness. In fact, within the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia, it is very hard to tell the difference between the Bolshevik propagandist and the Jewish cultural activist. All of them were part of the national construction of Soviet Jewish culture that simultaneously helped build support for the Soviet state and the Communist Party.[7]

The turn to culture allows scholars to see Soviet Jewish history as a history of production rather than as a history of destruction, and gives agency back to Soviet Jewish intellectuals. Western Jews have tended to see Soviet Jews either as tragic subjects or repressed, silenced objects.[8] Subjectivity appeared with "collaborators" like Korinsky, who participated in the state's propaganda project for their own self-interest, or "resisters," who opposed it in underground Hebrew classes and secret prayer groups or in the dissident and refusenik movements of the 1970s and 1980s.[9] Soviet Jews have, therefore, been portrayed either as tragic failures, silent bystanders, or rebellious heroes. The Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia, which was involved in the state and the Party and was part of the power structure, however, complicates these categories.

I center this history on cultural production, rather than cultural repression, in order to move away from the tragic narrative. Perhaps this move runs the risk of simply telling a different narrative, a romantic one. A book focusing on the expression, production, and flowering of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union without telling how the story ends risks sentimentality and romanticization, just as much as focusing solely on repression risks backshadowing. But the emphasis on cultural production also shows how Soviet Jews were part of, not apart from, the Soviet system and part of, not apart from, Jewish history. The historiographic focus on the oppression of Jews makes it easier to sidestep their own imbrication and implication in the Soviet system. But this focus also prevents us from talking about the ideological excitement and emotion the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia invested in this unique cultural, political, and aesthetic project – the creation of a particularly Jewish *Soviet* culture and a particularly Soviet *Jewish* culture.

YIDDISH AND THE IDEOLOGY DRIVING SOVIET JEWISH CULTURE BUILDING

Most of this book focuses on a small group of Jewish writers, activists, Communist Party bosses, censors, publishers, cultural critics, scholars, and intellectuals who made up the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia. They were drawing on a tradition of leftist, populist, and socialist Jewish culture and politics, which made Yiddish – the vernacular language of Eastern European Jewry – the defining feature of their cultural project. For this group, which worked with and for the Soviet state, Yiddish marked Jews as a distinct ethnic group – or, in the

language of the Soviet Union, a distinct nationality. Yiddish defined the new Soviet Jewish culture that this intelligentsia created.

These activists were not alone in believing that language defined modern nationhood. For many intellectuals in the age of nationalism, language was not just a means of communication; it was the embodiment of a people. In this case, Yiddish reflected the soul of the Jewish *folk*. By the turn of the twentieth century, some intellectuals thought that Yiddish was fundamental to the preservation of Jewish culture in the modern world. "In Yiddish the Jewish spirit is reflected and its value for the survival of our nation is beginning to be comprehended," read the invitation to the Czernowitz Language Conference in 1908 – the first major gathering of people interested in raising the status of the Jews' lowly "jargon," their kitchen language and mother tongue.[10] In 1923, fifteen years after Czernowitz and six years after the Bolshevik Revolution, Esther Frumkina, one of the chief socialists at Czernowitz and one of the most important Yiddish cultural activists in the Soviet Union, wrote:

> How much long-held pain and joy, how many profound experiences, how many gray secrets, how many eternal longings are embodied in the language. And how much intrinsic beauty and harmony lies within it. Whether it is beaming or laughing, serious and harsh or soft and dreamy, dry or damp – [Yiddish] is always a divine work of art, always a picture of the people that created it.[11]

Yiddish was much more than a language before, during, and even after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution that brought to power a political party seemingly opposed to nationalism in all of its forms. Why then would Yiddish, that marker of Jewish nationhood and Jewish difference, still be important in a class-based, socialist world?

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union invested greatly in developing social, political, and cultural institutions in the native languages of its many ethnic minorities so that each Soviet ethnic group could be inculcated with enlightened Soviet values in its own language. Within Soviet policy, it was language, more than any other single characteristic, that defined a nation. Ukrainians were Ukrainian because they spoke Ukrainian, Jews were Jews because they spoke Yiddish. Had all Jews already assimilated into Russian-language culture, presumably the state would not have considered them a separate nation. Because Soviet Jews were still overwhelmingly Yiddish-speaking, Soviet policies supported the formation of Soviet Jewish schools, clubs, newspapers, and other cultural institutions conducted in the Jews' native language: Yiddish. Jewish populist intellectuals and Soviet theoreticians working on policy toward ethnic minorities agreed that language would define the modern Soviet Jewish nation.[12]

Mikhail Levitan, an editor and important member of the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia in Ukraine, joined the Communist Party shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution and was charged with ensuring that the goals of the state and the Party were at the core of Soviet Jewish culture building in Yiddish.[13] He wrote a series of articles in 1926 explaining what he thought Soviet Jewish culture was, and was not, about.

> Yiddish is, for us Communists, not a goal in and of itself, but is only a means for Communist education and re-education of the Jewish masses. But does that mean that the culture building that we've done in Yiddish is just a tactical maneuver for us? . . . Do we approach Yiddish from the standpoint that it is a lesser evil than Hebrew? . . . Is it just meant to elicit sympathy from the worldwide Jewish masses to our work in the Soviet Union? And finally, does it mean that after we completely liquidate Zionist influence from the Soviet Union, and if the Communist International finds the key to the hearts and minds of the Jewish workers of bourgeois lands, will we suddenly throw out, as unnecessary baggage, all of Yiddish-language culture building?[14]

For Levitan, these rhetorical questions all had the same answer: no. In this litany of questions, Levitan summed up the utilitarian arguments why the Soviet state was supporting and helping build a Yiddish culture of its own. Some Soviet activists thought that it was a convenient way to spread Soviet propaganda to the Yiddish-speaking Jewish masses, both within the Soviet Union and abroad. Until Soviet Jews all spoke Russian, the state would have to bring them Communism in Yiddish. Other critics thought that the Soviets' use of Yiddish was tactical – to encourage Jews from around the world to support the fledgling and desperately poor country both politically and financially. Others thought that the Soviet state's support of Yiddish was simply a front masking its persecution of Judaism, Hebrew culture, Zionism, and other forms of Jewish culture and politics. Finally, Levitan posed the ultimate question: once all Jews became Communists, would Yiddish still be necessary?

There was a degree of truth to all of these notions. The Soviet state and the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia wanted the support of Jews for the new socialist experiment, and Yiddish – whose speakers now spanned the globe after the great migration of Jews from Eastern Europe – was a great way of helping build that support. The intelligentsia's creation of an alternative Jewish culture in Yiddish would certainly serve as a substitute for the forms of Jewish culture it was suppressing, such as "bourgeois, nationalist" Zionism and "benighted, backward" traditional Jewish religion. And there were some among the intelligentsia who considered Yiddish simply a means to a larger end of turning Jews into non-Jewish (Russian-speaking) Soviets.

The utilitarian arguments Levitan raised were not just about Communist internationalism and Soviet politics, but were also about the many approaches Jewish intellectuals had taken to modernizing Eastern European Jewry. Many nineteenth-century Jewish modernizers, known as *maskilim*, thought that to be modern, Jews needed to speak the languages of the high cultures that surrounded them – Russian and German – and needed to resurrect the Jews' classical language, Hebrew. For most *maskilim*, Yiddish was a relic of a time past, when Jews had their own vernacular language because they lived in a world apart. In the modern world, Jews were part of, not apart from, society, and therefore the continued use of Yiddish worked against their modernizing and integrating project. Those *maskilim* who chose to work in Yiddish saw its use in literature, newspapers, and other forms of print culture as a temporary means of bringing new ideas to the Jewish population in its native tongue. Yiddish was seen neither as a language of high culture, nor as a language of the future. It was a language of convenience. Most *maskilim* would have approved of abandoning Yiddish once their modernizing goals had been accomplished – in this case, once Soviet Jewry was speaking Russian and quoting Lenin.

But Levitan and the members of the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia were not *maskilim*.

The place of Yiddish in Jewish culture began to change when Eastern European Jewish intellectuals encountered nineteenth-century nationalism. Benedict Anderson, one of the foremost scholars of nationalism, has shown that secularization, imperialism, the rise of vernacular languages, and the dissemination of print were four of the processes that led to an era when national identification came to supersede local, religious, and other kinds of identities.[15] In the Russian empire, these processes came to Yiddish-speaking Jews in the nineteenth century. Secularization came as traditional forms of communal and religious organization began breaking down, and modern European philosophies changed the way Jews understood the world. The nineteenth century was also the heyday of Russian empire building, as Russia was struggling to define itself as both an expanding empire and an ethnic nation. This tension fostered nationalist politics among the elite of many of the Russian empire's ethnic minorities. For Jews, the question was in what language should they develop a new post-religious Jewish communal – or Jewish national – identity. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Jewish cultural activists in the Russian empire began developing a literature, a periodical press, school systems, and other institutions that laid the groundwork for new forms of collective Jewish identity, in both Yiddish, the Jews' vernacular, and Hebrew, the Jews' classical language, as well as in Russian and Polish.[16]

The most important political movement for the development of Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe was the socialist General Jewish Workers' Union,

known as the Bund, which in 1897 held its first conference. It soon began publishing its Yiddish-language newspaper, *The Worker's Voice (Di Arbeter Shtime)*, and in 1901, officially adopted a platform calling for "national and cultural autonomy," and made its official language "that of the Jewish working classes – Yiddish."[17] Zionists, who also convened their first world congress in 1897, eventually placed Hebrew at the center of their national platform, and, over time, did for Hebrew what socialists did for Yiddish – created a Jewish culture in the one and only language that each believed embodied the Jewish people. Both Zionists and Jewish socialists were envisioning "an alternative construct of Jewish identity grounded in a secular definition of Jewish peoplehood and reinforced by secularized narratives of the Jewish past."[18] Levitan and the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia were a product of all of these movements – the Jewish enlightenment, Jewish socialism, and Jewish nationalism. As enlighteners, they believed Jews needed to become part of Soviet society. As socialists, they believed in elevating the (Jewish) working classes to positions of power and in working toward the creation of a classless society. And as nationalists, they believed that the use of Yiddish and the development of Yiddish culture made Jews a nation different from all other nations. If Jews were no longer defined by religious practice and separate communities, then language could serve as a substitute.[19] Despite the linguistic assimilation of many Soviet Jews into Russian culture, there was a concerted effort on the part of the intelligentsia to make Yiddish the defining feature of Soviet Jewishness. After all, without language what would define Jews in a socialist, atheist, modern world?[20]

The first step in building Soviet Jewish culture was the creation of an elite group of Jewish intellectuals to serve as the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia. Chapter One describes how Soviet state policy and Jewish socialist ideology meshed to create such a group. The intelligentsia then needed to establish Yiddish as the one and only language that defined Soviet Jewry, the subject of Chapter Two. The next step in creating Soviet Yiddish culture, examined in Chapter Three, was the modernization of Yiddish so that it would be worthy of its new, proud status as the language of modern Soviet Jewish culture.[21] Chapters Four, Five, and Six examine the institutions and people who built Soviet Jewish culture, from the publishing houses where Yiddish was printed, to the books and newspapers they produced, to the poets who created a new kind of Soviet Yiddish literature. These people and institutions propagated Yiddish and built a culture that they hoped would develop a new secular Soviet Jew.

If the Jewish intelligentsia worked for a Soviet Jewish culture to create a modern Jewish nation, why did non-Jewish Soviet and Party leaders of the new state listen to and support these activists? In October 1917, the Bolsheviks suddenly found themselves in charge of, rather than trying to overthrow, a multinational empire. If they had clearcut ideas about the class struggle and economics, they

were less prepared to deal with the legacies of tsarist imperialism. With the fall of the tsar, in an era of anticolonial nationalism and self-determination, some of the empire's ethnic minorities were calling for cultural and political autonomy, if not complete independence. The Bolsheviks needed to incorporate socialist internationalism and the ethnic minorities' anti-colonial nationalism into state policy.

Studying the Soviet Union as a multiethnic empire became popular after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–91 and the rise of ethnic nationalism in Communism's place. The most pressing question for those studying this movement has been how Russia and the Soviet Union managed, and in some cases created, ethnic difference. Many scholars took theories of imperialism and post-colonialism as their point of departure for studying how the tsarist and Soviet empires imagined their ethnic minorities.[22] Because of this, there has been a focus on state policy toward ethnic minorities. Terry Martin's work on Soviet nationalities policy, for example, showed how the Soviet Union's interest in developing national minorities was an integral part of Soviet imperial policy. He coined the term "affirmative action empire" to describe the way Soviet policy fostered ethnic minorities by supporting and creating intelligentsias for them, and then giving them conditional access to power to remake the ethnic group in the state's own image.[23]

One might call this a state-building model of imperialism.[24] Other empires created a native intelligentsia and systems of imperial power in the language of the metropole, which makes sense if part of the empire's civilizing mission was to teach the "natives" how to be Western. All roads led to London and Paris, to English and French culture. The only other empire that vaguely resembled Russia was the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but even there, the state administration encouraged the use of German and Hungarian to maintain the empire's cohesion. In the Soviet case, why was the natives' own language important – central in fact – to Soviet imperial policy?[25] Lenin himself suggested that the tsarist Russian empire was different from Western empires in that it was both the oppressor of other national groups within its borders and the victim of oppression by the capitalist West.[26] It was, Lenin argued, a prime candidate for both a proletarian socialist revolution and anti-imperial national liberation. Once the revolution happened, the Bolsheviks found themselves in the position of being state-building modernizers of a multinational empire, revolutionaries dedicated to inaugurating socialism, and decolonizers combating the pernicious effects of tsarist Russian imperialism on its constituent nationalities. As Francine Hirsch has argued, "for Soviet policymakers, colonization and 'making nations' went hand in hand."[27]

Soviet state building and Jewish nation building in Yiddish were not mutually exclusive. One could create Yiddish culture and help foster the Soviet state. One

could call for class struggle and insist that Jewish children go to Yiddish schools. Soviet socialism and secular Jewish nationalism were not opposite ends of a spectrum in which the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia operated. In the 1920s, these ideologies and cultural and political projects developed together, each simultaneously informing and circumscribing the other.

A UNIQUE SOVIET NATIONAL MINORITY

Within Soviet nationalities policy, Jews were generally treated just like – and in many cases, better than – any other national minority until World War II, but they were still in a category unto itself. In the Soviet categorization of its national minorities, Jews were often compared to Poles and Germans, due to their common "Westernness," their high level of education, their high rate of literacy, and their history of socialist culture. This perceived level of cultural development allowed Jews more autonomy to develop their own Soviet culture. At the same time, Jews were compared to the Roma, more commonly known as "Gypsies," because of their common landlessness. This lack of a defined and bounded place put Jews in an anomalous position within Soviet nationalities policies, which used territory as well as language to define national groups. In fact, Jews' lack of a defined territory was a source of definitional challenge for many Soviet theoreticians, who thought that nations were defined by territory. The Yiddish intelligentsia (not to mention Zionists and other Jewish nationalists) also found Jews' landlessness an impediment to the full creation of a Soviet Jewish nation. Like Zionists, who needed territory in which to incubate a Hebrew nation in Palestine, Soviet Jewish activists fought to establish Jewish agricultural colonies, Jewish city councils, and eventually an entire Jewish region, in which the official languages were Yiddish and Russian, in order to create the territorial foundations of their Soviet nation.[28]

The aspect of Jewish collective identity that has made Jews perennially unique is that they have been and still are both a religious and an ethnic group. Even Hitler, whose anti-Semitism was firmly based in theories of race, mixed the two up when the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 denied citizenship to converts to Judaism, who had no connection to "Jewish blood."[29] Until 1917, many Russian state leaders and members of the Russian intelligentsia saw Jews as both a religious and an ethnic entity living within its borders. Jewish marriages were handled by Jewish religious courts, most Jewish children went to Jewish schools overseen by official Jewish councils headed by rabbis, and enmity toward Jews still often came from Christian-based anti-Jewish polemics despite the appearance of a racial anti-Semitism after the 1905 revolution. At the same time, since the mid-nineteenth century, Jews and Russians began to see Jews in overlapping categories – sometimes as a nation and other times as a "religious