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978-0-521-82630-3 - Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918–1930

David Shneer

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YIDDISH AND THE CREATION OF SOVIET JEWISH CULTURE

1918–1930

Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture changes our perception of Jewish cultural history by giving voice to those pioneering activists who created a vibrant Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Empowered by the Soviet state and the Communist Party to create a secular culture for the “new” Soviet Jew, these activists sparked a cultural flowering in the official national language of Soviet Jews: Yiddish. The writers, artists, and intellectuals chronicled here founded Yiddish-language schools, wrote for Yiddish newspapers, published scholarly works, and dedicated themselves to an unprecedented burst of secular Jewish artistic and cultural expression.

David Shneer explores the role these Jewish activists played within both Soviet and Jewish history. These activists deeply engaged widespread Jewish cultural trends of the era while simultaneously building the Soviet state and spreading its ideology. They were not passive objects of Soviet policies toward Jews, but rather they actively participated in the creation of these policies. Shneer shows how these activists were an integral part of twentieth-century Jewish history, and at the same time he addresses some of the painful truths about their involvement in the propagation of the Soviet system.

Dr. David Shneer is Director of the Center for Judaic Studies and assistant professor of history at the University of Denver. He is the editor of *Queer Jews* and author of the forthcoming book, *Jews Dismantling Diaspora*. Professor Shneer has appeared on television and radio as an expert on issues of contemporary Jewish culture. He has lectured in Russia, Germany, Canada, and across the United States on modern Jewish culture and Soviet Jewish history, and he has served as scholar-in-residence at the Hebrew Union College and as the Pearl Resnick postdoctoral Fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. His academic articles have appeared in journals in the United States, Britain, Israel, and Russia.

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[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page vii
<i>A Note on Translation and Transliteration</i>	ix
Introduction	i
1 Soviet Nationalities Policies and the Making of the Soviet Yiddish Intelligentsia	14
2 Ideology and Jewish Language Politics: How Yiddish Became the National Language of Soviet Jewry	30
3 Modernizing Yiddish	60
4 Who Owns the Means of Cultural Production? The Soviet Yiddish Publishing Industry of the 1920s	88
5 Engineers of Jewish Souls: Soviet Yiddish Writers Envisioning the Jewish Past, Present, and Future	134
6 Becoming Revolutionary: Izi Kharik and the Question of Aesthetics, Politics, and Ideology	179
<i>Afterword: How Does the Story End?</i>	215
<i>Appendixes</i>	221
<i>Notes</i>	229
<i>Bibliography</i>	267
<i>Index</i>	285

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Frontmatter

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[More information](#)

A Note on Translation and Transliteration

This book uses primary source material in Yiddish, Russian, Ukrainian, and a small number of sources in Hebrew and German. Since it is my goal to make this text as accessible as possible to all readers, I have rendered all titles of organizations, bureaucracies, and other institutions in English, although the original will also be provided on its first use. The endnotes will provide all original names and sources. For this reason, the same institution may be referred to in Yiddish, Russian, or at times, Ukrainian, depending on the source. For short poems, I have included both the original and the translation in the text; the original of longer poems can be found in the appendixes.

For Yiddish I have used the YIVO transliteration system. For Hebrew I have used a simplified, standard transliteration system. And for Russian I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system. For common personal names in the text, I have used spellings more familiar to readers of English (Alexander, rather than Aleksandr). Many of the people mentioned in the book used different names in different languages. For consistency, I have used the name by which I believe they are most widely known. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.