

JEWES IN THE ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL LIFE OF UKRAINE IN THE 1920S

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Jews have lived on the territory of today's Ukraine for over a millennium. Their interaction with the local population was already recorded in earliest written records of the East Slavs, including the *Primary Chronicle* and the *Kyiv Paterik*. The Jewish and Ukrainian communities were not always "two solitudes," as sometimes described. In fact, at various points in history they were allies in the struggle for civil rights and national emancipation. This was particularly true of the years preceding the February 1917 Revolution, when prominent individuals in the Ukrainian and Jewish intelligentsias worked together politically, motivated by the realization that the two peoples "had to mend their mutual relations, because circumstances had dictated that they were to live side by side."¹ When tsarism fell, the Ukrainian government (first the Central Rada and then the Ukrainian National Republic – UNR) proclaimed and built national-cultural autonomy for Jews. The Jewish population was given freedom in matters of self-government, education and culture. A minister (called a secretary) for nationality affairs was established, with three vice-ministers for Jewish, Russian, and Polish affairs. After the declaration of independence, the vice-minister for Jewish affairs became a full minister responsible for community self-government, education, and culture. Even Ukrainian banknotes included wording in Yiddish.

The UNR hoped that support for Jewish education would help to counterbalance the influence of Russian culture, which had been dominant in urban centres for close to two centuries, during which time the Ukrainian written word had been banned. Two networks of Jewish secular schools were created, one using Yiddish, the other Hebrew. Jewish research sections were created within Ukrainian academic institutions. Private, religious Jewish organizations, such as the *cheders*, Talmud Torahs, and yeshivas, were not subordinated to the ministry. It is worth recalling that in 1917 most Jews supported the Ukrainian government. They were "united on the question of the right of the Ukrainian people to determine their ultimate political destiny" and delighted that Parliament showed "more willingness to grant concessions to Jews than had any other constituent assembly in history."² In 1917 Yosef Shekhtman, one of Volodymyr (Vladimir) Jabotinsky's closest allies, published *Ievrei ta ukraintsi* (Jews and Ukrainians) in which he wrote:

Who if not we, children of an oppressed people, are capable of understanding the feelings and sufferings of a neighbour, who along with us has endured the cruelty and abuse of the old regime! We have been united by common aspirations and common goals. The moment has arrived when these aspirations are close to realization. Our common path is still a long one, but we believe, that a free Ukrainian people will support us on this path!"³

One important reason for this alliance lay in the fact that Ukrainians formed a minority of the urban population. Realizing that neither the Polish nor the Russian minorities were well disposed toward it, the new government looked for allies in the Jewish minority. Several commentators have described the pervasive optimistic faith in the fruitfulness of the Ukrainian-Jewish

accord.⁴ The UNR's leadership viewed the parallel development of Jewish cultural autonomy and Ukrainian national-territorial autonomy as a linchpin in its political strategy. Loyalty to the territory and its people, not to Ukrainian nationality or ancestry, was proclaimed as the new government's principal requirement of the residents of Ukraine by Mykhailo Hrushevsky, the first head of state. With the declaration of that principle, "Hrushevsky was laying the cornerstone of Ukraine's proposed relations with its national minorities."⁵ Prominent Jewish figures served in the government, among them Solomon Goldelman, an economic minister in the Ukrainian government, Arnold Margolin, who was vice-minister for Foreign Affairs, Moisei Zilberfarb, who was minister for Jewish Affairs, and the historian Mark Vishnitzer, who was a secretary of the mission to Great Britain.⁶ Jews were also part of the press and secretarial sections of the government missions to France and the Netherlands. In November 1918 Margolin personally read "proclamations issued by the government strongly condemning pogroms, explaining to the people that the Jews were fellow-citizens and brothers who were helping in the evolution of the Ukrainian state, and to whom the fullest rights were due."⁷ He tendered his resignation in March 1919 because although he "was aware that the government was not to blame for the pogroms," as a Jew, he could not retain an official position in a country where his "brethren were being massacred."⁸ When asked to stay on and work abroad as a diplomat for the UNR, he accepted, attending international conferences and serving as the government's representative in London. The Folkspartei, Poale-Zion, and the United Bund worked with the Jewish ministry. However, events leading up to the defeat of the UNR, and, in particular, the appalling wave of pogroms in 1919, in which demoralized units ostensibly loyal to the UNR participated, badly damaged this rapprochement.

Under Soviet rule in the years 1923–1928 the policy of Ukrainianization or indigenization—a concession that the Bolsheviks had to make to gain support in Ukraine—was accompanied by a great surge of interest in Ukrainian culture, a fact that shocked Russian urbanites, who had expected Ukrainians to willingly dissolve their identity in Russian, and instead witnessed a great, spontaneous cultural revolution. Ten thousand people gave "poet" as their occupation during a census in Kyiv; in 1927 the newspaper *Culture and Life* (*Kultura i pobut*) claimed there were 6,000 dramatic groups in Ukraine serving 12 million spectators. In the following year the journal *New Art* (*Nove mystetstvo*) informed that 70,000 people were involved in amateur theatricals, and more than 5,000 laid claim to being dramatists.⁹

The indigenization policy allowed for the continued development of not only Ukrainian, but also of Jewish secular cultural life, including the formation of Jewish institutions and structures. In the pre-revolutionary and immediate post-revolutionary years, the Jewish was the second-largest urban population in Ukraine, second only to the Russian. In Kyiv, for example, where before 1903 Jews had practically been forbidden permanent residence, their numbers grew from 50,792 (10.84 percent) in 1910, to 117,041 (21.04 percent) in 1919, and to 128,041 (31.95 percent) in 1923.¹⁰ Whereas other populations fled the city for the villages during the Revolution and its aftermath, or emigrated, the Jews often stayed. In 1926 they made up 26 percent of the city's population. The Soviet Ukrainian government, like the UNR before it, sought the support of this population and continued, in modified form, the UNR's policy of developing Jewish institutions and cultural life. This was part of the effort

to win over the local population. The government in Kyiv hoped for Jewish support in the Ukrainianization movement it had initiated. Jewish newspapers, libraries, clubs, and theatres were created. Although religious schools were banned, national schools for Jews were at first continued. The authorities set up a network of Jewish secondary institutions (technicums, or professional-technical schools). All this came to an end, however, in the late 1920s, when Stalin came to power and declared local nationalism (as opposed to Russian "great-power chauvinism") the "main enemy". This became the signal to curtail both the Ukrainianization movement and the movement for Jewish cultural autonomy.

Nonetheless, in the 1920s, as a result of the indigenization policy, Ukrainians and Jews became cultural allies. Interaction was intense as parallel institutions were created and parallel tasks embarked upon. A flowering of both Ukrainian and Yiddish literatures and cultures took place in Ukraine in this decade. Relations between Ukrainian and Yiddish writers were often cordial and close. Vadym Skurativsky has described the two literatures as "pointedly loyal in their mutual relations."¹¹ Some important friendships were forged. For example, the two poets Leib (Lev) Kvitko and Pavlo Tychyna worked together from 1926. Kvitko was also close to Andrii Chuzhy (pseudonym of Andrii Antonovych Storozhuk) and the Kharkiv journal *Avanbard* (Avant-Garde). Der Nister (Pinkhus Kalanovych) was a close friend of the writers Yurii Smolych and Maik Iohansen. The famous actor Solomon Mikhoels and a number of Jewish theatre directors worked very closely with the great theatre director Les Kurbas.

Yurii Smolych has pointed out that many Jews in the 1920s were "native speakers" of Ukrainian. They came from Ukrainian villages and towns, lived and grew up among Ukrainians, were born of parents who knew only Yiddish and Ukrainian. If they knew Russian, they did so badly. It was, writes Smolych, only the later, post-Stalin generation of Jews that grew up without speaking Ukrainian and was prejudiced toward it: "Along the way," he writes, "we lost a good colleague in our cultural process."¹² During the 1920s many Jews played prominent roles in the creation of a modern Ukrainian culture and identity, making major contributions to literature, art, cinema, and scholarship, "creating a home" for themselves in the culture and simultaneously helping to define the culture itself as diverse and complex.

Olena Kurylo, for example, was a leading linguist who explored Ukrainian dialects and folklore. Osyp Hermaiza was a leading historian. Abram Leites, Samiilo Shchupak, Volodymyr Koriak, and Yarema Aizenshtok were important critics. The last worked on the complete edition of Taras Shevchenko's *Diary*, wrote on Shevchenko and folklore, and produced studies of Ukrainian classics like Kvitka, Koliarevsky, Kotsiubynsky and Franko. Accused of Ukrainian nationalism in the 1930s, he was forced to move to Leningrad.¹³

Important figures of Jewish origin entered and made a name for themselves in Ukrainian literature in the 1920s, among them Leonid Pervomaisky (Illia Hurevych), Sava Holovanivsky, Ivan (Izrail) Kulyk, Aron Kopshtein, and Raisa Troianker. These and other Jewish writers contributed heavily to a number of literary journals, in particular *Molodniak* (Youth), the organ of the Komsomol or communist youth organization, and *Hart* (Tempering), which defined itself as the organ of the proletarian writers.

Many talented individuals of Jewish origin participated in the Ukrainian film industry. Oleksandr Voznesensky, who was also known as the writer Ilia Rents, in 1918–1923 created

a Kyiv film studio called Art Screen. Arrested in the 1930s, he died in Kazakhstan in 1939. Mykhailo Kapchynsky headed the Odesa (Odessa) film studios, which began construction in 1922. He reorganized film theatres, helping to create the cinema boom of the 1920s. By the middle of the decade Ukrainian film production, headed by the All-Ukrainian Film Photo-Cinema Management (vUFKU) was enjoying rapid growth. In the years 1925–1930 it produced outstanding films and laid the foundation of a national industry. By the end of the decade, the Odesa and Kyiv factories expected to produce a hundred films each year. A push was made to produce films that would be appreciated by the large Jewish minority of 1.5 million in Ukraine, and also to make films about Jews for the Ukrainian public. As a result, a range of films describing Jewish life were made. Screen versions of the works of Ukrainian-born Sholem Aleichem, who was canonized by the regime as an “official” classic of Jewish literature, depicted the poverty of Jews in the Russian Empire. Other films depicted Jewish life under the Soviet regime, and propagandistic films were also made about enemies of the regime. *Tini Belvedera* (Shadows of Belvedere, 1928), for example, tells the story of a love affair between an aristocratic Polish officer and a poor Jewish girl, depicting aristocratic Poland as anti-Semitic. All films on Jewish themes were stopped in 1930, when vUFKU’s autonomous status was liquidated.

Perhaps the most important Jewish organization in Ukraine was the Kultur-Lige. It represented—more than any other institution—the face of Jewish cultural autonomy. Headquartered in Kyiv, in the years 1918–1925 it actively promoted Jewish cultural life, publishing, organizing musical and theatrical performances, art exhibitions, an art school, a school of music, libraries, museums, university courses, and kindergartens. Created in January 1918 in Kyiv under the UNR government in order to develop Yiddish language culture, the organization initially emphasized the creation of evening classes and clubs. By the end of 1918 it had 120 branches throughout Ukraine. More branches were later created in Russia, Lithuania, Romania and Poland. Kyiv’s role in the Eastern European Jewish world became particularly important at this time because of the isolation and relative decline of cultural activity in such traditional centres of Yiddish culture as Warsaw and Vilnius during the First World War. Kyiv attracted some of the most active figures in Jewish culture and politics as they escaped from Petersburg and Moscow in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution. They contributed to the flourishing growth in the Ukrainian capital of Yiddish-language culture in education, theatre, book publishing and art.

The main organizers and literary figures in the Kyiv Kultur-Lige were David Bergelson, David Gofshtein, Moishé Litvakov, Iokhezekel Dobrushin, Der Nister (Pinkhas Kahanovich), and Nakhman Maizil. Others included Perets Markish, Leib (Lev) Kvitko, Nakhum Oislender, and Lypa Reznik. In the mid-1920s a younger group appeared that included Itsyk [Itzik] Fefer, Itsyk [Itzik] Kipnis, Noiakh Lurie, Zinovia Tokachev, and Shloimo Cherniavsky. Since it grouped together leading individuals from a number of Jewish political organizations, the Kultur-Lige also acted as a kind of inter-party association. It was an independent organization from 1918 until 1920. However, after Soviet rule had been imposed, its central committee was dismissed by a decree of December 17, 1920 and replaced with communists who saw it as merely an instrument of Soviet rule. In 1924 all the organization’s educational institutions were subordinated to the government, but the publishing house survived until 1930.



Poster design by Isaak Rabichev

The organization was committed to preserving and furthering the autonomous national life of Jews as a diasporic people by developing a contemporary Jewish culture in Yiddish, which at the time was the conversational language of most East European and American Jews. The Kultur-Lige saw the Yiddish language not simply as a means of communication, but as a unified cultural phenomenon, the product of a collective national creativity. It aimed at developing a modern Yiddish culture that would be a synthesis of the old and new, the national and universal, a culture of the whole Jewish diaspora "from Moscow to New York and from London to Johannesburg."

The artistic section was particularly successful. Formed in July 1918, it promoted a "Jewish style" in art, one that fused leanings toward abstraction with the devices of folk art. It included Borys (Barukh) Aronson, Mark (Moisei) Epshtein, Issakhar-Ber Rybak, Oleksandr

(Aleksandr) Tyshler, Yosyf Elman, Isaak Rabichev, Solomon Nykrytin, Yudel Ioffe, Isaak Pailes, Mordekai (Maks) Kaganovich, Nisson Shifrin, and Sara Shor. They were soon joined by El (Lazar) Lissitzky, Yosyf Chaikov, Polina Khentova, and Mark Sheikhel, who arrived from Petersburg and Moscow. Abram Manevych joined early in 1919.

In spite of all the difficulties posed by the political situation, the period 1918–1921 was the most productive. Artists decorated theatre studios of the Kultur-Lige, participated in discussions on the nature of national art in the Jewish Literary-Artistic Club. Chaikov and Rabinovich taught drawing and sculpture in the Kyiv Jewish High School of the Kultur-Lige. In 1919, a Jewish art and theatre studio was opened in Kyiv which continued to exist as a part of the Kultur-Lige until 1924, when it became the Jewish Art-Industrial School. With Mark Epshtein as director, it was one of three Jewish art institutes in the world—more leftist than the Bezalel Arts Academy in Jerusalem, and more focused on the national tradition in art than the Educational Alliance Art School in New York. Children's books were published in the Kultur-Lige's own printing house during the 1918–1920 period and were illustrated by artists like El Lissitzky, Natan Rybak, Sara Shor and Mark Chagall (see opposite and next page). These illustrations are today considered some of the best of Jewish book art in the twentieth century. An exhibition of the artistic section opened in Kyiv on February 8, 1920, and a second exhibition took place in April-May, 1922. A museum exhibition opened on September 10, 1921. Influenced by Alexandra (Oleksandra) Exter, whose studio most had attended, these artists showed a love of geometrical, flattened forms. They contributed to a variant of Ukrainian cubo-futurism that was less static and monochrome than the French. Like the art of Ukrainian modernists and avant-gardists, their work combined cubism with the archaic, and gravitated towards simplified monumental sculptural forms.



Page designs by El Lissitzky, for the children's book *Yingl Tzingl Khvat* (The Mischievous Boy) c.1918

The dream of the Kultur-Lige artists during this period was the discovery and recreation of a new Jewish national art, one that would “fuse Jewish artistic traditions and the achievements of the European avant-garde.”¹⁴ To this end, they explored ethnography and folk art. They were inspired by the contemporary rediscovery of folk creativity in Ukraine, which owed much to the great ethnographic expeditions through the Pale of Settlement directed by S. An-sky (Shlome Zanvla Rappoport) in 1912–14. In 1913 Nathan Altman copied ancient tombstones in Jewish cemeteries, while in 1915–16 Lissitzky and Rybak studied wooden synagogues along the Dnieper, making about 200 drawings of their interiors for the Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society. Solomon Yudovyn had participated in ethnographic expeditions in which he painted tombstones and ritual objects. Elman, Chaikov, and Kratko had studied the designs on Jewish silverware. This work allowed the artists to discover the shtetl as a distinctive topos in art.¹⁵ Jewish primitive art and children’s art became topics of special investigation. One commentator has written: “Lubok and gingerbread figures, toys and stencils—all these offer a complete program of contemporary applied aesthetics.”¹⁶ Like Ukrainian artists, they linked the new abstract art to what they described as their own “national sense of form.”¹⁷ The remarkable graphic art produced for the Kultur-Lige’s publications testifies to the surge of creativity in the years 1918–1922. In these years of intensive work, El Lissitzky illustrated around ten Yiddish publications, while Rybak worked as a book illustrator and a decorator for Jewish theatres.





Above: Illustrations by Sara Shor for the children's book *Cock and Bull Stories*

At right: Illustration of a tailor, one of many on shtetl life, by Mark Epshtein



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Top: Children's book illustration
by Issakhar-Ber Rybak

Above left: Illustration for the *Song of Songs*,
by Yosyf Chaikov, 1919

Above right: Scenes of shtetl life
by Issakhar-Ber Rybak

The influence of this Kyiv milieu was soon felt abroad. Aronson, the son of Kyiv's chief rabbi, who had studied set design in Exter's studio in 1917–1918, subsequently worked in over a hundred productions in the United States. Shifrin and Tyshler, who also studied in Exter's studio, moved to Moscow in the 1920s, where they became well-known theatrical designers. A number of artists emigrated to Europe. Issakhar-Ber Rybak moved to Berlin and then Paris in the 1920s, where he published albums of lithographs (in 1923 and 1924) that brought him fame. The images in these albums are of the Ukrainian shtetl and its Jewish figures. After a visit to study the Jewish agricultural colonies in Ukraine, he published an album on them (Paris, 1926), and his final album (1932) was based on his reminiscences.

There was also a large contingent of Jewish artists in the largest and most important Ukrainian school of the 1920s, that of Mykhailo Boichuk. He explored the icon, Ukrainian folk art, and the Italian quattrocento, searching for elements of a monumentalist, national style. The need to combine the international with the national, the universal with the folkloric, was common to both Jewish and Ukrainian artists. This explains the presence of Jewish artists within Boichuk's school. A number studied with him, including Nisson Shifrin,



Book illustration "Reading the Torah," by Nisson Shifrin

Emanuil Shekhtman and Teofil Fraierman. Their works often depicted Jewish life in small towns and villages. The search for types (sometimes even archetypes) was also a common interest of Boichukists (such as Antonina Ivanova, Vasyl Sedliar, Oksana Pavlenko, and Manuil Shekhtman), and for artists close to the Kultur-Lige (like Rybak and Mark Epshtein). The portraits made by these artists today constitute a gallery of types, a record of the appearance and behaviour of Ukrainian and Jewish villagers and townspeople.

It has generally gone unrecognized that the brief but powerful artistic ferment of 1919–21 made Kyiv the centre of both a Ukrainian and a Jewish avant-garde art that radiated an international influence. Throughout the 1920s, both Ukrainian and Jewish avant-gardists continued to produce remarkable achievements. Like the international avant-garde as a whole, the Ukrainian was visionary. It aimed at liberation of the imagination, brought important theoretical insights, and challenged accepted ways of perceiving the world. Avant-garde artists from Ukraine made large contributions to international art. They infused the avant-garde with a love of colour, texture, and movement. Alexandra Exter and Sonia Delauney (who was herself originally from Ukraine) are credited with transforming the muted greys and browns of Western cubism and introducing bright colours into modern design. Although initially criticized for her exuberant use of colour, Exter insisted that this was the “Eastern” contribution to cubism. Although we still await a synthetic treatment of the movement, it is evident that among its dominant traits were a love of colour; a romance with primitivism and kinetic energy; a focus on the local and on elements of a national, often ancient, past; a fascination with natural processes; and a concern with inner harmony and personal lyricism. Through these traits it brought its own distinct accent to the international avant-garde.

One reason why the achievement of this avant-garde has gone unrecognized lies in the fact that it has often been homogenized under the term “Russian.” For some artists this might indeed be an adequate characterization, especially for those who were originally from Ukraine, but who then lived most of their creative lives in Moscow or St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad. Among them one might count Nathan Altman, who was born in Vinnytsia, studied under Kiriak Kostandi at the Odesa School of Art, and was in Paris on two occasions (1911–12 and 1928–35). Another such artist was David Shterenberg, who was born in Zhytomyr, studied in a private studio in Odesa (1905), and then in the École des Beaux Arts and the Vitty studio in Paris (1906–1912). He then joined the studio of Fernand Léger and others, exhibiting in various Paris salons before moving to Russia. However, even here, the identity issue is a complex one. Interaction among artists from Ukraine, even when they lived in the two Russian capitals, was often intense, and their links with colleagues in Ukraine frequently remained strong. Aware of these difficulties, art historians have often identified these artists as members of both the Russian and Ukrainian avant-gardes. And, of course, there is the fact that many were of Jewish origin and brought a Jewish perspective to the creative explosion that produced the avant-garde. As a result these figures simultaneously belong to, and are claimed by, the Ukrainian, Russian, Jewish and the Western European avant-gardes.

It is interesting to speculate about the reasons that produced such remarkable artistic achievements in Ukraine in the immediate pre- and post-revolutionary years. Clearly, one factor was the Kyiv Art School, which from 1901–20 developed many great talents, among them

Alexandra Exter, Vadym Meller, Ivan Kavaleridze, Alexander Archipenko, Oleksandr Bohomazov, Abram Manevych, Anton Pevzner (Antoine Pevsner), Aristarkh Lentulov, Isaak Rabinovich, Aleksandr (Oleksandr) Tyshler, Mark (Moisei) Epshtein, Solomon Nikritin, Issakhar-Ber Rybak, and Anatolii Petrytsky. It accepted Jewish students in substantial numbers, often with the express permission of the director and sometimes in opposition to the desires of the government authorities. From 1901–20, almost half the students in the Kyiv Art School were of Jewish background. The resulting mix of talented and ambitious artists from different backgrounds had much to do with the generation of an innovative, creative atmosphere.

At least two other reasons were important in producing the artistic ferment in Kyiv, particularly during the revolutionary years and the 1920s. One was the creation in 1917–18 by the Ukrainian government (the UNR—Ukrainian National Republic, 1917–1920) of a Ukrainian Academy of Arts. It brought together some of the most talented professors, such as Vasyl Krychevsky, Yuri Narbut, Abram Manevych, and Mykhailo Boichuk, and many gifted students. Although this institution went through two name changes under Soviet rule, it continued to exert a strong influence on artistic life in Ukraine throughout this period.¹⁸ A second was the already-mentioned Kultur-Lige. In pre-war years, Jewish students, who saw the possibility of making a career in art at a time when many other professions were closed to them, could come through a number of academic institutions like the Kyiv Art School and the Academy of Arts, and then, from 1918, participate in the work of the Kyiv Kultur-Lige. Although, after the Kultur-Lige's Sovietization in 1920, some prominent figures left, the organization continued to exist until 1925. Moreover, the art school it created survived into the 1930s.

There were also, no doubt, deeper historical reasons for the artistic flowering. It could be argued that Ukraine had long been a meeting ground of cultural influences and was therefore prepared to confront and even welcome novelty. A distinct Western culture—baroque, Latin, and relatively cosmopolitan—already existed there from the late seventeenth century. Ukrainian Orthodox, Polish Catholic, Jewish rabbinical, and later Hasidic cultures interacted or rubbed shoulders, and continued to do so for many generations. In the nineteenth century, after most of Ukraine had come under tsarist rule, these interactions were overlaid by a Russian imperial culture. As a result, members of the avant-garde in early twentieth century could be of Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, or Jewish origins, and might sometimes mix imperial and national, or Christian and Jewish imagery in their art, much as occurred in the various literatures (Ukrainian, Russian, or Yiddish) that were produced in Ukraine. The coexistence of different viewpoints, and the possibility of shifting perspectives, is a feature of the avant-garde art from this period.

The subsequent fate of both Jewish and Ukrainian artists of the avant-garde is in almost all cases a tragic story. The Jewish intelligentsia was split between those who were more concerned with promoting cultural and national values, and those who gave pride of place to political-ideological issues. The most important figures in the Kyiv Kultur-Lige, for example, leaned in the former direction—toward the spreading of secular Jewish culture in Ukraine. They were challenged by the second group. One historian has written: "Those members of the Kyiv group who had nothing to express but their ideological orthodoxy looked for support from the so-called Jewish sections [*evseksyii*—national sections of the various communist

organizations] and acted in their name, according to their instructions."¹⁹ When the communist groups demanded complete subordination to themselves, the conflict between the two tendencies among Jewish intellectuals in Kyiv flared up. Nakhman Maizelson and other leaders left for Warsaw. Many activists (for example, most of the artistic section) moved to Moscow. Lev Kvitko and Perets Markish left for Germany; David Gofshtein, the oldest and best known poet of the Kyiv group, went to Palestine. Disillusioned by the situation abroad, most soon returned to Ukraine, where they shared the same fate as the rest of the Ukrainian intelligentsia. Many were killed in the 1930s. Some who survived the purges, like Lev Kvitko and thirteen other members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, were murdered by the KGB in 1952.

Although the Soviet government made attempts in the 1920s to deal with anti-Semitism, its own fierce anti-religious agitation, which specifically targeted Judaism and Zionism, only served to exacerbate the problem. In the post-revolutionary years synagogues were forcibly closed, and Judaism was branded as the most reactionary of religions. The struggle between Hebrew and Yiddish was presented as a class war. In August 1919 the Bolsheviks prohibited the teaching of Hebrew.²⁰ In June, 1919, a law was passed liquidating all Zionist organizations, as well as all Jewish party, political, professional, and cultural organizations created under the UNR, and the confiscation of the money and property of local Jewish communities began.

In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, the growth of Zionist parties mushroomed. Show trials against the "Jewish counter-revolution" began in 1922 and sentenced over a thousand individuals to prison terms or to Siberian exile. The antireligious campaign was spearheaded in 1921–1922 by the Jewish sections of the communist party. The strong reaction to these measures made the sections retreat temporarily, but they went on the offensive again in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Severe limitations on expressions of religious life were made law in 1929, and all non-government organizations were liquidated in the 1930s. The last synagogue in Kyiv was closed in 1936. Many of the closings have been preserved on newsreel in Ukrainian archives.²¹

Under Soviet rule, all Jewish educational institutions were subordinated to the People's Commissariat of Education of the Ukrainian SSR. In the mid-1920s and early 1930s the Soviet authorities set up a network of Jewish secondary institutions (technicums, professional-technical schools) all of which were shut down in the second half of the 1930s. By that time the policy of supporting Jewish schools was associated with nationalism.

Most Jewish political parties and organizations that had been formed in the revolutionary years or under the UNR were liquidated in the 1920s. Almost all underground Zionist organizations were destroyed. Only the Jewish sections of the communist party were allowed to exist in the 1920s in order to build a loyal communist Jewish culture on Yiddish. After 1930, these sections were not supported by the government and many in them were treated with suspicion because their non-communist affiliations prior to 1919.

Many Ukrainians in the Soviet leadership in Kyiv had also held non-communist affiliations prior to 1919. In the 1920s, these figures frequently supported Ukrainianization, saw Jewish culture as an ally, and supported Jewish scholarship. For example, in 1918, the newly created Ukrainian Academy of Sciences formed two research centres for the collection

and study of Jewish materials: the Jewish Historical-Archaeographical Commission (1919-1929) headed by Ilia Galant, and the Jewish section at the National Library of Ukraine. They continued their work under Soviet rule. In 1928-1929, when the Society for the Spreading of Enlightenment among Jews in Russia (*Obshchestvo dlia rasprostraneniia prosveshcheniia mezhdru ievreiami v Rossii*—OPE, 1863-1929) and the Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society (*Evreiskoe istoriko-etnograficheskoe obshchestvo*—EIEO, 1908-1930) were closed down, their valuable collections were sent from Leningrad to the National Library in Kyiv.

At the end of the 1920s, the Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture in Kyiv (1929-1936) became the main research centre for Jewish history and culture in the USSR. By the mid-1930s its library and archives had 100,000 items. In 1936 it was told to transfer its holdings to the National Library in Kyiv. Evacuated to Ufa during the Second World War, this collection was returned to Kyiv but not made available to readers. It contained the unique collection of folk music and recordings made by S. An-sky during his famous ethnographic expeditions (1911-13), and those by Yu. Engel and M. Berehovsky (made between 1911 and 1948). In 1950 the Soviet government closed the collection and destroyed the catalogues. Until 1990 the collection was kept in reserve vaults, where it survived almost entirely intact thanks to the staff.

From 1929-30 the Soviet authorities began to close all non-communist academic institutions, and to throw out of work all academic experts of pre-revolutionary training. Soon afterwards, in the 1930s, the pro-communist Jewish scientific organizations were also shut down. The only exception was the Cabinet for the Study of Soviet Jewish Literature, Language and Folklore (later called the Cabinet of Jewish Culture) in the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, which survived until 1949.

The preconditions for an extended Ukrainian-Jewish dialogue existed in the post-revolutionary decade, but political circumstances intervened to cut short the developing rapprochement. As Russian hegemony was reasserted under Stalin, the dream of an independent, albeit communist, Ukraine collapsed. Along with it died the vision of Jewish cultural autonomy. By the end of the 1920s, Jews were no longer drawn into the work of Ukrainianization, Jewish education and scholarship in Ukraine were being liquidated, and the development of Jewish literature and culture was being undermined. The rich history of Jewish cultural life in Ukraine, in particular the achievements of its artists and writers in the 1920s, is today being rediscovered and researched by a new generation of scholars.

Notes

- 1 Solomon Goldelman, *Lysty zhydivskoho sotsial-demokrata pro Ukrainu: Materialy do istorii ukrainsko-zhydivskykh vidnosyn za chas revoliutsii*. Vienna: Zhydivske vydavnytstvo "Hamoin" na Ukraini, 1921, 5.
- 2 Arnold Margolin, *Ukraina i politika Antany. (Zapiski evreia i grazhdanina)*. Berlin: Izdatelstvo S. Efron, 1922, 181.
- 3 Quoted in Israel Kleiner, *From Nationalism to Universalism: Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky and the Ukrainian Question*. Edmonton and Toronto: CIUS, 2000, 61

- 4 Volodymyr Vynnychenko, *Vidrodzhennia natsii*, Vol. 1, Kyiv-Vienna: N.p.: 1920, 297-8; Solomon Goldelman, *Zhydivska nationalna avtonomiia v Ukraini 1917-1920*, *Zapysky Naukovoho Tovarystva im. Shevchenka*, Vol. 182, Munich: Dniprova khvyliia, 1967 (translation: Jewish National Autonomy in Ukraine 1917-1920. Chicago: Ukrainian Research and Information Institute, 1968).
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