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Interwar Encounters with Official Status

Yiddish power and its limits in the interwar period are topics not just for one future book, but a series of works, looked at from different angles. This short survey of topics and sources is meant as a brief introduction, and hopefully an inspiration, to future scholars. For the purpose of setting the scene, the reader is referred to two masterpieces by Ezra Mendelsohn: *The Jews of Eastern Europe between the World Wars* (1983) and *On Modern Jewish Politics* (1993). These works provide the political background and much of the social context. The political aspects are most important, heuristically speaking, because twenty-first-century readers cannot easily get to grips with a world in which hundreds of thousands, or millions, of native Yiddish speakers are involved in modern manifestations of their culture, in conjunction with an array of political movements ranging from right-wing nationalist to far left, and often with varying degrees of state support. The polaric case is of course full-blown Leninist communism, which was illegal in the free states of interwar Eastern Europe while, quite conversely, being the law of the land in the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Studies of aspects of Yiddishism in the period include Goldsmith (1976/1987), Fishman (1981), Fishman (2005) and Katz (2007). For all the many works on Yiddish literature, periodicals, education and politics, there are still no synthetic works on the broad sweep of Yiddish culture in any of the interwar republics, across a swathe. The reason for that is that the subject has remained too controversial and painful even among allegedly dispassionate scholars who can be loath to tackle an array of ideologies that after the Holocaust remained discredited or tabooed. Sometimes it is because of having to deal psychologically with a culture that failed to anticipate genocide and whose ideologies are regarded as 'losers' precisely on those grounds. Another major

hesitation derives from moderns' difficulty in understanding, let alone conveying, the full leftness of many of the secular movements, and the full rightness of the religious traditionalists. Politics looms so large over Yiddish studies to this day that scholars who would wish to represent the full societal force of interwar Yiddish would have to overcome their discomfiture over what is today considered (embarrassingly) communistic far left and (embarrassingly) religious far right. Abilities with relativity are declining in a number of social science disciplines as the different political correctnesses maintain a tight hold over many sectors of academia. All the more so in light of academics' characteristic reluctance to own up to their own limitations and those imposed on them by professional constructs that can impact their career status.

Filling that gap remains a cardinal desideratum. However, there are numerous excellent sources for personalities, places and works, and also for major cultural trends. Two primary encyclopaedic works remain the four-volume *Jewish People Past and Present* (1946–1955) and the *Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (Hundert 2008). Recent volumes that run counter to the 'reticence' vis-à-vis the leftist background of so much of secular Yiddish culture include Glaser and Weintraub's *Proletpen: America's Rebel Yiddish Poets* (2005), Trachtenberg's *The Revolutionary Roots of Modern Yiddish 1903–1917* (2008), and Pomerantz Freidenreich's *Passionate Pioneers: The Story of Yiddish Secular Education in North America, 1910–1960*. For coverage of the more 'mainstream' trends, the best anthology is still Joshua A. Fishman's *Never Say Die* (1981).

When it comes to Yiddishism of the early twentieth century per se, the central event is the 1908 Chernowitz Conference (mentioned earlier) which proclaimed Yiddish 'a national language of the Jewish people' and brought together literary and political movers along with unknown young talent, inspiring generations of achievement in Yiddish (though, heaven knows, its specific projects mostly failed).

Paris Peace Conference, Polish Republic and more

If any subsequent event came to set the tone for the modern rise of Yiddish in the new states of Eastern Europe, it was the inclusion of the question of Yiddish on the agenda of the Paris Peace Conference. The seminal paper is still Joseph Tenenbaum's (1957–8) memoir; he

had himself been a delegate to the 1919 conference representing East Galicia. Concentrating on the educational requirements to be made of the new Polish Republic, and the protection of minority rights, there had been an extensive discussion about the question of Yiddish-speaking schools. Both Great Britain's Prime Minister Lloyd George and the American President Woodrow Wilson took an active part in the discussion. Wilson, lobbied by Jewish groups in the United States, expressed the fear that without explicit protections, there would be a danger of the vernacular language of the Jewish population, numbering millions, being banned at some point. One of the results for Yiddish of the Paris Peace Conference was the enshrinement of educational rights that in great measure came to fruition not only in the Polish Republic, but also in Lithuania, Latvia and other new republics in the heartland of Yiddish-speaking civilization in Eastern Europe. The schools would be producing readers of books and periodicals, and consumers of a wide variety of Yiddish cultural products in Eastern Europe.

Poland's capital, Warsaw, became the international European capital of Yiddish literature. Its environment generated internationally known authors, the most famous of whom, Isaac Bashevis Singer, who migrated to the United States in 1935, would in his advanced years become the only Nobel Prize winner for Yiddish literature (in 1978). The Warsaw Yiddish Writers' Union, at Tlomatska 13, became an international address for Yiddish and the stuff of foundational myths for the new and prodigiously prolific output of Yiddish in the interwar period. Warsaw (Yiddish *Várshe*) became the European queen city of Yiddish *belles lettres*, and home to the prestigious periodical *Literárishe bléter*.

A much smaller city, Vilna, then also part of the Polish republic and known as Wilno (Yiddish *Vílne*), became the international centre of Yiddish scholarship. During and in the immediate aftermath of World War I, young Yiddish scholars converged on Wilno, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania). They were all Litvaks, that is, Jews from the Northeastern Yiddish territory — the lands of the traditional Litvaks or northerners among East European Jewry (see Maps 2 and 4). They hailed from cities that after World War I were no longer in the Russian Empire but in Lithuania, Latvia, northeastern Poland and the Belorussian republic of the new Soviet Union. A number of them, led by Max Weinreich (1894–1969), set up in 1925 the *Yídisher vísnschaftlekher institút* (Yiddish Academic Institute or in the contemporary

Box 14.1 A stateless language gets its own academy

In 1923, Max Weinreich, a native of Courland (western Latvia), who had just completed his doctorate on the history of Yiddish studies at Marburg University in Germany, settled in Vilna (then Wilno, Poland; now Vilnius, Lithuania).

Two years later he established the Yivo (an acronym from the Yiddish for *Yiddish Scientific Institute*). The city that had for centuries been known as the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania' for its traditional rabbinic learning had seemingly overnight also become the symbolic capital of modern secular Yiddish learning.

Weinreich married educator Regina Shabad, daughter of the near-legendary Vilna doctor Tsemakh Shabad, who had helped set up a new Yiddish school system in the city during World War I. Shabad arranged the initial financing for the daring new academic venture in Yiddish.



Max Weinreich



Dr. Tsemakh Shabad





Laying the cornerstone for the new Yivo building at Vivulski



The completed building had state of the art facilities for archive preservation. It became an international symbol of 'high culture'

official version, Yiddish Scientific Institute). During its Vilna period, the Yivo published dozens of major works on Yiddish literary history, linguistics and folklore, all *in* Yiddish, thus giving Yiddish a remarkable academic literature — and cachet — in the near-complete absence of universities anywhere seriously including the subject in the interwar period. Following the 1913 ‘dreams’ of Ber Borokhov (see Chapter 12), the Yivo quickly produced an array of academic volumes, including linguistics, folklore research, history and popular education, that verily made it the scholarly academy of the Yiddish-conscious Yiddish-speaking world (see Trunk 1980; Katz 2007: 294–300; Kuznitz 2014). One of the Yivo’s co-founders, Zalmen Reyzen, produced a four-volume encyclopaedia of Yiddish writers (Reyzen 1926–9) that established ‘as a fact’ an international high-level Yiddish literature that could compete in the European arena. The Yivo itself published an impressive array of folio research volumes, most famously the series *Filológishe shriftn* in the late 1920s. All this was *in* Yiddish, as a matter of both practice and principle.

USSR

The one country where Yiddish attained truly official status and varying degrees of de facto state power was in the new Soviet Union. In line with Lenin’s nationalities policy and minority rights, Yiddish became a state language in regions where its speakers constituted a considerable portion of the population. In practical terms, that meant principally the Belorussian and Ukrainian republics, but with a national status that also produced Moscow-based institutions of culture and education. There were state-sponsored Yiddish-speaking schools and some higher institutions to train teachers and scholars, as well as a state-sponsored infrastructure that enabled publication and dissemination of prose and poetry and high-end staging of drama. There was also much practical-handbook type publishing for an array of purposes (handbooks on lawyers’ and biologists’ terminology on Yiddish continue to strike antiquarians today as particularly exciting). In the early and mid 1920s especially, the Soviet sponsorship of Yiddish seemed a kind of paradise for a stateless language, so much so that some famous authors, like Dovid Bergelson and Moyshe Kulbak, actually migrated to the new Soviet Union to be part of what looked like an inspiring new structure for the state sponsorship of Yiddish culture. They were eventually shot during Stalin’s purges, Kulbak in 1937 and Bergelson in 1952. But in the early 1920s such dark endings were not foreseen. Events like the Twelfth

Party Congress of 1923, which made way for Yiddish-speaking courts, town councils and cultural organizations, lulled Yiddish personalities to envy the Soviet Yiddishists their good fortune. The Jewish sections of the communist party, set up in 1918 and known in Yiddish as the *Yevséktsye* (from the Russian abbreviated form for 'Jewish section'), were given the power to build a new communist-grade Yiddish culture, and from the start, to fight a war of cultural destruction against non-communist Yiddish culture, and needless to say, against both religious and modern Hebrew Jewish culture. It was not long before the *Yevséktsye* became a beast for destroying its own as intolerance, suspicions of disloyalty to communism and a culture of total intrigue against one's teachers and colleagues set in, in most cases by the late 1920s. By that time, the usefulness of Yiddish for personal career power was setting in with a vengeance for the perceived potential competitors of the person in power, be that a petty official, party hack or actual educator or writer. The *Yevséktsye* was itself closed down in 1930, but the word *yevsék* for one of its members lives on in the sense of 'Soviet Yiddish hack, competent in Yiddish but caring only about his career, and given to permanent intrigue against all colleagues', a sense in which it can still be heard in Yiddish cultural circles today, fairly or unfairly, of those Yiddishly educated in the pre-1991 Soviet Union.

The massive intellectual and financial support for Yiddish in place of building a free modern culture and literature, such as was being successfully created across the border in the non-Soviet East European states, and in the Yiddish satellite emigration centres in North America and elsewhere, resulted in a special kind of Soviet Yiddish. It would be purged by the Soviet Yiddish communist masters of many of its Hebrew and Aramaic lexical items, these being seen as 'clericalistic' and 'reactionary' elements of the language. Many calques from Russian would be accepted in the literary language, giving its syntax a 'Russian cosmopolitan' feel. Most spectacularly for the users of language in such a 'writing-based society' as East European Jewry, the Jewish (Hebrew) alphabet was retained but with mandatory spelling reform that re-spelled Semitic words phonetically, did away with the word-final forms of letters and introduced mandatory diacritics. The look was one of weirdness to the very people for whom the individual alphabetic characters were nearly as 'native' as mother's milk. The net result was the Soviet creation of an artificial, and very temporary, kind of Yiddish. The Stalinist purges of 1937, and then again after the war, from 1948 to 1952 particularly, led to the murder of most of the leading Yiddish writers and cultural personalities. A miniature revival was initiated in the early 1960s with the

launch of *Sovétish héymland*, edited by the reliably Stalinist editor Aaron Vergelis until the collapse of the USSR and beyond. One of the ironies, though, is that, by the 1990s, when the Soviet Union had collapsed, his hand-trained younger or early middle-aged Jewish male 'Soviet Yiddish writers' easily took over the weak fields of secular Yiddish culture and publishing in its two centres, the United States and Israel, and for a time at Oxford in the UK (before abandoning it for greener pastures in America), giving much of today's secular Yiddish in the west and in Israel a Soviet timbre that is emotively unattractive to both religious and secular users of Yiddish in the west and in Israel. History is not wanting in ironies.

Then there is the component of modern Yiddish culture built specifically in, for and by the Soviet Union. Those in the lands conquered from the Soviet Union in the aftermath of Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941 — the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union — in present-day Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, western Ukraine and surrounding areas were subjected to the most complete and relenting genocide of the entire Holocaust. In the sense of utter genocide of the entire Jewish minority population in a territory, that is indeed a stage that was launched following this invasion.

We are then left with the uninvaded parts of the Soviet Union, of which only Moscow was a major Yiddish cultural centre. But Stalin's purges of the 1930s, the purges in and around 1937, the 1930s closing-down of Yiddish schools and cultural institutions, had already dealt a blow of the most major proportions to Yiddish in the Soviet Union. Once the temporary wartime alliance with his Anti-Fascist Committee (very useful for winning western financial and political support for the anti-Hitler war effort after Barbarossa) and the surviving famous Yiddish writers were no longer needed, the next major repression got under way in 1948 with the murder, by staged automobile accident, of the actor Solomon Michoels (Shloyme Mikhoels), a process culminating with the 'Night of the Murdered Poets' in Moscow's infamous Lubianka Prison on 12 August 1952 (though poets were a minority of those shot that day). Although its focal years of repression and destruction of Yiddish were shortly before the war (1937–41) and just after it (1948–52), taken in tandem with the Holocaust's having taken out the centres of Yiddish in what was the western Soviet Union at the time of the Nazi invasion of 1941, and bearing in mind the cumulative result, it is fair to say that Soviet Yiddish culture met a grim end in the general period of World War II. Before that, the sheer mass of educated readers and the corpus of literature produced meant that there would be

high-quality works of literature created and drama performed, though often tainted by 'red tails' of mandatory communist input to virtually every genre, accompanied by the ubiquitous party atmosphere of unending intrigue to purge colleagues.

The Yiddish experience with 'political power' in the Soviet context, while overwhelmingly disastrous in its outcome, nevertheless produced much of value along the way in the output of education, literature and academic research. There are many studies in English of the topic that might serve the interested reader well, particularly Kochan (1970), Shulman (1971), Gitelman (1972, 2001), Greenbaum (1978), Veidlinger (2000) and, most up to date, Shneer (2004), who uniquely, and from the methodological point of view admirably, aspires to seeing where possible the positive side of things, without ever losing the scholar's sense of judgement. Bemporad's (2013) study of Minsk is perhaps the best to date of an individual Soviet city.

In the permanent canon of lasting Yiddish literature, a number of Soviet Yiddish works might well be included. They might include Kulbak's novel *Zelmenyáner* (*The Family of Zalmen*), from the early 1930s, Der Nister's *Mishpókhe Máshber* (*The Family Mashber*), from the later years of the decade, and Peretz Markish's epic poem *Milkhóme* (*War*) of the mid 1940s. Even an informal canon of works not ruined by communism (in the sense of praise of communism and the regime being the author's theme instead of literary products of his or her free will) is far from being established, and different literary historians have different preferences. When the dust has settled, it will probably become clear that the greatest works of even the giants of Soviet Yiddish literature were in most cases the ones they wrote *before* they were living in the Soviet Union. For the authors cited here, these include Kulbak's mystical *Meshíekh ben Efráyem* (*Messiah, the Son of Ephraim*), published in Berlin in 1924, Bergelson's pre-Soviet novel *Nokh álemen* (*After All*), published in 1913, and Der Nister's *Gedákht* (*Meditation*), which he published while living and working in Berlin in the early 1920s. The best anthology of Soviet Yiddish literature is still Khone Shmeruk's (1964).

In the Soviet Union, secular Yiddishism was, not long after the nation's rise, hijacked to intoxicate millions of Jews (domestically as well as beyond Soviet borders) with the idea that their language and culture were finally achieving official recognition, support and security, the same kind of illusion that the communists were providing to other stateless ('non-territorial') minorities in the Soviet Union. In the bigger scheme of things, Soviet Yiddish culture was no more than an episode: an illusory meteoric rise followed by a brutal and tragic fall.

There have been a number of long-term negative repercussions as far as the story of Yiddish is concerned. One is a huge waste of talent (and life), as fine writers were forced to bend to the party line and were intimidated, imprisoned, tortured and murdered. Another is a huge dent in the prestige of Yiddish during the past generations when there were millions of pre-war East European born speakers of the language. As for those many Jewish collaborators who enthusiastically became the government's mouthpiece for political control and destruction of 'enemies', they have gone down in history in the infamous hall of *mósrím* ('betrayers', 'moles', 'snitches'), who are among the most hated in Jewish history. The post-Soviet issue, as noted earlier, is still felt in the remaining heavily subsidized secular Yiddish circles of America and Israel, though it would be unfair to lump together the results across the board; the ex-Soviets are not to blame for the fact that neither the American nor the Israeli Yiddish establishment had anyone local they cared to invest their remaining endowments in, before passing from life (or years of active work) somewhere in the temporal vicinity of the year 2000.

Standard pronunciation — and spelling

Beyond the usual rough-and-tumble of literary, academic and political environments, there was a certain wider 'stateless power struggle' over which Yiddish would become the international standard. Because the written language had been largely standardized on those points concerning pronunciation (because of the ease with which dialect readers phonetically render the same historic symbols), the most essential debate was between the pronunciation of the Litvaks (the northerners of the historically Lithuanian lands) vs the non-Litvaks (the southerners of Poland, Ukraine and other countries; see Maps 2, 4 and 5). For hundreds of years, the pronunciation of the Litvaks had been considered most prestigious for reasons to do with sacred Hebrew pronunciations, which had been shifting in each dialect area in tandem with Yiddish over the centuries (see Katz 1993a, 1993b, 1994). But the Litvaks were a minority, perhaps a quarter or so of East European Jewry, and it was only natural that the major southern blocks, particularly in the heart of Poland, would attempt to standardize pronunciation on a southern basis. This linguistic 'power struggle' was a kind of subtle reincarnation of older cultural tensions between the Hasidic south and the anti-Hasidic (misnagdic) north (see Schaechter 1977).

In terminology, it is simplest when the discussion is limited to modern East European Yiddish, to speak of the difference between the north and the south. (The approximate boundaries are illustrated on Map 5.) In academic literature one encounters Northeastern Yiddish vs Mideastern + Southeastern (or, for the latter: Central + Southeastern, or simplified to: Southern Eastern Yiddish). In popular folklore, the northerners are invariably known as the *Lítvakes* (Litvaks); the southerners as *Póylishe* or *Ukráinishe*, often subdivided further into *Volínér* (Volhynians), *Podólyer* (Podolians) and *Besaráber* (Bessarabians). Each dialect has 'put-downs' for the others. Southerners may call a northerner a *Lítvak* (with hypercorrect *u*), and northerners may call a southerner a *Páylisher* (with hyper-Polish *ay*), in both cases pressing into service empirically non-occurring forms for lampooning, but using a sound regarded locally as hilarious when it *does* occur in the usual systematic correspondences between the dialects.

Indeed, the most striking difference between the north and the south is in the system of stressed vowels, where the historic 'clock' has moved one notch, leaving a starkly different sounding but generally wholly consistent set of basic correspondences. Among them: northern *o* [ɔ] vs southern *u*: *Nosn* vs *Nusn* 'Nathan'; *zogn* vs *zugn* 'say'; northern *u* vs southern *i*: *shúre* vs *shíre* 'line', 'row'; *kúmen* vs *kímen* 'come'; northern *e* [ɛ] vs southern *ey* [ej]: *béged* vs *béyged* 'garment'; *zen* vs *zeyn* '(to) see'; northern *ey* [ej] vs some ['Polish' but not 'Ukrainian'] southern *ay* [aj]: *péysakh* vs *páysakh* 'Passover (holiday)'; *geyn* vs *gayn* 'go'; northern *ay* [aj] vs southern *ā* or *a*: *dáyge* vs *dáge/dáge* 'worry'; *vayn* vs *van/vān* 'wine'.

By the late 1920s it was clear that the northern system had won in Yiddish school systems, including in the emigration lands, though on the native territory of the southern dialects within Eastern Europe this was often a more 'theoretical' victory than a wholesale switch of dialects frequently witnessed, say, in North American secular Yiddish schools. Instead, on the native speech territory in the East European homeland of Yiddish, local adjustments in the direction of the standard were being made. While that was true for educational settings, a modified form of the southern, non-Litvak dialect, based largely on its eastern Ukrainian variant, won out in the realm of Yiddish theatre. By the late 1920s, a southern stalwart, the master Yiddish dialectologist Noyakh Prilutski, was able to proclaim the victory of the south in the standard language of Yiddish theatre, which had emerged as one of the major prestigious products of modern secular Yiddish culture (see Prilutski 1927).

As for orthography, the passionate debates were (and are) not over differences that relate to dialect or geographic origin, but differences on

a very different spectrum: from traditionalist and pre-modern, through to anti-traditionalist (the Soviet system, and the 1937 Yivo system that was a compromise with the Soviet model). It so 'happened' that some of the best-known episodes in the debates transpired in the New York 'colony' of Eastern European Yiddish in the decades following the war, and they were largely a process of self-destruction by some of the tiny groups of weak secular Yiddishists themselves.

For traditionalist eyes, various anti-traditional aspects of the Soviet and Yivo systems continued to be unacceptable and to represent, by spelling alone, the anti-traditionalist philosophies of the leftist and far-leftist movements that were developing Yiddish culture in pre-war Eastern Europe. The most famous example is deletion of the silent álef that separates two vovs [v] from one v [u] (or in southern dialects [i]), yielding וו instead of the millennium-old ווא for the word for 'where'. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, a group of extreme language normativists, purists on vocabulary (trying to take the language 'further from German') and 'Yivoists on spelling', undertook a massive campaign against Yiddish writers, journalists and publications that simply could not stand the Yivo spelling system (or the purists' assault on their lexicon). For some decades, the youth-for-Yiddish group Yugntruf remained focused on these issues, and its one picket action was against the last daily secular Yiddish newspapers rather than against any of the American Jewish institutions that were boycotting Yiddish, particularly Hebrew day schools and modern yeshivas (only one of which had a student movement for including Yiddish; see Bard 1971). At the same time, Yugntruf was the only young secular Yiddishist club for young people that conducted its business in (some kind of) Yiddish. Eventually it developed the highly successful annual *Yidish vokh* ('Yiddish Week') that complements the more academic international summer courses in America, Europe and Israel.

The issues of purism in vocabulary and adoption of an anti-traditionalist spelling variety, however, continued for many years to stymie the progress of the 'Yiddish in Yiddish' camp in the United States and beyond (see Katz 1993a, an openly anti-normativist, pro-descriptivist, pro-traditionalist tract, but with extensive bibliography from all sides of the debate).

Each spelling detail in Yiddish can in fact have a rich cultural history. One famous case concerns the letter *áyin* (classical '*ayin*'). For the best part of a thousand years, the Yiddish cognates of unstressed German end of word *-el* or *-en*) were spelled without the *áyin* that signifies the underlying shewa phoneme. Hence the Yiddish nouns

spelled הימל (*himl* 'sky') and לעבן (*lebn* 'life') have 'happily' corresponded with the likes of German spellings *Himmel* and *Leben* for the best part of a millennium. And so it should be: Yiddish writers, scribes, copyists, authors and teachers did not care about 'mirroring' German in their Yiddish cognates and Yiddish developed its own orthographic traditions (not invariable but within a fixed range). In the nineteenth century, Enlightenment proponents and worldly secularist, socialist Yiddishists alike started to 'improve' Yiddish by mirroring modern German spellings by the insertion of the 'silent áyin', yielding הימעל and לעבען, not to be confused with a traditionalist internal East European variation that entailed inserting *yud* before the syllabic consonants (yielding הימיל and לעבין). For decades the German-mirroring innovational spellings, הימעל and לעבען, became the mark of the secularist, leftist Yiddish cultural world. But after 1913, when Ber Borokhov (see Chapter 12) reformed modern Yiddish spelling and threw out the silent letters in a return to older Yiddish tradition, the traditional spellings increasingly, especially in the interwar period, became the spelling of Yiddish academic and educational institutions and publications. The popular press stuck to the Germanized spelling and, increasingly, that spelling became the opposite of what it had been introduced for: it became the mark of traditional orthodoxy that would have nothing to do with the 'reforms' of the secular Yiddishists. And so it remains in some Hasidic circles to this day. A strange old world.

Perspective

On the eve of the Holocaust, modern Yiddish in all its manifestations, centred primarily in its native territory of Eastern Europe, numbered close to eight million speakers. The principal countries (or Soviet republics on the USSR side of the border) and their Jewish populations are estimated as follows (in decreasing order of population and using pre-1939 borders): Poland (3,300,000); Ukrainian SSR (1,530,000); Russian SSR (920,000); Romania (800,000); Hungary (403,000); Belorussian SSR (375,000); Czechoslovakia (315,000); Lithuania (158,000); Latvia (95,000); Estonia (5,000). The actual number of Yiddish speakers is lower because of linguistic assimilation in some countries, but not by much. Knowledge of Yiddish and use of various of its cultural products extended well beyond both the religious and the secular Yiddish bases of the two major branches. Even assimilationists, 'extreme' Zionists and others were usually part of the *de facto* Yiddish-speaking civilization which seemed eternal on its native turf, where it seemed as natural a

part of the human geography as any language or culture in the multi-layered linguistic tapestry of Eastern Europe.

It is that demographic power which in interwar Eastern Europe made way for the more novel kinds of Yiddish power: educational support in the free republics, the investment (until Stalin's purges in the late 1930s) in Soviet Yiddish and, perhaps most remarkably though spoken about less, the role of Yiddishists in the (mainstream) politics of their countries. That often forgotten phenomenon is in its own way the most potent marker of interwar Yiddish power. The greatest Yiddish dialectologist Noyakh Prilutski (1882–1941) was in his time, in Poland, a member of the provisional council of state and a member of the Sejm (parliament). His party, the Folkists (one of the many leftist Yiddishist groupings), won seats in the Polish parliament. For the (fact-based) Yiddish imagination reflecting a certain 'achieved power', the memory that Prilutski had met with US President Warren G. Harding in the course of his political work for humanitarian aid for World War I refugees remained inseparable from Prilutski's role as master of Yiddish dialects (see Reyzen 1926–9: 2, 954–66; Weiser 2011: 202–3).

Yiddish had attained the perceived power of the smaller national languages of Europe by an international fabric of mainline institutions, of education, publication and research, among others, and by being strong in a number of largely free countries in Eastern Europe. For all the many issues and shortcomings arising, the interwar Polish Republic, the Baltics and others, were successful states in which the pre-World War I Yiddishist dream of a Jewish cultural autonomy as part of 'staying where one is' where Yiddish would become the high-culture language as well as the vernacular in its native territory was fulfilled to a spectacular degree, one that can often not be discussed freely today in the wake of the Holocaust.

When the unwritten book on Yiddish in the interwar republics is written, as it inevitably will be, it will reveal that secular Yiddishism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was one of the most successful power-for-language movements in human history, the more so for coming to pass without direct political power (outside the Soviet Union). A language never standardized by any state or empowered by any government had risen to be the language of education, society, politics, its own Yivo academy and a literature that rivalled, if post-war creations by its surviving writers are included, that of the middle-sized nation-states of Europe.

The internal diversity of Yiddishism ranged from the religious 'far right' to the political 'far left', though it is often neglected that there

was a hefty 'silent majority' that synthesized many traditional religious practices with very much of the modern world in the multilingual environment of Eastern Europe. The successfully developed infrastructure of interwar Yiddish, based on both intrastate and cross-border concepts and institutions, was able to fulfil the dreams of the movement. The Jews of Eastern Europe acquired an advanced language of culture rapidly evolved from their own universal vernacular, putting them on one level with their neighbours without coveting local political sovereignty or territory beyond the kind of minority rights formulated at the Paris Peace Conference and various other contemporary conclaves.

The millions of Yiddish-empowered people in the interwar free republics of Eastern Europe, and most conspicuously Poland, not least in view of a Jewish population of more than three million, were all however 'guilty' of one thing: they did not anticipate the most extreme case of genocide in history that was to wipe them off the face of Eastern Europe in a few short years.

Only very recently has some discussion begun to reflect the kind of simple mental acrobatics needed to fathom the interwar framework rather than a post-Holocaust retrospective that is, at the end of the day, an anachronistic imposition. In a 2014 comment on the old Hebrew-Yiddish language debates and disputes, Eli Kavon pointed out in a *Jerusalem Post* opinion piece (Kavon 2014) that earlier in the twentieth century Yiddish was very powerful while Hebrew was very weak, and that he therefore understands the unpleasant means used by the authorities in the pre-state Land of Israel to suppress Yiddish. Kavon does not distinguish these from post-Holocaust manifestations of the same policies (cf. Katz 2007: 310–23; Tsanin 1999). But that is part of another debate. The point for Yiddish and power is that the societal role of interwar Yiddish was projected to the UK, North America, other parts of the west by immigrant communities and even to the sociolinguistically hostile environment of the Land (and then the State) of Israel. The last masters of the language who had grown up in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe, be they writers, teachers, organizers, performers or just homespun survivalists and educators, managed to keep alive a viable periodic press and literature until somewhere around the year 2000, where the limitations of the human life span took their natural toll.

The leftist-modernist-inspired meteoric rise of a modern Yiddish language, literature and culture, victim of the Holocaust in its homeland, came to its end around half a century after the genocide in the native language territory.

With precious few exceptions — so few that almost each exception was a kind of sensation in the world of Yiddish — the transplanted émigré Yiddishists of America, Argentina, Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Israel and South Africa, among others, utterly failed to convey the full language and their full commitment to the language to their children and grandchildren (see Katz 2007: 352–5).

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Yiddish and Power

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First published 2015 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978–0–230–51760–8

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

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