

ary obstructionism.

pect any massive outflow of Jews before 1994 or 1995, although I would not expect the next two years. The real turning point will be a roughly 20 per cent decline in GDP and the Russian Ministry of Economics for in the run-up to the 1996 presidential election or a reformist successor is likely to be in power. On these projections may hold, more or less. It will have a vital role to play in tracking votes. Otherwise all is lost: a panic migration ensue as most Jews of the region make

GENNADY ESTRAIKH

Pyrrhic Victories of Soviet Yiddish Language Planners

The years 1917-1930 constitute the first phase of Soviet Jewish history.¹ The 1930s inherited from this period an elaborate machinery of Jewish national districts, soviets, kolkhozes, educational and scientific institutions, courts and police stations, periodicals and publishing houses, Party, trade union, and Komsomol cells, and more.² Yiddish was the *raison d'être* of all these institutions.

The Soviet Jewish establishment was fully aware of the key role of Yiddish: it is hardly coincidental that the years 1930-1937 witnessed a fierce power struggle over Yiddish language planning. Yosif Liberberg, the ambitious and charismatic director of the Kiev-based Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, was the first to aspire to leadership in this sphere. Liberberg claimed that his team of scholars, together with their co-workers in Odessa and Zhitomir, epitomized the cultural needs of the majority of Soviet Jews in so far as 60 per cent of the country's Jewish population then resided in the Ukraine.

In February 1931 Liberberg took the lead in convening the First 'All-Union' Yiddish Language Conference. The paper he presented to the conference, 'For Party spirit in Yiddish scientific work',³ led to the adoption of resolutions which marked a victory for him. These resolutions included condemnation of the Jewish Department of the Byelorussian Academy of Sciences (the main rival of the Kiev Institute) for its

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1 See Chimen Abramsky, 'The rise and fall of Soviet Yiddish literature', *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1982, 35-44; William Orbach, 'A periodization of Soviet policy towards the Jews', *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1982, 45-62.

2 See Yakov Kantor, *Natsionalnoe stroitelstvo sredi evreev v SSSR* (National Construction among the Jews of the USSR) (Moscow 1935).

3 The paper was published in *Di Yidishe Shprakh*, Kiev, no. 6, 1930, 1-16.

keenness on dialectology instead of practical language planning and the removal of Ayzik Zaretsky, the Moscow-based linguist, from his leading position in the implementation of spelling reform. Henceforth, the standardization of spelling would be the prerogative of the Kiev institute. Zaretsky, the pioneer of Soviet Yiddish language planning, and his Moscow colleague, Elye Falkovich, were instead given control over the less important problem of punctuation.

In reality, since the radical transition to phonetic spelling of the Semitic part of Yiddish vocabulary and the elimination of the five final letters, orthography had ceased to be a major issue. The main struggle was now over the vocabulary itself. The russification of the Soviet Yiddish vocabulary, like litmus paper, laid bare the impact of rapid social changes on the language of Soviet Jewry.

The results of polls and censuses demonstrate with clarity the acculturation processes of Soviet Jews. The results of two Ukrainian polls of trade union members conducted in 1926 and 1929 are perfectly clear: in the three years between the polls the percentage of Jewish trade unionists who listed Yiddish as their native language fell from 58.5 per cent to 42.5 per cent.⁴ Nonetheless, these figures, together with the returns of the 1926 general population census,⁵ show that a substantial number of Yiddish-speaking 'toilers' still existed in the USSR in the 1920s. Thus, the subsequent activities of the Yiddish language 'machinery' was justified in the eyes of the Soviet leadership, all the more so as assimilation and acculturation could be ascribed to 'the natural processes of Soviet society' and even entered on the credit side of Yiddish institutions.

A far greater threat were claims that the production of the 'machinery'—newspapers, magazines, books—had little effect. Inefficiency meant failure, which in Soviet terms would be labelled 'sabotage' or 'nationalism' or some other crime depending on the ideological campaign of the moment. Fear of such accusations inspired various manoeuvres as well as a merciless struggle to silence anyone who might exploit the question. The first mutiny was suppressed in 1924. The threat came from Byelorussia.

Minsk breaks the ice

In November 1923 the Jewish Bureau (*Evburo*) attached to the Gomel Provincial Committee (*Gubkom*) adopted a resolution on what it termed the incomprehensibility of the central Moscow Yiddish daily *Der Emes*. The resolution claimed that the language of *Der Emes* was impeding its

circulation.⁶ The Gomel Jewish Communists attacked the approach to the modernization and sovietization of Yiddish vocabulary pursued by the paper's editor-in-chief, Moyshe Litvakov, namely a massive introduction of fresh, raw coinages. In Minsk the Yiddish daily *Der Veker* took up the issue. Aaron Volobrinisky, a Yiddish activist and essayist, launched an open discussion, arguing that it was not the artificial lexicon introduced by *Der Emes* but the vocabulary of Yiddish-speaking workers that should be regarded as the model, especially for newspapers:

Art of word? Art of sound? Each is a nice thing but they are no more than a side issue, a dessert. But [. . .] magazines and books exist for literary desserts. The mass newspaper has no great use for them.⁷

A supporter of Volobrinisky wrote:

We must write as we speak. It is a thousand times better and more worthwhile to use such words as 'sovnarkhoz' [Council of National Economy] and 'sovnarkom' [Council of People's Commissars] which shock our 'mourners over Yiddish' . . . than to glitter with words and confuse the meaning.⁸

'Yiddish proletarian language'

Revealing information on the extra-linguistic roots of the issue is provided by Litvakov in his article 'The language of our newspapers' which was published in January 1924.⁹ Here Litvakov showed that the language planners were deeply uncertain over the nature of Soviet nationality policy. First and foremost, Litvakov stressed discrepancies between the slogans 'Proletarians of all countries (and peoples), unite!' and 'The right of nations to self-determination'. The latter slogan involved the egalitarian idea that all Soviet peoples must have boundless possibilities to individualize their national culture. Thus two extremes in language planning had evolved—an 'international' model and a 'national' model. Litvakov did not himself see the function of the Jewish Communists as merely easing the path to assimilation, as had been predicted in pre-revolutionary pronouncements by Lenin and Stalin.¹⁰

In accordance with Litvakov's 'national' approach to the development of Soviet Yiddish, not only the language of Yiddish political

6 Extract from Minutes of Central Bureau of the Jewish Sections, 12 January 1924 in Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Contemporary History, *fond* 445, *opis* 1, *delo* 157, *list* 10.

7 Quoted from Ayzik Zaretsky, *Far a proletarisher shprakh* (For a Proletarian Language) (Kharkov-Kiev 1931), 9.

8 *Ibid.*

9 See in Moyshe Litvakov, *In umru* (In Anxiety) (Moscow 1926), vol. 2, 149-58.

10 See Abraham Greenbaum, 'Soviet policy towards the Jews as an extra-territorial minority' in A. Greenbaum (ed.), *Minority Problems in the Soviet Union* (London 1951), 11-22.

4 Y. Veytsblit, 'The mother tongue of Jewish proletarians in Ukraine', *Der Shtern*, Kharkov, 3 April 1930.

5 L. Zinger, *Evreyskoe naselenie v Sovetskom Soyuze* (The Jewish Population of the Soviet

periodicals was at stake but also the language in all its functions, since lexical innovations also had to meet the requirements of Yiddish belles-lettres and theatre. Litvakov regarded as unacceptable innovations such russisms as 'khozyaystvennik' (industrial or economic executive), 'yacheyka' (Party cell), 'sovnarkhoznik' (Council of National Economy employee), and 'shkurnik' (self-seeker), which appeared freely in *Der Veker*. Generally speaking, Litvakov's view was not that the level of the literary language must fall but that the level of readers should be made to rise to the necessary standard.

Litvakov saw the fundamental change in Yiddish neologisms: the pre-revolutionary Jew had mastered a new concept along with its Yiddish name, whereas the post-revolutionary Jew had separately assimilated a new Yiddish word and its associated concept. He failed, however, to mention the reason for this change—i.e. the intensive intrusion of the Russian language into the daily life of Russian Jewry. For this reason new Yiddish coinages were obliged to compete with their 'powerful' Russian counterparts.

The 1923-4 discussions gave rise to the term 'Yiddish proletarian language'. It is no coincidence that the history of this discussion was later reflected in Ayzik Zaretsky's book 'For a Proletarian Language'.¹¹ In this book, written in the genre of 'linguistic writing on current affairs', Zaretsky stressed that the same complaints were being heard in 1930 as in 1923. Zaretsky himself was not impartial to these complaints. At that time he was deeply preoccupied by at least two radical projects for the 'proletarianization' of Yiddish—that a 'Yiddish-Russian' language should supplant the 'Yiddish-German' language during the transitional period of the assimilation of Soviet Jews and that the Yiddish system of writing should be Latinized.¹²

Moyshe Kamenshteyn, a Soviet Yiddish *apparatchik*, held similar views. In addition, he advocated the large-scale removal of *daytshmerisms* (borrowings from modern German). In 1930 several of the proposals he put forward found support with journalists at Kharkov's then nine Yiddish newspapers.¹³

In 1932 the Moscow magazine *Prosveshchenie natsionalnostey* published an article which was indicative either of deepening tensions among Yiddish language planners or of the urge of officials to set the Yiddish linguists at variance. The pseudonymous author of the article saw the

11 See note 7.

12 See, for example, the following publications by Zaretsky: 'Problems of Yiddish linguistics' in *Di Yidishe Shprakh*, no. 1, 1930, 1-20; 'The Latinization of Yiddish writing' in *Ratnbildung* (Soviet Education), Kiev, no. 12, 1930, 43-61; 'The Jewish language' in the 'Great Soviet Encyclopaedia' (Moscow), vol. 24, 1932, 160-3. See also Gennady Estraiikh, 'Latinization of Yiddish in the Soviet Union', *Outlook* (Vancouver), no. 3, 1992, 20, 22.

13 'The language conference in Kharkov', *Di Yidishe Shprakh*, no. 4-5, 1930, 85-90; no. 6, 1930, 43-6.

previous activity of all Soviet Yiddish linguists and language planners in the worst possible light. He noted that as in 1924 (the Litvakov-Volobrin'sky discussions) the issue of the desired future of Soviet Yiddish vocabulary was on the agenda.¹⁴ However, the most important events in this sphere were to take place in 1934.

The mutiny

A specific feature of the 1934 events was the participation of provincial Yiddish professionals. The true name of the main protagonist is unknown. In all his writings he went under the pseudonym of Sh. Alik (or Alek). At that time he was the editor of the second-rate Yiddish newspaper *Odeser Arbeter*.

In an editorial on 24 December 1933 Alik blasted those who were blocking the use in Yiddish of such innovations as 'sovet' (council), 'sovkhoz' (state farm), 'kulak' (rich peasant), 'udarnik' (shock worker), and some other Russian sovietisms.

Had it been an isolated event, Alik's editorial might have been forgotten. But soon after it had appeared the Kharkov *Der Shtern* (the central Yiddish daily in the Ukrainian Republic) responded to a further protest. The minor Kharkov factory newspaper *Shtolene Nodl*, with a readership of about 1,500 workers at the Tinyakov clothes factory, addressed a letter to *Der Shtern*, *Der Emes*, and *Oktyaber* (the central Yiddish daily in the Byelorussian Republic), as well as to the Kharkov Party authorities. The factory journalists argued that workers were unable to understand the Yiddish literary language used in their newspapers. Once again, the question of sovietisms was raised. Alik's statement began to be appreciated as 'a harmful *tendency* and a harmful *system* rather than an *accident*' (emphasis in original).¹⁵

On 18 February 1934 *Der Shtern* published the *Shtolene Nodl* letter together with a commentary which condemned the criticisms of both dissenting newspapers. Alik's decision to introduce several Russian sovietisms was described as a 'guerrilla trick'. The *Odeser Arbeter* of 10 March parried the blow, arguing that the Odessa Party authorities had approved the lexical innovations. Furthermore, it turned out that the newspaper had appealed to the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party 'to convene an All-Ukrainian conference with the participation of comrades from *Oktyaber*, *Der Emes*, and others'.¹⁶ Criticism was clearly regarded as an encroachment on the language planners' monopoly.

14 L. Stankov, 'For a decisive turn in studies of Yiddish', *Prosveshchenie natsionalnostey* (The Education of the Nationalities), no. 2-3, 1932, 70-4.

15 Ber Grin, 'Hebrew and Russian words in Yiddish' in *Morgn-Frayhayt*, New York, 12 May 1934.

16 'Is an initiative a guerrilla trick?', *Odeser Arbeter*, 10 March 1934.

It is possible that the Odessa and Kharkov appeals were coordinated. Most probably the Kharkov reformers, led by Moyshe Kamenshteyn, had decided to take advantage of Alik's attack. A participant later recalled:

During almost the entire winter and spring of 1934 intense preparations for an All-Ukrainian Yiddish Language Conference were in progress. . . . As the conference approached, the polemic became sharper, positions drifted further apart, and arguments flared up. Many sides took part in the debate. Suddenly everyone was an expert in linguistics and anyone who felt like it wrote declarations and counter-declarations. . . . Kamenshteyn ostracized all *daytshmerisms* since . . . fascism had seized power in Germany. He did the same with Hebrew words. . . . The situation had become complicated because the trio of Kamenshteyn, Alek and Veltman [the editor of *Shtolene Nodl*] invoked the eminent linguist Ayzik Zaretsky.¹⁷

In isolation

It was a vain gesture. By this time the incessant criticism had already subdued Zaretsky's radicalism. He had been subjected to criticism even for bizarre (though, one might think, harmless) dictums. For example, he had been ridiculed for his proposal that the word 'God' be removed from the *Internationale*, the Communist anthem.¹⁸ In 1934 the only thing he ventured to do was to pen an article on Russian influence on Soviet Yiddish. And although he condemned (fairly indulgently, it is true) the 'awkward experiment with russisms' in *Odeser Arbeter*, his article was accompanied by a footnote in which *Der Emes* completely dissociated itself from his approach to russisms and sovietisms.¹⁹

Logically the mutineers might have expected to find support among the Yiddish professionals from Byelorussia who undoubtedly could not forgive their previous fiascos under pressure from Litvakov and Liberberg. All the more so as their leader, Shloyme (Sam) Agursky, was eager to settle old scores—Litvakov's accusations in the late 1920s at the time of the power struggle between the Moscow and Byelorussian Jewish activists.²⁰ But Agursky was no match for his ingenious rivals from Moscow and Kiev. Moreover, he and Volobrinisky disowned their potential allies in Kharkov and Odessa. They argued that it was the Minsk newspaper *Oktyaber*, rather than *Odeser Arbeter* and *Shtolene Nodl*, which had triggered the current stage of the discussions and that the Minsk

17 Y. Chichelnitsky, 'His bright trace', *Sovetish Heymland*, no. 6, 1974, 155-161.

18 Ayzik Zaretsky, 'To eradicate religion from the language' in *Der Shtern*, 12 January 1930; K. Alaverdov et al. (eds.), *Yazyk i pismennost narodov SSSR* (The Language and Writing of the Peoples of the USSR) (Moscow 1933), 146-7.

19 Ayzik Zaretsky, 'On the language discussion', *Der Emes*, 8 and 9 May 1934.

20 Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics* (Princeton 1972), 458-468; Mordechai Altshuler, *Haevseksie bevrit-hamoatsot, 1918-1930* (The *Evseksiya* in the Soviet Union, 1918-1930) (Tel Aviv 1980), 241-52.

approach to lexical innovations had nothing to do with Alik's and Kamenshteyn's projects. In fact, it was a matter of some discrepancies between the lists of sovietisms which *Oktyaber* or *Odeser Arbeter/Shtolene Nodl* tried to introduce into Yiddish.²¹

Reaction in the foreign Yiddish press also contributed to the official evaluation of these events. Sh. Niger, writing in the New York daily *Der Tog* on 6 March 1934, argued that the real problem of Soviet Yiddish vocabulary was not the etymology of sovietisms but 'the *idle* word, the newly-coined words from the Party's florid language . . . the whole stiff set of words which *others* had prepared for them' (emphasis in original).²²

Paraphrasing Volobrinisky's 1923 article, he wrote ironically: 'Art of word? Art of sound? This is not for them. This is "fastidiousness" . . .'.²³

In the course of the debate the position adopted by Alik, Kamenshteyn *et al* was branded 'liquidationism'.²⁴ This label was borrowed from Stalin's pronouncement on those who called for a stepping up of the linguistic assimilation of the non-Russian peoples.²⁵ True, in the early 1930s signs of the approaching deliberate russification became apparent. Mykola Skrypnyk, Ukraine's Commissar of Education, even took his own life in 1933, after being viciously attacked for his efforts to preserve the national traits of Ukrainian culture.²⁶ However, in spite of some critical ideological re-evaluations, the period of the so-called *korenizatsiya* ('indigenization') policy, when the Soviet regime sought to 'take root' among the non-Russian peoples, did not come to an end. Furthermore, the official doctrine paid little attention to the formation of a single proletarian language: the powers-that-be were much more concerned that ideological unity should prevail.²⁷

'The Odessa language'

A surprise blow was struck against the mutineers. On 18 March 1934 *Pravda* published an article by Maksim Gorky entitled 'On language', an action which demonstrated powerful backing on the part of the Soviet authorities. Gorky called for the protection of the Russian literary language. He argued that it was 'necessary to distinguish the language of clerical dogmatism and preaching from the language of poetry'. He even

21 *Lingvistische Zamlung* (Linguistic Collection), Minsk, no. 2, 1934, 3-31, 91-123.

22 Quoted from F. Shprakh, 'A sample of unscrupulousness', *Der Emes*, 20 April 1934.

23 Quoted from Ber Grin, 'For the clear proletarian word', *Morgn-Frayhayt*, 15 April 1934.

24 F. Shprakh, 'On the struggle against nationalism in the present period', *Der Emes*, 3 April 1934.

25 *XIV syezd Vsesoyuznoy Kommunisticheskoy partii* (The 14th Congress of the All-Union Communist Party) (Moscow-Leningrad 1931), 54.

26 George O. Liber, *Soviet Nationality Policy, Urban Growth, and Identity Change in the Ukrainian SSR, 1923-1934* (Cambridge 1992), 167-8.

27 Elliot R. Goodman, 'The Soviet design for a world language', *The Russian Review*, no. 2, 1956, 85-99; Isabelle Kreindler, 'A neglected source of Lenin's nationality policy', *Slavic Review*, no. 1, 1977, 86-100.

wrote that Church Slavonic words might be utilized. At the same time, he condemned all kinds of 'vulgarisms' and 'barbarisms'. In passing, Gorky referred to the so-called 'Odessa language', pointing out that one of its 'advocates' was 'the Zionist Zhabotinsky'.²⁸

Though Gorky could not have had the remotest idea of the debates going on over the Yiddish language at the time or of Alik and the campaign the Odessa editor had provoked, his article, with its reference to the 'Odessa language' and its 'Zionist advocate', became a trump card in the hands of such pugnacious individuals as Liberberg, Litvakov *et al.* They did not waste time. Towards the end of April 1934 Liberberg sent seven scientific workers and two research students to Odessa. Their official assignment was to lecture to the local Jewish community, but it was evident that the mission had an ulterior motive. Odessa being a major Soviet Jewish centre, it was important to show that Alik had no support there. For this purpose, one of Liberberg's envoys, Kalmen Marmor (an American Communist who was studying at the Kiev Institute) stressed in his report that Odessa Jews spoke *literary* Yiddish and not 'Odessa Yiddish'.²⁹ At the same time, *Der Emes* noted that Odessa Yiddish journalists had 'turned away from Alik'.³⁰

The Kiev conference

The Yiddish language conference in Kiev on 7-11 May 1934 was the most representative forum in the history of Soviet Yiddish language planning. No analogous meeting has been so well documented. A special double issue of the Kiev linguistic periodical *Afn Shprakhfront* (no. 3-4 1935) contained an exhaustive chronicle of the conference. It is noteworthy that the opening day of the conference coincided with (or had been timed to coincide with) the day on which the Soviet government declared that the Birobidzhan Jewish National District (*rayon*) had been raised to a higher status, that of Jewish National Region (*oblast*).

The 116 delegates and numerous guests from twenty-five Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian cities were addressed by Ukrainian Party and government officials. The key role was assigned to Andriy Khvylyja, Ukrainian Deputy Commissar of Education. It is likely that the paper this high-powered ideologist read at the conference had been written for him by the Kiev institute. He personified the authority of the Communist Party and government, an authority which condemned all 'undercover talks' that there was no future for Yiddish.

This position reflected the desire of Ukrainian leaders to defend their policy against charges that indigenization (viz. ukrainization) was suppressing Jewish culture. This was all the more true because of the Ukrainization drive, which did have a wholesome effect on Yiddish activity, in particular because Yiddish was seen as an antidote against russification.³¹

Khvylyja accused Kamenshteyn of attempting to stimulate artificially language assimilation among Jews. The quotations he used give some idea of Kamenshteyn's project. This was a clear anti-*daytshmerisms* programme dressed up in anti-fascist verbiage. According to this project, Slavonic suffixes and endings should be substituted for some German ones, e.g. '-nik' instead of '-ler' in such nouns as 'virtshaftnik-virtshaftler' (industrial or economic executive), 'shpayznik-shpayzler' (food industry worker); '-entsye' instead of '-ents' in such nouns as 'tendentsye-tendents' (tendency), 'konkurentsye-konkurents' (competition); '-ne' instead of '(al)e' or '(el)e' in such adjectives as 'kulturne-kulturele' (cultural), 'sotsialne-sotsiale' (social). Some nouns, it was argued, should be de-Germanized by the additional shwa suffixation '-e', e.g. 'reforme', 'probleme', 'programe'. Kamenshteyn also proposed to use, for example, only 'vesne' (spring), 'osyen' (autumn), 'sudya' (judge), 'sud' (court) instead of 'friling', 'harbst', 'rikhter', 'gerikht'.

Kamenshteyn's project was clearly the most far-reaching proposed. While the proposals of *Odeser Arbeter*, *Shtolene Nodl* and *Oktyaber* dealt mostly with sovietisms and some others of the latest innovations, Kamenshteyn strove to alter a substantial stratum of Yiddish vocabulary. He thus became the main target for criticism. As a whole, Kamenshteyn did not invent new lexical items; rather, he tried to standardize various colloquialisms and colloquial models of word formation which had become widespread among Soviet Jewish urban dwellers.

Soviet Yiddish writers depicted the spoken language of their contemporaries. In this sense one of the most notable works was Avrom Abchuk's 'industrial' novel *Hershl Shamay*.³² Abchuk made wide use of such devices as the so-called 'macaronic language' in order to reproduce his characters' speech. His characters frequently spoke 'Kamenshteyn's Yiddish'. Therefore the language of Abchuk's characters came to light during the pre-conference discussion.³³

Many examples of linguistic attrition were registered by L. Vilenkin, a Soviet Yiddish linguist, in his case-study of the Yiddish vocabulary

28 Maksim Gorky, 'On language', *Sobranie sochineniy* (Collected Works) (Moscow), vol. 27, 1953, 164-70. On Gorky as a figure of authority and the role of his *obiter dicta* see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca and London 1992), 239-49.

29 Kalmen Marmor, 'In Odessa', *Moren-Frayhayt*, 10 June 1934.

31 Mordechai Altshuler, 'Ukrainian-Jewish relations in the Soviet milieu in the interwar period', Howard Aster and Peter J. Potichnyj (eds.), *Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective* (Edmond 1990), 296-8.

32 Avrom Abchuk, *Hershl Shamay un andere dertseylungen* (Hershl Shamay [part 1] and Other Stories) (Kiev 1929); Avrom Abchuk, *Hershl Shamay*, part 2 (Kharkov-Kiev 1934).

of Minsk and Moscow workers.³⁴ The Yiddish attrition phenomenon was especially characteristic of the younger generation. As the poet Dovid Hofshsteyn remarked during the conference, the Jewish Communists 'had freed people of the old mental associations. A youth had grown up that did not know the old and did not yet possess the new'.

Zaretsky offered assurances that the hybrid vernacular did exist and he classified its three forms—Yiddish-Russian, Yiddish-Ukrainian, and Yiddish-Byelorussian. In fact, nobody denied its existence. The essence of the dispute was whether the attrition of the spoken language should be accepted as literary norm. Paradoxically, all attempts to standardize the Slavonic component in Soviet literary Yiddish were labelled not only 'liquidationism' but also 'Jewish nationalism'. This meant that these projects were under suspicion as concealed efforts to preserve the durability of the Jewish nation—the hybrid Yiddish-Slavonic vernaculars might, allegedly, appear as a further development of Yiddish and offer Jews greater linguistic latitude for their ethnic delimitation.

During the conference the mutineers not only criticized each other but also retracted statements they themselves had made. Alik attributed Kamenshteyn's anti-*daytshmerism* to lack of belief in the future proletarian revolution in Germany. Volobrinisky too jumped on the bandwagon, criticizing his own position of 1924 and stressing that the 'Byelorussian comrades' did not intend to support *Odeser Arbeter* and Alik thus had nothing on which to base his hopes. Agursky, faulting Alik's position, could not miss an opportunity to attack both Litvakov and, especially, the Kiev institute. He recalled the 'Dubnow affair' (when the noted non-Soviet Jewish historian Simon Dubnow was invited by Liberberg to come to Kiev in 1928³⁵) as well as political mistakes in Ber Slutsky's 'Lexicon of Political and Foreign Words'.³⁶

Each of these Yiddish professionals had passed through the tribulations of Party life with its permanent purges, brainwashing campaigns and ideological zigzags. It is no wonder then that a peremptory shout by Party leaders threw them all into disarray. As far as can be ascertained from the extant sources, these people were ready to kowtow to the authorities because their real motivation was often political, rather than cultural-linguistic. At a time when some Yiddish activists were being accused of forming a bloc with 'Ukrainian nationalists', they wished to manifest their Communist vigilance and loyalty.³⁷ But they could not

34 Leyzer Vilenkin, 'On the language of Yiddish workers', *Der Shtern*, 6 April 1934.

35 Esther Rosenthal-Shneiderman, *Af vegn un umvegn* (On Main and Cross-Country Roads) (Tel Aviv), vol. 3, part 1, 1982, 116-31.

36 See Zachary M. Baker, 'A book which was rescued from oblivion', *YIVO Bleter* (New York), New Series, vol. 1, 1991, 273-80.

37 Hersh Smolar, *Fun ineveynik* (From Inside) (Tel Aviv 1978), 435; Bohdan Krawchenko, *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine* (Oxford 1985), 136.

foresee that such champions of 'national' language planning as Liberberg, Litvakov and others would convince the Party authorities that a large-scale slavization of Yiddish would bear the danger of 'liquidationism' or 'nationalism'.

Algorithms of word formation

Liberberg, who presided over the conference, managed to reduce Agursky, Kamenshteyn, Alik, and other rebels to second-rate participants, clearing the floor for the linguists.³⁸ It was Elye Spivak, the leader (after the death of the prominent Yiddish scholar Nokhem Shtif) of the philological section of the Kiev institute, who was assigned to back up official doctrine with scholarly evidence. It was a triumph for Spivak, who was later to play a major role in Soviet Yiddish language planning. Spivak's paper was a compromise between the Scylla of 'internationalism' (russification) and the Charybdis of 'nationalism' (misuse of Hebraisms and other 'archaisms'), an argument which he developed further in his 1939 doctoral thesis.³⁹ He condemned all attempts to 'romanticise russisms', which, in his view, would only serve to acknowledge that Soviet Yiddish had ceased to develop. Instead, he proposed the euphemistic definition of 'word formation by semantic matching' as a reflection in Yiddish of the 'drawing together' of all Soviet languages and their 'mutual enrichment'. Following Spivak's balanced approach the conference accepted three basic principles of word formation in Soviet Yiddish:

- (1) where Russian, Ukrainian, or Byelorussian utilized internationalisms, these words should be introduced into Yiddish as well;
- (2) where Russian, Ukrainian, or Byelorussian utilized both an internationalism and 'a national term', the international word should be given preference. A parallel Yiddish word might be coined only if the coinage were 'unstilted' and as adequate as the internationalism;
- (3) where there was no appropriate internationalism a corresponding German item could be borrowed, in direct or modified form. However, such borrowings were permissible only if the German word had a 'foothold' in the Soviet Yiddish lexicon and was comprehensible to Yiddish readers. Otherwise, words from Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian might be borrowed as well.

In other words, the conference accepted that Soviet Yiddish had practically ceased to produce lexical items independently. Innovations came mostly from Russian and sometimes from Ukrainian and

38 Litvakov was ill and could not come to Kiev, though on the eve of the conference he published the article 'For a pure and rich Soviet Yiddish' (see note 33) which ridiculed all 'deviationists'.

39 Elye Spivak, *Naye vortshafung* (New Word Creation) (Kiev 1939).

Byelorussian. At the same time, the conference tried to camouflage this trend, especially the trend of russification, which contradicted the policy of indigenization in Ukraine and Byelorussia. To be sure, russification also contradicted the ideas of many delegates at the conference. This spelled rejection of a direct Russian influence on Yiddish language planning,⁴⁰ and accounted for an inclination on the part of some leading language planners to the so-called 'international' and to German lexical items.

In fact, it was mostly russisms with international roots or affixes that were defined as 'international' words.⁴¹ As for German words, the conference challenged the anti-*daytshmerish* efforts of the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) in Vilno. In reality, this was not a new approach. In practice the borrowings of terminology from German had already been admitted as 'a natural way out'.⁴²

The conference formulated a new and more tolerant approach to words of Hebrew and Aramaic origin. According to Zaretsky's metaphorical statement, Soviet Yiddish linguists had ceased 'to control the words' passports'.⁴³ However, this did not mean that the words were *a priori* 'innocent'. The Manichean selection of ideologically clean words remained valid. But in any case, nearly all lexical innovations in Soviet Yiddish, whether coined from Hebrew, German or Slavonic elements, were loanwords or calques from Russian (like the two debatable variants for 'oporositsya' (to farrow)—the Hebrew-German coinage 'opkhazern zikh' vs the Slavonic-German one 'oporosyen zikh'). Therefore, the conference resolutions may appear naive, though the leading language planners were as a rule sophisticated time-servers rather than just ingenuous scholars.

Conclusion

The substantial gravitation of Soviet Yiddish towards Russian was a direct consequence of the legacy of assimilation which had gathered momentum in the final decades of Tsarist Russia and—perhaps to an even greater degree—of the deliberate demolition of the ecology of Yiddish in the post-

40 Rakhmiel Peltz and Mark W. Kiel, 'Di Yiddish-Imperye: The dashed hopes for a Yiddish cultural empire in the Soviet Union', Isabelle T. Kreindler (ed.), *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages: Their Past, Present and Future* (Amsterdam 1985), 277-309.

41 See 'Russian-international words' in Ayzik Zaretsky, 'The October Revolution and Yiddish' in *Af di Vegn tsu der Nayer Shul* (On the Roads to the New School), Moscow, no. 7-8, 1927, 20.

42 Leyzer Vilenkin, review of Yiddish translation of Ja. Tsuzmer's 1933 textbook 'Zoology' in the Central State Archive of Russia, *fond 296, opis 1, delo 539, list 68*. See also Holger Nath, 'Yiddish as the emerging national language of Eastern European Jewry', *Sociolinguistica* (Tübingen), no. 6, 1992, 61.

43 See note 19.

revolutionary years. In the two decades after 1917 the Soviet regime did not promulgate any edicts which could be described as direct acts of *linguicide*⁴⁴ against Yiddish. Quite the reverse, it gave Yiddish unique functional possibilities. However, 'by reducing Jewish nationality to a denationalized Yiddish language',⁴⁵ the regime deprived the language of its creative capacity. Thus, language planning measures became almost the sole instrument of its development. Having such elbow-room, many Yiddish activists, including dilettanti, came to believe that their projects would save Yiddish and, consequently, the network of Yiddish institutions in the Soviet Union. The radicalism of language planners was inversely proportional to the capacity of the language.

The 1934 conference was a climactic event in the history of Yiddish language planning in the Soviet Union. Nominally, it had again accelerated the Party's guidance over this field of activity. In practice, it was a convincing victory for a group of Yiddish professionals and their cultural policies. It was the Kiev Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture that consolidated itself as the *de facto* centre of Soviet Yiddish 'machinery'. In a sense the Birobidzhan project helped the Kiev institute to reinforce, for a couple of years, its position as a kind of scholarly reservoir for the Jewish Autonomous Region.

Liberberg and his co-workers would not long reap the fruits of this victory. In the spring of 1936 the Kiev institute would be closed down and later reduced to a 'cabinet' (research unit). Several of its leading scholars would disappear in the *Gulag*. Liberberg would perish some months later, being at that time the head of the Jewish Autonomous Region.⁴⁶ Almost all the major participants in the conference, victors and vanquished alike, shared the same fate.

44 See J. B. Rudnyckyj, *Linguicide* (Winnipeg-Munich 1976).

45 Zvi Gitelman, 510.

46 Abraham Greenbaum, *Jewish Scholarship and Scholarly Institutions in Soviet Russia, 1918-1953* (Jerusalem 1978), 66-71.