A Revolutionary Curtain Call

Yiddish Theatre, the Jewish Enlightenment, and the Russian Revolution

Sid James

PSU Challenge History of Modern Europe

St. Mary's Academy

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of Yiddish Theatre in Moscow and broader Russia in the era of the Russian Revolution as a Jewish cultural and political force. The intersection of the Russian Revolution and the Jewish Haskalah reformation created the space for Yiddish theatre, a cultural movement combining Jewish identity with revolutionary ideals, to thrive. Yiddish theatre became a space for community discourse and political critique during Stalin's rule, preserving Russian-Jewish cultural identity amid growing Soviet hostility. By examining the Russian Jewish community and its relationship to Russian government and society through the lens of Yiddish theatre, this paper reveals the lasting impacts of Yiddish theatre on Jewish history and on broader theatre history. Research utilizes specific theatrical choices and interpretations by artists such as Marc Chagall and Solomon Mikhoels, highlighting the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre, to illustrate the history of Yiddish theatre and Russian-Jewish identity. Through scholarly analysis, historical photographs, audience reviews, and the writings of prominent Yiddish theatre artists, this paper illuminates Yiddish theatre as a profound example of artistic and political resistance, showcasing how theatre preserves community identity through changing historical landscapes.

In his 1944 journal entry "My First Meeting with Solomon Mikhoels," Marc Chagall, the prominent artist of the Russian Yiddish theatre, writes that "just as on the theater stage, so on the stage of life. […] For our time, too, is our material. We work and breathe with it in our art."[1] Chagall, along with the rest of the artists of the Russian Yiddish theatre, fostered religious and artistic reformation against the backdrop of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Russian Jews were intimately familiar with the motivations for the revolution. Jews lived in newly industrialized urban centers with poor living conditions and were distrustful of the Russian Imperial regime after enduring years of oppression.[2] The Revolution coincided with the Haskalah, or "Jewish Enlightenment." The Haskalah movement sought to reform and enlighten Jewish faith, life, and values by "synthesizing [Judaism] with secular knowledge and reshaping it according to Enlightenment values."[3] The vibrancy of the Yiddish theatre was situated squarely at the overlap of the Haskalah with the stirrings and eventual actualization of the 1917 Revolution. Yiddish theatre was a product of its time – the reformation of the Haskalah combined with the freedom possible in the revolution to allow Jews a venue to advocate for their agency, unify their community, and preserve their culture in shifting political climates and despite persecution.

For centuries, Russian Jews existed under the systems of oppression built by the Czarist regime. Until the turn of the twentieth century, Jews mostly resided in rural Western Russia.[4] Despite Jews now making up about one-fifth of the Russian population, they were legally confined to the small fraction of Russian land that formed the area known as the Pale of

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[1] Susan Tumarkin Goodman and Zvi Y. Gitelman, *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, 2008, 80. http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA88837082.
[2] Zvi Gitelman, "Russian Revolutions of 1917," The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, n.d., https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/245.
[3] Yahil Zaban, "Haskalah," *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets*, January 15, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199840731-0095.
[4] "The Pale of Settlement," Jewish Virtual Library, n.d., https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-pale-of-settlement.

Settlement.[5] What followed was decades of changing restrictions on where Jews could reside, work, and travel, while opportunities for Jews in the professions, agriculture, the military, and education were severely restricted.[6] In a tipping point for Jews in the Russian Empire, Czar Nicholas ordered pogroms against Jews beginning in 1904, forcing the world's largest community of Jews out of Western Russia and into Russia's newly developed cities. Jews joined non-Jewish Russians in crowded, unsafe conditions and were prohibited from working civil service jobs. These events launched a Jewish enlightenment, the Haskalah movement in Russia, decidedly orienting Jewish communities toward anti-Czarism and revolutionary thought.

The Haskalah occurred during the period from the 1770s to the 1880s, during which Jews in Western Europe sought to secularize their education and language, and integrate themselves into enlightened European society by leaving an orthodox lifestyle and moving to secular activities and professions: agriculture, artisanship, and science.[7] The movement was inspired by the European Enlightenment, and thus aptly monikered "the Jewish Enlightenment" in English and "Haskalah" in Hebrew, from the Hebrew word *sekhel*, meaning "reason" or "intellect."[8] The oppression of Russian Jews at the hands of the Czar inflamed the reformist ideas that, according to Dr. Jacob S. Raisin, had been circulating since the turn of the nineteenth century, and fully awakened a Haskalah movement in The Pale by the turn of the twentieth century.[9]

At the same time, there was an emerging emphasis on literature and the arts in Jewish communities. Activities like singing in public, writing, reading non-Jewish texts, and creating art for pure enjoyment, were newly socially acceptable as many Jewish communities moved away

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[5] Russo-Jewish Committee, *The Persecution of the Jews in Russia: With a Map of Russia, Showing the Pale of Jewish Settlement* (London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Wertheimer, Lea & Co., 1891), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007703211. 5.
[6] Gitelman, "Russian Revolutions of 1917."
[7] Zaban, "Haskalah."
[8] "The Haskalah," Jewish Virtual Library, n.d., https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-haskalah.
[9] Jacob Salmon Raisin, *The Haskalah Movement in Russia* (The Project Gutenberg, 2005, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/15921/pg15921-images.html. 268.

from strict Orthodoxy.[10] And, after Czar Nicholas abdicated the throne in February of 1917, Jews gained the freedoms needed to create establishments that reflected Haskalah ideals. The Provisional Government abolished all legal restrictions on ethnic and religious communities,[11] directly stating in the Government's founding document that "the abolition of all social, religious, and national restrictions"[12] was a goal of the Revolutionary movement.

Rejoicing in their newfound freedoms, Jews organized institutions, movements, and political parties, including "[s]chools, relief agencies, publishing houses, a Yiddish and Hebrew press, drama and musical groups."[13] Yiddish newspapers contained not only news for Jewish audiences but also reviews of literature, artwork, and plays. There was a growing desire to unify the Jewish audience, but not under Judaism alone, and instead under a common condition and vision for the future expressed through art – a desire that would only be intensified by the coming decades of revolution. Theatre could not only provide the entertainment that people in an industrializing society craved, but also promote the reformist principles of the Haskalah and Revolution to the wider Jewish community through a medium that was familiar to religious peoples – storytelling. Thus, the theatre was the perfect venue to stage the Enlightenment.

Yiddish theatre found fertile ground with the advent of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Prior to the Haskalah and 1917 revolution, "Jewish tradition considered theater to be frivolous at best. Jewish law prohibited women from singing in public and men from dressing as women. These circumstances of Jewish life made it impossible for theatre to develop as an institution."[14] However, the coinciding cultural shifts brought on by the Haskalah, which allowed public

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[10] Nahma Sandrow, "Yiddish Theater in Europe," My Jewish Learning, February 27, 2018, https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/yiddish-theatre-in-europe/.
[11] Gitelman, "Russian Revolutions of 1917."
[12] "Proclamation of the Provisional Committee of the State Duma." 1917. https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/february-revolution/february-revolution-texts/formation-of-the-provisional-government/
[13] Gitelman, "Russian Revolutions of 1917."
[14] Sandrow, "Yiddish Theater in Europe."

singing and women's involvement in the arts, and the revolution, which invigorated the need for a united Jewish base, spurred Yiddish theatres to open in every major Russian city. The Moscow State Yiddish Theatre and the Hebrew-language theatre Habima in Moscow, the Yiddish Chamber Theatre in Petrograd, as well as approximately sixteen other small Yiddish Theatre troupes were founded during this time.[15]

The fact that Jewish theatre developed in Yiddish is no accident. In the 1897 census, "98 percent of the Jews declared Yiddish as their language" and author Benjamin Harshav finds that "yiddish was the language of the masses and of intellectuals alike."[16] The leaders of the Haskalah rejected Hebrew, as it was the language of an old, scriptural Jewish tradition. Jewish workers' unions supported Yiddish standardization, believing that "Yiddish, the language of 'simple' working-class Jews, should be the basis of a secular, Diaspora-based modern Jewish culture."[17] There was however, one more factor at play - the new Soviet government. The Bolsheviks, having replaced the dissolved Provisional Government in the 1917 February Revolution,[18] left the Tenth Party Congress of 1921 with a promise to help minorities "develop and strengthen their own Soviet statehood."[19] Scholar Yuri Slezkine points out that one of the motivations for this effort was the idea that minority groups "were victims of tsarist-imposed statelessness, backwardness and 'culturelessness,' which made it difficult for them to take advantage of new revolutionary opportunities and sometimes tempted them to engage in 'local nationalism.'"[20] By encouraging discussion in local languages and supporting the communities of ethnic minorities,

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[15] Jeffery Veidlinger, "Introduction," in *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000, 27.
[16] Benjamin Harshav, Irina N. Duksina, and Cholem Aleichem, *The Moscow Yiddish Theater: Art on Stage in the Time of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2008), 5.
[17] Gitelman, "Russian Revolutions of 1917."
[18] Christian Zapata, "Russian Revolution: Causes, Timeline & Bolsheviks," *HISTORY*, March 27, 2024, https://www.history.com/topics/european-history/russian-revolution.
[19] Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, 2.
[20] Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–52. https://doi.org/10.2307/2501300. 423.

the Bolshevik government could redirect the nation towards a sentiment of Soviet nationalism and unity. Slezkine cites a transcription of a conversation from the Tenth Party Congress, where the groundwork was laid for the Korenizatsiia, or nativization effort. The Korenizatsiia included Communist policies that encouraged communication and discussion of Communist ideals in local languages.[21] Thus, the Soviet government, led by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, saw an advantage in funding Jewish theatres. These theatres, thanks to the Haskalah, were a new fountain of Yiddish dialogue in the Jewish community.

The Moscow State Yiddish Theatre, referred to in primary texts as the GOSET, opened in 1921 utilizing Soviet funding under the Korenizatsiia,[22] and featured productions with a distinctly new Jewish tone. Aleksey Granovsky, Artistic Director of the GOSET, writes that the goal of the Yiddish Theatre was to "create something [Jews] had and always strove for…a temple where prayer is chanted in the Yiddish language."[23] "Prayer" being "chanted in the Yiddish language" suggests that the Yiddish theatre was intended to be a hub of Jewish community other than the synagogue, where Jewish issues could be discussed in a way that is non-religious and accessible, but still in a Jewish space. Each play performed by GOSET loosely resembled Jewish scriptural work, but was embedded with new revolutionary messaging with a satirical edge. One of the earliest works performed at both the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre and its competitor, Habima, was *The Dybbuk* by S. An-sky. *The Dybbuk* was set in a Synagogue, but the set, designed by Marc Chagall, resembled a twisted, surrealistic Synagogue, complete with a banner overhead which read "Hear, oh Israel" in Hebrew.[24] This is the beginning of the Shema prayer, the foundational statement of Jewish faith in the Jewish tradition. Actors took the

[21] Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, 2.
[22] Ibid, 41.
[23] Aleksey Granovsky, "Our Goals and Objectives" in *The Moscow Yiddish Theatre* by Benjamin Harshav, 85.
[24] Goodman and Gitelman, *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, 19.

stage costumed in overcoats, top hats, and long beards that were nothing short of a Jewish stereotype. The content, however, was resemblant of a well-known Jewish proverb, infused with new messages on the horrors of capitalism and the complacency of pre-enlightenment Judaism, reflected in the surrealistic set.[25] At times, the play even went so far as to directly equate religion with capitalism.

In an essay on his involvement in the Yiddish theatre, Chagall writes that he "intended to give a general direction, introducing the audience to the new Yiddish People's Theater," an artistically bold theatre that was built specifically for the post-Haskalah, Russian-Jewish community.[26] The style was only accessible to Jewish audiences, such that "[o]nly those segments of the audience who were steeped in the Judaic tradition were capable of deciphering the theater's codes."[27] Chagall's intent to subtly mask social critique within the culturally specific genre of the Yiddish Theater is evidenced in his writing *My Work in the Moscow Yiddish Theater* – where Chagall recalls inviting a non-Jewish director, Vakhtangov, to view a rehearsal of *The Dybbuk.* Chagall describes that "[Vakhtangov] is a Russian, a Georgian; …perhaps he sees in my eyes the chaos and confusion of the Orient. A hasty people, its art incomprehensible, strange. …At the end, I asked Vaktangov how he intends to conceive of *The Dybbuk.* He answered…'I don't know…of such a direction for the reborn Jewish theater.'"[28] Chagall recognizes that Vakhtangov's lack of Jewish background weakens his understanding and interpretation of *The Dybbuk*. Even though Vakhtangov is a director himself, and is no stranger to interpreting theatre, *The Dybbuk*'s deeply Jewish foundations, however critical, make non-Jewish audiences of any level of theatrical experience unable to fully grasp the production's message. Thus, Yiddish

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[25] Ibid, 29.
[26] Benjamin Harshav, Irina N. Duksina, and Cholem Aleichem, *The Moscow Yiddish Theater: Art on Stage in the Time of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2008), 72.
[27] Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, 17.
[28] Harshav, *The Moscow Yiddish Theater: Art on Stage in the Time of Revolution*, 74.

Theatre artists were able to critique religion and Jewish law while still connecting with the stories known to their audience and thereby launch Jewish social teaching into a new meaning and context. In doing so, Jews both preserved and enlightened their culture through performance.

The unique overlap between the Haskalah and the Russian Revolution incubated the Yiddish theatre. As the Soviet government matured, however, the government began to exert pressure on the theatre to become a messenger of Soviet thought. Until this point, the USSR lacked a centralized arts administration. In 1928, however, the Central Arts Administration was established and absorbed the Management of State Academic Theatres, the governing body under which GOSET had operated and been funded. With the establishment of the Central Arts Administration, all repertoire selections by individual theatres had to be approved by the Soviet government, which strictly rejected any anti-Soviet sentiment, and the rehearsal process for productions was carefully monitored.[29] Despite this deliberate act of censorship, Jews in this period stubbornly continued to use theatre to their own purposes. Veidlinger remarks that the "[t]he Yiddish theater successfully resisted all attempts to turn its stage into just another platform of Soviet propaganda."[30] In fact, the Yiddish theatre became a quietly revolutionary institution. Despite the Soviet government's support of Jewish communities early in the revolution, by the later 1920s the Soviet government became hostile to Jewish organizations because of their opposition to Soviet nationalism.[31] As the Soviet government took a more direct approach to enforcing nationalism, the government began cracking down on Jewish groups by targeting Zionism, which was "considered anti-Soviet and punishable under the law."[32] In 1930, Jewish political sectors were dissolved, and many Jewish leaders were subject to imprisonment,

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[29] Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, 112.
[30] Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, 3.
[31] UNHCR Global Law and Policy Database, "Jews in Russia and the Soviet Union: Chronology of Events: 1727 - 1 January 1992," Refworld, February 11, 2024, https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/irbc/1994/en/22048.
[32] Goodman and Gitelman, *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, 18.

violence, or "corrective labor" by Soviet forces.[33] Thus, Jewish communities became less supportive of the Soviet regime led by the Bolsheviks, and Gitelman finds that "[a]lmost all Jews in the Russian Empire and abroad welcomed the first revolution…but few were enthusiastic about the takeover of power by the Bolsheviks[.]"[34]And as for Yiddish Theatre, as the Soviets leaned more into propaganda and totalitarianism, the government demanded more nationalist content out of the Yiddish theatres to retain their funding.[35]

The Yiddish theatres retaliated, using the subtlety of theatre to protest. For example, in 1935 under Stalin, GOSET produced Shakespeare's *King Lear*, an unexpected international pick for the Russian GOSKET, starring notable Jewish actor and director Solomon Mikhoels, who would later come to lead the Jewish opposition to Stalinist fascism, in the title role.[36] A picture of Mikhoels as King Lear depicts a very different look from productions like *The Dybbuk*; Mikhoels is not made up to be a stereotypical Jewish character, but rather has a white wig and light makeup, which signifies that this King Lear is a *British* King Lear, and therefore the production is outside the Russian-Jewish scope.[37] Vedlinger's analysis of GOSET's *King Lear* notices the production's emphasis on the similarities between Lear and the Fool, which Vedlinger says "can be seen as an attempt to equate Stalin with a fool. On a more profound level it can be seen as a challenge to Stalin's tidy division of the world between Good and Bad, We and They, Red and White."[38] Solomon Mikhoels himself provides an interpretation of the play that is critical of Stalin, stating that "The tragedy of Lear is the bankruptcy of his former false and stagnant former ideals; and in the agonizing advent of the new, more progressive and truthful ideology," which Vedlinger interprets as Mikhoels comparing the fatal mistake of Lear's betrayal

[33] Ibid, 21.
[34] Gitelman, "Russian Revolutions of 1917."
[35] Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, 85.
[36] Susan Tumarkin Goodman and Zvi Y. Gitelman, *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, 2008, 29.
[37] Goodman and Gitelman, *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, 2008, 29.
[38] Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*. 144.

of his daughter to Stalin's betrayal of intellectuals who were instrumental in the formation of the revolution.[39] In his initial statement on the aims of the Yiddish Theatre, Granovsky explicitly states that "We," GOSET, "do not agree with those who assume that Yiddish Theater has its own special laws…and must not depart from daily life, or what is called Russian."[40] With this foundation of the theatre, paired with Vedlinger's interpretation, it can be inferred that GOSET's selection of *King Lear* was not an exploratory choice, but a covert rejection of Soviet Nationalism by introducing both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences to non-Russian material in a presentation that was critical of Stalin's polarizing rule. Surprisingly, *King Lear* elicited an overwhelmingly positive audience response and attracted massive audiences for over two-hundred showings,[41] perhaps because the new, large, non-Jewish audiences that the production attracted mostly failed to detect the production's critical messaging. Many critics remarked on the production's masterful critique of feudalism but did not comment on the deeper allegory to Stalinist Russia.[42] However, Jewish communities likely detected these themes more aptly. This further reveals Russian Yiddish theatre as an instrument of covert revolution and reformation within the Jewish community specifically.

Examining the work of artist Marc Chagall further reveals the quiet revolution present in the Jewish community. The murals of Chagall, GOSET's main scenic artist, were instantly recognizable to Jews and non-Jews alike. Chagall was an anti-nationalist,[43] and embedded that sentiment into his work and life outside the theatre. A visiting German critic provided a description – "The artist recalled the folkloric imagery of his childhood in a Jewish village, but

[39] Ibid, 143.
[40] Harshav, *The Moscow Yiddish Theater: Art on Stage in the Time of Revolution*, 85.
[41] Vedlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, 146.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Goodman and Gitelman, *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, 2008, 29.

also made visual allusions to contemporary trends in Russian avant-garde art."[44] What the critic was unable to see is that the "folkloric imagery" present in Chagall's art was subliminally critical of the government, including portrayals of Jews selling Yiddish Newspapers against a blood-red sky, invoking the backdrop of Communism, with titles that mention the "little fires" in the government at the time,[45] or another painting of a displaced, "wandering Jew" passing by Christian churches and government buildings, representing the Soviet's dismissal of Jews.[46]

Chagall used Yiddish language and Jewish culture to convey politically critical messaging so that it was undetectable by non-Jewish audiences, and the Soviet government. This intent can only be inferred, as Chagall never stated this intent directly, however many of his works – murals, paintings, and sets – heavily rely on Jewish folklore and context to form a critical message. Without the Jewish perspective, many of Chagall's works are enigmatic in meaning, but viewing his art through a Jewish lens reveals a message that is, more often than not, critical of society, politics, and culture. Therefore, his art contributed to the prevalence of subliminal, culturally specific messaging in the theatre as an institution. Most importantly, this practice of relying on Jewish Haskalah culture to strengthen community values during times of political transformation proves the Yiddish Theatre to be a revolutionary, specifically Jewish institution that was committed to the community it had created – not an extension of the Soviet government.

Yiddish theatre persisted under Soviet rule after the revolution, but faced major challenges under Stalin. Rather than trying to convince minority groups to perpetuate the

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[44] Ibid, 107
[45] Association des Amis de Marc Chagall, "The Newspaper Seller, Works on Paper by Marc Chagall (1914)," Marc Chagall, 1914, https://www.marcchagall.com/en/discovery/themes/politics/newspaper-seller-1914.
[46] Association des Amis de Marc Chagall, "On The Way, on the Road or the Wandering Jew, Works on Canvas by Marc Chagall," Marc Chagall, 1925, https://www.marcchagall.com/en/discovery/themes/politics/way-road-or-wandering-jew-1925.

nationalist sentiment, Stalin focused on homogenization and non-religious nationalism,[47] resulting in the Great Purges of 1936-1938.[48] Additionally, the "overrepresentation of Jews in Communist movements," in part due to the vocality of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee chaired by Solomon Mikhoels, "led to Communism being labeled as a 'Jewish Conspiracy.'"[49] As a result, "Yiddish cultural institutions rapidly fell into disuse in response to the signal from above that they, and all other non-Russian ethnic institutions, were no longer valued."[50] The final blow to Yiddish theatre in Russia came with the assassination of Mikhoels by Stalinist forces in 1948. The Moscow State Yiddish Theatre remained in operation until 1949, fighting numerous Soviet attempts to forcibly bankrupt and liquidate the theatre, and was one of the last surviving Jewish institutions under Stalin.[51] But the culture of Yiddish theatre did not die there, it simply relocated. Several troupes immigrated to New York and populated a Yiddish Theatre district that at times rivaled Broadway.[52] Eventually, those companies dispersed, becoming small threads in the fabric of today's Broadway, where Joseph Stein's *Fiddler on the Roof* debuted in 1964. What is little known is that *Fiddler on the Roof* is a modern retelling of *Tevye and His Daughters* by Shloem Aleichem, who also authored the very first plays that GOSET performed in 1921. *Fiddler on the Roof* is set in the Pale of Settlement, and is rich in the Russian-Jewish culture that the Nazis attempted to extinguish. The Yiddish theatre community's commitment to thrive, and even resist, under hostile political conditions not only united the Jewish community of the time of the Russian Revolution through Haskalah and Revolutionary ideals, but has preserved Jewish culture to the modern-day. And although non-Jewish audiences still have trouble detecting it, the

[47] Goodman and Gitelman, *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, 2008, 21.
[48] Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, 213.
[49] Gitelman, "Russian Revolutions of 1917."
[50] Goodman and Gitelman, *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, 2008, 21.
[51] Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, 267.
[52] Amelia Merrill, "Yiddish Theatre: Not Just a Thing of the Past," AMERICAN THEATRE, January 9, 2023, https://www.americantheatre.org/2022/12/29/yiddish-theatre-not-just-a-thing-of-the-past/.

Russian-Yiddish Theatre culture is a foundational reference for modern day entertainment as well.

While the few available sources on this topic offer a comprehensive analysis of the Russian Yiddish Theatre, there were considerable limitations to this research endeavor. Most primary source material related to the topic, including plays, pictures, books, and the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre itself, were burned by Nazi forces during their occupation of Russia. Beyond that, many surviving sources are written only in Russian, Yiddish, or Hebrew. Translation between these languages poses even more of a challenge, especially with Yiddish being heavily reliant on cultural contexts and figures of speech. Such a lack of sources naturally results in differing opinions on the broader implications of the topic. Some authors take an argument counter to this paper – arguing that the Soviet government used the Jewish experience to "lure" the community into communism, oppress them further, and thus the Jewish culture that the theatre preserved is not a Jewish culture, but a Soviet one. The true intentions of the Soviet government as a whole body will always remain ambiguous on this issue. However, I would argue that the question of whether the culture that was preserved in the Russian Jewish Theatre was Jewish or Russian is obsolete – it was Russian-Jewish. It was a product of its place and time as all movements are. Thus, the outcome was the preservation of *a* Jewish culture, regardless of the Soviets' intent.

Much of the information in this paper is credited to the YIVO encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, which has a massive online collection of primary source material dedicated to preserving the history of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Among their collections is the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre archive collection, which is the largest and most detailed primary history of this topic that is available. This is the most accessible evidence currently available, as

translations of many texts are unavailable and physical exhibitions and archives in Russia hold much of the information on this topic.

Embracing the Russian Haskalah and revolutionary ideals, the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre sparked artistic innovation, community unification, and Jewish advocacy, which preserved the culture of Jewish Russians and their art into today, defying persecution and attempts at erasure. Theatre has always been a space for the marginalized, where communities gather to experience their culture through art and performance, where "our time, too, is our material."[53] The historical narrative of the Jewish people, often illustrated through a series of persecutions, flight, and diaspora, hardly ever includes the vibrant, resilient communities, art, and innovation that continues to flourish in the theatrical world. It is time that theatre be recognized as not merely a source of entertainment, but a prolific means of community messaging and political resistance, where culture can outlast persecution. The most authentic cultural narratives are often stored in these underground centers of community, where performance is not limited by the outside world. In the modern day, community theatres like the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre are undervalued and underfunded. As is seen with the case of GOSET, theatre is not only a deep well of historical and cultural information, but a valuable investment for the community well-being of today, and for cultural preservation in the future.

[53] Goodman and Gitelman, *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, 80.

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