

DEVELOPMENT OF JEWISH STATE THEATERS IN UKRAINE IN THE 1920S AND 1930S OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Summary

The article explores the history of state Jewish theaters in Ukraine in the period 20-30s of the twentieth century. Important, previously unknown facts of organizational and creative processes of Kharkiv, Kyiv, and Odesa GOSETs are highlighted. This article describes the stages of the Soviet policy of indigenization and its influence on the development of Jewish theaters in Ukraine. The publication clearly describes the ways of each of the state Jewish theaters of Soviet Ukraine from their creation to the beginning of the Second World War, when all Jewish theaters were evacuated from Ukraine. Based on the analysis repertoire and changes in the administrative and creative management of theaters, the influence of the Soviet totalitarian regime on the theatrical art of one of the largest national minorities in Ukraine is highlighted. The first reference is made to archival documents that regulated the repertoire of Jewish theaters at the state level. The article examines the influence of the Soviet government on staff changes in the management of GOSETs in Kharkiv, Kyiv and Odesa. The author concludes the article by encouraging the study of national minority theaters for a more detailed understanding of domestic theatrical processes of the first half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Kharkiv GOSET, Kyiv GOSET, Odessa GOSET, "Culture League", indigenization, repertoire committee.

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1. Introduction

The development of theaters of different national minorities in Ukraine in the 20-30s of the XX century was researched mainly by historians in the context of the analysis of the Soviet policy of indigenization or in local research of the existence of these or other national communities that existed on the territory of the Soviet Ukraine. Among these studies are publications by L. P. Druz, O. O. Rafalsky, I. I. Martinchuk, L. V. Gutsalo, V. V. Turkova, T. I. Teremenko, O. A. Polidovich. The study of individual theaters of national minorities in Ukraine was performed by such teatrologists as L. I. Baraban (Bulgarian theater in Ukraine in the 20-30s), N. M. Tomazova (Polish theater in Kiev), I. A. Meleshko (modern researcher of Jewish theater in Ukraine).

The originality of this research is in the study of the Jewish state theaters development in the Soviet Ukraine during the various stages of the unwrapping of the policy of indigenization, which happened in the 20-30s of the twentieth century.

The relevance of the research leads to the realities of the development of state Jewish theaters in Ukraine in the 20-30s of the twentieth century through the prism of the modern analysis of the historical process of the Soviet regime.

The purpose of this publication is to present a complex description of the actual organizational and creative development of state Jewish theaters on the territory of Soviet Ukraine within the limits of the investigated period. Description of the way from the creation to the decline of theaters of one of the greatest national minorities that existed on the Ukrainian territory.

The scientific and research objectives of the article are to identify the specifics of Jewish state theaters of the 20-30s of the XX century in the USSR, to determine the organizational and creative tasks of these institutions with the political vector of certain periods of the Soviet state. The methodology of the research is based on comparative and relative-historical methods that make it possible to identify and analyze specific stages of the Jewish theaters' development in the Soviet Ukraine during different periods of their relations with the Soviet government. The study will be useful for Ukrainian and world history and will provide an overview of the attitude of the Russian administration toward other nationalities.

2. The Jewish theater studio “Culture League” – the alma mater of the future Ukrainian GOSETS

The first state Jewish theaters in Ukraine were established with the advent of the Soviet regime on its territory. However, as in most governmental affairs of the Soviet policy, the conditions for their implementation were initiated by the Ukrainian National Republic administration and the Ukrainian State. Therefore, the Ministry of Jewish Affairs under the UNR and the United Jewish Socialist Workers Party, which at that time was based in Ukraine and supported the Central Rada of the UNR, founded the cultural and educational organization "Culture League". The organization also had a theater section among the literary, musical, painting, sculpture and folk schools, pre-school and adult's education.

In June 1919, a theater studio was organized in Kyiv on Prorizna Street under the auspices of the "Culture League". There are documents indicating the intention to create not only a studio, but also an exemplary state Jewish theater, for the organization of which the committee formed and adopted the appropriate budget (*Evreiskyi hosudarstvennyi teatr, 1919*). This fact dates back to the year, when the Soviet power got settled in Kyiv, issued the decree "About the Kyiv theaters Nationalization". So, the supporters of the new Soviet system had big plans for the theater business.

At the same time as the rise of Jewish culture in Kyiv, similar trends were taking place in Kharkiv. In 1918, the professional theater “Unser Winkel” (“Our Corner”), founded by Moisey Rafalsky, was opened there from a self-produced corpse of Jewish artists. The performances of traditional forms and everyday themes "Der ewige Wanderer" (“The Eternal Wanderer”) by Josip Dimov, "Scapin the Schemer" by Moliere, etc., were demonstrated by actors in the Katerynoslavsky Theater, where the Kharkiv Theater of the Young Spectator is now working. One year later the troupe collapsed and split into two parts, one of which moved to Belarus and later became the foundation of the Belarusian State Jewish Theater with the same Rafalsky (1926), while the other one joined the "Culture League" studio in Kyiv.

I. Meleshkina, a well-known researcher of Jewish theater in Ukraine, in her work provides facts from a special meeting about the creation and purpose of the Jewish theater and studio in Kyiv (*Meleshkina, 2019*). But it did not come to the theater. The studio began its work under the leadership of Efraim Loiter.

It is also known about the collaboration between the students and Les Kurbas, who took part in the directing of the first performances (Loiev, 2003) Efraim Loiter also involves Semdor (Semen Doroshenko), a student and colleague of Kurbas at the Ruska Besida Theater and the Young Theater, Meyerhold's student Oleksandr Smirnov and actress Stanislava Vysotska, to work with studios (Meleshkina, 2019). In the winter of 1920, the studios performed Beinisch Steinman's play "Mashiach ben Yoseph" to the public. During the 1920s and 1921s the artists also toured Kyiv and other cities with "The Messiah" (a performance of the Itzhak Leibusz Peretz staged stories).

Considering the organizational and production staff of the Jewish drama studio, it is not difficult to guess about the experimental forms of creativity in the work of the team. Not all members of the studio were supportive of the thrust toward innovation. At the end of 1921, the students, led by the director, went to Moscow to study with such mastodons as Yevgen Vakhtangov, Vsevolod Meyerhold and others. In addition to creative teaching practices, Ukrainian actors with Jewish roots were led to new ideological forms and values in the theatrical arts, removing everything historical and planting a "new world" (which came with the revolution of 1917).

While Jewish studios were training to demonstrate their skills on native Ukrainian soil, in 1924 it became known that the studio would not be able to return to Kyiv. From the very beginning, the collective was financed by the "Culture League" and other Jewish organizations. However, all of them had been liquidated by that time, and the State Education Department had no money for the maintenance of the Jewish theater (*Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vladly ta upravlinnia Ukrainy*).

3. Development of the first Ukrainian GOSET in Kharkiv

The Soviet government decided not to get rid of the troupe that had gone through the Moscow school and became "...one of the best institutions for enlightenment work and artistic propaganda of the Jewish working population" (*Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vladly ta upravlinnia Ukrainy*: 25). Therefore, the People's Commissariat of the URSR still found 10,000 karbovanets (distinct unit of currency in Ukraine during three separate periods of the 20th century) in gold for the opening of the All-Ukrainian State Jewish Theater (the first GOSET) in the capital of the URSR – Kharkiv. (There only) At that time there was an active phase of the Soviet policy of indigenization – the gradual deception of the nations that had settled on the territory of the Soviet Union to adapt them to the formation of a single social and political realism in the cultural space of all the republics.

In the meantime, the Soviet authorities had already succeeded in penetrating all social and cultural spheres in the homeland of the Ukrainians. The theatrical establishments were already controlled by the Higher Repertory Committee of the Department of Art of Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs at the Narkompros of the USSR. "The Higher Scientific and Repertoire Committee, which has the exclusive right of artistic and ideological control of the repertoire within the USSR" (*Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vladly ta upravlinnia Ukrainy*: 16). The function of this theatrical authority included:

– "the review of the plays that were submitted to the Department of Arts, recommendations, approval or prohibition of their staging, supervision of the repertoire and its interpretation;...

– supervision of the artistic and ideological side of the theatrical performances and film plays productions;

- the creation and issuance of plays and films general lists recommended, allowed and prohibited for release;
- preparing a variety of repertoire guides, and manuals with theoretical and practical comments and instructions for each play...». (There only)

Therefore, in reporting on 1924 the Higher Scientific and Repertoire Soviet of the Main Political and Educational Committee NKO of the USSR stated that of the 349 pieces of the Jewish repertoire for the next year, 1925, 70 were permitted, while 279 were prohibited (*Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchyykh orhaniv vldy ta upravlinnia Ukrainy: 20*).

However, not only the plays choosing was done by the repertory council, but also their implementation. That is why at the second All-Union meeting of the Jewish culture workers the director of Kharkiv State Theater E. Loiter was blamed for the poor performances and organization of mass viewing, because of which the attendance of the theater suffered (*Kozerod, 1998*). After that, having decided to "put things in order" in the Ukrainian GOSET, Russia used its usual practice of sending a new director for the theater from Moscow, N. Norvid, who had previously been an actor in the Moscow GOSET. The Russian musical composer M. Milner became head of the musical department, and the Jewish theater director from Moscow S. Margolin was regularly invited to stage performances, although he was from Ukraine.

"The plays themes also changed. They more and more often created images of enemies, spies, and mocked "petty-bourgeois elements" (*Honcharova, 2016: 113-115*). The theater's repertoire includes such performances as "Hirsch Leckert" by A. Kusnirov, "Di Lezte" by L. Reznikov, "Barg Aruf" by Z. Chala and others. (There only)

4. The State Jewish Theater in Kyiv

Meanwhile, after the "Culture League" Jewish theater studio left for Moscow at the end of 1921, the "Kunstecke" ("Art Corner") theater moved to Kyiv. This theater was founded in 1919 in Poltava before it was settled down in 1922 in Kyiv and became the first stationary Jewish theater in Soviet Ukraine. Despite the fact that in 1924 the troupe separated and part of it stayed with the founder of the theater, Rudolf Zaslavsky, and another part with the leading actors Leizer Kalmanovich and Leia Bugova. Later, the troupe reunited, but without Zaslavsky. As Dmytro Jabotonsky, the actor of the "Kunstecke", wrote in his memoirs, the theater lived poorly, did not receive any subsidies, but still had the glory of one of the best theaters in the country (*Mindlin, 2019*). After the opening of the Kharkiv GOSET, the Kyiv actors of the Jewish theater were noticed by the Soviet authorities and began to receive complaints and even persecution. (There only)

Soon the leaders of the Soviet theater industry decided to liquidate the "Kunstecke" and open the state GOSET in Kyiv.

The troupe of the new Jewish theatrical center was made up of the actors of the disbanded "Kunstecke" and some of the artists of the Kharkiv GOSET who were relocated to Kyiv. Zakhariy Vin was appointed head of the theater, remembering whom actor Dmytro Zhabotonsky wrote: "Not a great talent. But a big cheeky...». (There only)

For the purpose of the new Melpomene he took the creation of a Jewish cultural center for the inhabitants of Kyiv. Over two years, the theater on Khreshchatyk, 29, showed Sholom Aleichem's "Der Oytser" ("The Scar"), O'Neill's "The Black Ghetto", M. Taitin's "Die Erste Schwalb" ("The First Swallow"), I. Fefer and E. Fininberg's "The Shpek" (The Devils), and others.

The first mentor of the Kyiv GOSET did not satisfy the theatrical arts Soviet leaders, so the Jewish section removed him from his position. But, according to favorite tradition, made a deal with a representative of a Jewish theater from Moscow. In 1930, B. Vershylov became the new artistic director of the Kyiv GOSET, adding his actors from the Moscow Jewish Theater Studio "Freikunst" to the troupe.

With these staff changes, the Jewish cultural center in Kyiv began to form an ideologically correct repertoire. The plays themes were industrial-heroic and soviet-patriotic basis: M. Pogodin's "Poem about axe", P. Markish's "The Fifth Horizon", "Naftoli Botvin", "Hirsch Leckert" by A. Wewiurk and others.

As we know, in 1934, Kharkiv's Jewish actors moved to Kyiv and united with local actors into a single all-Ukrainian GOSET.

Toward the middle of the 1930s, many directors were already very disappointed in the construction of a new institution with Soviet communist slogans. Before that time, the totalitarian regime had already carried out genocide of the Ukrainian people with the artificial famine, and in the art sphere the terror of the intellectuals had begun. Eventually, the Soviet policy will turn to repression and art, as it often is, predicts such things. In the middle of the decade, Borys Vershylov changed the repertoire of the all-Ukrainian GOSET, abandoning patriotic, heroic and industrial plays. The director is staging more and more classical material.

The 1934-1935 season was opened with the performance "The First Jewish Recruit" by L. Reznikov. Also significant classical performances for the theater were "Mirele Efros" by J. Gordin, "Uriel Acosta" by K. Hutskov (*Meleshkina*, 2019). With the consolidation of two Jewish Ukrainian troupes, the GOSET in Kyiv became the best Jewish team in Ukraine, which competed with the other republics GOSETs, including Moscow.

However, in 1936 the theater lost its mentor and artistic director B. Vershylov, who was sent to the Kyiv Russian Drama Theater named after Lesia Ukrainka. The GOSET artistic direction was taken over by a team of troupe directors.

From 1937, the theater was headed by Naum (Nohem) Loiter, the brother of Efraim Loiter, the head of the Jewish theater studio "Culture League", described above. The talented director also turns to the classical repertoire: "Stempeniu" by Sholom Aleichem, "Die Familien Ovadis" ("The Ovadis Family") by P. Markisch, "Without Guilt" by O. Ostrovsky, and others.

The next stage in the theater with the arrival of the new director consisted of something else – since 1937 the artists and workers of GOSET were under repression.

The first to be arrested was the actor Alexander Granakh. A talented artist of Jewish descent, he was born in Ukraine and lived in Germany for a long time afterwards. Granakh was accused of spying on Hitler's Germany. The artist was lucky, the commanders found among his belongings a letter from Leon Feuchtwanger, whom was hosted by Stalin himself. So Alexander Granakh was released and left the Soviet Union.

The following artists were subjected to repression: Emanuel Dinor (stayed in the concentration camps for 10 years), Yakiv Libert (2 years of exile, was released early) and other members of the theater staff. (There only)

The same B. Vershylov, who was former director of the All-Ukrainian GOSET, was under investigation for a year, until Stanislavski himself interceded and invited him to work at the Moscow Opera House. (There only)

Meanwhile, Naum Loiter left the theater in 1938. Moisey Goldblat, formerly one of the directors of the Moscow GOSET and the founder of the Birobidzhan GOSET, takes his place. Goldblat, either through his skillful approach to the Soviet officials or through his concentration of power on the war and post-war problems, served in the theater until its closure in 1950.

With the raised policy of solving the "Jewish question," all Jewish theaters in Ukraine were eliminated. The all-Ukrainian GOSET, which after a long wanderings turned out to be in Chernivtsi at the time, was the last to be closed, and no mention of Jewish theater in Ukraine was allowed for a long time.

Completing the research period of the All-Ukrainian GOSET in Kyiv, it is worth remembering the large-scale revision of the theater, which took place in 1939-1940 with the help of a special governmental committee.

The Jewish troupe was inspected for "correctness" of the repertoire, special staff, and documentation. As a result, "nationalistic excesses" were found to be the only, but important flaw for the Soviet Union's theater. This fact authentically confirms that until the end of the 1930s the Soviet authorities, without any adaptive forms, did not directly and clearly accept the manifestations of the national culture of the Jewish people, imposing on them a "single-right" artistic method of social and realistic realism. Up to that time, the Soviet Union had been vigilant monitoring not only the methods of theater productions and the choice of plays, but also the prominent manifestations of other national cultures (apart from the Russian one).

5. Odesa GOSET

Speaking of Jewish state theaters in Ukraine, one cannot miss Odesa, the city where ethnic Jews lived the most. However, the GOSET in the city on the Black Sea was the last of the three, namely in December 1930. Although an article about the need for a Jewish theater in Odesa was published as early as 1922 (*Zrytel, 1922*).

The director of the first state theater was Mark Rubinstein, who had previously run a local Jewish youth theater studio and had been a student of Vakhtangov. The studios became the backbone of the new state-owned troupe and opened the season with the play "Postril" by O. Bezimensky. The local press wrote about the premiere: "The play is timely, poignant... The main achievement of director Rubinstein is that he not only showed his great ability to work with young actors, to train them onstage, but also demonstrated a good theatrical culture and director's ingenuity. His production is original, dynamic, and perfectly connected with the design... The performance of "Postril" was a political and artistic exam for the state Jewish theater, and it was successfully passed" (*Chornomorska komuna, 1930*).

The premiere success did not last long in the theater. In 1934 the Odesa GOSET was already reformed and Wengre became director, but in 1935 he was replaced by Efraim Loiter. The director, who was removed from the Kharkiv GOSET in 1928. How he was again asked to become the director of another GOSTET – is a question. Most likely E. Loiter was rehabilitating himself in front of the government, working in Moscow in a Jewish studio and teaching at the GITIS.

The 1935-1940s with an accomplished director were a breakthrough for the Odesa GOSET. Among the theater's most brilliant performances were not only Jewish works, but also the world classics "A Doll's House" by G. Ibsen, "The Dog in the Manger", "Fuenteovejuna" by Lope de Vega. The Russian repertoire was not spared: "Without Guilt" by Ostrovsky, "Mother" by Gorky, "Six Loved Ones" by O. Arbusov. For the first time, the Jewish theater created a performance of Ukrainian playwright M. Kropivnitsky's "Glytai, or Spider" (*Bakanurskyi, 2013*).

Moreover, E. Loiter was able to employ great masters in the Odesa GOSET: composers Yakov Feintukh and Kostiantyn Dankevych; stage designers Matviy Drak and Petr Zlochevskyi and others. (There only)

The development of the Odesa Jewish Theater, like all the others in Ukraine, was halted by the Second World War. The troupe was forced to move to Tashkent. Later in 1944 a part of the troupe joined the Kyiv GOSET, which at that time was located in Chernivtsi. Some of the Odessa GOSET artists were also affected by the repression in the late 30s and early 40s. And the theater itself, like all other Ukrainian GOSETS, was closed in 1948.

6. Conclusions

Having comprehensively researched the history of state Jewish theaters in Ukraine in the 20-30s of the XX century it is possible to get a full picture of the formation and development of Jewish theater within the limits of the studied period. To analyze the relations of the Jewish theater in Ukraine with the Soviet government, which directly influenced its organizational and creative transformations. Taking into consideration that the Soviet history ignored the existence of Jewish theaters on its territory, the Jewish theatrical art in Ukraine is still understudied. Also the study of theaters of national minorities gives the possibility to make more detailed impression of the national theatrical processes of the first half of the XX century.

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