

ТЕАТР ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ РАДЯНСЬКОЇ КУЛЬТУРНОЇ ІНЖЕНЕРІЇ :
КЕЙС ХАРКІВСЬКОГО ДЕРЖАВНОГО ЄВРЕЙСЬКОГО ТЕАТРУ (1925–1934 РР.)

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Досліджено трансформацію єврейського театрального життя в Харкові наприкінці 1920 – першій половині 1930-х років у контексті посилення державного контролю над культурною сферою. На основі архівних джерел і періодики проаналізовано зміни у репертуарній політиці та ідеологічних вимогах до змісту п'ес. Показано, як політика радянізації та уніфікації культурного простору призвела до звуження творчої автономії Державного єврейського театру, спрощення сценічної мови й відходу від національної тематики. Простежено еволюцію художніх стратегій, спрямованих на збереження елементів єврейської культурної традиції в умовах цензурних обмежень. Доведено, що театр залишався важливим простором між культурною самореалізацією та політичною лояльністю, відображаючи складну динаміку взаємин між мистецтвом і владою в радянській Україні.

Ключові слова: єврейський театр, коренізація, культурна політика, національна ідентичність, радянізація, цензура.

Problem Statement. Studying Soviet mechanisms of cultural policy toward national minorities remains one of the key directions in contemporary humanities research. In this context, the analysis of national theatres as instruments for shaping a new socialist identity acquires particular significance. The Kharkiv State Jewish Theatre, from 1925 to 1934, functioned as an artistic institution and a laboratory of the Soviet project of «cultural engineering», aimed at transforming traditional Jewish culture into an integral part of the unified Soviet cultural space. Examining this phenomenon makes it possible to understand how the theatrical stage was used to reprogram ethnocultural memory, suppress religious and national motifs, and promote ideologically verified models of the «new Soviet Jew». The topic is also relevant today due to the growing scholarly interest in memory policy, cultural unification, and the role of art in authoritarian regimes.

Review of Recent Publications. The theoretical and methodological foundation for understanding the relationship between artistic practices and processes of ethnic identity formation is provided by the works of L. Haluha [6], P. Herchanivska [7] and I. Matviiv [21]. They propose using the analysis of repertoire, stage practices, and institutional policies to trace the transformations of theatrical institutions in connection with national narratives. A common feature of these studies is the emphasis on the idea that identity is not static: art functions as a space for producing and deconstructing narratives. Researchers have also paid attention to the policy of korenizatsiya (indigenization) and the ambivalent status of Jewish culture in the Ukrainian SSR. This topic, in particular, has been explored in the works of Ya. Vermenykh [3], A. Shternshis [33], and the collective monograph Socio-Political Activity and Historical Memory of the Jewish Community in the Context of Ukraine's European Integration [29]. The authors note that the «revival» of minority cultures during the korenizatsiya period was simultaneously a project of creating new national forms and a project of state control: the state encouraged the development of linguistic, cultural, and artistic institutions, but within ideological frameworks that imposed strict limitations. Yu's works provide empirical material on the activities of the Jewish theater in Kharkiv. Polyakova [27] and O. Honcharova [8]. These studies reveal only certain aspects of how the theater functioned as an instrument of Soviet cultural engineering in the 1920 and the early 1930 s, leaving many questions open for further scholarly investigation.

The article aims to analyze how the Soviet authorities used the Kharkiv State Jewish Theatre as an instrument of cultural engineering to transform Jewish identity, construct the image of the «new Soviet Jew», and implement ideologically approved cultural models during 1925–1934.

Presentation of the Research Material. In the 1920 s, the Soviet authorities launched a large-scale

social experiment in Ukraine aimed at shaping the «new man» – a Soviet citizen devoted to the ideals of socialism. One of the most effective tools of this process was culture, through which the state sought to instill models of desired behavior, modes of thinking, and forms of identity. Theatre, as a mass art form, occupied a special place in the system of Soviet «cultural engineering» – it not only entertained but also educated, persuaded, and propagated. From the very beginning of their rule in Kharkiv, the Bolsheviks, in contrast to the «old» operetta troupes that performed plays by Jewish dramatists for local audiences during touring seasons, sought to establish a Jewish theatrical collective that would educate the masses in the spirit of socialist values and political loyalty to the regime. To implement this idea, in 1920, with the participation of the Jewish Section (Evsektsiya) of the Department of Public Education, a Jewish theatre-studio was organized, operating at the Jewish Club named after the Third International. As actors, talented young workers from the city's industrial enterprises were recruited and hastily trained in the basics of acting. The repertoire of the theatre-studio mainly consisted of agitational plays on revolutionary themes. Among them were «Malkes» («The Rods») – devoted to the struggle of the Chinese people against European imperialists and created collectively by the studio members (the production was titled «The East Is Burning») – as well as S. Tretyakov's «Do You Hear, Moscow?». Some success was also achieved by Ernst Toller's expressionist drama «Masse Mensch» («The Mass Man») and the political buffoonery «Khakhomim» («The Wise Men») [27; 670–671]. However, critics noted that the studio lacked a coherent plan of work, a distinct theatrical identity, and experienced stage direction and professional training for its participants [16]. Consequently, it never advanced beyond the level of amateur artistic activity.

More favorable conditions for the development of a professional Jewish theatre in Kharkiv emerged after the Bolsheviks introduced the policy of korenizatsiya (indigenization), which aimed to support the national cultures and languages of ethnic minorities while simultaneously fostering their loyalty to Soviet power. This approach made it possible to preserve some aspects of Jewish cultural tradition while transforming them within the framework of Soviet ideology, thus shaping a new «Soviet-Jewish» cultural identity. One of the practical steps in implementing this national-cultural policy toward ethnic minorities was the establishment of the State Jewish Theatre in Kharkiv. This project had been under discussion since 1921. On June 7, 1921, at a meeting of the Bureau of the Jewish Section (Evsektsiya) operating under the Kharkiv Provincial Party Committee, it was recognized as necessary to create such a theatre in the city [10; 7]. However, due to a lack of funds, work on its establishment was not initiated then. Only on September 22, 1925, the Council of People's Commissars of Ukraine adopted a resolution to organize, starting from the 1925–1926 fiscal year, the State Jewish Theatre in Kharkiv. The resolution of the Council of People's Commissars of the Ukrainian SSR, «On the Organization of the State Jewish Theatre in Ukraine», stated that the theatre was being established «to promote the development of Jewish proletarian culture and to bring proletarian art closer to the broad Jewish working masses». The theatre's activities were not limited to Kharkiv alone – it was expected to «periodically serve cities with a significant Jewish population» [8; 114].

To organize the theatre, the Collegium of the People's Commissariat of Education allocated the premises of the Small Theatre [11; 180]. To oversee the theatre's work, on September 25, 1925, the main bureau of the Jewish Section under the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine approved a temporary commission consisting of Shprakh, Myshkovskyi, Lytvakova, Feldman, and Holubytskyi [9; 43]. The theatre was scheduled to open in November 1925, but the preparatory activities took longer than anticipated.

During the preparatory period, extensive work was carried out on staffing the new theatre. D. Ya. Holberg, a member of the Central Committee of the Rabmis, was appointed as the theatre's director. A permanent administrative board, Holberg, Lifshits, and Levkova, was also formed. E. V. Loiter was invited to serve as the director (stage manager) of the State Jewish Theatre. The artists I. Rybak, N. Altman, and I. Robichev were engaged to design the theatre's artistic decoration and scenery. Composers O. Krein, M. Milner, S. Shtenberg, and L. Pulver were invited to work with the theatre [14; 17]. The most painstaking work involved the formation of the theatre troupe. Its core comprised a group of students from «the Kultur-Lige» Theatre Studio – eighteen graduates who returned to Ukraine after four years of training in Moscow under prominent stage masters. In addition to these studio graduates, Jewish actors from other theatres, L. Bugova and M. Lifshits, were admitted to the troupe without competition. The remaining actors were selected through auditions. Thus, alongside the studio's graduates Ada Sonts, Danylo Stryzhevskyi, Iva Vin, Zakharii Vin, Vira Zisman, Hanna Levenshtein, Rakhl Synelnykova, Sheva Eilisheva-Hildina, Raya Kulyk-Ternovska, F. Rubinshtein, Emmanuil Dinor, Fai Zaslavskyi, Izia Izrael (Sapozhnykov), and Liya Bugova worked more experienced performers such as Arkadii Nuger, Aron Merenzon, Yakiv Holman, Yakiv Abramovych, Zinaida Murovana, Nadiia Viniar, and Nadya Nadina [27; 672].

The official opening of the State Jewish Theatre took place on December 6, 1925 [5; 336]. For this occasion, the troupe prepared two productions – «Purim-Shpil» and «In Bren» («In the Fire») by E. Loiter

and D. Meyerovich. The first to be presented to the audience was «Purim-Shpil». Yefraim Loiter arranged the composition of the text, I. Rybak created the stage design, and S. Shtenberg and L. Pulver wrote the music. This performance represented an attempt to creatively renew the Jewish folk stage tradition by combining it with the global trends of modern theatre. Using grotesque, buffoonery, satire, and carnival improvisation elements, the artists sought to preserve recognizable features of traditional folk spectacle (interludes, jokes, songs, dances) while imbuing them with new ideological meaning. Biblical narratives acquired contemporary resonance through allusions to current political events: traditional characters were transformed into bearers of socially significant meanings. Thus, Haman – the symbol of evil in Jewish religious tradition – appeared as a White Guard general, vividly illustrating the mechanism of ideological transformation of traditional folk motifs into instruments of Soviet propaganda. According to critics, the production of «Purim-Shpil» reflected a genuine need for a popular spectacle, and the festive exuberance of the performance revealed the influence of Evgeny Vakhtangov's staging of Carlo Gozzi's Princess Turandot [8; 114]. At the same time, there were also less favorable reviews. Some critics noted the superficiality of the ideological content and the excessive simplicity of the dramaturgy: «The content of the dramatization is primitive, just as the legend itself is primitive. What matters is not the plot, but the innovative theatrical form the theatre seeks to explore. Naturally, like any theatre striving to be revolutionary, it cannot conceive of form without content. Therefore, the naïve legend of Haman is heavily infused with political sarcasm and mockery of the past» [30].

The production «In Bren» (In the Fire) was received even more critically. It was not a coherent play but a series of sketches lacking a common thread, with characters drawn somewhat schematically. «The text is very weak. The play has no plot. It falls apart before the viewer's eyes into separate scenes. The production has many shortcomings – we emphasize, serious shortcomings – many crowd scenes are unfinished, there is a great deal of inconsistency, emptiness of style and performance, and yet this production is truly creative... The performance is vivid, oscillating between visible failures and brilliant episodes, between tastelessness and a fine sense of harmony. But overall, the theatre achieved much, and despite the text, the play is interesting» [32; 10]. At the same time, «In Bren» became the starting point for the formation of the so-called «revolutionary-romantic» direction, which was entirely in tune with the political and aesthetic expectations of the Soviet authorities. This stylistic approach combined elements of the heroization of the revolutionary struggle, ideological pathos, and emotional expressiveness, all intended to construct the image of the Jew as an active participant in the socialist transformation of the world. However, the realization of this artistic vision was hindered by the lack of a solid dramaturgical foundation.

Like most national theatres of that period, the Jewish theatre faced a severe shortage of original plays that could synthesize national traditions with the new socialist ideology. Considering the theatre's need for contemporary works, the All-Ukrainian Society for the Promotion of Jewish Culture (Gezkult) announced a competition for the best play in Yiddish. The main requirement was that the plays «in their content correspond to the significance of the October Revolution and provide an artistic reflection of it» [19; 201]. Monetary prizes were awarded for the best plays, and the plays were also considered for production by the State Jewish Theatre. Despite collaboration with leading Jewish writers Lev Kvitko, Itzik Fefer, Peretz Markish, David Bergelson, David Wolkenstein, and Gersh Kazakevich attempts to create a «new» repertoire often proved unviable. Typical stories about revolutionary events in the shtetls and the «turn to a new life» remained schematic, lacking artistic depth, and thus did not stay in the repertoire for long. Among the early productions of the theatre were A. Goldfaden's «Shabse Tsvi» (the main character's name) is based on works by Y. Zhulavsky and Sh. Ash, «Zagmuk» by A. Glebov, «Babeff» by M. Levidov, «Ballettoyes» («The Benefactor»), compiled from two plays by Mendele Mocher Sforim, and Oyzer» («The Treasure») by E. Loiter [31, 26; 17, 28; 23, 2; 11]. The reaction of the Jewish audience to this type of theatre was ambivalent. On the one hand, spectators perceived the stage as a space for preserving cultural memory and identity, where Yiddish was spoken and familiar motifs of traditional theatre were recognizable. On the other hand, the imposed ideological context and Soviet symbolism often clashed with the deep cultural codes of the Jewish milieu. For some, the theatre became a site of artistic compromise, a kind of «double-reading» stage, where one could simultaneously witness the continuation of tradition and its political reinterpretation. This ambivalence, the coexistence of authentic and ideologically constructed elements, became one of the defining features of the functioning of the Jewish theatre in Kharkiv in the following years.

In addition, the theatre existed in a challenging financial situation. The funds allocated from the budget for its maintenance, combined with its own earnings, were catastrophically insufficient for regular operation. This was noted in the report on the state of cultural and educational work in Kharkiv region for 1926–1927 [12; 62]. Considering the severe financial difficulties of the State Jewish Theatre, the Collegium of the People's Commissariat for Education of the Ukrainian SSR decided on April 27, 1925, to

provide it with a subsidy [20: 10]. However, the theatre was unable to receive the full amount. After prolonged negotiations, the Kharkiv District Executive Committee granted only half of the promised sum [1; 131]. Promotion of the State Jewish Theatre's activities and increased box-office revenue were supported by ceremonial events dedicated to the 50th anniversary of establishing the first Jewish theatre. The State Jewish Theatre actively participated in a series of festive events in the city. To mark this celebratory date, the theatre prepared a new play, «Tsvay Kunimlekh» («Two Fools»), authored by A. Goldfaden the founder of modern Jewish theatre [15]. As planned, the theatre did not limit its activities to Kharkiv alone. It went on tour in its second year [25; 98]. Audiences in Odessa, Dnipro, Poltava, Vinnytsia, Kremenchuk, Berdychiv, and other Ukrainian cities with significant Jewish communities were able to see the theatre's best productions, including «In Bren», «Purim-Shpil», «Tsvay Kunimlekh», and «Shabse Tsvi». However, the tours were accompanied by significant difficulties. The payments received for performances were insufficient to maintain the troupe. For example, during a tour in 1927, the theatre received only 70% of the sum required for its normal functioning [22; 8].

At the end of the 1920s, in the context of increasing party-state control over the cultural sphere, the Jewish theatre came under ever closer scrutiny by the authorities. The policy of centralizing artistic life gradually eliminated space for creative experimentation. The repertoire of theatres, notably the State Jewish Theatre, underwent a significant transformation: avant-garde explorations, formal innovations, and satirical grotesque disappeared, giving way to simplified realism bordering on naturalism. The theatrical language became more predictable and subordinated to ideological requirements, while expressive and symbolic conventions were replaced by «everyday plausibility» or artificial romantic rhetoric. Constructivist scenographic solutions gave way to decorative, illustrative forms closer to a narrative and «understandable» to the audience. The directing style of E. Loyter, shaped under the influence of the Yevgeny Vakhtangov school, increasingly failed to meet the new standards of Soviet theatre. His aesthetic, oriented toward expression, convention, and «inner action», was perceived as overly intellectual and distant from the «mass audience». This led to a decline in the popularity of contemporary productions at the Kharkiv Jewish Theatre and simultaneously intensified criticism of the director. He was accused of «aestheticism», «formalism», and even imitation of A. Granovsky an especially sensitive charge following the emigration of the founder of the Moscow theatre. Internal conflicts within the troupe merged with ideological pressure: in May 1928, Loyter's work was sharply criticized at the Second Congress of Jewish Education and Cultural Workers [8; 116]. As a result, even before the 1928/1929 season, he was removed from his position as artistic director. This development symbolized the end of the Jewish theatre's stage of creative autonomy and its entry into a new era of ideologically regulated «socialist realism».

Entering its fourth year of existence, the theatre significantly reshaped its artistic leadership and supplemented the troupe with new actors. The new creative director became M. Norwid, formerly an Moscow State Jewish Theatre actor. For several productions, director S. Margolin was invited. The head of the music department was composer M. Milner. To train new acting personnel, the State Jewish Theatre admitted 15 talented students from the Jewish studio of the Odessa Music and Drama Institute to its auxiliary troupe [24; 24]. Thus, by mid-1928, the troupe had increased by 50% [13; 99].

Among the productions of the theatre's new period of activity, notable works included «Hirsh Lekkert» by A. Kushnirov, «Barg Aruf» («Upwards») by Z. Chaloi, «Di Letste» («The Last Ones») by L. Reznik, and «Nit Gedayget» («Do Not Be Sad») by P. Markish. In addition to promoting works by Jewish authors, the theatre's management also focused on familiarizing Jewish audiences with Ukrainian literature. For example, in 1929, the theatre's artistic council decided to stage a performance based on works by Ukrainian writer Petro Panch, titled «Holubi Esheloni» («Blue Echelons») [23; 252]. Plays increasingly depicted enemies, spies, and ridiculed «petty-bourgeois elements». In «Hirsh Lekkert», whose plot was based on actual events related to the revolutionary uprisings of 1902, the activities of the Bund were condemned as a «petty-bourgeois and opportunistic organization». «In Barg Aruf», the action occurred in a Donbas mine, depicting a struggle against saboteurs and specialists. The censorship commission approved the theatre's repertoire, which carefully examined the content of plays; those that did not align with Bolshevik ideology were not allowed to be staged. However, works of new Jewish dramaturgy still failed to attract interest from the audience. They did not remain on stage for long, forcing the theatre to revert to staging plays by Gordin, Goldfaden, and Sholem Aleichem. Critics therefore argued that, in its five years of existence, the theatre had not yet acquired a distinct artistic identity [4; 7–8]. In its final two seasons in Kharkiv, the State Jewish Theatre focused primarily on contemporary dramaturgy. The repertoire included, in addition to the previously mentioned productions, «Yulis» by M. Daniel, «Roman Tsat» by M. Alberton, Yiddish translations of «Kadry» by I. Mykytenko, and Na Zakhodi Biy («The Battle in the West») by V. Vyshnevsky [18].

Considering that the theatre served not only the Jewish population of Kharkiv but also that of other Ukrainian cities, in 1933 the People's Commissariat for Education reorganized the State Jewish Theatre by merging it with the Kyiv Jewish Theatre to form the All-Ukrainian Jewish Theatre [17; 209]. Later, with the transfer of the capital of Ukraine from Kharkiv to Kyiv, the theatre was also relocated there, marking the beginning of a new stage in its activity.

Conclusions. The study has demonstrated that the activity of the Jewish theatre in Kharkiv can be viewed not only as a local phenomenon of cultural life but also as part of a broader Soviet project aimed at constructing the «new human» through art. Within the framework of the korenizatsiya policy, the theatre functioned as a laboratory of Soviet cultural engineering, where national traditions were combined with the ideological demands of the era. On the one hand, its establishment contributed to the institutional development of Jewish cultural life, provided young artists with opportunities to realize their potential within the state system, and allowed audiences to experience stage interpretations in their native language. On the other hand, repertoire policies, personnel decisions, and directorial experiments were constantly adjusted by authorities in accordance with political directives. The theatre simultaneously served as a platform for creative experimentation and as an object of ideological control. In this space, avant-garde forms coexisted with the doctrinal requirements of socialist realism. The intensification of party control and the imposition of censorship led to the loss of creative autonomy and a narrowing of the theatre's cultural mission. Despite these contradictions, the Jewish theatre in Kharkiv represented a significant stage in developing Jewish stage culture and art in Ukraine. Its activity reflected a complex dialectic between tradition and modernity, the national and the Soviet, art and politics. This constellation underlines its historical significance as a symbol of the striving to preserve cultural identity under conditions of total ideological control.

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UDC 792.03 (=411.16)(477.54) «1925/1934»

THE THEATRE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOVIET CULTURAL ENGINEERING :
THE CASE OF THE KHARKIV STATE JEWISH THEATRE (1925–1934)

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The article aims to comprehensively analyze the transformations in Jewish theatrical life in Kharkiv in the late 1920 – early 1930 s within the context of Soviet policies of cultural unification and ideological control. The main objective is to examine how the Soviet authorities used the Kharkiv State Jewish Theatre as an instrument of cultural engineering to reshape Jewish identity, construct the image of the «new Soviet Jew», and promote ideologically approved cultural models during 1925–1934.

The research methodology is interdisciplinary and combines historical-cultural, sociocultural, and art studies analysis. Methods of historical reconstruction, comparative analysis, and discursive interpretation of sources have been applied. Archival materials, periodical reviews, and memoirs of cultural figures were used to reconstruct a holistic picture of the functioning of the Jewish theatre in Kharkiv during a period of growing political pressure on the cultural sphere.

The study's results demonstrate that by the late 1920 s, the Sovietization of the cultural space had significantly reduced the theatre's creative autonomy. The repertoire underwent ideological revision, removing religious, national, and socially ambiguous motifs. The stage language was simplified, while artistic form increasingly adopted the features of socialist realism, which was only beginning to take shape. Nevertheless, artists sought to preserve elements of Jewish cultural tradition in music, acting, linguistic expression, and the choice of themes—creating a unique space of inner resistance. The theatre thus remained a field of intense interaction between creativity, national consciousness, and the political imperatives of the era.

The study's practical significance lies in broadening the understanding of cultural processes in Soviet Ukraine during the interwar period, particularly concerning the fate of national theatres within the framework of the korenizatsiya policy and its subsequent rollback. The findings may be used in developing university courses on cultural history, theatre studies, and Jewish studies, and in further interdisciplinary research focused on the interaction between art and power in totalitarian societies.

Key words: Jewish theatre, korenizatsiya, cultural policy, national identity, Sovietization, censorship.

Стаття отримана 28.12.2024

Стаття прийнята 2.02.2025

Стаття опублікована 22.12.2025