

The Night of the Murdered Poets

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/night-murdered-poets>.

Introduction

This guide offers one entry point to the complicated history of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union by unpacking one of the tragic endpoints of that history. “The Night of the Murdered Poets” refers to August 12, 1952, when thirteen Jewish citizens of the Soviet Union were executed by the state after having been convicted of “nationalist activity” and espionage. Five of those killed were among the most prominent surviving Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union, and so for many people their deaths came to mark an end of Soviet Yiddish culture and a final proof of Stalin’s murderous anti-Semitism.

It should be noted that “The Night of the Murdered Poets” is a misnomer on two important counts. First, only four of the thirteen victims were poets, though several others were prominent writers, intellectuals, and cultural figures; what really connected the group was their affiliation with an organization called the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. While the JAFC was supported by the Soviet government during World War Two as it worked to rally international Jewish support (and funding) for the war effort, after the war the very fact that the committee appealed to Jews around the world caused it to be branded as nationalist and therefore criminal in the Soviet Union. Secondly, the night of the execution was only the end of an ordeal that had gone on for years. The trial of the JAFC members lasted for two months, and this came after they had been imprisoned, interrogated, and tortured for two or three years in some cases.

The principle defendant in the trial, Solomon Lozovskii, testified that, “What is on trial here is the Yiddish language.” Indeed, for the poets among the accused, Yiddish poetry had literally become a matter of life and death. These writers had worked for decades to build Soviet Yiddish culture, and now their literary works were being used as evidence against them. Many had seen the Soviet Union as a liberator, even a savior, from the oppression Jews had experienced in Czarist Russia and during the rise of Nazism. The tension between the hope that many Jews had for the Soviet Union and the country’s ultimate betrayal of its promise to end anti-Semitism is one of the reasons this history and literature are so poignant.

The sources included in this kit come from a number of different genres, with the intention that as students learn about the history of the JAFC, Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union, and Stalinist autocracy, they are also learning how different kinds of sources can be approached, read, and used in different ways. What kind of information can we learn from a poem, a speech, a memoir, a court transcript, a song, or an essay? How do these different genres help us to understand a complicated historical event from different perspectives? And what do we do with historical material that is ultimately incomplete or even contradictory? On this last point, students will have to confront the fact that, even with all of these sources, it is all but impossible to understand what some of these historical figures really thought or felt about their lives, art, and work in the Soviet Union. The portraits of these individuals that students will gain from this kit will likely appear contradictory or even hypocritical. But history is not black and white, and we may in fact inhibit our ability to understand and learn from the lives and works of great writers like Dovid Bergelson, Perets Markish, Leyb Kvitko, and Dovid Hofshsteyn if we remember them only as “victim” or “martyr.”

Cover image: Members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Moscow, 1946. (Photo courtesy of the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service, Moscow)

Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Eastern Europe, Memoir, Poetry, Soviet Union, Yiddish

Reading and Background:

- A brief introduction to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee can be found in the [YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe](#).



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The entry also contains links to brief biographies of the major Yiddish writers involved with the committee and killed on August 12: [Dovid Bergelson](#), [Itzik Fefer](#), [Dovid Hofsheteyn](#), [Leyb Kvitko](#), and [Perets Markish](#). (Note that Markish's first name is sometimes written "Peretz"; when referring to publications that use this alternate spelling, we adopt that spelling as well.) Also central to the story of the JAFC (and the resources below) is the actor and director [Solomon Mikhoels](#), who led the committee and was killed in secret under Stalin's orders in 1948, shortly before the arrest of the other JAFC members.

- The book [Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee](#), ed. Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov (2005), is probably the most reliable English-language source on the topic. (Given that Soviet history—both that written from within the Soviet Union and that written from without—can be heavily politicized and that many archival materials and historical sources were unavailable until the fall of the Soviet Union, it is especially important for teachers and students to approach all histories of the region critically). Naumov's preface is an excellent short overview of the trial of the JAFC; Rubenstein's introduction is a thorough history of the origins and work of the committee and the trial; and the remaining bulk of the volume consists of the actual court proceedings and testimony by the defendants.
- For a more intimate view of the history of Soviet Yiddish culture, the trial of the JAFC, and the experience of Stalinist anti-Semitism, see the memoir of Perets Markish's wife, Esther Markish, [The Long Return \(Le Long Retour\)](#), trans. D. I. Goldstein, 1978.
- For background on the history of Yiddish culture and literature in the Soviet Union from its founding through its high point (or first endpoint) in the 1930s, see David Shneer, [Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918-1930](#), 2004, and Gennady Estraiikh, [In Harness: Yiddish Writers' Romance with Communism](#), 2005. For in-depth studies of Dovid Bergelson and Perets Markish, two of the major Yiddish writers who were killed, see [David Bergelson: From Modernism to Socialist Realism](#), ed. Joseph Sherman and Gennady Estraiikh, 2007; and [A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish](#), ed. Joseph Sherman, Gennady Estraiikh, Jordan Finkin, and David Shneer, 2011.
- There are a number of translations into English of works by the Yiddish writers killed for their involvement with the JAFC:
 - Dovid Bergelson: [The Shadows of Berlin](#), trans. Joachim Neugroschel; [Descent](#), trans. Joseph Sherman; [The End of Everything](#), trans. Joseph Sherman; [Judgment](#), trans. Harriet Murav and Sasha Senderovich; and [The Stories of David Bergelson](#), trans. Golda Werman.
 - Peretz Markish: [Inheritance](#), trans. Mary Schulman.
 - Poetry by Itzik Fefer, Dovid Hofsheteyn, Leyb Kvitko, and Peretz Markish can be found in [The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse](#), ed. Irving Howe.

Resources

1: Poem and audio recording, Itzik Fefer's, "I am a Jew" (Ikh bin a yid), 1941.

This poem is a powerful reminder that the Soviet Union's murderous policy toward Yiddish culture was a reversal of its earlier approach. During the war, Yiddish writers felt encouraged to express their Jewish identity in the fight against fascism, as this poem by Itzik Fefer does. The recording of Fefer reading the poem comes from a unique trip he and Solomon Mikhoels took to the US and the UK in 1943 as representatives of the JAFC to rally international Jewish support for the Soviet war effort against the Nazis. The poem demonstrates how Fefer—and many others—viewed their identity as both Jewish and Soviet. But almost immediately after the war, attitudes changed and Fefer removed the poem from collections of his work. The poem was used as evidence against Fefer in the trial (see the related activity in resource 8), and it ultimately cost him his life.

It should be noted that Itzik Fefer is the most controversial of the Yiddish writers killed for their involvement with the JAFC, because he informed on the JAFC and his fellow writers to the secret police and served as the chief witness for the prosecution in the trial. But it is not a simple or easy thing to condemn Fefer: despite his long membership in the Communist party and a lifetime of service to the revolution, in the end he lost his life as well, convicted of Jewish nationalism.

Suggested Activity: Assign students a stanza of the poem and have them research the references Fefer makes to moments of Jewish and Soviet history. Ask them to share what they learn and what Fefer demonstrates about his identity with each example. As students listen to the recording of Fefer, ask them to describe Fefer's oratorical style. Does it change or affect their sense of the poem?

Sources: Itzik Fefer, "I Am A Jew," trans. Joseph Leftwitch, in [An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Literature](#), ed. Joseph Leftwitch (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 321-324.

Editor's note: We have not been able to determine the rightsholder for Joseph Leftwich's translations, and we would appreciate hearing from anyone who knows who the rightsholder is.

Itzik Fefer, "Ikh bin a yid" in *A shpigl oyf a shteyn: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose by Twelve Soviet Yiddish Writers*, ed. Ch. Shmeruk (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1987), 694-697.

Kalabusha, "Itzik Feffer reads his poem איך בין א ייד", YouTube video, 6:35, August 12, 2010, <https://youtu.be/t6dx9sLBt9c>.

2: Poem, Peretz Markish's, "Mikhoels," 1948.

Solomon Mikhoels was an acclaimed actor and the director of the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, and one of the organizers and leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. He was killed by government agents under Stalin's orders in 1948, but his death was presented as an accident. Nevertheless, it was clear to many at the time what had occurred and only months later the arrests of other members of the JAFC began. Peretz Markish wrote and read this poem—which had the Yiddish title "Sh. Mikhoels - a ner tomid baym orn" ("S. Mikhoels—An Eternal Flame by His Coffin")—at Mikhoel's memorial service, openly acknowledging that Mikhoels was murdered. It was an act of great courage that was used as evidence against him in the trial (see related resources 6, 7, and 8).

(Note: The English translation of the poem is only an excerpt of the original. It translates sections 3, 5, and 6 of the Yiddish. There is no published translation of the complete poem.)

Suggested Activity: After (or before) reading and discussing the poem itself, ask students if they can think of other examples of poems that constitute acts of political resistance. Is it hard to imagine that a poem read at a funeral could become evidence in a trial that results in the death of the author? Students may be prompted to think about the role of poetry and music in civil rights struggles in the United States (from Langston Hughes' "Harlem" to Childish Gambino's "This is America" to the work of Paul Robeson (see resource 5)).

Sources: Peretz Markish, "Mikhoels," trans. Joseph Leftwich in *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Literature* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 306-307.

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Peretz Markish, "Sh. mikhoels—a ner tomid baym orn" in *A shpigl oyf a shteyn: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose by Twelve Soviet Yiddish Writers*, Ed. Ch. Shmeruk (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1987), 508-512.

3: Essay excerpt, Dovid Bergelson's, "Three Centers," 1926.

Dovid Bergelson was one of the greatest Yiddish prose writers, and he was the most internationally well-known of the Yiddish writers involved with the JAFC. He also had a more complicated relationship with the Soviet Union than most. Bergelson spent his youth in Kiev, but left the Soviet Union in 1921 after the chaos and violence of the first World War, the 1917 revolutions, and the resulting civil war. At first he was a vocal critic of Soviet Jewish culture, but with the publication of this essay he marked an ideological shift that would lead him to return to the Soviet Union in 1934 and become an advocate for the project to establish a Soviet Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan. The essay compares Yiddish culture in the United States, Poland, and the Soviet Union and concludes that the future for Yiddish culture lies in the Soviet "center."

Suggested Activity: Ask students to discuss what connection Bergelson sees between physical labor (factory work, farming) and literature. How does this compare to their own ideas of Jewish life in Eastern Europe? What is the connection between destruction and creativity for Bergelson? What destruction is he thinking of (an opportunity to talk about the great destruction and upheaval of Jewish life caused by the first World War and the 1917 revolutions)? The Soviet Union is often portrayed as gray and drab in Western culture; how does Bergelson use color in this excerpt?

Sources: David Bergelson, "Three Centres (Characteristics)," trans. Joseph Sherman in *David Bergelson: From Modernism to Socialist Realism* (London: Legenda, 2007), 353.

4: Speech excerpt, Solomon Mikhoels, from the first rally of the Jewish Anti-Fascist

Committee, 1941.

The first official activity undertaken by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was to organize a rally with speeches given by many of the prominent members of the committee, including Markish and Mikhoels. The rally was broadcast over radio, as one of the primary audiences was international, especially American Jews and Jews in the UK. Similar to Fefer's poem "I am a Jew," the speeches demonstrate the kind of appeal to a worldwide Jewish nation that was condoned during the war and deemed criminal afterward. The very phrase translated here as "fellow Jews" was discussed in the trial as irredeemably nationalist.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to identify the different audiences or constituencies that Mikhoels appeals to. What does he commend about each group and what does he ask of them?

Source: From: *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented Study of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR*, Shimon Redlich, Copyright (c) 1995 Harwood Academic Publishers, reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Books UK.

6: Photographs of JAFC members.

This resource consists of the following photographs:

- Jewish cultural figures who would become members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee signing an appeal to world Jewry to support the Soviet war effort against Nazi Germany, Moscow, 1941. (Front row, left to right) Dovid Bergelson, Solomon Mikhoels, and Ilya Ehrenburg; (second row) David Oistrakh, Yitskhok Nusinov, Yakov Zak, Boris Iofan, Benjamin Zuskin, Aleksandr Tyshler, Shmuel Halkin.
- Itzik Fefer, Paul Robeson, and Solomon Mikhoels, 1943.
- Members of the JAFC, 1946.
- Last photo of Solomon Mikhoels, 1948.
- Perets Markish speaking at Mikhoels's memorial, 1948.

These photographs can be used to put faces to the names and events discussed in the other resources in this kit. The staged photographs of the JAFC members—the group photos and the photo of Mikhoels, Fefer, and Robeson—were clearly meant to be used for publicity and propaganda when they were taken. And yet by 1952, they could just as well have been used as evidence against JAFC members, demonstrating for example Markish's role in the committee, which he downplayed in his court testimony.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to describe the photos from the perspective of the time when they were taken, the time of the trial, and looking back from today. Is it challenging to understand the hopefulness that might have accompanied the earlier photos when they were taken, given how things turned out? What value is there in trying to understand that perspective?

Sources: Photograph of Jewish cultural figures signing an appeal to world Jewry, Moscow, 1941. Courtesy of the Russian State Film and Photo Archives, www.RussianArchives.com.

Photograph of Itzik Fefer, Paul Robeson, and Solomon Mikhoels, 1943, courtesy of the [Jewish Public Library Archives](#), Montreal.

Photograph of members of the JAFC, 1946, courtesy of the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service, Moscow.

Last photograph of Solomon Mikhoels, 1948, used by permission of [YIVO](#), the Institute for Jewish Research.

Photograph of Perets Markish speaking at Mikhoels's memorial, 1948, courtesy of the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service, Moscow.

7: Excerpts from memoir, Esther Markish's, "The Long Return (Le Long Retour)," 1978.

Esther Markish wrote her memoirs when she was 66 years old and living in Israel after years of exile in the Soviet Union for the crime of being the wife of a "traitor to the motherland." Her husband, Perets Markish, was arrested in 1949, and it was not until he was officially (but posthumously) "rehabilitated" in 1955 that Esther and her sons were officially told that Perets had been executed in 1952. Esther Markish's memoirs are therefore understandably bitter in her depiction of their life and ordeals. They also provide a unique and intimate portrait of her husband and many of the Yiddish and Russian literary and cultural figures of the

1920s-1950s, including many of the JAFC members. The first excerpt, about Perets Markish's relationship with Mikhoels, illuminates Markish's poem about Mikhoels (resource 2) and contradicts Perets Markish's depiction of that relationship in his court testimony (resource 8). The second provides a different version of the story about the meeting between Paul Robeson and Itsik Fefer discussed in resource 5.

Suggested Activity: Unlike the other resources, these memoirs are personal recollections written thirty years or more after the events described. Ask students to consider if that affects how they read these excerpts, especially given that Esther Markish's versions of the stories about Robeson and even her husband's relationship with Mikhoels contradict the other sources. Is a memoir valuable as "evidence," "testimony," or "history"? If so, how? Is it more like literature? Does a memoir have to be demonstrably accurate in order for us to learn something from it?

Source: Esther Markish, *The Long Return*, trans. D.I. Goldstein (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 94-96 and 170-173.

8: Excerpts from the court testimony of Perets Markish and Itsik Fefer, 1952.

Remarkably, there is a complete transcript of the two-month trial against the JAFC. Like so many archival materials in the Soviet Union, it was only made available to researchers in the late 1980s. Joshua Rubenstein writes, "Because the trial was not a public one, there was no need to constrain the defendants from expressing themselves. And as the trial progressed, the judges grew more respectful of them, while the presiding judge, Alexander Cheptsov, soon understood that the entire case was a fabrication and tried to stop the proceedings. Under his direction, stenographers recorded every word of judges and defendants alike, creating a reliable account of the proceedings." These documents are extremely difficult to read; many of the defendants admit to "partial guilt" and agree that the JAFC was guilty of nationalism; many offer evidence against their codefendants. Moments of resistance are brief or coded. One can only imagine the mental state of the defendants after their years of imprisonment and interrogation, and their fear for their families. In the first excerpt, Markish attempts to represent Solomon Mikhoels as neither a colleague nor a friend and speaks of him only critically. Later in the testimony he had to correct the record as other testimony clearly demonstrated their professional relationship (supported by the memoirs of Markish's wife Esther in resource 7). He is questioned specifically about his poem on the occasion of Mikhoels' death (resource 2). In the second excerpt, Fefer is likewise questioned about his poem "I am a Jew" (resource 1).

Suggested Activity: As a pre-reading activity, ask students what their expectations are for reading a court document. Do they expect it to be a reliable source? Have students read the exchange between the Presiding Officer and Markish that begins on the bottom of p. 129 (from "How can this be?" to "Yes, it really is important.") What do they make of Markish mentioning that the chief defendant, Solomon Lozovskii, is laughing at him? Have students read the exchanges in both excerpts when the Presiding Officer quotes from Markish and Fefer's poems. Why and how does Fefer defend his poem? Why and how does Markish not defend his poem?

Source: *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, ed. Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, trans. Laura Esther Wolfson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 92-94 and 128-131. Reproduced by permission of Yale University Press.