

David Bergelson

- RUSSIA

David Bergelson was one of the greatest Yiddish storytellers, after the “classic” three (Mendeley, Shalom Aleichem, Perez), innovative and ground-breaking, he transformed the Yiddish literature in its three main genres: The novel, the novella and the short story. His works, which span through over 40 years of activity, are typically divided in to three periods.

In the first and earliest – which is characterized by a dark, but nuanced impressionism – he wrote short stories, novellas and two masterful novels (*When All Is Said and Done* and *Descent*), which all centered the intellectual and financial decline of the middle class residing in the small towns of Eastern Europe and living an empty and devoid life. In *When All Is Said and Done* (which is the *Madame Bovary* of Yiddish literature, both thematically and stylistically) He put a focus on the modern Jewish woman, who cannot find her place in the Jewish bourgeoisie environment.

The second period was written mostly in Germany, which Bergelson discovered (along with other Yiddish and Hebrew writers) only after the Russian revolution. There, he wrote stories which put a spotlight on the lives of immigrants; and a sharp and poignant, novel of ideas *Divine Justice*, which deals with tensions between the revolutionary government in the Soviet Union and the remnants of Jewish gentry there, and also touches upon anti-Soviet socialism. During this period, his writing became sober, sharp and analytical. His growing affinity to Soviet communism is also apparent during this time. It is also clearly expressed in the well-known essay “Three Centers” (1926), where Bergelson states that

Yiddish literature will only be possible in Soviet Russia and will necessarily wither in the rest of its cultural centers (Poland and North America).

In 1933, with the rise of the Nazi regime, Bergelson returned to Russia, from which he parted in 1919. It is then that he received a status as a great Yiddish writer. He made every effort to adapt his style to the norms of socialist-realism. As a descendent of the declining Jewish gentry himself, he saw fit to invest himself in a great auto-biographical novel (*Baym Dnieper*), which meticulously followed the progression of his ideological and intellectual stances over time. This was part of the great endeavor of “self-criticism”, which Soviet Marxism demanded from ex-bourgeoisies who joined its ranks. Only two tomes of this great work were finished and published. In addition to this novel, Bergelson wrote numerous short stories and plays which were successfully dramatized in both the USSR and Israel.

Despite his unwavering loyalty to the Stalinist regime, he was imprisoned in 1949, along with the rest of the leaders of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union, accused of Zionism and executed on August 12th, 1952.

If you’ve never heard of the great novelist Dovid Bergelson, that means Stalin won.

On Aug. 12, 1952, Dovid Bergelson, a top contender for the title of Greatest Yiddish Novelist Who Ever Lived, was executed by a Soviet firing squad—and he wasn’t a dissident. In fact, he was a loyal enough Communist that he published a famous essay in 1927 titled “Three Centers,” about which of the three centers of Yiddish culture—New York, Warsaw, and Moscow—offered

the best future for Yiddish writers. Bergelson's unequivocal answer was Moscow, and he wasn't yet wrong. At that time, Stalin's effort to brainwash ethnic minorities involved the Soviet government financing Yiddish-language schools, newspapers, theaters and publishers, to the extent that there were even Yiddish literary critics who were salaried by the Soviet government. During World War II, Stalin used these loyal Jews to his advantage by creating a "Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee," a group of Jewish celebrities, including Bergelson, tasked with drumming up money and support from American Jews for the Soviet war effort. After the war, Stalin announced that the committee he himself had created was actually (wait for it) part of a vast Zionist conspiracy. Bergelson and his co-defendants endured three years of torture in prison before pleading guilty to the crime of "nationalism" (read: Judaism). He was executed along with a dozen other Jewish luminaries, in an event later memorialized by Yiddish readers as the "Night of the Murdered Poets." Of course, being executed by Stalin was the Soviet literary equivalent of winning a Pulitzer Prize. Bergelson was that good.

Bergelson's works were celebrated for being very "European" rather than "Jewish," comparable with Chekhov rather than Sholem Aleichem. His greatest masterpiece, the 1913 novel *Nokh Alemen*—available in English as *The End of Everything*, in a [brilliant translation](#) by the late Joseph Sherman—is unique in highbrow Yiddish fiction for being about a woman who has an abortion. But since Bergelson's murder has cast him into the netherworld of Jewish martyrology, is it even possible to read this novel simply as "literature," as he surely desired? The strange answer is: not anymore, and maybe it never

was. Dara Horn <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/yiddish-madame-bovarys-abortion>

Mayn tsvaoh durkh dir ikh loz: The Socialist Realism of Dovid Bergelson

Abstract

This dissertation examines the socialist realism produced by Dovid Bergelson from 1926 to 1952. This socialist realism, primarily in the form of novellas, epic novels, and journalistic pieces, expresses a genuine faith in the Soviet system and in its leader, Josef Stalin. However, Bergelson's work also manages to engage with Jewish culture and identity, both by virtue of its creation and publication in the Yiddish language and through its focus on Yiddish and Jewish themes. This project hypothesizes that Bergelson identified an issue of identity within the realm of post-Haskalah Jewish letters. Those scholars and writers seeking to engage with Jewish literature found the genre faced with two questions. First of all, there was the issue of which language to use in the creation of new material: some favored Hebrew, citing its position as the language of learned Jews and its continued use in the Jewish liturgy. Others favored Yiddish, the "kitchen-talk" of women, the uneducated, and the working classes. Bergelson placed himself firmly alongside the latter. Secondly, Bergelson's work elaborates upon this self-referential uncertainty by questioning the location—or what I call the "homing"—of Yiddish literature. This homelessness was, I argue, based in the insufficiency of the shtetl as both a physical, bordered location, and as a metaphysical mindset that, to Bergelson, represented superstition, oppression, and poverty. Bergelson's solution to this problem was the "new Russia," or the Soviet state. Where earlier modernist writings produced in Kiev and Berlin, such as *Nokh aleman* and *Opgang*, deal with this shtetl, his new writings, such as *Baym dnyep* and *Birobidzhaner*, portray Jews engaging with historicity, self-formation, and a new Jewish consciousness. While a conflict certainly existed between one's identity as a Soviet and one's identity as a Jew, however those identities were undertaken and performed, I argue that Bergelson's readers found, in his writings, inspiration and guidance in their lives as both Soviet citizens and Jewish individuals. At the same time, this ever-present conflict is based in two systems that, though they may appear diametrically at odds with each other, do not function along the same delineations and cannot be defined in compatible ways. Though this incompatibility should have precluded any conflict or usurping of one system by the other, the tension between Jews and the Communist Party, particularly Jews active within their community, often had tragic outcomes. Indeed, Bergelson and his colleagues were simply writers and activists—sometimes reluctant activists—caught between, and within, two identities. This project will examine Bergelson's writings in relation to the Soviet Jewish experience, the fields of diasporic literature and minority literature, and the notion of self-creation in the face of totalitarianism. In performing this scholarship, I hope to illuminate new aspects of the spaces occupied by Soviet Jews, and to prove that those spaces make up a sort of uniquely Soviet "Yiddishland."

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