

**RESEARCH REPORT  
IREX STG**

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**Yiddish Theater Repertoire in Tsarist Russia, 1896-1917:  
A Database of Censorship Copies**

1. Topic and Place of Research: I spent six weeks at the St. Petersburg State Theatrical Library in Russia to complete my database of some 2, 500 Yiddish plays sent to the Tsarist Censor between 1896 and 1917.

2. Scholarly Significance of My Research: The database is intended to serve as a basis for a catalogue of the library's collection of Yiddish censorship copies and to inform part of a book-length study of Yiddish theater in late Imperial Russia. The publication of the catalogue will greatly enhance the accessibility of this important collection. It is not only one of the two largest collections of Yiddish plays in the world but also unique since it contains an almost complete repertoire of the twenty-year period leading up to the Revolution.

The book will be the first extensive work in English dealing with Yiddish theater during this period. Due to its problematic and often elusive history and a lack of scholarly interest in this mostly non-intellectual entertainment form (as opposed to the Yiddish art theaters in America and the Soviet Union), it has received little scholarly attention. The 1883 ban of productions in Yiddish forced the troupes to perform in "German" thus stifling the development of an "authentic" Yiddish culture and discouraging serious writers of Yiddish to increase the limited repertoire. Although this prohibition was never completely revoked during Tsarist times, the official attitude toward Yiddish theater became more permissive over the years, particularly following the 1905 revolution, which resulted in increased theatrical activity and a considerable expansion of the repertoire. In examining the repertoire and how it was affected by censorship decisions I will shed new light on the cultural practices of a minority within the Russian Empire and its complex negotiations with the Tsarist bureaucracy.

3. Approach and Research Methodology: The database contains fields for all information given on the title page: the name of the author or adapter, the title(s) and genre of the play, the alphabet (Hebrew or Latin) and language (Yiddish, German, or Germanized Yiddish), the exact date of the censorship stamp, the censor's decision (permission without text cuts, permission with cuts, or denial of permission) as well as any incidental information that the manuscript may provide (including, in most instances, specific information on what words or sentences were cut). The majority of manuscripts sent to the censor were adapted versions of Yiddish or foreign plays. Since they usually do not state the original author or title, one of my main tasks has been to try to identify the source (by skimming hundreds of plays) and to add this information to the database.

The database was designed to address the following questions: 1. How many plays were submitted each year and what percentage was permitted for performance? 2. What do these numbers tell us about the state of theatrical activity on the one hand and censorship policies on the other? 3. How did major political and social events, such as pogroms, the revolution of 1905, and World War I affect the repertoire both in regards to themes and activity level? 4. Which plays and/or authors proved to be particularly

popular? How did this popularity change over the course of the period? 5. In what alphabet/language was the play submitted? How did the choice of alphabet/language change over time? When were the first plays submitted in Yiddish? 7. What themes, words, or actions could not be presented on stage? How did censorship decisions change over time? How did writers alter the original texts in order to have their plays permitted?

4. Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions: For obvious reasons, censorship had a decisive impact on the development and repertoire of the Yiddish theater. All plays had to be submitted in German until the summer of 1907 when the censor decided unilaterally that plays could be written (and performed) in Yiddish. As a result the censorship office was immediately flooded with plays. However, the police department, which had originally issued the ban, did not revoke it. While an increasing number of plays were submitted in Yiddish, until the outbreak of World War I the majority of manuscripts continued to be in German or a Germanized version of Yiddish (in Latin characters), presumably to avoid difficulties with the local police who had to issue the final permission for performance. Yet the censor's permission of plays in Yiddish was not only significant for linguistic reasons: it also entailed that Jewish cultural and religious practices were no longer prohibited (e.g. reference to Jewish holidays or a Shabbat scene including prayers in Hebrew).

Overall, only 1/5 of all submitted plays were not permitted. Theater directors, who were responsible for the repertoire and for adapting plays, tended to know censorship rules well enough to successfully alter plays to get them passed with minimal or no cuts. Plays by intellectual writers who often dealt with controversial social, political or religious issues were more likely to be prohibited for staging even if they had been approved for publication.

5. Suggestions for Future Research: In order to attain a more complete understanding of Yiddish theatrical activity during the late Tsarist period, we need to explore individual wandering troupes and actors (e.g. repertoire, areas of operation, working conditions) as well as Yiddish theatrical activity in specific cities (e.g. Odessa, Warsaw). Reception in both the Russian and Yiddish press is another important area of inquiry. A detailed analysis of the censor's as well as the Central Administration's and governors' changing policies toward the Yiddish theater will be crucial to appreciate many of the reasons for its hampered development. It would also be useful to compare the situation of the Yiddish theater with other minority theaters in the Tsarist Empire (e.g. the Ukrainian theater).