# YIVO Institute for Jewish research in New York fires all its librarians

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**17 February 2020**

The Executive Board of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York announced in January that it would fire all four staff librarians, citing significant budgetary shortfalls. YIVO reported a $550,000 revenue shortfall in 2019. It had 39 employees in 2018 and annual expenditure of $5.1 million. Most of the YIVO's revenue comes with donor restrictions.

The YIVO Institute is one of the most important institutions in the world for the study of the Holocaust, the history of European Jewry and of the revolutionary movement in Eastern Europe and Russia before 1945. The YIVO library holds 400,000 volumes, including the world's largest collection of Yiddish-language works, and is separately organized from the YIVO archives, which hold 23 million items.

The firing of the librarians has been opposed by virtually all academics working in the field of Jewish and Yiddish studies. An open letter to the YIVO Board called "for the immediate reinstatement of the library staff, and for more financial transparency, and accountability, to the scholarly community that carries on this work." It stated: "The librarians recently laid off include some of the most knowledgeable Yiddish library specialists currently working. The loss of this knowledge and expertise is hard to exaggerate. ... the YIVO library is in high demand by researchers. It requires curatorial supervision, daily cataloging, acquisitions, maintenance, involvement in library outreach, and partnerships in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world." The letter warned that "Without its library staff and director, the YIVO library cannot fully serve the scholarly community or call itself a leading academic institution."

The letter was signed by over 1,000 scholars, artists and researchers, including the leading historians of Eastern European Jewry Samuel Kassow (Trinity College), Zvi Gitelman (University of Michigan), David Shneer (University of Colorado), Gennady Estraikh (New York University), Elissa Bemporad (Queens College), Avraham Novershtern (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and David Fishman (Jewish Theological Seminary). Among the signatories are also hundreds of artists and Yiddish teachers associated with the YIVO Institute, as well as many donors.

The YIVO Executive Board responded to the letter by defending the firing of the librarians as a necessary response to budgetary problems and as being in line with the efforts to "modernize" the library. It stated that the firing was a short-term measure but did not specify whether and when the librarians would be reinstated. The posting of the open letter by YIVO on its Facebook page prompted an angry and almost universally negative response from many of the signatories of the initial open letter.

On February 12, the Jewish *Forward* reported that two long-standing members of the YIVO Board, Karen Underhill and Stuart Shear, resigned after the layoffs were announced.

The firing of the librarians is not only an egregious violation of their labor rights but also marks an assault on the access to a cultural and historical institution which is of major significance to the international working class. Many of the YIVO library's 400,000 books, newspapers and documents have literally been rescued from Nazi barbarism, and are indispensable for the study of European Jewish history before the Second World War, the Holocaust and the pre-war revolutionary movement of the Eastern European working class.

The YIVO was originally founded in 1925 in Vilnius (now Lithuania, then part of Poland) by a group of Yiddish scholars, scientists, and historians. Up until the Nazi genocide of European Jewry during World War II, Yiddish was the main language of Ashkenazi Jews who lived in Eastern Europe and the former Russian Empire.

A more systematic scientific and literary use of Yiddish,

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however, only began in the late 19th century. The growing Yiddish national movement in the former Russian Empire was closely connected to the development of the socialist movement and the Russian revolution. Many of the YIVO founders and members were part of the revolutionary movement. Most of them were members of the Jewish Social Democratic Labor Bund, which originated in the Russian Social Democratic Party but broke from the Bolsheviks in 1903, or the socialist-Zionist Left Poalei Tsyion (LPZ).

In addition to developing a scientific understanding and study of Yiddish as a language, and developing its use as a language of other sciences, the YIVO was dedicated to collecting (zameln) all the materials relating to the history and life of the Jewish masses. In the inter-war period, this effort involved the collective work of thousands of ordinary teachers, workers, and students who submitted political and cultural periodicals as well as diaries, autobiographies and other personal documents to the YIVO.

During the war, the YIVO faced the danger of imminent and total destruction by the Nazis. In Nazi-occupied Poland, historians associated with the YIVO, most notably Emanuel Ringelblum, ran the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, which collected materials about all aspects of the political, social and cultural life in the ghetto.

In the ghetto in Vilnius, the so called Paper Brigade, which included the major Yiddish poets Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski, risked their lives to save tens of thousands of books and cultural artifacts from the YIVO Institute and other libraries of the city from destruction by the task force of the leading Nazi Alfred Rosenberg (ERR). As part of its criminal mission of cultural plunder and destruction in Nazi-occupied Europe, the ERR was planning on destroying 70 percent of the library and archival holdings in all of Vilnius. The rest was to be pillaged for the “research” of Nazi professors in Germany.

Among the documents and items saved by the Paper Brigade were thousands of manuscripts by Yiddish, Russian and French writers like Sholom Aleichem, Leo Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky and Romain Rolland, as well as works by the painters Marc Chagall and Ilya Repin. The Paper Brigade also collected invaluable documents on the Vilnius ghetto and resistance against the Nazis. After the war, many of these materials were sent to the YIVO Institute in New York, which became the YIVO’s new headquarters. Many of these items now form part of the YIVO library.

Another major collection that is now part of the YIVO library, the Tcherikover collection of Jewish history, was likewise saved from Nazi destruction during the war in France.

The anti-Semitic purges and policies of the Stalinist Soviet government in the immediate post-war period made it impossible for the YIVO to continue its existence in Vilnius. Much of the collection was buried by the Stalinist government for decades. The Lithuanian government and the YIVO Institute only recently negotiated the digitization of these materials, which is still ongoing.

This history accounts for the enormous value and complexity of the YIVO library. Apart from many historic rabbinic works and *yitzkor* (memorial) books that document the lives of pre-war Jewish communities, the library includes the private collections of leading figures of the YIVO itself and the Yiddish movement in the inter-war period, including Chaim Zhitlovsky and Max Weinreich, a Bundist, co-founder and long-time president of the YIVO, who authored an authoritative English-Yiddish dictionary.

The library includes very rare pamphlets and leaflets from the earliest days of Russian Social Democracy by Lenin and other leading revolutionaries. Moreover, countless volumes and periodicals are important to the study of the history of American Jews and the American Jewish labor movement. Many of these materials can be found nowhere else in the world.

It speaks to a significant rightward shift among the layers that have traditionally constituted the base of financial support and operation of the YIVO Institute that the firing of the librarians, who have decades of experience working in this library, and provide a living link to the YIVO scholars and historians who survived the war, could have even be considered. Their firing endangers the access of scholars and the general public to this vitally important history and must be opposed.

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