

Ber Borochov's "The Tasks of Yiddish Philology"

Barry Trachtenberg

University at Albany

Argument

Ber Borochov (1881–1917), the Marxist Zionist revolutionary who founded the political party *Poyle Tsien* (Workers of Zion), was also one of the key theoreticians of Yiddish scholarship. His landmark 1913 essay, "The Tasks of Yiddish Philology," was his first contribution to the field and crowned him as its chief ideologue. Modeled after late nineteenth-century European movements of linguistic nationalism, "The Tasks" was the first articulation of Yiddish scholarship as a discrete field of scientific research. His tasks ranged from the practical: creating a standardized dictionary and grammar, researching the origins and development of the language, and establishing a language institute; to the overtly ideological: the "nationalizing and humanizing" of the Yiddish language and its speakers. The essay brought a new level of sophistication to the field, established several of its ideological pillars, and linked Yiddish scholarship to the material needs of the Jewish people. Although "The Tasks" was greeted with a great deal of skepticism upon its publication, after his death, Borochov became widely accepted as the "founder" of modern Yiddish studies.

"As long as a people remain 'illiterate' in their own
language, one cannot yet speak of a national culture"
(Borochov 1913, page 355 in this issue)

When Ber Borochov's manifesto "The Tasks of Yiddish Philology" appeared in 1913, few people could imagine that Yiddish was substantial enough to be the basis of a new scholarly discipline. At the outset of the twentieth century, Yiddish culture in Russia – home to the vast majority of speakers – was paltry. By 1900, legal restrictions on Yiddish publishing had combined with historic perceptions of the limits of the language so that no Yiddish newspapers, literary journals, or textbooks were published in the empire and no legal Yiddish cultural clubs, theater companies, or secular Yiddish schools existed within its borders (Fishman 1989). Nevertheless, a period of rapid transformation and maturation of the Yiddish language was underway, led by a generation of Jewish youths determined to situate their mother tongue at the center of a cultural revolution.

Principal among this generation's leaders was Ber Borochov (1881–1917), who, by 1906 was well-known as the revolutionary and visionary who synthesized the seemingly irreconcilable ideologies of Marxism and Zionism. Today, Borochov is best known as the figure who founded the political party *Poyle Tsien* (Workers of Zion), which became the core of the Labor Zionist movement. However, Borochov also began to

explore the possibilities of continuing with Jewish cultural work once political avenues were blocked at the end of the failed 1905 Russian Revolution. “The Tasks of Yiddish Philology” was Borochov’s first contribution to Yiddish scholarship and crowned him as its chief ideologue. Modeled after late nineteenth-century European movements of linguistic nationalism, “The Tasks” was the first articulation of Yiddish scholarship – which had been developing by fits and starts for nearly a decade – as a discrete field of scientific research. It brought Yiddish scholarship to a new level of sophistication, established several of its ideological pillars, and linked Yiddish scholarship to the material needs of the Jewish people. Although “The Tasks” was greeted with a great deal of skepticism upon its publication, after his death, Borochov became widely accepted as the “founder” of modern Yiddish studies.

As a Marxist, Yiddish scholarship for Borochov was first and foremost a means for a much-needed exploration and cultivation of the Jewish proletariat. As he understood it, in pre-modern times, the Jewish *folk* were those who comprised the core of the Jewish people, who created and preserved their language, who stood opposed to and alienated from an elite rabbinic leadership, and who were the truest expression of an authentic Jewish existence. In his day, they formed the Jewish proletariat who labored under the pains of industrialization and stood at the center of the emerging Jewish nation. As a nationalist, Borochov accepted the (increasingly outmoded) assumption that nations were primarily defined by their languages and therefore, the way to bring forth a cultural renaissance among the Jews was through the fortification of their native language. Unlike his nineteenth-century German Jewish predecessors who – in his conception – founded the German Jewish school of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in order to promote Enlightenment goals of individual Jewish emancipation and assimilation, the twentieth-century project of *yidische visnshaft* (Yiddish studies/scholarship [literally, the science of Yiddish]) was bound up with the collective emancipation of the entire Jewish nation.

Born 21 June 1881, Borochov grew up in the Ukrainian town of Poltava in a family strongly influenced both by the Haskalah (Enlightenment) and Zionism.¹ Borochov’s parents made a conscious decision not to speak their native Yiddish in front of the children and so from the age of two or three, Borochov’s home was Russian-speaking.² As befitting a Zionist *maskilic* upbringing, Borochov received an education that was a mixture of private tutors, the state school system, and secular Jewish learning that gave him regular access to banned Zionist materials. He was heavily influenced by the Zionist milieu of Poltava and he twice attempted unsuccessfully to leave for Palestine at the ages of ten and sixteen. He graduated from *gymnasium* in 1900 but reportedly was refused academic honors by an antisemitic instructor, which resulted in his being barred from pursuing a university education in the empire. Rather than go abroad to continue his studies, upon graduation Borochov moved to Ekaterinaslav, a strong center of both Social Democrat and Zionist activity. Initially aligning himself with the Social Democrats, he was soon expelled from the party on account of his persistent engagement with questions of Jewish nationalism. He then found a home on the

opposite end of the ideological spectrum, joined with Zionist activists, and quickly gained a reputation as a powerful lecturer.

Borochov's political allegiances once again shifted as his increasing engagement with various diasporist groups and the extreme violence of the October 1905 pogroms (with nearly one thousand Jews killed) began to convince him of the weakness of the general Zionists' ability to provide for the immediate needs of Russian Jewry (Ascher 1995; Lambroza 1992; Wynn 1992). Abroad in Berlin in the fall of 1905, powerless to assist his fellow Jews, and realizing that the political tide was getting ahead of him, he began raising money for self-defense groups and composing increasingly radical essays. The most renowned and influential of these was his landmark work "The National Question and the Class Struggle" (Borochov 1937, 135–166). Written in Russian, this essay solidified his position as one of the major theoreticians of the new revolutionary generation, offered a materialist conception of the relationship between nation and class, and concluded with the assertion that antisemitism was a permanent fixture of diasporic Jewish life. Returning to Russia at the end of 1905, Borochov quickly sought to assert his place in the Jewish revolutionary camp. He established his own party out of the remnants of the loosely formed-*Poyle Tsien* in his hometown of Poltava, the founding text of which was his second historic essay (also composed in Russian), entitled simply "Our Platform" (*ibid.*, 183–205).

In June 1906, Borochov was arrested and expelled from Russia for the next decade. Based in Vienna (a small but significant center for Yiddish cultural and scholarly activity at the time), Borochov began to consider the possibilities of Yiddish (Kohlbauer-Fritz 1999). He commenced studying it in 1907, after realizing – like so many Russian *maskilim* and Jewish revolutionaries before him – that he would have to convey his message in the language of his intended audience of Jewish laborers. At the age of twenty-six and far from the Russian Jewish masses, he took up learning the very language that his parents had hoped to dissuade him from speaking. Very soon, Yiddish for Borochov became a scholarly preoccupation and increasingly central to his vision of Jewish autonomy. He soon began writing Yiddish essays and conducting research into its historical development. His first work in Yiddish, an examination of the national question in Belgium, appeared in 1908 (Borochov 1908).³ While traveling on behalf of the *Poyle Tsien*, Borochov spent much of his time in European libraries looking for sources of pre-modern Yiddish literature. The results of his investigations were published in a ground-breaking bibliography of Old Yiddish literature and literary studies entitled "The Library of the Yiddish Philologist." This essay, as well as "The Tasks of Yiddish Philology," appeared in 1913 and announced his entry into the world of Yiddish activism.

After being expelled from Austro-Hungary at the onset of World War I, Borochov traveled to New York and lived there from 1915–1917. His time in New York marked the period of his greatest isolation. Far from the *Poyle Tsien* movement in eastern Europe, he spent his time clashing with political opponents, writing for Yiddish newspapers, and working on a never-completed history of the Yiddish language. With

great joy he returned to Russia with the overthrow of the Tsar in 1917. His excitement was short-lived, however. He quickly clashed with his *Poyle Tsien* comrades when he adopted positions that seemed to many to hark back to his seemingly antiquated pre-1905 stances. Within a few months of his return, and on the verge of what he and his remaining supporters hoped would be his triumphal reappearance to the center of Jewish radical politics, he fell ill and died on 17 December.

Borochoy's "The Tasks" appeared in a 1913 volume entitled *Der pinkes: yorbukh far der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur un shprakh, far folklore, kritik un bibliografye* (The Record: Yearbook for the History of Yiddish Literature and Language, for Folklore, Criticism and Bibliography). Under the editorial stewardship of the literary critic Sh. Niger (1883–1955), *Der pinkes* was a *tour de force* of the new Yiddish scholarship. While its role in laying the foundation for subsequent scholarly investigations into Yiddish is undeniable, the volume was also the culmination of nearly a decade's worth of intellectual labors by activists to promote the possibilities of Yiddish through scholarly investigations into the language, history, culture, and sociological conditions of its speakers. Published by the Kletskin *Farlag*, this compendium is rich with the sort of linguistic, literary, folkloric, and bibliographic essays that had been published in the Yiddish press since the failed 1905 Revolution.

In his brief introduction, Niger articulated the goals of the volume, which he envisioned as the first in an annual series that would record the achievements of Yiddish publishing. Niger hoped *Der pinkes* would serve Yiddish scholarship and the Jewish community in two ways: "by gathering and cultivating various material that has a relationship to scientific investigations of Yiddish literature and language in general," and "by collecting and systematizing the relevant material for each year" (Niger 1913, 1). His hope to provide an annual record of Yiddish was not realized (as this was the only volume to appear), but his goal for *Der pinkes* to begin a process of creating independent forums for scholarly research into the Yiddish language and Russian Jewry indeed was. Niger intended that *Der pinkes* would forge new paths for Yiddish. He saw it as a vehicle that would set new standards for Yiddish orthography, establish a regular grammar for the language, and lay the agenda for future scholarly endeavors.

Central to *Der pinkes* was Borochoy's essay, a call for philological examinations into Yiddish on behalf of Jewish national renewal. In it, he sketched out a broad agenda for Yiddish research. His tasks ranged from the practical: creating a standardized dictionary and grammar, researching the origins and development of the language, and establishing a language institute; to the overtly ideological: the "nationalizing" and "humanizing" of the Yiddish language and its speakers. What set the "The Tasks" apart from earlier efforts to modernize Yiddish was Borochoy's coupling of the specific case of the Jewish national revolution to the scientific discipline of philology. Like his earlier programmatic works of 1905 and 1906 in which he forged the anti-nationalist theory of Marxism together with Zionism into a coherent ideology of Jewish liberation, in these essays he paired yet another set of seemingly incongruous ideas in service of Jewish national interests. Borochoy argued that the "objective" discipline of philology – with its

authority to establish a uniform orthographic standard, word corpus, and grammar – would be among the most powerful, necessary, and essential tools for realizing the national aspirations of the Jewish people.

As novel as his argument was to the case of *Jewish* liberation, Borochof drew deeply from ideological currents that had long been in vogue among nationalists. By the early twentieth century, philological examinations of the sort for which he was calling had long been viewed as essential to the national “revivals” taking place across the Russian empire.⁴ Rather than creating a program out of whole cloth as he has been so often credited, Borochof's contribution was the creative application of established models to the specific case of the Yiddish language. Although he was not the first to apply philology to the cause of national liberation, he was among the first to render them serviceable to the cause of Russian Jewish nationalism. Borochof himself acknowledged this point several times in “The Tasks,” and he decried that Jewish national development was stunted in comparison to those minority groups that took pride in their philological institutions (Borochof 1913, page 359 in this issue).

At the time when Borochof came to embrace philology, the discipline had grown so vast that it began to fragment and its practitioners began to specialize. As the linguist Karl D. Uitti writes, “By the end of the nineteenth century the very term ‘philology’ had come to mean . . . all university-standard activity related specifically to the study of language; the term covered textual criticism, general linguistics, historical reconstruction of texts and languages . . ., lexicography, sociolinguistics, and language geography” (Uitti 1994, 570). A consequence of this was that philological investigations increasingly gave way to the growing discipline of linguistics. Nevertheless, Borochof insisted upon making distinctions between the two fields. Borochof attacked linguistics as a narrow-minded apolitical general science concerned solely with the form of the language, while philology, he asserted, was part of a national project that had the ability to reveal the “cultural-historical worth” of a language and to determine its future national potential (Borochof 1913, page 356 in this issue, n. 2).

Borochof was not only adopting philology as a means of Jewish liberation at a time when it was becoming increasingly unstable, he was also working within – and challenging – its ideological assumptions. For much of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries philology had been employed in the search for the roots of European civilization, locating them first in Hebrew and then in Sanskrit (Olender 1992). Long before it was seized upon as a tool for national liberation movements, philological methods were used as a way of working through theological debates on the origins of Christianity, Europe, and the various “races” of the world. It was philologists who first began dividing languages into broad categories of Semitic and Aryan/Indo-European. In time, philology provided much of the vocabulary for the racial categories that insisted upon a vast divide between West and East. One consequence of this was that semitic languages such as Hebrew – and by extension Jews – came to be viewed in the West as ancient, outmoded, and in a state of deterioration, while Indo-European languages – and by extension, Europeans – as dynamic, complete, and dominant.⁵

By aligning himself with a discipline bound to such categories, the consequences of what Borochochov was proposing – creating a Yiddish philology – were profound and had the potential to challenge several fundamental assumptions of both philology and nationalism. First, given that Yiddish contains both “Semitic” and “Aryan” elements (what are often today classified as its “Hebraic” and “Germanic” components), it was unclassifiable according to extant philological categories. A Yiddish philology, therefore, would force the creation of a third category that would bridge the “Semitic” and “Aryan” ones and represent the Yiddish language, and by extension its speakers, as somehow bi-racial or bi-national. If at the heart of Borochochov’s project was the normalization of the Jewish people by crafting them into a nation via their mother tongue, engaging philology in service of this goal was, then, a bold choice. Speaking against the tendency of philologists to classify languages into single linguistic designations, Borochochov asserted that the admixture that was Yiddish was in fact its strength and should force a reconsideration of how languages were conceived.

Despite the frequency and availability of successful models, Borochochov’s attempt to apply philology to Yiddish would be no easy task. Making it more difficult was that Yiddish would have to serve double-duty. Since nationalist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ Eastern Europe still tended to rest upon the twin pillars of native language and territorial sovereignty, Borochochov’s plan for the landless Jewish nation would ultimately require rendering Yiddish substantial enough to satisfy both of these functions. In effect, what he and other Yiddishists sought to do was turn Yiddish into a state language without the state. It would therefore, be the task of the Yiddish philologist to forge a collective national identity not only by giving Jews an exclusive means to communicate with one another, but also by instilling within them a shared historical narrative, demarcating the nation’s borders, and determining – by virtue of fluency – one’s status as a “citizen.” In order to achieve this expansive conception of Yiddish, Borochochov cast his net as wide as possible and made the case that not only the Yiddish language, but the entire Yiddish culture, must be the Yiddish philologist’s focus of study. As he wrote to Niger in 1912 amidst the editing of *Der pinkes* (in which Borochochov had a substantial role), “My goal is not language, nor literature, and not our social development – but *culture*, which includes everything. And we see that all of our goals lie within culture” (Borochochov 1934, 13).

In addition to the theoretical implications of his project, Borochochov himself pointed to a series of practical challenges facing the Yiddish philologist. He believed that as a consequence of their statelessness, the language of the Jews lacked political and scientific terminologies. Therefore, when Jewish intellectuals sought to employ Yiddish, they often turned, he argued, to vocabulary from spoken contemporary German rather than developing terms drawn from the Yiddish language corpus. The tendency of Jewish intellectuals to model their Yiddish upon German was antithetical to the national project because it brought them increasingly further away from the Jewish *folk*, whom he envisioned (however ungrammatical and unstandardized their Yiddish) as the true source of the organic development of the language. He further accused his scholarly

contemporaries of mimicking German orthography and of incorporating German syntax into their sentence structure. Borochov concluded that far from being a form of corrupted German, Yiddish itself was being corrupted *by* German (Borochov 1913). Furthermore, he challenged the long standing conception of Yiddish as substandard. He dismissed common-place characterizations of Yiddish as a “jargon,” and as lacking a grammar or orthography – but also recognized that it would be the job of the philologist to disprove these conceptions scientifically. Complicating this was the fact that countless dialects were being spoken and that each person wrote according to his or her own way of speaking, with the result that any number of spelling systems were being employed.

In order to bring Yiddish to the point where it could fulfill these unifying functions, Borochov outlined three levels of “tasks” for future Yiddish philologists. The most basic of these was eradicating regional Yiddish variants and replacing them with universal orthographic, lexical, and grammatical standards. He believed that by determining the appropriate spelling, pronunciation, and definitions of Yiddish words, philologists could bring an end to the “mishmash” that tended to define the language of the Jewish people as they emerged from chaos and embraced their national identity. Borochov advanced the idea of creating an orthography based largely upon the Lithuanian variant of Yiddish, because, as he conceived it, *Litvish* allowed for the closest match between the written and spoken word. Furthermore, he called for engaging philology to ascertain the place of each linguistic group within Yiddish in order to understand what role the Germanic, Hebraic, and Slavic components played in the language and to overturn long-standing misconceptions about their functions.⁶

The composite structure of Yiddish notwithstanding, Borochov’s second level of tasks was the “purification” and “enrichment” of the language (Borochov 1913, page 367 in this issue). Adopting the racist terminology common to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century philology, Borochov argued that Yiddish needed to be purged of its foreign elements and supplemented with words drawn from its native stock. Philology would thus discern the origins of its disparate words, trace their introduction into the language, and determine whether to include them in or to expel them from the corpus of acceptable vocabulary. In effect, it was the philologist who was to determine the boundaries of what could and could not be uttered in the Jewish national language.

Borochov’s third and most “supreme” task of the Yiddish philologist was the “nationalization and humanization” of the language. Humanizing the language, he argued, would transform Yiddish into a vehicle that could express the full range of Jewish national creativity: “*Yiddish philology must assist in making the Yiddish language become a national cultural-medium and an educational-medium for the people and for intellectuals*” (Borochov 1913, page 370 in this issue; emphasis in the original). The best examples of this process, he offered, were those set by the writers Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (who adopted the persona of Mendele Mokher Sforim, 1836–1917) and Isaac Leib Peretz (1852–1915). For Borochov, Mendele was the “Columbus” of Yiddish who

discovered the rich possibilities of cultural creativity in the language, while Peretz was its “Napoleon” who brought into it the best European forms. By working scientifically, philologists could complete the task begun by these authors, first by identifying an authentic Yiddish literary tradition and then mining it for use by future generations:

Philology must excavate the hidden layers of the people’s creativity, it must unearth the treasures of our national creativeness that lie scattered in western-European libraries. Old Yiddish literature has its classical works like the *Shmuel Bukh*, the *Mayse Bukh*, the *Seyfer Hamides*, that have served as a paradigm for many generations and even used to be translated into foreign languages. The people possess a mass of words in their aphorisms, jokes, songs, stories, and riddles, and generally in their folklore, which philology should investigate and cultivate. These philological methods will enrich the language, and the people will become acquainted with their literary past and will learn to profit from its concealed wealth. (Ibid., page 370 in this issue)

The philologist’s task then, was to cultivate such works of national genius and to bring order to the “chaotic creative process” of nationalizing the language (ibid., page 370 in this issue).

Despite the praise these works received after Borochoy’s death, during his lifetime, opinions were quite mixed. Reviewing *Der pinkes*, the linguist Y. A. Joffe (1873–1966) hailed the volume as the fulfillment of his long-held desire for a home for Yiddish philological studies. Not only was this an achievement for Yiddish scholarship, it was an achievement for the Jewish people themselves. At the same time however, he recoiled from Borochoy’s overtly nationalistic agenda for Yiddish, viewing it as a betrayal of the necessary scholarly objectivity and as a delegitimization of the field of philology: “One must abandon the romanticism of passionate love for Yiddish – which remains a relic from the ancient past, and one must look upon their task with the sober eyes of a strict scientific undertaking” (Joffe 1914, 972).

Reflecting on Borochoy’s desire to reform the language and its vocabulary into a small, accessible set of grammatical rules, Joffe criticized Borochoy’s lack of awareness of the complexities of such a task and the lack of any scholarly consensus on basic issues concerning the language:

[Borochoy] speaks at length about the *purity* and enrichment of the language. But it is superfluous to speak about such a thing because what looks pure to one looks overly polished in another’s eyes, and to a third looks messy. And I don’t mean in the eyes of simple Jews, but indeed in those who write about Yiddish. One person might think that all Slavic words in Yiddish are a type of abscess that has to be excised or cut out – they would rather import words from German. A second person screams that this is *daytshmerish* and not Yiddish, better instead to bring in words from Hebrew. And who is right? Who can determine the right rule as long as it depends upon one’s taste and “how one feels?” Above all, philological grammars rest upon the rule of rules: “if it sounds good.” (Ibid., 973)

Joffe was by no means Borochov's only critic. In a long review of *Der pinkes*, the then literary critic and future architect of the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (YIVO), N. Shtif (1879–1933) challenged Borochov on several fronts, most notably his overt linkage of political ends with scholarly ones (Shtif 1914). Additionally, Borochov's insistence on imposing a standard orthography onto Yiddish earned him the ire of journalists. According to the literary biographer Sh. L. Tsitron (1860–1930), at the eleventh Zionist Congress (Vienna, 1913), Borochov was working as a correspondent and other journalists regularly teased him by asking how to spell various words in “a quiet protest against Borochov as an innovator in the field of Yiddish orthography” (Tsitron 1920–1922, 53). Borochov was also criticized at the Congress by the Hebraist J. Klausner (1874–1958) at a meeting of Jewish journalists. According to Tsitron, the question arose as to whether their proposed union should include Hebrew and Yiddish journalists, or be limited solely to the Hebrew. Despite Borochov's impassioned plea (in a time of increasing tension between the two linguistic camps) that “Hebrew and Yiddish are like a body and a soul” he was attacked for his efforts to defend Yiddish as a betrayal of Zionist principles (*ibid.*, 59–61).

In the years after his death, attitudes towards Borochov began to shift dramatically and he quickly became lionized in both Labor Zionist and Yiddishist circles. Yiddish researchers began to speak of Borochov as the “pioneer” and “father” of modern Yiddish studies. Marking the tenth anniversary of Borochov's death, the linguist Z. Reisen (1887–1941) hailed him as the “one who laid the groundwork” of Yiddish studies, as the figure who liberated Yiddish studies from the hands of the Germanists and the Hebraists, and as the one who set the research agenda that led directly to the creation of the YIVO (Reisen 1927, 998). The historian E. Tcherikower (1881–1943) referred to him as “the fighter for Yiddish, the first-born child of our language-science” (Tcherikower 1927, 1023). In his monumental *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh*, the linguist M. Weinreich (1894–1969) referred to him as a “pioneer” with “visionary gaze” (Weinreich 1980, 299). Even many of those who once criticized him, and who likewise played instrumental roles in shaping the field, later crowned Borochov as the originator of their movement.⁷

Of all Borochov's contemporaries, the literary historian Nachman Mayzel (1886–1966) has done the most to honor him as the founder of Yiddish studies. In 1966 he published the collected works of Borochov's writings on Yiddish (Borochov 1966). In this volume are reprinted the full range of Borochov's writings on the future of Yiddish studies, his philological explorations, literary histories, tributes to the “Classics” of Yiddish literature, critical reviews, and letters to colleagues. In the introductory essay Mayzel elaborates upon this characterization of Borochov as the founder of Yiddish scholarship and offers an insightful chronology of Borochov's Yiddish efforts, concluding that he was “the genius, the wonderful thinker, researcher, the discoverer of new worlds, of new ideas, ‘the Columbus of Yiddish scholarship,’ as Zalman Reisen called him” (Mayzel 1966, 9–38). In more recent years, this representation of Borochov continues to be echoed. For example, the scholar Dovid Katz, who has written about

Borochov on several occasions, has declared that Borochov founded the field of Yiddish linguistics, wrote its “Declaration of Independence,” set the standards for later Yiddish orthography, and created a research agenda that later scholars have followed nearly to the letter (Katz 1980, 10–20; 1986, 33–36; 2004a, 274–278; 2004b, 282–285). He hails Borochov as “the most brilliant Yiddish scholar of the twentieth century, who single-handedly fashioned Yiddish studies as a new field of academic research” (Katz 2004a, 274).

In large measure as a result of “The Tasks” and its later reception by scholars looking to establish a historiographical tradition for Yiddish scholarship, Ber Borochov came to symbolize the first generation of modern Yiddish scholars. This influence was so great that it was largely responsible for setting the terms of the debate on Yiddish scholarship in the first years of its existence. In his insistence that this new realm of Jewish studies *not* be disconnected from the immediate needs of its speakers, he became its most impassioned theoretician and fiercest advocate. Borochov described his task as breaking Yiddish free “from its ghetto walls.” To that end, *visnshaft*, with its potential to nationalize and humanize the Jews, was to point the way.

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