

A Failed Soviet Attempt for Jewish Settlement: The Birobidzhan Project

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the history of the Birobidzhan region and its development as a Jewish settlement under Stalin. It argues that unwelcoming geographic and climatic conditions, administrative mistakes, and problems concerning development of a Jewish culture, language and religion were major obstacles in turning the Jewish Autonomous Region into a Jewish Homeland. Several reasons, domestic and international, led the Soviet administration to consider creating a national homeland for Soviet Jews. While as early as 1924 Crimea was considered as a possible Jewish homeland, the focus quickly turned towards Birobidzhan. The year 1928, when Birobidzhan was given the status of Jewish National District, marks the rise of the region as a Jewish land, and the region became the center of attention and attraction for Soviet Jews. On May 7, 1934, Birobidzhan was officially promoted by a special decree from the status of a District to that of a Jewish Autonomous Region. Stalin's purges of 1937 stopped the development of the Jewish Autonomous Region, which received new waves of emigrants between 1934 and 1937. The stagnation which continued during the Second World War ended after the war with an increase of Jewish settlers and revival of Jewish culture, language and religion in the region. Anti-Semitic purges of 1948 did not spare the Jewish Region. The Jewish Autonomous Region survived the purges of 1930s, but could never recover from the destruction of the 1948 purges. The primary sources used in this research include a report written 1927 by the expedition committee for Birobidzhan, reports of American-Jewish Agrarian Organization, 1924-1938; memoirs of Jewish writers in and out of Birobidzhan, and articles by Michael I. Kalinin.

Keywords: Birobidzhan Project, Jewish Settlement, Stalin Government

'...The Bira is not the Jordan.

It never was the Jordan,
and it never will be.'

Dominik Horodinsky
in *Swiat*, Warsaw, December 7, 1958
(Goldberg, 1961: 170)

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Introduction

On March 28, 1928, the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union gave Birobidzhan, the Far Eastern province of the Soviet Union, the status of 'Jewish National District'. Birobidzhan is still today the administrative center of the Jewish Autonomous Region (*Oblast*) within the Russian Federation. It is the only political entity, aside from the state of Israel, which is specifically designed as a homeland for Jews. While the region became a popular destination for Soviet Jewish migrants throughout the 1930s and 40s, today the Jews comprise less than one per cent of the entire population of the Jewish Autonomous Region. This paper aims to explore the motives behind the Birobidzhan Project, its execution, and the reasons for its eventual failure. I argue that the Soviet initiative to turn Birobidzhan into a Jewish national homeland failed due to a complex set of geographical, political, and cultural factors.

The development and eventual failure of the Birobidzhan Project can be discussed within the framework of ethnonationalism and nation-building. On the one hand territorialization plays a crucial role in nation building (Williams and Smith, 1983). A spatially defined homeland is necessary for the reinforcement of a national identity (Smith, 1981). A common understanding of a homeland defines the nation by delineating clear boundaries that distinguish surrounding nations as 'others' (Kaiser, 1992). The perpetuation of perceived primordial markers of national identity depends on the cohabitation of the members of the nation predominantly in a specifically defined territory.

On the other hand, the homeland, the land that the nation will vie for, will fight for and will die for, has to have a historical ancestral relevance. A fundamental feature of the territory that acts as a unifying and motivating factor for the nation is its historical role in the birth, development, or the glorious past of the nation (Gottlieb, 1994). Birobidzhan had many aspects that could make it a homeland for the Soviet Jews, but, aside from other geographic and socio-political impediments, it did not have a historical connection with the Jews.

The Soviet Jews migrated to Birobidzhan not to seek an independent nation-state, but to establish a Jewish homeland within the Soviet Union. Most regional republics

within USSR came to be identified with a dominant ethnic community: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, etc. This practice reinforced the nationalist perception of an exclusive outlook towards the land. The Jews would also expect to be recognized in a similar way and be identified with a region, a land with boundaries, where the nation could feel attached to a homeland. Jews would expect that this would allow them to enjoy all the promises of the Bolsheviks' nationality policies. The 'nativization' (*korenizatsia*) policy, at least on paper, empowered nations within the USSR to develop local governments and institutions under the leadership of indigenous peoples and to some extent promoted local cultures and languages. However, it was precisely the empowerment of Jews as a nation that would provide the pretext for the Stalinist purges in the Region and cause the devastating decline of the Jewish population and culture in the Jewish Autonomous Region.

Motives of the Soviet Government

Birobidzhan lies in a pocket made by a bend in the Amur River. The mountainous country is unsuitable for agriculture, but is covered with virgin forest (taiga), which yields valuable varieties of timber. The region is also very rich in mineral resources, such as coal, mercury, tin, copper, iron, and gold. Although much of the ground is marshy, the swamp is suitable for farming and for cultivation when drained. The region also experiences severe winters (The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, 1940, s.v. 'Birobidjan'). Why did the Soviet government choose to establish a Jewish land in Birobidzhan?

The Soviet government had various reasons for establishing a Jewish land in Birobidzhan. The first goal was to rehabilitate the part of the Jewish population, which could not find a place for itself in the new economic order of the new Soviet state. The Tsarist regime prohibited Jews from working on the land and in state owned industries, from taking part in the civil and social services, and even from living outside cities and towns. The majority of Jewish people were restricted to making primitive handicrafts and engaging in small trade (Larin, 1925-1926: 3, 156). According to the Soviet leaders, the Birobidzhan Project was an attempt to give the economically disadvantaged Jews a

new start in agriculture and in industry. The idea of settling them on the land and turning them into peasants and workers promised to solve the problem.

Another political motive behind the Soviet government's decision to settle the Jews in Birobidzhan was the protection of the Far Eastern frontier. As a border province, the Birobidzhan region was prone to Chinese infiltration. The hope was that a settlement campaign to the region would prevent the immigration of the Chinese. Along with the Chinese threat, Japanese imperialism also was a political concern of the time. Populating empty regions in the Far East of the Soviet Union, in this case through the Birobidzhan Project, i.e. turning Birobidzhan into a Jewish homeland, seemed necessary to curtail possible Japanese plans in the region (Schwarz, 1951: 175).

One further purpose of the Soviet government in settling the Jews on the land was to attract finances from abroad. The government representatives were not only expecting the Soviet Jews to contribute to the Project, but at the same time they were inviting Jews from all countries to aid their brothers in the Soviet Union. The expectations were not unrealized. Ambijan¹, Agro-Joint² and ICOR³ in America made huge contributions to the project. Agro-Joint donated \$15 million in 1925, at the beginning of the Project alone, towards settling the working Jews on the land. ICOR, at the same time, started a broad campaign in North America and Canada to support the Project. In addition, the Jewish committees in Argentina and Palestine sent various kinds of aid to the Soviet Jews to help them realize the Birobidzhan Project ('Amerikanskaia Evreiskaia', 1997: 139).

The Birobidzhan Project would also garner political support for the Soviet Union in the international arena. The new state had a problem of establishing itself among the Western powers. In order for the Revolution to succeed, Western aid of credit and trade were needed. Moreover, the nature of the new regime and ideological basis of the Revolution complicated the situation. Historians have argued that 'in this conjunction, the treatment of the Jews in the Soviet Union was a feather in the Red cap and the endeavor to create a national Jewish state would be bound to create a measure of sympathy'

¹ Ambijan, American Birobidzhan Committee, was a Communist front organization, recruiting settlers to the Jewish Autonomous Region and raising funds.

² American Jewish Joint Agricultural Corporation (Agro-Joint) was operating in the Soviet Union, and contributed to the Jewish settlement projects.

³ ICOR, Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union, was an American society set up in 1924. The Association's aim was to help in the agricultural settlement of Jews in the Soviet Union.

(Goldberg, 1961: 192-193). Government officials had the idea that if Jews from abroad sympathized with the Soviet Union it would enhance the world's image of the revolution. From this point of view the organization of a Jewish republic had particular value (Kalinin, 1931: 40).

Another motivation for the Birobidzhan Project in Soviet government circles was the idea that the scattered Jewish population in the Soviet Union should be united into a national group with a territory of its own. The analysis of this idea and Kalinin's role in the development of the Birobidzhan Project will be discussed separately.

Kalinin and the preservation of Jewish Nationality

Michael I. Kalinin, the chairman of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee, was a determined supporter of the settling of the Jews and of the solution of the Jewish question. He claimed that the persistence of anti-Semitism was due to the abundance of Jewish administrators and professionals in the cities. He prognosticated that urban Jews would be the 'loss of the Jewish nation', through intermarriage or assimilation, by the third generation. In the meantime, to fight anti-Semitism and preserve Jewish nationality, Jews had to settle down and farm the land (Kalinin, 1931: 40). Kalinin in his famous speech of 17 November 1926 at the Congress of Ozet¹ stated:

To me this trend appears as one of the forms of national self-preservation. As a reaction to assimilation and national erosion which threatened all small peoples deprived of the opportunities for national evolution, the Jewish people have developed the instinct of self-preservation, the struggle to maintain its national identity... The Jewish people now face the great task of preserving its nationality. (Abramsky, 1972: 62-75)

In the search for the right place for the Jewish land, the Northern Caucasus, Northern Crimea and Siberia were examined. At first, the Crimea was agreed upon. In 1924, the Soviet Union set aside a section of the Crimea as a prospective autonomous Jewish region. Moreover plans were made to develop the region into a Jewish republic. A

¹ Ozet, in Yiddish Gezerd, is an abbreviation for The Society for Agricultural Settlement of Jewish Workers, which was an unofficial organization aside from the corresponding government organ, Committee for Agricultural Settlement of Jewish Workers, Komzet. Komzet was established in 1924 and had the major role in the development of Jewish agriculture.

special budget was created for it. The language in all facilities in the region was to be Yiddish, Jewish schools were organized, and work was to be ensured for unemployed Jews (Vsesoiuznoe Obshchestvo, 1925-1926: 294). However, the Crimea Project turned into the Birobidzhan Project. There is no clear reason for the downfall of the Crimean Plan. Kalinin mentioned that some anti-Semitic feelings grew in the country in parallel with the rumors about the Plan (Kalinin, 1926: 2). Another possible reason is Stalin's opposition to the plan. Supposedly he feared that in time of war, the Jews there would not be a 'sufficiently loyal element' (Emiot, 1982).

The government decided that Birobidzhan would be a place where a Jewish national republic could be organized. For this aim, the authorities organized an expedition to the Far Eastern region.

Birobidzhan Project: Expedition

Under the Tsarist regime, many attempts were made to develop the Birobidzhan area. At first, some Cossack families from the Transbaikal region were forcibly transplanted to Birobidzhan in the second half of the 19th century. Despite various plans of construction and completion of the Amur railroad, the region was ignored until the late twenties, when it attracted the attention of the Soviet government. In 1927, Komzet sent a group of experts for the exploration of the Birobidzhan region. According to expedition reports, it continued against an extremely oppressive background: in uninhabited partly marshy districts with no road at a time that was uncomfortable because of local climatic conditions 'which included rains, overflowing rivers, high temperatures and an intensified proliferation of vermin' (Bruk, 1028: 8).

The aim of the expedition was not to discover if the Project had potential. If this had been the aim, the report would have concluded that the Project was not applicable, as past experiences indicate that settlement projects in the region always failed (*Evreiskaia Avtonomnaia Oblast'*, 1999). However, the experts' aim was to draw up the necessary steps for the success of the Project. An analysis of this expedition report is made in the third section of this paper.

After examining the expedition report, the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union, by a decree on March 28, 1928, set aside all the free land in the Birobidzhan area for 'contiguous Jewish settlements', and the region itself was given the status of a Jewish National District (*Raion*).

Birobidzhan until WWII

The first settlers began to arrive in the Birobidzhan region immediately after the decree. The results of the rapid colonization were noticed instantly by their arrival. There were among the settlers, artisans, laborers and small traders, who were not used to working outdoors. Apparently, few of the settlers had any farming experience. Furthermore, the area with its taiga forests was not ready for agriculture. The majority of the settlers in the first two years could not bear the suffering, and either returned to the place from which they had come or spread out to the major centers of the Far East. In 1928 and 1929, only a little more than a third of the settlers remained in the Birobidzhan region. Besides, the settlers who managed to stay in the region established themselves along the railway, and not on the land (Shvarts, 1967: 357). During the next few years, new pioneers continued to arrive, but many, discouraged by hardships, left after a short stay. In 1930 and 1931, the situation improved somewhat: the influx of colonists still remained modest, but at least the migration of the colonists from the region took on less miserable dimensions. Nevertheless, by 1931, of the total population of 44,500 in the Birobidzhan region only a little more than 5,000 were Jews. These figures revealed a surprising fact: in spite of the categorical directive of the decree of March 28, 1928, calling for the discontinuance of non-Jewish migration to Birobidzhan, the influx of non-Jewish colonists continued and even outdistanced the influx of Jewish settlers (Shvarts, 1967: 176).

The unsuccessful attempts for Jewish settlement in the region during the first six years forced the directors of Soviet Jewish policy to change the whole character of the project in a radical way. On May 7, 1934, Birobidzhan was officially promoted by a special decree from the status of a District to that of a Jewish Autonomous Region.

In the years following the establishment of the Jewish Autonomous Region, there was a new influx of immigrants to the region. However, there are divergent figures and contradictory analyses of those figures available. The officials of the Region evaluated the influx as a great success, while in reality they were far from the target of the Five-Year Plans to bring 50,000 Jews to the Region. At the same time, some of the newcomers continued to leave the Region. By the fall of 1934, the number of emigrants was said by official statements to be 23,000, yet more than half of them had already left. By 1939, the population of Birobidzhan reached 100,000, however Jews comprised only one-fifth of the population (Goldberg, 1961: 175).

The Jewish Autonomous Region received new waves of emigrants from 1934-1937, however its development was stopped by Stalin's purges. The Birobidzhan administration was accused of having connections with 'traitors, spies, Trotskyites, Japanese agents, etc.' Most of the Region's leaders, who were sincere believers and strong supporters of the Birobidzhan idea, were liquidated. Moreover, the Birobidzhan Jewish library, Yiddish newspapers and Yiddish schools were closed. Under the influence of the purges, the Jewish Autonomous Region entered into a period of stagnation.

Rebirth of Birobidzhan Idea after WWII

Anti-Semitism during WWII was one of the reasons for the increase in solidarity among the Jewish people. German aggression towards the Jews during the war intensified national sentiment among them. This increased the interest of the world Jewry in the Jewish Autonomous Region as well. *Einigkeit*, the Yiddish newspaper in Moscow, often referred to Jewish immigrants' desires to take part in building the future Jewish State (Shvarts, 1967: 386).

Evidently, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee played a major role in attracting the attention of government officials to the Birobidzhan Project, which was largely ignored until then. Acquiring the necessary financial funds from the Soviet government and revitalizing intellectual enthusiasm towards the Region, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee's insistence and decisiveness were the key elements in renewing interest in

the area (Emiot, 1981: 3-5). In January 1946, a decree was issued encouraging voluntary immigration of Jews from the Ukraine to Birobidzhan, with the project to be underwritten by the government. Rail transportation was free. A bonus of 330 rubles was given to each immigrant. Additionally, if a family agreed to settle in Birobidzhan they were eligible to receive a ten-year loan of 10,000 rubles to purchase farm equipment (Schechtman, 1961: 70). Emiot (1981), a Jewish intellectual who settled in Birobidzhan after the Second World War, described the Jews' response to these incentives in the following way:

Transports of new immigrants were arriving almost daily. Ten thousand Jewish families from the Ukraine responded to the call. Old settlers in Birobidzhan told me that they had not seen so much activity, with so much Yiddish spoken freely in the streets, since 1936. The question even arose of opening a series of Yiddish elementary schools throughout the region to serve the large number of recent Jewish emigrants. (Emiot, 1981: 8)

In this period of revival, apart from government and Soviet Jewish support, the Birobidzhan region received aid from Jews in the United States, such as food and clothing; in addition to factory equipment, power plants, diesel motors, mechanical saws of all sorts, and prefabricated houses. In the Jewish Autonomous Region there were entire streets full of houses bought in Holland by American Jews. Even after the end of the Land-Lease program, American Jews continued their financial support for the construction of the Jewish Region through gifts and donations (Emiot, 1981: 8; Goldberg, 1961: 204). The Region, after suffering from the purges and WWII, was once again filled with Jewish enthusiasm.

Anti-Semitic Repression: Stalin's Politics

The attitude towards the Birobidzhan Project changed drastically by the summer of 1948. The beginning of an anti-Semitic campaign all over the Soviet Union put the Jewish Autonomous Region in a position in which all the government members of the Region and all the Jewish intellectuals in the Region were suspects of treason, bourgeois

nationalistic and counter-revolutionary activities. On the other hand, Kalinin (1931) had said:

Somebody, who calls it nationalism, forgets the significance of the existence of the Jewish republic. It is not counter-revolutionary, but an incredible revolutionary fact for Jewry in the entire world and for working Jews of the USSR. (Kalinin, 1931: 38)

However, all the formal and officially supported Jewish activities in the Region were listed among the sins of the arrested Jewish leaders and intellectuals. The words of Israel Emiot's interrogator describe the situation very well: 'Everything has its special time. The policies in our country change frequently. What was correct yesterday may be incorrect -even criminal- today' (Emiot, 1981: 48).

The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was liquidated and the newspaper *Einigkeit* was closed down at the end of 1948. Anti-Semitic oppression, which threatened Jews all over the Soviet Union, was harshly practiced in Birobidzhan too. The activities of the Jewish cultural institutions in Birobidzhan were abruptly cancelled. The Birobidzhan Yiddish Theater became the Home for Pioneers. The leaders of the region were arrested. All Jewish activity to revive the Jewish intellectual life and Jewish national enthusiasm in the Region that had taken place between 1945 and 1948 was declared 'nationalistic and counterrevolutionary' (Emiot, 1981: 48). The claims went so far as to argue that the Jewish people in Birobidzhan by means of a secret organization wanted to hand Birobidzhan over to the United States. Accepting foreign aid from the US was viewed as anti-Soviet propaganda in the West by Soviet officials. As the campaign became harsher, the Region was closed to the outer world. *The Voice of America* announced, 'Birobidzhan has been transformed into a concentration camp' (Shvarts, 1967: 199).

The Jewish Autonomous Region survived the purges of the 1930s, but never could recover from the destruction of the purges, which started in 1948. These last anti-Semitic events marked the failure of the Birobidzhan Project.

Geographic and Climatic Reasons for the Failure

As described in the first section, the geographical and climatic conditions of the district were not suitable for agriculture. Considering that almost none of the newcomers had agricultural training or experience, growing crops would have been difficult for them even if there had been the most suitable conditions for agriculture. The region was covered with taiga. The land suitable for agriculture was not enough even for the non-Jewish peasants of the region. Naturally, these peasants did not favor giving land to Jews who did not know how to farm, when they themselves suffered land shortage. This was a reason why more than half of the settlers turned back in the first years of the Project.

Another consequence of Birobidzhan's geographical location was its remote location. Certainly, a more central location within the Soviet Union, all the other conditions being the same, would have attracted many more Jews. In the very beginning, most of the Jews believed that the Project would fail. This was the first psychological obstacle for the Jews. Many Jewish intellectuals, who were full of Jewish national enthusiasm, hesitated in immigrating to the Region or rejected it. This factor was especially significant after the Second World War, when the Region became relatively prosperous and an easier place in which to settle down, compared to the beginning of the 1930s. Israel Emiot would accept settling in Birobidzhan only after continuous insistence of his Jewish intellectual friends. He noted (1981:4) that, in the beginning of the 1940s the Yiddish poet Peretz Markish, in his letters to Emiot, which aimed to encourage Emiot to live in Birobidzhan, confessed that his basic reason for leaving Birobidzhan was its remoteness: 'It is so far from everything!' (Emiot, 1981: 4). Besides, in 1930 the widow of Peretz Markish, Esther Markish (1978: 34) described her husband's reaction to the Birobidzhan idea, quoting his question: 'Could there be any doubt that the wilderness of Birobidzhan was alien to the Jewish spirit?' Mainly because of the geographically intolerable features of the Region, many Jews saw the Project as an insult to Soviet Jewry.

Administrative Mistakes

The expedition committee's report on the Birobidzhan region and its advice on how the settlement process should be held were overlooked by the administrators of the Project. As a result, the first-comers to the region were met with various difficulties. The

newcomers were physically and emotionally unprepared for the agricultural conditions and hardships of the region. The emigrants were not provided with decent housing, food, medical care, and working conditions. The harsh realities of life in the region during the initial years of settlement contrasted with the promises and public pronouncements of the government.

A comparison between the expedition report and what was actually done in the region indicates how the administrative mistakes caused hardships for the emigrants and led to the failure of the Project. The expedition report stated:

The work of colonization must be based on the following principles:

1. The colonization of the region, the phasing of the settlement, and the coordination of the entire complex of colonization activities, must be carried out in accordance with a strict plan that takes in the entire region as a whole and that is aimed at achieving a dense population of the respective lands over a period of years.
2. The colonization must begin in most densely settled southern and southwestern part of the region along the Amur, partly in the region of the Bira experimental area, and from there gradually spread to the uninhabited parts of the region. (Bruk, 1928: 79)

Contrary to the expert report, the first immigrants were not settled on the already inhabited area of southern and southwestern part of Birobidzhan, but stayed mostly around the train stations and especially surrounding the Tikhonkaia Station, which is in the northern part of Birobidzhan. If they had been settled in the previously settled areas, as it was described in the report, more emigrants would have chosen to stay in the Region. The report clearly expressed the need to build roads, main highways and bridges across the terrain. This would enable to mobility and access of truck, constructions vehicles, and tractors into the farther parts of the land (Bruk, 1928: 80). However the administration's haste in implementing the project resulted in the lack of a road network in the newly settled areas.

The hardships were multiplied without enough investment in infrastructure. The expedition report also explains the lack of transportation facilities. The distance of the railway from the market made it inefficient. The rivers in the region were suitable for transportation; however, only for a short time each year. That is why the establishment of

a highway network was necessary. However, the authorities ignored this issue as well (Bruk, 1928: 80).

4. The migration should be massive; settlements (approximately 100 homes) should be organized in order to facilitate the opening up and drainage of the area and to contend with vermin, and also with aim of facilitating the satisfaction of the cultural and economic needs of the settlers, i.e., the establishment of schools, medical aid, processing of products.

5. In order to ensure the success of emigration, it is necessary that the émigrés find on their first arrival prepared lots with fixed boundaries, water supply, and a certain measure of drainage and melioration wherever necessary, also some frame houses, even though in an unfinished state, since in these climatic conditions a covered shelter is immediately necessary, not for only families, but also for workers. (Bruk, 1928: 77)

The haste of the authorities in bringing the first settlers to the region forced some migrants to sleep outdoors until tents arrived and barracks were erected. Worse yet, primitive medical facilities were frequently located miles away from the new settlements.

7. Because of the local conditions it is necessary, a year before the arrival of the settlers, that the soil strata be upturned so that they will be ready to be sown by the following spring, that the walls and roofs of the houses be completed, and that the basic land reclamation work be accomplished. (Bruk, 1928: 77)

This point emphasizes the need for a yearlong preparation of the land and the houses before the settlers arrived. However, a month after the publication of the decree, the first settlers arrived in Birobidzhan.

8. The arrival of the settlers should go through the usual stages: explorers, workers, families; the explorers are called to plots which have been ameliorated or are being improved, so as to reach them in the summer and autumn, the workers arrive towards the spring for the sowing and the families arrive in the autumn for the harvesting... (Bruk, 1928: 77)

However, the selection of settlers was inappropriate and the arrangements made for them were inadequate. Many first settlers came to the region with their families, thus

they were more likely to return as they experienced the difficult conditions. This would eventually increase the number of settlers who left the Region.

While the administrative mistakes of the authorities interrupted the development of the Region, the purges of the 1930s and 1940s destroyed everything 'Jewish' in the Jewish Autonomous Region. Together with the administrators and intellectuals, all the Jewish national and cultural institutions were liquidated.

The Birobidzhan Project was condemned to failure from the beginning, because of the mistakes and haste of the authorities responsible for the Project and Stalin's later purges.

Problems in the Development of a National Culture

For the Soviet Jews, Judaism and Jewish nationality are strongly dependent on one another (Schnall, 1972: 74). The Jews, who had an expectation of finding a religious and national atmosphere in Birobidzhan, were disappointed.

The Jewish intellectual and cultural life in Birobidzhan, except for the short period after WWII, was lamentable. The *Birobidzhan Star*, the only Yiddish newspaper there, was unpopular. Furthermore, it was shut down by a decree during the war. Only one Russian daily was being published. Moreover, Yiddish was neither the official nor the spoken language after the purges of 1930s (Emiot, 1982: 5-6). The Yiddish schools in the Region were closed in 1948 and 1949, and were never reopened. Besides, there were no synagogues in the Region until 1947, and the one built in 1947 was burnt down in 1956 (Abramsky, 1972: 74). The Jewish character of the region mostly disappeared by 1950s.

There are various arguments about the reported growth of the Jewish population in Birobidzhan. Because of political and ideological reasons, some administrative organs and some of the newspapers tended to show the Jewish population as higher than it actually was. Consequently, there are many conflicting figures. However, all the figures agree that the Jews never constituted a majority in the Region. This fact made it harder for the Jewish national and cultural institutions to dominate in the Region (Goldberg, 1961: 226). The Jews would have preferred to live in Birobidzhan, if a Jewish national

atmosphere had dominated the Region. However, this was not possible for the above-mentioned reasons.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the geographical and climatic conditions of the Region, administrative mistakes, governmental policies and the lack of Jewish national sense in the Region were the basic reasons for the failure of the Project. Most of the Jews did not want to settle in Birobidzhan primarily due to practical obstacles: its mostly virgin geography and remote location. The Jews who moved to the Region suffered from the haste of the authorities. The ignorance of the alarming expedition report and the unprepared settlement process added to the disappointment of the newcomers, most of whom left the Region after a short time. Even those Jews who really believed in a future Jewish Republic and contributed to the development of Birobidzhan were executed during the purges of 1930s and 1940s. These purges, not only liquidated the Jewish administrators and intellectuals, but also erased the basic elements of the Jewish nationality and culture. The problems of the development of the Jewish identity in the Region in part, caused the failure of the Birobidzhan Project.

At the same time, it also should be noted that the Birobidzhan Project itself was a mistake. The Jewish people have no historical and national bond with this Region and they had no reason to go there. The leaders of the Project ignored this significant point. In fact, the Soviet government's motives in supporting the Project were based on its own benefits and political concerns, not on the concerns of the Jewish people. Particularly for this reason the state-controlled press published many articles about the happiness and prosperous life of the Jewish people there. Nevertheless, these were no more than ideological propaganda, which characterized the Soviet period.¹ That is why the Jews, for whom this plan was prepared, paid less attention to the Project than the authorities. Many Jewish intellectuals opposed the idea of Birobidzhan from the point of view that it was not the Jewish homeland. Ilya Ehrenburg, a prolific Soviet writer, was against the

¹ For articles on the wealth of the Jewish people in Birobidzhan, see Deividov, 1972; Shapiro, 1972; Britt, 1973; *Evreiskaia Avtonomnaia Oblast': Sbornik Statei*, 1965.

idea because, he claimed, it was an attempt to create a new ghetto (Emiot, 1981: 4)! Markish comments on this:

Living there in one community were Jews from all over the world, who naturally differed widely in character and customs. They could probably have blended with each other had they been united by a feeling of allegiance to a homeland, but Birobidzhan was not a homeland for them, not the land of the Jews that Israel later became. (1978: 34)

Birobidzhan is not the Jewish homeland and it could never be. As an old Hebrew saying implies: *Sheker ein lo raglaim* (Falsehood has no legs to stand on).

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