

Kinderlach and Communists

or

A Comparison Between Soviet Ethnic Policy and Labour Zionism Through the Lens of the Infamous JAO

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Introduction: A Most Interesting Place

Nearly 5,120 miles east of Moscow, over the continental divide and past the near endless steppes of Central Asia, lies Zion. Its capital, though not the Jerusalem of gold, is nevertheless a city of biblical proportion in the effect that it would have on the secular Jewish community of the Soviet Union and the world. Birobidzhan was the first Jewish state of the modern era and the ideology that would go into shaping its history and the history of the people who lived there, be they Jew or Gentile, Nomad or Industrialist, gives us an insight into how the world of modern leftist politics and their interplay with the so called “Jewish Question” would evolve from the 1800s to the contemporary era. Born out of the nationalist ideas of Lenin and Stalin in the 1920s, Birobidzhan was to be the great alternative to Zionism and the desire to re-establish a Jewish state in Palestine; a secular, nay, Soviet holy land given by the State, tilled by the Jews, and built as a safe-haven for those who flocked from the Pale of Settlement and the Anti-Semitism that emanated from the surrounding areas for centuries. But what were the implications of such a grand task? And what actually became of the land and the people who built it. These questions, and others of ethnicity, land ownership, and the socio-political intricacies of Jews, Judaism, and the behaviours that are expected of them are still felt throughout the world, be it in the Middle East or Fairfax Ave.¹ And what of Labour Zionism? How does an at times religious, at times cultural movement play into the unfolding of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast so far removed from any centre of Jewish life and intellectual culture in a decisively secular country?

The questions driving this paper are both large in scope and small in context. Plainly stated, this is a paper that looks at the confluence of history and identity. On the one hand there is the might of the Soviet state and its policies towards minorities and on the other there is the push, both externally and internally, for those seeking autonomy from the state to gain it. This paper will focus primarily on the Jews of the Soviet Union and their efforts to carve out a place for themselves, although it will also look at identity and ethnic policy in the general sense. It will look at the experiences of Russians, Jews, Indigenous Siberians, people born in Russia, people born in the Soviet Union, people born in Israel, and people who chose to move to the Zion described in the previous paragraph. Most importantly, this paper will focus on *people*, regardless of their

¹ A neighbourhood in Los Angeles with a very strong orthodox Jewish presence

ethnic makeup or national identity, and how they relate to one another despite their differences, be they constructed, biological, ideological, or geographical.

A more expanded explanation of this paper delves deeper into the specific types of questions that I will be dealing with, how, and why. As stated, the purpose of this paper is to look at how Soviet policies towards ethnic minorities and the Labour Zionist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries intersect, and more specifically, what the Soviet response to Zionism was and how the Jews of the USSR viewed that response. This is both a comparative paper and a speculative paper that will take political manifestos, propaganda, oral histories, and ethnographies alike into consideration. Based on the research undertaken, be it in the library or in the Far East, this paper will give an all encompassing look at nativization, Zionism, colonization and imperialism, and the struggles of identity all through the history of one medium sized town in a remote corner of the world that time, at least in the West, forgot.

When talking about Jewish ethnic identity as a distinct entity, as opposed to Jewish religious identity, academics tend to split hairs. Certainly within the American Jewish community there is a bit of a divide. However, these tend to fall along a religious line. The Conservative movement popular in the mid 20th century stressed the religious aspect of Judaism as a part of and apart from the Jewish ethnic identity. They find the Orthodox to be too engrossed in traditions which they see as deviating from historical Judaism. The Reform movement stressed Jewish ethnicity as the force which connected Jews on top of religion and sees the individual as autonomous from the religion. They pride themselves on their ability to evolve with the modern world and connect the advancements in science and ethics to Judaism. While both movements recognize the other as a legitimate form of Judaism and respect each others members and clergy, there is still a passive animosity between the two. However, within the Soviet Jewish community, there is no distinction between sects of Judaism. In post-Soviet Russia, Jews tend to fall into two camps: Orthodox and non-practicing. This is due to the Soviet Union's stance on religion. Being a secular state, they forbade religion; however, they stressed nationality.

The dichotomy of Jewish religion and Jewish ethnicity has been an issue for political and social establishments since the Roman conquest of Israel. The classification of Jews throughout European history

has been central to how Jews as a group were treated. A people without a claim to land, Jews were seen as a pestilence on European societies

While being vehemently anti-nationalist (at least in word), a founding principle of the Soviet Union was that all people are inherently equal and are thus allowed to indulge in their culture just as any Russian would. This included the right to language, self-governance within the RSFSR, and total equality before the law. This did not stop at women, nor other marginalized groups, but was instead meant to curtail so called “Great Russian Chauvinism”. Soviet attitudes towards the former Russian Empire had made them sensitive towards the plight of minorities and the historical dominance Russians. The term was originally coined by Stalin who in his 1923 address to the General Party, claimed that the “first immediate task of our Party is vigorously to combat the survivals of Great-Russian chauvinism”.² This belief would eventually lead to Soviet policies meant to help minorities and give them agency over their futures and daily lives. It would be out of these policies that Birobidzhan would be born.

Russia and later the Soviet Union was an imperialist state. Regardless of the rhetoric produced by the Party and the so called “Marxists” of 1930’s Soviet government, the USSR expanded through political, economic, and, at times, military might. The expansion of the Russian Empire into the Kazakh steppe has been compared to that of Manifest Destiny in the United States³, and the expansion through Siberia, and into the Russian Far East and Amur Basin was, for lack of a better term, genocidal in consequence for the native nomadic tribes. The Russian attitude towards the Chinese was one filled with suspicion and when the West began to undermine the might of Qing China, the Russians did not hesitate to join in. The difference between Russian imperialism, and European/Anglo-American imperialism lies in the physical geographical spaces that the various powers colonized; however, that does not detract from the imperial ambitions of the Russian and Soviet state. One could argue that while Anglo-American imperialism was focused on extracting resources from the colonized lands, Soviet imperialism was intended to spread Socialism and liberate the people whom they colonized. This being said, regardless of intention the Soviet state did colonize the lands

² <http://www.marx2mao.com/Stalin/NF23.html>

³ Steven Sabol, *The Touch of Civilization: Comparing American and Russian Internal Colonization* (Boulder, University of Colorado Press, 2017), 15

around them, establishing governments and social groups that were pro-Soviet, establishing culture that went against the folk traditions of those who were colonized, and generally transforming the landscape into a series of enterprises meant to extract natural resources. In this sense Russian expansion East and South was in its core an imperialist agenda.

With Imperialism comes displacement, a social situation not entirely foreign to the Jews of Eastern Europe. Shtetl life, although sedentary, was easily uprooted by Tsarist policies and pogroms. The Jews of Central and Eastern Europe were no strangers to forced movements as Russian, German, French, and English historical policies had all expelled Jews en masse. To the world, the Jews were an undesirable group of parasitic alien citizens in countries that did not wish to care for them, to the Jews they were refugees from countries that no longer wanted them attempting to find a place in a world that refused to care for them. This historical balance, Jew and Gentile, Displaced and Displacer would remain true throughout the Soviet Union's history as Soviet attitudes towards Jews changed from accepting to hostile as the Revolutionary period gave way to Stalinism.

Much of Jewish thought has gone into what it means to be a displaced people. Tradition dictates that Jews view themselves as a people who will return to an idealized homeland, even if such a homeland exists. No Passover would be complete without "Next year in Jerusalem" shouted, and yet despite the possibility of actually hosting a seder in Jerusalem, the victim mentality is ever present in Jewish identity. This is not a bad thing, nor a good thing, rather it is a product of a millennium of victimhood. In a sense, the identity of a Jew is intertwined with the identity of the diaspora. And yet, little thought is given to the relationship between displacer and displaced, nor is much thought given (outside the realm of Israel-Palestine, which is coincidentally, outside of the realm of this paper) to the thought of the Jew as the displacer: a displaced people displacing others. In a Soviet Union that gives little to no regard to indigenous Siberians, what is the interplay between Russian and Nomad in terms of development? And how does the Jewish middleman contribute? If a place is set up for a landless people by a landed people, do the landless truly become landed? Or rather do they become slaves of a "generous" empire. So what do we call the Jews of Birobidzhan? Colonizers invading a semi-foreign land at the behest of the State, or pawns in the chess game of Soviet influence and territorial ambition. Perhaps something in between or perhaps neither, but the point of this

paper is to analyze this community of far-flung Zionists and former Shtetl inhabitants from the macro to the micro; encompassing the Soviet attitude towards Jews, Zionism, and the reconciliation between the State and religion, the Jewish experience in Birobidzhan and the Jewish use of Soviet style socialism, propaganda, and rhetoric to achieve a secular Jewish state, and the Siberians who got caught between the steamroller of Russia and the ever complicated status of European Jewry. Perhaps it will answer these questions and perhaps it will not, but regardless of the outcome of this thesis there will still exist a Birobidzhan, there will still exist a Jewish community, and there will still exist the ever-convoluted dichotomy of the two.

In her book *Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement*, Katrina Powell speaks at length about the issues of prescribing the identity of displaced to others. This is certainly the case with the Jewish diaspora, but it is also different in key ways. Jews have historically viewed themselves as displaced and have thus put the identity on themselves. However, external forces did also pigeonhole their Jewish residents, occasionally physically with the establishments of ghettos, but also socially, by claiming the Jewish people to be a group without a legitimate claim to land. In an interview with Svetlana Ivanovna Skvortsova, the director of the Birobidzhan Museum of Culture, I learn that the Soviet state viewed the Jews as “elements without a class”, even more so than a group without land⁴. Once incorporated into the USSR, Jews were no longer landless, they were without a purpose. Of all the castes of Soviet society: worker, farmer, intelligentsia, the Jews did not fit into a clear category. This is partly because Jewish life in the Shtetl resembled that of medieval villages: bustling with artisans, farmers, apprentices, local law enforcement, and religious leaders. In a sense, they were microcosmic societies that existed physically within a country, but were socially, economically, and religiously separate from them.

Powell, while not specifically mentioning the Jews, makes note of Sudanese refugees who must take the title of refugee in order to receive benefits from the UN and various NGOs. She writes, “Sudanese refugees felt resigned to that marking [as a refugee] in order to gain access to resources... they resisted the ‘weight of the heroic genre’ and created [space] for a different kind of narrative”⁵. In a sense, the Jews are no different; resigned to the status of extra-societal, they created space and indeed culture that is both separate

⁴ Svetlana Ivanovna (museum director) in discussion with the author, December 28th, 2017, transcript

⁵ Katarina Powell, *Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement* (New York and London, Routledge, 2015), 188

from the outside world, and a response to it. This carefully constructed identity, no matter how unique, important, or at times isolationist, only made the exterior world angrier at the existence of Jewish society.

Powell claims that this has to do with a somewhat simplistic social phenomenon. She claims that “those who do not embrace accepted notions of victimhood are often further alienated from society”⁶, although I believe the Jewish case to be more intricate. This is in part due to the forced ostracization of Jews by the host country, which it can be argued only made Jews more resistant to assimilation. However, I believe that the greatest reason in the Jewish case has to do with Jewish excellence in the arts and sciences. Jews traditionally favour academics and the arts over other cultural traits such as cuisine or physical strengths. This has led to some pseudoscientific, if not social Darwinistic categorization of Jews as some sort of “super race”; however the fact remains that the record of Jewish academics and artists is both overwhelming and extraordinary. European Jewry in particular have a long track record of scientific, philosophical, and artistic contributions to European society, and other Europeans took note. Furthermore, where as some ethnic groups are ostracized for cultural practices, e.g. the Roma and their nomadic lifestyle, Jews historically were cast out of European society based on their religious practices. European folk tales tell of Jews stealing children to grind up into matzah or drinking their blood for wine. The blood libel is an abundant myth in many European countries. Tales of Jews bartering for children of poor farmers with gold, only for the gold to suddenly turn to leaves are present in many Central European countries⁷.

In her book “Where the Jews Aren’t”, Masha Gessen deconstructs the roots of Zionism and how individual Jewish intellectuals approached the topic of Jewish identity, nationalism, and the various responses to anti-semitism.⁸ Some of the narratives within the work fit within Powell’s model, while others do not, but if we turn to Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, for guidance he weaves a story of Jewish emigration that conforms only slightly to Powell’s thesis. He writes:

⁶ Powell, 189

⁷ <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/antisemitic.html>

⁸ Masha Gessen, *Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region* (New York, Penguin Random House, 2016)

The Jewish question exists wherever Jews live in perceptible numbers. Where it does not exist, it is carried by Jews in the course of their migrations. We naturally move to those places where we are not persecuted, and there our presence produces persecution. This is the case in every country, and will remain so, even in those highly civilized- for instance, France- until the Jewish question finds a solution on a political basis. The unfortunate Jews are now carrying the seeds of anti-semitism into England; they have already introduced it into America.⁹

This runs counter to Powell's "anti-assimilationist" thesis in that, according to Herzl, Jewish identity and anti-Semitism exist solely because Jews exist. In this sense, the Jewish question and the problems of anti-Semitism are akin to the physics of colours: without something to receive the wavelengths, colour does not exist, without a Jewish population and a place to receive it, anti-semitism does not exist. In this sense, Jews are trapped between a proverbial rock and hard place. For Herzl the key to emancipation from this vicious cycle is Palestine. For other early Zionists, the answer lay in Socialism.

Gessen mentions Nachman Syrkin in the first chapter of her book as the writer who influenced "The man who made Birobidzhan famous"¹⁰. Syrkin was, according to Gessen, the founder of Labour Zionism; the political movement which blended Jewish nationalism and Socialism into one entity. Syrkin comments on the biopower employed by nation states towards their Jewish populations. He claims that Jews exist outside of society, not in that they are removed from it (although this is sometimes the case, e.g. the Pale of Settlement), but rather that their economic, social, and political structures run parallel to that of main-stream society. This puts the Jews in a "peculiar situation which cannot be improved at present through the Socialist struggle"¹¹, although he believes that in the future Jewish emancipation will occur, as long as it is through Socialism. Writing in 1898, Nachman makes a direct reference to the eventual follies of Socialism in Russia, a land where "Jews have not yet been emancipated"¹². He continues, "In Russia, where the Jews are not emancipated, their condition will not be radically altered through an overthrow of their political statues. No

⁹ Gessen quoting Herzl, 21

¹⁰ Gessen Pg. 12

¹¹ <https://ia800508.us.archive.org/27/items/Syrkin1/Syrkin1.pdf> page 22

¹² <https://ia800508.us.archive.org/27/items/Syrkin1/Syrkin1.pdf> page 23

matter what new class gains control of the government, it will not be deeply interested in the emancipation of the Jews. ... Only in the future Socialist state will Russian Jewry attain emancipation".¹³

But are Jews displaced? From a historical standpoint, it could be argued that they are. Jews were expelled from Judea by Romans throughout the first two centuries A.D., finally expelling most of them after the Bar Kohhba Revolt in 136 A.D. But how long after this expulsion do they still count as displaced? Within the Jewish community, it is only until the return to Palestine, but is this a legitimate claim? If we begin with the establishment of the kingdoms of Judea and Israel in the Early Iron Age, then Jews had occupied Israel for over 1300 years. This is longer than post expulsion, but much of the early period of these kingdoms is speculative. Regardless, between the Bar Kokhba Revolt and 1948, close to 1000 years had passed. There is merit in claiming that they are, but generally displacement is more of a recent thing. Even in the case of people taken from their homeland less than 1000 years ago, e.g. African-Americans, terminology does not deem them "displaced". This paper therefore will not focus on the displacement of Jews from antiquity, but rather from the modern era and in the confines of the Russian Empire and then Soviet Union. Furthermore, it will look at the concept of displacement by displaced. While the Jewish Autonomous Oblast has not had a large indigenous population since before the Amur Acquisition, this weird phenomenon is central to the story of movement within Russia. Thus this paper will also look at the Soviet displacement of indigenous peoples by Russians, by Cossacks, and even by Jews. However, before any of this is discussed at length, this paper will begin with a bit of history.

Part I: Go East, Young Cossack

There had been Russian presence in the Far East since the 17th century when settlers entered the Amur Basin from the North as evident by the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) between the Russian Empire and the Qing Empire. The land, then controlled by the ethnic Manchus, was gaining a steady stream of Russian settlements encouraged by the Tsar. Ultimately, the Russians were driven out by the Manchus after their acquisition of China and the establishment of the Qing Dynasty. By the 19th Century the Qing were

¹³ <https://ia800508.us.archive.org/27/items/Syrkin1/Syrkin1.pdf> page 23-24

gradually losing control of their empire to the West as British and French imperialists exploited Chinese goods, culminating in the Opium Wars. Russia, eager to gain more access to the Pacific, threatened the Qing with war on a second front during the Second Opium War. In response, China signed a series of treaties included in the “unequal treaties” which gave the Amur river basin, an area of 1.85 million square kilometres, to the Russian Empire. However, before any territorial changes with China could take place, Russian settlers had to explore, survey, and populate Siberia and the Far East. Just as the American exploration into and surveying of the interior of the American continent led to genocide against the Amerindian populations westward of the Appalachians, Russian annexation of the Amur River Basin led to destruction of communities, loss of lives, and the erasure of culture, of the indigenous populations of the Russian Far East.

Russian aggression towards indigenous peoples of Central, Northern, and Northeastern Asia was neither unfounded nor indiscriminate. As Russian explorers, traders, soldiers, and eventually settlers flooded across Siberia towards the Pacific, they naturally came into contact with a large amount of indigenous peoples who, by virtue of being indigenous, were seen as “in the way” of the progress of the Empire. Russian response to Siberians was overwhelmingly negative, as killings were widespread amongst the Cossacks who would man the forts along the frontiers. Famous Cossacks like Vasili Poyarakov and Yerofei Khabarov (for whom Khabarovsk, the capital of the Far Eastern District, is named) were famed for their ability to conquer territory for the Tsar, typically by way of displacing, torturing, and/or murdering large amounts of indigenous populations. By the end of the 18th century Siberia, the Steppe, and the Far East including the Amur river basin where modern Birobidzhan sits, had been squarely annexed and made a part of the empire.

Through the Russian conquest of North Asia (specifically the geographical boundaries of Siberia, the Russian Far East, and much of the Steppe, Kuril Islands, and, while technically not Asia, Alaska) confederacies, khanates, villages, and entire ethnic groups fell. While Sabol makes the comparison of American expansion towards the Pacific to Russian expansion into the Steppe, it would be equally apt to compare American expansion with Russian expansion to the Pacific. During the Trail of Tears, 13,000 Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw died (at the lowest estimate), whereas under Russian expansion east through Siberia, out of a population of 20,000 indigenous persons, only 8,000 existed after 50

years of Russian presence in Kamchatka.¹⁴ Russian interaction with indigenous Siberians and North-East Asians could even be compared with British settlers in Australia, where explorers and settlers would hunt down the aboriginal populations as if they were animals. By the time of Cook's "discovery" of Australia in 1770, there were around "750,000 Aborigines. By the 1920's this number had fallen by around 90%".¹⁵ Similarly, Kabarov and Poyarakov would hunt and butcher natives throughout the 1640s and 1650s. Furthermore, there were populations whose numbers were brought down by significant margins, such as the Yakuts in the Lena basin where "70% of the Yakut population died within 40 years".¹⁶ Punishments levied against the indigenous populations were harsh, particularly when they refused to pay tribute, called "yasak" in Russian. Yasak was typically composed of pelts, used traditionally by herders and other members of the various indigenous societies of the North-East Asia. The same article containing the figure in the previous sentence states that "to ensure that yasak was paid, native women and children were taken hostage, enslaved and raped. Settlements were torched... Piotr Golovin, the Cossack governor of Yakutsk, hung men on meat hooks when yasak quotas went unfulfilled."¹⁷ Truly Russian expansion east ranks among the most catastrophic instances of colonization in history.

The area of the Amur river basin switched hands several times between the Qing and the Russians before ultimately becoming cemented as Russian territory after the Treaty of Aigun in 1858. The basin under Qing rule was very similar to it under Russian rule, at least in terms of the indigenous populations. Russian presence had either wiped out, or forced migration amongst significant numbers of Daur and the Manchu Banner System brought many of the Mongolic tribespeople into the fold of early Qing society.¹⁸ As an area that is geographically close to Manchuria, with some even lumping the Amur Basin as part of it, the indigenous persons who inhabited "greater Manchuria" had had relations with the people of the Amur.

¹⁴ Jamie Bisher, *White Terror: Cossack Warlords of the Trans-Siberian* (New York and London, Routledge, 2005), 6

¹⁵ <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/empire/g2/cs2/background.htm#bullet2>

¹⁶ <http://www.economist.com/node/15108641>

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ Steven Parham, *China's Borderlands: The Faultline of Central Asia* (London and New York, I. B. Tauris, 2017)



Fig. 1.¹⁹ “x” marks Birobidzhan



Fig. 2. ²⁰ “x” marks Birobidzhan

Jurchens, those who would eventually go on to establish the Qing Dynasty with the Manchus, had historically inhabited areas that overlapped with the modern day Jewish Autonomous Oblast. Maps of the Qing Dynasty clearly show the overlaps of the JAO and the Qing province of Heilongjiang,¹⁹²⁰ while earlier Chinese Dynasties like the Great Jin (1115-1234) had brushed up against the area. Preceding the Great Jin, the area had been owned and administrated by the Liao Dynasty; however, outside of the modern Chinese influence on the region virtually no remnants from Imperial China feel present in modern day Birobidzhan.

Part II: Birobidzhan: a History

Modern day Birobidzhan was born out of the early Soviet policy of Korenizatsiya. Korenizatsiya, which roughly translates to “nativization” was the process in which the Soviet government would grant recognized ethnic groups (with sizeable numbers) the ability to govern themselves on a piece of land where they would practice their culture (as long as it wasn’t religious), teach their language, and generally live their lives as Soviet citizens of *n* nationality. Examples of Korenizatsia range from The Ukrainian SSR to the Uzbek SSR to the Chechen-Ingush ASSR and the Yakut ASSR. In historical nations like Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and to a lesser degree the Central Asian SSRs, Korenizatsia included greater autonomy than it would in regions that had historically been a part of Russia like Chechnya, Yakutia, Volga-German lands, Dagestan, and many others. The Jewish Autonomous Oblast existed on a third level of Nativization. As an Oblast (roughly translated as Province) within the RSFSR, the area had less power in the Soviet Union as a whole and would not be considered as equal in power to Armenia, Estonia, Latvia, or even Yakutia or Tuva. Despite the latter two beginning as Oblasts (области in Russian) they would eventually be joined together to create larger and more power ASSRs.

The initial idea behind Korenizatsia was put forward by Stalin in his 1913 work “Marxism and the National Question” and was supported by Lenin. Stalin, himself an ethnic Georgian and therefore a minority

¹⁹ <https://www.chinahighlights.com/map/ancient-china-map/qing-dynasty-map.htm>

²⁰ http://www.ejinsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/1359404_e9d7fb9414b55407546a97188b11ca3b.jpg

in the Russian Empire, would be appointed People's Commissar for Nationalities and would lay the groundwork for the Korenizatsia projects in general, although during the 1930s he would be an architect for its demise. Funding for the JAO was sparse, particularly within the Soviet Union and the building materials necessary for the construction of the Oblast were either non-existent or in bad shape. It would be up to the international Jewish community to pitch in.

There is a conception in the West that Soviet citizens, if given the choice, would have left the country. This is not necessarily false; however, it is important to note that just as many Americans wouldn't choose to leave their home country, many Soviet citizens wouldn't want to leave theirs either. For the Jewish community in the USSR opinions were mixed; however, upon the founding of Birobidzhan and the JAO, both Soviet Jews and non-Soviet Jews saw an opportunity to escape millennia of oppression. While never making a majority of persons living the JAO, Jews from all over the world chose to move there to help build the first Jewish state. Jewish intellectuals and socialists alike saw the JAO as a means for a new future for Jews, one in which they could control their agency, their bodies, and their own futures. This is evident in the story of Mary Leder, an American Jew of Russian background whose family moved from Beverly Hills in California to the JAO. Her story is chronicled in her book, "My Life in Stalinist Russia"²¹, which tells of her attitudes towards the Soviet state, Stalinism, her own Jewishness, and the not unfamiliar story of being left behind in Stalinist Russia by her family because of State policies.

Economic support came from the West in the form of Jewish aid groups like ICOR²² (Organization for Jewish Colonization in Russia in English, Idishe Kolonizatsie Organizatsie in Rusland in Yiddish) and AMBIJAN²³ (American Committee for the Settlement of Jews in Birobidjan). Both organizations were based in the US, although ICOR soon spread to Canada.²⁴ ICOR initially sent funding for the establishment of a

²¹ Mary M. Leder translated by Laurie Bernstein, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back* (Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2001)

²² Henry Felix Srebrnik, *Dreams of Nationhood: American Jewish Communists and the Soviet Birobidzhan Project, 1924-1951* (Brighton, MA, Academic Studies Press, 2010), 13

²³ Srebrnik, *Dreams of Nationhood*, 33

²⁴ Henry Felix Srebrnik, *Jerusalem on the Amur: Birobidzhan and the Canadian Jewish Communist Movement, 1924-1951* (Montreal, McGill Queens University Press, 2008), 71

Jewish region in Ukraine and then in Stavropol, although these would soon fall off the table after local opposition to Jewish influx. ICOR would soon switch to funding the JAO only four years after their founding in 1924. AMBIJAN was founded before the Second World War in 1934 and functioned in essentially the same way as ICOR did. The two groups merged post World War Two in 1946 as international efforts to aid Jews increased due to the Holocaust and a rise in general Anti-Semitism.

The USSR did have fundraising organizations with Jewish emphasis; however, they worked very closely with the North American groups and were generally funded by individuals and not the State directly. These organizations include KOMZET (Committee for the Settlement of Toiling Jews on the Land, **Комитет по земельному устройству еврейских трудящихся** in Russian) and its close associate OZET (Society for Settling Toiling Jews on the Land, **Общество землеустройства еврейских трудящихся** in Russian). KOMZET was to the State's agency that distributed land to Jewish kolkhozes, OZET assisted settlers with tools, farming technology, agricultural education, and other various amenities that would be necessary for the new agricultural class of Jewish settlers. KOMZET was also responsible for scouting out prospective land. Headed by Professor Bruk, KOMZET took local flora and fauna, as well existing population into account. At the time of the expedition, some 27,000 people lived in the area that would become the JAO.²⁵ KOMZET officially voted on the JAO making it the official choice of the Soviet State. Other options at this point included Kazakhstan, Sibir, and Ukraine.

Architecture in Birobidzhan was to be an example of Soviet exceptionalism on the world stage. Hannes Meyer, a famous Bauhaus architect was hired to design the city's buildings, although most of it never came to fruition. Parts of the Birobidzhansky District include original Meyer buildings; however, Birobidzhan proper lacks any and is more typical of the Socialist Realism in architecture, complete with grey buildings, apartments that are essentially identical, and a complete lack of elevators in said apartments. Houses in Birobidzhan are large as the area is cheap for those with wealth. Many of the wealthy live on the outskirts of the city away from the hustle and bustle, as well as the reminder of the Soviet past. Meyer had worked in the Soviet Union prior to Birobidzhan and was famous for his contributions to the Bauhaus architectural school. Interestingly, some of Meyer's Jewish students would go on to design buildings for kibbutzim in Israel for

²⁵ Svetlana Ivanovna interview



Fig. 3.²⁹ Tractors from Dalselmash factory (Дальсельмаш) in Birobidzhan.

much the same reasons that Meyer designed buildings for the USSR. He believed that “architecture should answer ‘the needs of the people, not the needs of luxury’”.²⁶

Early attempts at farming were fairly unsuccessful in the JAO as the climate was difficult, the people were uneducated in agricultural practices, and infrastructure was lacking in general. Like many Soviet projects, the aim was far larger than the attempt. Housing was virtually non-existent and near constant rain washed out entire areas, including “animal graves” which lead to cases of “Siberian Ulcers”, an infection due to anthrax.²⁷

To counteract the environmental and infrastructural issues, the State began issuing incentives for would-be settlers, including credits with low percentages and settler tickets which would provide food and other

²⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/16/arts/16iht-rartbauhaus16.html>

²⁷ Ibid

benefits during travel. The first international kolkhoz (made up of Americans, Canadians, Argentinians, Western Europeans, and Palestinians (all Jewish)) was located near the village of Darilavka. The commune flourished until the Great Hunger of 1933. People began to leave soon after, which shut down the small but growing industry there, including the furniture factory and all agricultural and agronomical ventures.

After the Great Hunger, a number of kolkhozes sprung up around the Oblast. These included Waldheim (Valdgeym) and Birofeld (both Yiddish inspired terms), however the territory still remained underdeveloped. People began to set up artels²⁸, which functioned as small industrial facilities that produced small industrial goods necessary for life in the region. Furniture, clothes, and other amenities were manufactured to benefit the growing populations. Birobidzhan would soon become famous for one industrial good in particular. The so called “Wheel of Revolution” began making wheels for carts, but quickly changed from traditional wheels to tracks, like those on a tank.²⁹ Birobidzhan soon became the only place in the USSR to produce “crawlers” (harvesters and foragers on tracks) which were useful for the less developed regions of the country especially during the winter months and months surrounding winter.³⁰

Modern day Birobidzhan is a small sized city of about 75,000 people, 2,000 of whom are Jewish. Upon first visit, one may find modern Birobidzhan

a crumbling city, stagnated by the absence of industry once fostered there by the Soviet state. Its people are mixed economically, however many are on the poor end of the economic scale. There is a strong Jewish presence, however the number of Jews is slim. Its infrastructure is poor and snow is often left on the ground without being cleared from walkways or even streets. There are at least 6 shopping centres and a few more are being constructed. It is a shadow of its former self, once an industrial giant and an innovative place of agriculture, heavy industry, and Jewish culture, it is now a place without culture and purpose. It lies on either side of the Bira river. It is snowy, cold, and dirty but not grimy. The people are, thus far, kind and eager to meet me.³¹

²⁸ A local cooperative association

²⁹ <https://cvarnou.livejournal.com/57358.html>

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ian J. Kussin-Gika, personal diary, December 28th, 2017

This critique may be harsh, but is backed up by the personal accounts of both my translator Gleb Rummyantsov and the Chief Rabbi Eli Riss. It should also be noted that this account was written in December, and is therefore only an account of winter which, I have been told, is not nearly as pleasant as Summer. Despite the negative changes that Birobidzhan has gone through since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Jewish identity and culture is still present. In some sense, Stalin's project succeeded: there exists a place in Russia founded by Jews for Jews. It is free from anti-semitism³² and seems, at least in some respect, to have been the answer, or at least an answer, to the "problem" of Jews in Russia and the subsequent Soviet Union.

Part III: The Jewish Problem

"The project", says Zvi Gitelman in the introduction to Robert Weinberg's book "Stalin's Forgotten Zion" "to settle Jews in Birobidzhan was one of the most exotic and controversial attempts to solve what was perceived as a "Jewish problem" in the Russian Empire and its successor state, the Soviet Union".³³ Right off the bat Gitelman makes a clear statement claiming that the whole endeavour to create a Jewish state within Russia's borders was in order to either appease or exclude the Jewish population. While this is not entirely an unfounded opinion (territorial policy regarding Jews and solely Jews had been common place in the Russian Empire since the absorption of eastern Poland in 1791), it is generally agreed upon that the creation of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast was rooted in Bolshevism.

This is not to say that the Bolsheviks, nor their ideology, were necessarily in favour of ethnic autonomy for the Ashkenazim that inhabited the USSR, but rather that their willingness to allow autonomy for Jews was based in their belief in equality amongst all working peoples. However, there was much disagreement as to whether Jews even qualified as a distinct ethnicity or as religious group akin to Muslims and Orthodox Christians.³⁴ Stalin, then head of the People's Commissariat for Nationalities, believed that "A

³² Interview with Rabbi Eli Riss, in discussion with the author, December 28th, 2017, transcript

³³ Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland: An Illustrated History, 1928–1996* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1998), 1

³⁴ Ronald Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), 128

nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture,” and that “Among the Jews there is no large and stable stratum connected with the land, which would naturally rivet the nation together.”³⁵, a concept that was disputed by other members of the Communist Party. Lenin’s stance was more akin to those who viewed Jews as a nation which would have to assimilate by means of Soviet policies which would eventually phase out the religious practices of the non-secular Jews. This may be due to a fear of the influence of Jews within the Party and the country who would if confronted with a blunt effort to eradicate religion in general, eventually rise up and draw more interest in religion in general. Quoting Engels in his essay entitled “The Attitude of the Workers’ Party Towards Religion,” Lenin talks about the “Out-Bismarcking of Bismarck”³⁶ wherein Bismarck alienated the Catholic Party, leading to an upsurge in the Catholic political movement. He continues to list a series of tactics for battling religion without giving his opponents the means to his destruction saying, “The fight against religion must not be confined to abstract ideological preaching or reduced to such preaching. The fight must be linked up with the concrete practical work of the class movement, which aims at eliminating the social roots of religion”.³⁷ This is essentially the Soviet attitude towards Jews in the early years of the USSR: endowing a group of people with the right to assimilate through secular, class-based means will eventually strangle the perceived social need for religion amongst the group. While this approach worked to a certain extent with Orthodox Christians, the results were more mixed when it came to Jews.

Before the establishment of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, the Soviet authorities attempted to create a national state for the Jewish population in more familiar lands. There was an attempt to create a Jewish state on the Crimean peninsula, an area closer to the traditional homeland of Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe; however, the project failed due to outcry from the citizens who lived there. When asked if this was due to an anti-semitic stance by the Crimeans, Svetlana Ivanovna replied “no”. Rather she claims that

³⁵ <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03a.htm>

³⁶ Vladimir Lenin, “The Attitude of the Workers’ Party Towards Religion” in *Lenin Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973) 60

³⁷ Lenin, 62

the issue lay in the number of people living on the Crimean peninsula. She claims that the local populace saw the influx of Jews into the already heavily populated peninsula as invasive.³⁸ Other factors claimed by Svetlana included the region not being conducive to agriculture; however, I found this to be a weak argument due to Crimea's Mediterranean climate and fertile soil.

As an element without a class Jews were expected to adopt a trade meant to better the Soviet Union. The Soviet counsel wanted Jews to become farmers, something that was historically foreign to the majority of shtetl dwelling Jews. Given the average Jew's lack of agriculture experience, Crimea would have made an ideal spot to place them as it is actually conducive to farming. Despite this; however, the JAO was eventually chosen as the region meant for the new Jewish homeland. After the first harvest in the Far East, a large amount of settlers left. Partially due to the difficulty of farming in the swamp marshes and the hostile weather and environment of the region.

When confronted with the Jewish Question, Trotsky, writing in 1937, considers the outcomes of the actual establishment of a Jewish state. While Labour Zionists see the process of Jewish emancipation as beginning with the establishment of a state founded on socialist principles, Trotsky sees the Jewish Question of statehood as only being possible post-socialism claiming, that "Socialism will open the possibility of great migrations on the basis of the most developed technique and culture" which will eventually allow the "dispersed Jews who would want to be reassembled in the same community will find a sufficiently extensive and rich spot under the sun".³⁹ He continues by equating the desired displacement of the Jews, and that of other nationalities, as becoming part of the planned economy, or, in other words, the question of landless nationalities can only be answered by Socialism, not the other way around. Writing in exile, he offers his opinions on Birobidzhan believing that the Jews of the region must have a "limited experience" and that the USSR would be incapable of resolving the Jewish question, regardless of the level of Socialism practiced within the State. "The Jewish question", Trotsky asserts, "is indissolubly bound up with the complete emancipation of humanity" and is thus more than an ideological response to the dispossessed, but is rather a necessity for the success of Socialism and the prescribed future of human kind.

³⁸ Svetlana Ivanovna interview

³⁹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1940/xx/jewish.htm>

Commenting on the Jewish Aliyot into Palestine, Trotsky continues his earlier theory on resolving the “Jewish Question” by pointing out the failures of the British in Palestine, going so far as to call the whole endeavour a “mockery of the Jewish people”.⁴⁰ The British policy towards the Arabs, he believes, will lead to a land that will hold the Jews prisoners, rather than allow them to prosper, as the British had revoked their promise to found a Jewish homeland. He ends by reasserting that “the salvation of the Jewish people is bound up inseparably with the overthrow of the capitalist system”. Trotsky, himself a Jew, although he continually points out that he never learned Yiddish or “the Jewish language”, views Zionism not as an affront to Socialism, but rather a belief that would not only exist under Socialism, but succeed under Socialism. Zionism, he says is the utopian and reactionary solution to the Jewish Question under “decaying capitalism”, which will only take on a “real and salutary meaning”⁴¹ post capitalism, once matters of ethnicity are tied up with humanism, not tribalism.

And yet, when he brings up Birobidzhan in his article “Thermidor and Anti-Semitism”, he questions the actual implications of a region made specifically for Jews in a Soviet Union. “Is this or is this not a ghetto?”, he writes. Ghettos were taboo under “Socialist Democracy”, referring to the period before Stalin. Such a term did not, according to Trotsky, even apply since under Lenin migrations of peoples were “completely voluntary”. Whether this statement is actually true is up for debate, typically resting on the semantics of “voluntary” and of “migration”. Such an analysis lies outside of the realm of this paper, thus it will not be discussed at length; however, when asked about immigration to the JAO, residents of Birobidzhan overwhelmingly claimed that all movement was voluntary⁴². What is “correct”, writes Trotsky, is that in a world where Socialism has won out over Capitalism, a “world socialist federation will have to make possible the creation of a Biro-bidjan[sic] for those Jews who wish to have their own autonomous republic as the arena for their own culture”⁴³. Notice the operative phrase “have to make possible”, wherein, once again

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Svetlana Ivanovna Interview

⁴³ Ibid

Trotsky makes the claim that in order for a Jewish state to exist (and indeed one will), Socialism must come first.

Here Syrkin comes back into play. Both Trotsky and Syrkin were a) Jewish, albeit they had radically different views on their own Jewishness, b) Socialists who sought an overhaul of Capitalism through necessary violence, and c) interested in the rights of nationalities in ways that were deeper than Stalin and Lenin. Where Stalin used his position as People's Commissar for Nationalities to eventually gain more power after Lenin's death, Trotsky's interest in ethnic autonomy was rooted in Marxism and his later works written in exile point to his belief in equality amongst ethnic groups. Despite their similarities, Syrkin and Trotsky disagree on key point: timing. How is it that the father of Labour Zionism and a leading figure in the development of Socialism could disagree on the timing of Socialism and Jewish emancipation?

Simply put, Syrkin sees Socialism as both necessary for and also incapable of emancipating Jews. Socialism must happen first, but Zionism will only come about as a consequence well after the establishment of a solid Socialist state. Trotsky agrees, but he sees Jewish emancipation as something presupposed by Socialism. In a sense, Syrkin has two narrative running parallel: one of Socialism and one of Zionism which will only meet somewhere down the line. Trotsky, rather, sees it as sequential: Socialism leads to emancipation and eventually Zionism.⁴⁴ Therein lies the difference between Labour Zionism and Orthodox-Marxist Socialism, at least through the writing of two of its subsequent founders. However, ideology is, at least hopefully, larger than the personality of its founder and both Labour Zionism and Trotskyism would change over time, but close reading of Syrkin and Trotsky on the Jewish question shows a divide in theoretical approach to Jewish life post-Socialism: a common outcome at the end of two very different roads.

In some sense, Syrkin and Trotsky agree on the Jewish question and its relation to Socialism fully, except in the place of Jews within the Socialist struggle. Syrkin believes Jews to be outside of the struggle and instead inhabit their own dual struggle: the struggle to Socialism and the struggle to social emancipation. Trotsky believes that Jews are important to the Socialist struggle as a class of working poor; however, their "Jewishness" does not play an important role in their involvement in a Socialist struggle. This belief would

⁴⁴ Note that Zionism in these contexts does not necessarily mean a Jewish state in Palestine, rather a Jewish state somewhere in general.

eventually lead to hostility towards Trotsky from the Jewish community. Coupled with his staunch anti-Zionism stance, Trotsky's own feeling towards his Jewishness, and the actions undertaken by him during his time as head of the Red Army, Trotsky's account of Jewish life and its relationship to Socialism and revolution has alienated him from much of the modern Jewish community.⁴⁵

Labour Zionism has undergone a similar shift as the political life of Israel and Israelis has moved away from Socialism of most types (other than Kibbutzim and Moshavim) towards a newer more conservative and nationalistic branch of political Zionism. And yet, the history of Jewish intellectualism is full of utopian socialist dreams. The early Jewish migrants to Palestine even drew on Soviet style propaganda to draw Jews in from Europe. This is not entirely surprising as the early Jewish State was modelled after Pre-Stalinist Soviet-esque Socialism, and wanting to draw on the similarities and the success of Soviet propaganda, early Israelis and Jews who moved to Palestine before the establishment of Israel.

Part IV: Zionism: a Yidstory

Zionism, in its modern context, was born out a single event and the article written by the man who would go on to be called "The Father of Zionism" that covered it. Europe, both Western and Eastern had historically been an uneasy place for Jews. On the one hand, cities, states, and empires typically employed anti-semitic laws and European citizens were often distrustful of Jews. On the other hand, other options of living space were limited to Ashkenazi Jews who were limited in their language and in their movement from place to place. Modern Jewish history pays special attention to the Pogroms of Eastern Europe and Medieval Jewish history often focuses on the Christian anti-Jewish laws from England⁴⁶, Spain⁴⁷, and Germany⁴⁸. Historically, France was also anti-Semitic in its laws and social policies. Therefore, it is not unsurprising that one of the catalysts of Anti-Semitism in pre-20th Century Europe was the Dreyfus Affair in France.

⁴⁵ <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5207635>

⁴⁶ Jews leave England in the "Edict of Expulsion", 18, July 1290

⁴⁷ Spanish Inquisition, 1, November 1478- 15, July 1834

⁴⁸ Hamelin Ghetto and Pied Piper of Hamelin, as described in the *Memoirs of Glükel of Hameln* and the folk tale of the Pied Piper, a Jewish character who lures Christian children away from their parents.

Legal persecution of Jews in Europe was both commonplace and accepted by the public by means of traditional anti-semitism and pseudoscientific reports claiming Jews to be an inferior race based on misunderstandings of Darwin. Many royal courts had “Court Jews” who would play two roles: that of the banker or money lender to the royal family, as well as the occasional scapegoat for economic hardship.⁴⁹ Most famously, Joseph Süß Oppenheimer, the Court Jew for Karl Alexander of Württemberg, was put to death after the death of his sponsor.⁵⁰ Jews were also barred from holding high office in certain areas of civilian life including the military. Thus when Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jew of Alsace descent, was tried and convicted of treason, it was initially not so scandalous. The Dreyfus Affair took place between 1894 and 1906 and is typically associated with Theodore Herzl’s conversion from Germanophilia to Zionism. Herzl himself is quoted as claiming that seeing the crowds outside the Paris courthouse and hearing their chants of “Death to the Jews!”, although there is some controversy as to whether or not he was truly inspired by this event and was instead using it as an excuse to foment Zionism within Central Europe.⁵¹

On the other side of the European continent in Eastern and South-Eastern portions of the region, anti-semitism had been significantly more violent. Pogroms, events in which non-Jews would go into Jewish ghettos, shtetls, or neighbourhoods and burn buildings, rape women, and kill people, were common throughout the latter half of the first millennia A.D., although the riots in Southern France that targeted Jews for supposedly causing the Black Death, have been traced back to the 14th century (and some scholars put the first pogrom as far back as 36 B.C. in Alexandria⁵²). In her book “The Jews of Europe after the Black Death”, Anna Foa writes, “The first massacres took place in April 1348 in Toulon, where the Jewish quarter was raided and forty Jews were murdered in their homes. Shortly afterwards, violence broke out in Barcelona”.⁵³ Pogroms in the modern sense are typically associated with Russia and the Russian Empire, and

⁴⁹ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/court-jews>

⁵⁰ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11740-oppenheimer-joseph-suss>

⁵¹ <https://forward.com/schmooze/193316/did-dreyfus-affair-really-inspire-herzl/>

⁵² Sandra Gambetti, *The Alexandrian Riots of 38 C.E. and the Persecution of the Jews: A Historical Reconstruction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California, 2009: BRILL) 11–12. ISBN 9004138463.

⁵³ Anna Foa, *The Jews of Europe after the Black Death* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 2000), 13

include the modern day states of Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, as well Nazi Germany and other areas with significant minority Jewish populations like the Caucasus.

Pogroms in Eastern Europe were typically more devastating than those in other parts of the world. The majority of pogroms undertaken in Eastern Europe were done so before the 1917 revolution; however, pogroms and pogrom like events and policies continued into the Soviet period, with the Civil War as a particularly harsh period for Russian Jews. The first pogrom to border on genocidal was committed in the 17th century by a group of Cossacks in Ukraine during the Polish-Cossack War. It is estimated that between 40,000 and 51,000 Jews were killed during the war⁵⁴. The first internationally known pogrom took place in Odessa in 1871 in response to rumours that Jews had vandalized a Greek church. Greeks had been the other sizeable ethnic minority in the Ukrainian city and both groups struggled against each other and the ruling Russians.⁵⁵ The first pogroms that spread outside of urban areas took place in 1881 and 1882 throughout the Pale of Settlement. Violence was directed more towards property than at individuals, but man estimated 50 persons were killed. Economically it is estimated that “in the course of more than 250 individual events, millions of rubles worth of Jewish property was destroyed”⁵⁶.

The first pogrom of the 20th century took place on the 6th and 7th of April, 1903, the last day of Passover and the subsequent day in the city of Kishinev (modern day Chişinău, Moldova). It immediately sparked international outrage and a series of poems and articles the condemned the attack. By the end of the second day, 49 people were dead, 586 people were maimed, 1,350 houses and 588 shops were destroyed.⁵⁷ The Kishinev Pogrom still stands out as a single moment in history of Jewish suffering, both in Tsarist Russia and in general. Pogroms were common after the 1905 revolution as angered Russians equated Jews with revolution and revolutionary activities. Pogroms would continue through World War I as Russian armies would loot Jewish homes and attack Jewish non-combatants both in the Russian Empire and in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Pogroms were carried out in the chaos of the Russian Civil War by all armies, although

⁵⁴ <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ukraine>

⁵⁵ <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Pogroms>

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

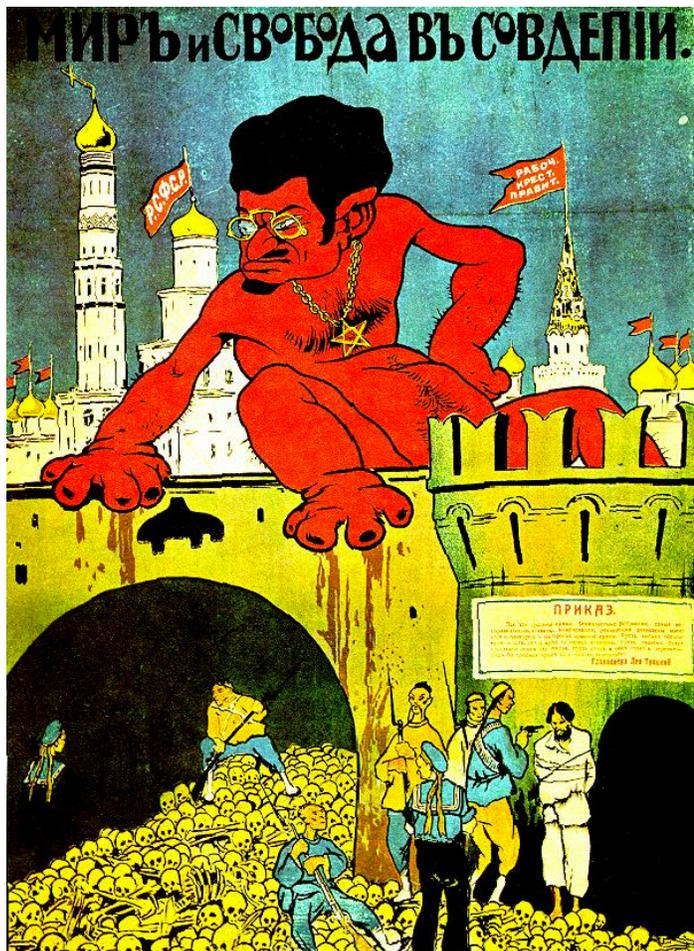
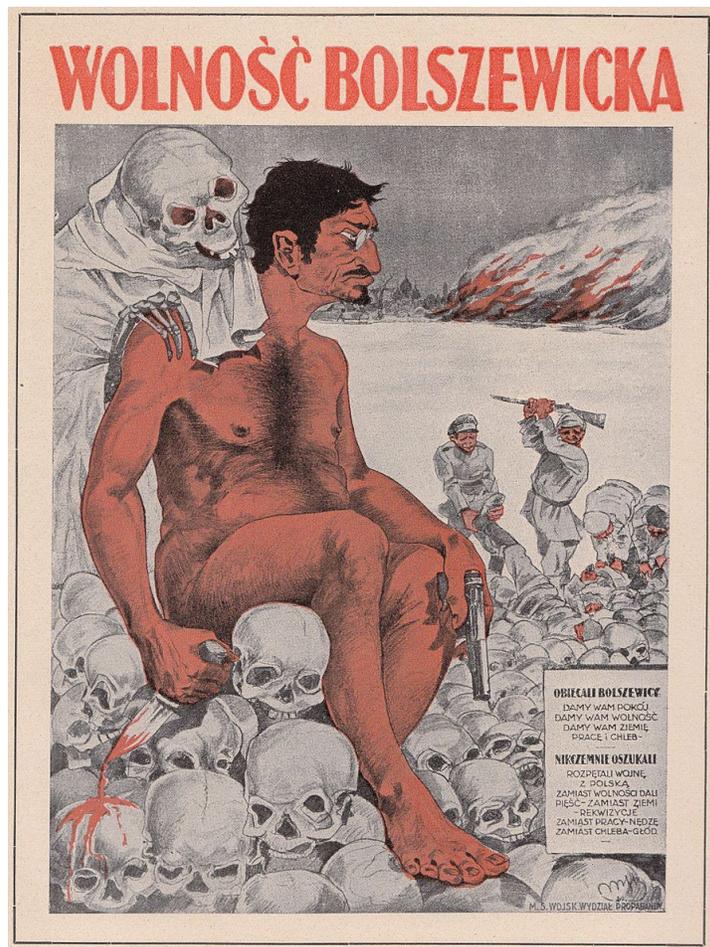
the Red Army had a better record of both a) not carrying out pogroms and b) punishing the soldiers who did. Jewish casualties during the civil war are estimated to start at 50,000 but may be much higher. Pogroms in the USSR were much less frequent than in the rest of Europe, although Pogroms after 1917 were much less frequent until the establishment of the Nazi government in Germany and Kristallnacht.

Zionism was both product of, and a response to, pogroms as well as other anti-Jewish laws and social policies. Jews throughout Europe were bared from publicly practicing their religion (occasionally being bared from practicing their religion at all like in Inquisitory Spain), bared from holding office, bared from owning businesses, bared from living amongst non-Jews, bared from keeping Kosher, taxed heavily, and were generally mistreated by the public. Zionism grew out of a wide array of Jewish nationalist movements, some of which were leftist and some rightist, with the Bundists being on the left and the Jewish Self-Defence Organaztion, the militia wing founded by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, on the right.⁵⁸

Part V: Red Jews

Due to the Jewish experience in Europe, it is not surprising that many Jews turned to radical politics. Socialists saw people as being inherently equal and deserving of equal rights in all regards. Zionism initially grew out of these radical Jewish movements and adopted much of the Socialist rhetoric despite being a nationalist movement. Labour Zionism in particular melded Socialism and Jewish nationalism together. Non-Zionist radical Jews made up significant portions of the intellectual and artistic circles in major Jewish cities like Odessa, Kiev, and Bialistok. Of the original seven members of the first Politburo, at least four were Jewish. Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Grigori Sokolnikov, and Lev Kamenev were all Jewish and of the remaining three, Vladimir Lenin, Andrei Bubnov, and Josef Stalin, Stalin was an ethnic Georgian and Lenin was half-Jewish (full if you count Jewish laws of descent as his mother was Jewish). Bubnov was unquestionably of Russian ethnic descent. In Lenin's case, he was unaware of his mother's ethnic makeup until after her death, and thus did not have to deal with the stigma of being Jewish in an anti-semitic country. Of the revised five member Politburo as established in 1919, at least two were Jewish, both Trotsky and

⁵⁸ Gessen, 23

Fig. 4.⁵⁸Fig. 5.⁵⁹

Kamenev, while there is some debate as to whether Nikolay Krestinsky was Jewish. This means that out of the seven men who, in some sense, founded the Russian Revolution, four were of full Jewish descent, one was of half-Jewish descent, one was of Georgian descent, and one was of Russian descent.

This does not mean that the Russian Revolution, nor Bolshevism in general, were “Jewish plots” as many contemporaries of the Russian Revolution claimed. This claim still exists, albeit in a much lesser extent, today. Of the top three men who would go on to hold high positions in the new Soviet government, Trotsky was attacked more than either Lenin or Stalin in anti-Bolshevik posters and other propaganda. As head of the Red Army during the civil war, Trotsky would supervise the destruction of Tsarist and non-Bolshevik forces

throughout the former empire. He was viewed by his enemies as barbaric for his role in the Revolution and in the Civil War, but also for his ethnic makeup. Compare the two posters above. Figure 4⁵⁹ depicts Trotsky as a sort of troll with an enlarged nose, hairy chest, and thick black hair. He has a snarled look on his face. A gold star (pentagram) is around his neck hanging from a gold chain. In the top left a church is depicted with its cross broken. Beneath him are skulls and bones, and a series of Chinese soldiers executing what looks like a Russian dressed in white. For whatever reason he is naked. The combination of the traditional anti-semitic imagery (nose, hair, snarl, gold-star necklace) and the anti-christian imagery are palpable. While the star hanging from his neck is not a star of david, the connection is an easy one to draw. The skulls and bones beneath him are an allusion to the death caused by the Red Army, but could also allude to the blood libel and other anti-semitic accounts of Jewish sacrificial ceremonies. Figure 5⁶⁰ depicts a similar scene, albeit much less



Fig. 6.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WhiteArmyPropagandaPosterOfTrotsky.jpg>

⁶⁰ <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1041702>

overtly anti-semitic. Trotsky is seen seated on a mountain of skulls, bloody knife in hand, overlooking Red Army soldiers attacking and stealing clothing from Polish soldiers. Again he is shown with exaggerated features: nose, snarl, red skin, hair, and nakedness, as death looks over his shoulder. Even posters that include the image of Lenin also depict Trotsky and typically do so in similar anti-semitic imagery.

Figure 6 above⁶¹ shows a collection of top Bolsheviks (note the absence of Stalin) sacrificing a figure meant to represent Russian Orthodoxy to Marx on a pillar of Internationalism. The men in the picture are: Uritsky, Sverdlov, Zinoviev, Lunacharsky, Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev, and Radek, plus two Red Army soldiers and a Red Army sailor. As pointed out earlier in this section, most of the founding Bolsheviks were of Jewish descent, including Uritsky, Sverdlov, Zinoviev, Lunacharsky, Trotsky, Kamenev, and Radek, essentially everyone but Lenin in the figure above. The footnote mistakenly includes Petrovsky as one of the figures; however, he was also of Jewish descent, and thus would continue to fit the trend. Trotsky, as per usual, is holding the knife used to sacrifice the Christian, once again mirroring the blood libel myth. Most of the figures in the image are drawn with features attributed to Jews: long crooked noses, curly hair, peyos⁶², scraggly beards, glasses, etc. Lenin is the only figure in the centre to not have any of these characteristics, unless we count the drunken and stupid looking faces of the soldiers and sailor. The statuette of Marx, who was coincidentally also Jewish, is reminiscent of some paganistic ritual sacrifice, although Marx's ethnicity is probably not the message of the altar, especially considering that the podium reads "Internationalism" (Интернационалу in pre-Soviet orthography).

The idea of "Jewish Bolshevism" goes back to the revolution if not before it. The idea states that Bolshevism (and the negative things that come with it, Communism, and revolution in general) is in fact a Jewish plot. It is mostly supported by the fact that a large percentage of the early Bolsheviks were Jewish, although non-religious in practice. Judeo-Bolshevism came out of general anti-semitism in Russia during the Civil War and before hand, but eventually spread to other parts of the world, most notably Nazi Germany.

⁶¹ <https://rosswolfe.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/in-this-white-poster-caricatures-of-the-bolshevik-leadership-uritzky-sverdlov-zinoviev-lunacharsky-lenin-petrovsky-trotsky-kamenev-and-radek-sacrifice-an-allegorical-figure-re.jpg>

⁶² Curly hair kept uncut on the sides of orthodox Jewish men's heads. Often referred to as "sideburns" although this is false considering that the hair begins on the head as opposed to facial hair.



Fig. 7.⁶¹



Fig. 8.⁶²

Note the figures on the following page.⁶³⁶⁴ The first poster, from Nazi Germany (translated into Russian from an original German poster), clearly shows that the Soviets, and Communism in general, is controlled by Jews. The text reads: “Red Army! You are going to “liberate” the people?”. The image shows a red army soldier being walked on a leash by an NKVD agent holding a pistol, who is in turn being walked on a leash by Stalin holding a sickle, who is in turn being walked on a leash by a large stereotypical depiction of a Jew. This shows a clear connection between the evils of Bolshevism and the evils of Jews who, by virtue of being Jewish, control the Soviet Union. This is laughable considering the history of the JAO and Stalin’s attitudes towards Jews.

Figure 8 is in some ways more troubling. Without getting into the politics of modern American gun control, the image essentially tells us three things. Jews caused the Russian revolution, Jews are both non-white and are therefore against whites, and Judeo-Bolshevism is still a belief shared by modern Americans. While the poster includes Stalin, it puts him in the centre and has him as the only person sans yellow star. Interestingly, the poster makes the claim that Lenin was Jewish, which as discussed earlier, is true only in one interpretation of Jewish hereditary law. It is important to note that figure 8 was initially designed to be a satirical interpretation of people who believe in Judeo-Bolshevism (as evidenced by its posting in [r/forwardsfromhitler](https://www.reddit.com/r/forwardsfromhitler/), a subreddit meant to lampoon the Far Right); however, its message regardless of intent still perpetuates the idea that Bolshevism was a Jewish invention meant to undermine Europeans. This is evident by various websites promoting various conspiracy theories using the image in conjunction with others to spread a hateful message.⁶⁵ Considering the ease and speed of spreading information in the modern era, it is not entirely inconceivable that such an image would eventually be used in its unintended meaning, ultimately furthering prejudice and historical revisionism.

Posters and images are powerful ways to spread information to the masses, especially pre-internet. Images shown throughout this section were meant to spread propaganda against a foreign group, be they

⁶³ <http://www.renegadetribune.com/bolshevism-jewish-sub-humanity/>

⁶⁴ <https://i.redd.it/pb5ipciw1za01.jpg>

⁶⁵ <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/753227106398062444/?lp=true>

Bolsheviks, Jews, or both; however, propaganda goes both ways such that for every anti-Bolshevik/Jewish piece of propaganda, there is a pro-Bolshevik/Jewish one as well.

Part IV: Jews Seeking Land

Zionist and Soviet propaganda posters can be broken up into different categories based on what they are trying to convey to the audience. Common themes for the Soviets included industry, family, agriculture, the State, and technology. The Soviets also ran several successful campaigns meant to entice people to emigrate from their home region and settle in a different one within the USSR. Often the movement was involuntary; however, in the case the JAO it was not. This meant that propaganda posters meant to attract Jews to the Far East had to be genuine in nature (although they were often fictionalized versions of the lands afar). The same can be said of Zionist propaganda posters during the second and third aliyot to Palestine. It is important to remember that these settlers truly believed in creating a Jewish State, be it national or provincial.

Thousands of people do not just pick up and leave their homes to go and develop a swamp or a swath of desert. Propaganda was integral to the successes of the Jewish experiments in the Far East and in Palestine; without it the intense number of people who made up the first communities in these areas would not have left in the first place.

Thematically, Soviet propaganda posters are recognizable by essentially three properties. Content wise, posters tend to feature persons, typically workers or peasants, either a) engaging in their work, b) engaging in community building or celebrations, or c) dictating some message from the state usually accompanied by a figure of Lenin or



Fig. 9.66

Stalin. Soviet posters tend to stick to simple colour schemes, primarily reds and blacks, white and yellow, or other single colours in large flat palates. State colours are featured prominently for nationalistic emphasis. Finally, Soviet propaganda is usually accompanied by writing, which changes with the region that the poster is from or intended for.

Note the themes in Figure 9 on the previous page.⁶⁶ It contains text in both Russian and Yiddish and tells of the paradise that the Jewish settlers would find in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. The colour schemes is primarily red and black with shades of grey for the people depicted. Finally, the people in the poster are engaging in work. The bottom right corner shows a group of Jews working in a field with a red hammer and sickle on top. The top left corner shows the double headed eagle on top of a tsarist official, a reminder of the pogroms and anti-semitism that were rampant under the Russian Empire. In the centre is the face of a younger Jewish man smiling, presumably for the opportunity afforded to him and his race by the Soviet State. The text reads: “With every turn of the tractor wheel, the Jewish agricultural work participates in building Socialism. You can you help him!”. This is a call to the Jewish population to help develop not only a land of their own, but the Soviet Union in general.

The existence of pro-Jewish propaganda posters does not mean that the Soviets didn't produce anti-semitic propaganda as well. The difference is that the anti-semitic posters typically attacked the religious aspects of Judaism, over the ethnic ones. That being said, depictions of the Jews in these posters still contained attacks on the Jewish physique typically taking traditional anti-semitic tropes such as over-enlarged noses and generally ugly faces. Figure 10 on the following page shows a poster depicting the prophet Muhammad, the “Christian God”⁶⁷ and a Jewish Kabbalist as a single entity (possibly a reference to medieval book “Treatise on the Three Imposters”).⁶⁸ The text above the heads of the figures reads “subscribe”, most likely in reference to the tendency for these religions (save Judaism) to convert others or “subscribe” to their

⁶⁶ <http://jewishcurrents.org/tag/birobidzhan/>

⁶⁷ https://dangerousminds.net/comments/the_gory_and_grotesque_art_of_soviet_antireligious_propaganda1

⁶⁸ Andersen, Abraham (1997). *The Treatise of the Three Imposters and the Problem of the Enlightenment. A New Translation of the Traité des Trois Imposteurs (1777 Edition)*. Lenham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN 0-8476-8430-X.

Each of the attributes that describe the cyclopes above have historically been attributed to Jews as well. The image of the shepherd is central to all three Judeo-Christian religions, although it is especially prevalent in Judaism. Abraham, Jacob, each of the twelve tribes described in Genesis and Exodus, Moses, King David, and Amos all either began as shepherds or continued as shepherds throughout their life, both before and after receiving messages from God. Jews have historically lived separate from Europeans in Europe, either in Shtetls or Ghettos and are often described as greedy, asocial, non-hospitable, and distrustful of their neighbours in anti-semitic imagery and writing. Finally, the myth of the blood libel and the grinding of Gentile children into Matzah mirror the gastronomical acts undertaken by Polyphemus towards the Greeks.

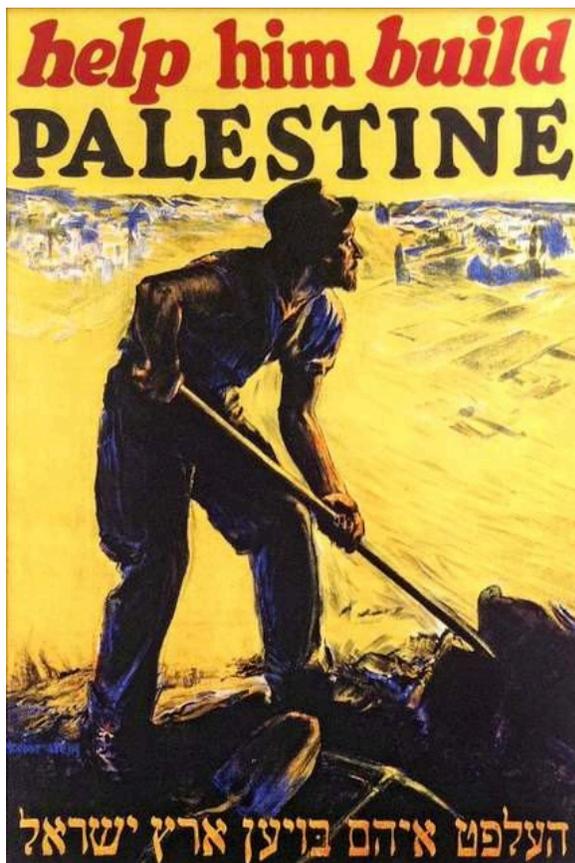


Fig. 11.⁷⁰

In regards to Zionist propaganda, there is a clear connection between its themes and the Soviet propaganda posters. Like the Soviet posters, Zionist poster (particularly the ones from before the creation of Israel and through the early years of the state) focus on depictions of workers at work, contain only a few colours, of which red, white, yellow, and grey feature often, and contain text in Hebrew. Often Zionist posters will also include text in English, Russian, Yiddish and occasionally French, Spanish, German, or Arabic. Compare Figure 9 on page 32 to Figure 11⁷⁰ to the left. The texts in English and Yiddish mirrors the message in the Russian text in Figure 9, specifically “help [sic] him build Palestine” in English and “Help him build the Land of Israel” in Yiddish, and “You can

help him!”. The colour schemes are different, although the same general proof concept is there: large swaths of flat colours including red and black (and in this case yellow), and the theme of a lone Jewish worker trying

⁷⁰ <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/505177283176481086/>

to “build” a new Jewish society through manual, as opposed to intellectual, labour is consistent with the Soviet posters.

Early Soviet posters are famous for their often abstract designs. Many of them contain complex collage-like images of the masses and/ or experimental designs. Artists like El Lissitzky (himself a Jew) produced avant-garde art celebrated by the early Bolsheviks under War Communism and the NEP. While this era of artistic expression in the Soviet Union died with Stalin, it had a profound impact on propaganda, which in turn had an impact on Zionist propaganda. Compare the two figures below. Figure 12⁷¹ depicts a figure, holding a copy of Pravda, the State newspaper, ushering a group of workers into factory work. The text reads “Shock Workers, join the ranks of the factories and (state) farms” in Russian. The colour scheme is



Fig. 12.⁷¹



Fig. 13.⁷²

primarily red and white, with grey imagery of an industrial park and a field filled with tractors. The crowd is full of men and women holding banners and generally appear to be happy, organized, and highly patriotic.

⁷¹ https://libcom.org/files/images/history/urss_soviet_poster_66.jpg

The poster is not only meant to drum up support for the Soviet industrial cause, but it is also meant to make the workers feel as if they are part of a larger system, as indicated by the word “ranks. Compare it Figure 13⁷² above. The figure of the man mirrors that of the worker in Figure 13; towering over a crowd of workers he embodies the tenacity and dedication that the Zionist settlers would bring to under-developed Palestine. The text in Hebrew reads “(Being) A worker is your place in our ranks”. This poster also uses the word “ranks” for presumably similar reasons. A modern perspective on the poster may claim that the crowd imagery eludes to the military might of Israel; however, seeing as the poster is dated to 1937, this is most likely not the case.

Another trope of propaganda posters, especially during war time, is the conflation of soldiers with historical and mythic heroes from the country’s past. For Russia, and the subsequent Soviet Union, that hero



was Aleksander Nevsky, the Russian knight who defeated the dreaded Teutonic Horde at the Battle on the Ice. Nevsky has been immortalized in Russian culture through the adoption of his

Fig. 14.⁷⁴

name for city centres, streets, cathedrals and lavras⁷³, and a micro-district in Kaliningrad. The majority of these are found in western Russia, primarily St. Petersburg, although there are churches and cathedrals that

⁷² <http://www.printmag.com/imprint/building-israel-through-posters/>

⁷³ A form of monastery unique to Russia

bear his name all throughout the Post-Soviet states in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Nevsky is also considered a holy figure in Russia and was canonized as a saint in the Russian Eastern Orthodox Church. Figure 14⁷⁴ shown above dates back to the “Great Patriotic War” and depicts a group of soldiers and a tank engaged in combat while three historic figures loom above and behind them. The figures are, in order from left to right, Saint Aleksander Nevsky, Imperial General Aleksander Suvorov, and Vasily Chapayev, a Red Army soldier and revolutionary during the Civil War, each a major military figure in Russian history. The text at the bottom reads: “We fight and stab audaciously as grandchildren of Suvorov and children of Chapayev”, although this is a more conservative translation. It fits the typical colour scheme indicative of Soviet posters:



Fig. 15.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ <http://euromaidanpress.com/2015/04/22/the-great-patriotic-war-as-a-weapon-in-the-war-against-ukraine/#arvlbdata>

⁷⁵ <http://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/jewish-national-fund-maccabi-stamp>

red, black, and grey. The image is overtly martial with every aspect of the imagery encompassing some aspect of war. Early Zionist posters, on the other hand, that contained warrior images usually didn't mesh with the main focus of the image. This is due primarily to the lack of any major conflicts fought by the Zionists against the Palestinians or other groups (Turks, Arabs, Coptics, etc.) that required a civilian army. Thus mythic and historical military figures were paired with agricultural images. Note Figure 15⁷⁵ to the left. Figure 15 shows a stamp published in Israel from the Jewish National Fund

(worth 25 cents!). In the foreground is a young Israeli agricultural worker. Plow in hand and settlement in the background, the man's face is resolved, his body fit, and rifle in toe. While the man is carrying a rifle, the image differs from Figure 15 significantly in that while the man has a rifle slung around his shoulder (indicative of no combat), the figures in Figure 14 are clearly engaged in battle and are overtly using their weapons. Finally, standing behind the man is Judah Maccabee, historic and mythologized saviour of the Jewish people during the Greek campaigns into Judea, ultimately commemorated in the holiday Chanukah. The tropes of Zionist propaganda posters are there: colour scheme is red, white, and blue; themes include



agriculture and defense, and there is text in both Hebrew and English. The Hebrew text reads: “Chanukah Gelt” a reference to the act of giving gifts on the holiday. Children often “gamble” with small coins not usually exceeding 25 cents, although now the custom has switched from actual money to chocolate coins. Finally, it is important to remember that at this time there were Stalinist Communist Parties all over the world, including Israel. The leading Communist party of the early state was Maki, which while technically being anti-Zionist, it recognized the State of Israel and a state for Palestine. Drawing ideology from

Fig. 16. ⁷⁶

the Post-War Stalin years, in 1949 they published the image on the previous page in celebration of Stalin's 70th birthday.⁷⁶ An image of Stalin in the context of Israel is odd to say the least. While efforts towards Birobidzhan were undertaken during the Early Stalin years, much of the reasoning that went into it was pragmatic and not humanitarian. Furthermore, after the establishment of Israel (one year before this poster was made) the USSR's stance on Israel was (thought initially positive), hostile. Fearing an American presence in the Middle East which had historically been at the fringes of Russia's sphere of influence, Soviet rhetoric became increasingly anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic⁷⁷. And yet, here exists a poster published by an Israeli party that recognizes Israel commemorating Stalin in a very Zionistic propagandistic way. The text is entirely in Hebrew and reads "70 years". The colour scheme is typical with red and blue making up the majority of the background and foreground. Thematically, there is the central figure of Stalin, head of contemporary Communist ideology. He is posed next to the flag of the USSR and a flag with the dove of peace, a symbol central to Israel and to Judaism in general.

Propaganda posters from the Soviet Union and the Pre-Israel Zionists show a correspondence. Thematically the two radical Socialist movements share common imagery; not surprising since Labour Zionism took much of their rhetoric from the Soviet Union. But posters are not the only means of propaganda that overlap between these groups. Film was also used by the Soviet state and Zionists to promote Jewish movement to Birobidzhan and Palestine respectively.

Part V: Lights, Camera, Emigration

The Soviet use of film as propaganda is widely known and has been the focus of a number of works. Used as both a means to modernize and a means to influence the peasantry, the early Soviet state produced highly experimental films as well as more digestible films about the Revolution, Russian history, and general Socialist fervour. As part of Lenin's plan to modernize the vast regions of Russia that lay outside of the

⁷⁶ <https://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/stalin-70th-birthday>

⁷⁷ Note, I am not conflating Anti-Zionism with Anti-Semitism, although the two do occasionally go hand in hand. It is important to not that Anti-Zionism does not equal Anti-Semitism; however, Anti-Semitism typically includes Anti-Zionist rhetoric.

major cities, mostly Moscow and Leningrad, films brought entertainment and, more importantly, news to those who would otherwise be left without it. Directors like Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and Yakov Protazanov (of which the former two were of Jewish ancestry) produced movies that functioned both as propaganda and entertainment, history and sensationalism. Movies like “Battleship Potemkin” took real historical events and tweaked them to make them to fit the Soviet narrative, while also satisfying the State’s desire for modernization through the use of film and film techniques. Propaganda as a genre came to dominate the Soviet Union up until the Thaw under Khrushchev, although films from the 1950s and 60s still had messages of Soviet supremacy even when the subject matter was humorous.

Film as message, not just propaganda were widely distributed as well. Newsreels, many of which functioned themselves as sort of mini-films, were common way to quickly spread information, both fictional and real, propagandistic and series. The 1936 Soviet film “Seekers of Happiness” is, in many ways both a narrative and a propagandistic message concerning the Jewish population of the Soviet Union’s semi-forced migration from the historical Pale of Settlement in Western Russia and Eastern Ukraine to the proposed Jewish homeland of Birobidzhan in the modern day Jewish Autonomous Oblast. Set in the then contemporary time of the mid 1930s the story’s intersection of Soviet policy towards ethnicity and Stalin’s own paranoia lends itself as a vehicle in which history can be interpreted through distinctly Russian, Soviet, and Ashkenazi lenses. The film’s plot revolves around a family of Soviet Jews as they move from an undisclosed area somewhere in Western Russia (or possibly abroad) to the undeveloped Birobidzhan.

The core family is made up of an old woman Dvoira, meant to represent Jews pre-Sovietization, a young woman Rosa who eventually falls for a Russian man, and a husband and wife who represent several Jewish motifs. The husband, Pinya, is a classic portrayal of the archetypal Jew, lazy, conniving, and lustful for gold. Throughout the film he repeatedly shown shirking his responsibilities on the collective and tricking others into getting his way. When it is revealed that his sole motivation for moving to Birobidzhan is to pan for gold (which he eventually kills a man over), Pinya goes from being a bumbling if not undesirable character to the film’s antagonist. In response, other members of the family learn to shed their ethnic, and in the case of Dvoira, religious identity in exchange for that of a Soviet one. Rosa ends up marrying a Russian

man and Dvoira, left without a Rabbi since their departure for the East, learns to allow for the mixed marriage from the head of the party in the region.

The propagandistic elements of the film are clear throughout. While we know little about the family before they arrive, we know that they are a “typical” Jewish family shackled by religious belief and innate anti-Soviet tendencies that can only be overcome by moving to Birobidzhan and accepting Bolshevism as their main personal doctrine. This would seem to go against the point of setting up an autonomous region specifically for Jews although this is not mentioned in the film. In this sense the film’s attitude towards Jews, and by extension any other recognized minority, seems fairly inline with the Soviet Union’s attitudes towards ethnic minorities. By taking the Jew out of their home and sending them somewhere else in order to build up the Soviet Union they will eventually learn to adopt Soviet principles, focusing less on their religious tendencies (the same can be said of the veil in Soviet Central Asia), and their social tendencies, all the while holding onto other aspects of the ethnic identity like language and music, both of which are displayed prominently throughout the movie. Yiddish singing and music, and writing and publications, are all displayed throughout the film despite all of the characters speaking Russian.

By the time of the film’s release in 1936 the Great Purge was already in its early stages. Much of the Purge was, according to Stalin and other Soviet officials, a reaction to Trotsky and general Anti-Stalinism, that swept everyone from peasants to city dwellers to party members and higher-ups within the Soviet system, most notably military officers. Russia had historically been an anti-semitic country and at certain points during the Purges lines would be blurred within the Jewish communities within the USSR as to whether local purges were anti-Trotskyite, or rather anti-Trotsky and therefore anti-Jew. This does not mean that Jews did not move to Birobidzhan during the 1920s and 30s, on the contrary many Soviet Jews saw it as a safe haven to continue their way of life that they had cultivated over the past decades in the Pale of Settlement; however, it should be noted that many Jewish families left Birobidzhan for the West, other parts of the USSR, and eventually Israel within the first decade or so of its establishment.

Interestingly, the current residents of Birobidzhan have a different take on the film. Svetlana Ivanovna and Gleb Rummyantsov both believe the film to be representative of Jews as a microcosm for society

at large, as opposed to a pseudo-jewish advocacy film that actually perpetuates anti-semitic tropes.⁷⁸ Rather, they see the character of Pinya as conniving not because he is a Jew, but because he is conniving. In a sense, his Jewishness is secondary since all ethnic groups have people who are conniving, just as all ethnic groups have people who are intrinsically good. This viewpoint is at once innocent and at once shady. On the one hand, Svetlana and Gleb are correct; every ethnic group has good people and bad people. People who will work for personal gain, such as Pinya, and people who will work to better the community, such as Rosa. However, to claim that Pinya does not fulfill the Jewish stereotype of the money-hungry, colluding Jew is too simple of an argument; especially in the context of the Soviet Union with its objectively anti-semitic policies.

The main purpose of “Seekers of Happiness” is, in a sense, to convince Jews from the western Soviet Union to move to the Soviet Far East. It is propaganda meant to mobilize people to leave their homes and move somewhere else in order to build a land for themselves. Never mind that it should also benefit the Soviets. Zionists used similar techniques to convince European Jewry, particularly in Central Europe as well as the western edges of Eastern Europe, to move to Palestine. One of the earliest Zionist propaganda films, “The Land of Promise”, was meant to function like “Seekers of Happiness”, i.e. as a means to excite Jews into leaving their homes to move far away so to build a homeland out of nothing. However, the difference between the two is that, while there may have been very little in the area that would eventually grow to become the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, Palestine had a population, with cities and people and a culture that mirrored their religious heritage. To say that Palestine came from nothing is to disregard the history of the Levant, and yet the film opens with the following line: “This is the land which God promised to Abraham. Once, while the Jews lived in this land, it was the centre of a great civilization. When the Jews were driven out the land gradually declined. Primitive life returned”.⁷⁹ The film shows footage of the vast deserts of (presumably) central and southern Israel, with a group of Arab men in traditional dress herding sheep. Whether this is meant to be an attack on the Arab population or rather just a historical critique, one can not say for certain.

⁷⁸ Svetlana Ivanovna Interview

⁷⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDoD6W2z01s> 3:36-4:03

The film acts more like a documentary than a narrative film. A voice over explains the images that flash on the screen in black and white. It shows a boat on route to the “new port of Haifa” on which there are young men and women dancing and singing in Hebrew. We see Jerusalem and the hustle of the market places, the people working in stalls and sitting outside smoking hookah. Credence is payed to the existing religious communities and their holy sites: Islam and the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque, Christianity and the Villa de la Rosa, and Judaism and the Wailing Wall and the Tomb of Rachel. Special attention is paid to the fact that the majority of the Jews in Jerusalem pre-aliyah are Sephardic or Mizrahi (particularly of Yemeni descent), and poor.

Juxtaposed to the old streets of Jerusalem are the settlements that are in the process of being built in the Galilee. These “cooperative colonies of Palestine” are claimed to be where “a national idealism is linked with a social idealism and the work of every man and woman is directed to a social and not a personal goal. Out of these cooperative colonies will come undoubtedly new forms of human organization valuable to the Jewish homeland and instructive to the rest of the world.”⁸⁰ These colonies would soon be called Kibbutzim and would come to exemplify the utopian goals of Labour Zionism. Typical of kibbutz life (especially in the early years), the film portrays communal life based around shared labour, shared meals, shared leisure time, and shared childrearing. We see men and women singing Hebrew songs while they till soil, break rocks, drill for water, milk cows, move straw, and plant and harvest various edible plants. Women run calisthenics in the yard while a man rings the lunch bell signifying the midday meal. Men and women eat communally while the children eat separately, also communally. Post-meal, a man plays the piano and sings Hebrew songs while the other pioneers join in.

In further contrast to the kibbutz, the film shows Tel Aviv, a city that “stands in the place which was wilderness 25 years ago. Sands and cactus where jackals roamed. It is a city still expanding. Still spreading North and South and East. Still changing sandy wastes into busy streets.”⁸¹ The film stresses the importance of women who demand equal share of the most demanding labour, as stone breakers, masons, road clearers, agricultural workers, etc. Industry, including soap making, silk manufacturing and weaving, and cotton textile

⁸⁰ Ibid 23:14-23:43

⁸¹ Ibid 28:25 - 28:46

making are touted as Jewish factory work. Mineral extraction from the Dead Sea, denture making, milk pasteurization, and candy making based on honey and milk production are mentioned as integral aspects of the Jewish homeland, proving the use of Jewish labour on the international market. The Anglo-Palestine bank is mentioned as a institution in the vein of Herzl, as a bank “not run for profit”, but rather a utopian Jewish national bank dedicated to the services of the country.

Hebrew is spoken “everywhere” and is used in print, as well as interpersonal communication via telephone, telegraph, and verbal interaction. Newspapers which cater to every political ideology are present; however, the film makes special note of “דבר” (Davar), the labour newspaper. Despite the labour newspaper’s highlight, Tel Aviv is still a religious city, at least in terms of business. The work week begins on Sunday and ends Friday afternoon, in order to make room for the Sabbath. An old man blows a bugle to signify the beginning of Shabbat and the end of the work week while Jews both religious and not close their stores. Non-work days are spent at Tel Aviv beach, which has come to rival that of “Venice, America’s Atlantic City, and England’s Brighton Beach as a world attraction”.⁸²

Like Tel Aviv, a new Jerusalem is being built up outside of the walls of the Old City. Funding comes from Hadasah, the Jewish National Fund, and a series of other international and national organizations that cater to the Zionist experiment. The Hebrew University is opened on Mount Scopus as the “centre of the spiritual and cultural rebirth of Palestine”.⁸³ Industry, primarily agricultural, is shown to be alive in Jerusalem as well as grapes, apples, plums, and olives are produced en masse. Wine from Carmel winery on Mt. Rishon is touted as rivalling Italy and France, and the self-sustaining nature of Palestine’s industrial goods is mentioned as both surprising and astounding. Truly Palestine has become a modern nation, thanks to the hard work of the Jews echoes as the central message of the film, while a tractor rolls off into the sunset for the film’s final scene.

Despite being a documentary, supplemented by historical fact and video evidence, this film is propagandistic in what it chooses to mention and how it chooses to mention it. Descriptions of pre-Jewish Palestine are bleak, land is described as desolate, unused, and primitive, while the Jews bring with them

⁸² Ibid 39:08-39:17

⁸³ Ibid 41:04-41:43

modernity. There may be some credence in this, namely in that much of the land that would eventually become kibbutzim and the major cities of Tel Aviv and the New City of Jerusalem was underused or generally abandoned; however, to call the land primitive or desolate is to equate the people of the land with these terms. The film makes note of the major achievements of Jewish Palestine, specifically the revitalization of agriculture, the influx of modern equipment, and the ability to be self-sustaining, and back this up with reference to the international attitude towards pre-statehood Israel. The Levant Fair, which ran from Summer of 1933 to Spring 1934, is used to illustrate the international astonishment with the major progress of Palestine. Its logo, the flaying camel, is in reference to the progress made by the settlers and the traditional labour soon to be phased out by modernity.

Comparatively, “Seekers of Happiness” and “Land of Promise” both set out to do the same thing: paint a picture of a land built by Jews in order to attract other Jews to come. Both films pay attention to the physical nature of building a homeland, be it in the Far East or in Palestine, and yet both films showcase the labour that goes into transforming a terrain either unsuitable or depopulated of people and resources, as positive. Both films came out of the mid 1930s and this led to very varied effects on the physical spaces of Birobidzhan and Palestine. The 1930s in the Soviet Union was a dangerous time and place to be a minority, particularly a Jew. With the Purge in full swing by 1938, Jews were accused of Zionism and Trotskyite tendencies. Both would lead to the slow depopulation of Jews in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. On the contrary, Palestine in the 1930s was a prosperous time and place for Jews. Jewish migration into Palestine remained high, growing from 174,610 in 1931 to 716,700 by 1948⁸⁴, industry was flourishing, as evidenced by the film, and international opinion of the Jewish settlers was high (at least in the West). It should be noted that Jewish-Arab relations were hostile throughout the 1930s and 40s, however this was also the case since the first settlers had arrived.

In the end it is difficult to say how much of an effect these films, and films in general, had on immigration to Birobidzhan and Palestine. From a historical perspective, the case can be made that regardless of the effect of the films, outside sources had more to do with population numbers than anything else. With the Purges in the Soviet Union and the rise of Hitler in Germany, the number of Jews either leaving the Far

⁸⁴ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-and-non-jewish-population-of-israel-palestine-1517-present>

East or joining the Zionists in Palestine would increase regardless of propaganda. The time of the films' releases also lends a hand in the historical analysis of these films. *Seekers* came out almost ten years after the establishment of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. Time had shown the difficulties of establishing a settlement in the region and the pre-existing issues that had plagued the JAO had not got away by 1936. *Land of Promise* was released a little over ten years before the establishment of Israel. International opinion was still widely in favour of a Jewish state and the progress that Palestine showed attracted more people than had been previously anticipated. For some Birobidzhaners, the prospect of a warmer climate caused them to move directly from the JAO to Palestine., for others the prospect of a Jewish state in the homeland was more authentic or exciting than one in East Asia. And yet, the similarities between Birobidzhan and Palestine are numerous. Both dealt with similar problems and both had similar goals. Rough terrain, biopolitics, land rights, state building, agricultural education, pressure from neighbouring groups and ethnic-autonomy: all were faced by the inhabitants of Birobidzhan and of Palestine. The difference lies in how the regions were governed, either top-down (as was the case in the USSR), or bottom-up (as was the case in Palestine) and depending on which was the case in any given region, the issues listed could either be dealt with or exacerbated. A glaring example came about when deciding what language to use as the official language of Birobidzhan.

Part VI: Langua Judæica

A large part of Korenizatsiya, or Nativization, was linguistic autonomy. To the Bolsheviks, being a recognized ethnicity meant having a “national language” which the group in question could use in their everyday lives regardless of use. When it came to the Jews of the Soviet Union there were two logical choices: Yiddish and Hebrew. Yiddish was the secular language of the Jews that had been spoken as the primary daily language since the Middle Ages, while Hebrew was the language of the religion that had been spoken in religious services and in Jewish philosophy since Antiquity. For the Bolsheviks, the choice was simple. On the one hand there was a secular language spoken by the majority of Jews in their daily lives and on the other was a language used specifically to study, and therefore further, Judaism. Thus, Yiddish was chosen as the de facto language of the Oblast. While being a practical approach (from the Bolshevik perspective), the choice of

Yiddish as the language of the region angered more people than it pleased.⁸⁵ The religious community (already ticked off by the overt atheism of the USSR) saw it as an affront on the religion and, therefore, the Jewish people as a whole. Meanwhile, the secular Jewish community saw it as a holdover of an era in which they had failed to assimilate and been persecuted because of it. Yiddish was in a sense a taunting of the Jews who wished to assimilate. These people wished to speak Russian and be viewed as ordinary Soviet citizens, not a marginalized group forced by the state to work in a language that had caused both pain and pride for them. This was an early problem with Birobidzhan that alienated populations of the Jews in the Soviet Union that was never fully addressed. To this day the JAO publishes the “Birobidzhan Shtern”, a Yiddish language newspaper despite the overall Jewish population making up only .2% of the population of the JAO. There are very few Yiddish speakers left today, despite efforts in the Teacher’s College to teach Yiddish.

Contemporary Birobidzhan still contains various husks left over from the top-down institution of Yiddish. The main thoroughfare is “Shalom Alechem Street”, written out in both Russian: “Улица Шолом Алейхема” and in Yiddish ‘שלום-עליכם-גאם’.⁸⁶ Other hold overs from the Soviet Era left in Birobidzhan include a “Soviet Street”⁸⁷, again spelled out in Russian and Yiddish, and the obligatory “Pushkin Street”⁸⁸ found in nearly every Russian town.

Despite only about .2% of people who reside within the JAO being able to speak Yiddish, most government or otherwise official buildings contain Yiddish writing on them. These buildings include the Palace of Culture, the main train station, and the local museum. The picture below⁸⁹ was taken on the side of the museum of local culture and history.⁹⁰ This is a direct layover from the Soviet Era and mirrors other policies of linguistic autonomy granted by the State in places like Ukraine, Georgia, the Sakha Republic, and the Central Asian states. The people who currently live in Birobidzhan, despite overwhelmingly not being able

⁸⁵ Weinberg, 6

⁸⁶ Kussin-Gika, Ian, J, Photographer. Photograph. Source, Personal Photograph

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Ibid



Fig. 17.⁸⁶



Fig. 18.⁸⁷



Fig. 19.⁸⁸

Fig. 20.⁸⁹

to speak and/or read the Yiddish language, take pride in their city's history and the culture that comes with the Soviet understanding of Jewish identity.

There is basis in considering language as an integral aspect of Nationhood, be it prescribed (as it was in the JAO) or political (as it is with Castilian Spanish or Parisian French).⁹¹ In his book “Imagined Communities”, Benedict Anderson talks about language as both as unifying force for a nation and as a tool for consolidating power.⁹² What differs in the case of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast from Anderson's account of, say,

Ukrainian nationalism with regards towards language is that while Ukrainian nationalism depended upon the language as a means for artistic purpose born out of a “grassroots” drive by Ukrainians, Yiddish was, in a sense, gifted from the top down. Yiddish also had a fairly large canon of plays and stories but the time of the JAO, partially because of the slant towards academia and culture that had flourished within the Pale of Settlement.

Zionists saw language as an integral part of the Jewish identity and as a chief concern for the Jewish people as a whole. Work on reviving Hebrew as a daily spoken language began in 1881 when Eliezer Ben-Yehuda set out to replace Yiddish as the language spoken by the majority of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe.⁹³ Like Esperanto, Ben-Yehuda hoped that Hebrew would eventually replace regional Jewish languages, e.g. Yiddish and Ladino, as a universal Jewish language. He also believed that the revival of Hebrew would lead to settlement in Palestine and a revival in Jewish identity as people indigenous to the Middle East, as opposed to Europeans. Although not a Labour Zionist himself, Ben-Yehuda's efforts would eventually lead

⁹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, Verso, 1983), 78

⁹² Anderson, 75

⁹³ <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-News/This-week-in-history-Revival-of-the-Hebrew-language>

to the first Aliyah which established the first permanent Jewish settlements in the Levant. Eventually Hebrew would become the first dead language to come back to life.⁹⁴ As Anderson points out in his memoir, “It is important to keep in mind that to learn a language is not simply to learn a linguistic means of communication. It is also to learn the way of thinking and feeling of a people who speak and write a language which is different from ours. It is to learn the history and culture underlying their thoughts and emotions and so to learn to empathize with them.”⁹⁵ Thus the revitalization of Hebrew was truly so much more than just a linguistic identity coming back; it was the formation of the new Jew, a political, social, and cultural rebirth.

When we look at Hebrew as a language that is both natural and in a sense constructed, the connection between identity and nationality and the mechanisms that went into their intellectual creation become apparent. In a lecture on the socio-linguistic history of modern Hebrew, Ivy Sichel⁹⁶ talks about the thought process that went into the resurrection of a language of cultural identity. Active ways to change the perception of Jews as conniving, meek, and passive were emphasized, particularly in terms of the accent used and the lexicon and phonological inventory of the new language. Sander Gilman writes in his book “Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews”, about the characteristics of Jewish languages, particularly Yiddish, and the anti-semitism that accompanied the use of and the properties of the language. Gilman writes on the seemingly illogical nature of Jewish self-hatred, particularly in regards to the desire for assimilation.

Labour Zionists and Soviet lawmakers alike understood the power of words and the politics of choosing one language over another, a dialect of the empowered over the submissive. In the case of Hebrew, “physical” aspects of the language, e.g. accent, syntax, and inflection, were all modified consciously in order to make a political statement about Jews, Judaism, and the Jewish State. Hebrew had been a sort of mythologized language, at least in the minds of Europeans, from the time of Christ. It was the language of the Bible (despite much of the Bible actually being written in Aramaic or Greek) and was therefore somehow

⁹⁴ <https://qz.com/969597/hebrew-was-the-only-language-ever-to-be-revived-from-extinction-there-may-soon-be-another/>

⁹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *A Life Beyond Boundaries: A Memoir* Quote taken from https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5847920.Benedict_Anderson

⁹⁶ Sichel, Ivy. “Ideology and Language Planning: Hebrew.” Powerpoint, Lecture, Santa Cruz, 11/29/17

closer to God than French or Russian. Hebrew adorns the logo of Yale University, was spoken by many of the founding fathers of America, was respected in European historical and theological circles for its perceived status as the first language (spoken by God to Adam and Eve). Despite the respect given towards Hebrew in the West, Jews were perceived in an entirely different way. Sichel talks about the ways in which the accent of Hebrew was chosen to be balanced between the East and the West, with their various languages and pronunciations. The Ben Yehuda Accent (named so because Eliezer Ben-Yehuda spoke this way) was adopted and eventually took on a very European sounding phonology that was correlated to upward social mobility and stepped away from the more “prestigious” Yemeni or Lebanese-Syrian accents which were believed to be more authentic sounding and more closely related to the original pronunciation of Biblical Hebrew.⁹⁷

Anderson talks at length about imagined communities as groups that share similar mythological origins. What is meant by this is fairly simple: groups of people create myths about themselves in order to distinguish themselves from others, but also in order to create a national identity for themselves. Hebrew is a prime example of this practice. Hebrew has been mythologized perhaps more so than any other language. Whether ancient Hebrew was a “scientific”, i.e. a natural language that can be traced from the present back to some Proto-Hebrew, or mythologized, i.e. a language (natural or otherwise) that was endowed with supernatural prowess, is up for debate. Particularly in the context of modern Hebrew, it is clear that the language was engineered from the top down. The Hebrew lexicon is famous for Hebraicization as both mandated by the individual and mandated by the state for names, e.g. Golda Meirson -> Golda Meir, Um Rashrash -> Eilat, as well as for lexical repurposing (wherein a preexisting word has its meaning changed slightly to become a new word), e.g. tayar = tourist, originally “to discover, to guide”.⁹⁸ Hebrew also has a fair amount of “semantic grafting”, where in a word’s meaning changes from one language to the next, despite the pronunciation being the same across the two or three languages. For example, the Hebrew word “lamut” meaning “to die” comes from the Yiddish/Russian word for “to desire”.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ Ibid

Politically, the first two attributes of modern Hebrew are clearly mirroring Soviet language policy in that the Zionists of the early years “retook” land through linguistic acquisition, and thus any instance of language tolerance seems to be patronizing rather than genuine. This was surely the attitude felt by the Jewish immigrants to Birobidzhan: a group that was consciously given the right to speak their own language by the state, despite the majority of them not wanting to speak that language anymore or anyways. As mentioned before, the official languages for the JAO were and still are Russian and Yiddish. Today the overwhelming majority of people speak Russian as their first language, with very few Yiddish speakers left. The juxtaposition of these two cases: Israel and Hebrew and Birobidzhan and Yiddish, show an interesting interplay between State and Language, with Israel falling more in line with an Andersonian analysis of language as a form of power; what he called print capitalism, with Israel was a prime example.

However, where as Anderson utilizes the concept of “print capitalism”¹⁰⁰ to distinguish the power of different ethnolinguistic groups over the other, the case of Birobidzhan seems out of place. Here we see instead a power allowing the language spoken by the minority to be made the language of the majority. Both in terms of the new Jewish territory and the fact that the majority of its residents were non-Jewish. Here we begin to see a unique situation forming. That which is between the displaced and the displacer, and the displaced by the displaced. In a sense, Russia and the Soviet Union can be viewed as a nation of displaced persons. Even the Russians believe themselves to be victims of various “barbarian” forces. Russian domination of Siberia was argued to be retaliation against the Mongol hordes that had once held dominion over Muscovy. Russian expansion into Central Asia, with Kazakhstan in particular, was viewed by the then contemporary Tsarist regime to be retaliation against the Kazakh Hordes that continued to attack trade routes and border stations along the artificial, and often shifting, Russo-Kazakh border.¹⁰¹ Russian expansion westward into Poland and Prussia was argued to be retaliation against the Teutonic Horde of the Middle Ages with Soviet artist Sergei Eisenstein going so far as to characterize the Germans as demonic in his film

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 45

¹⁰¹ Sabol, 75

“Alexandr Nevsky”.¹⁰² In the 20th Century, the partition of Germany into East and West was the Soviet response to the atrocities committed by Nazi forces behind Soviet lines. Even after retaliation was made against the Mongols, Kazaks, Poles, and Prussians, Russia looked upon itself as a victim against the Chinese for keeping the Russians from having a warm-water port on the Pacific. This area, specifically the Amur River Basin, would eventually become the Jewish Autonomous Oblast at the expense of the Chinese and the native inhabitants of Manchuria and the Russian Far East.

Conclusion: Next Year in Birobidzhan

As the introduction to this thesis stated: far from the centre of European intellectualism, Russian statecraft and the traditional homes of the Jewish People, nestled amongst woods, swamps, and hills in modern Russia’s only autonomous oblast, is a city envisioned by the Soviets to be the final solution to the problem of Jewish nationhood. Despite being objectively better than Hitler’s own final solution (at least for the Jews), Stalin’s choice to a) find a permanent spot on the planet for Jews to be Jewish, b) craft it under his and his contemporaries’ vision for a Soviet style Socialist interpretation of the world, and c) place it both as far from the historical homeland of Ashkenazi Jews and Moscow as possible, all the while being in the middle of the import Sino-Soviet border region along the Amur, was the end-all-be-all solution to the long and overwhelmingly negative history of Jews in Russia.

The Birobidzhan experiment is, much like many of the other experiments of the Soviet Union which outlasted the state itself, an odd combination of good-intentions, historical revisionism, and pragmatic politics. The theories and planning that went into creating the world’s first Jewish state were both old and new: a fine blend of Jewish identity, Marxist interpretation, Stalinist determination, and modern technological prowess. All of this can be seen in contemporary Birobidzhan, as well as in historical pictures and notes taken throughout the establishment of the region. The existence of Yiddish street signs, the almost overwhelming

¹⁰² Sergei Eisenstein, *Aleksander Nevsky* (Александр Невский), film, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1938; Moscow: Mosfilm), film.

amount of menorahs,¹⁰³and the big statue of Shalom Alecham¹⁰⁴in the centre of town all point to the “Jewish-ness” of the region, while the sheer volume of industrial output (pre-1991) was well known throughout the Soviet Union. All of these aspects of the city show themselves like scars on the old factory buildings, the attitudes of the older generation (most of whom are still fans of the USSR), and the word handed down that chronicle the cities past and hope for its future.

Birobidzhan tells the story of labour zionism, or its interpretation of it, much like it does with every other ideology that built it. In its physical aspects, American Jewish groups like ICOR and AMBIJAN donated much of the initial funding to physically built the housing and send the tools necessary for the first settlers to build the town out of the original train station. It was hailed by Yiddish writers like Bergelson, promoted as a centre of Yiddish theatre, literature, and life in general. Its founding was, in part, a response to the growing Zionist movement amongst Jews in the western parts of the Union and, is therefore, part of the response to Zionism. Every aspect of the city, from the choice of Yiddish as opposed to Hebrew, the secular nature of the Jewish planners, including Hannes Meyer, and the continuing anti-religious sentiments of the Party (albeit not unique to the Jews), were all active ways to dissuade Zionism. As part of the response to Zionism, Birobidzhan became an aspect of Zionism, as an exception but also as a microcosmic example of what Jewish life could have been if the religious aspects of Judaism and nationalistic aspects of Zionism were simply not present.

As a model of displacement, Birobidzhan stands at the crossroads of Russia’s interaction with the indigenous population and the historical diaspora of Jews. The people of the Amur basin were torn apart between Empire, destroyed by Cossacks, and left to struggle even in the Soviet era. Jews in Russia have a history of abuse at the hands of Cossacks and the blind-eyes of the State. And yet, Birobidzhan is a narrative

¹⁰³ Figures 21-23. Kussin-Gika, Ian, J, Photographer. Photograph. Source, Personal Photograph

¹⁰⁴ Figure 24. Ibid



Fig. 21.¹⁰³



Fig. 22.¹⁰³



Fig. 23.¹⁰³

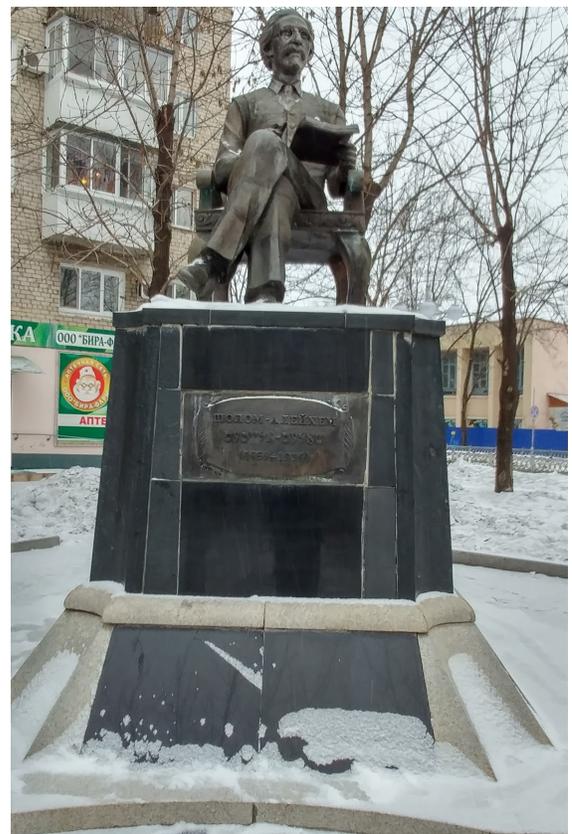


Fig. 24.¹⁰⁴

of displacement, even if not indigenous people lived there upon founding, for much the same reasons as its place in the history of Zionism. It is a symbol of Jewish emancipation, atop an area that slaughtered thousands. It is both home of the displacer and the displaced, conquerer and refugee, pharaoh and slave. While no Jews actively displaced any persons who had lived in the area before hand, the land tells a story of genocide, something which Jews are no strangers to, historically or otherwise.

But is Birobidzhan the Jerusalem of Gold that it was once envisioned to be? In some sense yes and in other senses no. Comparing the two cities is in some ways futile: one is ancient and central to three major religions, while the other is modern and central to virtually nothing. One drips history and culture stretching back to the Canaanites and into the modern day while the other only exhibits a small history that begins and essentially ends with Stalin. But it is the changes that both cities have gone through that connect them. Jerusalem shifted hands from empire to empire, much in the same way that Birobidzhan modulated between Soviet and Russian. Their influences on history are widely different, but both are important to the people that live there and both hold significance amongst the Jews, even if the latter has been banished to obscurity. And while Birobidzhan will most likely never hold much significance for the Jewish population at large, it is a shining city that once held the hopes and dreams of the Jews who put all of their resources, risked their lives, and started families to grow it into the city it is today, cracks and all. And it is for this reason that on the next passover I will gladly say “Next year in Birobidzhan!”.

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List of Figures

Figures	Page
Figure 1: Map of Qing China at its Greatest Extent	12
Figure 2: Map of Modern Day Russia and the Far East	12
Figure 3: Crawler Tractors from the Dalselmash Factory	16
Figure 4: White Army Anti-Bolshevik Anti-Semitic Propaganda Poster	27
Figure 5: Polish Anti-Bolshevik Anti-Semitic Propaganda Poster	27
Figure 6: White Army Anti-Bolshevik Propaganda Poster	28
Figure 7: Nazi Germany Anti-Bolshevik Anti-Semitic Propaganda Poster	30
Figure 8: Modern Anti-Semitic Judeo-Bolshevik Reddit Post	30
Figure 9: Birobidzhan Emigration Propaganda Poster	32
Figure 10: Soviet Anti-Religion Propaganda Poster	33
Figure 11: Labour Zionist Palestinian Emigration Propaganda Poster	35
Figure 12: Soviet Factory Worker Propaganda Poster	36
Figure 13: Labour Zionist Worker Propaganda Poster	36
Figure 14: Soviet “Great Patriotic War” Propaganda Poster	37
Figure 15: Jewish National Fund Maccabee Stamp	38
Figure 16: Israeli Poster Commemorating Stalin’s 70th Birthday	39
Figure 17: Birobidzhan “Shalom Alechem Street” Sign	48
Figure 18: Birobidzhan “Soviet Street” Sign	49
Figure 19: Birobidzhan “Pushkin Street” Sign	49
Figure 20: Birobidzhan Museum of Local Culture and History Sign	50
Figure 21: Birobidzhan Menorah in “Arbat”	55
Figure 22: Menorah on the “Breeder” Bakery Logo	55

Figure 23: Menorah in front of Birobidzhan Synagogue	55
Figure 24: Statue of Shalom Alechem in Birobidzhan “Arbat”	55

List of Interviews

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